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O'Connor, P.; Willing, I.; Duester, B.; Hölsgens, S.R.J.J.

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The leisure of grey spaces, urban play and the chromatic turn

Paul O'Connor, Indigo Willing, Benjamin Duester & Sander Hölsgens

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Introduction

This collection of paper looks to the spaces and locations in which leisure unfolds. In recent years a range of work on leisure, social geography and urbanism has focused on health and wellbeing in spaces coded by blue and green spaces (Bell et al., 2014; Britton et al., 2018; Costello et al., 2019; King & Dickinson, 2022; Nicklett et al., 2024; Nutsford et al., 2013; Potter et al., 2023; Ridgway, 2022; Wheaton et al., 2019). Blue space corresponds with waterways, leisure based in rivers, lakes and sea. Green space looks more generally to nature-based locales hiking, camping, mountain biking and forest bathing. This diverse body of scholarship advocates for nature-based leisure as part of a larger health and wellbeing movement that dovetails with environmental consciousness (Buser et al., 2018). These colour-coded spaces hold symbolic resonance with their associated natural qualities. The rhetoric of blue and green spaces captures both the material essence of these locales and their symbolic association.

Yet, in this discourse the city and the built environment are often made peripheral, or at the least something to transform in line with blue and green space (Miyagawa et al., 2023). Implicitly, leisure in the built environment is also cast as oppositional, an obstacle and a hazard, to the salubrious and therapeutic framing of nature-based leisure (Potter et al., 2023). This collection of papers responds to this *other* aspect of leisure, that which occurs in grey spaces. Grey spaces are identified as grey in a material sense (urban, concrete, artificial, constructed) while also being symbolically grey (ambiguous, liminal, ideologically nuanced). These works pursue the notion that the city and the built environment need to be pulled into this colour coded conversation on leisure. This chromatic turn in leisure studies works with the extant tropes of blue and green spaces to explore and enliven our understanding of health and the environment in nuanced ways.

Grey spaces as hybrid

The concept of grey spaces utilises grey as an analytical tool. Just as green and blue resonate with nature, grey serves as a prompt to enmesh both the material and symbolic elements of leisure in urban space. The concept emerges from work on skateboarding, where urban play unfolds in a grey milieu of concrete, asphalt and granite (O'Connor, 2024a; O'Connor et al., 2022). Skateboarders revel amidst grey-ness, attracted to mundane utilitarian street furniture and interstitial places of the city. These are the spaces in which they find therapeutic joy, friendship, and transcendence (Clark & Sayers, 2023; Friedel, 2025; O'Connor, 2020; Paechter et al., 2024). Skateboarders themselves occupy an analytically grey space, playing amidst pollution, and regarded as a social pollution. They are policed from the city (Németh, 2006) and streamlined to contained spaces in often marginal noxious locations (Glenney, 2023).

Skateboarders occupy a symbolic grey space where they are both lauded for their skills in Olympic competition and demonised for their noise and vandalism. Yet this greyness goes deeper and is attuned to the way in which skateboarders present as an archetypal example of the contradictions and caprices of urban leisure, resisting neat description and definition (Glenney & Mull, 2018; O'Connor, 2024b). Thus, when we discuss greyness in the passages below, it is shaped by this scholarship. We work interchangeably and deliberately to evoke the material and symbolic dimensions of greyness – as an epistemological tool.

The varied papers in this collection address an unfolding chromatic shift by building upon and extending the concept of grey spaces in innovative ways. This can be seen in the way that colour is used symbolically to explain different phases in public-private partnerships (Giamarino, 2025), to correspond with the emotional valence of the city (Karas, 2025), or address the contradictions of a colourful subculture deemed dead (Noe, 2025). There is a distinct political edge to these collective themes encompassing capitalism, pollution and colonialism. Rising populism, environmental degradation and culture wars have been played out in a context of polar oppositions and black and white thinking. These discussions on grey spaces offer a correction to such binary thinking, ushering in a willingness to deal with complexity and compromise (Elmas & Açıkgöz, 2025).

