# Parkour, The Affective Appropriation of Urban Space, and the Real/Virtual Dialectic

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Parkour is a new sport based on athletically and artistically overcoming urban obstacles. In this paper, I argue that the real world practices of parkour are dialectically intertwined with the virtual worlds made possible by information and communication technologies. My analysis of parkour underscores how globalized ideas and images available through the Internet and other media can be put into practice within specific locales. Practitioners of parkour, therefore, engage their immediate, physical world at the same time that they draw upon an imagination enabled by their on-screen lives. As such, urban researchers need to consider the ways that virtual worlds can change and enhance how individuals understand and utilize the material spaces of the city.

## EMPLACEMENT IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

With the increasing integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into our lives, more and more of our daily interactions take place "on screen" (Turkle 1995). Castells (1996) refers to this as a culture of real virtuality. In this process, the experiences of our physically situated, corporeal selves are becoming intertwined with the virtual presentation of our selves online (cf. Gottschalk 2010; Ito et al. 2010; Turkle 2011; Williams 2006). It is tempting, perhaps, to dichotomize on-screen and off-screen life. One is "real"—connected to the obdurate reality of time and space and hemmed in by biological limits and social inequalities (e.g., Robins 1995). The other is "virtual"—free-floating and filled with nearly limitless potential (e.g., Rheingold 1993). Over the last decade, however, numerous researchers have begun to emphasize the ways virtual worlds and the real world are actually interconnected (cf. Castells 2009; Haythornwaite and Wellman 2002; Wellman 2004). Instead of seeing a disconnect between time on-screen and time off-screen, researchers have shown that participation in virtual communities can facilitate participation in face-to-face interactions (e.g., Collins and Wellman 2010; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2001; Stern and Dillman 2006).

The focus of this paper is related to, but is also distinct from, these previous strands of literature. Instead of exploring the relationship between ICTs and community, my argument centers on ICTs and physical space. Specifically, how are the virtual worlds of on-screen life *emplaced* (cf. Gieryn 2000) in the real world? Such a question may appear

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misguided. After all, virtual worlds do not have a material existence—this is the very nature of their appeal. But, as long as there are humans inhabiting these virtual worlds, users must be emplaced somewhere (cf. Massey 2005). More importantly, as long as humans have lives off-screen, the real and the virtual will be interconnected. To this end, this paper reports on the practices of parkour as a specific example of the physical emplacement of a virtual world, and the concurrent virtual displacement of the real world.

Parkour is a new urban sport. However, most practitioners eschew the term "sport" and refer to it as a "discipline." Parkour involves the athletic and artistic negotiation of ledges, railings, staircases, and walls—everyday structures that become "obstacles" to creatively move around, over, and through. As I will show, traceurs (the name for practitioners of parkour) have a very active and direct engagement with their material environment (also see Bavinton 2007; Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011). At the same time, however, parkour is a set of practices inseparable from their dissemination on the Internet. By analyzing parkour and the Internet, therefore, social researchers can better grasp the dialectical connection between the virtual and real world. We can see how diffuse, globalized interactions become realized in *specific* locales by unique local actors—in this case, Chicago and its surrounding suburbs—by young men and women training in parkour.

I argue that the relevance of physical space can actually be renewed through the inhabiting of virtual worlds. As the spatial barriers to socializing over vast distances are torn down, traceurs are still emplaced. Further, for those taking part in the practices of parkour, the spatial barriers of the city (i.e., the various physical forms that contour the environment) are transformed into playful obstacles to jump, run, and vault over. Concurrently, I will show that such off-screen practices are tethered to life on-screen.

## PLACE, SPACE, AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Outside the discipline of geography, social theorists have often been reticent to bring physical space into their analyses (e.g., Gans 1969, 2002; for commentary on the antispatial position see Gieryn 2002a; Kidder 2009; Lofland 1998). This is not, however, to claim that social research ignores the material environment. To the contrary, as Gieryn (2000) shows, there has long been a "space for place" in sociology. To list just a few recent examples, Fenway Park has been studied as a public symbol within Boston (Borer 2006), the perceived legitimacy of hip-hop has been linked to the designation of place (Cheyne and Binder 2010), and geographic placement has been shown to be integral to the discourse of suburban youth (Kato 2011). Culling through the annals of sociology one will also find analyses of how individuals conceptualize the city (e.g., Suttles 1984; Wohl and Strauss 1958) and numerous studies about the meanings people attach to their communities and neighborhoods (e.g., Bell 1994; Firey 1944; Small 2004; Suttles 1968).

This literature tends to focus on place. In particular, social researchers have been interested in the meanings people attach to their environment. Less common is a theoretical engagement with space itself. Space is the abstract and asocial aspects of the material environment—direction, distance, shape, size, and volume (cf. Gieryn 2000). The sociological study of space is analytically distinct from the study of place (cf. Kidder 2011). The latter is focused on the signification of specific locations; the former is interested in the ways physical structures are incorporated *into* social action. In other words, the material world is a structure and (just like a social structure) it *influences* (in various ways) the perpetuation of social worlds (cf. Lefebvre 1976 [1991]; Pred 1986; Soja 1980 [1989]).

At the same time, once enacted, these spatial practices become emplaced in the material world.

The value of the sociological study of space can be seen in my own analysis of bike messengers (Kidder 2011), as well as the analysis of skateboarders (Borden 2001). Both groups represent subcultures that are enabled and constrained (cf. Giddens 1984) by material environments (also see Gieryn 2002b). Messengers and skaters develop self-identities based around their risky (and, in some cases, counter-intuitive) uses of the urban environment. Bike messengers, for example, weave in and out of gridlocked traffic and run red lights in making their deliveries. Skateboarders ollie and grind their boards over and across curbs, railings, and stairs. Ultimately, the subcultural meanings of messengers and skaters are intertwined with their engagement in and with physical space—or, more specifically, what I call the affective appropriation of space. Messengers and skaters may develop attachments to the places they inhabit, but their subcultures are not predicated on such meanings. Their subcultures develop through their spatial practices. That is, their subcultures are based around the ways they actually move through and manipulate their environment.

Missing from these previous socio-spatial studies is an adequate appreciation for what Appadurai (1993 [1996]) calls global ethnoscapes. Which is to say, spatial practices, though always localized in some place, are not necessarily local products.[1] Instead, with the advancement and proliferation of ICTs, the practices observed by social researchers are increasingly local manifestations of a hybrid, globalized culture. As Appadurai explains, "[Ordinary life] no longer occurs within a relatively bounded set of thinkable postures but is always skidding and taking off, powered by the imagined vistas of mass-mediated master narratives" (p. 55). In the case of bike messengers and skateboarders, both are global subcultures, and the practices taking place in one locale influence (and are influenced by) practices happening elsewhere. As such, the affective appropriation of space needs to be conceptualized as part of a larger dialectical process in which ICTs help mediate the real world emplacements of virtual worlds (cf. Wellman 2001).

