

## 2 The Skater's Body

### A Sensory Anthropology of Sideways Movement

We don't know when stances were first discovered, much less when humans first discovered that their body could move sideways. Surfing, an activity that predates skateboarding by centuries, if not millennia, provides a provisional answer. Early surfers – documented in European historiographies across the 1700s and 1800s – did not stand sideways but laid on their belly or sat on their reed boats and wooden boards. For Polynesian natives, canoe surfing was a tool for transportation and coastal foraging, a leisure activity, and a spiritual practice (Hough-Snee and Eastman 2017). Those that stood were first recorded in the nineteenth century, and predominantly did so face-forward like a mono-skier (Moser 2008). Sideways surfing was incidentally documented: an engraved image accompanying a 1831 travelogue by missionary William Ellis chronicles an oceanic scene – usually considered the first Western illustration of surfing (Blakely 2014). The scene's protagonist uses a narrow plank to ride a tumble of waves, his left foot facing forward. And yet, it took until 1962 before anyone talked about “having a stance,” with the first written record of a surfer being “goofy-footed” (Muirhead 1962). Remarkably, this was only five years after commercial skateboards were being produced (Borden 2001a), the moment skateboarding “broke out of the realm of casual play” (Davidson 1976: 14).

This timeline opens the possibility that skaters were the first to give words to being stanced. We can imagine a group of savvy sidewalk surfers bombing down a hill on their homemade boards on a waveless California day, in the late 1950s. The open space of the steep streets allows one of them to observe the others, pondering why her friends orient themselves with a different foot, leftways as opposed to her rightways stance. We see her whizzing by over the cement, as the grinding metal of her board's wheels makes a rattling, grating sound. She shouts at her friends: “you guys are so goofy!” The others look down at their feet and notice the footed difference. One of them retorts: “you are so regular!” – a real burn in America's cool culture of the 1950s. Later, they bring their stanced awareness to the water, and the rest is history.

Anachronistically, we can even imagine a prehistoric discovery of stance: did Peking man throw a spear goofy? After all, those who have discovered

their stance find it as natural as handedness, making its socio-biological history as alluring as it is revolutionary. Perhaps, we speculate, stance fills a missing link in the story of human evolution, up there with opposable thumbs, upright movement, and tool usage. We might speculate further: the attentional resources, sensory abilities, and proto-social emotions cued by our ancestors awoken when a body finds its stance, adding potential evidence to the claim that skateboarding and surfing, as spot-hunting cultures, provide a significant advantage in navigating urban and oceanic spaces. But we digress.

This chapter articulates a sensorium of skateboarding: its sights and sounds, feelings and smells, kinesthesia and tactility, proprioception, and shifting sensations. How do they make sense of and give sense to the city? Is there such a thing as a skater's way of sensing? And in what ways are a skater's perceptive experience mediated by the social, spatial, and symbolic order of the built environment? An inquiry into sensuous abilities, we hold, offers a generative framework for tracing how skaters become emplaced and enworlded. Recognizing that such a sensorium is a figuration of a multiplicity of site-specific practices, this chapter offers a starting point for understanding how skateboarding is localized and individualized – mutually contingent on situated subject positions. We open this chapter with a brief literature review on skateboarding's ways of sensing, from its history of ocularcentrism to a recent appreciation of multisensoriality and somatics. We then turn to the peculiar ways in which skaters habitually use their senses to scout for and identify architectural space readily available for trick play. As such, we make the argument that skaters acquire bodily techniques in relation to their environs, attuning to the specific characteristics of the built environment and its sociality.

