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Skateboarding, Time and Ethics: An Auto Ethnographic Adventure of Motherhood and Risk

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ABSTRACT

As a 52-year-old academic and mother of three, this research explores the ethics of the question ‘do I have time to go skateboarding?’ Using the themes of time, injury, ageing and learning, it explores the question in relation to Simone de Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity. The approach employs autoethnographic and sensory methods to document the authors own experience of learning to skateboard in her late forties and uses learning to skateboard as a vehicle from which to consider time and productivity. Embracing Beauvoir’s ethics of transcendence in navigating the psychological burden of ageing and informing the ongoing methodological approach required for making time to play, the author subverts ideas of progression and knowledge acquisition from childhood to adulthood and explores instead the converse transition from adult to child. The article draws conclusions about the value of lifelong learning and what expanded ideas about productivity mean for our ethical positioning in the world. How being in the skatepark together requires an ethical contract between skateboarders, an unambiguous ethics of being together where adhering to a system of unwritten rules means that everyone has enough space to stay safe. Risk and the time implications of injury are explored throughout in terms of the choices we make at different stages of our lives as we navigate a balance between personal desire and social good.

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Introduction

It’s a dry sunny Sunday in July, but I’m not skateboarding today. I am sitting here with my arm in plaster because yesterday I broke two fingers very badly whilst skating. I was in a small concrete ‘street course’ style skate park near my home in east London. I was approaching the mini quarter ramp and preparing to do a backside slash grind across the metal coping. As my front wheels touched the metal someone suddenly dropped in next to me. I attempted to step off the board but as it was at the top of the ramp, I lost my footing and dived back into the concrete, landing on my left hand and bending the fingers so far back that the bones on my ring and middle finger shattered into small fragments—my wedding ring was hastily cut off in the hospital emergency department before the finger lost blood flow due to swelling. As I reflect on what happened I am acutely aware that it was my choice to skate, to risk injury. The accident has caused

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a recalibration of how I am to be in the world with others. This article explores that tension and the ambivalence of my choices using Beauvoir's (1948) book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as my guide.

Skateboarding is a communal activity performed in shared spaces where the movements of other skaters must be anticipated to ensure that there is space for each rider to manoeuvre. The greatest risk is that of collision and because this presents such a big risk, the way we are together in the skatepark and how much we tune into one another's timing—is crucial.

Injured and unable to skate I am struggling, the part of my identity established through skateboarding is injured, my active body withdrawn. My practical orientation has changed, and the balance of contradictions in my human subjectivity have shifted. Participating in a range of goal-directed activities defines who I am. Injury leads to confinement and to speculation about the self, it troubles the apparently coherent idea of who and what we are. My injury changes my reality and causes me to take a break, to reflect philosophically on issues of risk and skateboarding, particularly in terms of the contradictions of being physically active, an academic and a mother of three. To unlock the interrelation between these elements means to acknowledge that our interpretation of reality varies over time. Writing on hermeneutics in the philosophy of sport (Lopez Frias and Monfort 2016) urge us to 'understand the body as an active source of meaning, not something passive at our disposal'.

In this paper I explore time, injury and risk and use Beauvoir's investigation of oppression, freedom, and liberation to examine the complexity of the ethical decision-making required when skateboarders ask themselves: 'do I have time to go skate?'

Researcher Positioning

I am a white academic born in an industrial city in the north of the UK. I am a university lecturer, researching into arts and cultural participation and teaching art educators at BA and postgraduate level. Politically left of centre, I am involved in a grassroots community renovation of my local skatepark and the process of participatory design for a new skate space—both in east London. I support the ideology of these projects where the community come together to make shared space better. Where rather than letting an inner-city space fall into decline, people's energy for good, for reparation, is called upon for collective action. I came to skateboarding as my current research area via my work in the arts, where I have explored equality and inclusion in cultural activities. I am interested in what motivates participation and how it is intrinsically valuable in our readiness to learn and to take a positive role in society.

The Research Field

My research follows my own curiosity, exploring the symbolism of participation as a form of resistance. I have explored the tension between art appreciation and the possibility for pedagogies of dissent, through the creation of a skatepark in an art gallery, see (Sayers 2016). Such symbolic resistance is expressed by Ali Khan in her (2009) 'Go Play in Traffic: Skating, Gender and Urban Context' when she describes her roller blading practice as a site of resistance to female gender norms.

Participation also symbolises resistance in the interviewees in MacKay's (2015) study where research participants note—I prefer to 'actively challenge oppressive male-dominated spaces like skateparks by getting on [my] board and skateboarding'. Equally Bäckström and Nairn (2018) observe that [young] women's presence in urban space is less familiar and often portrayed as 'alternative' or unusual (Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005). In an article for Grey Skate Magazine (Sayers and Fordyce 2021, vol 5 issue 12), I pick up the idea of the skate park as a contested public space and explore the disruption caused by female presence there. Through my sensorial, embodied (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2014; Howes 2003; Pink 2009) and emplaced research (Bäckström 2014; Pink 2011) I am questioning the sociocultural norms that position an older woman with children, as invisible, cautious, nurturing, perhaps even in decline as Hall et al. describe in their (2017) study which explores how physical performance across the adult lifespan correlates with age. Gullette (1997, 2018) argues against the ideology of life-course decline, a concept that approaches ageing as a process of deterioration. In Gullette's words, 'bodies get 'heavier' with stigma as people age past youth (2018, 254). Phoenix and Sparkes (2008) discuss how limitations on the anticipation of ageing are commonly seen in culturally constructed narratives of life's course (p.218).

