Parkour, Masculinity, and the City

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Parkour is a new, and increasingly popular, sport in which individuals athletically and artistically negotiate obstacles found in the urban environment. In this article, I position parkour as a performance of masculinity involving spatial appropriation. Through ethnographic data I show how young men involved in the sport use the city (both the built environment and the people within it) as a structural resource for the construction and maintenance of gender identities. The focus of my research highlights the performance of gender as a spatialized process.

Le parkour est un nouveau sport qui gagne rapidement en popularité et dans lequel des individus négocient des obstacles de leur environnement urbain tant athlé-tiquement qu’artistiquement. Dans cet article, je positionne le parkour comme une performance de la masculinité impliquant une appropriation spatiale. Je montre grâce à des données ethnographiques comment de jeunes hommes engagés dans ce sport utilisent la ville (à la fois l’environnement construit et les gens qui s’y trouvent) en tant que ressource structurale pour la construction et le maintien d’identités de genre. Le focus de ma recherche met en évidence la performance du genre comme processus se déroulant dans l’espace.

Grant Park

On most Saturday afternoons, the northwest section of Grant Park in Chicago comes alive with people climbing up concrete walls, dashing across sidewalks, flipping through the air, and vaulting over various structures. The scene is analogous to a disorganized gymnastics routine—performed on the gritty, hard, and sharp surfaces of the city. It also looks a bit like skateboarding, but the tricks do not involve boards. It might even look like martial artists practicing methods for escape. Using athletic prowess and artistic creativity, these urban acrobats negotiate their way around, over, and through the benches, ledges, stairs, and walls that contour Grant Park. They call their activity parkour—borrowed from the French word parcours (which means “route”). They refer to themselves as traceurs (as in someone who traces a route).1 Some traceurs might occasionally refer to their activity as a sport, but most

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prefer the term “discipline” (denoting, as many traceurs told me, that they are not in competition, but in a state of continual learning).

As one watches the traceurs bound and leap through Grant Park, two things are readily apparent. First and foremost, through parkour, an otherwise safe and quotidian environment is transformed into a site for danger and daring. The more skilled traceurs, for example, are fond of vaulting over a three-foot wall, which results in a 10-foot plummet to the grass below. To take the impact of such a drop without injury, the traceurs distribute the force of the landing with a well-rehearsed roll. The traceurs also jump across cavernous gaps (e.g., the walls surrounding a deep stairwell), where a bad takeoff could easily result in a harrowing fall onto concrete. Second, the traceurs are almost all young men. There are usually a few young women present, but they are unlikely to be doing the fast, powerful, and risky stunts that routinely capture the attention of onlookers and the praise of the other traceurs.

There is a surprising amount of class and racial diversity within the Chicago parkour community, and this is reflected in the Saturday afternoons at Grant Park. There are white college students who live in the city’s nicer areas. Working and middle class suburban high schoolers (Asian, Latino, and white) take the train in for the day. African-Americans from the notorious south side neighborhoods, as well as youths from the Mexican sections of the city, also take part. Age and gender, though, are much more homogeneous. These young men do not intentionally exclude women. In fact, most male traceurs seem flummoxed by the dearth of females within the community (see Fine 2005). Regardless of traceurs’ intentions, parkour (like other high-risk alternative sports) is a distinctly masculinized activity. Following Macdonald’s (2001) approach to analyzing the graffiti subculture (another activity which is disproportionately male), in this article I seek to uncover why young men practice parkour.

I argue that parkour allows for the accomplishment of masculinity. Specifically, I highlight how the discipline’s gender performances use the urban environment. Which is to say, by practicing parkour, traceurs are not only *doing* gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987); they are *spatializing* gender. I argue that traceurs appropriate their surroundings with performances of masculinity. Thus, I argue that their gendered sporting practices happen in and through physical space (van Ingen, 2003; also see Caudwell, 2011; Stoddart, 2010; Waitt & Warren, 2008). These practices produce what geographers refer to as a gendered sense of place (e.g., Curtin & Linehan, 2002; Jackson, 1991; Miles, 1997). Ultimately, by studying the spatial dynamics of parkour’s gendered practices, social researchers gain a better understanding of how inequalities are perpetuated (often unintentionally) within sporting worlds. In other words, the material environment is an integral aspect of sociological analysis (Kidder, 2011), and studying the ways traceurs spatialize gender provides an empirical example of this theoretical issue.

### Theoretical Background

#### Alternative Sports and Masculinity

Sociologists have long studied the role of sports in the construction of gender identities (e.g., Beisser, 1964; Fasteau, 1974; Sabo, 1980) and the perpetuation
of gender inequalities (e.g., Boslooper & Hayes, 1973; Hoch, 1972; Messner, 1988). Traditional, competitive team sports like baseball, basketball, football, and hockey have been analyzed as homosocial domains privileging men. However, over the last several decades, individualistic and noncompetitive sports have become increasingly popular—skateboarding, snowboarding, and surfing are the archetypical examples.

Researchers have a plethora of labels for these new sports: adventure sports (Breivik, 2010), alternative sports (Rinehart, 2000), lifestyle sports (Wheaton, 2004), post-sports (Pronger, 1998), and whiz sports (Midol & Broyer, 1995). While there are important distinctions between these labels and the demographic characteristics of the people participating in them (e.g., mountaineers and skydivers are very different from BMX riders and skateboarders), these new sports are generally understood to (or, at least, in their early years had the potential to) represent some sort of challenge to the mainstream sporting establishment. Which is to say, they are not activities that can be easily reconciled with the high school and collegiate models of coaching and team-based competition. These alternative sports are not only individualistic, but also tend to be premised on the intrinsic enjoyment of the activity itself (not competition), nonaggressive (but generally high-risk), and organized at the grassroots level (Wheaton, 2004, 2010).

