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Parkour and the City

Risk, Masculinity, and Meaning in a Postmodern Sport

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Conclusion

Appropriating the City

When Georges Hérbert promoted his *méthode naturelle,* he was reacting against perceptions of modern indolence. Science, technology, and an ever-expanding array of consumer goods promised to make life easier, but Hérbert worried these conveniences made people weak in mind, body, and spirit. By training in the rigors of the parcours, though, Hérbert insisted men and women could develop a moral sense of self. They could "be strong to be useful." The legacy of Raymond Belle exemplifies this vision of the parcours. From French Indochina to Paris, it is said that the elder Belle combined his corporeal talents with outright bravery in the service of others. Inspired by the mythic tales of his father, David Belle took up the challenge of training the parcours. However, the younger Belle did not just train the parcours. He and his friends adapted it to fit into their teenage lives and their youthful fantasies. This is to say, they were not training for civil or military service. These young men were running and jumping through the banlieues because it could be fun. They challenged themselves with arduous, daring feats, and they honed their athletic skills. As Sébastien Foucan recalled, "It became our game. [...] We would play at being ninja, superheroes. [...] It was all in our imagination. [...] So, the years passed, and our game carried on, and we progressed until we were able to face [more significant] heights and jumps."[1]

A Quintessential Postmodern Sport

When thinking about the genesis of parkour, it is paramount to appreciate that Belle, Foucan, Yann Hnautra, and the rest of that original group incorporated parcours into the built environment of the French suburbs. They did not merely train parcours *in* the banlieues; the Brutalist architecture of the postwar years *became* the parcours itself. These "dull and isolated places" were reimagined.[2] Utilitarian features of the cityscape—rooftops, stairwells, and walls—became sites of playful risk taking. These degree-zero spaces were infused with new forms of significance through the group's flow-inducing games. Of course, climbing, jumping, and running are ubiquitous in childhood. What set the founders of parkour apart was their codification of such play. Their activity became something more akin to a discipline. It was something to be trained. There were specific movements, and these movements were highly refined. The goal was not merely to provide kinetic efficiency; the goal was to have style—aesthetic flair. Speaking of his younger brother, Jeff Belle explained, "Instead of stopping at a reasonable point, [David] just kept going."[3]

Eventually, and with Jeff's help, the group's nascent discipline drew interest from the media. Advertisers and filmmakers saw potential for marketing a new lifestyle sport—a Z-Boys for the new millennium.[4] It is unclear if the promises of money frayed the bonds of friendship or if fame merely came along too late, but the original group splintered soon after their initial television coverage. Belle and Foucan emerged as the most prominent figures of the new sport. They made flashy commercials and starred in movies. And, following along with this mainstream attention came a growing stream of young people—mostly teenage boys—who wanted to learn the discipline for themselves. With the documentary *Jump London,* what had been an obscure activity from France became accessible to English-language audiences. In turn, Urban Freeflow's website served as the central hub for English-speaking traceurs throughout the world.

The original business model in parkour—to the extent that there was a model at all—was based around a handful of prominent practitioners landing roles in commercials and movies. Urban Freeflow helped usher in the second generation of parkour profit-making based around sportization. UF developed relationships with companies, sponsored athletes, promoted competitions, and sold parkour merchandise. Running in tandem with UF were American Parkour (APK; which was started by a

former affiliate of UF) and the World Freerunning and Parkour Federation (WFPF). These second-generation organizations still maintained performance teams that did commercial work, but the emphasis was on increasing participation in the activity and marketing the sport—all of which was buttressed by establishing a brand and selling clothing emblazoned with it. Today, over a decade after *Jump London* aired, the contemporary parkour business model still involves merchandising and performing, but the sportization of the discipline has moved away from the large-scale competitions promoted by UF (Red Bull's Art of Motion being the notable exception) and toward offering paid instruction for beginners (especially young children). Along with this training came the formal certification of instructors and purpose-built gyms. This new business model is exemplified by Parkour Generations (PKGen). Several parkour organizations, large and small, have also begun to expand and professionalize their merchandising. Companies have moved beyond just screen-printing logos on t-shirts to actually designing sneakers and more technical clothing, which they advertise in online catalogues rivaling those of any major corporate retailer.

