Grappling with Difference: An Ethnography of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) in the West Midlands

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Declaration

I hereby state that the thesis is my own work and I confirm that the thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.
Abstract

This thesis examines the martial art of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) through the concepts of ‘race’, difference, cosmopolitanism, conviviality, and carnality. Using immersive ethnographic fieldwork in combination with traditional observation that took place over a seven year period, the research is focused on a number of concerns. This study attempts to understand how a corporeality that is marked by tactility and a merging of bodies is experienced and negotiated by its practitioners. In doing so, this thesis gains a sense of the relationship between BJJ’s affective resonances and the ways in which ‘raced’, gendered, and other body-subjects are experienced within its spaces. Furthermore, through its exploration of BJJ’s historical Japanese and Brazilian roots, this study articulates BJJ’s contemporary culture through processes of cosmopolitanism, globalization, and commercialization. Importantly, this thesis brings to life the relationship between BJJ practitioner interactions and forms of multiculture, cosmopolitanism, conviviality, and masculinity. By the bringing through of its corporeal emphasis, this thesis allows for a corrective to the otherwise centrality of the cognitive, representational, and symbolic that is generally foregrounded in prevailing debates about convivial and cosmopolitan possibilities. This thesis is therefore an ethnographic study that provides a comprehensive analysis of the martial art and combat sport (MACS) of BJJ, and its relationship to significant sociological and political concerns.
Glossary

**MACS**: Martial Arts & Combat Sports.

**Grappling/Grappler**: These terms refers to those MACS and practitioners of BJJ, Judo and wrestling, among others, in which joint locks, chokes, trips and throws rather than strikes (punches and kicks) are used.

**The Mats**: In BJJ the mats are equivalent to a football pitch; they are BJJ’s *field-of-play*. They usually consist of a foam of varying thickness that is usually covered with canvas.

**Drilling**: The act of repeating the same movement or technique.

**Rolling**: The act of rolling is the corporeal act of sparring in BJJ. Two bodies become entwined as they *roll* together on the mats, each seeking openings in the other’s bodily defences to exploit and make their opponent *submit*.

**Tap-out/Submission**: A BJJ practitioner will tap their opponent’s body or they will slap the mats in order to signal their vulnerability and let their opponent know that they are near to the point of unconsciousness or joint dislocation. *Tapping* signals one’s submission and is a request to release the choke-hold or joint-lock.

**Gi**: The gi is the traditional BJJ suit which consists of a top/jacket (and lose bottoms) that is usually made from thick cotton or increasingly also from hemp. The gi is tied around the waist with a belt that ranges in colour from white for beginner, to blue, purple, brown, black, and finally through to the prestigious red belt.

**Nogi**: Refers to BJJ classes in which gi’s are not worn. Commonly, nogi practitioners wear pocketless grappling shorts and a tight-fitting top called a *rash-guard*. Nogi practitioners might also wear tight-fitting leggings under their grappling shorts that are called *spatz*. Such apparel acts as a barrier that helps prevents abrasions and/or the transmission of skin infections.
**The guard/guard-puller**: The guard position is fundamental in BJJ. Guard usually occurs when a player has his or her back to the mats with their legs wrapped around an opponent. Their feet may or may not be clasped behind their opponent. A guard-puller is a BJJ practitioner who preferentially enters the guard position – someone who pulls-guard. Labelling someone a guard-puller can be used pejoratively as it denotes someone who immediately pulls-guard, and who doesn’t look for or utilise other avenues of attack.
Introduction

There are men and women here in whom I place degrees of trust I would never have imagined giving them. Police officers, fire fighters, ex-military, right-wingers, gun owners, and white-collar workers. These are the kinds of people that have threatened my life and well-being for more than four decades. They are people I have never trusted. In the duration we create together, somewhere beyond these socially constructed chasms called difference, there is a mat, a field of contact, where we call one another brother and sister, and occasionally talk politics and family and injuries. But above all, we talk about “the roll,” and the humans we’ve encountered there, and our love for it all, and there develops among us a tissue of relation and care that mends the past and offers a pathway for imagining the future anew. (Stevens, 2014, para. 20).

These are the words of an African-American academic and novice BJJ practitioner conveying his affinity with the martial art of BJJ. Set against deep historic and contemporary racial and political divisions in the United States, the spaces of BJJ are experienced by Maurice Stevens as settings that bring people together who otherwise would have remained strangers, separated by divisions of ‘race’, ethnicity, and gender. For Stevens, there is something about BJJ, its roots, tactility, and its practitioners, that offers an identity, and way of experiencing the world that has the potential to help heal the trauma of racism. Potentially, BJJ’s Japanese, Brazilian, and also American heritage, and the symbolism of this syncretism, acts to draw people into its cosmopolitan culture allowing them:

…to leave some of the constraints on social relations at the door of the academy just long enough to encounter others and oneself outside the usual boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, and political preferences (2014, para. 18).

In this way then, through the art of BJJ strangers become friends, moulded together through a corporeality that effaces notions of personal space. This intercorporeal essence (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), in which raced and gendered bodies are ‘locked in this most serious play that is neither unbridled eroticism nor brute violence’ (2014, para. 3) potentially affords inclusive forms of relations and interactional practices that reflect the convivial realities of this contemporary moment.
Adopting a similar perspective to Stevens in conceptualising BJJ and its spaces as diverse and potentially inclusive settings, this thesis draws on the work of Elijah Anderson (2004; 2011) and Paul Gilroy (2004). This research conceptualises the spaces of BJJ as *cosmopolitan canopies*, and it examines BJJ culture and its associated practitioner interactions through the lens of *multiculture* and *conviviality*. In following this route, this thesis looks to expand upon conviviality’s focus on racial difference to include other categories such as *gender*, *sexuality*, and *class*. Similar to Stevens, this thesis also foregrounds the role of BJJ’s corporeality in its analysis, thereby offering the potential to uncover the ways in which its physical intimacy and the real dangers that are posed by its techniques, feed into this form of conviviality. Furthermore, by exploring the wider historical and contemporary relationships between BJJ and forms of cosmopolitanism, this thesis constructs a comprehensive understanding of BJJ culture, both globally and locally. Importantly, the thesis adopts a critical approach to its analysis. It reveals the ways in which racism, nationalism, multiculture, embodiment, and gender all intersect with BJJ’s corporeality, epistemology, institutional structures, and the interactional practices of its practitioners.

The thesis is structured across six interrelated chapters. It begins by analytically situating its own theoretical basis and conceptual form within a wider field of established sociological knowledge. Chapter 2 addresses the methodological and philosophical nature of the research. It explores how the research was formulated and it discusses in detail the range of methods and approaches that were used in its construction.
Chapter 3, chapter 4, chapter 5, and chapter 6, reflect the empirical findings. In addition to their own bounded conceptual and empirical focus, the four ethnographic chapters also attempt to convey the physical, conceptual, and temporal spatial framework of the BJJ ethnographic sites. Mapping this spatial framework in this way helps to mould the extensive research into a workable thesis. This mapping requires asking an array of generative questions. Such as what are the physical features of the spaces, and how do these spatial features affect behaviours and interactions? What are the rules or expected forms of conduct within the spaces? Are there areas within the spaces where these rules can change? What are the specific practices that are taught, shared, refined, and adopted, and how are they contextualised by the space itself? And how do the temporal rhythms of the space affect these practices and interactions? By attending to these spatial and temporal features, these chapters provide an additional layer that contributes to the ethnography’s overall analysis. (It is important to note that while a particular ethnographic chapter’s focus and analysis might be weighed heavily in favour of either the bodily or the discursive, in practice, all four ethnographic chapters draw on both these areas, albeit prejudicially).

Chapter 3, ‘On the Mats’, focuses its attention on the pedagogical structure of a typical BJJ beginners class. Its analysis is undertaken through the prism of BJJ’s pedagogical framework as this allows for the chapter to convey to the reader BJJ’s corporeality. Furthermore, this structure helps to facilitate an understanding of the bodily in relation to BJJ’s development in early twentieth-century-multi-racial Brazil, and in relation to the Brazilian martial art of Capoeira. This bodily focus reveals the intercorporeal/intersubjective essence of BJJ’s pedagogy and its corporeality. In addition, this focus allows for an analysis of BJJ’s tactility; it conveys how touch is experienced by novice practitioners on the mats. It also highlights how particular bodies can pose challenges for those who are unfamiliar with the art’s corporeality. From these bodily themes, the chapter identifies the potential ways in which BJJ’s corporeality helps to construct a collaborative environment that is marked by partnership and mutual care.

Chapter 4, ‘Bodies in BJJ & MMA’, follows ‘On the Mats’ predominantly corporeal focus as it moves to explicitly foreground the concept of embodied difference. Through an attentiveness to the ways in which a particular aspect of BJJ’s historical legacy has shaped a present-day discourse, this chapter highlights how certain types of racialised bodies can be
[mis]interpreted through this aspect of BJJ’s corporeality. The chapter then takes a broader focus as it briefly examines racialised embodiment within the wider MMA gym space. The work of this chapter subsequently highlights a contrast between the ways in which racialised bodies are be framed in the spaces of BJJ and MMA respectively.

Incorporating those physical and temporal spaces that exist outside of a strict pedagogical and mat-based structure, chapter 5, ‘At the Edge’, analyses BJJ practitioner interactions on, and off the mats, through the concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality. In doing so, it outlines a relationship between BJJ practitioners and contemporary multiculture in the West Midlands. Following this, the chapter then turns its attention to the forms of masculinity that are constructed and practiced by BJJ practitioners within the field-sites. By adapting Gilroy’s conviviality and broadening its scope, the chapter analyses a particular form of BJJ hegemonic masculinity, one that is marked by inclusivity and openness rather than aggression and rigidity.

The final ethnographic chapter, ‘The BJJ Canopy’, interrogates how a global BJJ culture intersects with local institutions, spaces, and practitioners. In addition, it also details a relationship between BJJ and the medicinal plant of cannabis. This chapter aims to provide critical appreciation of how BJJ culture, its history and contemporary articulations can be understood alongside sociological understandings of cosmopolitanism, globalization, and commercialization. The thesis then summarizes it mains points in conclusion.

In totality, this thesis provides an exploration of the physical and conceptual features of the BJJ spaces involved in the ethnography. It also sets out an examination of the interactive trends, corporeal practices and institutional structures that are unique to this martial art and combat sport (MACS). And importantly, it provides an analysis of the relationships between the culture and interactive practices of BJJ, and significant sociological concepts such as ‘race’, difference, conviviality, cosmopolitanism, and the body.
Chapter 1 - Mapping the Literature

Introduction

At the heart of this thesis is an attempt to explore how BJJ practitioners interact and engage with forms of difference and to understand the place of BJJ’s corporeality and wider culture in these practices. This chapter draws out these broad themes in order to sculpt the thesis’ own theoretical and conceptual shape. Utilising a broad range of sociological and multi-disciplinary works, the chapter is structured over three interconnected parts that collectively thread together the thesis’ main theoretical concerns.

Part one explores difference, specifically the category of ‘race’. It draws on those theorists whose work into the embodied, affective aspects of ‘race’ and its lived experience provide critical insights for the thesis, and which are also important in the wider fight against racism. This section also attends to the relationship between racism and sport, and to BJJ’s own relationship between its historical development and the concept of ‘race’. It also raises important points relating to the concept’s complexity and adaptability, and how these concerns relate to the thesis. Following this, part one of the chapter closes by turning its attention to those sociological concepts that challenge, de-emphasise, or reorient how we experience ‘race’, and which also offer ways to reimagine how we live together.

Part two is concerned with the concept of carnality, specifically the importance of a dynamic and sensing body to our sociological understandings of the social world. It situates the body conceptually and in relation to the specific concerns of research that explores bodily practices. The concept of habitus is centred as a mediating construct that acts to coalesce the phenomenological and structural aspects of the social world. The study’s relationship to enactive ethnography and carnal sociology is addressed, as well as the concept of affect.

Part three addresses martial arts and combat sports (MACS) specifically. It draws primarily on ethnographic studies to offer an analytical exploration of those studies whose themes and
focus provide methods and insights that closely relate to the thesis. The dispositional nature of martial disciplines as well as the gendered dynamics of MACS spaces are all highlighted. These concerns reflect the thesis’ own interest in the distinctiveness of specific martial arts and the gender relations that are associated with their spaces and practices.

In total, this chapter explicitly situates the ongoing significance of ‘race’ and the impact of racism within contemporary society. Significantly, it also explores those concepts that act, in some sense, to challenge to the divisions of ‘race’ and which are concerned with the ways in which people live together and with difference. This chapter is also very much concerned with the bodily and embodiment, and the potential ways in which difference is experienced and lived. By contextualising these concerns within the framework of the martial arts, the following chapter offers an opportunity to analyses concepts like difference, cosmopolitanism, conviviality, and carnality, through a field in which such concerns are under underexplored, thereby extending sociological knowledge into these areas.

Part 1 - Difference

‘Race’

Importantly, Paul Gilroy (1998) and Anoop Nayak (2006) both highlight the fundamental problem of research that is concerned with ‘race’. They pose the question that, if taxonomies of human groups along lines of racial difference have no legitimate biological and scientific basis, that is, if ‘race’ is in fact a falsehood engineered from the demands of early capitalism and colonial expansion, then, as researchers, why should we enter into a ‘pious ritual’ (Gilroy, 1998:842) and continue to deploy and interrogate a concept that is sociologically recognized as lacking validity? Indeed, Nayak ponders that, ‘if ‘race’ is after all ‘an empty category that holds no value, [then] what does it mean to be writing, researching and conducting ethnography in the name of race’? (2006:411).

This paradox can be answered by Stuart Hall’s assertion that while ‘race’ may not be a biological fact, it is still however a cultural, social, and historical fact that continues to organise classificatory systems of difference between human groups. For Hall, therefore,
‘race’ remains ‘the centrepiece of a hierarchical system that produces differences’ (2017:33) as we understand and negotiate them in everyday life. This hierarchical system can be understood as being at the very heart of the philosophical foundations of Western society. Indeed, Charles Mills (1997) argues that ‘race’ stands as the tenet of a ‘white’ supremacist contract between the ‘white’ populations of the world that involves a set of formal and informal agreements that always differentially privileges ‘white’ people as a group with respect to ‘non-whites’ as a group. Furthermore, rather than the supposedly ‘raceless’, universal nature of Western philosophical ideals, what we find in reality is that the concept of ‘race’ has actually been a central shaping constituent of those very ideals (Bhambra, 2007; 2014).

Moreover, while ‘race’ may have no basis in scientific knowledge, Linda Alcoff (1999) highlights how it clearly continues to shape the social and political world in ways that belie its mortality. Within everyday contemporary social life, ‘race’ continues to remain a constitutive element of embodied experience. This lived experience of ‘race’ is of course deeply phenomenological (Ahmed, 2007) as it is ‘a ‘holistic’ experiential reality of embodied, affective, and spiritual depth (Hook, 2008:144). It ‘operates pre-consciously on spoken and unspoken interaction, gesture, affect and stance’ (Alcoff, 1999:17) and, significantly, ‘race’ works through ‘the domain of the visible’ (Alcoff, 1999:20) by attaching meanings to specific bodies. These meanings have remained relatively constant over time and have been resistant to overwhelming evidence that refutes their validity.

These inescapable, real-world effects of ‘race’ are facilitated through the ways in which discursive systems organise and regulate the social practices of men and women in their daily interactions with one another (Hall, 2017). Discourse in this sense is not just an abstracted reality of meaning and signification that exists only through language. Through this conceptualisation of racial discourses as ‘systems for the representation of, and the organisation of practices around one of the great facts about human society, namely the fact of difference’ (Hall, 2017:46 emphasis added), ‘race’ is therefore understood as being grounded in the daily, lived realities of social interactions.

At this embodied interpersonal level it can be argued that the discursive system of ‘race’ works through Franz Fanon’s ‘historico-racial schema’ (1967:111). This racial-structuring
framework can be seen as existing outside of the social encounter, but also at the same time it can be understood as constructing, and as being constructed through the social and historical practices that define the encounter. This schema has historically inscribed ‘black’ bodies with a variety of specific histories, qualities, and meanings. It follows then that Mills (1997), conceptualises racialised bodies as kinds of preordained beings that carry a halo of Otherness\(^1\) around them. Significantly, it is important to note that these racialised bodies always present the potential social interaction with a dilemma, a barrier, a divide wrought by the weight of a history.

This history of colonisation and slavery can be understood as having led to ‘black’ and ‘brown’ body-subjects being inscribed with essentialised qualities that mark them out as different to, and lesser than, their ‘white’ counterparts. Malcolm James (2021:11) cites the ‘colonial division of humanity’ as also being a ‘colonial division of intimacy’, through which ‘black’ and ‘brown’ body-subjects have historically gained only ‘differentiated access’ to the ‘membership of the family of mankind’ (Gilroy, 1998:847). Given the central role of the body within the concerns of this thesis, it is significant that Derek Hook (2008:145) notes that this colonially rooted ‘differential order of embodiment’ resulted in a disassociation of European, ‘white’ [male] identity from the body (Garrett, 2018). In contrast, it also led to an extreme over-representation of ‘black’ identity with the body itself.

Mills (1997) crystallises this racialised impersonal and interpersonal reality by conceptualising every ‘black’ person as a limb of a larger ‘black’ body that is irrational, overly sexual, encroaching, threatening, and which potentially disturbs the reified space and spaces of ‘whites’, who are first and foremost (cerebral) individuals and people, rather than just (carnal) bodies. Anderson helps to convey this threat in centring the figure of the anonymous black male who is avoided in public spaces and who is intimately associated with the fear of crime. Elijah Anderson highlights how within urban street settings this has led to a situation in ‘white skin is associated with civility and trust, [while] black skin is associated with danger and distrust’ (2011:15).

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\(^1\) Otherness/the Other – by using capitalization, this term acknowledges that social identities are constructed, contested and managed, and it recognises that the Other is defined by a relationship to the self.
It follows, therefore, that ‘the continuing significance of race’ (Feagin, 1991) directly manifests itself at the intersection of racialized bodies and the social realities of present-day society. What is meant by this is that in a UK which is now characterised by super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), where the now post-colonial, ‘black’ Caribbean and African and ‘brown’ S.E Asian, mixed populations, and their descendants, along with many other ethnic groups, have made home, the colonial racialised order of embodiment still continues to have resonance and play out in social interactions. Despite spurious narratives that claim that societies such as Britain and the US are wholly transformed nations with regards to racial issues, where ‘race’ is no longer a significant factor in society (Packer, 2008; Cho, 2009; Hollinger, 2007), the lived experience of racialised groups of people in the West challenges such narratives. The historico-racial schema that has since the onset of European colonialism inscribed ‘black’ and ‘brown’ bodies with undesirable attributes, continues to essentialise these same bodies, bodies who now it should be noted, make up a significant proportion of the domestic UK population. Within the realm of present-day inter-corporeal social interactions, this fact obviously has significant implications for research that attempts to engage with ‘the affective factor of bodily experience itself, with the ‘expressive phenomenology’ […] of body as a surface of experience that undergoes anxieties, visceral responses…’ (Hook, 2008:148).

The continuing existence and salience of a historico-racial schema, therefore, requires specific sociological research that effectively asks in what ways does the lived reality of continuing racialized embodiment impact at the level of the inter-corporeal social encounter? And how is this difference negotiated by people in everyday social situations? The contextualisation of this examination of the lived experience of ‘race’ within the culture and the spaces of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ), further enhances the intensity of these concerns. BJJ’s corporeality, specifically its intense tactility, means that research that is contextualised by its practice provides an opportunity to explore ‘the sensuality of racism; the phobias of racial proximity and contact, and those anxious physical reactions to the bodily presence of racialised others’ (Hook, 2008:149).
Racism & Sport

The field of sport generally ‘represents a particularly useful site for exploring the complex interplay between ethnicity, ‘race’, nation, culture, and identity in different social environments’ (Ansari, 2004:209). Examining the intersection of ‘race’ and sport can provide important insights into the ways in which historical racialised understandings of the human subject seeps into all areas of social life. Despite the popular belief in the meritocracy of sport, as evidenced by the achievement of ‘black’ athletes, sportsmen and women, sport, in all its various forms is of course riven with racism and essentialist ideas concerning the qualities or inherent abilities of certain groups (Nakrani, 2019; Gillet, 2021). Sport’s specific emphasis on those physical capabilities and mental capacities needed for success within its highly pressurised environments has meant that sport has always acted as a vehicle in which essentialised attributes are made visible.

Consequently, the success of certain groups within the sporting arena has fed into wider debates surrounding the significance of biological factors over those specific social and/or cultural determinants. In relation to the sport of athletics for example, while its world champions and its local club competitors appear to embody a diversity and internationalism, racialised understandings of the corporeal and mental capabilities of different bodies have historically been rife within the sport (Baxter, 2021).

Contemporary discourses surrounding the supposed genetic and environmental advantage of East African long distance runners, along with the controversial banning of women in athletic competitions who display and embody certain masculine traits (Brenner, 2021) all raise the spectre of the racialised body. Indeed, up until the mid-twentieth century it was still being widely argued that ‘black’ and ‘white’ sprinters should not compete together because ‘black’ people had an unfair advantage because ‘they were closer to primitive man that white people’ (American national coach in 1941 cited Baxter, 2021:49). In contrast, however, ‘whites’ were said to be more suited to long distance running because of their superior mental capacities (Baxter, 2021). Moreover, throughout the 1920s and 30s, ‘black’ boxers ‘were routinely prevented from fighting their ‘white’ counterparts or excluded for competing for titles to enforce the prevalent national mythology of the innate inferiority of African Americans’ (Gilmore, 1975 cited in Wacquant, 2005:452).
Arguments like these clearly highlight the historical ostracism of whiteness from the carnal realm and the pervasive discourse associated with ‘the meta-physics of whiteness’ (Hook 2008:144). For while ‘black’ body-subjects are carnalised and locked into their own corporeality, ‘white’ body-subjects, on the other hand, are understood as being embodied by the higher values of culture, intellect, civilisation, and rationality.

Interestingly, other significant work (see Alcoff, 1999; Garrett, 2018) has explored the ways in which a racialised connection between ‘blackness’ and the body within the field of sports can also be seen as embodying a process of positive racialization. This is a process that ostensibly turns the ‘symbolic equation in Western culture of ‘whiteness’ with mind and ‘blackness’ with the bodily’ (Hook, 2008:143) from the dehumanising into what is attributed as a positive. And so in this manner, many of the qualities that help to forge Fanon’s historico racial-schema, which animalise and explicitly tie the ‘black’ body to the carnal, such as ‘black’ physicality; aggression, rhythm, speed, strength are all qualities that within the field of sports can have immense social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and which are also important factors for sporting success and achievement.

Research that examined the impact of racial stereotypes within sports has actually shown that ‘white’ people admire and show affection for ‘black’ male sportsmen almost exclusively when they conform to these positive stereotypes regarding athletic superiority (Beilock & McConnell, 2004). Celebrated ethnographic research by Back (1996) that explored ‘race’ and youth culture in the UK, has also shown that while young ‘white’ youths in south London identified with, and adopted certain aspects of black culture, they also constructed it largely around racialised definitions of a black masculinity. This ‘black’, uber masculinity stems directly from the historic processes that have tied black males to the corporeal. And so while it may seem positive to highlight the natural speed of black men, their muscularity, the power, and the aggression inherent within their bodies, what this inevitably does is further validate racist tropes and refuted scientific theories that seek to biologize racial differences (Back, 1996).

This interpenetration of ‘race’ and the ‘black’ body also has the effect of pushing ‘black’ males to collude in this representation as hypermasculine in their attempts to win back a
historically over-sexualised and emasculated masculinity (James, 2015). This, in turn, moulds their body and directs them into fields such as sports, which then reinforces the belief in the naturalness of this racialized difference (Garrett, 2018:37). Subsequently, within the field of sports and martial arts, this differential order of embodiment hinders, and has the effect of disabling ‘black’ athletes. Instead of possessing a strong work ethic, ‘black’ athletes are described as being naturally gifted. Rather than having the technical skills or sporting intelligence like their lighter skinned counterparts and teammates, darker skinned sportsmen and women are instead described as being fast and strong (Nakrani, 2019). Furthermore, while young ‘white’ males might admire what they see as the natural abilities of ‘black’ sportsmen, they actually construct themselves, and ‘white’ athletes, as possessing better sporting intelligence and dominating games which they believed are based on these qualities (Turner, 2008). As with Back’s South London ‘white’ youths who viewed black masculinity as hard or bad, while these stereotypes are dressed up as positive characteristics, they are still problematically locked within the historico-racial-schema which re-affirms ‘black’ people as inherently different to ‘white’ Europeans (Back, 1996).

Race & The Development of BJJ

Narrowing this sporting focus onto the martial art of BJJ offers an example of how ‘race’ can be constitutive of a corporeal practice’s early formation and identity. The work of Jose Cairus (2011; 2012; 2020), which will be a recurring presence throughout this thesis, suggests that ‘race’ and racialised embodiment have been determining factors both in BJJ’s historical development and its epistemology. Cairus, a Brazilian BJJ black-belt, and academic, currently teaching at the University of Illinois, whose research topics include the African and Arab-Muslim diaspora in Latin America, as well as the history of BJJ, traces these factors back to the philosophical and political forces that were active in Brazil following the proclamation of the Republic (Brazil) in 1889. Cairus highlights how through a rising wave of nationalist enthusiasm for their new modern state, the previously proscribed martial art of Capoeira was adopted by progressive Brazilian elites. The integration of Capoeira into mainstream Brazilian circles increased after a touring Japanese martial artist called Miako was defeated in a prize fight by a Capoeirista called Cyriaco, who was also a former slave. Newspaper headlines such as ‘Asia kneels to Brazil’ (Cairus, 2011:102) highlighted the nationalistic jingoism which was associated with this victory.
However, this situation dramatically changed when another Japanese Jiu Jitsu/Judo fighter, known as Count Koma\(^2\) defeated a Capoeirista called Ball Foot in the biggest prize fight in Brazil at that time. Brazilian Capoeira’s defeat against Japanese Jiu Jitsu caused ‘profound disappointment among the local patriots’ (Cairus, 2011:104) and subsequently forced Brazilians to reassess not only their national martial art, but also their relationship to a victorious and modernist Japan\(^3\). ‘This style of Capoeira peculiar to Japan known as Jiu Jitsu, in which one takes the opponent down by grabbing his legs’ (Lima, 1903 cited in Cairus, 2012:37), stood as just one of many examples of the qualities that Japan and Japanese immigration to Brazil could bring. In contrast to Chinese immigration, which was seen as a failure due to a racialised schema that constructed the Chinese as indolent and backward (Cairus, 2012), the Japanese, on the other hand, were seen as ideal immigrants who embodied a rational, martial, and modernist Brazilian future.

Subsequently, as part of a sweeping modernist programme that embraced ‘using martial arts as a tool to promote eugenic improvement’, the Brazilian military adopted Jiu Jitsu and not Capoeira as their national martial art. It was believed that the modernist principles inherent in Japanese Jiu Jitsu, as opposed to the ‘primitive rhythms’ of Capoeira ‘would prepare Brazilians to rule over the nation-continent’ (Cairus, 2011:105). Capoeira swiftly moved from being the national martial art to be seen as an embarrassing remnant of slavery and a metaphor for backwardness. Capoeira embodied a brutish, Africanised carnality which was at odds with a European and Asian modernist rationality and intellect. Interestingly, as this distancing from Capoeira and turn towards Jiu Jitsu began, Capoeira underwent a process that attempted to de-Africanise it. Given the high proportion of ‘black’ Brazilians in the population, for whom Capoeira represented their cultural and physical resistance to slavery and racism, and, coupled with a desire of the republican elite to mould a Brazilian identity that would fuse both ‘black’, ‘white’ and indigenous heritages into *mestizaje*\(^4\), Capoeira had to be seen as mixed (2011).

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\(^2\) Count Koma would go on to teach the sons of a wealthy Brazilian, previously slave-holding family. These were ‘The Gracies’ who are heralded as having developed BJJ from their own adaption of Count Koma’s teachings.

\(^3\) The Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905.

\(^4\) A term used to describe a person of mixed racial and ethnic heritage in Latin America.
Consequentially, this would also help to obscure the embarrassing history of slavery, enable the Brazilian elite to whitewash history, and to perpetuate racism by keeping Afro-Brazilians marginalised (Cairus, 2011; 2012). These very same cosmopolitan elites embraced the Japanese martial artists who toured Brazilian towns and they wholeheartedly embraced the new *Japanese Capoeira*. Gradually the Japanese art was adapted by these early Brazilian practitioners until it distinguished itself enough to be labelled *Brazilian Jiu Jitsu* (BJJ). The direct descendants of those elites who were so active in trying to disassociate Jiu Jitsu from its Afro-Brazilian counterpart, Capoeira, would go on to spread BJJ across the globe. Through the reach of their global cosmopolitan network, these Brazilian masters would define and articulate the art’s core dispositions and help to situate the art as antithetical to so-called primitive fighting styles such as boxing or Capoeira.

This summarising of the historical development of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and its relationships to the concepts of ‘race’ and nationalism, provides us with a specific example of the processes of racialised embodiment. Cairus shows that BJJ was developed through a philosophical and embodied duality with Africanised Capoeira. In conjunction with the examination of ‘race’ and embodiment that this section has undertaken, this discussion helps to provide an explanation and justification for the study’s utilisation of ‘race’ as the primary category for its framing of difference. Given the UK’s historic and ongoing problematic relationship to slavery, colonialism, and its racially and ethnically diverse population, and also, in light of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu’s own relationship to ‘race’, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism, a sociological focus on a British based BJJ culture and its practitioner’s negotiations with forms of embodied difference, provides a unique sociological opportunity.

The Complexity of ‘Race’

Before turning this chapter towards the ways in which sociologists have attempted to ‘transgress categorical differences and establish a shared, common humanity’ (Berg & Nowicka, 2019:2), it is useful to briefly acknowledge the important contextualisation of racial difference within a specifically British social context. Although much of the work discussed so far has tended to focus upon the duality between ‘black’ and ‘white’, given the lived reality of a complex and diverse society such as Britain, the ‘black’ and ‘white’ binary is too
simplistic. ‘This does not mean [however] that ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘brown’ are no longer powerful biopolitical signifiers’, it just means that ‘race’ continues to slip its anchors and ‘disrupt how we understand its relationship to the body’ (James, 2015:715).

Stuart Hall’s sliding signifier (1985) helps in this attempt to appreciate the complexities associated with the lived reality of ‘race’. In articulating his position, Hall highlights how the term ‘black’ means something slightly different in the UK than it does in the US. Only in language are they the same. For Hall, ‘ideologies are systems of representation’ that are composed of concepts, ideas, myths or images in which men and women live their imaginary relations to the real conditions of existence. (1985:103). Or in other words, as ideology or ideological knowledge is the result of specific practices and circumstances, it follows that the same term ‘black’ carries different connotations because it operates within a different ‘system of differences and equivalences’ (Hall, 1985:108). Therefore, ‘it is the position within the different signifying chain which “means”, not the literal, fixed correspondence between an isolated term and some denoted position in the colour spectrum’ (Hall, 1985:108).

Also, it is important to note here that internally, within a specific society, these signifying chains are not static. The term ‘black’ and the associated understandings of difference that the term constructs within British society, has changed and has been reconstituted over time. While the specific signifying chain of both the US and UK for example, may have been ‘clearly inaugurated at a specific historical moment, i.e. slavery’ (Hall, 1985:110), the understandings, constructions and responses to ‘black’ bodies are situated and localised. ‘Racial arrangements and their implications [can be seen as] a response to and product of local arrangements, relations of power and historical legacies (Goldberg, 2009:1271). Subsequently, racialised bodies are always being transformed through the specific ‘vantage point of their formation and function’ (Friedman, 1995:17).

It follows therefore that understandings of difference as embodied by specific types of body-subjects are obviously not clear cut and simplistic. ‘Race’ and racism does of course not only correspond to colour, but also to other qualities, ideologies, and practices that are historically specific. Through this understanding we find that although Eastern Europeans for example, are indeed categorised as ‘white’, within a British contemporary signifying chain that was arguably inaugurated against a backdrop of hostility and fear over immigration and economic
insecurity, Eastern European body-subjects, like the Irish previously, have been Othered and inscribed with negative connotations (Back et al, 2012; James, 2015a). In much the same way, a contemporary signifying chain that was amplified by the terrorist attacks of the early 21st century, has similarly inscribed Muslim ‘body-subjects’ (Crossley, 1996:39) with specific negative qualities which are perceived and understood as different to the ‘white’ somatic norm. To grasp these complexities and this discursive functioning is to understand ‘race’ as a sliding signifier. Subsequently, difference, as it is understood and lived within British society is historically specific and cannot be reduced to just a simple construction of ‘race’ as marked by those most obvious and visible differences such as skin colour, or the ‘black’ versus ‘white’ duality.

This complexity that is a feature of racial categorisations and their lived experience has also been perhaps most famously interrogated by Paul Gilroy (2004). Gilroy argues that, on the streets of contemporary British cities, the ruptures caused by Fanon’s historico-racial schema have been partly transcended through ordinary, productive contact and cultural articulation that better facilitates a normality to the realities of living with difference. Today, in urban and even semi-urban areas throughout the UK, there has been a cultivation of what Amin (2013) calls an indifference to difference, whereby multiculture and everyday diversity has led to negotiation of identity mixture and the unspectacular breaching of categories of difference (Valluvan, 2016). While we therefore find certain sections of society, geographical areas, and public spaces, as continuing to be marked by racial and ethnic divisions and mistrust, we also find areas and spaces that are marked by social practices that can disarm, or that even act to challenge, such taken-for-granted taxonomies.

Living with and Reimagining Difference: Cosmopolitanism & Conviviality

The above review of ‘race’ has so far been concerned with conveying the weight and significance of its historical legacies, its contemporary iterations, its sensuality, and its complexity. This analysis has rightly situated ‘race’ as one of the most problematic and enduring legacies of modernity. It is not surprising therefore that in response to the divisions and antagonisms that ‘race’ and racism create, sociology has sought to explore those concepts that offer more inclusive ways of living and experiencing the social world. Rather than problematising difference, concepts such as cosmopolitanism and conviviality instead attempt
to articulate sociologically framed approaches to ways of living that embrace difference, or which at least conceptualise it as just another ordinary facet of contemporary social life. In light of this thesis’ theoretical framework, cosmopolitanism and conviviality are important concepts in the framing of the ethnographic spaces and in the analysis of the interactions that take place within them.

