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Handrails, steps and curbs: sacred places and secular pilgrimage in skateboarding

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that significant places in the sport of skateboarding are banal urban spaces. These locations are made meaningful through interaction, history and media coverage. This has resulted in the emotional attachment and veneration of places that are overlooked by the general public. Building on cultural geography and the literature on pilgrimage, an analysis of sacred space and secular pilgrimage is presented. Skateboarders are shown to be deeply engaged with places that have been inscribed with historic meaning. Media is shown to be instrumental in making and communicating the importance of skateboarding 'spots'. Through textual analysis and ethnographic work a distinction is made on the importance of space. Skateboarders are shown to perform secular pilgrimages, and to be emotionally invested in the history of particular sites. Skateboarding, unlike other sports, privileges places that are not legitimate sporting locations. The stadiums of skateboarders are urban settings, handrails, curbs and steps.

Introduction

Skateboarding's stadiums are hidden in plain sight, they are often found space and appropriated architecture (Howell 2005; Beal 2013a; Blayney 2014). Sets of steps in a San Francisco office plaza, brick banks under the Brooklyn Bridge and a handrail at a Hollywood school, all hold meaning to skateboarders in a similar way that 'Old Trafford' is important to football fans. These places are made significant through the actions of individuals and the media in which they are reproduced. For some skateboarders, these places convey quasi-spiritual importance, resonating a shared cultural heritage and connecting quite personally to a sense of identity.

In this article, I explore how these places connect skateboarding to mainstream sports, but also how they differentiate skateboarders and their relationship with space from other athletes and sports fans. Much has been written on the notion of space in skateboarding (Willard 1998; Borden 2001, 2014; Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009; Chiu 2009; Mehring 2015), yet little has explored the emotional engagement of specific places, and how skateboarders regard them as personally meaningful. Drawing on ethnographic work with skateboarders and an interpretive analysis of skateboard media, I argue that skateboarding

spots communicate a collective history and can become sacred sites, and places of secular pilgrimage (Cusack and Digance 2009; Wagg 2015).

The framing of skateboarding as a lifestyle sport is significant for this discussion as typically lifestyle sports have emerged without an official, pitch, track, court or stadium. Thus, the importance of place, that has been distinguished in mainstream sports (Henning 1997; Bale 2003; Gaffney and Bale 2004; Vertinsky and Bale 2004) needs to be clarified regarding lifestyle sports such as rock climbing, BMX and parkour. Lifestyle sports have also been termed extreme sports, and action sports (Wheaton 2013; Thorpe 2014; Robinson 2015) and while there is no consensus on their definition, there is a recognition that such sports can be individually pursued and correspond with the values and practices that imbed them in the lifestyles of participants. The emphasis on culture and lifestyle in academic work on sports such as skateboarding, snowboarding and surfing, also connects to issues of affect and spirituality (Taylor 2007; Evers 2009; Thorpe 2011; Wilsey 2014). Just as there is an established literature on the connection between sport and religion (Hoffman 1992; Baker 2007; Parry et al. 2007; Magdalinski and Chandler 2017), I believe that this can be extended to the significance of space in skateboarding. Therefore, this article acknowledges the work performed on skateboarding and space, and seeks to contribute to an understanding of the emotional engagement with space that occurs in skateboarding. This has been foreground in the work of Friedel (2015) who looks at how skateboarding contributes to peace and conflict resolution, and is apparent in skateboard media and writing which conveys a deep passion and love for the sport (Hocking, Knuttson, and Maher 2004; Mullen and Mortimer 2004; Jepsen 2012; Ridge and Lewis 2014; Wilsey 2014; Sediton 2016; Thornton 2016).

The emotional engagement professed by skateboarders connects it to notions of devotion, ritual and worship. Atkinson (2008, 419) describes lifestyle sports as fitting into the practitioner's 'daily life like a religion'. While I stop short of a discussion on skateboarding and religion, I do engage with work on secular pilgrimage (Margry 2008; Cusack and Digance 2009) in an attempt to contrast the cultural meaning of skateboarding spots with the more established importance of sports places such as Madison Square Garden, Wrigley Field and the Maracanã. Thus, while a sports fan may make a pilgrimage to Anfield, and have an intimate knowledge of the matches performed there, so to do skateboarders pay homage to sets of steps and their histories. While a football pitch is purposely made distinct as a place of sports, many skateboarding sites are overlooked, out of bounds, and policed by security guards denying access. Skateboarders continue to be criminalized (Borden 2001; Németh 2006; Woolley and Johns 2010; Carr 2013) by the very same activities that have now made their way into the Olympics. Yet by contrast these sites are democratic, free to use and open to the novice and the professional alike. In contributing to the discussion of place in sports, skateboarding provides a notable tangent.

