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# Nairobi on Board:

## Skateboarders' Sensory Experiences of Community, Body, and Space

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## *Abstract*

In this paper, I argue skateboarding to be a ritualizing performance that acts as a catalyst for transformative energies and heightened emotional states. Aided by the sensory experience of riding a board, powerful feelings of connectedness and unity arise amongst those who practice skateboarding, so intense that they transgress day-to-day social boundaries and temporarily overcome the socioeconomic segregation of ordinary urban life.

Skateboarding is often conceptualized as an identical global phenomenon, bypassing its localized nature and culturally specific character. When it comes to skateboarding practices in the Global South, little has been written beyond the perspectives of development and peacebuilding, fortifying narratives of skateboarding as simply a Western export. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to expanding the literature on skateboarding beyond the Global North and deepen the understanding of diversity in skateboarding practices.

Using sensory ethnography and leaning on the fields of ritual- and performance studies, I explore the life worlds of skateboarders in Nairobi, Kenya, trying to understand their experiences of community and the interaction between the skateboarding body and space. Through the act of skateboarding, my participants reinvent themselves and the world they want to belong to, simultaneously drawing on a global cultural legacy and performing a context-specific identity and localized practice.

**Key Words:** social anthropology, skateboarding, Kenya, collective effervescence, ritual performance

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## *Introduction*

Moving around various urban locations over the past six years, I have observed skateboarders in passing, being captivated by the immanently meditative and ritual-like quality of the repetitive sounds and tirelessly performed movements. In this paper, I try to get closer to the lived experience of skateboarders in Nairobi, Kenya, as they engage in the embodied practice of balancing a wooden deck on four wheels. What do skateboarders experience that leads them to phrase their leisure time activity as heaven on earth, freedom, magic, a lifesaving escape, family, or home (only to mention a few)? Why do they engage in riskful behaviour, causing regular incidents of injury, arrest, confrontations with law enforcement, exposure to crime, and disdainful comments from strangers?

At first glance, the amount of time, effort, and money that is channelled towards skateboarding by my informants can seem highly irrational, especially in the Nairobi context, where many lack a stable income, exhaustive health insurance, or formal housing. The prevalence of crime, violence, and corruption is high and the urban spaces are far from easily skateable. Still, for most of my informants, to ‘stop skateboarding’ is much more of a far-flung alternative than the constant confrontation of obstacles that accompanies the skateboarding practice in Nairobi. In the following paper, I explore the life worlds of my participants and try to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

## **Focus and Research Question**

This paper focuses on the skateboarding practice and -community in Nairobi. As a relatively new subject in academia, skateboarding has only been researched since the turn of the 21st century. While having developed into a global phenomenon, little has been written about skateboarding on the African continent, and to my knowledge, no academic text on skateboarding in Kenya exists at the time of writing. As such, this paper aims to contribute to expanding the academic literature on skateboarding beyond the Global North and deepen the understanding of the localized and context-specific character of such skateboarding practices.

I guide my research along the following question: What do Nairobi skateboarders experience as they engage in the act of skateboarding? More specifically, I try to understand the basis of skateboarders’ excitement, their motivation, and their willingness to endure pain, confrontation, and risk. I wonder how it feels to be a part of the skateboarding community;

what is the experience like and how is it perceived through the senses? I am also curious about the interaction between the skateboarding body and space; how is the spatial environment connected to the body and practice of the skateboarder?

In the first and upcoming chapter, I will give a brief background to the subject, clarify some terminology, and review some of the existing academic literature on skateboarding. This is followed by a short introduction to the theoretical orientation of the paper. The next chapter is concerned with the construction of the study and methodological considerations underlying the project. In the third and fourth chapters, I discuss and reflect on my empirical material while making use of theoretical concepts which I continuously introduce alongside my findings. This is followed by the final section, which concludes the paper.

## *Chapter 1: Foundations*

Most commonly, skateboarding is told to originate from Californian surfers in the 1950s, creatively adapting their practice to the streets, on days when waves were flat and impossible to surf (O'Connor 2020: 6). In reality, however, experiments of constructing a board with wheels took place in both Europe and the United States as early as the late 1890s (if not even earlier) (ibid.).<sup>1</sup> Since then, skateboarding has developed into a complex phenomenon, understood as both a sport, leisure time activity, subculture, lifestyle, art form, and a political act, involving a wide range of actions, attitudes, and philosophies (Friedel 2015: 11; O'Connor 2020: 6). As a multi-billion industry and one of the fastest-growing sports in the United States during the first decade of the 21st century, skateboarding has spread its wings and become globally dispersed (Thorpe 2016: 92).

While not necessarily originating in California, early American practitioners have nonetheless been heavily influential in the contemporary global skateboarding culture and skateboarding parks all over the world reference the topography of Californian cities (Abulhawa 2017: 419; O'Connor 2020: 49-50). Simultaneously, skateboarding has been argued to be fundamentally local, as it is “concerned with the micro-spaces of streets” (Borden 2001: 1). Lately, skateboarding scenes in South America, the Middle East, and South East Asia have been increasingly recognized, yet mentionings of the African continent are few (with an exception of South Africa). However, skateboarding scenes are emerging all over Africa as well, including Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Ghana, Ethiopia, Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya.

In Nairobi, a small but steady skateboarding scene emerged in the early 2000s. After roughly a decade, in 2010, the Skateboarding Society of Kenya (SSK) was founded by a group of local skateboarders, and three years later, Kenya's first and East Africa's largest skatepark was built on the grounds of a local non-governmental organization (NGO), in cooperation with the German organization Skate-Aid (Skate-Aid e.V. n.d.; Tumshangilieni Mtoto n.d.). At the time of writing (July 2023), the SSK has 181 registered members, with approximately 50 active skateboarders, and is frequently hosting events in collaboration with local artists and small-scale businesses. Nonetheless, skateboarding is still considered a new and uncommon

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller picture of the history of skateboarding, extensive work has been written by Iain Borden (2001, 2019a).

practice in Kenya, and Nairobiian skateboarders struggle to access skateboarding equipment and spaces to skate.

## **Definitions**

A skateboard is composed of a wooden deck with a softly curved nose and tail, covered in coarse grip tape on the top and (most frequently) expressive artwork underneath. Fixed to the bottom are two metal trucks, holding a pair of wheels each. There are numerous variations in the width, length, material, brand, and style of such boards, serving individual preferences and different terrains of use. Connected to the skateboard is the bodily practice of balancing it, while using the strength of one's leg to push the board forward. Through skilful movements of pushing, dragging, flipping, jumping, kicking, and grinding, the board is also used to perform 'tricks,' either on flat ground or over and along obstacles. Such tricks need to be extensively practised to master, requiring incredible amounts of patience, repetition, and commitment.

It is this embodied practice and performance that I refer to when using the words 'skateboarding' or 'skating' in the following paper. Similarly, when I write the word 'skater,' this always refers to an individual engaged in the skateboarding practice, and never to rollerblade skaters, inline-skaters, or ice-skaters. I do not differentiate between the different types of skateboards (long-board, short-board, dancers, cruisers, etc.) or styles of skateboarding (street, pool, freestyle, downhill, etc.), as most of my informants would engage in several different styles of skateboarding, often seamlessly switching between one and another over the course of a day. I have avoided the extensive use of skateboarding-specific terminology (mainly because of my own unfamiliarity with such lingo), but when it does occur, definitions are provided in the attached footnotes.

## **Skateboarding in Academia**

Iain Borden (2001) was one of the first to write an academic piece on skateboarding and has since assumed a position as 'the father' of skateboarding academia. His work constitutes a backbone to the study of skateboarding and has been exhaustively referenced in any following research. Coming from an architectural historical background, Borden (2001) applied a socio-spatial analysis to the skateboarding practice, exploring the interaction between cityscapes, space, and the skateboarding body. His conceptualization of



skateboarding as a performance and production of alternative urban space is fundamental to the way skateboarding has been approached in this paper.

Much of the academic literature on skateboarding has continued to emerge from the fields of architecture, urban geography, and urban design. A common topic within skateboarding academia has been the skateboarding practice in relation to public space, drawing connections to urban class conflict and gentrification (Howell 2005), between citizenship and visibility in public space (Németh 2006), and contrasting between ‘public space’ and ‘common space’<sup>2</sup> (Cianciotto 2020). These works extend the foundations of academic knowledge on the topic of skateboarding and provide an important context for the further exploration of the subject.

Another well-researched and distinguished topic within the existent literature on skateboarding is skateparks. They have been argued to both create new forms of community (Borden 2019b) and to be battlegrounds of power play and negotiation (Jones & Graves 2000) or sites of urban governance, conceptualized as ‘neoliberal playgrounds’ (Howell 2008). Skateparks are heavily controversial within the skateboarding community because while designated places to skate are appreciated, the controlled and institutionalized nature of skateparks also conflicts with the spontaneous and transgressive identity of street skateboarding (Borden 2001; Howell 2008; Jones & Graves 2000; Németh 2006, amongst others).

In an attentive phenomenology of South Korean skateboarding, Sander Holsgens (2019) illuminates how skateboarding preferences differ, being locally and culturally specific rather than uniformly global. In Seoul, skateboarders avert the risky street skateboarding practice, preferring meticulous skill acquisition within the well-known, predictable, and safe environment of the skatepark. Skateboarding is then understood and practised more like a sport and less as a subcultural lifestyle or transgressive phenomenon (Holsgens 2019). So far, much of the research on skateboarding has been heavily based on an American context, and Holsgens’ (2019) work is one of few that emphasizes the context-specific characteristics of

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<sup>2</sup> While public space is regulated by authority and only open to the general public as long as predetermined rules are being followed, common space “is managed by those who directly produce and inhabit the space (commoners)” (Cianciotto 2020: 677). In contrast to public space, the accessibility of common space is context specific and locally constructed.

the skateboarding practice, moving away from the conceptualization of skateboarding as an identical global phenomenon and culture.

