Parkour, Anarcho-Environmentalism, and Poiesis
Michael Atkinson

*Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 2009 33: 169 originally published online 20 March 2009
DOI: 10.1177/0193723509332582

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jss.sagepub.com/content/33/2/169

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society

Additional services and information for *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jss.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://jss.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://jss.sagepub.com/content/33/2/169.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Apr 21, 2009
OnlineFirst Version of Record - Mar 20, 2009

What is This?
Parkour, Anarcho-Environmentalism, and Poiesis

Michael Atkinson
Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

As innovated by French “free runners” David Belle and Sébastien Foucan in the 1990s, Parkour is a physical cultural lifestyle of athletic performance focusing on uninterrupted and spectacular gymnastics over, under, around, and through obstacles in urban settings. Through the public practice of Parkour across late modern cities, advocates collectively urge urban pedestrians to reconsider the role of athleticism in fostering self–other environment connections. This article taps ethnographic data collected on Parkour enthusiasts in Toronto (Canada). For 2 years, the author spent time in the field with “traceurs” (i.e., those who practice Parkour) and conducted open-ended interviews with them regarding their experiences with the movement. In this article, the author explores Parkour as an emerging urban “anarcho-environmental” movement, drawing largely on Heidegger’s critique of technology along with Schopenhauer’s understanding of the will to interpret the practice of Parkour as a form of urban deconstruction.

**Keywords:** Parkour; poiesis; environmentalism; youth sport; Heidegger

I ventured out with five traceurs for an 8-mile run during the early hours of a mid-summer morning in 2006. As a distance runner, I have staggered out of my house half awake on many such mornings with friends for an 8- or 10-mile session. On this day, we did not complete a typical running loop down paths, on sidewalks, and through carefully carved out trails; these were not my usual running allies. The 8 miles saw us hurtling through alleys and across low roof tops, vaulting over fences, scrambling underneath bridges and hop-scotching down city streets, and weaving our way between cars. This type of running is free running, or what is known globally as Parkour. My entire body ached at the end of the 8 miles, my mind had been exhausted, and my emotions had run wild. After nearly 6 months in the field participating with traceurs (a name given to free runners), I finally realized the essence of Parkour. Free running is a mode of bringing forth or revealing dimensions of the physical and spiritual self through a particular type of urban gymnastics. It destabilizes and disrupts technocapitalist meanings of a city’s physical and social landscape for its practitioners. Parkour is ultimately a communion with one’s habitat, in the

**Author’s Note:** The author would like to express his gratitude to the editors for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Please address correspondence to Michael Atkinson, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK, LE11 3TU; e-mail: M.F.Atkinson@lboro.ac.uk.
goal of exploring how one’s body is shaped by the political geography of a late modern city.

After the free running session, I had experienced what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) describes as “flow” or what Maslow (1970) articulates as a “peak experience.” For 8 miles, I ran and jumped with traceurs as part of a fluid and responding tribe, not as a spoke in a rationally calculating and environmentally detached wheel of athletes concerned predominantly with externally defined, preset, and tightly policed time and distance running goals. We took turns shepherding one another through the city, practicing speed and stealth in our movement at times as we made our way across the rolling and varied architectural terrain. The movement, and our underlying orientation in the session, encouraged me to let go of all conscious thought and simply be present with my breath, movement, and the physical environment. Lines separating roads, buildings, cultures, selves, and bodies disappeared. I had never experienced the city, or running for that matter, in this way. And even though I felt exhausted at the end of the session, a strange peace descended upon me.

The physical practice of Parkour is part of a globally burgeoning (sport) counter-culture. Although not all of those who practice free running are concerned with the experience of flow, freedom, or the use of urban gymnastics as social critique, a small cluster of 12 traceurs with whom I shared time and space in Toronto approach free running as a vehicle for experiencing flow and, at the same time, challenging dominant social constructions of their urban environment as sanitized corporate space. In this article, I analyze urban traceurs as an innovative “anarcho-environmental movement” (Shepherd, 2002) who at once critique the political economic ethos underwriting the design of, and physical cultural movement within, urban cities such as Toronto and who bring forth an aesthetic-spiritual reality of the self through poiesis.

**Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Parkour**

The philosophical roots of Parkour as an environmental-athletic-critical practice date back more than 100 years. The late modern manifestation of Parkour is a particular offshoot of a style of training called “Hébertism.” Hébertism emerged in the early 20th century through the athletic philosophies of French naval officer George Hébert.

A lifelong advocate of intense physical training as a means of developing personal virtue, Hébert was particularly impressed by the physical development and body-environmental oneness of the “indigenous peoples” he encountered across the African continent. Hébert was stationed in St. Pierre, Martinique, during 1902, when the town fell victim to a volcanic eruption. Hébert himself coordinated the evacuation of nearly 700 people from a local village. The experience had a profound effect on him and reinforced his belief that athletic strength and skill must be combined with
courage and altruism to be civicly useful. Hébert came to believe that the pursuit of physical perfection and communion with one’s local environmental surroundings is a technique for developing one’s sense of place in the physical and social environment and as a vehicle for bringing forth the underlying essence of one’s own humanity (Delaplace, 2005).

Upon his return to France in 1903, Hébert tutored at the College of Rheims, where he innovated a path-breaking physical cultural lifestyle. He designed a series of apparatuses and exercises to teach what he dubbed the “Natural Method” of physical disciplining. Hébert believed that individuals should train in open environments as an unfettered animal species traversing a variety of landscapes and obstacles. Hébert’s physical cultural method eschewed remedial gymnastics and the Swedish methods of athletic training popular in France at the time. For Hébert, these methods seemed unable to develop the human body harmoniously with nature or to prepare his students for the moral requirements of everyday life (i.e., courage, confidence, truth, calmness, other-orientation, and oneness). Hébert believed that by concentrating on competition and performance within contrived environmental spaces (such as a gymnasium), mainstream sports cultures actually negatively affected the corporeal and social development of youth.

Hébert’s Natural Method typically placed practitioners in a wooded setting, wherein they would be instructed to run a course ranging from 5 to 10 kilometers. Practitioners were simply told to run through the woods, over bushes, through streams, climb up and down trees, and traverse fields. Students were also instructed, at particular time or distance points, to lift fallen logs, carry and throw heavy stones, or even hang from trees. Hébert believed that by challenging his students to practice basic human muscular-skeletal movements in uncontrolled settings, they would develop qualities of strength and speed toward being able to walk, run, jump, climb, balance, throw, lift, defend oneself, and swim in practically any geographic landscape. Hébert felt that Natural Method practitioners would progressively learn to encounter and control any emotions or social situations they encountered in life. In a liminal and energetic sense, the Natural Method demanded that one possess sufficient energy, willpower, courage, coolness, and fermeté to conquer any physical or mental obstacle. In a moral sense, by experiencing a variety of psycho-emotional states (e.g., fear, doubt, anxiety, aggression, resolve, courage, and exhaustion) during training, one cultivated a self-assurance that would lead to inner-peace.

Hébert became, then, the earliest proponent of what the French would later call the parcours (obstacle course) method of training. Modern woodland challenge courses and adventure races—comprising balance beams, ladders, rope swings, and obstacles—are often described as Hébertisme courses both in Europe and North America. It is even possible to trace a full array of modern children’s playground equipment to Hébert’s original parcours designs of the early 1900s. The French government named Hébert “Commander of the Legion of Honor” in 1995 for his life-long commitment to physical and social pedagogy.
The contemporary subculture moniker “Parkour” clearly derives from Hébert’s use of the term parcours(e) and the French military term parcours du combattant. Indeed, Hébert’s Natural Method of training had a special impact on French military training in the 1960s. French soldiers during the Vietnam War were especially inspired by Hébert’s method and philosophy of physical and emotional development and employed the Natural Method as a technique for honing their jungle-warfare skills. Among the French soldiers exposed to the Natural Method was Raymond Belle. Belle became proficient in parcours training methods and promoted their virtues almost as passionately as Hébert.

