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"We Are Rolling and Vaulting Tonight": Sport Programs, Urban Regeneration, and the Politics of Parkour in Turin, Italy.

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Abstract:

The following paper aims to contribute to an interdisciplinary field of enquiry addressing the ways in which lifestyle and informal sports can inform policy debate and development at various levels. It will do so by considering the ambivalent position that parkour is taking within policies of urban and community re-branding enacted in Turin, Italy. Parkour in Turin is an increasingly structured discipline often endorsed by events celebrating the city's vibrancy, and by local projects that target youth, and promote social participation. However, this discipline implies also a spontaneous and irreverent engagement with urban spaces that often creates frictions and conflicts between *traceurs* (parkour practitioners) and other actors in relation to what constitutes the public, how it should be used, and by whom. Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic research with a group of twenty traceurs predominantly of migrant origins, this study focuses on the participants' ambivalent engagement with one project promoting social participation through sports in Turin's urban spaces. Building on the ethnographic material, this paper addresses the emerging relationship between social projects, informal urban practices and emerging forms of creative urbanism. The discussion focuses on the ambiguities and fault lines of urban agendas incorporating lifestyle and informal sports in their (neoliberal) vocabulary of community and place regeneration. However, this article calls also for the necessity to engage with spontaneous, informal physical practices as a way to acknowledge, and support existing, contested negotiations of citizenship and belonging in urban spaces.

Keywords: Youth; Sport Policy; Parkour; Citizenship; Turin; Urban Regeneration

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Acknowledging the world-wide diffusion of lifestyle and informal sport practices in the last three decades, several scholars recently started to interrogate the benefits and implications of the inclusion of informal sports in policy practices promoting health, sport and social participation (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; Thorpe and Reinhart, 2012; Thorpe, 2014; Wheaton, 2010, 2013).

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This paper aims to contribute to this debate and to this special issue, by addressing the ambivalent role and position that parkour is taking within social projects promoting urban re-generation and social participation through (in)formal sports in Turin, Italy. The social benefits of parkour will be addressed in this paper not in relation to the potential contribution that the practice *per se* can offer to youth sport programs and policies. Rather, the discussion will focus on the contextualised enactment and uses of parkour in Turin by different actors, and will address parkour as a practice wrought with contradictions indicative of current trends within urban politics. Parkour represents thus an *event* (Mould, 2009) both revealing the fault lines of the city's contemporary policies of urban, and social regeneration, and informing the presence of spontaneous experiences of (contested) socialization in Turin's public spaces. This study aims to provide, and calls for contextualised qualitative analysis on the social benefits of lifestyle/informal sports (see also Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011), by articulating the practice, diffusion and regulation of parkour in Turin to the broader urban and social processes in which it emerged and is enacted.

Most of critical studies on sport for development programs (Coakley, 2011; Spaaij, 2009; Coalter, 2010; Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011; Fusco, 2007, 2012; Agergaard et al., 2015) provided insightful critiques of “naive and unrealistic generalizations about the transformative capacity of sport” (Spaaij, 2009, p.1266). Some of these critiques addressed the promotion and enactment of sport for development programs by “sport evangelists” (Coakley, 2011) embodying an “uncritical and one-dimensional view of sport” as inherently producing positive outcomes in the form of “development” (Coalter, 2010, p. 17). Others critically discussed sporting programs as favouring the government and control of minorities and migrant youth leisure (Agergaard et al., 2015), the promotion of a neoliberal ideology focusing on *personal* development and success, and the discounting of social issues and needs for progressive change at a collective, or community level (Coakley, 2011).

Aiming to contribute to this critical literature, but also to combine it with an exploration of the potential benefits of lifestyle sports, this study will focus its analysis and discussion on the interpretation and use of urban space endorsed by a sport and community project in Turin, and by

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groups of disenfranchised youth, mostly of migrant origins, practicing parkour. Elaborating on the focus that parkour enables by emplacing the body in urban space, this paper identifies the reciprocal constitution of *body and place* (Silk and Andrews, 2011) as a meaningful site to address the consequences and negotiations of Turin's policies of urban, and community regeneration. Furthermore, and aiming to address the potential benefits of lifestyle sports, this bodily and spatial focus will enable me to highlight the relationship between parkour, public spaces and citizenship, intended here not much as a legal status, but as an "indisputable belonging to a community" (Marshall 2009 [1950], in Semi, 2015, p. 15) that is often *spatially* achieved, exerted and limited in the city (Mitchell, 1995, 2003).

In elaborating these arguments, I draw upon 14 months of ethnographic participation with young men practicing parkour in Turin public spaces. In the following sections of this article I will address parkour, the context of research and the methodology used in this study, in order to introduce and set up this study's discussion.

Parkour in Turin: A contextualised examination

As a number of studies already provided meaningful readings of parkour as a discipline and (sub)cultural phenomena (Fuggle, 2008; Stapleton and Terrio, 2012), this section focuses mainly on the contextual dynamics related to the diffusion of the *art du déplacement* (art of displacement) in Turin. Parkour started to be practiced in Turin from the mid 2000s, and as other lifestyle sports, the discipline is currently engaging in a debated process of structuring and institutionalisation (Ferrero Camoletto et al., 2015). In the research context, "Parkour Torino", a not-for-profit charity founded by some of the elder traceurs in Turin, was recognised by local traceurs as the only official parkour association in Turin. This organisation is mainly responsible for the provision of periodic parkour gatherings, for coordinating "official" parkour performances at institutional and corporate events in Turin and surroundings, and for promoting the discipline to the general public (i.e. media, sporting