Cosmopolitanism ‘…is a term whose very generality has enabled numerous critics to expound at length on its features without realising any particularly concrete definitions.’ (Knowles, 2007:1). For instance, cosmopolitanism has been described as ‘infinite ways of being’ (Pollock et al., 2000:588). It has also been variously defined as an expansive act of the moral imagination and an ability to focus on both the near and far (Appiah, 2005). Other definitions (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002), construct cosmopolitanism as a metaphor for global democracy and world citizenship that challenges ‘conventional notions of belonging, identity, and citizenship’ (2002:1). Cosmopolitanism has also been conceptualised as ‘a way of thinking that declares its opposition to all forms of ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism’ (Fine, 2003:452). In this way, cosmopolitanism can be viewed at once both a theoretical approach toward understanding the social world and a normative stance in favour of universalistic standards of moral judgement, international law, and political action (Fine 2003). It has also been described as a concept that views human beings as shaping their lives within overlapping memberships of family, neighbourhood and identity groups that encompass all of humanity. In this way, for Appiah (2005), cosmopolitanism denotes both local and global allegiances that are not necessarily in competition with each other.

Apart from its ephemeral multiplicity however, what has also been called into question are the theoretical and somewhat distant nature of many of its sociological articulations (Wise & Noble 2016). Rather than embodying clear and accessible understandings that offer practical ways of living and relating, cosmopolitanism’s allegedly elitist malleability risks the effect of obfuscating its relevance to routine, everyday life. Clearly, the concept remains potentially an ambivalent and therein problematic term. This situation is compounded by the fact that ‘contemporary understandings of cosmopolitanism were formed during the heyday of European colonialism’ (Pollock, 2000:577). Indeed, Gilroy (2004:15), argues that the concept retains such ‘imperialist traces’ as it was entangled with the expansion of Europeans into new territories and forged ‘by consolidation and management of the resulting imperial orders.’
Gurminder Bhambra (2011) echoes Gilroy by asserting that such colonial processes are inextricably intertwined with the concept of cosmopolitanism. Subsequently, it is argued that in cosmopolitanism we find the articulation of unequal, differentially embodied positions such as ‘citizens and non-citizens, conquerors and conquered, fellow nationals and foreigners, majority, and minority’ (Nowicka & Vertovec: 2014:345).

Despite such critiques, however, I argue that cosmopolitanism still remains a very useful and adaptable tool. Indeed, its very malleability and openness to interpretation, which has been viewed as a shortcoming, I argue, can actually be viewed favourably. Viewed this way, cosmopolitanism is always in the act of becoming, of being utilised for a specific goal, or being used to describe a specific practice. Keeping an open sociological mind, upon closer inspection we are able to find conceptualisations that relate to the form of cosmopolitanism that this thesis is attempting to articulate.

Elijah Anderson’s concept of a *cosmopolitan canopy* very much reflects this form of adaptable and contemporary cosmopolitanism (2004; 2011). Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopies are defined as those public spaces that, within the context of contemporary urban social life, can be thought of as refuges that offer partial respite from the divisions of ‘race’ and the effects of racism. Anderson proposes that, despite the tension, fear and suspicion that is especially associated with the racialised embodiment of black males, there are still numerous and densely bounded public spaces that offer a respite from the tensions of ‘race’. Anderson conceptualises these spaces as cosmopolitan canopies. From parks to restaurants, shopping centres, markets, offices, clubs, cafes, gyms or dojos, Anderson asserts that they can all be potentially viewed as islands of civility; urban oases that allow people of different backgrounds to lower the barriers of ‘race’.

Under such canopies, through their own form of ‘folk ethnography’ (2011:xv), people can learn something about other groups of people that may in fact break down previously held negative stereotypes. These canopies of diversity, or cultural contact zones (Berg & Nowicka, 2019), are spaces that offer both partial relief and opportunity. Partial relief from the effects of an oppressive a ‘racial etiquette’ (Mills, 1997:52) that frames lived experience, and an opportunity to encounter and interact with the racialised Other. Under these canopies, Anderson (2011; xvii) claims that ethnic and racial borders are deemphasized, and
opportunities for diverse strangers to encounter one another in a relaxed context are created. People may even discover a cosmopolitan outlook or, they might even employ their own form of cosmopolitanism when confronted by difference elsewhere (Wise, 2013).

Through ideas such as a cosmopolitan canopy, sociology comes to envisage certain physical and conceptual spaces that act both as a partial relief from the adversity of racism, and as facilitators of social interactions that traverse forms of embodied difference. The gyms and spaces of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, therefore, provide an example through which to interrogate the concept of a cosmopolitan canopy, and to test the robustness of its claims to encourage interaction across barriers of difference. And given BJJ’s essential corporeality, this sociological focus can also provide insights into the relationships between the body and cosmopolitan practices. This focus on the particularities of certain spaces therefore has the potential to reveal how ‘spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that inhabit them’ (Ahmed, 2007:156) and also, to identify the place of social and corporeal practices in this construction.

In a similar effort that aims to localise and situate cosmopolitan practices in the realities of everyday life, Colin Jerolmack (2009), examines those cosmopolitan ties that pigeon flying fosters in some of New York’s working-class neighbourhoods. Rather than the racial and ethnic conflict that many community studies find among the racial-ethnic groups who share the same neighbourhoods, Jerolmack (2009:453) highlights how pigeon flying creates a solidarity amongst these groups which he calls ‘back fence cosmopolitanism’. Jerolmack found that the shared interest in the pastime of pigeon flying deflects much of the racial animosity and divisions that exist within these neighbourhoods. Divisions, which as Jerolmack observes, did occasionally surface as the men fell back on ‘ethnocentric’ (Anderson, 2011:190), racialised stereotypes to make sense of the other group.

Jerolmack’s (2009) study explicitly highlights how social practices can organise social relationships and demonstrates that ‘shared everyday activities can be as vital as ethnicity or class in primary group formation’ (2009:435). Through this observation, we find that a shared activity such as pigeon flying has the potential to not only deflect racial and ethnic tensions, but it can also come to define and bind these groups of people. Rather than being ‘black’, ‘white’ or ‘Hispanic’, these individuals became ‘pigeon flyers’, a label and definition that outweighed any socially constructed ethnic or racial identification. In Jerolmack’s work we
are therefore alerted to the types of processes that can help to disarm the barriers of difference, while at the same time actively constructing alternative, non-racially based social networks.

The work of Michele Lamont & Sada Aksartova (2002), also offers a practical and useful conceptualisation of cosmopolitanism as simply the bridging of difference in everyday life. Differing in its focus from Anderson’s (2004; 2011), conceptualisation of urban spaces, Lamont & Aksartova instead examine the ideological and emotional resources that people draw upon in their negotiations with difference. From their analysis of in-depth interviews with non-educated ‘white’ and ‘black’ working-class men in the United States and their ‘white’ and North African counterparts in France, Lamont and Aksartova used their respondent’s ability to transcend racial difference as the central tenet in their expression of cosmopolitanism.

Upon examination of the results from their interviews, Lamont & Aksartova (2002) found that the interviewees in both countries generally used universal criteria that can be applied to all human beings to evaluate other groups and themselves, such as morality, common physiology, or human nature. In other words, these men use ‘broad principles of inclusion, which they take to transcend group identities or ascribed characteristics’ (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002:3). These criteria, or ‘the cultural repertoires of universalisms that are differentially available to individuals across race and national context’ (2002:1) are essentially the culturally specific ideas, values and processes that enable these men to positively engage with the racialised other. Similarly, we might ask what cosmopolitan understandings BJJ practitioners possibly draw upon in their negotiations with difference?

Following a similar basis to Anderson’s ethnography of indoor food-courts in Philadelphia’s Reading Terminal, Hannah Jones, and her colleagues (2015), undertook participant observation in three branches of franchised leisure and consumption cafe spaces in different areas of England. Their study paid ‘particular attention to the ways these spaces work as settings of encounter and shared presence between groups often envisaged as separated by ethnic difference’ (2015:644). Counterintuitively, their research found:

that corporate spaces which are more often dismissed as commercial, globalized spaces of
soulless homogeneity, can be locally inflected spaces whose cultural blandness may generate confident familiarity, ethnic mixity, mundane co-presence and inattentive forms of conviviality’ (2015:644).

Rather than viewing the so-called ‘McDonaldization’ of leisure spaces as problematic, in this respect, the ‘very predictability/known-ness of such corporate leisure and consumption spaces’ (2015:647) actually enables ethnic mixity and materializes Gilroy’s notion of conviviality as the way in which diverse populations dwell in close proximity without insuperable conflict.

Given the growth in MMA gyms in recent years, and the rise of the so-called, McDojo, how might these findings assist in understanding the differences between franchised BJJ academies and more localised gyms? As with the regularity and standardization of corporate café spaces that facilitates a form of cosmopolitanism and conviviality, the popularity of franchised BJJ spaces might similarly attract people as they are conceptualised as more ‘open’ to confident use’ (2015:657), and more malleable than local spaces. Examining the differences and similarities between different kinds of BJJ spaces is part of thesis’ focus and is addressed in chapter 6.

Whilst sharing the same semantic terrain as cosmopolitanism (Berg & Nowicka, 2019:3), Sivamohan Valluvan makes clear that, ‘[a]s opposed to being a concept which simply names everyday practices of multi-ethnic interaction, conviviality speaks specifically to an ability to invoke difference whilst avoiding communitarian, groupist precepts. (2016:218). Conviviality can therefore be understood as referring to a contemporary way of living and interacting that arises out of the increasing super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) of British society.

In streets, estates, schools, places of work, and spaces of leisure, people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds have been living together, interacting, and getting on with their increasingly intertwined lives. Admittedly, this has not been without conflict and division. However, in spite of a predominantly hostile and racist political climate and significant changes in the make-up of Britain’s traditional immigrant base, people from different

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5 A McDojo is a pejorative term used to describe those martial art schools that teach a largely impractical, ‘plastic’ form of martial arts strictly in order to make money.
backgrounds have continued to successfully juggle the potentially explosive issues of difference in their everyday lives. Accordingly, this experiencing of difference as an ordinary and unremarkable aspect of life, has helped fashion related ways of coexisting and interacting that naturally reflect this reality.

Rather than erasing difference, conviviality draws upon a communally lived experience of difference to help facilitate social interactions that are largely free of the rigidities and rehearsed essentialisms that are imposed by ‘race’, nationalism, and religion. Paul Gilroy, who was central to developing this radical notion of conviviality in social theory, captures its ethos as a ‘liberating sense of the banality of intermixture and the subversive ordinariness of this country’s convivial cultures in which ‘race’ is stripped of meaning and racism’ (2004:131). In this way, conviviality points to an interrelatedness, and sense of shared life (Wise & Noble, 2016), that is reflected in the social practices and the interactional abilities that are contemporaneously apparent. As such, it is opportune to note that although conviviality and cosmopolitanism do share the same semantic terrain, conviviality remedies many of the inherent philosophical and theoretical problems associated with the allegedly abstracted and elitist nature of its conceptual counterpart.

Conviviality, more so than cosmopolitanism it is argued, ‘is deeply phenomenological for it understands sociality as being in the world’ (Berg & Nowicka, 2019:4). Rather than simply signifying an intellectual and aesthetic openness to people (as is the charge often directed to cosmopolitanism), conviviality turns sociological attention towards the specific practices that people employ in their everyday lives. Furthermore, while cosmopolitanism does offer an alternative to the normativity of ethnic and racial belonging and identity (Valluvan, 2016), it still does so from an epistemological position that mirrors the unstable foundations of both multiculturalism and community cohesion. In this sense, cosmopolitanism can be understood as affirming taken for granted categories of difference such as nationality, ethnicity, and ‘race’. And while it may do so from a position of ethical curiosity and interest in the Other, this attraction towards difference can be seen as being problematically tied to a ‘raced’ and ethnicised view of the world in which clearly defined categories of difference form the basis of one’s experiences of that world.

Conviviality in contrast, helps to move away from this ontological and epistemic trap by
offering the chance to move beyond ‘race’ and instead look towards a present which emphasises a togetherness or a withness as lived negotiation and belonging as practice (Wise & Noble, 2016). Importantly however, as Sivamohan Valluvan (2016) highlights in his reading of Gilroy, the need to think beyond race does not somehow imply a visualization of conviviality that is absent of racial difference. Difference, or rather the unremarkable breaching of racial difference, is after all the foundation upon which convivial relations are built. What conviviality does do however is to offer a sociological approach to difference that opens up a space from which to reimagine how we live together in a realistic and contemporaneous fashion. This realism or pragmatism that is inherent within conviviality, stems in part from its refusal to ignore or downplay the tensions, conflicts or unconviviality that are an inescapable feature of the lived experience of multiculture. Its ability to recognise that both amity and conflict inevitably exist side by side (Valluvan, 2016) makes it a central concept to the concerns of this thesis.

Conviviality, as well as Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopy, both embrace the grittiness of contemporary urban social life in which, ‘boundary-crossing and interethnic solidarities are also accompanied by local conflicts, ethnic exclusion and boundary maintenance.’ (Nowicka & Vertovec, 2014:346). Through their study of the Alum Rock area of the West Midlands, Karner & Parker (2011) discovered these kinds of ambiguities. They found that complex social realities challenge notions such as community cohesion and integration discourse. Instead, what their research highlighted was that local lives were lived ‘amidst mutually contradictory forces’ (2011:10). On the one hand there were everyday antagonisms between individuals from different ethnic groups, and on the other, there were enduring, as well as newly emerging bonds existing between individuals. Rather than being clear-cut and one dimensional, local realities reflected the complexities and ambivalences that appear to be a normal part of social life. It is precisely this sensibility in thinking about inter-ethnic and inter-racial interaction that makes conviviality a useful tool with which to examine ‘social practices, relationality, and institutional structures…’ (Berg & Nowicka, 2019:7).

The concept of conviviality, therefore, assists cosmopolitanism in its attempt to conceptualise processes that reflect the being together and the overcoming involved in contemporary negotiations with forms of difference. These two conceptual resources, therefore, jointly contextualise the spaces of BJJ and also serve as tools to analyse the ways in which BJJ
practitioners relate to, and interact with, forms of difference.

Part 2 - Carnality

Introduction

From the work that has been undertaken so far, it is clear that categories of difference such as ‘race’ have a continuing and detrimental legacy within contemporary social life. We find that historical processes such as colonialism have attached specific meanings and qualities to specific groups of bodies. Subsequently, we find that ‘black’ and ‘brown’ body-subjects have been intimately tied to the baser, carnal realm of humanity, while their ‘white’ counterparts are conceptualised as embodying a higher, more cerebral realm. Such ideas and understandings of the human subject have historically bled into the very fabric Western social thought since the beginnings of modernity. Consequently, the discipline of sociology itself has historically been ruptured by its own dualistic divide. Historically, the body, and all things carnal were seen as the possession of the biological sciences. The living, visceral human body was not sociology’s concern. Sociology was viewed as a social science that was concerned with social facts and the ways in which societal structures determined the lives of people. Feminist and ‘black’ researcher’s work from the mid-twentieth century has been instrumental in legitimising a focus on the body and embodiment as a focus of sociological study. In light of this historical legacy, and given the object of study of this thesis, the chapter now turns its attention to the body and carnality explicitly.

This section of the chapter begins by drawing on the discipline of phenomenology to frame its understanding of the social world. This conceptualisation is important as it situates the body and embodiment as fundamental to the way in which we experience and relate to our environment. Next, this part of the chapter explores Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and discusses its significance to these themes, and its practical applicability to the research. Habitus’ relationship to enactive ethnography and carnal sociology is also highlighted. Finally, the concept of affect, its specific qualities, and its relevance in understanding how
differently embodied subjects are experienced through BJJ’s corporeal framework\(^6\) is underlined.

Dynamic Corporeality - A Shared Social World

The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962), who could be seen as the foundation for modern social theory’s attentiveness to the body, posits a view of the social world that denotes a carnal bond between human beings; what he terms *intercorporeality* or carnal *intersubjectivity*. These concepts suggest that we live in a shared, ‘we-centric space’ (Gallese, 2014:6), where ‘our perceptual openness enjoins us to an interworld…a shared visual world or intermundane space.’ (Merleau-Ponty cited in Crossley 1996:29). The basis of our involvement in this intersubjectivity is our own body. Our dynamic corporeality, acting through, constructing, and responding to our environment, in conjunction with other bodies is what gives life to our world. This is an intersubjective social world precisely because we all share a related physical form. Because we are sentient beings, whose own subjectivity assumes embodied and therefore public forms, consequentially all subjectivity is therefore intersubjective. This fact of existence allows for a genuine human interworld. As the ‘plurality of consciousness’ is primary, it ‘takes the form of a wordless corporeality’ (Csordas, 2008:114).

In terms of the implications of these insights, the social therefore cannot be thought of as an object over and above social subjects or as only an object of thought. The social is in fact an intercorporeal, intersubjective structure where bodies are situated in relation to one another. In this way, the social is ‘reproduced through embodied action and it consists in sites of shared meaning and mutual…interaction where bodies act and are acted upon’. (Crossley, 1995:61). The *social* then, can be thought of as a system formed from and experienced through our bodies and their essential intercorporeal and intersubjective nature.

\(^6\) Corporeal Framework: This term refers to those aspects of any bodily practice which gives rise to a particular disposition or a type of *corporeal accent/*accented corporeality. In addition, it also relates to the specific shape, weight, intensity of movement, etc., of individual bodies. Furthermore, these terms also refer to those distinct sedimented dispositions and lingering accents of sports and bodily practices, that although are historical in essence, continue to affect the practitioner’s corporeality as they engage in new and distinct bodily practices within new and distinct spaces and environments.
Habitus, Carnal Sociology, & Enactive Ethnography

The concept of habitus also situates the body as the site through which the social world is brought to life. The concept brings together and fuses the opposing, dualistic traditions that have been part of modern sociology and social theory. Pierre Bourdieu states that the concept which he is most associated with, was envisaged by him as a way of breaking ‘with the intellectualist…philosophy of action’ (1992:120), but ‘without falling back into subjectivism, which [like objectivism] is quite incapable of giving an account of the necessity of the social world (1990:52). Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977) is an attempt to account for the ways in which culture, or ‘different conditions of existence’ (1984:170) become internalised through practices, framing one’s experiences through what appears to be natural (doxa) choices and decisions.

Using the culture of BJJ as an example, we find that in any given field or area of social life, there is an associated ‘accumulated labour’ (1986:15) or capital. In its embodied state, cultural capital refers primarily to the bodily knowledge and techniques of BJJ that have been deposited inside the body of an accomplished BJJ practitioner. This form of capital can be understood as ‘external wealth converted into the integral part of the person’ (1986:17). Through an objective set of rewards, i.e. belt colour-ranking and titles etc., the novice BJJ practitioner aligns his or herself to this particular set of implicitly understood goals and behaviours that defines what is valued, and what has status within the culture.

The habitus, or one’s way of being, is subsequently moulded in accordance with these contextualised sets of rules. And, because ‘the habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure’ (1984:170), the habitus of a BJJ practitioner actually acts back on, and in turn moulds the field of BJJ. It follows then that Bourdieu’s habitus acts to transcend the dualities of ‘determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society’ (1990:55). In doing so, the concept therefore acts as a mediating structure between the sociological poles of objectivism and subjectivism.

The theory of practice as practice insists, contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the
habitus, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions (1990:52).

Bourdieu makes clear here that the habitus is a set of acquired and transposable dispositions. These dispositions are a product of a history, of individual and collective practices that have been conditioned by ‘a particular class of conditions of existence’ (1990:53). This embodied history generates and organises practices and representations, working at the unconscious level and ‘internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history’ (1990:56). These dispositions proscribe and prohibit the individual’s range of freedoms, choices, ‘possibilities and impossibilities’ (1990:54) as they go about experiencing and shaping their social lives.

The relevance of this concept to the thesis is multifaceted. Firstly, at the broad, theoretical level, habitus lends support to the position that the social is in fact material and is located in the immediacies, relations, and practices of body-subjects. The concept of habitus is therefore part of a broader intellectual corpus of multi-disciplinary knowledge that situates the body and carnality as central to any conceptualisation of society. Secondly, habitus’ usefulness also relates to an important concern of the thesis; namely how does the culture and practice of BJJ influence the relations and interactions of BJJ practitioners? Subsequently, the question is posed, what are those dispositions that are unique to BJJ? This brings us to the third point, one that has critical implications for the way in which the research investigated such concerns and the methodology that it employed in this task.

Bourdieu (1990:52), makes clear that:

…one has to situate oneself within ‘real activity as such’, that is, in the practical relation to the world, the preoccupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence’ with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as spectacle.

What this means is that if I want to try to understand how the corporeality of BJJ frames interpersonal interactions and relations, then I must put myself (my body) in the midst of BJJ’s practice. By becoming a BJJ practitioner, I can gain a more visceral and more realistic understanding of its practice and its habitus. I will then be in a much stronger position from which to undertake my analysis of its dispositions and the interactions that take place
Pierre Bourdieu’s doctoral student Loic Wacquant has taken these insights and assiduously developed a comprehensive research method and philosophy that puts habitus at the heart of its theoretical and practical applicability. The concept of carnal sociology (2005) and its methodological practice, enactive ethnography (2014; 2015), recognises that researchers, like all human agents, are also sentient, carnal beings, and that we learn by doing. Therefore, through bodily immersion by the researcher into the cosmos under investigation, Wacquant argues, that enactive ethnography treats the mindful body of the analyst as a ‘fount of social competency and an indispensable tool for research’ (2005:466).

Drawing upon Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of habitus as contextualised bodily dispositions and skills, carnal sociology claims that ‘settings that inculcate, cultivate and reward distinction by transposable sets of categories, skills and desires among their participants can be fruitfully analysed’. (Bourdieu cited in Wacquant, 2014:2). It follows therefore that by undergoing an apprenticeship within a culture of BJJ, by mirroring the regimes of bodily action and acquiring the dispositions that characterises its practice, I gain a fuller, more situated understanding of this particular world. Consequently, enactive ethnography was the form of ethnographic research that I predominantly used to construct the empirical foundations of this thesis. This form of research is also addressed in chapter 2.

Affect

This part of the chapter has attempted to relay the intersubjective and intercorporeal nature of our existence. Indeed, as the carnal fabric of the social world infers, we are not self-contained in terms of our energies and so there is no real secure distinction between our body, other bodies and the environment. This ‘intercorporeal hinge’ between individuals (Csordas, 2008:111) that the concept of affect implies, helps to thread together the sense of carnality as it might relate to BJJ practitioner interactions. As affects are attached to things, ideas, sensations, relations and specific bodies, and given that the non-conscious affective resonance or ‘white noise’ of affect is the much more profound and compelling feature of any interaction (Daly, 2016:210), a focus on affect can therefore help to reveal the sensuality of racism and its effects on interactions and relationships. This research is accordingly mindful
of the ways in which BJJ’s tactility and physical intimacy might interact with the affective structure of ‘race’.

In his research on affect and racism, Les Back utilises affect to conceptualise racism as ‘a kind of rigged collective nervous system which is the result of a particular kind of education of the senses’ (2011:314) that cultivates affective states in relation to the presence of the Other. Therefore, ‘paying attention to the affective realm offers a way to better understand the workings of contemporary forms of racism and the misrecognition it produces’ (2011:314). Indeed, as ‘our nervous system is not only the product of flesh, nerve impulses and membranes, but the product of history’, and because ‘in a post-imperial society like Britain, the legacy of colonialism, war and racism inhibits and channels our affective impulses (2011:318), this focus on affect provides a sociological opportunity to better understand ‘the affective factor of bodily experience.’ (Hook, 2008:148).

We find affect, for example, in the narrative of the music, the darkness of the dancehall, or the sight of the reggae speaker stack and its becoming relation with the reader/viewer (registered as excitement/apprehension), just as we find it in literature, language and the spectacle. (James, 2021:18).

As Malcolm James makes apparent in his take on sound and music, a conceptualisation of culture cannot be thought of as primarily symbolic and as being transmitted solely through communication, just as it cannot be viewed as solely textual or visual. His research into the ways in which ‘the bass-mediated demands of the reggae and dub sound system [bled] into the fractured fervour of pirate radio…and then into the hyperlinked intensities and immediacies of YouTube music videos…’ (2021:2), conceptualises affect as relation. In this way, the sonic relates sound to the subject and by extension, sound to the cultural. For James ‘the sonic is culturalized sound matter’ (2021:6).

Other cultural theorists, such as Jeremy Gilbert (2004), have also addressed the so-called post-logocentric notion of culture and the body’s place within it by critically thinking about the place of music in conceptions of culture. For Gilbert, music has always posed a problematic ‘dilemma for cultural studies methodologies that have traditionally prioritised language as the model form of communication’ (2004:4). Music’s specificity lies in the fact that it is registered not just cognitively, but at the level of the physical body in ways which
visual and linguistic media are not. Gilbert conceptualises music as a form of organised experience or affect, one whose structured effects cannot be fully understood in terms of meanings. Precisely, they cannot be understood according to the structural logic of language. ‘A notion of ‘culture’ which sees in it only ‘signifying practices’ is therefore not up to the job’ (2004:4).

Lawrence Grossberg (1992), again working from within a complex cultural studies seam, also highlights the dilemma that the proliferation of non-linguistic musical genres, such as disco and dance music such as House, Techno, or Jungle/Drum & Bass, poses for traditional cultural frameworks and methodologies. The very existence of these largely non-vocal genres, ‘which exist primarily to be danced to suggests that any attempt to talk about music-in-culture must have recourse to an understanding of music as effective at the corporeal level’ (Gilbert, 2004:5).

Through an understanding of affect as relation in UK black diasporic sound, the rise of Grime music, and its relationship to music videos and the visual, James (2021) reveals how affect can be understood as incorporating both the sonic and the visual. Affect, for James is therefore not a denial of the textual or the signifying. This positioning echoes in some way debates concerning the nature of the social world and habitus’ role in mediating the objective and subjective nature of society. Similarly, this reading of affect merges the supposedly dualistic aspects of culture involved in its analytical study. This conceptualisation, therefore, enables us to theorise beyond the artificial division between material reality and consciousness. Discourse or culture in this sense implies that there is no ultimate distinction to be made between the material and the ideal, the physical and the mental, and between practice and meaning. Through these understandings, we again find a collapse of dualities, and in their place, discover fusion and interpenetration.

These ideas around the concepts of affect, discourse and culture are useful to the thesis because, in conjunction with established phenomenological knowledge and the concept of habitus, they provide a carnal conceptualisation of the social world that centres a sensing, dynamic body as the site of the social/culture. This is important to research that is not only framed by a bodily practice, but is also concerned with embodiment, and the bodily reactions to the intimate presence of the Other. The intercorporeal hinge (Csordas, 2008) that affect
implies, therefore, assists in the attempt to get beneath the surface of racism to reveal the relationships between this affective realm and the misrecognitions that a contemporary racist nervous system might produce (Back, 2011).

Part 3 - Martial Arts & Combat Sports (MACS)

Introduction

This final part of the chapter highlights those multi-disciplinary studies whose research and field of interest are focused on the martial arts in their various forms. Although in the last decade or so, there have been some academic studies that have been explicitly focused on BJJ (Hogeveen, 2013; Stevens, 2014; Kavoura et al, 2015), attempting to remain strictly bounded by only BJJ, given the relative lack of research, is not possible. This thesis therefore helps, in some small way, to rectify this situation. Furthermore, by following a multi MACS approach, this chapter situates the thesis within a broader field of martial arts, allowing it to identify those broad themes, insights, and ways of researching that similar studies of other artforms have initiated.

It seems inevitable that any ethnographic research focused on martial arts from over the last decade or so, will have drawn in some way from Loic Wacquant’s seminal study, Body & Soul: notebooks of an apprentice boxer (2004). Wacquant claims that his research involving his membership to a local Chicago boxing gym called The Woodland Boys Club, was originally visualised as a way for him to facilitate a better practical understanding of the relationship between a neighbourhood on the south side of Chicago and the lives of local African-American men. However, over time, Wacquant claims that he found himself increasingly attracted to the gym and to the sport of boxing more generally. What had started out as a way for him to access a targeted sample of the local population, in time grew into a deep affinity for pugilism. Wacquant claims that at one point he even seriously considered giving up his sociological career so that he could focus full-time on boxing. And so from this initial emphasis, as Wacquant grew more and more accustomed to the bodily techniques of boxing and as he began to build close relationships, or carnal connections with his coach Deedee Armour and his teammates, the focus of the sociological study changed. Rather than being focused on the allure of the street corner for the economically-disadvantaged men of
the local neighbourhood, Wacquant’s study, instead, focused in on the centrality of habitus to any investigation into social and bodily practices.

Indeed, what is arguably most significant about Wacquant’s study is that it provides a strong example of how a carnally minded sociology, one that employs enactive ethnography, can help construct deep understandings of the world under investigation. Wacquant’s ethnographic immersion in *Body & Soul* subsequently provides the MACS researcher a positioning that facilitates a way of studying the martial arts, and of incorporating into its methodology the concept of habitus. Wacquant makes clear that habitus was critical to his study of pugilism as the concept was both the topic of the investigation; he dissected the corporeal and mental dispositions that make up the competent boxer. But also, that habitus was at the same time the very tool of the investigation; the practical acquisition of pugilism’s dispositions served ‘as a technical vehicle for better penetrating their social production and assembly’ (2011:82).

Wacquant subsequently argues that his immersion into the world of boxing provides a clear example of the distinctive possibilities and virtues of a carnal sociology on both theoretical, and practical levels. His ethnographic research essentially consisted of studying the dedicated institutions and focused pedagogical programs that forged a specific habitus, by submitting to them in the first person (2013:4). For Wacquant, this meant that he immersed himself into the art of boxing; he actually became a boxer. This first-hand ethnographic immersion therefore allowed him to experience the martial habitus which is embodied within the bodily dispositions of the martial artist.

Through his own boxing apprenticeship at The Woodlawn Boys Club and his sociological analysis of his time there, Wacquant was subsequently able to explore and reaffirm Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as a set of acquired dispositions. Furthermore, he also reaffirmed that the practical mastery of acquiring dispositions operates beneath the level of consciousness and discourse; one’s body must first grasp the technique and this unconscious process overweighs any ‘mental’ understanding. His research also makes clear that dispositions will vary by social location and trajectory; different individuals, with different life experiences and backgrounds will have gained varied ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. As such, they will be more or less distant from the dispositions required by boxing, or
BJJ for example. This finding is potentially significant for understanding the relationship between those potential practitioners who might be drawn to the art of BJJ, and a BJJ club’s specific institutional habitus. In this way, we might find that the particular dispositions of a BJJ gym and its coach, acts to sift and weed out those whose own dispositions do not align with the club or the coaches’ particular ethos (see chapter 6).

Following this dispositional focus, the work of David Brown and George Jennings (2014) identifies and examines the types and range of dispositions that are displayed across the entire field of the martial arts. They contend that:

…there may be multiple core dispositions observable within the habitus of any single martial art, but that these dispositional schemata also tend to have some significant congruence across martial arts as well (2014:34).

Through this insight, we find that although each different martial art has its own set of practices that define and construct its own unique corporeal framework, there are also many important similarities that connect martial art practitioners of all disciplines.

Brown & Jennings identify three dispositions that they assert are integral regardless of whether one is a boxer, a BJJ practitioner, or any other martial artist. The first disposition is what they term the combat efficacy-efficiency disposition. This is related to one’s ability to defend one’s self in a violent situation. Those subjects displaying this combat efficacy-efficiency disposition had a past history of street-fighting or had been in the armed forces. Their unique past history intersected with their martial arts practice and gave rise to a disposition that reflected this past history and their present motives for learning the art.

The second disposition is what Brown & Jennings term the practice-perfection-mastery disposition. For practitioners displaying this disposition, one’s ability to be the best one can be, to realise one’s potential is paramount. This disposition ‘emerges as artistic in orientation’ (2013:42) and can be seen as an ongoing, never-ending, and inevitably unachievable pursuit. The third disposition is termed the body-self environment disposition. This disposition is conceptualised as a progressive tuning in, or a sensitivity to one’s embodied self and the external environment as training progresses. This disposition is seen as having intrinsic value,
for it instils a sense of being relaxed, conscious and more at ease with one’s self. This disposition is also linked to the spiritualised, self-development interpretation of the martial arts. As the thesis will explore in chapter 6, these insights have significance in understanding the particular nature of individual BJJ spaces, and the types of martial artists they attract and are able to keep.

Bourdieu was keen to stress that, ‘most commentators completely overlook the significance between my usage of [habitus] and the totality of previous usages. I said habitus so as not to say habit…’ (1992:122). Habitus, for Bourdieu conjures a generative, creative capacity, whereas the term habit signals a mechanistic approach. However, studies that attend to the mechanisms of a martial art’s pedagogy, can also provide important insights into processes of dispositional inscription. Bryan Hogeveen (2014) in his study of habit and BJJ, draws upon Merleau-Ponty in identifying habit as providing the corporeal schema necessary for smooth and effortless navigation and negotiation of the world. In this way, ‘habit is knowledge in the hands’ that readies the understanding body for meaningful interface in the world’ (Hogeveen, 2014:80-81).

Hogeveen’s research highlights that habit enables us to seamlessly navigate through space and ‘only bodies that are fully immersed in this space acquire the requisite corporeal schema to grasp its significance’ (2014:84). He makes clear that habit is not won through intellectual engagement. You can read about how to perform an action countless times but until the body experiences the feel of the gi, the opponent’s angle of the body and resistance, the movement will not be fully assimilated into the body.

Hogeveen’s work reveals how pedagogical habit and repetition allows for pre-reflexive negotiation and navigation of the world. Repetition or drilling is shown to gradually allow for techniques and actions to become second nature; one no longer tries to perform the technique, one simply performs the action without thinking. These insights can shed light on specific BJJ’s techniques and the ways in which they are shared and transferred through the pedagogical structure of a typical BJJ beginners class (see chapter 3).

While enactive ethnography contends that immersion, and the embodiment that it facilitates, can offer the sociologist a deep knowledge that otherwise might remain hidden, it is also true
that a more traditional ethnographic approach can also yield deep insights. The accumulated work of Sara Delamont (Delamont, 2006; Delamont & Stephens, 2010; 2014; Rosario, Stephens & Delamont, 2010), into the Brazilian martial art of Capoeira, follows this more traditional research posture. Her work subsequently brings to life an artform that is imbued with a rich Afro-Brazilian heritage. Through Delamont’s and her colleague’s body of work on Capoeira, we discover, among other things, that ‘race’ and nationality, as well as physical supremacy, are crucial parts of the Capoeira’s teacher’s authority; teachers of Afro-Brazilian descent are seen as representing the true embodiment of Capoeira. My own research is interested in how BJJ might reflect and/or contrast with Capoeira in this respect. Given that Capoeira and BJJ share Brazilian roots, an examination of the similarities and of the differences between these two fighting styles could provide new insights into their respective relationships to forms of racialised embodiment (see chapter 3).