Materials and Methods

Since 2017, I have been exploring my experience of ageing by writing myself into a different narrative. I have been learning to skateboard through participation, and reflection, by documenting the development of my technique. In formulating a research methodology for this enquiry, I use Hobbs (2006) assumption 'that personal engagement with the subject is key to understanding a particular culture or social setting'(101). As the research draws on my own experience in the field, I align it with auto ethnographic practices (Wacquant 2011) and from sensory ethnographic practices, in particular the 'sensory apprenticeship' articulated by Pink (2009) and used by Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason (2014). Downey's exploration of the idea of apprenticeship is useful to me in as much as I am learning skills but also reflecting on how techniques are learned. Auto ethnography is a qualitative research method that focusses on insights drawn from personal experience. This research is not simply conducted through observation but through the bodily experience of skateboarding. I acknowledge Downey's, Dalidowicz, and Mason (2014) observation of 'the opportunities generated by participation, but also the limits that immersion and active engagement [are] impose[d] upon [my] exploration of culture' (184), my parenthesis. However, experiencing the sensorial and bodily experience of feeling the board and the transition beneath my feet opens up my opportunity for understanding in ways that observation alone would not. As such, my study also draws from Ingold's (2013) discussion about anthropology and 'knowing from the inside' (5) as I explore transformations within the process of life. I am learning about skateboarding 'with' and 'from' rather than learning 'about' skateboarding in a more documentary focussed approach—one that Ingold would describe as synonymous with ethnography (3). As Wacquant asserts learning a skill and training to acquire techniques is 'pedagogical work' (2011, 86).

Through mixed methods I am researching, writing, reflecting, and filming to link my everyday life and my creative practice. I have a library of clips documenting the development of my skateboarding skills. I have attached commentary to these clips to reflexively overlay theoretical tools that assist with the attachment of cultural symbolism (Sayers 2018). I experiment with modes of filming that avoid the objective gaze (Mulvey 1989). I use Instagram as a diary of my learning and through this approach I hope to shrink the gap between my narrative based textual discourse around skateboarding and socio-cultural participation and the reality/materiality of my bodily experience. Using theory allows me to interpret these visceral experiences and provides me an analytical tool that locates the significance of my experience within its sociocultural context. In this paper my experience is analysed using thematic analysis and guided theoretically by Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948) where I take note of what Beauvoir calls 'aesthetic attitude' (79) and the ethics of avoiding 'detached contemplation' and situating myself in the world that I seek to discuss, in so doing, in Beauvoir's terms I must 'will myself to freedom' (84) and that means accepting the ambiguity of existence. More on this later.

The themes of time, injury and risk are pulled out of my experience of learning, and each is related to the broader sociocultural theme of ageing. I have chosen the philosophical writings of Simone de Beauvoir as she offers a framework through which to explore the constant making and remaking of our being and the rejection of societal conventions, only to perhaps replace them with counter-cultural conventions, as we bid for acceptance within a new social group. In so doing, calling into question our own freedom and the freedom of others, 'to will oneself free is also to will others free' (1948, 78). I use *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Beauvoir 1948) to guide the analysis of my findings because, whilst, Beauvoir writes specifically about ageing in "The Coming of Age" (1970) the focus there is on 'old age' (13). Apart from a short paragraph about the menopause early in the book (pg. 27), the age to which she refers is over 60, she states 'I shall use the words, *old, elderly* and aged for people of 65 and over' (13 'footnote'). In *The Second Sex* (1949) Beauvoir addresses the period between maturity and old age (587) to which I will refer later on in this paper. The context for my research is at the point of middle age, the menopause and my discussion is about a woman doing something solely for herself. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948) Beauvoir's navigation of concepts of 'being-for-oneself' and 'being-for-others' are significant as many of my observations relate to skateboarding during lockdowns in the UK (2020) at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a period when many people, able to loosen their normal social and economic roles, explored sports and hobbies on their own terms (Clark & Sayers, 2023 in review). Post-pandemic, such hobbies and the time spent doing them somehow need to be justified. Beauvoir's (1948) writing is useful to me as it explores the ethics of choice and self-deception as we navigate a world full of ambiguity.

Time is explored here through ideas of acquisition in relation to skateboarding and how for me it has been legitimised since it became part of my professional work, making it 'productive' in a socially acceptable way, and a 'research activity' in academic terms. In this article I document my learning journey, and with the construction of a literary framework, engage philosophically with that learning journey.

Risk is a common theme in action sport research, although women's participation in risky sporting activities is a more niche area of literature. From a sociological perspective, there are a number of studies that relate directly to skateboarding, particularly for

younger bodies (Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009; Haines, Smith, and Baxter 2010; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005). There is little skateboarding research published about older bodies, to explore middle-aged women in relation to risk I have used literature on ageing and risk in other sports to provide useful counterpoints (Gullette 1997; Hall et al. 2017; Phoenix and Sparkes 2008; Dupont & Beal 2021).