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and local institutions). Nevertheless, the parkour scene in Turin, as far as I experienced it, was far from a homogeneous community and included diverse, sometimes contrasting visions about the discipline. Several crews ambivalently engaged with "Parkour Torino" initiatives and other sporting, and social, institutions (see also Ferrero Camoletto et al., 2015). For this research, I mainly interacted with the latter elements of Turin's parkour scene. Therefore, I engaged with traceurs who joined informal crews predominantly formed by disenfranchised young men of migrant origins[1], who trained in the city's public spaces, and only occasionally participated to Parkour Torino's public initiatives. These traceurs often described their engagement in parkour as a consequence of their marginal socio-economic status, and lack of affordable leisure opportunities, and not as a conscious, deliberate choice of a sporting/leisure activity. This aspect showed an interesting continuity with the motivations and status of the original representatives of the discipline (gathered around the group *Yamakasi,* or "strong spirit" in Lingala language), who were mostly young men of working class and/or migrant background (see Marshall, 2010; Stapleton and Terrio, 2012). Although occasionally mixing themselves in events and daily practice, the diverse parkour groups in Turin nevertheless addressed the differences running between them. The traceurs who often trained in more structured environments (i.e. adapted, or purpose made gymnastics halls) with Parkour Torino underlined their professionalism, technical proficiency, and "authenticity" recognised by international parkour institutions[2] (see also Ferrero Camoletto et al., 2015). The traceurs who trained in diverse informal groups in public spaces stressed instead the socializing and inclusive motives and aspects of their practice, implicitly suggesting that these elements had been "lost" by some parkour groups, at the expenses of a focus on technique, institutionalisation, and self-promotion.

The differences between diverse parkour groups were not framed in terms of status, class, or ethnic belonging, but rather concerned different engagements with the discipline, its aims and meanings. These elements of dispute on what parkour is, means, and does for traceurs in Turin highlighted an underrepresented feature in the literature, where often the discipline is addressed as embodying a uniform, and normalised ethos (see Mould, in press), despite the recognised lack of coherent

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definitions defining the practice (Fuggle, 2008). Aiming therefore to provide a so far under-addressed perspective in the literature on lifestyle sport (see Wheaton, 2013, 2015) this study will consider the uses, meanings and stakes of parkour amongst a group of disenfranchised young men, most of whom are of migrant origins, in Turin.

The analysis provided complexifies some of the early readings of parkour and urban spaces, that framed the discipline mainly in terms of "subversive resistance to oppressive city space" (Stapleton and Terrio, 2012, p. 19). As Stapleton and Terrio (2012) highlighted, in contrast to the narratives that stress parkour as a subversive activity that is untainted by commercialism, its very existence as a global phenomenon stems from its appropriation and commodification by corporate marketers and elite tastemakers (see also Daskalaki and Mould, 2013). Contrarily to common readings that describe traceurs as (predominantly white, male, middle class) urban *flâneurs* consciously subverting the rules and boundaries of the capitalist city (Bavinton, 2011; Daskalaki et al., 2008; Atkinson, 2009), the disenfranchised youth in this study openly admitted their involvement in the practice as a lack of other leisure opportunities. Nevertheless, their spontaneous, and unrequested engagement with parkour in public spaces challenged dominant visions about what constitutes the public, how it should be used and by whom (see De Martini Ugolotti and Moyer, 2016).

Acknowledging the inherent ambivalence of the discipline, in this work I will therefore draw on some of the multiple meanings available and produced on parkour in Turin, to explore the role that the practice took in the simultaneous promotion and negotiation of contemporary policies of urban and social transformation enacted in Turin. I will not do so by elaborating on any supposedly shared meaning or system of values embodied by parkour, against which its utility for specific policies and initiatives can be evaluated (see Coakley, 2011). Rather, I will look at the ambivalent use of parkour by disenfranchised, mainly (post)migrant youth in Turin to unpack what social benefits parkour provides as a discipline, according to the different actors and contexts where it is enacted.

On a final, important point, reflecting a general trend (see Stapleton and Terrio, 2012, Thorpe and Ahmad, 2013) in Italy parkour is an increasingly popular practice amongst (mostly male) urban

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youth (Stagi, 2015). During the research, I seldom encountered young women who were regularly practising parkour in public spaces. On this issue, Kidder's (2013) has underlined the (unintentional) exclusionary results of traceurs' performance of masculinity in urban spaces by groups of traceurs in Chicago. Mould (in press) also cautioned researchers on uncritically adopting a normalised perspective that recognises traceurs as mainly male (and predominantly white, and middle class), young, and physically able, thus skewing “the gendering of urban spatiality that is constituted by its practice” (p. 2).

Although for this article I was not able to engage with female perspectives on parkour and its eventual social benefits, I intend to address the issue of gendered and spatial relationships in parkour and other informal/lifestyle sports in future contributions. Paying attention to gender differences, and inequalities, in informal sporting settings is fundamental to address and evaluate the contribution and limitations of informal/lifestyle sports to inclusive social policies (see also Thorpe, 2014).

Methodology

Data for this study are derived from 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Turin, where I engaged in consistent parkour practice with approximately twenty research participants aged 16–21 and interviewed four operators working in one project promoting sport and social participation to disenfranchised youth in Turin. The young men I followed were committed traceurs with various levels of experience. Most of them were of migrant background, their families originating from diverse countries from Eastern Europe, Northern and Western Africa and South America. Only two of the participants could be considered as “ethnically Italian”. Despite a diversity in legal (legal residents or Italian citizens), and social status (participants with Italian citizenship but with migrant background were widely addressed as *alien bodies* in Turin social spaces by a wide range of different actors), it can be argued that participants shared a common condition as young people

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living at the margins of Turin's process of social and spatial redevelopment (see De Martini Ugolotti, 2015), as I will explain further in the following sections.

