

Youth and Sporting (Im)mobilities in Disrupted and Conflicted Spaces

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War, conflict and natural disasters disrupt millions of lives around the world each year. With fighting and wars raging across the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, death tolls are “on the rise” (Storm, 2015), and the United Nations recently estimated the cost of natural disasters at \$300 billion per year (UN Global Assessment, 2015). Scholars working in the social sciences and humanities have long been looking beyond the casualties and economic impacts of such events, to examine the social and psychological consequences of such events on individuals, families and communities.

Over the past decade, mobilities researchers have contributed to this scholarship by examining the (im)mobilities and migration patterns of those directly and indirectly affected by war and natural disasters. Typically adopting interdisciplinary approaches and asking different sets of questions to those working in conflict studies, disaster studies and environmental sociology, scholars working within the mobilities paradigm offer a fresh approach to understanding the politics of war and disaster-related mobilities and migration practices. Some have revealed the injustices, and deeply affecting experiences, of migrating away from and back to communities devastated by disaster. While others are examining how nation states are policing and regulating the mobilities of particular peoples, objects and knowledge in a post 9-11 world.

Most of these studies have, however, focused on the macro-mobilities of poor or marginalized citizens, and/or the migration of residents away from, and sometimes back to, their homes and communities following periods of conflict or

major disasters. Less consideration has been given to the effects of political upheaval, conflict and natural disasters on the *everyday* micro-mobilities of those who choose (or are forced) to continue living in cities and towns ravaged by ongoing conflict and war, or damaged by natural disaster. Even less attention has been given to the movement and mobilities of youth in disrupted, conflicted and 'dangerous' spaces.

For many researchers and governmental and aid organisations, children and youth are among the most at-risk in contexts of war and natural disaster. Certainly, children and youth can be exposed to particularly high levels of physical, social, psychological and political risk in such deleterious conditions. Despite their best intentions, however, there is a tendency for funding agencies, aid workers and researchers to position children and youth in contexts of war and disaster as 'victims' with little consideration for their agency and ability to develop culturally-specific responses to such conditions and events. Thus, unique forms of youth agency, resilience and resourcefulness continue to be overlooked.

Outside of international aid and development studies, there is a growing body of literature examining the unique forms of youth politics, activism, entrepreneurialism and civic engagement emerging in the 21st century (Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Kelly, 2006; Wishart, Taylor & Shultz, 2006; Younnis et. al., 2002). Indeed, as illustrated in the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Hong Kong 'Occupy Central', and the Maple Spring (Québec) movements, youth are increasingly proficient at utilising new technologies and social media to forge transnational networks and connections, and produce politically-inspired groupings and civic performances in ways that were not previously possible (Gilchrist & Wheaton,

2013; Thrift, 2008; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). Yet few have considered the creative forms of agency, resilience and civic engagement among local youths in contexts of war and disaster.

In the remainder of this presentation I will be sharing some of my recent work that has focused on new forms of youth resourcefulness and activism in damaged and conflicted spaces, particularly in Christchurch, Afghanistan, and Gaza. These are contexts in which youth physical mobilities are highly constrained, yet in each of these cases we also see youth creatively developing an array of strategies and initiatives to help improve their own and others health and well-being, and in some cases, challenge power relations.

While I focus on the unique forms of agency and resilience adopted by local youth in contexts of war and post-disaster, my analysis is also informed by an understanding of the transnational economic, social and cultural processes operating within and across diverse geographical settings. In so doing, this presentation is informed by the approach developed in my latest monograph—*Transnational Mobilities in Action Sport Cultures*. This book was a response to recent critiques of transnationalism and mobilities studies, particularly the limits of ongoing, artificial binaries, such as macro/micro, structure/agency, and global/local. My presentation today builds upon this framework, as I seek to reveal new forms of youth agency that are specific to the local conditions, while simultaneously informed by global power structures and transnational flows of people, ideas and objects.

Unfortunately I don't have time to provide details of the mobile methods employed for each project, but each of the three cases have included a similar multi-method approach, including interviews and media analysis of both the mass media coverage of the various initiatives, and the social media produced by the groups

themselves. New technologies such as Skype and private messaging in Facebook also played a particularly important role in facilitating conversations with youth in Afghanistan and Gaza. Some of the cases that I present today were informed by collaborations with others, however, the broader arguments I am offering here are part of a larger and ongoing project related to action sports for development and peace building in local and global contexts.

