

ical Issues in Sport and Society

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Parkour and the City

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Risk, Masculinity, and Meaning in a Postmodern Sport

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Rutgers University Press

New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, New Jersey, and London

Introduction

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Thinking Sociologically about Parkour

Jesus, whom most people called Scales, was standing on a six-foot-high wall in the northwestern corner of Grant Park in Chicago. For Scales and the fifteen or so other young people in this section of the park, it was a typical summer Saturday afternoon. Just to Scales's right, a group of teenagers were climbing up a different, higher wall. After a running start a young man would plant one foot on the wall, from which he would kick off and propel his body upward, reaching an arm as high as possible, hoping to grasp the top of the nearly twelve-foot-high structure. If successful, he would dangle for the shortest of moments—held only by the tips of four fingers—before bringing up his other arm. Once both hands had found purchase, the young man would pull his head and shoulders over the brow of the wall. Then, by pressing down on the top of the wall and straightening his arms, he would raise his torso high enough to swing a foot over the top. With one final leg thrust he would be standing on the summit. This maneuver is called a wall run, and the most skilled of the group could make it from the ground to the top in what looked like one fluid motion. Few, however, could get enough height in their initial kick off the wall to make the first hand grab. As they tried, others in the group would alternately cheer them

on, offer up joking taunts, and provide sincere words of encouragement. Often someone would be using a smartphone to film the attempts.

To Scales's left—across the park benches occupied by tourists and homeless men, and past the grass where kids played games—another teenager was doing a handstand atop a seven-foot-high wall. In a show of confidence, he did the maneuver at the very edge of the structure. For nearly a minute he seemed frozen in time. As he tempted fate with his handstand, several others were running up the wall below him. Instead of trying to summit the structure, they would run a few steps up the wall and then kick out, throwing themselves into back flips. In an effort to refine his technique, one of the practitioners asked another member to film him. The practitioner did the flip, consulted the footage, and then tried it again. Frequently, members of the group made suggestions to each other: “You need more height,” or “Try to rotate faster.” Just a few feet to this group’s right, four young men and two women were practicing their wall runs up a shorter wall, which stood about five feet high. They were beginners and not yet skilled enough to summit the twelve-foot-high wall at the other end of the grass. One of the more advanced in the group was standing watch over the novices and offering guidance.

Grant Park is a centerpiece of Chicago’s downtown, popular with locals and visitors alike. The area Scales and his group were in, officially known as Sir Georg Soliti Garden, lies on a slight incline in the city’s topography. The tall retaining walls that border the level grass are only waist high on the other side. The variety of wall heights and the presence of shallow staircases, two electrical transformer boxes, and some interesting tree placements were the main reasons the group regularly went there. What might at first glance appear to be a tranquil (if not boring) part of the city was being used as the setting for a surprising array of stunts. Casual observers to the afternoon’s proceedings often seemed confused by the total incongruence of sweaty, shirtless men gambling over the ornate Beaux-Arts structures of the park. At the same time, the men’s grace and moxie were seductive to many onlookers to whom the maneuvers appeared almost effortless—at once impossible and inevitable—like the feeling one has when watching highly trained dancers. Frequently, people passing by stopped to take photos. Sometimes they made requests of the young men: “Can you do that again?” or “Do a flip!” The week before, two police officers stopped to watch the proceedings. They observed from a distance and then continued on their way. Occasionally, passing cops offered words of support to the group.

For his part—on that day, at that moment—Scales was paying little mind to what the other members of his group were up to. And, despite his penchant for attention-seeking from bystanders (especially young women), Scales was not thinking about them either. Standing on the wall, he was staring at a nearly five-foot-high wall opposite him. Between him and that second wall was more than nine feet of open air, below which was a flight of rough, concrete stairs. His thought was to jump the span . . . *maybe*. There could be no running takeoff, and he would have to land perfectly still, lest he fall off the second wall. The distance itself was not a challenge for Scales. Even from a standstill, he could jump much farther. The angle of the jump and sculpting around the walls, though, complicated the maneuver. Seeing Scales lost in contemplation, another member of the group, Nario, walked up and started matter-of-factly, “It looks small.” With his assessment done, Nario climbed up and prepared to jump himself, but once in position he changed his mind. “It’s scary; I’m not gonna lie.” As Scales and Nario deliberated, others started showing interest in what was happening on the wall. Like Nario before them, most seemed to think the jump was rather basic. In turn, Nario and Scales invited any taker to come and do the jump first. A few clambered up the first wall to get a better perspective on what would be required. Despite its seeming simplicity from the ground, everyone but Scales eventually descended without trying to make it to the next wall.

