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# Contested bodies in a regenerating city: post-migrant men's contingent citizenship, parkour and diaspora spaces

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## ABSTRACT

The following paper contributes to interdisciplinary debates at the intersection of informal sport/leisure, migration and urban studies. It does so by drawing on an ethnographic research with young men of migrant origins in Turin, Italy, and by addressing the relevance of parkour in the participants' experiences and negotiations of 'what it means to (not) belong' in urban spaces. The focus on parkour provides a unique entry point to address the politics of belonging that unfold in urban spaces as contested sites where competing images of the city, the nation and of who belongs to them converge, clash and overlap. This is particularly relevant, though not limited to the Italian context, where political narratives and realities still legally and socially define the children of migration as *alien bodies* in the nation, while Turin's urban leaderships portray youth cultures and multicultural diversity as *assets* for the city's symbolic, cultural and financial regeneration. As the intersection of such discourses shapes the manifold ways through which post-migrant urban subjects become essentialised, valorised and pathologised in Turin, the paper's findings foreground the relevance of informal sports as entry points to (re) consider discussions on citizenship, conviviality and rights (to the city) in contemporary urban contexts.

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## Introduction

The increasing scholarly attention to informal sporting practices has contributed to a wide range of inter-disciplinary debates on shifting participation trends in physical activity, the relationship between sport and health in late-capitalist societies and the spatial politics of informal leisure practices. Most of these discussions have been initiated by scholars who highlighted the increasing relevance of lifestyle sports in the lives of young (and less young) people from the 1990s onwards (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017; Wheaton, 2013). However, by focusing on the physical cultural practices of racialised (post)migrant populations, the literature on informal sports has also addressed issues and experiences that, apart from relevant exceptions,<sup>1</sup> have been rarely addressed in existing scholarship on lifestyle sports. The work of Jeanes, Spaaij and Penney (2019) have highlighted how for social groups often excluded from mainstream sport and wider social spaces in Victoria, Australia, informal sporting practices constituted relevant forms of physical activity and socialisation. Relatedly, Van Ingen et al. (2018) discussed how for racialised youth living in a public housing neighbourhood in the Canadian Niagara region, informal sporting practices constituted

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a way to experience their community as a 'good place' despite pervasive processes of territorial stigmatisation. Furthermore, a number of scholars (Aquino, 2015; Aquino et al., 2020) argued that informal sporting practices can constitute forms of anti-racism and means to claim a right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991) for migrant populations in super-diverse urban contexts such as Sidney, Australia or Singapore.

Building on and expanding these perspectives, this paper contributes to existing debates at the intersection of informal sport/leisure domains, migration and urban studies. It will do so by drawing on a long-term ethnographic research with young men of migrant origins practicing parkour in Turin, Italy. The focus on parkour, as a urban discipline cutting across definitions of what is (il)legitimate and (un)desirable in urban landscapes (De Martini Ugolotti & Silk, 2018) will provide a unique entry point to address the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011) that unfold in Turin's urban spaces. Relatedly, the study will engage with urban spaces as contested sites where competing images of the city, the nation and of who belongs to them converge, overlap and clash. This is particularly relevant, though not limited to the Italian context, where political narratives and realities still legally and socially define the children of migration as *alien bodies* in the nation; this, while Turin's urban leaderships portray youth creative practices and multiculturalism as *assets* for the city's symbolic, cultural and financial regeneration (De Martini Ugolotti, 2015; De Martini Ugolotti & Moyer 2016). Following these premises, the situated standpoint of this paper will be used to consider how the mundane, transient embodied and spatial productions enacted through parkour interrogate and (re)articulate notions of citizenship, conviviality and right to the city. Importantly, questions of citizenship and belonging in urban contexts and the role that informal physical cultural practices occupy in relation to these need to be addressed in relation to existing debates on the topics and specific historical, cultural and socio-political contexts (see also, Mantu, 2015). The sections that follow will thus locate the paper's context and discussion within existing perspectives on (urban) citizenship, migration and the right to the city, before offering some methodological considerations and a discussion of the data and their relevance for this special issue and for wider inter-disciplinary debates on the topic.

### Post-migrant youth, (urban) citizenship and the right to the city

The Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad (2004) argued that the children of migration perform a 'mirror function' in European societies. The children of migration's social positioning and conditions reflect and reveal the silences and omissions of European nations' (post-)colonial relationships with the(ir) Other, embodied in European histories by the colonised and in the contemporary world by immigrants and their children (Sayad, 2004). Sayad's reflections meaningfully resonate in the Italian context, where renewed debates about cultural authenticity, intensifying ethno-nationalist politics and waves of moral panic depicting the country as under siege by 'uncontrolled migration' continue to define migrants and their children as out of place in the collective body of the nation. These public sentiments are enshrined in Italian Citizenship Law, which in its current iteration (dating from 1992) significantly favours access to citizenship through descent (*ius sanguinis*) and marriage with an Italian citizen (*ius conubii*), rather than through birth, residence and social/community ties (Baldassar & Raffaetà, 2017; Hepworth & Hamilton, 2014). Consequently, according to current Italian law, almost half of all children of immigrants who were born in Italy have the same legal identity as their parents as 'laborers for life' (Sayad, 2004, see also, Della Puppa & Sredanovic, 2017). Such conditions bind many youngsters of migrant origin to a protracted second-class status in the country where they were born and/or raised, thus limiting opportunities for upward social mobility and to position themselves as rightful members of Italian public life and polity. As Ambrosini (2013) noted, inequality is maintained and reproduced among children of migrants in Italy through a regime of differential access to rights and public services at local and national level that often reinforce social exclusion, loss of work security, unemployment and subordinate assimilation.