My engagement with participants in the field resonated with Moyer's (2005) street ethnography perspective, as a methodological approach that takes place 'down below,' on the sidewalks, street corners and the back lots of the cityscape. This entailed regular and extensive 'deep hanging out' with the research participants in their cultural milieu, including long hours in Turin's public spaces. This approach enabled me to gain valuable insight into young people's practices, stakes, and daily navigation of public spaces and the power relations affecting their lives. A (street) ethnographic approach enabled my co-presence with respondents in the field as a "passionate participant" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 115) and my participation in respondents' practices facilitated a theoretically driven, "visceral" analysis (Sweet and Escalante, 2015) of the observed practices in the context of research by including my own "sensations, moods, and physical state of being" during parkour practice (p. 1827). Wacquant (2004) and Stoller's (1997) focus on apprenticeship as a means to access the field, contributed to inspire and inform this project. However, I contend that an engaged inquiry about physical culture(s) requires more than a sensuous and carnal commitment to the subject of study. In daily compiling my field-notes, generally at home, after departing from the traceurs' group, I reflected on my embodied participation and my political, gendered, racialized bodily presence in the field, following the recognition that my body *did* class, gender, race, and unwittingly influenced talk, attitudes, gestures amongst the participants and other social actors in the context of research (see also Carrington, 2008; Giardina and Newman, 2011; Francombe et al., 2014). As such, I used my embodied self-reflexivity to recognize my voice and make it an analytical tool to dialogue and create knowledge *with* participants.

Finally, I integrated the ethnographic material with eighteen semi-structured interviews with traceurs in public spaces, and in some cases at their homes or in a community centre. Interviews with operators of the sporting/social project took place in their work offices. All the interviews lasted a minimum of one hour and as long as two hours. Permission for the youth to be interviewed

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was requested from a tutor (if underage) of each participant as well as the participant themselves – none refused. All interviews were audiotaped with permission and transcribed with relevant texts samples translated into English. Participants' names in this paper are fictional to protect respondents' privacy. For the same reason also the name of the social project specifically addressed in this paper has been modified.

Rebranding the city "That looked like a factory": Turin's Creative Urban Regeneration and Sport Policies

> "Turin is a city of sport […], an Olympic city; being awarded as 2015-2018 European Sport Capital acknowledges our meaningful history and future [...] we plan to host several international sporting events, and to make sport and physical activity central elements of community cohesion, elements of social promotion and participation for Turin's residents" (Piero Fassino, former Turin Mayor, 14th May 2015)

In the last two decades the municipality of Turin, together with its main cultural-economic lobbies, responded to the decay of the "Italian Detroit" (Pizzolato, 2008) by trying to rebrand the city image, and transform it from a "city that looked like a factory" (Bagnasco 1986), to an European and international capital of culture, tourism and leisure (see also Semi, 2004, 2015; Vanolo, 2015). The domain of sport has represented one of the key elements of Turin's radical social, and spatial transformations, as undoubtedly such radical transformations were enabled, justified and deeply influenced by the hosting of 2006 Winter Olympic Games, and their controversial, and still debated legacy (Dansero and Puttilli, 2010; Bondonio and Guala, 2011 Bottero et al., 2012; Vanolo, 2015, Bondonio et al., 2016).

As the former Mayor of Turin's words at the beginning of the section suggested, the city's award as European Sport Capital both acknowledged the city's sporting history, and outlined its future as an

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international hub for sports activities and events, with all the expected positive outcomes represented by "flows of sport followers and tourists, occasions for [multi]cultural relations, and for economic activities" (Fassino, 2015). Furthermore, sport was not just described as promoting Turin's public image and economic development, but as benefiting Turin residents' welfare (Bondonio et al., 2016), through its capacity to promote community life and social inclusion of individuals and groups at the margins.

It can be argued then that the sporting domain constituted an important element in Turin's process of regeneration as a both "creative"[3] and inclusive city. Drawing on a progressive "sport for all" policy approach (Bondonio et al., 2016, pp. 18-20), in the last years Turin's municipality has actively integrated sport programs in urban policies aiming to redevelop and rebrand urban spaces through the "empowerment", participation, and responsibilization of local communities. Since 2008, Turin Municipality's Urban Policy Division enacts a program co-funded by Compagnia di Sanpaolo Bank Foundation targeting the city's "residual areas"[4]. According to Turin Municipality's Urban Policy Division, "residual areas" are urban spaces lacking public services and facilities, but that nevertheless represent meeting points for youth and local communities in Turin's peripheries (Città di Torino, 2014). The program aims to "recover and redevelop local residual areas through the participation of citizens and local communities (Città di Torino, 2014)", and as part of the program, the "*Cambia Gioco!"* (Change Game!) project started in 2014 aimed to promote "the dissemination of good practices and care of public space through new recreational uses of public spaces" (Città di Torino, 2014). Following the aims of the project, local youth and communities had the chance to learn and play a range of (in)formal sports and physical activities (namely frisbee, netball, tchoukball, hitball, flag, and cross-fit) in urban parks and "residual areas", as means to facilitate "socialisation and collective participation" (Comune di Torino, 2014). Similarly, in 2014 Compagnia di Sanpaolo Foundation started a social program in collaboration with Turin Municipality's Youth Policy Division. The program, called YEPP (Youth Empowerment Partnership Program), aims to promote "youth and community empowerment and lasting positive change"

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(YEPP, 2015) and focuses its action on the rebranding of two "problem" neighbourhoods' public spaces by engaging with local (disenfranchised) youth. Within the YEPP program, the project "*CAMBIAmenti: Riprenditi il tuo Spazio"* (Changes [but also Change of Minds in Italian]: Claim Back your Space) aimed to "claim back" public spaces from physical, and social/moral decay, by engaging youth and local communities in sporting activities. Although disciplines like parkour were not explicitly mentioned in these projects, both "*Cambia Gioco!"*, and "*CAMBIAmenti"* activities included in their aims the valorisation of spontaneous and "positive" practices enacted by young people in local urban spaces (YEPP, 2015).

