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

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**Abstract:** Capoeira and parkour are two different body practices which have gained worldwide attention in urban settings in the last few decades. The following paper will explore how capoeira and parkour relate to the construction of identity paths amongst children of immigrants between 12 and 20 in Turin, Italy. It will do so by looking at how such practices are used by young men of migrant origin to negotiate and perform narratives of self-worth, belonging and recognition within marginalising and excluding urban environments. This study acknowledges that social identifications are created, negotiated and (re)produced through bodily and spatial means and within networks of power relations. Following this premise, the insights proposed in this paper suggest that the ambivalent and fluid use of bodies and spaces implied by capoeira and parkour can represent a meaningful lens to understand the embodied and spatial identity negotiations enacted by participants in their daily lives. This theoretical perspective will illuminate the place that active bodies, spaces and leisure practices take in the negotiation of social identities, and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, enacted by youth of migrant origin within early 21st century Turin cityscape.

**Keywords:** Capoeira; Parkour; Turin; Leisure; Identity; Migration.

Capoeira and parkour are two distinct bodily practices, which have caught in the last few decades the interest of young people in urban settings around the world (Fuggle 2008; Stapleton and Terrio 2009; Thorpe and Ahmad 2013). This paper explores how such leisure practices were used by groups of young men of migrant origin as means to negotiate processes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as to perform publicly narratives of self worth and belonging within the urban landscape of Turin, Italy. The insights here presented are informed by 9 months of ethnographic research conducted between 2011 and 2012 with young *capoeiristas* and *traceurs*<sup>1</sup> in Turin. Willing to provide insights about immigrants' children leisure practices as resources to negotiate unequal social conditions and objectifying social identifications, the study engaged with a multidisciplinary

theoretical framework in order to understand the embodied and spatial dimensions of such negotiations. Following Silk and Andrews (2011), this study engaged with a contextually based understanding of corporeal, and spatial, practices (Silk and Andrews, 2011, p. 7). Furthermore, this study acknowledged that the stakes implied in the social practices here observed can only be appreciated by understanding the economic, political, social and historical relationships that comprise the social context (Silk and Andrews 2011, p. 9). In order to provide an initial contextualized understanding of the phenomena here studied, the following section will therefore provide background information about the research context, Turin. An analysis of the bodily practices observed, capoeira and parkour, will then introduce a discussion of the insights provided by the study.

### **Background: Immigration in Turin.**

The city of Turin, the fourth largest urban centre and the third economic hub in Italy, has a relatively long history of immigration as, since the 1950s, job opportunities in the industrial sector and other related economic activities attracted many internal migrants, at first from southern Italy (Merrill 2011). These internal migration flows significantly dropped for various reasons in the early 1980s (Merrill 2011). However, the need for flexible labour persisted in Turin, and internal migrants were rapidly replaced with immigrants from North and West Africa, East Asia, South America, and, from the early 1990s, Eastern Europe. The region around Turin provided various job opportunities for immigrants in the industrial sector, as well as in elderly care, cleaning services, seasonal fruit collecting in the countryside. However, since the early 1990s, Italy, and the city of Turin, saw the rise of openly racist organizations, including political parties, and witnessed increasing acts of intolerance toward immigrants and their families (Dal Lago 1999). Mass media contributed to the creation of on-going waves of moral panic, which depicted immigrants as a "national pollutant" (Merrill 2011) and responsible for the country's criminality, violence and "moral decay" (Dal Lago 1999; Calavita 2005; Palmas 2009). The economic crisis, which hit Italy in the early 2000s merely

served to accentuate such discourses. The fragile balance that had allowed migrants to be “welcomed” in Italian society due to the need for temporary, highly flexible workers for low-qualified jobs, or what Ambrosini (2007) termed “works of the three Ds”, dangerous, dirty, demeaning, suddenly collapsed. The last few years have seen the rise of nationalistic rhetoric like “Italians first” or “No to a Multi-Ethnic Italy” among a disillusioned population that seems scared and confused by the effects of the economic crisis. This rhetoric has contributed to the endorsement of increasingly restrictive laws for civil rights, work and residence for foreigners in Italy (Rossi 2011). The *Belpaese* (beautiful country), and the city of Turin, came to be sites where citizenship orientated towards a modern equivalent of feudal privilege, implying degrees of membership distinguishing citizens, legal residents and illegal migrants (Calavita 2005, p.15). Eventually, other structural factors, such as high unemployment levels among young people between 16-24 and the collapse of public education, have had greater negative effects on younger people and immigrant families (Fondazione Leone Moressa 2011) and influenced current desires, horizons and social trajectories of many of the young people I met in the field.

