

My c i t y m o v i n g , p a r k o u r
M o v i n g m y c i t y , p a r k o u r
P a r k o u r , m y c i t y m o v i n g
My p a r k o u r , c i t y m o v i n g
P a r k o u r , m o v i n g m y c i t y
C i t y , m y p a r k o u r m o v i n g
P a r k o u r , m y m o v i n g c i t y
M o v i n g , m y p a r k o u r c i t y
C i t y , m o v i n g m y p a r k o u r
My m o v i n g c i t y , p a r k o u r
P a r k o u r c i t y , m y m o v i n g
M o v i n g p a r k o u r , m y c i t y
C i t y p a r k o u r , m y m o v i n g
My m o v i n g p a r k o u r , c i t y

H o w t h e p r a c t i c e o f p a r k o u r d e e p e n s
t h e l a n d s c a p e o f L o n d o n

M i c h a l M e r z e l



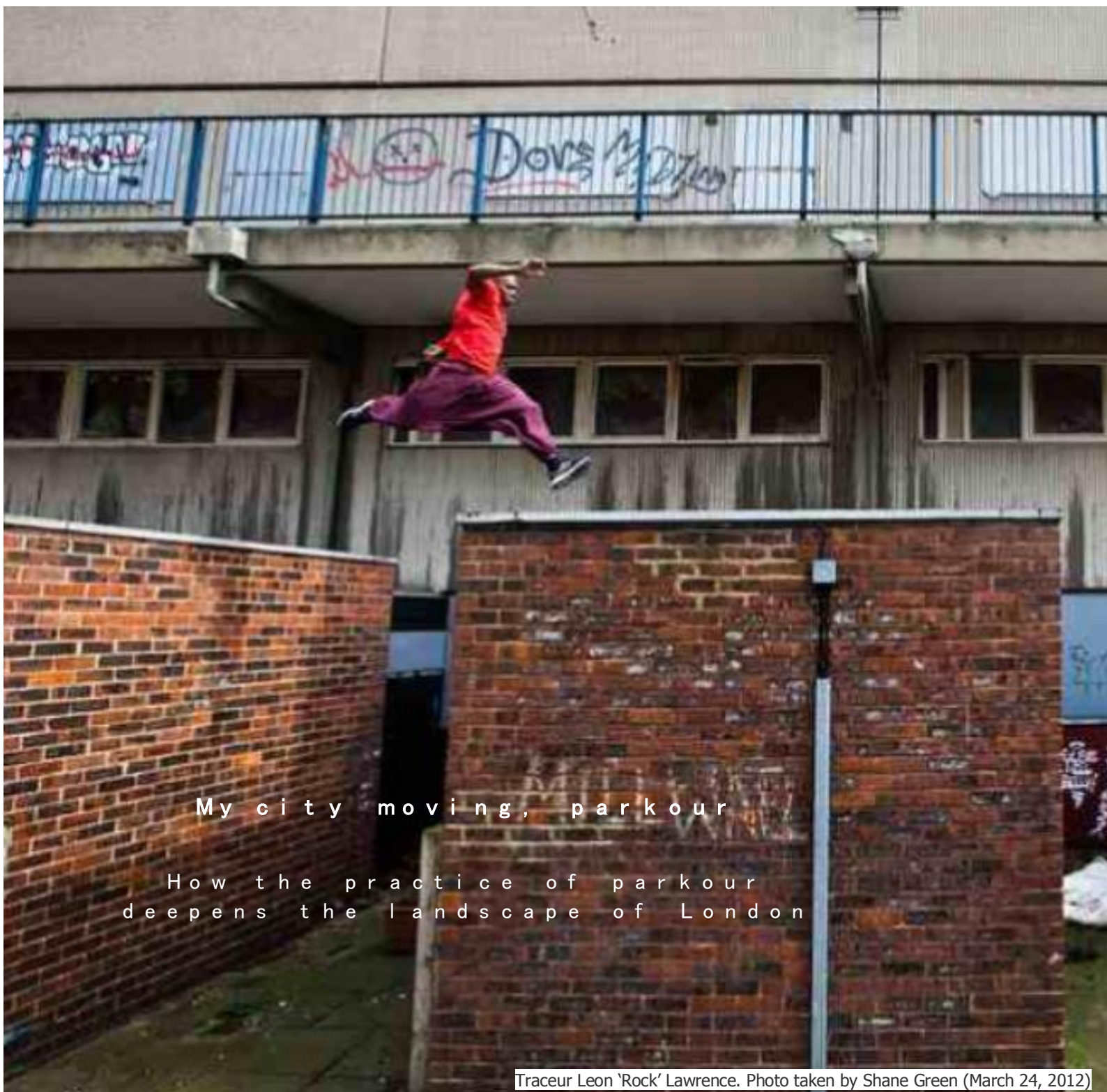
Bachelor Thesis Cultural Anthropology

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My city moving, parkour

How the practice of parkour
deepens the landscape of London

Traceur Leon 'Rock' Lawrence. Photo taken by Shane Green (March 24, 2012)



Supervised
by
Fabiola Jara
Gomez

To
No
One
And
Every
One
In
Particular
.

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London parkour spots

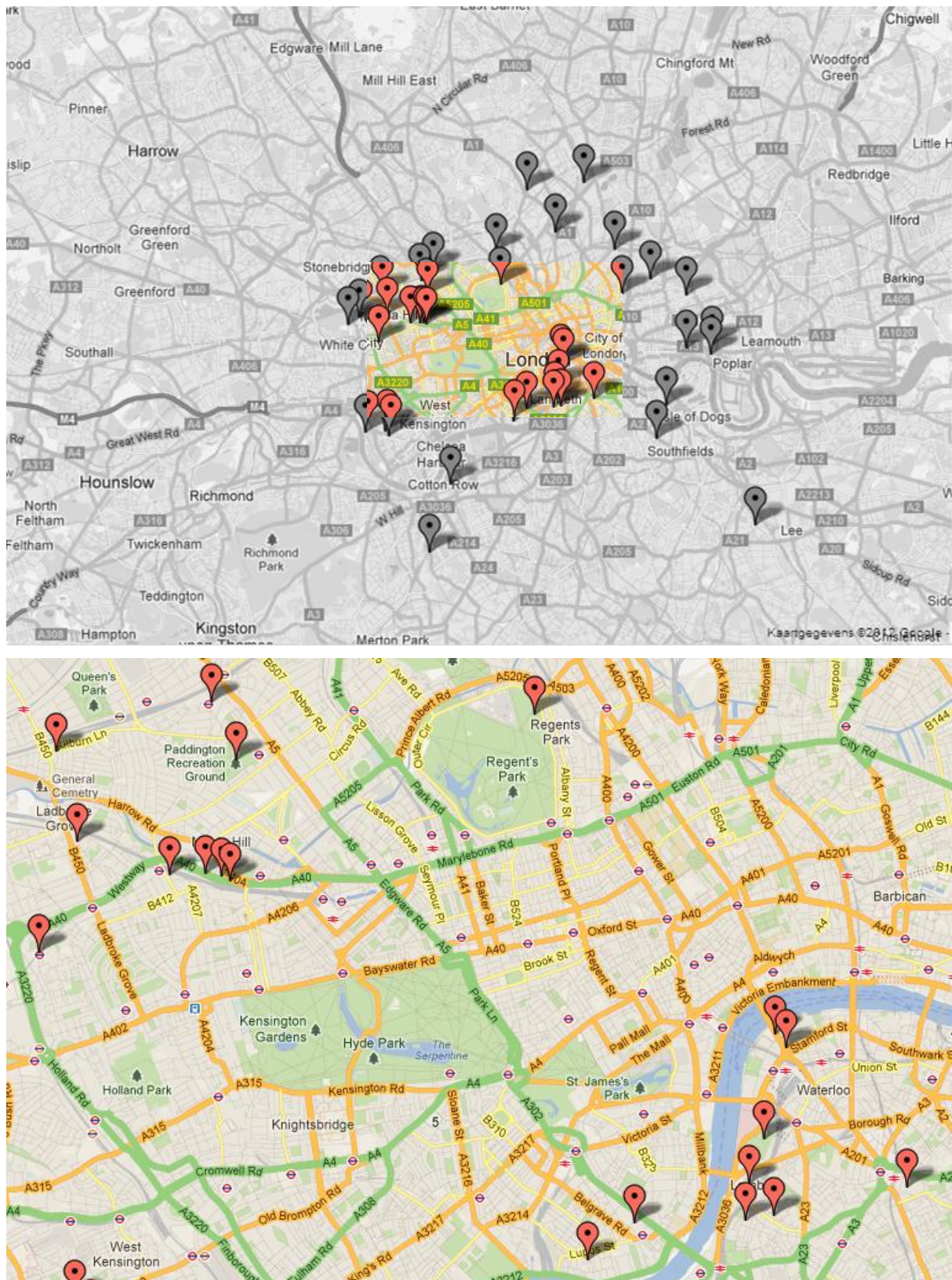


Image 1. Map of London parkour spots. Source: Parkour Generations.com. (Colored area indicates main study field.)

Acknowledgments

There are many people to whom I am grateful but since it is impossible to thank them all here, I will focus on those who were directly involved in this study. First, I want to thank Fabiola Jara Gomez, under whose guidance this study became. I appreciate most of all the creative space she offered to take this study along an embodied understanding of parkour.

I want to thank Tim Ingold, who made this thesis possible by providing the theoretical and academic tools to know the world by moving in it.

I want to say a special ‘thank you’ to my mother, Door Merzel-Gijsbers. She helped me to stay focused on what we can and should communicate to the world about the world.

During fieldwork, I learned that while some families are based on blood, others are generated through movement. I would like to thank Parkour Generations, all the people who are part of it, for allowing me to become part of their ‘family’. Thank you, Andy, Joe, Leon and Lyudmil for making space for me in the youth classes. Seeing them teach presented many insights about the discipline of parkour itself.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the traceurs who took the time to tell me about what the practice of parkour means to them (one interview was taken by email). Their stories are testimonies to the line told in this thesis.

Thanks to Leon – for seeing the world as a child does,

To Soxacen – for moving in the city in a different way,

To Suneet – for emphasizing the social nature of moving together,

To Jonny – for explaining to me what parkour vision is,

To Nick – for reminding me what the parkour community is about,

To Velichka – for facing the fears of the practice with me,

To Stephen – for pointing out that traceurs indeed queue up for a jump,

And to Lyudmil – to whom not only the city, but the whole world is a possibility.

A general introduction to this study

Lines of moving and knowing in the study of parkour

I met Yao for the first time at an indoor parkour class. During indoor classes, the practice of parkour centers on movement through stations. A station is a composition of different equipment, like a horse and scaffoldings¹. At that time, I was still not participating with the classes as I wanted to observe the movement of others. As he looked at me – dressed in jeans and boots, my hands filled with a pen and a notebook – Yao asked if I was joining in. My firm reply – that I was there to observe – was met with a loud “ahh”, in which Yao raised his head slightly upwards, letting the sound become a thunderous chuckle. He then turned back to the three guys waiting at the station and illustrated to them a *vault to sit*². As I observed the other practitioners trying to master this new movement, I felt that the chuckle was in fact a challenge – it seemed to comment on my own static presence. Yao was telling me that if I was there, I was expected to move with the others. The famous saying within parkour – “we start together, we finish together”³ – was expressed in that chuckle. A minute later I was dangling from the scaffolding, the pen and paper lost among the other personal possessions that were stacked against the side of the gym wall⁴.

Although parkour takes place both indoors and outdoors, it is in essence an outdoor practice. It started as child’s play, a way of interacting with the living environment. Parkour, according to the well-known practitioner Sébastien Foucan, originated from a childlike mind: it is reminiscent of a child running through the city and interacting with the environment (Jump

¹ For an example of a station browse forward to image 2.

² A *vault to sit* is a movement within parkour where the practitioner swings both his or her legs over a rail, to come in a sitting position on the rail. This movement is known under different names in parkour. See appendix iii for a visual.

³ This expression was coined by a French group of practitioners, created in 1997, called Yamakasi. The term Yamakasi meaning ‘strong spirit’ in Lingala. The expression is representative of their philosophy: “It is being strong to develop oneself and to accomplish the realization of our objectives, we start together, we finish together: strength in unity because together nothing is impossible”. See: <http://www.majesticforce.com/en/label/guylain>.

⁴ This illustration was taken from field notes, 13-3-2012.

London 2003). To the practitioners themselves, the practice of parkour can be hard to define⁵. To some it is a form of overcoming obstacles, both physical and mental. To others, parkour centers on fluid motion from point A to point B. Although practitioners can answer the question of what parkour is, many do not feel the need to do so. It does not matter how it is defined, what matters is how it is practiced⁶.

The practice of parkour revolves around interaction with the environment. Practitioners of parkour – called traceurs – use their bodies to move through the environment and to pass any surfaces they encounter. Although parkour is practiced both in nature and in the city, it is the relationship with the urban environment that is explored in this thesis. For this study I went to London – the capital for parkour at the moment – to observe and participate in the practice of parkour. The central issue looked at in this study is how traceurs perceive the city through the practice of parkour. Therefore, the research question is “how does the practice of parkour deepen the landscape of London?”

