



**CLIMBING WALLS, MAKING BRIDGES: CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS' IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS THROUGH CAPOEIRA AND PARKOUR IN TURIN.**

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Manuscripts

1  
2 **Abstract:** Capoeira and parkour are two different body practices which have gained  
3  
4 worldwide attention in urban settings in the last few decades. The following paper will  
5  
6 explore how capoeira and parkour relate to the construction of identity paths amongst  
7  
8 children of immigrants between 12 and 20 in Turin, Italy. It will do so by looking at  
9  
10 how such practices are used by youngsters of migrant origin to negotiate and perform  
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12 narratives of self-worth, belonging and recognition within marginalising and excluding  
13  
14 urban environments. This study acknowledges that social identifications are created,  
15  
16 negotiated and (re)produced through bodily and spatial means and within networks of  
17  
18 power relations. Following this premise, the insights proposed in this paper suggest that  
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20 the ambivalent and fluid use of bodies and spaces implied by capoeira and parkour can  
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22 represent a meaningful lens to understand the embodied and spatial identity negotiations  
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24 enacted by participants in their daily lives. This theoretical perspective will illuminate  
25  
26 the place that active bodies, spaces and leisure practices take in the negotiation of social  
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28 identities, and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, enacted by youth of migrant origin  
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30 within early 21<sup>st</sup> century Turin cityscape.  
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41 **Keywords:** Capoeira; Parkour; Physical Activity; Leisure; Identity; Migration.  
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44 Capoeira and parkour are two distinct bodily practices, which have caught in the last  
45  
46 few decades the interest of young people in urban settings around the world. This paper  
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48 explores how such leisure practices were used by groups of young people of migrant  
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50 origin as means to negotiate processes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as to perform  
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52 publicly narratives of self worth and belonging within the urban landscape of Turin,  
53  
54 Italy. The insights here presented are informed by 9 months of ethnographic research  
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56 conducted between 2011 and 2012 with young capoeiristas and traceurs<sup>1</sup> in Turin.  
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58 Willing to provide insights about immigrants' children leisure practices as resources to  
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60 negotiate unequal social conditions and objectifying social identifications, the study

1  
2 engaged with a multidisciplinary theoretical framework in order to understand the  
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4 embodied and spatial dimensions of such negotiations. Following Silk and Andrews  
5  
6 (2011), this study engaged with a contextually based understanding of corporeal, and  
7  
8 spatial, practices (Silk and Andrews, 2011, p. 7). Furthermore, this study acknowledged  
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10 that the stakes implied in the social practices here observed “can only be understood by  
11  
12 the way in which they are situated and articulated into a particular set of complex social,  
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14 economic, political, and technological relationships that comprise the social context”  
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16 (Silk and Andrews 2011, p. 9). In order to provide an initial contextualized  
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18 understanding of the phenomena here studied, the following paragraphs will be  
19  
20 therefore dedicated to provide background information about the research context,  
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22 Turin. An analysis of the bodily practices observed, capoeira and parkour, will then  
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24 introduce a discussion of the insights provided by the study.  
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### 32 **Background: Immigration in Turin.**

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36 The city of Turin, the fourth largest urban centre and the third economic hub in Italy, has  
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38 a relatively long history of immigration as, since the 1950s, job opportunities in the  
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40 industrial sector and other related economic activities attracted many internal migrants,  
41  
42 at first from southern Italy (Merrill 2011). These internal migration flows significantly  
43  
44 dropped for various reasons in the early 1980s (Merrill 2011). However, the need for  
45  
46 flexible labour persisted in Turin, and internal migrants were rapidly replaced with  
47  
48 immigrants from North and West Africa, East Asia, South America, and, from the early  
49  
50 1990s, Eastern Europe. The region around Turin provided various job opportunities for  
51  
52 immigrants in the industrial sector, as well as in elderly care, cleaning services, and  
53  
54 seasonal fruit collecting in the countryside. However, since the early 1990s, Italy, and  
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56 the city of Turin, saw the rise of openly racist organizations, including political parties,  
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58 and witnessed increasing acts of intolerance toward immigrants and their families (Dal  
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Lago 1999). Mass media contributed to the creation of on- going waves of moral panic, which depicted immigrants as a "national pollutant" (Merrill 2011) and responsible for the country's criminality, violence and "moral decay" (Dal Lago 1999; Calavita 2005; Palmas 2009). The economic crisis, which hit Italy in the early 2000s merely served to accentuate such discourses. The fragile balance that had allowed migrants to be "welcomed" in Italian society due to the need for temporary, highly flexible workers for low-qualified jobs, or what Ambrosini (2007) termed "works of the three Ds", dangerous, dirty, demeaning, suddenly collapsed. The last few years have seen the rise of nationalistic rhetoric like "Italians first" or "No to a Multi-Ethnic Italy" among a disillusioned population that seems scared and confused by the effects of the economic crisis. This rhetoric has contributed to the endorsement of increasingly restrictive laws for civil rights, work and residence for foreigners in Italy (Rossi 2011). The *Belpaese* (beautiful country), and the city of Turin, came to be sites where citizenship orientated towards a modern equivalent of feudal privilege, implying degrees of membership distinguishing citizens, legal residents and illegal migrants (Calavita 2005, p.15). Eventually, other structural factors, such as high unemployment levels among young people between 16-24 and the collapse of public education, have had greater negative effects on younger people and immigrant families (Fondazione Leone Moressa 2011).