Methods

This article draws on ongoing research on skateboard culture which began in 2015. It combines interpretive textual analysis on skateboard media and data drawn from open-ended qualitative interviews with an international cohort of 23 middle-aged skateboarders, and additional ethnographic work in Hong Kong's skateboarding community. My ethnographic work in Hong Kong's skateboarding scene has included observation and interaction with more than 200 skateboarders since 2015. Two-thirds of this cohort were Hong Kong Chinese,

while the remaining third were a mix of white, East and South-East Asian and mixed-raced skateboarders. My field notes have provided a foundation to explore themes that arose in textual analysis and to also identify complementing themes in skateboard media. My research findings were also supplemented by qualitative interviews with 23 middle-aged skateboarders performed via Skype. These skateboarders were a mix of North America, European and Australasian residents. While the focus of these interviews was largely on skateboarding in later life, place consistently featured as a topic of discussion. My status as a researcher was revealed to all my informants and I obtained consent for their comments to be used. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity and the research was approved by Lingnan University's ethics committee.

The research focussed on exploring the various dimensions of skateboard culture, pursuing how skateboarders expressed their ethics, emotions and embodied experiences. The analysis works with the extant literature on skateboarding and lifestyle sports and integrates work on sports and connects with a body of work on the anthropology of pilgrimage and social geography (Hoffman 1992; Preston 1992; Margry 2008; Watson and Parker 2014). My research involved surveying magazines (Thrasher, Jenkem, Transworld Skateboarding, The Skateboard Mag) and following social media feeds on skateboarding on Youtube, Facebook and Instagram. My focus in analysis is related broadly to culture, affect, embodiment and philosophy. Various themes emerged during textual analysis and field work, one of which was the prominence of sacred places, and pilgrimages in skateboard culture. It became apparent that many skateboarders are emotionally invested in places that have appeared in skateboard magazines and videos. In several cases the most important sites are those in the USA, and frequently California. The relevance of California to skateboarding both past and present is distinct, and has been communicated globally through skateboard videos and magazines. However, these notable sites are most commonly shared public space, and thus differ considerably from other important sporting sites. Throughout the research, accounts highlighting the prominence of place are consistently tied to the consumption of skateboard media.

The importance of skateboard media has been utilized by Borden (2001), Beal and Weidman (2003) and Yochim (2010) to illustrate its tie to skateboarding. This is distinct in the work of Yochim who explores a variety of skateboard videos and integrates an analysis of them in the discussion of gender and masculinity. The prominence of social media in contemporary skateboard culture is one that analysis cannot ignore. This has been identified in mainstream sports (Dart 2012) and is also increasingly a theme in research on lifestyle sports (Thorpe 2014; Wheaton 2015).

In my research, social media reinforced the importance of place and social bonds. I would observe Instagram clips of the latest tricks at Hollywood High, or Barcelona's Macba, but so too would I observe references to historic skateboard videos, and the past achievements of professional skateboarders. These discussions, or the Instagram clips, will then be discussed again by skateboarders that I observed in my field work. One clip, for example, a switch backside tailside by Tiago Lemos in June 2017, first appeared on Instagram (@brian_panebianco 2017) but was shared throughout the skateboard media world, appearing in Thrasher (ThrasherMagazine 2017), The Berrics (2017) and blogs (Boil the Ocean 2017) and many more locations. One evening I was having a meal with four other skateboarders and someone made mention of Tiago Lemos, everyone acknowledged the trick he had performed, commenting on either the height, the fact it was switch or the location. Each had

witnessed the trick individually on social media, and each acknowledged the trick without explaining it, consolidating their shared knowledge, identity and status as skateboarders (Beal and Weidman 2003; Wheaton and Beal 2003; Dupont 2014). This is a key example of what Yochim (2010) describes as the corresponding culture of skateboarding, a tie between media, tricks, people and place. In such scenarios, my status as both a researcher and a skateboarder provides access and understanding to such cultural practices. Such insider knowledge is particularly helpful in the world of sports research facilitating participation activities without the need for explanation of the intricacies of shared knowledge (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

I have not provided an in-depth media analysis of all issues pertaining to space in skateboarding for the primary reason of data saturation. Any exploration of skateboard videos, magazines, websites, blogs and books provides a powerful impression of how space is important, if not central in the embodied and emotional lives of skateboarders (Burnett et al. 2008). Any example can also be richly embedded in a nexus of information about place, past and present. Thus, I have chosen to provide examples which are largely contemporary and distinct, to underline these connections. I have also included first-hand accounts through interviews, and field work that contrast with themes that I explored from secondary sources. For some, it is clear that sites made popular through media and the corresponding culture of skateboarding, resonate at an emotional and spiritual level.

The importance of place

The importance of space in sports is manifold, it extends from the body and encompasses the sites in which sport is performed and watched. Building from the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty (1962) which sees knowledge and perception as extending from sensing the world, place is intrinsic in all human experience. It fits therefore that space is essential to both society, and sport, thus whenever we are talking about sport we also are engaging in some understanding of place (Cresswell 2004). However, self-evident place may appear, its ubiquity risks simplifying its importance. Theoretically, it has been explored by cultural theorists such as Lefebvre (1991) and de Certeau (1984), sociologically in urban studies (Mumford 1961; Park 1967) and in cultural geography (Massey 2005). Place is differentiated from space, location and landscape by Cresswell (2004) who highlights that place is best described as 'meaningful' and is thus created through human interaction. Simply put, we give meaning to spaces, and this emotional and cultural attachment transforms them into places.