Ageing

Ageing has become an important theme in this research due to my entry point into skateboarding which came about through my children when they became interested in learning to skate. By facilitating their opportunity, I was very quickly immersed in the culture myself, I have been regularly skating ever since (See Figure 1). My children no longer skate much but my drive to progress is urgent, insatiable, all consuming. I have been skating for just over 5 years at the time of writing, now 52 years old I feel pressurised by limited time—hours to practise and the longevity of my physical ability to skateboard. My continuing participation is limited by the psychological burden of my ingrained association between ageing and decline (Gullette 2018), whilst simultaneously I am experiencing changes in my body associated with ageing; vision, fitness, strength and balance, which are irritating through the limitations they bring. Such precarity is unsettling as I have found ‘home’ in skateboarding but feel that I don’t have enough time to



Figure 1. Skating together. Photo: Amanda Fordyce.

reside here for long. Many younger skateboarders will tell you they have a cut off age after which they think they will no longer skate, around 40. Phoenix and Sparkes (2008) study, whilst not specifically to do with skateboarding, explores the anticipation of changes during life's arc spoken by younger athletes voicing their expectations around their ageing bodies. O'Connor (2021) describes the derisory comments levelled at middle-aged male skateboarders 'the middle-aged skateboarder as a joke' (118) which O'Connor finds contrasts with the perception of middle-aged female skateboarders who are 'celebrated for facing their fears' (ibid.). I'm already a decade older than most skateboarders perceived end point. Wrestling with preconceptions of age can be self-limiting, as such, time is an urgently pressing issue for me in regard to skateboarding and achievement. This urgency though has to be absorbed, as this kind of research cannot be rushed, my experience as participant observer resonates with Downey's, Dalidowicz, and Mason (2014) and Pink's (2009) notions around apprenticeship. Downey's, Dalidowicz, and Mason (2014) says 'the incessant active learning processes of re-discovery, variation, innovation, inspiration, disciplining—even failure—through which individuals gain expertise and the community of practice continues through time even though practices themselves constantly vary' (3). For Pink (2009) 'Learning through apprenticeship requires an emplaced engagement with the practices and identities that one seeks to understand'(12).

Resisting notions of time efficiency and productivity is an area of academic interest to me in terms of arts and learning where acquiring technical skill requires an investment of time and good creative arts pedagogy involves slowing down. I have practised and written about pedagogies that encourage slowing down, taking time to notice one's surroundings, to reflect and to linger in spaces of not knowing where outcomes are not predetermined (Sayers 2018). The tension between my interest in 'slowness' and my urgent drive to skate interests me as a pedagogue. Learning takes time. The inherent repetitive and meditative aspect of skateboarding means slowing down and maintaining focus¹. Quick gains are rarely made in learning, here change and progress happen gradually and incrementally. In this paper I draw out the ambiguity that Beauvoir suggests in exploring the tensions in how we choose to use our time. I contrast the view of skateboarding as a slacker activity 'useless, anti-productive, anti-achievement' with my experience of it as a powerful way to build physical and psychological strength.

Discussion

Existentialist philosophy gives us a way of thinking about choice as a contingent part of freedom, a choice that can be described as an 'ambiguity' between freedom and subjectivity. Simone de Beauvoir produces an existential ethics and outlines a series of ways of being through which we may examine existence and live up to the responsibilities of our own freedom. Ethics provide a code for moral decision making that determines how we can be in the world with others. Rather than a rule book, Beauvoir (1948) offers us an ethic of liberation which is in opposition to an ethic of oppression. The sub-culture of skateboarding is often characterised by an independence of thought and freedom from rigid social norms. Skateboarder identities have been seen as counter-cultural and independent with skateboarder characteristics imagined as people who do not follow convention; who make their own rules. In reality, skateboarding has its own internal

conventions in terms of clothes, attitudes and language. Like many risk based sports it is conventional for participation to decline after 40 years of age. Recognising that we are not simply objects produced by our own past experiences but authors of our own transcendence foregrounds a belief in the individual's autonomy meaning we can better achieve 'principle[s] for making choices' (Beauvoir 1948, 8) and ultimately exercise liberatory ethics in choosing how we use our time.

Beauvoir examines human will in relation to 'choice' and the value ascribed to 'man's passion' through discourse on what is useful and that which is useless(10). How we determine the utility of things is up to the individual: for some spending hours and hours 'playing' on a plank of wood with wheels might seem a useless waste of time, for me it is essential to my existence. Beauvoir gives a framework of thought through which we can explore our freedom to choose. She rejects ideas by which human beings define themselves according to rigid categories of value.

If this choice is considered as useless, it is because there exists no absolute value before the passion of man, outside of it, in relation to which one might distinguish the useless from the useful' (Beauvoir 1948, 10).

This 'passion' Beauvoir says 'is not inflicted on him from without. He chooses it' (1948, 10). And this choice of who we are and who we shall become is where the ambiguity lies. The notion of 'nothingness,' that Sartre (1943) and Beauvoir (1948) talk about, and the realisation that one is 'no-thing' sits uneasily with notions of self-improvement, particularly as an older woman. A pressure that comes with age is of having 'made-it' through the acquisition of financial stability and material possessions by which a person can be defined. But, if we accept the moment of nothing that Beauvoir is talking about—the gap between facticity and transcendence—then we must recognise that we are not easily defined, settled and complete. Instead our being is constantly in motion, yet-to-be-decided, and the struggle for 'completion' is false, the search for an authentic self could in fact lead us towards 'bad faith' (Sartre 1943). We are neither all facticity (facts about who I am) or all transcendence (who I might become) – I am what I am, but I am also what I am not yet (Sartre 1943), that is the nature of existence. This idea of the self, intent on its own completion, is an interesting concept to explain my drive for self-realisation (transcendence) despite the facts about who I am. I experience, all the time, the incomplete, undefinable being that Beauvoir describes, and through skateboarding enjoy attempting to overcome the deficiencies of my other modes of being whilst understanding this as a project which will never be complete.