While it is fundamental to tease out these conditions in relation to the context of the study, perspectives addressing post-migrant youth<sup>2</sup> either as (missed) citizens *or* migrants arguably fail to address how the children of migration straddle between these categories rather than falling into one or the other (see, Ní Mhurchú, 2016). Relatedly, authors have argued that while typically understood as a legal status of membership in the nation-state polity, citizenship can also be addressed as the acts of becoming claim-making subjects in and through various sites, domains and scales, as made evident by discussions on cosmopolitan and environmental citizenship (Isin, 2008; Ní Mhurchú, 2016).

These understandings of citizenship as an act, rather than as a status through which subjects who are not formally recognised as citizens can claim to their right-to-have-rights arguably resonate with discussions on urban citizenship and the Lefebvrian notion of the right to the city (Blokland et al., 2015). Significantly, notions of urban citizenship and the right to the city have been the focus of analyses that examined how racialised and migrant youth employed informal leisure/sporting practices to advance right-claims in the name of (urban) belonging (Aquino, 2015; Aquino et al., 2020; Ní Mhurchú, 2016; Satta & Scandurra, 2015). Overall, these perspectives have been important in exploring the multiple ways in which urban subjectivities and forms of belonging can be negotiated through informal sport/leisure practices. Yet, these analyses have still left unexplored marginalised groups' engagement with informal sport within urban contexts where leisure, multi-cultural diversity, and "creative" urban re-appropriations have *also* become instrumental in contemporary processes of late-capitalist city-branding (Binnie et al., 2006; Schmoll & Semi, 2013; Ahmadi, 2018; Romero, 2018; Berglund, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to consider analyses that have sympathetically but critically engaged with the idea of the right to the city by observing how claims and re-appropriations of the urban can "address and correspond with neoliberal urban designs and enclosures" (Mayer, 2013, p. 5). In many cases the promise of 'reclaiming the city' through participation cannot undo socio-spatial hierarchies and reinforces them, and citizenship becomes less a set of rights that status-holders 'possess' and instead has to be earned by specific types of conduct (Van Schipstal & Nicholls, 2014; Blokland et al., 2015; De Martini Ugolotti & Silk, 2018). Drawing on these considerations and critiques, this paper addresses the engagement with parkour of a number of post-migrant young men in Turin to explore two related questions: how contemporary processes of de-industrialisation and uneven urban regeneration shape the extent to which post-migrant young men can exert belonging and civic membership in urban spaces? and how these youth live, navigate, and negotiate such processes?

In addressing these questions, the paper will approach citizenship as a spatial process in which forms and practices of everyday urban life inform urban dwellers' ideas and feelings about their place within the social and spatial political order (Morange et al., 2018). Following these considerations, parkour will thus constitute an embodied and emplaced vantage point to explore post-migrant traceurs' navigation and negotiation of 'what it means to (not) belong' amid co-constitutive processes of migration, de-industrialisation and (neoliberal) urban regeneration. Via an integrated methodological approach that privileged the voices and experiences of about 30 young men aged 16–25, the paper will address the relevance of parkour in the participants' daily experiences and trajectories that will be discussed through the notions of *contingent citizenship* and *diaspora space* (Brah, 1996). The discussion will put to dialogue and expand both concepts to shed light on the ambivalent positioning and (in)visible spaces of belonging that emerged from the young men's engagement with Turin's cityscape. From such vantage point, the paper contributes to inter-disciplinary discussions on leisure, informal sports, urban citizenship, and conviviality.

## Methodology

This article draws on a corpus of qualitative data produced through a long-term ethnographic engagement with about 30 male traceurs aged between 16 and 25 in Turin. Following a 18 months-long fieldwork between 2014 and 2015, I made shorter (3 to 5 weeks long) ethnographic visits to

Turin once a year between 2016 and 2019. During this time, my first-hand engagement with parkour proved significantly helpful in gaining access and building relationships with the young men in the study. Throughout the research, I kept an ethnographic diary to reflexively consider how my own position as a White, middle-class, Italian academic influenced my experiences of parkour and/in Turin and my interactions with the young men in the study. Alongside this ethnographic writing, this paper draws on data generated with the research interlocutors through interviews (28) and group conversations (3), visual methodologies, including photo elicitation (Yi'En, 2014), co-creation and co-production with eight of the participants of a 32-min documentary film, and analysis of policy documents, media reports and websites related to Turin's urban renewal. This integrated, multi-method approach offered the possibility to articulate an ethnographic perspective taking place 'down below', on the sidewalks, street corners and back lots of the cityscape with an analysis of early twenty-first century Turin political economy. Furthermore, this *slow* and protracted ethnography allowed the time, flexibility and the possibility to adapt and address the fluid characteristics of the research context, including the participants' preferences in how to get involved in the study.

Most of the research interlocutors' families migrated to Italy from South America, North and Western Africa and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> All the participants were dedicated traceurs with different levels of experience, but were only marginally involved (beside occasionally participating in 'official' parkour events) in the practice's sportisation process; the latter was based in Turin as in other contexts on the creation of official associations and training spaces, the affiliation to national sporting federations and the adherence to international standards for parkour instructors (Sterchele & Ferrero Camoletto, 2017; Puddle et al., 2018).