### **Moving sideways<sup>1</sup>**

Why did humans learn to move sideways? Sensorially, it is not an intuitive movement: unlike crabs, we need to move our head and core to see where we're heading, pressuring our central nervous system along the way. From a socio-historical perspective, it holds both ludic and political meanings. The sideways *position* unlocks many ways for the human body to move, an entire axis of activity. This includes sports like baseball, golf, hockey, tennis, and pickleball. Militia and fighting strategies involve sideways *orientations*, as do archery and shoveling. Some of these practices, including javelin throwing and golf swinging, are *handed*. Practitioners use hand tools – a club, a spear, a bat – and usually think of themselves as right- or left-handed. By contrast, martial arts like Taekwondo and boxing are *footed*, structuring bodily techniques around a dominant leg. We are sure there are exceptions for how to distinguish handed from footed sports, but the point is: all these activities include sideways motilities dependent on a dominant limb.

Stance, by contrast, reconfigures the body itself as being laterally oriented, cultivating a plethora of sensorial, symbolic, and social meanings. As a

below-the-knee-activity, you might imagine footedness as a central determining factor for skateboarding's sideways orientation. But preliminary studies suggest no correlation between a person's dominant foot or hand and their stance (Alexandre 2023). Whereas handedness and footedness are overwhelmingly "right dominant," the difference between a goofy and regular stance is near chance (Nootens and Harrison-Caldwell 2017). This begs the question: what is it about planks and boards that link them with a stanced orientation rather than its footedness?

Perhaps phenomenology offers a generative starting point. If anything, it's the dominant theoretical framework used to make sense of the skater's corporeality, their toes and fingers and twists and turns. It positions bodily experience as one of perceptual immediacy, seemingly unmatched for the study of wheeled sensorial orientations tailored to the perfection of tricks. Consider this example by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope [...] The distance from me to the object is not a size which increases or decreases, but a tension which fluctuates round a norm.

(1945[2013]: 352)

What is considered an optimum distance to look at pictures is not given but rather a technique embedded in a cultural context. Rather than an object readily available for research, like a scroll to be read, a body "is a living entity by which, and through which, we actively experience the world" (Desjarlais and Jason Throop 2011: 89). For phenomenologists, this living, existential body is a degree zero for our experience of and engagement with our environment. There is a particular interest in the entanglements between the immediacy of perception and broader socio-political forces.

What's more, to a phenomenologist, a bodily space is reshaped by the tools and equipment we use. The example most frequently used, and coopted from Martin Heidegger, is the hammer.

Taken strictly, there 'is' no such thing as *an* equipment. To the being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is. Equipment is essentially 'something in-order-to.'

(Heidegger 1927[1962]: 31).

A hammer, following this logic, is no tool with a flexible set of possible affordances. Rather, it is a piece of equipment – enveloped in the carpenter's toolkit – used *in-order-to* put to a specific kind of work, namely hammering.

Such a tool doesn't have to be observed or theorized before using. Instead, it simply takes on the role of the extension of our body, provided we are skilled hammer-users. Translating this phenomenological insight to the practice of skateboarding, one could argue that the skater's body becomes wheeled: the skateboard is a tool *in-order-to* glide. This use-case affects your possible actions and activities, including bolting eye-cry fast down hills and flying gut-drop high in the air (Loland and Bäckström 2023). For a phenomenologist, a skateboard as a tool inherently "affords" sideways actions, like gliding or riding. Following this line of logic, there are appropriate and less appropriate approaches for doing so.

Like tuning a guitar by turning the keys until hearing a harmonizing frequency, one can attune to the spatiality and temporality of a space or society through the movements of one's body to find its unique harmony until they are in lockstep, inseparable, and self-regulating – *clicked in*. This means becoming an interlocked whole: subject/object/environment. Rather than being a "mental script" or a taught model, *enskilment* is a set of bodily dispositions learned by doing. This involves situated and horizontal pedagogies, where the learner may mimic but is never formally taught by the expert. Instead, it is an education of attention, where the learner shapes their worldview through their engagement with a sociality of practitioners (cf. Gowlland 2019; Ingold 2000). This form of "enskilment" presents three intersecting parts for achieving this attunement, optimum context, or appropriate use-case of tools (cf. Pálsson 1994; Woods et al. 2021). One becomes *enskiled* in 1) a taskspace or an emplaced pattern of activity, by 2) a sensory attention to this pattern through the movement of one's body, which creates 3) a self-regulated, yet community-driven wayfinding that continuously matches the taskspace to bodily movement until interlocked. These three parts result in an "enskiled performer": an expert at a sensory craft.