The examples above are emblematic of a wider range of public-private programs that use sport as a tool to spatially, and socially rebrand Turin's public spaces by promoting local communities and youth's "positive" engagement with the territory. As the examples showed, the realm of sport thus increasingly represents a "cross-cutting approach to social policy" (Coalter 2007, p. 116, in Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011, p. 110) in Turin's context. Moreover, these public-private sport and social programs promote a model of community participation and responsibility in addressing local spatial/social issues that meaningfully aligns with the Municipality's rationale for drastic cuts to welfare provision in a context of deep economic recession. As happened in similar cases, Turin's "creative" urban rebranding absorbed large local budgets by integrating private and public sectors to attract tourism and capital investment[5] (Bondonio and Guala, 2011, p. 316; Bottero, et al., 2012, p. 204), but implied also severe cuts to social spendings like welfare and public services. Despite the optimistic, and selective narratives of successful urban *renaissance* (Vanolo, 2015), in recent studies Turin's municipality figured as the most indebted council in Italy[6] (CGIA, 2014), and the poorest city in the industrial north of the country (Presa Diretta, 2013). In 2014, Turin had a 49% unemployment rate in the 15-29 age range (Cassi, 2014), and in 2015 the city counted the highest number of evictions in a year in Italy (almost 5000) (Fama, 2016).

As highlighted by some of the critical readers of the creative city model (see Mould, 2015), Turin's spatial and social rebranding possibly exacerbated many of the problems it ostensibly aspired to

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resolve (i.e. economic stagnation, unemployment, socio-spatial polarization and uneven development). In this context, which sees (in)formal sports as both key promoters of Turin's vibrancy and rebranding, and as crucial tools of youth and community responsabilization, the role of public-private sport and community programs is thus not neutral in the development of specific trends in urban and social policies.

In particular, parkour is currently taking an interesting role within this process, through a mix of promotional urban events, and a progressive structuring and involvement with local institutions[7] (see Ferrero Camoletto et al., 2015). By addressing the ambivalent relationship that disenfranchised traceurs engaged with one of Turin's public/private projects of community (re)development, this article will thus unpack some of the consequences of Turin's "creative" urban regeneration. The critical analysis of different uses and interpretations of parkour by various actors and stakeholders will offer some insights about the practice's contested and ambivalent role for social policies, urban governing bodies and disenfranchised youth.

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Rolling and vaulting in Turin

> "I came to train with Salim, Hamza and Emilio in a relatively affluent suburban area in the far south of Turin [...] As expected, our presence is noticed right away, some people stop to watch fascinated and curious, others, more numerous, concerned and vigilant. Almost two hours into training, a car stops by and a man comes out shouting that we are scaring his old mother: apparently she thought we were thieves of some sort trying to break in her place (sic!). He adds we should have some respect as we are *not even from here* (I am not sure whether he implied with "here" the neighbourhood or whether it was a reference to the participants, and mine with them, "exotic" phenotypes, or both). We apologise to the man for inadvertently scaring his mother, explain we were training parkour, and move to a couple of meters to train on another wall (which is not a

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building perimeter). A group of about ten youngsters follow the scene and get closer to us. The discussion just broke the training mood, but on the other hand we all feel that by going away we would admit we were doing something illegitimate or dodgy (something the man was clearly implying). The group of youngsters who stopped by when the man yelled at us stay to 'watch us' when he leaves. They do nothing, but stay very close to us, basically on our feet, checking and commenting (not nicely) every move we do. The man in the car also patrols the area by driving slowly around the place where we are now training" (Fieldwork diary, 18th April 2015)

The above excerpt from research field-notes depicts a vignette of the typical interactions participants faced when practicing parkour in Turin's public spaces. Conflicts and tensions with other members of the public sphere (i.e. residents, security forces, business owners) are not unfamiliar to traceurs (Mould, 2009, in press; Lebreton et al., 2010; Ameel and Tani, 2012) and practitioners of other informal urban sports (Borden, 2001). However, in the above excerpt the aggressive reactions of various members of the public to the traceurs' use of public space was clearly related also to their (and mine with them) perceived "otherness" that contributed to define all of us as alien, unwelcome bodies in the cityscape.

