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Crossing the symbolic boundaries: parkour, gender and urban spaces in Genoa

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This paper shows how girls and women who practise parkour cross the gendered divisions of space, sport and other symbolic territories that are brought into play by so-called risk-taking sports, and how it may therefore be considered a subversive action. The strategies of negotiation produced by such symbolic crossings are examined via the concepts of reproductive and resistant agency and of gender manoeuvring. In particular the concept of gender manoeuvring will be used to examine the mechanisms of inter- and intra-gender inclusion and exclusion which, within subcultures, pass through a recognition of authenticity. Indeed, in the culture of parkour the question of authenticity emerges when media dissemination produces a split into two distinct practices: *art du déplacement* and freerunning. The *traceuses* cross this boundary because of their different origin (they are from the streets as opposed to the gym), thereby building within their gender further discourses on authenticity.

Keywords: parkour; gender; symbolic boundaries

Introduction

In the summer of 2013 a TV commercial[1] for a Californian firm that produces engineering-type toys for girls rapidly attracted attention all over the world. The video opens with an image of a girl looking disappointed, then the shot immediately widens to show that the child, dressed as a ballerina, is nailing her dance shoes to a skateboard and then, driven by a new intent – signalled by her expression and by the music – she races out of the house. The following scene shows another young girl dressed as a princess sitting in the doorway of a house, waiting; here too there is a sudden change of behaviour and, after having slipped on her sunglasses and helmet, but still full of female frills, she jumps on her bicycle to race off along an avenue. The story then goes back to the first child who, still dressed as a ballerina, but now also equipped with a helmet, is racing on the skateboard that she is 'wearing' through her ballet shoes.

The power of this video is that, by depicting the crossing of territories and symbolic spaces – from private to public, from passivity to action – it shows the existence of a social order of gender that is usually taken for granted. It shows that a gender division exists in types of space (house/road); that there are male and female toys and sports; and that crossings require negotiation. The two children, even though they cross gender divisions, maintain their gender's features in their accessories; but they use the resources of their own symbolic territory to find an

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equilibrium in the transgression (the nailed-on ballet shoes). This paper will show how the girls and women who practise parkour act on the borders of symbolic territories and what strategies of resistance or adaptation they use to manage the symbolic breaks produced by their transgressions. Using the analytical perspective of the heteronormative paradigm, this paper will examine how the female practise of parkour crosses the gendered division of space and sport and of the specific symbolic territories of so-called risk-taking sports.

Studies of the sociology of sport have produced significant consideration of the relationship between sport, hierarchy and gender identity (e.g. Lenskyj 2013; Kolnes 1995); many researchers clearly find the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) valuable in helping to understand the gendering processes related to sport (Pringle 2005). Less frequently, studies focus on the physical and spatial dimensions that make up the background to the relationship between sport and gender. As has been widely demonstrated in the consideration of the heteronormative paradigm, physical environments are defined in terms of gender. It is therefore interesting to reflect on an outdoor sport in this context, since this seems to be a territory that is doubly gendered. Studies that have looked into sport, gender and the natural environment start from the supposition that 'men have often used "wilderness" landscapes to perform adventurous masculinities' (Stoddart 2011); among these, sports such as mountaineering and snowboarding were taken into consideration (Anderson 1999; Thorpe 2010), as well as parachuting (Laurendeau and Sharara 2008). In these practices one of the essential components is the category of 'edgework' (Lyng 1990), often dealt with in association with the so called 'extreme' or 'action' sports with particular notions of masculinity (Newmahr 2011) or of 'authentic participation' if the risk is taken in an urban context (Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009).

Parkour is particularly significant as an environment in which to apply these considerations because it is a sport practise that takes place in the public space of cities, and it is characterised, at least in the collective imagination, as a 'risk-taking' sport (Benasso and Stagi 2013), but it is also a typical example of tension between co-optation and contestation of the system (Vivoni 2009).