Lately, so-called Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) projects have caught an interest in skateboarding, and numerous philanthropic skateboarding projects have appeared around the globe (Skateistan, The Skatepark Project (previously known as Tony Hawk Foundation), Skate-Aid, Concrete Jungle Foundation, WAW, Make Life Skate Life, and many more). Existing literature on the involvement of skateboarding in SDP projects highlights the benefits of the skateboarding practice for community- and youth development, focusing on individual empowerment, skill mastery (balance, coordination), social skills (sharing, respect, communication), self-regulation, self-expression, creativity, the creation of 'therapeutic landscapes,' cross-cultural experiences, emotional well-being, experiences of belonging, protection against community violence and gang recruitment, fostering equality, and more (Abulhawa 2017; Bader 2018; Bradley 2010; Thorpe 2016; Sorsdahl et al. 2021).

Skateboarding has often been argued to carry great potential for the SDP movement because of its distinctiveness from traditional, institutionalized sports. Usually, it is categorized as an 'action-' or 'lifestyle' sport, emphasizing the individualized and unstructured nature of skateboarding in contrast to rule-bound, team-based, regulated, and competitive<sup>3</sup> sports (Thorpe 2016). However, such statements have also been critically reviewed, locating action sports NGOs within a broader neo-liberal context (Beal et al. 2017; Thorpe and Rinehart 2012) and emphasizing the need for critically developed, adequately supported, and culturally sensitive SDP programs (Thorpe 2016).

Sophie Friedel (2015) notes the fine line between development- and peacebuilding practices and Western cultural imperialism. Taking an alternate approach to peacebuilding, along the lines of transnational peace research, she writes a sensitive and thoughtful autoethnographic book on the inner emotional state of peace, ignited by the act of skateboarding. In a similarly introspective although less critical article, Dani Abulhawa (2017) reflects on the smooth spaces of skateparks that allow for a flow of movements and transitions, connecting this to a strategy of smoothing political and social space in areas of restriction, oppression, and occupation. Holly Thorpe, Lyndsay Hayhurst, and Megan Chawansky (2018) also call for a

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<sup>3</sup> While competitions have gained more and more prominence within skateboarding, this is mainly on a professional level and the practice is still largely understood as non-competitive (Thorpe 2016: 100).

more nuanced and critical understanding of power relations, ethics, and risks, as they draw attention to communications strategies of SDP organizations and the complexities of portraying sporting girls from the Global South.

The hierarchical gender dynamics within skateboarding have been another source of criticism in response to the claims of positive social impact. Research has shown that while female participation in action sports is increasing, both public and private skateboarding environments are strongly male-coded and exclusionary (Carr 2017), and female skateboarders are still being devalued and excluded, especially from the street skateboarding practice (Atencio, Beal & Wilson 2009). Subsequent research has thus begun to explore strategic interventions for challenging the male dominance within skateboarding, suggesting moving beyond a gendered framework and intentionally positioning women “first and foremost as skateboarders, rather than as women” (Bäckström & Nairn 2018: 435).

While the literature on skateboarding in relation to community- and youth development is diverse in geographical locations, including Australia, South Africa, Palestine, Afghanistan, and the United States (amongst others), there is almost no literature on skateboarding in the Global South beyond this category. The lack of literature exploring skateboarding in non-Western contexts from a different lens than that of development and peacebuilding is striking and somewhat concerning, as it fortifies narratives of the Global South as in need of ‘rescue’ and skateboarding as simply a Western export.<sup>4</sup> I apply this critique as much to myself as to anyone else, as I too planned to write a paper contributing to this area of literature, and it was solely by unforeseen circumstances that I changed the focus of my research (see [Chapter 2](#) for a more detailed description). Retrospectively, I see value in broadening the perspectives on non-Western skateboarding and exploring diverse local skateboarding practices from a variety of angles.

Recently, scholars have approached the practice of skateboarding from new directions, drawing on a wide array of fields, including anthropology and performance studies. Paul O’Connor (2020) has written a thorough examination of skateboarding as religion, in which

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<sup>4</sup> Here it is worth noting that the literature I have reviewed is limited to literature written in English, thereby most likely overlooking research originating in the Global South itself. Brazil, for example, has a strong skateboarding scene and a rich array of literature exploring skateboarding from a variety of angles. Nevertheless, the noted pattern is still telling of which themes are rendered relevant by Western scholars in regards to the Global South.

he conceptualizes skateboarding as a form of ritualized play, leaning heavily on anthropological theories and concepts of ritual, myth, and pilgrimage. His work has in many ways been of great inspiration to this paper, although I do not seek to defend (nor rebut) his claims of understanding skateboarding as religious per se. Hunter H. Fine (2018) explores surfing and street skateboarding as the embodied gestures of cultural performance, drawing connections to ethnocultural legacies and sociopolitical constructions. His text “ponders *why we move the way we do*,” and how such movements communicate identity in relation to the “shifting social and physical landscape” (Fine 2018: ix). I situate my paper along the lines of these scholars, exploring the intersections between ritual, performance, and space, rooted in the skateboarding practice in Nairobi.

### **Introducing Ritual and Performance**

In this paper, I draw on theories and concepts from ritual- and performance studies. These will be introduced continuously throughout the text, alongside my empirical material. As such, no designated theory chapter can be found in this paper. However, a quick introduction to the fields of ritual- and performance studies may be helpful at this stage, to explain the connection between the two fields and provide some of the basic understandings underlying the upcoming concepts.

Ritual studies, it has been noted, is an inherently complex topic with no generally agreed-on definition of ritual, let alone how it is best to be understood (Bell 1997: x). Rather, the field of ritual studies consists of a wide variety of theories and approaches, fluctuating with time, and ranging from sacred, religious ceremonies to secular, everyday actions. While some stress the distinctiveness of ritual action from other human activity, others point to their congruence (Bell 1992: 70). It is beyond the reach of this paper to dive deeply into this complicated theoretical discussion and take a clear stance on the definition of ritual. My interest lies not in whether or not skateboarding can be classified as a ritual, but rather in what understandings can be gained when approaching skateboarding as a ritualizing practice.

The way I approach ritual is by directing the focus to the embodied practice of the ritual act itself, leaning partly on Catherine Bell’s (1992: 93) notion that “strategies of ritualization are particularly rooted in the body.” Bell (1992: 93, 100) argues ritualization to be a circular production of ritualized bodies and ritualized practices, whose primary objective is not the expression of inner states, but the restructuring of the body itself. This making and remaking

of the body works both as a reproduction and transformation of the sociopolitical context in which it takes place. As such, the distinctiveness of ritual is not what it communicates or symbolizes, but that it “*does things*” (Bell 1992: 111).

Performances are “twice-behaved behaviours,” reconstructed actions that are trained for and rehearsed by humans (Schechner 2006: 28). At the core of all performances lies a ritual action, they are “living examples of ritual in/as action” (Turner 1988: 7). What is understood to *be* a performance in a social context fluctuates with time and place, but all human activity can be studied *as* performance, Richard Schechner (2006: 38) argues. Based on an underlying notion “that any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance,” Schechner (2006: 2) writes that performance must be understood as a spectrum of human activity. As such, the way I use ‘performance’ in this paper is not referring to the performing arts (music, arts, drama), but to the performances of everyday life - the enactments of social realities that mark identities and mould the body (Schechner 2006: 28, 42).

## *Chapter 2: Approach*

In the following sections I present my methodological considerations, the proceedings of the fieldwork, and shortly introduce the participants of the project and the settings in which it took place. However, more information on my participants and research context is also presented in direct connection to my material, in the upcoming chapters.

### **A Change of Plans**

Writing my research proposal in the autumn of 2022, I had a very different paper in mind than the one presented here. While still involving skateboarding in Nairobi, my initial interest concerned skateboarding being used in SDP projects for rehabilitating children from vulnerable communities, with a focus on children's own perspectives. I was supposed to conduct my fieldwork at the first, and so far only, public skatepark in Nairobi, on the grounds of the Kenyan non-profit organization Tumshangilieni Mtoto. A day before leaving for my fieldwork, however, I was notified that the skatepark was under construction and the children connected to the organization were not allowed to skate. While the renovations were to take two weeks, they are still not completed at the time of writing, almost exactly five months later (although parts of it are accessible for skating again). These circumstances quickly forced me to rethink my focus.

For several reasons, I did no longer feel comfortable with making the children the focus of my project. With them not being allowed to practice skateboarding, the activity felt distant and abstract and difficult to speak about. Not being able to rely on participant observation anymore, I also did not want to add to their already very long school days by engaging them in interviews or workshops for my research purposes. Also, although the children learnt and spoke English in school, the language barrier was still prevalent. Amongst each other, the children spoke Swahili or informal languages<sup>5</sup>, making it difficult for me to grasp certain situations or casually join conversations. With all of this in mind, it became clear that my project would take on a different route than first laid out.

Instead, I quickly became acquainted with teenage- and young adult skateboarders (during the first weeks, visitors would still come to the skatepark as they did not know about the

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<sup>5</sup> Sheng, and more recently Shembeteng, is commonly spoken by urban youth in Nairobi and consist of a creative mix of Swahili, English, local languages and made-up words.

renovations), whose skateboarding practice was not limited to the skatepark. When they asked me to join them at their other regular skating spots, I began spending my time with them, travelling to different sites in the city. It has often been noted that social research is chaotic and unplanned by nature (Davies 2008: 29) and impossible to fully plan and prepare for (Pink 2015: 51). Having this in mind, I chose to take on an open and unfolding research approach, trusting that spending time with my participants would allow for research topics and themes to emerge.

