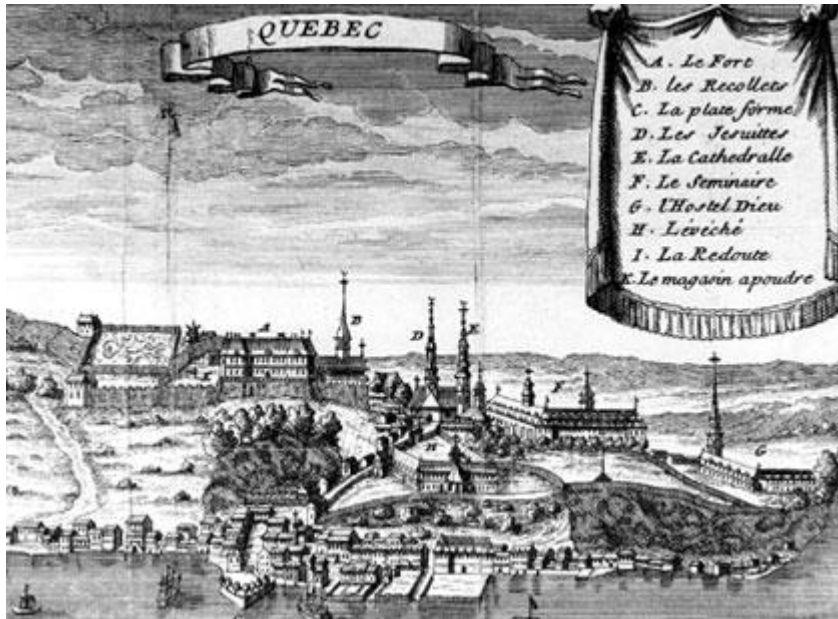


## **Running across the Rooves of Empire**

*This article takes a common strand of space and power, mediated by comparative notions of empire and its memory. It focuses initially on Quebec City, discussing the relations there between topography and power, in the socio-spatial, including imagined, arrangements that pertain to the division between upper and lower towns, tourist/administrative core and banlieue, as well as the original tension between the administrated city and the vast North American – and native - hinterland. These relations have persisted and adapted in the contexts of the first French empire and its replacement by the British, and in the contemporary city, which in some ways can be seen as on the periphery of the American empire. The central text discussed is a 1998 novel by Pierre Gobeil, *Sur le toit des maisons*, in which two disaffected young men journey from the lower town to the river by climbing across the rooves of the city. The second half of the article links this to the phenomenon of parkour, in which 'free-runners' trace alternative pathways through urban space and which originated in the Paris banlieue. Discussion of parkour centres on Michel de Certeau's alternative mappings of the city, but the argument here also invokes embedded, imagined histories and memories of colonial space, and the problem of narrative representation and its ideological resolutions, emphasising the ambivalent tensions in the phenomenon, and in de Certeau, between order and resistance. The colonial dimension is manifest not only in the parallels of policing and social apartheid which persist in the French banlieues, but even in official recuperation of the parkour phenomenon in, the action films *Yamakasi* and *Banlieue 13*, which dramatise these contradictions and memories. The article thus alludes to both the first and second French empires, as well as to the role of differently lived francophone histories in the formation of youth narratives and subcultures.*



An engraving – much imitated throughout that century - published in Claude-Charles Le Roy de La Potherie’s *Histoire de l’Amérique septentrionale* of 1722 captures Quebec City from an observation point to the east, on the St Lawrence but at an ‘impossible’ point above the water, the view framing the town from the Cap aux Diamants on the left to the mouth of the St Charles on the right (figure 1). The city’s foundation here was after all ‘where the river narrows’, *kebec* in Algonquin: a site which was fortifiable, defensible, with access to the Atlantic and where the original fur trade monopoly could be easily policed. The ornamentality of the sailing ships glimpsed in the foreground of the image is confirmed by the clear view afforded above them towards the Haute Ville, where the monumental building work that had taken place during the French regime, housing political and ecclesiastical authority in principally a Governor’s Palace, Cathedral, Seminary, Jesuit College, and Ursulines Convent, is exaggeratedly visible. Here the conventions of royal and court power construct a European view of the town - of what the monarch might himself have gazed upon – which is assimilated by local elites.

In contrast, the period of British rule (and of the integration of the former New France into British imperial networks of trade, military strategy, and capital accumulation) that

began officially in 1763 with the Treaty of Paris, following Wolfe's military victory in 1759, was marked by a multiplication of points of view. At first these were bound up with military agendas but they also included notions of the picturesque - now extended from the domestic to new imperial domains - and of the painter's subjectivity, as the viewpoint became explicit rather than abstract. This multiplication also meant therefore that views *from* the Haute Ville were now more common. A good example is James Pattison Cockburn's *The Lower City of Quebec, from the Parapet of the Upper City*, 1833 (figure 2).