In this paper the intention is to examine the ways in which female participation in this urban sport may be conditioned by male definitions and by confinement of place, but also which strategies may be used in order to negotiate one's own space in these contexts and make sense of one's own social position (Laurendeau and Sharara 2008). In this context the concept of gender manoeuvring seems useful, that is, manipulations of the relationship between masculinity and femininity (Bäckström 2013).

The Genoese context is a particularly suitable framework to locate the research because it shows peculiar characteristics as far as gender is concerned (high rates of unemployment, education, movementism etc.) combined with widespread conservative and conformist behaviour. Furthermore, for historical-economic reasons, the Genoese territory has very few squares or spaces for sociality and, for geo-morphological reasons, it is structured on net urban confinements. These configurations, in the urban female experience, may become real and true segregations, not least because of recent security policies that have increased the domination of power relations in public spaces thanks to the creation of fear and insecurity about all the places said to be unsuitable for the 'vulnerability' of female bodies. The difficulty for women of exhibiting and positioning oneself in a public space in Genoa is therefore doubly significant: indeed, cultural features combined with gender declinations make actions of violation more difficult and thus symbolically more powerful.

The information was gathered through ethnographic research in a Genoese training space and the carrying out of semi-structured interviews both with Italian *traceuses*[2] belonging to the group PKFemItaly and with Genoese *traceuses*. Initial interviews with the stakeholders, carried out at the beginning of the research, were essential in deciding the framework and structure of the interview, and to define the choice of people to interview: specifically whether their origins were in the world of artistic gymnastics or not and consequently, as explained in the next section, whether they practised ADD (*art du déplacement*) or freerunning, the two main types of parkour as defined by devotees.[3]

A brief history of parkour and its evolution

The distinction between parkour and freerunning (hereinafter PK and FR respectively) is felt and observed above all by those who define themselves as practising ADD, citing the authenticity of PK as deriving from principles such as 'training for oneself', 'being strong to be useful', 'measuring yourself against your own limits'. For those who do it, ADD is almost a philosophy of life founded on discipline of the body and movement, through training made up of repetition and control: they consider FR an unbalanced drift to the aesthetical-spectacular dimension.

Parkour is a metropolitan discipline born in France at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. It consists of performing a run, overcoming any kind of obstacle with the greatest efficiency of movement possible and adapting one's body to the surrounding environment. The first terms used to describe this form of training were 'art of movement' (*art du déplacement*) and 'pathway' (*parcours*). The founders of PK are considered to be David Belle and Hubert Koundé (to whom the derivation of the word 'parkour' from '*parcours*' is attributed), and also the Yamakasi group (more linked to *art du déplacement*) and Sebastien Foucan, the promoter of freerunning which, in comparison with PK, prioritises the acrobatic and risk aspects to the detriment of efficiency.

The spread of PK initially happened by word of mouth, then, above all, through the Internet, which became the main means of dissemination thanks to the videos uploaded to YouTube. In the space of about 10 years films, documentaries and video games helped to publicise PK in the media. Like many subcultures,[4] PK also suffered the centripetal attraction of the system[5] that tried to commercialise it and to institutionalise it as a sports discipline, by organising competitions and by incorporating it into traditional sports organisations in gyms – the 'sportisation process' (Dunning 1999) that so many other resistance sports have fallen prey to in the past 30 years (Atkinson 2009).[6] This type of dissemination subsequently contributed to radicalising the distinction between the more spectacularised and competitive declinations and the practices tied to the original idea of a lifestyle and a physical and spiritual culture, or freerunning on one hand and ADD on the other.

As far as the perspective of gender is concerned, this tendency towards institutionalisation and, at the same time, spectacularisation and commercialisation has produced further declinations. At first PK struggled to attract young women because, as already mentioned in the introduction, it is considered a 'masculine' sport, connected with being risky and practised in public spaces. But from the moment it suffered the 'sportisation process', and therefore entered traditional gyms, it attracted numerous girls who – because they had spilled out of the competitive paths of artistic gymnastics or because they felt the appeal for the fashionable practise – decided to recycle themselves in this discipline. The different matrix of origin of the devotees of PK, as we shall see, has produced strong divisions in Italy and in Genoa.