After a great deal of contemplation, Scales convinced himself he could make it. As members of the group were fond of asserting, jumping ten feet is jumping ten feet. It should not matter if you are on the ground hopping cracks in the sidewalk or fifty feet in the air, leaping between two buildings. The height, the angles, the look of the walls—these did not make the physics of the jump harder. They merely produced an illusion of difficulty—creating a mental block. In varied iterations, Scales assured himself that he had done much bigger jumps in the past, that the danger today was not all that serious, and that he had fallen from higher places before without much injury. But still, to hedge his bet, he asked some people to stand below the second wall. They would be ready to catch him if his jump came up short and he started to fall backwards onto the stairs. With his sporters ready and a few more members of the group looking on (including one person filming), Scales steeled himself and—like so many times before—jumped (see figure 1). In the end, just as he had predicted—and despite what had been his almost overwhelming sense of fear—it was not that difficult a



FIG. 1. Scales jumps the span between two walls in Grant Park. Three other traceurs serve as spotters should he fall backward on the landing.

maneuver. Once complete, there was little fanfare. Scales announced it was no big deal to those who had watched, and the tiny, focused gathering around this section of the wall dissipated as group members filtered back into other parts of the park.

This was just one brief moment in the group's afternoon, occupying the attention of a handful of the participants for a few short minutes. Other members of the group were totally unaware it even took place. Aside from piquing the interest of an ethnographer, the episode is notable only in its mundanity. Before and after this moment, nearly all the young men and women present would have similar experiences that day. They would confront physical challenges and face mental struggles—culminating in periods of excitement and bouts of fear.

The physical layout of Grant Park helped allow for these events to happen. Later that same day, construction scaffolding along Jackson Boulevard would facilitate other movements, as would the benches and planting fixtures around Chase Tower. The Chicago Riverwalk had been part of the setting the week before. Months prior it had been the University of Illinois at Chicago campus and countless other sections of downtown. As they

had done for years, on subsequent Saturdays, most members of the group would meet up again. Each week there would be new obstacles, new movements, and new variations of stunts done before. These young people were seeking out opportunities for adventure—what many of them commonly described as finding “challenges to overcome”—in the otherwise prosaic architecture of the city.

The Discipline of Parkour

Nario, Scales, and the rest of the group gallivanting and hurdling through Grant Park that Saturday were engaged in an emerging sport called “parkour.” However, most practitioners shun the notion that the activity is a sport, preferring instead to consider it a discipline or a lifestyle. Parkour originated in France. The term “parkour” itself is a neologism derived from the French word *parcours*, which means route (as in the route of a race). Parkour is sometimes called “freerunning” (or “free running”), the “art of movement,” or the “art of displacement.” Practitioners of parkour often refer to themselves as “traceurs” or “freerunners.” The most common definition traceurs use to explain parkour to outsiders is that it is about finding the quickest, most efficient way to get from point A to point B, using only the human body.

Experiencing Movement

In theory, parkour can be practiced anywhere. In fact, its oldest roots are in training people to move through the wilderness. As a contemporary practice, however, it is very much an urban and suburban phenomenon. In truth, in a human-built world, the most efficient way to get from point A to point B without a vehicle is almost always achieved by simply traveling on a sidewalk or street (with running on these designated pathways being the quickest method). Thus, rhetoric aside, parkour—as it is actually practiced—has very little to do with efficiency, speed or energy conservation. Instead, it is about what many traceurs describe as “experiencing movement.” More specifically, it is about performing an evolving repertoire of stylized athletic maneuvers within urban and suburban environments.