### **Migration, Identity and Leisure**

Several contributions in different disciplines have addressed how demeaning social categories, conditions of social exclusion and dynamics of *subordinate assimilation* (Ambrosini 2007) influence the sense of self and belonging of young people of migrant origin in contemporary European societies.

In transcultural psychology several authors underlined the cleavages (Moro 2003), de-affiliation processes and generational inversions (Yayahoui 2002) young people of

1  
2 migrant origin face when confronted with the difficulty to find a way to connect  
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4 sometimes diverging cultural and moral orders: those of the host country and those of  
5  
6 the families. Such processes can produce deep conflicts between generations and painful  
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8 experiences of feeling divided among youth, which, in turn, can result in violent and  
9  
10 tragic manifestations of unrest (Moro 2003). From a sociological perspective, Sayad  
11  
12 (2002) described the miserable relationships that in France children of Algerian  
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14 immigrants had with their bodies: disgraceful, ugly, *suspect* bodies which betrayed them  
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16 in their desire to be “as everyone else”, by reminding everyday their “otherness” in  
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18 French society (Sayad 2002, pp. 345-346). Sayad's work, which draw on Bourdieu's  
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20 (1977) and Goffman (1963), addressed the processes through which dominant regimes  
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22 of representation defined immigrants social identities in France, and highlighted how  
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24 such social categories were inscribed in/on the immigrant body.  
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30 Such insights are fundamental in underlining the disruptive effects of social inequalities  
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32 and dominant regimes of representations in the lives of immigrants, and their children,  
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34 but do not provide accounts on children of immigrants daily negotiations of established  
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36 social prerogatives and identities.  
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39 A small body of literature in social sciences (Schneider 2005; Palmas 2009, 2010;  
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41 Jimenez-Sedano 2012; Palmer 2009; Ngo 2008) suggested that, despite profound social  
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43 inequalities and painful cleavages, children of immigrants can to a certain extent be  
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45 successful in mobilizing various resources to build creative processes of identification  
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47 and belonging, even in marginalizing and objectifying environments. Furthermore, other  
48  
49 contributions in literature have focused on the role of leisure as a means to maintain  
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51 meaningful identity bonds with the country of origin in diasporic communities (Liu  
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53 Farrer 2004; Zoletto 2010, 2011), as well as to engage with intercultural encounters  
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55 within contexts of migration (Tiesler & Bergano 2012). Aiming to contribute to these  
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57 insights, this study highlights how children of immigrants' engagement in leisure  
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1  
2 activities, such as capoeira and parkour, represented an instrument to negotiate social  
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4 identifications and processes of inclusion/exclusion in Turin cityscape. Importantly, the  
5  
6 focus on capoeira and parkour allowed to illuminate how participants enacted such  
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8 negotiations by using the same sites through which they were daily objectified and  
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10 marginalized in Italian society: their bodies and the urban spaces they daily lived and  
11  
12 crossed. Willing to integrate perspectives on leisure and identity in migratory contexts,  
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14 this study will address the “everyday” as a site where power, dominant social categories,  
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16 and identities, can be both legitimised, reproduced, and negotiated in actors' daily lives  
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18 (Borden 2001; Skey 2010, 2011). The nature of the daily practices observed in this  
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20 study will furthermore provide an opportunity to understand the role that active bodily  
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22 practices take in framing actors' social experiences, and in constituting a forum for the  
23  
24 manufacturing of individual identities (Giardina and Newman 2011). The insights  
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26 provided by this paper suggest therefore that leisure practices, and the active body, can  
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28 thus represent unique sites where to observe and understand identity negotiations  
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30 enacted by groups of children of immigrants in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Turin. Eventually, this  
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32 paper shows how the identity negotiations enacted by participants did not address only  
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34 to the symbolic, aesthetic, and textual elements of social life, as previous studies  
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36 exploring youth identity negotiations through subcultural and leisure practices  
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38 suggested (Hall & Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979; Schneider 2005; Palmas 2009, 2010;  
39  
40 Jimenez Sedano 2012). Rather, the identity negotiations enacted by participants  
41  
42 practicing capoeira and parkour in Turin public spaces public took place through a  
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44 complex reinterpretation and redefinition of their bodies and of the spaces they daily  
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46 lived and crossed, as showed in the following paragraphs.

### 56 **Capoeira and Parkour: A Brief Overview**

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59 Capoeira and parkour may be distinct disciplines, but both have captured young  
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people's imagination in various urban contexts (Fuggle 2008, p. 205). One probable

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reason for the rapid diffusion of the two practices is that both disciplines do not have coherent definitions, thus enabling the capoeirista (or simply capoeira) or the traceur to find his or her own meaning in the practice. At a first sight the only commonalities between capoeira and parkour are that they are both bodily practices generally enacted in urban spaces. According to many capoeira *mestres* (masters) and scholars, the origins of capoeira can be traced to the 17th century in Brazil when enslaved Africans fled from their owner's plantations and mines to the forests to establish hidden and renovated communities called *quilombos* (Lewis 1992; Downey 2005). Capoeira was a form of physical exercise practiced mostly by young men and women and was meant to keep them fit for self-defence. To develop self-defence techniques without incurring in the prohibitions, and punishments, of slave owners, slaves hid their martial training in an apparently "innocent" form of dance. Music is an outstanding feature of capoeira, which is played by couples in a *roda* (circle of practitioners) while the *bateria* (orquestra) play and sing with musical instruments such as a *berimbau* (a string instrument with a single string in three sizes *gunga*, *médio* and *viola*), the *atabaque* (drum), the *pandeiro* (tambourine) and the *agogô* (double cow-bell). The *berimbau* is the leading instrument in the *roda*; this instrument is of African origin and has a long steel string fixed between a gourd-like fruit and the top of a long wooden bow. The *berimbau* is usually played by the master or the group's senior member and determines the rhythm of the play. Various *toques* (rhythms) mark the styles of play and influence and interact with the players during the game, together with singing (an important and constituent element of the practice). During the games, capoeiristas must pay attention to the messages coming from the *roda*, songs or rhythms, while at the same time trying to challenge their opponent and adequately counter his or her attacks. As the word suggests, practitioners do not consider the capoeira game as a challenge with a winner or loser. Rather, it can be seen as a "dialogue of bodies" (Fuggle 2008) as one player questions the other and