Gendered Spaces

This previous section of the chapter has served to introduce the reader to the sociological field of MACS. This brief review has highlighted the significance of the concept of habitus for both the focus and also for the method used to conduct the research. The place of pedagogy and habit, as well as the potential similarities between Capoeira and BJJ were discussed. Having provided this overview, the chapter now turns to the very specific issue of gender and of gender relations within MACS spaces.

Given that the cultures and spaces of martial arts have been described as a ‘masculine domain par excellence’ (Mennesson, 2000:28), exploring how issues relating to gender difference become self-evident, particularly in terms of how gender is negotiated by BJJ practitioners and how the relationship between affect, physical proximity, and other forms of embodied difference exceed that of solely ‘race’ or ethnicity, will be critical. Potentially, BJJ’s corporeality within mixed-sex training environments unsettles prevailing norms and conventions regarding bodily space and physical contact. Examining BJJ practitioner’s negotiations with gender difference subsequently helps to gauge and complicate the much vaunted, inclusive and progressive nature of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu culture (Kavoura et al, 2015). Insights gained in this respect could, therefore, broaden the way we conceptualise forms of cosmopolitanism and conviviality.
In his ethnography of MMA cage fighters, Dale Spencer (2012) found that essentialized notions of gender were active constructs that affected the attitudes of many of his male subjects regarding female participation in MMA. According to Spencer, the MMA fighters he studied had three primary responses to the inclusion of female bodies in MMA, which he classed into three distinct types: tradition-based rejection, ability-based rejection, and pro-female affirmation.

It’s too brutal for women…I don’t know why she wants to mess up her face…I don’t like it, women should stay at home and cook…I don’t want to see her [girlfriend] come home with a missing tooth or black eye or seeing guys doing MMA with her. (2012:67).

The above comments by Spencer’s research subjects typify the tradition-based rejection, which was, in fact, the most commonly found type.

I want to see the strongest and fastest and they [women] are not the strongest and fastest…I tried to watch women boxing and it’s not the same. Even watching Ali’s daughter there, it is still not all that good to me…I think women should hold the numbers between rounds. (2012:67).

This ability-based rejection was the second most common type found within the research subjects. Female bodies here are essentialized as having particular feminine qualities that make them unfit for the sport of MMA.

I do think women should fight…my best students have been women…they have less ego…women are the most technical’ (ibid).

These comments reflect the pro-female affirmation type, which was the less commonly found amongst Spencer’s subjects. This type invariably reflected an understanding that females have a habitus that relies less on physical strength and is comprised of superior technique.

Theoretically then, given the widely-held belief in BJJ culture that it exemplifies the superiority of technique over strength, BJJ might possibly offer women the chance to compete with men on a slightly more equalised level. Or, at the very least, there is a
possibility where the institutionalised habitus of BJJ creates a more favourable alignment with the symbolic capital afforded to women, qua women.

Equally, for Alex Channon (2013), the martial arts are sites where patriarchal notions of male physical power and normative masculinity can be eroded from within through female participation. ‘Because of their important symbolic link with dominant codes of masculinity, [martial arts] can also be a powerful site through which to challenge binary, hierarchical conceptions of gender.’ (2013:2). Women’s development of the supposedly masculine ability to physically dominate others poses a direct challenge to a key site of male fantasy. By partaking in the martial arts and through developing a body suited to physical combat, women can reject essentialized notions of feminine passivity and fragility and can become the living expression of feminist resistance (McCaughey, 1998).

This transformative potential of martial arts in terms of dismantling essentialized notions of femininity and masculinity has been explored by Phillipa Vilija, Mark Mierzwinski & Laura Fortune (2012). Their research found that while those women involved in the martial arts did challenge essentialised notions of gendered embodiment, this challenge and empowerment remained only at an individual level. These female martial artists saw themselves as different to and as challenging what they saw as normative gender roles and attributes. One participant said that she ‘...had never been a girly-girl’ (2012:532), and all saw themselves as unlike, and different to, the majority of women, whom they saw as embodying normative notions of femininity. Importantly, they did not problematise those normative views which position women as weak and men as strong.

Importantly, their work found that in order challenge these conceptions of gendered embodiment, women needed to not only develop those physical attributes of the martial artist, but that this martial habitus also needed to be developed in conjunction with the questioning of normative notions of femininity. In other words, the cultivation and habituation of women’s physical strength does not necessarily result in the development of a feminist consciousness (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998). Physical feminism (McCaughey, 1998) necessitates that physical development needs to be accompanied by the raising of a feminist consciousness if it has any chance of dismantling notions of patriarchy and constructing a feminist habitus within female martial artists. In light of these discussions, what remains of
interest to me is whether and how a putatively cosmopolitan, inclusive ethos ascribed to BJJ spaces might also forge a consciousness that is in fact critical of those social ideologies that seek to divide and essentialise along the lines of difference such as ‘race’, but also, as is emphasised here, gender.

While women’s involvement in the martial arts challenges the fantasy of male physical supremacy and has transformative potential on an individual level in terms of gendered embodiment, within such mixed-sex training environments men too, are asked to relearn basic bodily assumptions and comforts. In other words, the transformative potential of mixed spaces is not just limited to women. Channon (2013) captures the dismantling of ideas surrounding male physical superiority within men themselves, when they are forced, through mixed-sex training environments, to actually hit and be hit by women. Channon highlights how his:

..early engagement with mixed-sex training was structured by the learned dispositions of a lifetime saturated with experiences and images of male physical prowess, with a concurrent default belief in relative female ‘frailty (Channon, 2013:7).

Through auto-ethnographic accounts of his own martial art journey, Channon highlights the problematic nature of the masculine habitus in relation to mixed-sex training environments. This is a masculine habitus that has been socially conditioned since boyhood to not hit girls. This paternalistic, gentlemanly conduct is obviously problematic, both in terms of reheating a chivalric patriarchy, and also in relation to the very nature of terms of mixed-sex training environments. Indeed, how are women able to develop the skills to become an effective fighter if, while sparring, their male training partners refuse to hit them? Where else are they able to train? Indeed, female participation in mixed-sex training environments is essential given the lack of high-level female-only martial art spaces. As most spaces are predominantly male dominated, women and men must therefore face having to spar and hit one another. According to Channon (2013), having to spar with a women affected male martial artists on a visceral level. These men were unable to engage in effective training or sparring with women. Channon found that this was especially so with novices who weren’t used to seeing women fight.
In relation to BJJ, this aversion to hitting women could possibly become reconfigured into an affective unease or nervousness concerning the intimate nature of rolling with a woman. BJJ’s intimate physicality might therefore act as a barrier that can prevent certain men from taking up the art and which successful newcomers might have to learn to overcome and embrace. If we substitute a male for a female body, we can see that the corporeal tension changes. Male BJJ practitioners do not have to hit women, but in mixed sex environments they do have to roll with them, and this physical intimacy arguably produces a tension unique to BJJ. A subsequent reluctance of men to engage in honest sparring with women arguably causes exactly the same problems for female BJJ practitioners as they do for female practitioners of the striking martial arts; if men will not realistically engage with women, then how can they progress and become the best martial artists they can be? The female martial artists that Channon interviewed spoke of their frustration with males who refuse to hit them while sparring:

Sometimes I feel like saying will you fucking hit me for once? Because otherwise it’s pointless me being here…That’s the one thing that does annoy me when I spar with guys…I just need someone to be able to hit me, that’s the only way to learn how to keep your defences tight if you get hit in the face. (2013:10).

In addition to these specific issues, female pugilists face various forms of discrimination in gyms and are invariably perceived as outsiders (Halbert, 1997) or viewed as space invaders (Puwar 2004). In this sense, normative masculinity not only polices which bodies are seen as natural and which belong in any given space, but it also prescribes modes of conduct, interactions, and relationships between the genders. However, as women gain physical strength and spar and fight, which traditionally have been practices associated with men and masculinity, such exposure to women in mixed-sex training environments and having to directly face the reality of sparring with a woman, forces men to redefine their female sparring partners and female martial artists in general. Through these spaces and their practices, gender is performed in ways that therefore challenge existing directives. These practices, in turn, open up spaces for new understandings and a more realistic appreciation of the capabilities and qualities of women’s bodies. Uncovering and examining such processes within the domain and spaces of BJJ will provide further insights and broaden this wider body of sociological and multi-disciplinary knowledge.
Before concluding, it is important to briefly highlight the work of Akihiko Hirose & Kay Keiho Pih (2010) (see chapter 3 for a detailed analysis). Their research examined BJJ and other submission fighting styles through the lens of hegemonic masculinity. They found that American MMA publics viewed martial arts like BJJ as having feminine traits, and in opposition to the more manly fighting styles such as boxing or kick-boxing. These findings are important for the research as they point towards the possibility that BJJ’s tactility might in fact help to mould a form of gender relations that reflect BJJ’s corporeal intimacy. Indeed, what might it be about BJJ’s corporeality that has the potential to affect responses in this way? Subsequently, we might ask whether BJJ practitioners practice a form of masculinity that is different to that which is practiced by other martial artists? In attempting to answer these concerns, this thesis can help to expand on Hirose & Pih’s findings, and to also position itself to better understand the ways in which the corporeality of BJJ contextualises its practitioner’s interactional practices.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to map those works, those theorists, and those concepts that form the sociological foundations upon which this thesis sets out its own important concerns. Beginning with the concept of difference, part one of this chapter set out its justifications for its use of ‘race’ as the study’s main category of difference. Through its examination of a range of works, part one of the chapter highlighted how the divisive and adaptable concept continues to structure the lived reality for a significant proportion of the UK’s population. Part one also pointed to the ways in which ‘race’ and racism have been interwoven with the field of sport, and with the historical development of BJJ. Furthermore, turning its focus towards how sociology has attempted to conceptually overcome the divisions of racial difference, this review in part one also examined the concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality, and addressed their significant relationship(s) to the research.

Part two of the chapter explored carnality, specifically how the body and carnality in general are central concerns to contemporary understandings of lived experience, and the very fabric of the social world. Part two also examined the concepts of habitus, carnal sociology, enactive ethnography, and affect, and their conceptual and methodological relevance to the
study. Part three of the chapter addressed MACS and that body of knowledge within the
study of the martial practices that is concerned with habitus and with the unconscious
application of habit. Part three then turned its focus to the gendered nature of martial art
spaces and the specific issues that women martial artists face. Finally, part three briefly
positioned masculinity and its significance for the study.

Overall, this chapter has outlined and examined those main areas of sociological interest that
arise out of the unique concerns of this ethnographic study. In doing so, it has set out its own
sociological agenda, and has crafted its theoretical and conceptual form.
Chapter 2 - Methodology & Research Philosophy

Introduction

The following chapter examines the methodological and philosophical concerns of the research and the challenges of the research process. This methodological unpacking follows a temporal order in that the chapter commences by returning to the very beginnings of the project. It does so in order to relay why and how the research was imagined and formulated the way it was. This introduction attempts to make explicit the sociological threads that the research tries to draw out. It captures and conveys these concerns by drawing upon Elijah Anderson’s idea of a cosmopolitan canopy, and also Malcolm James’ notion of intimacy (2021) to situate its study. The section subsequently reflects upon the construction of a research design that enabled me to sufficiently capture the interactive qualities and relations that are contextualised by the corporeality and spaces of BJJ. I draw on Wacquant (2004) to argue that by gaining a broad, emic knowledge of a wider BJJ culture in partnership with acquiring a carnal appreciation of its corporeality, the research stands as a full-bodied encapsulation of this particular world. And significantly, through the gaining of this carnal knowledge, the research is better placed to understand the possible ways in which BJJ’s tactility, hybrid roots and cosmopolitan spaces come to inform and shape interactions between its practitioner-participants.

Following this detailed discussion, the chapter turns to the specific methods that were used to help the project achieve its goals. Firstly, the specific sites, their geographical and physical qualities, the makeup of the participants, and the ways in which these spatial and personal characteristics came to impact the research are covered. Next, the chapter turns to gaining access to the research spaces and addresses those issues associated with gatekeepers or primary practitioner-participants. The chapter then discusses and reflects upon the project’s utilisation of enactive ethnography. Particular attention is paid to the physical practicalities of conducting such research, the implications that this form of ethnography carries in terms of positioning and situating the researcher. Autoethnography is also briefly addressed here. The chapter then moves on to discuss how my own racial embodiment raised specific
methodological challenges that are relevant in relation to research that explores ‘race’, and for a ‘black’ ethnographer conducting ‘cross-racial’ ethnographic research. The focus then moves on to discuss the other methods that were also used, such as the use of interviews. It also addresses the study’s selective use of social media.

The chapter here also specifically addresses the critical act of writing the ethnography. The construction and use of fieldnotes, the practical and ethical dilemmas involved in deciding what to include and the actual conceptualisation of the themes and the structure of each of the four ethnographic chapters are similarly addressed. The ethical considerations that bound and informed the research are also tackled. The ambiguities and tensions involved in trying to adhere to the requirement of participant anonymity, while simultaneously trying to create honest, interesting, and sociologically significant research are worked through. Finally, the chapter concludes by briefly summarising the main methodological points covered.

Positioning the Path

I commence this methodological examination by returning to the very beginnings of the research prior to finding its present, quite different, shape. Initially, the proposed research reflected the work I was doing immediately prior to doctoral study. Working for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) at the start of the economic recession that began in 2008, it became clear that the ongoing political demonisation of welfare recipients and subsequent tightening of welfare provision detrimentally impacted certain groups more than others. The increasing tacit pressure that was put on front-line DWP staff to increase the use of benefit sanctions had the subsequent effect of targeting those individuals and groups who were seen as easy statistical targets. From observations and experience, it was clear that those targeted overwhelmingly included recently arrived immigrants. As well as among those who might crudely be described as the urban underclass of all ethnicities, those categorised as ‘non-white’, seemed to be particularly disposable. And so the chance to leave what was becoming an increasingly toxic work environment for an opportunity to study and examine how state welfare provision was part of a wider history that intimately tied its contemporary iteration to racialised and [post]colonial understandings of Britain and Britishness, felt like a very welcome escape.
It was clear from the outset that research that was focused on the welfare state was part of a wider body of research that fitted well within the conventions of a sociology or social policy tradition. However, despite the project’s potent timeliness, it soon became clear that this particular research path was not appropriate for me. I worried that its sociological focus risked becoming mired only in the effects of racism and that this was something that could potentially overwhelm me. Engaging with this initial research path had stirred my own uncomfortable sensitivities towards racism’s seemingly insurmountable effects. What became clear to me at this stage was that whatever research I would construct and undertake, it would have to offer a different framework and focus to solely examining the discrimination and exclusion of social groups within British welfare regimes.

I came to understand that my own positioning required me to approach studying the issue of ‘race’ and other forms of difference, through the idea of spaces and relationships that offered the possibility of subduing division, and which exhibited forms of cosmopolitanism and conviviality. Any new research project that I undertook would have to approach the study of difference in a way that was conscious of, and ideologically grounded in, the critical historical, political, and social realities of racism. Significantly however, the interplay between my embodied self and my role as researcher also positioned me to explore these concepts through the negotiations and forms of intimacy that takes place between people.

In many ways, my uncertainty at the initial direction of my research fits within a broader historical dilemma with regards to researching race. Bulmer and Solomos (2004) point out that:

Since the earliest stages of scholarly research in sociology about ‘race’, there has been some tension about what the focus should be. Should the core concern be to study the relations between racial and ethnic groups in specific social environments? Or should the focus be on the impact of processes of discrimination and exclusion, and their impact on minority communities? (2004:3).

The redirection of a project that was at first focused on processes of discrimination to one that would attempt to explore relations and negotiation in specific social environments was undoubtedly influenced by my background and personal outlook. It is inevitable that a researcher’s own background informs the research process (Holmes, 2020) and this fact was most clear at these initial stages of formulation and development. The fact that I had been
born into a ‘mixed-race’ family of Barbadian and Anglo/Irish parents, meant that I had been witness to the ambiguities, (mis)understandings, conflicts, irrationalities, and solidarities that inform all aspects of British multiculture and social life. Furthermore, the geographical and temporal context of these familial intricacies had also framed my research positioning. My home city of Coventry was severely impacted by the manufacturing decline of the 1970’s and 80’s. It was also marked by the rise of overtly racist and nationalist movements who brought violence and division to the city’s streets and public spaces (Mandair, 2021). Growing up as a teenager in the 1980’s, I had been both witness to and the object of racist violence. Learning to box in order to fight and defend oneself in one of Europe’s most violent cities (Thompson, 1994; 2001) was therefore a necessary task. In addition to helping equip me with the skills needed to defend myself, learning to box in the local gym, (which incidentally sat across the road from where I would get to meet Muhammed Ali7 on his visit to Coventry in 1983), also exposed to me the possibilities of specific practices and spaces to bridge the divide between groups of people. My training sessions at the boxing club were the only occasions that I remember my ‘black’ Bajan father and ‘white’ Irish Catholic grandfather interacting warmly together.

This sense of coming together, of overcoming racial division and of occupying and building a shared sense of space was also an integral part of the city’s musical culture and heritage. Coventry’s Two Tone music phenomenon was rooted in the West-Indian sounds of Ska, but it was moulded from the realities of the urban decay, and in the multiculturalism of UK city life (Guardian, 2021). Two Tone, with Coventry bands like The Specials and The Selecter, reflected a hybridity or syncretism that would be at the heart of UK youth culture going forward to the present day. This multi-racial merging that Two Tone signified was to be reborn and intensified in 1990 when Britain’s first legal all-night dance venue, The Eclipse, opened in Coventry. The multi-ethnic and multi-racial, Hardcore and early Junglist ravers who shared this space together, helped mould Britain’s first homegrown music genre of Jungle/Drum & Bass (Belle-Fortune, 2004). Being part of a movement that ‘brought a lot of people together’ (Kenny Ken, cited in Belle-Fortune 1994:12) and being able to witness in real-time, the birth of a music and a culture that realistically reflected and embodied

contemporary Britain’s multi-ethnic and multi-racial makeup, was profound. This experience of the potentiality of specific social spaces and practices to defuse racial division and to nurture a shared sense of community, continues to inform my own political outlook. In addition to these factors, my marital connection to inspiring memories of Tito’s\(^8\) multi-ethnic, Non-Aligned, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has also served to orientate this positioning. Constructing social research that in some way built upon these experiences, and that tapped into these forms of intimacy, was important for me to be able to successfully undertake and complete a meaningful research project.

In attempting to capture what I mean when referring to intimacy, James’ (2021) study of ‘black’ British music from Dub to Jungle and Grime, and their associated forms of sonic intimacy, offers a lens through which to better understand this relation. For James, this form of intimacy is non-sexual, but is instead concerned with innermost depth, presence, wholeness, and privileged knowledge (2021:10). Such intimacy is the product of relation, and of interaction and reciprocity, between people (2021:13). Such an understanding of intimacy helps gets beneath the surface of quotidian social interactions and relationships. It intimates ‘spoken and unspoken interaction, gesture, affect and stance’ (Alcoff, 1999:17) and importantly, it expresses a sense of carnality. Intimacy’s spells are partly cast by the gaze, the face and touch (James, 2021:14) and so, in this way, carnality can serve as a guide in an exploration of social spaces and the unique ways in which they come to contextualise the practices and interactions that distinguish them. Forms of intimacy between people subsequently have important implications for the study of spaces and those relations between people that take place within their physical and conceptual parameters.

Back & Solomos’ (1993:196) assertion that ‘it is impossible for research on racism not to be

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\(^8\) Brotherhood & Unity was a popular slogan used in Yugoslavia to promote its idea of an inclusive ‘multi ethnic solution to politics and state’ (Mills, 2010: 1108). Josip Broz Tito’s socialist Yugoslavia, along with Nasser’s Egypt and Nehru’s India were some of the founding members and major forces within The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which attempted to steer a course of independence from either bloc throughout the US and Soviet cold war. NAM was to be predicated on a foreign policy of national independence that was based on peaceful coexistence, with anti-colonialism seen as the primary goal of the movement. (Finucane, 2014: 8/11).
political in some way’, of course extends to research on those qualities or practices that can to an extent obscure, or challenge racism. Amid a present social climate in which once extreme forms of racist political ideology are now mainstream (Jones 2021; Valluvan 2021), what could be more political than examining everyday spaces and practices in which people potentially mould inclusive ways of being and living? As Belle-Fortune highlights in relation to the power of the Jungle/Drum & Bass rave, the culture of political change is subtle and takes time. Certain spaces can allow people to change their outlook and readjust the ways in which they interact with people from a range of diverse backgrounds. And so, ‘[i]t follows that the intimate presences of the rave, or dancehall might be powerful enough to dispel difference and eliminate personal space between people (James, 2021:15).

Strangers who are friends. More than just saying to the bloke next to me, “Alright mate.” What else is in there? What else could our interaction be? How can we share the sum of our experience? What’s our collective potential? Can we change things? (Belle-Fortune, 2004:106).

From this opening orientation, we get a sense of the potentiality of certain cultures, their spaces of being, and the forms of interactions they can engender. This does not mean of course that such spaces offer a panacea to forms of racism and/or essentialised understandings of difference. Of course they cannot. However, these spaces can and do nurture the moulding of primary group ties (Jerolmack, 2009) that to a significant extent lower and soften the barriers of ‘race’ and potentially other forms difference also. Therefore, research that attempts to explore the unique features of particular cultures in relation to specific concerns and questions of difference is of both sociological, and political importance.

BJJ Spaces as Cosmopolitan Canopies

So far, I have attempted to convey the way in which my own unique positionality interacted with the early research process. I have shown how the research focus on ‘race’ was realigned towards an idea of intimacy, relations, and interactions. Having done this I now turn to the process of translating and formulating these concepts into a practical and workable sociological research design. In this search for a design that would be empirically grounded in the immediacies of everyday social interactions, and which could incorporate qualities
such as negotiation and intimacy within a wider framework of ‘race’, the concept of cosmopolitanism, specifically Elijah Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopies provided the initial framework.

As I have previously highlighted in chapter one, Anderson proposes that ‘as people become intimate through shared experiences, certain barriers are prone to be broken’ (2004:17). In specific public spaces he identifies as cosmopolitan canopies, ‘people, whose reference point often remains their own social class or ethnic group, have a chance to encounter others and so work toward a more cosmopolitan appreciation of difference’ (2004:28). In such spaces:

…racially, ethnically, and socially diverse peoples spend casual and purposeful time together, coming to know one another through what I call folk ethnography, a form of people watching that allows individuals informally to gather evidence in social interactions that supports their own viewpoints or transforms their common-sense understandings of social life (Anderson, 2011: xv).

Drawing upon the Chicago School of urban ethnography from the mid-1900’s, Anderson’s research took ‘race’ as its focus, and placed it within the everyday, lived and embodied realities of the contemporary social world. Importantly then, Anderson had taken ‘race’, but had approached it in a sociological manner that was alert to the ways in which categories of difference are destabilised and made banal through everyday interactions in public spaces.

Loic Wacquant (2005) similarly points to the messiness of everyday life, in which social, ethnic, and racial barriers can be blurred. He asserts that within the sphere of the local area, or the boxing gym, what matters most at ground level is people’s doings, how they relate to one another in recurrent interpersonal encounters, rather than how a broader society categorizes and treats them. Contextualised in the immediacies of everyday life, categories of difference such as class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and occupation for example, can be less relevant and/or adapted in accordance to those interactional properties that are manifested in repeated face-to-face encounters. Capturing and examining these forms of interactions within their contexts, spaces, and wider culture could therefore provide insights into how difference, in its various forms, is experienced and lived.

After the initial conceptualisation of a research project that would interrogate the idea of a
cosmopolitan canopy, as contextualised through the qualities of a particular space, I began to
explore options for field-sites. As outlined in Chapter 1, Anderson had taken Philadelphia’s
multi-racial and multi-ethnic public spaces to examine the ways in which difference is
negotiated by people within these environments. I initially thought about using a UK
University campus or shopping centre to examine similar aspects of multicultural life.
However, I was not convinced. Such space’s qualities, and the interactions they would shape
would not sufficiently capture the forms of intimacy that I had envisioned. I worried that the
data sourced from these spaces would be of a broad, macro, and transient type, which would
be unable to get beneath the surface of the formal civility and blasé orientation that is a mark
of contemporary urban life (Simmel, 1903).

Significantly however, at this time, I had just started training in the martial art of Brazilian Jiu
Jitsu (BJJ). Affected by a newcomer’s keenness, I was struck by BJJ’s unique corporeality,
its focus upon touch and sensitivity, and its techniques that constricted and hyperextended,
rather than punched and kicked. Interestingly, its culture, and its practitioners also, seemed to
exhibit forms of cosmopolitanism and gender relations that contrasted to conventional
conceptions of fighters. Furthermore, it was Brazilian, or at least its hybrid origins were,
partly. On a personal level, Brazil, its people, football teams and mediatised culture had
always been a source of fascination for me during my childhood. BJJ’s hybrid Brazilian and
Japanese roots therefore not only provided a broad cosmopolitan angle in terms of the
research, but there was also a personal investment as well. Other work (Stevens, 2014;
Hogeveen, 2013; Kavoura et al, 2015) had also highlighted the intimacy and exchange of
vulnerabilities that takes place on the BJJ mat, and so, in this way, they offered a form of
reassurance in taking the research down this particular path.

This decision to contextualise a study of difference through the unique tactility of BJJ was
also informed by my reading of Wacquant’s already canonical Body & Soul (2004). As I
detailed in Chapter 1, Wacquant had showed that it was sociologically insightful to undertake
immersive research to examine a specific culture and corporeality of a combat sport.
Therefore, it was also possible for me to undertake research where I could immerse myself
into a culture of BJJ in order to examine the ways in which difference was negotiated by its
practitioners. By ‘performing the phenomenon’ (Wacquant, 2015:1), that is, by training in the
techniques of BJJ, and gaining a more intensely sensuous understanding of its corporeality, I
would be in a much better position to understand how the art’s tactility and carnality, and its hybrid Brazilian-Japanese roots, might influence these negotiations. Furthermore, framing the spaces and culture of BJJ through the above lens of Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopy offered a way to theoretically conceptualise the spaces and interactions.

And so, after much reassessing and reimagining, I had eventually found a way of formulating a research project that, in opposition to the ruptures caused by categories of difference, would strive to bring to sociological life those realities and spaces whose practices offer a chance to conceptualise sophisticated ways of living together, with difference. This research is, therefore, a study on ‘race’ that doesn’t just get mired in racism, but which explores how contemporary life is also suffused by spaces and cultures that seem to speak against racism, in intuitive, habitual, and unremarkable ways (James, 2015; 2015a). That is to say, this research grapples with a conception of difference where space and everyday cultures emerge that might help challenge or unlearn essentialised understandings of difference. This is therefore a research project that speaks to me personally and reflects the reality that my life as a ‘black’ man is one of racism, but importantly, it is also one of bonds of openness, friendship, and cultural enchantment across multi-ethnic spaces that also promise something beyond racism.

Field-sites

During this period of research formulation (2011-2013), I was irregularly training at three different BJJ spaces, all within around twenty miles of each other at sites across the West Midlands. The first - (2011-2012), was a small private gym in an urban, industrial area of Coventry that was used by a small group of mixed martial artists who formed the gym’s amateur and professional fight team. An ex-colleague at the DWP, who I shall refer to as ‘C’ throughout this thesis was part of this gym’s team of security specialists and bouncers. He and other members would often bring along people like myself who, while they may have trained in other martial disciplines, had no grappling experience. It was at this space where I was first introduced to BJJ and had been confused and frustrated, but also intrigued by its corporeality. This space consisted of a matted main room of maybe 7 metres by 4 metres that was used for grappling, boxing and/or Muay Thai training. Memorably, on one side of this
room, a mirror took up nearly the entire wall. And above this mirror the British Union Jack, the Brazilian Verde e Amarela\(^9\) and the Japanese Hinomaru\(^{10}\), were all arrayed in homage to the Brazilian-Japanese roots of BJJ and its present British context. The space also had a smaller room that had a number of resistance training machines and weights, and it had a small changing room which contained a single shower. The price to train in this space was £5 per session, but this not strictly enforced. As long as the rent for the space was covered each month, no demands for fees were made. This space closed down permanently in 2012.

The second space - (2012-2013), was a large activity room that was situated within a Midlands university’s sports complex. The activity room was booked out and used by a number of different university sport clubs including the University’s BJJ club that usually trained here around lunchtime or early afternoon two days per week. Classes were taken by the senior (purple-belt) ranked BJJ practitioner who was the club captain and also a Judo black-belt. Interestingly, classes here were divided, with women being taught by the club’s senior female practitioner (a BJJ blue-belt and Judo black-belt). Men and women would immediately separate at the beginning of each class and gather on different sides of the mats, with each group following its own pedagogy as directed by their respective coaches. As the mats were not a permanent feature of this space, practitioners here were responsible for both putting the mats out and clearing them away, readying the room for the next class, which throughout my time training there was usually yoga. This club’s practitioners reflected the elite university which bore its name. Coming from the predominantly economically advantaged backgrounds, practitioners were also internationally and ethnically diverse. In my time there I regularly trained alongside practitioners from Singapore, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Malaysia, and Mexico, among others. Most were taught-postgraduate students who were in their early to mid-twenties, with some undergraduates, doctoral researchers, and a couple of middle-aged members of the university’s administrative staff also regularly attending. The price was £5 per class, plus membership to the university sports centre (those without membership would wait outside the complex to be signed in for free by the club captain).

\(^9\) The Brazilian flag is commonly known as *Verde e Amarela* or *The Green and Yellow*.

\(^{10}\) The flag of Japan is officially called *Nisshōki* the ‘Flag of Sun’ but is commonly known as the ‘*Hinomaru*’, meaning *Circle of the Sun*.
The third space - (2012-2013), was a gym that was located on a high street in a bustling and ethnically diverse area of Birmingham. This spacious gym covered the entire first floor of a commercial building, which also housed a national supermarket chain on its ground floor. The gym consisted of one large room which was primarily a weight-training space, but it also had a full-sized boxing ring, and towards the back of the space there was a permanent matted section. The BJJ training sessions here also cost £5 each. They were taught by a British ‘mixed-race’-‘white’/East Asian internationally recognised black-belt instructor who had recently set up his own independent training space and BJJ team using this gym’s mats as his base. There was a strong link between this space and that of the university, as the university team captain was a senior student of this black-belt instructor. This instructor would occasionally travel to the university in order to teach a specific class. Furthermore, many of the university team members would also travel to Birmingham throughout the week in order to train at his gym. Students who were driving over to Birmingham from campus would post to the university team’s Facebook page to let others know they could pick up others who needed a lift. This space was the most ethnically and racially diverse of all the spaces and its attendees reflected the ethnic diversity of contemporary West Midlands. And given this coaches’ prominence within BJJ circles, attendees were also drawn from the wider Midlands area.

It is worth taking time to pause and reflect on events that relate to specific field-sites and their shaping influence on the research. Agar (2006) conceptualises ethnography as a logic-in-use rather than a predefined set of steps or fieldwork methods. That means proceeding through the research process alive to the possibilities and implications of potential routes, dead-ends, and discoveries. Central to this process are those moments where ethnographers are confronted with a surprise or something that does not go as expected (Green et al, 2011). Rather than proceeding on a smooth, linear trajectory, all research necessarily involves this toing and froing of ideas and decisions, of repeating steps and actions, and most relevantly, of directional changes, some momentary, others permanent. Instead of a clear linear path from a field-site with qualities that fitted within conventional understandings of multiculture and conviviality, the research was able to broaden the scope of these concepts. This reimagining of conviviality as to capture other forms of difference, such as gender, as well as the racial and ethnic forms it already presupposes, would not have unfolded in the way that it did had I
not taken the decision at the beginning of 2014 to concentrate solely on one particular field-site.

As stated, from 2011-2013 I was training across these three sites while trying to formulate a clear research path. While gradually I was coming to better understand the focus and goals of the research, I had still not officially\(^{11}\) started fieldwork. At the end of 2013 I had just completed my research upgrade document which set out a clear research design that aimed to interrogate the ways in which BJJ practitioners negotiated difference within its physical spaces and the role that BJJ’s corporeality played in these negotiations. And so, ready to move forward and officially begin the fieldwork from which my study of difference would be grounded, I began to think about getting official or formal agreement from both the university team captain and the instructor at the Birmingham gym. At the same time however, my old colleague from the DWP, ‘C’, whom I had kept in touch with as friends since the Coventry BJJ space had closed down, was now one of the senior BJJ instructors of a new gym facility in a nearby town in an urban hinterland of Warwickshire. Subsequently, I had also begun to train at this facility, and had probably started to attend more sessions here than I did at the two other sites.

Since I had begun to split my time between these two teams who were at that time rivals\(^{12}\), the Brazilian term *Creonte*\(^{13}\), which roughly translates as traitor, had occasionally been

\(^{11}\) ‘Officially’ started fieldwork’ – what I mean by this is that I had not yet drawn up and handed out an official ethics form to the practitioners at these sites. I was not in a position to do this until I had properly formulated the research. I did however always tell anyone who I trained and conversed with that I was a doctoral researcher who’s research was interested in ‘race’ and the ways in which martial artists interact.

\(^{12}\) Within a couple of years of these two BJJ teams coming into existence, the initial rivalry evaporated and ties were being forged between the two clubs. Joint training sessions took place, and some practitioners began to train at both sites while still competing for the team at which they were primarily based.