Enskilment comes at you, fast, requiring intuitive bodily adjustments that are only slowed by reflection, quickened by reaction. Sensorially, this can be understood by the following: when skating, the aim is to "get things right," by identifying skateable space, performing successful tricks, or skating in a way that simply clicks. When the board has the appropriate weight, attire fits well, and the city's surface feels right, you just know it all belongs together, as does anyone observing you. Skaters, one could argue, seek this optimum fit by first acquiring and then maintaining this tacit know-how through *enskilment*. This optimum context is emplaced, meaning that the specific socio-spatial configurations of the built environment or other dominant cultural markers may affect the process of seeking bodily dispositions that feel right. Through *enskilment*, skaters find their place in the world, developing a capacity to use their body as a principal locus for filtering sensory input and discriminating what's meaningful (i.e., *skateable*) or not (Hölsgens 2018). As an epistemic culture, like other crafts like boat making or weaving, skaters work toward and maintain a situated know-how.



Figure 2.1 The bloodied hands of Johnny Tassopoulos after a heavy skate session.

Source: Photo by Taylor Ballard.

### Subverting expectations

What if there is no optimal way to use a skateboard? What if skaters perform a critique of Merleau-Ponty's example of optimizing the angle to view a painting, or of Heidegger's deterministic understanding of the hammer as tool? What if the point of skateboarding is neither one of maximalism and success nor one of standardized somatics and normative trick play? Perhaps we need to attend to a more complex mode of emplaced subject formation – one which offers a radical alternative to the persistent schema of the skater's body (or the surfer, carpenter, and museum visitor) as a neuter. Given the importance of stance, a slight shift to this bodily schema may radically alter one's orientation, revealing a secret worldview unknown to those who continue their search for somatic perfectionism.

Take the example of switching one's stance. Professional skater Salman Agah is known for pushing the idea that skating switch is not only possible but also could be part of every skater's repertoire, essentially doubling the possibilities of tricks, symbolic meanings, and stylistic individuation. Confusing some onlookers, shifting between stance means appreciating, rather than resolving, impractical and ineffective motility. Skaters who learn to switch their stance have to come to terms with the, at times, adverse, unnatural, and dangerous feeling of such techniques. For what's front-facing becomes backward, what's left right, and what's intuitive artificial. In some ways, this is similar to writing or throwing a ball with your non-dominant hand. The main difference is that

stance structures your full orientation: your outlook on the world is shifted, including your balance, proprioception, eyesight, and breakfall techniques. Using Merleau-Ponty's example, it's like looking at a painting using a mirror. Or, perhaps more apt, it's like painting using your non-dominant hand, while also looking through a mirror and standing on a moving object. With some training, it's most certainly doable, but it sensorially reorients your approach of a task-at-hand. Skating switch is a puzzling thing of beauty that never feels quite right, unlike the phenomenologist's desire to optimize their intuitive bodily disposition. It's pushing against the grain of normative play, uplifting the graceless and gawky – as if shouting in delight, “I have two left feet!”

While filming his video part for Emerica's *Stay Gold* (Miner 2010), Taiwanese-American skater Jerry Hsu endured severe leg injuries. These were followed by multiple ankle and knee surgeries. Rather than prioritizing his recovery, like many professional athletes would, Hsu decided to push through by switching his stance. As such, the video molds a public figure of creativity and perseverance. As Hsu says,

Ok, so imagine your right knee had a really bad injury that you're recovering from. Whenever you ollie, you pop off your right foot. That's the foot that will propel you. Your other foot will lift you but it's that right foot that snaps off the ground and pushes you into the air. Well, my back knee was so hurt at the time that I couldn't skate normal, but I could skate switch. So, it was completely the injury. I did film a few things that were regular but they just weren't all that good. I think [filmmaker Jon] Miner made a good choice with the switch theme because it made the whole thing much stronger. [...] He gave it a story to make up for my injuries.