To gain insight to the world of the traceurs, a theoretical framework was needed that allows me to learn how traceurs perceive their own movement in London. The theories that were used to guide this research concern the relationship between movement, the body and the environment. This relationship has been central to many debates within anthropology concerning the meaning of space and place. Many scholars have theorized about the relationship between movement and the environment by placing emphasize on the definition of space through culture rather than through movement (Feld and Basso 1996). When wanting to understand social phenomena like parkour it becomes evident that such theoretical approaches are unproductive. A theory based on a distinction between the environment and

⁵ In this thesis and during fieldwork, I have referred to the practice of parkour as such. The practice is known under other names such as *parcours* and *l'art du déplacement*, depending on the history and on the different informants (Angel 2011:10). *Parcours* comes from French, meaning ‘a route’. Another term that is often used to describe the practice, is *freerunning*. The term *freerunning* was coined to make it understandable in English during the broadcasting of the documentary *Jump London* (2003). There are debates within the community of parkour as to whether these terms in fact refer to the same movement. Some practitioners regard these as separate forms of movement. Others, such as the well-known practitioner Stephane Vigroux, regard these terms as referring to the same practice.

⁶ The practice of parkour can be defined as a sport but it is mostly referred to as a discipline within the community itself. The difference between a sport and a discipline is related to the extend in which other parts in life are influenced. According to some more experienced traceurs parkour is defined as a discipline: “parkour is a concept, an approach to living and training. It has an essence, difficult though that is to define. It’s far more than just an amalgamation of athletic skills, agility and strength training. That essence is found and nurtured best in its natural environment – which is, paradoxically, any environment that was not designed specifically for parkour!” (Dan – traceur 2012). I refrain from using the terms discipline or sport in this thesis due to any connotations these definitions might have to the reader. To understand parkour, it does not matter how it is defined, what matters is how it is practiced. Therefore, I will address parkour in this thesis as the practice of parkour.

movement neglects to acknowledge how movement is part of the world. Furthermore, through movement, perceptions of the world are part of it (Casey 1996:17; Ingold 2011:46).

With this thesis I wish to contribute to this debate, by illustrating how anthropological understandings need to be sensitive to the fact that movement and perception are entwined. This implies that anthropological insights need to be established on an understanding of the way people in the field become. Because this process of becoming is equal to moving in the world, this study came into being in a close symbiotic connection to my own observant-participation. Contrary to the traditional anthropological method of participant-observation, observant-participation emphasizes the relevance of the experience of the anthropologist to an understanding of people's becoming in the world. This in turn allows anthropologists to gain insight by acquiring similar perceptions to the field of study. In this case, by moving with traceurs in London, I become one.

In regard to the practice of parkour, this process of becoming further implies that movement determines the way traceurs perceive the landscape of London. As part of an anthropological approach to the study of movement and the environment, the traceurs' perceptions of the world are regarded as the landscapes in which they move. In the main question I have chosen to use the term *deepen* to emphasize how the landscape is part of the world in which traceurs move.

From February the 6th until April the 30th of the present year, I was able to learn about the practice of parkour by engaging with traceurs in London. London offers visible and less visible opportunities to engage with traceurs. This is due to the fact that parkour has become a well established phenomenon in the city itself. One channel, through which I was able to contact the traceurs I practiced with, was the organization Parkour Generations⁷. Parkour Generations offers different indoor and outdoor parkour classes in different areas in London. The indoor classes, I participated in, were held at two sports centers. One indoor class was held at the Moberly Sports and Education Centre in the area of Kilburn Lane, London. The other class was held at the Westminster Academy centre, located at Harrow Road, London.

⁷ The organization itself has described Parkour Generations as follows: "Parkour Generations represents the largest collective of the most experienced professional practitioners of the stunning movement discipline known as Parkour or Freerunning that the world has to offer. Working around the world for over a decade, the founding members of Parkour Generations came together to create a vehicle to transmit the incredibly strong benefits and positive effects of this amazing art form. The work of Parkour Generations is focused on integrating the natural and largely untapped physical and mental potential of every person into their modern life in a holistic and functional way: to make movement and the use of the body a central part of our daily life. This is done through mediums which include teaching, conceptual and architectural consulting, live demonstrations, education and research, media work and artistic representations". See: <http://www.parkourgenerations.com/content/about-us>.

The outdoor classes were given at various locations in the city. Some of these are well-known spots such as Earlsfield, Elephant and Castle, Kilburn and Vauxhall. The traceurs affiliated with the organization are also the traceurs with whom I explored the city and from whom I learned, through participation, during different parkour gatherings. In fact, these gatherings – taking place outside regulated classes – constitute the majority of the data collected in the field. It is important to highlight the fact that the practice of parkour in the city is dynamic. Besides training at different spots, traceurs explore other areas while moving. Moving with the traceurs, many places in London were explored, extending west, north and south of the river Thames.

As a side note, it will be noted that all the practitioners in this thesis are referred to as traceurs. Using only their names, other personal characteristics and background have been omitted. Within the practice of parkour, it is said that practitioners are equal to each other. By moving together, traceurs build shared experience that transcends their personal lives. By referring to the traceurs as such, I wish to convey this impression from the field.

The findings presented in this thesis are based on the perceptions of London through the practice of parkour: they are formed by the experiences of the traceurs themselves; they are shaped by my own trainings and experiences; and they are the result of different social encounters within the community. First, the theoretical perspectives that have framed this study will be further delineated. Continuing from where I left above, the theoretical chapter explores the relationship between the body, movement and the environment; the human perceptions in relation to the city; and the embodiment of movement through the process of becoming. The process of becoming is both related to an understanding of human presence in the world and to an anthropological enquiry of knowledge. After an outline of the setting in which this study took place, the thesis continues with an ethnography of parkour in London. Here, the physicality of London, the possibilities for play, the shifting of perceptions, the fears of the practice and the sharing of experiences and movement are presented. In a concluding chapter, the theoretical concepts are brought together with the empirical findings to discuss the main research question as to the relationship between movement and the environment through the practice of parkour.

Becoming a traceur: a methodological account

A few years ago I saw a short video fragment about parkour. I would not be able to retrace that video now but I remember seeing a guy running up a wall and jumping over several rooftops. At that time, parkour embodied ‘playfulness in the city’ to me. The fascination stayed but the images that feed my ideas about parkour were those of the extreme stunts that circulated in the media and on the internet.

When I was able to do fieldwork, it was the unrestricted capability to move within the environment that triggered this enquiry and London became the field of study. I had not been involved in many physical activities up until that point and was in fact not familiar with the practice of parkour beyond what it looked like. In a similar way to Wacquant, when he initiated his study into the world of boxing, “I thus found myself in the situation of the perfect novice” (Wacquant 2004:3).

Anthropologists are often happy to go out and ‘be there’ where the action is (Bradburd 1998). ‘Being there’, a famous expression within anthropology, implies that anthropologists need to familiarize themselves with the (everyday) rhythm of the participant’s lives. In turn, it allows people in the field to adjust and familiarize themselves with the researcher. This process is not natural nor is it evident but it is of crucial importance to any form of understanding, friendship or rapport (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Through adjustment, regular life returns and hopefully the anthropologist has been able to make the transition from being an outsider to being, in the very least, tolerated, and at best an informed observant.

From my first observation in London, I found that my presence was somewhat of a contradiction – to say a kink – in the flow of movement that is so distinct to the practice of parkour. Practitioners of parkour are drawn together by movement. It is how they relate to each other. During my first month in the field, I neglected to acknowledge this fact due to my belief in the powers of anthropological observation. I now realize that I did not know how to apply **participant-observation** to a field that was, almost tangibly, disturbed by my static presence. Only in a later stage, when understandings, friendships and rapports were established, did I find that observations became less of an intrusion to what was happening around me. During that first month, practitioners often invited me to join in and, when I declined, became respectfully distant. The declined invitations seemed to build up until I felt I had hit a concrete wall. One that, at that time, I could still not overcome.

A change occurred once I traded the notebook for a pair of sport shoes. After a month of mainly observations, I started to participate in indoor and outdoor classes held in west

London. Shortly thereafter, I was able to meet up with other traceurs to train on our own time. I enjoyed the movement, and through it I was able to relate to the practitioners. More important, they were moving with me. This is not to say that I stopped writing down any of my observations during the trainings and the classes. I only wish to illustrate that to understand what parkour means to a traceur, the best and perhaps the only way, is to move with them.

Through movement, traceurs relate to each other and to the environment they live in. It is a perception, generated through parkour, that is intrinsic to a growing awareness within the traceur: “only by practicing yourself, you can understand it” (Lyudmil – traceur⁸). My eagerness to participate and learn was met with a readiness to show me how. Ultimately this led to a growing awareness of being part of the community⁹. This is not exceptional to my case; traceurs will invest in any individual showing a serious effort to learn parkour. As most practitioners come together to practice, my involvement through training offered a threshold to engage in discussions about parkour, to relate to subjects concerning parkour and to observe and learn by training with other practitioners.

This has made **observant-participation** – other than the previous mentioned participant-observation – the most important anthropological tool in my study. By training myself, I was not only able to relate to other practitioners but I was also receiving a large amount of anthropological data and experience through the changes that occurred in the way I started to move. Through practice, I gained what traceurs refer to as ‘parkour vision’. This vision is communicated easily to people outside the parkour community but resonates poorly in the perception of the city by non-practitioners. The process of ‘embodiment’ allowed me to experience parkour through my own engagement with the environment. By becoming a traceur, I could recognize the world in a way that is similar to that of other traceurs. Therefore, (anthropological) participation goes beyond ‘understanding’ – to what Ingold calls ‘living anthropology’ (Ingold 2000). In relation to embodiment, Wacquant recognizes “how boxing ‘makes sense’ as soon as one takes pains to get close enough to it to grasp it *with one’s body*” (2004:7, emphasis added). Participating means changing yourself and has consequences for your being in the world: through training, my body was able to make new movements and thus allowed firsthand data on the effect parkour has on the body and on a sense of the city. The experience was data.

⁸ This quote was taken from a conversation with Lyudmil after an indoor class at Westminster Academy Centre about studying parkour, 13-3-2012.

⁹ Several of the traceurs I encountered in London confirmed to me this sense of being part of the community. In an open interview with Stephen, he voiced to me that by training I now belonged to the group.

This study is not solely based on my own ‘becoming’. Participation in the practice of parkour took place in a triangular research method that combines observations and field notes, informal conversations and open interviews together with my own training. Combining different methodologies allows for a more reliable analysis of different observations, behaviors and expressions made in the field (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Many of my observations were among classes and workshops given to children by experienced traceurs. Although these observations are not part of the empirical chapters, observing youth classes helped strengthen many findings. From experience in the field, my view is that to understand how traceurs perceive the world is to see them teach¹⁰.

As my understanding of parkour has deepened, so the images of parkour have become layered. These images are as much anthropological data as the fieldwork itself. The music that is used, the shots chosen – parkour videos carry their own message. Their presence in this thesis is of illustrative nature but the reader is encouraged to look for the (social) meaning behind the movement¹¹.

¹⁰ Such an example took place during a class given by Joe, one of the teachers at Parkour Generations. Parkour classes are usually constructed around some condition exercises, followed by movement through stations. During this particular class, five of the eight boys, present in the class, became distracted by the available equipment of the station and started to use it for other purposes than initially intended for. Joe adjusted the class to the focus of the boys, inventing with them a game that flowed naturally from their unusual use of the equipment. The purpose of the game was to cross the gym as a team, using only the three pieces of equipment and without any of them touching the ground. For this challenge, the boys needed to rely on teamwork and on creative thinking, in order to reach the other side of the gym together. These observations were taken from field notes, 19-4-2012.

¹¹ Within anthropology, “a video recording provides a valuable record of the field, it illustrates the perspective of the participants, the choices they make in the shots” (Emerson et al 1995:10).

Theoretical perspectives of movement and parkour

A theoretical framework

The practice of parkour centers on movement. As stated in the introduction, parkour allows its practitioners a distinct manner of moving in the environment. Movement is always related to the world and is part of the way people are able to perceive it. Therefore, the way this relationship unfolds, relates to the way practitioners of parkour move and perceive their environment. The practice of parkour raises questions about the way in which traceurs see their environment and how movement leads to different understandings of the space in which they live. It has been said that practitioners of parkour experience freedom through movement – that the practice of parkour is “setting them free” (Jump London 2003). Although the term freedom is used frequently to describe the practice of parkour, it is not a word used often in this thesis. Another description relating to parkour and one more relevant to this thesis is that the practice of parkour offers its practitioners possibilities through movement. Through parkour, traceurs are able to develop “open and creative perceptions of spaces and the possibilities they hold” (Angel 2011:177).

To gain insight into the world of parkour, into its possibilities for and through movement, I will first discuss some of the theoretical understandings about the relationship between movement, the body and the environment. Anthropological perspectives can offer us tools to study – and thus to try and understand – this relationship. The way in which anthropologists study the world is partly formed by the way they (and therefore I) regard it: our epistemological lens to the world guides our understanding. As such, I want to explain my anthropological approach to understanding movement in relation to the environment.