This paper seeks to help fill the virtual gap within the socio-spatial literature, as well as add to the study of ICTs' sociological effects by researching how virtual worlds are emplaced in the real, physical world, and (vice versa) how the real world is displaced through ICTs. As such, we gain a much more complete understanding of our day-to-day lives—lives that increasingly mix our off-screen and on-screen selves. We will see this by analyzing parkour—a local and global practice, a real and virtual social world. I will show that traceurs affectively appropriate urban space and their embodied, emotional practices arise from the globalized ethnoscape of parkour's virtual domains (e.g., YouTube and various websites). With parkour, therefore, we see that life on-screen and life off-screen are not a dichotomous either-or distinction. Further, though just as tethered to ICTs as any group of young people (cf. Ito et al. 2010), through their enactment of parkour, traceurs are playfully and creatively engaged with their immediate, material world—not disconnected from the real world as many pundits fear (e.g., Aboujaoude 2011; Nie 2001; Turkle 2011).

STUDYING PARKOUR

The data for this paper derive from a year and a half of semi-regular participant-observation among traceurs in the greater Chicagoland area—an area chosen for its

convenience as well as its prominence in the Midwest parkour community. Although the theoretical focus of this research hinges on the interconnection of virtual and real worlds, my interest is in how parkour is lived in practice—off-screen. Thus, in the traditional sense of ethnography, I embedded myself as much as possible in my field site and worked to develop rapport within the social world via face-to-face interactions. In other words, though the Internet was used as a resource in data gathering, this paper is not an example of online ethnography (e.g., Hine 2000). Likewise, this is not a multi-sited ethnography (e.g., Marcus 1995); it is about parkour as it is practiced in and around Chicago. I am interested in the global interplay of images and information, but my interest is in how these things are localized in a specific place.

Active participation in the practice of parkour can generally be broken down into two categories: "jamming" and "training." Training involves a small number of traceurs (i.e., somewhere between one to five traceurs) focusing on coordination and strength development for parkour. Jamming is more of a parkour-oriented party. People can and do train at jams, but the general focus of a jam is social. They are a time to watch and learn from other traceurs, while also showcasing one's talents. Over the course of my fieldwork, I attended 20 jams. Two were three-day events attracting traceurs throughout the Midwest. Most were weekly events in downtown Chicago at Grant Park. Ten to 30 people usually attended these jams, and they ranged from neophytes to experienced traceurs. I also participated in two training sessions with different suburban parkour groups. In addition, I attended five indoor gymnastic gym training sessions.

My interest in parkour arose out of my previous research on bike messengers. The creative and unique ways traceurs make use of the urban environment has distinct parallels for furthering my interest in the sociological analysis of material space. However, as a college professor in his mid-30s with (at best) average physical coordination and a general aversion to bodily injury, I find the vast majority of parkour practices highly stressful and anxiety producing (cf. Saville 2008). Despite this, for my first several months of fieldwork, I actively participated in parkour training. Especially in gymnastic gyms, which are soft and relatively safe environments, I wholeheartedly practiced parkour. Outside the gym, my participation was far more reserved. I did conditioning and warm-up exercises with the traceurs and trained small jumps and low-level wall climbing. This facilitated my understanding of parkour practice, as well as aided in developing rapport among traceurs. I was never treated as a complete insider; my age, clumsiness, and general lack of courage set me apart. But I did become a regular fixture at jams, and my identity as someone planning to write about parkour was well known and generally appreciated.

Beyond my participant-observation among Chicagoland traceurs and the informal interviews that always accompany such engagement, I formally interviewed 22 traceurs. These individuals ranged in experience from just a few weeks of parkour training to over a decade. They also varied from people with limited parkour-related social connections to traceurs with vast on-screen and off-screen social networks within the local and national parkour community. Further, like the people in this study, my time spent in the physical co-presence of other traceurs was supplemented by time reading about and watching parkour online. My analytic approach followed a blending of the extended case method (Burawoy 1991)—looking for ways to improve my ideas about the affective appropriation of space—and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967)—allowing theoretical analysis to be driven by empirical observations. I coded my field notes and interviews for recurring themes and patterns, and these initial codes were then organized into conceptually

relevant categories and coded more selectively (cf. Lofland et al. 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

African-Americans, Asians, Latinos, and whites all regularly attended jams in Chicago. Whites, however, were almost always the majority. Class backgrounds seemed reasonably mixed with traceurs coming from working and middle class suburbs, as well as affluent and poor neighborhoods within Chicago. There was far less variance in terms of age and gender. Which is to say, parkour is a discipline performed largely by males in their late teens and early 20s. Within the sociology of sports there is a vast literature addressing the ways young men and women utilize various alternative sporting practices in the construction of gender identities (e.g., Beal 1996; Evers 2004; Thorpe 2010; Waitt and Warren 2008; Wheaton 2002). In the present analysis, I bracket questions about gender to focus on how traceurs—male and female—enacted a real/virtual dialectic as they took part in parkour.

Most of the traceurs in my study were public figures in the parkour community. That is, they were known locally and many routinely posted comments, photos, and videos of their parkour exploits online. Because of their public profiles and the fact that very little (if any) of this research is of a sensitive nature to the people in it, I have not followed usual sociological conventions of confidentiality for informants. Instead, I allowed my respondents to decide if they would like their real names or a pseudonym used. Many traceurs were already known by nicknames, and in most cases I have used these nicknames. For traceurs that did not use nicknames, in most instances, their real first names are used. In cases when I could not get in touch with former respondents, I have erred on the side of caution and used fictional pseudonyms. Following Duneier (1999), though, I believe the practices of journalists are actually a more honest and open method for conducting certain (but certainly not all) sociological research projects.

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

THE ART OF MOVEMENT

What is Parkour?

In the late 1980s, a group of teenagers from the Paris suburb of Lisses began implementing military fitness techniques as a method for playing in their immediate surroundings (cf. Alosi 2009; Atkinson 2009; Christie 2003). Their term for their activities was "parkour," a neologism derived from the French word for race route: *parcours*. Visualizing a gymnastics routine performed on asphalt and concrete, skateboarding tricks done without a board, or maybe even martial artists fleeing from combat will help readers unfamiliar with the discipline capture the general imagery of parkour. Starting with its French originators, parkour has been permeated with philosophical musing about the individual's capacity for mental and physical improvement (e.g., Foucan 2008; also see Edwardes 2006). Throughout the 1990s the physical techniques and philosophical underpinnings of parkour spread throughout Europe and eventually to the United States.

**FIG. 1.** A traceur prepares to jump the span of the Daley Plaza subway entrance. There are at least two notable aspects to this photo. First, risk is paramount to the traceur's decision on where to make his jump. There are several places where the traceur could jump the same distance without risking a potentially deadly fall. However, the traceur intentionally positioned himself over the deepest part of the stairwell. Second, the designers of Daley Plaza never intended the structure to be used as a platform for jumping. Walls meant to provide safety are used here as a catalyst for risk-taking.

Building on the French originators' philosophical emphasis on personal progression, the most commonly used definition for parkour describes the discipline as one of training the body to move "quickly and efficiently from point A to point B." In Chicago, this definition was used routinely. However, as many traceurs acknowledged, no one in the Chicago parkour community strictly trained for efficiency in a scientific sense. Instead, traceurs were interested in traversing a course that was challenging and dangerous. For example, at Daley Plaza in downtown Chicago, there is a stairwell descending over 20 feet to the subway station below. One evening I watched a traceur jump the seven and a half feet across this cavernous gap. There was nothing particularly "efficient" about getting to point B this way, but it looked impressive and accomplishing it was thrilling for the traceur. Aaron summed up the reason traceurs perform such jumps succinctly: "endorphins!"