When traceurs practice parkour, they call it “training.” When traceurs hold a parkour event, they fit a “jam.” Jams are mostly informal. While some

tracuers and entrepreneurs are working to formalize the discipline into a regulated sport, parkour is mostly experienced as an activity totally outside the purview of institutional control. It is mainly a discipline of young people learning from each other.¹ Because of the lack of any sort of official hierarchy, parkour jams are usually organized in the loosest of ways. There are moments of intense concentration, like Scales focusing on his jump, but there are also moments of tomfoolery. In fact, not long after Scales made his jump, he was bouncing around on all fours pretending to be an ape in order to distract another traceur from his training. Likewise, while some people might spend hours engrossed in learning a movement, others will spend hours at a jam just talking with their friends. There are, however, frequent efforts by traceurs to give parkour training an aura of seriousness. The very use of the term training underscores this point. It is hard to imagine amateur skateboarders or snowboarders describing their routine activities as training.² While all traceurs train because they enjoy the activity, many traceurs insist that parkour must be more than just fun and games. For them, parkour should be a true discipline—like a martial art. Not surprisingly, given the young age of most practitioners and the lack of formal organization, this is an ideal that even those espousing it rarely live up to.³

Over the last decade, parkour has transformed from an obscure French discipline to a global sport with mainstream appeal. In parkour's popular ascendancy, Madonna hired traceurs to perform in music videos and stage acts, and in what became the famous opening sequence to *Casino Royale*, a villain used parkour to evade James Bond. In fact, the discipline now influences a variety of stunt work for television shows and movies (e.g., *The Bourne Legacy*, *Live Free or Die Hard*, and *Prince of Persia*). MTV produced the reality show *Ultimate Parkour Challenge* in 2009. Two years later, another youth-oriented network, G4, produced a similar parkour-themed televised competition called *Jump City: Seattle*. As interest in the discipline swelled, numerous parkour websites began popping up around the world. How-to videos became widely available online, as did documentaries. Parkour was even spoofed on NBC's hit sitcom *The Office*. While it has yet to (and may never) achieve the mass recognition of sports such as surfing or BMX, parkour's growing popularity has drawn interest from the International Olympic Committee for inclusion in future games.⁴

My goal in this book is to place parkour and its popularity within its relevant sociological context. The discipline shares much in common with other sports and urban subcultures. Skateboarding and graffiti are two of

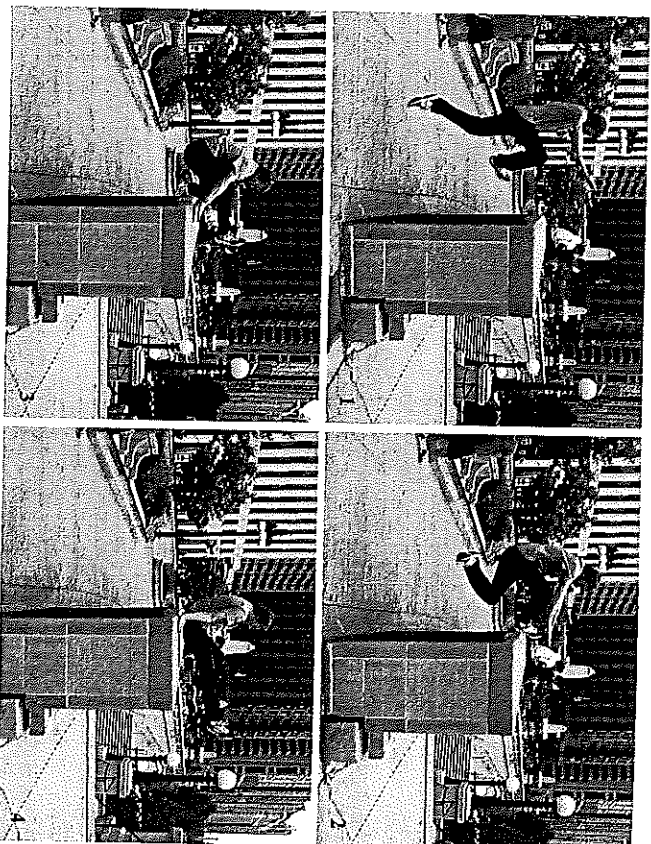


FIG. 2. Dash vault sequence (left to right). Jordan performs a dash vault over a relatively high wall near the stairs leading to Chicago's riverfront. (Photos: Keri Wigninton).

the most obvious examples. Young men dominate both, the activities are risky, and they involve reimagining how the city's built form can be used. Parkour also shares numerous similarities with the various stunts and antics young men have long been both praised and chastised for performing. One thinks of the iconic photographs from the early 1900s with construction workers precariously balancing themselves on the I-beams of unfinished skyscrapers. In sociologist Erving Goffman's terms, parkour is just one of myriad ways for finding *action* in the city.⁵ It is about taking chances and testing one's character. These things said, sports, like all aspects of culture, are products of their time, and parkour represents a particular orientation to urban adventure seeking. Many of the individual components might be found elsewhere, but traceurs have given them a new arrangement. This book is an effort to map out this arrangement.