During the research, approximately half of the traceurs were attending vocational courses, while the other half were constantly moving between highly precarious, low-paid and/or cash-in-hand occupations (e.g. as movers, builders, kitchen staff). Daily experiences of surveillance and suspicion, if not open hostility reinforced the interlocutors' marginalised position in Turin's social and spatial landscape. Relatedly, the participants often described their engagement with parkour as a consequence of their socioeconomic status and lack of affordable leisure opportunities, rather than as a conscious, deliberate choice. For many interlocutors, their interest in parkour started as a combination of sheer boredom, the practice's free participation and flexibility (e.g. no need for specific equipment or 'playing ground'), the affinity with children's games they loved (balancing on walls, climbing trees) and seeing other young men training in public spaces. Parkour practice in Turin's public spaces was male-dominated, and I seldom met female traceuses training in public spaces during the research. These missing research encounters reflect how parkour is still overall a male dominated practice, despite a growing number of female practitioners (Stagi, 2015). In this sense, it is fundamental to underline that this article offers a gendered perspective on issues of urban citizenship and belonging, as the discussion addresses the experiences, practices and negotiations of young male traceurs in Turin. Participants' names in this paper are fictional to protect respondents' privacy. For the same reason the name of the social project addressed in this paper has also been modified.

## A creative atmosphere: parkour, urban branding and contingent citizenship in Turin

After an unpleasant training session in the South of the city during which some residents (including young people) aggressively questioned our presence as we trained in a green area with some benches and walls, we show up with Lucio, Amir and Mouassin at a urban sport convention co-sponsored by the municipality and a number of "urban" clothing brands; the public-private, free, open-to-all event showcases all things urban (and physical cultural), from DJs and clothing stalls to ultimate frisbee and BMX, from skateboarding to calisthenics and parkour, all at the Parco Dora post-industrial park. Lucio, Amir and Mo wanted to check how things are, and the vibrant and celebratory atmosphere of the event seems to cheer up their mood a bit. Yet, when it comes to the structure created by Parkour Torino [the local parkour association] to offer taster

trainings and demonstrations, the looks among the three seem more perplexed. “That’s cool, but I don’t know . . .” mutters Mo unimpressed, “people seem to love it and have fun” I tease, “Yeah, I know . . . you get all you need in one space . . . but I am not sure the real thing is like that” When asking what he meant, he replied “You have seen it today, almost everywhere we go to train, at some point someone would come to bother us, it can be the man at the window telling us to get a job, the elderly who call the police . . . even guys of our age come to us and ask ‘why did you guys come to do your stuff here?’ I think these spaces are *just a bit too nice*, my problem with this is that it becomes easier to just stay in places like this and *you end up stopping training outside of these places . . .*” Soon after this exchange, the Parkour Torino traceurs noticed Lucio, Amir and Mo, warmly greeted and invited them to join a parkour showcase taking place there later that evening. “We are going to get quite some people excited with parkour at the event” the fellow traceurs enthusiastically predicted as they invited Lucio, Amir and Mo to join them. While the three eventually joined a free-movement session during which they exchanged moves and praises with other traceurs, they kindly declined to perform at the showcase due to previous commitments and an early work-start the following day. At the bus stop on the way home however, Lucio confessed being a bit tired of performing in front of people that “will clap you while on stage” and “hide their bags from you on the bus” (Fieldnotes, 16 September 2015, emphasis added)

Turin, in the North-West of Italy can be seen as a typical case of a post-industrial city that since the 1990s has engaged in a process of re-branding as an international hub of culture, innovation and tourism (Capello & Semi, 2018). In this case, the city’s repositioning as a ‘global city, minor’ (Sassen, 2009) was arguably achieved through the hosting of the Winter Olympic Games in 2006 that justified, enabled and accelerated a drastic reshaping of the ‘Italian Detroit’ (Pizzolato, 2008) from the city centre to the industrial periphery alike. Turin’s own way of being global has thus found physical expression through the production of aesthetically alluring, leisure-oriented, and consumption-enticing urban territories, including ‘regenerated’ gentrified neighbourhoods (Semi, 2015) flagship architectural landmarks and urban hubs (such as the post-industrial park of Parco Dora mentioned in the excerpt above). As similarly observed in other regenerating cities (Berglund, 2019; Romero, 2018), in Turin public-private initiatives aiming to ‘support the interaction between youth creativity, cultural production and urban re-qualification’ (Città di Torino, 2021) have increasingly identified youth (physical) cultural practices as a worth-investing part of the city’s cultural economy. The municipality and private actors started to support street-art as well as urban informal sporting initiatives/events in the formerly industrialised parts of the city (the event in the excerpt being one of those) as ways to rejuvenate, revitalise and rebrand these areas. Yet, managing cities as a landscape of leisure, tourism and events remains a highly excluding process, even when framed through urban agendas that celebrate culture, civic participation and urban diversity (Ahmadi, 2018; Binnie et al., 2006). In this sense, Turin’s spatial and social rebranding arguably failed to address, when not exacerbated many of the problems it ostensibly aspired to resolve (i.e. economic stagnation, unemployment, socio-spatial polarisation).