(Whiteley 2015, online).

Skating switch is not the opposite of Hsu's dominant mode of orientation but rather its aching lining. In Hsu's case, it is a way to circumvent an injury but not just: his switch stance communicates an affect and a politic, as much as it displays an awkward technique. Pushing back against a dominant stance is an enculturation: the point, here, is not to maximize the affordances of the plank or board but rather to break the rules by subverting the body's intuitive mode of engaging the world. Hsu shows that there is pleasure in reorienting oneself, in the face of an aching body. It is as if the knee injury unlocks a structure for unveiling somatic truths: how we move in the way we do, and why this matters. This, too, forces spectators to consider their expectations of the extreme athleticism skaters are known for. There's something decidedly unaesthetic about skating switch: the awkward push, the ungraceful shoulder movements, the apprehensive gaze.

But skateboarding has never been about hegemonic beauty or about the rule of thirds or divine-like bodies or formal principles. For long, it's been treated as a subculture because of its inimitable values and practices because of its rejection

of the economic and political and aesthetic. Skating switch is a negation of the classicist notion of beauty as something eternal, symmetrical, uniformal, and perfect. It orbits ideas of the weird and the ugly, seeking elegance in the irregular. Perhaps it's for this reason that there are myriad social media posts dedicated to Hsu's stance in *Stay Gold*. As YouTube user @EE.creative writes, "Jerry Hsu, the true Switch God" – ascribing something divine to a shift in his bodily orientation. @Nirvezz draws us back to earth, acknowledging how a reconfiguration of stance hurts in double: "Take a slam switch stance. it's awkward."

Hsu's switch stance comes with praise not only because of his technical aptitude but also because of the capacity to insert another layer of subjectivity into his somatic behavior. It's about overcoming an injury, as much as it draws attention to the ways we value embodied difference. The few studies done on stance in surfing demonstrate this relationality between the sensory and the social. For instance, sideways movement affects not just the acquisition of athletic techniques, like riding a wave frontside or backside, but also the social pressures for catching specific kinds of waves via sedimented dispositions (cf. [Anthony et al. 2016](#); [Furley et al. 2018](#)). In skateboarding, the entanglements between subject formation and athletic techniques are perhaps most tangibly clear by its appreciation of divergent orientations, of the oblique and nonnormative, the uncomfortable, and the gritty.

Feminist writer Sara [Ahmed \(2006\)](#) is interested in what and whom our bodies are oriented by, including what happens when these are not within our immediate reach or feel awkward or are stigmatized. Critiquing phenomenology as a "straightening device," including but not limited to one's sexuality, Ahmed draws attention to the kinds of bodily behavior and sociality less compulsory or proximate. Experiencing bodily disorientation or facing spaces designed for bodies unlike ours, she suggests, drastically affects the way we carry ourselves in the world. Phenomenology foregrounds the processes of smoothing and straightening, aiming to eliminate friction to the point of optimizing one's orientation in the world. More specifically, this means sliding into a hegemonic embodiment, one which is decidedly masculine and heteronormative, and able-bodied and white. "Getting things right," as phenomenologists suggest, often corresponds to ideas of fitting in, of becoming one and universal. Ahmed wonders what happens if we break away from such trodden paths, by way of choice or in line with the core of being:

The question is not so much finding a queer line but rather asking what our orientation toward queer moments of deviation will be. If the objects slip away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, or out of place, what will we do?