In sports, a designated space can become a sporting place. Planned, designed and constructed football pitches, swimming pools, basketball courts and running tracks are legitimate sporting locations. Gaffney and Bale (2004) provide a discussion on the importance of the stadium and how it resonates with a sensuous experience. Significantly, they note that the growth in big commercial landmark sporting events (Wenner and Billings 2017) has led to a focus on grand stadiums as an increasingly generic experience of place in sports. However, they do highlight the fact that the purpose of big sporting events, stadium architecture and communal spectatorship, is to create memorable and historic experiences (Gaffney and Bale 2004). They argue, as does Cresswell (2004), that history creates places through shared memories and narratives that inform peoples' identities and lives.

The experiences of space for skateboarders have been shown to be somewhat different to other sports. Borden's (2001) groundbreaking analysis of skateboarding applies Lefebvre and shows how skateboarders create places of meaning that they derive from functional street architecture. One distinct example is the handrail that is designed for support and safety as one traverses down steps, for the skateboarder it is transformed into an item of dangerous spectacle to be slid and grinded upon with acute balance and timing. Not all skateboarding occurs in the street, stadiums and skateparks are increasingly prominent (Lombard 2010; Thorpe and Wheaton 2017), some even achieving heritage status (Brown 2014). However, it is the case that many important places in skateboarding are overlooked, banal, functional architecture. Yet they hold deep historic and emotional significance for skateboarders. It can be argued that part of the sport of skateboarding is placemaking (Jacobs 1992; Project for Public Places 2017). This is creating a sense of place through culture, practice and community. Wilsey (2014, 113) elaborates on this claiming that, 'skateboarding is bringing emotion to emotionless terrain – unloved parking lots, vacant corporate downtowns long after the office workers are home'. There is thus something peculiar about the way skateboarders make places in that they are places overlooked by others, that they are made significant through discovery and performance.

In skateboarding, there is a focus and love for the banality or urban space. Borden (2001, 224–225) reproduces a two page spread from R.A.D. magazine that shows images of curbs, drain covers and brick walls juxtaposed with photos of skateboarding and poetic text about urban potential. Similarly a book on DIY skatespots constructed throughout the world shows virtually no skateboarding, only the vacant spaces of concrete transitions and curbs (Gilligan 2014). One book from Thrasher Magazine is titled 'the places you must skate before you die' (Burnett et al. 2008). The concrete banks, steps and handrails made famous in skateboarding videos, magazines and social media, are important places that some skateboarders seek out and wish to visit, to perform pilgrimage and pay homage to all that these sites have seen.

Secular pilgrimage and sports

The significance of sites of pilgrimage extends deep into human history and our initial ties to place, as foregrounded in the previous discussion. The European pilgrimages of the thirteenth century and the 'Grand Tour' in the seventeenth century are presented by Urry (2001) as examples of noble and enriching pursuits that over the centuries departed from religious pilgrimage and became tourism. Margry (2008) discusses secular pilgrimage and argues that we have to re-assess what pilgrimage presently encompasses. Sport stadiums (Gaffney and Bale 2004), iconic individuals (Beal 2013b) and spectacular performances (Feezell 2013), all connect to ideas of temples, holy men, miracles and worship. Gammon (2004) states that the importance of place has made some sporting grounds notable places of visit, even for those who are not sports fans. This is a dynamic which mirrors the way churches have become tourist attractions (e.g. the Sistine Chapel).

There is, however, a dualism in pilgrimage, that has a specific place or site as its focus, and the journey that the pilgrim must embark upon. For Turner (1969) there is a triad, where departure, or preparation for it, is also included as a key component. We find that the importance of journey, and departure, is relevant in both religious and secular pilgrimages. Here, there is arguably much material that can relate to lifestyle sports where the importance of mobility (Laderman 2014; Thorpe 2014) has been discussed at length. Place

is sometimes secondary to the nomadic lifestyle of exploration, endless journeying for the perfect spot. Thorpe (2014), for example, highlights how each lifestyle sport has a list of destinations made iconic through media coverage and personal stories. Place is important to the surfer, snowboarder and skateboarder but in very different ways. Natural settings dominate the former two activities, while constructed and found space is important to the latter. Similarly, snowboarding and surfing can be regarded as middle-class pursuits in contrast to skateboarding which although often imagined as white and middle class, is in no way essentialized by these dynamics (Wheaton 2013; Thorpe 2014). However, all are connected by the lack of importance they have with regards to stadiums and sports grounds which have tended to dominate discussion of sports pilgrimage (Gaffney and Bale 2004; Gammon 2004).

One interesting example of sports pilgrimage is the case of 'Pre's Rock' discussed by Wojick (2008). Fans of the long-distance runner Steve Prefontaine make a pilgrimage to the rock where Prefontaine was struck by a car and killed while running in 1975. Yet even this pilgrimage is situated in a larger discussion of space. The rock for example is situated in Eugene, Oregon USA. It is also near to Hayward Field where Prefontaine ran. Visitors to Pre's Rock are thus also visiting Hayward Field and Eugene and not simply visiting the rock alone.