As in July 2015 The Guardian celebrated Turin as a ‘blueprint for the post-industrial city of the future’ the municipality figured as the second most indebted in Italy (Fondazione IFEL, 2018) and the poorest city in the industrial north of the country (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2013). Between 2016 and 2020, Turin had a 30–32% unemployment rate in the 15–29 age range (ISTAT, 2021), and in 2015, the city counted the highest number of evictions in a year in Italy (almost 5000) (De Martini Ugolotti, 2017) while welfare budget and services were drastically cut (Bolzoni, 2019). Concurrently, the construction of an inclusive, edgy, and consumer-oriented urban vision has been accompanied in Turin (as in and other cities) by increasing demands for surveillance, containment and expulsion of urban dwellers deemed as disorderly and damaging the city’s redeveloping image: the homeless and urban poor, undocumented migrants (and increasingly asylum seekers), political activists, and ‘disruptive’, often racialised youth (with these categories often intersecting) (see, Semi, 2015). Within these urban trends which reflected similar processes in other ‘regenerating’ post-industrial cities (Berglund, 2019; Binnie et al., 2006), the young traceurs occupied blurred and shifting positions. Their bodies and bodily performances would be valorised, and often essentialised when they provided authenticity to Turin’s vibrant, edgy and cosmopolitan image in its creative urban hubs and entertainment

districts. Yet, skin colour, an accent, a ‘suspect’ or ‘improper’ practice, such as training parkour in a public, yet not designated area would be sufficient to be perceived as damaging the order and image of urban spaces, and usually resulted in heightened and pro-active policing and harassment (De Martini Ugolotti & Silk, 2018; see Figure 1).

You can have a document (ID card) that says you are an Italian citizen, like I have, *but if your face says something else*, you know Moroccan, Senegalese, Romanian . . . you remain that, and the people you meet in the streets, they treat you just like that: a foreigner . . . and since all the “good foreigners” are busting their asses cleaning offices or homes, in some kitchen, or in a construction site, those you see out in the street are all the bad ones up to no good, and that would be us (laughs) that’s what all the people who comes to bother us when we train must think . . . (Samba, 23 years old)



**Figure 1.** Police interrupting an informal parkour training and taking one participant to the local police station for ID checks (on immigration status) (Photo by Abdelrazak).

The participants’ engagement with parkour appeared far from being simply a means to unequivocally, if controversially, re-claim space and a sense of rightful presence in the city. The ways in which the participants’ parkour practice shifted from a celebrated manifestation of urban vibrancy to a symptom of urban disorder overlapped with the selective inclusion of their racialised, classed and gendered presence in urban spaces. These dynamics revealed how differential forms of inclusion operated a “dirty work of boundary maintenance” (Crowley, 1999, p. 24, see also, Yuval-Davis, 2011) sifting through markers and practices of (un)acceptable difference across specific spatial and temporal urban settings.

Experiences of being considered at the same time as (not)belonging according to specific spatial and temporal contexts seemed all too evident in Mo, Lucio and Samba’s lucid, disenchanting and ambivalent accounts of a regenerating city. Moreover, the young men’s accounts started to outline their suspended and blurred membership in Turin’s public life, that I address in this paper as contingent citizenship; a semi-permanent ‘on probation’ membership status. This status is often contingent on the capacity (or willingness) of specific racialised, classed and gendered bodies to contribute to a palatable and visible urban image of vibrancy and diversity and/or to the invisible, precarious workforce sustaining regeneration processes.

Discussions regarding forms of *contingent* and *precarious* citizenship have been important to unpack the legal and bureaucratic configurations of welfare policies and citizenship deprivation laws in European countries (UK, France, Belgium, etc.; Fargues, 2017; Lafleur & Mescoli, 2018; Mantu, 2015). These analyses have highlighted how increasing concerns surrounding citizenship, welfare, migration and asylum in Europe have intensified legislative efforts that have redefined and restricted citizenship entitlements, and access to public services for (post)migrants and the urban poor. These critical socio-legal perspectives have thus illuminated how legislative and welfare

frameworks are effectively redefining ‘who deserves to belong’ in several European nations. This paper expands the analytical purchase of these analyses on contingent citizenship by addressing these processes beyond a focus on legal and bureaucratic procedures. Consequently, this paper addresses how shifting configurations of citizenship emerge at the intersection of legal/bureaucratic frameworks and processes of conditional inclusion that materialise in the texture of everyday urban life. In this way, this paper’s discussion of contingent citizenship highlights the multiplicity of actors, institutions and relationalities involved in the definition of ‘who deserves to belong’ in changing urban contexts.

In this sense, the young men’s experiences of contingent citizenship in Turin were not exclusively shaped by the Italian restrictive citizenship legislation and welfare regimes; Nor they were *only* defined by urban processes that in binding place-branding, market revitalisation and social good contributed to render specific urban bodies simultaneously visible for celebration *and* containment (De Martini Ugolotti & Silk, 2018). As De Koning et al. (2015) underlined, articulations of (urban) citizenship are always shaped by a wide array of overlapping and at times competing public and private actors: from national law-makers and local authorities to corporate investors and non-for-profit organisations. In this sense, to understand the young traceurs’ experiences as contingent citizens in Turin is also fundamental to explore their relationship with public-private, community-oriented initiatives; in particular, those aiming to *empower* disenfranchised young people while aiming to *rebrand* peripheral urban areas through informal (physical) cultural practices. It is to these relationship that I turn in the next section.