The relationship between movement and environment

The relationship between movement and the environment seems to be a logical one. We are situated creatures and thus, to rephrase Stewart's observation, movement yields to a place's own gravitational force that affects the sense and knowledge of that particular space (2010). Gravity is central to the way we sense the world around us. We are bound by nature to move within an existing environment (be it natural or build-up). Being on the ground and breathing in the air, humans are part of an environment. Living and breathing, as Gibson states, 'allows us to move about – to do things, make things and touch things. [It] affords movement and perception' (Gibson 1979 in Ingold 2011:22). Movement and perception are hence entangled.

Through movement we can acquire different perceptions of the world we are observing. The way we move about, constantly brings forth new understandings of the environment. Walking long a landscape affords a different perception and awareness of the environment than when using any means of transport. According to Ingold, this is the difference between a traveler and a *wayfarer* (2010:134). While the traveler encompasses the world by means of traveling across it, a wayfarer moves through the world. The knowledge of the wayfarer, "is not built up but grows along the paths [he takes], both on the ground and in air" (Ingold 2010:134). Walking along "is rather, in itself, a way of thinking and knowing – 'an activity that takes place through the heart and mind as much as through the feet' (Rendell 2006:190 in Ingold 2010:134)".

The relationship between body and environment

To understand movement in relation to the environment, we need to realize that our feet – as part of the body – form a medium for us to know the ground. The body functions as a sensory tool to know the world. The eyes are one of the more prominent ways in which humans are able to observe the world. Thus, it is by the presence of the body – mainly the eyes – that movement and perception are entwined. Leonardo da Vinci has stated that we are able to observe the world because of light penetrating the eye and informing the brain. "Do you see how the eye embraces the beauty of the whole world?" he asks (BBC 2011). While the eyes certainly offer the brain a visual perception of the world, even an esthetic one, it does not determine the way we in which we are able to perceive its physicality. To some extent, it may even impend on our capability to observe its tactile surface. Being that the feet and hands

come in direct contact with the surface of the world, it would seem logical to state that they dictate our environmental perception in much the same way as the eyes do. In this sense, touch is a way of knowing. The human body has other senses that generate a connectivity to the world beyond our immediate experience (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Here, I am referring in particular to the conscious connection generated through the body's surfaces.

This conscious connection between the body and the environment is also determined by the human interpretation of touch. There exists a discrepancy between mind and body that can influence our environmental perception (Ingold 2011:45). Through the body, people experience different and multiple sensory impressions of the world. In much the same way, the body in turn can imprint on the world's surface (Ingold 2010). An example Ingold uses to illustrate this, is the footprint left behind by the sole of the shoe in mud. As is stated above, our minds and hearts seem to determine as much as our feet the way we perceive life. More than solely our feet, our minds and hearts are moving us along. Despite, or perhaps due to this discrepancy in the experience of our body and of our mind, people observe the world and understand the environment by means of scaping it – giving it form and shape. This is called *composition* (Stewart 2010:221). Here, I am not referring to any cultural imprinting on the world¹² but rather to the notion that our environmental perception depends on the way we use our body for interaction. Thus, freedom of movement and the way people decide to move are part of the way people experience space (Angel 2011:71).

While it is possible to state that movement generates perception, movement remains bound to where it takes place, and is thereby exposed to constant (social) changes. The world is not static. The world changes by both human and natural interventions. One might say that human interventions are natural. This state of *decomposition* implies that people “[experience] the natural world through the unraveling of object and landscape” (Stewart 2010:221). Therefore, studying the world is acknowledging its natural state of becoming. The equal presence of a state of composition and a state of decomposition enable us to form a different understanding of the relationship between the environment and the body, where the two are in a constant state of co-constitution (Ingold 1992).

¹² The notion of cultural imprinting relates to debates about space and place, as was mentioned in the introduction. The importance of environmental influences to social science was first acknowledged in the ecology studies. Here, it was argued that anthropological enquiries enabled the academic study of the relationship between the environmental particularities and cultural adaptations (Steward 1955:103-104). This relationship was expanded to include an understanding of how cultures instill meaning unto the world (Ingold 1992:40). Culture was thought to reflect how peoples allowed empty space to become a lived-in environment.

Understanding parkour: movement, body and environment

The study of parkour requires an understanding of the relationship between movement and the environment. The relationship between these two concepts forms an ongoing platform for interesting debates within academic circles. Several of these debates will be addressed throughout this theoretical chapter. In this paragraph, I will address more specifically the way in which parkour offers scholars a renewed opportunity to study movement within the social world through a more encompassing perspective.

Brunner is among those scholars formulating new concepts of relational movement. According to Brunner, “parkour expresses the creation of new relations between bodies (materials, a.i. architecture, organisms and persons) through movement” (2011:144). The city itself is regarded as an active body unto which the practitioners of parkour lend themselves for physical and social contact. It is a relation in which all have a say.

Along these lines of thought, Brunner understands parkour to be not solely “a practice intent upon re-imagining place” or a “longing for meaning and production of knowledge”. Instead, “parkour addresses what a body can do in its most extreme diversity as distributed across its urban ecology that offers (or withholds) itself for a potential dialogue” (Brunner 2011:144-145). Although I prefer not to address the relationship between movement and the environment as a dialogue, this analogy serves as a strong reminder to approach the practice of parkour within an ecology of potential. Such an approach within anthropology recognizes that movement in conjunction with the environment offers possibilities. These possibilities are generated by the mere presence of these two realities – being it the world and people in it. In fact, Brunner describes the entire ecology as creating intensities in its totality (2011:145). This study will focus on the dialogue between the practitioners of parkour and on the dialogue emerging by the movement of traceurs in the city. As parkour is practiced mostly in urban environments (Mould 2009), the city plays an interesting part in the potential for movement.

City movement

The city: social movement

Cities form the ground for human activity. They gather in them different lives and as such different movements in a concentrated environment. There are several theories concerning the definition of social space. These theories relate to the way in which people move in the city

and interact with other people in the same space. With the grand diversity in human movement, the city ought to be painted as a central locus for potential. This is not the case however.

It has been argued that the city holds separate spaces for its inhabitants to move in. One argument that seems to support this notion is the architecture of the city itself. Thomson (2008) argues that the city is carved out of designated pathways and sidewalks. The sidewalks themselves guide the movement of people (Thomson 2008). To illustrate this, Thomson uses the example of a map. According to Thomson, a map works not by producing the city but by deleting all of it except for a trace (2008:260). Although this perspective offers many interesting insights to the study of movement, it lacks an understanding of the relationship between movement and the environment in which both determine the perceptions of space. The example of the map argues how most people in the city are in fact travelers rather than wayfarers when moving in the city. In this sense, the city becomes a place of destinations instead of a place of movement.

Another argument put forward about the fragmentation of the city, comes from Daskalaki et al (2008). According to him, the city is dominated by corporate design, constructing the experience of its inhabitants, and by this, promoting and preserving hegemonic and homogenizing discourses. Corporate space is considered to be “lacking richness of civic space”, leaving no space for the potential of human movement. This argument relates closely to Thomson’s definition of space where an inhabitant is limited to moving between his home and his livelihood, never able to connect to the other people he passes while taking his familiar routes. The designated routes of movement enable people to connect to other places in the city, where social interaction can take place but are not in themselves social spaces. According to Daskalaki et al, this lack of civic richness is mostly a consequence of the city’s design and is expressed “not just in terms of form but in terms of structures – both spatial structures and the kind of social structures/interaction they invite” (2008:abstract).

The notion that movement in the city lacks sociality is credible. However, to state that this lack of sociality is due to the urban space being fragmented seems insufficient once we regard movement and the environment within a process of co-constitution. To say that urban space is lacking civic richness, implies that while space is inhabited by corporate design, other possibilities of movement are impossible. If I was to take the example of the map as the main representative of the way in which people are able to move and perceive their surroundings, the city itself would become obsolete. With obsolete I mean that the city would be brought

back to a one-dimensional scenery, in which the only possibility for movement is pre-designed by the existing corporate powers (whichever those are at any given moment).

The city: a battlefield?

When the city becomes a space in which different forms of movements are unable to occupy the same space, the potential for movement turns into a struggle for existence. Not lightly, the city has been described as a battlefield many times. However, it is not the space itself but the perceptions of space that can render people afraid.

According to Guss (2011), the city's subjects are believed to be rendered passive by a perception of fear. Fear can deter people from connecting to one another despite them traversing along the same paths. Regarding the city as a battlefield and its urban bodies as soldiers, the paths between home and work indeed become a means of transport instead of paths where social movement are sought after – are welcomed – or are even deemed possible. People living in the city observe the world without depth due to the spreading of a “message saturated with fear that renders the subjects within the potential multitude ‘fleeting and passive’” (Hardt and Negri 2000:320 in Guss 2011:81). In my view, Guss is referring to a multitude of social possibilities or to a potential through movement.

The subject of fear among the inhabitants of the city plays into the manner scholars have defined the urban spaces they study. Angel refers to the experience of fear in the city as a state in which we all live (2011:165). “Negative associations of fear have the potential to isolate and alienate you from geographical as well as social spaces” (Angel 2011:71). While studying parkour, different scholars have come to a similar conclusion concerning the role fear has on the inhabitants of the city and on the way practitioners of parkour redefine their environment through parkour. Thomson (2008) believes that parkour allows its practitioners to disrupt the geographical and social isolation of people. Parkour produces movement between places in new and diverse ways, thereby disrupting the flow of the entire city (Thomson 2008). Some argue that parkour is an active form of fight or social critique. Atkinson (2009) has stated that parkour allows for its practitioners to challenge dominant constructions of urban environment as corporate spaces and by doing this, it creates a political re-appropriation of the urban space. Through parkour, the city's battlefield transforms into “an arena for capitalist versus subversive practices” (Mould 2009:abstract). Other less violent struggles are described by Ortuzar, who believes that parkour serves as an act of fleeing or as a means to escape: “[parkour] is an act of flight” (2009:55). Parkour allows people to break free from the urban environment and is even able to transform the space in which people

navigate (Ortuzar 2009:65). Lastly, Feireiss consents to the notion of parkour serving as a means of contesting the spatial constraints of the city, although he believes this is done in a playfully way (2007).

Theories of separation and original space

There are more than a few ways in which practitioners of parkour are believed to contest the urban environment. Some are locked in a vengeful combat, while others are fleeing the scene straight into new landscapes or simply playing out their own will by fooling around. What all these have in common is a definition of the city as a divided playing field and as a space in which definitions change the space itself. These ideas relate to a more conservative thought within academic discourse about a disconnection between us and the world. It is a thought centered on the assumption that space and place are separate realities, where one is shaped into the other by means of cultural imprinting. Within this thought, it is believed that through culture, people lend meaning to an otherwise empty world.

I will start by stating that the notion of the environment as an hierarchical or lateral enclosing of our world is broadly contested by Ingold (2011b). According to Ingold, the world is not made out of the thoughts men or women have about it. Animals do not stop living in the world despite their seeming inability to evaluate it. The relationship between an animal and the environment is more complex. Ingold rightly argues that supporting the notion that culture is man's adaptation to the environment, would imply that 'culture is an adaptation to nothing at all, and to say that it is adapted is no more than affirming that cultures exist' (1992:39).

If we are to assume that something can only come out of something, then we have to acknowledge that the spaces we inhabit – be they full-grown cities or a desert scene – carry in them something original. It is this original spark that offers people the possibility of generating diverse expressions in the social world. There is a potential there: "the environment can be conceived as existing out of the inherent potentials of objects, *affordances*, which in interaction with the *effectivity* of the subject, determines the capabilities of the (human) agent in his/her environment" (Ingold 1992:46).

Furthermore, what strikes me as remarkable about the above mentioned notion of separation is not only the assumption that something originates out of nothing – a notion deflated by Ingold – but also the ensuing realization that the world could not encompass the two. I do not imply that emptiness itself is something but rather that the presence of

affordances – the potential itself – lead to a vacuum or a depth in the environment. I agree that “the purest form of potential is emptiness itself” (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995:22), for emptiness does not imply nothingness but rather growing intensities.

Several recent studies into the practice of parkour seem to suggest that such growing intensities are absent. These studies lean on the understanding that the world resides in transitional states: as one meaning takes over the other, a change in social space should be appointed. Below, I have summarized a number of the definitions used to understand the practice of parkour:

Recent studies have stated that traceurs seek **to free themselves** from the corporate spaces that separate them from experiencing ‘their’ city (Guss 2011). “The architectural configuration as obstacle embodies the **transformative** potential of **deteritorialization** through movement” (Brunner 2011:149). Conquering their fear through ‘spatial liberation’, they are **able to free** themselves from the pre-planned urban constraints and of the disempowerment and feelings of confinement in urban life (Guss 2011:74,76). Traceurs are thus “capable of **transforming** the otherwise alienating non-places to grounds of possibility, creativity and civic identity” (Daskalaki et al 2008:abstract). “Parkour goes beyond **contesting** conceived space. Traceurs **reshape** space as they imagine and then experience new possibilities of movement” (Guss 2011:76).

If you have to gain “your grounds of possibility” by “transforming spaces that are alien to you” then you have already lost the battle. Possibilities are not gained by transforming or reshaping the world, they simply exist. In the same way, spaces are not anybody’s, they simply are. As such, “parkour was never invented by anyone, it’s always been there” (Mould 2009:747). I consider space to remain in an original state, building on it or deconstructing it is a matter of decoration. The ways of decorating are meaningful since “they enlarge the *effectivities* of their users, [and] can radically transform the perception of the environment” (Ingold 1992: 46). It is perception of what a place can give you that can change, not what it is. Through movement, practitioners of parkour are able to ‘[visit] in the city’s space-time that has never been previously visited’ (Thomson 2008:129).