Post-Disaster Sporting Mobilities: The Case of Christchurch

The earthquake that struck Christchurch on 22 February 2011 killed one hundred and eighty five people and injured many more. It flattened the downtown district, and damaged or destroyed almost two hundred thousand homes. The earthquakes caused long-term damage to essential infrastructure (e.g., roads, sewage, and water), and forced more than fourteen thousand to migrate from the region. The various (im)mobilities of this natural disaster are being studied by an array of scholars from across the disciplines, some of whom are in this room today.

As well as destroying vital infrastructure, natural disasters also destroy built sporting facilities (e.g., gyms, playing fields, swimming pools, club rooms, stadiums). Understandably, the rebuilding of these facilities is not of immediate concern to councils and residents during a state of emergency. In the weeks and months following a natural disaster, however, the damage to such facilities is keenly felt by residents as they seek to re-establish post-earthquake lifestyles and routines. The post-earthquake experiences of athletes and residents in organized, competitive and recreational sports are important. In my work, however, I took a slightly different approach, focusing instead on the experiences

of highly committed participants in non-competitive, unregulated action or 'lifestyle' sports, and how these individuals adapted their sporting participation in the changing socio-cultural-economic-physical geography following the earthquakes.

The majority of the 14 participants in this project described their sporting activities being sidelined in the wake of the earthquake by the health and wellbeing of family and friends. A few weeks after the earthquake, however, many recognized the extent of the earthquake damage for their sporting participation. As Emma—a passionate surfer—explained, “once we got most of the chores done, we started to realize that something huge was missing from our lives”. Indeed, for many, their favourite sporting spaces were destroyed or seriously damaged, and thus their familiar, deeply embodied, sporting mobilities were disrupted. For skateboarders the “red zoning” of the city centre meant the loss of one of their favourite urban playgrounds. Climbers not only lost access to their indoor climbing facility, but also to the fourteen hundred world class climbing routes in the Port Hills. Mountain bikers were also devastated by the closure and loss of hundreds of trails in the nearby Port Hills.

Extensive damage to major sewer pressure mains forced the Christchurch City Council (CCC) to release untreated wastewater into the rivers. As a result, local beaches were closed for nine months, which caused serious disruption to the everyday lifestyles of local surfers and other beach users.

All of the participants in this study described experiencing strong emotional and psychological responses to their disrupted sporting mobilities [SEE SLIDES]. Some also deeply mourned the loss of sporting places of attachment: “I feel so sad for the places

we lost”, proclaimed Japanese climber, Yukimi, “my favourite climbs were there, my projects were there. I miss them”.

According to cultural geographer, Tim Edensor (2010) it is common for individuals to attempt to minimize the affects of a major disruption to everyday routines by trying to “restore familiar spaces, routines and timings” (p. 5). This was certainly true for many lifestyle sport participants living in Christchurch. Attempting to regain some sense of familiarity in the rhythms of everyday life, passionate skateboarders, surfers, and climbers adopted creative practices and alternative sporting mobilities. For example, many passionate surfers car-pooled to access non-polluted surfing beaches north and south of Christchurch; many climbers took up bouldering and organized group trips to Castle Hill. In so doing, beaches and bouldering routes became ‘therapeutic landscapes’. For some Christchurch residents, their sporting participation in these spaces helped them escape (if only temporarily) from the stresses of daily life. For example, Aaron, a passionate surfer, described the importance of surfing for social interaction and fun with his peers, which had a lingering affect: ‘There is such a strong presence of community and fulfilment in relationships within surfing... I think just getting away from it all for a few hours... you’d come back [from your surf] and be in a calm place for at least a few days’.

Some Christchurch youth also set about reappropriating earthquake spaces and in so doing demonstrated agency and creativity in their responses to the earthquake. For example, embracing the do-it-yourself, anti-authoritarian attitude at the core of their sporting culture, some skateboarders took to creating indoor skate-parks in buildings set for demolition. According to Trent:

We started exploring all those abandoned buildings. We found a really cool warehouse on the cusp of the city border... someone had jimmed the door open and there was just a massive stage and people had built ramps all down

the centre of it, boxes here, a manual pad here, more ramps here and you could skate off the stage.