Symbolic capital, authenticity and gender manoeuvring

In Italy PK arrived around 2005 and spread thanks to the initiative of the individuals who created the first groups, using websites and social networks, but also thanks to the presence of Laurent Piemontesi, one of the founders of the Yamakasi group, which, besides building one of the largest groups in Milan, has spread the philosophy and the practice of PK with training courses and meetings with many fledgling Italian groups, including the Genoese one that was created in 2008 by a tiny group that discovered PK through the Internet. If at the Italian level the division between FR and ADD is not always so clear-cut and declared, among female devotees of PK the distinction appears distinctly present and self-proclaimed. In Genoa, in particular, the groups that practise ADD and FR are separate, even though paradoxically they often train in neighbouring zones. The girls that practise PK mostly belong to FR and they all come from the world of artistic gymnastics. Some confine themselves practise to the gym, others alternate practise between the gym and outdoors. By contrast, the followers of ADD have a very varied sporting past (sailing, football, *capoeira*[7] for example, in general definable as not typically female sports) and they train exclusively outdoors, following the natural method of Belle. In the words of those interviewees belonging to the two groups the concept of authenticity as a distinction between the different practices occurs frequently: on the one hand the followers of ADD consider the gymnasts that practise FR non-authentic because they do not follow the basic principles of PK, on the other the gymnasts in FR use their technical competence – acquired through training in the gym and for this reason not recognised by the devotees of ADD – as symbolic capital in the field of PK. For the ex-gymnasts, oriented to the spectacularity and plasticity of movement, their technical competence is a value that they claim as capital in comparison both with the girls who do ADD and with the boys who practise the different forms of PK. The notions of symbolic capital and field, referring to the work of Bourdieu (1979, 1998), are therefore useful to illustrate how individuals also control specific contexts through competences related to social practices linked with a wider context.[8]

According to Bourdieu symbolic capital is valorised and accumulated with reference to the logic and practices that constitute each social field. Individuals and groups fight through the embodied meanings and practices that make up the field; positions of power are defined according to the ways in which the embodied self is recognised and legitimised.

In this sense even the gender positions may be modified by the symbolic capital that comes into play. As shown by the work of Holly Thorpe on masculinity in the sports sub-culture of snowboarding, the concept of field in conjunction with habitus and capital produces a variety of nuances and gender positioning that for the men who practise that sport depend on 'their positions within the field, their (overt and tacit) knowledge of the rules and stakes within the field, and their ability (and willingness) to accrue culturally valued forms of capital (i.e. symbolic, physical, social, cultural, hyper-masculine capital)' (2010, 202).[9]

In subcultures one of the main symbolic capitals that filters the competences recognisable as legitimate and suitable is precisely the concept of authenticity. In this context the reflections of Thornton (1995) are very interesting when she points out how subcultural members are able to internally distinguish and externally label participants as either authentic or inauthentic along any number of ideological lines. Furthermore, according to this author the border between 'us' and 'them' in the external culture is articulate and complex, primarily because subcultures are formed on the inside and also through the media that give them recognition. What is more, the process from culture to subculture is never of simple co-optation: if anything one is dealing with a reflexive and dynamic process in which meanings and crossings are redefined.

These reflections, entering the debate on the post-CCCS,[10] are particularly interesting because in recognising the subjectivity of the members both in the definition of internal boundaries and above all in the relationship of negotiation and resistance towards the mass culture, they allow us to revisit the concept of subculture in relation to mainstream culture and more generally the concept of authenticity (Wheaton 2007). In the case of PK, for instance, the sportisation process cannot be seen entirely as a process of submission of subculture to popular culture, since it gives female followers access to a field that otherwise they would not have had, and also the possibility of negotiating hierarchies based on certain symbolic capitals.