In skateboarding iconic spots are found space (Borden 2001), anonymous urban locales constructed for functional use as walls, handrails or parking lots. Their appropriation by skateboarders, and the documentation of their use and its communication through skateboard media, is a path distinctly different from institutional sport. The iconic places of skateboarding are seldom constructed precisely for skateboarding, they are hidden in plain sight. Even in surfing and snowboarding, locations of importance may well be found space, but these tend to be sites of natural beauty important because of their scenic and functional nature not their mundane urbanism. Academic work on skateboarding has identified the importance of place in skateboarding (Borden 2001; Yochim 2010; Woolley, Hazelwood, and Simkins 2011) yet stopped short of making a distinct connection to its emotional importance and the notion of pilgrimage. However, Beal (2013a) provides an astute explanation of both the importance of place and a list of iconic spots in skateboard culture. She highlights that skateboarders are invested in finding fresh places and creatively adapting sites for new uses. Yet this search also generates a wealth of significant places that stand out, that are revisited, and memorialized. Through acts of skateboarding, spots gain notoriety locally, and through media coverage and association with personalities they gain international recognition and sub-cultural meaning. Beal goes on to state that 'their iconic status is more about what the spot symbolizes than whether it is well designed. The sites need to embody the ideals of skateboarding: creativity, freedom and do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos' (Beal 2013a, 43). While Beal does not frame these spots as pertaining to pilgrimage she identifies them as being iconic precisely because they communicate important ideals and values about skateboarding.

Margry (2008) highlights that accounts of secular pilgrimage complement and problematize the anthropological scholarship on pilgrimage and ritual by Turner and Van Gennep. For Turner, as noted above, the process of pilgrimage has three stages a departure where preparations are made, the journey, which places the pilgrim in a liminal state, and the *communitas*, or the collective and shared experience of the pilgrimage itself. Yet, this same dynamic can also be applied to the most banal examples of mass tourism and thus makes

the relevance of religion or even spiritual matters ambiguous at best (Gladstone 2013). Gammon (2004) suggests that pilgrimage exists on a hypothetical continuum where piety is at one pole and the secular tourist is at the other. He highlights that even for pilgrims who journey for expressly religious purposes, their travel may include other priorities. This can be demonstrated in various ways, Mitchell (2016), for example, discusses gay sex tourism, pilgrimage and racial nostalgia.

An exploration of secular pilgrimage is tied to the sporting event of the annual Melbourne Cup horserace (Cusack and Digance 2009), in which a distinction is made about the social transformations which have seen commercial events 'sacralized' and religious places 'secularised' as little more than tourist attractions. Cusack and Digance tie their analysis to spiritual transformations which see a departure from organized religion. This extends to a body of work on the sociology of religion which sees a greater emphasis on identity construction and individuality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Secular pilgrimage emerges as a way to share a communal experience of place made meaningful through historic expression. Cusack and Digance argue that secular pilgrimages like the Melbourne Cup connect to consumerist rituals and identity construction.

Returning to Turner's notion of *communitas* provides a further way to connect the ritual and religious processes of pilgrimage to lifestyle sports. *Communitas* is to Turner (1969) a form of communal experience that transcends class position. The emphasis on liminality is key here; through shared ritual experience the pilgrim is equal to all others. Race, gender, and wealth are elided in the shared experience. Turner also connects *communitas* to social change and subjective experience highlighting how hippies, marginal persons and social movements echo and represent this shared human experience that he recognizes as a blend of 'lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship' (Turner 1969, 96). Indeed, many skateboarding spots are lowly, banal, liminal places, overlooked sets of steps, drainage ditches and handrails.

In the following, I present examples of sacred places and secular pilgrimage in skateboarding, making the case that the importance of place in skateboarding, as a sport, is differentiated from other significant sporting locations.

Place: mythic California

There is a long-standing association with skateboarders and California that was further popularized in the commercial and critical success of Stacy Peralta's documentary 'Dog Town and Z Boys' (Peralta 2001). The film provides a narrative of the origins of street skateboarding through the creative and rebellious activities of 1970s Californian youth who sought out empty backyard pools as places to develop new styles of skateboarding. Prior to this time, skateboarding had existed in different incarnations with some histories connecting it to the East Coast of the United States as early as 1893 (New York Times 1893). Following this early history, Yochim (2010) argues that skateboarding represents a mythic quality about the American maverick, typified as adventurous, entrepreneurial and male. For many people the association with California as the primary home of skateboarding is matched not only in its popularity in the state, but also with the imagining of California as a place of freedom, creativity and openness. Professional skateboarder Rodney Mullen relays accounts of early visits to California to participate in competitions during this era. He refers to California as a 'Skateboard Mecca' (Mullen and Mortimer 2004, 49) and curates

a quasi-shrine to the artefacts he brings back from his visits, which include unremarkable items such as bus tickets (2004).