This way of looking not only mobilised Romantic forms of subjectivity in relation to the beauty of the city's site it also, by the first half of the nineteenth century, played on its connotations of the pre-modern and pre-industrial, conjuring an early tourism which by 1879 reached a culmination in the construction of the terrasse Dufferin, named after the Governor-General who three years earlier had encouraged the City Council to foresee 'one continuous

uninterrupted pathway for pedestrians’, ‘a walk which for its convenience, freedom from noise, danger and interruption, for the variety and beauty of its points of view, and for its historical and civic interest, will be absolutely unequalled’ (quoted in Geronimi, 2003, p. 127). In the contemporary, post-Quiet Revolution and nationalist era, the old city as *promenade* through hundreds of *lieux de mémoire* of Quebec history, and those of French-speaking North America, completes the picture.

However, there is another side to Quebec City which is ignored by these ‘top-down’ configurations of *looking at or from*, and of *moving through*, the cityscape. The narrowness of the land between the heights and the St Lawrence that had formed the terrain of Samuel de Champlain’s very first constructions in 1608 meant that the lower part of the town expanded around and behind the Haute Ville, along the estuary of the tributary that flows into the St Lawrence, the St Charles: the *faubourg* of St Roch (named after the patron saint of lost causes) was incorporated in 1752, after becoming a place of banishment when a general hospital was constructed there in 1692 housing the blind, the insane, the paralysed and the poor who were not to dwell at the Hôtel-Dieu in town. It was later to house a cholera hospital, and became the main working-class district with the city’s industrialisation in the nineteenth century, particularly in the second half when cheap labour from a rural exodus came to work in shoe and garment manufacture. Although prosperous and commercial by the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with all the trappings of nascent North American consumerism such as department stores and tall buildings, it remained banished from the city’s self-image. Indeed, until very recently, the district continued to suffer from the homology between physical and social elevation that characterized class division in the city, as well as from the marginalization of the inner city in the expansion of the suburbs. Already in the 1930s the French geographer Raoul Blanchard had noted how this suburbia had reconfigured the city: ‘Québec devient une ville de plaine avec des annexes sur la

colline' (Blanchard, 1935, p. 292). This is Quebec City as Los Angeles rather than as a remnant or offshoot of an older European culture: a network of freeways, detached houses and shopping malls that takes place exclusively in French, with rates of car ownership that far exceed those in Montreal. Between 1961 and 1976, the regional population rose from 358,000 to 543,000, yet Quebec City itself saw its population drop by 38,000. Within these developments, the image of St Roch that has come to dominate is that of a transit zone, through which one passes either socially (on the way, hopefully, to life in the Haute Ville), or physically (direct links between the Haute Ville and the *banlieue* impelling the destruction of part of the district to make way for a motorway that ends on parliament hill, taking the civil servants of the 1960s Quiet Revolution to their offices). The motorway pillars are the site of a very active graffiti culture. Today, the district's future seems bound up with a revalorisation of its history and an artistic vocation impelled by the installation there of Laval University's School of Visual Arts.

In all these instances – *ancien regime* and first French Empire, British colonialism, the tourist gaze, industrial capitalism, technocratic organisation, postmodern consumerism – the space of Quebec City has been the object of what Michel de Certeau designates as 'strategies':

J'appelle *stratégie* le calcul (ou la manipulation) des rapports de forces qui devient possible à partir du moment où un sujet de vouloir et de pouvoir (une entreprise, une armée, une cité, une institution scientifique) est isolable. Elle postule *un lieu* susceptible d'être circonscrit comme *un propre* et d'être la base d'où gérer les relations avec une *extériorité* de cibles ou de menaces (de Certeau, 1990, p. 59).

A 1998 novel by Pierre Gobeil, *Sur le toit des maisons*, explores the hierarchies, visualities, and itineraries inherent to, and possible within, the strategic, in this sense, mappings of Quebec City that are embedded in histories of empire, territory, capitalism. On

the night of their middle school leaving dance and of the summer solstice, two (unnamed in the text) sixteen-year old boys – who have in fact been the two leading lights of the school's geography society (and one of whom is the novel's first person narrator) – begin a journey across the rooftops of the city:

Je me rappelle que du pare-chocs d'un camion au capot d'un autobus, de la couverture d'un garage jusqu'au faite d'une église, tout nous semblait facile. Les constructions s'enchaînaient les unes à la suite des autres comme un gros mécano et lorsque à cause d'un feu ou d'une demolition, notre entreprise s'avérait plus hardue, on trouvait toujours un madrier ou une échelle, un bout de corde ou une clôture de planches à laquelle nous raccrocher (Gobeil, 1998, 29).

This is the domain, then, not of 'strategy' but of what de Certeau calls 'tactics', of the absence of that *'propre'* associated with the demarcations of rational control in favour of a 'tour de passe-passe', combining 'des éléments audacieusement rapprochés pour insinuer l'éclair d'autre chose dans le langage d'un lieu' (p. 62). These 'trajectoires indéterminées', apparently meaningless because they do not fit into the grids of 'l'espace bâti, écrit et préfabriqué où elles se déplacent', are in fact 'phrases imprévisibles' within 'un lieu ordonné par les techniques organisatrices de systèmes' (p. 57). 'Tactics' vigilantly take advantage of

Les failles que les conjonctures particulières ouvrent dans la surveillance du pouvoir propriétaire. Elle y braconne. Elle y crée des surprises. Il lui est possible d'être là où on ne l'attend pas. Elle est ruse (p. 61).

