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# Insider Knowledge, Outsider Practice: The Disruptive Liberatory Potential of Skateboarding in US Higher Education

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Abstract: This conceptual paper articulates how the unique social, experiential, and navigational perspectives of college skateboarders contribute to their potential as changemakers in higher education. Drawing from the theory of campus ecology and multidisciplinary body of skateboarding scholarly literature, this paper applies the unique navigational and analytical lenses of skate culture to render visible oppressive institutional conditions that are currently absent from educational scholarship. In order to accomplish this application, I conduct an extensive search for literature, and begin the writing by contextualizing the macro- and micro-systemic elements of the U.S. tertiary system and emplacing skateboarding within them. Then, I use skate scholarship to argue that skateboarding provides new critical perspectives on the philosophies of public space, policing, and social deterrence that manifest in university spaces. Additionally, this work explores campus skaters' resistance to systemic challenges such as racism, cisheteropatriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism. I conclude by offering future directions for both theoretical and empirical research that employ skateboarding as a lens through which to examine U.S. higher education.

Keywords: higher education, skateboarding, campus ecology, public space, philosophy

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## Insider Knowledge, Outsider Practice: The Disruptive Liberatory Potential of Skateboarding in US Higher Education

Skateboarding[1] is a widely popular social phenomenon in the United States, boasting more than six million participants in 2017, roughly 50% of whom are college-aged—at least 18 years old (Corwin et al., 2019b). As both an individual sport and cultural community, skateboarding plays a significant role in the social identity development of its participants, shaping their navigations of and interactions with the broader society (Glenney & Mull, 2018). Many of the sport's core values align well with the goals of education and schooling, including physical and mental health development, skill-building and demonstration of mastery, creativity, intrinsic motivation, and self-authorship (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Corwin et al., 2019b; Seifert & Hedderson, 2010). However, skateboarding's liminal position between mainstream and subculture (Beal et al., 2017; Dinces, 2011; Nolan, 2003) as well as its longstanding association with criminality (Dickinson et al., 2022; Németh, 2006) have prevented the sport and its associated interest groups from developing substantive formal relationships to colleges, universities, and higher education research communities. This is in direct contrast to other sport cultures present in U.S. higher education. For example, the highly integrated relationship between American higher education and the sports it sponsors in intercollegiate competition is well-documented (e.g.,Bass et al., 2015; Comeaux, 2020). Outside of college athletics, other active transit sports such as cycling are typically welcomed on campus in both political and infrastructural capacities. Nevertheless, skateboarding maintains a significant, yet under-examined, presence on U.S. campuses as both an athletic performative practice and a subcultural community.

Skateboards provide students and other campus affiliates with a transportation option that requires fewer economic and logistic commitments than cars or bicycles (Fang & Handy, 2019). In addition, university grounds commonly hold public space designations, inviting skaters to enjoy the well-maintained infrastructures and unique physical features on campuses. On the other hand, institutional administrations, facilities teams, law enforcement agencies, and other members of the campus community have their own views and perspectives—often negative—on the sport's presence in campus life that can vary between institutions (Jackson et al., 2018). A brief survey of college and university newspaper articles written since the onset of the 21st century reveals this variety of perspectives about skateboarding on campuses (Alvarenga, 2014; Dinh, 2012; Spallone, 2016). These opinions and reactions to the sport often mirror those shared by broader society, but they are influenced by the unique institutional contexts present in higher education. While a robust campus discourse about skateboarding abounds, the scholarly conversation about the sport and its relationship to higher education is severely limited. The topic is almost nonexistent from education research outlets, and existing scholarship on skateboarding and higher education focuses primarily on skateboarding as a mode of transportation (e.g., Fang & Handy, 2019) or a learning tool (e.g., Zeng et al., 2022). This dearth of social scientific and theoretical knowledge about skateboarding and its relationship to U.S. higher education prevents education scholars from accessing and utilizing the analytical skills that skaters employ when navigating their environments. These skills include active assessment of the built environment's accessibility and functionality, recognition of exclusionary and hostile design, and intellectual capacities for problem-solving and social development. In the practice of

[1] I use skateboarding/skateboarders and skating/skaters interchangeably throughout this paper.

skateboarding, skaters may employ them with mindful intention, but over time they become intuitive and embodied. If better understood, these skills will provide increasingly pointed opportunities for education scholars, institutional administrators, and activists to expose, critique, and restructure the oppressive ecological elements of the U.S. tertiary system that shield dominant social groups and cause harm to its marginalized stakeholders.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this writing is to articulate a critical social-political-economic framework for examining U.S. higher education using skateboarding's uniquely transgressive worldview and its associated scholarship's multidisciplinary approach. It is paramount to articulate the scope of this work clearly. It is neither a call for universities to welcome skateboarding as a mode of transportation nor a recommendation to the reader to begin participation in the sport, although both of these aims should *definitely* be priorities of future writing. Rather, it is an invitation for conventionally trained education scholars to frame their empirical and philosophical examinations into the tertiary system through the lens of the skateboarder; a lens that I argue provides a unique capacity for uncovering truth and challenging injustice. Given the ever-present need for expanded modes of inquiry in educational scholarship, engagement with alternative subcultures such as skateboarding can provide researchers with new epistemological frameworks through which to ground their work. Thus, this writing engages with perspectives from outside the intellectual traditions of the education field to render visible elements of higher education previously unconsidered in the discipline's literature.

## Author Positionality and Acknowledgements

As a lifelong skater raised in the communities from which skateboarding emerged in San Diego County, California, my ecological orientation in any environment is significantly influenced by skateboarding. My sense of movement through space, interpretations of my physical and cultural environments, and worldview cannot be divorced from my participation in the sport. I have used these emotional and cognitive orientations as a collegiate skater, from the time I entered my undergraduate program through my doctoral program, both at large public research universities. These same orientations bring me to this work and drive my passion to improve the visibility of skateboarding in higher education, particularly at institutions like the ones I have attended, where I believe significant social and cultural reimagining is a particularly urgent necessity. Given this passion, it is also important for me to acknowledge that my worldview and capacity to bring about holistic change is limited. As a white, cisgender, straight man, both the U.S. collegiate environment and skateboarding culture reflect my specific socialization to the detriment of my marginalized peers. To this end, I commit to engaging decolonial, Indigenous, antiracist, and Queer perspectives and voices in my writing.