It is also true, as different studies on gender and action sports have shown (Thorpe 2006), that the media have facilitated the access of women to certain activities, primarily because they were considered a priority target for expanding the market, rather than to enable them to become 'authentic' participants. The study by Atencio, Beal and Wilson on the participation of girls in skateboarding shows how in this field the embodiment of stereotypes and role expectations collaborate to maintain the gender divisions (2009). The male habitus, closely linked with 'risk-taking behaviour and technical prowess' is extremely meaningful as capital in this field; for the same kind of reasons women, who have a habitus considered as lacking in skill and averse to risk-taking, 'came to be positioned as inauthentic participants in the street skateboarding social field and were largely excluded from accessing symbolic capital' (Atencio, Beal, and Wilson 2009, 3).

Unlike other urban or action sports, in the field of PK girls succeed in entering more easily and gaining recognition of their own capital: in ADD because the basic philosophy accords value to effort and consistency in training (claimed as female competences by the very same participants), in FR because they succeed in bringing and valorising competences gained on the outside. It is also because in both cases, even the concept of edgework, which is fundamental in these sports environments, takes on a different value. In ADD the logic of risk is completely turned upside down: one works to avoid risk through technique and discipline and, in general, anyone who takes a risk is stigmatised; in FR the competences incorporated in the training in the gym of the ex-gymnasts tend to annul the risk. Some studies on gender analysis in action sports have spoken of 'reproductive and resistant agency' (Laurendeau and Sharara 2008) to thematise how women use strategies to negotiate space in typically masculine arenas. These strategies extend from the avoidance of more difficult situations (such as the snowpark in snowboarding), which are said not to be interesting – an example of reproductive agency – to the emphasis of the valorisation of female abilities in particular techniques and of the importance of collective strategies (resistant agency). The concept of gender manoeuvring as a specific kind of interaction is also important in this context. Gender manoeuvring is 'when one or more people manipulate their own gender performance or manipulate the meaning of others' gender performance in order to establish, disrupt, or change the relationship between and among masculinities and femininities' (Schippers 2002, xiii). Bäckström applies this concept (derived from a musical context) to a study of female participation in skateboarding, showing how the work of deconstruction of the gender order is both inter- and intra-gender (2013). According to this perspective, the actions linked with gender manoeuvring must be built from micro to macro, that is, acting in specific situations, but also at a symbolic level, proposing and vindicating alternative femininities to the hegemonic ones and finally at a political level working on the construction of networks and on visibility.

All these studies conclude that, beyond the internal recognition of the possibility of affecting the heteronormative hierarchy in these sports environments, the introduction of the female body

in male territories has in any case a positive value for female participation and produces political effects (even if in the medium to long term) and always will.

Gender and space

The well-known photo 'An American Girl in Italy' by Ruth Orkin shows a young woman who is walking with her eyes down through the crossfire of the stares of 15 men. According to Stefano Ciccone it is that network of looks that criss-cross the body of the girl 'partly accomplice, partly ravenous' that reduce her right to be a citizen of the city, in that public space where she is exhibited (Ciccone 2009, 85). Indeed, the social order of gender traces in the public space the more or less porous borderlines that define the conditions and the means of access and visibility of the different subjects that cross it (Blidon 2011, 32).

In Italy in recent years (especially since 2010) gender studies have begun to achieve greater visibility and institutional recognition.[11] At the same time, the Gender-Sensitive Approach – a means of interpretation of several aspects of human life, of identity production and the relationship between an individual and culture, according to the perspective of gender – is progressively spreading into different subject areas; recently this type of reading has even entered social geography. In Italy certain geographers of gender, in particular Rachele Borghi, Elena Dell'Agnese and Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg, have developed an interesting approach that connects the analysis of space according to a heteronormative perspective to reflections of a Foucauldian matrix on the body as a bio-political boundary of the definition of social space order.