Before proceeding to the next paragraph, I would like to end this one with a scientist named Richard Feynman. To explain the world, he is forced to turn to simplistic analogues. He describes the environment we live in as build up from multiple radio waves in the air. The

radio waves in one room in one place can contain information from all over the world, for example from a radio station in Russia:

This big field, this area of irregular motions, this electric field, this vibration, contains this tremendous information and it is all really there. That's what gets ya. It was there all the time, it was only when you turned on the radio that you noticed it. [...]which everybody knows but you've got to stop and think about it to really get the pleasure about the complexity... about the inconceivable nature of nature.

(Feynman 1981)

Experience of the embodied

Embodied experience: wayfaring

The nature of nature is thus that space offers possibilities in relation to perception and movement. This connection between moving and observing in the world can bring to the surface its potential. It was already concluded in a previous paragraph that perception and movement are entangled by the mere presence of humans in the world: “perception is [a] function of movement, what we perceive must depend on how we move” (Ingold 2011:46). As such, experiencing the world is always related to the way people move.

Even more so, movement itself can define our place in the world (Ingold 2011b). There is a difference between defining our place in the world by moving in it and transforming that same space through movement. To me, defining entails a constant shift in knowledge of a world that is. Transforming it entails changing it. Wayfaring is what Ingold (2010) sees as a human state of embodied experience for wayfarers do not travel across the surface but rather move through it. Contrary to the notion of the traveler, as discussed earlier, the wayfarer is part of the world he or she discovers by the action of moving in it. Therefore, a place is not a point in space but a continuing line. Learning to know the space around us originates from movement: “Moving *is* knowing. A wayfarer knows as he goes along” (Ingold 2010:134, emphasis added).

Embodied experience: lines of becoming

Through the body, a wayfarer senses the world and its physicality. The ‘theory of direct perception’ asserts that we discover meaningful objects in the environment by moving in it (Ingold 1992:47). Moving allows for a fuller understanding because it generates contact between the body and the environment. Few people have phrased this understanding as beautifully as Merleau-Ponty when he declared that “the secret of the world must necessarily be contained in my contact with it” (Merleau-Ponty 1968 in Stewart 2010). However, there is more than mere touch to this relationship between the body and the environment that ultimately generates the potential of space.

Along the paths of contact, people are able to define their lives. “Life, for Deleuze, is lived not within a perimeter but along a line” (Ingold 2011a:83). These lines are called *lines of becoming*, for they are part of the way we become by moving in and thus acquiring knowledge of the environment. The co-constitution between the environment and people is however not one of direct contact. According to Deleuze it is a ‘symbiotic connection’, for it is not the impact between the environment and the body that creates potential but rather the lines that issue forth from that impact (Ingold 2011a:83).

At this point, I would like to revisit Brunner’s relational movement. Parkour, to Brunner, “is [not] a novel practice of embodied encounter that ‘makes the world’ in a phenomenological sense [but] the affective potential of the entire ecology that creates intensities” (2011:144,145). How we decide to move in the world can generate new lines of movement and as a consequence, extract the possibilities around us – and the potential to be. With more physicality and movement, parkour nourishes “a greater sensitivity to cues in the environment and a greater capacity to respond to these cues with judgment and precision” (Ingold 2010:133). Though beautifully phrased, the secret of the world is therefore not contained in touch but in the lines generated along this connection. Parkour offers its practitioners a deeper understanding of the environment due to its emphasis on touch but it is the (social) lines that are generated out of this physicality that create potential.

Embodied experience: meshworks

As each wayfarer moves through the environment, and becomes, he or she lays a trail (Ingold 2011b). The paths people take are individual but they are not isolated from others. To regard the movement of wayfarers as different trails implies a different understanding of the environment. In general sense, once we consider people’s existence to be defined by movement and thus not bounded in space, the environment becomes “a domain of

entanglement” (Ingold 2011:69). Wayfarers walk an inhabited world and encounter other wayfarers along their way. The gathering of a multitude of different trails in the city creates what is termed *meshworks*. *Meshworks* contain social conditions for possibilities (Ingold 2011). This is even more so in the city. In the city people gather in diverse ways and under different circumstances to form a ‘nexus of life’. As people’s movement becomes entwined they form ‘a tangled mesh of interwoven and complexly knotted strands’ (Ingold 2011b:151). These lines are not defined nor contained by a knot, ‘rather they trail beyond it, only to become caught up in other lines in other places’ (Ingold 2011b:149).

The social entanglement of movement creates possibilities for interaction between people. In parkour, encounters are considered to be social in nature: movement creates social lines and can cultivate a “sense of belonging and shared ownership” (Angel 2011:191). Parkour illustrates how individual paths are organized to form a “system of ‘networked individualism’” where “[traceurs] become individuals in places” (Angel 2011:168). It is the coming together of these lines that lays beneath people’s perceptions of the environment.

Landscape

This will be a small paragraph. It will flow from the theories discussed until now that our perception of the world is represented by movement in space, allowing *lines of becoming* to form along it and *meshworks* to get entangled by it. The practice of parkour can create new ‘social landscapes’ due to its engagement with the environment and through the constant shift in the perceptual awareness in relation to movement (Angel 2011:134,191). The landscape is thus ‘*with us, not against us*’ (Ingold 1993:154):

As people, in the course of their everyday lives, make their way by foot around a familiar terrain, so its paths, textures and contours [...] are incorporated into their own embodied capacities of movement, awareness and response [...]. But conversely, these pedestrians’ movements thread a tangled mesh of personalized trails through the landscape itself. Through walking, in short, landscapes are woven into life, and lives are woven into the landscape, in a process that is continuous and never-ending (Tilly 1994:29-30).

Ingold (2011: 47)

Conclusion

Parkour enables scholars to study the urban environment as a landscape (Atkinson 2009, Angel 2011). A landscape can be defined as an open-ended process because the possibilities for movement generate a constant shift in perceptions of the world. These possibilities are not invented upon the surface but are part of the knowledge gained by moving in it. “Lives, our own lives, are not linear. It’s much more appropriate to think not of linear metaphors for human growth and development but of organic metaphors – that our lives revolve around the responses we have to the opportunities that meet us and we in turn reciprocate with them” (Robinson 2006). Through contact, lines of becoming issue forth. These lines increase in “concentration and intensity with the fluency of action, along the ever-extending pathways of the body’s sensory entanglement in the life world” (Ingold 2010:136). Intensity in movement therefore deepens the awareness and knowledge of a place.

A wayfarer is ‘continually on the move [...] he is *his* movement’ (Ingold 2011a:83). Wayfarers learn to know the world by walking it and “the knowledge that runs in the ground is that of all knowledges. Or in a word, it is social” (Ingold 2010:136). Through parkour, practitioners in the city become entangled with each other (Angel 2011:174). This connection between different life lines is not one of a static nature but that of potential and is referred to by Ingold as *meshworks*.

Parkour in London: the setting for this study

To understand the relationship between movement and the environment through the practice of parkour, I needed to go there where parkour takes place. Parkour has become a worldwide phenomenon and increases in popularity and exposure. Although there are trainings in the Netherlands, they are both too short and too few for a rich anthropological study. As an anthropologist, I needed to be exposed to parkour as much as possible. Firstly, I needed to be able to observe and train with practitioners on a daily basis; because parkour is not related to any defined space or time, it can be difficult for the anthropologist to immerge himself or herself in the world of the traceurs. Secondly, I found it crucial to be able to go to trainings and learn from more advanced traceurs. This was due to the fact that my understanding of parkour revolved around gaining a different perception through movement. Part of understanding something, is learning how to do it. The practice of parkour nurtures a shift in perception that originates from the relationship between the body and the environment. The anthropologist can learn about this relation through the process of becoming. By training on a regular basis and under guidance of more experienced traceurs, I was able to become a traceur.

London offered different opportunities to train with traceurs and to come into direct contact with a large parkour community. On an organizational level, parkour is well established in London. There are two major parkour organizations, namely Urban Free Flow and Parkour Generations. These formal channels allowed for an easy entrance to the practice and therefore to my field of study. I established contact with Parkour Generations. Parkour Generations offers a large rang of trainings. I will name them here to illustrate how divers and focused the classes have become. Teachings consist of *indoor*, *outdoor*, *womens*, *fitness*, *youth*, *family*, *schools*, *workshops* and *private* classes. This diversity and the fact that the classes cover the whole week, allowed for richer fieldwork.

As part of my anthropological inquiry, the youth classes provided extensive field notes on how practitioners interact with one another. During these classes, every child becomes a traceur¹³. There is no difference between traceurs despite age, level, or social background.

¹³ Within the practice of parkour, the teachers regard and approach each individual as a practitioner. This equal attitude towards all participants was voiced to me by some of the traceurs. More so, this was evident from their attitude towards the children in the classes. In both adult classes and youth classes, practitioners are required to treat other practitioners with respect; to await their turn during the station exercises and to not disturb other practitioners while they are moving. Both in conditioning exercises as in the practice of parkour during station exercises, the classes for children and adults are similar.

Therefore, interactions between teachers and children provided insight into how ideas and perceptions about parkour are being transmitted and communicated. As I have stated twice before, these findings did not make it into this thesis, due to lack of writing space. Still, they have been of immense value to the line of argument presented in this thesis.

Through the Parkour Generations classes, I got into contact with both the more experienced traceurs and with other practitioners, on different levels of skill and experience. The gatherings between traceurs are multiple and fluid, like the practice itself. Besides the classes, there are many unregulated trainings and other forms of social wanderings and explorations. An example of other forms of social movement is walking in the city¹⁴.

Through parkour, practitioners in London interact with one another and with the living spaces they train in. Anthropology acknowledges space as an essential part of the socio-theory where culture is conceptualized in spatial ways (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). As traceurs go out into the streets to move, social interaction takes place not in the privacy of the practitioners' own home but in public spaces. These public spaces – the city's body – becomes intertwined with the personal experience and movement of the traceur.

London provides a rich context for the anthropological study of parkour due to its physical urban body. London offers its practitioners a great deal of possibilities to train and move. The overindulgence of London in concrete constructions is part of the reason that the parkour community has been able to flourish there: "London is the capital of parkour in the world, the architecture gives opportunity for parkour to develop. So for training, it is pretty much the place to be" (Lyudmil - traceur¹⁵). The city has several famous areas where practitioners frequently go to train. Among these are the Imax spot, the Vauxhall spot and the Earlsfield spot. These places are called spots because of their concentrated movement. London's spots are characteristic of her architectural surface: solid, hard and layered. However, the trainings are not defined to particular spaces in London. Practitioners move around in the city in a dynamic way.

The notion of space is relevant for the study of parkour because it is part of the way in which traceurs define their movement. Bourdieu (1984) appointed the concept *habitus* to the skills, perceptions and attitudes gained by humans as they experience life. Traceurs spend various hours training and moving outdoors and therefore, the *habitus* of the traceurs in

¹⁴ I have joined practitioners while they stayed outside after classes. These social gatherings contained parkour – traceurs would practice balancing or jumping while walking – but they were not intended to visiting spots. Rather, walking in the city was a way of spending time together after the class finished. What characterizes these gatherings is movement. The practitioners do not stay in one place but instead keep moving in the city.

¹⁵ This quote was taken from an open interview, Shepherds Bush, 27-4-2012.

London is London's physical urban body. The different areas in London, and the streets themselves, are the space in which traceurs move. An understanding of the way in which traceurs wander in London is significant for this is part of the *habitus* of the traceurs.

A P a r k o u r E t h n o g r a p h y

Writing an ethnography of parkour

All human knowledge takes the form of interpretation – Walter Benjamin

Before going into the different ways in which the traceurs in London engage with the environment and with each other, I need to address once again my role as an anthropologist and, in a broader sense, as a storyteller. As with all anthropological endeavors, an ethnography reflect “the researcher’s deeper assumption about social life and how to understand it” (Emerson et al 1995:10). Due to these perceptions, the researcher will make conscious and less conscious choices as to what will ultimately be presented in the ethnography (Emerson et al 1995:5). In the process of writing field notes and during the writing of this thesis, a large part of the richness of the field is inevitably lost due to my own personal preferences and academic choices. This is not to say that the following descriptions and events did not take place, for they have. It is to say that while I present my findings as a whole story, different stories can be told about the practice of parkour.

As humans, we are all predetermined to view the world from different perspectives. These perspectives are changeable and evolve or deepen during the life course. The intangible nature of the human perception is magnified within the discipline of anthropology for it is anthropology’s strive to account for the world in the truest – most objective – sense of the word. It is only recently, that social sciences have acknowledged the inevitable nature of subjectivity (Spiro 1996). This subjectivity leads to an awareness that anthropological accounts are but one version of the world (Emerson et al 1995:66). On the other hand, this subjectivity also allows the researcher to gain new perspectives in the field through the process of becoming. This process of becoming entails participating in the field of study and learning new perspectives and perceptions through embodied experience. Through my diverse encounters with traceurs in London, I was able to learn to move in the world in a similar way to how they move in it. My hope is that the following chapters will resonate with their perceptions of the world and their engagement with London.