Affectively Appropriating Urban Space

The defining features of parkour are encapsulated in what I call the affective appropriation of space. The discipline involves stylized athletic movements that are realized by traceurs reimagining the built environment. When journalists and academics have written about parkour—or even when traceurs themselves describe their activities—appropriation of the material world is a common focus. This is the essence of the discipline's appeal. Without reimagining the urban form, parkour would just be gymnastics. To quote Pasha again, "Your imagination creates ways [for] how you would go through these roofs by using parkour. People who don't know what parkour is, they would just look at these roofs, and their imagination wouldn't do anything with that. People who do parkour, they have [a] completely different [. . .] imagination."

The spatial appropriations of the discipline are important because, as Henri Lefebvre argues, the material world has obdurate qualities, and this reifies the social relations that produced it.[5] This is to say that, once built, the concrete, glass, and steel of a downtown business district can seem immutable. A universe of contingencies is narrowed down by profits and politics, with the matter-of-fact yet undeniably imposing facades

of corporate centers demonstrating whose special interests have won. At the same time, such abstract spaces can also be utilized for other means. Official conceptions of space and everyday perceptions of them can be overturned by creative spatial practices. A built environment that had heretofore seemed only to afford one set of activities explodes with new possibilities. A structure designed to allow pedestrians or motorists safe egress now becomes a ladder for reaching what had been an inaccessible nook.

This spatial potential is why so many youths are enamored with graffiti and skateboarding, too. Such activities allow participants to lay claim to their physical surroundings in unauthorized and exciting ways. The anonymity of the metropolis is erased by turning subway cars into personal billboards. The monotony of the shopping mall is disrupted by grinding its curbs. This is also why graffiti artists' and skaters' relatively minor transgressions—paint and scuff marks—can evoke such strong reactions from those who seek to maintain the existing social order.[6] If spatial appropriations threaten to overturn taken-for-granted assumptions, then from the perspective of those in power, there are good reasons to police those practices.

Writing about skateboarding, Iain Borden discusses the intersection of body, board, and terrain.[7] Skaters interface with the space through which they travel. Following sociologist Anthony Giddens, in this sense, structures—typically seen as constraints to action in social theory—have to be appreciated as equally enabling of those actions.[8] In other words, the seemingly agentic practices of graffiti writers, skateboarders, and traceurs are made possible by the very structures they appropriate. Their transgressions do not happen in spite of such structures; they happen through them. We have seen this throughout the book as practitioners reimagine the affordance of the built environment. For all of traceurs' creativity, parkour cannot simply occur in any given space; the material world is inseparable from the process.

Because spatial appropriations require an engagement with the material world, the discipline is also an embodied practice. To be in the world is to be engaged with one's corporeal self. While much of everyday life can be alienating, there are moments in which all people become highly attuned to what they are doing. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to this as flow, and he considers such engrossment in the task at hand as an optimal experience.[9] The flow experience is actively sought out and deeply enjoyed. Csikszentmihalyi adopted the term "flow" because the individuals he studied frequently used it themselves. Likewise, traceurs refer to a long series of

maneuvers as a "flow run" or practicing the transitions between maneuvers as "flow work." And, it is no coincidence that Paul "EZ" Corkery named his organization Urban Free*flow*.

The experience of flow is at the heart of both play and rituals. When either is successful, the activities take on a quality of unquestionable reality. Clifford Geertz describes this as the "really real."[10] This is to say, flow states feel subjectively profound, and when experienced collectively, these subjective feelings take on an objective quality. To quote Eric again, "It's a very, I'm going to say, spiritual [experience]—not in a religious context, but in a context that has to do with understanding the self in a manner that creates [. . .] great joy and relaxation. [. . .] I don't want to call it nirvana, because that's not technically correct. I'm going to use the term 'moksha'—awareness of the universe." Individually or collectively, the flow of parkour happens in and through the built environment. It is the affective appropriation of space, and it is a dialectical process. Which is to say, it is in seeking out flow that traceurs reimagine the material world, and it is in this reimagining that practitioners become engrossed in their embodied practices.

The concept of affective spatial appropriation is integral to the argument laid out in this book. Chapter two considered the global ethnoscape of parkour. In that chapter we saw how traceurs' use of new media intertwines with their reimagining of the city. Perceptions and experiences of urban life are altered as virtual worlds and the real world continually feed back into each other. Chapter three looked at how traceurs' affective appropriations of space constitute urban adventures. In particular, young men are attracted to these types of activities because they have the potential to affirm culturally valued attributes of masculinity. Chapter four built on these previous two chapters to offer an analysis of risk and safety as critical to the meaning traceurs give to their affective appropriations of the city.