I will explore the ways that traceurs' engagement with new media can help alter their perceptions of local environments. I argue this engagement is best characterized as a dialectic between the virtual and the real world. While traceurs are not unique in this regard, they can help us understand the more general process of globalized ideas and images influencing local

practices. I will also consider how traceurs use the structural resources of the city in performing their urban adventures. In particular, these young men's stunts serve as valued methods for making masculine identity claims.

Finally, I will analyze practitioners' conceptualization of danger and safety. Despite the potential for bodily harm, traceurs view their actions as affirming the self. Instead of positioning parkour as a form of thrill seeking, they insist it demonstrates an ability to successfully assess risks, manage fears, and persevere through challenges. Appreciating this unique constellation of practices is key to understanding why individuals like Scales find purpose in reimagining the architecture that surrounds them. Further still, analyzing parkour in this way enhances our sociological understanding of the city itself. If urbanism is about the lives individuals lead in the city, parkour represents a unique postmodern interpretation of that way of life.

About the Traceurs

As described above, most of the practitioners I came to know were young men. Their experience ranged from just a few hours of parkour practice to over a decade of training. The majority were white, but a significant portion of the social world comprised African-Americans, Asians, and Latinos. Class backgrounds were quite varied, but many seemingly came from middle-class families. Reflecting their class and racial diversity, members of the Chicago parkour community lived in a wide range of locations—from impoverished inner-city neighborhoods to posh suburbs. Most practitioners were in their late teens to early twenties, although some were considerably younger and a few much older. Many traceurs I encountered were in high school (or even lower grades), while some were attending institutions of high learning from city colleges to state universities to prestigious private institutions. For those working full time, occupations were similarly diverse, ranging from low-wage service workers to white-collar professionals. Young or old, working or middle class, white or minority, most people at jams had less than two years of experience in parkour.

While parkour involves an astounding degree of coordination and strength, traceurs are usually not archetypal “jocks.” A few traceurs I spoke with had backgrounds in diverse sports, including gymnastics, soccer, track, and even football. Some were involved in alternative physical activities such as rock climbing and mountain biking. Most, though, described their athletic pursuits before parkour as fleeting or non-existent. Nathan

provided a characteristic response: “I’ll play a little ping-pong every now and then with the old man, you know. [. . .] I wasn’t a high school jock or anything—more of a hacky sacker than a football player.” Additionally, in distinct contrast to the stereotype of the extreme sport participant, traceurs tended to be clean-cut and mild mannered.⁶ This was a point of pride for many traceurs, who often contrasted the image they tried to project with what they felt were negative public perceptions of skateboarders.

Aside from talking about parkour, a good portion of these traceurs actually spent a great deal of time discussing stereotypically “nerdy” pastimes. One group of traceurs visiting Chicago for a jam, for instance, repeatedly lamented having left their cards for Magic: The Gathering at home. Magic is a very popular (but also popularly mocked) fantasy trading card game. On another occasion Andy was nonplussed when I failed to recognize the symbol on his hat as a reference to the fantasy video game *The Legend of Zelda*. As such, more than one traceur referred to the community as being filled with “athletic-nerds.”

When I started attending jams, there was not a clearly defined fashion or clothing style associated with parkour, at least locally. Traceurs tended to wear basic athletic attire: sneakers, sweatpants, and t-shirts. While these items were often branded with parkour-specific words or images, the cut of the clothing and the manner they were worn was not distinct. Over the years—following European trends—many Chicago traceurs adopted extremely baggy sweatpants as part of their look. Later, exaggerated drop-crotch sweatpants also became popular (again, following international trends in the parkour community).

For my first foray into the field, I was not sure what to expect, and, as I quickly found out, my preconceived notions about how parkour was practiced were utterly incorrect. Having seen edited footage on YouTube and various documentaries, I assumed traceurs would be running through the city, jumping, rolling, and vaulting over various obstacles as they traveled to some destination. On the contrary, the traceurs I studied very rarely (if ever) used parkour to traverse any sort of appreciable distance. Instead, traceurs would gather in an area well known for having structures amiable to parkour, like a particular section of a public park or a university quad. They would train on the obstacles available at one location and then move to another area—usually just by walking in the typical fashion. Often there was considerable distance between one training area and another. During these walks, traceurs would often engage in horseplay (some of which might



FIG. 3. Traceurs milling about Ogden Plaza in downtown Chicago. On display here is the popularity of baggy sweatpants in the parkour community.

be parkour related), but I never witnessed a concerted effort to have a “flow run” from one section of the city to another.