1  
2 tries to leave the opponent “without answers,” using bodily mastery and trickery rather  
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4 than physical domination. Though its almost mythical origin can be traced in the  
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6 plantations, mines and renovated communities of fleeing slaves in the tropical forest,  
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8 capoeira emerged as a widely known, and criminalized, practice in Brazilian urban  
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10 areas<sup>2</sup> in the late 18th century (Lewis 1992; Downey 2005). Capoeira games were  
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12 played mainly in public squares, streets, markets and, during religious festivities, in  
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14 front of churches. After its legalization in 1937, and its progressive structuring as a  
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16 mainly gym-oriented activity, capoeiristas relationship with urban spaces did not lose its  
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18 intensity, and although still marginalized in Brazil for decades, and to some extent also  
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20 nowadays, public *rodas* and performances in streets, markets, parks and squares  
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22 remained fundamental elements of its practice until present days. In general, a  
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24 consistent body of literature on capoeira mainly addressed its cultural and historical  
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26 aspects (Almeida 1981; Lewis 1992; Taylor 2005, 2007 amongst all). However, more  
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28 recent contributions addressed the transformation occurred to capoeira as a cultural  
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30 practice through its worldwide diffusion by addressing specific issues: masculinity and  
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32 gendered relations, habitus and phenomenology (Joseph 2008, 2012; Delamont 2006;  
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34 Delamont and Stephens 2008, 2010; Downey 2005, 2008), religiosity (Meller 2005;  
35  
36 Nascimento 2013), “sportization” and “professionalization” of capoeira (Wesolowski  
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38 2013; Aceti 2013). Although meaningful, such contributions however did not explore  
39  
40 how capoeira has been re-appropriated and transformed by practitioners outside gyms  
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42 and fitness centres, in urban public spaces around the globe.

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52 Unlike capoeira, parkour does not rely on centuries of history and practice, but gained  
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54 worldwide visibility and diffusion soon after it was created in France. The main  
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56 founders of parkour, Davide Belle, the son of French working class parents, and  
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58 Sebastian Foucan, the son of Guadeloupan migrants, developed the practice in the late  
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60 1980s by applying training methods they had learned from Belle’s father (a fire-fighter)