Hybridity recurs as a motif across these papers and resonates with the liminality of the grey spaces paradigm, i.e. the nuance encoded ideologically into greyness as betwixt and between. We understand hybridity as akin to greyness, a space of blending, nuance, and fusion. Hybridity is at once celebrated as a term of fusion and mix, and reviled as pollution and miscegenation (Karla et al., 2005). This dynamic of hybridity is apparent in the tension and transformation of public-private space partnerships (Giamarino, 2025; Ding et al., 2025) in the mix of artificial waves (Byun & Choi, 2025), artificial turf and football cages (Crossley et al., 2025). Hybridity is relevant in challenges posed by polluted space that are both colonised and playful (Glenney & Dubois, 2025), or dangerous (both physically and emotionally) while ludic (Elmas & Açıkgöz, 2025). Hybridity across these papers is also chromatic, fusing green with grey (Crossley et al., 2025), blue with grey (Byun & Choi, 2025) and black amidst vibrant colour (Noe, 2025). In new urban surfing facilities such as *Wave Park* near Seoul, there is a convergence of issues that both open up surfing and democratise it to more people while also transforming its practice and culture. Byong and Choi see *Wave Park* as a hybrid space in which new forms of surfing can unfold sometimes as regimented, controlled and ordered. But they also recognise that such artificial leisure spaces present themselves symbolically as a pollutant to the social gauge of authenticity so important in lifestyle sports.

Such mix is apparent across the works in this Special Issue. As a collection they contribute to a critical and reflexive engagement with leisure in the face of the Anthropocene and posit possibilities of its pursuit amidst pollution (Evers, 2019), catastrophe (Cherrington & Jack, 2022), and the crisis of capitalism (Critchley, 2022). These discussions offer hope beyond dystopian urban imaginaries (Fitzgerald, 2024) and the fatalism of a resigned civilisational entropy (Stiegler, 2018). These works are both a response to disaster leisure (Glenney & O'Connor, 2022; Thorpe, 2013) and an optimistic statement about the capacity for creative human play in constrained circumstances where pollution, risk and austerity limit leisure in spatial, class, ethnic and gendered ways.

Youth leisure

A concern a number of these papers raise is the grey space which youth leisure occupies. Young people as repositories for hope and optimism feel the varied crises in their leisure acutely and a number of these papers address this dynamic head on. Firstly, Crossley et al. (2025) show how football has been demonised and criminalised in informal settings in the UK. As school and public playing fields across the country have been reduced, and sold off, young people have been left with ever shrinking space in which to play the national sport. The rise of football cages provides a key example of the contradictions by which youth leisure in Britain is understood in contradictory ways. Cages are presented as both a problem, being risky places of delinquency, and a solution, to contain and formalise an all-weather location for play. Informal football in the UK is thus a provocative example of material and symbolic grey space. Crossley et al. offer a timely chromatic debate where urban green spaces as 'nature based' spaces are cast grey as many are made artificial. Here we argue that the value of colour is to layer understanding between the physical and analytical. The recent example (Barkham, 2025) of 52 hectares of a London park being transformed to artificial all-weather football pitches for a women's soccer academy emphasises the ambiguity at play here. In this case, an informal leisure space is made formal, public space is made corporate, physical green space is made analytically grey, and yet important legitimate space is made for women's sport has too long been kept marginal. In such a scenario informal green spaces for play are a continued casualty, and grey spaces of play are too often commercialised or criminalised.

The urgency for people, especially youth, to have access to spaces that are safe and promote inclusion becomes clearer when viewed through a human rights framework. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2024) involves a pledge in Goal 11 to 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'. Target 11.7 urges that by 2030, cities will also 'provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities' (United Nations, 2024). This international strategy, however, overlooks the specific potential of 'grey spaces' as sites that add value and can contribute to improving the lives of children and others. The presence of youth, and especially racialised minority youth in urban space is an issue of contestation and human rights where technologies of deterrence are employed to further limit access to space (van den Berg et al., 2018). A critically needed invitation to think more carefully about exactly what kinds of 'public spaces' exist beyond 'green ones' can be found in Stenning's (2025) contribution in this issue that includes a case study of the UK which has insights transferable to other cities with high-density living. She begins her paper by emphasising how children's play has historically been restricted to notions of what constitutes 'proper places' for outdoor play. She proposes that applying a 'grey spaces lens' assists with understanding debates by play planners, advocates, researchers and practitioners in relation to existing 'ideas of children and play and to the ambiguities and relationalities in children's ludic geographies'.

Importantly, Stenning points to the centrality of grey spaces and research highlighting that children in the West will spend more time in built environments than green ones. However, grey spaces are revealed to be marked by a strong resistance by planners and

the public towards play, based on notions that children are nuisances, and elevate risks to safety and property. Her study identifies the value children bring, how they 'turn up the colour' of urban landscapes through their play and paraphernalia (and even things such as colourful chalk on grey streets). Their presence also attracts more community engagement and connections.