Continuing, Trent proclaimed the appropriation of damaged buildings as a “salute to all the people that look down their noses at us and think we’re just nuisance, good-for-nothing skaters”; rather than “sitting around and moaning about all the damage... we are out there doing something, and saying ‘hey look what we can do with all the broken stuff’”. Through the creative use of earthquake-damaged spaces, skateboarders’ constructed different spatial re-imaginings of a post-earthquake city, and in so doing, subtly disrupted dominant readings of earthquake spaces as dead, damaged and only fit for demolition.

In the wake of a natural disaster, alternative sporting mobilities appear to offer enthusiasts’ opportunities to redefine physical and emotional disaster geographies and rebuild social networks and connections. For some, such processes also contribute to increased civic engagement. Let me give you an example from a follow-up study that I am currently working on.

Earlier this year, the transnational denim corporation, Levi-Strauss announced that it would donate \$180,000 towards the building of a community skatepark in the small coastal Christchurch village of Sumner. Despite having the best of intentions, this is an obvious case of cause marketing, and part of the broader Levi Strauss global campaign that has included building skateparks in Bolivia and India. The Sumner community was divided as to their opinions of this offer. While the majority of residents were in support of the skatepark, a small group of wealthy landowners were highly concerned about the placement of the skatepark on a public reserve on the waterfront (in front of many of their houses), the process in which this site had been allocated, and the motives of the

Levi Strauss corporation. This group invested in the most expensive lawyers, published adverts in the local paper, and engaged in some other questionable tactics to try to stop the proposed development. Their actions only fuelled local youth who rallied together and established various online platforms to help organize their responses.

On May 5, I travelled back down to Christchurch to follow up on my latest round of interviews conducted in April, and to attend the Community Board Consultation. Attracting more than 500 community members, this Board meeting was an incredible example of youth civic engagement and their willingness to publically campaign for their rights to physical play and expression in public spaces, and to speak into this largely adult-dominated space. The board ultimately voted 2/5 for the skatepark, with one councilor admitting that he had been planning to vote against the park but was moved by the passion of local youth: "We need to let our kids have a bit of fun and make sure they feel valued."

So, the first part of this project focused on the various (im)mobilities in a post-disaster Christchurch and youths creative responses to these local conditions. More recently, I am examining how local action sport enthusiasts are helping render visible pre-quake power relations, with some youth actively challenging the reassertion of these power relations in a post-quake Christchurch.

Sporting Mobilities in Conflict Zones: The Case of Skateistan

Afghanistan has experienced over 30 years of ongoing conflict and social dislocation. With 68% of the population under the age of 25 (and 50% under the age of 16), international development and aid organizations have invested in an

array of projects aimed at improving the health and education of Afghan children and youth. Among such development efforts is Skateistan—an ‘independent, neutral, Afghan NGO’ that provides skateboarding tuition, and art and language education, to ‘urban and internally-displaced youth in Afghanistan’. Founded in 2006 by Australian skateboarder Ollie Percovich, the two Skateistan facilities—one in Kabul and another in Mazar-e-Sharif (northern Afghanistan)—now provide skateboarding and educational programmes for more than 1000 Afghan children and youth per week, with girls making up to 40 per cent of these participants.

Each of the 8 Skateistan staff members that I have interviewed strongly believes in the power of skateboarding—as a non-traditional, non-competitive form of play and self-expression—for creating positive changes for Afghan youth. Importantly though, they are adamant that skateboarding is just ‘the carrot’ to ‘connect with kids and build trust’. As well as teaching key interpersonal skills and respect across cultural and gender divides, the aim underpinning the skateboarding instructional and educational programs offered at Skateistan are to prepare Afghan children and youth to become future leaders. My analysis of Skateistan is contextualized within critiques of development, and particularly sport for development initiatives that tend to adopt a ‘deficit’ model, assuming poor or disadvantaged youth need ‘our’ versions of sport for their empowerment. However, Skateistan offers a refreshing alternative to many such programmes: it prioritizes the voices and needs of its participants, encourages peer mentoring rather than hierarchical coach-athlete relationships, respects the unique history and politics of the context within which it works, and is using sport—or rather, physical play—to create transformation within the wider community via an

array of highly creative and culturally sensitive approaches. As a result, Skateistan has gained international acclaim for their work, winning numerous awards including the 2015 Laureus Foundation Sport-for-Good award.