Because alternative sports are understood as a challenge to typical jock stereotypes, there has often been an assumption (on the part of participants and researchers alike) that these new sporting worlds would be free from the gender hierarchies of traditional, male-dominated sports. Alas, this has not been the case. While alternative sports do not mirror the hyper-masculinity valorized on the playing field or the codified sex segregation of most organized competitive sports, alternative sports tend to be male-dominated, and their sporting identities are still predicated on enduring pain and embracing risk (e.g., Atkinson, 2008; Evers, 2004; Kay & LaBerge, 2004; Kusz, 2003; Laurendeau, 2008; Robinson, 2008; Simon, 2002; Waitt & Warren, 2008). These issues have been at the forefront of studies attempting to understand women’s experiences in alternative sporting worlds. Thorpe (2010), for example, shows that despite a fluidity of gender boundaries within the snowboarding subculture, the everyday practices on the slopes tend to marginalize women (as well as many men) who fail to perform challenging and dangerous maneuvers (also see Anderson, 1999). Similarly, Atencio, Beal, & Wilson (2009) argue that street-style skateboarding places a heavy emphasis on physical risk and the potential for injury. As a consequence, female skaters often feel excluded from this domain (also see Beal, 1996, Donnelly, 2008; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2008; Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly, 2004). Combining their research on skydiving and snowboarding, Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) detail the difficulties faced by women in these sports and the differing tactics available for asserting their competencies in them. While highlighting the dynamic nature of gender relations (and the potential for structural change), Laurdeaneau and Sharara’s analysis emphasizes the feelings of otherness often experienced by women in these sports (also see Wheaton, 2002). As such, even when women participate in alternative sports, they still tend to be dominated by men. Thus, these alternative sporting practices remain deeply intertwined with men’s understandings of themselves as men and their presentation of self to others (Kusz, 2004).
Gendered Space and Sports

Recently, sociologists of sport have started to address how gender is related to meanings of places and uses of spaces (van Ingen, 2003). Several recent examples include Caudwell’s (2011) analysis of UK football stadiums as a space of homophobic practice (also see Vertinsky, 2004). Caudwell also details efforts to construct spatial narratives that allow for more egalitarian practices within the sport. Stoddart (2010) shows how skiers view the sublime of the backcountry as a space for masculine risk-taking. He contrasts this with the gender-neutral attributions given to ski resorts. In the world of surfing, Waitt and Warren (2008) argue that men value the sport as a set of embodied practices involving physical danger and excitement, and these sensual aspects are realized in specific surfing locales. That is, surfers come to identify themselves as “locals” at particular beaches, and this identification has significance in relationship to male friends, as well as men from other places (also see Evers, 2009). Alternatively, Leeds Craig and Liberti (2007) detail how the physical setting of a gym can help de-masculinize the workout environment by orienting the equipment to allow for conversations during exercise and focus users’ attention onto likeminded (i.e., feminine) others.

While there is a growing (but still small) body of literature on the connections between gender, space, and sports, the existing studies of parkour have not focused on its masculine orientation. Geyh (2006), for example, situates parkour as a creative resistance to the regimentation of urban life. Instead of conforming to the assumptions and desires of urban planners, traceurs remap the flow of movement in the city. Bavinton (2007) echoes the idea of resistance in his analysis of parkour. “[…] Traceurs are using urban spaces in ways other than those that they have been designed for, and in ways other than those that have been normalized as acceptable social behaviors” (p. 407). Similarly, Daskalaski, Stara, and Imas (2008) describe parkour as a form of “radical inhabitation” (p. 51). In Saville’s (2008) analysis of parkour, he emphasizes the positive (and transformative) aspects of fear. Specifically, traceurs learn to see their environment in terms of fear (e.g., being scared to jump a gap between two rooftops), and they strive to overcome these fears. Like Geyh, Bavinton, and Daskalaski et al., Atkinson (2009), argues that parkour is a lived critique of urban design—what he calls poiesis. Mould (2009) also follows this tact by positioning parkour as a method for rediscovery of the urban environment. However, in ignoring the way masculinity both produces and is produced by the “radical inhabitation” of urban spaces, researchers have failed to analyze the ways in which parkour may marginalize certain people, even while offering transgressive potential to others (see Macdonald, 2001).

In many respects, the previous analyses of parkour follow a theme common in writings about skateboarders’ use of the urban environment. While skating is frequently critiqued for its exclusionary nature, researchers interested in spatial practices emphasize the ways skaters appropriate the commercialized and overly routinized spaces of the city for purposes of excitement and joy—against the cold rationality of profit (Borden 2001; Irvine & Taysom, 1998; Vivoni, 2009; also see Peralta, 2001). In the analysis that follows, I want to move beyond a dualistic focus on either masculinity or spatiality in urban sports. In its stead, I provide an understanding of parkour that simultaneously addresses gender and space as mutually constitutive.
The previous studies of parkour address core aspects of the discipline. Parkour is about redefining urban space; parkour is also about experiencing and conquering fear. And, the traceur’s radical inhabitations are as thrilling as they are creative. However, these aspects of parkour should not be separated from the performance of masculinity. As I will show, what the traceur’s activities demonstrate (perhaps more than anything else) is that individuals can appropriate urban space in efforts to bolster and shape their gender identities. In the end, the analysis I provide underscores the importance of including physical space within the analysis of sports and gender performance (and vice versa).

**Masculine Appropriations of Space**

My argument is based on a synthesis of two previously disparate theoretical concepts. First are manhood acts (Schwalbe, 2005). From this perspective, masculinity is not something inherent or innate in the individual, nor is masculinity the sole province of males (Dozier, 2005; Pascoe, 2007; Sedgwick, 1995). Manhood is something that must be asserted (and reasserted) through one’s actions (Butler, 1990). In other words, by behaving in certain ways (which are historically situated within a given culture) individuals can make claims to “appropriate” gender identities. These identities are neither static nor totalizing; they must be continually renegotiated. By positioning my analysis of gender in terms of manhood acts, I am interested in how traceurs’ actions serve as a particular type of gendered performance.