Dialectic of the Virtual and the Real

Arjun Appadurai discusses the ideas and images circulating through new media as global ethnoscapes that allow individuals to rethink what is possible at the local level.[11] As we have seen, parkour exemplifies this concept. Most would-be traceurs first learn about the activity from spending time on the Internet. By and large, it is YouTube videos that reveal new prisms of the possible for these individuals. As ZK recalled, "Oh, wow. They're running, jumping, flipping. I enjoy watching this. I could probably do this if I put in the time." Even after someone becomes a seasoned practitioner, the Internet continues to be an integral aspect of their participation in the community. Showreels, tutorials, and posts to social media inspire traceurs and help shape their training. In short, life on screen is a ubiquitous part of experiencing parkour.

The discipline's portrayal through new media is not truly analogous to the activity as it exists in the real world. In this sense, like so much of postmodern culture, parkour can be considered as simulacra—edited and framed to highlight the spectacular. Photographs and videos are never more than approximations of the events they purport to represent. The planning and practice that go into stunts are removed, as are the false starts and aborted attempts.[12] What remains is a procession of disjointed actions fused together in a form that can only be experienced virtually. In other words, the on-screen depictions of parkour are a montage of movements collected across time and space, stitched together into a cohesive whole and usually set to music. Most notably, traceurs own participation in the discipline often becomes subservient to the requirements of producing what Daniel Boorstin calls pseudo-events.[13] When the camera is rolling (and it frequently is), visceral moments get evaluated less in terms of immediate experience and more in terms of how they will appear when spliced together for consumption on the screen.

At the same time, for all its mediated aspects, parkour is also an embodied practice. Without bodies in motion—and the attendant somatic sensations—there could be neither flow nor spatial appropriation. Traceurs become engrossed in their activities because, not only are the tasks challenging, there are also real consequences to what they are doing. Those too flippant about their physically situated selves will not last long as traceurs. As such, while parkour may be inseparable from the interplay of signs circulating within the virtual world, it cannot be reduced to simulacra. Instead, as traceurs train, the global ethnoscape of parkour becomes instantiated through traceurs' off-screen activities. The on-screen is impossible without the off-screen, and vice versa.

PK vision and the dialectic of the virtual and the real are highlighted in chapter two by Tommy's efforts to find a spot to perform a double kong vault. Tommy learned about the maneuver watching videos of traceurs from Europe, but he had to scour suburban Chicago to find just the right obstacles to attempt the movement himself. As Appadurai emphasizes, mediated ideas and images alter the imagined possibilities of individuals

throughout the world. To be realized, though, these new prisms of the possible must be interfaced with the traceur's body and his local environment. Practitioners must venture out into the real world and put their bodies into motion, and this requires reimagining the types of movements afforded in one's physical surroundings.

Urban Adventures and Manhood Acts

In pursuing the optimal experience of flow, traceurs make use of the city in risky ways. Practitioners carve action out of otherwise prosaic environments. Sometimes their urban adventures are social in nature—for example, passive-aggressively taunting security guards or hitting on women. Usually, though, traceurs are interested in reimagining the affordances of physical space. Walls become structures to climb; stairwells become cavernous pits to jump across. To seek out these risks and tempt fate involves demonstrating one's power and control. These vagaries of the environment must be bested, and to do this one must be in command of his body and stay cool under pressure. Thus, these adventurous actions align with contemporary Western notions of masculinity, and participating in them tests one's masculine character. From this analytic vantage point, parkour involves manhood acts, to use Michael Schwalbe's term.[14] Through training, a traceur can positively affirm his identity as a "man." Or, to put this somewhat differently, the manhood acts of parkour help distinguish those who successfully adhere to the cultural attributes of masculinity and those who do not.

As we saw in chapter three, the city provides a series of structural resources for traceurs' gendered performances. First, the physical form of the city affords certain movements—and not others. For example, construction scaffolding allows for lachés, and mulch makes for a softer landing after a long drop. The PK vision inspired through the global ethnoscape of the discipline helps transform the built environment into obstacles that constrain and enable action. To quote Jaska again, "Whenever there's one of those little scaffold things I can't help but under-bar through it and then go back to walking like I'm a normal person." By appropriating space, and putting their bodies on the line in the process, traceurs align their discipline with manhood acts.

Second, the crowds of strangers who fill the city provide another structural resource that traceurs make use of in their gendered performances.