### ‘Empowering’ contingent citizens: civic participation, informal sports and the right to the (rebranding) city

“Karim and I have attended for a couple of years this group of people, some of them our age, who weekly meet in an association not far from where my father lives [...] When they realised we were doing parkour they asked us to show and teach something in a community event they did in summer in the public gardens they help to manage . . . that was amazing, people loved the session, but more importantly I felt I was giving back something through what I knew, and people were seeing the value of who I am and what I do” (Marcos, interview, 6 September 2015)

“The project’s objectives provide to the area *positive models of occupation of public spaces*, in order to *foster the re-appropriation of places by those who live in the neighbourhood*, with particular attention to boys and girls *through cultural and sporting animation* [...] to *identify positive leaderships and empower young people* willing to be actively involved and made responsible of the use of public space [...] *the realization of a neighbourhood brand, actions of local marketing and creation of merchandise products with project’s users* [...] *all the actions aim to valorise neighbourhood youth human capital and competences*” (Living and Learning Together, Program Project 2014-2015, Operative Plan, pp.2-5 emphasis added)

The domain of informal sports has gained an increased attention amid urban analyses and debates surrounding the construction of community-oriented and inclusive cities (Aquino et al., 2020; Wise et al., 2018). While academic perspectives have highlighted the significance of informal sports in facilitating intercultural encounters in cities, the translation of these calls in specific urban policies have been arguably rarer to observe. This makes Turin’s urban policies on the topic a relevant case to explore, one with broader relevance for other informal sports and urban contexts. Drawing on a progressive ‘sport for all’ policy approach (De Martini Ugolotti, 2017), in the last two decades Turin’s municipality has actively integrated informal sport-focused programmes in urban policies with the aim to rebrand urban spaces through the ‘empowerment’ and participation of local groups and grassroots associations. This has led to the implementation of an array of localised public-private initiatives aiming to ‘recover and redevelop local residual areas through the participation of citizens and local communities’ (Comune di Torino, 2014) and facilitate ‘socialisation and collective participation’ through informal sport participation<sup>4</sup> (Comune di Torino, 2014).



The presence of a number of localised public-private initiatives aiming to employ informal sports to foster civic participation and rebrand peripheral, ‘incident prone’ urban areas is thus relevant for the discussion of this paper and for broader analyses on informal sports, urban governance and the right to the city. First of all, while equipped with a healthy dose of pragmatism and *desconfiança* (diffidence) (as Mario would put it) the young men in the study were often very keen to *participate* to initiatives and activities (including the research I was conducting) that offered them ways to voice and address everyday and wider issues in their lives. In this sense, as Marcos hinted in the excerpt above, parkour constituted an important way through which he and other young men in the study sought to affirm their worth and to be valued for ‘who they were’ and ‘what they did’. Secondly, public-private ‘community regeneration’ initiatives often acted as the most accessible point of contact with public institutions in the participants’ everyday lives, for example, by providing information and support to access specific resources (from training courses to job opportunities). Between 2015 and 2018 some of the participants were approached and became involved for short periods as youth leaders in a series of activities lead by the LTT community initiative: a public-private project aiming to work with young people in specific ‘problem’ neighbourhoods and to involve them in the ‘positive reappropriation’ of urban spaces (see second excerpt above and De Martini Ugolotti, 2017). These initiatives arguably resonated with previously mentioned models of neoliberal urban governance that could be seen as incorporating ideas and practices concerned with ‘reclaiming the city’ through bottom-up urban interventions. These initiatives often evoked the Lefebvrian ‘right to the city’ to promote the creation of vibrant and ‘participated’ urban spaces (see Figure 2). As some authors have underlined (Blokland et al., 2015; Mayer, 2013), neoliberal urban strategies in the Global North have thus provided issues of urban citizenship and the right to the city a renewed significance but also rendered them inherently ambivalent against a background of intensifying economic and spatial inequalities and increasing nativism. These ambivalences and tensions emerged in the context of the study, where the hostile reactions of various urban residents to the participants’ use of public space was often clearly related to their racialised ‘otherness’ and was not so pervasive for traceurs who did not ‘look’ or ‘sound foreign’ (see De Martini Ugolotti, 2017). The ambivalent relationship that most of the participants had with the project that aimed to ‘empower’ them through parkour could be seen as indicative of the distance between the initiative’s aims and participants’ realities, which Dragan eloquently summarised in an interview in 2018:

I think that they always wanted to help with the best intentions and actually provided some opportunities that we could not really access elsewhere [Dragan refers to part-time paid roles as youth leaders, courses and “up-skilling” opportunities, travelling, including abroad, to youth meetings etc.] . . . but they did not completely understand what was most important for us, for some of us at least, or maybe they could not do anything about it . . . All along they seemed to keep thinking that all we needed was a legitimate space to train but we made clear we’d rather have them to vouch for us when we trained around in the city and had to deal with racist pensioners, grumpy shop-keepers and policemen . . . but this never went anywhere . . . they’d rather have us manage a nice parkour/gym space to get the local youth involved and all that, but again *all on us* . . . it was then that I told them, no hard feelings, but not for me (Dragan, interview, 1 September 2018, emphasis added)