"The word 'thank you' doesn't exist in O'odham culture … sharing is simply implied, and we believe that all good deeds come back to the giver in some way" (Escalante, 2007). This paper was prepared on the lands of the Kumeyaay, Luiseño, Tongva, Cahuilla, and Serrano peoples, upon which I am an uninvited occupier and temporary steward. I skate, learn, and grow on all these lands as well as those of the Tohono O'odham, Pascua Yaqui, Diné (Navajo), and Apache peoples.

## Methodology

To accomplish the aims of this work, I draw on prior empirical and theoretical work situating skateboarding within the campus ecologies of U.S. higher education institutions (Corwin et al., 2019a; Davidson, 2023). The scholarship used in this study was collected via a robust literature search process from the following online databases: Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, and the Educational Resource Information Center. As skateboarding is a relatively young subject in social scientific and philosophical scholarship, I also conducted targeted searches for authors who presented at *The Stoke Sessions: An International Conference on the Culture, History and Politics of Surfing and Skateboarding* hosted by the San Diego State University Surf/Skate Studies Collaborative.

I have created the term *insider-outsider* to position college students who skateboard within their campus ecologies, as they are integrated within the institutional environment yet simultaneously transgressing its prescribed physical and cultural boundaries. With this novel role in mind, I discuss how skateboarding culture and practice offer ways to resist social, educational, and economic injustice on college campuses. As *insider-outsiders*, the skateboarding community interprets engagement with public space, capital generation, and the realization of human potential in ways that directly challenge the American tertiary system's settler colonial neoliberal status quo, a status quo that is upheld by a *spatial-natural imaginary* that renders many oppressive institutional policies invisible to campus-goers.

In the ensuing passages, I discuss the roles and perspectives of the *insider-outsider* identity in university spaces. I begin with a broad philosophical approach to understanding how the physical and cultural dimensions of campuses form unique urban ecologies rife with latent tensions over public space, social norms, and economic productivity. Skateboarding's presence on campuses often renders these tensions explicit. With this approach established, I turn to an exploration of how campus skateboarders interact with their universities in three alternative capacities: (1) interpretations of campus environments, (2) semiotic navigation of physical infrastructure, and (3) disruptions to the rhythm of capital production. Next, I turn to the issue of social justice in higher education, and how skateboarding's presence on campus offers novel challenges to, or reinforcements of, dominant social orders that marginalize university students and other affiliates. I conclude by providing future directions for skate scholarship in higher education, including theoretical, empirical, and practical methods for scholars and practitioners to utilize the *insider-outsider* perspectives of campus skaters as means to advance justice.

## Philosophical Orientation: Higher Education and Skateboarding Ecologies

It is important to consider that the relationship between skateboarding and U.S. universities is informed by the philosophical and operational underpinnings of the nation's tertiary system. This system's settler colonial (e.g., Lee et al., 2020; Nash, 2019), and neoliberal (e.g., Giroux, 2014; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) functions are well documented in the discipline's literature. The U.S. tertiary system's prominent interest groups, including governments and private enterprises, maintain a complicated subversive set of political and discursive mechanisms by which to shield the true destructive nature of U.S. university operations from the public. These mechanisms highlight tertiary institutions' contributions to social mobility, benign economic development, improved civic engagement, and other benefits yet belie their keystone position in maintaining the dominant status quo. In the ensuing passages,

I interrogate the higher education ecology from broad to narrow and emplace skateboarding within this ecology.

## Institutional Enterprise, Pollution, and Leisure

Under the present global neoliberal economic regime largely driven by U.S. imperialism, engines of knowledge production and dissemination, such as universities, enjoy a privileged position (Giroux, 2014). This economic regime's consequences include the solidification of academic capitalism as the *modus operandi* for U.S. universities, wherein state disinvestment in higher education forces institutions to move to the market and privatize the knowledge they generate via patents, technology transfer, and state/private contracts (McClure, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In many ways, the operation of academic capitalism and its contributions to anthropogenesis is inexorably tied to *pollution* and *pollutives*. Pollutives can be material, such as toxic chemicals used in industry and manufacturing, but they can also be considered perversions or defilements of normative social orders, such as the skateboarding community's encroachment into public spaces (O'Connor et al., 2022). Thus, while material pollutives are often objectively measurable, social pollutives are context-dependent, existing only insofar as one or more dominant systems consider them aberrant. Relationships between universities, governments, and private enterprises contribute to materially pollutive knowledge uses including war, energy, pharmaceuticals, heavy industry infrastructure, and manufacturing, which undoubtedly have a negative impact on the global community (e.g., Barron et al., 2023; Giroux, 2014). At the same time, U.S. campuses maintain physical infrastructures marked by expansive land use and the notable integration of natural-environmental elements such as lawns and shade trees, widely considered contributors to ecological well-being normally absent from urban spaces. (Bruce, 2011; Fiene & Sabbatini, 2011; Kriken, 2004). While nominally open to the public, these spaces are heavily policed in order to maintain institutional reputations as urban oases—breaks from normal networks of residential and commercial development; leisure sites amongst a broader pollutive, entropic climate that the institutions themselves help create. Universities' accumulated wealth, foundationally stolen from dispossessed Indigenous communities and enslaved Africans (Lee et al., 2020; Nash, 2019; Wilder, 2014), contributes to the construction of heavily monitored, architecturally totemic built environments and fabricated green spaces.