Studying Lifestyle Sports

Parkour can be considered a lifestyle sport⁷—an athletic endeavor that contrasts with traditional team sports such as baseball, basketball, and football in meaningful ways. First and foremost, while lifestyle sports are often practiced with friends, the activities themselves are individualistic. One person, on one surfboard, rides one wave. There are competitions within many lifestyle sports, but such events are often viewed as antithetical to the spirit of the activity. This is true even among many of the competitors themselves.⁸ Participants feel their actions are about intrinsic enjoyment—not the money or status possibly garnered from winning competitions. Likewise, efforts to institutionalize and regulate lifestyle sports are generally viewed by participants as threatening their intrinsic enjoyment of the activity. In essence, participants in lifestyle sports tend to not consider their activities as sports at all. They see themselves participating in a lifestyle to which a certain athletic endeavor—freestyle skiing, inline skating, mountain biking, etc.—is integral.⁹

Researchers have studied an array of lifestyle sports and analyzed them from multiple angles. The original focus on these activities has tended to conceptualize them as forms of youthful resistance to the status quo. For example, if football espouses a macho, must-win ethos, then skateboarders’ flippancy attitude toward competitions and their outright mockery of event organizers challenges the hegemonic function of traditional team sports.¹⁰ More recent studies, though, have been far more critical of lifestyle sports’ counter-hegemonic potential. After all, these activities tend to be the purview of middle-class whites, and many are male-dominated. Thus, while participants may be undermining certain aspects of the contemporary power structure, their homogeneity inevitably reinforces other aspects.¹¹

Over the last several decades, lifestyle sports have also become big business. Some researchers, therefore, have reoriented academic attention to how previous forms of resistance have been co-opted by corporations. Alternatively, others have stressed that while lifestyle sports involve a great deal of consumption, participants are not just cultural dupes. Their purchases are selective and their understandings of advertisements highly nuanced. In other words, lifestyle sports participants can be understood as simultaneously resisting and embracing corporate influence.¹²

Most of the previous social research into parkour has focused on traceurs’ appropriation of the city, especially as it relates to what Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre calls “abstract space.” For Lefebvre, abstract space results from the conceptions of urban planners and architects. In the neo-liberal city, for example, the environment is cleared out and built up for the generation of profit.¹³ Against abstract space, though, is the lived experience of the individual. As people actually inhabit the material world, there is the potential to challenge the capitalist production of space. As Lefebvre writes, “The user’s space is *lived*—not represented (or conceived).” When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of everyday activities of users is a concrete one, one which is to say, subjective.” In other words, those who design and build urban environments cannot perfectly dictate how its denizens will use them.¹⁴

Organization analyst Maria Daskalaki and her co-authors offer a good example of how previous researchers have analyzed parkour as a subjectively lived production of space. “Parkour is about the inhabitants’ ability to take control of the given space and transform it into a landscape of possibility. [. . .] The philosophy of parkour continues to offer lenses for seeing the corporate spaces differently [. . .]. This is because parkour was

conceptualized not as a reactive movement but as an expressive medium of individuals who view the city as a playground.” Or, as literary theorist Paula Geyh writes, “Parkour effectively remaps urban space, creating a parallel, ‘fluid’ city, a city of movement and free play within and against the city of obstacles and inhibitions.” Likewise, sociologist Michael Atkinson writes, “Free running is a mode of bringing forth or revealing dimensions of the physical and spiritual self through a particular type of urban gymnastics. It destabilizes and disrupts technocapitalist meanings of the city’s physical and social landscape for its practitioners.”¹⁵