According to this perspective, which has turned out to be extremely useful for reflections on space and body in parkour, space is not a simple background or a stage on which human actions are played but a producer of meanings and a reproducer of mechanisms and social dynamics (Borghi 2010). The difficulty in noticing this lies in the fact that the discursive practices that influence and often determine the use of public space, the *gendered* nature of social space, are hidden behind the naturalisation of the division between public space and private space, a reflection of the division of social roles (Borghi and Dell'Agnese 2009). Indeed, public space is conceived, managed and modelled on the basis of a rigid dualistic conception (male/female, legitimate/illegitimate, homosexual/heterosexual) that silently turns the space of all into the space of a few (Borghi and Schmidt Di Friedberg 2011). Patriarchal norms turn some public spaces of the city into 'forbidden' places (Borghi 2010): the dominion of relationships of power in public spaces is also expressed through fear and a sense of insecurity that characterises the female urban experience and socially builds its vulnerability. In the accounts of the interviewees the interiorisation of these boundaries emerged very strongly; as regards space the *traceuses* often made reference to their embarrassment the first time they did PK in public places. According to the interviewees, PK brings this sedimentation out into the open because it obliges you to work on the individual perception of the incorporated limits: 'it is a difficult job because you have to fight against yourself . . . . I had to demolish some of the walls in my head' (G, 23 years old, ADD). Many of them spoke of how PK had modified their look and their presence in space: 'PK changes your vision of space . . . it helped me to see myself differently in space and to free myself of so much embarrassment' (D, 42 years old, ADD).

However, changing one's perspective does not mean no longer seeing the limits or thinking that they do not exist. Some interviewees declared that they never trained alone because 'it is difficult . . . mmm yes . . . then in certain places it is dangerous'. The relationship with space and time unsuitable for the female body is also narrated in terms of training for strategies of escape:

'Since I started doing PK I happen to walk along dangerous roads, I think about all the possible trajectories that I could take, I explore the surroundings … I study the main doors, the spaces between the parked cars. I try to visualise what I could do … for sure I would drop my backpack, which is heavy because I always have my laptop with me to run better . . . . I know exactly how far I could run at a certain speed … a little like being in a video game, I'm always on the lookout' (E, 22 years old, ADD).

In Genoa, as already mentioned, most of the females who do PK belong to FR and come from a background of artistic gymnastics. *Traceuses* of this kind train mainly in a gym. When PK is done outside, it takes place primarily on a beach surrounding the Govi Gardens where those who do ADD also train. Both the Govi Gardens, and above all the beach, are areas that are quite isolated from the flow of people who stroll along the Corso Italia, Genoa's sea promenade. The beach of Punta Vagno, one of the few to have remained public in the city, is particularly detached from the rest of the coastline and protected, from onlookers and in terms of access, by the presence of numerous boats of amateur fishermen. Furthermore, the presence of sand, which is rather rare on Genoese beaches, is a favourable condition that makes landings softer and less dangerous, partially reproducing the effect of mats in the gym. Therefore, in some ways it seems that the women's presence in public space is limited and protected. Times and places of public exposure are indeed adapted according to the perspectives of reproductive agency and gender manoeuvring. Public exhibitions in more central spaces of the city are organised as events that are participated in as a group and to which one goes prepared. Even the body of the *traceuse* appears in public space with another type of manoeuvre: the filming of videos, which are then shown on YouTube. An interviewee explained that she decided to have herself video-recorded in solitary training in degraded environments and to put these videos on YouTube because 'I think I have an effect … I believe … seeing my muscular body training in an abandoned alley and then jumping away … I wanted to show that this work on the body frees you … and indeed the video ends with me looking out over the city from a high point when it is getting dark' (L, 25 years old, FR).

Indeed, if it is true that places are not simply a background to the order and dynamics of gender and that it is really spatialisation that contributes to legitimising them, it is also true that they can offer opportunities. The opportunity of bringing a series of corporal practices into being, *performances*, as Butler (1990) would call them, which are 'aggressions' to places, through work on bodies and on their physical presence in 'forbidden' spaces, may then become, in the narrations of the *traceuses*, a symbolic act at the edges of gender.