Researchers of masculinity have argued that in contemporary Western societies, manhood acts are about performances that denote control and power over oneself and one’s environment (e.g., Connell, 2000; Johnson, 2005; Kimmel, 2005). Thus, I am interested in how parkour allows men to assert themselves as individuals with control and power, even if these men are unlikely to meet (or aspire to) the standards of “hegemonic” masculinity (see Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1995). Not all men pursue masculinity in the same ways or with the same goals in mind (Connell, 2000), but most men engage in some form of manhood acts to distinguish themselves as “masculine” and separate from women. Put simply, parkour affords males the opportunity to act in ways that can be interpreted (by themselves and others) as manly (see Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Second, building from Giddens’ (1979, 1984) theory of structuration, is the appropriation of physical space. Space is the abstract and asocial aspects of the material environment—direction, distance, shape, size, and volume (Gieryn, 2000). The sociological study of space is analytically distinct from the study of place. The latter is focused on the signification of specific locations; the former is interested in the ways physical structures are incorporated into social action. In other words, the material world is a structure and (just like a social structure) it influences (in various ways) the perpetuation of social worlds (Gieryn, 2002; Lefebvre, 1976 [1991]; Pred, 1986; Soja, 1980 [1989]). From this perspective, the material world is not something in the background of human action, but is an essential aspect of that action. Like social structures, therefore, physical structures constrain and enable agency.

In my previous research, for example, I explain how bicycle messengers are able to make their time-sensitive deliveries by weaving in and out of snarled automobile traffic (see Kidder 2011). Traffic regulations and other users of the road
are constraints on their action, but (at the very same time) the conditions of urban gridlock allow messengers to creatively (and quickly) navigate through the city. In other words, bike messengers are only useful to businesses because the structural conditions of the city make delivery by motor vehicle slow and costly, but these same conditions allow a daring cyclist to become the fastest person in traffic by hopping onto sidewalks, riding the wrong way down one-way streets, and running red lights. In studying parkour, I am interested in how traceurs appropriate space in the course of performing manhood acts. That is, how does the city become a structural resource for traceurs and what do the traceurs’ uses of these resources tell us about masculinity and the physical world?

By synthesizing manhood acts and spatial appropriation, I am bringing to the conceptual forefront the dialectical connection between the urban environment and gender enactment. In other words, the city is not simply a stage on which people perform their gender. The city is a structural resource used within performances of gender. Through parkour, men co-construct an embodied masculinity characterized by risk-taking and controlling physical space. To this end, I analyze parkour as a particular way in which young men transform the urban environment into a structural resource for asserting masculine gender identities. As previous researchers of alternative urban sports have shown, there are valuable aspects to these practices (i.e., creativity, enjoyment, and resistance). However, in this article, by exploring the gendered nature of these performances, I want to highlight these spatial practices’ (unintentional and unfortunately) exclusionary results. That is, traceurs—as they climb, run, and vault through places like Grant Park—are transforming the city (albeit only temporarily) into masculinized spaces—environments for taking physical risks as proof of their manhood.

In the analysis that follows, my argument is broken into two parts. First, I posit parkour as a masculine social world. I do this by highlighting the ways traceurs symbolically emphasize the male body in action and the importance of corporeal risk-taking. Second, I situate the masculine performances of parkour within the urban environment. The city’s built form provides the opportunities for doing parkour, and the city’s inhabitants provide a valuable audience for appraising the traceur’s risky stunts. It is only by analyzing all of these aspects together that researchers can adequately understand the sociological implications of parkour. And, through such an understanding we gain new insights into gender as a spatialized process.

Data and Method

The data for this article derives from a year and a half of semiregular participant-observation among traceurs in the greater Chicagoland area. During this time, I attended various parkour events—from “training sessions” with just a few other people to multiday “jams” with well over a hundred people. As described above, the traceurs at my field site were almost all male. Asians, blacks, Latinos, and whites were all regular participants, but whites (most seemingly from middle class backgrounds) were the majority. Traceurs (with only a few exceptions) were in their late teens to early 20s. Occasionally, young children were at a jam, and I met a few traceurs in their late 20s and early 30s. Beyond participant-observation
(and the informal interviews that always accompany such engagement), I formally interviewed 22 traceurs. These individuals ranged in experience from just a few weeks of parkour training to over a decade. Most had been involved in parkour for less than two years.

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. The stated goal of parkour (echoed throughout various media accounts, as well as by the traceurs themselves) is efficient and quick movements through one’s surroundings. As it is actually practiced, however, parkour is not about speedy travel or the economy of motion. It is about athletically and artistically making use of the cityscape—almost always in a way that poses the risk of bodily harm. Having seen edited footage on YouTube and watched the documentaries _Jump London_ (Christie, 2003) and _Jump Britain_ (Christie, 2005) I assumed traceurs would be running through the city, jumping, rolling, and vaulting over various obstacles as they traveled to some destination. To the contrary, much like skateboarders, the traceurs I studied very rarely (if ever) used parkour to traverse any sort of appreciable distance. Instead, traceurs would gather in a certain area (e.g., one section of a public park or a university quad) and “train” on the obstacles there (e.g., practicing leaps from one ledge to another or scaling a wall). After a while, people would move to another area—usually just by walking (in the typical fashion). Often there is considerable distance between one training area and another. During these walks, traceurs would often engage in horseplay (some of which might be parkour related), but I never witnessed a concerted effort to have a “flow run” from one section of the city to another.

To be at a parkour jam is to be in a chaotic swirl of activity. Jams are held in areas that have multiple sections conducive to parkour training. Taken as a whole, traceurs do not have a unified focus, but break off into numerous groups based on friendships and varied interests for training. Some people will be vaulting in one section, other people will be jumping or swinging from another section. The result is an erratic fluidity of people and training goals as the jam progresses. One of the interesting results of this general commotion is that no one (not even the experienced traceur) knows where it is possible to sit or stand without being in someone’s way (which is an added stress for the ethnographer attempting to observe).