\(^{13}\) The term has been widely used within BJJ circles to denote a student who is seen as being disloyal to their instructor or team. These individuals are viewed as potential spies who might be passing on the details of specific secret techniques to rivals. As traditional Brazilian power has waned however, due to the globalisation and the diffusion of BJJ institutional power to other parts of the globe *(see chapter 6)*, there has been an organised pushback against what is seen as being the politicisation of the term *Creonte*. Its use is contemporaneously understood as being rooted in the political and economic rivalries of BJJ’s original Brazilian context, rather than the realities of its present, globalised, less partisan form. To get a sense of the charged
directed at me. It usually occurred as I walked onto the mats at the Warwickshire space by one of the senior practitioners calling out something like, “Here he is. The creonte!” While this was nothing more than jovial banter, the term and its use inevitably brought to light the situation I was in. Continuing to be a truly multi-sited research project was not going to be as smooth as I thought it would be. I could sense that there was some mistrust and potential unease that I had not ‘planted my flag’ for one team or another. The fact that I was a researcher who was interested in researching these spaces was less important than the fact that I was also a BJJ practitioner, and competitive novice fighter who was viewed as standing in no-man’s land in terms of the rivalry between the two teams. (The role of enactive ethnography in this dilemma was probably significant in that if I had been just an observer then my loyalties might not have been questioned the same way. However, as I was to all extent and purposes, viewed as just another practitioner and team member, then by not dedicating myself to one team or another, I was suspect).

I had also just competed for the Birmingham team in a new competitive Midlands league\textsuperscript{14} that their instructor had recently set up. A week or so after competing in this fight (which I lost to a fighter from a team in Coventry), ‘C’ told me that I was going to have to finally choose a team. He put across the benefits of training and learning with and from the team\textsuperscript{15} that he was now a part of. And he also informed me that I would be able to get permission from the gym owner ‘N’ to conduct the research at this site. My relationship could at times be strained with the Birmingham instructor, and it also took longer to drive to his gym than the Warwickshire space. Furthermore, the Warwickshire space was mixed-sex as women trained on the mats with men. This was important to the research as BJJ’s tactility had always raised the spectre of male-female rolling. Understanding the significance of BJJ’s corporeality in relation to gender differences could be a significant aspect of the research, but up until this

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\textsuperscript{14} This league was disbanded soon after it began as fighters from different clubs were reluctant to sign up. I was informed by ‘C’ that many were suspicious that it had been set up more of a way for this instructor to examine and suss out other teams in order to give his own fighters a slight competitive advantage at major BJJ competitions.

\textsuperscript{15} A detailed outline of the structure of the team, its coaches and their lineage is provided in the chapter, \textit{The BJJ Canopy}.”
point due to the peculiarities of the university and Birmingham sites, it had always remained hypothetical. Subsequently, going forward I decided to undertake the research based solely at the new Warwickshire facility. I had significant experiences that shaped my understanding of BJJ culture from the spaces in Coventry and Birmingham, but from 2014-2018, the Warwickshire space, its denizens and associated networks became the sole field-site.

The space itself which I shall refer to as simply the Warks Gym throughout the thesis, was located just outside of the county of the West Midlands in a semi-urban area of Warwickshire that had major road links to Birmingham, Coventry, and Leicester. It sat at the back of an easily accessible, well-maintained business park which housed a variety of commercial businesses such as a machine tools company, an indoor cricket facility, a warehouse, and an aerospace manufacturing firm, among other commercial enterprises. The gym facility was large. It had a 1700 square foot matted area on both its floors. On the ground floor it had a reception and toilet area, and separate male and female changing rooms with multiple showers. It also had a weight-training area, boxing ring, and an MMA cage. Due to its private setting, use was also made of its outdoor space, weather permitting, for additional circuit type training. Due to its new facilities, the reputations of its coaches, and its accessible location, it was a very busy and successful training facility. It offered a wide range of mixed-sex adult training programmes in boxing, Muay Thai, BJJ, judo and MMA, with children’s BJJ, judo and self-defence classes too. In addition, there were female-only kickboxing and self-defence classes, with yoga classes and personal training sessions also on offer. The facility’s users came from both the immediate local area, and from places further afield like Coventry, Leicestershire, and outlying parts of Birmingham. In terms of BJJ, practitioners covered a wide range of ages and backgrounds. College and university students, army staff, teachers, IT experts, the unemployed, police, engineers, tradespeople, prison officers, bouncers, business owners, manual workers, administrative staff, as well as those who participated in the underground economy, all regularly trained BJJ at this modern MMA training facility.

In terms of ethnic and racial diversity, this space was not as diverse as the Birmingham site. In fact, the area in which the facility was located had historically been viewed by some in neighbouring urban centres as a place that was unwelcoming for those categorised as ‘non-white’, and/or to a lesser extent non-local. In fact, as a ‘black’ man from Coventry, this specific area always had somewhat of a racist reputation, an opinion that had only been
further validated by the election of far-right councillors to a local ward around the same time that Barack Obama was elected the first ‘black’ president of the United States. This schism however, sat in stark contrast to the actual facility. The space itself felt like an island of cosmopolitanism and multiculture that was surrounded by a traditional working-class, conservative provincialism. The facility’s staff were about an even split in terms of ‘white’ and ‘black’, and ‘mixed-heritage’ backgrounds. The facility was also decorated in the images of ‘black’ sporting icons and the sounds that punctuated its space were mainly those of the ‘black’ diaspora, specifically Dub Reggae, House, or old-school Hip-Hop. Given the diverse makeup of its staff, while the Warks Gym was not as super-diverse as the Birmingham site, its staff and those who used the facility did however reflect a diversity characteristic of contemporary UK multiculture.

Through this comparative lens between the diversity of the site and the perceived provincial racism of its immediate geographical vicinity, the site represented a cosmopolitan canopy in its conventional sense. The gym itself could be seen as an island of civility acting as a ‘respite from the tensions of urban life and [as] an opportunity for diverse peoples to come together’ (Anderson 2011:xiv). In relation to the makeup of the space’s BJJ practitioners specifically, they were predominantly ‘white’, but there was also a significant British Asian element, along with a smaller ‘mixed-heritage’ and ‘black’ contingent. There were also a significant amount of non-British ‘white’ participants who regularly trained and were working locally but who came from Poland, Germany, and Canada. Most important to note however, was that at this facility, women trained on the mats alongside men. There was no separation. While still being primarily male in terms of the numbers of practitioners, there was always at least three regular female practitioners who trained and participated throughout the course of the field-work. And in addition, there would regularly be new female attendees who would come and train at the space for a period of time.

It is interesting and also important to note that soon after the Warks Gym became the main field-site, the reasons for the Birmingham’s space’s lack of women came to light. This shall be fully explained and discussed in more detail in chapter 3. However, for now it is important to state that in light of the reasons to solely concentrate on the Warks Gym site and to leave the Birmingham and university spaces, we come to appreciate the importance of field-sites generally, and their respective constitutive features in relation to the shape and findings of the
research. By leaving an exclusively male environment and instead, focusing on a space in which women trained and interacted as equals to men, I was able to explore the specificities of mixed-sex training in a culture of BJJ. Subsequently, I was able to capture first-hand some of the issues that many women face within martial art spaces. Without the field-site acting as a vector for the research, this aspect of BJJ’s corporeality and culture would have remained silent. The research has however been able to examine these underexplored sociological aspects of BJJ culture and in doing so, it has enabled a broadening out of the categories of difference that undergird the concept of conviviality (see Chapter 5). This reworking of conviviality is one in which categories of differences such as gender, as well as racial and ethnic differences, are an integral part of its BJJ contextualised conceptualisation.

Gatekeepers & Key Informants/Primary-Practitioner-Participants

Before tackling the act of the fieldwork itself, extending from the previous discussion concerning field-sites, it is useful to approach the subject of those relationships-in-the-field that can have a bearing on the research and one’s access to the site. The change from a multi-sited research project to one that began to focus on just one single field-site had implications for those relationships-in-the-field that are significant within the research process. While the switch in focus to one field-site had reduced the total numbers of participants, given the size and growing success of the Warks Gym and its BJJ classes, this was not really a significant issue. The field-site represented a typical BJJ club and space and its participants represented a diverse cross-section of society. Also, the switch meant that I no longer had to manage or juggle relationships with various gatekeepers and key informants across three different sites. To a certain extent this made the ongoing ethnographic process less complicated. The person who had engineered access to the fields-site and who was also my main key informant at the Warks Gym, was a personal friend and so this theoretically made it simpler to go about the act of researching. However, having a key informant who was also a friend also brought its own set of issues.

One example concerns the use of cannabis by practitioners at the site. In chapter 6, I highlight the use of cannabis within a local and globalised BJJ culture. The fieldnote I used captures the first time I became aware that cannabis use was actually a thing within elements of BJJ.
culture. (While being a cannabis user myself, I had yet to become aware of the specific use by BJJ practitioners). In this fieldnote I come across two practitioners in the changing room who were stoned. They laughingly admitted that they had been smoking weed outside of the facility in order to, in their words, “...get in the flow!” After this incident, and in response to what must have been a look of amusement on my face, ‘C’ asked me what was up. After telling him what had happened he became quite serious. “No!”. He said shaking his head. “Shitheads! That’s not right. I have a duty of care for anyone on the mats...”. ‘C’s’ response was puzzling as knowing him the way I did, his reaction seemed out of character. Upon reflection, I initially put it down to his new role as a BJJ coach at the Warks Gym. Maybe he actually did think that cannabis’ effects on practitioner’s senses while on the mats was a safety issue. However, about a month after this incident, running slightly late I walked onto the mats to find a number of practitioners mid-roll. At the end of the five minute round, ‘C’ stood up and said half laughing, “God I’m so stoned!” When I pointed out what he’d said previously, he just shrugged and said, “Its Open mat!”16. It was only at this point did I realise the possible impact that our new roles had played with regards to the incident.

In the context of the gym, the mats and specific BJJ relationship networks, I was arguably no longer just Carl, ex DWP colleague and personal friend. Within these contexts, I was also an official University of Warwick researcher who was recording the interactions and events that took place. Subsequently, ‘C’s’ response was one of a new coach at a new facility who was consciously reacting to sensitive and tricky information that a researcher had disclosed to him about two of his charges. As I would find out over the course of the fieldwork, the use of cannabis by BJJ practitioners is quite common, even whilst training. On the realisation that ‘C’ also engaged in this practice but had kept it secret, I knew then that the research process and our involvement in it, was changing the nature of our relationship.

From gaining access to the site, introducing me to a wide network of senior BJJ practitioners and coaches, acting as a key point-of-contact for the research, and as someone who shared his knowledge about BJJ and martial arts more generally, overall ‘C’ was an important reference

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16 An open mat is a non-structured training session that would occasionally take place on Sundays or on public holidays. Open mat attendees can choose to practice whatever technique they want or they can roll for as long as they like. These sessions are open to anyone including non-team members and so can attract different practitioners from different clubs.
point within the research process. Of course there are times and periods throughout the fieldwork when relationships can become strained and require effort on part of the researcher. This is especially so at the beginnings of the research, when one is finding one’s way through the process, building and testing relationships, and generally approaching how one goes about the act and practice of researching. And for those who are being researched, they are also learning to become more relaxed and at ease in the presence of those who are asking potentially sensitive questions about potentially sensitive areas. The research process is therefore one of learning and evolving for all those involved.

Elijah Anderson (2013) humorously recalls a time at the beginning of a particular research project when he was hanging out with a group of men on a street corner. The man who had taken it upon himself to act as his main informant suddenly became frustrated with his peers and chided them for their lack of animation. They needed to start “doing stuff” as “the Professor had come to do research!”. In relation to my own research, there was one similar incident which stands out.

‘In the changing room was that tall, ‘white’, nervous teenager who wears glasses and who I’ve now seen a few times at the beginner BJJ class. ‘C’ began chatting to him and then I remember ‘C’ saying something like: “Blacks are dangerous aren’t they?”. ‘C’ had that cheeky look on his face like he was trying to get a reaction. Suddenly the kid turned around from facing the clothes pegs and said something along the lines of: “I understand what you’re saying.”. He then said something like he thinks ‘black’s’ are very aggressive and mentioned that YouTube video where that young ‘white’ guy goes up to young ‘black’ men (in what looks like pretty run down, poor areas) and either tries to kiss them or touches them. The kid spoke about the black youth’s aggressive reactions and how they had even taken their guns out of their waistbands and pointed them at this ‘prankster’….When the youth left the changing room, ‘C’ looked at me smiling and said: “Ooo! I bet you’ve got loads of research there haven’t you!”’

This fieldnote reflects the fact that ‘C’ had recently become aware that this teenager held racist views. In this excerpt ‘C’ purposely coaxes the youth into exposing his racism in my presence. For ‘C’ this was part of doing research. Here he had provoked a reaction that he hoped would visibly indicate this person’s stance on the issue of ‘race’. Upon reflection, it is incumbent upon the ethnographer to gauge the right amount of distance and balance needed in terms of one’s relationships with a range of other participant-practitioners. A BJJ team and
space can be marked by rivalries, close confidences and groups within groups that serve to politicise in some way the structure of the space itself. Being seen as the researcher who was also the friend of the second-in-command, could therefore have implications in terms of who opens up and what they open up about. There was a possibility that my proximity to ‘C’ might jeopardise my ability to fully access and experience the space and the practitioner interactions that were part of it. The reduction of key informants across three field-sites, in theory, had simplified the research process, but it also brought its own set of challenges such as those mentioned above. In time and over the course of the fieldwork, and as I became more secure about what I was doing, what I needed to find out, and about where the research was heading, I was able to shake off any feeling of being managed, or of being seen as primarily “the coaches’ mate”. However, this required effort and work on my part to juggle the relationships-in-the-field in order to ensure that the research reflected a balanced and well-rounded rendering of BJJ culture, and the interactions, spaces, and relationships that realistically bring it to life.

**Enactive Ethnography**

Despite the proselytizing zeal that Loic Wacquant (2005; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016) can at times be guilty of, as detailed already in Chapter 1, it is true that enactive ethnography can generate ‘multidimensional, polychrome accounts of social life’ (2015:4). Wacquant argues that there is danger within those ethnographies that rely on observation rather than participation. He suggests that non-participant observation can produce so-called torpid black and white renderings that are disembodied and abstracted from the immediacies of the real world. In contrast, Wacquant asserts that the immersive fieldwork of enactive ethnography provides the ‘building blocks for a flesh and blood sociology’ (Wacquant, 2015:4), a carnal sociology (Crossley, 1995). Ethnographies that only provide ‘a spectatorial viewpoint, ones that fail to grasp action-in-the-making and which do not centre the skilled and sensate organism of the observer as chief investigative tool’ (Wacquant, 2015:4), are unlikely to realise the rich and deep understandings that researcher immersion can potentially provide. Given these assertions, and also the similarities in terms of examining a culture of BJJ to that of boxing, utilising this form of ethnography was best suited to study the nexus of negotiation, corporeality, and difference in BJJ’s spaces and its cultures.
On a practical level, this meant that from 2014 to 2018 I became a member of The Warks Gym. I began paying £45 per month by direct debit in order to attend two BJJ classes a week that was headed by BJJ black-belt coach, ‘B’. At the beginning of 2016, after recovering from a total left hip replacement the previous year, I upgraded this membership to £65 per month for an unlimited amount of any of the martial art classes that were taught at the gym. I only ever took part in the BJJ classes however, both gi and nogi. The gi classes took place every Monday and Wednesday evenings and Friday and Saturday mornings. While the nogi classes took place every Thursday evenings and Saturday morning. There were also monthly ‘open-mats’ which were informal sessions where attendees could train in whatever techniques they wanted, or spar for as long as they could. In addition to these slots, there were also specific sparring sessions that would be arranged by one of the coaches that usually included one or two of the other practitioners. I attempted to train at least twice a week, although due to family, work commitments and injuries, this could be intermittent, with gaps of sometimes a few weeks between classes. I did however enter three BJJ competitions and attended around five seminars which were taken by internationally recognised BJJ fighters and coaches. I attended other competitions and events in support of teammates, and I also joined numerous BJJ social media groups in order to immerse myself further in the local, national, and international culture of BJJ.

Part two of Chapter 1, highlights that at very heart of the philosophy of enactive ethnography is a conception of the human agent and, therein, the researcher, as a suffering, sensual, carnal being. Enactive ethnography views ethnographers as being no different than the people they study - as humans we know and understand through our bodies, so subsequently we can leverage this carnal comprehension by deepening our own social and symbolic insertion into the universe under examination. I therefore utilised this positionality to acquire a carnal, sensuous comprehension of BJJ’s touch, its pressure, its pain, and its intercorporeal essence. I used my own body, in conjunction with the verbal interpretations of other practitioner-participants, to pose questions around how the intense physical intimacy of BJJ’s form might affect wider, everyday interactions between practitioner-participants of different races, ethnicities and genders. Especially in relation to gender, this first-hand carnal rendering within a mixed-sex training environment allowed me to appreciate the possible implications of BJJ’s corporeality on interactions, and the forms of gender relations practiced within its
Significantly, performing the phenomenon in the attempt to become a boxer or BJJ fighter, for example, rests upon one’s own physical ability to carry out the techniques and movements that inform its pedagogy. This has obvious implications in terms of the researcher being able-bodied and physically fit. This was brought into sharp focus for me by the ongoing pain and lack of mobility in my left hip throughout the course of the early fieldwork. Putting one’s body through the corporeal rewiring that is necessary means that getting hurt is an unavoidable and natural part of this particular fieldwork method (Spencer, 2014). Upon reflection, I have to question whether I was actually able to immerse myself as fully as I would have been able to if I had not suffered this injury at that time. Due to the pain my training and subsequent fieldwork was always intermittent. This admittedly, did cause gaps throughout the fieldwork, with the longest time off coming at the end of 2014 for just over a year. While at first I feared that not being able to train would detrimentally affect the research, in reality what this situation meant was that I had to reconceptualise what I had considered to be fieldwork up until that point.

Encouraged by teammates to keep training in whatever way I could, I began to attend the gym as an onlooker. I would sit at the edge of the mats stretching and moving as best I could and making notes, watching events and interactions on the mats unfold. At first, this change from fellow practitioner to note maker was noticed and commented on by some practitioners. Carl-the-teammate had become Carl-the-researcher, and occasionally I would spend time answering questions about what I was doing and what my research was about. The ethics forms that I had handed out a year before explaining my research and laying out the basis for agreeing participant involvement, had either been forgotten or maybe not even read. Now though, sitting at the edge of the mats, writing things down on paper, I was embodying my role as conventional, classical researcher. This made the research more visible and could be better understood by those who before had just seen me as a fellow practitioner, one who asked lots of questions.

What had at first felt like a failure of sorts, therefore, in time was reconceptualised and incorporated into the research. Instead of participating I was now doing classic observation. This unexpected change in my viewpoint opened up a broader gaze. Rather than being caught
up in the moment myself, I was able to watch the class and capture the interactions that were taking place between practitioners across the mats. I could better see the forms of relationships between particular bodies on the mats and this assisted in my conceptualising a sense of mat-based communality that was being nurtured in front of me. Therefore, classic observation helped me to better situate and contextualise the knowledge that I had gained previously as an active participant, and which I would gain once more as soon as I was fully recovered. From a proselytising stance borrowed from Wacquant that viewed immersive fieldwork as superior, through necessity I had adopted the spectatorial point of view, scoping the action from the bank, rather than swimming in the stream of action (2014).

In an important precedent, but also contrast for my own research, Sara Delamont and her colleagues took a similar approach in their studies of a culture of UK Capoeira (2006; 2010). She notes that her fieldwork was rigorously limited to capoeira classes and events:

The research stops at the end of the class. I go home. I never go to the pub, to parties, to clubs, to people’s houses for music practice or to watch videos. When I interview capoeiristas I do so in my university office (Delamont, 2006:172).

Using classic observation and non-active participation, Delamont and her colleague’s work still captures the sensuousness and corporeality of Capoeira, but it does so more from an etic positioning than that of a full insider. Full immersion might have possibly added an extra layer of description from a first person point of view concerning both the carnality and the social, communal side of the Capoeira culture. However, in terms of the overall depth of this body of work, we still very much get a sense of the importance of both Capoeira’s form and its sociality; its smell of sweat and rum. Concerning my own research, while being a predominantly immersive project in the vein of Wacquant, it also combined this with a more conventional approach similar to that of Delamont.

Furthermore, in terms of the concept of immersion and my immersion specifically, due to the fieldwork spanning a four year period, with another three years training experience prior to officially starting, I did gain a deep emic knowledge and understanding of BJJ, its corporeality, culture, and its practitioners. And also, in many ways it is hard to actually quantify ethnographic immersion or apprenticeship and/or the length of time actually needed
to have immersed oneself sufficiently enough. Therefore, rather than a set of categorisations it is probably better to think of immersion conceptually, whereby immersion refers to striving for the acquisition of deep embodied knowledge by following a specific research philosophy and set of practices. In this way we can arguably view ethnography more generally as an act of immersion within a specific cultural setting. For some ethnographers like myself, immersion might involve the acquisition of specific body techniques in order to understand how such corporeality contextualises the interactions that take place between its cultural practitioners. For other ethnographers, performing the phenomenon in this way is unnecessary and superfluous to the structure and goals of their ethnographic research. Choosing the depths of one’s immersion rests upon the focus and requirements of the research, with one’s choice of methods simply reflecting the needs and practicalities of the specific research project.

**Autoethnography**

My insertion into the research act through immersive enactive ethnography does however raise issues in relation to the extent to which this form of ethnography can be viewed as just another form of autoethnography. Importantly, Wacquant raises an objection to the charge sometimes raised that enactive ethnography and many of the associated studies that utilise it are in fact works of autoethnography. While Channon (2013) is explicit in situating his study of Kung Fu and its examination of his own embodied masculinity’s reaction to hitting women in mixed sex training environments, Wacquant makes clear that *Body & Soul* and enactive ethnography in general is not autoethnography. ‘However flattering it might be to accorded such pioneer status, I must dissent with [the] proclamation of *Body & Soul* as the first sociological classic of reflexive autoethnography’ (Wacquant, 2005:469).

I agree with Wacquant in this respect, and, while acknowledging that my own research does utilise strands of autoethnography, I also situate the research as not being a piece of autoethnography. Indeed, I view my immersion within the field-site as a collaborative project; I, as a researcher was just one among a larger group of sensate bodies who were all attempting to graft and mesh a specific corporeal schema onto and into their own bodies. As already stated, I did this strictly as a way to inform and to better understand the practice, the
context and culture in which the practice springs from. It was not in any way an attempt to find out about myself, nor was it an attempt to construct a piece of work that was ‘based around the story told by myself about myself’ (Neyland, 2008:53).

My research does clearly draw on my own experiences and subjectivities, but it does so in conjunction with the experiences of other participants also. The data I gathered was analysed in its totality and contextually in order to construct a rendering of a culture of BJJ and its practitioners. Furthermore, my research is also not an exercise in ‘native anthropology’ (Wacquant, 2005:469), as although I had begun irregular training in BJJ, I was always a sociologist first who was searching for a suitable site. BJJ became that site, and enactive ethnography was simply the best way to explore it. Therefore, it is important to note that I was a sociologist who became a regular BJJ practitioner in order to examine how BJJ practitioners interact with difference and the role that corporeality plays in these interactions. My work, like Wacquant’s, is not autobiographical, or even biographical, as it is not organized around the life stories of individuals (Wacquant, 2005).

Conducting Ethnographic Research As a ‘Black’ Researcher

In spite of the theoretical distance put between my ethnographic research and that of the autoethnographic method, the research does still draw on strands of autoethnography. Probably the clearest example in relation to issues of ‘race’ within the fieldwork. The fact that I am an ethnographer who is also a ‘black mixed-race’ man is inescapable. Subsequently, research which generates data and findings in relation to ‘race’, ‘will also generate intended and unintended impacts and interpretations in the social worlds’ (Neal, 2018:408). Rather than just acknowledging this fact however, the challenge is to find ways of engaging with and managing these concerns. Indeed, whilst still privy to assorted close and negotiated interactions characteristic of the spaces studied, my background also likely affects how others adjust and police some of their own behaviour vis-à-vis my own presence (Brown, 2011; Cabrera, 2016).

I was aware of the possibility of this at the initial stages of the fieldwork at the Warks Gym. Although the site was ethnically diverse and came to be conceptualised through the research
as part of broader UK multiculture, the majority of gym members and BJJ practitioners were still ‘white’. In time, it became clear that racially imbued interactions were overwhelmingly absent from the observations and interactions that I was experiencing. At first, it seemed possible that this was due to a post-racial sensibility to expressing forms of overt racism (Burnham, 2008). Maybe participant-practitioners were just being savvy in disguising their other attitudes? Maybe when I was not present, there was a more racially insensitive reality being lived? These were the kinds of questions that I initially began to ask myself.

However, as the fieldwork and my own understandings of the site, culture and context progressed, my interpretation and analysis moved away from this cynicism. Indeed, I was not the only ‘black’, ‘mixed-race’, or ‘non-white’ practitioner within the space. Therefore, my individual absence would have made little or no significant difference in terms of the ethnic or racial dynamics within the site. And, most significantly, rather than being a matter of simply disguising racist attitudes in the presence of racialised others (although this might be the case for some practitioners like the teenager in the changing room as one such example), the research found that the lack of such incidents was instead due to two critical factors.

Firstly, it was due to a form of coach authority that actively confronted and challenged racist incidents. And secondly, it was also due to the fact that the fieldwork space, and the people who used it, were simply reflecting the realities of contemporary UK multiculture. As I will argue in the following chapters, the lack of overt racial incidents was not due some kind of tacit, secretive pact between practitioners, but was instead because practitioners were exhibiting and practicing certain forms of convivial relations (Gilroy, 2004; Berg & Nowicka, 2019; Valluvan, 2016). This indicates an important aspect of my research approach and philosophy. As whilst staying attentive to positionality and researcher effects, I avoid being trapped within these frames. This subsequently allows for analysis of what is witnessed on its own terms – so as to avoid researcher navel-gazing (Latour, 1996) overwhelming the possibility of research in itself as a sincere and generative endeavour. Having said this, I am of course alert to the possible ways in which my own positionality intersects with the research, its formulations and presentation. One such way was in how my own embodied presence and stance towards issues of identity and ‘race’ were an inescapable presence within some of the fieldnote excerpts that have been used in the ethnographic chapters.
‘...I take that to indicate that he sees a genetic advantage being passed on from a black father. We all laughed (me not uncomfortably, just consciously). Also, ‘N’ said something about he has to tell ‘them’ (?) that he’s quarter black because ‘they’ think he’s white? (not sure of the context). And then he also said that his mum is ‘Half-Caste’. I heard ‘C’ say kind of under his breath “mixed-race” as though correcting ‘N’. Part of me wanted to say something then but I didn’t feel that it would have been appropriate right there (he seems like a pretty decent person but being from [...] with his personal background, he just seems a bit naïve).’

In this example taken from the chapter ‘At the Edge’, the voice of the researcher, my voice, is clearly audible. “Me not uncomfortably, just consciously”, would actually seem to indicate that I was in some sense uncomfortable in a situation in which the problem of ‘race’ was invoked through a ‘mixed-race’ BJJ coaches’ essentialised understandings of ‘black’ [male] bodies. Echoing Hill-Collins’ (2000) explicit centring of ‘black’ feminist intellectuals as educators or mentors of less informed ‘black’ women, here too, we find in my presence a desire to enlighten someone who I perceived as racially naïve, and who I possibly saw as in need of some kind of political knowledge. As the arbiter of what is included in the fieldnotes and what is not, it is possibly significant in some way that I chose to keep this excerpt in its original form. Possibly, it was as a way to situate and make public my own positionality in response and in contrast to ‘N’’s use of problematic terminology.

Here then is the presence of the researcher as active participant and embodied social being, negotiating, processing, and ultimately presenting his own positionality and its own peculiarities. It is a clear example that ethnographic accounts are very much inter-subjective narratives that are formed at the confluence of self and other and telescoped through our own personal interpretative lens (Nayak, 2006). Herein, by allowing these research excerpts to remain in original, unedited form, I seek to expose my own guilts and less than politic reflections in a way that remains true to my original experiences. In other words, one important feature of positionality for me is not to mask or curate my own complicities and negotiations, even though this may at times be seen by others as injudicious or embarrassing. The commitment to positionality requires this degree of honesty, as much as honesty is a tenable aspiration, where my own involvement, presence and reactions are relayed in ways representative of those real-time experiences.
Other Methods & Resources

Interviews

Apart from my ethnographic immersion into a specific BJJ space which was undertaken in combination with the classic observational method, another important method of data collection was the use of interviews. Conceptually, one can think of my time on the mats, training and partnering with fellow practitioners and the conversations that we would have as in some sense an interview of sorts. Not every interaction I had could be thought of in this way, but as a researcher who had questions that I wanted to ask, I would often take the opportunity as I partnered with someone on the mats to elicit from them their opinions and knowledge with regards to what I was trying to gain an insight into. Indeed, most of my interactions can be seen as following the natural flow of the greetings, catching up, banter and bonding that takes place between BJJ practitioners.

However, there were also those occasions when I would attempt to draw out a specific practitioner’s opinions on a matter or certain subject, in order to better situate the understandings that I had constructed or was in the process of constructing. This undertaking would still be part of the normal flow of the BJJ class, in that it would take place *in situ*, and not separate or conceptually cordoned off from the rest of the class and the practices and interactions that are part of it. I believed that this form of ethnographic research would yield more ‘natural’ data than the interview (Kultz, 2013:82). However, as the formal interview encounter produces ‘a particular kind of frame in which personal narratives’ (Jones, 2011:78) can be explored in a more private setting, I did use this particular method also.

For example, I found it useful in following up on something that might have been previously raised by someone. As I wrote up my account of what had taken place that evening or previous day, a comment that had been made or a conversation that had taken place would leave me with queries or questions. In upcoming training sessions I might then approach a practitioner-participant and try to clarify what they meant or to get their thoughts on a particular matter. In one instance, while rolling with ‘H’ who was a senior practitioner, he disclosed to me that taking up BJJ had been a way for him to move on from having cancer and how it had helped him to become less work orientated and less materialistic. Realising
the sensitive nature of what ‘H’ was telling me and wanting to delve deeper into his narratives around the impact of BJJ in his life, an arranged formal but un-taped interview conducted at the end of the class and out of earshot was a way of eliciting this information. I also conducted another interview in this way whereby, after rolling with a female practitioner ‘K’ and hearing about her negative experience of another BJJ space, I thought it would be useful to interview ‘K’ in a more detailed manner. This allowed me again to gather information away from the temporal and physical requirements of the actual BJJ class in a way that could engender a setting which was more conducive to the sensitivities of these more personalised narratives.

In addition, there were also those countless occasions when I would question ‘C’ and draw on his BJJ knowledge, both on the mats and in a more formalised interview setting. In short, while my ethnographic immersion was sufficient in order to gather a wide and deep understanding of the culture and its contextualised interactions, the formal interview method was an additional and useful tool which helped to fill in the gaps, and which enabled the research to delve deeper into specific issues.

Social Media

This a significant, but also sensitive source of data that raised specific ethical concerns. I drew upon this method by joining the BJJ team’s private Facebook group along with the Warks Gym’s Facebook group. I also joined a number of national and international BJJ social media groups. Members within these groups would post BJJ related information. These stories, comments, and links to other sources of information were used as way of gaining a broader knowledge of BJJ culture, and of getting a deeper sense of its practitioners. The dilemma of social media for the research however, lay in its very nature, in that one would be drawn into accepting fellow practitioner’s friend’s requests and thereby joining their wider private social media network. This can be seen as simply a normal part of contemporary social life and a natural part of the modern ethnographic research process. However, these non-BJJ related networks and their associated posts complicated what the research became aware of and also what it could use. I therefore took the approach that I would be extremely judicious in how I incorporated data gathered from social media. Realistically, the realm of social media and its impact on social spaces required much more attention and depth than the
scope of this research allows. I was primarily interested in *lived reality*; those everyday physical, embodied interactions that take place between practitioners, not those that are marked by a digital self. And so while the realm of social media provided important insights, I was conscious of its potential to transgress practitioner-participants private lives, their anonymity, and also the trust that had been built over the course of the fieldwork.

**Fieldnotes & Writing**

Fieldnotes were of course a critical and fundamental part of the research as they enabled it to capture the very slice of reality that I had just experienced within the field-site. Apart from the period of classic observation that I undertook while injured, my fieldnotes were not constructed *in situ*, but were instead constructed from memory usually a few hours after training or the morning after. In addition, these fieldnotes would be enhanced by the jotting down of ideas and thoughts that might have suddenly sprung up, or which were garnered from conversations that I had with other practitioners through social media, text messages or phone calls. The study’s ethnographic text relies on the experiences captured through these fieldnotes and although these representations can never exactly represent what exactly happened, they do retain ‘key truths about processes – about ‘how things happen’ or ‘how things work’’ (Humphreys & Watson, 2009:42). And as an ethnography is of course, ‘an act of memory’ (Coffey, 1999:127), I understand ‘that even detailed fieldnotes, or physical mementoes, are tools that enable memory, rather than ‘pure' sources themselves’ (Jones, 2011:74). In preparing to write-up the fieldnotes for the ethnographic text as an aid to memory and to help categorise the work I’d gathered, I coded the fieldnotes manually using different coloured marker pens. These were used to highlight examples, incidents and train-of-thought analysis that related to headings such as gender, conviviality, race, corporeality etc.,

The act of writing the ethnographic chapters has been centred around myself as a positioned and reflective sociologist (Bulmer & Solomos, 2004:212) who has tried to convey an honest, if partial, rendering of both a particular and broad culture of BJJ. The four ethnographic chapters provide in their totality a full-bodied, but focused exploration of BJJ culture. ‘On the Mats’ conveys BJJ’s corporeality and pedagogy. ‘Racialised Bodies in BJJ & MMA’ specifically examines ‘race’ as it is experienced through the corporeality of BJJ and the
spaces of MMA. ‘At the Edge’ interrogates BJJ practitioner interactions through the concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality, while ‘The BJJ Canopy’ examines a wider BJJ culture.

Through the writing of these chapters and the wider thesis, I have opted to wherever possible convey the research in a clear and accessible manner that avoids an overly sociological and academic style. I believe that this is important to ensure that my research reaches as wide a range of individuals as possible by not sealing it off through overly complicated and theoretical prose. This act of simplification, of taking abstract theoretical concepts and thoughts and distilling them into a clear and accessible textual style is in art form in itself which requires skill and much effort and does not in any way lessen the research’s sociological significance.

Concerning the use and presentation of specific terms within the text, I have chosen to acknowledge their problematique by putting racial categories in quotation marks. This solution, if rather clumsy, does however highlight how the research is alive to how ‘race’ gets made and also destabilised. This bracketing points to how ‘race’ and its meanings shifts across time and space, and also importantly, how at times it retreats in significance vis-à-vis other markers of joy, pleasure, difference, social divisions, distinction, cultural taste, and aspiration etc.