The main components of facticity, embodiment, tradition, and capabilities, should be understood not as essentialist, objective features of sport, but rather as constitutive moments of our permanent attempt to make sense of sport as a human practice (Lopez Frias and Monfort 2016)

The facticity of me suggests that the odds are against me becoming a considerably better skateboarder because of my increasing age, my limited time to practise, living in the UK with dark nights, wet weather and limited indoor skateparks with even more limited opening hours. These facts are definitive, but they are also ambiguous. My 'self', who I perceive myself to be, and how others perceive me is in constant flux. My transcendence is less about who I might become and more about living with the flux, the ambiguity,

through which I retain my sense of 'self' as a work in progress. Also, importantly, by actually skateboarding, not just thinking about it or talking about it, existing within it rather than playing at it or projecting the identity of a skateboarder—I avoid the self-deception that Sartre refers to as 'bad faith' (1943, 71) because I am actively participating. This is where the existential struggle with injury comes in because when injured we can't 'do' the thing that we will ourselves to be and for me that starts a process of insecurity and worry that my skateboarding persona is slipping into 'bad faith', becoming an artifice—a role that I perform. Sartre offers us an understanding of being-for-others and how the judgement of others turns us into pure facticity in their minds. Defining myself as others see me (or as I think others see me) has always been a danger for me. This is where Gullette's (2018) work on the psychological burden of ageing comes in as she critiques the sociocultural processes of meaning making that define the life cycle arc as one of increasing decline and suggests we can see it otherwise.

This is a paper about time and our freedom to choose how we use it. I would like to draw this discussion back to Beauvoir and her all-important ideas about the transition from childhood into adulthood and the apparent freedom to choose what we do with our lives. As skateboarding keeps us in a childlike state of play then is it an avoidance of this responsibility? Or is it a good example of Gullette's (2018) argument that the limitations placed on the ageing body are largely sociocultural and therefore can be rethought. Added to this, important ethical considerations about how the individual exists in society



Figure 2. Learning to skate at Hackney Bumps 2017.

are where Beauvoir's asserts that a will to freedom also requires willing the freedom of others. I relate to this as I skateboard for me, but I also skate for the freedom of others particularly female skateboarders and other older skateboarders. The visibility of a skateboarder (see [Figure 2.](#)) who looks different from normative depictions of what skateboarders look like in skate media, questions who has ownership of the public spaces in which skateboarding takes place (Sayers and Fordyce 2021).

The logics of time and the controls it elicits over how we are in the world are instrumental in how we deal with the ethical problem of how we choose to spend our lives. We live with the ambiguity of coming to terms with where our own individual desires end and our allegiance to society begins (Beauvoir 1948). As an adult I have different responsibilities than that of a child. Disparaging remarks like 'grow up' and 'aren't you too old to play with toys' are common to adult skateboarders. We have made choices to use our time differently. In my case that is a constant juggling to achieve a balance between my commitment to my employment, family, home, keeping physically fit and skateboarding. Living with ambiguity.

In Beauvoir's work on children, there are three key areas that resonate with ambiguities that exist within skateboarding. The first of which relates to the insult mentioned previously – 'grow up' (see Sutton & Sayers 2020). At the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood we face the true ambiguity of the world. In that moment we are faced with all the freedoms and all the choices and the responsibility of making the right choice. In the many different activities we become involved in, we attempt to achieve balance, social pressures encourage us to become completed beings but we never do, we are always re-constituting ourselves. For adult women, being-for-oneself can be considered selfish whereas being-for-others is often more acceptable. Skateboarding is doing something entirely for myself and as such I find myself continually justifying this decision. Beauvoir (1948) illustrates the struggle we go through in accepting our true state of freedom and the strategies people use to deny the inherent ambiguity of existence. 'Freedom is realised as an independence in regard to the serious world ... and the ambiguity of existence is felt not as a lack but in its positive aspect' (ibid. 62). The choice to be a 'nihilist' or an 'adventurer' (ibid. 61–63) describe some of the attributes necessary to skateboard—contesting the serious world and defined by vitality and scepticism concurrently.

The second is about the way in which children perceive time. There is a contrast between children and adults in how time is perceived. When children are at play, they exist in the moment. They do not consider what has come before or what will come next (Beauvoir 1948, 1). The sensory experience of 'now' is much stronger for children. One of the most beautiful aspects of skateboarding is that when you're engaged in the repetitive motion of trying to perfect a trick you cannot think about the past or the future, you must exist in the moment of now—there is no past there is no future—only now. I am 'no thing', not what I am, nor what I am not, as the wheels roll I am in this literal motion, in this moment I am learning in the gap between facticity and transcendence.

But between the past which no longer is and the future, which is not yet, this moment when he exists is nothing (Beauvoir 1948, 6)

When skating I can't consider any of the tasks or worries that govern the rest of my time. I must concentrate entirely on the board, my body, the surface on which I skate, I must be

immersed (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2014). This being in the moment of now and now alone is liberating. I am for a short time disconnected from my to do lists, email correspondences etc. I am, for a short time, free.