For my first several months of fieldwork, I actively participated in parkour jamming and training. Occasionally, traceurs train in gymnastics gyms, and in these (relatively) safe environments I wholeheartedly practiced jumps and vaults. My training outside the gym, though, was far more reserved. I would do conditioning and warm-up exercises with the traceurs and attempt small jumps and low-level wall climbing. As a college professor in his mid-30s with (at best) average physical coordination and a general aversion to bodily injury, I found most parkour practices too anxiety-producing and stressful to be enjoyed. I also have no doubt that if I trained harder in parkour, I would have done little more than injure myself. Nevertheless, my participation in parkour practice—as clumsy and unimpressive as it might have been—facilitated the building of rapport. Once I became a familiar fixture at parkour events, I worked to establish myself within the community as an interested outsider (e.g., telling people I planned to write about parkour and the people who practice it).
I entered the field curious as to the traceurs’ use of physical space (see Kidder 2012). My interest in parkour as a manhood act emerged from the ground up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the process of coding my field notes and interview transcripts, the importance of performance emerged as a pattern in relationship to control, power, risk-taking, and masculine identity. These initial codes were then organized into conceptually relevant categories and coded more selectively (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), allowing for the present analysis of how traceurs appropriate urban space through manhood acts.

Following the approach advocated by Duneier (1999), I have not uniformly used pseudonyms in my writing. Instead, I gave my respondents the option of using their real names, or, in many cases, the nicknames for which they are known within the parkour community. Because most of the traceurs in my study are public figures in the parkour community, and very little (if any) of this research is of a sensitive nature to the people in it, I believe this is a more honest and open method for reporting my findings. In cases where I could not get in touch with former respondents, I erred on the side of caution and used fictional pseudonyms.

Much of my data are derived from interactions in the field (without the aid of a recording device), and, therefore, many of the quotes cannot be replicated verbatim. Following Strauss and his co-researchers (1964), I use standard quotation marks for passages that are verbatim. I use single quotation marks for passages that are nearly verbatim. I use no quotation marks when the writing in my field notes was only able to capture the gist of what I heard.

Before moving on to the analysis, it should be noted that in certain situations, traceurs drew distinctions between “parkour” and more expressive movements they referred to as “free running.” The preferred term for all generic descriptions of the practices at my field site, however, was parkour. Keeping with its commonly applied usage, I will refer to all activities involving the athletic and artistic negotiation of urban obstacles as “parkour” (also see Archer, 2010). Likewise, I will use the word “community” to describe the social world of parkour (locally, nationally, and internationally). This follows emic use of the term among traceurs. For simplicity, I will also use the term “traceur” as gender neutral, but many within the parkour community preferred to distinguish between traceur (male) and traceuse (female). Conversely, because I am writing almost exclusively about men in this article, my use of male pronouns is intentional.

A Masculine Social World

Not Your Typical Jocks
Like most alternative sports, the difference between parkour and traditional competitive teams sports is readily apparent. And, like skateboarders (see Beal, 1996), this difference is important for many traceurs (also see Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011). As Angel, a young male traceur, told me, “You can just be yourself and not have anyone tell you what’s right or wrong. […] In different sports, like basketball [and] baseball, there [are] rules you have to follow. Parkour is just free; do what you want.” Some traceurs have athletic backgrounds (e.g., formal gymnastics training), but many others recall only passing interest in sports—often mentioning activities more akin to youthful play than competitive games. For example, Upz told me, “I
love running around parks. I never did any team sports; [I] never did anything like that. I played hacky sack for a while, that’s about it.” Likewise, Nathan explained, “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.” Summing such statements up, Grant referred to traceurs as “athleti-nerds.” By this he meant that many people involved with parkour are not into traditional sports and they are certainly not stereotypical “athletes.”

In stark contrast to what might be expected of a nearly all-male sporting world, talk involving the objectification of women or sexual exploits were strikingly infrequent. This is very different from descriptions of traditional athletes (e.g., Messner, 1993 [1994]), as well as surfers (e.g., Booth, 2004). This is even more surprising given that almost all traceurs are teenagers or in their early 20s (see Pascoe, 2007). When spending time with male traceurs it was also a rarity to hear disparaging remarks about the sincerity or dedication of women in parkour. Again, this can be contrasted with previous research (e.g., Kelly et al., 2008; Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008). And, this is despite the fact that none of the female traceurs in Chicago regularly performed the powerful and risky maneuvers generally revered in parkour (e.g., vaulting into a 10-foot drop as described in the introduction). In fact, the few female traceurs who routinely attended jams were quickly integrated into the social world. Carolyn, for example, often led various training sessions at jams and traveled with other traceurs for jams in other states. These things said, and while traceurs are cognizant (and proud) of the fact they are not stereotypical jocks, male traceurs were still able to use parkour to bolster masculine identities.

**The Male Body in (Symbolic) Action**

The starting point for understanding parkour practices as manhood acts are the ways the male body is symbolically put into action. Traceurs visually and verbally work to show that their bodies are powerful and in control. As I will exemplify, the male body is put into symbolic action visually by training without shirts. Verbally, the male body is put into symbolic action by heroic “what-if” scenarios that fill up a great deal of parkour talk.

Unless temperatures are extremely cold, at some point during a Chicago jam (often right at the start) someone will call out that it is “shirtless o’clock.” Of course, parkour is a strenuous activity and in the heat of summer there are pragmatic reasons to train without a shirt, but these reasons are far less compelling when it is 55 degrees. Irrespective of the physiology behind body temperature regulation, hot or cold, the call for shirtless o’clock is a chance for the young men with muscular and toned physiques to put their bodies on display. It is also a chance to sort out the individuals too embarrassed or insecure to take part in the practice, and (just as there are men eager to take their shirts off) I observed numerous traceurs mortified by the prospect of showing their bodies.

Training in parkour, therefore, is a chance to display the male body at work (see Wacquant, 2004), but not everyone can take equal part in the display. It is those with muscles and veins rippling just beneath their skin who most relish the opportunity for shirtless o’clock. Robinson (2008) makes a similar point about rock climbers—“it is then clearly apparent who has the biggest muscles or broadest shoulders or who is overweight, or not” (p. 44; also see Braun, 2003). Further,
because parkour is generally practiced in places not associated with exercise or sunbathing, the shirtless male body seems incongruous with the surroundings. Stated another way, the shirtless traceur emphasizes his masculinity by inserting his physique in an environment filled with otherwise clothed men and women (who are not training in parkour). Thus, as the traceur appropriates the urban environment through parkour, he is calling attention to the fact that (in contrast to the clothed others) he has the muscle power to control his surroundings. Unlike the clothed non-traceurs following the dictates of urban design, the traceur is using his body to assert his agency over the built form.