In her examination of urban movements in the Global North, Margit Mayer (2013), argued that the appropriation of movement principles such as self-management, self-realisation and all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity has become a generative force in today’s neoliberalising cities. However, as Mayer (2013) cautioned, these programmes and the concomitant public discourse tweak the purpose of participation: they are designed to encourage activation and self-responsibilisation rather than political empowerment. Participatory initiatives in urban settings have thus been critiqued for setting up scenarios of ‘impotent participation’ (Swyngedouw, 2011) that can end up reinforcing rather than reducing urban inequalities and can disguise partial representations of the city as (supposedly) reflecting shared ideas of ‘common good’ (Bolzoni, 2019; De Martini Ugolotti & Silk, 2018). While Dragan’s words arguably hinted to some of these critiques, the point here is not to question the intentions or results of civic participation initiatives



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Figure 2. Flyer of a community programme employing sport to “reclaim your space” in the city. (Photo by author).

aiming to include informal sport participants. Rather, these initiatives are relevant to examine how the attempts to include and ‘empower’ the traceurs in the study as youth leaders illuminated the ambivalent relationship between informal sporting practices, the right to the city and contingent citizenship in Turin. In other words, the participants’ relationship with projects like LTT, which tended to (dis)solve social and political issues into economic ones (e.g. by associating youth spatial practices to the rebranding and economic revitalisation of urban areas) captured further ambiguous stories of selective recognition and inclusion. Significantly, in a social and political context in which access to public services was diminished by budget cuts and citizenship rights were not available to a significant number of urban dwellers (as in many cases for migrants and their children), the role of public-private initiatives often acted as facilitating access to resources in the urban areas where they intervened. Yet, if area-based initiatives often worked in enabling what Uitermark (2014) defined as *surrogate citizenship*, at the same time they also unwittingly filtered the access to resources to

(young) individuals willing to become responsible of the use of public spaces (as per LTT operative plan above). In this way, these interventions significantly made urban dwellers' 'responsibility' for the revitalisation of their neighbourhoods an implicit prerequisite to support their rightful claims to the city. In other words, these interventions unwittingly but arguably contributed to the stratification of precarious urban dwellers' access to opportunities and resources based on their 'deservingness' (see also Lafleur & Mescoli, 2018). Nevertheless, as the data in these sections hinted, the young men in the study continuously attempted to navigate and negotiate these processes through parkour. The following final section addresses these negotiations by discussing the participants' engagement with parkour as an emergent, temporary yet productive means through which they situationally redefined the city as a *diaspora space* (Brah, 1996).

### (En)countering contingent citizenship: parkour, urban margins and diaspora spaces

So, when the guys of the project kept asking us "why don't you want to set up a training space, we'll help you with the bureaucracy" and "it might change the way people look at you in the streets when they see what you are doing here" I did not know exactly what to reply, but I just knew it was not for me, you know? And here's the thing, it's not my problem to convince people that I am not the threat they think I am, my parents and their generation have been trying to do that since they came here, and nothing much changed for them or for us, so I am going to keep training where it is most interesting to me and my friends because that's how we have fun and express ourselves . . . it might not make me look good to some people's eyes or not make things for the better but I can live with that (laughs) (Samba, interview 2 September 2017)

Being dark "and handsome!" (adds Raheem laughing) attracts quite some attention when we train around, and not all of it is good (laughs) . . . We still do our things regardless, but places like abandoned factories, underground-parking . . . they give you possibilities that other places do not . . . there are no families, shop-owners, police . . . *just us and the walls* (Alex and Raheem, 8 July 2015, emphasis added)

The previous two sections addressed the idea of contingent citizenship as capturing ambivalent experiences and manifestations of belonging in Turin's post-industrial and regenerating cityscape. The notion of contingent citizenship thus addresses a tenuous form of membership that is *partial*, *conditional* and *relational* and creates blurred urban and political subjects who could be defined as either citizens-aliens/aliens-citizens. Socio-legal analyses have employed the concept to highlight the emergence of legislative and policy reforms aimed to police and redefine the boundaries of the nation, and who belongs to it, among widespread debates regarding migration, asylum, welfare and citizenship entitlements across European countries (Fargues, 2017; Lafleur & Mescoli, 2018; Mantu, 2015). In the context of the study, the concept of contingent citizenship expanded these analyses to explore how urban dwellers' positioning within the social and spatial political order emerge not only as a reflection of their legal status but also with and through the forms and practices of everyday urban life.

The idea of contingent citizenship thus illuminates the multi-faceted processes of boundary-making that filter, manage and selectively include racialised, classed and gendered bodies in and through different spatial and temporal frames in regenerating cityscapes. In the case of this study, these processes manifested through the celebration and pathologisation of the participants' bodies in regenerated urban areas but also through narratives (and expectations) of empowerment, participation, and responsibility. Therefore, the contingent citizen can be seen as an ambivalent, in-between position between Isin's active and activist citizen (Isin, 2008). For Isin (2008) the active citizen acts out already created scripts and positions of belonging and civic participation and the activist citizen disrupts them to carve spaces of political action. Between them, this paper discussed the contingent citizen as a blurred political subject navigating the intersection of national regimes of differential rights mostly affecting migrants and their children (Fargues, 2017; Hepworth & Hamilton, 2014; Mantu, 2015) and urban regeneration narratives tying citizenship to responsibility and deservingness (Van Schipstal & Nicholls, 2014; Blokland et al., 2015; Lafleur & Mescoli, 2018; De Martini Ugolotti & Silk, 2018).