The Affective Appropriation of Space

There are two essential points to be made about traceurs’ appropriations of the city. First, parkour is not only happening *at* some place: it is enacted *through* space. This is Lefebvre’s most critical insight into what he describes as the production of space. “Space is at once the result and the cause, producer and producer [. . .]”¹⁶ To this point, architectural historian Iain Borden offers an especially adroit study of skateboarding. He shows that the landscapes of possibility produced by the sport are about more than the reinterpretation of space. Instead, it needs to be understood that skaters’ embodied practices can only happen through an engagement with space. “In terms of skateboarding’s relations to architecture, its production of space is not purely bodily or sensorial; instead, the skater’s body produces its space dialectically with the production of architectural space.” That is, the skater finds lines of movement through the material world, and his body interfaces with the physical structures—“a dynamic intersection of body, board, and terrain.” According to Borden, it is at this interface (and only at this interface) that skaters appropriate space. In other words, spatial structures enable and constrain skaters’ actions.¹⁷

This social dialectic of spatial structures is no small point. Sociological theories are typically aspatial. To the extent that sociologists even consider the material world, they are apt to rely on concepts of place.¹⁸ Space involves abstract geometry (direction, distance, shape, size, and volume). Place, on the other hand, is about the cultural significance attributed to spaces. For example, a researcher may focus on the meaning of Fenway Park to baseball fans or how housing project residents feel about parotizing local businesses catering to the middle class.¹⁹ Alternatively, sociological studies of space involve what psychologist James Gibson calls “affordance”—that is,

what can be done *in* and *with* the physical environment.²⁰ Grant Park’s Sir Georg Solti Garden, for example, affords wall flips and wall runs (see figure 13 in chapter two). The wooden playground in North Side Chicago’s Oz Park affords swinging movements (called “laches”) and “precision jumps” (see figure 7 in chapter one). The city, in this sense, provides structural resources that individuals use agentically, but their agency is only possible because of the structures.

The appropriation of space, of course, helps define and redefine places²¹—a point that will be touched on throughout the book. My theoretical and empirical emphasis, however, is on traceurs’ actions within space itself, not the meanings practitioners attributed to the places in which they train. In other words, in this book, I focus on how traceurs come to reimagine what type of movements the city affords. Admittedly, most sociological inquiries are probably best complemented by thinking about place rather than space. Some social worlds and subcultures, though, need to be analyzed in terms of how they use space—the dialectic between individual agency and physical structures.²² I contend that parkour is one of those social worlds, and I argue that to think sociologically about parkour requires a serious consideration of the activity’s spatial aspects and how they relate to the meaning of the discipline for traceurs.

Second, spatial appropriation must be understood as an embodied practice. To be in the world is a visceral experience.²³ This is highlighted in the opening vignette. At various moments, the traceurs became engrossed in their training. This was necessary because to lose concentration would be to risk personal disaster. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to such engrossment as being in a state of flow. Flow is about becoming totally immersed in embodied practices. It is about losing oneself in an activity.²⁴ In essence, flow involves straddling the threshold between boredom and anxiety. The tasks being performed must perfectly match the abilities a person possesses. To illustrate this point, consider paid labor. Work is generally described as unpleasant precisely because it lacks this balance between skills and requirements. If jobs are too easy or mindless, they feel boring; when jobs are too challenging or stressful, they create anxiety. The same holds true for games. Games are fun when talents are stretched to the very limit, but not beyond it. At this threshold, an individual’s attention is focused in the moment and—unlike normal, reflexive thought—*only* in the moment.