These two UK-focussed papers are enhanced by research focussed on other locales and settings offering a global contextualisation of youth leisure in a chromatic frame. Elmas and Açıkgöz (2025) adapt Evers' polluted leisure (2019) to develop 'dystopian leisure' as a framework for a postqualitative analysis of the safety concerns of Roma children's leisure in Turkey. Safety of the children is compromised by drug trafficking in their neighbourhood and broken appliances and glass polluting public spaces. Dystopian leisure maps resilience strategies through which children normalise the physical danger that their polluted environment poses in their everyday life while struggling with managing the emotional stress induced through the misbehaviour of adults. Greyness manifests here in various intersectional layers, from the materiality of the ghettoised neighbourhoods that the Roma community are forced into, to children's continuous search for hidden grey spaces suitable for play and concealed from the eyes of violent adults. Their rich analysis also gives important focus to differences in gendered experience between Roma boys and girls where expectations and dangers differ dramatically. Contrasting with Stenning's work, Roma girls are encouraged to play near to home and close to grandmothers who monitor their behaviour, yet they covet the freedom of grey spaces beyond such surveilled confines despite their potential hazards.

The frame of youth is expanded in a focus on informal DIY leisure practices in Russia. Karas (2025) explores the context of the crisis of capitalism in the Capitalocene by investigating greyness as a facet of urban rooftop exploration in St Petersburg. While 'roofing', practitioners gain access to the roofs of buildings through trespassing, that is, accessing backyards, stairs and freeclimbing walls. Karas traces roofing as young peoples' strategy for breaking out of the city's perceived overarching greyness to enjoy its lights and white nights during the summer period of midnight twilight from a legally inaccessible, but financially unconstrained perspective. This novel approach recasts discussion on the challenge of access to leisure in an increasingly pecuniary ordering of public space. Roofing thus actively challenges the greyness of everyday life by injecting colours into the perception of the cityscape and thus functioning as a quotidian subversion of authoritarianism in Putin's Russia.

East Asia

Moving a focus to East Asia and beyond youth, two papers provide a discussion on the tension between blue and grey spaces in lifestyle sports. Firstly, Byun and Choi (2025) explore how typically outdoor sports can make their way to indoor or artificial settings. Zooming in on wave parks in South Korea, they trace how surfers make sense of the artificiality of sports facilities. Mimicking the blue spaces of oceans, the greyness of sports halls punctuates and subvert the socio-somatic norms of surfing. Not only does one of the few lifestyle sports without an entry fee become ticketable, the turn to wave parks also makes the experience more sports-like. This provides a provocative recasting of the notion of 'pay to play' at various levels.

Byun and Choi describe how surfers in these constructed environs primarily focus on techniques and skills, and less so on surfing as a way of life and coexistence with blue spaces. Still, some participants in the study crave for ‘natural waves’ and are torn between the accessibility and reliability of artificial waves in contrast to authentic blue space and surf culture. This finding resonates with how Korean skateboarders oscillate between purpose-built and found spaces (Hölsgens, 2019, 2021), using the former to practice tricks and the latter to build community, and also broader discussion on artificial waves (Roberts & Ponting, 2018). Byun and Choi push this argument by linking the grey hues of the indoor leisure spaces to identity formation and community building.

Shifting focus to BMX in Wuhan, China, Ding et al. (2025) explore how an annual informal jump event into East Lake has become commodified. This article fuses a popular lifestyle sport that has little academic attention with a case study of resistance against commercial real estate development and the preservation of informal leisure. The ‘Everybody’s East Lake’ event comes to be a topic at once relevant to blue space in its origins, grey space in its commercial transformation, and polluted leisure in environmental ethics. In resisting the privatisation of the event and the BMX community have enacted both an inclusive egalitarian project and operationalised the Chinese principles of harmony.

Moving beyond lifestyle sports but remaining in East Asia, Villani et al. (2025) turn their focus to the urban Zumba dancing of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Conspicuously occupying the streets of the central district of the city, the dancers utilise the grand grey spaces of the business district for their own leisure. Migrant workers become a key topic for discussion as their work and status in Hong Kong is marginal and precarious, they have little free time, low wages, and seldom their own space. Most live in the residence of their employers, sometimes sleeping in a living room or bathroom. Occupying the streets on their Sunday break becomes both leisure and resistance in a contrasting spatial politics to the ways lifestyle sports engage with grey space.