(2006: 179)

Can such a queer phenomenology be helpful to deepening our understanding of the skater's body – and its stance? Skating switch is a way to make things prick and sting, to render a veiled dominant social order of the senses

visible. And there's beauty to this. As YouTube user @mchlselects writes in their appraisal of Hsu's video part, "fuuuck that switch heel down the double set was a poem" (Miner 2011). But, as Ahmed writes, nonnormative bodily orientations face contestation, too. Multiple YouTube commenters draw problematic connections between Hsu's athleticism and ethnicity: "How the fuck he still alive after all those gnarly bails? Was he in Yakuza before" (@m47kr2nt0n in Miner 2011). Or: "i would love to hear the 911 call from someone who lived nearby... hi yes, 911, there is a crazy chinaman, maybe japanese, playing with a skateboard and yelling at a fence" (BigSirZebras in Miner 2011). The nonconformity of skating switch is here confounded with the ethnic categorization of the non-white body – using Asian stereotypes to "praise" Hsu.

As much as the history of skateboarding is one of racial diversity, its discourse reproduces existing power relations (cf. Williams 2020; Willing and Pappalardo 2023). Stance, here, exceeds its position of context-less technical ability. Its sensory pains and pleasures decidedly intersect with normative models of sociality and identity. Learning to skate, let alone attuning to a switch stance, is by no means a universalist experience. What feels most natural or appropriate to some may appear deviant or out of line for others. In *Stay Gold*, Hsu is praised for taking falls like a "Yakuza" or performing tricks as a "Chinaman" or "Japanese." Such readings unmistakably position the white skater's body as a neutral position. Elsewhere, Hsu reads out comments on his skating, saying: "The internet brings out the worst in people. It brings out, like, their most racist thoughts" (Crailtap 2013). He chronicles not only how he's often confused with other skaters of Asian backgrounds but also how his ethnicity is portrayed as representative of "commitment," "being smart," and "being good at everything."

On a panel discussion at *Slow Impact* (2023), Hsu shared how he wanted to break away from such narratives, seeking to navigate what it means to him to be a child of immigrants. Speaking on both his skate and art practice, he states:

Perfectionism is all that I understood. 'Cause of the culture I come from, you know, perfectionism is sort of really hammered into you [...] If you just look at Chinese characters, just like the amount they have to practice it, to make it absolutely ... to turn you to a machine, is sort of the culture I come from. So, a lot of what I do in my life is unconsciously and consciously trying to reject that.

Jerry Hsu's performance in *Stay Gold* shows that each sensory input is an unwitting social stance. Skating switch, here, is a skate technique enveloped in a discourse of racialized stereotypes, gazed upon from a "space of whiteness" (Williams 2022). Put differently: if enskilment is a way for skaters to find their place in the world, this exceeds the immediacy of perception and physical aptitude. This echoes misogynist expressions of skating or running

or throwing “like a girl,” which “reflect their subordinate position in patriarchal societies and expected gender behavior” (Rana 2022: 294). Bodily performance is legitimized or rejected through sedimented socio-cultural lenses, drawing attention to the kinds of bodies deemed normative and desirable, or unfamiliar and oppositional. An inquiry into the diversity of stance, then, offers a crucial insight into the ways in which the senses are socially modeled, historically formed, and culturally configured (Harris 2020).

### The skater's senses

Foregrounding stance is, perhaps surprisingly, not a common practice within skate studies. Most scholarly attention goes to the skater's eye: the capacity to scout “architecture not for historical, symbolic or authorial content but for how surfaces present themselves as skateable surfaces” (Borden 2001a: 219). In this analysis, the urban infrastructure of curbs, stairs, and handrails becomes desirable because of its seemingly limitless potential for play (Vivoni 2009). To skaters, architectural historian Iain Borden intimates, granite, steel, and asphalt present themselves as urban layers of creative density. Aptly conceptualized as the “skater's eye,” what's at stake is a mutually transformative encounter between body, tool, and environment (cf. Borden 2001a; Hölsgens 2024).

The mythology of the skater's eye took off around the time that skateboarding moved from emptied swimming pools in the 1970s to the streets in the 1980s. This cultural shift was materially symbolized by the ollie, a tactic of jumping with the board beneath one's feet. The ollie accounts for much of the creativity we observe today, becoming essential to the processes of urban place-making. What exactly is the skater's eye, its gaze and related stance position? Whose eye are we witnessing, and how does it speak to societal orderings of sports and lifestyle, or the cultural tenets of the senses? How can we best capture the entanglements between bodies and spaces? In short, what are the divergent and coinciding subjectivities of skaters?