The third area of linkage between Beauvoir's work and skateboarding is where she elaborates on the relationship between childhood and human freedom when she talks about the formation of subjectivity, becoming who we are. She asserts that what is important in this growth and development is that we move past passive nihilism—believing in nothing and having no purpose—and become a child. As a child at play we reconceive time. Where the spirit wills its own will (Beauvoir 1948, 33). Children are constantly opening up to new beginnings, new games, new understandings. When skateboarding, in a state of near constant life affirmation, we resemble Beauvoir's idea of children at play (38) - we don't have the weights on our back of what we should do—we are like children discovering the world for the first time because whilst we rely on the skills and memory of past manoeuvres it is essential to be open and responsive to the environment. Every skateable obstacle is different, as are the conditions in which we skate. We must be present in the moment to skate at our best, insider knowing as Ingold (2013) describes. Children at play are pure life affirmation, present, enjoying the game they are playing now, and then they move on to the next game. Through skateboarding I resemble the child at play again. In this place where I am excited to find new games to play or finding new ways to look at things where I am not afraid to take risks. Here, through skateboarding, I am affirming life and creating my own values.

Time and Productivity

Ideas about productivity change as we grow older. For the average skateboarder, skateboarding has rarely been associated with economic gain. Through a combination of the lockdown's associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and skateboarding's inclusion in the Olympics there have been a huge rise in the number of beginner skateboarders, especially girls and women. Whilst the growth of physical fitness and skills development are incredibly positive, the potential for injury is ever present. Where for children this risk is balanced by the benefit of learning, the balance for adults is different: adults are relied upon to maintain, economic stability for their families. Adults, rather than children, have expectations to be more productive than playful in their social roles, they negotiate these at their own risk. Such capitalist ideas of productivity are challenged by my decision to spend time on the board.

Walker (2009) talks about 'an internalization of the importance of managing time in a demonstrably efficient manner' (in Shahjahan 2015, 284). In the beautifully titled 'Being "Lazy" and Slowing Down: Toward decolonizing time, our body, and pedagogy' Shahjahan (2015) talks about the idea of 'being lazy' in relation to neo liberal attitudes to education and time as a construct which severs nature from the human body. If we were to use ideas of capitalist productivity as discussed by Shahjahan (2015) we could easily conclude that skateboarding is inherently pointless in economic terms, and some would argue therefore that learning to do it is a 'waste of time'. Only very recently has it been monetised by the uptake of brand interest. This means that some skateboarders are now sponsored, but for the majority of amateur skateboarders it remains useless in commercial, consumer and productivity terms. However, productivity is not solely defined

by economic gain. Skateboarding has made me extremely busy through identity construction, self-improvement and learning new skills as well as through researching, writing about it and leading community engagement projects. Spending time skateboarding means having to rethink 'productivity' on my own terms.

My life as an academic and a mother are time poor. I have studied and gained a PhD. I have built a career, a family and a relationship with my partner and together we rebuilt our home. All these things are about inherent productivity, moving forwards making gains, making improvements, building a life, building a professional profile, building security. I started skateboarding aged 47 when the youngest of my three children was 7 years old. The initial stages of learning to skateboard were inevitably time hungry and injury ridden – 'pedagogical work' as described by Wacquant (2011). Learning to do this time hungry activity from scratch is at odds with a life of capitalist productivity and yet it has added enormous value to my existence. I was driven to pursue skateboarding for the fact that it refuses capitalist ideas about time and productivity, in so doing it undermines the idea of progress as something linear which in consumerist fashion is about acquisition in an attempt to 'be somebody'. Skateboarding recognises the continual flux and flow of being that existentialist 'nothing' acknowledges.

The modern concept of time is removed from nature and removed from the human body. Ever since the invention of the clock, time has been a linear thing, and not connected to a cosmological experience of the world but more of a separation of the body from nature. The natural phenomena that take place in time and space out in the world is at odds with the kind of logic that we use to measure time. And so, I reflect on the time spent in the skate park where learning to skate requires a huge commitment of time. I estimate that I've spent at least 2000 hours skateboarding over the last 5 years. I can lose whole days in the skate park. I go out for an hour or two and I'm still there five or six hours later often pursuing the same thing over and over again, each tiny incremental success is only perceptible to me but the drive to improve keeps me focused and engaged in this repetitive meditative activity. Although some may argue it is a useless activity, this progression is so very useful to me, and such a sense of progressing drives near obsessive levels of participation by skateboarders in skateboarding.

If we explore time in terms of pedagogy and we reject the idea that learning is primarily for achieving specific life goals and instead explore alternative ideas of learning and time as non-linear, we can reject the idea of always progressively moving towards an outcome. In addition, we can embrace a kind of process of unlearning—a non-linear notion of time that's about living in the moment embodying silence and welcoming sensory ways of knowing (Pink 2009). If we acknowledge the body in the learning journey and respect or pay attention to the situation in which learning takes place, then we can come to new knowledge intrinsically and more effectively. These approaches require a form of slowing down or 'slowness' as referred to in the pedagogic approach to the creative process of placemaking called 'Artscaping' (Ayliffe et al. 2020). Knowledge production is of necessity a slow process, it involves not just a mind but the body as well and in that respect the body needs to be incorporated into the learning environment (see Hickey-Moody, Palmer, and Sayers 2016).

Slowing down disrupts a subjectivity that ties time with rationality or productivity, or, more importantly, with being civilized or modern. It is about inviting abundance thinking in the

present and focus on our bodies now for its intrinsic value as a knowledge producer, rather than later, or for some other extrinsic value (Shahjahan 2015, 298).