Following his tour of duty in Vietnam, Belle taught his son David the principles of the Natural Method. The younger Belle had participated in martial arts and gymnastics as a young teen and immediately took to the method. After moving to the Parisian suburb Lisses, David Belle further explored the rigors and benefits of the Natural Method with his friend Sébastien Foucan. By the age of 15, Belle and Foucan developed their own suburban style of the Natural Method they termed Parkour. Belle and Foucan had little access to sprawling woodland areas, so they instead fashioned an (sub)urban style of Natural Method. In a sense, their use of concrete and steel city spaces jibed well with Hébert’s philosophy of immersing oneself in one’s immediate physical/natural environment to gain a deep phenomenological awareness of it. In the BBC documentary Jump London (Christie, 2003), Foucan described his initial construction of Parkour as a physical and spiritual lifestyle of movement in which “the whole town [Lisses] was there for us; there for free running. You just have to look and you just have to think like children. This is the vision of Parkour.”

Belle and Foucan gathered recruits and followers in Paris and then across Europe throughout the 1990s. By the end of the decade, media in France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands had documented the emerging lifestyle movement. Media reports predictably framed the practice as a vacuous and style-oriented urban youth counterculture and paid little attention to its core ideological and spiritual tenets. Belle later referred to Parkour’s insertion into the media during the late 1990s as part of a generational “prostitution [and destruction] of the art” (Christie, 2003). As a result of media attention, widespread youth interest, the commercialization of Parkour images and identities, and movement away from the spiritual to the spectacular aspects of Parkour, Foucan and Belle disagreed vehemently over the vision and purpose of Parkour. Belle continued, at least for a time, to adhere to the original principles of Parkour and the original essence of Hébert’s Natural Method. Belle pioneered a more daredevilish and aesthetically oriented lifestyle of Parkour now globally referred to as “urban freeflow.”

The ideological split between Belle and Foucan and severing of their original “Lisses crew” into separate Parkour factions is rather stereotypical for a youth lifestyle or subculture movement, especially in the wake of the lifestyle’s mass
mediation and popular cultural ascendance in commodity form (i.e., Parkour clothing, language, moves, and jargon). It is interesting that Belle and his followers attempted to subculturally police the Hébertisme essence of Parkour by publicly decrying its popularity as a style/commodity culture. Thornton (1995) points out how subcultural members are able to internally distinguish and externally label participants as either authentic or inauthentic along any number of ideological lines. Focuan and his converts, by contrast, now sell Parkour to global audiences through television commercials and documentaries, movies, clothing lines, training schools, video games, and even international Parkour competitions. Although Belle’s loyalists remain somewhat resistance oriented and purist, Focuan’s brand of Parkour continues to undergo the quintessential “sportization process” (Dunning, 1999) that so many other resistance sports have fallen prey to in the past 30 years (Atkinson & Young, 2008a). Sportization is the process by which subaltern or alternative forms of sport, leisure, and play are co-opted and incorporated into mainstream sports cultures. They become formalized, institutionalized, hierarchical, and rule-bound types of sport that are organized and operated on the basis of intense competition, social exclusion, and domination of others.

In a local and global overview of Parkour factionalization in the past two decades, we witness three relatively distinct traceur contingents emerging. First, there remains a self-labeled tribe of Natural Method traditionalists who believe that training à la Hébert’s original woodland style is the only true method of practice. Geographically, these individuals live in direct proximity to dense woodland areas or possess the requisite economic and social capital to travel to wilderness regions on a semiregular basis. They are, however, an incredibly small and esoteric wing of the larger Parkour figuration. Second, sub(urban) traceurs view themselves as Natural Method traditionalists but firmly eschew the idea that one needs to train “in the wild” to reap the social and psychological benefits of Parkour. Instead, they see their own neighborhoods and cityscapes as important physical environments to explore, experience, understand, and deconstruct through athletic movement. Important to them is Hébert’s (political) emphasis on using training as a vehicle for “bettering” the social world and not merely using it as a self-rewarding liminal practice. For them, the physical and emotional lessons learned through Parkour must be set to beneficial social use.

Third, and following the lead of Foucan, an entire generation of competitive free runners has emerged. These individuals are indeed thrill and sports competition omnivores who may understand (and even partially embrace) elements of Parkour’s spiritual and moral essence but are nevertheless predominantly interested in the spectacular physical aspects and commodification of the practice. Competitive free runners have become the largest demographic in the Parkour global network. They tend to live in urban environments on the fringes of downtown city cores, are White males, share lower middle- or upper working-class backgrounds, and value
alternative sports cultures’ important spaces wherein they subculturally connect—at least for a period of time. A number of individuals in this group may only marginally engage in the practice, preferring instead to consumeristically align themselves with the sporting/spectacular images of the Parkour movement rather than its lifestyle assumptions. These young men, perhaps without an ideological commitment to the practice, often drop in and out of the group, moving on to other sports experiences and subcultures.

The genesis and global factionalization of Parkour is not, however, the central interest of this article. This article is more narrowly concerned with how a small gathering of urban traceurs in Toronto adopt the physical cultural lifestyle for environmental and spiritual reasons. Emphasis is given to how the practitioners in Toronto use free running as a technique of urban criticism and as a vehicle for one’s own “essence revealing.” As I argue, Parkour at once draws attention to the socially disciplining nature of late modern urban space and encourages a renaissance of physical cultural practices around more spiritually sensitive and poetic ideologies of athleticism.

**Urban Traceurs as Late Modern Flâneurs**

The late modern urban traceur movement is an assemblage of flâneurs who bound across and scale city spaces to underline the oppressive nature of them. Baudelaire (see Benjamin, 1997) characterizes the (Parisian) flâneur as a gentleman stroller of city streets and sees him or her holding a key role in understanding, participating in, and portraying modern industrial cities. Social and economic changes ushered in by industrialization processes in France, argues Baudelaire, lead dilettante flâneurs to immerse themselves in the moving human rhythms of metropolitan spaces and become the “botanists [or artists] of the sidewalk” (Benjamin, 1997). In common sociological parlance, flâneurs engage aesthetic and sometimes socially disruptive explorations of the city—especially in commercial avenues where inhabitants of different backgrounds mix—to cynically and flamboyantly highlight its constraining social-political dimensions. Their street theatre is starkly opposed to the tightly corseted normative movement within commercial city zones. Flâneurs thus deploy spectacular forms of street theatre or movement to criticize the sheer uniformity, speed, and anonymity of modern city life.

Urban traceurs, as flâneurs, deliberately call attention to the late modern city’s spatial organization and its environmentally sterile, commercial policing. The work of Henri Lefebvre (1991), especially in *The Production of Space*, helps to explain Parkour as a form of urban environmental criticism in this respect. Lefebvre details how social relations of production are reinforced through the mapping and operation of city space. Lefebvre underscores how the organization of the modern city creates an omnipresence of production/capitalist relations and physical cultural practices
among its inhabitants. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre contends that there are different levels of city/urban space, from very abstract and crude natural space (absolute space) to more complex spatial zones whose significance is culturally produced and reinforced over time (social space). Lefebvre’s argument is that social space (such as a central business district in a city and its connecting zones) is a complex cultural construction (based on values and the social production of meanings) affecting public practices therein.