Nonetheless, data collection is never completely neutral and usually guided by the theoretical orientation of the fieldworker (Davies 2008: 47). While my research question was undecided, I was still set on pursuing a sensory approach to my research. Sensory ethnography builds on the recognition of the body as a site of knowing in itself. Rather than viewing the mind and the body as two separate entities, where the body is simply rationalised and controlled by the mind, they are understood to be intertwined and integrated. Knowledge and learning are seen as embodied processes (Pink 2015: Chapter 2). This notion is developed further to also include the relationship between bodies and the environments they inhabit, extending the concept of embodiment to that of emplacement. Here, the materiality and sensoriality of the environment are recognized, and the way place, space, and the self are interproduced through the sensory experience of living in and moving through the world (ibid.).

As such, I guided my attention towards the senses as I was collecting data and subsequently when I was analyzing my material. Further, this attention is directed towards both my participants and myself, letting my own embodied experiences become a source of knowledge. Here I tread carefully, as the risk of self-absorption is great, and the assumption, that there is a sameness to the experiences of different people, a slippery slope. Nonetheless, as noted by Tutenges (2023: 22), “we humans are intimately connected and [...] defined by not only physical but also psychic similarities” and “[t]here can be moments when experiences are shared.” Thus, by acknowledging the sensory and embodied knowledge of my participants I also acknowledge my own, and understand the research process as one in which participants and researcher co-produce a world through mutual engagement and participation (Davies 2008: 8; Pink 2015: 75).

## Researching Skateboarding in Nairobi

My empirical material is based on nearly ten weeks of fieldwork in Nairobi, Kenya during the first half of 2023. Through participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews I collected data from teenage- and young adult skateboarders, ranging from the age of 15 to 26 years. On certain occasions, children as young as ten and adults up to their 50s would be present as well, but they would rarely be directly involved in my data collection. My participants came from different socioeconomic backgrounds, spanning from wealthier and well-educated families to more troubled households with unstable housing situations, low incomes, or difficult family dynamics. Many of my closest informants came from severely underprivileged contexts. A few of them were employed, others were trying to find employment, and still a few others pursued opportunities for self-employment and small-scale entrepreneurship. While many had completed some sort of higher education, they were almost all struggling to make a living and build a career.<sup>6</sup>

I interacted with approximately forty to fifty different skateboarders over the course of my fieldwork, spending time most extensively with about ten of them. These skateboarders were skating frequently, and often together in different constellations, and thus became my key informants. The overwhelming majority of skateboarders I interacted with were male. I met four female skateboarders who were actively skating and was told about a handful of others who had been part of the scene earlier but disappeared for various (often unknown) reasons.

Much of my material is recorded during skating sessions, taking place at the upper level of a parking garage, at the sports grounds of the University of Nairobi, on the streets of town at night, in residential areas on the outskirts of the city, or somewhere between Nairobi and the nearby town Limuru. I also observed various skating lessons hosted by my participants, was invited to another skating project for children in the informal settlements of Kibera, and spent time at my participants' homes, in bars, food shacks, shops, markets, and so on. Roaming around Nairobi with my participants, joining them for daily adventures, or making our way home together, was an important part of my fieldwork. Within ethnography, 'walking with

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<sup>6</sup> Kenya has an extremely young population structure (in 2022, 38% of the total population was <14 years old) and unemployment is to a large degree a youth problem (UNDP 2013: 20; World Bank n.d. (a)). The informal sector is large and youths have extremely limited access to formal employment. Urban areas generally and Nairobi specifically have high rates of youth unemployment, and the access to jobs is clearly linked to poverty (UNDP 2013: 21, 59, 73). In 2019, unemployment rates for people with advanced education (12%) were higher than for those with intermediate (8%) or basic education (4%) and more than twice as high as overall unemployment rates (5%) (World Bank n.d. (b, c, d, e)).



others' is a well-known and acknowledged way of inquiry (Pink 2015: 111). Facilitated by the physical co-presence in sharing the steps of one's participants, empathy and a sense of belonging is created, allowing for a connectedness as one attempts to understand the ways one's participants live and move through the world (Pink 2015: 112). Moving around the city with the skateboarders, travelling by foot, public transport, motorcycle or car, contributed greatly to a closer understanding of what it means to be skateboarding in Nairobi.

Upon meeting someone for the first time, I would always inform them about the research project I was working on and the type of information I was collecting and writing down. This was not always easy, as it is difficult to explain the exact aim or outcome of a research project that is open and unfolding. Often, I would repeat the explanation to my participants on several occasions. Rather than being a 'one-time thing' at the beginning of the fieldwork (or interview), I viewed consent as an ongoing process in which participants have the right to be reminded of the data collection taking place (Davies 2008: 56). This is especially true for participant observation spanning over some time, as participants may not always keep in mind that social interactions and informal conversations serve as data collection (ibid.).

Nevertheless, I believe my participants were continuously quite aware of the underlying reason for my presence, usually inquiring about my progress with the project and very intentionally sharing information with me. For example, whenever I was with them, I wrote field notes, and skateboarders would usually approach me voluntarily, curious about what I was writing. When I was feeling awkward with my pen and notebook or recorder at first, the skateboarders often encouraged me to record and take notes, telling me that I would forget whatever they shared with me otherwise.

After roughly a month of getting to know the skateboarding community and beginning to develop some questions and interview topics, I began scheduling and conducting semi-structured interviews with my participants. With time, a very loose framework of four to five themes emerged, which I used for most of my respondents. I chose my interview participants partly based on their availability and interest in participating, partly because of their specific backgrounds and engagements in the skateboarding community. All in all, I conducted semi-structured interviews on eight occasions, with seven skateboarders and one with the German director of the Tumshangilieni Mtoto organization. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 2,5 hours, with an average of roughly 1,5 hours. Only one of the

respondents was a female skateboarder. All names of participants that are presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

The times and locations for the interviews were chosen by the respondents and took place at different skating spots around the city, my respondents' homes, and at the skatepark. When conducted in public places especially, some of the one-on-one interviews occasionally turned into group interviews, as someone would come and join the conversation for a while, to then return to their previous activity (most often, skateboarding). I recorded these interviews with a recording device and wrote notes during or directly after the interview. For casual conversations as well, I would often scribble down their contents in my notebook or phone during bus rides, skating sessions, skating lessons, dinners, walks, while eating ice cream, watching skating videos, etc. As often noted, with ethnographic research the distinction between interviewing and participant observation is not strictly separated (Göransson 2019: 120). Occasionally, I would also record conversations with and between my participants, for example after confrontations with the police or security guards, while looking through photos of past skateboarding events, or at the end of skate sessions, when they would sit down next to me to rest.

Although highly time-consuming, I chose to transcribe all of my recordings at their full length, based on the understanding that hearing is an active and interpretative process (Greene & Hogan 2005: 183), and that “the process of analysis is intrinsic to all stages of research,” including transcription (Davies 2008: 231). Reading through my notes and transcriptions, I began to code sections according to thematic repetitions and tried to build a structure from there. Once I began to write up my findings, however, the process was largely intuitive.

### **Reflecting on the Fieldwork Experience**

As a young and first-time student fieldworker, conducting an ethnographic research project is a humbling experience. The way my project played out, and the paper presented here, is in no way flawless. There were many times I wished I had asked sharper questions, followed up on something mentioned by my participants, or directed my focus differently during observations. For example, I wish I had dug deeper into the relationship between black or African identity and the skateboarding practice during my fieldwork. Simultaneously, my inexperience and being close in age to my informants may have aided the participatory

character of the project, levelling out unequal power structures in relation to age and professional status. Similarly, the fact that I do not skate myself essentially erased any false perceptions of expertise that I might have been ascribed with in my role as a fieldworker. Arriving in Nairobi, I knew basically nothing about skateboarding, unmistakably making me the student of my participants.

Not knowing how to skate, or having any personal experience of the skateboarding lifestyle, can clearly be understood as a limitation to my project. Just as ‘walking with others’ is seen as a fruitful ethnographic approach, ‘skating with others’ would probably have been an even more appropriate method in the context of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, I would like to believe that the knowledge produced in the interplay between my participants and I is different from, rather than less than, the knowledge brought forward by a fellow skateboarder. Moreover, from the skateboarding literature I have come across, virtually every author is themselves skating. To be a non-skater researching skateboarding might then carry the potential of new perspectives or understandings.

Before the beginning of my fieldwork especially, I was quite nervous about my association with the Tumshangilieni Mtoto organization, as I was scared that it would lead to preconceptions about my position that might be inconvenient for the research project. While I was spending much of my afternoons, evenings, and weekends with my participants and away from Tumshangilieni Mtoto, I was nonetheless regularly involved in tasks and activities at the organization. Looking back, however, I believe that it was beneficial to be somewhat connected to the NGO, which was well-known within the skateboarding community in Nairobi. While I made it clear to my participants that I was in no way a representative of Tumshangilieni Mtoto, it still allowed them to place me within a familiar context and category.

Ethnographic research is not and does not aim to be, a straightforward representation of social reality (Pink 2015: 5). Rather, it acknowledges the constructed nature of social encounters and research outcomes, in which power relations and identity markers are reflected (Davies 2008: 9, 255; Pink 2015: 62). As such, what is presented here in this paper is shaped by the positionalities of my participants and myself and the social, political, and historical contexts in which the fieldwork and research project played out. While the skateboarders were overwhelmingly kind, welcoming, and respectful towards me, it was

nonetheless challenging at times to be the only woman amongst a group of men. Navigating cultural differences and interpreting behaviours could be a confusing undertaking. Speaking to female skateboarders and learning about their experiences became a refuge and comfort, and while this paper does not further explore the gender dynamics within the skateboarding community in Nairobi, all social encounters are undoubtedly gendered.