Time does not have to be productive in extrinsic terms such as for economic exchange: actions rather than transactions define identity. There is no need to reduce, everything in society to economics when continuing to consider skateboarding as an anti-capitalist activity which produces no economic gain for the average skateboarder. There is enormous value in people being active in their communities, not cogs in an economic machine (Arendt 1977). The community that is built around skateboarding is different from other sporting activities; it is a lifestyle, a culture, a way of being in the world (Borden 2001, 244). Skateboarding is often seen as an activity for slackers in fact it's sometimes termed 'slacker hedonism' (Sayers and Griffin 2020). I propose we see it as 'productive hedonism', in which identities are created through physical activity and interaction rather than identity created via commodity transactions. Consumer society produces pressure to be commodity rich, to demonstrate success through possessions. I prefer to resist this idea and for me skateboarding is an important tool in that resistance.

Motherhood

In my job as an academic there are endless tasks of assessment, scheduling, management, measurement, control, planning, teaching, researching; these tasks I'll never complete. The sooner one is ticked off several more have already appeared in the inbox. This is mirrored in the domestic tasks faced by parents and carers where endless food preparation, eating, tidying up washing, shopping for groceries, attending to life admin. These tasks also I'll never complete, they are endless and have been exacerbated by a long period of lockdown. Such activities feel more futile to me than endlessly approaching a ramp to try to finesse, nuance and achieve a better movement of the body and the board. To land that trick.

Beauvoir helps us to explore the decision making that governs our use of time. The ambivalence she talks of is to do with our constant need to balance individual desire with our allegiance to society (Beauvoir 1948). Recently I have let that balance slip, I have been skating too much and tension has arisen in my home life. My failure to give enough time to domestic tasks has a knock-on effect on the workload others face. When I began skateboarding, I became aware that the early evening skate after work was at children's teatime. Time spent skating was literally a choice between stay home and cook or go out to skate. At that time, I felt hemmed in by the confines of being a mother to three. My youngest was 7 years old and so we were, as a family, just coming out of a time when the schedule is governed by the needs of small children. My children were old enough and resilient enough to have a quick sandwich and go skate, this change in our use of time was liberating. That was OK for a while but now that my children don't really want to skate anymore my absence from the family home is felt acutely, and following my individual desire, is at odds with my allegiance to my family. The ambivalence of experience between being-for-oneself and being-for-others is acute and is something that society can label as selfish. But a balance must be sought, as with any passion the balance between desire and social good is difficult, for me as it all too often comes down firmly on the side of passion rather than what I can perceive as the mundane. Begging the

question, how can I will the freedom of others as well as willing my own freedom? When 'mundane' chores are family or work—can a balance be found? Or is it just the reality of life that I am trying to avoid? Do I need to simply 'grow up'? Of course, I find that difficult to accept; time is scarce but how we use it is up to us. With skateboarding I gain a sense of achievement that I feel neither at work nor in my domestic environment. Now, injured, I can't skate and so the balance at home is gradually returning. The easiest way to avoid tension is to stop doing the thing that causes it. However, that is to give up and give in. To over compromise and lose one's own drive. That is not ethical. In Beauvoir's terms—too great an allegiance to others and too little to the self creates another un sustainable and unbalanced situation (DE 1948). But most adults live with such suffering, such self-sacrifice. I think it is important to seek out an alternative.

The most valuable use of time is often seemed to be things that enhance your career or your economic security. For mothers, valuable use of time can be seen to be the upbringing of their children with too much involvement in other things considered a distraction from the primary focus of motherhood. Time is seen as continual progress, progressing efficiently from the past into the future.

Skateboarding could be considered as an antidote to this, a form of mindfulness. It is about slowing down, focusing on the body in the environment being fully present in the here and now: in the experience. It embodies useful notions of psychological time in the conception of aesthetic experience. Pedagogically, learning takes time and there is an inherent repetitive and meditative aspect of skateboarding that means slowing down and maintaining focus. How we conceptualise 'time' and how we use it are our choices. It is not divided into fixed and absolute categories. Our choices can enable freedom from rigid social norms.

Injury, Failure and Learning

All learning involves a risk of some sort (Biesta 2006) as to take on the new we must make an ontological leap (Atkinson 2022). Failure is inevitable at some point; without it we wouldn't learn. Critical observation and judgement can negatively affect our ability to progress and achieve success. This is where the peer-to-peer mechanism that happens in the skate park is important for effective learning. Peers support one another, usually one is more knowledgeable, but the advice is responsive rather than instructional. It is connected to the ethics of being together in the skatepark, the rules and etiquette that help keep everyone safe—a community of practice operating together (Wenger 2000). Being together allows learning to take place that uses mimicry and memory, as one participant copies another. Leading by example rather than an expert teaching one who knows less (Rancière 1991). This way the inevitable failures are easier to overcome as the experts' judgement is defused, instead participants are immersed together in a cycle of conscious action. Confidence in having the necessary skills and technique is applied to the task/trick/object of study and therefore high levels of achievement, self-affirmation and a desire to repeat the task and improve. This desire and motivation can only be achieved through immersion and a will to improve, perfect, to do it again and again, a drive that is an important part of progression in physical and creative tasks.

'Every fibre of your being says don't do that again and yet cognitive override kicks in' (Skateboarder: Rodney Mullen (2013), TEDx on 'Getting Up Again).

Injury is inevitable and as adults, the decision to do something that risks our physical well-being is an anathema. When we get hurt, convention would suggest that we stop doing the thing that leads to injury. But, as Rodney Mullen says a ‘cognitive override’ kicks in, in other words the drive to continue skating is stronger than the will to remain injury free—the mind in this sense overrules the body and we get up and carry on. Sometimes this is more difficult than others and many adults have expressed a renewed fear when returning from injury. A fear that can be debilitating and can obstruct progression.