Thus the Quebec City boys have only the chimneys they have passed to map out their progress: 'elles sont tout ce qui nous reste pour faire le décompte des stations' (Gobeil, 1998, p. 32). The litany of street names is here about familiarity and investments of meaning ('enchantement': Gobeil, p. 33) rather than A to Z map reading ('Ces noms créent du non-

lieu dans les lieux; ils les muent en passages’, creating an imaginary rather than literal geography; de Certeau, 1990, p. 156). The boys’ movement is akin to dancing (‘Comme des danseurs, nous relevons la tête ensemble’, Gobeil, p. 34), which for de Certeau exemplifies the *stylisation* (rather than *usage*) which can characterise everyday practices of walking (another ‘figure cheminatoire’) in the city, when literal and systemic mapping is left behind in favour of the stroller’s magnification of certain details (‘singularités grossies’) and elimination of others (the ‘îlots séparés’ which make walking like hop-scotch: ‘toute marche continue à sauter, ou à sautiller, comme l’enfant’, de Certeau, p. 153). Indeed, the figure of the child is crucial in the novel: the adolescent boys as between child and adult; the memory, prompted by old pop hits even at the dance-hall before they set off on their journey, of ‘cette époque des culottes courtes où nous nous égarions dans les rues de la Basse-Ville’ (Gobeil, 24) and which then reinvests, through re-enchantment, their experience on the rooves:

Québec s’étendait à nos pieds comme une vieille habitude qu’on aurait souhaité voir disparaître et, curieusement (...) c’était des images de notre enfance qui remontaient à la surface, comme ce plein ciel sur les plus vieilles montagnes du monde, ce trou entre les pierres où les amoureux se cachaient dans l’herbe et ces flûtes criardes qui n’en finissaient plus de résonner dans nos poitrines tant nous semblaient hauts et magnifiques les marche-pieds des camions (Gobeil, pp. 40-41).

De Certeau celebrates such (re)creations of an ‘espace de jeu’ (p. 159), but also follows Freud, creating analogies between the condensations/metaphors and displacements/metonymies characteristic of language, of walking, as we have seen, and of the dreamwork. He thus comes to argue that these tactical practices of space, this ability, in fact, to *dream* a place (‘ce qui peut être rêvé du lieu’, p. 163), is linked to childhood negotiations of separation from the mother, of absence and of otherness: ‘Pratiquer l’espace, c’est donc

répéter l'expérience jubilatoire et silencieuse de l'enfance; c'est, dans le lieu, *être autre et passer à l'autre*' (p. 164).

However, the juxtaposition of Gobeil's novel and of de Certeau's cultural theory also points to ambiguities in both. In *Sur le toit des maisons*, the boys' itinerary takes them from the west side of Saint-Sauveur (initially a workers' village outside the city limits, but which became an extension of Saint-Roch and was then incorporated into the ever expanding city in 1889) eastwards to the Saint-Roch covered mall. This, we recall, is the overcrowded, initially working-class lower town on the north side of the high plateau on which sits the Haute Ville. Their first glimpse of the latter is that of the city walls, stretching from east to west 'telle une meringue accrochée à un gâteau de mariés' (p. 28). The transition from Lower to Upper Town at the Saint-Roch end is marked by the difficult scaling of the cliff, as they crawl underneath electricity cables, and by the textual division to the second section, 'La Haute Ville'. However, that vertical mapping of the city's class and erstwhile ethnic divisions, so central to its self-image, is not here explored historically. The Saint-Sauveur district's role as one of the sites in Quebec popular culture of the construction of the 'national' people, in novels by Roger Lemelin (*Au pied de la pente douce*, 1947; *Les Plouffe*, 1948, with their radio and television soap opera, and cinematic, spin-offs) that weave ambivalent relationships with the British Empire and with Canada, is not explored. Indeed, as de Certeau argues of Parisian street names, here names such as Verdun, Mazenod (after a nineteenth-century French missionary), Garagonthié (after a native leader who negotiated for the French with the Iroquois), St François, Dorchester (after a British Governor-General), lose their 'légitimations historiques', like the inscribed value on used coins becomes erased, but continue to mean something, now polysemically, in the minds and memories of those who pass through them:

ils se détachent des endroits qu'ils étaient censés définir et servent de rendez-vous imaginaires à des voyages que, mués en métaphores, ils déterminent pour des raisons



étrangères à leur valeur originelle mais des raisons sues/insues des passants. Etrange toponymie, décollée des lieux, planant au-dessus de la ville comme une géographie nuageuse de <<sens>> en attente (de Certeau, p. 157).