FIG. 2. David, inside a stairwell, prepares to jump onto the facing wall. This stairwell is in Grant Park. It provides authorized personnel accesses to the commuter train station below. David was drawn to this jump because, though the maneuver itself seemed simple, the odd angle for the takeoff made the movement difficult. The stairwell, like much of what interests traceurs, is not generally perceived by nontraceurs as a significant aspect of Grant Park's landscape. David, however, found a way to use the slanted wall of the stairwell as a personal challenge.

Despite the occasional admissions by most traceurs that they were not simply concerned with efficiency, there was still a great deal of boundary work (cf. Pachucki et al. 2007) between the idealized efficiency of "parkour" and what the traceurs called "free running." Unlike parkour, free running is more expressive and flamboyant (e.g., incorporating flips and other flashy maneuvers). By their own definitions, all of the traceurs I observed in Chicagoland were free runners, but much like Anderson's (2003) discussion of "regulars" at Jelly's bar, parkour was the preferred term for the self-descriptions of what the people at my field sites were doing. Keeping with its commonly applied usage, I refer to *all* activities involving the athletic and artistic negotiation of urban obstacles as parkour. Likewise, I use the word "community" to describe the social world of parkour (locally, nationally, and internationally). This follows emic use of the term among traceurs. Conversely, for simplicity, I use the term "traceur" as gender neutral, but many within the parkour community prefer to distinguish between traceur (male) and traceuse (female).

Doing Parkour

As described above, the simplest way to visualize parkour is that of street gymnastics, skateboarding without a board, or a (non) martial art. Like skateboarding, parkour is a

**FIG. 3** A traceur is in the midst of a wall flip. He has run toward the wall, planted a foot on it, and is using his momentum to propel himself into a back flip. This wall forms a barrier between a lower section of Grant Park and the raised section above the commuter train station. Its design is utilitarian, but for traceurs it affords an array of creative uses.

way to transform an environment ostensibly built for one purpose (e.g., allowing people to access the subway) and use it for another (e.g., as a span to jump across). Previous researchers have been attuned to this aspect of the discipline (e.g., Atkinson 2009; Bavinton 2007; Daskalaki et al. 2008; Mould 2009). Borden (2001) persuasively argues that skateboarders creatively appropriate the minimalistic and utilitarian features of postwar architecture—the sort of designs that define towns like Milton Keynes in England. "This is not an activity which could take place in medieval, renaissance, or early industrial cities [ . . . ]. It requires the smooth surfaces and running spaces of the concrete city [ . . . ]" (p. 195).

Parkour's home of Lisses is characterized by the same smooth surfaces and running spaces described by Borden (cf. Christie 2003). And Lisses has become something of a parkour Mecca, with traceurs traveling to this storied location, and many more who will never actually make the journey fantasizing about the pilgrimage. Of particular note is the Dame du Lac, an iconic sculpture within the parkour community. Towering several stories tall, its numerous ridges and protrusions allow the brave traceur ample opportunities to creatively ascend its massive surface. The Dame du Lac has been featured in countless photographs, stories, and videos about parkour. Numerous

**FIG. 4** The pleasant aesthetics of Grant Park are apparent in the background of this photo (e.g., the geometric layout of the sidewalks, vegetation, and benches), but these elements do not afford the maneuvers that most interest the traceurs. Here, Ryan jumps from one electrical box to another. Beneath him, another traceur films the movement. Ryan regularly films his training, and sporadically edits the footage into samplers that he posts online. In this photograph, Ryan is also wearing the archetypical traceur garb: sweatpants, t-shirt, and parkour-specific shoes.

foreign traceurs, having seen the sculpture time and again, relish a chance to train on it.

Turning back to Chicago, much of its built environment predates the smooth surfaces and running spaces popularized by the Bauhaus. Regardless, Chicagoland traceurs are drawn to what Borden—borrowing from Barthes (1953 [1968])—calls zero degree architecture. That is, traceurs make use of spaces seemingly devoid of meaning. These are the areas left over in the creation of something else. In the case of Grant Park, a grand example of 19th century urban green space, it is not the statues or fountains that capture the imagination of the traceurs. It is the forgotten crevasses of two walls meeting, in hidden stairwells, and on random ledges where much of the action is—in the full meaning in which Goffman (1967) uses the term.[2] These are the places that seem meaningless until they are brought to life through parkour. Like skateboarders, therefore, traceurs are offering a lived critique of the built environment—asserting playful creativity in the dead spaces of the city.

At the same time, though Chicago is filled with countless places for training in parkour, the city (unlike Lisses) does not have any special significance within the larger parkour community. Certain places are important to local traceurs (e.g., the "nacho" sculpture at the University of Illinois, "the wall of death" at the intersection of Monroe and Columbus,

etc.), but there are no Chicago training spots even remotely comparable to the Dame du Lac in prestige. However, Chicago traceurs expressed no great longing for training in other locations either. The enjoyment of travel (and many Chicago traceurs visited other cities) seemed predicated mostly on the social interactions they had in the places they visited. Which is to say, most modern urban environments are conducive to parkour, and, thus, though Chicago has certain features that separate it from Kansas City or Minneapolis, traceurs seemed generally indifferent to ranking such differences. However, as parkour expands and matures as a social world, more places may develop the iconic status of Lisses, and traceurs may increasingly desire to take part in training at locations imbued with subcultural meaning (cf. Snyder forthcoming).

For my first foray into the field, I was not sure what to expect, and, as I quickly found out, my preconceived notions about how parkour was practiced were utterly incorrect. Having seen edited footage on YouTube and watched the documentaries *Jump London* (Christie 2003) and *Jump Britain* (Christie 2005), I assumed traceurs would be running through the city, jumping, rolling, and vaulting over various obstacles as they traveled to some destination. To the contrary, the traceurs I studied very rarely (if ever) used parkour to traverse any sort of appreciable distance. Instead, traceurs would gather in an area well known for having structures amiable to parkour (e.g., a particular section of a public park or a university quad) and "train" on the obstacles there (e.g., practicing leaps from one ledge to another, scaling a wall, etc.). After a while, people would move to another area—usually just by walking in the typical fashion. Often there was considerable distance between one training area and another. During these walks, traceurs would often engage in horseplay (some of which might be parkour related), but I never witnessed a concerted effort to have a "flow run" from one section of the city to another.

Being a Traceur

In parkour, safe environments are rendered into dangerous ones, but traceurs are not stereotypical daredevils. Parkour also involves an astounding degree of coordination and physical strength, but traceurs are not stereotypical athletes either. In distinct contrast to the "extreme" sport participant (e.g., Kusz 2004), traceurs tend to be clean cut and mild mannered. When I asked Ryan to compare traceurs to skateboarders, for example, he explained:

> From my experience the whole culture [of parkour] is different from [ . . . ] skateboarders [who] tend to be rebellious. If security comes, [skaters are] like, 'Oh, Fuck you,' or whatever [ . . . ] and they'll fight with security. Generally, traceurs are extremely respectful and if they're asked to leave they will. [ . . . ] I think traceurs do it [ . . . ] to keep the image of parkour looking good. [ . . . ] There's just not the rebellious nature to it.