As a white person in Nairobi, one is unavoidably situated within colonial power relations and structurally treated differently. My presence influenced situations and interactions, sometimes to the convenience of my participants and sometimes to their annoyance. It also shaped the way my participants related to me and I to them. I am especially conscious about the fact that my participants offered me their time and knowledge, without any payment in return. Often making an effort to bring me along, they enabled me to move around the city in ways and at times and places that would otherwise not have been accessible to me as a foreigner.

In portraying previous encounters with foreign skateboarders, journalists, and companies, my informants sometimes expressed that they had felt used, abandoned, and not sufficiently reimbursed for their hospitality. Similarly, one of my younger informants once asked me what he would get out of this, as I was about to conduct an interview with him. Explaining to him the minimal outreach of this paper, I was made crucially aware of my own partaking in this unequal exchange and the very limited gain for my informants in participating in this project. I do not seek to defend myself nor provide a solution to this dilemma. Rather, I want to acknowledge the complexity of conducting ethnographic research and the truly indispensable contribution of my participants.

So far, I have briefly contextualized the topic of my research, introduced my theoretical point of departure, and explained how this study was constructed. In the following chapters, I will present my findings. The first chapter focuses on the experience of community while the latter chapter focuses on the interrelation between spatial environments, the body, and the skateboarding practice in Nairobi. In the final section of the paper, I conclude my findings.

### *Chapter 3: Community*

When I declared my original research focus a dead case, I decided to take a very open approach to my fieldwork, hoping for a new focus to appear somewhat organically over time. This has been excruciating at times, and I am still not sure if it was the best way forward. Anyhow, in my quest for a new research focus, I sometimes asked my participants what they found to be most interesting or worthwhile to explore when it came to skateboarding in Nairobi. The absolute majority of them answered “the community.” While I asked them to elaborate on their answers, in different ways trying to probe for what they meant, I quite frankly never really understood what it was about the community that they wanted me to look into. Maybe this had to do with my inexperience in fieldwork, failing to ask the right questions or notice the right things. However, I wonder if it may also be because community is better *experienced* than explained.

The term ‘community’ can simply refer to an area of common living, but it also indicates a feeling of togetherness, a specific form of social relationship. To distinguish between the two, Victor Turner (1969: 96) uses the Latin term ‘*communitas*’ when referring to the latter. Moments of *communitas* are amply charged with affects, Turner (1969: 138) writes, it has something magical about it, “to exist is to be in ecstasy.” Similarly, Mary Douglas (1996: 46) states that confronting ambiguity (which, as will become apparent later on, is intimately connected to *communitas*) can be a stimulating and pleasant experience, generating a gradient of intense emotions. I approach the prompt (“the community”) given to me by my participants, by trying to understand their lived experience of it. How does it *feel* to be a part of the skateboarding community? What is the experience like, and how is it perceived through the senses?

#### **The Experience of Bliss**

To dive deeper into the phenomenological element of *communitas*, I will make use of the Durkhemian concept of ‘collective effervescence,’ based on the elaborated definition by Sébastien Tutenges in his book *Intoxication* (2023). Collective effervescences is a state of heightened collective energies experienced in both religious and nonreligious contexts, and applicable to small-scale gatherings as well as entire eras (Tutenges 2023: 6). Tutenges (ibid.) defines it as “an altered state of heightened intersubjectivity marked by intense, transgressive, and yet mutually attuned actions and emotions among individuals who are gathered in the

same place.” In contrast to the original conceptualization by Émile Durkheim, Tutenges (ibid.) emphasises the spatial and temporal closeness of individuals and actions for collective effervescence to arise. Further, he extends the concept to not only cover ‘serious’ social events but also include the leisure time activities of individuals (2023: 6-7).

During my time in Nairobi, I participated in two different skate events: one skateboarding competition at a parking garage and one ‘downhill event.’ For the latter, skateboarders travelled to Limuru, a small town located at a slightly higher altitude than Nairobi, to then skate back to the city together. While I believe moments of *communitas*, or collective effervescence, to be part of the everyday practice of skateboarding, these special occasions serve well for exemplifying and dissecting the experience of such heightened intersubjectivity. At the hand of my field notes, I will here reflect on the experience of participating in the downhill event, which took place on a Saturday in late March, right at the beginning of the rain season. The days before, heavy downpours had turned the dusty roads leading through the informal settlements of Kangemi into landscapes of sticky mud. On the day of the downhill event, however, the sun was burning my skin, just as predicted by Tony the day before, when he declared that “it never rains on a skate day.”

Sitting on the *matatu*<sup>7</sup>, which was specially organized for the excursion, the air was charged with infectious excitement and anticipatory tension about what was to come. Tutenges (2023) divides collective effervescence into five experiential components; unity, intensity, transgression, symbolization, and revitalization. Unity, he writes, is the most important of the components, “a powerful feeling of connectedness, of being part of a community, a common body” (Tutenges 2023: 6). When we reached Limuru, people along the roadside were casting curious glances at the group of skaters, as they welled out of the *matatu*. Leah, who was the only female skateboarder participating, and I joined on the back of a *boda*<sup>8</sup>. The last time she skated downhill she fell so badly that she had to go to the hospital, so today she would only skate certain sections, she told me. As I observed the group of skateboarders making their way through the landscapes of Limuru, they indeed reminded me of a common body, flowing in synchronicity, as they forcefully pushed their boards down the road. In my field notes, I wrote:

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<sup>7</sup> Most commonly, *matatus* are privately owned minibuses functioning as share taxis. Known for their colorful exterior and loud music, *matatus* are part of the informal public transport sector in Nairobi, catering mostly to the poorer areas of the city. *Matatus* are one of the main ways for transportation in Nairobi (Rasmussen, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Short form for *boda boda*, which is the East African term for motorcycle taxis (Wikipedia, 2023).

The skaters flow past us, the youngest ones crouch down low on their boards, hands clasped behind their backs and chests leaning forwards, as they roll down the hill. The sound of wheels on rough asphalt surrounds us. Amongst green fields and breathtaking scenery the skaters fill the road in wavelike motions, a united stream of movement, only interrupted when the abrupt halt of a fall causes someone to break away from the group.

Towards the end of the same day, when we had moved closer towards the city and the boda was no longer with us, Tony asked me to join him on his board. With my knees drawn up close to my chest, I sat down on the deck, facing forward. Tony placed his palms on my knees, transferring some of his weight into my body as he began to push the skateboard. Once we caught up with the rest of the group, the sound of the surrounding skateboards was deafening, like ocean waves roaring. The vibrations of the deck below me fused with the sonic landscape, flooding through my body, at first tingling, at some point numbing. When the road levelled out, Tony jumped off the board, but Junior immediately placed his hands on my shoulders, moving me along with him, as he skated next to me. Suddenly, I felt the small hand of one of the young boys on my back as well, also assisting in pushing me along with the group. In my notes, it says: “I am overcome by a strong sensation of community there and then, as I see the excitement on their faces, and their joint effort to make me a part of their day.”

Tutenges (2023: 6, 64) describes the second component of collective effervescence as a rush of emotion, overcoming a person with such intensity that they are carried outside of themselves, shifting away from the burdens of everyday life. Friedel (2015: 19) writes that “the action of skateboarding also catapulted me into stages of [...] ultimate bliss and ecstasy [...]. Yes, skateboarding also gave me peace of mind, a deep inner happiness and fulfilment.” Facilitated by the movements of the skateboarding practice, Friedel (ibid.) understands ecstatic moments of bliss as a state of inner peace in those who ride a board, and argues this to be transformative of stagnant energy. Similarly, Tutenges (2023: 28) writes that the synchronizing of participants’ “bodily and mental rhythms,” through a mutually attuned presence, is key to the intense emotional rush. Inherent to collective effervescence is the spatial closeness and shared focus on an object or activity that allows participants to engage in “rhythmically coordinated interactions” (Tutenges 2023: 11).

Thus, the sensory experience of riding a skateboard amid a group of skateboarders, also doing the same thing, very much aided the rise of collective effervescence. Feeling the vibrations of the deck, hearing the rolling sounds, or sensing the stream of air over the skin is integral to experiencing “the dopamine of skateboarding,” as one of my informants phrased it. This is not to say that all participants experienced the same uniform rush of emotions or were affected in the same way. Depending on their embodied predispositions, participants are affected differently by the “processual, multifaceted, and ambiguous conditions,” Tutenges (2023: 13) writes. My experience of joining the group of skateboarders on the back of a boda, or Tony’s skateboard, was most certainly different from the experience of pushing and riding a skateboard along the curvy roads of Limuru. Nonetheless, the bodily presence and focused awareness of a common activity, amongst everyone attending, allowed for a shared state of heightened energy to arise.

### **Desiring Risk and Experiencing Flow**

Intimately connected to the experience of intensity, is transgression. Caught up in the state of collective effervescence, people often engage in transgressive actions, ranging from playful breaches of social norms to more serious law-breaking behaviour (Tutenges 2023: 79). During the downhill event, many of the skateboarders would grab a hold of passing vehicles (bodas, trucks, matatus), letting themselves be carried away in high speed by the engine-driven machines, in the midst of already chaotic traffic and uneven roads. This certainly riskful behaviour can be difficult to understand, especially from an outside perspective.

Tutenges (2023: 82) writes that the crossing of limits often causes a heightening of the senses, drawing one into the present moment and allowing one to become fully absorbed by the here and now. This can be understood as a form of anti-structural play, where the exploration of risk allows the player to enter a pleasurable state of ‘flow’ (Schechner 2006: 92). The state of flow, termed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes a merging of the player with the activity they are engaged in, to a point where the surrounding world fades and nothing else seems to matter (Schechner 2006: 97). One of my informants indirectly described this state of flow to me when he repeatedly, on various occasions, would tell me “The problem is, you *think!*” Let me exemplify what I mean by the following conversation,



which was recorded one afternoon at the mall, where I met with another skateboarder to conduct an interview.