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

Several contributions in different disciplines have addressed how demeaning social categories, conditions of social exclusion and dynamics of *subordinate assimilation* (Ambrosini 2007) influence the sense of self and belonging of young people of migrant origin in contemporary European societies. In transcultural psychology several authors underlined the cleavages (Moro 2003), de-affiliation processes and generational inversions (Yayahoui 2002) young people of migrant origin face when confronted with the difficulty of finding a way to connect sometimes diverging cultural and moral orders: those of the host country and those of the community of origin. Such processes can produce deep conflicts between generations and painful experiences of feeling divided among youth, which, in turn, can result in violent and tragic manifestations of unrest (Moro 2003). From a sociological perspective, Sayad (2002) described the miserable relationships that in

France children of Algerian immigrants had with their bodies: disgraceful, ugly, *suspect* bodies which betrayed them in their desire to be “as everyone else”, by reminding every day their “otherness” in French society (Sayad 2002, pp. 345-346). Sayad's work, which drew on Bourdieu (1977) and Goffman (1963), addressed the processes through which dominant regimes of representation defined immigrants social identities in France, and highlighted how such social categories were inscribed in/on the immigrant body. Such insights are fundamental in underlining the disruptive effects of social inequalities and dominant regimes of representations in the lives of immigrants, and their children, but do not provide accounts on children of immigrants' daily negotiations of established social prerogatives and identities.

A small body of literature in social sciences (Schneider 2005; Palmas 2009, 2010; Jimenez-Sedano 2012; Palmer 2009; Ngo 2008) suggested that, despite profound social inequalities and painful cleavages, children of immigrants can to a certain extent be successful in mobilizing various resources to build creative processes of identification and belonging, even in marginalizing and objectifying environments. Furthermore, other contributions in the literature have focused on the role of leisure as a means to maintain meaningful identity bonds with the country of origin in diasporic communities (Liu Farrer 2004; Zoletto 2010, 2011), as well as to engage with intercultural encounters within contexts of migration (Tiesler & Bergano 2012). Aiming to contribute to these insights, this study highlights how children of immigrants' engagement in leisure activities, such as capoeira and parkour, represented an instrument to negotiate social identifications and processes of inclusion/exclusion in Turin cityscape. Importantly, the focus on capoeira and parkour illuminated how participants enacted such negotiations by using the same sites through which they were daily objectified and marginalized in Italian society: their bodies and the urban spaces they daily lived and crossed. Seeking to integrate perspectives on leisure and identity in migratory contexts, this study will address the “everyday” as a site where power, dominant social categories, and identities, can be both legitimised, reproduced, and negotiated in actors' daily lives (Borden 2001; Skey 2010, 2011). The nature of the daily practices observed in this study will, furthermore, provide an

opportunity to understand the role that active bodily practices take in framing actors' social experiences, and in constituting a forum for the manufacturing of individual identities (Giardina and Newman 2011). The insights provided by this paper suggest, therefore, that leisure practices, and the active body, can thus represent unique sites where to observe and understand identity negotiations enacted by groups of children of immigrants in early 21st century Turin.

Correspondingly, this paper shows how the identity negotiations enacted by participants did not address only the symbolic, aesthetic, and textual elements of social life, as previous studies exploring youth identity negotiations through subcultural and leisure practices suggested (Hall & Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979; Schneider 2005; Palmas 2009, 2010; Jimenez Sedano 2012). Rather, the identity negotiations enacted by participants practicing capoeira and parkour in Turin public spaces took place through a complex reinterpretation and redefinition of their bodies and of the spaces they daily lived and crossed, as showed in the following paragraphs.