Skateboard media that has documented skateboarding in California has also been instrumental in elevating a variety of banal urban locales to iconic places with their own form of spiritual magnetism. Skateboarders worldwide know of a set of four steps in San Francisco referred to as 'Wallenberg', a set of 12 and 15 steps in a Los Angeles high school as 'Hollywood High', and a grass bank at another school called the 'Carlsbad Gap'. The importance of such spaces is underlined in a documentary that was made to pay homage to the Carlsbad Gap after it was destroyed as part of school renovations (Just Skate 2017). A scale model reproduction of the location was manufactured and marketed as a skateboarding toy (FingerSkateSelective 2017) and the spot was reproduced as a location in the Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2 computer game (Tonyhawkgames 2016). Similarly, homage was paid in the form of a farewell skateboard competition to the Clipper spot, a ledge at a San Francisco high school that was scheduled for demolition. Videos of the event (Thrasher 2015a, 2015b) detail professional skateboarders doing tribute tricks and discussing the historic events and personalities associated with the spot. This ties directly to the sense of history that Gaffney and Bale describe (2004). It also highlights the fact that even after places have been destroyed, as in the case of the Carlsbad Gap, they remain culturally significant. They are revisited not in person, but in videos, interviews and photographs. The preservation of places and moments in video which can be re-watched, provides the opportunity for media pilgrimages, which emphasize the importance of the past. Videos can also be the focus of a pilgrimage, providing a context to visit a location.

Matt, a British graphic designer in his early 40s spoke of visiting San Francisco on a business trip and seeking a hotel near to the Embarcadero Centre, a plaza made famous in numerous skateboard videos in the 1990s.

I was in San Francisco I deliberately chose a hotel in Embarcadero. You know, my view, my room. I requested a room looking on to it. Most people would think it's weird but it was like, you know, where else ...? And especially because of 'Questionable', you know, that is where it all went down. Mike Carroll, Rick Howard, everyone ... You know, that's no different from going to Brazil and seeing Christ the Redeemer. That has the same impetus and relationship to me as it would to somebody else of a Christian faith.

Matt describes a form of pilgrimage and makes a comparison to religion. He explains how meaningful the office plaza is to him. This account is also significant because it highlights not just the importance of place but also the individuals associated with it. The explanation emphasizes that Embarcadero is significant because of a skateboard video, Plan B's 'Questionable'. This triad, (place, people, media) is also emphasized by 43-year-old Londoner Andy who regards himself as a skate tourist. He speaks of a recent road trip to California.

Venice Beach was like nirvana. The skate surf culture there is so revered. You're treated, dare I say, a little bit like royalty. If you're on a board people move out the way, cars stop, you skate through traffic. It's just so engrained and the weather is beautiful every day so you can just, you know, skate every day ... Yes, I never experienced that sort of real culture where it was just like a playground for boarding. You've got the strip down there and I was skating past spots where I used to see Natas and Eric Dressen skate in the videos.

In conversation with one Hong Kong skateboarder who has visited California and many famous skateboard spots, I learned of the difficulty of gaining access to some of these locations. For example, he described Wallenberg as a dangerous place to skate because the local

skateboarders do not like tourists. He claimed that, if you go there you must be able to stand your ground and prove through competent skateboarding that you are worthy of visiting the spot. He mentioned that the best way to visit was to go with a local. He also noted that it was common to encounter professional skateboarders at these sites, some would even sell their equipment to skaters passing through. This is worthy of reflection, how possible is it for a tennis fan to visit a court and play with the Williams sisters, or Roger Federer? Skateboarding places are open and democratic, to other skateboarders.

This democracy is only undone by the fact that all skateboarders are equally criminalized and excluded from certain public spaces. Wallenberg is also challenging to access with skateboarders having to wait until the caretaker leaves for the day. The difficulty of gaining access to spots like Wallenberg connects to Preston's (1992) typology that pilgrimage sites are often remote and hard to reach. This adds a challenge to such visits, they may not be expensive to visit, unlike stadiums and big sporting mega-events, but they may similarly be difficult to secure access to. The need to work with local rules, the benefit of having a guide, the need to perform rites at a specific time and the commercial opportunism encountered, all connect this account of Wallenberg to other pilgrim stories. During the Muslim Hajj, Saudi rules must be keenly observed, only Muslims can enter the holy city, pilgrims are required to have a hajj guide, rites must be performed on the appropriate days, and the city is full of paraphernalia to purchase and take home (Bianchi 2004). Just as a prayer mat purchased from Mecca might be valued for its connection to place (despite being made in China) one could argue a set of wheels purchased from a professional at Wallenberg could be a meaningful artefact to a visiting skateboarder. This is not to conflate Wallenberg with Mecca, but more importantly to differentiate other locations of sporting pilgrimage.

A skateboarder from the East Coast of the USA who I interviewed while he toured Hong Kong stated that he had visited Hollywood High and was in awe at the size of the steps and rail. Seeing it in real life gave him even greater respect to the professionals he had watched performing tricks at the site on video. He suggested that in some ways such sites were daunting, but to simply be able to skate in places where 'so much had happened' was a fulfilling experience. This was emphasized by Matt who spoke of the notorious San Francisco spot the Hubba Hideout.

It's just cool to see the place in which those tricks occurred, or how big some of those things were. So, you see like a big set of steps like Hubba, then you know how difficult that stuff really is.