The city's concrete embrace

The physical side of things

“It’s being comfortable in the environment” (Tim – traceur¹⁶)

It is a cold evening at the end of February and the surrounding outdoor area appears obscure in the faint glow of the street lightings coming from further up the road. The yellow lights cast large human shaped shadows along the wall of an old red-brick building, where the practitioners are traversing it. You can hear other practitioners on the ground talking quietly but energetically to each other. Some call out encouraging words to those who are traversing along the side of the wall. The building is on the site of a dark low-level playground, located next to the Kilburn Park tube station, on the west side of London¹⁷. On the building, a sign is placed – *children’s play area: for 2-8 year olds only*. The practitioners are here to train in the Wednesday outdoor parkour class, held by Parkour Generations. The class is comprised of eleven practitioners, four of them are present as teachers, and the others (including myself) are students. Although there is no distinct or stereotype appearance to the traceurs, they are all dressed in comfortable cloths. They are dressed to move efficiently: no jeans or other restrictive garments are visible, their bags are light and their sport shoes worn in.

On the other side of the two and a half meter building, one of the other teachers is standing next to a student, while she tries to level herself onto the top of the roof. She has climbed along a niche in the wall, where a window previously existed. From there, she jumped and caught the small ledge on the edge of the roof. She now tries to find support for her feet along the wall so that she can kick her body upwards. When her shoes graze the red bricks, they create scraping sounds that become synchronized with her heavy breathing. while she clings to the ledge, the friction generated between the

¹⁶ This quote was taken from the video, “Parcours - Livewire”, posted on the website of Parkour Generations. See: <http://www.parkourgenerations.com/news/personas-5-bruno-peixoto>.

¹⁷ This vignette was taken from field notes and observations, Kilburn Park, 29-2-2012.

skin and the gravel ledge forms small blisters on the inside of her hands. As the teacher seems to conclude that she is not able to lift her body any further, he pushes her feet slightly upwards, lifting her body so that she is able to place her arms along her hands on the roof. From there, she lifts her entire upper body to a position in which she holds her arms stretched along her body. She brings one foot up, without using her knee to support her movement, and then the other foot reaches the top.

Feeling the surface of the world through the entire body, expands the sensory capacities of humans to perceive their surroundings. It enables them to acknowledge its physical presence. In order for a practitioner to reach the rooftop, he or she has to engage in a lot of physical contact with the building. Although the level of the practitioner will determine the ease with which this is done, every traceur has to make use of the feet, the hands, in fact of the entire body, to achieve this. Through particular movements such as climbing, jumping and vaulting, traceurs in London come into direct physical contact with buildings, fences and railings across the city. The ground itself becomes an obstacle: “the city is all pavement. It is a bit aggressive with the body” (Soxacen – traceur¹⁸).

Most traceurs suffer from calluses on the palms of their hands due to climbing and hanging from rough surfaces and metal railings. Other typical inflictions to the skin, caused by parkour, are brushes and abrasions on the practitioner’s lower legs. These physical imprints on the body are all signs of the intimate contact between the practitioners of parkour and the concrete, metal and stone body of the city. Most commonly among traceurs are the elongated scars located along the shins, that linger against the skin like dark and ominous recollections. They are created by landing incorrectly on a wall or on a rail, where the feet are being misplaced and the legs then graze the concrete. I have seen many such scars among the traceurs I trained with and have collected one myself while trying to vault a playground wall. These and other scars are a reminder that through parkour, engagement with the city becomes an intimate and tactile experience.

The fact that practitioners of parkour experience the city on a more intimate level was also expressed to me by one of the traceurs I trained with. After a Sunday’s parkour class I joined five practitioners for a meal at Spicy Basil. Spicy basil is a Thai restaurant located near

¹⁸ This quote was taken from an open interview, Westminster Academy Centre, 20-3-2012.

Kilburn Park station. The place is kind of a parkour hotspot in itself. Many traceurs will travel to Kilburn after a day's training to share an inexpensive Thai meal. While we wait for the warm dishes to come, Velichka mentions the scars on her forearms: "you see these? Now I touch and climb everything in the city" – The visible dirt marks that run across the back and front of her hoodie and jumper serve as a testimony to this. One of the exercises during class that day was circling a tree from both sides, without touching the ground. "Since the trainings, I am less concerned about bad things that can happen. I trust my body more. The way I look at things is different now". At the age of twenty-seven, Velichka does what she didn't do while growing up, she gets up close and personal with the city she lives in. It is a physicality that is raw and organic and it leaves its marks on the human skin – "it's much worse now than when I was a kid. As a kid I was told that I shouldn't touch things and get dirty. Now I have brushes and scars"¹⁹.

Seeking familiarity in all the right places

Imagine a person going to the gym. At first, the available equipment will seem alien and strange. The gymnast needs to go on an exploration of the environment to become familiar with it. By trying, he will discover several things: how much weight the different handle bars carry, how he should place his feet correctly while running the treadmill and how he can increase the desired speed. For this person, the gym is the environment in which he moves. Not until he physically engages with it, will he become familiar with it and will he be able to learn new movements.

Practitioners of parkour also practice in gyms. These gyms are empty of the conventional equipment, where instead of the traditional treadmills and other fitness equipment, stations are being build to allow a combination of different movements (see images 2 and 3). In principle, stations are designed to simulate outdoor experience. I will not discuss the differences between indoor and outdoor training as they are too complex to go into here. Here, it is relevant to state that although parkour is practiced indoors, it is centered on outdoor movement.

¹⁹ These quotes were taken from a conversation I had with Velichka about the physical effects of practicing parkour outdoors, 22-4-2012.



Image 2. Equipment in indoor class at Westminster Academy Centre. 2-3-2012. My photo.



Image 3. A station at indoor class, Westminster Academy centre. 2-3-2012. My photo.

To practice movements such as a *precision jump*²⁰, practitioners of parkour go outside and visit different places in London. In parkour, the city itself becomes the gym or playground in which traceurs build familiarity with the environment. Being able to vault a fence or to circle a tree, allows traceurs to acknowledge that the city has a particular physical attribute – it offers surfaces to engage with. To some, this environment is reassuring: “outside the things are solid, they don’t move. When I jump, they’re there” (Dorcia – traceur²¹). By actively exploring different sites in London, traceurs establish familiarity with the features presented in the city.

Practitioners of parkour will practice a certain move on different surfaces and at different places in the city, to gain a sense of familiarity with the city and to build confidence in their movement. Lyudmil once told me, when I first started to train, that “the reason you should practice a move at different places is that you have to know you can do it everywhere, also in new places. Don’t get use to doing it only in one place”. This understanding is also expressed in the following advice about how to practice parkour: “for your own training, go everywhere, explore the whole environment and the place you live in” (Dan – traceur²²).

The confidence gained by practicing the same movements in different places, allows the traceur to approach a new area or spot and explore the existing (architectural) surfaces without feeling estranged. During Parkour Generations classes and during other trainings, traceurs rotate between different places in the city. Most places are known to the traceurs but also in new areas, they seem comfortable. Although a particular spot can be new, the urban equipment available is not: the railings and concrete walls are different in size and relational composition but contain the same physicality. Depending on the level of the traceur, he or she will be confident to approach a new obstacle. Like the gymnast, who will now recognize the physical attributes of a treadmill everywhere, a traceur who has become familiar with the

²⁰ A precision jump is a well-known movement within the practice of parkour. I have asked practitioners to describe this movement. Here is one of the descriptions of a precision jump, given by Nick: “Ensure both the taking off point and the landing point are stable and free of hazards. Set up the jump by standing at the edge of the taking off point, feet shoulder width apart. Keeping the eyes on the landing point, bend the knees and bring your arms behind you, and begin leaning forwards. Throwing your arms forwards and up to give extra momentum, jump from the taking off point. In the air, bring your arms back behind you and bring the knees up close to the body. Eyes should still be focused on the landing point. Extend the legs in preparation for landing. When the feet touch the landing point, absorb the impact by allowing your knees to bend, slowing momentum. Swing the arms forward again as you land, which will help to stabilize the landing”. This quote was taken from a formal interview, 26-3-2012.

²¹ This quote was taken from field notes, 19-2-2012.

²² This quote was taken from a video, “workshop Parkour Generation - Milano” (March 25, 2011). See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb35VOicz7w>.

physicality of a wall or a rail, will be able to approach different walls and rails in a similar way.

Striding the streets of London: movement and awareness

There is playfulness to the practice of parkour that resembles child's play. While moving in the streets of London, I see how traceurs take the opportunity to vault a fence that lies in their path instead of going around it. This is also the case when vaulting the fence takes the same amount of time and effort as passing through it. The choice to vault the fence a meter from where the gate is located instead of going through the gate, illustrates the attitude many of the practitioners have towards their environment. Leon, one of the traceurs I trained with, told me about this playful attitude towards the city. To him, parkour leads to a sense of exploration. He compares it to the way children relate to the world: "As kids do, they like to explore a lot more and they're more open to what's around them. As you get older, you kinda switch off. You kinda literally focus only on where you need to go. Parkour makes you open your eyes to the world again, to see it with different eyes, as a child would see it"²³. This playfulness is not only expressed through their tendency to explore their surroundings but also by a sense of growing awareness to the surroundings in which they move.

While walking with Lyudmil, I notice how focused he is on his forward movement. He keeps his eyes on what appears in his path and, at the same time, he seems to be aware of what is happening around him. Sometimes, he will jump from one pavement to another when he notices that there are no people in his path. As he moves rapidly along the sidewalks, he passes other pedestrians in a smooth motion. Once he nears a pedestrian walking in front of him, he will leap to one side, bringing himself on the same line with the other person. From there, he will leap back with ease to his original path of movement. It is as if the other person was standing still and Lyudmil merely had to traverse him. He says that he can recognize other traceurs by the way they walk. They are more present. Leon contrasts the movement of a traceur with that of other pedestrians in the city: "you can see how on the streets of London, if you just watch the average person, most of them are looking gloom and not really thinking about what's in front of them, and someone bumps into them, they just get angry and go on. For them, it's literally from home to work, work to home". There is lightness and awareness

²³ The quotes used on this page were taken from an open interview with Leon, Westbourne Grove, 13-4-2012.

to how traceurs move. To them, moving in the city entails potential to explore and interact with the movement of others. It is noticeable once you know what to look for.

This awareness to the city is also expressed through a sense of community within parkour. The notion of a parkour community is evident from many of my conversations with traceurs. As many others have confirmed to me, Stephen believes that once you train parkour, you are part of the community: “I guess because we all have a similarity between us, we all kind of have the same mindset, I’m not sure if this is through parkour or that it is from before that. We’ve got the same immaturity: we like to play, we’re open with each other and very welcoming as well”²⁴.

On a social level, parkour generates a sense of openness while being outside in the streets. Practitioners have told me that they have become more open-minded to social interaction with other traceurs and with people in general after engaging with the practice of parkour. This is especially true of the London based parkour community. Being it that London offers a number of classes and other parkour gatherings, traceurs in the community encounter different faces on a regular basis. Because the community is growing, traceurs meet many other practitioners during their trainings. Meeting all these people within the parkour community, is one of the reasons Stephen has become more social. To Stephen, the people he trains with become his friends. This sense of community then flows over to the city itself. “I’m just happy to talk with everyone, you know, people that I never met before. It wasn’t that I wasn’t social before, I just didn’t bother”. Socially, their awareness to the city becomes a way of being in the world. “Parkour makes you more approachable, more confident, that’s how I feel it’s helping you anyway. I am less scared to approach other things in life”. Just like a child, Stephen is aware of the social and physical opportunities London offers him.

²⁴ The quotes on this page were taken from an open interview with Stephen, Waterloo, 10-4-2012.

Possibilities for play

Spots

Stephen likes to go out into the city and find new spots to train. A spot is “a place for concentrated movement” and will usually contain a composition of walls and other architectural features that are used in parkour practices. Stephen will walk around in London to find different areas and see what opportunities they offer for movement. Or he will notice a particular area while riding the bus and make a note to himself to return to that place another time to see it or to train there. In contrast to some of the other traceurs, Stephen likes to find places that are small: “my favorite spots are really tiny. I like to have small spots, where you need to think and not do a big jump”²⁵. A spot can be big or small depending on what the traceur looks for.

Often, finding spots are a matter of imagination, as Lyudmil expresses when he says to me that spots are everywhere: “I find spots even on the ground, you know. Even when I’m walking on the kerb, I see a gap between the kerbs or where the street closes and then I decide, okay, this could be a place for me. Because I jump from the kerb, put one foot of the ground and then, for the next one, I have to be on the other side of the street”²⁶. Parkour can be practiced everywhere in the city because everywhere there are architectural features²⁷.

Despite the fact that every place in the city can be defined as a spot, traceurs prefer to go to places where there are multiple obstacles present and where they are able to practice several different techniques in one location. The traditional spot is difficult to find in the sense that not many places offer concentrated movement. Plenty of areas offer either walls to practice jumps and *wall-runs*²⁸ or contain an elaborate construction of rails. Not many contain both. There are several locations that can be labeled traditional spots and these are very popular among traceurs. Most practitioners prefer to practice at these places as they can stay in one area, without having to relocate to other places. If they have to walk a lot between different areas, they practice less.