Although traceurs are fond of sweatpants, sneakers, and typical gym gear, they are also not "jocks" (e.g., Sabo 1980). As a case in point, aside from talking about parkour, traceurs spent a great deal of time discussing video and role-playing games—stereotypically "nerdy" pastimes. For example, one group of traceurs visiting Chicago for a jam repeatedly lamented having left their Magic: The Gathering cards at home, and one of Chicago's older traceurs was nonplussed when I failed to recognize the symbol on his hat as a reference to The Legend of Zelda.[3]

A few traceurs I spoke with had backgrounds in traditional sports (e.g., gymnastics, soccer, and track) or were involved in other alternative sports (e.g., BMX, rollerblading, and skateboarding), but most described their athletic pursuits before parkour as fleeting or nonexistent. Upz provided a characteristic response, "I love running around parks. I never did any team sports; [I] never did anything like that. I played hacky sack for a while. That's about it." If there is one thing that seems to unify traceurs it is finding enjoyment in moving their bodies through the environment in ways not intended by urban designers. This enjoyment is wrapped up in the thrills of taking corporeal risks, the satisfaction of showing off as strangers walk by, and the simple camaraderie of being with friends. As a general rule, it is the individuals willing to take the biggest risks, and do so with grace and style, that garner the most respect among their peers. Due to limitations of space these matters cannot be explicitly addressed. However, they are implicit in much of the following analysis of the real/virtual dialectic.

THE GLOBAL ETHNOSCAPE OF PARKOUR

American Parkour

Given the European origins of parkour, the first exposure to the discipline for the would-be American traceurs of the late 1990s and early 2000s came from the mass media and the Internet. Parkour's diffusion in America, therefore, is a superb example of Appadurai's (1993 [1996]) concept of global ethnoscapes. "More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by the mass media in all their forms. That fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies" (pp. 53–54). The role of fantasy is apparent in the recollections of Ando, one of Chicago's first traceurs. Ando's explanation of the Chicago parkour community's history—filled with references to the formation of local, national, and international connections (all mediated through different on-screen lives)—is worth quoting at some length.

> Back when it first started getting popular in Britain, that's when we heard about it. [ . . . ] We saw it on TV. We saw Yamakasi on TV. [ . . . ] Yamakasi is one of the original French groups [ . . . ]. They had their own movie for parkour; it was born there. [ . . . ] It just looked like they were jumping and moving really uniquely. They're jumping really high, moving really swiftly. It seemed kind of like they were super-human. We didn't know people could jump that high. We never thought of tic-tacs [i.e., jumping toward a wall and kicking off of it] getting you higher like that. They had everything down and coordinated. All the moves were really tight. We just watched all [the videos available on] Urban Freeflow [the premier English-language parkour site at the time]. We mimicked it. We went on the forums and talked to them. It was really helpful, but it was very unorganized back then. [ . . . There was] only Urban Freeflow. [There was a] French website [ . . . but] everyone spoke French. Barely anyone spoke English. [ . . . ] It was just very inspiring to see how they moved, to be able to move like them. [ . . . ] It was just fresh and new, and exciting to see something new like this. [ . . . ] We started going to Chicago [from the suburbs] and met up with [lots of different traceurs]. [We met] through the forums [on] Urban Free Flow. [ . . . ] In the beginning we had guys come out from Indiana, and

eventually we met up with [ . . . ] all these other Michigan guys and then everyone from New York [ . . . ]. We started making a lot of connections nationally.

For Ando it was a British television show, broadcast in the United States, that provided a new prism of the possible for his life, and he was not alone. Inspired by their own mediated exposures, other people in Chicagoland were also looking to mimic what they saw. Further, they were able to transform their budding globalized imaginations into localized, real world experiences by utilizing the virtual community of Urban Freeflow. Urban Freeflow provided two essential functions. First, the website posted tutorial videos for performing parkour maneuvers (i.e., on-screen pedagogy). Second, it provided a forum for virtual interaction. Over the years, Urban Freeflow's influence waned as other websites appeared, but the same processes described by Ando are still just as essential to parkour.

Before moving on to how Chicagoland traceurs make use of on-screen pedagogy and virtual interactions in the contemporary realization of parkour, a few caveats must be explained. First, in comparison to Ando's discovery of the discipline in the early 2000s, parkour today is far more and far less global. It is more global because—mirroring the explanation provided by Ando—parkour has spread throughout the urbanized world. It is no longer a French or British import. The practices of parkour and the imaginations inspiring it now come from around the globe. It is less global because, unlike when Ando watched the Yamakasi, parkour is no longer something inherently foreign and distant for people in and around Chicago. A simple Google search will quickly direct interested individuals to the Chicago Parkour website—putting them in virtual contact with local traceurs. However, even in its most localized form, parkour in Chicagoland is integrated into the global ethnoscape of parkour. For example, two traceurs living in the same house posting things for each other online are also adding to and taking from the global flow of images, sounds, and words that define and refine the discipline.

Second, there are important and drastic changes brought about by the Internet and other ICTs. Regardless, it is essential to not get carried away in the descriptions of them. In recent years there has been a rather ridiculous tendency to ignore all the global diffusions of culture, ideas, and information that happened in the past and, thus, discuss the communications made possible by the Internet as something completely and utterly new (cf. Wellman 2004). Listening to the mainstream media's coverage of the Arab Spring, for example, one is left with the impression that before Facebook and Twitter the 1979 Revolution in Iran and the First Intifada must not have been possible.

Likewise, Ando's initial exposure to parkour is probably not that different from suburban youths in the 1960s discovering angst-ridden rock music over the radio or landlocked teenagers in the 1970s fantasizing about life on the California coast via subscriptions to *Surfer* magazine. What is different, though, is the degree to which virtually present (i.e., physical absent) others influence local practices (Castells 1996). Many neophytes train in parkour for sometime without ever meeting another traceur face-to-face. However, unlike in the past, this physical separation does not mean traceurs isolated in the real world are isolated in the virtual world. Many of these virtual interactions are taking place in real-time. Even questions posted to message boards allow for a call-and-response that is quantitatively and qualitatively different from writing a letter to the editor or calling into a radio show.[4]

Thus, what makes parkour an instructive activity for researching the real/virtual dialectic is not simply that parkour has been diffused across time and space. There is

nothing particularly noteworthy about that. What makes parkour instructive is focusing on how ICTs are changing *how* we can interact with others and how those interactions are emplaced. Which is to say, physically absent others are increasingly able to be virtually present and it is the on-screen presence which increasingly influences off-screen practices (cf. Williams 2006). Nevertheless, and contrary to assumptions that lives are succumbing to the virtual world, parkour also highlights the continuing importance of the corporeal. Parkour is bringing people out into the real world, but this physical engagement is dependent on the virtual.