Lefebvre (1991) thus writes that the social production of urban space is fundamental to the reproduction of social-cultural power relations and chances shared between people. The commercial ordering of city space and the architectural determination of movement there reproduces the tacit logics of market capitalism itself. As such, the interests of the ruling, hegemonic class rhizomatically creep into the design, function, and representation of all social space and direct all cultural movement respectively. In this context, one might add, physical space is less frequently viewed in natural/environmental terms and more as a resource for market capitalist production and order. Roads, buildings, parks, schools, even rivers and trees in the city are managed as social space (or rather as market commodities) with market capitalist codes, uses, and relations in mind. It is the self-appointed role of the urban traceur as flâneur to question the ideological parameters and disciplining structures of the socially produced, power-saturated, and environmentally pathological city space.

Urban traceurs are one of many interconnected figurations of late modern urban critics who draw attention to not only the capitalist dominance of city space and modalities of movement within it but also the environmentally noxious and detached nature of late modern urban life. Perhaps one of the most influential public flâneurs of the late 20th and early 21st centuries in this respect is Canadian geneticist-environmentalist-activist David Suzuki. Suzuki’s (2000) book *The Scared Balance* warns of the complex social, cognitive, emotional, and environmental impact of late modern capitalism on the human species and other species-beings. Suzuki uses a blend of art, poetry, scientific empiricism, and personal narrative to represent how the Western capitalist global design suffocates the human spirit and clouds one’s self-environmental awareness. Suzuki’s message is similar to other urban-environmentalist flâneurs in that only by exploring the essential human spirit and locating humankind’s sacred place in nature will the species survive another millennium. Akin to the anarcho-environmentalist group Shepherd (2002) ethnographically documents, Suzuki’s message is that one must lead by example. In other words, to effect moral, spiritual, and cultural change toward “connected” environmentalism, a person first seeks enlightenment regarding one’s place in nature through present-minded observation of the environment (via personal engagement with it) and then seeks to show others how to explore a similar path.

Along the above lines and others, the ideologies and practices of the late modern urban traceurs have far deeper philosophical and ecological roots than contemporary
anarcho-environmentalism. It is difficult to envision the social criticism accompanying the physical cultural practice of free running as historically unwoven from the New England transcendentalist movement of the 19th century. Transcendentalism developed as an idealist philosophy among writers in and around Boston in the 1830s. The transcendentalist movement tacitly (re)affirmed Immanuel Kant’s principle of publicly relevant “intuitive knowledge” and vehemently rejected organized religion for its extremely individualistic celebration of the divinity in each human being. Instead, early transcendentalists strived to underscore the essentially interconnected and interdependent nature of bodies, minds, spirits, selves, animals, and environments. One of the founding figures of the transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1836), issued what was virtually the movement’s (and Transcendental Club) manifesto in his essay *Nature*. *Nature* articulated natural phenomena as symbols of higher spiritual truths and that by connecting with natural phenomena, humans could explore the parameters of collective universal truth planes. Transcendentalists of the 1830s were particularly inspired by spiritual ideologies that rejected the deterministic and utilitarian ideologies of Calvinism (and other Christianities) and were clearly influenced by non-Western philosophies including Buddhism and Hinduism. Others involved in the Transcendental Club in the late 1830s, or readers of its magazine *The Dial*, included George Marsh, Amos Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and William Channing. The transcendentalists’ manner of interpreting nature in symbolic terms had a profound influence on the American literature of this period, notably in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman.

The process of self, social, environmental, and spiritual connection/exploration from a transcendental perspective was perhaps most poignantly illustrated in Henry David Thoreau’s (1854) book *Walden*. Indeed, Thoreau is historically cited among members of the deep ecology global movement as arguably the first North American environmentalist, and amazingly, the late modern urban traceur practices have deep ideological affinities with Thoreau’s physical cultural preferences. With regard to the historical contextualizing of urban free running, Thoreau’s environmentalist legacy is important along three critical lines. First, deeply embedded in Thoreau’s treatises on the purpose and need for wilderness communion and conservation is a stinging critique of Western industrialization and detachment from nature (or God) in increasingly sterile urban spaces. In *Reform and the Reformers* (1846) and *Life Without Principle* (1863), Thoreau paints a decisively pessimistic portrait of modernist industrial life, heavily cleaved along class lines. In these works and his vast array of others like *Walden*, which detail his sojourns into the wilderness, he tells a consistently cautionary tale about the trappings of modern industrial life on the self-social-environmental-spiritual connection, as so commonly told by contemporary urban traceurs.

Second, Thoreau’s (1849) *Resistance to Civil Government* laid the conceptual and ideological framework of “resistance” for later environmental movements of the 20th century, including the anarcho-environmentalists Shepherd (2002) describes.
Thoreau articulates that individuals possessed a moral obligation and spiritual duty to passively resist (i.e., resist through nonviolent means) modes of governmental tyranny and, in some ways, forms of cultural pathology. Thoreau explains how individual acts of nonviolent defiance toward modes of domination are critical for maintaining a spiritual integrity of the self and as a moral example for others. Small acts of noncompliance may, in short, stimulate great social awareness, debate, and eventual change. For environmental reformers and critics of the 20th century, Thoreau’s prescription to veritably act locally while thinking globally/universally became bedrock ideology for a range of social movements.

Third, Thoreau’s environmental transcendentalism was buttressed by a belief in personal immersion with/in/through the physical environment as a corporeal technique of connecting with “broader truths” about the nature of reality. Through stark, visceral, and emotionally challenging excursions into “nature,” the modernist clutter in the mind is removed and one is able to encounter a set of truths that confront all living beings. Such encounters work to expose the conditioning of the physical environment on the self and reveal the essential being.

From more than a dozen philosophical angles, Hébert’s Natural Method and later manifestations of urban free running are indeed physical cultural cousins to American transcendentalism. The urban traceur’s brand of Parkour is a physical cultural practice that engages a critique of late modern capitalist urban life and its (ideological, social, and physical) architecture through a unique form of collective athletic passive resistance. Through their sporting immersion in the urban environment, traceurs, at once, seek to understand the transcendental nature of the self and publicly showcase their gymnastic exploits in a role-modeling fashion.

Baudelaire, Lefebvre, Suzuki, and transcendentalists such as Thoreau were not alone in their stinging critiques of modern, and now late modern, social organization and spatial arrangement. Among the others, Martin Heidegger’s (1954/1977) sociocultural deconstruction of the encroachment of technoscientific (and I would add market capitalist) into modern and late modern city zones is centrally helpful in decoding the significance of Parkour as a form of social critique. Heidegger describes the Western idea of technology (including capitalist modes of production and design) as loosely dialogical with the ancient Greek idea of techne, an act or process of applied discovery. In a traditional scientific sense, techne is the process of applying knowledge and empirical measurement apparatuses to discover “truths” about the physical (and social) world and, of course, to employ such truth discoveries to produce the means of human subsistence and development. Technology for Westerners is normally conceived as the “bringing forth” (Heidegger, 1954/1977) and control of the metaphysics underpinning all life. Late modern cities are designed and managed as technological wonders in these respects, as physical, social, and interpretive spaces embedded with rule-bound logics of (capitalist-rational) production and control. Using Heidegger’s terms, late modern city life is completely enframed by technoscientific and commercial ontologies. In his theoretical schematic, humans (in cities and elsewhere) are merely standing reserve armies within and against
which production technology is deployed, extended, tested, and improved. The human potential for work, the desire and energy to move, and even the physical environments in which humans live are systematically re-sourced to serve technological needs and purposes (i.e., production efficiency, tool refinement, market expansion and consumption). He argues that, in the end, technology uses humans more than humans use technology. As Heidegger notes, and as Pronger (2002) echoes, Westerners have understudied the ancient Greek’s holistic notion of techne. Heidegger stresses that not all ontological questions or human needs may be addressed by quantitatively demarcating the boundaries of lived experience through applied mechanical and scientific means. To this end, Heidegger exposes the “other side” of techne: the bringing forth or revealing of aesthetic and poetic human realities through subjective emotional expression and reflection—what the ancient Greeks called *poiesis*.