Skateistan receives funding from an array of foreign embassies (i.e., Denmark, Germany and Norway), with further assistance from private donations and fundraisers. However, to survive, and indeed thrive, in a very competitive NGO market, Skateistan has also developed highly creative, collaborative relationships with global action sport companies. For example, skateboarding companies – Blackbox Distribution and TSG – have provided Skateistan with skateboarding equipment (e.g., skateboards, wheels, trucks and bearings) and safety gear (e.g., helmets and wrist-guards), and host various awareness- and fund-raising events in an array of countries (i.e., Australia, Germany and the United States) to further facilitate flows of resources from the Global North to Afghanistan.

According to Ollie, the Internet has always played an integral role in the development, communication, and fundraising efforts, of Skateistan: “even when the organization was very very basic. . . the Skateistan website had photos on there that connected with people. Without the website, and more recently the use of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, it would be very hard for people to know what we’re doing here”. Indeed, Skateistan is very proficient at using social media and producing high quality content of their own to further raise awareness of their work. For Percovich, the value of the Skateistan website is more than its “ability to win awards and bring money in”; but also for its “connecting effect” between “Afghan youth and youth around the world”:

. . . if they can share stories with each other and they can share

experiences. . . I think that breaks down a lot of barriers, a lot of misunderstanding. I do believe that's a really important tool in the interaction between the Muslim world and non-Muslim world. (personal communication, September 8, 2011)

In the first few years, the Skateistan website offered Western consumers an unlimited flow of information—stories, photos, videos, and art (and commodities)—featuring and/or produced by Skateistan participants, but the media consumption by Afghan youth was carefully controlled. However, in another interview conducted earlier this year, Ollie told me that this had changed dramatically with increased access to very cheap smart phones [SEE SLIDE].

In my most recent work with Skateistan, I have been focusing on their female-focused programmes within the context of the 'girl effect' in development. When I asked Ollie how local female skateboarders are negotiating western messages of sporting femininity that they are increasingly being exposed to via social media and also visits from international volunteers and staff, he replied:

...the girls are quite creative in terms of the way that they address this. If they see a girl skating with a baseball cap on in a picture somewhere, then they simply put the baseball cap over their headscarf and they kind of achieve the same look. ...They're just looking at different ways of subtly getting around this societal rule that says you've got to have your head covered.

Continuing, he described the importance of creating space and support for Afghan girls and women to challenge gender boundaries at their own pace and in their own ways. "They know the boundaries they can push and in what contexts. They can be most effective when they are pushing a boundary just in a small way". In fact, somewhat surprisingly, all of the Skateistan staff I spoke to expressed a complex understandings of the difficulties of creating longterm

sustainable change in Afghanistan, with many highly critical of 'quick fix' and 'top down' solutions too often adopted by other development organizations in this region.

In this example we can see some of the multi-layers of transnational mobilities operating within action sport-related NGOs. First, Skateistan was established by an action sport enthusiast who confronted such inequalities and injustices during his travels that he could not ignore them, and instead drew upon his existing networks and connections to initiate change in this local context. Indeed, the corporeal mobilities of Western action sport enthusiasts to foreign contexts is actually how many action sport related NGOs have developed to date, and this neo-colonialist approach to sport for development is certainly not unproblematic. However, what is unique about Skateistan is their efforts to create space for the voices of local children and youth, and employment and leadership opportunities for both young men and women in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Kabul facility is now entirely run by local Afghan leaders. Thus, it might be argued that this NGO helps create space for youth agency—and particularly girls agency—that might not otherwise be available.

Skateistan has also been very proficient in utilizing transnational networks and media technologies to connect with the global skateboarding industry and community. In so doing, they facilitate a constant flow of information, as well as economic and cultural resources, between Afghanistan and the transnational skateboarding community. So, in this example, we can see the interconnections of global and local mobilities of people, information, and objects, with local youth mediating these flows in their own culturally specific ways.

Sporting Mobilities in Conflict Zones: The Case of PK Gaza

With approximately 1.7 million residents and refugees occupying an area of 365 square kilometers (40 kilometers long and 10 kilometers wide), the Gaza Strip is among the most densely populated regions in the world. The impacts of decades of blockades, conflict, and constrained mobilities are particularly severe for Gazan youth. Over 50 percent of the population is under the age of 15 years and unemployment rates are the lowest in the world. Yet youth are by no means passive in their response to Israeli occupation and brutalities. Palestinian youth have held significant roles in the ongoing conflict and attempts of uprising, with 85 percent of male adolescents and 65 percent of female adolescents involved in demonstrations against the occupation (Barber, 2001). In an excellent historical and geographical analysis of the Palestine–Israel conflict, Gregory (2004) describes the Palestinian ‘youth culture from which many suicide bombers have emerged’ as ‘both communal and competitive’ (p.105), and suggests ‘a sort of jockeying for symbolic capital among those for whom most other opportunities for recognition and worth have been systematically withdrawn’ (p.105).