Gender performance through space and the body

Kidder, in his article 'Parkour, masculinity and the city', uses the concept of gender performance – understood as a process that develops 'through' and 'in space' – to illustrate that *traceurs* use the city as a resource to build and maintain gender identity (2013). According to this author: 'Parkour allows for the accomplishment of masculinity' because 'by practising parkour, *traceurs* are not only doing gender; they are spatialising gender' and they 'appropriate their surroundings with performances of masculinity' (Kidder 2013, 2). The city is a structural resource used within performances of gender. Through parkour, men co-construct an embodied masculinity characterised by risk-taking and controlling physical space (Kidder 2013, 3).

Foucault's reflections were derived precisely from the geography of gender and applied to space to show how this reflects relationships and dynamics of power that often have in one's

body control their ultimate space of inscription (Borghi 2010); the production of a determined social space also produces a determined type of 'body', a body conceived both as the material dimension of the person and as a set of concepts and ideas constructed socially, which show us and which sanction what is 'appropriate' (and therefore normal/normed) for the body of a man and for the body of a woman (*ibid.*). Thus the way in which bodies are perceived and considered becomes a mirror of social construction and control of space; the 'place' becomes the micro-scale at which relationships and conceptions of gender take shape. The stakeholders interviewed spoke about how girls beginning to practise PK have a feeling of bodily inadequacy: 'In the beginning they always apologise … they are ashamed of being slower', 'they are embarrassed', 'they always ask: "do you think I can do it?"'.

According to Kidder, the way the male body is symbolically set in action in the public space demonstrates how parkour is being used as an act of virility. For example, this symbolic action takes on a visual meaning through the exposure of naked chests that show a male body at work. PK, like other urban sports, is a masculine social world, dominated by men who carry out actions codified as virile and produced and reproduced in a public space that is the territory of maleness (Kidder 2013, 15).

Nevertheless, it must be said that the centrality of the body in the practice of PK has a completely different connotation from, for example, the support for masculinity in the practise of body building. In parkour, the muscle of a performing body is functional to the performance and no longer an end in itself, or simply part of the body adornment (Peignist 2009). In general the interviewees said they were satisfied with their body that was, yes, muscular but 'harmoniously muscular' (A, 27 years old, ADD). 'I have the body I need to do what I like' (D, 42 years old, ADD).

However, the question of the masculinisation of the female body in sport is one of the most controversial issues in gender studies of the sociology of sport. On the one hand it can even be perceived as a stigma, on the other the beauty of the female athletic body is 'repaired' with a portrayal on front pages and calendars that re-transforms it into a seductive body (Lenskyj 2013). Even the styles of sportswear have collaborated in this process of repair, which eroticises the female body (Kolnes 1995). In PK this has not happened: if anything, the baggy clothes produce a certain neutralisation of gender, even though it must be said that there is a certain difference in the style of dress: devotees of FR tend to show more boldness in exhibiting their bodies, wearing scantier clothes that highlight muscularity and tonicity.

Some interviewees declared that they feared their bodies might become too muscular and certainly believed that the males who practise PK tended to exaggerate their strength training when this was not necessary: 'It is necessary to train the body to the correct level without exaggerating, but at times it seems to me that men like to have lots of muscles' (J, 27 years old, FR). 'I don't want huge muscles. In the beginning I trained like the men, then I realised that many movements can be done better with technique rather than with strength. I learned a lot from climbing, where women have introduced a new technique to make up for their lesser strength' (E, 23 years old, ADD). This is also gender manoeuvring.

The construction of the female body in the practice of PK may therefore represent a territory of subjectivity unanchored from both gazes and masculine models. One is dealing here with a body that is not constructed according to aesthetic female models of seduction, or male ones of virility, but according to the needs for practising the sport. Furthermore, it is a body that becomes subversive because it crosses the symbolic boundaries of gender and space through practices of subjectification.