Poiesis is an artistic, aesthetic, emotional, and public method of revealing “different” human truths. These truths are, according to Heidegger (1954/1977), humanistic, moral, ethical, spiritual, and we might add green realities. Poiesis arises from an act, a symbol, a thought, a feeling, or an expression that brings forth knowledge of the human condition falling outside of rationally technological ways of understanding human essences. Those interested in poiesis are less concerned then with measuring and accounting for something quantifiable in the world than the possibility of simultaneously experiencing the material and nonmaterial parameters of human existence. Heidegger suggests that social and personal explorations of poiesis can provide moments of catharsis and liberation for people, or moments of ecstatics, wherein the conscious and calculating mind is “let go” and the body and mind move as one.

In the remainder of this article, ethnographic experiences and interviews with urban traceurs in Toronto are explored in the process of understanding how free running is practiced as a flâneur-esque critique of late modern capitalist city space and capitalist ideology and as a simultaneous act of poiesis. Traceurs eschew the totalitarian technocapitalist enframing of the late modern city and the re-sourcing of bodies and space therein. Because urban free running is ideologically framed along these lines, the practice can become a zone of liminality for practitioners wherein poiesis and flow are both individually and collectively explored. After embracing, deconstructing, and critiquing the enframed city space surrounding them, they are “free to become” through running. Urban free running is then the art of revealing or bringing forth possibilities of the alternatively environmental self/society in late modern cities.

**Parkour as Anarcho-Environmentalism**

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so
As late modern flâneurs, urban traceurs typically express disdain for suffocatingly organized, scripted, contained, authoritarian, competitive, and consumer-based cultural experiences and spaces. They prefer open, creative, and liminal lifestyles. The group of urban traceurs from which data in this article stem are a young, lower middle-class urban cluster of traceurs in Toronto with whom I interacted closely for 2 years. They are predominantly male, are of mixed ethnic background or national origin, are high school graduates (only a few members of the group have university or college experience), range in age from 18 to 31, and live in close proximity to one another in the downtown core of Toronto. They have limited life experiences with organized sport but do share common backgrounds and interests in outdoor physical pursuits. Although they do possess extensive friendship and familial bonds, they almost universally describe feelings of alienation and isolation in/from social networks in the city. Each expresses an interest in environmental awareness, politics, and protection—a lifestyle position mainly impressed on them by close parents and peers. A majority of them grew up outside of organized/institutionalized religious networks but express a keen interest in exploring spiritually centered lives. It is interesting that they overwhelmingly feel a stereotypically (at least historically) middle-class political/vocational duty to act in socially responsible and beneficial manners. To this end, they prefer physical cultural practices that seamlessly integrate their somatic preferences, ideological leanings, and social values.

As a result of the above, what ostensibly brings and ties urban traceurs together is their interest in “postsport” (Pronger, 1998) lifestyles. A postsport physical culture is one that subverts modernist ideologies and practices outright and is one in which corporeal dichotomies between the sacred and profane, the raw and the cooked, the civilized/socialized and the primordial body are challenged through athletic movement. Whereas traditional sports practices contain, discipline, and enframe physical bodies as resources to be deployed toward the attainment of external goals (i.e., competitive and performative sport outcomes) within impersonal and sanitized architectural sports zones, postsport practices eschew the body-(or environment)-as-resource schematic. Postsports are at once moral, reflexive, community-oriented, green, spiritual, anarchic, and potentially Eros-filled physical cultural practices. They often adorn the guise of mainstream sports forms and techniques of play (e.g., swimming, running, cycling)—what Wheaton (2004) describes as the “residual” elements of modernist sport—but their individual or collective engagement and experience bears little similarity. Postsports are cooperative over competitive, socially inclusionary rather than hierarchical, process oriented, and holistic. A postsport physical culture values human spiritual,
physical, and emotional development (or rather realization) through athleticism, beyond medical-technical or power and performance terms.

Urban traceurs’ postsport orientation is encrypted into their daily or weekly free running “jams.” Although there are ostensible veterans and neophytes in the Toronto crew, members respectively take turns organizing and leading runs, developing new tricks and skills, and hosting social gatherings. Although the crew mainly comprises young men, scarce emphasis is placed on the practice as an exclusively gendered zone or that the physical risks undertaken in a free running session are affirmations of one’s hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, an immediate sense that these young men explore Parkour as a decisively nonhegemonically masculine practice is gleaned in the field among them. To this end, they neither configure a jam as a form of domination over the environment nor athletic others. Additionally, the urban traceurs spend copious amounts of time before and after jams discussing their emotional and psychological needs as free runners and what they perceive to be the sociocultural virtues of free running as a form of anarcho-environmentalism.

As postsport enthusiasts, urban traceurs in Toronto describe a pressing need to seize local city spaces from private, commercial interests and to use surrounding “natural environments” toward their physical, emotional, and psychological needs as urbanites. The late modern urban environment is artificial, cold, fragmented, and impersonal to them. A city from their experiential reality is constructed for efficiency, commercial interest, public control, and social surveillance. As such, the political-economic geography of metropolitan areas alienates people from one another and limits one’s abilities to commune with the natural environment (which urban traceurs feel necessary for “healthy” human development and spiritual growth). Ben, age 23, said to me:

Where I come from in the city, there’s no wilderness, no flowers, and people aren’t sitting around a fire together singing. I’m around millions of people I never talk to or care about. . . . How can you have a strong [spiritual] connection to a place like that at first? My neighborhood in Toronto was not constructed to be ours. It’s just somewhere I live. . . . Houses, and like apartment complexes, are just boxes people seal themselves in every night after school or work. But even in that sense, I need to connect with the space around me so that I can understand its rhythms and realities . . . to know how it works on me. Getting outside into the thick of the neighborhood and touching all of its parts helps me connect to it all.

Traceurs like Ben suggest that Parkour is a path toward urban “oneness” and environmental connection through tactile experience, a way of life devoted to aligning the mind, body, and spirit within the environmental spaces at hand, even when those spaces seemingly kill the human spirit.

In Western cultures that are physically and spatially mapped to promote hyperindividualistic consumption ideologies, sociologists have ignored how small clusters of like-minded actors such as urban traceurs actively resist late modern capitalist modalities of life through forms of athleticism in their own backyards.
Sociologists have noted how particular esoteric religious, or neotribalist (Atkinson & Young, 2001), groups reject mainstream forms of consumption and body indulgence via the strict practice of asceticism, or simply through morally grounded lifestyles predicated on intense body purification, restriction, and control (Atkinson, 2006). Such ascetics approach the body as a natural entity needing protection from noxious physical pollutants (e.g., drugs, alcohol, disease, and in some cases medicines) or risks to its moral integrity created by physical cultural codes (e.g., sexual or eating norms and preferences). Oftentimes, an ascetic philosophy is buttressed by a belief that it is one’s duty to align body practice with spirit. Few, however, have studied either the practice of asceticism in popular subcultures (Atkinson, 2006) or sport (Wheaton, 2004). Fewer still have “connected the dots” and documented the relationship between asceticism, athletic practice, and environmentalism.