In the wake of these processes I argue that such seemingly unpolluted, "green" campuses create and maintain a kind of *spatial-natural imaginary* in the minds of university affiliates such as students, faculty, and staff, which shields them from the pollutive disjointedness between the campus grounds and their marginalia. The spatial-natural imaginary is an ontological orientation—a specific confluence of existential modalities—in the minds and behaviors of campus interest groups. These ways of being that make up the spatial-natural imaginary are informed by normative educational culture and campus physical environments, as well as the social, political, economic, and geographical relationships between institutions and their surrounding communities. Campus affiliates such as students, faculty, staff, and even members of the public are trained to consider university grounds as green islands in gray oceans of urban blight, where cleanliness, safety, and prosperity are reinforced in two key capacities: (1) discursively via campus communication with the public and (2) semiotically via architecture and landscape. The spatial-natural imaginary is especially pronounced in environments such as deserts and dry coastal climates common to the Southwestern United States, where skateboarding is particularly popular (e.g., California, Arizona, New Mexico). In these spaces,

colonial logics motivate universities to exercise violent dominion over land use, leading to the implantation of green spaces in arid locales populated by non-native plants which require significantly more water than the environment can sustain. Prior examinations of space and social difference—particularly race—have determined that space and place are inherently contested (Neely & Samura, 2011; Soja, 2010), and that sociocultural dominion is (1) the most significant determinant in the development of built environments and (2) often shielded from public scrutiny in said environments (Lipsitz, 2007). Systems of social power and subordination such as whiteness and settler colonialism assign tacit meaning to spatial contexts depending on who inhabits them, in which "certain spaces come to be known as welcoming, safe, and desirable, while others are rendered dangerous, unsafe, lacking in value, and inferior" (Duran et al., 2022, p. 614; Lipsitz, 2007). In keeping with this theorization of space, I posit that institutions of higher education reinforce the *spatial-natural imaginary* via a set of discursive strategies which promote universities' contributions to social welfare and human progress while reordering historical and current practices of land seizure, labor exploitation, military industrialism, and knowledge gatekeeping. I move to understand that university leadership maintains a contradictory relationship with pollution, with institutions investing significant capital in *material* pollutives while expending great energy and intention on eliminating what leadership deems *social* pollutives from the campus grounds (O'Connor et al., 2022). The U.S. higher education system is foundationally informed by various systems of dominion and marginalization including white supremacy (Gusa, 2010; Wilder, 2014), neoliberal economics (Giroux, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and settler colonialism (Lee et al., 2020). Thus, the social pollutives that institutions seek to eliminate include the perceived ills in the communities surrounding institutions as well as the personhoods, conducts, beliefs, challenges to authority, and lifeways that exist in defiance of these dominant orders—those of the racially, sexually, and socioeconomically marginalized (Duran et al., 2022). In addition, universities' safety discourses dehumanize members of the subaltern such as the unhoused, undocumented, and those participating in informal economies such as sex work, drug dealing, graffiti art, and panhandling.

A recent development in the discipline of leisure studies is the chromatic conceptualization of leisure sites—i.e., *green spaces* such as public parks or national forests and *blue spaces* such as public beaches, rivers, and lakes (O'Connor et al., 2022). Skateboarding, by its nature, occurs in *gray spaces*; access to urban infrastructure is a necessary prerequisite to participation (O'Connor et al., 2022). I offer that the subtextual implications of chromatic language matter significantly in understanding the impact of the *spatial-natural imaginary* on the campus community, and ultimately how skateboarding disrupts it. Whatever *greenness* does exist on university campuses contributes to campus interest groups' notions of their institutions as sites of social and ecological wellness and leisure, despite the fact that the built environments of college campuses contribute to anthropogenesis at vastly accelerated rates when compared to other human-built spaces, rendering them gray spaces in green cloaks. For example, campus leaders, influenced by normative colonial perceptions of how university spaces are designed, consider the maintenance of fabricated green leisure spaces more important than the conservation of precious water resources, even in climates where these water resources may be better directed to sustain human life off campus. This masks *grayness*, which in turn carries pollutive connotations. As a form of leisure, skateboarding's dependence on urbanicity thematically associates it with ideas of urban blight and the "darkness" of U.S. cities. Skateboarding's presence on campus, therefore, forces campus community members to disengage from the

*spatial-natural imaginary*, as the sport's presence has a de-cloaking effect on those who observe it on campus.

## Institutional Operation, Oppression, and Control

University leadership and planning teams design, construct, and maintain the built environments of campuses with purposes specific to tertiary education's academic capitalist operations (Fiene & Sabbatini, 2011; Kriken, 2004; Renn & Patton, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Stakeholders groups are invested in the campus' ability to catalyze the production and dissemination of knowledge capital and serve as a site of place-based institutional identity development (Bruce, 2011; Fiene & Sabbatini, 2011; McClure, 2016; Renn & Patton, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). To maintain this capital generation operation institutional leaders maintain rigid perspectives on conduct, control, deterrence, and aesthetic order despite a public perception of social permissiveness (Dickinson et al., 2022; Howell, 2001; Renn & Patton, 2011). For example, the culture of law and order influences the policing of college and university campuses in terms of both the structural arrangements of campus agencies and campus officers' perceptions of their roles within their jurisdictions despite the significant difference in public safety needs of campuses vis-à-vis the wider community (Dizon, 2021). Institutions employ hyper-policing as a form of doctrinal protectionism against perceived external social and ecological threats to the campus physical environment, which is designed to center places of institutional mythmaking, heritage, or memory that students, alumni, and other members of the campus community venerate; these include sports facilities, monuments, and historic campus buildings (Craig et al., 2011; Dyreson, 2010). Frequently, the myths that these sites uphold are underpinned by the same white supremacist, imperialist, and exclusionary philosophies that inform the experiences of numerous marginalized student groups, particularly People of Color, women, and Queer communities (e.g., Duran et al., 2022).