Trying to explain a trick whose name he did not know, Tony was demonstrating a flip on his board. Then, he asked Caleb for a T-tool<sup>9</sup> to tighten his trucks. Caleb rummaged through his bag, searching for it. “Let me see. But I think I carried it, I don’t know,” Caleb told us.

“The problem is you’re thinking. Stop thinking,” Tony responded. We laughed at him. “You know when you think, you stop yourself from doing lots of things,” he explained to us.

“Yeah, I feel it. I feel it,” Caleb agreed. “By the way, I carried it,” he said, as he pulled out the tool from the depths of his bag and handed it over to Tony.

“So you just have to *not* think, just do it,” Tony continued his reasoning.

“Just do it, yeah. By the way, in skateboarding, if you think about something so much, you’re going to fall,” Caleb explained to me.

“You’re definitely not landing it [a trick],” Tony nodded.

Agreeing with him, Caleb echoed: “You won’t land it for sure.”

Integral to the successful skateboarding practice is the ability to let oneself become completely absorbed by the embodied activity, disrupting temporal states and focusing deeply on the here and now (O’Connor 2020: 36). “One ceases to flow if one becomes aware that one is doing it,” Turner (1988: 133) writes. Interviewing a female skateboarder, she told me, “especially for overthinkers, I think skateboarding is just *perfect*. ‘Cause you don’t think about anything else when you’re skating, you’re just skating, you know?” Abulhawa (2017: 421) also describes the state of flow as ‘unthinking,’ a moment in which years of hard work and practice are united with an immediate physical environment.

Combining these notions of flow and play, and connecting them back to risk-taking and transgression, is the concept of edgework, developed by Stephen Lyng (2005). Edgework refers to voluntary risk-taking, originally in the context of skydiving, and recognizes the profound level of skill and engagement that is required in moments of voluntary high-risk activity. Apart from the immediate rush that risk-takers experience in the negotiation of

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<sup>9</sup> Also known as ‘skateboarding tool,’ a T-tool functions as an all-in-one tool for putting together a skateboard and adjusting the wheels and trucks.

danger, the appeal of edgework lies in its capacity to serve as an escape from ordinary life and the enclosed social conditions (Lyng 2005: 5). Edgework can facilitate personal character development and group cohesion, in particular for people in social positions where such opportunities might otherwise be missing. Being linked together by their shared desire to experience ‘the edge,’ risk-takers generate strong bonds between themselves that disregard societal separations (Lyng 2005: 4, 6).

Most of my participants were in a position between childhood and ‘real’ adulthood (the idea of adulthood in Nairobi being strongly connected to marriage, family, and a stable income), struggling to enter the job market and build a life for themselves and future families. Coming from underprivileged backgrounds, many of my participants knew that their chances to find work were slim, especially within their field of studies, as personal connections are crucial to job opportunities in Nairobi. In their home communities, there were little to no opportunities for youths, causing many of their childhood friends to become involved with drugs or illegal activities. Having in mind the socioeconomic background of many of my informants, their engagement in the (sometimes mild, sometimes more intense) edgework provided by skateboarding can thus be understood as a potent way to grow their personality and experience a sense of belonging. Through engaging in the common activity of risk-taking, unequal structural positions can be bridged, and the otherwise rare opportunities for exploring the self and one’s abilities are provided.

### **Capturing Emotions and Performing Images**

Symbolization as a component of collective effervescence refers to the process of infusing physical objects, words, or bodily movements (for example) with collective energies, allowing participants to re-immense themselves into past experiences of effervescence (Tutenges 2023: 98-99). Within skateboarding, the practice of filming skate sessions can be understood as a way to actively create and accumulate such symbols. Reflecting on skateboarding media, O’Connor (2020: 124, 137) notes that skateboarding videos provide a powerful sense of *communitas*.

During the downhill event, I was repeatedly asked to film the skateboarders or to hand out my phone, to allow someone else to film with it. Not only did I receive numerous messages the days following the event, asking for the film clips, but they were also edited into a short

video which was shared and posted online.<sup>10</sup> In the following weeks, individual clips of the downhill event were posted on my informants' social media accounts and repeatedly watched together, initiating conversations about memories and highlights from the excursion. On a different occasion, towards the end of a regular skate session during which Junior had asked me to film him, he told me: "Now I will sit on the matatu and edit them [the video clips], and smile, and people will ask 'why is he so happy?'" As argued by Tutenges (2023: 99-100) and O'Connor (2020: 127, 137-139), videos can function as a symbolization of collective effervescence, allowing the skateboarders to re-live the heightened emotional state experienced before.

With skateboarding, effervescent symbols are not limited to skateboarding videos but can also include the skateboard itself or the bodily gestures performed during the skateboarding practice. If understood as symbolization, the repetitive movements and sensory experience of being on the board is at once a production of collective effervescence and a revival of what has already happened. Borden (2001: 123) reflects on how the ever-repeated moves of the skateboarder are neither simply an act of copying nor "an act of pure physical spontaneity." He writes that "through body-actions the activity of skateboarding [is reproduced] as codified in moves and communicated as a set of *produced* images" (ibid). In other words, the way skateboarders move their bodies is not only a carried-out action but the performance of an image - an embodied symbol.

As skateboarders perform their repetitions of movements, they also tap into an embodied knowledge of cultural importance and become part of a historical dialogue, Fine (2018: xii) writes. Reflecting on surfing and street skateboarding as critical cultural practices and performances, he situates movements and embodied practices in a wider historical, cultural, and political context. Performances are social, political, and ritualistic manifestations that give meaning to specific gestures (Fine 2018: xvi). Skateboarders reproduce "themselves as themselves (seeing themselves do a move), themselves as other than themselves (seeing themselves in the role of others), and other skaters as themselves (being the reflection of other skaters)," Borden (2001: 124) argues. This merging of the self and the other is inherent to the experience and reliving of effervescence (Tutenges 2023: 38).

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<sup>10</sup> "DOWNHILL SKATE COMPETITION featuring Kenyan Skateboarder's" by Kiara Skate, YouTube. <https://youtu.be/iqHb3VDRoO0>

## Transformation and Mystical Powers

During one of my last days in Nairobi, I travelled to Donhom with Tony, to conduct my final interview with him and Malek. We sat in Malek's room, where every surface was crammed with paintings and artwork, eating sweet potato cubes and drinking a mix of hot chocolate, ginger, and moringa. Throughout my fieldwork, several people had suggested that I should interview Malek, mainly because of his strong commitment to the children from his home community, whom he was trying to introduce to skateboarding. As he was telling me about his efforts, I asked him what valuable skills children learn from the skateboarding practice.

“From a personal perspective, before skateboarding, I was not as confident. I feel like I was always afraid of bullies,” Malek told us. “Cause like, these dudes at home, who are so big, and every time you pass by they ask you for money,” lowering his voice, he imitated the bullies from his past, “they're like: ‘Ey man!’ It was just-” Malek interrupted himself, bursting out in laughter.

“I get the vibe,” Tony chipped in.

“You know, I was also really small when I was going to high school, I was really short. So I feel like I was so prone to being bullied and stuff. But the moment I started skateboarding, all these bullies that I used to see, even the major one, the biggest one of them, I feel like he was respecting me. I don't know where that came from. He was like: ‘What the fuck?!’ He didn't understand what I was doing, so I feel like they all stayed away from me. I was a bit untouchable. And I feel like that came from my inner self. I feel like I got elevated beyond all these people. And I feel that's my confidence, my confidence improved.”

A central concept in both performance- and ritual studies is ‘liminality.’ Referring to the second phase of transition in ritual (separation, margin, reaggregation), the liminal phase is a “betwixt and between” state of ritual subjects undergoing this phenomenon (Turner 1969: 95). In liminality, a person is stripped of their former identity, status, and power - they enter a time-space that is neither here nor there, ruled by ambiguity and immediacy. It is in the liminal phase that the transitions and transformations of ritual take place, creating new social realities as the ritual subject is inscribed with a new identity and powers (Turner 1969: 96, 102). Within the performing arts, the empty theatre space is a liminal space, “open to all kinds of possibilities,” Schechner (2006: 67) writes. In Malek's experience, it is the

skateboard that is a liminal space, allowing him to let go of his old identity and tap into new powers. By stepping on the board, he is transformed from ‘small,’ ‘afraid,’ and ‘insecure,’ to ‘untouchable,’ ‘confident,’ and ‘respected.’ “You can be anything you want on that board,” Michelle similarly told me during an interview.

Collective effervescent has a revitalizing quality, it can infuse participants with new life, ‘elevating’ them, as expressed by Malek. The experience of collective effervescence can be empowering, encouraging people to take action, intensifying social relations, and boosting self-confidence (Tutenges 2023: 24). However, collective effervescence is not simply a pleasurable and fruitful experience - rather, it should be understood as an umbrella term, Tutenges (2023: 7) argues, encompassing a range of intense emotions and thriving in the twilight zone between risk and reward. Continuing his reflections, Malek told us:

“Yeah. Me against the world. And I feel like those days, the self-confidence just shoots, it just bursts out. ‘Cause I’m going downhill, kids are following me, they’re running after me, screaming. Some people are saying some shit, on the road. Some women are saying some bad shit. Also, having to face all those things, negative comments, positive, other ones, that just shows you how society works. [...] It makes you also not give a fuck. Learn how to not give a fuck, not care.”

“Do you think that there are challenges or struggles with introducing the children to this community, or this mentality?” I asked him.

“Yeah, I definitely think so. I think that mentality definitely needs some guidance, probably,” Malek answered, a smirk on his face. We all laughed. “Wow, I think you could easily get so lost in it if you’re not in it for the right reasons. You know we’ve lost several people from the scene who were really good and they’ve gone down to maybe drugs [...]. This mentality is empowering, it’s like a superpower. You feel like no one can tell you anything. But that definitely needs to be channelled in the right way.”