Shepherd’s (2002) analysis of the Australian anarcho-environmentalist movement provides a useful framework for conceptualizing urban traceurs as an ascetic-athletic-environmental movement. Shepherd suggests how resistance to commodity hedonism and environmental degradation may be waged through intense physical discipline and its public representation. The environmental group Shepherd highlights aggressively rejects capitalist philosophies of mass consumption underpinning late modern urban spaces in favor of a “less is more” approach to resource use. In the hope of minimizing their collective environmental footprint, the members rather neoliberal practice Spartan discipline and thereby attempt to initiate “a moral [environmental] regeneration of the social world” (Shepherd, 2002, p. 142). According to Shepherd, by meticulously monitoring and controlling their physical “wants and needs,” they simultaneously reject physical culture pressures toward commodity hedonism and explore their spiritual and moral connections to the natural environment.

Urban traceurs, who share middle-class backgrounds, generally promote a belief that free running has revealed to them that mainstream (middle-class) North American lifestyles, and the city spaces that support such lifestyles, promote personal, social, and environmental pathology. They frequently juxtapose their own intense training practices and corporeal disciplining against urban trends of obesity, inactivity and immobility, overreliance on technology, and personal greed. Chris, age 29, argued:

I don’t know why people debate it so much, the answer is right in front of our bloated guts. We live like gluttonous slobs, so the body becomes that. Most people’s goal in life is to have more of everything, cruise around in an SUV, and get shit the easiest way possible. That’s not human nature deep down. We need struggle and hardship and sacrifice to feel inner satisfaction. . . . If we keep them up [consumption practices], we’ll get more diseased like the earth we’re ruining. My [free] running taught me nothing is ever easy, and the struggles define you. Not your ability to win a struggle, just your ability to try and struggle.
According to Chris, free running is engaged as a lifestyle/resistance movement promoting a regeneration of urban cultural practice toward personal and civic responsibility. By collectively showing people in open downtown city spaces how one’s immediate social environment may be used to engage the body in athletic ways, their attempt is to undermine dominant constructions of such space as the site of passive and unreflexive movement. Each individual free running body becomes a symbol of cultural possibility and a collective reminder for observers that free movement can produce moments of intense *jouissance* in highly scripted commercial spaces. Despite Melucci’s (1996) and Gitlin’s (1993) criticisms that new social movements rarely include a collective desire to alter a range of social practices or norms, Parkour is, at least for some urban traceurs in Toronto, designed to promote social awareness, collective health, and personal vitality. Jim, age 24, said:

> I’m so much happier in my life after starting with it [Parkour]. I talk to people about that all of the time, you know, like spending a few hours outside everyday and getting sun on my face and air in my lungs . . . all of the training and focus also helps you sort out what is important in life, and it gets rid of a lot of the stress producing clutter you carry around in your head. I try to tell people that as much as possible and prod them to come out and try a few runs with us. It will change your life, make you healthy if you are sick. People need to be shown this as a way of life, they need to see it first hand before they will believe.

Common in much of the new social movement literature is, unfortunately, a relative discounting of the efficacy or interest of (youth) groups to reform collective sensibilities in these ways (see Castells, 1996; Diani, 2004). Lifestyle sports movements like Parkour are generally discounted as style-oriented neotribes and members described as ideological poachers and poseurs like their counterparts in snowboarding, skateboarding, and surf cultures (Atkinson & Young, 2008b).

But by and large, Parkour is not the typical youth “resistance” or urban-critical subculture (like skaters, punk rockers, or hip-hoppers) that is documented with such frequency in the deviancy and popular culture literatures (Atkinson, 2003; Bennett & Khan-Harris, 2004; Muggleton, 2000; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2004). First, Parkour is not a recreational or leisure venture for urban traceurs (Atkinson & Young, 2008a) but rather an overarching style of life or vocation. Members do not surreptitiously practice on weekends and then slip back into their weekly middle-class routines. Neither do urban traceurs nihilistically wallow in self-destructive patterns of negation and social retreatism. Parkour is not only a physical cultural practice of criticism one engages daily but a mindset that filters into everyday practice for others to observe. As Jai (age 30) said to me, “it [Parkour] is a style of living, a movement and a consciousness. Once the door is opened, you cannot shut it again.”

Second, traceurs do not only strive to expose the inherent binary contradictions embedded in late capitalist modalities of life (i.e., expansion/destruction, equality/
 stratification, consumption/conservation, freedom/surveillance, technology/nature, and others), they also strive to propose socially alternative physical cultures—grounded, for them, in free running and communion with one’s urban physical environment. Ben told me:

I think Parkour is a new way for people, a way for people to be happy and find peace. It’s a way to concentrate on being one with the air and light and ground, and like, the people around you.

Third, Parkour lifestyles are neither short term nor fatalistically preoccupied with commodity forms and systems of representation. Quite to the contrary, theirs is a physical and spiritual style of life geared toward creating permanent change in social-cultural practices. Glenn, age 21, commented:

My hope is that people will see me [free running] and start to change the way they live . . . remembering to value freedom over being told what to do, what to eat and how to walk. To see the city as a jungle gym and not a business jungle.

As an innovative form of anarcho-environmentalist resistance, then, Parkour is in the first instance a political re-appropriation of commercial urban spaces. Buildings, parks, walkways, dumpsters, steps, and practically any edifice is viewed as an obstacle to be used for spiritual and physical development and site for disrupting the order of technocapitalist space. Pearce (age 31) said, “A jam [session] is exactly that, cultural jamming. Free running is a slap in the face to people . . . a way of making them see possibilities where there seem to be only rules and limitations.” Parkour is, in this respect, urban vivisection, and clear ideological links to the use of downtown space by first waves of North American skateboarders are evident (Beal, 1995). Running or leaping over, under, through, across, and between the physical features of a late modern city opens up the ideological ownership of such fixtures in the urban environment and cultural movement in public space. For an urban traceur, one’s urban/social/physical space is not contained within the home or within an office; it encapsulates everywhere the urbanite lives and moves, and a person needs to be physically “at one” or “at home” in this environment. Phil (22) said to me:

The second you leave the house, you should move like a traceur. It doesn’t stop or start anywhere. When you train you take it to another level of intensity, but you should always be aware of your movement. Parkour is something you can practice on the walk to work, on lunch, going to the movies, whenever and wherever. . . . Move like water all of the time, whenever you get the chance. That’s the nature of moving naturally.

Traceurs like Phil do not view a building or a bench as the private capital of a corporation or a local government but as part of their own habitat to be embraced, deconstructed, and appropriated through movement.
Parkour is therefore a physical cultural practice replete with a potential to critique the territorialization and denaturalization of urban space by commercial interests. By using downtown space (in physical, cultural, and cognitive senses) as an open playground, traceurs challenge the ongoing enframing of a city like Toronto as a strictly progressive, modernist zone:

A jam is blitzkrieg. We’re like rats all of a sudden coming out of the woodwork and taking over . . . like flash mobbing. I think Parkour defies most people’s logic about what they expect to see downtown, and so it’s a bit wild and scary at first. No, a guy in a hoodie doing crazy tricks doesn’t fit here. This is a place designed for lawyers and bankers, not us. I know that for sure when the cops show up, and tell us, despite the fact that we are doing nothing illegal, to get lost or we’ll be fined for [being a] public nuisance. (Darren, age 27)

Spectacular displays through political economic and commercial zones such as Bay Street and University Avenue in Toronto may challenge pedestrians to consider the polysemic nature of city space. The subaltern gymnastic and aesthetic practice of Parkour may destabilize taken-for-granted public readings of the city as simply a glass and steel resource for late modern capitalism that hides the natural dirt, plant life, and water of the terrestrial world. Aaron (age 19) said:

It wasn’t until I started [Parkour] and tried to find trees and water to train in downtown that I realized we didn’t have any in my neighborhood. . . . Then, you go and find some, and people scream at you to get off, cause that’s not what trees should be used for . . . they’re more like decoration than part of my environment.