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

Capoeira and parkour may be distinct disciplines, but both have captured young people's imagination in various urban contexts (Fuggle 2008, p. 205). Although there are no official statistics enabling the precise quantification of capoeira and parkours practitioners worldwide, the increasing number capoeira and parkour of schools and groups around the globe has been acknowledged both in academic and specialized literature in both disciplines (Stapleton and Terrio 2009; Vieira and Röhrig Assunção 2013; Thorpe and Ahmad 2013). One probable reason for the diffusion of the two practices is that both do not have coherent definitions, thus enabling the *capoeirista* (or simply capoeira) or the *traceur* to find his or her own meaning in the practice. At a first sight the only commonalities between capoeira and parkour are that they are both bodily practices generally enacted in urban spaces. Capoeira is an afro-brazilian art form which includes music, dance, acrobatics and martial arts. Capoeira was developed a form of physical exercise practiced mostly by slaves, and was meant to keep them fit for self-defence. Due to the prohibitions and limitations

emplaced by slave owners, slaves hid their martial training in an apparently “innocent” form of dance during religious festivities and gatherings. Its practice was first documented in Brazilian urban areas from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and from the early 1970s it started to gain progressively an increasing recognition and diffusion worldwide (Lewis 1992; Downey 2005; Taylor 2005, 2007). Parkour does not rely on centuries of history and practice, but gained worldwide visibility and diffusion soon after it was created in France in the late 1980s. Parkour consists of using all available urban furniture to go from one point to another in the least number of movements possible, while also trying to avoid touching the ground and, simultaneously, paying attention to the fluidity and simplicity of the movements. The main founders of parkour, Davide Belle, the son of French working class parents, and Sebastian Foucan, the son of Guadeloupan migrants, developed the practice in the late 1980s motivated by the lack of activities and opportunities for entertainment available for young people in their town (Fuggle 2008). With parkour they were able to transform the urban environment into a playground using physical obstacles as supports to cross through and over spaces and to live in new ways urban spaces.

In general, a consistent body of literature on capoeira mainly addressed its cultural and historical aspects (Almeida 1981; Lewis 1992; Taylor 2005, 2007 amongst all). However, more recent contributions addressed the transformation of capoeira as a cultural practice through its worldwide diffusion in relation to masculinity, gendered relations, habitus and phenomenology (Joseph 2008, 2012; Delamont 2006; Delamont and Stephens 2008, 2010; Downey 2005, 2008), religiosity (Merrel 2005; Nascimento 2013), “sportization” and “professionalization” of capoeira (Wesolowski 2013; Aceti 2013). Although meaningful, such contributions, however, did not explore how capoeira has been re-appropriated and transformed by practitioners outside gyms and fitness centres, in urban public spaces around the globe. Literature on parkour on the other hand focused mainly on the liberating relationship and opportunities parkour enables for practitioners within contemporary urban spaces (Saville 2008; Daskalaki et al. 2008; Atkinson 2009; Mould 2009; Marshall 2010; Bavinton 2011; Guss 2011). However only few contributions have addressed the

possibilities of researching parkour in relation to different topics such as relationship with other lifestyle sports (Fuggle 2008), sport policies and sport for development interventions (Gilchrist & Wheaton 2011; Thorpe & Ahmad 2013), (hegemonic) masculinity, gender relations, commodification of youth expression and hybridized identities (Stapleton & Terrio 2009).

It can be argued, that capoeira and parkour mainly differ in the relationship they establish with (public) space and with the object of their bodily dialogue. While the relationship with space in capoeira is mediated by the group of participants, and the bodily dialogue is established with another practitioner, parkour, although enacted in groups, implies a more individual relationship with space, which is the main “partner” of every *traceur*. Within capoeira, space can be an arena to display publicly physical and artistic abilities and gain, even if temporarily, public recognition. However, space its use and management, is also a fundamental component of the bodily dialogue enacted by *capoeiristas*, who look for cracks and fissures within the opponent's game to use them as spaces to manoeuvre, escape, counter, and perform successfully unexpected blows and sweeps. On the other hand the *traceur* engages in a more personal relationship with urban space. Parkour practice seems to suggest a specific experience of fleshed bodies and the surrounding space by explicitly recognizing perception as our primary mode of *being-in-the world* (Merleau-Ponty 1962), and by grounding subjective existence in the body rather than in the mind (Fuggle 2008, p.214). Furthermore, such intimate and personal relationships transform space as a ground of experience, allowing to recognize, embrace and overcome, individuals' feelings, as fear or lack of confidence, and physical limitations (Saville 2008). However, notwithstanding the evident differences between the practices, capoeira and parkour present some striking commonalities, especially with regard to the way they were re-appropriated and used by participants in this study. Primarily, although engaging differently with space, , capoeira and parkour emplace meaningfully the body in urban spaces, and therefore enable a deep, multifaceted analysis of participants' bodily and spatial negotiations in the research context. Furthermore, both practices' use of the body are characterized by a doubleness and a familiarity with continuity in difference (Hall 2000). Both capoeira and