Participants often reported the symbolic and concrete acts daily reminding them to their embodied, and often undesired *difference* in Turin's urban environments. These acts involved 'judging looks', threats and acts of discrimination on the streets and public areas, including, but not limited to, during their training sessions in public spaces:

"On the bus, people won't sit by me, or if they have, they hold tight their stuff. To them I am a Moroccan who's on that bus to steal their purses or bags" (Hassan, 20 years old)

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> "If I ever had issues with police?! A couple of weeks ago I was running in the park, it was dark, late afternoon [in winter], all of a sudden two cops come out from a car right in front of me shouting "Show me your ID! What are you doing?". "What am I doing?!" "I am running, man!" … Of course I didn't tell them that, I shut my mouth and gave them my ID..." (Emilio, 20 years old)

This excerpts show how, in a context of economic disarray and social tensions, a constellation of anxieties on crime, economic crisis, and illegal migration contributed to construct disenfranchised (and mostly post-migrant) males' bodies as crucial *objects* of social control in Turin's public spaces (see De Martini Ugolotti and Moyer, 2016). Despite, or perhaps because of their marginalisation in Turin's urban and social spaces, most of participants described finding parkour as a chance to socialize that they did not have in other environments. Interestingly, they also described how their engagement with the discipline was more the consequence of a lack of other opportunities, rather than a conscious choice of an amusing past-time:

> "At the beginning I wasn't at all interested in it. It was my friend Hamza who got me into it, so I said, ok, let's do this, kong, vaults, all that stuff... but when I realized how useful it could be for my life, then I thought, "ok, I have to make myself up here", and now parkour is part of me" (Ruan, 21 years old)

> "I didn't know what it was at first, I just saw a video on youtube, and then some kids jumping... I had nothing to do, and that was free and looked like fun, that's how I started." (Abdelrazak, 20 years old)

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Several respondents acknowledged that they started training 'just for joke', 'because it was free, and I wasn't doing anything anyway' (Ricardo, 18 years old) or even because 'I was already doing it (parkour) back at home, but I just had no name to call it!' (Samba, 20 years old). Nevertheless, as they engaged more in such practices, the participants recalled starting to realize how their daily trainings responded to some of the issues they lived and faced daily:

> "Most of the people you see training here, they do it because they feel isolated, you know, socially, but also within their own families" (Karim, 20 years old)

> "For me parkour isn't just about learning how to move, it's mainly about making friends, in places where a lot of people hang out, there's the possibility to meet people who might become your friends. You see some people training and jumping, you join them, it's that easy, and that's how I met most of the people I call friends now" (Ruan, 21 years old)

The above excerpts showed how, together with the attraction of being able to perform daring leaps and spectacular moves, what involved the participants in parkour was also the discipline's free accessibility, and the opportunities it provided for socialization, while traditional social institutions, family, school, but also organised leisure activities, seemed to have difficulties to reach, or include the participants (see De Martini Ugolotti, 2015).

As such, the participants' presence and trainings in public spaces did not only incur in harassment by actors of the public, but obtained also a great deal of attention by groups of other youth and occasional by-standers, who usually gathered to assist their training sessions in some of their usual training spots[8]. Amongst those impressed by the participants' abilities, and by their creative engagement with urban spaces, were also the operators of LLT (Living

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and Learning Together) project. LLT is one of the several public/private community projects enacting in Turin that aims to re-qualify and re-brand peripheral, blighted urban areas in collaboration with local youth and communities (more information about the project will follow in the next section). The research participants friendly welcomed the presence of LLT's operators' in one of their favourite training spots, a relatively forgotten and hidden peripheral park that gained the authorities' attention for petty criminal activity involving youth, homelessness, and drug addicts' presence. The LLT's operators on their side thoroughly supported the participants' public trainings, and also acknowledged and "capitalized" on the possibilities that participants provided them to contact and involve local youth in the project's activities, through the undeniable attention and interest that the traceurs instigated in peers and younger users of that space. This ongoing informal relationship between the social program and the participants evolved throughout the research process with insightful turns for the issues addressed in this paper.

Boyz in the ~~Hood~~ sporting centre: or, the sanitization of parkour, and public space

> "The project's objectives *provide to the area positive models of occupation of public spaces through cultural and sporting animation*, in order to *foster the re-appropriation of places* by those who live in the neighbourhood, *with particular attention to boys and girls* […] to *identify positive leaderships* and *empower young people willing to be* actively involved and *made responsible of the use of public space* […] all the actions aim t*o valorise* neighbourhood *youth's human capital* and competences" (LLT Project Operative Plan, 2014, pp. 2-5 emphasis added)

The LLT project is one of many examples of the ongoing collaboration between Turin Municipality's Youth Division and private funding actors. The project targets specifically

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youth in specific "problem" neighbourhoods with the aim to involve them in the "positive re-appropriation" of blighted urban spaces, or "residual areas" in the terms of Turin's Municipality. LLT started to operate in the spring of 2014 in the neighbourhood of Porta Palazzo, a strategic area within Turin's regeneration process. The neighbourhood is adjacent to the touristic and glamorous city centre, it hosts numerous migrant communities and has often been the site of heated tensions regarding the presence of migrants and significant gentrifying initiatives (See also Semi, 2004, 2015).

In this context, the project aims to "engage local youth in through actions aiming to valorise their human capital and competences through […] a re-appropriation of public spaces that aims to facilitate processes of positive place identity and local urban rebranding" (LTT Operative Plan, 2014, p. 3).

Following these objectives, during the research the project's operators were promoting various activities[9], including the provision of sports in the neighbourhoods's public spaces, and specifically targeting youth between 15 and 30 years old. As mentioned above, the area's public spaces represented a specific focus of the program's initiatives as commented by one of the operators:

> "One of the main aims of the project is to promote a positive use of public space […], I am convinced that an embellished place initiates more smiles, happiness, motivation, we aim to do this by involving youth in positive engagement with local spaces in the neighbourhood, mainly through sports and other initiatives..." (Franco, project co-ordinator and operator)

The above excerpts illustrated how youth behaviours and use of space have been of great concern not just to urban residents, but to wider regeneration policies and community redevelopment programs in Turin. On this issue, Fusco (2012) highlighted how sport and

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physical activity have often been depicted as solutions to the "problem" of youth and public spaces (p. 145).