To this end, urban traceurs argue that their movements in the city only appear as strange because the “natural” environment of their city is, in itself, strange.

The practice of Parkour brings forth an idea that athletic movement in the city is too often bound within confined and contrived zones of play and that the architecture of the city neatly demarcates boundaries between appropriate work and leisure spheres. The latter is defined primarily by its binary opposition to the other in urban planning processes. Urban traceurs suggest that movement in any athletic form should not be separated into controlled and denaturalized zones of play but rather engaged within one’s immediate environmental surroundings:

If I step back, really step back, and consider the idea of running on a treadmill, six floors above the ground, with an iPod lodged in my ears, in a temperature-controlled room, it makes me sick. No other creature is as fucked up as that. We’ve become afraid of the outside, and doing what is natural in the outside, because we are told we shouldn’t. Or, running or something is against the law in practically every place but in the park ten miles away from where I live. I have to take a fucking bus somewhere to go for a run. (Jim, age 23)
When practiced in one’s own public backyard (i.e., the open downtown), free running, in Heidegger’s (1954/1977) sense, brings forth and reveals, through its obvious strangeness there, the fundamentally dominated nature of city life by late modern ideological codes and practices. Urban athleticism in denaturalized spaces is a technique for revealing the disciplining omnipresence of play’s binary opposite (i.e., work and industry) in the late modern city. Along these lines and many others, urban traceurs illustrate the schism between the natural body, free movement, and the environment that members of cities like Toronto encounter as part of everyday life. Owen, age 25, said that

only people who aren’t physically free and feel inhibited to act because it doesn’t seem right, think what I do is strange. Isn’t that something, basic things like running and jumping [in open public] are weird or against the rules. It’s like you can’t run where you live. What the fuck does that tell you?

Despite all intentions toward promoting a new physical culture, though, the spectacular and easily dismissed physical practice of free running may effectively have no impact on modalities of urban thinking or spatial use. For well over 40 years, subculture researchers have illustrated how the core political-ideological messages of countercultural movements are often misinterpreted, ignored, diluted, or eventually co-opted into popular cultural (Atkinson, 2003). The public resistance offered through free running is often interpreted by audiences as a busker-like entertainment or momentary spectacle engaged by these flâneurs (Atkinson & Young, 2008a). Urban traceurs may discount or fail to recognize in this instance how urban dwellers are often jaded or desensitized to physical spectacles and shock value performances as they have become almost pedantically encoded into late modern capitalist ways of business and leisure.

One must equally question seriously, therefore, whether Parkour urban criticism or self-exploration produces any enduring impact on the broader community. For all intents and purposes, Parkour may simply be a prototypical magical subcultural resolution achieved through flamboyantly styled public criticism rather than a tool for observable social change. Simply put, the physical cultural practice of free running may not have a ranging social impact in the city beyond the level of the practicing traceurs. Akin to the group of anarcho-environmentalists Shepherd (2002) documents, urban traceurs prefer to raise consciousness by example. Leading by example does not always procure followers or ensure intended social change. With due regard to Stuart Hall’s (1980) seminal essay, just because traceurs’ activities are encoded as resistant does not guarantee audiences decode them as such. To steal phraseology from Hall (1986), it is a social resistance “without guarantees.”

Perhaps even more critical is that urban traceurs are often criticized for engaging in a neoliberal, do-it-yourself, and hyper-self-reflexive (introspective) version of community protest that is precisely advocated as a political diversion in late modern
life. Rather than aggressively protesting environmental destruction through institutional political-economic means, their social protest occurs as easily dismissible public street theatre or self-indulgent and attention-seeking leisure. Traceurs mainly respond like Shepherd’s (2002) anarcho-environmentalists by suggesting the self/individual must be broken down (often in highly self-reflexive and spectacular ways), inspected, and “healed” first before they can work to help heal the urban environment. They argue that one must first look and work inward before one may holistically connect with outer environments. To this end, they underline how free running has the potential to be anarcho-environmentalist if it is viewed as an act of personal and social poiesis.

The Will, Asceticism, and “Free” Running

At the bedrock of “original” Parkour philosophy lays an emphasis on using spectacular forms of running and gymnastic movement to engage intense self-introspection and awareness (Toorock, 2005). For the traceurs with whom I interacted, undertaking the practice of free running as a form of social critique (as described earlier) develops first and then in tandem with critical self-analysis. The individual deliberately thrusts himself or herself into physically demanding, exhilarating, and anxiety-producing contexts of athleticism to confront the barriers of one’s personal abilities, limits, beliefs, and thoughts established following years of socialization within city spaces. By pushing one’s own limits, or undertaking “edgework” as Lyng (1990) calls it, traceurs seek to explore the nature of their own will, desires, and wants that move them to act as culturally enframed urbanites. One’s “true” nature, they feel, is masked and perverted by socially created wants and desires. It is further polluted by the denaturalized state of their urban living conditions. Steven, age 21, says:

a good jam is one when I go to the limits of my body and mind and find out who I am, what makes me tick. It’s the moment when you can get seriously injured when you come face to face with what is, and what’s not, important in life.

Owen added:

Being on the edge made me learn who I am at my core. When I look into myself and confront my humanity, I realize what makes me function. It’s when my body and mind are punished that I learn about me. In the middle of a run, when nothing else in the world matters and I’m tired, I realize how controlled and forced the rest of my life is . . . so a monkey vault or cat leap is not agony or pain to me. It’s the rest of my life and what’s in my head every day that makes me hurt.

By placing oneself in patterned contexts of suffering (physical, mental, emotional, and sometimes social), urban traceurs come to reflect on what creates suffering in their lives, including the seemingly natural habitats in which they live. Like
Thoreau’s venture to Walden Pond, a Parkour session or “jam” may become a medium to let go of socially instilled conscious thoughts, worries, and physical landscapes that help enframe one’s thoughts and to be simply “at one” and present. A jam, to heavily existentialist free runners, becomes a vehicle for understanding how the human will is shaped in late modern urban zones.

Albert Schopenhauer’s (1903) conceptualization of the human will in The World as Will and Idea helps to deconstruct traceurs’ interests in examining the parameters of their (urban) suffering through urban athletic edgework. Schopenhauer argues that most lived experience is replete with suffering. Suffering is created by motivations of the human will (Die Welt) and the actor’s pursuit of the will’s fickle desires. Writing quite some time before sociological critiques of capitalist modernity and the advance of consumer societies, Schopenhauer ostensibly predicted that Western cultures would become pathologically commodity-fetishized, alienated, fragmented, and disconnected from nature. He noted that the socially learned desires (will) to accumulate social power, material goods, and other forms of capital in the “external world” produce vast human suffering regardless of one’s class, gender, ethnicity, or age. Because consumptive desires of the will are never fully satiated or fulfilled (only ever replaced) in market-oriented and neosocialist cultures, members whose wills are externally determined and referent to market logics are damned to live in suffering. Peter, age 26, said to me:

One of [the] most enjoying aspects of a run is that it gives you a space to unplug. You’ve got no time to care about what you need to buy, or how you need to dress. All of those fucked up things that cause migraines and that you realize are totally meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

Akin to Schopenhauer (1903), Pascal (1670/1995) tells us in Pensées that any instance of fleeting happiness created through, for example, the purchase of an object, eating of a meal, a sexual conquest, or achieving victory in sport allows for only a temporary cessation of suffering. Schopenhauer believes that as long as the will is calibrated externally by the wants and desires (re)presented to people within the tactile world, suffering continues. Examples in the world of sport abound. Pronger (2002), for example, described in his critical assessment of modern health and fitness how technoscientific discourses (pouvoir) map themselves onto human desires to move and “be” (i.e., shaping the will to become fit and fitter), radically altering one’s ability to self-define and express the body’s own will or vital essence (puissance). When one’s desire to be healthy/thin and fear of disease/fat is molded externally, one will endlessly chase new diets, workout regimens, fitness classes, and other aids to be stronger, leaner, and young looking—goals without terminus or point of conclusion.