Racism and white supremacy are fundamental to the campus ecologies of U.S. higher education given the American tertiary system's inexorable connection to Black enslavement (Wilder, 2014) and Indigenous dispossession (Lee et al., 2020; Nash, 2019). These historical systems of dominion continue to operate in the present day, rendering U.S. universities as embedded sites of white supremacy (Gusa, 2010). Ecological interpretations of race and higher education reveal the violence inherent to People of Color's experiences on American university campuses both in their built environments (Duran et al., 2022; Krusemark, 2010) and their cultures (Gusa, 2010; Oxendine et al., 2020; Patton et al., 2016; Renn & Patton, 2011). Systemic racism impacts campus policing practices as it does in wider U.S. society, forcing Students of Color—Black male students in particular—to endure enhanced surveillance, antagonistic treatment, and outright violence at the hands of campus police (Dizon, 2021; Smith et al., 2007). Based on the U.S. tertiary system's long and foundational history of cisheteropatriarchy, colleges and universities are also sites of *de jure* and *de facto* exclusion for women and LGBTQ+ people (Patton et al., 2016; Renn & Patton, 2011). This exclusion manifests ecologically in the campus social and physical environments, which commit discrimination and violence upon people in marginalized positions on the gender and sexuality spectrums (Patton et al., 2016).

As higher education is a raced and gendered system, so is skateboarding; the sport remains heavily white-dominated (Corwin et al., 2019b) and male-dominated (Abulhawa, 2008). Critically, white cisheteropatriarchal spatial dominance within skate culture has created an environment for marginalized skaters which alienates, ridicules, objectifies, and excludes them

(Geckle & Shaw, 2020; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013, 2014; Williams, 2020). Thus, interpretations of skateboarding as counterculture must attend to the multiple forms of social dominion that inform its current constitution. Of particular importance to this work, a significant tension exists in the space between skateboarding's inherent social transgressiveness and its reinforcement of cisheteropatriarchy. While the presence of skateboarding in urban spaces often disrupts the rhythms and anthropological norms undergirded by dominant forces in American society, its challenges to (in)justice in the realms of racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities must push against not only these rhythms and norms, but also the oppression present within skateboarding subculture. Movements among marginalized skaters have long challenged the dominant status quo in the skateboarding community, and in doing so they also doubly challenge unjust externalities in wider society.

For example, despite public perception to the contrary, Skaters of Color are integral to the sport's history, culture, and continued development (Sueyoshi, 2015; Williams, 2021), and female and Queer subcultures within the sport have made significant challenges to the hetero-masculine hegemony in public spaces (Abulhawa, 2008; Corwin et al., 2019b; Fang & Handy, 2019; Geckle & Shaw, 2020). Additionally, despite its anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian cultural origins and continued valuation of resistance to mainstream society, skateboarding has not been immune to the same economic regime catalyzing changes to higher education (Beal et al., 2017; Corwin et al., 2019b). Thus, academic capitalism and skateboarding corporate interests share a common capitalist logic, particularly with regard to how profit interests influence the discourse of both higher education and skateboarding as public goods committed to community development (Beal et al., 2017; Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). While college skaters may view their position on college campuses through a lens of subcultural identity, the actual extent to which participation in skateboarding constitutes a rejection of the capitalist order is mitigated by how much of this identity is constructed by capitalist interests (Batuev & Robinson, 2017; Cantin-Brault, 2015; Dinces, 2011). In fact, the corporate underpinnings of skate culture as seen through skate equipment, new media, lifestyle goods, and organized competition serve to legitimize skateboarding's cultural identifiers within a capitalist order (Batuev & Robinson, 2017; Cantin-Brault, 2015; Corwin et al., 2019a; Dinces, 2011) in a manner similar to the ways that universities employ campus mythologies and institutional symbols to create marketable commodities.

## The *Insider-Outsider* Position

The preceding points of critique highlight the fact that skate culture contains similar sites of struggle to those in higher education and broader society—the struggles for justice, liberation, and free expression on the bases of race, gender, sexuality, and economics. However, the sport's worldview is quite culturally distinct from that of the modern university. Skateboarding celebrates cultural aberrance, critical thinking, and the questioning of authority for authority's sake, all values that shape social movements for change and run counter to institutional policies and practices. Thus, despite the systemic challenges inherent to skate culture, the sport offers significant liberatory potential within the higher education environment. Beal et al. (2023) postulate that skateboarding is not inherently progressive, but it is almost certainly transgressive. Transgressiveness comes not from an outright rejection of social norms, systems, and practices, but from a willing extension of thought and behavior beyond their prescribed boundaries; a challenge to the assumption that these boundaries should exist in the first place. For those who

are simultaneously interested in resisting the oppressive higher education status quo, yet hold affiliation with their institutions, the question of how to ontologically self-realize looms large. Institutions enact the *spatial-natural imaginary* to make both social ills and marginalized experiences invisible. In higher education, skateboarding is an act of rendering visible using insider knowledge of the campus environment and an outsider practice of observational performance to disclose concealed mechanisms of social control and oppression.

One compelling argument regarding skateboarding's transgressiveness asserts that "a skater can be both 'in place' and 'out of place' at the same time" (Nolan, 2003, p. 311). As I attempt to situate skateboarding and its participants within the higher education ecology, this may be the most apt argument with which to proceed. Students and other campus affiliates who skateboard exist simultaneously in multiple ecological realms. They are undoubtedly affiliated with their institutional and broader higher education cultures, yet also associate with a sport culture that encourages counterinterpretation of social environments. The sport's reputation, either earned or perceived by mainstream society, as independent, countercultural, and transgressive often labels participants as threats to public order (Borden, 2001; Chiu, 2009; Dickinson et al., 2022; Nolan, 2003). Skaters typically occupy regulatory positions as pedestrians, whereas the other most common type of active transport, bicycles, are considered motor vehicles. Therefore, skateboards may not be permitted on roadways, but also may be restricted, either materially or temporally, from walk-only zones on campus given the perceived (unfounded) threat they pose to pedestrian safety. Thus, campus skaters' positions are, due to the social and political structure of the campus-built environment, liminal by nature. Thus, skateboarders on campus are *insider-outsiders*; members whose spatial location within and impact upon the campus ecology is fluid.