However, focusing on the participants' obstinate training presence across Turin's cityscape contributed to highlight not only how unequal topographies of power emerged through the participants' engagement with parkour and the city, but also how the young men in the study tentatively, situationally but productively navigated and negotiated them. As conveyed in Samba's account, these negotiations were enabled and enacted through their engagement with parkour, but were not explicitly directed at addressing urban and social inequalities in the form of labour exploitation, housing conditions or racism. Rather, they implied creative, physical and affective engagements with innumerable, often unremarkable urban spaces (e.g. public parks, driveways, parking lots, pedestrian pathways and flyovers, abandoned buildings) as unexpected means to redefine the forms of conditional belonging that were inscribed on their bodies and in the spaces where they lived, crossed and trained (see [Figure 3](#)).

In other words, the focus on parkour is significant to discuss how the participants' engagement with the practice enabled them to (en)counter their contingent citizenship by redefining the city, and its unremarkable features as spaces where 'new forms of belonging and otherness are appropriated and contested' (Brah, 1996, p. 243). Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space is fundamental here to address the relevance and engagement that the young men in the study had with the urban spaces in which they lived and trained, despite possibilities to access more 'legitimate' practicing grounds and social positions. Firstly, by addressing the constitution of diaspora spaces based on a 'homing desire' rather than on a 'desire for the homeland' (p. 16), Brah's work highlighted diaspora as 'a condition that is "inhabited" not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous' (Brah, 1996, p. 16). In this sense, Brah's concept highlighted how the participants' embodied and emplaced engagement with the city contributed to forms of commonality that emerged also because of intersecting experiences of spatial and social displacement (e.g. discrimination, economic and housing precarity, subordinate assimilation) instead of a shared 'origin', language, etc.:

We were in class together, and probably the reason why we started to get closer to each other at the end of the second year was that no one else would ... so take a Peruvian, a Moroccan, and a Romanian, put them together and shake (laughs) ... We often quarrelled but regardless we kept coming back training together ... and thinking of it now ... we were lifting each other up when everything else was putting us down ... no money, your family changing home and jobs every year, forget about school and what comes after ... we realised quite soon that we actually had a lot in common with a lot of other guys we trained with, for us it made no difference what language we spoke at home ... so parkour for us became like that thing we talked about ... if there was a dinner with only Moroccan youth, I'd go there and I wouldn't exactly know what to say and what



**Figure 3.** Alex and Cosmin training on a passage-way wall (image from participatory documentary).

to do, the same if at the same table there were only Italian youth, I'd sit there without exactly knowing what to do . . . but in parkour it was fine . . . because we had to figure a way that worked for us to go from one place to the other, you know? (Abdel, interview, 5 September 2018)

One day Abdel came to us saying let's start training parkour . . . At the beginning I wasn't interested at all, it was more because Abel kept on calling me out to train, and I said "Ok let's do these things, jumps, kongs [Parkour movements] I don't really have anything else to do, right?" . . . but then it struck me, it was like, "we are always stuck by these stupid grey walls, I might just as well learn to climb them, these guys in the video just did it . . . and you know what? there's plenty of walls and other shapes to climb and jump on around here, so why not playing with them?" (Lucio, interview, 16 July 2015)

Abdel and Lucio's accounts meaningfully resonated with the particular kind of 'politics of location' articulated through diaspora spaces. With this, Brah underlined how spaces are simultaneously physical and metaphorical means for the assertion and negotiation of 'psychological, sexual, spiritual, cultural, class and racialised boundaries' (p. 198). Brah's politics of location highlighted how (urban) spaces become part of the uneven reproduction and negotiation of identification, difference, solidarity, and belonging that take place in everyday social domains across intersecting social positions. Significantly, in the participants' accounts such politics of location unfolded during their everyday lives and parkour practice also *as and through* embodied intensities ranging from pain, 'stress', rage, isolation, to care, fun and attachment to place and each other (see De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). In other words, these embodied intensities *emerged with* urban spaces and surfaces as involved, practical and engaged interlocutors of their daily practices and negotiations of precariousness, marginality and selective inclusion, instead of inert backgrounds for action):

"I learnt to love the ground: I step, I lean, I sweep, I fall, I slip on it, I make it shake. I use it and I fear it when my hands and feet take off in a jump. I never look at it, but I always feel it . . . yes, I learnt to know it as if through it I could know me . . . the ground is not always the same, it is alive, it is a mirror, It is my ally to trick you, to escape from you, to move with you in this city where we both live" (Samba, poetry, July 2015)

Even some traceurs think we are not serious because we do not train in the [parkour] gyms, or want to become instructors . . . I guess it all depends on how you look at the same thing, if you focus on the moves only, then you will probably see the sport or the performer, if you look at the space where you move, then you see parkour . . . we train in these spots because this is where we live anyway, and finding new "hidden treasures" and ways to move matters to us . . . You learn to live surrounded by concrete by landing, and falling on concrete, you know what I mean? (Naso, 23 years, September 2019)

This expanded engagement with diaspora space allowed to address how unremarkable, in-between urban spaces and the ways they were redefined through parkour *actively participated* in the constitution of domains of belonging and commonality among the young traceurs (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). In this sense, authors underlined the role of urban planning and design in facilitating conviviality (Aquino et al., 2020; Neal et al., 2015; Rishbeth & Rogaly, 2018) in divided and unequal urban contexts. Yet, the notion of diaspora space as adopted in this study captures a different way in which the spatial organisation and material infrastructure of cities bring to the fore (im)possibilities of urban encounters across difference. In other words, it emphasises how the innumerable urban margins emerging from processes of de-industrialisation and regeneration offered and were (re)made spaces to dwell and live together by the young traceurs within a city marked by the socio-economic consequences of de-industrialisation and the exacerbating divisions of neoliberal urbanisation.