²⁵ This quote was taken from an open interview, Waterloo, 10-4-2012.

²⁶ This quote was taken from an open interview, Shepherds Bush, 27-4-2012.

²⁷ A video, send to me by Leon, illustrates this notion. The video is called “spots are everywhere” and is a beautiful example of the relationship between movement and the environment. see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHfWldORz0A>.

²⁸ A *wall-run* is “a one footed take off then kicking upwards against the wall, grab the top of the wall and climbing up”. This description was taken from Angel’s “Ciné Parkour” (2011:282). See appendix iii for a visual.

The Vauxhall spot

“Why would you do something like that, what child would play on a concrete block? It makes no sense. Other countries would build a proper playground there. London is conducive for parkour: they build a wall because they want people to walk around it, we go over it; a big concrete block instead of a metal fence. A brick wall is great for us, it is the thinking around the city.”

– Jonny on the Vauxhall spot and London

The Vauxhall spot, borrowing its name from its proximity to the Vauxhall tube station, is such a popular spot and is often visited by traceurs. The spot is located on the south side of the river Thames. I have visited the Vauxhall spot many times: during the morning hours, late in the evening, to celebrate someone’s birthday and to attend a goodbye party.

The first time I visited the Vauxhall spot, I was pleasantly surprised. However, to describe it is a challenge on its own. It is a peculiar place (see images 4 and 5). Resembling a box, it seems to be carved out in the ground, offering an open space surrounded by stone walls. On one side of it, a staircase leads up to street level. In it, you will find several arrangements of small concrete blocks, a multitude of concrete walls and four solitary trees. The concrete walls, colored grey and red, are set in both diagonal and parallel directions to form a playful composition. To an outsider’s eye – that of a non-practitioner – the box seems to offer little possibilities. This observation is supported by the fact that no one, except for the traceurs themselves, seems to use it. Although the original intention of the spot remains a mystery to the traceurs I spoke to²⁹, one thing is agreed upon: the place offers many opportunities to move and to play.

²⁹In a conversation we had about the Vauxhall spot, Stephen suggested the place was perhaps meant to be a mace, a place for children to play.



Images 4 and 5. The Vauxhall spot. 18-3-2012. My photo.

A vision through parkour

Someone who is a beginner to parkour, can only progress through training. Without training or practice, there is little chance a practitioner will gain skills. Therefore, a traceur will consciously start to search for such opportunities in his environment. To be able to practice, a traceur will have to find railings and walls to which he or she can vault. While this progression can be achieved in the indoor classes, most traceurs will start to look for new ways of movement outside. This shift in attention to the environment in which traceurs live, creates a different perception to all the areas in the city.

All the practitioners I spoke to, tell me that once they started to practice parkour, they started to see things differently. On a Sunday morning, I meet up with Jonny outside Barons Court station, located in west London. We had agreed to meet each other at the entrance of the station and then to venture out and find a peaceful place to sit down and have a quiet conversation about parkour. We greet each other and decide to just start walking and look around the area for an appropriate spot. As we cross the road at the right side of the station entrance, we find ourselves in a small green area filled with trees: the graveled path leads to one of four benches. As we sit down on a bench, I realize we are in a cemetery.

The conversation quickly leads to the subject of ‘parkour vision’ and to how traceurs experience a change in their perception of the environment due to parkour. Jonny, who practices since 2008, explains to me how this perception works: “you see the world in a different light, instead of a cemetery, you see *Kong’s*³⁰ and jumps. That’s ‘parkour vision’. [Parkour] vision is when you look around you and see obstacles, jumps and ways that you can jump”. Through training, a traceur becomes alert to these possibilities. Through experience and the building of skills, a traceur starts to see increasing ways of movement in any area. This was also explained to me by Lyudmil: “if you and I go to the same place, I’ll see more than you. If you see forty percent, I see two hundred percent” – the same place will contain more movement to an advanced traceur than it would to any beginner – “that’s because of experience and that changes as you do more parkour”³¹.

Once a traceur starts to practice parkour, he or she can deepen their vision of the city. As a traceur becomes more experienced, the same area offers more possibilities to move in it. Through ‘parkour vision’, London becomes a place of interaction with the architectural

³⁰ A *kong* is a vault in which the practitioner places both hands on an obstacle, allowing the body to dive between the hands. See appendix iii for a visual.

³¹ This quote was taken from a conversation with Lyudmil about parkour vision, 5-4-2012.

features. The more you train, the more possibilities you see in relation to movement. In this way, “capabilities lead to possibilities”³².

Playing parkour in London

On a Thursday afternoon, Velichka, Suneet, Laura and I made our way from London Bridge station to Waterloo station. We were outside in the city to train on our own time and started to make our way to Waterloo, taking the famous route along the promenade. We wanted to arrive on time to the place where we would gather with other traceurs to participate in the outdoor class later that evening. While making our way along the water, we pointed out to each other the possibilities of movement. Instead of walking beside the rail, separating the promenade from the water and towering high above the water level, Velichka balanced along it. She was holding on to Suneet’s hand as a measure of safety. Walking with practitioners of parkour, the journey often becomes an exploration.

Even while traveling by public transportation, the journey is an exploration. A majority of the practitioners I trained with, are required to travel no less than thirty minutes by tubes or buses to get to a particular spot. This does not mean that they stop moving. Many times, traceurs will use these opportunities to practice other forms of movement. Such an example is placing the feet onto the rails located above the seats in the tube. In this position, the traceur is hanging upside down while the tube moves. Another challenge traceurs often try out is hanging by the hands from the same rails (see image 6). The idea is to hang from the rail as long as it takes the tube to travel between one stop and the next.

The entire city entails such challenges and opportunities to explore the environment. Traceurs will stop their walk and go over to explore an architectural feature that catches their attention: it can be a wall with small niches that makes it possible for the traceurs to traverse along it; it can be the scaffoldings placed around many buildings in the city – as part of reconstruction works – that offer opportunities to climb and swing; it can be the hundreds of rails along sidewalks and in the parks that are used to practice balancing. The skills that are developed by training enable practitioners to approach the city in a playful manner. Traceurs take the time to play outside with the outside. A beautiful example of this playfulness is a

³² This is a known expression within parkour and has been voiced to me on several occasions in regard to the deepening of parkour vision.

short video, showing Stephen at the Vauxhall spot³³. The video illustrates how he moves between two of the walls while making use of the position and distance of the walls to perform a distinct set of movements.

This playfulness in movement is further evident from the way in which traceurs combine and invent different ways of interacting with their environment. During one of the visits to the Vauxhall spot, I witness a new form of play. While standing beneath the trees, a small group of traceurs, all affiliated with Parkour Generations, invented a new game around the red and grey walls. The purpose of the game is to touch all the corners of the walls as quickly as possible. As they gather at the end of the long red wall, situated closest to the trees, they decide which one of them will go first. The first traceur starts by touching the first corner nearest to her. She then runs along the wall to the other side, touching that corner. She stops and turns on the spot to take two steps back to touch the corner of the smaller grey wall running parallel to the red one. While she runs past the corners of the walls, the others help her keep count of the corners she touched already. When she is finished, she observes another traceur take his turn. He starts by touching the first corner of the red wall with his left hand. He takes a step and with his right hand reaches out to touch the corner of the smaller grey wall. He takes a big stride and touches both corners at the other end of the walls, one after the other. He finishes a few seconds later than the first traceur. After everyone takes their turn, the traceurs add to the initial game by complicating the rules. Instead of being allowed to run, vault and jump along the walls, the traceurs have to remain on them the entire time.

³³ "Alternative Vauxhall Routes No. 2", 27-2-2012. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2NtjzfOnTU>.



Image 6. On the Bakerloo line. 29-2-2012. My photo.

Show me your line: moving and perceiving space

Exploring the city's places and perceptions

The places that have become parkour spots are not especially designed for parkour³⁴. As parkour is practiced within the city, most places that are referred to as spots are part of the existing living areas. Many parkour spots are small playgrounds and residential courtyards that offer a multitude of concrete features to which tracers can move. Sometimes, a spot can offer some isolation as the Vauxhall spot does. Other spots, like the Elephant and Castle spot at the Heygate estate, are suitable because they are largely abandoned (see image 7). Due to its planned demolition, the Heygate estate is vacant. There are no residents in the immediate area around the courtyard. Traceurs enjoy this emptiness but they are not prohibited nor are they withdrawn by the presence of other people in the spots. Most spots are located within active living areas. Playgrounds are often empty but they are located within a neighbourhood and are therefore experienced as part of the private social spaces in which people reside.



Image 7. Elephant and Castle spot. 19-2-2012. My photo.

³⁴ An exception to this are several parks designed especially for the practice of parkour. In London, the first park designed for parkour is called the L.E.A.P. park and is located at the Westminster Academy Centre. The L.E.A.P. park looks like a large playground, but instead of the regular swings and slides, the park contains concrete blocks and walls, stacked next to each other. In the center a large scaffolding construction is present. The park was designed by Parkour generations and offers practitioners a place for concentrated movement. See Appendix iii for a visual.

During one of the parkour trainings, I notice this ambiguity in the perceptions of space and what they serve for. At one of the other spots, located at Michelson House in west London, an elderly woman exits her apartment shortly after the practitioners have gathered in the inner courtyard. It is around twelve in the afternoon on a Sunday, and I am not surprised to see faces peeking through the windows at the sound of people talking and moving around. Even more so, since this particular Sunday training is a large group of approximately twenty-five practitioners. A larger group carries its unique dynamic in relation to the city. When a parkour gathering becomes larger, it creates more contrast with the living environment as inhabitants become worried about the presence and intent of the traceurs moving outside their home. Large groups of traceurs will be asked to leave a certain area frequently. When the elderly woman strolls by, the practitioners are running and jumping in the small inner area – consisting of a playground, a small grass field and a construction of walls. Seeing the traceurs crossing the field of grass, she stops to comment on the activities, that I believe to her were a sign of disrespect: “we try to grow plants here and you come and walk all over it, this is a living space, a play yard. You come in droves and you disturb the place”. She continues on her walk without waiting for a response. It is as if she is content merely to express what was on her mind³⁵.

Lucid notions of when space should be defined as either private or public places remains unclear to me. There is no one clear definition as to what makes space closed off. Through parkour, many traceurs experience a shift in their perception of the environment. As traceurs train at different spots, they make use of the urban structures in a way that is not conventional. Consequently, the use of space is changed. A rail usually serves as a marker for separation or for safety. A traceur will use it to practice balancing or to execute a vault or a precision jump. A wall serves as a barrier, to a traceur it is an obstacle. This is not appreciated by everyone and many people experience the activities of parkour as a disturbance to what they perceive as their private environment. Stephen tells me about his own experience: “people train on playground but usually get kicked out. When the kids come, we don’t want to get in the way when they’re playing. Some people do, but that’s wrong. If people come out to tell us to move on, we do”³⁶. Traceurs are aware of how their presence may disturb these perceptions of space.

³⁵ These observations were taken from field notes, Michelson House area, 18-3-2012.

³⁶ This quote was taken from an open interview, Waterloo, 10-4-2012.

To Soxacen, this change in perception of the environment was one of the aspects of parkour that actually attracted him to the practice. People's perceptions about space are defined as open or closed due to notions concerning privacy and to ideas about the limitations of its physical attributes. "[People] don't want to see their environment being used in a different way than used to. They have been told to walk around the wall, that walls are there to stop people and that's what they do. But the meaning of the wall is inexistent. I do understand [people] but I don't believe that is a healthy way"³⁷. In some cases, traditional perceptions of space can become so intrinsic that they have become unrolled norms: we don't cross or go to some areas because we think we are not allowed to when in fact "no one cares"³⁸. It is difficult to state where the boundary lies when it comes to the perceptions of private space. Space is not in itself disturbed. It is the human perception and idea about what space should be that brings about different reactions. To Soxacen, the urban features in London are not only there to be acknowledged and respected but also to be played with.

Shifting perceptions of the own becoming

To the practitioners of parkour, the city is not being disturbed by their movement. I joined traceurs while they practiced in different places in the city and the general perception to the city is that of openness and accessibility. "If you have to go through a gate, or if there is a boundary then you know it is private property. It is hard to define. If nothing says that it is private then it is public" (Stephen – traceur³⁹). I am not implying that traceurs cross into private properties or consider playgrounds merely for their own purposes, for they do not. It is the opposite, as Leon told me, parkour is a form of respecting and appreciating what you can do outside, appreciating the environment. Being familiar with its physicality and therefore feeling comfortable to approach new areas. By knowing how to move around certain obstacles, there seems to be less restriction in movement and spaces can open up. Through my own training in the practice of parkour, I experienced how it is in fact the human perception that constitute the boundaries of what is considered closed space:

³⁷ This quote was taken from an open interview, Westminster Academy Centre, 20-3-2012.

³⁸ This was expressed to me by Kiko when I asked her if we were allowed to climb on the slanted roof of a public building. She wanted to show me the place as it was used in a famous video featuring parkour. My apprehension to climb the roof contrasted with her perception of the accessibility of it.

³⁹ This quote was taken from an open interview, Waterloo, 10-4-2012.