In *Sur le toit des maisons*, however, this geography not only ‘takes off’ from places themselves, so do the geographers; ‘Nous avons parcouru toute la ville de Québec sans toucher par terre’ (Gobeil, p. 69), and they dream of doing so in the decidedly non-urban itineraries that might take them towards the American frontier or along the *chemin du roy* to Montreal. Even before they reach the climactic point, on a roof on the rue des Jardins in the Old Town, the boys had been entranced by the panorama looking north over the St Charles, enumerating the bridges, creating in fact a map: ‘C’est facile lorsqu’à partir d’un point dans le ciel, on avance en recréant la ville en morceaux comme on le ferait sur une carte’ (Gobeil, p. 42). For this boys’ story is also one of would-be transcendence, another key to its tendency to de-historicise: ‘Tu penses qu’on pourra survoler la ville, vaincre nos peurs et voir apparaître, en même temps, et les montagnes et le fleuve?’ (Gobeil, p. 31). That transcendence meshes with forms of myth-making central to the French-Canadian experience: a nomadism, or an aspiration to nomadism (the key figure of the *coureur de bois*, the masculine figure escaping *ancien régime* regulation and ‘going native’ in the North American hinterland); the haunting presence of the ‘forêt originelle’ (Gobeil, p. 95) so close to the city, intensifying the relationship between ‘civilisation’ and ‘wilderness’, the homely and the uncanny; and a very northern fascination with the exotic – a tropical otherness kept enticing and manageable because of its distance from the self or the same, or because of its presence on a coloured map (the boys’ infatuation with ‘Cayenne’, e.g. pp. 103, 111).

In fact, the romantic *survol* is here at times linked to the great Foucauldian *repoussoir* to de Certeau’s micro-resistances, namely the panoptic vision of surveillance famously evoked in his pages on the World Trade Centre in New York, which ‘mue en lisibilité la

complexité de la ville et fige en un texte transparent son opaque mobilité' (de Certeau, p. 141). The fact that Gobeil's narrator has it both ways is encapsulated in his invocation of Jack Kerouac. That exemplar of French-Canadian nomadism (he was of course born to Québécois immigrant parents in Massachusetts, and French was his first language) is here referenced as being both on the road and panoptic: his time working as a fire lookout in Oregon (recounted in his *Lonesome Traveler*, 1960).

The narrator's companion – and the initiator of the journey - dies when he falls, or jumps, from the roof in the rue des Jardins. The third part of the novel, 'Finale', is thus a retrospective journey, retracing the steps – and trying to make sense of - the first. In the shopping mall at St Roch, the narrator rails against the 'monde de compartiments' (Gobeil, p. 84) which is the supermarket with its cash registers and trolleys all in a line, to the point of wanting to break the glass and tear up the plan of the shopping centre inside (p. 84). Now alienated by the city, he engages in another itinerary, through the forest to the foot of the Laurentian mountains to the north. The imaginary (narrative) resolution to this real (ideological) contradiction (how, for example, to reconcile adolescence and adulthood, past and future, leaving and staying, nomadism and sedentariness, as in Kerouac's forest lookout post?) takes place when, indeed, he climbs a pine tree and gazes back towards the city at night: 'C'est intrigant, une ville, vue de loin' (Gobeil, p. 112). Finally, the narrator achieves a reconciliation of sorts, as befits his physical position here, with the self-renewing, impenetrable mass of the city's core, the Haute Ville, as, 'sans m'en vouloir et avec une infinie patience, elle était descendue des plaines, pour s'en venir reprendre sa place, là où nous la connaissons depuis notre enfance, dans le ciel de la Basse-Ville de Québec' (Gobeil, 113).

Before tackling a better known example of the uses of de Certeau in examining fictions and other cultural practices of urban space, three qualifying adjustments need to be

posited in the light of the text just discussed. The first is about fictions and narratives. The latter are key to de Certeau's understanding of the *practices* of everyday life: they are about doing and making, permitting diversities of action in a pre-established space. However, the example of the 'resolution' to be found in *Sur le toit des maisons* poses questions about what happens when those practices, those 'récits', *are themselves put into narrative form* and partake therefore of an interaction of social/historical and aesthetic forces, raising questions about a 'readability' distinct from that of an 'administration fonctionnaliste' (de Certeau, 144) but also from the unpredictable 'unreadability' of everyday practice. In crude terms, Gobeil's text to an extent literalises de Certeau's proposition that 'la vie urbaine laisse de plus en plus remonter ce que le projet urbanistique en excluait' (de Certeau, p. 144): a 'remontée' certainly happens, but its contradictoriness, as we have seen, invites interpretations of the kind Fredric Jameson describes in *The Political Unconscious*, as 'the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*' (Jameson, 1981, p. 81). If this first point is about narrative *representations* of the narrative *practices* of everyday life, the second point would stress, to a greater extent than de Certeau himself, the way in which the binary oppositions he deploys are to be understood as fields of tensions caught in interrelation: *carte* (seeing, totalising, knowing) and *parcours* (finding and making paths, moving) may be useful distinctions, and historically the former has displaced the latter, but in reality a spectrum of oscillating positions exists between them (de Certeau, pp. 175-180).