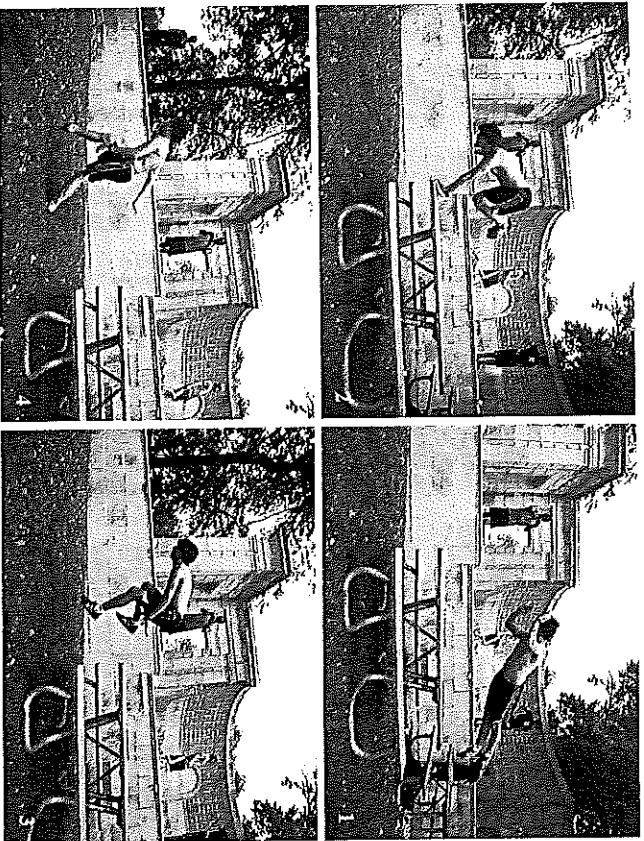


FIG. 4. Kong vault sequence (right to left). Seth performs a long kong vault over a picnic table in Cummings Square in the suburb of River Forest, Illinois.

In thinking about flow, we must continue to be attentive to the fact that such experiences can only happen through an engagement with the physical spaces in which they are embedded. Thus, it is traceurs' appropriations of space that generate flow. Further, it is in seeking out the flow experience that they appropriate space. In geographer Stephen Saville's study of parkour, for instance, he notes that "through intimate play with place, the practice of parkour is a good example of how people can explore, refine and even enjoy fearful emotions. They become a key through which place can be engaged." For Saville, those fearful but enjoyable emotions are about flow.³³ This can be seen in the description of Scales as he readied himself for his jump. He was scared of the jump, but immersing himself in the challenge was viewed as a positive experience. And, this was only possible in and through his interface with the physical structures of the city. Taken together, this is what I call the affective appropriation of space—the intersection of embodied practices and lived experience within the material world.³⁴

Postmodernity and the Neoliberal City

Inherent in all sociological studies of sport is the assumption that play and games have a significance that extends beyond the activities themselves. As Norbert Elias writes, "[S]tudies of sport which are not studies of society are studies out of context." His point is that whatever a person does, it must be understood as one part of the ongoing process that constitutes society.³⁵ This does not mean that any practice or outcome is the inevitable result of a given set of social conditions, but it does mean that certain social conditions make certain practices or outcomes possible.

In this book, I argue that parkour is quintessentially postmodern. Following geographer David Harvey, I understand postmodernity as a particular cultural form bound to changes in the global flow of capital.³⁶ This involves a general incredulosity toward meta-narratives, an increasing exposure to mediate images, and the breakdown of stable identities. Further, neoliberal discourse is hegemonic within postmodernity.³⁷ Whether this cultural condition really represents something that is *postmodern* or whether it is better conceptualized as part of a new phase of modernity is less relevant for my argument than the fact that the term "postmodernity" has come to encapsulate these cultural changes.³⁸

Ultimately, the sociological study of parkour enhances our understanding of the city within the conditions of postmodernity. New media, by which I mean the coupling of the Internet with personal computers, smartphones, and social networking tools, have changed how individuals experience reality. Sociologist Jean Baudrillard goes so far as to argue that reality itself has been supplanted by simulacra.³⁹ To speak of postmodern culture, therefore, is to speak of the proliferation of new media in everyday social life. As I will show, traceurs are engaged with the real world, but their engagement cannot be separated from what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls "global ethnoscapings"—the worldwide circulation of ideas and images.⁴⁰ These mediated forms are intertwined with traceurs' affective appropriations of the city.

The self in postmodern culture is predicated on performance. Identity is no longer understood as something purely ascribed by one's characteristics; it is something that must be individually developed. To quote philosopher Judith Butler (1990), "[A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body.

[...] They] are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means.”³⁵ The urban adventures of traceurs exemplify such performances. Parkour allows for tests of character that sociologist Michael Schwalbe refers to as “manhood acts.”³⁴ In other words, traceurs’ affective appropriations of space are a way for young males to lay claim to the valued identity of manhood within the ever-shifting culture of postmodernity.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes neoliberalism as a “Darwinian world” that substitutes public trust in the democratic state with faith in the free market. Individuals are charged with being personally responsible for their physical well-being and financial success. As political scientist Earl Gammon writes, “Unlike Fordist man, who conceived welfare as a right, neoliberal man saw reciprocal relations with greater society as incompatible with the new vision of selfhood.”³⁵ Postmodernity is the culture of neoliberal man, and risk taking in parkour must be understood within this context. Far from seeing themselves as daredevils, traceurs see themselves as risk assessors who manage their fear and avoid potential harm. In contrast to pushing the edge of survival—à la sociologist Stephen Lyng’s lauded concept of “edgework”³⁶—traceurs’ actions can better be conceptualized as attempting to make a *hedge* on their bets. Such actions are symbolic, and they affirm a self prepared to live in the neoliberal city, which shifts collective risks onto the individual.³⁷