parkour blend apparently conflicting uses of the body, as capoeira combines harmoniously dance and fight elements, while the “free flow” of movements of parkour has its origin in a rigid military training. In addition to that, several participants in the study practiced both capoeira and parkour in public spaces, often mixing movements and techniques, as many of them reported integrated benefits and features in both practices (i.e. management of risk, danger and violence, increased bodily consciousness and awareness of emotional reactions, embodied ways of knowing and experiencing the world, “liberating” experiences in overcoming physical limitations). However, both practices represent also highly commodified global popular cultures that attract, and are managed, predominantly by young men (Stapleton & Terrio 2009, p. 20; Thorpe & Ahmad 2013). Such assumptions were supported by my experience in the field, where I seldom had chance to meet young women regularly practicing capoeira and parkour in public spaces. The lack of female participation in the practices observed in the field can provide hints regarding the possible reproduction of hegemonic gender differences and power relations within capoeira and parkour groups, as suggested by Joseph (2012) and Thorpe and Ahmad (2013). However, the lack of female participation in the practice observed in public spaces might also reflect a more general perception of the “in-between” public spaces observed (i.e. peripheral public parks, street corners, walking footpaths, abandoned buildings) as dangerous sites, unsuitable, or not “proper” for young women to occupy according to hegemonic conventions about femininity in the context of research. Such elements thus can provide also hints regarding spatialized and gendered power relations in the research context. Though a focus on gender relations is outside of the scope of this article, such elements indicate the pivotal role of leisure, and physical practices, in reproducing, legitimising, or challenging, gender and sexual norms and differences within the field of research (Silk and Andrews 2011) which may be explored in other contributions. Finally, acknowledging the ambivalent and nuanced characteristics of capoeira and parkour practices in contemporary transnational cultural flows, this study posits capoeira and parkour as unique points of analysis. The ethnographic analysis of such practices enabled observation and understanding of how leisure

bodily practices and contested re-appropriation of public spaces related to participants' identity negotiations in Turin.

## **Methodology**

Data for this study are derived from nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Turin, where I engaged in numerous informal interviews and daily capoeira and parkour practice with approximately 30 research participants aged 12-20, whose parents originally migrated from Eastern Europe, Northern and Western Africa, East Asia, and South America. Agreeing with Jimenez-Sodano's (2012), to understand the lives and practices of young people living at the margins in Turin, I did not follow the participants by ethnicity (e.g., selecting only children of Brazilian immigrants or with Moroccan or Romanian background) since that approach would definitely have limited my insights in the field. I conducted eight (one-on-one) and two (dyads) in-depth interviews with capoeiristas and traceurs (practitioners of capoeira and parkour) in a community centre. I also had eight (individual) in-depth interviews with street educators working with migrant youth in Turin in their work offices. The in-depth interviews lasted a minimum of one hour and as long as two hours with both groups. Permission for the youth to be interviewed was requested from a tutor of each participant as well as the participant themselves- none refused. All interviews were audio-taped with permission and transcribed with relevant texts samples translated into English.

Participants' names in this paper are fictional to protect respondents' privacy.

The fact that I was also a capoeirista proved enormously helpful in gaining access to the fieldwork setting and to the research participants. I made initial contact with three young capoeiristas who I already knew well because of our common practice. They agreed to introduce me to a larger group of approximately 12 *capoeiristas*, four of whom also trained in parkour. They made introductions to a group of approximately 15 *traceurs*, who I also included in the research. In the field I engaged in an ethnographic observant participation (Wacquant 2004) of the practices analysed, by participating in respondents' capoeira and parkour sessions. Such embodied engagement stemmed from the

recognition of apprenticeship as a meaningful means to penetrate social worlds (Stoller 1997; Wacquant 2004) and understand meaning, values and experiences attached to capoeira and parkour. Such methodological approach followed also epistemological and methodological insights from Physical Cultural Studies scholarship, summoning an analysis *of* body practices and subjectivities which stems *from* the body of the researcher (Pelias 2007, p. 186) as a locus of political and analytical praxis (Giardina and Newman 2011, p. 524). During research I therefore used my body as a site of ethnographic data-collection and inquiry, by engaging in a reflexive commitment to recognize my own embodied experiences in relation to capoeira, parkour, the contexts where they were enacted and research participants' practices.