Practitioners' power and control over themselves and the environment must be validated for their performances to have any significance. Therefore, it is onlookers who consummate the traceurs' bravery in the face of peril. The applause and shocked expressions of their ad hoc audiences give traceurs claim to culturally valued attributes of masculinity. As Cody said, "It's when you do a flip and all the kids are like 'Whoa!' [. . .] That's probably one of the best feelings from training, just doing something and hearing kids losing their mind. [. . .] I also like crowds because it means people are fascinated with what you do. It means they like seeing what you're doing."

When researchers study male-dominated social worlds like parkour, it is common to question why more women do not participate in them. A frequent answer is that women are intentionally and unintentionally marginalized by male participants. Alternatively, Nancy Macdonald reverses the question to inquire, not why more women do not take part, but why so many men do.[15] What is it that men get out of their own participation? With parkour, we see that despite the many ways traceurs challenge the traditional masculine norms of sport subcultures, training still serves as a manhood act. Women, of course, can and do train, and many train far more rigorously than the men. However, in many respects, female traceurs are defying cultural stereotypes about women. Male traceurs, on the other hand, are living up to the cultural ideals of manhood. And, for this reason, more young men are attracted to the discipline than women. Risk taking affirms their identities in ways that it does not for young women.

Edgework and Hedgework

At first blush, the fact that traceurs so willingly embrace risk aligns with Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework—the state of flow created when individuals push the very edges of survival.[16] The prototypical edgeworker, however, lauds risk for risk's sake. The vocabulary of motive found in parkour, on the other hand, is very different. Vocabularies of motive are always situated within a given sociohistorical context, and they offer justifications for normative actions. They allow members of a social world or subculture to account for their practices. Edgework, a motivational orientation that rose to prominence in the 1980s, was, according to Lyng, one kind of anarchistic and nihilistic response to the alienation of contemporary life. By contrast, traceurs roundly disavow the notion of wanton thrill seeking.

Instead, they emphasize the ways in which their practices are safe and responsible. Like edgeworkers, traceurs intentionally submit themselves to fear-inducing situations. This fear, though, is almost always described as something to be managed through the slow progression of skills. Risks exist, but traceurs emphasize the reasoned manner in which they have assessed them and prepared themselves to surmount them. The point I am making here is not that traceurs are actually more safety-minded than prototypical edgeworkers. Rather, the accounts practitioners give for their actions (irrespective of what those actions are) are different: are dangerous situations highlighted or downplayed? Is facing uncontrollable hazards viewed as a positive or negative for one's sense of identity?

The motivational orientation of traceurs resonates with the neoliberal rhetoric pervasive in postmodern culture. I refer to this as hedgework. Practitioners focus far more on the ways they are mitigating risks than on the ways they are seeking out these risks. Putting the nihilism of edgework in stark relief, as hedgeworkers, traceurs continually affirm their dedication to protecting the self. The daredevil—irresponsible and chasing a rush—is the straw man practitioners repeatedly knock down in their incessant talk of precaution. And, in a society that increasingly shifts myriad collective risks onto the individual, it is, perhaps, only to be expected that young people would adopt these cultural tropes in exaggerated and symbolic form.

The hedgework of parkour involves rites of risk and rituals of symbolic safety. Rites of risks are the urban adventures of the discipline. They come from spatial appropriation, and they are the source of flow. They are also the manhood acts of traceurs. When a practitioner stands on a ledge and steels himself for a jump, he is practicing a rite of risk. He knows he might be injured, and he acknowledges that he feels scared of the possibility. However, to fully participate in the rite, he must manage this fear and act in spite of it. This is the test of character Erving Goffman discusses as fateful action.[17] At the same time, a stunt's riskiness does not automatically make it meaningful—quite the opposite. Traceurs generally deny that they tempt fate at all. Instead, the rites of risk found in the discipline are only meaningful when properly couched in the rituals of symbolic safety. Thus, talk of progression, stretching and warming up, using gyms, and having a healthy diet are posited as counterbalances to the destructive potential of their stunts. Ultimately, by emphasizing the precautions that have been taken leading up to a given maneuver, practitioners affirm the sacredness of the self.