Shortly after I started training with other traceurs, I made my way from the nearest station, the Royal Oak station, to the Westminster Academy Centre, to join in on an indoor class. The path leading to the Academy is divided in two: one route leads across a lighted sidewalk, while the other, marked by a fence, leads through a dimly lit parking lot. I walked this distance twice before and twice did I follow the lighted way, paved with other pedestrians. This time, when I reached the point where the illuminated path diverted, I stopped to look at the darker trail. Since the Westminster indoor class started at eight o'clock in the evening, it was by now dark and cold outside. The same thought occurred to me that appeared there twice before: I cannot go there; it is dark; no one else passes there; and the gate is there for a reason, probably. A walk across the dark path seemed prohibited, almost impossible to me. But another thought also materialized: I knew that I could physically traverse the fence. I looked at the five other pedestrians on the street, all moving along the sidewalk. The city contains fences and walls that guide our movement. These fences and walls are not in themselves the concrete markers of our capacity to move but are rather social indicators. I got curious to see if I could overcome the fence. Already, I was getting used to touching the ground, the walls and railings of the city during the outdoor trainings. Going over the fence and across the parking lot was the quicker way of getting to the centre. Even if I did not vault it, I felt more confident that I would find a way to cross it. The fence, once a barrier – both physically and socially – became an obstacle to overcome. What I saw was the open space behind the fence to walk through. When I approached the fence, I distinguished to the side of it a stone step-up and a lantern, stripped from its light. Using these urban features, I climbed over the fence.

The lines of fear

Fears of the body and mind

During a women's jam⁴⁰ I got into a conversation with Naomi about enhancing our jump capability. A stronger jump enables a practitioner to progress within the practice and face bigger challenges. I noticed that my jumps were not powerful or controlled. I believed that was the reason I was afraid of certain precision jumps. With every jump, I felt my legs slightly dragging behind. When I shared this with Naomi, she told me to start and “engage your bum”. To achieve a bigger jump she has started to exercise her gluteus muscles – illustrating with her leg a slightly backwards motion. By becoming stronger physically, traceurs reassure themselves that they are able to execute the different parkour techniques on a more advanced level – meaning that physical strength enables a traceur to face the more challenging obstacle that he or she is afraid of.

Although the challenges within parkour revolve around pushing the physical capacities of the traceur, physical strength is no guarantee that a traceur will progress within the practice of parkour. Once I started to “engage my bum”, I found that my jumps were indeed becoming more powerful but my fear to face more challenging obstacles did not diminish. Despite learning to understand the own strength, every traceur encounters a stage in which he or she will become afraid to complete a certain movement. For every practitioner this fear is located at different levels and at different techniques. Training can build confidence in the body but the mind has other obstacles. Mentally then, parkour revolves around breaking down the fear that limits the practitioner's ability to move.

I got intrigued with the notion of fear in the practice of parkour. I wondered why practitioners expose themselves to fear and what it brings them. One evening, Lyudmil and I had a conversation about it. As we were talking about the difference between indoor and outdoor training, he mentioned how the factor of fear plays into the capabilities of a traceur to do certain things indoors but not outdoors. When I asked him to tell me more about this fear factor, he replied that it plays a big role, not only in parkour as a discipline, but in other sports and in life as a whole: “fear is tricky. It really plays with our minds and our bodies, even

⁴⁰ A women's jam takes place once a month and is organized by Parkour Generations. During a jam practitioners train together in a less formal setting. It is designed as a women-only outdoor training day, where women of different levels and ages can practice together.

physically. When fear is taking affect on you, on a person, a person is not feeling confident in their movement. It restricts their mental freedom. People are feeling less confident even for things they are perfectly capable of doing”. When I asked him what he means with mental freedom, he replied that “mental freedom is about learning to overcome your fear and asking yourself if it is real, or is it just a mind trick that you don’t believe yourself?”⁴¹

As Lyudmil finished his sentence, I remembered what Jonny said about fear being there for two reasons: one is to protect your life – “legitimate, because you can die from it”. The other kind of fear “is there because you don’t know what’s on the other side”. People experience doubt and become afraid of things they are physically capable of doing because they don’t know. Through parkour, Jonny told me, these fears and doubts are addressed: “a large psychological aspect of parkour is going back and conquering these fears, once you conquer that, you can progress”⁴².

Breaking a jump: sharing the fears of the practice

Once a traceur encounters something he or she is afraid of, a process can take place by which a traceur faces his or her fears. This process is called ‘breaking a jump’. The term breaking a jump does no refer to the physical aspect of doing a jump. It is not a physical but a mental overcoming. The “breaking” part in breaking a jump is when practitioners know that they can make the distance by jumping but when they can’t bring themselves to do so. This is usually related to heights, as the same jump becomes more dangerous once it is performed on higher walls. However, a jump does not have to be high of the ground to have painful consequences. Even on a low railing, a wrong landing can cause serious injuries. I have witnessed several traceurs breaking, and not breaking, a jump. I have broken one jump during my stay in London, and many more I did not. I was told by Jonny that different traceurs have different ways of going through this process: “some do it care free while others think ‘how can I back out, what do I do in the worst case scenario?’. Different people have different ways of preparing. A lot of people have preparation on the ground – to know they can make the distance. They build up the jump, check the surface. Some don’t need preparation, they just know”.

⁴¹ This quote was taken from an open interview, Shepherds Bush, 27-4-2012. The terms discipline and sports are written down as they were used in the interview.

⁴² This quote was taken from an open interview, Barons Court, 25-3-2012.

Despite the differences in approaches, the process of breaking a jump centers on the traceur addressing his or her doubts and fears. Every practitioner recognizes the fear that comes with trying a new challenge. They are able to recognize the doubt that another practitioner experiences as he or she stands in front of a wall, trying to “see” the *kong to precision* before deciding if he or she will execute it. Once a traceur moves, the others can relate to the traceur as they watch him or her vault the wall – where the practitioner places both the hands on the wall, allowing the body to pass through the space between the arms and then releasing the hands from the wall – and they appreciate the ability of the traceur to “stick”⁴³ to another surface behind the wall – where the practitioner uses the balls of the feet to land and stay on a precise spot.

Although parkour is a form of play, most traceurs do not face the challenges they take lightly. Nor do they regard the challenges of others with disinterest. The fears and other emotions, feelings and weaknesses generated in parkour are shared among all the practitioners. The comfort zone of a traceur may come to lie further away as he or she progresses but at the edges of it, it resurfaces. “The fear is the same, it is familiar, you get to a point and you know how to process it. It can become a bit easier but the jumps become bigger so the fear stays” (Stephen – traceur⁴⁴). A jump can generate the same doubt as it is practiced over increasingly larger gaps. This way, practitioners keep acknowledging and keep relating to each other on a similar level, despite the differences in the personal abilities and in the personal progress.

All traceurs engage in similar fears through the practice of parkour. Through engagement with fears, practitioners are able to develop their parkour vision – they are able to see more possibilities for movement and thereby, they gain more confidence in themselves. This process is never-ending as traceurs will move to the boundaries of their own capabilities to find new possibilities. By dealing with the fears, they are able to “see what’s on the other side”. On the other side of the fear, is mental freedom. This sense of mental freedom – or confidence – is gained by overcoming challenges and is shared among all the traceurs. By sharing the same fears and possibilities of the city, traceurs regard and treat other practitioners as equals to themselves. They recognize in others, not only the same fears, but also the same mental progress through movement.

⁴³ The phrase “stick it” refers to the ability of a traceur to remain steady on the spot to which he or she jumped. This is relevant for practitioners of parkour as many surfaces to which they jump are small in size, for example a rail or a narrow wall.

⁴⁴ This quote was taken from an open interview, Waterloo, 10-4-2012.

Social gatherings of the moving kind

Moving together

Parkour is an individual discipline: “it is a way of training the body and the mind in order to improve yourself. The method of training is based on movement, functional training, functional strength and overcoming mental fears and limitations” (Dan – traceur⁴⁵). The physical progress practitioners make, the mental challenges they face and the jumps they break, are all part of their personal improvement. Despite the emphasize on individuality, traceurs will practice together most of the time. Even a social occasion like a birthday celebration or a farewell party often takes place outside, at familiar spots and consists of moving together.

In this study, the tension between individuality and practicing together becomes relevant. The social interaction between the practitioners during gatherings, is part of the way in which traceurs can progress and are able to share the practice itself. The game of touching the corners of the walls at the Vauxhall spot illustrates how parkour contains a strong social aspect to it. In all gatherings, traceurs engage with each other and push each other’s capabilities. When practitioners share the same level of capabilities, they can feed off each other’s movement. If one traceur does a particular jump, the other knows that, despite being afraid of it, he or she can do it as well. Traceurs that are on the same level can push each other more on a mental level. For example, the trainings of Stephen and Leon revolve around them challenging each other to do the things they are afraid of trying or the challenges they think they are not able to face⁴⁶. Perhaps it is useful to compare these gatherings to other events. Just like in a dance event, where the individual performance needs to take place within the gathering to become meaningful, the gatherings of traceurs are based on the sharing of parkour.

Parkour gatherings are often build around a dynamic in which traceurs both learn and teach. This is not only true of regulated classes but of all gatherings, including those outside the classes. Advanced traceurs push each other and engage in teaching less experienced

⁴⁵ This quote was taken from a video, “workshop Parkour Generation - Milano” (March 25, 2011). See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb35VOicz7w>.

⁴⁶ This was voiced to me by Stephen in a conversation about the dynamic of trainings. For an impression of these trainings, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_4p8PQLf9c&feature=relmfu.

traceurs. The extent to which practitioners will help others during trainings is meaningful. Beginners often rely on more advanced traceurs when learning new techniques. In regard to the way parkour is practiced, Lyudmil finds this dynamic between the individual and others in the group logical. Especially in the beginning, practitioners gain skill and practice by observing and interacting with other traceurs – “beginners don’t know where to start, there’s a lot of different stuff to practice, they still don’t have rhythm, no mentality to approach a certain challenge”. Advanced traceurs will take the time to understand and instruct other traceurs so that they are able to progress in their own way. Because it is an individual practice, different traceurs will relate to each other in different ways – “everybody has his own way, some ways cross, others don’t”⁴⁷. The personal dimension in the practice of parkour, adds to the diversity in dynamic and interaction between one training and another.

Shared experience

Practitioners like to share the challenges others have done. This is not merely a consequence of beginners not having the right mentality to approach the challenges within the practice. Many traceurs are eager to try the same movement in the same spot where they saw other traceurs perform them. Stephen told me once how the Imax spot became the most famous spot in London after the documentary ‘Jump London’ was aired and how many traceurs started to go there to train. Traceurs will return to these spots to train together, to try the same jumps they saw on videos or to try the challenges they saw their friends do in the past. When practitioners practice together at a spot, or at other places in the city, they often engage in the same challenges. “It’s weird that when someone does a jump, the others stand in a queue and want to do the same jump,” Stephen says. “They want to do the challenge someone else does. It’s funny to see people queue up when there are other jumps over there”⁴⁸.

Practitioners share challenges not only to know that they can do it. By sharing the same challenges, traceurs construct similar experiences. This is visible when practitioners move and practice together in London. A wall with niches in it, offers the practitioners possibilities to traverse it. This is done collectively by the practitioners (see image 8). Another

⁴⁷ These quotes were taken from an open interview, Shepherds Bush, 27-4-2012.

⁴⁸ This quote was taken from an open interview, Waterloo, 10-4-2012.

example dates from my first participation at a Sunday training⁴⁹. During this gathering, all the practitioners climbed unto a shed roof to practice jumps between that roof and another one located next to it. As the entire group of practitioners was able to climb up and down the roof, my inactivity was noticed. I was not sure I could reach the roof alone so other traceurs helped me to reach the top and come down again. Traceurs like to share their experiences with others and stand beside them when they face similar challenges.



Image 8. In the area of Hammersmith. 25-3-2012. My photo.

The fact that practitioners of parkour enjoy sharing their experiences, is further confirmed when regarding the extensive use of parkour spots. Spots are visited frequently by traceurs. Doing the same or a similar jump means that practitioners share the same difficulties and the same achievements. The Earlsfield housing estate is a spot favored by some of the more experienced traceurs (see image 9). Because of its many smaller spots, it is an area that offers a lot of different movements.

⁴⁹ The Sunday trainings are held by several traceurs affiliated with Parkour Generations. Among these are Stephen and Leon. The trainings are not regulated but offer traceurs of different levels the opportunity to train together. The trainings are called the 'Sunday Trainings Supa XXI' and center on exploration of different and new areas in the city. For an impression see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_4p8PQLf9c&feature=relmfu.



Image 9. Earlsfield spot. 31-3-2012. My photo.

On one of our visits to the spot, Lyudmil tells how he used to practice here with other experienced traceurs and how their trainings would be extremely hard on both a physical and mental level. As Lyudmil describes to me the way in which they trained, he's face lights up. Going back to the same spots brings back memories of shared challenges. These memories linger in that particular place. As we walk through the housing estate, he shows me at different places what jumps he and others have done. Practicing parkour together creates shared experiences that become part of a certain area. Even when traceurs are not there when another traceur does a challenge, they can relate to others because they practice the same movement in the same spot.