## The Skater's Ecological Orientation to Campus

The skater notices intrinsically what the trained higher education scholar does not. This is, of course, a generalization, yet critical gaps in the discipline's literature show evidence to support such a statement. In the ensuing passages, I provide an analysis of the skateboarder's ecological navigation of the university environment via a multidimensional framing of skateboarding participation. Affiliation with the sport renders visible elements of the campus ecology that stakeholders attempt to cloak from public scrutiny. In the following sections, I explore the various capacities in which the *insider-outsider* perspectives of skateboarding create modes of environmental interaction and interpretation unique to participants.

### Alternative Interpretations of Campus Environments

Given that physical infrastructures make up the necessary underpinnings of skateboarding as art and practice, skaters are heavily invested in the development of built environments, yet may care little for the intended use of these environments and whether or not they succeed on their own merits (McDuie-Ra, 2022). Rather, the skateboarding community is an *adjacent infrastructural public*, assessing infrastructure on the basis of its mis-use value and experiencing physical spaces differently than those for whom this infrastructure was developed (Collier et al., 2016; McDuie-Ra, 2022). On university campuses, skaters' membership in this adjacent public manifests in both practical and expressive capacities. Commuters or travelers occupy a liminal zone between infrastructures developed for pedestrians, bicycles, or cars, as campus

transportation initiatives do not consider skateboarding as a present and viable modality (Fang & Handy, 2019; Jackson et al., 2018). More critically, skateboarding's elements of play and performance have a transformative effect on the relationship between campus infrastructure and the individual. These infrastructures' restrictions on car travel, broad open pathways, creative energies, and public gathering opportunities all position university grounds as ideal playgrounds with which to engage in both the material and social dimensions of skating practice. Rather than adhering to built environments' nominal roles as engines of capital generation and sites of quiet leisure, skaters view them as "playgrounds," where distinctive elements of the urban campus geography yield greater access and compatibility with the sport's methods and improved opportunities for social engagement among fellow skaters (Aschenbrand, 2022; Woolley & Johns, 2001).

As participants in a multi-sensate artistic and athletic practice, skateboarders constantly seek out new ways of interacting with physical space and its associated social environments, which allows them to see their university campus through the lens of a skilled, creative resident-practitioner (Bäckström & Sand, 2019). They consider the skateability of the institution's built environments as the primary metric of infrastructural quality and in doing so reconstitute the derivation of pleasure from these environments, simultaneously contributing to yet disrupting the campus' existing organizational saga (Aschenbrand, 2022; Bäckström & Sand, 2019). This form of place-based resistant celebration challenges the notion of the academy as authoritarian, managerial, ideally constituted, and functionally ordered (Glenney & Mull, 2018). Sensate relationships between the material worlds of the university and the embodied performances of the skater can even construct novel social realities for the campus community (Maier, 2016); transgressing the prescribed rhythms of the *spatial-natural imaginary*. In these capacities, the skater moves though the college campus with a kind of "elemental wildness" (Glenney & Mull, 2018, p. 442), creating a new, more fluid anthropological rhythm of the higher education environment (Glenney & O'Connor, 2022).

In most cases, the spaces which skaters traverse were designed with ritualism or legacy in mind, as temples to intellectual or athletic achievement, particularly within a white, Western, masculine framing. Institutional memoryscapes such as stadia, monuments, landmarks, or other physical components of the university saga contribute to skaters' abilities to reorder, transgress, and simultaneously celebrate public spaces in a playful capacity (Glenney & Mull, 2018; McDuie-Ra, 2021; O'Connor, 2018). In particular, student skateboarding participants express both their identities as skaters and members of the campus community by mis-using these memoryscapes to explore dual polarities—resistors of institutional norms, yet contributors to institutional memories (Manan & Smith, 2014; McDuie-Ra, 2021). As members of their institutional communities, skaters likely circulate amongst themselves mythical places apart from what campus stakeholders consider significant (Manan & Smith, 2014; McDuie-Ra, 2021; O'Connor, 2018), as well as defy leadership's preordained expectations of reverence and deference toward certain monuments. Banal architectural features, quiet courtyards, and hidden pathways through campus all contribute to an institution's ecology of skateboarding, demonstrating how the historic and emotional art of placemaking is embedded into the sport and its participants (O'Connor, 2018). The extent to which alternative uses of institutional spaces and resources pose a threat to the actual operations of U.S. universities is indeterminate. However, institutional leadership's significant focus on maintaining a relatively rigid social order and a pervasive organizational saga definitely influence the ways in which certain types of behaviors are encouraged or constrained; how challenges to institutional values, histories, or figureheads

are received. Subtextually, important components of the institutional saga may represent white supremacy, industriousness, Western ascendancy, settler colonialism, or state violence. It is critical for higher education scholarship to seek alternative perspectives on which spaces within the university environment should be considered central and how scholarly examinations into these spaces should interrogate the priorities of the dominant order.

## Differentiated Patterns of Semiosis

Skateboarding has a long history of interactions with the legal and political systems in the United States; in many cases these interactions are antagonistic in nature. Thus, the skater's navigational lens within "public" spaces operates differently than those outside the sport. Universities' investments in the maintenance of (imagined) public safety and capital assets lead to a policy structure undergirded by the assumption that skateboarding is disruptive to the campus community (Jackson et al., 2018). From early design phases through construction of built environments, campus planners and administrators engage with "defensive architectural tactics" (Howell, 2001, p. 1) for deterring skateboarding including skatestoppers (Dickinson et al., 2022). In maintaining existing facilities, universities set policies and novel physical barriers intended to protect the intended-use value of campus property (Carr, 2010). In traversing their environments, skateboarders engage in vigilant observations of hostile architecture, a concept that is all but absent from the scholarly conversation in higher education. While features like skatestoppers directly target skating, other examples of hostile architecture disclose the ways in which universities maintain the *spatial-natural imaginary*. For example, benches with regular armrests designed to prevent unhoused people from resting tacitly communicate that only those who engage with campus spaces in an intended-use capacity—that is, contribute to the regular flows of capital production—are entitled to free use of the institution's physical infrastructure. Thus, skateboarding offers education scholars with a semiotic lens through which to critically examine institutional design choices.