Ethical Considerations

At every stage of the research I have attempted to create a robustly ethical project that is guided by principles of honesty, integrity, balance, and confidentiality. At the beginning of the fieldwork I distributed an research ethics form in which I provided an abstract of the research. The document also stated that all information would be kept securely, and that people’s identities would remain anonymous. I also informed all participants that they could request to view any of the work that I had written. In fact this was taken up by three of the participants of whom I provided a BSA study group paper and first drafts of the literature review and one of the ethnographic chapters. Subsequently, I received some important feedback from one practitioner-participant. In the spirit of listening, of transparency, and in the acknowledgment that the research was a collaborative process, I decided not to include a
certain incident.

In relation to the anonymity of those individuals and spaces that were involved in the research, I have used single or double letter abbreviations to identify individuals or institutions. This provides a certain level of cover that shields these individuals and institutions. One important point to note concerning anonymity is that in relation to the construction of ethnographic research, it can only go so far. What I mean by this is that the precautions that I have taken can serve to anonymise the individuals and spaces at the broadest level. General readers of the thesis who are unfamiliar with the network of BJJ spaces in the West Midlands will not have any idea of who the individuals are, or which are the spaces and institutions involved. Most probably, even those familiar with BJJ culture in the West Midlands will be unaware. However, for those who frequented the gyms and teams involved in the project, of course they may be able to see past the abbreviations and have an indication of the field-sites. They will also be able to recognise individuals from some of the images that have been used. My only defence here is to state that all the work throughout this thesis is a balanced and honest reflection of the people, interactions, and spaces that I experienced. In fact, the careful decisions I took about what to include and what to omit was weighed heavily in the direction of cautiousness and integrity rather than towards the principle of research at all costs. My cautiousness regarding the use of information from private social media accounts and the incident that I chose to omit, are just two such examples of this.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an in-depth analysis of the production of the ethnography (Neyland, 2007). Through this reflexive engagement with all aspects of the research process, the work of this chapter has served to inform the reader of how the research was formulated, to make clear the goals and areas of concern, and to offer a reflexive examination of the range of methods that were used in this particular ethnographic bringing to life. Having laid out this methodological blue-print, the thesis will next directly draw on this fieldwork as it begins to set out and analyse its findings.
Chapter 3 - On the Mats

Introduction

The thesis begins its ethnographic exploration of BJJ by first focusing on the art’s corporeality and the pedagogical framework through which its techniques and dispositions are shared and acquired. In doing so, the thesis outlines the significance of BJJ’s physicality for the ways in which practitioners relate to each other on the mats. This chapter commences by conveying the space on which BJJ’s techniques are universally relayed and practiced. This brief overview helps to relay the significance of the mats within BJJ’s pedagogy and with regards to related issues of hygiene. Subsequently, this overview serves as an orientating introduction to the chapter, its structure, and its related themes. In addition, it also provides some insights and background knowledge for those not familiar with the practice or culture of BJJ.

Next, the chapter focuses on the warm-up section of a typical BJJ class. It highlights how the movements involved in both BJJ and Capoeira’s warm-ups are viewed as essential in re-wiring the novice’s body. Significantly, the chapter’s analysis here highlights important philosophical differences between BJJ and Capoeira in this respect. This, in turn, reveals their positioning towards ideas of Brazilian-ness, and also ‘race’. Following this, the chapter then situates BJJ’s intercorporeality and the critical act of partnering within its pedagogy. The act of partnering is revealed as potentially stirring affective intensities which novice practitioners must overcome. These potential responses to the tactile presence of an Other are then brought into focus through the concept of gender. The chapter here explores in detail the range of issues that women martial artists, BJJ practitioners specifically, face within mixed-sex training environments. The centrality of partnering in BJJ is then further explored, before the chapter examines how BJJ’s corporeality, the inherent dangers of its techniques, and the act of sparring, all helps to construct mat-based relations that are largely marked by a sense of community and of consideration for the Other.
The Mats

The mats are an essential component of any BJJ space. Importantly, the mats provide an area on which BJJ’s techniques can be shared and safely practiced. The mats safely allow for bodies to be thrown, tripped, pulled, pushed, and grappled to the ground. And once grounded the mats allow bodies to confidently roll, slide, and entangle in ways that a different material would not allow for. In BJJ, the mats are akin to the boxing ring, yet they are also much more. In boxing the ring is predominantly used for sparring or bouts, with the majority of boxing training taking place outside of the ring using various punching bags, skipping ropes, or shadow boxing in front of mirrors. In BJJ however, every technique and drill, every fight or spar that takes place, takes place on the mats. Every aspect of BJJ’s training structure involves this matted space. Without the mats or some kind of similar material, preventing injuries from impacts such as falls or trips, or the cuts and grazes from skin sliding and slipping, or being pressurised against the ground, would be much more difficult to prevent. It is important to note however, that the mats in themselves cannot stop such injuries from happening. Careful and attentive fellow practitioners, alert, and experienced coaches, combined with the preventative material of the mats provide in complementary conjunction, the necessary safe environment on which to practice BJJ’s corporeality.

Figure 2: A digital image of a poster from the Warks gym male changing room wall.

Given the exposed, potentially grazed, sweating skin of BJJ bodies, the hygiene of the mats,
as well as the personal bodily hygiene of the mat users, were prominent issues that would regularly arise throughout the fieldwork and which could cause some friction within the spaces. The poster pictured above adorned one of the walls in the male changing rooms of the Warks Gym. The poster very clearly raised the spectre of public embarrassment and it left no room for ambiguity; we were but sweating and excreting forms of flesh. Acknowledging this fact meant that it was incumbent upon us, as BJJ practitioners, to take care of our own bodily hygiene. Being conscious of one’s own carnal presence within the context of this bounded space was therefore a personal requirement. But it was a personal requirement that not only affected and benefitted us as individuals, this necessity and act of good also extended out and into the collective group.

Given the importance of mat cleanliness, only bare-feet are allowed on the mats, (although some practitioners might occasionally wear socks). In trying to maintain mat hygiene, and due to the ease at which the foot can slip in and out of them, flip flops are an essential item in the BJJ practitioners training bag. Probably the most obvious instance that highlights the importance of wearing flip-flops in relation to mat hygiene concerns toilet breaks. On one occasion I observed a relatively new practitioner being publicly called out by the coach for leaving the mats for a toilet break with bare feet. The guilty novice looked embarrassed and only after liberally applying the coaches’ anti-bacterial gel to his feet was he allowed back on the mats. “And that goes for everyone! Do not be stepping off the mats without wearing something on your feet!” (‘C’, 2016). The coach used this incident to publicly reinforce a critical rule of the mats. His public admonishment reminded everyone present of their responsibility to the wider group and simultaneously also refocused attention away from the individual and back onto the group, thereby helping to assuage this new-comer’s public embarrassment.

While this hygiene process naturalises a texture of care and mutual responsibility, prefiguring a collective ethos that exceeds merely the individual transacting with a private experience or service. This same hygiene process also risks codifying a system of hygienic cleanliness that is disciplinary and sanitarily cleansed. This opens up possibilities for those who are considered, by their very social markers unclean or divergent, to be placed under extra scrutiny and shamed.
‘Rolled with someone I had never seen at training before, although I gather that he used to train with ‘RJ’ at academy X. He was a thirty something British Muslim guy who wore a skull cap. You could tell that his gi had not been washed and it wasn’t pleasant rolling with him. Driving back from Birmingham with ‘IG’ he brought this guy up straight away: “He fucking stunk! His beard scratched me to pieces!...I’m not being funny, but I can’t tell the difference between these Pakistani guys...”’. ‘IG’ was very serious, even a bit aggressive about it all. His tone caught me off guard. I started to ask questions about his personal background and he began to tell me how his family had to leave Bulgaria after the collapse of communism and move to Germany (he seemed vague and didn’t really get into the reasons why they had to move). I asked him about growing up in Germany and any racism that he’d been subjected to. He got all animated about his past experiences which could be summed up by his rhetorical questions to his abusers: “I mean what the fuck man? I look just like you, why the fuck are you being like this to me?”. ‘IG’ has dark European looks. To me he looks Turkish which I probably think he would hate to hear – the previous week I’d overheard ‘GT’ and ‘DS’ laughing about him saying that he’s a bit of a racist.’

In this fieldnote excerpt we can get a sense of how discourses around hygiene and discourses surrounding the unclean Other intersect. Historical archives of racism have consistently stereotyped the non-European about their hygiene standards in contrast to the supposed cleanliness of Westerners (Dawood, 2020). In this fieldnote example, while admittedly the Muslim practitioner’s gi was unwashed, this irregularity opened up a space for the spectre of racism to emerge. An unclean gi on this particular body had led to one practitioner adapting the well-worn trope of ‘they all look the same to me!’. Interestingly, also, from the responses to my own questions regarding this Bulgarian practitioner’s experience of growing up in Germany, it was clear that he had also been subjected to racism. His own Otherness and outsider status had been intensified by his dark European looks. The racism he’d experienced appeared to come as a shock him as he had believed himself to look similar to his German peers, thereby theoretically shielding him from such abuse. Racism was not something that he as a ‘white’ European should have faced. Arguably, it was something that they should be subjected to, not him.

Although a seemingly curious opening vignette, this brief discussion of the mats, and the associated hygiene practices of BJJ practitioners, has highlighted an indicative instance of how ‘race’ gets played into an otherwise basic feature of BJJ mat culture; an analytical approach that attunes the reader to the chapter’s extended discussion of the bodily practices
Rewiring the Hips: BJJ & Capoeira

Structured by the temporality of a typical BJJ class, the chapter commences its analysis of BJJ’s corporeality and pedagogy with an extensive examination of the warm-up. This sociological attention will highlight the importance of the moulding, or of the rewiring of BJJ practitioner’s bodies, through the demands of BJJ’s corporeal framework. In addition, this analysis also serves to distinguish BJJ’s pedagogical and theoretical reasonings for its focus on re-wiring from that of its Brazilian counterpart, Capoeira. In doing so, this section highlights the ways in which ‘race’ and nationalism intersect with the art of BJJ, and Capoeira.

The function of pedagogical work is to replace the savage body…with a body habituated, that is temporarily structured and kinetically remodelled according to the specific demands of the field. (Wacquant, 2004:60).

In fact, the warm-up section of an hour long gi beginners class at the Warks Gym would commonly take up well over half an hour of the lesson. For many newcomers who had never attended a BJJ class before, this lesson structure, the time and importance that it placed on ‘regimen, routine, and drills’ (Wacquant 2004: 60) would come as a surprise, if not shock for many. Addressing these concerns as they walked around the mats inspecting and correcting form, the coaches would often vocalise the importance of performing the bodily movements and repetitiously drilling the techniques. Their words aimed to reinforce the belief that if you were serious about one day achieving the goal of a BJJ black-belt, aligning one’s own corporeality ever closer to the corporeality of BJJ was the only legitimate route that that a white-belt novice could take.

‘...He instructed us to make three lines at one end of the mats where we were to perform three backward snakes and three forward snakes. Backward snakes are also known as shrimps, as I suppose they in some way try to replicate the way a shrimp moves on the sea floor. First, everyone break-falls onto their backs from the standing position. (The break fall is a movement where one
attempts to drop onto the mats with your feet fully off the ground, landing spread-eagled on the back of your body but using your outstretched arms and open palms to break the fall. The louder the sound that is made from arms and palms hitting/slapping the floor, the better the break fall has been performed as this lessens the impact, potentially painful, that one feels from the fall. This loud slapping of palms against the mats is always audible whenever attendees go to the floor). Once on your back, you immediately turn your body to the side, resting on either the left or right side of your body with arms and palms outstretched as though they are pressed against an invisible opponent. Staying in this position, you then slide your knees up towards the palms before pushing your feet into the ground and sliding backwards still in this side on position. Immediately, you turn to the other side and complete the same movement until you have slid from one end of the mats to the other…On the jump to feet from knees - one knee down, two knees down, jump back up and then the forward crawl, cat bend and jump with feet placed to beyond hands, I heard “Oh No! Not this!” . And smiles and vocalisations/expressions of being resigned. ‘C’ in response called out that those with stripes or coloured belts should not have a problem with these exercises and should be able to get their feet comfortably beyond their placed hands.’

We get a sense from these two combined fieldnotes of the types of movements that are intrinsic to BJJ’s corporeal framework and the potential difficulties that can be experienced by practitioners in trying to master them. Any doubts or concerns that newcomers with no historical experience of grappling to draw upon may have had regarding their ability to perform such unfamiliar movements was tempered by a sense of what could be in terms of one’s potential to improve and progress. The challenges that BJJ mobility movements posed for some newcomer’s bodies, especially their hip flexibility, was therefore countered by a sense of the future. This was a future that was only attainable if you submitted yourself to the guidance of the coach and remodelled your own corporeality through the prism of a BJJ corporeal framework. Training, practising, and experiencing the movements intrinsic to BJJ would in this way weave BJJ’s uniquely accented corporeality into the corporeal schema of those practitioners who were dedicated enough (Hogeveen, 2013). ‘Habit and routine activity’ (Wacquant, 2004:102), accented by the pedagogy of BJJ would pull these practitioners forward in time on both a physical and aspirational level.

As with the Brazilian MACS of Capoeira, hip flexibility in BJJ is fundamental to its corporeality. In contrast to Capoeira however, in BJJ there appears to be no relationship between hip flexibility and an idea of Brazilian-ness (Rosario, Stephens & Delamont,
2010:113 emphasis my own). In BJJ, one’s ability to successfully perform the mobility exercises in the warmup through building appropriate flexibility in the hips was always conveyed by the coaches simply in terms of its practical functionality to carry out the movements with good technique. Capoeira, on the other hand, appears to fuse the functionality of altering the waists of their students through warm-up exercises with notions of a culturally accented corporeality. This ‘jogo de cintura’ or Brazilian ‘game of the waist’ (Rosario, Stephens & Delamont, 2010:116) subsequently tasks itself with loosening the ‘hard, inflexible waists’ of its European students and stresses the need for non-Brazilian novices to become more flexible and agile, or more Brazilian, in their bodily hexis.

This idea of a specific type of corporeality that embodies cultural ways of being can be understood through Mauss’ (1979:97) ‘techniques of the body’. Techniques du corps conceptualise the ways in which from society to society people know how to use their bodies. Subsequently, hip flexibility and loose rhythmic waists in the art of Capoeira embodies a specifically Brazilian accented corporeality. While in contrast, the European or, more specifically, Northern European bodies of Capoeira’s Western practitioners are conceptualised as rigid and in need of remodelling towards a more Brazilian or, specifically, a more Afro-Brazilian accented corporeality. We therefore find within a culture of Capoeira a kind of culturalized mythology that foregrounds ‘black’ Brazilians as bodily and rhythmic, while ‘white’ Westerners are framed as being dissociated from the body and its carnal qualities (Garrett, 2018). In contrast to Capoeira, however, in BJJ any such association is not even considered or has been effaced.

Within BJJ’s pedagogical structure, the need to master specific movements was always strictly conveyed by the BJJ coaches through the prism of practical functionality. Within this context, mastering the warmup and drilling movements simply pulls practitioners forward towards a more aligned and functional corporeality. In Capoeira, however, while the warmup and drilling repetitions are also understood through the prism of functionality, they are also conceptualised as something more. Mastering these movements for a Capoeirista brings them closer to a perceived Brazilian corporeality. In this way, the Capoeira warmup not only facilitates an ability to perform the required techniques, the warmup in Capoeira is also ‘an essential part of the process for the ‘enculturation into a new, [more ‘Brazilian’] habitus’ (Delamont, 2010:117). This notion of Brazilian-ness, touched upon here through the place of
hip-flexibility, notwithstanding its problematic assumptions about ethnically or nationally ordered cultural characteristics, also requires broader interrogation as it is a central form of disassociation that distinguishes BJJ amidst much of the MACS cluster.

**BJJ’s Functionality**

Reflecting upon such similarities and differences, it would not be incorrect to say that the relationship between BJJ and Brazilian-ness is much less a feature of its pedagogy and culture than is the case for Capoeira. While both MACS may have their roots in Brazil, unlike Capoeira, BJJ does not necessarily stress a critical attachment of its style to an aspect Brazilian culture, or to an essence of Brazilian-ness. To understand why this disconnect might exist, it is helpful to examine a narrative that exists in BJJ culture (Danaher & Peligro, 2001). This narrative can also shed light on the possible reasons behind BJJ positioning itself as a *modern* martial art, one that exists within a wider field of MACS, but which in essence is different to traditional martial practices. This narrative claims that BJJ, unlike traditional MACS, rejects a static theoretical position and instead favours the empirical. Or simply put, BJJ only utilises what works in real-life violent confrontations. Subsequently, the narrative goes, BJJ, in contrast to its peers, is open to and marked by innovation (Kavoura et al, 2015). This exceptionalism narrative situates BJJ’s development as proceeding along scientific lines. It claims that early BJJ practitioners, ‘rejected abstract theorisation and instead sought to put their theories to the test, abandoning and modifying their theories [techniques] in the face of hard evidence’ (Peligro & Danaher, 2001:13).

This real world testing, or what Wacquant (2016:70) refers to as ‘the proof of the theoretical pudding of habitus must consist in its empirical eating’, distinguishes BJJ from other MACS and situates its pedagogy within a strictly *modern, rational, or functional* corporeal framework. Subsequently, it is said that ‘BJJ breaks through an unhealthy fetishism for authority, ancient ideas, tradition, and doubtful meta-physical theories and explodes the myths and mystique surrounding the martial arts’ (Peligro & Danaher, 2001:13).

The validity of the claim that BJJ is a force for positive change within the field of MACS is however obviously dependent upon one’s own positioning. BJJ practitioners might agree with
its reasoning, while practitioners of other MACS would challenge its tenets. Moreover, even if one generally agrees with the supposition, the reality is that such a claim is true only when assessed from the position of its own (unstable) epistemic vantage point. What is meant by this is that if you claim that BJJ is an art that only focuses on what works in real life fights and, BJJ is an art that has developmentally jettisoned the ineffective and superfluous, and, if you view any deviation from this rational or functional epistemological stance in martial practice as irrational, or pejoratively traditional, then yes, BJJ can from this stance be viewed as a force for good. However, as with any assertion or claim, when tested, we find that in reality the situation is much more complex and its foundations far more unstable and problematic in terms of the rigid epistemic, and the participatory closure it looks to actualise. BJJ (inclusive of its advanced practitioners) attempts to position itself here within a politics of distinction, wherein it wishes to distinguish itself in an assertive manner, playing into wider late capitalist logics that prize symbolic distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) at the expense of porosity, indeterminacy, and humility.

Moreover, it is far from correct to say that BJJ as a whole is only marked by functional techniques that cut through superfluous, redundant, eye-catching moves. Contemporary BJJ is replete with moves and techniques that would not work in real-life violent situations. For example, dropping into a sitting position on the floor and shuffling one’s backside forwards or backwards in an attempt to catch, or hook, the legs of your opponent would probably be catastrophic in a real fight. Outside the rules of an IBJJF tournament or club sparring session, guard-pulling would not be so effective against a punch, kick, or knee on the streets. Indeed, there are countless examples of techniques within BJJ that while might work in the context of the mats, could be fatal off them. Given this reality, it seems naïve to suggest that BJJ as a specific MACS is in some way more effective or functional than boxing or wrestling for example. The success of strikers and wrestlers within contemporary MMA tournaments clearly bears fact this out. BJJ’s exceptionalism with regards to functionality is therefore questionable and reveals more about its self-mythologisation as opposed to any wider,

17 The International Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Federation or IBJJF is the world’s largest BJJ organisation which hosts the world’s most prominent tournaments. The IBJJF constructs the rules and regulations that practitioners and clubs and practitioners must adhere to if they are to compete within its competition structure and legitimately advance along its belt ranking system.

18 Strikers: a striker is a fighter who primarily uses punches and kicks, elbows and knees
putatively objective appraisal. The fact that this mythologization, as narrated along these illusory terms, does nonetheless command a certain audience is in itself very interesting.

Secondly, this idea of BJJ exceptionalism also relies upon assuming that the only barometer of a MACS is its effectiveness in real life violent confrontations. Apart from the fact that BJJ’s own effectiveness in such situations is suspect, this narrative of exceptionalism also overlooks and elides other MACS’ functionality as fighting arts. Furthermore, this narrative carries within it the potential to dismiss as redundant any traces or qualities that offer something more than just functionality. Through this prism, any esoterically tinged martial art is considered dubious. Capoeira’s use of chanting, drumming, and dancing for example, can be potentially labelled as an ‘embarrassing remnant of slavery’, or as ‘a metaphor for backwardness’ (Cairus, 2011:105). Rather than viewing these more abstract elements as adding layers and a richness, in addition to the functionality of their own art’s unique techniques, such a narrative delegitimises other MACS when assessed against the true and nominally rationalised essence of BJJ.

My point here is to not dismiss outright the claims that BJJ has on bringing about change to a wider field of MACS. It must be noted that through their successes in early MMA tournaments, the original cohort of Brazilian BJJ fighters did force practitioners of other arts to reassess their art’s own functionality. The emergence of BJJ did help to reveal that it was not pressure point attacks and spinning kicks that worked in real fights. At that time, BJJ revealed that what worked overall was grappling someone to the ground, nullifying their threat and dominating them through the use of submissions, chokes, and strikes. However, this initial success and prominence meant that a doctrine trapped in its own self-importance developed. This seemed particularly true for those who jealously guard and espouse the supposedly superior cerebral qualities of functionality and technique.

Furthermore, this narrative also lacks a certain self-awareness in relation to BJJ’s historical development, and the racial and political landscape of the new Brazilian Republic vis-a-vis its relationship to Capoeira. Once those historical processes that attempted to distance a modern, rational and technically superior Japanese Jiu-Jitsu from the ‘Africanised rhythms of Capoeira’ (Cairus, 2011:105) are acknowledged, then modern BJJ’s possessiveness of functionality, its disembodiment of Brazilian culture from its corporeal framework, and its
potentially dismissive attitude towards certain traditional Eastern/Chinese MACS can be understood as arising out of the twin processes of racism and nationalism.

Given the highly charged historical social landscape in which aspects of Brazilian culture were *de-Africanised* and refracted through an acceptably ‘white’ Western narrative, it remains at best naive to ignore these processes as potentially helping to mould BJJ’s epistemic stance. Subsequently, the relationship between qualities such as *functionality* and *technicality* and notions of *modernist Western* and *Japanese* intellect might possibly better inform those aspects of BJJ’s historical development. In this way we might find terminology such as *the traditional* as a pejorative stain upon Capoeira for embodying a so-called *primitive*, ‘black’, African carnality. Concomitantly, we also might find that ‘traditional martial’ arts is a term overwhelming reserved for largely *Eastern* or, more specifically, Chinese martial practices, which inherently lack functionality and are supposedly weighed down by the baggage of superstition and mysticism. Cognisant of this historical context, labels of functionality, cerebrality and technicality in relation to BJJ, therefore, become inextricably bound to racialised understandings of *the human* and the unique civilisationism they are said to practice and embody.

This attempt to situate the wider legacy of racialised and civilizationist assumptions that shape the narrations-of-self favoured by BJJ allows in turn for a fuller unpacking of the hips/functionality premise. It is clear that rather than viewing the kinetic remodelling of practitioners hips as solely only facilitating functionality, Capoeira’s conceptualisation of hip flexibility as the embodiment of Brazilian-ness can be understood as fundamental in connecting and celebrating Capoeira and Afro-Brazilian culture. In BJJ, however, such connections to understandings of Afro-Brazilian legacy are absent. The reasons for this *absent presence* (Schilling, 1993) can arguably be traced back to historical processes and factors which informed and shaped BJJ’s early development.

**Partnering & Intercorporeality**

Throughout the initial phase of the warmup, practitioners are simply individual bodies, expertly or not, throwing themselves onto the mats and contorting themselves into
movements that habitually facilitate a BJJ corporeal framework. On hearing the call, “Ok. Partner up!”. However, which was often followed by “Choose someone roughly the same size and height”. BJJ practitioners would begin the critical process of merging with another body that would continue for the remainder of the class. What became clear very quickly upon becoming a BJJ practitioner was that within the pedagogical structure of the art, having the tactile presence of an Other body paired and synchronised with one’s own is fundamental in acquiring its corporeal framework. Simply put, there is no real learning in BJJ without another body to engage and interact with (Hogeveen, 2013).

The Other’s uniquely accented body, and my own body’s interaction with it on the mats, is the instrument of both mine and their advancement. This ‘interdependence of the self and Other’ (Daly, 2016:193) is a significant feature of BJJ that marks it out from other MACS that I had previously experienced, such as boxing. This is not to diminish the community-making nature of MACS like boxing or to mark other MACS out as solipsistic practices. The pedagogical power of the ‘milieu of the entire gym’ (Wacquant, 2004:127), the posters, equipment, the coach, one’s peers, and the individual boxer’s own efforts in the manufacture of the pugilist has been documented (Wacquant, 2004). While acknowledging this fact however, my own fieldwork explicitly highlights that the BJJ mats, in many ways, can be thought of as a space that is marked by a profound ‘communion with otherness’ (Crossley, 1996:28). For BJJ bodies, in the course of drilling, melding, and learning together on the mats, the interpersonal Other can in many ways be conceptualised as an extension of oneself.

The argument can be made therefore that, “…we do in fact live in an interworld; rather than being absolute disjunctions of interiorities and exteriorities of self and Other, there are mirrorings, continuities and intertwinnings.” (Gallese cited in Daly, 2016:174). Such sociological meditations on embodiment, alterity, and the intersubjective nature of our shared lived reality have been important resources in the thesis’ attempt to critically reflect upon the centrality of the Other in the pedagogy of BJJ. Phenomenological understandings on the intersubjective nature of our social world in particular, help to situate the relationship of the Other for those engaged and interacting with partners on the mats. Examining how ‘the grappler’s body is forged in the space between and among active bodies’ (Hogeveen, 2013:81) reveals an analogous relationship with phenomenological ontological positionings. The idea that my body and the body of the Other are two sides of the same phenomenon
enjoined together in an ‘I-Thou’ (Crossley, 1996:32), intersubjective relationship, is at the heart of both phenomenological understandings of perception and, as I argue, the corporeal framework of BJJ.

Merleau-Ponty’s idea of reversibility (1962; 1968), implies that we are body-subjects who are visible-seers, tangible-touchers, and audible-listeners. And it is through this fact of our shared corporeality that we can come to appreciate the Other as a second self. The Other and I, we both experience the intermundane space of our environment through our unique and shared corporeality. For BJJ practitioners, this means that the Other’s dynamic body is the basis through which the dispositions of BJJ are acquired. Bodies are bound to each on the mats, pedagogically, physically, and conceptually. As BJJ bodies engage with each other, as they touch and gauge the Other’s unique feel, as their bodies embrace, their limbs become entwined, as each practitioner attunes to the muscle and breathing rhythms of the Other; this synchronisation brings about a realisation that the experience that I have of my own body can be transferred to another body-subject (Crossley, 1996).

I come to understand that the body that has enveloped me shares the same form and the same vulnerabilities as mine. Wincing, guttural noises, gurgling, reflexive reactions; we both feel the same pressure and direction as our bodies seek to position themselves against, or through the other’s body. I can feel the other’s calmness or urgency as I gain a positional advantage. And I can feel their panic or easy acceptance as I manoeuvre their elbow joint to the point of dislocation. Bodies in BJJ are locked together viscerally. It is through this carnal sensing that they know each other. Indeed, through BJJ’s corporeality ‘thought becomes an intersubjective action to be felt and understood across body-subjects’ (Crossley, 1996:39). On the mats, this fact of intersubjectivity becomes primary. The mats and the practices that take place on them reveal our ‘intrinsic interdependence.’ (Daly, 2016:38).

Partnering Up

This intense merging and melding of bodies always signalled the end of the warmup and the start of the drilling section of the class. Drilling is essentially the act of continuously repeating the same technique with a partner so that both bodies learn the sensations and
nuances involved in a particular movement. Through drilling techniques and specific movements in partnership with an Other body, the twin processes of habituation and sedimentation facilitates bodies who are able to seamlessly occupy the nuanced positionings of BJJ’s techniques (Hogeveen, 2013). Practising and experiencing the specific timing and bodily movements through drilling, therefore, moulds a BJJ practitioner’s body so that it will move automatically around and about the touching, sensing body of an Other (Hogeveen, 2013). As previously detailed, learning and partnering in BJJ are inextricably intertwined. For a new-comer to BJJ’s pedagogical structure, the command to “partner-up” could stir ‘visceral forces’ (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010:1) that one had to learn to negotiate and calm over time.

For some martial artists, especially striking based MMA fighters, the affects linked to BJJ’s tactility could actually be a barrier to them engaging with the art (Hirose & Pih, 2010). Memorably, as I had just begun the immersive fieldwork, I was warned by an MMA fighter from another gym that I should be careful, as according to him: “There are loads of gays in BJJ.” (MMA fighter, 2012). For this stereotypical MMA ‘toxic hard man’ (Schiller 2020:292), while the techniques of BJJ could be selectively authorised (Hirose & Pih, 2010) into his own repertoire of mixed fighting styles, this authorisation was severely tempered by his own homophobic fears surrounding same-sex touch and physical intimacy. For this fighter, BJJ’s corporeality, its tactility, and the inevitable contact of Other male bodies for such long periods of time was intimately tied to his own homophobia. This meant that BJJ and BJJ practitioners were, for him, suspect. While this fighter may have needed to master an array of BJJ techniques to enhance his MMA fighting repertoire, these techniques were acquired solely within the safe space of an MMA class. In this way, he was able to appropriate what he needed from BJJ’s corporeality without his masculinity being potentially tainted by it.

While this is admittedly an extreme case, the fact remains that for many newcomers and novices, BJJ’s tactility and its centrality of partnering could at least unsettle anxieties associated with having the tactile presence of an Other [male] body so intimately tied to one’s own. For those martial artists who had begun training in BJJ, negotiating and overcoming these potential anxieties was an ongoing process that varied in time and necessity according to the practitioners own uniquely accented corporeality. Indeed, Akihiko Hirose & Kay Kei-
Ho Pih highlight the fact that ‘many submission and grappling techniques require relatively prolonged physical contact with one’s opponent and often resemble culturally recognizable postures of homosexuality.’ (2010:200).

The guard position is arguably the most obvious BJJ technique that could be said to resemble a posture of homosexuality. While its similarities to the sexual missionary position are clear, the guard is also the most common technique in BJJ with its array of variations central to BJJ’s corporeal framework. The guard position allows the partner on their back to help control and restrict the range of movement of their opponent while simultaneously offering a range of transitions or attacks. Repeatedly performing techniques from the guard position was probably the most common form of drilling in a class at the Warks Gym, and probably within most other BJJ training spaces as well. Learning to stay relaxed and at ease while in guard was, therefore, vital for a novice’s progression and development.

Hirose & Pih (2010) have elucidated how BJJ’s corporeality embodied by techniques such as the guard means that, for many MMA enthusiasts, BJJ, in contrast to stand-up fighting styles such as kick-boxing, boxing, or Muay Thai, is feminised and conceptualised as being less manly. Even the act of tapping for these MMA practitioners and fans, is refracted through the prism of a rigid, hard form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) that is marked by popular character types such as the ‘alpha male’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:840). Through this toxic hegemonic lens, the act of tapping by an MMA fighter is seen as quitting. Perversely, those fighters who refuse to tap and get badly injured are lionised by these MMA audiences and are, in fact, viewed as real men. In this sense, the grappling arts generally, but
BJJ in particular, is associated with notions of femininity and its corporeality tainted by fears surrounding same-sex physical proximity and intimacy.

For newcomers to the mats, BJJ’s tactility and the erotic nature of partnering and/or drilling in the guard was something that their nerves and tension could reveal. On one occasion, at an extremely busy basic gi class which had a high number of young newcomers, their unease at being directed to partner up and drill from guard was palpably written on their faces. Sensing this tension, the coach joked, “And remember. It’s only gay if you look into their eyes!” (‘C’, 2017). The comment drew some nervous laughter, but its homophobic nature was obvious. Its affects lingered throughout the class and, once the class had finished, the coach remarked to me directly that, “I shouldn’t have said that!” At the next week’s class, the coach, possibly as a public response to his previous comment, used me as an example to address the way I, like many other novices, always seem to look away from their opponent whenever in guard position.

“‘Looking away is common, especially with novices when you’re in guard because it’s like the missionary position. What you have to do is look at the eyes but focus on peripheral vision. When you become advanced you can close your eyes, just feeling, but,”, and he demonstrated, “...if my head’s all the way back on the floor then I’m going to bridge19. If I’m trying to turn on my side then I’m probably going to sweep20 you and so you need to be conscious of this otherwise you’re not going to see these signs.’”

These non-conscious moments of intensity (Shouse, 2005), brought on by the tactile presence of an Other body, were something that practitioners had to confront if they were to successfully continue developing in BJJ. The bodily tension that was such a mark of novice practitioners was antithetical to adapting and aligning one’s own corporeality to the demands of BJJ’s corporeal framework. On the mats, BJJ novice practitioners had to learn to ‘“Relax.” and “Let go.’ (Warks Gym coaches 2013-2018). In the tactile presence of an Other, BJJ practitioners needed to be relaxed and open enough to sense ‘the fine gradations of leverage

19 To bridge/Bridging – refers to the movement in which the partner who’s back is on the mats elevates/thrusts his/her hips up to create space between themselves and the mats in order to alleviate the downward pressure of their partner’s body, and to try to facilitate a positional advantage.

20 To sweep is to disrupt your opponent’s balance in order to transition into a better, more dominant position.
and feel’ (Hogeveen 2013:81) and to incorporate the timing and rhythm of BJJ’s movements and techniques. Letting go of this defensive reaction to the touch of an Other body against one’s own was crucial, not only in terms of drilling, but also for acquiring BJJ techniques in general. There could be no real ‘second-self’ (Daly, 2016:193) to an anxious body. Being tense and self-conscious would close and tighten a body in such a way that both, they and their drilling partner would not reap the benefits from performing the moves as they were meant to be executed.