Reimagining the Neoliberal City

The final day of the 2014 Colossal Jam, a three-day annual event sponsored by Aero, took place at Cummings Square in River Forest, Illinois. River Forest is a wealthy village just outside Chicago, with sprawling homes on tree-lined streets. It sits just west of Oak Park, another affluent town that butts up against the big city. They are both streetcar suburbs—just far enough from the supposed ills of urbanization, but still conveniently connected by public transportation. Ernest Hemmingway was born in Oak Park. Frank Lloyd Wright built his studio there, and the neighborhoods are dotted with his stunning architecture. Cummings Square is one block from the west end of Oak Park's bustling downtown shopping district and directly across the street from River Forest's Whole Foods Market. Regretfully, it is the kind of park that exemplifies urbanist William H. Whyte's critique of public spaces.[18] Despite its prime location, Cummings Square is almost always empty. Its most common occupants are vagrants waiting for the bus. The design of the area cuts it off from the surrounding pedestrian traffic. It has a wide grassy lawn and attractive features, but still feels confining. Thus, even on a beautiful summer afternoon, hardly any residents or tourists venture inside. In fact, aside from the traceurs, the only other notable visitors that day were a church group who gave out food and held a sermon for the homeless.

Cummings Square is interesting because it is not reductive architecture; it is forgotten architecture. It is a place that was maybe once a vibrant part of the social fabric, but now lies mostly unused. If occasionally traceurs train in spots solely to attract the attention of onlookers, the selection of Cummings Square for the final day of Colossal was driven by the opposite impulse. There are ample features to train on, but barely any passersby to serve as an audience. It is quiet and secluded—a place traceurs can technically be out in public, but, for all intents and purposes, also be on their own. Barren and forgotten as it might have been, Cummings Square took on a whole new feeling as the traceurs occupied its spaces that day. A few randomly placed picnic tables were moved around to use as platforms, landing pads, and barriers (see figure 4 in the introduction and figure 15 in chapter two). The park's grand stone stage, with its ornate walls and ledges, offered all sort of opportunities for vaults and jumps (see figure 27). I spent the afternoon walking from one pocket of activity to the next. Some traceurs were doing flips of almost unbelievable height, plummeting to the

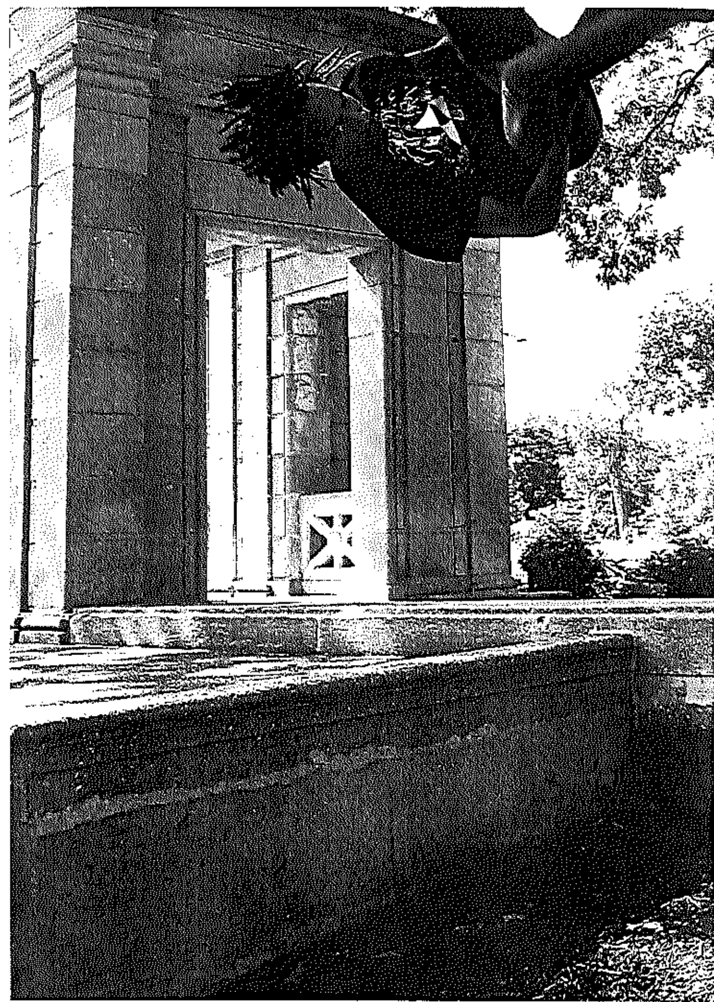

FIG. 27. ZK in mid-rotation at Cummings Square in River Forest, Illinois.

grass below into perfect PK rolls that absorbed their impact. Others were working on more nuanced and technical aspects of the discipline. Some were just goofing around: adding odd variations to vaults, playing with the bokken Eric brought with him,[19] or kicking around a soccer ball another traceur supplied.