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2 together with Belle's own military and fire-fighter training. The name parkour derives  
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4 from the expression *parcours du combattant* (fighter's tracks), a system developed in the  
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6 early twentieth century by George Hébert as a training method for the French military  
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8 and subsequently used by fire-fighters. Belle and Foucan grew up in Lisses, a Parisian  
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10 suburb and trained in their local environment. They were motivated by the lack of  
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12 activities and opportunities for entertainment available for young people in their town  
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14 (Fuggle 2008). With parkour they were able to transform the urban environment into a  
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16 playground using physical obstacles as supports to cross through and over spaces and to  
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18 live in new ways urban spaces. Practically, parkour consists of using all available urban  
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20 furniture to go from one point to another in the least number of movements possible,  
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22 while also trying to avoid touching the ground and, simultaneously, paying attention to  
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24 the fluidity and simplicity of the movements. It is evident that such a view of an urban  
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26 setting pushes practitioners to re-imagine urban furniture (i.e. benches, walls, trees) in  
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28 creative ways as holds, supports or trampolines to perform running leaps, flips and other  
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30 acrobatic moves to reach their targets. Practicing parkour does not require special  
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32 equipment or structures and thus, it can be practiced virtually whenever and wherever.  
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34 These conditions encourage practice by urban youth, especially in peripheral  
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36 neighbourhoods who lack amusement and leisure structures. According to David Belle,  
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38 parkour's objectives are to escape and to reach: to escape from dangerous and hostile  
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40 situations and to reach new levels of ability, body mastery and self-improvement  
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42 (Fuggle 2008). Literature on parkour focused mainly on the liberating relationship and  
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44 opportunities parkour enables for practitioners within contemporary urban spaces  
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46 (Saville 2008; Daskalaki et al. 2008; Atkinson 2009; Mould 2009; Marshall 2010;  
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48 Bavinton 2011; Guss 2011). However only few contributions have addressed the  
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50 possibilities of researching parkour in relation to different topics such as relationship  
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52 with other lifestyle sports (Fuggle 2008), sport policies and sport for development  
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2 interventions (Gilchrist & Wheaton 2011; Thorpe & Ahmad 2013), (hegemonic)  
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4 masculinity, gender relations, commodification of youth expression and hybridized  
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6 identities (Stapleton & Terrio 2009).  
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10 As this study addressed the almost simultaneous practice of capoeira and parkour by  
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12 groups of participants, some reflections can be spent in regard to the ways such  
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14 disciplines were enacted and appropriated by respondents in the field. It can be argued,  
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16 that capoeira and parkour mainly differ in the relationship they establish with (public)  
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18 space and with the object of their bodily dialogue.  
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22 While the relationship with space in capoeira is mediated by the group of participants,  
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24 and the bodily dialogue is established with another practitioner, parkour, although  
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26 enacted in groups, implies a more individual relationship with space, which is the main  
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28 “partner” of every *traceur*. Within capoeira, space can be an arena where to display  
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30 publicly physical and artistic abilities and gain, even if temporarily, public recognition.  
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32 However space, its use and management, is also a fundamental component of the bodily  
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34 dialogue enacted by capoeiristas, who look for for cracks and fissures within the  
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36 opponent's game to use them as spaces to manoeuvre, escape, counter, and perform  
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38 successfully unexpected blows and sweeps. On the other hand the traceur engage in a  
39  
40 more personal relationship with urban space. Parkour practice seems to suggest a  
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42 specific experience of fleshed bodies and the surrounding space by explicitly  
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44 recognizing perception as our primary mode of *being-in-the world* (Merleau-Ponty  
45  
46 1962), and by grounding subjective existence in the body rather than in the mind  
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48 (Fuggle 2008, p.214). Furthermore such intimate and personal relationship transforms  
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50 space as a ground of experience, allowing to recognize, embrace and overcome,  
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52 individuals' feelings, as fear or lack of confidence, and physical limitations (Saville  
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54 2008). However, notwithstanding the evident differences between such practices,  
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56 capoeira and parkour present also some striking commonalities, especially in regard to  
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1  
2 the way they were re-appropriated and used by participants in this study. Primarily,  
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4 although engaging differently with space, as discussed, capoeira and parkour emplace  
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6 meaningfully the body in urban spaces, and therefore enable a deep, multifaceted  
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8 analysis of participants' bodily and spatial negotiations in the research context.  
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10 Furthermore, both practices' use of the body is characterized by a doubleness and a  
11  
12 familiarity with continuity in difference (Hall 2000). Both capoeira and parkour blend  
13  
14 apparently conflicting uses of the body, as capoeira combines harmoniously dance and  
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16 fight elements, while the “free flow” of movements of parkour has its origin in a rigid  
17  
18 military training. In addition to that, several participants in the study practiced both  
19  
20 capoeira and parkour in public spaces, often mixing movements and techniques, as  
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22 many of them reported similar benefits and features in both practices (i.e. management  
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24 of risk, danger and violence, increased bodily consciousness and awareness of  
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26 emotional reactions, embodied ways of knowing and experiencing the world,  
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28 “liberating” experiences in overcoming physical limitations). Eventually, both practices  
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30 represent also highly commodified global popular cultures that attracts, and are  
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32 managed, predominantly by young men (Stapleton & Terrio 2009, p. 20; Thorpe &  
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34 Ahmad 2013). Acknowledging the ambivalent and nuanced characteristics of capoeira  
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36 and parkour practices in contemporary transnational cultural flows, this study posits  
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38 capoeira and parkour as unique points of analysis. The ethnographic analysis of such  
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40 practices enabled to observe and understand how leisure bodily practices and contested  
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42 re-appropriation of public spaces related to participants' identity negotiations in Turin.  
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## 51 52 53 **Methodology**

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56 Data for this study are derived from nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Turin,  
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58 where I engaged in numerous informal interviews and daily capoeira and parkour  
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60 practice with approximately 30 research participants aged 12-20, whose parents

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2 originally migrated from Eastern Europe, Northern and Western Africa, East Asia, and  
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4 South America. Agreeing with what argued by Jimenez-Sodano (2012), to understand  
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6 the lives and practices of young people living at the margins in Turin, I did not follow  
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8 the participants by ethnicity (e.g., selecting only children of Brazilian immigrants or  
9  
10 the participants by ethnicity (e.g., selecting only children of Brazilian immigrants or  
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12 with Moroccan or Romanian background) since that approach would definitely have  
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14 limited my insights in the field.

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16 I conducted eight (one-on-one) and two (dyads) in-depth interviews with capoeiristas  
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18 and traceurs (practitioners of capoeira and parkour) in a community centre. I also had  
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20 eight (individual) in-depth interviews with street educators working with migrant youth  
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22 in Turin in their work offices. The in-depth interviews lasted a minimum of one hour  
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24 and as long as two hours with both groups. Permission for the youth to be interviewed  
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26 was requested from a tutor of each participant as well as the participant themselves-  
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28 none refused. All interviews were audio-taped with permission and transcribed with  
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30 relevant texts samples translated into English. Participants' names in this paper are  
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32 fictional to protect respondents' privacy.