The history of (literal) maps is that of the erasure of figures which refer to the *parcours* (journeys, explorations) which made the map possible. De Certeau is clear that this 'colonising' process (p. 178) is of a piece with the contemporary 'rationalité technocratique' (p. 65) which characterises post-war French urban life. On the other side of the coin, the devalued and often invisible practices and ruses of contemporary life are seen to multiply as

rational organisation expands and intensifies. Instead of taking place in stable localised environments,

les tactiques se désorbitent. Désancrées des communautés traditionnelles qui en circonscrivaient le fonctionnement, elles se mettent à errer partout dans un espace qui s'homogénéise et s'étend. Les consommateurs se muent en immigrants. Le système où ils circulent est trop vaste pour les fixer quelque part, mais trop quadrillé pour qu'ils puissent jamais lui échapper et s'exiler ailleurs. Il n'y a plus d'ailleurs (de Certeau, pp. 65-66).

My third preliminary point, then, is about the need to historicise further de Certeau's analyses. If colonialism and its history are central to the development of his distinctions (and indeed he argues at one point that, as far as practices and tactics are concerned, 'nos voyages partent au loin y découvrir ce dont la présence chez nous est devenue méconnaissable'; p. 82), then questions are raised about their place in post-colonial societies: what does it mean for 'us' to be all immigrants now, de-localised in an ever-expanding domain of administration? In addition, what relations are there between the tactics here described and collective resistances in either national (the absent 'people' of *Sur le toit des maisons*, as we have seen) or class terms? The implications of this longer quotation from de Certeau, very much of its epoch, that of the 1980s, of the decline of grand emancipatory narratives and the generalisation of consumer cultures, are, not only that there is no position outside the 'system' (administrative, capitalist), but, more pessimistically, that the strategy-tactics relation contributes to the self-regulation of that system, what Meaghan Morris describes as 'a programmed feature of capitalist culture' (Morris, 1992, p. 465).

These questions can be answered only by contextualising, by looking at specific cultural instances in which these dynamics unfurl.<sup>1</sup> This is why we began with that

representation of Quebec City, and why we now examine the commonalities and differences that arise from making the leap, as it were, to another instance, the phenomenon of parkour.

Parkour, *art du déplacement*, free running, urban free flow, are variations of a youth movement which began in a *banlieue* of Paris. It was founded in Lisses, a *commune* - whose population has increased tenfold to 8,000 in the forty years since 1968 - near the new town of Evry in the Essonne department 30 kilometres south of Paris, by David Belle (b. 1973) – partly inspired by the fire rescue tradition in his family (his father was in the army in Indo-China before becoming a firefighter) - and Sébastien Foucan (b. 1974) in the late 1980s. A variety of running leaps, flips and acrobatics aims to find new pathways – *parcours* – through the (sub)urban environment of the *banlieue*: ‘Courir, sauter, grimper, maîtriser l’équilibre, gérer le stress, développer toutes les qualités physiques et morales nécessaires pour ne pas être bloqué par l’obstacle, sont les valeurs qui font le parkour’

(<http://www.sportmediaconcept.com/parkour/>). Clearly, this renegotiation of the environment, in which the meaning of walls, parapets, rooves, bollards, is transformed in a new urban journey, is grist to the mill for those seeking, like de Certeau, to emphasise the popular energy and meaning-creation which exceeds the grids of administration and urban planning. De Certeau takes the supremely *kinetic* example of Charlie Chaplin, and extends it to the modern urban stroller, but it is clear that this is a description *avant la lettre* of the practices of parkour:

[Chaplin] fait d’autres choses avec la même chose et il outrepassé les limites que fixaient à son utilisation les déterminations de l’objet. De même, le marcheur transforme en autre chose chaque signifiant spatial (...) il accroît le nombre des possibles (par exemple, en créant des raccourcis ou des détours) et celui des interdits (par exemple, il s’interdit des chemins tenus pour licites ou obligatoires) (...) Il crée

ainsi du discontinu, soit en opérant des tris dans les signifiants de la <<langue>> spatiale, soit en les décalant par l'usage qu'il en fait (de Certeau, p. 149).

Thus the *traceur* – the practitioner of parkour – is the reply, from the margins that Haussmannisation first created when it relegated the lower classes from the transformed ‘capital of the nineteenth century’, to the *flâneur*, famously theorised by Walter Benjamin as the detached spectator of the fantasmagoria of the new urban spectacle. He is a variant, a product to an extent also of the age of the motor car that combined velocity and the confinement of pedestrians to the edges of the street, mediated and made possible by pop culture such as graffiti, skateboarding and martial arts movies (Belle’s admiration for Bruce Lee), of the Situationist *dérive*, spotting fissures in the organisation of the urban landscape, creating opportunities for play and for the aesthetic *détournement* of given pathways and structures.<sup>2</sup> But amid the celebration of this movement from below (inevitably, there is much evocation of Deleuzian lines of flight, see for example Paula Geyh’s online piece at <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0607/06-geyh.php>), and of the richness of the encounter between high theory and popular culture, let us recall the need to historicise further.