On-screen Pedagogy

The Internet is crucial for the transmission of parkour knowledge. There is a wealth of information about parkour on the Internet. Like all social practices, parkour is continually evolving—new maneuvers are created and old ones fall out of favor, and the Internet is the means by which parkour's evolving practices are codified and explained. There are instructional books about parkour (e.g., Edwardes 2009), but none of the traceurs in my study owned or read them. For example, when I told Grant that I was planning to eventually write a book about parkour, he told me that a few them already existed. He then told me that he has never read any of them because 'you can learn everything in them and more with 15 minutes on the Internet.' Likewise, though nearly every traceur I talked with had watched at least segments of documentaries about parkour, only one person had purchased a physical DVD. As a recent phenomenon, therefore, parkour has matured with the Internet and more traditional mediums of knowledge transmission have been disregarded (e.g., Snyder 2006). In their place are web-based articles, blogs, forums, and YouTube.

Like Ando, very few traceurs in Chicagoland learned about parkour from someone already experienced with it. Instead, people discovered parkour through the screen. Occasionally, the medium was film, television, or a video game, but the ubiquitous answer to the question of "How did you learn about parkour?" was videos on YouTube. Cody, for example, told me, "[How I got into parkour] is actually kind of lame. I saw some videos of it online, and I was like, 'Oh, that's cool." Although Cody wished he had a less "lame" answer to my question, his response was highly representative:

> I first found out about parkour just watching videos on YouTube and junk. "Oh, wow. They're running, jumping, flipping. I enjoy watching this. I could probably do this if I put in the time." –ZK
> I watched it online, and I was like, "Cool, I'll do it." –Digs
> If I had to nail it down [ . . . ] there's a video called "Russian Climber." That's it. That's the video. [ . . . ] I saw it. "Oh, we should do that. It's pretty cool." –Jaska
> "Hey, look at this video of these crazy dudes jumping off of buildings." "Oh, that's so cool. We should do that someday." –Max

Far more important than the Internet's role in exposing would-be traceurs to the existence of parkour, though, is its function as an instructional tool. At the most basic level, traceurs used Google Maps to share information about various training spots throughout Chicagoland. Most notably, both neophytes and experienced traceurs regularly consulted how-to videos posted online. These YouTube tutorials often served as an introduction to proper parkour technique. Recounting his initial method of training Ryan explained,

"I'd look up a new vault [on Urban Freeflow], I'd do it, and [ . . . ] like a true beginner I'd be like, 'Okay I have this vault now' and I'd go to the next one [ . . . ]." Max described a three part process of first seeing a movement in a sampler (i.e., a video edited for the purpose of showcasing a traceur's talent), asking someone to label particular movements, and then looking up tutorials for those movements. "At first I used samplers. 'Oh, what's that trick?' I'd YouTube it. Sometimes it helps because [ . . . it shows] an example [ . . . ] of the proper way to do it."

A surprising aspect of on-screen pedagogy is that it occasionally supplants off-screen instructions during face-to-face interactions. This underscores how the Internet is routinely posited as the principal location for parkour knowledge.[5] At jams I often heard experienced traceurs direct neophytes to Internet forums. Forums were held out as the place not only to meet other traceurs, but also the place to learn from them and get answers to their questions. This is notable because these inexperienced practitioners were there, interacting with experienced traceurs in the flesh, but these off-screen meetings were being used as a gateway to bolster on-screen communications in the future. Similarly, I overheard one skilled traceur—a person who frequently served as an instructor both at jams and in gymnastic gym training sessions—dismiss the value of face-to-face instruction altogether. 'I know it sounds nerdy, but the best way to learn is from YouTube. That's how most of the people here learned. There's instructional video on how to do everything.' The point here is not to assert that socialization in the real world is being marginalized, but to emphasize just how important on-screen pedagogy is to the perpetuation of parkour.

Virtual Interactions

Internet forums are not only a place to learn things; they are also a place to interact. In this regard, sites like Urban Freeflow, American Parkour, Chicago Parkour, and many others function like numerous online communities. They are places to post questions, provide answers, as well as express thoughts and feelings. Further, like most young people, Chicagoland traceurs are on Facebook, and their experiences with parkour make up part of their online identity. To my knowledge, there is nothing particularly unique in the methods traceurs use to socialize online or the frequency and magnitude of these socializations (cf. Collins and Wellman 2010; Ito et al. 2010; Stern and Dillman, 2006; Turkle 2011). Nonetheless, their on-screen interactions are essential to understanding their lives off-screen. In particular, I want to focus on interactions that are doubly absent. That is, I want to focus on interactions that are with others who are both physically and cognitively absent from the interaction.

As we saw in the quotes above, most of the traceurs I met first found out about parkour through sensational video footage posted to YouTube. In their recollection of this first exposure, they insert themselves into the story. Which is to say, as they remember it, they were not passive observers. Instead, the videos ignited their own vision for what they could do and what they could be. These videos symbolically enter into their interactions with themselves and their friends (e.g., "I could probably do this" or "we should do that"). This is the very essence of Appadurai's global ethnoscapes—ideas and images from around the world become integrated into our aspirations and self-understandings. Even if these objects are incapable of interacting with us; we interact with them. And, we bring them into our other social interactions.

Traceurs, even those with no ambitions for corporate sponsorships and mass media attention, can post videos with the hope that they will serve to widen the prisms of the possible for others. As Ryan said, "I get inspired by videos." In more detail, Strafe explained, "Before, I'd only seen the videos that were really good, and as a beginner [ . . . ], those would really discourage me [ . . . ]. But, I saw a [ . . . ] sampler [of] someone after their first year [ . . . ], and I realized there was an intermediate step. You didn't have to be that good right away. So, I thought, this is at least worth a try. That's how I got into."

Further, when videos are posted online there is usually the ability to post comments about them. Ryan, for example, remarked about reactions to videos he has posted of himself, "Sometimes it's nice to hear people say, 'Ryan, your training's been awesome lately.' Sometimes I'll post it, [ . . . and I'll] get criticism, and it's like, 'I hadn't thought about that [technique or movement] before.'" Thus, videos not only serve as instructional tools, they become incorporated in symbolic interactions with the self and others.[6]

Beyond the instructional and sensational videos, there is also the philosophy of parkour. Like other alternative sports, parkour is not defined by competition and most practitioners are attracted to it precisely because it is different from mainstream sports (cf. Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011). To this end, the virtual world of parkour is filled with treaties on what parkour really is and what the practices really mean. In terms of the latter, there are countless variations on parkour being primarily a *mental* discipline. As a mental discipline, it is said that training in parkour should be transferable to other, nonphysical problems in life (e.g., romance, school, work, etc.). In terms of the former, there are numerous debates about the role of flips and other nonefficient techniques in parkour. As mentioned above, there is a difference between parkour and free running, but this difference is blurred in practice. In online forums and articles, however, there are often very bright lines separating them.