Liminal entities are regularly understood as possessing mystical powers, partly because of the danger they are ascribed to, Turner (1969: 106) writes. Over the course of my fieldwork, skateboarding was frequently referred to as ‘magic,’ both by observers and practitioners themselves. Skateboarding can infuse the practitioner with superpowers, but without the proper guidance, such powers easily become destructive. The skateboarding practice has

commonly been perceived as a chaotic and reckless practice and has been associated with the use of intoxicating substances (Borden 2019b: 3). My participants often faced negative comments from outsiders, at times simply pointing out their general disturbance, other times accusing them of being drunkards and smokers. While skating sessions in Nairobi were regularly accompanied by the smoking of weed or drinking of beer and liquor, this was seldom in excess and usually only pursued by a few people. Rather, several of my informants were highly conscious of their own health, avoiding not only drugs and alcohol but also sugar, caffeine, and too little sleep, making an effort to eat healthily and exercise regularly. Similarly, existent literature notes that skateboarders often ‘self-police’ their spaces, restricting weed-smoking, graffiti, littering, or loud music (Borden 2019b: 7).

### **The Efforts Behind Effervescence**

While both *communitas* and collective effervescence are connected to spontaneity, antistructure, and immediacy, neither one of them simply ‘occurs.’ Turner (1988: 133) writes that “it takes a great amount of order to produce a “sweet disorder,” a great deal of structuring to create a sacred play-space and time for antistructure.” Collective effervescence requires not only a willingness to ‘let go’ of restraints and conventions, but also an active engagement including mental preparations and safety measures to attain the wanted experience (Tutenges 2023: 27). In skateboarding, *communitas* and collective effervescence do not simply arise but are nurtured by facilitators, preparations, and strong self-discipline. On the day of the downhill event, Tony and Kian took upon themselves the task of guiding the group of skateboarders to Limuru and back. As the organizers of the event, they had arranged a matatu especially for the excursion, informed everyone of a meeting point in town, and coordinated a route that allowed skateboarders to be picked up along the way. While the matatu was officially to leave at 11 am, Tony thoughtfully took into account that most of his friends had quite a liberal understanding of being on time, and did not expect to leave central Nairobi until two hours later, at 1 pm.

Several of us were assigned small tasks - I was to bring a set of bearings<sup>11</sup>, Junior was carrying an extra board for his brother, and Kian was packed with bottles of soda and a box of crackers. The participants had been informed beforehand that transportation costs and snacks would be covered, and that small cash prizes would be distributed during the day. Reaching

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<sup>11</sup> Round metal pieces that go inside the wheels of a skateboard and mount them to the axle.

Limuru, Kian led the way, walking up the paved road, away from the highway. Being way too eager for regular walking, the youngest ones immediately stepped on their boards, skating ahead of the rest of us. As we reached the highest point of the uphill road, Tony and Kian gathered everyone, demanding their attention, to pass on important information about the journey ahead. Using a stone to draw on the ground, Kian composed a map depicting sharp turns, steep sections, road bumps, and other obstructions. The skaters listened attentively to the instructions.

By sharing this important knowledge of the upcoming terrain, the high risk of speeding down trafficked and curvy roads on a skateboard was partly subdued. As earlier noted, edgework is a *skilful* recklessness rather than a mindless one (Lyng 2005), and Tony and Kian carefully orchestrated the downhill event to enable the best possible outcome. Transitioning from the ordinary state of mind to the extraordinary state of collective effervescence can be a daunting undertaking, as Tutenges (2023: 27) notes. Thus, a sense of security is important to allow the necessary relaxation of the mind and the body to enter a heightened emotional state (ibid).

Ensuring this feeling of safety was a collective effort during the downhill excursion, especially with regard to the youngest participants, children as young as ten who had gotten their parents' permission to accompany some of the older skateboarders. When having to cross the highway by foot, which although not uncommon for Nairobians is still a dangerous quest, the older skateboarders kept a stern eye on the children, making sure that they stayed close and crossed safely. Nearing the end of the excursion, as nightfall was about to settle, it was through a collective deliberation that Kian and Tony decided to close the skating session, judging it as too high of a risk to continue skating in the darkness. Once again gathering everyone by the side of the street, Kian spoke a few well-chosen words. All eyes were on him, as he solemnly told us that "In a few years, skating in Kenya will not be the same," charging the moment with the spirit of historical importance. Clapping and cheering loudly, the energy was kept alive and buzzing between the skateboarders, even though tiredness slowly began to sneak up on them.

The task carried out by Kian and Tony was not only a physical act of showing the way but also an emotional navigation, balancing the build-up of energies with gentle supervision,

instilling feelings of ‘psyche’<sup>12</sup> as well as safety. During the downhill event, they were the ritual leaders, securely guiding the participants through the ritual process. Nonetheless, reaching and maintaining states of collective effervescence requires collective efforts (Tutenges 2023: 46). During the whole day, skaters contributed to keeping the energy up, for example by someone regularly shouting “We outside!”<sup>13</sup> which was answered with cheerful shouts by the group.

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<sup>12</sup> eagerness, excitement, enthusiasm, confidence

<sup>13</sup> “We outside!” can be understood as an adaption of the phrase “we out here,” which originates from black skateboarding and is a popular expression in black and Latino culture in New York. Katherine White (2015: 7) writes the following about the expression: “Every exclamation of “we out here,” often shouted during moments of intense excitement in a skate session, asserts ownership over the city and a celebration of black and Latino culture, perseverance, and joie de vivre. We out here! We exist! We matter! And we aren’t going anywhere...”



## Chapter 4: Body and Space

Having explored the experience of the skateboarding community in Nairobi, I now extend my focus to the spaces through which the skateboarders move. It has been argued that there are few sports where the interrelationship between play and place is so intimate as in skateboarding (Carr 2017: 27). The skateboarding practice is “inherently “about” a specific site and its terrain,” - it is inseparable from its environment (ibid.). Similarly, Åsa Bäckström and Anne-Lene Sand (2019: 126) stress the interdependence between the city and the *situated* body when exploring urban practices, writing that they understand the body as “being attuned to the city.” Building on the notion of emplacement, in which the interrelationship between bodies and the materiality and sensoriality of spatial environments is emphasised (Pink 2015: 28), I here explore the intersections between the body, performance, and space. How does the spatial environment affect the body and practice of the skateboarder? And how do the performative acts of skateboarders influence the spaces they occupy?

### Dwelling in the Urban Margins

Skateboarding has a reputation for being an anti-social practice, vandalising and destroying public spaces (Bradley 2010: 290; Jones & Graves 2000: 137). During my time in Nairobi, however, I never witnessed anyone being disrespectful towards the places they skated. While not always obeying all rules or limitations they were confronted with, my participants nonetheless were opting for a compromise, a co-use of a space, rather than seeking its domination or destruction. Telling me about how skateboarders acquire new places to skate, Caleb said the following:

“We’ll come to a new place, obviously there will be resistance and people will be like: ‘What are you doing here? This is our place!’ And we’ll be kind and polite and tell them: ‘We just wanna skate, we just wanna be here.’ Maybe they’ll allow us, maybe not. We just skate there and then, ‘cause we keep coming, we keep coming. Maybe we clean the whole place, ‘cause you can’t skate in a dirty area. We clean the place so the place looks more vibrant and the people who are around there feel accommodated more. So that’s how skateboarders acquire a place to skate. ‘Cause people see the positivity in it.”

Writing about early Californian skateboarders, Borden (2001: 55) argues that they were co-opting space and time rather than appropriating it, utilizing “a practice which lies intermediate to domination and appropriation and between exchange and use.” Of course, this strategy is partially utilized because skateboarders generally lack the means to truly control the spaces they seek to skate. In Nairobi, the skateboarders have no real power over virtually any of the places they visit, as they are owned by private- or state actors who could withdraw their willingness to cooperate at any time. One of the main skating spots in Nairobi, for example, had been Uhuru Park, one of the few public recreational parks in the city. In 2021, however, renovations of the park began, revoking the skateboarders’ right to occupy the space and forcing them to leave their ‘home base’ behind. When asked about the skateable future of Uhuru Park, my informants’ outlook was meagre.

Instead, the skateboarders soon gained access to the upper level of a parking garage, connected to a mostly abandoned and slightly weird mall. While situated quite central, in a wealthy business district in Nairobi, my informants described it as “boring, very boring,” “underground,” and as a place where “people would just come to smoke weed,” before they started skating there. “With skateboarding, we go to those fucked up places ‘cause we’re many and we’re community,” Caleb told me in an interview when I asked him if skateboarding had changed the way he moved through the city. It has been repeatedly stated that skateboarding is an activity taking place in the margins of urban space, as skateboarders physically encounter abandoned, sketchy, or unwanted places (Borden 2001; Fine 2018; O’Connor 2020). Responding to the same question as Caleb, Michelle answered similarly:

“With skateboarding, I’ve really gotten to know the city in a very different way. I skate through prostitutes, lots of them. [...] You see what’s happening, you see the night scene, the things that go on, you know? You get to interact with homeless people very differently.”

By accessing marginal urban places, skateboarders also encounter their inhabitants. Public space in Nairobi is crowded with diverse urban dwellers, most commonly including street vendors, street children, pick-pocketers, gangs, prostitutes, and homeless people. These spaces inherently challenge and traverse perceptions of legality and illegality, sometimes through actively law-breaking behaviour, but oftentimes by their sheer existence. Douglas (1966: 48-50) argues that when something falls between classificatory boundaries it is often

labelled as dangerous and approached through physical control, to maintain structure and its associated authority. People living at the margins of society are ‘matter out of place,’ the anomalies of societal structure (Douglas 1966: 44). As such, their existence alone (and in extension the spaces they roam) is the basis for inspection and critique by law enforcement. Through a sort of ‘guilt by association,’ skateboarders as well are branded as suspicious, as they drift around on the streets of Nairobi.