As emerged from the quote at the beginning of the section, space was thus symbolically linked to youth health, participation and an optimistic future by providing "positive models of occupation of public spaces", and fostering "the re-appropriation of places" by "boys and girls". These highly desirable outcomes were to be obtained mainly by identifying and empowering youth "willing to be made responsible of the use of public space". Although practices like parkour were not included in the original project activities, LTT's Operative Plan included in its aims the identification and fostering of "youth practices and talents that contribute to the attractiveness and positive identity of Porta Palazzo".

In this sense, participants' training sessions seemed to meaningfully reflect the project's rationale and vision of fostering youth's talent, health and place-promotion, and represented an attractive means to engage with, and attract local disenfranchised youth. The operators evidently regarded the participants as actors possibly aligning with the subjects the program aimed to empower, in order to promote (disenfranchised) youth "human capital":

> "I think these guys [the traceurs] have the potential to make an amazing job to inspire young people in the area. They are youngsters with initiative, taking care of themselves, and constantly aiming to improve themselves with what they have in their life. They see urban spaces in a different, creative, way, as a place of opportunities, not of obstacles. This is the kind of mindset we value in the project" (Franco, Project operator)

> "Franco and Sara arrived at the training spot, and immediately came by to greet us, sweating under the sun. As usual, Franco approached Emilio, who is an experienced, dedicated traceur, and an informal leading figure in the group. We all engage in a brief conversation on the delights of training on concrete in Turin's August boiling heat...

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Franco comments on how this can be a proof of a traceur's dedication, but Emilio chips in straight away to clarify: 'It's not just for the sake of it, it's a means to get to know what you want to become and achieve, how hard do you want what you want, you know, to keep you in check... as for me, I am pretty sure if it was not for parkour, I'd probably be wasting myself away around with a bottle of something with my cousins...'. Franco's eyes are wide open, visibly amazed by Emilio's words..." (Fieldnotes 28th August, 2014)

The participants' appreciated the fact that representatives of an official institution positively acknowledged their public enactment of parkour, and addressed it as an example of "positive youth leadership", while usually their trainings in public spaces were interrupted by "concerned" citizens and police forces. In many occasions the traceurs' reported how such positive acknowledgement made them feel as if they were doing something good not just for themselves, but for the community, by being represented as "positive examples" for others. Less than a year from the project's start, Emilio was offered a one-day-per-week job as a peer trainer in parkour and other physical activities. LTT's operators made clear to Emilio that this opportunity would not become, or substitute, a "proper" full-time job. Rather the operators' described it as a "middle-passage", as an incentive for him to keep on developing his motivation, social and work-skills that would help him to pursue his life goals. Emilio would be accompanied by a project operator and granted absolute freedom in choosing where and how to conduct his trainings in the area. This was generally interpreted by the participants as a further, collective recognition of their worth, and a further motivation to keep training. However, a couple of months later the situation had changed and all the projects' activities had been moved to a city council managed open-air sporting centre very close to the traceurs' usual training spot. When I interviewed the project's operator working with Emilio and asked her about the change, she said:

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> "It was a decision of the project's coordinators to group all the activities and the youth at the polyvalent centre. It is easier to offer a productive involvement in our activities here, in the previous [public] spaces doing that was more difficult, it was more dispersive, you couldn't engage enough with the youth as they were constantly around... We think this site can provide *a good idea of public space* […] those who came along understood the project's aims" (Sara, Project operator, April, 2015, emphasis added)

However, despite the operator's assumptions, Emilio's opinion about the change was definitely less enthusiastic:

> "Well, it does seem a bit weird, we have been put in this small piece of green with two benches between two futsal/tennis fields, we can't really do much here. Plus, who comes here mainly do it to play football, and while they wait for their turn they play table tennis, *I think they are completely missing all the others... I don't think though this project is up to what they described to us* when we met them, you know, *valorising the positive stuff young people are spontaneously doing in this city*, *I really hoped this project aimed to change people's perspective on what we can do*, and not just us doing parkour, you know? and *you can't do it if you close yourself here...*" (Emilio, emphasis added)

Providing an interesting contrast, Sara's and Emilio's accounts showed the distance between the project's and participants' aims and realities. As the accounts explained, the project's decision to move all its activities in an open-air sporting centre operated a crucial shift on what it is understood as constituting "public space" and the desired moral bodies attending it (Rose, 1995). Sara's account highlighted how the projects' idea(l) of "positive" public space

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thus conceived it as open, freely accessible, but also as facilitating control and (self)regulation, by avoiding "dispersion" and inciting youth to become engaged participants in the project's health, and community re-branding initiatives (see Fusco, 2012, p. 146). Conversely, Emilio's disappointment seemed to be related to the projects' inability to live up to the expectations created not only in regard to the legitimation of parkour practice in Turin public spaces. He meaningfully voiced his interpretation of the projects' claim to encourage youth's re-appropriation of public spaces as an intention to tackle the geographies of power that disenfranchised and (post)migrant youth daily experienced in Turin's public spaces.

Contrarily to Emilio's expectations, the project's invitation to engage youth in "productive activities" within the gates of the sporting centre, configured instead youth concurrent practices and uses of space as inherently unhealthy, a(t) risk, or ambiguous at best (see also Fusco, 2012).

As a consequence of this shift, a number of crucial socio-spatial issues influencing local youth lives and practices (i.e. unemployment, gender inequalities, social exclusion, but also lack of social housing and failing public education), were effectively eclipsed by the project's proclamations of innovative, participatory initiatives of health and social promotion focused on youth responsibility, and re-imagining of public spaces (see Fusco, 2007, p. 58).