Here again the Quebec City comparison is enlightening. Clearly, the boys in *Sur le toit des maisons* ‘do’ a form of parkour without knowing it, negotiating obstacles (Gobeil, p. 29), helping each other as they look for opportunities and routes (p. 35), and their story is very much a boys’ one, with hints of the homoerotic (p. 51). (The child-like aspect of their activity is echoed by Foucan in the *Jump London* DVD, ‘you just have to think like children’.) But in this place shaped, if we focus on colonialism, by the first French Empire, the British Empire, and also perhaps the American Empire of consumerism and the market, *banlieue* has a very different meaning. For the Quebec (inner) City boys, it is ‘le royaume des autobus scolaires’, in French terms a *banlieue pavillonnaire* the critique of which is central to North American culture (*American Beauty*, dir, Sam Mendes, 1999; *Desperate Housewives*).

Quebec culture shares this emphasis on middle-class conformity and routine (another Quebec City novel for example, *Haine-moi!*, confronts the suburbs with the lumpen elements of the Old Town via the itinerary of young protagonists), as Gobeil's narrator thus sees the suburbanites:

ceux qui avaient choisi ces coins retirés avaient des familles avec des chiens, des bateaux, des autos avec des stéréos, des piscines avec des systèmes de chauffage, mais [...] ils ne se baladaient jamais sur les toits des villes la nuit (Gobeil, p. 108).

The different connotations of the *banlieue* in French are products of many other histories – of post-war planning, modernist architecture, urbanism - but the failure of the republican model which they represent is also of course bound up with colonialism and post-colonialism: post-war immigration, the unresolved aftermath of the Algerian War, the continuation of colonial police methods in spaces which reproduce the manicheism of the colonial city, a ghettoisation that is experienced in ethnic and racial terms (see the analyses, for example, of Lapeyronnie, 2008). Parkour is, needless to say, very *métissé* and multiethnic; David Belle has the Indo-China connection, Sébastien Foucan's parents are from Guadeloupe.

De Certeau's emphasis on the links between colonialism and the *carte*, and all it entails, while sweeping, are consistent with this historicisation. However, we also must bear in mind the ambivalences of parkour's own history, as it demonstrates how de Certeau's fields of forces are always characterised by a *tension*. Colonialism, including ambivalent relations to the exotic, plays a major role in the history of physical education in France. One of the sources for Belle of parkour was the 'méthode naturelle' associated with Georges Hébert (1875-1957). Hébert was a French naval officer involved in the rescue following the eruption at St Pierre in Martinique in 1902, and who in his service came to admire the corporeal qualities and abilities of indigenous peoples. On his return to France he became a

physical education tutor at Reims, and produced before and after World War I a number of manuals on his theories. *Hébertisme* gave rise to the *parcours du combattant* which is the basis for military obstacle courses today (for example, Hébert, 1912; on Hébert see Griffet, 1998, and Villaret and Delaplace, 2003), and has also been used in fire service training. Parkour could be seen as a counter-cultural hijacking of these practices and histories, or, at least in part, consistent with them. However, a look at two recent French cinematic texts reveals that ambivalences are displayed, not only in the putting into narrative of parkour practices, as we have seen, but in their *spectacularisation*. Here the scopic aspect of the phenomenon we observed in Quebec City and *Sur le toit des maisons* – histories of the view, different ways of looking at and perceiving the cityscape as it is moved through, temptations of the panoptic – is magnified by the reality of being looked at as well as looking.

The parkour boom has partly been a classic case of subcultural proliferation, aided by the internet and YouTube, with groups forming across the world (see for example [www.glasgowparkour.co.uk](http://www.glasgowparkour.co.uk)). Older paradigms of (sub)cultural analysis tended to focus on the relationship between symbolic violations of the social order and the processes of ‘incorporation’ which then recuperated or co-opted them by propelling them into generalised processes of commodification, or by some ideological sleight of hand. Thus Dick Hebdige, for example, wrote of the way in which, in the case of 1970s punk, the success of some individuals reinforced the idea of social mobility and of an open society, thus contradicting the premises of the movement itself (Hebdige, 1979, especially pp. 92-99). Certainly much ‘mainstreaming’ has occurred in the case of parkour, in the form of music, video games, film (Sébastien Foucan’s appearance in the opening scenes of *Casino Royale*, dir. Martin Campbell, 2006), marketing (<http://www.parkour-online.com/parkour-shop.html>) and corporate sponsorship (figure 3). It may be possible to make a case, as with Lawrence





Grossberg's analysis of rock and roll, for parkour, which is splitting into different emphases and styles, to be seen as 'a fractured unity within which differences of authenticity and cooptation are defined in the construction of affective alliances and networks of affiliation', alliances which 'are always multiple and contradictory' (Grossberg 1997, p. 493). However, we have seen that parkour itself is already marked by ambivalent and complex relations to any binary oppositions around order and resistance. What is more useful is to trace its specific *operations* when it is put, as we have seen, into narrative and spectacle in specific *contexts*.