Infrastructure communicates both inclusive and exclusionary messages to the observer. In the case of skateboarding, the university welcomes participation via the implementation of skateboard racks in living, learning, and community spaces. Painted or posted signifiers akin to the bicyclist symbol also present campus transportation infrastructure as encouraging to skaters and removes anxieties about legal repercussions toward participation. Conversely, skatestoppers demonstrate an institutional commitment to protectionism and prohibition (Howell, 2001). The commonplace nature of signs prohibiting skateboarding in certain spaces operate in a much less clearly delineated capacity than elements constructed to expressly permit or deter the practice. Skateboarding's intrinsic resistance to authority causes many participants to ignore or actively defy these signs (Nolan, 2003); universities may post them on campus as a signifier of safety to members of the campus community with negative perceptions of the sport. Safety discourses abound as a means of determining who is welcome on campus and to what extent; these discourses reinforce the *spatial-natural imaginary* and justify protectionist policing practices, particularly toward quality-of-life crimes.

These crimes encompass a wide range of social behaviors, including skateboarding. Many campuses have policies to prevent the performance of skate tricks (Jackson et al., 2018). Skateboarders may ignore these policies to take advantage of the mis-use value of institutional property, leading to tension between campus authorities and skaters, which is magnified by the abstract physical and cultural threats of skateboarding to the campus (Borden, 2001; Carr, 2010

McDuie-Ra, 2022). Thus, the campus policy climate regarding skateboarding ranges from lukewarm to cold. Institutions without formal policies restricting skateboarding do little to encourage it as a mode of transportation or practice of wellbeing, and those with formal policies typically take a punitive approach, particularly toward street skating's supposed criminality, danger to others, and propensity for property destruction (Fang & Handy, 2019; Jackson et al., 2018). Motivated by their perceptions of skateboarding as dangerous and skaters as inconsiderate and reckless, university police departments strictly enforce these policies through confiscation of skateboards and removal of skaters from campus grounds. Given the connection between racism and campus policing, officers likely target Skaters of Color with greater frequency, contributing to the criminalization of Black, Indigenous, and Brown existence on campus (Dizon, 2021; Smith, 2007). Skaters' *insider-outsider* awareness of surveillance and deterrence offers an abolitionist perspective. While Communities of Color, immigrant communities, and transient communities have endured heightened surveillance and harassment from law enforcement for generations, white, socioeconomically, and politically privileged scholars and practitioners would do well to question how the policing of leisure, alcohol and drug use, spatial encroachment, and "disorderly" conduct advance institutional arguments for funding and maintaining hostile law enforcement agencies and encourage a misguided white public perception of higher education as an ordered space free from social ills.

## Disruptions to the Flow of Capital Generation

Examinations into skateboarding on college campuses estimate that the most widespread motivation for participation is transportation (Fang & Handy, 2019; Jackson et al., 2018; Walker, 2013). Although relatively uncommon compared to other primary modes of travel into, within, and out of higher education spaces, "skating to school" offers several benefits above and beyond these modes. Those who choose skating as their mode of transportation in college appreciate how skateboards provide the user with an active transportation method that is frequently more convenient, less expensive, and less mechanically complex than bicycles (Fang & Handy, 2019). The ability of the skater to take their transportation mode with them into most campus spaces eliminates the need to find adequate storage or parking that is present among cyclists and drivers (Fang & Handy, 2019). Additionally, skating aligns with campus initiatives to promote active transportation among students and other affiliates on both ecological and wellness grounds (Corwin et al., 2019b; Jackson et al., 2018). Despite these benefits, colleges and universities typically do not engage skateboarding in transportation initiatives, leaving participants to create novel physical pathways through transit networks designed for other modalities.

Compared to users of other transportation modes, college skaters consider the fact that their mode is *fun* to be the most important influencing factor in mode choice rather than convenience or cost (Fang & Handy, 2019; Seifert & Hedderson, 2010). I argue that students who skate to and from their institutions utilize their *inside-outsider* perspectives, considering campus transit from an adjacent lens (McDuie-Ra, 2022). In navigating campus transit networks, the commuting skater traverses multiple urban terrains, pedestrian, auto, and bicycle, in order to determine the most efficient, creative, and enjoyable routes to their destinations rather than following a prescribed infrastructural and semiotic pathway (Bäckström & Sand, 2019; Chiu, 2009; Borden, 2001). They develop a highly self-reflective, growth-oriented method of campus navigation and consider the physical environment's optimum transit potential based on its capacity for skateboarding rhythm and flow (Chiu, 2009; Seifert & Hedderson, 2010). This

reinforces the idea of skateboarding as "an act of spatial reinterpretation" (Walker, 2013, p. 15), a reordering of seemingly inflexible built environments into a dynamic and fluid ecosystem that delivers both practical and spiritual benefits to the participant (Aschenbrand, 2022; Vivoni, 2013).

Similarly, the choice to skate on campus represents an implicit rejection of the academic capitalist strategies that undergird institutional transportation initiatives. Transportation programs frequently act as revenue-generating auxiliaries, relying on the necessity of car travel and parking scarcity to charge affiliates—particularly students—for the ability to move to, from, and within campus. However, skateboarding transgresses the institutional capitalist climate as skateboards do not require payable storage, nor do they depend on spatial security and fineable enforcement policies like cars. Skaters do not contribute to the pollutive enterprise of fossil fuels, in which many U.S. institutions are invested (Barron et al., 2023; Whitford, 2021). As a discordant practice, skateboarding disrupts the ordinary rhythms of capital generation by taking advantage of spontaneous celebration and temporal disjuncture (Borden, 2001; Carr, 2010; Glenney & O'Connor, 2022). For example, the skater making their commute longer to enjoy specific components of the campus infrastructure *en route* to their destination constitutes an oppositional perspective to the "time-is-money" productivity culture of U.S. universities. This type of leisurely disruption may invite resistance from campus actors heavily invested in maintaining and reinforcing regularly scheduled capital production. Additionally, skateboarding's countercultural roots play out in unapologetic mis-uses of public and private spaces and assets, frequently in direct defiance of legal and economic authorities in charge of controlling them (Dinces, 2011; McDuie-Ra, 2022; Nolan, 2003) From this perspective, I argue that skateboarding provides sites of resistance to late capitalism at the institutional level via skaters' discordant social and performative practices (Dinces, 2011; Glenney & O'Connor, 2022; McDuie-Ra, 2022; Nolan, 2003).