‘Next up was the triangle drill where one person is in the other’s guard and is simply there to relax and let the guard-puller practice continuous triangles. Breaking grips and pulling the arms towards your own neck, you lift your hips off the floor and wrap your legs around the other’s neck, simulating the triangle choke which is extremely effective and which done correctly nearly guarantees a tap. (The drill is much lighter as it’s just about the movement and technique. There is no force involved). When ‘C’ saw that ‘G’ and myself were again pairing up he instructed her to go and pair with the short middle aged man and told ‘F’ to pair with me. I assumed it was due to size and shape. After a few attempts, ‘F’ pointed out that I needed to get my hips further up. This meant really thrusting the pelvis up towards his face. On doing so I could feel the difference; it was tighter and easier to wrap my legs around his neck. After a few more attempts and while I was still in position, ‘C’ came over and directed me to then pull ‘F’s face into me. As I did ‘F’ began to tap almost immediately. This came as a revelation to me as I’d always believed the effectiveness of this move depended on being able to wrap the legs around the neck like a vice, which in turn is dependent on having extremely flexible legs and very loose hips.’

From the above excerpt, we can see how the erotic nature of performing triangle choke drills could be a factor in the tensing of a body and the closing off of a novice practitioner’s ability to smoothly carry out the movements. Having to wrap your legs around another man’s neck while thrusting your pelvis towards his face took getting used to. Some of the tension that I displayed was no doubt partly assuaged by my partner’s advice to get my hips further up, but it still took the explicit direction of the coach in order for me to open-up even further and pull my partner’s face into my pelvis. My unease and my tension had misled me into a more aggressive and, arguably, a more masculine posture, which was antithetical to being light and smooth.

Such an example explicitly highlights the intimate character of a BJJ corporeal framework
that breaks down spacing between bodies and effaces cultural rules concerning physical proximity and personal space (Strube & Werner, 1982). The tactility and intimacy between male partners on the mats therefore ‘disrupts established patterns of interaction between those of the same sex’ (Spencer, 2012:128) and in doing so, arguably, opens up spaces that can challenge forms of hegemonic masculinity within martial arts (Hirose & Pih, 2010). In the same way that a cosmopolitan canopy can potentially disarm divisive communitarian understandings of difference (Valluvan, 2016), those practices involved in learning to relax and being at ease in the tactile presence of an Other can similarly help to disarm rigid forms of masculinity (Channon & Mathews, 2015; Anderson & McCormack, 2016). (Chapter 5 will provide a more detailed analysis of masculinity as it relates to BJJ’s corporeality, its local spaces, and its wider culture).

This exploration of how partnering in BJJ, with all its associated physical intimacy, can create unique challenges for novice practitioners has so far been exclusively male-centric. However, as with contemporary MACS spaces in general, the BJJ club at the Warks Gym was mixed-sex. Although less in number (there was about one female practitioner for about every six or seven males), the female practitioners were active and well-established members of the club. They ranged in experience and ability from complete novices to experienced blue-belt competitors. In this space, male and female practitioners trained, drilled, and rolled together on the mats without gender distinction. Partnering up with someone of a different sex meant that those anxieties and visceral intensities that could erupt in the tactile presence of an Other male body took on a similar, but slightly different intensity when thrusting one’s pelvis into the face of a partner of the opposite sex.

**Gender on the Mats**

In the Field-sites section within the methodology chapter, I highlighted how the decision to focus on a single site acted as a vector for the research. Using the Warks Gym as the field-site in which to immerse myself opened up the possibility of exploring themes relating to gender. The reason for this was that the Warks Gym was a truly mixed-sex training environment. In contrast, while at the university site men and women trained in the same room at the same time, this training was however performed separately. The men trained on one side of the
mats together, while women trained together on the other side. And at the site in Birmingham, I had never actually seen women training at the space. Soon after my decision to focus solely on a single site, it subsequently came to light why women were absent from this gym. What was revealed was that the British Muslim owners of the gym space from whom the Birmingham BJJ coach rented the mats, were in fact practicing a form of gender exclusion within the facility. In short, women were not allowed to train at this gym. If any woman came to the gym and enquired about joining, it would be suggested to them in an ostensibly considerate and polite manner that this was not the right space for them. They would be told that it was full of loud, aggressive weightlifters and fighters who would be horrible to train alongside. It would be suggested that they should instead check out the other gyms that were nearby and which were more suitable for them etc.,

Upon hearing about the realities of this space, my own naivety was brought into sharp focus. It was now clear as to why there were no women who trained at the facility and why only the males from the university team ever travelled over to Birmingham. Also, the confusing signs that were placed on the walls of the male changing room now all made sense. On the half a dozen or so occasions that I had showered and got changed there I had been oblivious to the meaning of these signs, which said something close to; ‘Please do not leave the shower area naked. Do not be naked whilst getting changed.’. Only upon first hearing about the gym owner’s religiosity and its impact on who was allowed to frequent the space did it dawn on me that these signs were linked to a very particular view of the world. This was a world in which men seemed to fear seeing other men naked and where they also needed to be protected from whatever temptations would occur if they shared the same training space as women.

When I asked two practitioners who used this gym and with whom I was still in touch, their response was one of embarrassment, mixed with a kind of resignation, “It’s stupid I know but ‘RJ’ is a great coach...I don’t agree with it, but it’s their culture isn’t it?”. Such reasoning, or excuse-making, highlights a rendering of the concept of multiculturalism in which problematic practices are excused or tolerated on the grounds of an essentialised and stereotypical conception of the cultural Other. On further discussions with some of the Warks Gym practitioners about the revelation, some shared this sense of ambiguity in saying that it was wrong, but... There were also others who said they could never train at such a place
knowing what they now knew.

It is critical to point out here that of course there are assorted Islamophobic discourses that would presumptuously characterise this scenario as representing an intrinsic cultural attribute of Muslims, ignoring the many diversities and variations that inevitably characterise the views of Muslims as would be the case with any putative background. Equally, there are Islamophobic frames that would identify only this form of gender separation as problematic or worthy of reproach, leaving uninterrogated other situations where gender segregation or anxieties arise. Indeed, it is important to reiterate that the university space itself was also observing a de facto gender separation. Furthermore, there are further Islamophobic discourses that would intuitively flag gender segregation as reprehensible by default, when in fact some women might actually find it preferable for such a segregation to manifest in particular contexts (Mahmood, 2019). As such, it is important to note that whilst this gender scenario was seemingly tied, in this instance, to the particular views of the owners as relevant to a certain ethnic/religious background, it is also the case that ‘it is only Islamophobia that allows for wholesale characterisations of a community to be fixed along racially essentialist terms’ (Valluvan, 2021, personal communication, 24th March).

Highlighting this situation is significant, however, as it reveals a number of important issues. Firstly, it points to the fact that there does seem to be a tension that stems from BJJ’s tactility with regards to same-sex training, and, as this example highlights, mixed-sex training, too. The fact that one training space practiced gender separation on the mats would seem to imply that this was in fact the case. Furthermore, the gender segregation practiced at the gym in Birmingham also points to how these fears can also be understood as being related to wider forms of sexism and misogyny. The gym in which the BJJ space was situated prohibited women entirely. Women’s bodies could not be conceptualised as space invaders (Puwar, 2004) here as they weren’t even allowed across the border. What is also interesting about this situation is the way in which some of the male practitioners who used this space justified and accounted for the fact that they were aware of the exclusion but continued to frequent the space anyway. In totality, the situation and the related issues that arise out of it clearly highlight some of the significant and pressing issues that women face in both wider society and within gyms and martial art spaces specifically. Subsequently, given the tensions that stem from BJJ’s corporeality in relation to mixed-sex training environments, and more
generally in terms of women’s participation in what traditionally has been viewed as masculine spaces, it is necessary to examine gender and those related themes as they are practiced and experienced within the spaces of BJJ.

In its most established sense, the term gender refers to those ‘socially produced distinctions based on sex differences that are enacted through various practices that (re)work bodies in specific ways in the attempt to signify specific masculinities and feminities’ (Spencer 2012:55). These distinctions based on sex-differences between males and females serve to construct and essentialize ideas regarding male and female bodies. These notions serve, along with others of ‘race’, ethnicity, class etc., to delineate which bodies belong and are seen as natural in certain spaces. They also serve to define the limits, potential, and capabilities of certain bodies in relation to specific practices. Masculinity is signified as antipodal to femininity. Crudely, masculinity is associated with hardness while femininity with softness, masculinity with aggression and femininity with passivity, etc (Channon, 2013). As previously discussed in Chapter 1, given the widely held perception of martial arts as a masculine domain, MACS, including BJJ, can be seen as embodying essentialized notions of masculinity.

Unsurprisingly, research (Dufur, 1999) has highlighted the significant obstacles facing women who want to participate in sport in general. Female pugilists face various forms of discrimination in gyms (Halbert, 1997) and are invariably perceived as outsiders. Normative masculinity not only polices which bodies are seen as natural and which belong in any given space, but it also prescribes modes of conduct, interactions, and relationships between genders. Despite being bastions of masculinity, or rather, because they are bastions of masculinity, MACS spaces can generally be thought of as sites where patriarchy and normative masculinity can be eroded from within through female participation. The development of the supposedly masculine ability to physically dominate others poses a direct challenge to a key site of male power. By partaking in the martial arts and through developing a body suited to physical combat, women can reject essentialized notions of feminine passivity and fragility and can become ‘the living expression of feminist resistance’ (Channon, 2013:3). As part two of Chapter 1 also highlights, MAC spaces therefore have transformative potential for women in terms of dismantling essentialized notions of femininity and masculinity. For men also, training alongside, fighting, and finding
themselves being physically dominated by women, forces many male practitioners to begin a process of critically re-evaluating their beliefs in male physical superiority. This leads to some male martial artists to ultimately question the legitimacy of their own essentialised understandings of embodied difference.

Given this transformative potential of training in a MACS, and despite arguably being one of the best suited martial practices for woman due to its supposed ability to help a physically smaller and weaker person dominate someone much bigger and stronger (Danaher & Peligro, 2001; Kavoura et al., 2015), BJJ’s corporeality still acts as a barrier to some woman and men from taking up the art. Its tactile intimacy and the intensities this ignites in some potential practitioners means that BJJ, specifically, is arguably in a much more difficult position to attract female members than its striking MACS peers. One incident from the fieldwork, in particular, highlights the difficulties that BJJ has in terms of attracting female students to mixed training sessions.

As I was waiting in the reception area, a woman in her thirties had come into the gym to look at the facilities and to see whether she would like to join. I was able to hear the conversation that took place between her and the coach. She had previously attended two gyms but had been put off. “It felt a bit sleazy. When I was in someone’s guard I could see his mates smiling and winking at him.” From what she said, it was clear that her brief experience of BJJ was not positive and served to reinforce the fears that might possibly arise within mixed-sex BJJ training environments. After hearing this and thinking about how the gym could overcome such issues, I suggested to the coach that as the gym had women-only kick-boxing classes then why could it not also have a women-only BJJ class? I thought that this could be a way to give potential women practitioners a taste of the art in an environment where, as newcomers they would feel more at ease. The coaches’ response to the suggestion was significant in terms of the way his own philosophy and the institutional habitus of the BJJ club prevented any possibility of a women-only class.

“‘P’ has mentioned a female-only class loads of times and I just keep telling him no. Same as kid’s only classes, I’m not doing it!”. I asked him why he felt this way and he replied: “That’s not why I do it. BJJ for me is a fighting art. It’s the way I fight. It’s part of my repertoire. Straight punches, kicks and then BJJ to finish them off. It’s an art for real fighting situations. I want to be surrounded by people who think like me. They might never be champions etc., but they have to compete. They might
be hobbyists but still, it’s about having the right mind-set. There are plenty of other gyms for that, just for money! Look at ‘K’ (female mid 20’s) and ‘MT’ (female 41yrs). They’re warriors! They come and get stuck in with the rest of us. I don’t want to be training little kids, or women who are just trying to lose weight and get fit. Fuck that!”’ (‘C’, 2014).

From this fieldnote excerpt we see that the idea of women-only sessions is an anathema to the coaches’ own pure martial art philosophy. Drawing upon the work of Brown & Jennings (2013) that was discussed in Chapter 1, for ‘C’, who had a street fighting and martial art background in both Muay Thai and Wing Chun, ‘the purpose of a martial art is to be able to look after yourself’ (Ted 2008, cited in Brown & Jennings, 2013:40) regardless of your gender. ‘C’ refused to coach any such classes and left the gym owner ‘P’ unable to put any additional classes on the timetable and tap into the potential interest that there may have been for a women-only class.

While adamant in his decision not to teach such a class, as he believed that its attendees would not be serious martial artists, ‘C’ was, however, conscious of the difficulty in attracting female practitioners to BJJ. One possible solution that he employed was to regularly let the women who used the wider gym space, know that privates21 were available with the BJJ coaches. On one occasion, as the female kickboxing students were descending the stairs ‘C’ called out to them and their instructor: “You can’t call yourself a true fighter if you can’t fight on the ground. Privates are £25 ladies. You can do it in pairs if you like!”. Some of the women stopped and observed the mats for a while and then left shortly afterwards. I’m unaware if any of those kickboxers actually attended any of BJJ classes or have paid for private tuition.

‘K’, who was the most senior ranked woman at the club, also had a similar experience as the woman in reception. After a training session one Saturday morning I interviewed her and asked her specifically about her experiences and thoughts on the possibility that BJJ’s corporeality prevented women taking up the art.

“‘...I’ve had a few friends come along with me and they’re like oh God that’s so...”’. ‘K’ made a facial expression that conveyed to me the issue. “I know what they mean as I’ve been to some places

21 Privates are individual training sessions with a coach on the mats outside of normal BJJ class sessions.
where you just feel really uncomfortable.” I asked what she meant by that, “Well they’re being really creepy, like keeping you in their guard, or they just don’t do anything. Or, because you’re a woman they go all out and really put it on as they can’t lose against a girl. This place kind of weeds those types out though, it’s really good here.” (‘K’, 2014).

‘K’s disclosure highlights another important issue for female MACS practitioners. After having to navigate the rampant misogyny and lechery of some gyms and after having found a space where they feel respected and safe, female practitioners then have to also face the affects that their gender has on some of their male fellow practitioners, “…as they can’t lose against a girl.”. Indeed, going all out and putting it on when paired with a female was a common reaction for some male practitioners. Faced with the perceived challenge to their ego and masculinity, some male MACS practitioners would become exaggeratedly competitive against a woman. ‘G’, who was another experienced female practitioner at the Warks Gym and who practiced nogi as well as gi, found that “…especially those young MMA guys go all out with me.”. In contrast to having to deal with this enervating aggression and acts of overt masculine ego protection, female MACS practitioners must also face the challenges that are posed by those male practitioners who just will not realistically fight them. Having a male training partner who has become so tense and closed in the face of their tactile and competitive presence can be just as demoralising for women as facing an insecure and threatened man who just cannot lose.

For those men who close up in the presence of female fighters:

…the habituated lessons of gender propriety affects them physically, evoking a sense of unease at the level of the body which prevents them from engaging in effective training or competitive sparring with women (Channon, 2013:9).

As previously discussed in Chapter 1, this paternalistic, gentlemanly conduct is obviously problematic in terms of mixed-sex training environments as how else can women develop the range of skills necessary to become an effective fighter if their male training partners refuse to competitively fight with them? In addition, and specific to BJJ, this visceral aversion to fighting women is no doubt further complicated by the intimate and tactile nature of BJJ’s corporeality. Similarly, this reluctance by men to engage in honest sparring with women arguably causes exactly the same problems for female BJJ practitioners as they do for female
practitioners of the striking martial arts. In a male dominated environment, if men will not sincerely spar with women, then women practitioners will find it much more difficult to progress.

Despite these problems, however, the existence of mixed-sex training in MACS spaces like the Warks Gym, does have an important role to play in dismantling essentialised understandings of gender difference. As Alex Channon’s work has shown, having to directly face the reality of sparring with women, men are forced to redefine their female sparring partners and female martial artists in general. The subversive value of mixed sex training comes when the primary identifying label of female is replaced by martial artist as it,

…signifies the dissociation of the exclusive links between masculinity, men and fighting prowess, showing that men are beginning to see women as potential equals in the context of physical combat (Channon, 2013:14).

‘Got tapped by ‘MT’! I could see her setting me up for an armbar\textsuperscript{22}, but I just couldn’t relax. This was my first time rolling with a woman and it showed. Whereas I would normally get in close, I felt too uncomfortable to do that with her. As soon as she tapped me everyone stopped and started laughing. ‘C’ asked loudly; “So how does it feel to get tapped by a woman?” I instantly replied, “I didn’t get tapped by a woman. I got tapped by a blue-belt!”

What this excerpt highlights, and what is borne out through my own experience of mixed-sex training on the mats, is that exposure to the abilities of female sparring partners results in a realization for men that ‘even if women are not as strong as men in absolute terms, they can still be formidable opponents’ (Roth & Basow 2004:254). Subsequently, male martial artists come to view and treat female martial artists the same as they would another male practitioner. That woman or female is transformed into that fellow grappler or martial artist. The rewiring process, therefore, relaxes and opens up male bodies in the tactile presence of a female body who is actively trying to dislocate their joints or render them unconscious. Concurrently, this process moulds better, more honest, and more confident male training

\textsuperscript{22} An arm-bar - A position/submission in which an opponent’s arm is isolated [usually] with the elbow fixed into the attacker’s pelvis and with their palm facing upwards. If the attacker places downward pressure on the forearm, dislocation at the elbow joint will occur.
partners for female practitioners. In this way, mixed-sex training spaces acts as contact zones (Crafter & Iqbal, 2016), where different genders interact and possibly learn to deconstruct their ingrained, preconceived essentialised ideas regarding embodied gender differences. Spaces such as the Warks Gym, therefore, offers both men and women the chance to ease the barriers of difference and to create environments in which BJJ practitioners, regardless of gender, are primarily seen as fellow team members and practitioners whose concerns, needs, and ambitions are very much the same as one’s own.

Mat Partners

The ‘interdependence between self and other’ (Daly, 2016) that is at the heart of BJJ’s pedagogical framework and corporeality is exemplified through the necessity of having a partner on the mats. As has been discussed, while the act of partnering or pairing up on the mats can stir anxieties, it is ultimately a process that joins two bodies together in a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship. This feature is important to note as it gives an insight into the relationship between this fundamental aspect of BJJ’s corporeality, and those forms of relations and interactional practices that are a mark of the field-site.

Partners on the mats drill, roll, and learn together. And critically, both learn from each other. Ideally, a good BJJ mat partner is someone who can and will constructively point out your mistakes, correct your positionings and generally provide encouragement in the face of what can often feel like the unfathomable mystery of many BJJ techniques. As BJJ’s tactile sensitivity allows a partner to sense the other’s mistakes, a good partner therefore is someone who will tactfully address any issues they sense as their partner rolls. A closed, tense, or an overly competitive partner would either not sense these nuances, or if they did, would offer no helpful feedback.

‘The importance of the right training and sparring partner - I've always been unbothered by whoever I was paired up with, or with whom I was sparring with (although in relation to sparring I've always wanted to roll against the highest belts). Choosing someone who complements you however, who will constructively point out your mistakes or positives is vital to improving. The Other, as in your partner, is essential to learning and improving. They don't have to be a higher belt, they just need to be the right sort of person.’
In reality however, many, if not all, BJJ practitioners have their favourite bodies to partner with, someone they’re used to rolling with and with whom they feel safe and comfortable. For higher belt practitioners who might be preparing for an upcoming contest, partnering with only one or two others was commonplace. For everyone else however, the coaches’ regular directions on the mats to “swap partners” highlighted the importance of experiencing a variation of body types. The disjointedness and friction that this possibly entailed was beneficial in terms of one’s learning and progression:

My body, flowing with the rhythm of up, down, and out, meets bodies along lines of difference like sex, size, ability, gender, race, class, and occupation, and must calibrate to each, developing a set of physical questions while forming responses to those that each unique embodiment poses (2014, para 15).

As Maurice Stevens makes clear, partnering with a range of body types and individuals, each displaying a uniquely accented corporeality, is crucial to the development of a BJJ practitioner’s skills and ability. Ultra-heavy partners and light-featherweight partners alike, both offer a unique corporeal perspective from which their partners can experience their contrasting physicalities. Tall, short, strong, fast, aggressive, calm, each aspect of an individual’s own uniquely accented corporeal framework provides variety for their partners on the mats. This contact with, and embrace of, corporeal difference offers the chance for BJJ partners to hone their skills and incorporate the feel of each uniquely accented body. In this way, fears concerning one’s training partner or doubts about the benefits of rolling with a particular body are transformed. Every potential partner and every corporeal experience on the mats can be understood as a learning experience. Engaging with differently accented bodies offers accordingly, the chance for practitioners to incorporate the specific nuances in one’s own movements and form that correspond to each differently accented partner.

Thinking about these specific qualities, it is clear that by centring this symbiotic relationship between different body-subjects, BJJ’s intercorporeality and the mat space more broadly affords interactional opportunities which presupposes partnership and a certain diversity. Indeed, these potential mat-based relations can indeed be characterised by a kind of non-sexual presence and form of privileged knowledge (James, 2021). As has been shown, this
intimacy arises directly out of the intersubjective and intercorporeal nature of BJJ and the centrality of partnering in its pedagogy. However, as the class moves on from rewiring, drilling to practicing techniques, and finally sparring, it is clear that the danger inherent within BJJ’s techniques also acts to forge a sense of community and mutual care.

Community, Consideration & Corporeality

‘I could see ‘KF’ and ‘E’ had paired up and were practising something. Both were smiling and joking (now this raises just how much smiling there usually is). Everyone seems pretty concentrated as ‘C’ breaks down the technique, like tonight using ‘RA’ and ‘KF’ as dummies to display to everyone the technique. But when ‘C’ put the choke on, ‘RA’ gurgled and there were laughs from those who were gathered. Also ‘KF’, when ‘C’ put the choke on him, he seemed quite dramatic, as if part of the dummies role is to visibly relay the feeling to everyone gathered. This is also the case sometimes, like tonight when ‘RI’ and ‘E’ were finding it difficult to get the choke tight on me. When they did manage to get it pretty good, I found myself over-acting almost, or not really over-acting but wanting them to know that what they were doing was eventually good and would have led to me going unconscious. And so, when I think about all the smiling, jokes, and laughter, while there are those times when its serious, there always seems to be smiles and laughter either coming from some pair doing a technique funnily wrong or being flash etc.’

Consideration for one’s partner plays a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of this friendly and cooperative atmosphere on the mats. Coaches and practitioners alike provide the necessary elements that ensure that BJJ’s “fight ending” (‘C’, 2014) and potentially life threatening techniques can be safely shared and practiced. Moving around constantly surveying the mats, the coach verbally and tactiley corrects body positionings and answers practitioner’s questions. With the help of both the coach and one’s partner, bodies begin to understand a little more and subsequently, techniques are performed slightly better and more safely than they were just minutes earlier. This can lead to a slight lowering of intensity and focus, which subsequently opens up conversational spaces for practitioners to occupy.

Away from the immediate concerns and advice on a specific technique being practiced, practitioners get to know their partner. Personal questions about their martial arts or sporting background, occupation, etc, would be asked and answered. Discussions of family, work,
children, nights out, drugs, and life in general would take place, moulding closer and better partners and also aiding in the construction of an atmosphere of competitive sociability (Jerolmack, 2009). As these conversations would take place during the class, these chats would take place somewhat surreptitiously. For as novice BJJ practitioners attending a regular class at the Warks Gym, we were there to learn and practice, not to talk too much.

‘On one occasion, mid-session, I spotted what I thought was a loom band on my training partner’s wrist (‘white’ male 26yrs old music producer and DJ). “Is that a loom band?” I asked. “No it’s my Glastonbury wristband. I’m not ready to take it off yet.”. His reply indicated that he had a memorable time at the festival. He continued to tell me about what he got up to with me listening and also adding my own experiences of Glastonbury. I noticed the coach had glanced over at us as we spoke. Suddenly, another student who was practising next to us interrupted: “My daughter makes loom bands. She’s really good at them. She’s made...”. Before he could finish the coach walked over. “We’re here to train. If you want to chit chat do it afterwards!”. - This highlights the difficulty with interacting with students around anything other than BJJ techniques while on the mats. One feels as though talking whilst training is seen as disrespectful to the extent that no one really talks about anything other than the technique they’re practising whilst training on the mats.’

Significantly however, these rules concerning talking to one’s partner in class were never hard and fast. They could be flexible depending on the mood of the coach, the busyness, time, and focus of the class. And water breaks, breaks between sparring, Saturday morning classes, partnering with a much higher belt, and other temporal and liminal spaces could all create a wider and more robust spaces in which conversations between partners and even between small groups could develop. (These types of spatial accents and the discourses that arise out of them shall be examined in chapter 5, ‘At the Edge’). Also, it was clear that coach intervention was only ever utilised whenever the talking overshadowed or disrupted the training. For it was clear that these conversations, the act, and process of partnering, along with the coaches’ own ‘policing’ and directing on the mats, all combined to construct an informal and collaborative atmosphere. In the construction of this climate, the role of the BJJ coach on the mats can therefore be conceptualised as one of *composer*. By allowing a certain flexibility with practitioners, the coach helps to set the rhythm and flow of the class. In other words, they help to orchestrate the mood. The conversations and banter that this loosening facilitates helps to construct a communal and dynamic space.
To estimate precisely to what extent this type of atmosphere directly stems from the dangers of techniques of strangulation and joint dislocation is hard to quantify. However, from the experience and knowledge that I gained through the fieldwork, I can say that training in BJJ without this sense of community and consideration would be very risky. As my experience of the mats was predominantly marked by sociability rather than aggression, I am therefore in a position to imagine the alternative. And it is clear that without this sense of community and care, training in BJJ would be much less safe, especially for novices as yet unacquainted with the art’s corporeality. This communal spirit therefore negates these potential dangers. As the BJJ class moves into its final phase, these concerns are brought into sharp focus.

**Sparring**

For the last fifteen to ten minutes of a BJJ class, the coaches call out for everyone to take a drink and then to begin sparring. In many ways, as with the act of ‘asking a boxer to glove up’ (Wacquant, 2004:81), the partnering-up for sparring could be much more of a delicate process than the initial act of partnering at the start of the class for drilling.

‘V’ made eye contact with me when sparring was called out. You can’t avoid or ignore the eye contact - acknowledging an unsaid truth in BJJ. Maybe it’s a lot less formal than Judo or Karate etc., but instead, there are unwritten rules that exist between two bodies. If someone is making eye contact with you when sparring is called, and you purposefully look away – Why? Therefore, people kind of scan the mats. They don’t really make eye contact. They just use their peripheral vision until they see a suitable opponent.’

Partnering-up in order to spar subsequently always carried its own unique set of concerns. Given the serious nature of techniques that could break an arm or render someone unconscious, it was ‘vital that one dominates at all times the impulses of one’s affect’ (Wacquant, 2004:91). Therefore, it was incumbent upon partners to keep their aggression and competitiveness in check and roll in a light, flowing manner. Despite its potential dangers, however, good sparring always involved a friendly competitiveness. Good sparring partners were always people who, while competitive, engaged and fought in a way that was contextualised by this competitive sociality.
‘When ‘C’ instructed us to swap partners ‘Z’ raised his head; “You in Carl?”’. From knees again we slapped hands and punched fists. I pulled guard immediately and inserted my left hand inside his gi at the back of his neck. As soon as I did the same with my right hand on the other side of his neck he said, “You’re not gunna choke me from there Carl!”. In his strong Canadian accent. We sparred for two rounds. At some points I could hear and see ‘C’ close-by shouting encouragement and saying well done. At the very end of the last round I managed to catch ‘Z’ in a cup choke (on my knees with ‘Z’ leaning into me, with my hands together cupping his chin and fixed into his throat, I gently curled my hands towards me, which puts pressure on the Adam’s Apple). I could hear him begin to gurgle, but the bell went before he tapped. ‘Z’ said, ‘You had me there Carl!’’. We slapped and bumped, patted each other on the back and thanked each other. ‘C’ called out to everyone to finish and stand in line.’

We see from this example that despite the type of physical techniques that attempt to restrict your opponent’s airways, fighting on the mats was by and large carried out in this competitive, but friendly manner. Part of the framework for constructing and, importantly, for maintaining this form of mat-based conviviality was the implementation of an informal rule that was overwhelmingly abided by. As a way of diffusing possible conflict by way of signalling one’s convivial intent, immediately before BJJ partners engage in the act of sparring, they always slap hands and touch fists. This *slap and bump* is a kind of non-verbal agreement between partners. It was an indication and acceptance that all was in good faith and devoid of animosity or aggression. Indeed, if you ever forgot to present your hand to slap and punch before engaging, the omission might be met with a remark such as “Ooh. It’s like that is it?” (‘V’, 2017). Similarly, if you found yourself trapped in a position by a partner who was successfully hyper-extending your elbow or gradually putting you to sleep, using any free and moveable part of your own body to tap theirs signalled that you submitted. *Tapping*, by and large results in the immediate release of the hold or choke that is causing so much pain and/or distress. To not immediately release your submission once your partner has tapped is not only dangerous, but it is also considered an act of extreme bad sport and can be received as an act of aggression.

If there did happen to be any lingering “bad blood” (‘TM’, 2016) between sparring partners that might have been tainted by an accidental elbow in the face and that was not immediately acknowledged and apologised for, or if a submission was not released immediately upon your partner’s tap etc, then at the end of the class, when the coach called out everyone to “line
up”\textsuperscript{23}, the act of having to formally look everyone in their eyes, thank them and then shake their hand provided another valve to diffuse any such tension. By reading an individual’s affect as they lined up and thanked their training partners, in this way, the coach could gauge if there was any lingering animosity. However, if there was any such friction, it usually dissipated over the course of the next few classes. Maintaining this sense of community was crucial in the construction of a safe and collaborative space. Responsibility therefore fell on both the coach and on the practitioners themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter, in its totality, has conveyed a sociological sense of BJJ’s corporeality, its tactility, and techniques. Contextualised by the specific pedagogy of a typical BJJ class, its bodily, and discursive analysis has drawn out the most relevant and salient features in order to situate BJJ’s unique corporeal framework. In the thesis’ attempt to understand how BJJ’s corporeality frames interactional practices, and how such corporeality might inform a broader culture, beginning with this corporeal examination has provided a base and a foundation from which to explore further aspects of this particular world.

This endeavour to draw out and convey BJJ’s carnality and its affective resonance began with BJJ’s field of play. This brief introduction highlighted the critical importance of the mats in facilitating BJJ’s techniques and its unique physicality. Due to a corporeality that is based upon physical sensitivity and tactility, BJJ bodies are subsequently exposed for significant periods of time to the skin, hair, and bodily droplets of Other bodies. This has the subsequent effect of centring both mat and personal body hygiene, which in turn naturalises a mutual care and responsibility between practitioners. Both satisfactory mat hygiene and individual hygiene, therefore, play an important role in the construction of an optimal training environment and in the construction and maintenance of agreeable interactional relations. Hygiene deviations can be viewed as problematic and an affront to this spirit of community.

\textsuperscript{23} Lining up at the end of the class in belt-ranking order, along with the expectation/requirement that lower ranked practitioners have to give way to higher belts on the mats, are the main explicitly formal aspects of a BJJ class. These aspects of BJJ will be addressed in detail in the chapter ‘The BJJ Canopy’.
Significantly, when such deviations are attached to certain racialised bodies, these irregularities can provide an opportunity for racist and civilisationalist conceptions of the body-subject to emerge.

Following this introduction, the chapter then turned to the beginnings of a typical BJJ class and specifically, the warm-up. It highlighted the physical difficulties involved in performing specific movements, and it also revealed that this warm-up was tasked with not only preparing practitioner’s bodies for the upcoming lesson, but also with rewiring or remodelling their corporeality. Similar to the Brazilian martial art of Capoeira, this BJJ warmup specifically targets the hips of its novice practitioners in order to loosen their learnt rigidity. Within the pedagogical epistemology of BJJ, this loosening of the hips is conveyed through the prism of functionality. That is, its reasoning is strictly conveyed through the necessity of simply needing to perform the techniques efficiently. Capoeira, in contrast, conveys this hip rewiring process in terms of the need of novice Capoeira’s to embody a more Brazilian habitus. This idea of Brazilian-ness is entirely absent in a culture of BJJ. The reasons for this difference between the two Brazilian fighting arts can be understood as arising out of historical processes in which BJJ’s so-called modernist, scientific principles were juxtaposed with Capoeira’s carnality and primitivism.

Next, the chapter explored BJJ’s intercorporeal essence. It highlighted an important point that within BJJ, there can be no acquisition of its corporeal framework without the presence of an Other body to engage with. It made clear that, in BJJ, on the mats, the Other is inextricably intertwined with oneself. This interdependence is woven into the fabric of the art through its very corporeality. BJJ’s sensing, visceral, and tactile nature implies an intersubjectivity between BJJ partners as they meld together on the mats. Exploring the nature of this intercorporeality, the chapter focused its gaze on the act of partnering. Partnering in BJJ is shown to force different bodies to interact with each other in a way that can stir anxieties, especially for novice practitioners. These tensions are understood as partially stemming from ingrained fears surrounding physical proximity and same-sex touch.

Interestingly, we find that within a wider field of MACS, BJJ and related submission grappling styles are in fact feminised by a certain Western demographic. BJJ’s femininity for this group of MMA fans sits in contrast to the traditional hegemonic form of masculinity that
they associate with striking MMA fighting styles. In response to those tensions associated with physical intimacy, BJJ practitioners must learn to become relaxed in the tactile presence of an Other body and learn to let go of their fears and, therefore, ease this bodily tension.

Following this thread, the chapter then examined gender and how BJJ’s physical intimacy raises similar, but unique concerns in relation to mixed-sex training spaces. This focus on gender also revealed the issues that women face in gaining access to martial art gyms and also those specific issues that arise when they do find a safe and welcoming space in which to train. Significantly, women’s participation in mixed-sex training environments is understood as helping to dismantle essentialised understandings of gender. In a similar way to a cosmopolitan canopy’s potential to ease the barriers of racial difference, mixed-sex training spaces in the martial arts can also act as spaces where men are forced to conduct their own folk ethnography, and rethink their belief in male physical supremacy, and their concurrent belief in the fragility of women’s bodies.

Next, the chapter refocused attention back onto mat-partners and how each differently accented BJJ body facilitates a positive learning experience for practitioners on the mats. Again, the role of the Other is re-emphasised by highting the importance of sharing information, advising, and pointing out things in the process of acquiring BJJ’s often complicated and confusing techniques. Following this, the chapter highlighted the mats collaborative atmosphere and interactional relations that stem, in part, from the dangers of BJJ’s techniques such as joint dislocation and airway restriction. This sense of community and consideration is found to be nurtured by both an experienced and sensitive coaching style, and also the collective, intercorporeal nature of BJJ, which translates into practices of mutual respect and care between practitioners and sparring partners.