In this sense, a spot contains memories that become part of the traceurs' own history and practice of parkour. The experiences gained through parkour – the sharing of parkour experience – are extended beyond direct experience. The spots are visited by traceurs because they know others have done challenges there, which they themselves want to try. The revisiting of the different spots in London, creates familiarity with these places in the city and with the parkour community in general. A spot is not merely a place *for* concentrated movement, in the sense that it offers its practitioners a variety of movements. It is a place *of* concentrated movement, due to the fact that practitioners use these places over and over

again. The movement that is generated in a spot, builds up over time. As traceurs return to these places, a spot becomes a place of sedimentation of parkour events.

Lyudmil gave the following explanation for the fact that traceurs experience a sense of community among all the practitioners in London. In his words, he describes what I became aware of at the end of my fieldwork period through my own experience. Thinking about the parkour community and the people that are part of it, Lyudmil shared his thoughts. “If half the jumps we do are challenges and another practitioner has done this challenge, he knows the feeling. Or like, he or she has shared my personal experience, that I experienced as well. I think this, in the long run, really builds up. So, it is like people are getting experience together without actually being together. So this could be it, why people who do parkour, sometimes think alike and interact alike”⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ This quote was taken from an open interview, Shepherds Bush, 27-4-2012.

The concluding line of this study

This study is an anthropological exploration of the way in which traceurs in London engage with their environment and how movement relates to the landscape of the city. It is here, that I return to the main question of how the practice of parkour deepens the landscape of London. The way in which I chose to formulate the question is important. The word deepen implies that our perceptions of the world are already there, in the world itself. This is the inconceivable nature of nature. Human perceptions of the world are not invented unto it nor are they capable of transforming it. These realizations have framed my anthropological understandings of the practice of parkour. To conclude this study, I return to the line of argument that originated in the field several months ago and has made its way to these final pages. These understandings have been a becoming of their own and have brought me to the perceptions I now have about parkour and the landscape of London.

The landscape of London is a tangible one to the practitioners of parkour. The physicality of London is brought out through direct engagement of traceurs with the urban features of the city. Traceurs engage with their whole body when they move. Through use of multiple sensory capacities, traceurs are able to embody the city's presence. This multi-sensory awareness creates depth in the experience of London's concrete body. It is a physicality that is so organic that it marks both the practitioner and the wall he or she traverses.

Through touch, traceurs are able to acknowledge that the urban surfaces contain a physical attribute, allowing them to play with it. When a practitioner engages in parkour, a bench becomes a possibility to vault and a wall becomes an obstacle. This playfulness is an important aspect of the practice of parkour. The playfulness and comfort of traceurs to be outside is reflected in the way they move in the streets of London. Reminiscent of Ingold's wayfarer, a traceur discovers his or her surroundings by moving in it and by paying attention the opportunities to vault a fence or climb a wall. As Leon mentioned to me, parkour makes you pay attention to the world again. It opens your eyes and makes you look around. A traceur learns to know the world by moving – jumping, vaulting and climbing – in it.

This way of looking and experiencing the world deepens over time as the practitioner becomes more skilled. Through practice, traceurs start to "see" the various ways in which they can interact with the all the fences, walls and rails, placed along the city. This shift in perception to what the environment offer traceurs, in terms of interaction, is called 'parkour

vision'. Parkour vision allows a practitioner to gain more insight to different ways of moving in a particular area. Through practice, this perception of the environment becomes more complex as it offers increasing ways in which a traceur is able to move. Through my own becoming – by training and moving with the traceurs – I was able to experience this shift in perception of the city.

I illustrated in the ethnography how perceptions of the environment depend on the way in which people move in it. Interpretation of the social world is determined by the presence of *affordances* – the potential of objects – and by the *effectivity* of movement. The perception of London among traceurs is determined by their possibilities for movement offered by the presence of London's concrete body. Therefore, the co-constitution of space is a matter of perception. To understand this relationship, anthropological enquiries should focus their attention on how human perceptions come into being. This process of becoming is then a process in which anthropologists are able to acquire similar perceptions to the ones they learn to know.

The practice of parkour generates distinctive perceptions about the use of space and leads to a different way of experiencing the city. This lays at the heart of the meaning of landscapes: our environment is part of our perception and movement. It is not space itself that is either closed or open, it is the way we decide to move in it. Many places in London are perceived by both practitioners and inhabitants as part of their living environment. Playgrounds are defined as private and public, determining on who's point-of-view is enquired. The way people move, determines the way they "see" the world.

To expand their parkour vision, traceurs repeatedly face the fears of the body and of the mind. In the ethnography, I described how traceurs overcome obstacles by engaging with these fears. By building physical strength and confidence, traceurs can reassure themselves that they are able to executed a particular movement. However, the real fear when facing an unknown obstacle, is the fear located in the mind. In this sense, fear of the unfamiliar, alienates the practitioner of his or her environment. The space becomes closed. Mental fear for a challenge implies that traceurs are not confident in their own movement and therefore become limited. Fear creates uncertainty, as Jonny stated, because "you don't know what's on the other side". The phrase "what's on the other side" can function as a metaphor for the perception and attitude of traceurs in London. Learning to know what's on the other side, is part of the practice of parkour.

To overcome their fears, traceurs engage in a process called 'breaking a jump'. 'Breaking a jump' is a mental process in which traceurs face their doubts in relation to their

capabilities. Once traceurs break a jump, they generate confidence in their movement. Knowing what's on the other side means being comfortable to move. This sense of being able to move, is reflected in the expression "more capabilities lead to more possibilities". Overcoming fear becomes a manner in which the city's tactile characteristics are known and thus the city itself. Breaking a jump creates openness to the environment. It is a mental freedom that comes from learning to know the unfamiliar.

By sharing the same fears and challenges, traceurs create a sense of community within the city. Facing the same challenges enables traceurs to relate to each other on a social level, in which they regard each others as equals in the practice. Traceurs are able to relate to other practitioners through the sharing of these experiences. Movement is therefore not merely what practitioners do together but also how they interact with one another. Despite the fact that the practice of parkour is determined by individual progression, traceurs prefer to move together. These *meshworks* are a result of traceurs coming together at different spots in the city and a result of traceurs moving together between places in the city.

Moving together is a form of interaction and generates sociality. This attitude extends beyond the trainings and is part of the way traceurs regard London as a social place. Through parkour, traceurs gain awareness to the social aspects of the city. The fact that traceurs prefer to move together, relates to an understanding of how the practice of parkour deepens the landscape of London. As the landscape is formed by the entanglement of movement, it is by definition social and shared. It is not solely the physicality of London that generates the potential for play. The city becomes a place to play both with the urban surface and with other traceurs in it. Many traceurs have expressed that parkour becomes a way of life. A way of perceiving the place they live in and the people they encounter as possibilities to play. Therefore, more than merely the impact between the environment and the body, it is the line issuing forth from that impact – the sharing of movement – that creates potential.

Spots are illustrative of the growing, or deepening, awareness of traceurs for the potential of movement. Spots are popular among traceurs because they offer a place for concentrated movement. Traceurs go to spots to practice together and to share their challenges and fears. These shared experiences then become part of the place itself, creating a locus of parkour events. In this sense, spots are not merely places *for* concentrated movement. They are also places *of* concentrated movement, for they gather in them the shared movements of the traceurs who visited these places. The sharing of movement extends beyond direct experience as traceurs relate to the movement of others even when other practitioners are not

there physically. Through the practice of parkour, traceurs are able to experience the landscape of London as consisting out of shared movement.

For the practitioners of parkour, the landscape of London is a place of possibilities – it offers potential. This potential is not invented upon the surface of London but is rather part of the places where traceurs move together. The shared opportunities for movement at different spots build up over time, as traceurs visit and re-visit these spots. A spot thus contains many layers of shared experiences that linger and become part of the experiences of others. This layering generates depth in the awareness of London, both as a physical and social landscape, as traceurs move together between the different places of the city.

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Writing this thesis, I realize that my anthropological study about parkour, within an academic framework, has ended. Although the study itself has ended, I still keep in contact with the parkour community based in London and I continue to practice parkour at home together with other traceurs. Over the course of three months, my involvement with the practice of parkour has grown deep roots. At the same time, this involvement within the field of study has raised some (ethical) questions concerning my role as an anthropologist. These questions are part of a broader field of epistemology relating to anthropological methods of fieldwork. What are the consequences of my becoming to the end product of the anthropological understandings gained in the field? How valid are the collected field notes in relation to my role as an *active* or *complete* participant? And how reliable are the findings due to my involvement with parkour? These questions have forced me to look into my own becoming and into the issue of whether, in the classical dooms scenario among anthropologists, I have “gone native”?

I have spoken before about the method of **observant-participation** – contrary to the traditional term of participant-observation – as being the most important anthropological tool in this study. Through observant-participation, a researcher is trying to come to a perception that is similar to that of the people in the field. I refer to this process as “becoming”. The approach of observant-participation raises questions about the existing differences between “going native” and “becoming” that are both related to the level of involvement and participation of the anthropologist.

The classical definition of participant observation entails that “a researcher takes part in the daily activities [...] of a groups of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002:1). Through participant-observation, a researcher is able to write about a subject from the “inside” and “outside”, allowing for a theoretical and personal understanding to form (Angel 2011:58). Observant-participation extends on this notion by acknowledging that participation is a way of gaining a perspective to the world by changing the way of movement. Perhaps this distinction is confusing or seemingly irrelevant. It is not. The difference is in the level and focus of the engagement of the researcher: while the first implies an more analytical attitude to the field, the second revolves around a more sentient experience of the world by learning new skills.

A main objection that echoes within anthropology about (personal) involvement in the field is “the danger of becoming too involved with [it] to write analytically and objectively

about it” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002:6). During my study, I engaged with parkour on a full scale, in the mornings and in the evenings, training both in the classes and outside the classes. Occasionally, this engagement extended to times when parkour was not practiced but where practitioners would come together for other social events. Sometimes, practicing parkour in the city would extend from ten o’clock in the morning till eight o’clock at night – on those intense days I would roam the streets of London with others without writing down a single note. The general fear is that a researcher will completely neglect to record any experiences and observations gained in the field due to a desire to want “to be” in the field. Going native is a process in which “the researcher sheds the identity of investigator and adopts the identity of a full participant in the culture [and] is generally associated with a loss of analytical interest” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002:22).

There is however a difference between experiencing a high level of (emotional) involvement while conducting anthropological research and ‘going native’ (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). My view is that being involved with the research subject or with the community itself does not imply that a researcher has abandoned analytical endeavors or that he has become less professional. Understanding how traceurs perceive their environment requires a bodily understanding of how particular movements can change the human perception. Movement is intrinsically related to perception and this includes academic observations as well.

Here, I wish to return again to the methodological accountability of fieldwork within the discipline of anthropology and to the process of embodiment that is central to what Ingold entitles living anthropology. Realizing a living anthropology is recognizing that whether we acknowledge the people in the field or ourselves as lines of becoming, humans are not merely analytical creatures but rather sentient ones. Denying this form of embodiment would imply that being less involved – being less in the body and more in the head – yields a more scientific approach. Robinson, himself a professor, laughingly confesses that “there is something curious about professors. they live in their heads. [...] They’re disembodied in a kind of literal way, you know, they look upon their body as a form of transport for their heads, don’t they? It a way of getting their heads to meetings”⁵¹. Although scholars rely mostly on analytical evaluation – located in the head – to interpret the social world, the body and its many senses offer us multiple understandings as to how the practice of parkour relates to the environment. Robinson tells about the tendency of dancers to have “to move to think”. Could

⁵¹ Robinson (2006). See: http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html.

that not be said of anthropological enquiry in general? Through participation I have changed the way I am in the world, as everyone who learns something new, and this embodiment of parkour has brought firsthand insight into the relation between parkour and the (social) city. I have used that experience as data.

Therefore, the boundary between becoming and going native is one of neglecting or refusing to take an analytical stance towards the observations and becomings one undergoes. It is a border that distinguishes between becoming and simply being in the field. While some days were more intense in experience and participation than others, the process of becoming implies that I continuously reflected on my own engagement with the city while training and moving. An awareness to this process from the start enabled me to observe it as it deepened and as it became more than just participant observation. In this sense, I never abandoned any analytical reflection but instead tried to engage in active analysis of the progress I experienced through the practice of parkour and through my own becoming as a traceur.

Appendix ii **Abstract**

This study looks into the relationship between movement and the environment through an anthropological understanding of the manner in which the practice of parkour deepens the landscape of London. An embodied understanding of the practice of parkour – a process called ‘becoming’ – enables anthropology to gain insight into the world of the traceurs. Through ‘parkour vision’, traceurs deepen their perceptions of the city. Movement offers practitioners the possibilities to explore both the social and the physical aspects of the urban environment. Through parkour, traceurs generate shared experience by facing similar challenges and fears. These shared experiences take place directly and indirectly as they become part of the city’s surface itself.

Key words: parkour, movement, environment, landscape, London, traceur, shared experience, perception, becoming

Appendix iii L.E.A.P. parkour park



The images were taken on February 26, 2012, during a parkour jam. My photos.

Appendix iv **Parkour movements**

Kong



Source: andoverparkour.tripod.com

Wall-run



Source: wilchinchilla.tumblr.com

Vault to sit



Source: AmericanParkour.com