Around the same time as the 2014 Colossal, plans to renovate Cummings Square were getting underway.[20] The backers of these changes, no doubt, hoped it would be a boon for businesses in River Forest and

Oak Park. Shoppers from across the street could buy food and then have lunch in the park. With the proposed new stage lighting, park events could encourage attendees to patronize local restaurants afterwards. A revived Cummings Square really could improve the quality of public space in the community. Traceurs, though, show us how spaces can be renovated without the bulldozer and hammer. While business interests guide the sportization of the discipline, at the individual level, parkour is an example of what philosopher Michele de Certeau calls "tactics"—a way for the weak to make use of the strong.[21] Places are reinvented in terms of spatial affordances. As Sophie Fuggle, a scholar on French culture, argues, "Parkour is also a form of writing, constructing a new city from the one presented to us by architects and town planners. It is a form of writing which is both collective and individual."[22] Meaning is reinfused by traceurs through embodied practices unaligned with typical consumer routines. Joyous risk taking and the honing of corporeal skills transform places like Cummings Square through the affective appropriation of space.

In this book we have seen the ways new media is integrated with traceurs' training. We have looked at how the risk taking so prevalent in the discipline serves as gendered performances. We have also discussed the rituals of symbolic safety that give purpose to what might otherwise be interpreted as self-destructive acts. There is something quintessentially postmodern about parkour. The embodied practices of the discipline cannot be completely disentangled from its pseudo-events on the screen. The activity itself is highly performative. It is life imitating art, imitating life—inspired by superheroes and comic books. Unlike parcours, parkour is not a utilitarian activity; it is stylistic. Performative aspects of the self have an increasing significance in postmodernity, and as taken-for-granted roles become suspect, performances give veracity to identity claims. Parkour is one such performance type—allowing individuals to show they are men. Most importantly, the vocabulary of motive used by traceurs resonates with the neoliberal rhetoric of postmodern culture. Parkour teaches traceurs how to hedge their bets. This is to say, it shows they are a particular type of person—someone willing to take risks, not because he is reckless, but because he has studiously prepared himself for it.

If we live in a risk society, parkour is a sport that reflects this new ethos for affirming personal responsibility in navigating the hazards of contemporary life.[23] It is a way for young people—especially young men—to give meaning to the confluence of factors (many contradictory and many totally

out of their control) that are shaping their lives. As discussed in chapter four, just as the cockfight transposes the status insecurities of Balinese men onto roosters,[24] parkour takes the all too real (but intangible) obstacles of living life in advanced capitalism and projects them onto symbolic (but tangible) challenges that the brave and the talented can overcome. Of particular importance, whereas several researchers have considered lifestyle sports as a form of soft diplomacy for the neoliberal agenda, with parkour we see how this free-market hegemony can also work its way from the bottom up.[25]

Throughout the preceding pages, I have attempted to offer a more complete exploration of the discipline—to appreciate the complex sociological landscape that contours the environment (socially and physically) in which traceurs actually operate. Traceurs, like all of us, live in a globalized, postmodern culture. The study of parkour—or any aspect of life—must acknowledge this context. In turn, understanding the discipline and what traceurs get out of it also opens our eyes to new modes of living within the neoliberal city and finding meaning in postmodernity. Ultimately, traceurs show us tactics—however small—for moving and thinking in new ways for new purposes. Traceurs' affective appropriations of Cummings Square that Sunday afternoon were not blueprints from a revolution. Parkour is a lifestyle sport, after all, not a social movement. Still, the traceurs' actions were far from mundane. In their jumps and vaults there were flickers of a much brighter light—of living creatively, of challenging what others take for granted.

Appendix A
Brief Note on Data and Method

As explained in the introduction, the data for this book derive from several years of participant observation among traceurs in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. My first jam was in March of 2010, and my last parkour event was the opening half of a two-day training course in July of 2014. In the interim, I attended thirty-four other jams and six parkour classes. Sometimes I was an active participant in training; other times I was a more passive observer. In all cases, I used social gatherings as an occasion to talk with traceurs about their activities. By learning the basic parkour maneuvers and training with participants, I developed an appreciation for the discipline. Like the traceurs in this study, I came to see new "opportunities" in my environment. I began to think about how it would be possible to climb over a structure in front of me, jump down from it, or swing across it. I also developed an understanding of progressing from awkward first attempts to successful completion of maneuvers. I experienced the fear of trying a new action and the excitement that can come from mastering it.[1]

My direct fieldwork was augmented by semi-structured interviews with forty participants from the Chicago area. I used the interview setting to encourage traceurs to discuss their personal experiences training. I also used the interview setting to question participants about their impressions of specific episodes I had previously observed them taking part in.