The project's tentative "containment" of youth and of traceurs in a sporting centre apparently resonated with the cases described by Gilchrist and Wheaton (2011) and Ameel and Tani (2012), and seemed to represent an example of emerging attempts to frame parkour within a landscape of social, and spatial, control (Vivoni, 2009, p. 130).

However, the evolving relationship between the project and the traceurs highlighted more than a manipulative, mono-directional landscape of (soft)control over disenfranchised youth. It rather showed the complexity, and diversity of the stakes related to the visions and uses of the city and urban spaces by participants', and by the local, public-private actors embodying Turin's regeneration process.

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Contested (public) spaces, citizenship, and the unexpected social benefits of parkour

> "We appreciate the productive discussion we had with the traceurs after the relocation of the trainings in the sporting centre, and we provided for a venue that suited better their training philosophy... I understand there had been a misunderstanding about our decision to include them in the sporting centre activities. Our initiative was motivated by the idea of legitimising and supporting the important role that these young men are having in building a healthy, cohesive community in such a difficult neighbourhood." (Pietro, project coordinator)

> "It all comes to that, and it's very simple: You can give us as many places you want, but we'll keep looking for more..." (Alessandro, 20 years old)

As a consequence of the events described in the previous section, the participants did not stop collaborating with LLT project, but they rather negotiated with the operators the possibility to use a school hall where they could train acrobatics with mattresses once a week. In this way, the traceurs managed to keep some advantages that the project undoubtedly provided them (including a small financial return for some of them, and the social and community recognition deriving from their role as "youth leaders"). They also contributed to the projects' aims of community responsibility and participation, by offering an open and informal physical activity to local youth in the school's sports hall. However, as Alessandro's quote highlighted, participants' engagement with the project did not keep them from a continuous search of new (public) spaces to train, socialize, meet other peers and improve themselves.

The operator's clarification on the attempted inclusion of parkour in the sporting centre's spaces showed clearly how the perceived benefits of parkour assumed two quite different

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meanings and implications according to the project, and the participants. For the project's operators, the promotion of parkour was related to the idea of supporting disenfranchised youth's engagement in a free, engaging physical activity that minimised the risks of possible involvement in anti-social behaviours (as argued by Emilio when discussing with Franco). As such, the inclusion of parkour trainings in the sporting centre did not simply represent a subtle, manipulative attempt to “eliminate traceurs from the streets” (Ameel and Tani, 2012, p. 21). Rather, it aimed to provide participants with a “safe and legitimised space” (Ferrero Camoletto et al., 2015, p. 307) to promote, empower and possibly legitimise their practices. This attempt was thus coherent with the institutionalisation and “sportification” process that the discipline is currently, and actively, pursuing (Lebreton et al., 2010, p. 303) in several contexts, including Turin. Furthermore, the attempted inclusion of parkour trainings in the sporting centre espoused the project's aims to make the local youth responsible for the regeneration of their community, by engaging with other local disenfranchised youth through physical activities in a (supposedly) safe, healthy, and regulated space. As discussed above though, this perspective promoted young people's health, and community re-generation as a matter of young people's individualised and self- responsible choices, and contributed to construct normative ideas of “healthy” public spaces, and ways to live in them (Fusco, 2012, p. 152).

The project's vision of participatory urban regeneration also actively enacted an elision of structural urban inequalities located in urban spaces, through a “common good” ethos of youth, and community empowerment/responsibility: a cohesive “we” implying a homogeneous population with a common investment in a unified vision of what is a healthy city/community, its development and management (see also Fusco, 2007, p. 55),

On the contrary, the participants' spontaneous and unrequested practices showed urban spaces as contested arenas, cleaved by hidden, unequal power relations, and as sites where the meanings and contours of inclusion and belonging in the city had to be daily negotiated:

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> "Well, that annoys me a bit... we are always been told to move away, "you can't jump here", "no, you can't do this here" when the spaces we train are abso-fucking-lutely public […] If in a public space one person, or a police man comes to me and tell me "you can't do that" if I'm not doing anything wrong, that really annoys me!" (Hamza, 21 years old)

> "It's not even the issue that you [the authorities] have to give me a place, because we don't play tennis or golf, we don't need apposite places, and I am not a thief or a thug, I am not doing anything wrong, so I want to choose where to train... (Hugo, 19 years old)

According to the operators and participants' perspectives, the meaning and implications of the supposed social benefits of parkour were thus drastically different. Although participants' ethos of self-improvement and inner motivation meaningfully aligned with the project's image of youth leaders of healthy, responsible communities, their engagement with parkour implied a far more complex relationship with the city than the project's aims of positive urban rebranding.

The participants' spontaneous and unrequested use of the *whole* city as an unfolding playground actively contradicted, though *not opposed*, the project's idea of urban spaces as rebranded, freely accessible, but controlled and (self)regulated areas. The participants' use of public spaces instead engaged the city, from the blighted peripheral parks and "residual areas" to the city centre, for how it was daily lived by disenfranchised youth in Turin: as a site of daily tensions and negotiation, where disenfranchised youth's civic membership was contingent on how embodied markers of *difference*, be it poverty, ethnicity, gender, religion, or a combination of these factors were perceived in specific spatial/temporal contexts (see Glick Schiller, 2015; Manley and Silk, 2014; De Martini Ugolotti and Moyer, 2016) .