### **Creating spaces of recognition within excluding places**

Although capoeira and parkour are also taught in gyms and social projects in the city of Turin, the engagement respondents' had with these two bodily disciplines went far beyond these training spaces, and involved their everyday life context more widely. The young men I met during fieldwork preferred to choose the spaces to engage with capoeira and parkour "on the way to school", "while keeping an eye on younger siblings in the park", and did not need a dedicated, regulated time or space. Therefore, as I observed and followed children of immigrants choosing and transforming "in between" public spaces (e.g. public parks, empty parking lots, street corners, abandoned factories, pedestrian areas) into playgrounds and free open-air gyms, I gradually developed the idea that respondents' used the spectacular display of physical abilities implied by capoeira and parkour also as means to declare in public, unrequested and irreverent, their presence in the city's life (and polity). As several participants have often mentioned during the research, urban spaces constantly reminded them of their position in Italian society as "tolerated" guest, even when they were born and raised, studied and worked in Italy<sup>2</sup>.

So, the other day I am walking with my friends at the park, there's a big car parked, a man and two ladies stand outside of the car drinking and listening to music from the radio. As I pass them I begin to move, cause

you know, I can't stand still when I hear music, the man begins to shout at me "come here and dance for us, you monkey, as you usually do where you came from!" (Lazer 17 years old)

"We are young, we are 'foreigners', we are always 'around', we are exactly who they [police men] look for first" (Bogdan 16 years old).

It is opportune then to interrogate what influence the materialisation of social positioning and categories in public spaces can have in the construction of children of immigrants sense of self, self worth, belonging and membership in Italian society. Specifically in the city of Turin, the neoliberal urban reform which aimed to transform a "city that looked like a factory" (Bagnasco 1986) to an European capital of culture, tourism and leisure since early 2000s radically exacerbated dynamics of social and spatial exclusion towards marginal groups and "visible minorities" (Skey 2010) in urban public spaces. As the municipality, and various cultural entrepreneurs, celebrated Turin's supposed social inclusiveness through festive events and parades, mainly portraying an exotic and aestheticized vision of multiculturalism as pleasant diversity, (Mitchell 1995; Silk and Andrews 2008), the city public spaces started to be reconfigured in the name of security (Rose 2000; Wacquant 1993), mainly at the expenses of the marginal groups usually attending such spaces: homeless and immigrants. As Bogdan account indicated, the progressive militarization of public spaces in predominantly immigrant inhabited neighbourhoods coincided with narratives of victimisation (Skey 2010), depicting specific urban areas as "taken over" by dangerous minorities, and with a growing process of criminalization of immigrants presence in public spaces (Wacquant 1993). Immigrants, and their children, in public spaces were increasingly perceived as "too many" (Skey 2010, p. 719), challenging their prerogatives as domesticated, and invisible, "others" (Hage 1998; Palmas 2009; 2010), and associated with potential criminal or morally scandalous activities. Participants often reported the symbolic and concrete violence they encountered in their daily living environments, including "judging looks", threats, and acts of discrimination on the streets and public areas, including when they trained in capoeira and parkour in public spaces.

When we train in small groups at the park or in any open space large enough for us, sometimes people yell at us, they tell us to go away, and sometimes threaten us. They tell us to get a job, that we are vandals, but we do

not break anything! (Abdelrazak 14 years old)

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

Every participant in this study was able to tell several of such episodes with various degrees of verbal, and physical, harassment by groups and members of the public. However such occurrences did not seem to deter participants from continuing to engage with capoeira and parkour. This, in turn, seemed to push them to use capoeira and parkour to discuss and negotiate the social categories through which they were identified by other actors in public spaces rather than inhibiting them.