Overview of the Book

Parkour and the City is the product of several years of participant-observation among traceurs in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs—which is to say, I spent time with these young men and women as they trained and jammed, and, occasionally, I practiced parkour maneuvers with them. I also spent a lot of time talking with traceurs and asking them questions about their discipline. More information on my qualitative approach to researching parkour can be found in appendix A. We have already come across many parkour terms in the course of this introduction. Moving forward with the book, though, readers may find it helpful to consult appendix B. There I provide a quick and easy reference for some common words in the social world and how I am using them.

My argument in this book is broken into four substantive chapters. In chapter one can be found a history of the discipline and efforts to develop it into a commercialized, regulated sport. This broader overview is interspersed with specific connections to the past and present of the Chicago parkour community. Chapter two links simulacra and global ethnoscapes to the situated, embodied practices of traceurs. I emphasize how the virtual worlds of the discipline (made possible through new media) are dialectically connected to engagement with the tangible, real world of the city. Chapter three shows parkour as a form of urban adventure, allowing for performances of manhood acts. This chapter highlights the structural resources of the city and the ways traceurs utilize them in masculine identity construction. Chapter four contains an analysis of the dangers of parkour in relationship to the traceurs’ conceptions of safety. In symbolically prioritizing risk assessment over thrill seeking, I posit the discipline as a form of “hedge work”—resonating with the rhetoric of personal responsibility abounding in the neoliberal city.

certification. A key form of legitimacy, this certification is a source of revenue for organizations.

Ultimately, this commercialization and sportization helps to shape the larger social world of parkour. Today, would-be traceurs might first be exposed to parkour through an advertisement or film clip. Their first actual training experience may come in the form of a paid class at a purpose-built gym. Further, beginners and experienced traceurs alike are apt to read blog and Facebook posts from organizations such as American Parkour, Apex Movement, Parkour Generations, and Tempest Freerunning. In fact, gyms, organizations, and their affiliated performance teams constitute a significant portion of the parkour social world's new media presence.

At the same time, the daily practices of most traceurs are generally far removed from such routinization. Organizations like PKGen (or UF before it) influence the content and character of the global parkour community, but they do not unilaterally define it. In practice, most traceurs may borrow from these organizations' ideas and imagery, but they mix them together with other ideas and images, then alter everything to fit the particularities of the dynamics within their own social context. The meaning of parkour, therefore, must be understood as embedded within seemingly disjointed perspectives and practices that are experienced in nuanced ways. In this chapter, for example, we have seen how the instrumental fitness goals of Georges Hébert were revised by a group of teenagers in the banlieues as a form of playful, stylized spatial appropriation. Seeking to capitalize on a new form of urban chic, advertisers and filmmakers took interest in the activity during the early 2000s. Media attention helped the discipline spread beyond France. Would-be traceurs in America and Britain wanted to emulate what they saw the French originators perform, but in the process the discipline changed. Some of these changes were the result of translation problems (e.g., confusion over parkour versus freerunning), but the activity mainly evolved as traceurs applied and practiced the discipline within a changing social context. In the next chapter, we will explore how the virtual worlds made possible through new media intertwine with real world practices—transforming the way local environments are conceptualized.

2 New Prisms of the Possible

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Sherry Turkle, a renowned professor who studies human-computer relationships, famously characterizes the integration of new media within society as living life “on the screen.” Sociologist Manuel Castells refers to this as a culture of “real virtuality.” Both theorists emphasize the ways communication and information technologies are changing sociality.¹ The Internet, portable electronics, and social networking tools facilitate the rapid transmission of ideas and images from around the world and connect individuals separated by vast physical distances.² As Arjun Appadurai writes, “[Ordinary life] no longer occurs within a relatively bounded set of thinkable postures but is always skidding and taking off, powered by the imagined vistas of mass-mediated master narratives.”³ This results in researchers observing local activities that are not necessarily local products. Instead, with the advancement and proliferation of new media, daily practices are increasingly manifestations of a hybrid, globalized culture. This unbounding of thinkable postures is what Appadurai calls global ethnoscares. To put it simply, the fantasies of on-screen life can result in reimagining what is actually possible offscreen.⁴