In a 1987 issue of *Thrasher Magazine*, surf and skate photographer Don Redondo writes a fictional story chronicling how “an average person” loses their sight and surgically implants an eyeball from a dead skater. This eyeball takes on a life of its own, gazing long at curbs and stairs, forcing its new user to divert their attention to their architectural surroundings in a way only a skater would: “She found herself staring at painted curbs and looking for small things to jump ‘on’ or over” (Redondo 1987: 70). This cyborgian implantation of the all-seeing eye is as much cultural lore as it romanticizes a skate cosmology. Symbolically represented by a green-blue retina, here's a potent tale making the case that skaters universally share a *vision*, a literal worldview. What's more, the skater's eye is hierarchically positioned in relation to the layperson's vision, engendering it desirable and enchanting, as if it renders the world anew. For a moment, the story's protagonist becomes “cross-eyed,” seeing two distinct landscapes – one tailored to pedestrian lines

of movement and the other to skateable space. Slowly but surely, a paradigm shift unfolds, where she *becomes* a skater, her sight representing a worldview unfamiliar to other city users.

Urban historian Iain Borden takes Redondo's story as a reference point for conceptualizing how skaters navigate the built environment. They do see the city as a site for play, considering space as "a uniform entity" that is "reduced to the homogeneous level of skateable terrain" (Borden 2001b: 13). Over time, this insight is worn out to a commonplace: speak to a skater in the streets and they will comment on how they see the city differently, recognizing creative potential in everyday street furniture. Borden's analysis centers on adolescent boys and young men in the US and UK, who traverse the modernist plazas built by architects like Mies van der Rohe to perform a critique on capitalist rhythms of the city. Despite this situated analysis, Borden's conceptualization of the skater's eye has generated the misconception that all skaters across the globe, no matter their backgrounds or upbringings or beliefs or bodies, and regardless of their spatial surroundings, possess the same kind of vision.

Countering the resulting ocularcentrism in skate studies, there is value to elucidating such a singular cyborg ontology by modeling a "skater's ear." Following Don Redondo, a collective of skate scholars ask their readers to imagine an ear transplant patient receiving the aurality of a dead skater:

As she walks back to her flat, she hears a rattle sound, a grind, and a set of cheers. Part of her is annoyed, while another part of her dances sideways in celebration. It is as if the sounds of skateboarding transport her to their cause, extending her mind to an activity that unlocks a knowledge of the city previously unknown.

(Glenney et al. forthcoming).

This aural knowledge is prompted by a theory of texturology, an episteme of the city that uses the vibrations of sound for knowing the ground: the material surfaces reverberate in the skater's body and, in so doing, co-produce the potential for emplaced creativity (Glenney et al. forthcoming). As skilled listeners, they aurally perceive the inner-workings of their ball bearings, the snapiness of their wooden plank, the skateability of an obstacle, the anti-sociality of the obstacle's protectors – the police – and the sociality of their peers. These skatesounds act as social invites to friendly peers, while also betraying their presence to surveying security. As such, skateboarding holds an acoustemological potentiality, pointing to "what is knowable and how it becomes known through sounding and listening to that which is audible" (Littlejohn 2021: 40). To the informed ear, the gritty sonic matter of polyurethane wheels is an indexical sign of an emphatically wanted or unwanted presence: a sonic awareness of the not-yet-seen.

Might smell and taste contribute to this multisensory array, including bodily fluids such as sweat and blood enmeshed with alleyway funk of urban



Figure 2.2 Ruby Lilley taking off her skate shoes after jumping into a pool, having lost a bet.