Through its focus on bodies in the act of doing BJJ, this chapter has taken a more corporeal analysis while the next chapter tips the balance more towards the discursive. The thesis will now take this chapter’s bodily thread and will examine the ways in which certain bodies are categorised and located within BJJ and MMA spaces.
Chapter 4 - Bodies in BJJ & MMA

Introduction

This chapter brings through the previous chapter’s focus on the bodily, specifically, that chapter’s attentiveness towards how the gendered body presents particular challenges in terms of physical intimacy. ‘Bodies in BJJ & MMA’ draws on this thread in order to identify those bodily processes that can potentially Other certain types of body-subjects within the spaces of BJJ. This sociological attentiveness arises out of the experiences of my time on the mats and my sociological immersion in a BJJ culture. As chapter 2 clearly outlined, this sensitivity explicitly draws on my own positioning as a ‘black’ researcher who was also a BJJ practitioner. I argue that my experience as a ‘black-mixed-race’ man, with decades of experience of various UK sporting cultures and in combination with my role as social researcher, meant that I was able to detect a relatively constant theme that resulted in the pejorative categorisation of certain types of BJJ practitioners, and, that there is a relationship between these [mis]interpretations of particular bodies and racialised conceptions of the body-subject. Furthermore, I argue that these racializing processes, while a product of their contemporary environments, can also be traced to the historical development and philosophical roots of BJJ.

This comparatively short ethnographic chapter begins by examining aspects of BJJ’s corporeality and processes of racialisation. Like all of the ethnographic chapters, it draws on both the bodily and the discursive in its descriptions and analyses. Having discussed the peculiarities of BJJ and these processes, the chapter then moves to briefly explore the wider MMA gym space(s) in which the BJJ club(s) were based. By adopting this structure, the chapter highlights the specific ways in which an idealised sense of BJJ corporeality stands in symbolic contrast to those who are perceived as deviations from this somatic ideal. Furthermore, it also facilitates an understanding of the role that ‘race’ plays within a wider MMA space/setting. Subsequently, this structure allows for an analytical contrast between BJJ and MMA that, in turn, informs and builds upon the specific insights of each particular case.
BJJ Bodies

‘Rolled with a purple-belt called ‘BH’. He was middle-aged ‘black’ guy who was really strong. I did well against him though….I was waiting to give ‘C’ a lift back. He was talking to ‘MT’ and ‘KF’ about ‘BH’. ‘MT’ was saying how he always goes all out in sparring and refuses to tap... ‘Too much of an ego!”. ‘KF’ said something about how he always has to look good, flashy techniques etc,. It felt a bit like they were characterising this guy in a certain way when I’m not sure if that’s the case...’

In this fieldnote, near to the beginning of the fieldwork and after some time away from training due to injury, I returned, met, and rolled with ‘BH’ for the first time. Admittedly, as the fieldnote alludes to, ‘BH’ was strong, but I didn’t get a sense of him being overly aggressive. The subsequent conversation between ‘MT’, ‘C’, and ‘KF’, and the way they were describing him, therefore raised the suspicion that ‘BH’ was being framed through a certain schema; flash, ego-orientated, and ultimately, mentally weak. I knew that these were themes that had historically been used to denigrate ‘black’ men and, especially ‘black’ boxers. Despite these concerns, I dismissed these thoughts as possibly an over-sensitivity, or insecurity, as I was relatively new to the field-site, the practitioners, and the wider culture of BJJ.

As I spent time on the mats, rolling and talking to practitioners, listening to the coaches practical advice, and their BJJ and non-BJJ related stories, and, as I became an active participant within a variety of international BJJ focused social media groups, the dispositions and culture of BJJ became more and more familiar. I understood this particular world much more than when I had started out, and I had come to know what had value, or capital, within it. As Chapter 1 highlighted with its reference to BJJ’s myth-making/exceptionalism narrative, there is a widespread discourse across BJJ’s global networks that positions BJJ as uniquely different to other MACS.

“BJJ relies on technique, not strength”. “BJJ’s technicality enables a physically weaker person to defeat someone much stronger”. “Through having to ‘tap’ [and face the existential act of ‘submission’], BJJ teaches humility”. And that through these processes, and, having to stay calm in the face of suffocation or dislocation, one learns “to control/lose one’s ego.”. These were constantly repeated truths that I heard throughout the course of the fieldwork and across all field-sites. These sayings would be regularly repeated by novice and advanced
practitioners, coaches, and internationally recognised professional BJJ fighters alike. They acted to shape a discourse in which BJJ was seen as distinctive. “Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is the human game of chess” (Hogeveen, 2013) was a commonly cited saying, as well as the opinion that: “You can learn how to box in a few months, but BJJ take years.”. It was clear that within this particular field of BJJ, this embodied and philosophical sense of technicality had capital and that this technicality was, more often than not, contrasted against the MACS of boxing.

As a practitioner who was viewed as being physically strong, I was regularly reminded by the coach and some of the senior practitioners to not use my “explosive power.”. That I needed to “…forget about [my] ‘ego’”. Admittedly, I could find this frustrating at times, especially when I felt myself to be implementing the advice but continued to still be framed in this manner. Therefore, on a personal level, it could sometimes feel as though I had been characterised in a particular way and that this rigid characterisation framed how I was interpreted on the mats. And it was clear that within a culture of BJJ, the ascription of traits such as strength and ego, stood in symbolic opposition to the much vaunted BJJ dispositions of technicality and humility. Admittedly, I was a novice practitioner, and so undoubtedly I did exhibit a novices’ technical awkwardness. However, from being described as a boxer who could be “too nice!”. To being seen within a BJJ context as someone who was overly aggressive, was a reflexive experience. I felt that I was being misread and that my bodily shape, strength, and previous boxing training, as well as my intermittent training in BJJ, had probably been a factor in this misrecognition.

Furthermore, through this reflection and analysis, it also became clear that I was not the only one who was ascribed these labels of being unable to let go or of being too aggressive in their style of rolling. In fact, what was evident was that those practitioners who shared a similar type of corporeal framework, whether they were novice- white belt practitioners like myself or advanced blue-belts, were similarly labelled this way. And that, in addition to this, those who were interpreted through this antithetical prism were either ‘black’, ‘mixed-race’, British Muslim, or Polish, as well as those ‘white’ British practitioners who could be said to embody a ‘working-class masculinity’. In short, these groups of body-subjects were often used as an example that stood in contrast to the revered BJJ ideal of technicality over strength.

“In the changing room ‘O’ was talking about his injuries with a sense of what could have been. He
spoke about the people he started training with and how many of them are already senior black-belts. “It’s helped me in a way though.” He said, referring to his numerous knee and shoulder operations. “I’ve got to think more about technique and not just powering through.” He went on about this saying how he now understands what he was doing wrong, and repeating all of the stuff about letting go etc, etc. This chimes exactly with ‘C’s’ often public criticisms of him - how he’ll never get past his blue-belt because he’s always using power. Was ‘O’ saying this hoping it’d get back to ‘C’ from one of us in the changing room, or was it more of him trying to convince himself?’

In this fieldnote we get a sense of a BJJ coaches’ influence and authority over a physically imposing, ex-British-army-soldier of British-Pakistani heritage and his constructions of his own BJJ identity and corporeal framework. ‘O’s’ reflexivity here can possibly be interpreted through coach ‘C’s’ semi-public criticisms of him. In this way, his critical reflections on his own lack of technicality to those who were present in the changing room could have been a way for his words to reach the ears of the coach through the club’s informal practitioner grapevine. However, regardless of the reasons, ‘O’s’ words here also serve to highlight how this type of corporeal reading and categorising is clearly understood and experienced by those who are its focus. These individuals knew that regardless of the extent to which such categorisations were valid or not, the fact that they had been categorised in this way was a hindrance to their formal progression.

Being characterised as someone whose corporeal framework was viewed as antithetical to the BJJ ideal was a charge that brought a certain sense of unease and trepidation, especially when it came to sparring. Therefore, it was at first difficult to objectivised these charges at a sufficient distance from one’s own sense of personal embarrassment. However, the more I observed and experienced, the better able I was to connect this BJJ dispositional discourse to those same myth-making narratives discussed in the previous chapter in relation to BJJ’s functionality. Firstly, as my training and fieldwork progressed, it became apparent that there was some debate over this strength/technicality positioning. This revealed that despite the prevailing discourse, there were in fact some BJJ lineages where there wasn’t so much of a juxtaposition of these two supposedly contrasting qualities. In fact, there were even some BJJ lineages and Brazilian based academies where strength and aggression could be viewed favourably, and, interestingly, these particular lineages were smaller rivals of the most

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24 For a discussion of the place of lineages in BJJ culture see chapter 6, ‘The BJJ Canopy’.

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prominent worldwide BJJ franchises who have come to frame and promote the functionality discourse.

What also became apparent was the very insular nature of many of these so-called truths. Far from having an exclusive relationship with BJJ, the ability to teach its practitioners to ‘stay calm and relax’ (Wacquant, 2004:93) is also something that boxing coaches routinely cite as a specifically pugilistic disposition. And, in relation to the often repeated sayings that links the technicality of BJJ to the game of chess, Wacquant makes clear that ‘[b]oxers and trainers…assert that boxing is the thinking man’s game’ that they frequently liken to a game of chess’ (2004:97), and that boxing ‘..takes time [and] teaches patience…’ (2004:143). Subsequently therefore, we find that these cerebral and disciplining qualities are not in fact the exclusive preserve of BJJ.

Furthermore, by once again returning to the work of Jose Cairus (2011; 2012; 2020), we find that throughout its embryonic development in Brazil, BJJ’s corporeality was developed in both physical and symbolic opposition to the ‘black’ carnality of Capoeira, and the thuggish physicality of boxers. Through Cairus’ historical examination of BJJ, we find that mainstream BJJ’s relationship to cerebrality and technique over strength and aggression can be viewed as in some way an earlier echo of a contemporary new-racist discourse. Both these forms eschew an overt racist positionality and instead seek to attach an implicitly understood racialised inference. In this way, the term boxer can act as a substitute for a Afro-Brazilian. Likewise, the so-called Africanised corporeality of Capoeira can infer primitivity and a racialised sense of carnality without being seen to be (too) explicitly racist. Similarly, terms such as illiberal or unenlightened can act as surrogates for Muslim, or Muslim culture within a contemporary Westernised discourse.

Given this contextual knowledge we are then able to entertain the possibility that the often unthinkingly repeated BJJ discourse on the higher qualities of technicality and functionality can be understood as being partly tied to this particular early twentieth-century Brazilian order of embodiment. The fact that both Capoeira and boxing, the two martial arts most associated with ‘blackness’ in Brazil, are historically frequently used as examples for this contrast between cerebrality and carnality, is therefore not all that surprising. Importantly, while within the historical context of BJJ these specifically disavowed corporeal
categories have primarily been embodied by Afro-Brazilians, what we find in a contemporary UK cultural context is a continuation of this ‘black’ categorisation. However, we also find Hall’s sliding signifier at work – where other social locations, such as Muslim, and not least, Eastern European males, are also at risk of being folded into its symbolic aversion.

‘In the Saturday morning nogi class... That stocky Polish MMA fighter ‘LW’ was there. When he was sparring with ‘C’, ‘C’ found it hard to take him down. You could see that ‘LW’ was really putting effort into defending ‘C’s’ takedowns and having some success. After sparring, ‘C’ asked him about his garish rashguard. It had an image of what looked like a Medieval battle scene. ‘LW’ said that it depicted some Polish warrior/saint who defeated, was it the Turks? At the end of the session, once ‘LW’ had left, ‘PO’ said something about how he is dangerous on the mats because he is always aggressive. This then prompted ‘DR’ to say something about ‘they’re’ from a really masculine culture with ‘PO’ adding his experience of visiting Poland. As he was speaking, ‘H’ said something along the lines of, “that’s why Russian men don’t smile do they...”. “He’s Polish, not Russian!” Quipped ‘C’...

Through this fieldnote, we find that a competitive practitioner of Polish descent being characterised by other practitioners as dangerous and aggressive. His taciturn nature being read as an essentialised quality that is a mark of his wider ethnic grouping. Interestingly, the nationalistic images on his rashguard prompted a further discussion between ‘C’, myself, ‘DR’ and ‘PO’ about far-right groups in Eastern Europe. ‘C’ spoke about a documentary he’d watched on Russian skinheads and made the point that there was no difference between these skinheads and Muslim terrorists. What this subsequent conversation highlighted, however, was the connection that these ‘white’ British male practitioners made between Eastern European men in general and a hard, traditional hegemonic form of masculinity that was also tainted by a right-wing nationalism.

“‘It’s a well-known adage in BJJ that you’ll always get someone who lost [a competition] come back saying “He was fuckin massive! He never spoke a word of English. Mean-looking bastard. I’m sure he was Polish or Russian!”’ (‘C’, 2018).

From this insight we see how within a particular BJJ discourse, the image of the Eastern-

25 To takedown is the act of manoeuvring a standing opponent off their feet and taking them to the ground.
European male has become a kind of antihero/villain. This forbidding character fulfilling in many ways a similar role in a contemporary UK BJJ culture as the anonymous ‘black’ male in US urban settings (Anderson, 2004). We find then that BJJ’s potentiality to Other does not simply correspond to ‘black’ or ‘brown’ body-subjects but can also include ‘white’ ethnic groups. In other words, a corporeal malediction that has historically afflicted ‘black’ male bodies in BJJ can similarly affect Eastern European male bodies. Such processes clearly highlight the ways in which ideas of ‘race’ infuse other related categories such as nationalism, to act as a disciplining function (Lentin, 2017).

The direct cause of this form of xeno-racism (Sivanandan, 2001) is uncertain. However, as Malcolm James (2015; 2015a) highlights in his study of urban multiculture in outer East London, there exists a form of locally inflected memory practice that links the loss of innocence and a local communal spirit with the arrival of new immigrants, particularly Eastern European migrants. Significantly, both ‘white’, ‘black’ and Asian-British local residents associated these recent immigrants with ‘moral and social decay’ (2015a:31). The Russians and Lithuanians were accused of “…taking all the jobs” (2015a:37) with ‘the newer violation presented by the figure of the Polish worker, who was seen simultaneously as an illegitimate presence and a direct threat to British ‘history’” (2015a:35). As with a culture of BJJ in the West Midlands, Brexit and such fears over immigration and economic insecurity can be viewed as having led to a kind of signification spiral that maps such concerns onto a matrix of other fears or anxieties.

In relation to a culture of BJJ, these anxieties then possibly interweave with a perceived threat to [British] masculinity to Other and essentialise Eastern European male bodies. Like ‘black’ and Muslim bodies who display specific physical traits, Eastern European male bodies who exhibit strength and/or muscularity, and that are viewed as taciturn in their demeanour, are subsequently also in danger of being essentialised as ego-centric, aggressive, and as lacking finesse and technical ability (Nakrani, 2019). There was one particular incident in the fieldwork that shed light on the nature of these processes, and also highlighted the way in which class, rather than ‘race’, or ethnicity could also trigger this type of formatting.

‘D’ was a super-heavyweight ‘white’ middle-aged boxer who had just started training in BJJ at the Warks Gym. Admittedly, it was always intense rolling with him as he sparred very
competitively. After some weeks, it was apparent that some of the other practitioners avoided him. They had labelled him as aggressive and a possible danger to roll with. However, ‘D’ and myself always got on and would usually partner together on the mats. I believed that he could sense that he was being avoided by some of the other practitioners and he confided to me that he was thinking about leaving. He was going to find a gym in Coventry as he believed that “my face doesn’t fit here!” He felt that his dispositional nature was unsuited to this particular BJJ club.

However, not long after his confession, there seemed to be a change in both his attitude towards the gym and the attitude of his fellow practitioners towards him. He was still the same powerfully-built practitioner who still rolled extremely competitively. Now, however, rather than his corporeal framework being viewed through a grave and judgemental lens, these traits had become just an accepted feature of rolling with ‘D’, something that you just had to be mindful of. “He’ll learn in time.” Came a comment from someone who a couple of months earlier had warned me against rolling with him as “…he’s going to do someone some serious damage!” Weeks later, at an extremely quiet Friday morning class, ‘Y’ who was a senior brown-belt coach at the Warks Gym, brought up ‘D’ in conversation with me. He told me that at one session, where it had only been him and ‘D’ training, he’d been able to really talk with ‘D’ and get to know him. Subsequently, ‘Y’s’ impression of ‘D’ had changed: “He’s not what you think…” ‘Y’ said to me.

It then became clear to me that ‘Y’, and others, had stereotyped ‘D’ in a particular way that was based upon their own lack of personal knowledge of him. In conjunction with his physical features, his urban, working-class roots, and his outgoing character, ‘D’, like myself and those others previously mentioned, had arguably been formatted through that particular BJJ lens that has the potential to misread, label and Other body-subjects who appear to corresponded to traits that have a specific historical, BJJ related significance.

And so what these examples make apparent then is that it is not necessarily ‘race’ or ethnicity per se that assigns specific bodies into certain categories which are seen as antithetical to the dispositions of BJJ. Rather, it is a kind of visual and affectual formatting that is taking place, in which specific physical qualities intersect with BJJ’s historical discourses within a contemporary UK context to attach antithetical qualities to certain types of bodies. Given the
discussion of racialised embodiment in Chapter 1, we can come to understand how carnal qualities have historically been attached to conceptions of the ‘black’ body. Subsequently, within a contemporary racial context, we find that these conceptions of the ‘black’ body can become attached to body-subjects across various categories of ‘race’, religion, ethnicity, and class.

On a practical level, this situation can also be partly explained as being the result of the lingering effects of a dated training pedagogy. Within the wider field of MACS more generally, the practice of weight training can still be weighed down with stereotypes from a less modern approach to martial arts training. This tradition can potentially view weight-training as at odds with the bodily flexibility and speed needed for martial combat. (Boxers such as Evander Holyfield and Anthony Joshua, along with a wide range of contemporary MMA fighter’s success challenge the veracity of such claims). Interestingly, in relation to BJJ specifically, this ambiguity towards weight training may be explained not so much by a disinclination towards weight-training per se, but rather, by an unease towards a perceived type of masculinity that is associated with the practice. In this way, certain male bodies can be [mis]interpreted and formatted as individuals who exhibit forms of masculinity which are at odds with the essence of a controlled, cerebral BJJ martial artist.

These findings are important in understanding the social and the physical complexities and peculiarities that distinguish the ways in which BJJ practitioners format and negotiate difference. They shed light on how difference can shape interpersonal encounters and how understandings of racial and physiological differences are contextualised through BJJ’s corporeal framework. Furthermore, these findings also suggest that it would be useful to examine more fully the relationship between BJJ’s corporeality and gendered difference. Understanding how such processes both construct and are constructed by such forms of masculinity can, therefore, also extend considerations of how conviviality is sociologically applied, wherein conviviality becomes a frame to also situate negotiations of masculinity within the BJJ spaces of the West Midlands.

Before the following chapter explores this convivial proposition, the remainder of this chapter will first briefly examine the wider gym space in which the BJJ club was situated. Not only does this help fulfil the intention to attend to the spatial features of the ethnographic
site(s) as outlined in the thesis introduction, but it also highlights an interesting contrast between BJJ’s relationship to certain forms of racialised masculinities and that of its MMA peer.

**MMA Bodies**

The gyms and martial art spaces within urban and semi urban settings in the West Midlands can increasingly be conceptualised as spaces of multiculture and diversity. Superficially at least, elements of ‘black’ culture are very much present within these spaces. On the walls of the Warks Gym, for example, the majority of the posters and images that served as ‘pedagogical tools’ (Wacquant, 2004: 124) reflected triumphant ‘black’ and ‘mixed heritage’ athletes. Boxers like Muhammed Ali and Mike Tyson, BJJ and MMA champion Rickson Gracie, Judoka Teddy Riner, and the British champion weightlifter Zoe Smith, all served as inspirational and aspirational images for gym users, and martial artists.

In addition, the sounds that reverberated to ‘multi-ethnic congregations’ (Valluvan, 2016:212) inside these spaces were explicitly that of the *Black Atlantic* (Gilroy, 1993) diaspora. In terms of the BJJ classes across two different field-sites, they would usually be conducted against the backdrop of old-school (1980’s and early 90’s) Hip-Hop. It was not uncommon for a certain coach to suddenly rap along to a tune as he taught the class. In fact, across all of the field-sites, either old-school Hip-Hop, Dub Reggae, or House would be the chosen music of the coaches to roll to. In these spaces, the ‘associated sonic intimacies’ (James, 2021:4) were therefore a bodily and symbolic link to elements of ‘black’ culture.

Indeed, I argue that within these contexts, irrespective of local variations and nuances in levels of diversity and population make-up, those processes of embodiment that have historically attached a specific carnal quality to ‘black’ bodies means that conceptually, within these MMA/gym spaces, ‘black’ [male] bodies can be understood in many ways as a *somatic norm* (Puwar, 2004). This remains so despite the fact that, compared to their ‘white’ counterparts, people from British communities of colour are less likely to be gym goers, or be engaged with some kind of sporting activity (Moving Communities, 2019), or work within the wider fitness industry (Khouv, 2020).
To suggest then that ‘black’ bodies within such spaces can in some way be viewed as a somatic norm might seem contradictory. However, the ethnographic research highlights that the within the field-sites, both ‘black’ and ‘brown’ bodies, while proportionately less in number were still significantly present. In contrast to a wider fitness industry that is marked by an overall lack of diversity, the staff who worked at these sites were both ethnically and racially diverse. Significantly however, I also argue that regardless of this actual physical presence, that is, even if ‘black’ bodies were, in fact, not represented numerically within these spaces, these bodies can still be conceptualised as being present. What I mean by this is that, within these contextualised spaces, ‘black’ male bodies specifically, can be viewed as belonging. Indeed, it can even be argued that those [male] bodies who embody essentialised characteristics of a certain type of masculinity can, in fact, possess a form of symbolic capital here (Bourdieu, 1984) in contrast those affective aspects of BJJ that have just been discussed.

Within these MMA and gym contexts, ‘black’ men’s supposed aggression and athleticism means that they are not in fact out of place (Amadasun, 2013). This both physical and abstracted presence of ‘black’ [male] bodies being understood as in some sense natural. That is, certain essentialised traits and qualities are seen as belonging to, and within, particular social settings. Indeed, as previously discussed in Chapter 1, sociological work (Alcoff, 1999; Garrett, 2018) have highlighted the ways in which a racialised connection between ‘blackness’ and the body within the field of sports can also be seen as embodying a process of positive racialization. As I’ve already stated, this is a process that ostensibly turns the ‘symbolic equation of ‘whiteness with mind and blackness with the bodily’ (Hook, 2008:143) from the negative and dehumanising into what is attributed as a positive. And so in this manner, a perceived ‘black’ male physicality - aggression, rhythm, speed, strength are all qualities that within these MMA gym spaces can have value or capital.

‘On the drive to the gym by the roundabout, there were those posters tied around lampposts which again featured ‘I’. I’s images were different to the ones used by ‘P’ last summer where he was standing in a Muay Thai guard with his world championship belts around his neck and his naked muscled torso on display, but they still had shots of his torso as centre stage. ‘He was born into Muay Thai’ were the words that stood out. Other than the gym's name I don't think there was much else anyone in a car could read unless there was a traffic jam. Obviously, ‘I’ is a top Muay Thai fighter and sought after coach, and he has a great body which is great advertising for the gym. But it kind of
stands out to me as going into [local area] there are these prominent images of a ‘black’ man (who is the ‘face of the gym’) where I can’t remember ever seeing a ‘black’ person along that particular route.’

Recorded in this fieldnote is my reaction as I drove through a section of the immediate area in which the main field-site and gym is situated. The posters stood out to me as they vividly contrasted my own experience of the gym and its denizens with certain enclaves of the immediate locality which I personally sensed as somewhat homogenous, possibly racist. ‘I’s’ muscular ‘black’ body and his impassive gaze symbolised the diversity of the gym space and also seemed to challenge the ‘white’ gaze (Swanton, 2010: 2333) of commuters and passers-by. ‘I’s’ uncompromising embodiment of ‘black’ male masculinity, set against this geographical and social backdrop, therefore, raised for me the wider gym’s relationship to forms of cosmopolitanism, specifically, Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopy. From this positioning, the Warks Gym could be conceptualised as representing an island of multiculture that was set against pockets of homogeneity and often intense boundary maintenance (Grima, 2015). ‘I’s’ images symbolised a ‘black’, corporeal capital that was drenched in the sweat of martial practice. And so while the image confidently confronted the potentially racist gaze, it also simultaneously welcomed those locals who wanted the opportunity to experience the martial aspects of their corporeality and local spaces of diversity. In this way, the gym itself could be viewed as a cosmopolitanism canopy that, superficiality at least, brought diverse people together.

Significantly however, despite this cosmopolitan potential, the foundational aspects of this coming together can also be interrogated critically. The reason for this is that it presupposes the carnal qualities that are routinely attached to ‘black’ bodies. Subsequently, the gym may have offered the overwhelmingly ‘white’ local inhabitants a cosmopolitan experience, it still did so from within a wider framework of embodiment which ultimately serves to reinforce and perpetuate racist understandings of distinct categories of bodies.

‘N’ was sitting with ‘C’ behind reception. Upon noticing the new banners in the gym, I mentioned ‘I’s’ great physique and conditioning. I asked how old he is, to which ‘N’ replied 50yrs (is that literal?) I cannot clearly remember precisely how or who started it, but from there something was said about ‘black’ men’s body’s/fitness. ‘C’ then joked about ‘black’ physicality. ‘It’s because they were having to run away from lions!’ ‘N’ then said quite seriously that he thought it was because of
slavery; something about all the physically weak being weeded out. ‘N’ then said that it’s ‘not going to help him though as it’s his dad who is ‘white’ (I take that to indicate that he sees a genetic advantage being passed on from a ‘black’ father). We all laughed (me not uncomfortably, just consciously). Also, ‘N’ said something about he has to tell ‘them’ (?) that he’s quarter ‘black’ because ‘they’ think he’s ‘white’? (not sure of the context). And then he also said that his mum is “Half-Caste”. I heard ‘C’ say kind of under his breath “mixed-race” as though correcting ‘N’. Part of me wanted to say something then, but I didn’t feel that it would have been appropriate right there (he seems like a pretty decent person but being from [the local area] with his personal background, he just seems a bit naïve).

Apart from its use as an example in chapter 2 to address my own voice in the fieldnotes and my positioning as a ‘black’ researcher, this fieldnote primarily conveys a lingering historical and racist myth. This myth concerns the relationship between ‘black’ men who embody the fantasised ideal of ‘black’ physical supremacy (Garrett, 2018) and the specific genetic factors that supposedly account for this fact of difference. Through the narration of this myth, we also see how patriarchy interweaves with Fanon’s historic racial-schema to define a specific legitimacy that can only be genetically passed down through the paternal line. Subsequently, we find that the physicality, as embodied by the images of the gym’s Muay Thai coach, has the potential to reinforce a historically embedded belief in the inherent carnality of ‘black’ bodies. Therefore, the premise of any cosmopolitanised coming together can be viewed as, in some sense, pyrrhic in nature. Furthermore, through ‘N’s’ comments in the fieldnote, we can also see how, despite those processes of cross-racial interaction and miscegenation that have been a central feature of UK multiculture, lingering colonial-based racist terminology and understandings of difference still plays a very real and active role in the way some individuals experience their social worlds. Here then, we find an orientation towards difference as inevitably existing alongside frames of difference that are still mired in a colonial symbolic matrix.

Conclusion

This chapter has played an important role in getting beneath the surface of BJJ’s corporeality and examining the ways in which its distinct features intersect with notions regarding ‘race’,
ethnography, and class. Drawing on my experience as a ‘black’ ethnographer and BJJ practitioner, it has identified a relationship between the BJJ discourse of technicality to a developmental history that sought to distinguish the art from Capoeira and boxing. Subsequently, the chapter has shown how this history works within a contemporary UK context to attach meanings to specific categories of bodies whose physicality corresponds to racialised and essentialised understandings of the body-subject. In contrast to BJJ’s Othering of certain carnal traits, the chapter has also highlighted how within the spaces of MMA, such qualities can have capital and status. Consequentially, due a historical racialised order of embodiment that connects the ‘black’ body to the carnal, within the MMA spaces of the ethnography, ‘black’ [male] bodies can in some sense be understood as visible and as belonging.

Finally, by conceptualising ‘black’ masculinity and, by implication, the gyms and spaces of MMA as cosmopolitan canopies, this chapter has opened up a space from which this thesis can explore this conceptualisation in more detail. Subsequently, the following chapter takes this cosmopolitan/convivial potential and uses it to examine BJJ practitioner interactions.
Chapter 5 – At the Edge

Introduction

This chapter examines BJJ practitioner interactions that take place away from the immediacies of a typical class structure. As such, the chapter’s sociological analysis is focused upon those temporal and liminal physical spaces, such as water breaks, the changing room, pre- and post-training conversations, and also the realm of social media. This chapter draws on the concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality in order to frame and make sense of those ‘seemingly mundane conversations that convey in oral and osmotic fashion the values and categories of judgement in currency in the [BJJ] universe’ (Wacquant, 2004:40). In doing so, it contextualises a culture of BJJ in the West Midlands through the lens of UK multiculturalism. ‘At the Edge’, therefore, looks to build upon present understandings of the concept of conviviality by incorporating other forms of difference within its conceptual fold. Subsequently, this chapter situates a culture of BJJ and its associated interactional negotiations with ‘raced’, ethnicised, and gendered difference within a contemporary and slightly reimagined convivial framework.

Cosmopolitanism, Conviviality & BJJ Practitioner Interactions

Given today’s political and social climate and deepening social inequalities and divisions, it is arguably more important than ever to identify and understand how certain social spaces and practices can physically, and symbolically, bring a diverse range of people together, provide opportunities for these people to engage with each other, and to mould shared practices and distinct dispositions together. This chapter, therefore, draws on the concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality in order to frame the spaces of BJJ and to understand the interactional practices of its practitioners.

As already outlined in Chapter 1, certain readings of cosmopolitanism endow the concept with a certain superficiality or naivety. Framed this way, cosmopolitanism is seemingly tied
to a neo-liberal consumer culture and a corporate globe-trotting elite. Subsequently, the charge is levelled at cosmopolitanism that it is unsuitable to unpack the grittiness and complexities of contemporary urban social life. While I recognise that the concept is open to such interpretations, I take the position, however, that cosmopolitanism is relevant to any sociological understanding of BJJ’s history and global culture (see chapter 6), and that the concept can help conceptualise the interpersonal interactions and relationships that take place between BJJ practitioners. Indeed, rather than being too abstract and/or divorced from the realities of everyday urban life, cosmopolitanism, as framed by this thesis is alert to the complexities and conflictual nature of the social world. Cosmopolitanism is, therefore, both an adaptable concept and an important tool for the research.

Significantly, rather than using the concept of conviviality to supersede cosmopolitanism or in some way rectify cosmopolitanism’s ‘‘happy-clappy’ togetherness’ (Wise & Noble, 2016:425), this chapter, instead, employs cosmopolitanism in conjunction with conviviality, as complementary in its analysis. This is done not through an appeal to any rigid theoretical positioning, but, rather, through a grounded and empirically based analysis that examines a range of interactions, and which draws out their connections to these concepts. Subsequently, this framework allows for an exploration of the individual dispositions that are associated with a cosmopolitan mind and also, ‘those interconnections, co-constitutions, and crossovers, between what are always provisional groupings’ (Jones, 2021, personal communication, 25th March).

In this way, cosmopolitanism and conviviality can be understood as helping to construct a more realistic conception of the field-sites and their associated interactions. This contemporary reality is one in which cohabitation and interaction across difference is ordinary (Nowicka & Vertovec, 2014), but where the wider frameworks of racialised and ethnicised conflict are not elided. Subsequently, these concepts help the thesis to contextualise the everyday interactions and the shared social lives and spaces that create an ‘indifference to difference’ (Amin, 2013:1) ethos, wherein difference is accepted as an everyday fact of life.

'At the end of the gi class as everyone was either gathering their belongings or waiting for the next class, I got talking to ‘CT’ about his mammoth training schedule [he has a two year old and twin baby
girls and he’s turning professional) - the implications in terms of his family life. He says his wife is really understanding – better he is training and doing something he loves than going out to the pub etc. He also mentioned that he was one of five siblings. I then mentioned that my mum was one of six and asked whether his surname was Irish to which he said yes. ‘FL’ laughed and said that sounds like Asian families – lots of kids. ‘CT’ made a joke about Catholics and contraception. ‘FL’ then brought up how Kashmiri Asians call every older adult uncle and aunt with ‘CT’ saying how that’s similar to where he grew up as a kid - if an adult knew your mum or dad, you’d call them uncle or aunt such and such…”

Through this fieldnote we can get a sense of the BJJ space as a site in which interactions across categories of difference are normal. At the end of a training session, three BJJ practitioners from different ethnic backgrounds become engaged in a casual conversation. Difference can be seen as being invoked here, but it is done in a way that draws attention to the similarities, in this instance between Irish Catholics and Kashmiri Asians. Significantly, this banal interaction avoids falling into a rigid and divisive communitarianism that is at odds with being at ease in and around difference (Valluvan, 2016). In this fieldnote excerpt, a ‘white’ British practitioner of Irish descent, ‘CT’, makes a joke at an aspect of his family and cultural background. This then prompts ‘FL’ to make an analogous connection to his own family and cultural background, which in turn provides an opportunity for ‘CT’ to draw another cross-cultural connection between Kashmiri Asian culture and his own working-class Anglo-Irish upbringing.

The facticity of difference in this example is real, it exists, but difference as it is embodied and expressed here can be understood as nothing extraordinary. Both practitioners ‘CT’ and ‘FL’ are able to identify the similarities between aspects of their own backgrounds, but it is done in a way that reflects a contemporary reality where a proximity to difference is, firstly, quotidian and secondly, has helped to nurture learnt related interactional abilities that express a sophisticated ease with the presence of difference. This form of conviviality can be seen as the result of what happens when people are in regular contact with multi-forms of diversity (Williams, 2013).

‘Partnered with ‘PS’ at the Saturday morning class. He said that he usually works Saturdays (motorway maintenance), so this was his first Saturday session. It was a pretty relaxed class with quite a few regulars away competing and so we chatted quite a bit. He spoke about his younger
mixed-race brother, who he said I remind him of. He spoke about his mum remarrying a ‘dark’ Libyan man and the hassle they got growing up in a certain area of Birmingham... “You can imagine Carl...That’s how we learned how to fight [kickboxing]...I can’t do with all that racist shit...That’s my brother you’re talking about. What did you just say?”. He said as though standing up to the racists.’