Conclusions

Heteronormativity traces boundaries in social space: it delimits places, it distinguishes settings, and it builds bodies. It is an invisible social order that becomes visible only when it is broken, and then strategies of repair are activated.

In this paper we started from the supposition that PK is an attack on social order due to its 'subversive implication' in urban spaces and that the female practice of PK might represent a specific aggression on the symbolic boundaries of gender. Given that crossing the boundaries of gender needs strategies of negotiation and mediation, we considered the categories of resistant and reproductive agency, concepts that were born in the context of work on domination and on hierarchies of gender, to then reflect specifically on the genderisation of sports environments. Carrying out a boundary crossing means recognising the boundaries, not necessarily (or directly) to knock them down, but if anything to try to build strategies to overcome them, sometimes by avoiding them, or turning them into resources (which is also one of the basic principles of PK). The concepts of resistant and reproductive agency applied to the female presence in PK have produced different reflections. If at the individual level working on the boundaries also means taking into account the effects of the incorporation of gender identity in terms of habitus, for example in the specific case of risk-taking or action sport, it means negotiating with those boundaries that are considered – and therefore incorporated – as limits. At the cultural level the consequences that produce boundary crossings are also articulated in a reflexive way. The drive to co-optation of the subculture within the culture, which in the sports field is known as the sportisation process, has led PK from the public space to the private one of gyms, but it has also given rise to an inverse process that has brought female bodies out of the private space into the public one. Sub- (and post-sub) cultural studies have long discussed how the processes of hybridisation between cultural levels often lead to problematising the question of authenticity. The girls and women who practise PK cross this division through their different origin (from the streets as opposed to from the gyms), building within their gender further discourses on authenticity. The authors who have used the categories of gender manoeuvring to analyse the practices brought into play by women who cross into masculine arenas have underlined how such strategies are always intra- and inter-gender. According to this perspective, it is important that the practices become visible beyond the ways in which they are produced, and are therefore turned into political gestures. The female practise of PK, being placed in a setting that is doubly gendered, gives rise to a doubly subversive symbolic action. The presence of the female body in public space is symbolically powerful for those who act on it and for those who observe it; it takes on a political value when it is disseminated through videos and the images that circulate in the media. The female of practise PK in Genoa is a performance of aggression on boundaries: a city that has strong boundaries between public and private, and is not used to spaces of sociality but that nevertheless has a strong tradition of female movementism, is the ideal territory, offering a context in which the symbolic and political character of a performance becomes truly effective, making the ultimate goal of gender manoeuvring possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v + pz7g4qy019M

2. *Traceuses* and *traceurs* are those who do parkour.
3. This division of terminology is not recognised everywhere, for instance in the United States freerunning is the term used to mean parkour.
4. For a summary of the debate around the use or the overcoming of the subculture term in the field of sport, see Wheaton (2007).
5. Belle later referred to parkour's adoption by the media during the late 1990s as part of a generational 'prostitution [and destruction] of the art' (Christie 2003).
6. Sportisation is the process by which 'subaltern or alternative forms of sport, leisure and play are co-opted and incorporated into mainstream sports cultures' (Atkinson 2009, 173).
7. *Capoeira* is an activity from Brazil that combines music and movements from dance with martial arts.
8. The concept of 'amalgamated social fields' is used in many studies that cross the perspective of subcultures with the concept of social field (Atencio, Beal and Wilson 2009).
9. Thorpe (2010) identifies different models of masculinity as a result of the interweaving of the variables of age and symbolic capital. Those who feel strong on the field play with the boundaries of gender more freely. Some may even display very subversive masculinity compared with models of hegemonic masculinity, for instance by wearing pink clothes and accessories considered feminine.
10. The subcultural theory associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has received a lot of wide-ranging criticism: the debate revolves around the idea that the concept of subculture may be inefficient as an analytical category in certain juvenile contexts (Wheaton 2007).
11. Several university laboratories have been set up and a number of scientific journals have been created. In the Italian Sociology Association a specific section of 'gender studies' has been created.

Notes on contributor

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