Beyond the display of the male physique, the traceur’s body is put into symbolic action in the discursive explanations for why the young men were drawn to parkour in the first place. Talk in parkour is filled with “what-if” scenarios, for which the traceur believes he is uniquely trained to survive. To this end, traceurs routinely referred to heroic needs for evading capture or reaching someone in distress. In explaining the importance of training in parkour, for example, Phil told me, “[I]f you’re in a situation where you’re being chased by somebody, or you’re chasing somebody, you can’t have that split second where you think […]. You’ve just got to go all out for it and commit […].” Likewise, Strafe explained, “If you’re at a point where someone is chasing you […] or you [had] to get to somebody, either way, there are going to be serious consequences. […] However, the reasons we train are for the what-ifs. […] You hope there isn’t [a need for it], but you’re prepared for the possibility.” Moreover, traceurs frequently added fictional elements to the urban environment. When jumping a sidewalk it might be fantasized to be ‘made of lava,’ gaps were ‘filled with spikes,’ other people were ‘zombies,’ and etcetera. One common theme (and a rather incongruous concern for people in the Midwest) was parkour’s utility in getting through the rubble left after an earthquake.

Despite the frequency of these sorts of comments, few traceurs gave any indication that parkour had (or ever would) play a practical role in their lives (i.e., chasing someone or trying to reach someone in distress were not going concerns). In fact, Strafe directly followed his claims about training for the what-ifs by stating, “That is sort of secondary on my mind. I didn’t get into parkour because I wanted to be able to evade chasers, but I love the idea of being able to move more efficiently and not be inhibited by barriers.” Traceurs’ appeals to surviving disasters and evading chasers, therefore, should not be understood as literal representations of their motives. Instead, as Strafe disclaimed, they are secondary. The value of these what-if scenarios is that they conform to the heroic (and warrior-esque) narratives integral to the socialization of young men (Jordan & Cowan, 1995; also see Pecora, 1992). Parkour is not really about navigating the rubble left after an earthquake or outmaneuvering attackers, but talking about such scenarios calls forth the image of the powerful, in control male—a man that (like the superhero of comic book fame) can handle whatever the world throws at him.11

Taking Corporeal Risks

For the traceur, the male body in action is about a body at risk for physical harm. All sports involve some risk, but one of the defining features of many alternative sports is the emphasis placed on danger (Le Breton, 2000; Lyng, 2008; Simon, 2002).12 Like skateboarders, traceurs take otherwise safe environments and transform them
into places of risk by appropriating architectural features for new purposes. As Borden (2001) writes, “In the case of the handrail, the skateboarder’s reuse of the handrail—ollieing onto the rail and, balanced perilously on the skateboard deck, sliding down the fulcrum line of the metal bar—targets something to do with safety and turn it into an object of risk” (p. 192). As numerous researchers in masculinity have argued, such risks are distinctly masculine. In other words, these actions are about physical power (i.e., having the speed and strength to do them) and control (i.e., the control of one’s body and control over the environment). Further, the traceur’s risky appropriations are collective achievements—underscoring the performative aspect of their masculinity. That is, parkour is a chance to see and be seen by one’s peers, and, more importantly, strangers.

Voigt’s effort to precision jump a gap outside the north entrance to Millennium Park in downtown Chicago provides a useful example of risk-taking and peer-influence in parkour. Voigt practiced the distance required for the jump at ground level several times and then moved on to a wall. The traceurs gathered around him to watch; no non-traceurs were nearby. Standing on the wall Voigt said, “This is scary.” More than once he explained to the group, ‘I don’t want to do this.’ People just continued to stare up at him. It was apparent to everyone in the group that, as long as he could get over his fear, he could make the jump from the wall. As he stood above us trying to build up his nerve, ZK came up to him and said, ‘Don’t think about it. On the count of three, just jump.’ Voigt replied, ‘I don’t want to do that.’ But, ZK counted down, and Voigt jumped. It lacked commitment, but he did not get hurt. Voigt got back up, hesitated some more, and jumped again—this time almost making it. The whole process was repeated several times until, finally, he stuck it.

Voigt’s jump was unlikely to kill him or even seriously injure him, but it could have easily resulted in broken bones, sprained joints, and torn flesh. Knowing that these injuries are possible (and, more importantly, highly probable for those without the necessary skills) allows parkour maneuvers to serve as a manhood act. That is, Voigt knew he might get hurt (and he willingly expressed those fears), but he still acted. He showed that he could control his fear and use his body to power through the environment in a way other people cannot. In other words, through the control of his body, Voigt risked his body to demonstrate his control over the environment, and, as such, his jump was a manhood act. It distinguishes him from those without the power to control themselves and their surroundings.

While traceurs can and do train on their own, parkour is often a group activity. As ZK’s goading of Voigt shows, traceurs encourage each other to perform potentially dangerous actions. As I was told multiple times, the joy of jamming in parkour is having an opportunity to push and be pushed by other traceurs. For example, when I asked Ando about whether jams increased the risks people took, he replied, “Yeah. Some people feel that sometimes. That’s only natural when there’s pressure from other people, when they’re like, ‘Yeah! Do it.’ [...] It’s good and bad. You can surprise yourself, ‘Wow, I actually could do that’ when the pressures on [...]’ In other words, traceurs provide an audience in which manhood acts can be assessed. As Sync told me, “It’s more like, ‘I can do this. Let’s see if you can do it.’ [...] You push each other a little bit. By yourself it sometimes gets to that point where you kind of lose your own motivation and then when you see someone do something you’ve never seen before then you go to try it, there you go, you’ve got something new to try.” As I will show in the next section, performing dangerous
stunts in view of strangers is even more important. But, seeing and being seen by other traceurs as one acts in a manly way gives parkour part of its meaning. It allows young men to test themselves in relationship to their peers.