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37 The fact that I was also a capoeirista proved enormously helpful in gaining access to the  
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39 fieldwork setting and to the research participants. I made initial contact with three  
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41 young capoeiristas who I already knew well because of our common practice. They  
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43 agreed to introduce me to a larger group of approximately 12 capoeiristas, four of  
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45 whom also trained in parkour. They made introductions to a group of approximately 15  
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47 traceurs, who I also included in the research. In the field I engaged in an ethnographic  
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49 observant participation (Wacquant 2004) of the practices analysed, by participating to  
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51 respondents' capoeira and parkour sessions. Such embodied engagement stemmed from  
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53 the recognition of apprenticeship as a meaningful means to penetrate social worlds  
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55 (Stoller 1997; Wacquant 2004) and understand meaning, values and experiences  
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57 attached to capoeira and parkour. Such methodological approach followed also  
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2 epistemological and methodological insights from Physical Cultural Studies  
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4 scholarship, summoning an analysis *of* body practices and subjectivities which stems  
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6 *from* the body of the researcher (Pelias 2007, p. 186) as a locus of political and  
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8 analytical praxis (Giardina and Newman 2011, p. 524). During research I therefore used  
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10 my body as a site of ethnographic data-collection and inquiry, by engaging in a  
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12 reflexive commitment to recognize my own embodied experiences in relation to  
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14 capoeira, parkour, the contexts where they were enacted and research participants  
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16 practices.  
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### 22 **Creating spaces of recognition within excluding places**

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25 As Borden (2001) underlined, urban spaces operate as a kind of social mirror, users  
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27 often checking their identities against a building or boundary (p.102). Borden's  
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29 perspective drew on a Lefebvrian analysis of urban spaces as social constructions,  
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31 which reflect and reproduce social tensions and power relations, and as products, and  
32  
33 producers, of social practices and identities (Lefebvre 1991). For the purpose of this  
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35 study Borden's reflections represented meaningful insights as they allowed to appreciate  
36  
37 how a leisure practice like skateboarding enabled participants to negotiate their  
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39 experience of the spatial and material conditions influencing their daily lives and  
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41 practices (Borden 2001, p.2). Following this lead I assume that capoeira and parkour  
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43 provided participants similar means to negotiate, if not the material conditions shaping  
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45 their lives in Italy, at least the subjective experience of such conditions. Such  
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47 perspective is found also in several contributions relating to the emancipating and  
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49 “subversive” implications of the spatial re-appropriations enacted by traceurs within  
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51 neo-liberal and post-colonial urban spaces (Atkinson 2009; Marshall 2010; Guss 2011),  
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53 but it has not been addressed by literature observing the practice of capoeira in  
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55 transnational settings. I argue that the observed embodied and emplaced re-  
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2 appropriations, enacted by actors through their active engagement in capoeira and  
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4 parkour, assumed a particular meaning in regard to the position given to children of  
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6 immigrants in Italian society. Although capoeira and parkour are also taught in gyms  
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8 and social projects in the city of Turin, the engagement respondents' had with these two  
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10 bodily disciplines went far beyond these training spaces, and involved their everyday  
11  
12 life context more widely. The young men I met during fieldwork preferred to choose  
13  
14 the spaces to engage with capoeira and parkour "on the way to school", "while keeping  
15  
16 an eye on younger siblings in the park", and did not need a dedicated, regulated time or  
17  
18 space. Therefore, as I observed and followed children of immigrants choosing and  
19  
20 transforming "in between" public spaces (e.g. public parks, empty parking lots, street  
21  
22 corners, abandoned factories, pedestrian areas) into playgrounds and free open-air  
23  
24 gyms, I gradually developed the idea that respondents' used the spectacular display of  
25  
26 physical abilities implied by capoeira and parkour also as means to declare in public,  
27  
28 unrequested and irreverent, their presence in the city's life (and polity). As several  
29  
30 participants have often mentioned during the research, urban spaces constantly  
31  
32 reminded them of their position in Italian society as "tolerated" guest, even when they  
33  
34 were born and raised, studied and worked in Italy<sup>3</sup>.  
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43 We are young, we are 'foreigners', we are always 'around', we are exactly who they [police  
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45 men] look for first (Bogdan 16 years old)  
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50 So, the other day I am walking with my friends at the park, there's a big car parked, a man and t  
51  
52 wo ladies stand outside of the car drinking and listening to music from the radio. As I pass them I  
53  
54 begin to move, cause you know, I can't stand still when I hear music, the man begins to shout at  
55  
56 me "come here and dance for us, you monkey, as you usually do where you came from!" (Lazer  
57  
58 17 years old)  
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It is legitimate then to interrogate what influence the materialisation of social

1  
2 positioning and categories in public spaces can have in the construction of children of  
3  
4 immigrants sense of self, self worth, belonging and membership in Italian society.  
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6 Specifically in the city of Turin, the neoliberal urban reform which aimed to transform a  
7  
8 “city that looked like a factory” (Bagnasco 1986) to an European capital of culture,  
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10 tourism and leisure since early 2000s, radically exacerbated dynamics of social and  
11  
12 spatial exclusion towards marginal groups and “visible minorities” (Skey 2010) in urban  
13  
14 public spaces. As the municipality, and various cultural entrepreneurs, celebrated Turin's  
15  
16 supposed social inclusiveness through festive events and parades, mainly portraying an  
17  
18 exotic and aestheticized vision of multiculturalism as pleasant diversity, (Mitchell 1995;  
19  
20 Silk and Andrews 2008), the city public spaces started to be reconfigured in the name of  
21  
22 security (Rose 2000; Wacquant 1993), mainly at the expenses of the marginal groups  
23  
24 usually attending such spaces: homeless and immigrants. The progressive militarization  
25  
26 of public spaces in predominantly immigrant inhabited neighbourhood coincided with  
27  
28 narratives of victimisation (Skey 2010), depicting specific urban areas as “taken over”  
29  
30 by dangerous minorities, and with a growing process of criminalization of immigrants  
31  
32 presence in public spaces (Wacquant 1993). Immigrants, and their children, in public  
33  
34 spaces were increasingly perceived as “too many” (Skey 2010, p. 719), challenging  
35  
36 their prerogatives as domesticated, and invisible, “others” (Hage 1998; Palmas 2009;  
37  
38 2010), and associated with potential criminal or morally scandalous activities. As the  
39  
40 following accounts show, participants' engagement with capoeira and parkour allowed  
41  
42 them to use the ambivalent and creative use of the body and space implied by the  
43  
44 practices observed to negotiate marginal social positioning and objectifying  
45  
46 identifications in Turin cityscape. As discussed, participants often reported the symbolic  
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48 and concrete violence they encountered in their daily living environments, including  
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50 “judging looks”, threats, and acts of discrimination on the streets and public areas.  
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60 Harassment and discrimination also appeared when they trained in capoeira and parkour