It's funny, you know, because the same mothers who would hold their bags if they see me walking on the streets with my friends, when I train in public parks come to ask me if I can give capoeira classes to their children! (Joseph, 18 years old)

While the youngsters may not have felt they had enough power to have open discussions with police—“how can you discuss with them?”— Joseph account showed how they used capoeira and parkour to counter and overcome daily dynamics of discrimination, violence and exclusion, as well as to perform and provide images of self-worth and ability in public spaces. Both Abdelrazak and Cesar recognized their attempts to use the same sites through which they perceived to be discriminated, their bodies and public spaces, as means to provide alternative images from the usual stereotypes of *male immigrant bodies* by enacting capoeira and parkour:

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

I'm sure they send us away because we are foreigners, they may be thinking we do this while we sell drugs, or we'll vandalise something, or just as if we have less rights to stay in public parks! This just makes me want to go on training, you know, these situations really help me to grow, to understand my direction, I keep on training at the park 'cause I have no other place to stay fit and meet my bros', but also because I know I am not doing anything wrong, I am not as they see me. (Cesar, 16 years old).

In such accounts it is possible to recognize the existing relationship between how spaces are

perceived by actors in relation to how individuals perceive themselves, their sense of self worth, belonging and social location within them. Participants' engagement with capoeira and parkour seemed to enable them to use the ambivalent and creative use of the body and space implied by such practices to negotiate marginal social positioning and objectifying identifications in Turin cityscape.

Through their creative and irreverent public engagement with capoeira and parkour Abdelrazak and Cesar attempted to counter the established prerogatives, and objectifying identifications, of immigrants as “(un)domesticated others” (Skey 2010, p. 719) in Italian society. Although often objectified as thugs, vandals and drug dealers, as *alien bodies* in public spaces, participants did not simply interiorize such categories or reactively endorse them (Sayad 2002), rather they attempted to transform their experiences of space from spaces of exclusion to spaces of belonging:

When we held a *roda* in Piazza Castello [Turin's central square, in the shopping and touristic area] at the beginning I was nervous. I was in the main square of the city, where I seldom go, as I do not feel at ease there [...] everybody checks out everybody, old ladies holding their bags as they pass beside me and my friends [...] here comes the police patrol to check our documents and warn “behave, we got eyes on you”[...] but then, when the music started, I felt just like playing, everything disappeared, there were just my “bros” who were playing with me and the *roda*, I just felt such incredible energy coming from there [...] the crowd, people were not just *looking* at me, they were *clapping, laughing, singing*, while they were *enjoying* with me the capoeira games. I totally forgot where I was, because I was doing capoeira and wherever I was, *that was my place*.

(Abdelrazak 14, years old, emphasis added)

In Abdelarazak account is possible to recognize then how, by re-imagining space through capoeira (and parkour in other cases), he and his friends were able to re-image themselves from *bodies out of place* as rightful members of the public in Turin central square. Though is licit to question the extent of the effects of such negotiations on the dominant regime of representations shaping participants' lives (Atkinson 2009), it is possible to assume that through the discussed situational temporary re-appropriations of spaces, enacted through the different means provided by capoeira and parkour, participants' identities were “formed and transformed as they negotiated the contours of the city”

(Fuggle 2008, p. 214). The spatial negotiations enacted through capoeira and parkour practices seemed then to offer participants, rather than explicit attempts to change the material conditions constraining their lives and trajectories, tentative, situational, self-surpassing responses to their implicit interrogative “Where, and what, is my place in here?” In engaging with such quests for belonging and self-worth, participants' spatial identity negotiations related also to a re-definition and re-interpretation of their bodily experiences and embodied identities through capoeira and parkour, which will be addressed in the following paragraph.

### **“If I can climb a wall of ten meters”: embodied narratives of belonging and self-worth**

According to research participants the practice of capoeira and parkour did not allow them only to tactically re-appropriate and redefine previously alien and threatening spaces, but also helped in redefining themselves and their bodies, in a similar way to that observed by Borden with skateboarders (2001, p. 53). Interestingly, capoeira and parkour seemed to be initially chosen by participants not because of their history or outstanding features, but rather because of a lack of other leisure opportunities and of economic means (Horolets 2012). Many respondents acknowledged that they started training “just for joke”, “because it seemed to be an entertaining way to work out for free and learn to do some back flips” (Ricardo 16 years old) or even because “I was already doing it (parkour) back at home, but I just had no name to call it!” (Samba 18 years old). Nevertheless, as they engaged more in such practices, research participants started to use the skills they developed by training *capoeira* and *parkour* to address also other needs and issues in their lives:

I like capoeira because it teaches you how to move in every situation [...] we all fall one day or another, isn't it?