Source: Photo by Taylor Ballard.

pollution? Does the riskiness of skateboarding's exploits add to this sensory array, perhaps paralleling the feeling of vertigo, similar to that of highwire walking? Stanced activities like skateboarding are not merely visual, nor aural, but embodied, pointing toward the uninterrupted reciprocity between the body and its environs. Pao [Nowodworski \(2023\)](#) connects the skater's sensorium with the vestibular sense – equilibrioception, or the perception of balance and spatial awareness. He reasons that the sense of balance, located in an organ in the middle ear, plays a crucial role in sideways movement: the vestibular is coupled with vision to produce a communal gaze, a multisensory endeavor that includes the imagination of a trick performed at a designated spot.

### **Becoming a skater**

Adding a multisensorial addendum to Don Redondo's story is insightful for understanding how people learn to skate. But the most pressing issue is that these cumulative readings often assume that sensory models are universal, as if enskilment transpires in the same way to all skaters. However, the fictional origins of the skater's eye already confirm that a universalist understanding of its techniques is not tenable. The skater who dies is a man, whose driver's license has expired and whose soul floats away "on to better things." The cyborgian eye transplant is performed on a young woman, living at her mom's. Her daytime gaze at skateable space translates into nightmares, in which

she speeds “down a big black asphalt hill, not in a car or anything, but way too fast” (Redondo 1987: 71). For the deceased skater, Redondo notes, such speeds are like a “good song,” unbelievable yet thrilling and full of flow, but not for the woman: she is frightened by the skater’s gaze, requiring the visit of a doctor to check in on her.

The gender typology of both protagonists shouldn’t be seen as a coincidence: what’s at stake is an archetypal story of the supposed masculine desire and feminine fear of danger, velocity, and adventure. Rather than an enmeshment of stance and ethnicity, as is the case in the popular discourse on Jerry Hsu’s video, sight is here a punctuating device for a decidedly gendered orientation. It’s important to note that Redondo’s story is published in a core skate magazine, *Thrasher*. These media outlets have a legacy of featuring rugged “men who are skilled and risk-taking,” while framing “women in sexualized ways or as less skilled” (Beal and Ebeling 2019: 105). The skater’s eye, portrayed in this mediated context, takes on a male gaze, drawing attention to narratives of assimilation. The story’s protagonist *becomes a skater* by acquiring a man’s eye rather than through situated learning and enskilment. What’s more, the skater’s ability to identify skateable space is deemed undesirable or even unhealthy for nonnormative skaters: her mother suggests seeing a doctor, as if such techniques do not belong to a woman’s body.

Challenging these gendered models of the skater’s gaze and ocularcentrism, artist-researcher Dani Abulhawa (2020) stresses that skateboarding’s ultimate expression – trick play – can best be categorized as bodily kinesthetic intelligence. She notes how skaters merge a tacit knowledge of one’s own motile and sensory perception, the ability to reproduce motion observed in others, and the capacity to precisely execute intentional movements. What emerges is an emplaced interplay between normative and personalized techniques. While most skaters do perform tricks by creatively engaging architecture, this is by no means a universalist form of skill acquisition, nor does it mean that seemingly similar movements feel or mean the same to all. Learning to skate is not a simple matter of acquiring *the skater’s* eye and performing tricks accordingly. Rather, it is an enskilment that centers the practitioner’s own sense of their embodied self, conditioned by the expectations of others about sensory perception and shaped by the social structures of an environment (Glenney 2023). “The resulting performance,” Abulhawa (2020: 72) writes, “may look the same as that produced by another body, but it doesn’t mean that both bodies arrive at the trick or indeed that they perform the trick in the same way.”

Dutch Olympian Candy Jacobs is intimately aware of the variations of embodied and emplaced experiences, including how these are mediated by social and cultural structures: “If I would jump El Toro [a set of twenty stairs] twice, I would probably tear all my shit up. I know that if [professional skater] Nyjah [Huston] does it five times in a row, he’s gonna be good” (Pushing Boarders 2019). Jacobs ascribes this bodily difference to the historical lineage of the skate industry, who have supported men over women and

gender-nonconforming people for multiple decades. Such industry-wide support resulted in a context where professional athletes like Jacobs had to pay out of their own pocket to get fitness coaches and medical support, limiting the training for high-performance tricks and increasing the socio-economic repercussions of injuries. What's more, Jacobs, skating at El Toro would result in a decidedly different sensory experience and social set of meanings compared to multi-millionaire Nyjah Huston, whose athletic performance is made possible by brands like Nike and Monster. Jacobs expresses how she's achingly familiar with the gendered standard for skating: women and gender nonconforming people must skate like Nyjah Huston, *like a man*, to attract attention from the skate industry. Alternatively, these skaters have to mold themselves to what the industry considers marketable, which generally means attuning to the male gaze (Abulhawa 2020).