### **Becoming One with the Streets**

Spending time with my informants, I witnessed several confrontations between police or private security and the skateboarders. One of them was on my very first night joining the skateboarders in uptown Nairobi, as they were “hitting the streets.” In the centre of town, people mainly skate one spot, which is interchangeably referred to as “blue ledge” or “smooth road,” both referring to the physical features of the place. The way skateboarders refer to the places they skate is telling of how they relate to their surroundings. Skateboarders identify places through a heightened use of their senses, focusing on the ‘micro-experience’ of space. Borden (2001: 35) writes that the phenomenal experience of architecture creates a ‘sensuous geography’ that is not only seen but *listened for* and *felt*. The texture of surfaces is felt through the vibrations of the skateboard or the scraping of the skin, objects are heard through aural salvos that are created by the impact of the board upon them. Accordingly, places are (re)named after their most substantial quality: their sensory experience. It is the *smoothness* of the road that makes it worthwhile and thus chosen as its trademark.

The smooth road is a straight, one-way street with parking lots on one side and a walkway on the other, separating it from a more heavily trafficked main road and junction. Cars entering the street are few and far between, and the ones that do usually drive at a calm pace. As such, the road constitutes a refuge from the otherwise hectic traffic and buzzing night scene of Nairobi. Skateboarders are not the only ones having discovered the place. Groups of youth occupy the sidewalk, taking photographs or just hanging around, street children roam the street, asking for food or to borrow a skateboard, and at times, street vendors and intoxicated people enter the mix. On this first night of joining the skateboarders in town, time was nearing 10 pm. Most of the skateboarders had begun their journeys home after having skated the smooth road for two-three hours. The few of us that were left were waiting for Caleb, Tony had borrowed his phone for filming and had to give it back to him. As we sat by the

side of the street, talking, a police car rolled up and two policemen stepped out, starting to question the group. Tony was the only one responding to their questions, completely relaxed. Sometimes he simply laughed at their questions, which was not very appreciated by the policemen, who looked increasingly irritated. As they spoke in Swahili, I did not understand what was being said, but I asked Tony to repeat the conversation to me in English immediately after the police had left.

“What were they saying?” I asked him.

Not the slightest roused by the confrontation, Tony answered calmly: “They’re like: ‘You’re among the people who are robbing people in town.’ I told them I quit school, I quit school some years back, so they’re like: ‘If you don’t go to school, where do you get your money? You didn’t get an education, so probably you’re stealing!’”<sup>14</sup>

“That’s what they were saying right now?” I asked, still a bit baffled by the whole situation.

“Yeah. [...] And I told them I stay at Kiambu, it’s a different place from where I am staying.”

“Yeah, they asked if you come from Kangemi, right?”

“Yeah. You know, we’re bad boys from there. Crazy guys,” Tony told me, chuckling.

“Is it a bad area?” I asked.

“It has a bad reputation because most of the young people have nothing to do, so most of them, they steal.” Nodding his head towards a group of youths, who had just entered the street next to us, he told me: “You know, if they [the police] come with the car right now, these guys are going to run away, I am a hundred per cent sure about that. So they thought we are the same group, like we have the same character.”

In this context, running away from the police is understood as being engaged in criminal activity; having something to hide. “As long as you do not run away, but just stay calm and in the same place, you will be fine,” Caleb told me later, once he joined us on the smooth road.

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<sup>14</sup> In actuality, Tony did receive and complete an education. Based on his mischievous nature, I suspect that he consciously phrased his answer in a way that allowed some ambiguity in regards to his education (choosing the word ‘quit’ instead of ‘finished’), as a way to harmlessly fool around with the police.

Moving around the city at night, in seemingly random locations, the skateboarders temporarily become part of the liminal spaces they visit. Continuing her reflections on moving through the city as a skateboarder, Michelle told me “You’re like a street person, you’re one of them.” Here it is useful to call to mind Turner’s differentiation between liminal rituals and liminoid rituals, and the difference between transformation and transportation. Liminal rituals are permanently changing the ritual subject, facilitating permanent *transformations*, whereas liminoid rituals are temporarily *transporting* the subject into a different social role, state of mind, or mode of acting (Schechner 2006: 72). While transformations are only experienced a limited amount of times in one’s lifetime, transportations can occur daily. Voluntary leisure activities are therefore more commonly termed *liminoid* rituals (Schechner 2006: 67). As such, one can understand skateboarders to undergo a transportation, from their regular self to a ‘street person,’ through the liminoid ritual of skateboarding.

This transportation is aided by the embodied performance that street skateboarders engage in. Challenging the normative use of public space, skateboarding is considered an anomaly or ambiguity in Nairobi. As skateboarders grind handrails, jump stairs, or flip their boards over various obstacles, they redefine architectural elements and give them new purposes. Borden (2001: 105) notes that skateboarders interrogate architecture with their body and in relation to their own actions, “refusing to accept it as a pre-existent world and instead (re)producing architecture on [their] own terms.” This ‘out of place’ practice is then almost always synonymous with the physical control Douglas (1966: 49) writes about, at best resulting in reprimands, at worst in arrests. Inherent to street skateboarding becomes its fleeting and immediate quality, as it is never known beforehand for how long a spot can be skated before being chased away by authority.

### **Tangible Traces of a Ritualizing Act**

Dirt is ‘matter out of place,’ Douglas (1966) states, and conceptualized as such, dirt is deeply ingrained in the practice of skateboarding. However, dirt is not only present as an abstract category but also in its physical form. During one of my very first conversations with a skateboarder at the mall, he told me:

“In skateboarding, when I go watch skate clips and see someone land a very awesome trick, I tend to look at their T-shirts. First, it’s sweaty, it looks greasy, eh? So sweat and the greasy part is maybe dirt from the falling. [...] So I see; this was a battle he was fighting all that time, yeah? He didn’t land it the first time he started skating.”

Becoming sweaty and greasy is unavoidable when skating, at least if you are skating hard. This was made especially visible by one skating session taking place on the grounds of the University of Nairobi. Malek, Caleb, and Tony were skating a staircase, each of them dedicated to landing a different trick. Malek was the most energetic, boldly jumping the stairs at high speed, only to crash on his back in full force. In contrast, Tony was skating more timidly that day, pushing his board with more hesitation. Fear would overpower him at the very last second, he told me, causing him to jump off the skateboard right at the edge of the stairs, or kick it away mid-air. The frustration was starting to show on his face, tightening his jaw. Seeing him stand next to Malek, I noticed the cleanness of his shirt, in contrast to Malek’s dusty back. At some point, however, something seemed to click. Tony too was slammed to the ground, his bails no longer allowing a staggering landing on the feet. He grimaced in pain, as a bad landing twisted his ankle. “Is it painful?” Malek asked. “Not as painful as me not landing the trick,” Tony answered, already preparing to try again. Within a few minutes, he had landed his trick. By then, his white shirt was covered in red soil.

There is a certain pride in the dirt collected on one’s clothes during a skating session. The skateboarder’s complete commitment and submission to the practice is made tangible by the dirt covering the body. It makes visible some of the pain and sacrifice that goes into the practice. The so often repeated and sometimes brutal falls that skateboarders endure can be understood as a ritual humiliation, through which the ‘lowly’ status of the liminal state is demonstrated, O’Connor (2020: 138) argues. The painful encounters in skateboarding can act as either a catharsis or a medium to transcendence, through which moments of ecstasy are experienced, he continues (O’Connor 2020: 4, 139).

Tutenges (2023: 44) reflects on the soiling of the body in nightlife milieus as an element of degradation, through which everyday statuses are erased. “This has the effect of pulling them down to the same earthy or subearthy level, [...] everyone is urged to lower himself or herself and partake in collective acts of cheerful indecency,” he writes (ibid.). In liminality as well,

the lowering of the high is crucial. Turner (1969: 97) writes that “liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.” Pain, humiliation, and dirt are forms of degradation, aiding the stripping of former identity, status, and power, which is so imperative to the liminal phase of the ritual.

Once the skateboarding session is over, and the skateboarder has left the liminal state, permanent traces of the ritualizing act remain. As the skateboarder is left with marks, scratches, and scars, the practice has been physically inscribed on the body. “These marks tell a story,” Junior explained to me during our interview, as he smoothed one hand down his shin, feeling the irregularities under his skin. “It builds you and moulds you,” a young skateboarder expressed, while he reflected on his love for skateboarding. I choose to understand this statement as referring to both the moulding of the body and to the moulding of the mind. Understanding skateboarding as a ritualizing practice, it not only shapes the body to reflect the internal but to remake the very body in itself (Bell 1992: 100).

Skateboarders acquire a new way of moving their bodies through space, an “incredible space-orientation,” by which places are “felt rather than seen,” as expressed by Borden (2001: 106). He writes that skateboarders develop “intense vision, a responsivity of touch, sense, balance, hearing, posture, muscular control, strength, agility and fluidity” (ibid). Katherine White (2013: 27) also notes that as she began to skateboard, she developed a sensory map of the city, centred around the ‘rough,’ ‘crunchy,’ or ‘whisper smooth’ surfaces of pavement, heights of curbs, and “the location of particularly deep sidewalk cracks and potholes.” Bäckström and Sand (2019: 126) understand this as the body becoming ‘citized’ through a dialectic relationship with its spatial environment. The act of skateboarding transforms both the skateboarding body and mind, and the practitioner leaves the skateboarding session in a slightly altered state from before the practice began.