When Chicagoland traceurs talked about parkour—especially to outsiders (or a sociologist asking them formal interview questions)—they routinely brought forth allusions to parkour as a mental discipline and the importance of distinguishing it from free running. What is notable here is that these issues are generally quite foreign from actual practices of parkour during jams and training sessions. Among the people I studied, many were quite cynical about the idea that parkour's skills were transferable to other aspects of life. Jaska, for example, told me, "Parkour is not life." In more detail, Ryan explained:

> When I first started I was really into improving your capacity to move and your mental capacity of overcoming obstacles and how that can carry over into actual life. When, in reality, what I've experienced is, what you learn mentally in parkour doesn't really carry over into solving a math equation. [ . . . ] I don't know if I actually thought that, but I tried to convince myself.

In addition, though all the traceurs I met routinely ignored efficiency to perform flashier and more exciting movements, most still asserted the importance of distinguishing parkour and free running. Max, for example, told me, "I don't really like when people confuse [them]." Similarly, Phil explained, "There's parkour and there's free running. A lot of people confuse the two, and there's [ . . . ] an ongoing [debate about it]. [ . . . ] What ticks me off, though, is I see people with videos and they say, 'I'm doing parkour,' and then it's all flips. They're flipping everywhere. I'm like, 'No, that's not really parkour. You're doing free running. It's a little bit different. Nice try, though.'"

What these quotes underscore is how traceurs—locally situated—defer (at least partially) to absent others—the generalized other of the global parkour ethnoscape. Which is to say, as it is realized in real world practices, parkour is about enjoying the creative, risky, and skillful movements of the human body through environments built for other purposes. But because parkour is not simply a local phenomenon, traceurs grapple with fitting their actions and motivations into the virtual parkour canon they access in their lives on-screen. As such, when traceurs were asked to explain themselves in the etic situation of a formal interview they engaged in boundary work meant to ally themselves with a virtual presentation of parkour at odds with the practices found in Chicago. Thus, traceurs routinely referred to "people" who got irate about confusing parkour with free running, people who were upset over the organizing of parkour competitions, and people who felt that the discipline of parkour would improve other aspects of their lives. As best as I can tell, these were not people the traceurs had ever met. Such people were certainly not found among the experienced and respected members of Chicago's parkour community.

## APPROPRIATING THE REAL WORLD

### Overcoming Obstacles

Having discussed the global ethnoscapes of parkour, we must now turn to how Chicagoland traceurs emplace it in the real world. As we do this we must stay attentive to the fact that parkour's virtual existence is integrally intertwined with its material practices. Thus, for Ando it is not simply that that he trained in the suburbs of Chicago or that the Yamikasi developed parkour in the suburbs of Paris. These are part of a dialectical relationship between the virtual and the real. Looking now at physical space we need to attend to how the real/virtual dialectic is integrated into the ways the material environment constrains and enables social action.

A useful starting place for our analysis is to return to the subcultures of bike messengers and skateboarders. Both groups make use of the urban environment in unique and unintended ways. Specifically, skateboarders and bike messengers play in and with the utilitarian features of the city. "In the case of the handrail, the skateboarder's reuse of the handrail—ollieing onto the rail and, balanced perilously on the skateboard deck, sliding down the fulcrum line of the metal bar—targets something to do with safety and turns it into an object of risk" (Borden 2001, p. 192). For bike messengers, automotive and pedestrian traffic are re-conceptualized as "problems" to be solved as they pedal at breakneck speeds through the "urban death maze" of the congested city (Kidder 2011). In both subcultures, therefore, individuals appropriate physical space and transform it into something useful from their perspective. Handrails become slides; gridlocked streets become mazes. This appropriation, however, is not performed willy-nilly. The material environment itself (as a structure) is intertwined with the actions that can be performed within it. Gibson (1979) refers to this as affordance—certain environments allow for certain types of actions, only to the extent that individuals can perceive these possibilities.

Chicago, like other urban environments, affords the movements of parkour. That is, there are objects and structures available to be used as obstacles. Despite their discursive claims to efficiency of movement, traceurs are really interested in finding the path of *most* resistance between points A and B. For example, a video of a man running down a paved

path—no matter how flawlessly efficient from an abstracted, scientific point of view—would probably not inspire too many YouTube viewers. To train in parkour, therefore, a traceur must develop routes that will be difficult—scaling a wall, vaulting over a railing, walking up a staircase upside down on one's hands, et cetera. The traceur is lauded for overcoming obstacles other people cannot, or for doing them in a fashion too difficult or frightening for other people.

Traceurs generally discuss their training in terms of "progression." Sync described it well. "When you do something that you've never done before, or you've been trying so long to be able to do, and you finally do it, it's like an adrenaline rush when you finally do it, and it just feels really good, but then it goes away so you have to do something else." Similarly, Strafe stated, "In that moment, you are the king of your own little world in which this was the obstacle and you overcame it. For that obstacle at that time, you own it. And then you go on to another obstacle. To me, that's what's so great about parkour." Or, as Max explained:

> I'd say that parkour became *the* thing to do when we [i.e., a small group of Max's friends] all [ . . . ] got good. We would endlessly waste time training, and we just didn't feel like we were going anywhere, and then one day I got the kong [i.e., a specific type of vault], and then [soon after my friend] got the kong. [ . . . ] After that it kept on going, getting better and better. And, you just wanted to get better. You felt tired at the end of the day, but there's a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day that you did something [ . . . ]. Like today was [ . . . ] different than yesterday—[one] step better. I used to have a fear of high drops, and I love them now. It's like a night and day thing for me with parkour. It's just awesome.

To successfully do parkour, traceurs must develop their bodies and minds to be able to perform the required movements. This is rather obvious; to perform any physical activity, individuals must condition themselves to it. Concurrent with the development of one's mental and physical capacities, however, is a refined sense for looking at the world (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1945 [1962]). This is generally referred to among traceurs as "PK vision." It is about reimagining what the environment can afford, and it is through the development of one's PK vision that the global ethnoscapes of parkour become localized. PK vision, therefore, is a dialectical product of the global and the local embodied within the traceur.

PK Vision

An aimless walk with a group of about 15 traceurs through downtown Chicago provided instructive examples of PK vision. The traceurs had left one of their usual training spots near the Shedd Aquarium and set out to find construction scaffolding to train on. As we walked, Strafe pointed upwards to an apartment building where the top several floors were staggered in setbacks. The setbacks did not start until several stories up in the air, and they were certainly unreachable. However, Strafe was still awestruck: 'You wish you could climb that. I love that building. Wall run after wall run after wall run.' Later on the walk—we never did find scaffolding—we passed a large building with a long protruding ledge for its windows. The ledge was about eight feet off the ground. Seeing this, one of the traceurs got really excited. Another tried to dissuade him, telling him it was a bad idea because it might attract attention from the police.[7] The first traceur retorted,

"So climbable." The second traceur agreed, and then despite his own advice, they both conspired to get on top of it.

Likewise, after I first started attending jams and training in parkour (as limited as my training might have been), I began developing PK vision. Although, it was not until sometime later that I would learn about the term. An excerpt from my early field notes is interesting in this regard:

> I've definitely noticed myself evaluating [...how places] could be used for PK [...]. Yesterday [my wife] and I went [...] to the downtown [...] park, and even before we left the house I was excited about the options (remembering that there were some interesting structures there from my last visit). [...] I made a point of having us walk over to the amphitheater area [to try wall runs]. [...] I half-heartedly tried a kong vault over a weird concrete ball thing, but it didn't really work. [...] I [spent] some time looking around for things that maybe I could try to do—to no avail, but it was interesting to want to look at the environment this way [...].