The Hubba Hideout set of steps got their name from the street slang for crack cocaine (Salo 2017). A 'hubba', or small hit of crack, would be sold at the steps because it was secluded and a good place to partake in illicit transactions, hence 'hideout'. The emphasis on the spot for skateboarders is the concrete ledges on either side of the steps which skateboarders grind and slide. These ledges came to be called hubbas. The influence of this spot can be felt in skatespots and skateparks around the world with large concrete ledged handrails all now receiving the moniker of 'hubbas'. With the growth in mainstream appeal of skateboarding the Hubba Hideout has even been referenced in the New York Times in association with professional skateboarder Brian Anderson (Dougherty 2016). Anderson's performance of a 'frontside blunt slide' on the hubba is reproduced in the 1996 skateboard video 'Welcome to Hell' and was famously the trick that secured him sponsorship. The notoriety of the place has been furthered heightened by the fact that Anderson has subsequently become a cultural icon beyond skateboarding, being the first professional skateboarder to come out as gay.

As important as place may well be, not all skateboarders have reverence for iconic locations. Sarah, a 44-year-old Californian pool skater, confessed that she did not feel a particular need to visit any iconic spot. She stated that, 'there is no place that has been that built up in my mind or my consciousness that I, like, need to go there'. Sarah did say that she enjoyed the journey process of travelling to an important spot with her friends, but had no greater passion for any location than another. In some senses her familiarity with California had also made it less of an iconic place. She felt that the skate scene in California was too male centred and sexist and felt a little excluded by it in comparison to other places.

Another example of the importance of media in skateboard placemaking, is demonstrated in the documentary 'The L.A. Boys' (Kennedy 2016) which explores a group of skateboarders who grew up in Los Angeles and were featured in the 1989 video 'Ban This' (Peralta 1989). The four skateboarders, Guy Mariano, Rudy Johnson, Gabriel Rodriguez and Paulo Diaz, all grew up as friends skateboarding together. Stacy Peralta wanted to capture this fraternity in 'Ban This' and their scene corresponded with the increasing dominance of street skateboarding in the late 1980s. All four skateboarders went on to have careers as professional skateboarders and the documentary touchingly reunites the friends 25 years later at the spots they skated in the 'Ban This' video. The friends re-create some of the tricks they performed as teenagers and in one incident they find a dent they made on a metal grate that was captured in the filming of 'Ban This'. Ultimately, the documentary is an exploration of a sporting moment and the places and personalities it is tied to. What differentiates it from other sports is that these locations are a school yard, a handrail and a brick wall in a parking lot.

California is thus branded, for many, as a sort of skateboarding holy land, tied to place, media and people. For some it provides sites of pilgrimage but also an ethic and an ideal. The importance of media, and particularly video, cannot be understated in the process of making places iconic to skateboarders. Skateboard videos, and increasingly documentaries like 'The L.A. Boys', and 'Dog Town and Z Boys', re-inscribe the importance of place by paying homage to locations and their histories.

The journey

My emphasis is upon place, however, it is difficult to provide a discussion on place and pilgrimage without acknowledging the journey that surrounds visits to these key spots. Academic work on skateboarding acknowledges the importance of moving through space, and the local journey that skateboarders embark on as they visit their local spots. Skateboarders in Northern England have been shown to construct nightly nomadic practices where they gather with friends and travel to and through keys spots in their nightly skate (Jenson, Swords, and Jeffries 2012). Much of the reportage on skateboarding in magazines speaks of the road trip which skateboard teams embark on and 'life in the van'. This journeying has been made the subject of an annual 'King of the Road' (KOTR) competition in Thrasher Magazine and now syndicated on the Viceland television network. In KOTR three teams of skateboarders visit various cities across the USA and attempt to complete challenges or tricks at specific locations. Many of these challenges include homage to professional skateboarders, their tricks and importantly their spots (Viceland 2017). Similarly, skateboard videos play on the importance of place and the notion of travelling pilgrims. The iconic 1987 skateboard film by Powell Peralta, 'The Search for Animal Chin' (Peralta

1987), involves a group of skateboarders searching for the mythic Animal Chin who they believe to be a wise skateboarding sage. By the end of the film Chin is revealed to be the embodiment of joy and adventure in skateboarding, not a person or place. In the 2015 film 'We are Blood' (Evans 2015) a group of professional skateboarders take a road trip across the USA, and then a tour of Brazil, Barcelona and Dubai. While the film is a polished piece of commercial skateboarding in part funded by Mountain Dew, its theme is the solidarity and connection that skateboarders share across the world and that the skateboard is itself a passport to skateboarding communities at home and abroad. This was emphasized by one of my informants in Hong Kong. At 22 years of age, he claimed that his skateboard meant that he could go to any city in the world and find skateboarders and a community to help and support him. Returning to Yochim's (2010) argument about the corresponding tie between skateboard media and skateboard culture, we can understand that the journey is important in skateboard videos because it is important in skateboard culture and vice versa.