Skateboarding

A collection of papers focus on skateboarding, building on and extending the context from which the grey spaces concept emerged. Firstly, Buchetti (2025) scrutinises the borderlands of skate goods and spots. Based on fieldwork in Tijuana, Mexico, he identifies ‘border grey spaces’, where the leftover scraps of clothes, skateboards, and tools made for the United States are reappropriated by Tijuana skaters. This results in a grey infrastructure for the circulation of material goods: although the Mexican city is a vital node in its production cycle, dominant skate lore suggests that California is the home to all things skateboarding. Buchetti conducted interviews with 62 participants to grasp how these dynamics play out in the lives of skaters. How do they make a claim to authenticity? What kinds of skate goods and skateable spaces are used, and why? And what does it mean to reside in such close proximity to San Diego – where some of the most influential skate brands are located? Buchetti takes the chromatic turn in lifestyle sports and leisure studies to articulate how greyness has economic, legal, symbolic and infrastructural dimensions. Key to his argument is the notion of secrecy: as much as

Tijuana is at the heart of the contemporary skate industry, its status is veiled, mystified, and indeed greified.

Casting light on an overlooked facet of skateboarding, the colourful subculture of freestyle adds to the chromatic debate. Noe (2025) highlights the intersectional dimensions of greyness in the understudied field of freestyle skateboarding in which practitioners accompanied by music perform competitive choreographed trick routines on a flat space without obstacles. Framing freestyle as a subculture that operates in a marginalised dark space outside of the dominant scope of street skateboarding, Noe adapts the framework of greyness by means of a dark materiality that freestyle skateboarders must decode in urban surfaces to successfully perform their tricks. This process results in the collision of freestylers' practice with material challenges such as unevenness and prescribed use of flat public surfaces designed for other sports such as basketball and the social stereotyping of freestyle as dead or androgynous.

Traversing the peripheries of skate culture to the core of the culture and industry, the grey spaces of California become our next focus. Chris Giamarino (2025) interrogates the 'pollution of publicness' in his article on grey spaces of polluted leisure through three phases of development at West Los Angeles Courthouse. The 'street spot' is culturally significant to skateboarders (Snyder, 2017; Willing & Pappalardo, 2023), from being a popular place to 'session' and even attracting skate tourists due to its skateability and being featured in numerous professional skateboarders' clips. Giamarino draws inspiration from Davis's (1990) excavation of public space privatisation 30 years ago and David Harvey's (2003) concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' to explore how grey spaces such as street skating spots are framed as desolate and polluted to warrant private development. The pollution of publicness, as argued by Giamarino, must be seen as a process of privatisation.

Through his skater's eye, Giamarino observes and discusses three stages of chromatic shifts that symbolise the changes in accessibility of the Courthouse for skaters. These are Monochrome (public); Shades (public-private) and Compound (private). In doing so, he draws attention to how the strategies skateboarders' adopt to access grey leisure spaces are often contested, ambivalent and themselves also 'grey' rather than clear cut. In particular, efforts for public space sometimes involve co-opting the tenets of neoliberalism rather than the subcultural resistance traditionally associated with skaters. He reveals how 'the construction of The Courthouse has produced contradictions between private redevelopment desires and struggles by skateboarders to preserve publicness'. Giamarino lives in LA, knows the spot well and has advocated for its preservation amidst council plans for its development. In his view, spatial justice requires a more vigorous refusal of processes that *pollute publicness* rather than making compromises and being co-opted. While specifically a case study of the West Los Angeles Courthouse, his paper's call to action can be transferred to other grey spaces that are urban sites for leisure and the sometimes grey politics and relationships skateboarders have to navigate with forces of privatisation.