With capoeira I learnt that when you can't avoid it, sometimes you simply can't, you have to have learnt how fall well, so that your fall will not stop you from getting your life done! (Ricardo 16 years old)

What also is great about parkour is that adrenaline, that feeling that you have when you jump an obstacle which hinders you to get somewhere and you try everything to find a way to overcome it [...] You feel all these contrasting emotions, fear, deception, rage, excitement, but when you do it you feel so damn powerful, and you

feel like: if I find the way to climb a wall of ten meters just with my imagination, I can use it for other obstacles in my life. (Samba, 18 years old)

Ricardo's and Samba's accounts show how they used their bodily engagement with capoeira and parkour to recognize and mobilise personal abilities and a sense of self worth in order to address challenges and backlashes in their daily lives, in a way that has been recognized by Saville (2008), Thorpe and Ahmad (2013) and others in relation to parkour, however without relating such aspects to individuals' process of identity construction. Ricardo, Samba and various other respondents seemed to commit to capoeira and parkour as practices “imbued with the flexibility and preadaptation necessary for unpredictable change” (Bateson 1972 *in* Vigh 2009, p. 425) to address the unpredictability in their everyday lives, and to recognize and build in themselves a sense of ability to face it. Participants said that capoeira and parkour practice did not only provide them with the bodily skills required to engage actively with the multiple and moving constraints in their daily lives, rather they described how constant work on their body allowed them to gain a consciousness of their postures and reactions to various situations, eventually enabling participants to act on them:

Since I started to practice [both *capoeira* and *parkour*] I feel my body and I feel I know myself better. I know how I react to certain situations [...] I feel like I know more how to face things in my life, both an obstacle, somebody provoking me or something even worse [...] (Ciprian, 14 years old)

Since I started doing *capoeira* I realized I gained this posture, this way of walking, relaxed, “sly like a cat” (laughs) [...] I think people read the way you walk or you look at them and react by consequence! I know this because, before beginning with capoeira, I was so insecure that in unknown or confrontational situations I always attacked others, so they could not see how scared I was (Wendell, 17 years old)

Ciprian and Wendell's accounts show how participants used capoeira and parkour not only as means to navigate unpredictable, and possibly violent, environments and spaces, within an unpredictable “city of unknowns” (Borden 2001, p. 142). But also capoeira and parkour seemed to represent a means of enabling them to recognize themselves as valuable and capable individuals able to cope with unpredictable events and interactions within challenging daily life contexts. Together, the re-appropriation of spaces, and of their bodies, seemed to help participants to redefine both the city



and themselves in a process which showed how capoeira and parkour represented for them meaningful tools of identity construction.

I see capoeira and parkour as instruments to know myself and my limits, and to overcome them [...] they are as well means to take care of myself, to get to know what I want to become and achieve, I am pretty sure if not for that I'd probably be drinking and wasting myself somewhere around with my cousins (Reda, 19 years old)

Participants seemed therefore to use such leisure practices as attempts to both redefine themselves and social relationships with others. Where traditional social institutions, family, school, but also organized leisure activities, seemed to have difficulties to reach participants and provide clear answers to the identity questions posed by the “children of migration” (Sayad 2002), capoeira and parkour seemed to be proactively used by participants as meaningful means of identification and socialization.

I do prefer practicing here [in a public area] rather than in gyms [...] even if had money for it, I wouldn't train in a gym: there everybody trains alone, you hardly speak with others, everybody with their earplugs staring at the wall like zombies! When you go around and see somebody bustin' some moves you can go there and ask “show me that again”, or “do you to do it this way?”, and that's how I met most of my friends. (Bogdan, 16 years old)