Thus, the journey in skateboarding is a well-documented and important element of pilgrimage. But as I have already foregrounded, part of the journey is also in the representations provided in media. Over years, and decades, skateboarders see the importance of place revisited, re-made and consolidated. Pilgrimage includes a journey, but skateboard media also provides an historic journey. For example, Thrasher magazine (Phelps 2017) reports on an annual competition where an important skate spot is revisited. The article which reports on the 2017 event begins by revisiting the history of the contest itself, citing Mark Gonzales as the first to ollie the Wallenberg steps in 1990. Phelps then mentions other skateboarders and the tricks they did down Wallenberg, 'Markovich trying the kickflip ... Drew frontside flicked it, Darrell switch backside 180'd and Lindsey did the perfect heelflip'. The article serves as a cultural reminder of place and history and the personalities that created it. The writing is always slightly ambiguous, not open to the novice, and again contingent on past experience and shared knowledge, further consolidating the fact that skateboarding is in itself a journey.

Beyond California

Legendary skateboard spots can be found across the world and include the 'Brooklyn Banks' in New York (Mehring 2017), Philadelphia's 'Love Park' (Howell 2005; Németh 2006), the 'Marble Wave' ledge in Shenzhen, 'Macba' in Barcelona and London's 'Southbank' (Borden 2015). One Instagram feed (@iconicspots 2017) is a collection of photos of these vacant urban spaces and to the casual observer these spots would not represent skateboarding at all. In recent years, there has been a variety of activism from skateboarders to protect such iconic locations in skateboard culture (Howell 2005; Borden 2015). Similarly, some skateparks have achieved heritage status, a move that details both the cultural impact of skateboarding and the depth of communal association to certain spots (Brown 2014). The 'Bro Bowl' built in Florida in 1979, was the first skatepark in the USA to be listed on the National Register of Historic Place in 2013 (Skateboarding Heritage Foundation 2017). It has subsequently been demolished in a redevelopment of the surrounding area. The bowl was laser scanned and reconstructed in an effort to preserve the site and its legacy (Pratt 2015).

What has made some skateboard spots so famous is not their popularity as places to practice skateboarding, but a recognition of the struggles that others have endured at these locations.

A set of 25 steps in Lyon has become iconic not because of its physical features, but because of the history and personalities attached to it. In the 2002 film 'Sorry' from the skateboard company Flip, professional skateboarder Ali Boulala attempts to ollie, or jump, down the large set of 25 stairs. While coming close to making the ollie, Boulala ultimately fails and injures himself. One commentary on the video from the skateboard website Jenkem argues that Boulala's failure is a triumph for skateboarders.

Ali Boulala's Sorry part is the realest account of skateboarding ever produced by a professional skateboarder ... He bails. He gets hurt. He gets really hurt. And he doesn't win ... he's just like us. He is our champion (Ridge 2015).

Boulala's failure is seen to communicate the essence of skateboarding, not winning. More tragically, Boulala was involved in a motorcycle accident that killed his friend and Flip teammate Shane Cross in Australia in 2007. Boulala was also seriously injured in the accident and was subsequently imprisoned for manslaughter. For many people the 25 steps at Lyon belong to Boulala and the failure echoes with the tragedy of his story. However, the March 2015 edition of Thrasher magazine pictured skateboarder Aaron 'Jaws' Homoki jumping down the Lyon set of steps. Within less than 24 hours of the picture being posted on the Thrasher Facebook page the picture received several hundred comments. The image was controversial and discussion revolved around specific themes, 'the spot was sacred', 'Jaws had failed to do what Boulala had done', 'Jaws wore protection', 'Boulala had been disrespected'. The achievement was made even more awkward in many people's eyes by the fact that Thrasher had invited Boulala along to bear witness. Many comments on social media were unsure if this was ultimately respect to, or mockery of, Boulala. The depth of feeling surrounding the 25 stairs at Lyon speaks little of the ability of a skateboarder to ollie down them, but much about shared cultural referents, sense of history and legacies. Here, a connection to Turner's (1969) notion of *communitas* is apparent. The specific urban architecture is in itself liminal, a place in which people move through and pay little attention to. Yet, this liminal zone is one in which a powerful communal experience is shared. Perhaps even more relevant is the idea of spiritual magnetism (Preston 1992) communicated through a tragic personality, it is in part the failure and flaws in Boulala in which people identify.

Morrison Hill: Hong Kong

The previous examples have mostly engaged with locations in the USA, but the global popularity of skateboarding means that spots have gained importance throughout the world. As a result, the importance of place in skateboard culture leads some skateboarders to associate different cities around the world with specific skateboarding spots. These tend to have been made famous through magazines and videos. In East Asia, a number of spots in Chinese cities have become famous and brought with them a slew of skateboard pilgrims seeking the endless array of marble ledges that cities like Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai offer. One skateshop in Shanghai produced a T-shirt with the words 'Come skate Shanghai, everybody is doing it', sarcastically mocking the large numbers of skateboarding tourists passing through. Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region of China since 1997, has a different history to other Chinese cities, and a different importance in terms of travel. Hong Kong is often a gateway to China a key transportation hub and a convenient place to get visas to travel into China. Many tourists, and skateboarders alike, stop off in Hong Kong as they travel through East Asia. In Hong Kong one small bicycle track in Morrison Hill