As with other sports, traceurs’ position in the social hierarchy is largely the result of the risk they take (e.g., Atencio et al., 2009; Evers, 2004; Kusz, 2003; Laurendeau, 2008; Messner, 1990; Robinson, 2008; Saville, 2008; Vaccaro et al., 2011; Waitt & Warren, 2008). It is by putting their bodies on the line that traceurs make claims to the valued gender identity of manhood. Positing parkour as a masculine performance, however, is only the first step in the argument. The theoretical contribution of my analysis comes from linking the masculinity of parkour to how traceurs make use of the urban environment as a structural resource. Thus, the symbolically charged male body taking risky actions is not performing in a spatial void; he is performing in the city and his performance has consequences for how his environment is understood by traceurs and by the city’s other inhabitants.

Being Men in the City

Transgressions and Exclusions

What makes parkour a particularly valuable social world for the analysis of gender and space is the traceur’s distinct use of the urban environment, especially public places like parks, plazas, and sidewalks. As the previous literature on parkour has shown, these practices are creative, and in their creativity traceurs experience joy and offer resistance to the myopic profiteering of urban development. In this regard, parkour represents a form of transgressive agency within the urban environment. This is why Atkinson (2009) refers to parkour as poieses, and it is a valuable perspective for analyzing any number of social worlds and subcultures that appropriate the city in ways not conceived by others. But, the practices of parkour are highly gendered. As with skateboarding, researchers interested in the spatial practices of parkour have tended to avoid the connection between such actions and gender identity.14 In the remainder of this article, therefore, I want to make a direct connection between the masculine practices of parkour and the traceur’s use of the city. With parkour, we can see a set of practices that are simultaneously transgressive and masculine. That is, at the very same time traceur’s creatively appropriate their environment (i.e., poieses), they also engage in manhood acts which are necessarily exclusionary for those without symbolically charged male bodies and those not interested or unwilling to put their bodies into harm’s way to demonstrate their control and power.

Opportunities in Public Space

Traceurs train in the public spaces of the city. This is the very foundation of parkour. As a discipline, parkour is about continually scanning the environment for new opportunities for movement (i.e., movements for which the environment was not explicitly designed). As one traceur asserted, “You learn to appreciate things in life that most people never see. When somebody walks into a building with a stairway and a bunch of rails around it, they’re walking into a building. They don’t even
see what’s in front of them. When I walk in I’m excited instantly. [...] I instantly see opportunities.

In this search for opportunities, Rich advised beginners to continually look for ways to train in everyday life. ‘If you see a gap, jump it. If you come to a staircase, precision up 40 stairs.’ In a similar fashion, numerous traceurs told me about places they routinely did parkour as they went about their everyday lives. Pirate, a college student, trained as he walked to class (e.g., balancing on handrails or vaulting over walls). Likewise, David told me, “On the way to work there is this wall. [...] Everyday, going in, I’ve [vaulted over it], and I keep going.” Or, as Jaska said, “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.” The point here is not simply that traceurs exercise in public. Runners are also dependent on public space for their fitness. The traceur’s fitness, however, is inexorably connected to risk-taking.

It is by merging fear and fitness that parkour becomes a particularly poignant type of masculine performance. Specifically, people afraid of, incapable of, or uninterested in parkour’s risks do not take part in this refashioning of urban space. The city, therefore, becomes a structural resource for traceurs in asserting a gender identity denied to others. That is, the opportunities the traceurs seek are synonymous with danger, and their transgressions are only available to those willing to take part in manhood acts. The result is a cityscape defined in terms of those with the power to control and those without. The urban environment, thus, is treated as a proving ground for masculine gender identities (in which other identities are subordinated).

**Showing Off to Strangers**

The meaning of the traceur’s spatial appropriations becomes apparent when traceurs discuss what it is that they like about parkour. A frequent refrain is that traceurs can do things other people cannot, and this fact is—because of parkour’s public nature—routinely on display. And, it is the public display of parkour that bring to light the dynamic nature of the city as a structural resource for traceurs. First, as the previous literature has shown, the built environment is necessary for parkour maneuvers; there must be “obstacles” that can be transformed into opportunities. Second, and what the previous literature has not addressed, is that beyond its architecture, the city provides an audience for the performance. Not just an audience of peers—as Evers (2006) and Waitt and Warren (2008) describe with surfing—but an audience of strangers who have the potential to be astounded by the traceur’s finesse in taking risks.15

In attempting to articulate what attracted him to parkour, Jaska, for example, stated that, “[...] there is [...] the element that a normal person could not do this.” Likewise, Sync told me that, “I would have to say my favorite part of doing parkour is the ability to do the things the average person can’t [...]” When I asked Sync to describe the worst part about doing parkour he, again, brought up non-traceurs, “I think the worst part of parkour is the mixed reactions you get from people. [...] You’ll do a wall climb and they’ll just walk by [...]. I think the negative reactions you get are [...] more common [...] ignore you because [they’ve seen you do parkour...].” Sync’s concern about being ignored is particularly notable. He does not want to be left alone in the city, free to do as he chooses. Sync wants to
create a spectacle. Specifically, he wants to be admired (or, at least, acknowledged) for his powerful control over the environment—“the ability to do the things the average person can’t.”

Sync’s desire for attention is by no means rare. Ryan, for example, explained, “A lot of it’s—people won’t admit this, people in parkour don’t like admitting this at all—a lot of it is an ego booster—as bad as that sounds. […] People try to persuade themselves that they don’t do it for anyone else, but I think everyone does at least a little bit.” In other words, showing off one’s skills is an integral part of performing parkour (even if people do not like to admit to it). Just as one’s peers are an important aspect of manhood acts, an audience of strangers (unable to do and perhaps startled by parkour) offers even more confirmation that the traceur possesses the desired qualities of masculinity. For this reason, traceurs routinely time particularly flashy moves to coincide with people walking by. This tends to be done rather surreptitiously (for being too blatant about wanting to show off is frowned upon). The traceur tracks approaching pedestrians out of the corner of his eye, and (subtly) attends to onlookers. The traceur’s goal is to appear as if he was just minding his own business training in parkour, but his maneuvers were just too astounding to not attract an audience. The most successful performance, therefore, should appear to not be a performance at all—which gives the manhood act that much more veracity.