For Schopenhauer (1903), freedom from suffering occurs when one learns to shed off the concerns of the human will (i.e., external desire) through ascetic lifestyles. Alan, age 28, said:
Some kids think that if you have a run or two with us every month, some magic enlight-
enment will happen. No chance of that. If you want to benefit from the practice, you
have to practice the mindset of freedom with every breath, every move you make. That
really means giving up and letting go of the mental and cultural clutter that people carry
around. It means sacrifice to practicing and reflecting on what truly makes you tick, the
relationships you make, and the impact you have on the earth. Massive commitment
and complete lifestyle-changing stuff.

What Alan is articulating is the sense of being a late modern ascetic that many of the
traceurs I interviewed share. Schopenhauer (1903) believed that by practicing
asceticism (what the ancient Greeks called *askesis*) and denying the will what it
wants (after learning how one’s will is shaped externally), one could encounter the
essential nature of one’s suffering and thus be liberated from its tyranny.

Strict renunciation of the will’s desires and fears is, for Schopenhauer (1903), the
only path for truly freeing one from suffering. Urban traceurs seem to agree, as they
frequently argue how, by strictly denying the pressures of capitalist materialism and
their learned fears of moving openly in capitalist city zones, one is liberated. A
24-year-old traceur named Sam said to me that

part of being Parkour is dedication and sacrifice to “the way.” It [Parkour] demands a
pure mind and body. To achieve that, well, it’s about giving up the need for anything
else. . . . To lose yourself and just move wherever you are, no matter what. It’s about
not looking at city block as a pre-mapped out space that indicates where you can and
cannot go.

When the individual finds a way to turn inward and explore one’s “central core” (i.e.,
to, in many ways, understand the essence of how desire, fear, and suffering are
related), he or she locates what Schopenhauer (1903) referred to as the “life drive.”
Tom, age 26, said, “Someone who’s done this [Parkour] and is one with it feels a ray
of light shooting out from your middle all the time. It’s energy, you know, pure
force.”

Schopenhauer (1903) concludes his metaphysic by arguing that even ascetics are
never freed entirely from the trappings of the will. Through daily introspection,
denial of external needs, and intense self-disciplining via physically rigorous activ-
ity, the will can be largely “tamed” but never conquered. The urban traceur Jim
seems to agree, as he said to me:

I get up in the morning and do yoga for an hour and a half. Then I walk an hour to work
. . . silent meditation at my desk for 45 minutes, and then I eat . . . I walk back home,
slip into my gear, and then out the door for a couple of hours of hard, sweating pouring,
body pounding training . . . I find my peace of mind by blocking out all else. There is
a joy beyond words in being that strict, but it’s never perfect, never complete or inde-
structible. You can’t live in that bubble forever, and you find the world gets under my
skin every day.
Jim further articulated that one’s method, or technique, of Parkour training fundamentally needs to be ascetically rigorous, focused, and reflexive to be personally (and then later) socially and civically useful. Jim explained how urban traceurs learn to become ascetically focused as a process over time.

During training processes, traceurs like Jim first learn “soft” and fluid gymnastic movements as their gateway into training the mind to be aware of what is first “holding them back” and then how to let go—simple jumps, rolls, and running forms. As they progress and become more self-focused and connected with their bodies/environments, they experiment with more physically demanding acrobatics that require intense mind–body oneness and what they call a “present absence.” Physically demanding jumps, vaults, and run speeds make traceurs suffer to further understand the nature of urban suffering. Traceurs use demanding styles of movement to learn how to let go physically and psychologically, to trust the mind and body to move, and to simultaneously abandon one’s social desires and fears. Highly risky tricks—which jeopardize the physical self—are initiated to remind one to let go of the willing self. Joe, age 26, said, “Giving your body to a move teaches you to submit to movement. To feel the body move as a body, and not as a mind in a body, or as a body in an unnatural [city] space.”

Traceurs devote hours of training weekly to the practice, learn how to find comfort in uncomfortable sessions, and Spartanly reject most other physical cultural practices in their lives. A traceur named Patrick told me that as one becomes a Parkour apprentice, everything else in one’s free time is abandoned and all needs and wants apart from Parkour are systematically removed. Patrick’s submergence into the ascetic Parkour lifestyle extracted him from many of the sources of suffering in his life:

Doing it day in and day out, and shifting my mind to only Parkour moves didn’t allow drugs or sex, or video games or online shit, or whatever, rule my head. It also teaches you to not be concerned with how much someone else has or what they are doing, and only worry about what you can control. . . . Oh yeah, and to take the time to stop and enjoy the beauty around you. How can I say this, it’s like the body can be the most beautiful thing on earth because of how it can move. That kind of nature is beautiful, not things you buy in a store.

Traceurs like Patrick encourage others to appreciate the aesthetic beauty and possibilities of the “free running body” and to avoid judging one another about the quality or skill of anyone’s technique. The point of Parkour is to quiet the mind and mute the will/desire by running, jumping, crawling, and vaulting in beautifully athletic manners.

Practicing with a number of urban traceurs in training sessions helps develop an appreciation of “the way.” As social movement, esoteric subculture, or lifestyle sport—whichever conceptual moniker we employ—urban traceurs derive much social support among “the own” (Goffman, 1959). Traceurs in Toronto are careful to point out that as a social practice, however, Parkour should not involve the typical level of socially disintegrative and self-concerned competition or interpersonal
bravado evidenced in most male-dominated sports cultures. Each should explore the prospects of Parkour at his or her own pace, step by step, leap by leap. Their collective emphasis is to help one another learn free running techniques and facilitate a deeper understanding of “the way.”

For traceurs in Toronto, one begins to understand the social, critical, and spiritual essence of Parkour when rigorous movement becomes phenomenologically experienced as effortless and natural. The idea of “flowing” through the city as an urban traceur is ultimately represented through the basic moves of Parkour. Moves such as the “cat leap,” “monkey vault,” and “cat balance,” as they suggest, involve mimicking animal movements that enable traceurs to travel over and between urban obstacles. These somewhat seemingly “unnatural” athletic movements (i.e., jumping from wall to wall, cascading off of a three-story building onto the ground, or balancing on a ledge 200 feet in the air) can appear aesthetically beautiful. The physical and aesthetic appreciation of Parkour by urban traceurs draws parallels in these ways to modern dance and movement cultures such as the Brazilian dance/martial art Capoeira. Traceurs often articulate that when one learns to let go of external desire through Parkour, one’s body feels permanently different, flexible, energized, relaxed, and vital. They compare the physical and mental state of Parkour to water flowing over rocks, not only because of the grace and the artistry of water’s movement over rocks in a stream but also because flowing water seems to effortlessly pass across, under, over, or around any environmental obstacle it encounters.

Traceurs quite frequently used the term *flow* to describe feelings of *ecstasis* during a particular jam. Flow is experienced when one is immersed in a jam to such an extent that absolutely nothing else matters (no self, no mind) and one moves and reacts on relative autopilot. From Schopenhauer’s (1903) philosophical position, when the traceur’s body is no longer the subject or object of the (external) will but rather a connection to the physical materials (literally) one communes within the city, one flows. The social psychological concept of flow was popularized by the Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1975) in his book *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. Central to the attainment of flow for traceurs is the physical and psychological match between the demands of Parkour and the abilities one possesses to move as “water” over the metaphoric rocks and trees of city space. The match promotes harmony of mind and body through movement and relaxed effort and can produce a Zen-like, meditative state for urban traceurs. Markus, age 21, told me:

> I know I had a particularly great session when I feel exhausted and pumped at the same time. When I cannot go on any more, but could go on forever. It’s like you almost can look down at yourself from the clouds and see yourself move. It’s amazing when it happens.