Road has long been used by skateboarders and has been awarded skatepark status by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). It has received international recognition because of its unusual architecture that includes humps and winding paths through lush vegetation. Morrison Hill embodies the ideals identified by Beal (2013a), its architecture is unusual, and corresponds with the freedom and individuality that skateboarders tend to value. Similarly, as a found spot appropriated for skateboarding it corresponds with the DIY ethos and creativity found in skateboarding culture. As a frequent visitor to this site since 2001, I have met various visiting professionals that include X-Games champion Eric Koston and Zoo York rider Zered Bassett. Morrison Hill has thus become a site for skateboard pilgrims and with each notable visit the spot becomes more widely known. In October of 2014 Street League champion Shane O'Neill visited Hong Kong and posted a picture of Morrison Hill on his Instagram feed (@shanejoneill 2014). The post featured a shot of the skatepark with O'Neill's board in the background, and the text 'HONG KONG'. The message was simple, to skateboarders Morrison Hill signifies Hong Kong. The dazzling skyscrapers and the busy harbour that adorn so many postcards of the territory are not chiefly important to skateboarders when they imagine Hong Kong. In skateboard culture place can be communicated through iconic spots. During O'Neill's visit he skated with local skateboarders who frequent Morrison Hill. While many of these skateboarders were excited to skateboard with a visiting professional, O'Neill was arguably performing a form of ritualistic deference to the locals i.e. showing them and their spot respect by engaging with them. Similarly professional skateboarder Torey Pudwil visited Hong Kong specifically to film a line in Morrions Hill skatepark that featured in a video he released funded by his sponsors (Red Bull 2017).

With reference to the Wallenberg example, homage is simply not paid to place, but to the denizens of the spot also. In conversation with visiting professional skateboarder Jake Johnson I learned that the Morrison Hill spot was well known to professional skateboarders in the United States and it was a key location on any visit to Hong Kong. Johnson was enthusiastic about finally getting a chance to skate what he regarded was an iconic spot. The fact that both Converse shoes, and in 2017 New Balance Numeric shoes, both chose to do skateboarding events at Morrison Hill underlines the importance of this place and how it is remade and reaffirmed by the skateboarders that visit. This association is further highlighted by video footage of skateboarders at Morrison Hill available on Youtube. One montage includes more than eight well-known professional skateboarders including Chris Cole, Stefan Janoswki, and Jamie Thomas (Rodgers 2017). Again, beyond the world of skateboarding these names may carry little relevance, but like Steve Prefontaine to the world of running, they carry a depth of meaning and association to many skateboarders.

Returning to the literature on pilgrimage, Morrison Hill could be understood as having a form of spiritual magnetism and a type of 'sacred geography', a place not made for skateboarders but embraced by them. It has also been further developed through association with various personalities, who are clearly not supernatural but recognized for their skill (Preston 1992). The numerous visits from professional skateboarders characterize Morrison Hill as a mandatory place to visit for skateboarders passing through Hong Kong. The obligation, as Preston has argued, is both an important part of pilgrimage and a notable part of sacralized modern tourism (1992). These accounts highlight that place in skateboarding is important, but differentiated from place in other sports since many of skateboarding's most important

spots are not legitimate sporting facilities, they are banal urban locations, yet they hold a sense of history that equals that of stadiums.

Conclusion

These varied accounts of important places in skateboard culture connect to existing discussions of both space (Cresswell 2004) and sport (Henning 1997; Bale 2003; Gaffney and Bale 2004; Vertinsky and Bale 2004; Wenner and Billings 2017). They highlight that skateboarding is not unlike other sports in the sense of history surrounding placemaking. Yet, skateboarding is differentiated in the types of spaces that become significant. Much of skateboarding's iconic places are overlooked urban space. This means that they are unidentified to the average person unlike the ways stadiums are distinct even to those disinterested or unaware of sports. Skateboarding's important locations may be denied to skateboarders, they may have to trespass, risk fines or wait till late at night to visit them. Yet, they are also democratic, not everyone can score a goal in Wembley stadium, but any skateboarder can visit Wallenberg, or the Lyon 25.

What is most significant in this discussion is that place in skateboarding is intimately tied to history, places become vessels of the past and are connected to photographs and videos. The importance of skateboard videos in placemaking is distinct, and is shown to be self-aware and self-referential. Skateboarders remember 'who did what and where'. Thus, the stadiums of skateboarding are handrails, curbs and steps. There is little room for spectators in these locations and thus the importance of the photographer and videographer is elevated or reinforced by the culture of skateboarding itself. With skateboarding's inclusion in the 2020 Olympics we must consider how the increased popularity of the sport will correspond with this sacred past. Will skateboarders sustain the importance of urban place? One answer is in skateboard media, if magazines, social media and video continue to dominantly represent skateboarding in the streets, urban space will continue to be significant. Skateboarding provides a clear departure from the increasingly generic spaces of sports stadiums that Gaffney and Bale (2004) note.

The other component of this discussion is the emotional and spiritual life of skateboarders. This has been shown to be bonded to space. The accounts of Boulala, the 'L.A. Boys' and my informants, show that places in skateboarding form part of the narrative of people's lives. Thus, while a stadium or tennis court can be regarded as hallowed ground (Gaffney and Bale 2004; Wagg 2015) so too can a set of steps. The distinction that remains significant is that while skateboarding has been accepted as a commercialized and legitimate sport, its practice and acceptance as an urban performance and culture is still overlooked, criminalized and contested.

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