## Skateboarding's Challenges to the Dominant Order

The prior sections of this writing have articulated (1) the ecological spheres in which higher education and skateboarding exist and interact with one another and (2) the uniquely attuned ways in which college skaters navigate their position within those ecological spheres. I now turn to the sport's multidisciplinary body of literature to draw connections between empirical and scholarly understandings of the sport to issues of social justice in higher education.

### Race and Indigeneity

In examining Communities of Color, a clear connection exists between higher education experiences and skateboarding participation. Groups of Color in the United States' navigation of institutional and social environments is indisputably informed by their racial backgrounds (Patton et al., 2016; Williams, 2020). College Skaters of Color must maneuver through both institutional and skate cultures invested in the reproduction of whiteness and co-opting of Black culture (Gusa, 2010; Williams, 2020). However, skating offers numerous sites of resistance to white racially dominant systems and narratives at universities. Skateboarding participation can act as counterstorytelling since the sport's "informal nature … create[s] the opportunity to challenge or adhere to the broader pressures of racialized norms, offering the prospect for empowerment" (Williams, 2020, p. 324). Skaters of Color reject the white institutional norms of

conduct, behavior, and being via spatial reclamation and reconstitution of campus spaces into sites of play and celebration (Tichavakunda, 2021). Additionally, Skaters of Color offer a challenge to performative institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion discourses via the creative, sensate practice of skateboarding which highlights their centrality in a campus environment that seeks to render them invisible.

Skateboarding offers a pathway toward decolonizing and Indigenizing higher education due to its alternative engagements with dominant understandings of physical environments (Borden, 2001; Fisher, 2017). Native American activism has been central to shifting the ontological understandings of space and place in the U.S. tertiary system, and skateboarding contributes to these understandings because "it is intimately connected to, and in conversation with, the landscape" (Fisher, 2017, p. 58). U.S. universities reside on stolen Native land, and Indigenous skaters on campus have the power to "utilize skateboarding to express sovereignty on and within their land" (Fisher, 2017, p. 58) in opposition to these institutions' land occupation. In addition, Asian Pacific American participation in skateboarding recaptures the sport's Indigenous Pacific roots in surfing and its early adoption and development among the Asian American diasporic communities of Southern California (Sueyoshi, 2015). For Asian Pacific Islanders, skateboarding is a mode of *expressing,* not *requesting,* belongingness, highlighting the integral role of these communities in the social ecology of the United States and therefore higher education (Sueyoshi, 2015). Black skateboarders use the sport to enact rebellion against racialized norms and crime culture as well as enhance their commitments to intellectual development and personal growth in both formal and informal capacities (Corwin et al., 2019a; Edwards, 2015; Williams, 2020). Many Black skaters also center reflectiveness and nonviolence in their practices as a means of refusing ghettoization by the white-dominant state authority and policing systems (Edwards, 2015; Williams, 2020). This "subculture of rebellion" (Edwards, 2015, p. 40) is a powerful means for Black campus skaters to claim their rights to liberation and education in an institutional environment that views them as unwelcome. Latinx[2] skaters report increased self-efficacy and educational confidence as a result of participation in skateboarding, and use the sport to develop their senses of perseverance in the face of significant odds (Corwin et al., 2019a). While white claims of ownership over culture and space abound in higher education and skateboarding alike, these cultural groups' skating on campus reveals the racist logics behind these claims and offers counterperspectives to the white institutional majority.

## Gender and Sexuality

Given the higher rates of skateboard participation by college men and the gender dynamics present in both skateboarding and higher education, women skaters are significantly more salient on campus than their male counterparts. Female skateboarders occupy a marginalized position within the hyper-independent, hypermasculine culture of the sport, so their participation alone is an act of gendered performance (Atencio et al., 2009; Bäckström, 2013; Abulhawa, 2008). Women "write themselves into" (Abulhawa, 2008. p. 59) skating in a manner similar to their agentic resistance to exclusion in the collegiate environment; in this way, college women who skate are engaged in a doubly subversive performance of gender. Female skateboarders navigate their status as *co-eds* in the chauvinistic American university culture and

[2] There is disagreement over the use of "Latinx" in its associated communities. While the term is imperfect and language-context dependent, I employ it here based on its familiarity to U.S. audiences and the absence of another term in that context that accounts for the range of gender identities in the Latin diaspora.

their simultaneous engagement with the "pariah femininities" (Bäckström, 2013, pp. 33, 40) associated with their participation in skateboarding. Skateboarding media and college-culture social networks sexualize women's bodies, challenge women's intellectual capacities and human potential, and enforce rigid norms of gender and sexuality expression (Abulhawa, 2008; Patton et al., 2016). Community building efforts among groups of women skateboarding participants have created sites of resistance to these problematic cultural forces, establishing a positive womens' skate culture neither defined by nor centered within its masculine norms (Atencio et al., 2009; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013, 2014). In the campus environment, women skaters assert their right to spatial engagement, challenge their institutions' hierarchical gender orders, and establish room to enact different femininities (Bäckström, 2013).