Howe (2008) gives a nuanced understanding of conflicting factors, as she puts in ‘competing voices’ in the internal struggle to keep going, she talks about ‘the self-talk experienced by the participant in physically stressful or possibly dangerous sport pursuits who must come to terms in some way with powerful and conflicting motivations’ (356). Howe’s observations resonate strongly with my experience when she talks about the difficulty in persevering if the motivations of the self are not aligned (357).

The voices competing against each other to be heard, the ones pushing us on and those counselling surrender, are the conscious expressions of our various desires and motivations, not all of which can be realised at once. This, in the end, is what it is to be a self: the relation we maintain between all our competing drives, sensations, affects, motivations and judgements (Howe 2008, 361).



Figure 3. Dropping in—the point of no return 2019.

Learning to drop-in (Figure 3) to a concrete bowl took months of practise and many falls that have resulted in an unsightly haematoma on my left hip, a necessary hazard of action sports. To achieve success at dropping in was a huge mental and physical battle, to be brave enough to shift my weight to the front of the board and make it drop. Being already injured and knowing I could fall and hurt myself again required enormous ‘cognitive override’ (Mullen and Mortimer 2004) but I had to switch off the mental fear and do it anyway. On the one hand I must accept injury as part of skating but on the other I must mitigate risk to keep the injuries minor. The contradiction between wanting to do something and being afraid of it is a constant struggle in skateboarding. Coming back from injury I repeat to myself that my past does not determine my future. I exercise my freedom to choose whether to skate, or not. I am aware of the risk but I perform a kind of withdrawal of consciousness of my physical being. I turn my body into a thing and I tip over the edge of the coping. I am consciously deceiving myself, making my mind blank to remove the moment of choice as the board tips past the point of no return, the wheels make contact with the concrete transition, I feel the grip and I’m back in the bowl and rolling.

Risk

In their chapter, *Safe Danger—On the Experience of Challenge, Adventure and Risk in Education*, Martínková and Parry (2017) investigate the concept of risk including the complications of risk management decision-making. They,

‘note that “risk of danger” might refer to one’s own intentional behaviour (when choosing to put oneself “at risk” of danger), or to accidental factors or to hazards within the given situation (let us call these extrinsic factors), which we may or may not have understood, or noticed’ (ibid. 78).

At the beginning of this article I described the collision that led to my injury. Where there is undoubtedly a substantial intrinsic risk of danger in skateboarding, by far the greatest risk comes from extrinsic factors (wrongly anticipating the movement of other skateboarders) and causes the majority of accidents in public skateparks (Haines, Smith, and Baxter 2010). Usually I am constantly making risk-assessments, practicing ‘safe-danger’ (Martínková and Parry 2017) to the detriment of my skateboarding sometimes.

Participation in risk taking activities carries more social and cultural validity for men than for women. In their article on *The Distinction of Risk in Urban Skateboarding* (2008) Atencio et al characterise the capital accrued by male skateboarders:

The distinction of risk was used to underpin the men’s street masculinities. Men who became associated with risk-taking behaviours and attitudes gained symbolic capital because they were legitimised and recognised within the socialfield/s (Atencio et al, 2009).

Attitudes to risk vary with age, one of the questions posed in the philosophical literature on risk draws attention to the careful joy experienced by ‘adventurous risk-takers’ as they age (McNamee 2007, 8) who goes on to question whether there may be efficiencies in prudently formulating a rational life plan, one that sees a reduction of risk, ‘what kind of old age shall I live to?’ asks McNamee (2007, 5). This possets ‘the idea that we should lead our own lives rather than be led by them’ (6) and as we can see from the literature on

philosophy, risk and adventure (Anderson 2007; McNamee 2007; Peterson and Sandin 2010) such care allows for risky activities to be 'pursued for the joy and satisfactions they bring to life' and can contribute to the 'good life' long into the future (McNamee, 8).

For mother's engaged in action sports time is a source of tension, a significant part of their adult life may have been taken up in motherhood, which means that temporal bias towards the future is not uncommon, the biological clock is always ticking, a fact we are reminded of on entering the menopause. For many women, 'the future' after their child-bearing years represents a return to a pre-motherhood life-plan. For the skateboarding mums that I have been riding with, they are not picking up a sport they left behind in youth but starting something new, for the first time. Learning to take risk at such an age defies rational life planning in a conventional sense.

Society can exert a 'soft paternalism' as discussed in Anderson (2007) which coerces older adults or those with family or caring responsibilities to stay safe. For doctors, who in their professional capacity, must consider limiting the actions of competent adults (ibid) an ethical decision is required. Risk taking in motherhood is described by Stewart and Burrows (2016, Spowart et al.2011) in their work on snowboarding mothers where they explore women who question 'what it means to be a "good mother" by creating practices to achieve their own happiness' (2011, 187). Spowart & Burrows question 'how mothers who engage in action sports negotiate the moral terrain they inevitably encounter' (2016, 155) commenting wryly that whilst there are benefits in aerobic exercise for a mother-to-be 'snowboarding is not regularly promoted to pregnant women due to the perceived risks associated with taking part' (2016, 162). Clearly, as the authors point out, 'tensions exist between the identities of a "mother" and the risks often associated with participating in action sports' (2016, 155).