Street skating has long been conceptualised as a provocative presence in mainstream society and yet studies grounded in an anti-colonial or de-colonial framework go under-recognised and are still emerging (Geckle, 2025; Kamper & Williams, 2025; Romero & Miles, 2025; Willing & Pappalardo, 2023). In Brian Glenney and Peter Dubois's (2025) article in this special issue, the authors propose

that ‘skateboarding, like surfing, exists in a settler ambiguity, a colonial grey space’. Their article positions Indigenous and Native approaches to skateboarding at the forefront and adopts an oppositional approach to counter a white-washed history of skateboarding. Skateboarders, they argue, can be a decolonising force, as seen in Indigenous-led efforts by Colonialism Skateboards and Apache Skateboarders, and Native women skateboarders such as Di’orr Greenwood, from the Dine Navajo Nation, and Rosie Archie, who represents Nation Skate Youth. Glenney and Dubois also introduce Indigenous concepts such as ‘the commons, horizontal mentoring, and soft pedagogies’ and make a distinction between ‘Ready-Made’ and ‘DIY’ skateparks.

De-colonialising grey spaces includes complicating the idea of ‘Ready-Made’ skateparks as sites for free leisure. Instead, the authors liken such sites to colonial reservations in terms of restricting what happens and where, and how it is surveilled. In contrast ‘DIY’ skateparks are proposed as radical and anti-colonial and with parallels to Indigenous concepts ‘land title’, rather than individualist ownership. They then present two case studies, Lead Skatepark to critique the former, and Wounded Knee Four Directions/Toby Eaglebull Memorial Skatepark (Eaglebull for short) to better understand the latter. Both are located next to toxic mines with harmful legacies to the Lakota People. Other sites are also discussed, with a shared dilemma: if pollution is colonialism, how can people decolonise spaces that are already polluted? While not settling for easy answers, the authors emphasise Indigenous concepts that must be prioritised to navigate what they state are a ‘colonialist/decolonialist “grey space” of dense socio-material meaning’ attached to skateparks.

Horizons of chromatic leisure

This mixture of scholarship exploring grey spaces in youth leisure, East Asian contexts, and skateboarding adds to an already robust body of scholarship on blue and green spaces. As a collection they identify the chromatic turn that has been unfolding in leisure studies. As a contribution to this body of work, they extend the notion of chromatic leisure to new horizons. These works offer insight into how a range of hues can be explored and mined for analytical insight. We propose that these framings of chromatic leisure provide important reflection on urban leisure, indoor-outdoor play, built and artificial space. Just as they engage with the material, they also explore potent ideas of ideology, pollution, capitalism, death, dystopia, and colonialism. Chromatic leisure is therefore a paradigm to work within, a framework to convert empirical observations with analytical depth. The geographic diversity of these articles captures the versatility of a chromatic leisure lens. The fact that they address a range of different contexts through a shared conceptual language makes this a diverse, but cogent, collection of work. Most critically this collection of work demonstrates that the concept of ‘grey spaces’ is malleable to new applications. Greyness is a point of departure in these varied papers which signal further explorations in chromatic leisure.

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Notes on contributors

Dr Paul O'Connor is Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Exeter's SPSPA department. His research focusses on the sociology of skateboarding, Hong Kong Studies, religion, pilgrimage and cultural hybridity. He is the author of the books 'Islam in Hong Kong', and 'Skateboarding and Religion.'

Dr Indigo Willing is the co-author of 'Skateboarding, Power and Change' with Anthony Pappalardo and art by Adam Abada (2023, Palgrave Macmillan), co-chair of the International Advisory Board, Skateistan and co-founder of award-winning skate initiatives. She holds Fellowships with the Winston Churchill Trust, University of Sydney and QLD State Library.

Dr Benjamin Duester is a research fellow in Musicology at Georg August University of Göttingen, Germany. He is a co-founder of the SSHRED (Skating, Sustainability, Health Research and Environmental Design) research network which highlights the creative and circular use of waste in art and urban practice. Ben is the author of *Tomorrow on Cassette: Tape Jams in the New Media Age* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

Dr Sander Hölsgens is Assistant Professor in Anthropology at Leiden University, The Netherlands. He is a co-director of Pushing Boards, a platform and international conference tracing the social impact of skateboarding worldwide. Sander's writing on skateboarding has appeared in *Skateism*, *Vice*, and *Jenkem*. He is the author of *Skateboarding in Seoul: A Sensory Ethnography* and *Skateboarding and the Senses: Skills, Surfaces, and Spaces* (with Brian Glenney).

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Paul O'Connor

SPSPA, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

 p.j.oconnor@exeter.ac.uk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4245-3473>

Indigo Willing

National Anti-Racism Framework, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4949-6791>

Benjamin Duester

Department of Musicology, University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5782-8015>

Sander Hölsgens

Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Universiteit Leiden Universitaire

Bibliotheken Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8770-8110>