In Nairobi, skateboarders would seldom shy away from spots, surfaces, or equipment because of them being ‘un-skateable.’ In random conversations with Swedish skateboarders, however, my photos of locations or skateboards, or my descriptions of the skateboarding practice in Nairobi, were often rendered unsuitable for skateboarding and caused reactions of dismissal. As noted by Duncan McDuie-Ra (2023: 11), the diversity of the global skateboarding experience is often overlooked. The idea of what skateboarding is, and how it is supposed to

be practised, is heavily influenced by a certain type of urban context which is not necessarily representative of the skateboarding practice in, for example, Nairobi.

Simultaneously, Thorpe (2016: 107) notes that action sports (e.g. surfing, snowboarding, skateboarding, parkour) are increasingly being re-appropriated by non-Western communities in relation to their specific physical and social environment. What was interpreted as unfit and an unpleasant skateboarding experience by some of the Swedish skateboarders was creatively approached, adapted, and re-imagined by my participants. This is not to say that Swedish skateboarders would not be able to engage in, or enjoy, the skateboarding experience in Nairobi. Rather, I want to point to Holsgens' (2019: 369) argument that skill acquisition is "fundamentally site specific and depends upon the sociocultural and experiential context." The way in which the body and mind are altered through the practice of skateboarding is distinct to its physical and social environment.

### **Transforming Spaces**

Skateboarding can be understood as a ritualizing act, transforming or transporting the practitioner. But it is also a performance that is transformative of space. Skateboarders do not simply occupy spaces but *perform* them, as argued convincingly by Borden (2001). Building on philosopher Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory on the production of space, where human agency and space are part of a dialectic process, inter-producing each other through practices, experiences, ideas, objects, and imagination, Borden (2001: 233-234) thoroughly displays how the skateboarding practice creates new forms of urban space. He argues a shift from sites of production and ownership to spaces of play and creativity. Urban places and their physical features are constantly reimagined and performed as infinite playgrounds by skateboarders (ibid.).

The presence of skateboarders usually attracts the attention of bystanders, causing people to stop various activities to observe the performance. During the downhill event, as the group of skateboarders stopped in a small settlement somewhere between Limuru and Nairobi, a vast amount of people gathered to observe the spectacle. Children came running or were brought out by their parents, boda guys stopped their journeys and leaned against their vehicles, and shopkeepers left their stalls. "This is crazy, we're bringing out a whole community!" Leah exclaimed excitedly, as we watched some of the skateboarders compete for the longest



manual<sup>15</sup> down a steep hill. A few days before, as I was visiting Michelle in her apartment, she showed me pictures and videos from earlier excursions and events that had taken place before my stay in Nairobi. I recorded our conversation as we were laying on our stomachs, looking through photos and watching a YouTube video<sup>16</sup> on her laptop.

“When we’re skating along the road, people are like ‘Oh, can I try?’ Or they’re like ‘Who are those guys? What are they doing?’ These are people from construction, right?” Michelle was showing me a photo of three men, sitting by the side of the road with safety helmets on their heads. “There was a building behind here [that] they were working on. And then immediately after, they joined. Not to skate with us, but they were sitting there.”

“Watching you?” I asked.

“Yeah, they watched for a while. [...] And then...” Switching to her browser, Michelle searched for a video on YouTube, pressing the play button. A group of skateboarders appeared on the screen, gathered by the side of a trafficked downhill road. “We did a session here. See, people started coming, to sell stuff. It has a relationship, right? [...]” Pointing to the sidewalk that was filled with skateboarders, she told me: “Closed this road. We closed this one also. And then people are just skating downhill, the whole time. [...]”

“Wow, it’s so many people,” I noted.

“Yeah. And then see here, people are selling things already. ‘Cause if you’re here for like an hour or so, people start getting hungry, vendors start selling. Can you see that dude? He’s selling sugar cane. I think you can see the sticks. [...] You see, Maasai started coming to sell us sandals.” The amused face of a street vendor looking into the camera made us laugh.

“That’s funny,” I commented.

“Skateboarding in Kenya, especially since it’s so new, it brings so many people together, in a very weird way. No one is gatekeeping skateboarding,” Michelle explained to me.

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<sup>15</sup> Balancing on the back- or front wheels of the skateboard, while keeping the other set of wheels off the ground.

<sup>16</sup> “Parking lots and Sidewalks” by Evon Makena, Youtube. <https://youtu.be/tCeFPPh2tK8>. The conversation refers to the first 40 seconds of the video.

O'Connor (2020: 194) argues the skateboarding practice's remaking of space by leaning on concepts of ritual festivals. Festivity is a liminal space of relaxed social norms and in between decency and chaos. At the heart of skateboarding resides spontaneous festivity, O'Connor (ibid.) writes, it "is itself a festival." The festive performance of skateboarders can be understood as a ritual cleansing of ordinary, earthly places, bringing emotion, liveliness, and play to the urban streets. In festivity lies the capacity of transcendence and the bringing together of dissimilar groups of people (O'Connor 2006: 194-195). Skateboarding has often been praised for its ability to create strong bonds, be inclusive of practitioners no matter their cultural or ethnic background (and to a lesser extent, gender and sexuality), and especially for its ability to overcome socioeconomic differences (Borden 2019b: 9; O'Connor 2020: 9-10). In Nairobi also, many of my informants spoke about the fact that skateboarding brings together people from different instances of society. In an interview, Malek told me:

"I've interacted with people from all walks of life [in a way] that I don't feel is possible in a normal life. I don't think that's possible at all. I've skated with fifty-year-old people, I've skated with kids. I'm friends with kids. I don't think that's possible in a normal society setup."

Throughout my fieldwork, I too met skateboarders from all sorts of backgrounds, reaching from former street children to relatively well-off foreigners, men in their late forties to girls below the age of ten, well-educated young adults to school drop-outs, deeply faithful Christians to atheist, and so on. In a city like Nairobi, where the cleavage between rich and poor is wide and the socioeconomic segregation strong, it is quite extraordinary to find a mixture of people like this, engaging in a common activity.

According to Turner (1969: 95, 132), *communitas* stands in direct contrast to the institutionalized structure of ordinary life, dissolving differentiations of social position to instead nurture intense bonds of comradeship. It is an egalitarian, anti-structural union of individuals that arises in the state of liminality (Turner 1969: 96). Borden (2019b: 9) notes that skateboarding, through its bodily practice, works as a form of prefigurative politics, embodying "the world it wishes to create." When understanding the skateboarding practice as a performance of ritual, it *embodies* ideas rather than expresses them (Schechner 2006: 57). Similarly, Bell (1992: 209) argues that the making and remaking of the body during ritualizing acts is a reproduction (and transformation) of the sociopolitical context in which it

takes place. Understanding skateboarding through the lenses of communitas and ritual, it is because of the liminal qualities of skateboarding, its inherent immediacy, chaos, anarchy, 'betwixt and between-', 'out of place-'ness, that it is exceptionally efficient in creating community and transgressing socioeconomic boundaries.

## *Concluding Remarks*

I began this paper by wondering about what Nairobi skateboarders experience as they engage in the act of skateboarding; their experience of community and their connection to the spatial environments they inhabit. Inspired by attentive works on skateboarding rooted in phenomenology and sensory ethnography, I chose to pay special attention to the senses as I collected and analyzed my material. Skateboarding is, as has often been noted, a complex phenomenon, difficult to define with a single term. In this paper, I argue it to be a ritualizing performance that acts as a catalyst for transformative energies and heightened emotional states.

Aided by the sensory experience of riding a board, powerful feelings of connectedness and unity arise amongst those who practice skateboarding, so intense that they transgress day-to-day social boundaries and allow the practitioner to fuse with immediate physical environments and enter states of deep focus. The repetitive movements of the skateboarding practice can be understood as a performance of charged embodied symbols, through which earlier emotional states can be re-lived and re-created. By stepping into the liminal space of the skateboarding practice, the skateboarder is stripped of their earlier identity and inscribed with new powers, transforming and revitalizing the practitioner. This is a transformation of both the body and the mind, altering the way skateboarders perceive and move through space, and leaving them with physical inscriptions on their bodies.

The skateboarding practice is also a temporary transportation, in which the performer briefly becomes one with spatial environments, and a transformation and performance of the spaces they inhabit. As skateboarders move through different places, they interact with and perform those spaces, filling the urban streets with creativity, play, and emotion. The festivity, chaos, and immediacy inherent to the skateboarding practice offers a way to transcendence and egalitarian bonds of comradeship, temporarily overcoming the socioeconomic segregation of ordinary urban life. As such, the embodied performance of skateboarders is also a form of prefigurative politics and situated in a wider sociopolitical context. Through the act of skateboarding, my participants reinvent themselves and the world they want to belong to, simultaneously drawing on a global cultural legacy and performing a context-specific identity and localized practice.

Many of the findings in this paper confirm earlier writings on skateboarding, especially those that have explored early, emerging skateboarding scenes in other contexts. Thus, there undeniably is a global overlap in the skateboarding practice, community, and culture. Nonetheless, skateboarding is also inherently local, and there is much room for further exploration of the specific character of skateboarding practices in different locations, not the least in the Global South and on the African continent. Usually, skateboarding is connected to the hyper-modern, concrete, and most of all; *Western* city, disregarding the prevalence of the skateboarding practice in other types of urban landscapes. In Nairobi, urban space is arguably different from the cityscapes in skateboarding metropolises of the Global North, shaping the skateboarding practice, and in connection the skateboarding body and identity, in its own particular way.

Further, while this paper took a different turn than first expected, I still find there to be importance in the original research idea. As skateboarding grows as a tool for community- and youth development, there is a need to critically examine the SDP skateboarding projects emerging all over the world. The perspectives and opinions of participating children and youth are especially important to raise, as they often come from vulnerable and underprivileged communities, their voices being frequently underrepresented and overlooked.

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