Social expectations anticipate that older adults and particularly mothers with children should not get involved with action sports, danger, or risk. The ethical implications of exposing oneself to risk and the potential impact of that on others makes us question what it means to accept or not accept risk. Management of risk within decision making requires weighing up expected utility in order to make 'rational' choices (Peterson and Sandin 2010). There is a tension between opening ourselves up to what is not-yet-known and mitigating against unwanted future events.

Alongside significant injury comes time off the board during recovery. This has ramifications in practical terms as it effects a person's ability to work, do household chores, dress the self, drive etc. My injury coincided with our family summer holiday so our usual routine of cycling, paddleboarding, skateboarding was significantly compromised. I chose to invest time in skateboarding, a dangerous sport where the potential for injury is ever present. My injury had an impact on my family and rendered me less useful in many of the usual ways. However, I was able to participate more fully in other respects: I became more attentive to my family's emotional needs, I had more time to engage in their projects, I was more 'present'.

As we get older, we can become more inhibited in terms of our will to control risk. As an adult, I have all sorts of what Bourdieu (1986) calls 'capital' already accrued. Injury represents the loss of physical capital because it can lead to incapacity and our ability to accrue economic capital. Loss of physical capital may lead to low social value, to prevent this an individual may develop preventative dispositions resulting in their becoming risk averse. For these reasons, learning progression in older people can be slower partly

because taking risks and being experimental happens less as we age. We tend to reduce risk in our lives to preserve the various forms of capital that have been accrued.

Conclusion

I have explored the question 'do I have time to go skate?' My own circumstances in relation to this research, as female, a mum, over 50, has caused me to question certain social norms described by Beauvoir as 'immanence' (1948 29, 590): constrained, passive and stagnant alongside the more desirable 'transcendence' (1948: 169, 1949: 29): an indefinitely open future. Through skateboarding I have actively sought a life that is productive, powerful, outward looking and future focussed. In refusal of Beauvoir's observations about 'the dangerous age' (1949, 587) where:

With no future, she still has about one half of her adult life to live (587).

Mapped on to my experience of skateboarding, the ideas Beauvoir asserts about 'maturity and old age' (1949, 587–608), resonate with my argument for the value of time spent on the board where time spent skateboarding reflects the decision I have taken to negotiate the imposed social roles of work and motherhood and reserve some time to explore what is possible in the present moment.

We have to live with the ambiguity of willing our own freedom but also, if we are to accept Beauvoir's ethics then we must also will the freedom of others. As an educator this means always pushing towards pedagogies that are empowering and emancipatory for the learner (see Sayers, 2011). Using my time in this way has challenged my prevailing ideas about utility and productivity, mapping Beauvoir's work onto this research process has offered an understanding of the importance of maintaining the ambiguity of what I am and what I am not, regardless of age.

Do I have time to go skate? raises ethical questions about how I am in the world with others. How as a parent I can pursue my own goals and achieve my own happiness whilst also recognising the needs of my family. The balance, as in any ethical positioning is not fixed, it must be constantly attended to.

The learning curve has been steep and full of risks, but whilst skateboarding continues to enhance me culturally, physically, and psychologically it challenges me too. As with any sport, particularly risky ones, there is an internal dialogue with oneself (Haines, Smith, and Baxter 2010). Particularly returning from injury, I fight a constant and strong urge to surrender and give up and yet the enjoyment is too great to stop. Through skateboarding I experience a paradox, I am more fulfilled, resilient to new circumstances and to change, but the social construction of age and the barriers that come with it urge me towards stopping and letting myself off the hook. I have inspired other adults to start skateboarding and to keep going even when it is hard, to acknowledge that the sociocultural limitations placed on our bodies can be rethought. To engage in skateboarding at 50+ is to overrule social expectations of age and gender and find a balance between risk, skill, and the psychological burden of ageing. To not always be-for-others and to not allow the facts about ageing to limit the experience of ageing. In doing so, I reject the idea of a culturally constructed life course that limits me to a narrative of decline.

Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity.
(Beauvoir 1948, 77)

Skating helps me deconstruct the confinement of adulthood. I am an adult who became a child and deconstructed my hierarchical, expert based academic identity by being a beginner again and learning to skate. This learning is indeed pedagogical work, and work for which I cannot stand at a distance. I use research methods that are immersive and participatory to explore culture through bodily experience. Emplaced engagement allows me to create my own auto ethnographic study but also to research other people and groups in skateboarding with an understanding and empathy that translates into expertise in this community of practice (Wenger 2000).

Skateboarding is time consuming, but my apprenticeship in skateboarding and the value of making time to do it has more benefits than simply learning a physical skill. Making time to skate has provided me with cultural, technical, and material learning not to mention learning about myself and others. It has provided purpose, given my life meaning and a sense of belonging. Nearly 2 years on, I am currently returning to skateboarding after the third surgical intervention to try to fix the fingers I broke at the start of this paper. Howe's (2008) article, 'On Competing Against Oneself, or "I need to get a different voice in my head"' has been incredibly useful to me in understanding my return to my skateboarding self as 'the activity of putting potentially conflicting elements into relation'. I am not competing against anyone else but competing against an internal struggle with myself in which, as I approach risk, I fight against 'the desire to give in' (Howe 2008, 12). This 'giving in' could also be a metaphor for ageing and propels me to answer the question 'Do I have time to go skate?': I think I must.

Note

1. Skateboarding can be deconstructed into a series of micro progressions. Achievements are made incrementally, often imperceptibly to anyone other than the skater who makes minor adjustments gradually refining stance, style, distribution of weight each time the move is performed.

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