In my recent research with Nida Ahmad, we have found some Gazan youth to be adopting different strategies to overcome the severely constrained mobilities in their everyday lives. Drawing upon virtual interviews and media analysis of various print, digital and social media, we revealed how youth (particularly young men) in Gaza developed their own unique parkour group, despite various social, cultural, economic, physical and psychological obstacles. This quote from Al-Jakhbeer, co-founder of Parkour Gaza, is revealing (see slide). Clearly, the symbolism of the activity is not lost on the participants.

Parkour is arguably one of the most accessible action sports. In contrast to skateboarding, surfing, or sandboarding, which require (often expensive) equipment (e.g., skate-, surf-, sand-boards) and access to specific types of environments (e.g., smooth concrete, waves, sand-dunes), parkour requires little more than a pair of shoes fit for moving efficiently within the urban environment. In contrast to the development of most traditional sports, parkour reached Gaza in 2005 via media communications. When Abdullah Anshasi watched the documentary *Jump London* on the Al-Jazeera documentary channel, he knew this was a sport suitable for him and his friends. He promptly followed this up by searching the Internet for video clips of parkour, before recruiting friends to join him in learning the new sport. Continuing to develop their skills, they soon found parkour to be so much more than a sport. In their own words, 'it is a life philosophy' that encourages each individual to 'overcome barriers in their own way' (cited in Shahin 2012). The original group are now actively involved in coaching groups of children and youth. Parkour is also a political act. For example, practicing their manoeuvres in the sandy hills in Nusseirat is a way of reclaiming space. Formerly an Israeli settlement now deserted in the center of Gaza City, Mohammad told me that practicing in this location is a way to 'demonstrate that this land is our right'.

As part of the younger generation of technologically savvy Gazan residents, the founders of PK Gaza are explicitly aware of the potential of the Internet for their parkour practices, and also for broader political purposes. The PK Gaza and Freerunning Facebook page has 28 thousand followers from around the world, and the group also posts regular YouTube videos that can receive upwards of tens of thousands of views. Both Facebook and YouTube are key

spaces for interaction and dialogue with youth beyond the confines of the Gaza strip. Mohammad told me that, in so doing, 'we contribute very significantly to raising international awareness of what is happening in Gaza. We offer video clips, photographs and writings related to the situation in which we live... and deliver the message to all the people's that's watching online that there are oppressed people here'.

With such global exposure, the PK Gaza group began to receive offers of support from individuals and groups around the world. For example, in February 2012, with sponsorship from the Unione Italiana Sport Per Tutti ('Sport for All'), three of the original PK Gaza team were able to travel outside Gaza for the first time and attend the Italian Free Running and Parkour Federation's annual event in Milan. The young men used this, and subsequent trips, as an opportunity for informal cultural diplomacy and raising awareness of the plight of those living in Gaza.

As well as raising awareness of the conditions in Gaza and offering a temporary escape from the harsh realities of everyday life, the PK Gaza team strongly advocates the socio-psychological benefits of their everyday parkour experiences. They proclaim the value of parkour for their resilience and coping with the frustrations, fears, anxieties and pains of living in the Khan Younes refugee camp. As seen in this quote, some medical and health professionals also acknowledge the value of such activities for young men living in such a stressful environment (see slide). Such observations are supported by a plethora of research that has illustrated the value of physical play and games for resilience in contexts of high risk and/or ongoing physical and psychological stress (e.g., refugee camps), and the restorative value for children and youth who have

can not participate in parkour due to religious limits on their physical mobilities.

The key point here is that findings from one location can not be generalised across other contexts with very different social, cultural and physical geographies.

Ultimately, any analysis of the (im)mobilities of youth in geographies of war and disaster must create spaces for the voices and lived experiences of an array of local youth and consider the potential of youth agency, while also recognizing the various forms of local, national and transnational power that enable or constrain such mobilities.