During a free running flow experience, traceurs relinquish self-consciousness and doubt and become “one” with the activity and the physical habitat in which it is performed. Neither the city nor their movements are enframed by late modern capitalist disciplinary rules and regimes. This engenders a biopsychological state in
which the traceur is rewarded solely by movement and flight and not by extrinsic (competitive) or will-oriented reward. Christian, age 20, said:

I had [free] run for almost 10 miles one day before I even “came to.” I was in it so heavy, soaking up the heat and the wind and listening to the air in my lungs go in and out. Better than any artificial high, yeah.

Although athletes in mainstream sports often refer to flow experiences as being “in the zone,” the flow experience traceurs in Toronto describe seems to be highly coveted but rarely attained by elite-level athletes, perhaps because of a psychologically embedded focus on reward and recognition from others (see Wheaton, 2004).

In the analysis of symbolic “death sports,” Le Breton (2000) argues that the burgeoning interest in flow experiences in “natural” and “untamed” environments (versus contained gymnasium or sports facility) is a sign of a diffuse modern anxiety and isolation, in this instance leading young urbanites like traceurs to search for subaltern physical cultural “ways.” Data provided in the previous section indeed indicate that traceurs share anxiety and isolation in late modern life and pursue free running in the “wilderness of the urban environment” along these lines. Important to them is that one will never experience flow in free running unless one first uses the practice to understand, deconstruct, and critique the confining and pathological nature of his or her own urban environments. In other words, people must first strive to understand how they, and their bodies, are contextualized and physically ordered as resources within urban space before they are free to become.

Once the basic Parkour “edge” techniques are habituated and flow is experienced on a quasi-regular basis, an urban traceur often articulates feeling as if he or she possesses a “total connection” with one’s mind, movement, and the surrounding physical environment. Temporarily losing the desire to rationally control one’s self, honing flow through Parkour, and developing a sense of connection with the urban landscape is articulated as something purely aesthetic. They believe that most people are motivated and moved by forces/wills beyond their control (i.e., market capitalism and consumption), and their inabilities to move as present, minded agents manifest into personal feelings of inadequacy, fear, and alienation (i.e., suffering). By contrast, urban traceurs talk about feeling energetically invincible during a particular jam. Gerry, age 27, claimed:

The greatest power in life comes from being in a state of no power, where you have no concern for it. Parkour means being an empty vessel ready to move, not being a ball of worry about what you don’t have.

Their feelings of invincibility stem not from a competitive mastery over the self, others, or the environment (so typical in sports cultures) but as a result from their abandoned desire to achieve competitive, consumption-based goals. Such a sense of being through free movement, what Pronger (2002) calls “puissance” and what Buddhists call “mindlessness,” liberates one from fears of personal failure and social impotence (trappings of the will) and creates an enduring feeling of ecstasy for a traceur.
**Discussion: Parkour and Redefining the Urban Scapeland**

The particular cluster of urban traceurs I studied in Toronto are highly critical of the externally determined nature of the will in late capitalist societies, the dominance of their local environments (and possibilities for movement therein) by governmental agendas, and the deleterious social-cultural impact of capitalist *pouvoir* on their senses of self. To this end, they seek to disrupt the urban space through which capitalist pouvoir is deployed with subaltern Parkour movements. Such is an essential component of their anarcho-environmentalism. Parkour is their techne for laying bare central social, cultural, spiritual, and environmental ethics in late capitalist city life and its impact on human will/desire/suffering. Parkour, on a far more individual level, is an ascetic and aesthetic form of self-negation geared toward the removal of suffering in the city. By focusing on the aesthetics of gymnastic movements, the spiritual experience of physical rigor, and communion with one’s (urban) environment, they pursue something about bodily experience that ventures beyond rational knowledge. In sum, Parkour can be an innovative late modern form of social protest and self-exploration through intensely political athleticism. Urban traceurs encroach on the commercial hegemony in downtown spaces in cities like Toronto and call into question the social construction of movement and spatial ideology therein. The case study of Parkour suggests that new subcultural movements in sport are increasingly adopting environmental concerns and foci and that sport may be tapped as a vehicle for experiencing alternative forms of poetic and aesthetic spiritualism in late modern life.

Upon even further reflection, a critical component of the anarcho-environmental essence of Parkour appears to lie in its configuration as a collective practice geared toward encouraging urbanites to see the city as a scapeland. Scapelands are, for Lyotard (1989), physical spaces that produce an emancipating experiential awareness of impermanence, emptiness, unconscious remainder, and presence. Lyotard’s (1989, pp. 216-217) scapeland is a place and state of being wherein which “is” before description and definition; it is that which appears as the erasure of an ideological or narrative support. A scapeland is characterized by the absence of direction and destination provided by cultural scripts or modes of thinking and understanding, such as technocapitalist ways of mapping and defining urban infrastructures or physical cultural practices within them. A scapeland is raw, open, primitive, and decolonized space. The urban traceurs veritably strive to transform city spaces into open scapelands, as physical and undetermined zones of play and personal connection. By breaking down or deconstructing modernity cultural views on the nature of urban space, how one is to move in such space, and how thinking/movement therein shapes one’s will/desires, free running’s ultimate anarcho-environmental potential develops as traceurs publicly ask through their cat leaps and monkey vaults, “What happens when one cannot apply a traditional cultural heuristic map to a space?” “What results when the individual is projected into a physical setting saturated by ontological emptiness or instability?”
Given the above, urban traceurs are not simply flâneurs without purpose or ascetics without a desire to change (one-by-one) mentalities regarding how to connect with the self, with others, and with the environment. Their street theatre is predicated on heavily flamboyant and spectacular moves because it is designed to stimulate spectacular thoughts and practices among audiences. Parkour is a physical cultural disruption of the taken-for-grantedness of corporatized and denaturalized urban zones and is intended to transform it into a collective scapeland. Their desire to practice Parkour (what they view as an environmentally aware practice) in heavily ascetic styles symbolizes how they feel, in Heidegger’s (1954/1977) terms, that to reframe the urban environment in an alternative manner, one has to spectacularly destabilize the enframing nature of its current state. Like the nature of their selves, it has to be stripped bare before it can be reassembled as “whole.” The sheer growth of the traceur movement in Toronto and other urban zones is a loose indicator that their message is being received and that more young people in these environments embrace the idea of the downtown core (and indeed their own selves) as a scapeland for self, other, and environmental work.

References


Michael Atkinson is a senior lecturer in the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Loughborough University, leading the instruction of research methods and skills at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. His current research efforts are physical cultural studies investigations of bio-ethical and bio-pedagogical issues in sport, exercise, and health using a blend of cultural studies, poststructural, and existential theories, including studies of the social logics of eating, dieting, and nutritional supplementation in sport and exercise cultures; postsport cultures including Parkour, fell running, and Ashtanga yoga; and the surgical shaping(s) of sports bodies. He has presented and keynoted research findings at conferences in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia and published in a spectrum of academic journals, including *Sociology of Sport Journal, International Review for the Sociology of Sport, Olympika, Leisure Studies, Body & Society, Field Methods, Sex Roles,* and *Youth & Society.* He is author of *Tattoooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (2003), *Battleground Sport* (2008), and *Deviance and Social Control in Sport* (2008, with Kevin Young) and editor of *Tribal Play: Subcultural Journeys Through Sport* (2008, with Kevin Young).