As Sync explained, not having people react is a source of frustration; the performance of masculinity is unrequited. A successful performance results in unambiguous appraisals from onlookers. In the awestruck stares of strangers, the traceur’s claims to control and power within the urban environment are confirmed. As a case in point, while training at the Chicago riverfront, a group of teenagers on the bridge overhead called out, “Do something cool.” The traceurs turned to Steve, who was well known for the flamboyance of his stunts. Living up to the group’s expectation, he performed a flip off a small wall. Soon after, another group of onlookers requested more flips, and Steve complied (over and over again). At one point he did a series of jumps culminating in a flip onto the sidewalk, but instead of stopping he kept running and vaulted over the railing separating the sidewalk from the river below—as if he was going to dive in. But, as he vaulted, he held onto the railing and twisted into a one-handed grab that left him dangling just a few feet above the water. This produced mad screams from the onlookers, thinking he had just plunged into the Chicago River. Thus, in an almost vaudevillian act of risk and skill, Steve’s performance set him apart from the onlookers (as they most certainly could not replicate what he did) and the rest of the traceurs present that day (as they also lacked the ability).

Numerous researchers have connected masculinity with control of the environment. In the sociology of sport this has mainly been in the analysis of activities that take place beyond the confines of the city—for example: rock climbing (Braun, 2003; Robinson, 2008), skiing (Stoddart, 2010), and surfing (Waitt, 2008). In these sports, athletes are controlling untamed nature through their manhood. As a performance, witnesses to their acts are largely confined to their immediate peers (aside for elite athletes whose exploits are given media attention). In parkour, it is not the wilderness being tamed for human use; it is civilization being remapped for danger. Moreover, the traceur gives a performance that is available to a wide audience of
onlookers—peers and strangers alike. His appropriations of the city, therefore, can become part of a larger understanding of what the city means for everyone.

Gendering Public Space

When Jaska and Sync say that they like parkour because other people cannot do it, and when Steve panders to the crowd, they are all helping redefine life in the city. This redefinition is inherently creative, exciting, and transgressive. But, at the exact same time, traceurs are appropriating public space in distinctly masculine ways. Such appropriations are inherently exclusionary. Non-traceurs lack the physical coordination, flexibility, and strength. More importantly, most people (we can assume) chose not to do parkour because they are not interested in taking such risks. Thus, the performance of parkour becomes a spectacle of males asserting that they are men. Crowds are awestruck by the sight of traceurs turning urban forms into dangerous obstacles. Of course, females can (and do) perform parkour, and women (as much as men) seem to enjoy watching traceurs bound through the city. Regardless, parkour is a masculine social world (i.e., it is dominated by men doing activities culturally coded as manly). And, as a masculine social world that is produced and reproduced in public space, the traceurs’ use of that space influences the meaning it has for not only themselves, but also for others. In other words, for performers and audiences alike, ostensibly safe environments are transformed into spaces of masculine identity-making. The public spaces used by traceurs are made meaningful through parkour because of the opportunities they allow for men to prove that they are men. Thus, when Grant Park comes alive Saturday afternoons, it comes alive in a distinctly masculine way. Traceurs and the people passing by come to see it as an environment for active males putting themselves at risk.

Conclusions

Social researchers have long chronicled the connection between sporting practices and masculinity. While in many ways challenging traditional gender norms, alternative sporting practices continue to bolster the perspective of male domination. That is, these sports afford males the opportunity for masculine performances, and the actions of men become the most highly valued within the sport. In recent years, a handful of researchers have brought physical space into their analyses of gender and sport. They have shown that it is not only the sporting practices themselves that are gendered, but also how they are enacted through space and localized in place. It is the appropriation of space in the negotiation of manhood acts that reifies traditional gender assumptions of powerful males in control of their environment and passive females (as well as less masculine males) as lacking such control.

Researchers interested in the spatial aspects of alternative urban sports, however, have been less attentive to the ways gender is realized in place and through space. Instead, analyses of alternative urban sports have tended to analyze practices in terms of transgressive agency—Atencio and his co-researchers (2009) provide a notable exception. From this view, skateboarders and traceurs are challenging the regimented and sterile urban environment by turning architecture for profit into an arena for play. Such practices, however, are gendered, and the sociology of sport
will benefit from theory that can acknowledge the simultaneously transgressive and exclusionary aspects of urban appropriation.

As I have shown throughout this article, in parkour, the city becomes a proving ground for manhood. It becomes a space for symbolically asserting the male body in action as muscular and toned men remove their shirts and discuss the heroic what-if scenarios in which they are specially trained to persevere. More importantly, parkour is about taking corporeal risks in the urban environment. It is through physically dangerous actions that traceurs demonstrate that they have the power to control their fear, and, thus, control the environment by moving through it in ways unintended by urban designers.

In their manhood acts, the city is a structural resource for the traceur. First, the built environment is appropriated for new purposes (as previous researchers on skaters and traceurs have noted). Second, these masculine performances are witnessed by myriad outsiders who occupy the public spaces of the city. Thus, the spatial appropriations of parkour are given extra meaning as strangers provide an audience capable of confirming the value of the masculine performance (i.e., parkour is something that inspires admiration or awe).

Ultimately, my analysis of parkour highlights the interconnection of gender and the physical world—what I’ve called the spatialization of gender. Which is to say, gender is a social construction, but it arises out of actions embedded in the material environment. This perspective is relevant to urban sociology because it underscores how the city (as a structural resource) is part of a process (what Giddens calls structuration) in which gender identities are created and sustained (Grosz, 1998). Likewise, sociologists of sport can also benefit from a more direct theoretical engagement with the places and spaces of competition and play (van Ingen, 2003). In terms of the current study, the urban milieu—which allots traceurs both audiences and obstacles—is essential for parkour and the masculine identity work it allows.

Notes

1. Parkour began in the Paris suburbs of Lisses in the 1980s (Alosi, 2009; Atkinson, 2009; Christie, 2003; Edwardes, 2006)—hence the French origin of many of the terms. Throughout the 1990s parkour’s popularity spread across Europe and by the early 2000s (if not sooner) was also being practiced in the United States.

2. I am using “urban” here to denote human-made spaces designed to accommodate large volumes of people. These can include dense developments within the city core or the more diffuse architecture characteristic of the suburbs—both of which are distinct from rural areas and the wilderness.