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in public spaces:

When we train in small groups at the park or in any open space large enough for us, sometimes people yell at us, they tell us to go away and sometimes threaten us. They tell us to get a job, that we are vandals, but we do not break anything! (Abdelrazak 14 years old)

Often it happens that police send us away while we are training [in a public park]; we both know it is not illegal, but they say “this is not the proper place” and send us away [...] we go, because how can you discuss with them [...] (Cesar 16 years old)

This, in turn, seemed to push them to use capoeira and parkour to discuss and negotiate the social categories through which they were identified by other actors in public spaces rather than inhibiting them. While the youngsters may not have had enough power to have open discussions with police—“how can you discuss with them”—they used capoeira and parkour to counter and overcome daily dynamics of discrimination, violence and exclusion, as well as to perform and provide images of self worth and ability in public spaces. Both Abdelrazak and Cesar recognized their attempts to use the same sites through which they perceived to be discriminated, their bodies and public spaces, as means to provide alternative images from the usual stereotypes of *male immigrant bodies* by enacting capoeira and parkour:

More often people, mothers, children, stop to watch us, or take photos, some children try to do what we are doing [...] Sincerely I like it, because people look at us differently [...] If I do capoeira or parkour I can distinguish myself, people note me and admire me because of what I am able to do. (Abdelrazak 14 years old)

I'm sure they send us away because we are foreigners, they may be thinking we do this while we sell drugs, or we'll vandalise something, or just as if we have less rights to stay in public parks! This just makes me want to go on training, you know, these situations really help me to grow, to understand my direction, I keep on training at the park 'cause I have no other place to stay fit and



1  
2 meet my bros', but also because I know I am not doing anything wrong, I am not as they see me.  
3  
4 (Cesar, 16 years old).  
5  
6

7 In such accounts it is possible to recognize the existing relationship between how spaces  
8 are perceived by actors in relation to how individuals perceive themselves, their sense of  
9 self worth, belonging and social location within them. Through their creative and  
10 irreverent public engagement with capoeira and parkour Abdelrazak and Cesar  
11 attempted to counter the established prerogatives, and objectifying identifications, of  
12 immigrants as “(un)domesticated others” (Skey 2010, p. 719) in Italian society.  
13  
14 Although often objectified as thugs, vandals and drug dealers, as *alien bodies* in public  
15 spaces, participants did not simply interiorized such categories or reactively endorsed  
16 them (Sayad 2002), rather they attempted to transform their experiences of space from  
17 spaces of exclusion to spaces of belonging:  
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32 When we held a *roda* in Piazza Castello [Turin's central square, in the shopping and touristic  
33 area] at the beginning I was nervous. I was in the main square of the city, where I seldom go, as I  
34 do not feel at ease there [...] everybody checks out everybody, old ladies holding their bags as  
35 they pass beside me and my friends [...] here comes the police patrol to check our documents and  
36 warn “behave, we got eyes on you”[...] but then, when the music started, I felt just like playing,  
37 everything disappeared, there were just my “bros” who were playing with me and the *roda*, I just  
38 felt such incredible energy coming from there [...] the crowd, people were not just *looking* at me,  
39 they were *clapping, laughing, singing*, while they were *enjoying* with me the capoeira games. I  
40 totally forgot where I was, because I was doing capoeira and wherever I was, *that was my place*.  
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49 (Abdelrazak 14, years old, emphasis added)  
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53 Though is licit to question the extent of the effects of such negotiations on the dominant  
54 regime of representations shaping participants' lives (Atkinson 2009), it is possible to  
55 assume that through the discussed situational temporary re-appropriations of spaces,  
56 enacted through the different means provided by capoeira and parkour, participants'  
57 identities were “formed and transformed as they negotiated the contours of the city”  
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1  
2 (Fuggle 2008, p. 214). The spatial negotiations enacted through capoeira and parkour  
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4 practices seemed then to offer participants, rather than explicit attempts to change the  
5  
6 material conditions constraining their lives and trajectories, tentative, situational, self-  
7  
8 surpassing responses to their implicit interrogative “Where, and what, is my place in  
9  
10 here?”. In engaging with such quest for belonging and self worth, participants' spatial  
11  
12 identity negotiations related also to a re-definition and re-interpretation of their bodily  
13  
14 experiences and embodied identities through capoeira and parkour, which will be  
15  
16 addressed in the following paragraph.  
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### 22 **“If I can climb a wall of ten meters”:** embodied narratives of belonging and self- 23 24 **worth** 25 26