Around the same as these field notes, I remember walking by another park—a park I had been by countless times. Suddenly, the low and wide wooden posts that lined the parking lot jumped out at me. They were about two feet off the ground and five feet apart, and they would be an ideal place for practicing precision jumps.

The imagined potential of PK vision is perfectly summed up by a traceur who chimed in during my interview of someone else, "The way you perceive objects around you changes *a lot*. You'll never look at the world the same way again. [...] Instead of challenges you begin to see opportunities where challenges are. [...] You can't help it. You just see stuff and you're like, 'Oh man, I want to do parkour." More accurately, nontraceurs see neither challenges nor opportunities. The urban environment is not filled with "obstacles" at all; it is filled with forms and shapes largely deprived of any creative human uses. The environment may afford vaults and wall climbs, but most people fail to perceive such possibilities. To this end, Micca explained:

> You learn to appreciate things in life that most people never see. When somebody walks into a building with a stairway and a bunch of rails around it, they're walking into a building. They don't even see what's in front of them. When I walk in I'm *excited* instantly. I don't even know what's in the building or why I'm going there, but I know that in [...] the building is exciting stuff.

Expressing the same sentiment Cody asserted that as a traceur, "you're never bored." He would go on to explain:

> [Parkour] just helps you get over mental boundaries. After training it for probably about six months you start to see things kind of differently. [...] I'm driving; I'm constantly looking around for a new spot. [...] "I wonder if I can make that wall run?" [...] You just see everything as an obstacle to overcome—instead of just a boundary or a border you cannot cross. [...] "I wonder if I can do this to get to that?" [...] You just start thinking more about what's in your grand spectrum of abilities. You just start thinking different[ly].

It's important to note that PK vision does not solely reside in the eye of the individual traceur. It is a collective process that comes about as traceurs interact with each other, and the social origins of PK vision are not lost on traceurs. Ryan, for example, described jams as less about training and more about "discovering other movements with people." As Aaron explained, "[ . . . S]omeone will see something you've never thought of before and you can do it, and you wouldn't have seen it if it weren't for them." In more drastic terms one traceur told me, "I hate training on my own. I need people to suggest things to do." But, PK vision is not an entirely local phenomenon. That is, it is not only shared with those that are physically present. It arises out of parkour's global diffusion. Without the virtual worlds of parkour, the imaged possibilities of the traceur would be truncated. At the same time, though, the virtual world of parkour is only possible because it is emplaced in the real world. Thus, the local is globalized and the global is localized. ICTs facilitate this dialectic, but it is equally dependent on the emplacement of these practices.

THE EMPLACEMENT OF A GLOBAL ETHNOSCAPE

As we have already seen, traceurs reflect back on their first virtual exposures to parkour with awe. Mediated through the screen, they saw people performing seemingly impossible actions (e.g., Max recounting, "Hey, look at this video of these crazy dudes jumping off of buildings"), and this inspired them to want to begin their own training. This training usually involved a progression from individual practice (or practice with a few equally inexperienced friends) to attending jams. At all times, even after one becomes an experienced traceur, the virtual world of parkour is continually thrust into the real world of their parkour practices. Whether it is being inspired by another's sampler video, or posting one's own videos, learning a new movement via an online tutorial, or reading a blog post about the philosophy of parkour, what parkour is on-screen feeds into what parkour is off-screen and vice versa.

There is an important sociological point to be made of this real/virtual dialectic. First, of course, is the mere fact that it is dialectic and not an either/or proposition. Second, and more importantly, it helps us better understand the city and our place within it. When traceurs discuss PK vision and their creative and risky exploits within the urban environment, we can see how the profit-oriented intentions of urban planners do not necessarily dictate how urban spaces are actually put to use (cf. de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1976 [1991]). Which is to say, through parkour, individuals re-imagine the city. The abstractions of capitalism can be turned into something joyfully lived—in ways never intended by their designers. For example, the slanted concrete walls beneath Chase Tower in downtown Chicago can afford more than the shuffling of people off to work or the office lunch crowd on a sunny day. For the traceur, it allows for playful thrills that have no connection to Chase's financial bottom line. This area also affords traceurs a potential audience to shock with their stunts. Often people passing will stop to watch, as well as shoot videos or take photos. The sociological analysis of parkour, however, can go even further.

Following Appadurai, parkour is unbounded from the local at the very same time it is put into localized practice. Thus, traceurs are remaking the city—turning bland structures like ledges and walls into objects of play. And this play is not only enjoyed by traceurs; it is consumed by others as well. But, these real, physical practices are

instantiations of far-off, ephemeral worlds lived on-screen. We have already seen this in Ando's inspiration from the Yamakasi. In very specific terms, several other traceurs also explained how they searched through their immediate environments to replicate what they learned was possible through ICTs. For example, Tom told me, "I started watching videos of Daniel Ilabaca [a world renowned traceur from England]. 'I want to do that.' [. . . I watch videos] all the time. [. . . G]uys from Europe, I watch a lot of that. [. . . ] Whenever I see a video on there, 'Oh, I want to do that.' So, I go out and try to do that."

At the same time, Tom was keenly aware that what he saw on-screen was not always easily replicable in his off-screen world. "You try to adapt [the moves] to [the environment] you have [locally]." But, the maneuvers one can watch in the virtual realm are not always ones the local environment affords, regardless of one's skill level. As Tom would go on to explain, his desire to replicate what he was seeing performed elsewhere sometimes took added effort. "I could never find anything to do [a double kong vault on]. I drove around for a day, until I found something." In other words, Tom learned about double kong vaults virtually, and he wanted to enact them off-screen. This took effort—driving around all day searching for new environments that contained just the right kind of obstacle to practice the movement. Likewise, David told me that he came across an online discussion about the utility of using the railings on handicap access ramps for vaulting practice. After learning about the potential of such railings, David said, it got "a little bit obnoxious." By this he means, he found himself continually scanning the environment for such structures, and he was exceedingly eager to use them when he came across them.

Chicago, like all places, is what it is because of what people make of it. What makes cities such interesting places (or frightening, frustrating, or fun places) are the heterogeneous ways different individuals and groups go about living their lives within the city. The large crowds of curious onlookers that traceurs attract speak to this point. By studying Chicago traceurs, though, we see how some of these urban practices are dialectically woven within individuals' virtual lives. The obdurate forms and shapes of Chicago's landscape are brought to life in exciting and new ways through parkour, but the traceur's imagination is inspired from images and texts circulating within the virtual world. Thus, the Chicago that traceurs are living—in the full breadth of Lefebvre's (1976 [1991]) sense of the term[8]—is a Chicago that is real, hard, and immediate. It is a world that traceurs experience with all their faculties. It is also a Chicago that is utterly ephemeral and imaginary—until the moment that those desires are put into practice (e.g., when Tom finally found a place to try the double kong). This, in turn, feeds into how non-traceurs (locals and tourists) experience the city (e.g., Grant Park, among many other things, is now a place where young people flip off of walls).