3. This is not, however, to say that alternative sports cannot be integrated into mainstream sporting culture, and numerous sociologists of sport have addressed this issue (e.g., Beal, 1995; Rinehart, 1998, 2008; Thorpe, 2006).

4. Kaplan (1979), for example, notes the indignation of male cliff divers toward a highly skilled female competitor. As one cliff diver explained, “This is a death-defying activity. […] The men are taking a great gamble to prove their courage. What would be the point if everyone saw that a woman could do the same?” (p. 178; also see Bryson, 1983; Whitson, 1990).

5. Poiesis—the Greek word from which “poetry” is derived—means to act on the world, to take part in its transformation. Poiesis is, in many respects, analogous to Lefebvre’s (1976 [1991])
lived space (i.e., space that allows for creative action and artistic expression, often at odds with state authority and capitalist interests).

6. Extending these concerns, Gilchrist and Wheaton (2011) question if purpose-built parkour parks will limit traceurs’ ability to creatively rediscover and remap the cityscape.

7. It is useful to note that Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) position manhood acts as an alternative to the preponderance of studies that categorize and differentiate the plethora of masculinities. “[T]he tendency for sociologists to embrace the men-and-(fill in the blank) pattern when studying men and masculinities has, in our view, become limiting. […] Our approach is to avoid the men and pattern and instead look at […] what men do, individually and collectively, such that women as a group are subordinated to men as a group and such that some men are subordinated to others” (p. 278). Pascoe (2007) makes a similar critique in her study of high school masculinity.

8. To expand on this point a bit more, Giddens’ (1979, 1984) theory of structuration helps researchers understand how social relations are anchored in and mediated through physical space (see Friedland & Boden, 1994; Pred, 1986; Soja, 1980 [1989]). In other words, the built environment should be conceptualized as both structured and structuring (also see Bourdieu, 1970 [1990]). That is, humans literally make their surroundings, but, once made, those surroundings limit and enhance future human actions (Gieryn, 2002). Overall, the social relevance of space is summed up in what Soja (1980 [1989]) calls the socio-spatial dialectic. In this dialectic “social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent” (p. 81). Further, it must be understood that space is not a predetermined process; it is only realized in the practice of knowing, strategic agents (see Lefebvre 1976 [1991]). The built environment, therefore, is part of a duality—structure and agency—and cannot be adequately conceived of outside this interplay. Thus, there is an important, but often overlooked, sociological significance to the spatial aspects of social action (see Gieryn, 2000; Kidder, 2011).

9. As an ethnographer I only have data on the Chicago parkour community. Documentaries (e.g., Alosi, 2009; Christie, 2003, 2005; Schröder, 2010), journalistic accounts (e.g., Gerstenzang, 2008; Strait, 2011), television shows (e.g., MTV’s Ultimate Parkour Challenge and G4’s Jump City: Seattle), as well as various cultural products from within the parkour social world (e.g., Jump Magazine, videos posted to YouTube, websites, etc.) provide evidence that Chicago is quite similar other parkour communities throughout North America and Europe.

10. I interviewed 21 males and one female. My female interviewee was one of three females routinely at the jams and training sessions I attended. Women attending larger public events, if they participated more than once, only did so sporadically. And, as mentioned above, they rarely (if ever) took part in the more dangerous or flamboyant stunts. This does not mean that females are not practicing parkour. To the contrary, many of the women that I encountered only periodically in the field appeared to be training regularly on their own or in small groups. This underscores how the public performances of risk-taking (which are the focus of this article) are particularly appealing to male traceurs.

11. This is not to claim that imagining what-if scenarios is strictly the province of men. Women in self-defense classes, for example, may also be motivated by what-if type thinking. In the case of parkour, however, the scenarios are usually outlandish and position the traceur in a specifically heroic role (i.e., a role that is grounded in fictionalized dramas emphasizing masculine ideals of control and power).

12. Alternatively, other researchers have questioned the importance of risk in alternative sports (e.g., Stranger, 2011; West & Allin, 2010). At the discursive level, traceurs are ambivalent about risk. To outsiders they are eager to downplay the dangers involved (also see Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011). But, among themselves, “risk” is a ubiquitous topic for discussion. More importantly, the decisions traceurs make about what urban obstacles they wish to surmount and how they will surmount them leave no doubt that a desire for risk-taking is paramount. In the example of Voigt (see below), had his interest simply been in performing the jump, he could have stayed at ground
level. He moved up to the wall precisely because it increased the risks involved. Williams and Donnelly (1985) make this same point in reference to climbing: “Jeopardy is a constitutive element of climbing. […] Indeed, jeopardy is so important that to remove it from climbing would be to make the activity something else […]” (p. 4).

13. It is important for the reader to note that I am not claiming such risks are inherently male. Obviously, many women take part in “masculine” sports. Further, I am not claiming that risk (as an objective assessment for the potential of death, injury, or pain) is inherently masculine. Childbirth, for example, is incredibly risky and inherently feminine. In modern Western culture, gymnastics is also considered a “feminine” activity for young girls, but it involves an objectively similar set of risks to parkour. The difference, and this is essential, comes from how these risks are enacted and understood (individually and culturally).

14. Atencio, Beal, and Wilson (2009) are a notable exception; their analysis of skateboarding connects gender and spatial issues (also see Thorpe, 2011, ch. 9).

15. Traceurs’ desire for the attention of outsiders contradicts Donnelly and Young’s (1988) conception of identity in sport subcultures. The explanation for this divergence in findings far exceeds the confines of this paper. However, my field notes and interviews leave absolutely no doubt that Chicagoland traceurs are highly attentive to and concerned with the perceptions of non-traceurs (see below). It should be noted that public perceptions of parkour in Chicago do not appear to characterize traceurs as antisocial or deviant (by contrast, see Atkinson & Young, 2008; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011). Security guards occasionally shooed traceurs off some properties, but when compared with the treatment of skateboarders (see Borden, 2001), there is very little regulation of parkour. However, traceurs claimed to experience more harassment from authorities in the suburbs.

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