The first feature film to use parkour was *Yamakasi - les samourais des temps modernes* (2001), directed by Ariel Zeitoun and with a script by, among others, Luc Besson for his production company Europa Corp. He conceived the project with Charles Perrière, who plays 'Sitting Bull' in the film and who was an original member of Belle and Foucan's

‘yamakasi’ (*Ya makási* means ‘strong in body and spirit and as a person’ in the Lingala language of the two Congos) group of *traceurs* in Lisses. The cast also includes Williams Belle and Châu Belle Dinh. To an extent, the film is thus a continuation of the action or chase movie genre developed in Besson’s other productions such as the phenomenally successful *Taxi* series that began in 1998, along with the combination of youth culture and postmodern irony that characterises many of his films as director (*Subway*, 1985). *Yamakasi* has a simple, goal-oriented narrative in which the ethnically diverse septet of *traceurs* races against time to obtain money (through the burglary of the Parisian homes of wealthy hospital board members) for an organ transplant that will save the life of a young boy who injured himself in the *banlieue* while trying to imitate their feats. The Law/not Law distinction inherent to the popular thriller is played out via a Robin Hood-style humanism, in which ‘coeur’ is explicitly posited against ‘loi’ (in an early verbal confrontation with police Inspector Vincent) and, against the excessive force used by the agents of the state, the use of a gun is limited to bringing down an opulent chandelier on the heads of their pursuers. What remains is the agility, the *expertise* of the *traceurs* as they confront their antagonists, namely the bureaucracy and incompetence of both petty and powerful officials (hospital receptionist, police chief, *conseiller politique* who refers to them as *racaille*). In this, the young men are little different from James Bond or other heroic figures of the popular thriller, whose skills are often posited *against* the compromises and rigidities of the organisations they work for, and whose masculine bodies are put through a series of tests over which they triumph. However, it is the *traceurs*’s feats that are spectacular, their bodies more lithe - in constant flow and movement – than those of action hero icons such as Bruce Willis or even Daniel Craig. Needless to say, the role of women is marginalised (worried female relatives of the sick Djamel, one female love interest embraced at the end) and the action relentlessly homosocial, but the absence of individual Oedipal trajectories (castration threats overcome, integration into the social order

through heterosexual coupledness) is noteworthy. There are collective identities at stake here, the ‘nous’ of the *banlieue* against the ‘beaux quartiers’ of Paris, but even the nature of ‘France’ itself: ‘On est en France, on n’abandonnera pas les enfants comme ça’, cries the intermediary beur police figure Vincent, and it is perhaps significant that at the end he resigns from the police rather than re-integrating the lessons learned into its structures.

That these are mild challenges to the social order is the least one can say. Life in the *banlieue* is barely explored, but the extreme polarisation between Paris and *banlieue* to be found in Kassowitz’ *La Haine* (1995) here turns into a reappropriation of the capital city by the *traceurs*, as for the first time they are filmed running across the rooftops of Haussmann’s city. This is a marketing strategy, of course (the posters for the film emphasise the Parisian landmarks that form the backdrop, see figure 4), but, as David Thomson points out, it means that attention is redrawn to the (capital, in both senses) city itself, and the way that parkour as ‘an instance of the unruly intersection between capital flow and human bodies’ may demonstrate the way ‘they may intersect at angles of varying and oppositional intensities’ (Thomson, 2008, pp. 251-252). The flying *traceur* framed against a backdrop of official or commercial city centre buildings is contributing to a new aesthetics of the city which defamiliarises by reawakening past histories and suggesting new futures, as well as new pathways.

While *Yamakasi* had the *traceurs* running away from the police, *Banlieue 13* (dir. Pierre Morel, 2004, again with a script by Besson- co-written with one of the stars, Bibi Naceri, who plays the drug baron Taha – and produced by Eurocorp), eventually has them



running alongside, and, what is more, in a non-place and non-time. In the near future, the eponymous *banlieue* has been surrounded by a wall since 2010, its two million inhabitants left to rot without state services. The narrative brings together Leïto (a starring acting role for David Belle), who has fallen foul of Taha and wishes to rescue his sister from him, and Captain Damien Tamaso of the police (played by stunt man/choreographer and former circus acrobat Cyril Raffaelli), who has been sent into the district undercover, ostensibly to defuse a neutron bomb that has fallen into Taha's hands and risks killing all the inhabitants. However, it emerges that the bomb has deliberately been placed there by the government in order to

eradicate *banlieue* 13. Leïto and Damien defuse the bomb and expose the plot, and the wall comes down.