As such, groups of capoeiristas and traceurs provided participants a sense of community in which the contested re-appropriation of public spaces, and their bodies, enhanced a sense of agency and belonging, developed without resorting to outspoken conflict, violence or attempts to abolish physical and social constraints affecting their lives. Rather such spatial and bodily identity negotiations were enacted through re-interpreting, transforming and using public spaces (Fuggle 2008; Bavinton 2011) and their bodies according to their needs of well-being, socialization and recognition. Furthermore, the bodily and spatial engagement with leisure practices as capoeira and parkour represented a significant means to build identity paths of belonging and self worth within marginalizing environments, and to negotiate processes of inclusion and exclusion in early 21st century Turin public spaces. Participants' engagement in capoeira and parkour seemed to follow a desire to make their bodies, and the spaces they daily lived and crossed, contested tools of self

constitution and self development, therefore contributing to illuminate the role of leisure in the embodied and spatialized constituency of actors' social lives and identities. Eventually, by engaging in capoeira and parkour, participants tried to prevent dominant regimes of representation and urban organization to dictate who they could be(come) in Italian society. In such a perspective it looks like participants' public and bodily engagement with capoeira and parkour tentatively and publicly posed in response to the fundamental question “Who am I?” (Borden 2001, p. 245). Though the extent of such identity negotiations need to be understood as partial, and contextually bounded, participants accounts showed the role that leisure practices take in the process of identity construction amongst groups of children of immigrants in Turin. Furthermore, by highlighting how the identity negotiations addressed in the study subjectively redefined and transformed participants' bodies and lived spaces, this contribution calls for further enquiries about the embodied, and emplaced, identity politics (Hall 2000; Borden 2001) enacted through leisure by social actors.

## **Conclusions**

This paper aimed to show how the practices of capoeira and parkour related to the process of identity construction amongst groups of young men of migrant origin in Turin, Italy, and to represent a starting contribution to address the intersection between identity, body, space and leisure. As Borden (2001) underlined, urban spaces operate as a kind of social mirror, users often checking their identities against a building or boundary (p.102). Borden's perspective drew on a Lefebvrian analysis (Lefebvre 1991[1974]) of urban spaces as social constructions, which reflect and reproduce social tensions and power relations, and as products, and producers, of social practices, which later work applied also to the theorization of identity (Borden 2001; Friedman and Van Ingen 2011). This study aimed to contribute to such analyses by observing how the relationship between bodies and spaces, created through the practice of capoeira and parkour, represented means for the young men I met to negotiate social identifications and processes of inclusion/exclusion in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Turin public spaces. The public practice of capoeira and parkour, as multi- faceted

and always moving, seemed to embody and emplace what Corsin-Jimenez has called a “geography of becoming” (2003, p. 142). As if echoing Corsin-Jimenez’s claim that “the world happens with us and, in choosing what set of practices we will enact and engage in, we are also choosing what world we want to live in” (2003, p. 141), participants' embodied and spatial practices seemed to imply the opportunity for other possible spaces, social paths, histories and identifications for children of immigrants (Jimenez 2003, p. 142). Finally, this study offered a perspective enabling appreciation of how participants' identity negotiations and appropriations went beyond the symbolic, aesthetic and textual elements of social life, but took place through a complex reinterpretation and redefinition of their bodies and of the spaces they daily lived and crossed. However, the negotiations of social categories and identities enacted through bodily and spatial re-appropriations by participants needs to be carefully analysed, since they represented nevertheless frail and tentative trajectories in unstable and unfolding environments. As suggested by Borden (2001), Lindegaard (2009) and Stapleton and Terrio (2009), the situational, embodied and spatial identity negotiations enacted by social actors are not immune from the reproduction of hegemonic norms, differences and power relations. The observation of participants' multifaceted and complex bodily and spatial engagement with capoeira and parkour practices in Turin public spaces offered thus a series of interrogatives which could not be addressed in this article: how hegemonic representations of masculinity are negotiated or reproduced by young *capoeiras* and *traceurs*? How the practices observed reproduce, reflect or challenge current spatial and gendered power relations in Turin public spaces? How and to what extent the social capital provided by capoeira and parkour relate also to the possible reproduction of power relations and hegemonic norms and differences *within* groups of practitioners, in relation to issues of “intersectional exclusion”<sup>3</sup> (Horolets 2012, p. 3)? A further engagement with the complex and nuanced issues raised by children of immigrants' engagement with capoeira and parkour in Turin public spaces may thus provide further meaningful insights on the role of leisure in immigrants', and their children, daily lives and identities.

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- 1 Capoeira and Parkour practitioners.
- 2 According to a recent research (Bonini 2009, p. 99) currently, upon turning 18, almost half of the children of immigrants who were born in Italy must present a working contract or a studying justification to remain in Italy and remain living where they grew up.
- 3 Intended as the marginalisation and exclusion of individuals who belong to more than one marginalised category (i.e. non-white migrant women in urban public spaces).