## CONCLUSIONS

In her new book, *Alone Together*, Turkle (2011) offers a thoughtful warning about the directions we are allowing ICTs to take us. We live in a fleshy, immediate world, but we are increasingly escaping to different ones. Perhaps nothing captures this more clearly than Second Life—a virtual domain in which people develop avatars and construct habitats, often spending very real money to purchase things that have no existence outside of the virtual realm (cf. Au 2008). Turkle asks us to consider the psychological and social costs of

such escapes. Her critique insightfully calls forth an increasingly pervasive narrative about technology: people (especially the young) are trading corporeal experiences for artificial ones. From this perspective, we are plugging in and tuning out. From this perspective, the city is reduced to little more than a container for biological beings cognitively transported to somewhere else.

There is, however, a counter-narrative to Turkle's argument. This is a narrative about the virtual worlds' emplacement in the real, physical world. As we have seen through the analysis of Chicago parkour, traceurs affectively appropriate urban space and their actions are intertwined with their lives on-screen. With parkour, therefore, we see the dialectic of the real and the virtual. Traceurs are plugged in and *tuned in* to the world around them, and the former is dependent on the latter. Thus, traceurs are not naively escaping into a virtual world disconnected from their physical selves and their material environments. To the contrary, parkour represents a visceral engagement with reality. Its joys and its pains are not simulations of action. The agony and the exaltation of traceurs comes directly from their bodies moving through space in unintended ways. But though parkour is not a simulation for the individual, it is possible only through the individual's replication of actions found in the virtual world. Thus, in certain ways, our virtual lives can actually enhance our engagement with the real world. In particular, by studying traceurs we see how re-imaginings of the city can arise out of and feedback into the virtual domain.

Future researchers could expand on the ideas developed in this article in two main ways. First, in what ways is parkour unique and in what ways is it representative of a more generic dialectical process of the real and the virtual? I believe that the global ethnoscape of parkour has a great deal in common with other social worlds and subcultures. In particular, researchers should attend to how specific material spaces are re-imagined through the inhabitation of virtual worlds. For example, how have various sporting worlds and art worlds redefined local places at the same time they have taken from and added to the global flow of ideas and images? Skateboarding and graffiti are two excellent examples, and Snyder (2006 and forthcoming, respectively) offers an excellent starting point for studying how various media help perpetuate these subcultures within urban environments. Second, what are the consequences of software specifically developed to facilitate the real/virtual dialectic of material spaces? With the smart phone app Foursquare, for example, people virtually "check in" as they arrive in real places, allowing friends to follow them from afar and strangers to potentially meet them in person. Grindr offers a similar service designed specifically for gay men to meet new friends and sexual partners. How do these applications change understandings and uses of space? Grindr, in particular, challenges traditional assumptions about community and propinquity. It is an open question, however, how spatial practices might be transforming as a result. Ultimately, what all these questions emphasize is that urbanism is a way of life, but that life is more than ever unbounded from the local—at the very same time it is emplaced within the city.

Acknowledgments

## Notes

[1] Borden (2001) does provide an analysis of how skateboarding has been globally diffused through the mass media and the Internet. This fact, however, is in the *background* of his theoretical treatment of skateboarders' spatial practices. My goal in this paper is to foreground the dialectical relationship between the virtual and the real world.

[2] Action, of course, means activity; it is something that can feel exciting. For Goffman, action is about experiencing "fateful moments" in which outcomes are unknown. Because outcomes are unknown, action becomes a means for testing one's character—to see who has the fortitude to coolly handle otherwise stressful situations. Financial gambles and physical altercations are classic examples of where the action is.

[3] Magic: The Gathering is a role-playing fantasy card game. The Legend of Zelda is a series of fantasy video games.

[4] Specifically, message boards allow for a sustained exchange of ideas between people. By contrast, a letter to the editor only has two steps: comment or question and single reply. Call-in shows can provide a forum for dialogue, but there is generally little back-and-forth between interlocutors. Taking this into consideration, along with the ability to post hyperlinks, images, and videos, it is clear that the Internet allows for unique interactions with absent others.

[5] One can juxtapose this to boxing, a sport that explicitly disavows abstract knowledge (Wacquant, 2004).

[6] There is a broader, existential question about why traceurs make videos of themselves at all. In this regard, they appear to simply be following a general social trend. Which is to say, concurrent with the rise of on-screen life is the digital capturing and virtual posting of real world activities. Traceurs, like skateboarders (cf. Snyder, forthcoming) are concerned with improving the quality of their filming and photography. This includes purchasing the right equipment, as well as learning about capturing images from certain perspectives (e.g., to make jumps look bigger) and editing footage in certain ways (e.g., to give the appearance that traceurs are actually traveling somewhere when they train).

[7] Police and security are a going concern for Chicagoland traceurs, but these authority figures are far more tolerant of parkour than skateboarding. In Grant Park, for example, police never reprimanded the traceurs and often watched with approval. Building security in downtown Chicago rarely paid attention to traceurs, unless they were climbing near doors or windows. In these incidents traceurs would be asked to leave. I only met two traceurs formally charged with a crime for doing parkour. They were climbing on top of a suburban grade school building at night and both were cited for trespassing. Baumgartner (1988) provides a cogent analysis for the different priorities of urban and suburban police officers. Namely, city authorities are focused on crimes involving theft and violence, whereas in suburban areas police work often entails maintaining a boundary of public normalcy. Thus, suburban teenagers (for myriad reasons, parkour just being one of them) become a frequent target for police harassment.

[8] For Lefebvre space has three phases. The first two phases offer themselves to a rather static reading; conceptions of space simply become the perceptions of space—giving the cultural order a naturalized appearance. For example, dividing homes into rooms with different functions, which then map onto sex-segregated practices (e.g., mothers in the kitchen and fathers in the den). However, because space is not only determining, but can also be determined, space—as it is *lived*—can be appropriated by the user against intended conceptions. For Lefebvre, it is lived space that has revolutionary potential. Lived space is a space for creative action—a space for what de Certeau (1984) calls tactics (i.e., the practices of unsung heroes, subverting the strategies of the ruling powers).

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## Parkour: La Apropiación Afectiva del Espacio Urbano y la Dialéctica Real-Virtual (Jeffrey L. Kidder)

### Resumen

Parkour es un deporte nuevo que se basa en superar obstáculos urbanos de manera atlética y artística. En este artículo, se afirma que las prácticas concretas o "reales" del parkour están entrelazadas de manera dialéctica con los mundos "virtuales" creados por las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación. El presente análisis del parkour muestra la forma cómo las ideas e imágenes globalizadas disponibles a través de la Internet y otros medios pueden ser puestas en práctica en espacios locales específicos. Los practicantes del parkour, en consecuencia, se conectan con su mundo espacial inmediato al mismo tiempo que imaginan sus vidas proyectadas "en la pantalla". De tal forma, investigadores urbanos necesitan considerar las maneras en las que el mundo virtual puede cambiar e influir en la forma cómo los individuos entienden y utilizan los espacios concretos de la ciudad.