On the one hand, *Banlieue 13* in terms of spectacle completes the appropriation of parkour for action cinema. Apart from the thrilling opening chase scene as Leïto evades Taha's gang, it is here mostly adapted for combat, Leïto even using it to kill a police official who had abandoned his sister Lola (Dany Verissimo) to Taha. The trajectories cross a generic, undifferentiated space, as sequences were filmed not only in various Parisian suburbs but also in Romania. On the other, its associations with *banlieue* counter-culture lead to a bizarre ideological operation. It is clear from two, let us call them 'political' discussions between Leïto and Damien that within the narrative structure the two men represent a dialectic that the ending of the film must resolve. (Indeed, Lola as non-sexual object to be rescued – although she has her own brief action sequence and is crucial to making safe the bomb – is consistent with this emphasis on the male-male relationship.) In the first, Damien critiques Leïto's emphasis on 'hatred' by invoking an alternative 'education', that is 'liberté, égalité, fraternité'. Leïto is initially resistant to this, but the two come together around shared 'values', especially equality before the law. Their relationship seesaws: in the second conversation, Leïto accepts with a slightly ridiculous nod Damien's proposition that he is not defending (powerful) individuals: 'c'est des valeurs, les mêmes que toi si j'ai bien compris, non'; but at the film's climax he is proven right about the malign purpose of the authorities. The problem turns out to be not enough republicanism (the breaking of the republican pact that removes education and police services from the district), rather than the republican model itself: the evil (individual) politician is foiled through 'democracy' not violence, in an appeal to the democratic public sphere (the mass media, here given voice by Patrick Poivre d'Arvor). The accompanying DVD interviews with filmmakers are therefore somewhat disingenuous in their claims for the relevance of the social commentary here (despite, a year



before the November 2005 crisis, the references to ‘racaille’ and the burning of cars, half condoned here as a way of expressing grievance) because this dystopian future is outlandishly more ‘other’ to the present day than it is the ‘same’: next to a radiation bomb meant to kill two million, contemporary metaphors about ghettos or claims about underfunded schools pale somewhat in comparison. And if the future contains these quasi-fascist elements, they are in fact easily overcome, by media exposure in what therefore is presumably still a democratic state. Fanon famously wrote about the colonial city:

La ville du colonisé, ou du moins la ville indigène (...) est un lieu malfamé, peuplé d’hommes malfamés. On y naît n’importe où, n’importe comment. On y meurt n’importe où, de n’importe quoi (...). La ville du colonisé est une ville accroupie, une ville à genoux, une ville vautrée (Fanon, 1968, p. 8).

In *Banlieue 13*, the historical memory that is invoked is that of the holocaust (Damien: ‘on a déjà tué six millions sous le prétexte qu’ils n’étaient pas blonds aux yeux bleus’), the opposition between republicanism and fascism constituting a safe and tidy reference for the film, the Warsaw ghetto (created by the Other) rather than the much more ambivalent memories of the colonial city or even apartheid. These incoherences – part of course, of another imaginary resolution of real contradictions - in fact point to a form of ‘inoculation’, contrasting a worse future – where nonetheless wrongs can still be put right - with a present now rendered more acceptable.

The point of *Banlieue 13*, is, of course, the action and spectacle, but it represents perhaps a limit-case of the way in which the myriad possibilities – and ambiguities - of parkour can here be channelled to monological ends and indeed ‘strategies’ (industrial-cinematic, political). That the phenomenon is characterised by tensions, like de Certeau’s own categories, has been clear throughout this analysis. There can be no global evaluation or

judgement of it, because it can be understood only in relation to its specific manifestations and contexts, including the medium in which they are represented, the historicity of a place, the life of an individual. For example, in the latter case, there are grounds for a wide-ranging sociological (and cultural) qualitative analysis of the discourse and stories woven by its practitioners, of its relation for them to place, identity, France, the transnational. In this way, embedded in often contradictory assemblages which bring together architectures and histories of empire and nation, parkour might help us to understand, not how to intervene, but how to live – to look and to move – in the contemporary phase of global capitalist culture.

## Notes

1. For an interesting analysis, based on de Certeau's categories, of the colonial city of Fort-de-France and its representations, see: Loichot, V. (2004) 'Fort-de-France: Pratiques textuelles et corporelles d'une ville coloniale', *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 48, pp. 48-60.
2. Amid the abundant literature – almost entirely web-based – on parkour, see the summary by Shawn Shahani, 'Parkour: the Evolution of the Disparate Tradition' (<http://shawنشahani.wordpress.com/2008/07/15/parkour-a-european-disparate-tradition/>), who asks, 'Is the *traceur* just a practicing *flâneur* with locomotive purpose or a drifting Situationist with a concerted mindset?'

## Figures

1. Quebec City in Claude-Charles Le Roy de La Potherie *Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale* (1722).
2. James Pattison Cockburn's *The Lower City of Quebec, from the Parapet of the Upper City* (1833).

3. The corporate sponsorship of parkour at the Mayor's Thames Festival, September 2008.
4. Poster for *Yamakasi*.

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