At times, systemic adversity results in the reappropriation of claims to proficiency. Sport scientist Åsa Bäckström (2013) discusses a performative resistance by all-women skate networks in Sweden. Taking ownership of discourses of competency and skill to perform resistance through the Swedish word *grym*, loosely translated as "cruel and awesome," the network claims prowess and ability in a male-dominated community. As such, they legitimize their presence, not least by reappropriating a terminology otherwise associated with a masculine sway of pride and power. These skaters perform a social stance by reappropriating a gendered norm. Simultaneously, an increasing number of elite mature skaters (supported by sports and health brands) now advertise their use of diet plans, workout regimes, and sobriety advocacy to non-professional skaters. By promoting an *athletic* lifestyle, rather than one rooted in urban and street culture, these skaters pivot on health and wellness. Put differently, bodily techniques, like sideways movement, acquire situated meanings in specific contexts – opening up the possibility for subject formation and communal practices.

The point, here, is that the senses are necessarily mediated by encultured socialities like gender, providing a critique of gestalt and early phenomenological ideas that claim immediate, unfiltered, and primordial embodied perception. As sensory anthropologist, David Howes (2023: 154) writes,

social factors, therefore, along with individual abilities and environmental allowances, deeply influence our mode of seeing, hearing, smelling, and so on. To assert otherwise is not merely an act of gross naïveté; it is a sign of contempt for the ways in which individuals and social groups have had their senses constrained and their experiences disdained by the politics of perception put forward by the dominant class.

Building upon this foundational insight from the anthropology of the senses, we must account for the contextual peculiarities of the skater's sensorium, i.e. how the senses are ordered, tuned, and integrated. This is further

complicated by the recognition that skaters hold divergent, at times hierarchically organized social positions (Dupont 2014): filmers and photographers can visually identify skateable space and test their textural sounds with incredible acuity, tasked with visually and sonically recording these performances. Spotters position themselves on the sidewalks and streets to prevent skaters from crashing into pedestrians and vehicles, combining a tacit knowledge of urban rhythms with an intimate familiarity with trick play. The skaters performing the tricks have an attuned vestibular and textural sensory array that can pick out the “feel” of a spot, imagining potential stanced bodily movements as enhanced by their tool, the skateboard.

Becoming a skater – including the process of learning to skate switch or habituating the skater’s dominant sensory modes – is located at the axes of class, ethnicity, gender, access, and ability. Marginalized populations of skaters cannot necessarily run the risk of being arrested for their illegal play or using abandoned city spaces, reinforcing that the mythologized skater’s eye is a decidedly white and male organ (cf. Abulhawa 2020; Williams 2020). Besides, the skater’s eye plays out distinctly among skaters with divergent eye conditions, some of whom use a white cane during trick performances – foregrounding tactility and sonic practices for proprioception (Carroll and Cianciotto 2020). Sensorially, the vibrations of wheels on street surfaces can strike neurodiverse bodies in a more aggressive fashion, enmeshing tingling joy with overwhelming stimuli, a misophonia. From trick play and sideways orientation to urban place-making and athletic performance, a skater’s stance envelops the sensory and the social.

## Note

1 Parts of this section are derived from or revised reflections on Hølsgens’ PhD thesis, *A Phenomenology of Skateboarding in Seoul, South Korea: Experiential and filmic observations* (2018), made open access as *Skateboarding in Seoul: A Sensory Ethnography* (2021).

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