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Through their contested engagement with parkour and public spaces, the participants thus illuminated the hidden tensions, power relations and hierarchies of belonging (Back et al., 2012) emerging in Turin's (self)celebrated process of inclusive and participatory urban regeneration. However, as suggested in other studies (see Borden, 2001), the traceurs in the study did not engage in such contested re-appropriations of space to enact an explicit political agenda (see Lefebvre, 1991; Mitchell, 2003).

Rather, the participants' *desire* for socialization and recognition in the Turin's public spaces (see also Daskalaki and Mould, 2013; Mould, 2015) informed the inherent political negotiation of their positioning and relationship with the LTT project, and with the city. As such, for the group of young men in this study, one of the (unimagined) benefits of parkour was their active negotiation of the meaning and contours of belonging in Turin public spaces, as sites where participants came to recognise themselves as contested, marginal, yet rightful members of the city's public life, and polity.

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Conclusions: **The politics of parkour, and of desire**

Drawing on an ethnographic perspective, this paper contributed to the inter-disciplinary discussion on the social benefits of lifestyle sports/informal practices, by unpacking the ambivalent position that parkour acquired within initiatives of urban and community re-branding enacted in Turin. I contend that if we want to address effectively the benefits, and limitations, of lifestyle sports in grass-root, or institutionalised activities, the assumption that informal physical practices like parkour embody inherent homogeneous characteristics or “cultural values” (see Atkinson, 2009; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; Thorpe, 2014; Mould, 2009, in press) risks providing an analysis that is one sided at best. As a discipline that does not provide “any particular clear or finished blueprint for action” (Saville, 2008, p. 892), parkour can represent diverse, even competing cultural values and forms of inhabiting the body and (urban) space: from the anti- authoritarian “anarcho-

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enviromentalism" described by Atkinson (2009) in Toronto, to the courses provided by Parkour Generations in London for security, surveillance and anti-infiltration purposes (Parkour Generations, 2015), to the emerging "sportified" and regulated training landscapes created and/or pursued by several parkour groups (Lebreton et al., 2010, p. 303).

In this sense, parkour represents an empty frame and canvas providing with its lack of definition countless possibilities for practitioners' creative expression, but "whose meaning, use, and impact is dependent on the ways in which it is employed on how and to what ends it is used" (MacAloon, 1995, in Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011, p. 289). In order to establish its social benefits or inclusive capacities (for example in relation to gender) we need to look at its contextualised uses and practice.

together with the power forces in which it is imbued locally and globally

This study provided only a partial analysis that could not include in its discussion important intersectional articulations of gender, class, race and disability in relation to parkour. However, it provided an initial, critical discussion of the discipline's ambivalent incorporation in broader contexts of urban policy, and politics, and of the negotiation of this process by a group of disenfranchised, mostly (post)migrant traceurs. Whereas a focus on lifestyle sports' participants who do not fall in the white, (often male), middle-class demographic has been absent in the literature on the subject[10] (see Wheaton 2013, 2015), this paper showed how such a perspective can provide critical insights on the stakes and possibilities of informal sports practice within the context of contemporary cities (see also Daskalaki and Mould, 2013; Mould, 2015).

In particular, the discussion of disenfranchised youth's spontaneous and unrequested engagement with parkour in Turin's urban spaces highlighted the (unexpected) citizenship negotiations enacted by the participants, driven by irreverent *desires* of self-expression, recognition and socialization. The (re)appropriation of (in)formal sports by marginal social groups can therefore provide insightful perspectives on the daily sites of contestation over the meanings and contours of belonging and citizenship that are created in urban spaces without the assertive foregrounding of an explicit transformative social project (see Soja, 1996). This can thus represent a meaningful lens to ferret out contextual manifestations of inequality in urban spaces (Moyer, 2005). Moreover, this

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focus can enable researchers, policy-makers, activists and citizens to identify and be inspired by "yet to come" experiences (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013, p. 2), and by the irreverent meaning-, self-, and place- (re)inventions that exceed power inequalities and strategies of urban planning, and that daily take place on the sidewalks, parks, street corners and back lots of our cities.

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[1] Interestingly, this ratio is not common amongst traceurs' crews training in more structured courses in gyms and sporting associations in Turin.

[2] Parkour Torino endorsed the ADAPT instructor qualification system created by the UK based "Parkour Generations". As this qualification is the only acknowledged by parkour's founders, it is thereby (re)presented as embodying the authentic version of the discipline (see Ferrero Camoleto et al., 2015, p. 314)

[3] The creative city model has been described as aiming to cultivate glamorous innovation and cultural vibrancy, thereby creating a more attractive place for businesses and tourists, and thus stimulating further economic rewards (Mould, 2015). Through a (neoliberal) logic indissolubly tying market revitalisation with the upscaling of urban residents' quality of life, the creative city model has also been purported to encourage social inclusion, and responsibility, cultural participation and poverty alleviation (Semi, 2004; Mould, 2015).

[4] Translations from texts in Italian were made by the author.

[5] The implementation of new legislation from the regional government, such as Law 18/1999, favoured stimulating private companies to "enrich and valorise touristic areas" with public funding, (Bottero et al., 2012, p. 208), mainly by supporting the construction of tourist, or tourism related structures.

[6] According to CGIA's study Turin's enormous public debt is a direct consequence of the expenses the municipality sustained for the 2006 Winter Olympic Games (see alsoVanolo, 2015, p. 3).

[7] Parkour is featured in the most recent promotional video produced by Turin's Municipality Tourism Office http://www.torinoemotion.it/news051115/

[8] A "spot" is a location traceurs choose to use for training.

[9] Theatre and participatory video courses and workshops for "active job search".

[10] Though with notable exceptions (Thorpe and Ahmed, 2013; Thorpe, 2014).

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