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28 According to research participants the practice of capoeira and parkour did not allow  
29  
30 them only to tactically re-appropriate and redefine previously alien and threatening  
31  
32 spaces, but also helped in redefining themselves and their bodies, in a similar way to  
33  
34 what observed by Borden with skateboarders (2001, p. 53). Interestingly, *capoeira* and  
35  
36 *parkour* seemed to be initially chosen by participants not because of their history or  
37  
38 outstanding features, but rather because of a lack of other leisure opportunities and of  
39  
40 economic means (Horolets 2012). Many respondents acknowledged that they started  
41  
42 training “just for joke”, “because it seemed to be an entertaining way to work out for  
43  
44 free and learn to do some back flips” (Ricardo 16 years old) or even because “I was  
45  
46 already doing it (parkour) back at home, but I just had no name to call it!” (Samba 18  
47  
48 years old). Nevertheless, as they engaged more in such practices, research participants  
49  
50 started to use the skills they developed by training *capoeira* and *parkour* to address also  
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52 other needs and issues in their lives:  
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I like capoeira because it teaches you how to move in every situation [...] we all fall one day or  
another, isn't it? With capoeira I learnt that when you can't avoid it, sometimes you simply can't,

1  
2 you have to have learnt how fall well, so that your fall will not stop you from getting your life  
3  
4 done! (Ricardo 16 years old)  
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8  
9 What also is great about parkour is that adrenaline, that feeling that you have when you jump an  
10  
11 obstacle which hinders you to get somewhere and you try everything to find a way to overcome  
12  
13 it [...] You feel all these contrasting emotions, fear, deception, rage, excitement, but when you do  
14  
15 it you feel so damn powerful, and you feel like: if I find the way to climb a wall of ten meters  
16  
17 just with my imagination, I can use it for other obstacles in my life. (Samba, 18 years old)  
18  
19

20  
21 Ricardo's and Samba's accounts show how they used their bodily engagement with  
22  
23 capoeira and parkour to recognize and mobilise personal abilities and a sense of self  
24  
25 worth in order to address challenges and backlashes in their daily lives, in a way that  
26  
27 has been recognized by Saville (2008), Thorpe and Ahmad (2013) and others in relation  
28  
29 to parkour, however without relating such aspects to individuals' process of identity  
30  
31 construction. Ricardo, Samba and various other respondents seemed to commit to  
32  
33 capoeira and parkour as practices "imbued with the flexibility and preadaptation  
34  
35 necessary for unpredictable change" (Bateson 1972 in Vigh 2009, p. 425) to address the  
36  
37 unpredictability in their everyday lives, and to recognize and build in themselves a sense  
38  
39 of ability to face it. Respondents said that capoeira and parkour practice did not only  
40  
41 provide them the bodily skills required to engage actively with the multiple and moving  
42  
43 constraints in their daily lives, rather they described how constant work on their body  
44  
45 allowed them to gain a consciousness of their postures and reactions to various  
46  
47 situations, eventually enabling participants to act on them:  
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56 Since I started to practice [both *capoeira* and *parkour*] I feel my body and I feel I know myself  
57  
58 better. I know how I react to certain situations [...] I feel like I know more how to face  
59  
60 things in my life, both an obstacle, somebody provoking me or something even worse [...]  
(Ciprian, 14 years old)

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4 Since I started doing *capoeira* I realized I gained this posture, this way of walking, relaxed, “sly  
5 like a cat” (laughs) [...] I think people read the way you walk or you look at them and react by  
6 consequence! I know this because, before beginning with *capoeira*, I was so insecure that in  
7 unknown or confrontational situations I always attacked others, so they could not see how scared  
8 I was (Wendell, 17 years old)  
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16  
17 Ciprian and Wendell accounts show how participants used *capoeira* and parkour not  
18 only as means to navigate unpredictable, and possibly violent, environments and spaces,  
19 but eventually as means enabling to recognize themselves as valuable and capable  
20 individuals able to cope with unpredictable events and interactions within challenging  
21 daily life contexts. Together, the re-appropriation of spaces, and of their bodies, seemed  
22 to help participants to redefine both the city and themselves in a process which showed  
23 how *capoeira* and parkour represented for them meaningful tools of identity  
24 construction. Participants seemed therefore to use such leisure practices as attempts to  
25 both redefine themselves and social relationships with others within an unpredictable  
26 “city of unknowns” (Borden 2001, p. 142). Where traditional social institutions, family,  
27 school, but also organized leisure activities, seemed to have difficulties to reach  
28 participants and provide clear answers to the identity questions posed by the “children  
29 of migration” (Sayad 2002), *capoeira* and parkour seemed to be proactively used by  
30 participants as meaningful means of identification and socialization. As such, groups of  
31 *capoeiristas* and traceurs provided participants a sense of community in which the  
32 contested re-appropriation of public spaces eventually enhanced a sense of agency and  
33 belonging, developed without resorting to outspoken conflict, violence or attempts to  
34 abolish physical and social constraints affecting their lives. Rather such spatial and  
35 bodily identity negotiations were enacted through re-interpreting, transforming and  
36 using public spaces (Fuggle 2008; Bavinton 2011) and their bodies according to their  
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2 needs of well-being, socialization and recognition. Furthermore the bodily and spatial  
3  
4 engagement with leisure practices as capoeira and parkour represented a significant  
5  
6 means to build identity paths of belonging and self worth within marginalizing  
7  
8 environments, and to negotiate processes of inclusion and exclusion in early 21<sup>st</sup> century  
9  
10 Turin public spaces. Participants' engagement in capoeira and parkour seemed to follow  
11  
12 a desire to make their bodies, and the spaces they daily lived and crossed, contested  
13  
14 tools of self constitution and self development, therefore contributing to illuminate the  
15  
16 role of leisure in the embodied and spatialized constituency of actors' social lives and  
17  
18 identities. Eventually, by engaging in capoeira and parkour, participants tried to prevent  
19  
20 dominant regimes of representation and urban organization to dictate who they could  
21  
22 be(come) in Italian society. In such perspective it looks like participants' public and  
23  
24 bodily engagement with capoeira and parkour tentatively and publicly posed in response  
25  
26 to the fundamental question "Who am I?" (Borden 2001, p. 245). Though the extent of  
27  
28 such identity negotiations need to be understood as partial, and contextually bounded,  
29  
30 participants accounts showed the role that leisure practices take in the process of  
31  
32 identity construction amongst groups of children of immigrants in Turin. Furthermore  
33  
34 by highlighting how the identity negotiations addressed in the study subjectively  
35  
36 redefined and transformed participants' bodies and lived spaces, this contribution calls  
37  
38 for further enquiries about the embodied, and emplaced, identity politics (Hall 2000;  
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40 Borden 2001) enacted through leisure by social actors.  
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### 49 **Conclusions**