Skateboarding has the potential to offer "a capacity to imagine and enact alternatives outside of the expectations and pressures of the dominant social order" (Geckle & Shaw, 2020, p. 132). In this way, the very act of skateboarding on college campuses is an act of Queerness, of simply challenging the hegemonic social order of the higher education environment. Unfortunately, the hetero-masculine foundations of the sport frequently require Queer skaters to choose between marginalization due to their authentic expressions of their identities, or tentative acceptance into skate culture by relegating their identities to obscurity (Geckle & Shaw, 2020). In a similar fashion, college and university environments enforce strict boundaries of gender and sexuality expression, relegating Queer members of the campus community to a peripheral position within the campus culture (Patton et al., 2016). Thus, Queer collegiate skaters engage in acts of resistance not only within the traditional modalities of their sport, but also in the defiant performativity of *skating while Queer* in the university environment, which disrupts hegemonic notions of the sexed/gendered academic landscape while offering transformative glimpses into future ways of being on campus (Geckle & Shaw, 2020).

## Institutional Culture

While relatively day-to-day engagements with skateboarding characterize the sport's presence in higher education ecology, it is critical to consider the social-philosophical elements that skating imprints upon participants. Namely, the collective set of cultural practices and worldviews that identify someone as a *skater* play a role in how they conceptualize themselves based on their affiliations with these cultural practices and their subsequent associated interactions with the surrounding environment. Despite public and institutional perceptions of skateboarding frequently tending toward the negative, the social values common across the sport align well with higher education and community development. Skateboarding relies on a balance between self-reliance and social engagement. As a highly individual and self-determined activity, skating allows the participant to move from space to space freely without a formalized authority structure (Beal & Weidman, 2003). Additionally, skateboarding contributes to participants' intrinsic motivation (Seifert & Hedderson, 2010) and affinity for skill development (Corwin et al., 2019b). Skaters practice these skills on their own, but just as importantly seek support from and reliance on multigenerational informal communities of other skaters who provide encouragement and advice (Haines et al., 2010; Woolley & Johns, 2001). Additionally, skaters frequently identify themselves as observant nonconformists with values, perspectives, and experiences outside those of the mainstream (Beal & Weidman, 2003). When skateboarders bring these three interwoven abilities—individualism, cooperation, and criticality—into the college environment, they bring a uniquely fine-tuned set of tools to help them and their peers

succeed academically and socially. Skateboarding's longstanding activism work in the realms of counterculture, public space, social marginalia, and alternative aesthetics benefits universities' much-needed efforts to widen their epistemological frameworks, challenge dominant perceptions, and seek inclusion for diverse populations (Glover et al., 2019; Németh, 2006; Vivoni, 2013).

## Imagining Skate Futures in Higher Education

Skateboarding's embeddedness in the campus ecology of U.S. higher education provides scholars, educators, and skaters alike with opportunities to improve the skateboarding conditions at universities. Such improvements have the potential to bring about systemic change in higher education on a number of levels. In order to realize these improvements, there is much more scholars and practitioners need to understand about skateboarding on campus. Future research should consider the following arenas, among others.

### New Directions for Research

First, there is a need for qualitative, first-hand inquiry into college skaters' experiences, particularly Skaters of Color, Queer skaters, and women, who are under-examined in and underserved by both the higher education and skateboarding literatures. This work can provide greater insight into the *insider-outsider* worldviews of college skaters and how their experiences are both centered and peripheral in the campus environment. Second, critical analyses of campus discourses on skateboarding will help researchers and practitioners alike understand the campus climate surrounding skateboarding as well as provide insight into how to change negative perceptions of the sport. Third, continued examinations of skateboarding as campus practice and performance will aid the development and promotion of inclusive, welcoming campus infrastructure networks and call attention to the harmful effects of the *spatial-natural imaginary,* holding institutions to account. Finally, as an ultimate goal, any research into skateboarding and American higher education must contribute to broader abolition and decolonization movements within both fields.

### Concluding Arguments

University students at large engage in a constant push-pull between the demands of college and their senses of self and wellbeing. As an unstructured, self-directed practice, skateboarding carries a liberatory ontological and epistemological quality that separates it from other campus activities and cultures. Therefore, participants can employ skating as a kind of reclamation of the campus environment, freeing them (even momentarily) from the rigid, hierarchical structure of their institution and its associated stressors. Additionally, skateboarding invites institutions to shift their view of student success from "resilience" and "grit" in the face of an unchangeable, oppressive academic climate toward creative expression and placemaking as paramount modes of transforming university culture toward inclusivity and responsiveness. As mentioned in the opening passages of this writing, formal relationships between higher education institutions and the skateboarding community are extremely rare, so these dynamics of interaction between campuses and skaters typically occur without dialogue between the parties save for the occasional conflict between skaters and law enforcement. However, as the scholarship on skateboarding suggests, opportunities for universities to leverage skating as a

practice of wellbeing or mode of sustainable transportation should be plentiful (e.g., Corwin et al., 2019a; Fang & Handy, 2019). Future research and writing should elaborate on these opportunities, including the ways in which the authority-averse skateboarding community might enact or respond to formal relationships with institutions. I conclude by offering words of knowledge from a group of diverse college skaters and advocates at the University of California, San Diego (Skateboarding at UCSD, n.d.):

- Skateboarding can be a positive influence on the student population and should not be treated as an act of rebellion.
- It is an activity which you can meet people instantly.
- Skateboarding brings all kinds of people together.
- Skateboarding is great because it is something you can do all afternoon or it is something you can do on a study break, but most importantly it is best to do with friends.
- It will always keep you motivated to improve your own skills.
- The sport also promotes self-expression and creativity.
- It is such a variable sport and hobby that the possibilities are endless.

As critical evaluations and changemaking initiatives of higher education attempt to expand the flexibility of the campus environment, university skaters offer an *insider-outsider* model for how this can be accomplished. As *insiders*, they are intimately familiar with their home institutions as students, but also possess additional embodied, experiential knowledge of their campuses vis-à-vis their non-skating peers. As *outsiders*, they maintain critical lenses of navigation and interaction with their institutions that counter normal rhythms of capital generation and social marginalization. Using these perspectives, skateboarding participant-advocates can take an active role in disrupting systems of dominion and oppression, promote skating on campus, celebrate the sport's role in shaping college culture, and improve educational experiences for all.

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