In this sense, the notions of contingent citizenship and diaspora spaces integrate each other by articulating how experiences of (not)belonging among the young men in the study were shaped by wider urban processes and regimes of differential rights, but were also temporarily, yet productively negotiated through mundane, marginal and informal practices and *spaces*. Such double perspective on the relationship between informal sports and urban inequalities can reveal the blurred political subjects produced by urban and spatial processes of differential inclusion 'where "inside" and "outside" becomes an ever more unstable line in diversifying contexts' (Ye, 2019, p. 490).



**Figure 4.** “The drive-way by the Mac” One of the favourite training spots for the traceurs in the study (image from participatory documentary).



**Figure 5.** “The bridge” another cherished training spot.

Nevertheless, it can also contribute to reveal how these processes are incessantly negotiated, eroded and displaced through mundane leisure and physical cultural practices that emerge within, despite and because overlapping forms of inequality and displacement.

## Conclusions

By following the parkour practices of a group of post-migrant young men aged 16–25 in Turin, Italy, this paper engaged with the notions of contingent citizenship and diaspora space as connected lenses to address how experiences of (not)belonging are shaped and shared, experienced and negotiated through informal sporting domains in unequal urban contexts. Through this double lens, this paper aimed to contribute to and complicate existing discussions that addressed informal sporting practices as means to negotiate forms of belonging for precarious and marginalised urban populations. Addressing how the post-migrant men in the study experienced Turin’s rebranding cityscape through their engagement with parkour, the notion of contingent citizenship illuminated the emergence of blurred political subjects who were simultaneously celebrated, responsabilised and pathologised in urban regeneration processes. Discussions of informal sporting practices as

enabling racialised and migrant populations to claim a right to the city were arguably complicated in Turin. In this context, multiple regeneration initiatives that incorporated this idea(l) arguably created a 'vortex of rights' (Kuymulu, 2013) that watered down and obfuscated the utopian and radical potential of Lefebvre's concept. Coupled with the examination of the participants' experiences of contingent citizenship, the notion of diaspora space advances instead a possible perspective to approach how domains of belonging can emerge from informal sporting practices and from the spaces they create with(in) unequal urban contexts and processes. By *expanding* Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space to capture the intensities through which belonging and difference are embodied and emplaced, lived and negotiated in everyday urban life, this paper highlighted how the participants' engagement with parkour did not oppose their conditional inclusion, nor advanced specific claims in Turin's public life and polity; it exceeded instead the young traceurs' contingent legitimisation as 'assets' or 'responsible/empowered citizens' via their thick engagement with often unremarkable spaces that in many cases constituted the 'leftovers' of urban regeneration processes and rhythms (e.g. unused parking lots, abandoned factories/buildings, etc.).

Highlighting how leftover, in-between urban spaces and post-industrial ruins could become (diaspora) spaces of belonging through parkour does not aim to romanticise the urban margins (or parkour), nor to diminish the importance of engaging with the role of urban planning and design in shaping the possibilities of urban encounters across difference. Yet, the notion of diaspora space underlined the apparently irrelevant practices and spaces through which the participants shared urban life and everyday struggles, and cared about another while navigating uneven urban changes and regimes of differential rights. In this sense, the gaps, crevices and in-between spaces that often constituted the traceurs' playgrounds (e.g. abandoned buildings and factories, parking lots and underground passageways) emblematically symbolised Turin's unfinished post-industrial regeneration and the unequal spatial and social processes that accompanied it. Yet, at the same time, through the traceurs' practices these leftover spaces did not emerge as unused and unusable urban voids but as structuring of transient yet productive urban domains and intensities of belonging, care and relationality. Consequently, the combined lenses of contingent citizenship and diaspora space highlighted the ambivalent ways in which informal sporting practices and the spaces they create come to matter in different ways across different spatial, social and temporal contexts in contemporary cities shaped by uneven, less-than-coherent and multi-scalar processes. This perspective can thus underline how, by looking at informal leisure practices, and the urban crevices and gaps in which they often take place, it can be possible to grasp the emergence of practices of belonging and ways of seeing and inhabiting the city that interrogate and (re)articulate notions of urban citizenship, conviviality and the right to the city.

## Notes

1. See De Martini Ugolotti (2015), De Martini Ugolotti and Moyer (2016) and Thorpe and Wheaton (2021).
2. The term 'post-migrant' is used in this paper to highlight the ambivalent social positioning which many children of migration occupy. The term underlines how children of immigrants embody the 'posterity of immigration' (Sayad, 2004) of their parents/families. Yet, they continue to be often considered 'foreigners' in the countries where they were born and/or lived most of their lives.
3. The traceurs' families came from Romania, Brazil, Morocco, Egypt, Senegal, Nigeria, Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, Peru, Dominican Republic. Only two of the more than 30 participants in the study were born in Italy from parents who were born in Italy themselves.
4. The initiatives included a wide range of informal sporting practices like street football and volleyball as well as other informal physical activities such as ultimate frisbee, tag and tchoukball.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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