50  
51 While this paper aimed to show how the practices of capoeira and parkour related to the  
52  
53 process of identity construction amongst groups of young people of migrant origin in  
54  
55 Turin, Italy, it is beyond the scope of this study to address exhaustively the complex  
56  
57 implications of participants' practices and identity negotiations in Turin cityscape. I  
58  
59 therefore intend this article as a starting contribution to address the intersection between  
60

1  
2 identity, body, space and leisure, which represents the main focus my current and  
3  
4 ongoing doctoral research. Following this lead, this concluding paragraph will address  
5  
6 some issues which I understand representing meaningful directions for further  
7  
8 investigations and analysis. The public practice of capoeira and parkour, as multi-  
9  
10 faceted and always moving, seemed to embody and emplace what Corsin-Jimenez has  
11  
12 called a “geography of becoming” (2003, p. 142). As if echoing Corsin-Jimenez’s claim  
13  
14 that “the world happens with us and, in choosing what set of practices we will enact and  
15  
16 engage in, we are also choosing what world we want to live in” (2003, p. 141),  
17  
18 participants embodied and spatial practices seemed to imply the opportunity for other  
19  
20 possible spaces, social paths, histories and identifications for children of immigrants  
21  
22 (Jimenez 2003, p. 142).  
23  
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27  
28 However the negotiations of social categories and identities enacted through bodily and  
29  
30 spatial re-appropriations by participants needs to be carefully analysed, since they  
31  
32 represented nevertheless frail and tentative trajectories in unstable and unfolding  
33  
34 environments. As suggested by Borden (2001), Lindegaard (2009) and Stapleton and  
35  
36 Terrio (2009) the situational embodied and spatial identity negotiations enacted by  
37  
38 social actors are not immune from the reproduction of hegemonic norms, differences  
39  
40 and power relations. Participants' engagement in capoeira and parkour might indeed  
41  
42 reproduce dominant gender relations and discriminations, as well as hegemonic and  
43  
44 commodified representations of muscular and rebellious masculinity (Borden 2001;  
45  
46 Stapleton & Terrio 2009), while simultaneously trying to embody social identifications  
47  
48 which not reproduce stereotyped negative images of male immigrant bodies  
49  
50 (Lindegaard 2009). Although Atkinson's (2009) account of a parkour community in  
51  
52 Toronto seemed to suggest otherwise, other studies references in capoeira literature  
53  
54 showed how hegemonic gender relations in specific social contexts can be reproduced  
55  
56 in specific interactions within capoeira and parkour groups (Joseph 2012; Thorpe &  
57  
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1  
2 Ahmad 2013). A focus on the mentioned aspects of gender relations within the  
3  
4 described practices opens therefore a series of meaningful issues to address about the  
5  
6 role of leisure, and physical practices, in reproducing, legitimising, and sometimes  
7  
8 challenging gender and sexual norms and differences within the field of research (Silk  
9  
10 and Andrews 2011). Furthermore, it is undeniable that capoeira and parkour provided  
11  
12 participants valuable forms of cultural and social capital enabling them to situationally  
13  
14 negotiate objectifying identifications in Turin public spaces. I assume nevertheless  
15  
16 meaningful to address how and to what extent the social capital provided by capoeira  
17  
18 and parkour relate also to the possible reproduction of power relations and hegemonic  
19  
20 norms and differences also *within* groups of practitioners. I assume indeed that a  
21  
22 fundamental element in researching leisure practice in relation to identity amongst  
23  
24 immigrants communities would need to address issues of “intersectional exclusion”  
25  
26 (Horolets 2012, p. 3), intended as the marginalisation and exclusion of individuals who  
27  
28 belong to more than one marginalised category (i.e. non-white migrant women in urban  
29  
30 public spaces). A further engagement with the complex and nuanced issues raised by  
31  
32 children of immigrants' engagement with capoeira and parkour in Turin public spaces  
33  
34 may thus provide further meaningful insights on the role of leisure in immigrants', and  
35  
36 their children, daily lives and identities.  
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<sup>1</sup> Parkour practitioners.

<sup>2</sup> Such as the cities of Salvador de Bahia, Rio de Janeiro and Recife.

<sup>3</sup> According to a recent research (Bonini 2009, p. 99) currently, upon turning 18, almost half of the children of immigrants who were born in Italy must present a working contract or a studying justification to remain in Italy and remain living where they grew up.

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