In this excerpt we see how the act of partnering on the mats afforded a conversation in which one novice practitioner opened up about his family background. Maybe eased by the fact that I reminded him of his brother, ‘PS’ who was in his mid-forties, disclosed personal information regarding his own family. The fact that I was also ‘mixed’ no doubt implied that I would understand what he was getting at in terms of the hassle or the racism that he and his family had received, and, implicitly, that I, as a fellow martial artist, also recognised the necessity of fighting in the face of racist aggression.

As with the previous fieldnote that highlighted familial similarities between Irish Catholics and Kashmiri Asians, these excerpts do suggest, or at least point towards, a cosmopolitan imagination (Delanty, 2008). This is an ability or characteristic that while is able to recognise the fact of difference, exhibits an ability to make connections across these categories that facilitate ways of interacting and of building ties between people. Most significantly however, both of these fieldnotes highlight an important point with regards to UK society. The everydayness of interactions like this within these settings highlights the ways in which ordinary people, in the face of a historically racist political terrain, have always found ways to just get on and live together.

‘I took a drink by the boxing ring and was joined by ‘MZ’ doing the same. ‘PO’, ‘H’, ‘O’ and ‘Y’ were all seated on the mats chatting between themselves. No one else seemed to be staying for the next nogi session which I had planned on doing. ‘MZ’ asked me how I was doing. I asked him about how his application to join the RAF is going. He kind of shrugged and seemed frustrated. He said that even though he’s lived in the UK since he was 7yrs old, “I mean I went to primary school here!”. They still want him to take an English proficiency exam which costs circa £179? He also said something about having to pay more money for something to do with his passport. Was it for Translation? But in total just for him to be able to apply it was going to cost hundreds, and more than I think he can afford at the moment. I said that I was surprised that he needed to do all of this and again mentioned that there’s a history of Polish in the RAF from WWII. “I know!”. He replied,
expressing disbelief. He spoke about wanting to move on from his job as an Electrical Engineer at a small local company. He said that as he’s the youngest and it’s a local [English] family run business, he gets the jobs and is expected to do the things no one else wants to do.’

In this fieldnote, two practitioners engage in a conversation within the temporal space between the end of a Saturday morning gi class and the start of a nogi session. A number of weeks earlier this twenty-year old British-Polish BJJ and MMA practitioner had heard me swear in Serbo-Croat after failing to successfully perform a technique on the mats. He had been able to recognise a specific verb which has a wider Slavic etymology and he approached me to make certain that he’d heard correctly. From the ensuing conversation, ‘MZ’ and myself would always make conversation whenever we saw one other. Through our interaction at the edge of the mats we get a sense of ‘MZ’s’ frustration at his difficulty in trying to join the RAF. ‘MZ’ had spoken to me previously about how he’d always wanted to join the RAF as an engineer. And it was clear that he was conscious of the contribution that Polish pilots in particular, had made to the British second world war effort. It is important to note here that interactions like this between myself and ‘MZ’ are just one among countless others that would take place between practitioners of different backgrounds.

These interactions could also, on occasions, involve an acknowledgment of the specific social and economic challenges faced by certain national and/or ethnic groups. In the example above, ‘MZ’ appears to appreciate the injustice of an immigration and bureaucratic process that Others him and categorises him as an outsider despite his thirteen years living in the UK. His frustration at his treatment and status at work also signals a further critique of an economic structure that exploits workers based, in this case, upon age. The extent to which ‘MZ’s’ treatment within this local company was further influenced by his outsider status in terms of his Polish background, in addition to his age, is also signalled. The work of Karner & Parker (2011) highlights how local economies enable both multi-ethnic solidarity but can also exclude to varying degrees based upon ethnicity and cultural background. ‘MZ’s’ status within this small local engineering firm may have therefore also been affected by processes of differentiation that are based upon exclusionary ideas of national identity and

26 The RAF initiated a racist recruitment policy pre-second world war that restricted those who could join on the basis of ‘race’. The 1917 Air Force Act restricted recruitment to those who were of only ‘pure’ European descent (Back, 2011: 311).
communitarianism.

‘Got talking to the new guy, ‘D’. He spoke about getting his Irish passport... ‘Where’s your dad from?’. He asked. He then said how his best friend’s dad is Jamaican and this man’s best friend is Bajan. “Monkey eaters he calls them!”’

In this fieldnote we see how connections and insights that are underscored by difference were invoked as a way to break-the-ice with someone whom you are about to roll with for the first time. ‘D’s’ signalling of difference through his pointing towards a sense of sharedness and similarity could be possibly interpreted as a non-conscious experience of intensity (Shouse, 2005) that the affective structure of ‘race’ (Back, 1996) caused in response to the presence of a racialised other; (me). However, importantly the interaction contains a convivial essence. We see that ‘D’ signalled to me a very specific piece of emic West Indian cultural knowledge. Such insider awareness by a ‘white’, Anglo-Irish, forty-year-old man directly stems from those contextualised processes of cohabitation and interaction that have been at the heart of UK society for decades.

Both theoretically and conceptually, the concept of conviviality or notion of living together not only facilitates ways of conceptualising contemporary urban life, but it also provides an alternative to multiculturalism and community cohesion in terms of realistic rendering of the type of society in which we contemporaneously exist. Indeed, one of the many issues associated with the problematic concept of multiculturalism is that it has been viewed ‘…as a set of policies that promoted black and minority ethnic self-interest.’ (James, 2015a:28). In fact, perversely, multiculturalism was even cited as the main reason for the economic and educational disadvantage of the ‘white’ working-class. On the other-hand, ‘community cohesion and integration discourses’ (Karner & Parker, 2011:1) seem preoccupied with perceived unassailable divisions and cultural differences between different groups. Consequently:

The appeal of Gilroy’s ‘conviviality’ therefore, lies not only in its rejection of integration and its emphasis on securing shared identities of national self, but also in its departure from principles of ‘respect’, ‘recognition’ and ‘culturalism’ when theorising multi-ethnic cohabitation (Valluvan, 2016: 206).
The conceptualisation of BJJ practitioner interactions through the concept of conviviality can, therefore, be viewed as facilitating a focus shift away from a multiculturalism mindset that would arguably categorise and differentiate, before making much of the bridging across racial and cultural divides and the associated symbolism inherent in its display. The rigid taxonomies implied by community cohesion discourses would seek to reconceptualise such interactions as demonstrating whether certain groups, or areas, display ‘cohesion and integration or are lacking in both’ (Karner & Parker, 2011:3). Conviviality however is generatively relevant precisely because unlike the concepts of multiculturalism and community cohesion, it facilitates a way of seeing/recognising interactional practices in which difference is made commonplace, but without rehearsing the divisive politics of national integration and specific group recognition (Valluvan, 2016).

Conviviality & Conflict

It is important to note that conviviality and also Elijah Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopy do not in fact signal social harmony or the absence of group tensions. Everyday social life involves complex and contrasting processes that can both nurture solidarity and also ferment mistrust. As such, conviviality coexists with racism and conflict. As a sociological concept, in spite of some superficial readings, conviviality does not seek to elide or downplay this reality. Indeed, its usefulness as a concept partly rests in this appreciation of contemporary lived realities within urban settings. Research undertaken by Karner & Parker (2011) in another area of the West Midlands close to my own field-sites highlights the complex social realities that define local lives within contemporary urban settings. As with their research, my ethnography also ‘reflects [a] growing sensitivity to local encounters as key sites for cultural negotiation’ (2011:4), and also identifies both conflict and conviviality as coexisting side by side.

‘I jokingly asked ‘G’ whether she was talking to her boss yet. She blushed a little and said that all was fine and something about how she is more experienced, and he is young and didn’t know what he’s meant to be doing on the project. (The last time I saw her she was visibly angry about how he’d

messed up something that had left her looking as though she had been responsible. He also has a
naked ‘girl’ calendar in his office. She’s an engineer who’s working on designing, is it ‘composite
tools’?). ‘G’ didn’t smile or laugh, and I sensed maybe I’d hit a raw nerve. She went on to say that the
company she works for based near [name of local area] had to recruit her from Germany and
someone else from Austria as they didn’t have the knowledge here in the UK. And how this boss thinks
he’s an expert etc. I mentioned Brexit and said something along the lines of I wonder how long will
that be the case? ‘G’ said something like it’s all going crazy. Then she said: “And you have that
yellow haired freak!” (Trump). This description and her seriousness made me laugh. We chatted
about how everything seems messed up at the moment. I felt as though she was on the same
wavelength and I presumed she was similar politically. I then for some reason mentioned that [my
wife] and I were thinking about driving across Europe, but that we were still unsure. ‘G’ must have
presumed that I was worried about terrorist attacks as she said: “It is so dangerous now! I mean
look, they’re bombing Paris…. “. She then brought up “That woman!”. She was referring to Angela
Merkel. “She’s let in 980,000 from God who knows where or what they think.”. She went on about
Germany’s policy and I just tried to look as though it hadn’t taken me aback. “She’s been there too
long.”. ‘G’ went on. “Just like with Helmet Kohl, he stayed on for too long.”. As she spoke I recalled
that ‘Gs’ partner was a Mexican guy, and so I was trying to process what she was saying regarding
Middle Eastern Muslims along with this.’

At the beginning of this particular interaction we get a sense of the general catching up and
chit-chat that is a common occurrence between two teammates who were partnering together.
I followed up on what ‘G’ had revealed to me the previous time we had partnered regarding
her issues at work. This conversation then led to a conversation concerning the wider political
climate from which given ‘G’s remarks and my previous interactions with her had led me to
perceive her in a particular way. However, her sensitivity to possible terrorist attacks across
Europe meant that she had misinterpreted my wariness of travelling as stemming from a fear
of Islamic terrorism. ‘G’s affective response had formatted someone’s unsurety about the
rigors of driving twelve hundred miles into an assemblage of fears over a ‘civilisational threat
from Islam’ (Berg & Nowicka, 2019: 1), Muslim immigration, and the health of German
democracy. Coupled with her serious, urgent tone and body posture while laying out her
fears, combined with the initial surprise at the direction of her talk, meant that I had to try
hard to control my own affective response to feelings that I did not necessarily share.

Apart from the fact of the interaction itself, what this particular fieldnote also points towards
is the specific basis for much of conflict that would occur within the main field-site. The
communal spirit of the mats and a coach authority that actively confronted any incidents of racism or sexism, made overt acts of racism or sexism extremely rare. However, anti-religion, specifically Islamophobic attitudes like the ones ‘G’ displayed did occur much more frequently. Interestingly these incidents always seemed to increase in intensity around and in reaction to certain events such as Islamist terrorist attacks (Swanton, 2010). Discussing the concept of Islamophobia, Abbas suggests that this way of naming a ‘fear or dread of Islam or Muslim’ (2005:11) may be a relatively recent term but it is a term that draws on a long European history which has viewed Islam in an overwhelmingly negative light.

That such Islamophobic sentiments were a recurring theme should not therefore be a surprise. The fieldwork was conducted against the broader backdrop in which Islamophobia (alongside anti-immigration sentiment) has become a centrepiece of contemporary new racist discourses. Within this political context, Muslims have become the central Other figure where various master-frames spanning the terrorist, the inassimilable cultural outsider, and the unenlightened misogynist, all alternate to present the Muslim as the pre-eminent demon against which popular nationalists and civilizationist discourses are oriented. This figure of the Muslim speaks to assorted wider shifts towards a cultural and/or new-racism – where codified attributions eschew a direct pathologisation and instead call into question the Muslim’s ability to live in modern, Western society. Here then we see essentialised attributions of a cultural incompatibility thesis - where the racialised Muslim is seen as the bearer of an alien culture that is threatening and/or alien to [Western] cultural integrity and commitments. Needless to say, such discursive tropes would routinely intensify in the wake of the news cycle’s periodic foregrounding of Islamist violence or other comparable so-called culture clash scandals.

‘After the Paris28 attacks ‘C’ had posted something about them [Paris attackers] being savages. He also said stuff about the gradual erosion of the UK as a secular state, the rise of Islam, and sharia law, and how EU Law and the Human Rights Act makes it impossible to stop a future in which sharia law wouldn’t be adopted in the UK and the rest of Europe. And how Islamophobia is a ‘straw man’. As we walked onto the mats ‘MT’ said something about it and she asked him what he’s going to do if ‘O’ (Muslim practitioner and long-time acquaintance of ‘C’) turns up today. “I don’t care”. He said.

28 ‘The Paris attacks’ were a series of radical Islamist terrorist attacks that took place on Friday 13 November 2015 in Paris, France.
In the above fieldnote we see how the realm of social media can intersect with the mats; how conflict within a specific BJJ multiculture can arise from issues of religion, specifically, Islam. An antisocial media post (Vaidhyanathan, 2018) of an Islamophobic nature made by ‘C’ had been perceived as causing tension and friction between ‘C’ and ‘O’ who is Muslim. By the following week when ‘O’ and ‘C’ were next together on the mats, there appeared to be no obvious tension. As in the wider public sphere, once the initial surge in intensity following any attacks had subsided, tension seemed to ease, and things at least appeared to be normal. However, it would be naive to think that underneath the affective surface such bursts of conflict would not continue to simmer, changing and affecting the intricacies and nuances of future intra-practitioner interactions. Indeed, through, but also beyond, the Islamophobic premises that would surface, the main field-site was, therefore, characterised by certain emergent anti-religion sentiments. These being sentiments that had the potential to score certain zones of conflict and discomfort in the gym’s ambient culture.

‘Before the class, ‘C’ mentioned that ‘V’ had contacted him about ‘TM’ deleting some posts where he’d said something like: “There’s no need to be so?…You’re sounding like an arse!”’. In response to ‘C’ posting some negative comments about religion and religious people. ‘C’ joked at how ‘TM’ is probably all worried and now won’t turn up….When I partnered with ‘TM’, I asked him very seriously: “What did you say to ‘C”? He seems a bit off with you.”. From the look on ‘TM’s’ face I couldn’t keep it up. I laughed and told him: “I was only joking!”’. ‘TM’ looked dead serious. “Oh don’t say that! You shouldn’t have said that! I nearly never came tonight.”

In relation to this incident, from the conversation that I had with ‘TM’ immediately after the events recorded in this fieldnote, I learnt that during the time I had stopped training due to an injury, ‘TM’ had started training at the Warks Gym and had become social media friends with some of his fellow practitioners. After keeping quiet about a number of posts that he’d found offensive, he finally snapped back and called one of the coaches an “Arse!”’. In the end he said that he decided to leave because he’d just had enough of what he saw as offensive comments and disparaging views towards religion in general. He spoke about how that although not being religious, his family had sent him to a Catholic school where due to his agnostic stance he’d been shocked when a teacher told him in front the class that his soul was damned. Despite this, ‘TM’ told me how he believed that religion could be a comfort in
certain circumstances and to not allow people to believe in whatever they wanted, he believed was “Closed minded!”

A year and a half later he had finally decided to return as he really wanted to get his blue-belt (which he did about a year later). He’d been extremely nervous about his return to the club, especially as ‘V’ and I had started to direct some jokes and so-called banter at ‘TM’, stirring his nerves about the situation even more and causing him to go into his social media timeline in order to delete some of his past comments. His desire to return to BJJ eventually overcame his anger at the social media posts though. When I asked him about how he’ll react next time if something similar happens he replied that, “I’m just here to train now. I’m not getting involved.”

The significance of these type of tensions is important in relation to certain wider political processes. These examples highlight how racism is always shifting in form and in intensities, where certain forms of racism become less acute amidst other racisms. While overt forms of racism were rare or non-existent in this particular BJJ context, at those moments of media crisis, social media platforms could give rise to this type of Islamophobia. In light of these findings, therefore, Abbas’ (2005) claim that Islam has in fact superseded ethnicity in the British discourse on racialized minorities is credible.

From the discussion and analysis that has taken place do far, it is clear that, while BJJ practitioners displayed an ability to be at ease in the presence of difference, and that relations and interactions across categories of difference were commonplace, we still find forms of exclusionary practices and attitudes. The concept of a cosmopolitan canopy does not imply a space completely free of division or absent of those individuals who fall back on communitarian and racialised conceptions. Likewise, the social, economic, and political background that has provided the foundations of contemporary multiculture also reflects the gritty and conflictual realities of urban life. While people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have played sports and gone to school together. As they have lived and worked

29 While arguably raising ethical issues relating to the role of a researcher within a field-site, the fact that I was part of a group of practitioners and BJJ team, and through this experience had gained a carnal connection with my teammates, my participation in this so-called banter can be viewed as being part of my immersion and my sincere relationships with my fellow teammates.
alongside each other, in short, while they have been exposed to and learnt about their neighbours and fellow city dwellers, this has not meant that racism or conflict has disappeared.

Within a convivial conceptualisation of contemporary society, we find conviviality and conflict existing side-by-side. And while there are of course forms of syncretism that offer alternative primary identities, such as those linked to ['black'] music sub-cultures (James, 2021) for example, this also does not mean that ‘race’ or ethnicity are somehow no longer relevant in how people define their own social and individual selves. Indeed, as Valluvan Sivamohan makes clear, Paul Gilroy’s anti-communitarian conviviality does not require a habit of identification without ‘race’ and/or ethnicity. Instead, conviviality, by presuming the legitimacy of difference, facilitates a reality in which ‘difference just makes less of a conspicuous impression’ (2016:210) where difference has been habituated and made ordinary.

Using this convivial thread and thinking about the spaces of BJJ and the interactional qualities of its practitioners, we discover a culture that is largely marked by a sense of community and mutual consideration, one that can be said to also exhibit a cosmopolitan or convivial sensibility. BJJ practitioners can be seen as reflecting the diverse, multicultural, and convivial realities from which they have been socialised and in which they are presently living. In addition, as the previous chapter highlighted, the BJJ spaces of the West Midlands are also visually, sonically, and symbolically connected to forms of UK multiculture. At a broad, macro level, these spaces can be thought of as cosmopolitan canopies in that they are settings in which diverse people interact and learn something about the Other. However, as we focus deeper and move to examine specific BJJ practitioner interactions, we find these interactions with difference as reflecting an ordinariness and banality that is a mark of conviviality. Consequently, difference is not viewed as something unique or of deserving of special consideration. This banality of difference can therefore be understood as assisting in the construction of a diverse, inclusive space and culture.

Given that we find this sense of banality, but also sophistication in relation to interactions with forms of racial and ethnic difference, we might think about how this sensibility might intersect with other categories or forms of difference. In doing so, we might discover a BJJ
contextualised cosmopolitan imagination, or a convivial dispositional sophistication towards the ways in which practitioners experience and perform gender relations for example. Indeed, as the next section of the chapter explores, the concept of conviviality can be broadened so as to include such categorisations and to frame, the forms of masculinity that are practiced by BJJ practitioners within BJJ spaces.

**Masculinity**

Martial arts and combat sports (MACS) play an important role for the construction of masculine identities. These masculine domains are therefore a sociologically significant field in and through which to examine the role of *gendered relations* within social interactions. Furthermore, if we think more deeply about forms of masculinity, the basis of gendered relations can be understood as essentially a category of *difference*. In this way, those qualities that are associated with a specific form of masculinity can be seen as being embodied, and as being practiced in ways that categorise and mark the individual and related social group. Consequently, what we find are hegemonic forms of masculinity that exclude, and expel, subordinate, and marginalise other forms of masculinity (Hirose & Pih, 2010; Connell, 1995). This normative process works to categorise, order, and essentialise those body-subjects who do not fit within a historically conventional, gendered order of embodiment. Subsequently, it is important to state herein that difference need not therefore be conceptually limited to just racial and ethnic categories, allowing for wider readings of how, amongst other things, gender and sexuality too might be incorporated into its fold. Conviviality’s essence of inclusivity is therefore drawn upon to outline how other forms of difference are also inclusive of British multiculture and, therefore, worthy of sociological analysis within the broader convivial framework of this chapter. The remainder of this chapter will subsequently interrogate more fully the terms by which masculinities are both configured, but also destabilised amidst the BJJ spaces of my ethnography.
Conviviality & BJJ Hegemonic Masculinity

For Connell (2020, para 1):

To speak of masculinities is to speak about gender relations. Masculinities are not equivalent to men, they just concern the position of men in a gender order. They can be defined as the patterns of practice by which people (both men and women, though predominantly men) engage that position.

Furthermore:

…masculinity is not a fixed character type always and everywhere the same but is multiple, contextual, and historical, and finds expression in four interrelated patterns: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalised (Garrett, 2018:32-33).

These multiple masculinities exist in relation to each other and also femininity within a hierarchical structure. Connell (1995) characterises hegemonic masculinity as the exalted ideal of manhood, the epitome of what a man should be within a given social context. To reiterate, Connell emphasises that the form hegemonic masculinity takes is not always and everywhere the same but is dependent on the specific contextualised pattern of gender relations. Hegemonic masculinity is therefore directly related to the surrounding social and cultural environment in which that hegemony is exercised. In this way, hegemonic masculinity is institutional in nature. This means that within each specific social institution or setting, like a BJJ space for example, a unique and contextualised form of hegemonic masculinity is practiced within its parameters (Hirose & Pih, 2010).

By narrowing this spatial gaze slightly, we can also get a sense of how space, specifically how certain micro-spaces within wider social settings, can help facilitate this contextualised form of gender practice. ‘In that narrow little room [where] we exchange with parsimony born of a sense of modesty - words, taps, laughter and especially looks…’ (Wacquant 2004:238), BJJ practitioners were visibly more at ease and communicative than in any other space within the main field-site. Similar to Wacquant’s findings, my own research points to how the changing room has been a space in which individuals were able to communicate with
each other away from the ears and eyes of the coaches. In fact, the changing room was the only space within the main field-site in which the coaches were usually absent. As ‘C’ admitted: “We give them [practitioners] a chance to slate the session, or us if they want. That’s why I always get changed on the mats, and if you’ve noticed [main coach] ‘B’ never goes in there.”

In light of this revelation, it was clear that the coaches made a conscious decision not to go into the changing rooms as they were aware that their presence potentially constricted communication. Their absence from this space allowed practitioners to speak freely, to criticise them if they felt the need to. Especially for newcomers, this freedom provided a space where practitioners could express themselves in a far less self-conscious way than they otherwise would have been able to.

‘In the changing room was that rugby playing dad and his young son. It was the first ever BJJ session for the dad and I asked him how he found it. “I loved it!”’. He said. “There’s just so much to learn….”. His enthusiasm was visible, his eyes were ‘alive’. I said something like: “They’ll be getting you to enter a competition next.”. He laughed and said now that the rugby season has finished, he’ll be able to train BJJ. He then said, (he looked a bit shy as he said it): “It’s mad, and my wife can’t understand it, but you miss the contact.”. He kind of moved his head to a position that looked like he was referring to a scrum. - So what I felt that he was referring to here was bodily contact (within the confines of acceptable, non-sexual, physical contact between males in a competitive sports sense). His blushing seemed to highlight his unease at admitting this.’

This fieldnote is important as it provides an example of the social and interactional affordances that certain spaces can potentially facilitate. The excerpt also gives a sense of the specific issues and those particular features of a contextualised practice of masculinity. This dad and novice practitioner’s admittance that he misses the physical touch involved in contact sports such as rugby and MACS like BJJ, is significant. His facial blushes signal his affect at opening up about this ‘unspeakable’ subject. He admits that he finds it hard to talk about this to his partner. Significantly however, within this setting, he does find it possible to talk to other men such as myself. Possibly, he feels that other men can relate to what he is saying. Importantly, this excerpt also highlights how tactility can in fact act as a shaping force for a certain type of related masculinity. Indeed, as highlighted in chapter 3, ‘BJJ bodies are forged through touch…’ (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014:82). Subsequently, we find that such tactility
can act both as a deterrent to potential practitioners, but that it can also serve to construct and define a practice of masculinity that has totemic qualities for those engaged in its practice.

Within the wider context of martial arts, ‘touch has been found to paradoxically lower levels of aggression’ (Habkirk, 2016:1). Also, research by Akihiko Hirose & Kay Kei-ho Pih (2010) that examined the relationship between striking and submission styles of fighting and forms of masculinity in MMA, found,

…that the more salient exhibitions of ‘traditional’ hegemonic masculinity (e.g., aggressive, confrontational, less intimate physical contact) came from athletes who use striking as their main fighting style and identity’ (2010:191).

In contrast, athletes whose main styles were grappling-based like BJJ, who use submission techniques to defeat an opponent, tended to exhibit their masculinity in a less confrontational and less traditional manner. Chapter 3 also highlighted how BJJ techniques require prolonged tactile contact with one’s opponent and often resemble culturally recognizable postures of homosexuality (Hirose & Pih, 2010). It also discussed how the intimate nature of BJJ’s corporeality presents a hurdle that new practitioners have to negotiate. The tactile centring of grappling styles like BJJ appears to present such a challenge with regards to non-heteronormative physical intimacy that it can potentially mould a distinct physical culture and related form of masculinity.

Hirose & Pih’s (2010) research also found that US/Western MMA publics viewed grappling arts that focus on submissions as less violent than striking styles which were viewed as more manly ways to fight. BJJ fighters, wrestlers, and Judo specialists were all feminized and seen as less masculine than kickboxers and other strikers. The ability to tap in submission styles was even viewed by this public as cheating and as giving up, in contrast to the clean, unambiguous knockouts associated with a punch or a kick. Interestingly, this same research also found that no such distinction was made between the two fighting styles and their perceived masculinities for Brazilian and Japanese MMA publics. Potentially, Brazilian and Japanese MMA enthusiasts have a different appreciation and understanding of grappling styles of combat and so do not perceive them as embodying a feminised masculinity in the same way as US and other Western publics.
‘A young man in his early/mid-twenties had a ‘Tapout’ trademark tattoo on his right calf. It was really clear even from where I was sitting at the back of the mats against the wall. From what ‘W’ and ‘C’ were saying, he was a local ‘hard-man’/gangster who trains MMA. Somehow the conversation got onto MMA, nogi and gi BJJ. ‘C’ was saying how none of the MMA attendees train gi BJJ, and not many attend the nogi class. “They just won’t train BJJ!”’. He puffed up his chest and clenched his fists imitating a ‘hard-man’. “‘I ain’t fuckin rolling around on the floor with men. I’ll just knock em out!'”. He said sarcastically in a deep, macho-sounding voice. “A few might occasionally train nogi, but usually they all just stick to the MMA class. What it is, is that they’ve been watching the UFC, they see all the moves and want to do them, so they come along and do a nogi class thinking that they can do a flying armbar\(^\text{30}\) and that they don’t need to train BJJ. It’s just bullshit!”’. He turned to ‘W’.

“When you lot were training for the white collar MMA show, I kept telling all of them that they need to train BJJ. If any of them would have come along they would have had another option – take it to the floor and no one would have been able to do anything. They just don’t want to know. All they want to do are flashy kicks and punches and knock people out…”

What is reflected here through ‘C’s’ words and attitude are the contours of the institutional nature of a BJJ contextualised form of hegemonic masculinity. While Hirose & Pih (2010) highlight the relationship between submission and striking styles in MMA, my own ethnographic research has an analogous relationship between gi BJJ and MMA and, to a lesser extent, nogi practitioners. Those practitioners who might irregularly attend nogi classes and who do not train in the gi, as well as those MMA practitioners who refuse to attend the specialist nogi or gi sessions, are potentially stereotyped, by some BJJ practitioners, as embodying a much more traditional hegemonic form of masculinity. This type of masculinity is seen to be at odds with a more inclusive form that is embodied by traditional BJJ gi training practitioners. In chapter 3, I captured how a homophobic MMA fighter would only attend MMA classes in order to appropriate what he needed technically from BJJ. His fear of prolonged same-sex touch and the meanings that he attached to it meant that he would not train at a BJJ class. In the above fieldnote we similarly find the accusation that there was in fact a reluctance by some MMA practitioners to attend gi BJJ classes.

What ‘C’s’ mimicking of a neanderthal in the fieldnote alludes to is this articulation of a

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\(^\text{30}\) The flying armbar is one of the most spectacular submission techniques in BJJ, and also one of the rarest. For a detailed description see: https://jiujitsu-news.com/how-to-do-a-flying-armbar/
toxic, alpha-male character type that is endemic in popular psychology, and which has become ‘a scientific sounding synonym for a type of rigid domineering, sexist ‘macho’ man’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 840). The reason that these specific MACS practitioners were reluctant to attend nogi classes, as stereotyped by this BJJ coach, was that their primitive mentality was partly the result of their fear of non-heteronormative physical touch. “Rolling around with men on the floor” could be understood as challenging these men’s sense of manhood. Prolonged intimate physical contact with another man possibly raised the spectre of homosexuality for these practitioners and so it was not a practice that fitted with their uber-heterosexual self-identity. BJJ’s tactility, therefore, with its associated femininity and homoeroticism was subsequently a barrier for some of the MMA practitioners within the wider gym space.

Thinking here about hegemonic masculinity’s institutional nature, we subsequently find that within the institutional structures of BJJ, what is hegemonic does not necessarily correspond to the traditional hegemonic form that is embodied by many MMA and also some nogi practitioners. What is dominant or hegemonic in the context of a culture of BJJ arguably embodies a more inclusive vision of masculinity. What is in fact subordinated within a BJJ contextualised practice of gender relations is actually the misogynistic, homophobic, or more traditional type of hegemonic masculinity. Although the previous chapter did highlight one instance of homophobia when the coach jokingly said to a group of nervous first-time practitioners “It’s only gay if you look into their eyes!”. The coaches’ later admittance of regret at his comments, as well as the generally inclusive form of masculinity that was practiced within the space, suggests that BJJ practitioners are in fact marked by this inclusive, non-traditional form.

“We were on the mats having another very chilled and free Saturday morning class. I cannot exactly recall how it precisely came up, but in response to something someone said about the Tuilagi31 brothers, I replied that dressing up as a woman would be a fun thing to do. ‘V’ then said ‘...it’s quite liberating actually!’”. He then went onto recall how for a dare on a night out him and his friends had

31 Tuilagi brothers are seven siblings, six of whom all reached international level rugby for Samoa and England. The seventh sibling is fa'afafine and goes by the name Julie Tuilagi. Fa’afafine are people who identify themselves as having a third-gender or non-binary role in Samoa, American Samoa and the Samoan diaspora. It is a recognized gender identity/gender role in traditional Samoan society, and an integral part of Samoan culture.
only £20 with which to go to a second-hand shop and buy an outfit for the night. “You try and find my size! But there were loads of big dresses, so I went as a woman.”. He didn’t say exactly how it was liberating but I felt that he meant as with regards as to escaping rigid ideas about what being a man is or should be. - Dressing up and pretending to be a woman could therefore be liberating of sorts. ‘RH’ spoke up “Have you seen that man who dresses as a woman in [supermarket]?”. I also mentioned the man who wears dresses near to the University who always appears to be in a fluster, at which point ‘C’ said something like: “They always have to act out what they think a woman is. Like they’re performing a role they think is the idea of what a woman is”. The conversation got back to the Tuilagi brothers; the second oldest brother wears a dress, makeup etc, but according to what ‘V’ was saying he isn’t considered ‘gay’. ‘V’ said that in that culture the second brother becomes, appears, or embodies womanhood. ‘V’ said that it had to do with the high testosterone levels in this culture and so there’s a lack of women, at which point ‘KF’ said that’s not entirely true and actually men who have daughters have more testosterone. We both had a laugh together at this comment due to what it meant for us personally. At the end of the class, as I was leaving the mats ‘KF’ joked, “I bet you’re going home and will search about Samoan culture now. We spoke more about it and ‘KF’ told me to watch (he couldn’t remember the famous cross-dressing artist’s name) as he’d gone to a gang and then spoke to MMA fighters to discuss their conceptions of masculinity. ‘KF’ said that it was really interesting. I then spoke about BJJ and masculinity with him and mentioned that I thought it could differ from that of a traditional boxer or MMA fighter. ‘KF’ was nodding his head in agreement, “Definitely!”

This fieldnote captures one of the broad range of types of conversations that would take place at the edge of the mats between practitioners. The topic of this particular conversation, men’s cross-dressing, and the matter of fact way in which it was discussed, does suggest that BJJ practitioners do not necessarily fit into a rigid, traditional categorisation of gender relations. However, while these musings are interesting in themselves, they are arguably more significant when conceptualised as being part of a broader convivial framing, whose interactional affordances facilitates such interactions. And while ‘V’s admittance that he wore a dress on a night out and that it was “liberating” could be seen as part of a historical, British, comedic, and ultimately patronising tradition of men dressing up as women, it also clearly highlights how these affordances allow someone to express themselves in this way. Juxtaposed against stereotyped conceptions of fighters as bearers of an uber masculine form of embodiment, BJJ practitioners can in this way be seen as disruptors of those essentialised conceptions that are mired in homophobic and toxic forms of masculinities. BJJ spaces are therefore not defined by hegemonic masculinity in the traditional sense.
Admittedly, while the insights into Samoan culture’s gender roles are not accurate, the conversation in itself is interesting as it frames the spaces of BJJ as being open to such types of discussions. The general conversation also reminded ‘KF’ of a documentary where the cross-dressing artist Grayson Perry (2016) had explored the so-called toxic masculinity of British male MMA practitioners. Research by Bowman (2020:395) that also references the documentary, supports the argument put forward by Grayson Perry that media representations of MMA and its associated masculinity need to be understood as playing an active role in the invention, maintenance, and modification of gendered representation. It appears that the tough, macho, and toxic masculinity that is displayed by many MMA practitioners is just a role that they are performing; a role that they have been socialised or invited to perform, and the only role that they know.

The social, economic, and personal backgrounds of many of these men appears to construct an extremely rigid, but also an extremely fragile form of masculinity. The documentary and associated research found that underneath the tough, aggressive, and violent exterior of many of these men was an emotional sensitivity and a desire to break free from the constriction and suffocation of the traditional hegemonic model. These observations suggest that given the right context (the BJJ mats, or a changing room for example), ostensibly hard, unsympathetic, and taciturn men, can find a more thoughtful, expressive, and emotionally sensitive self.

‘Conscious of needing to get back home quickly I gathered my bag and made my way into the changing room. I quickly undressed and got showered, washing my hair. I did not hear how the conversation outside of the showers started, but as I began to dry myself while stood in the shower section, ‘PO’ said to ‘H’ that he was working at a session tomorrow. His facial expression showed a concern, as though it was really important... “Sex offenders.”. He said. There was a bit of a silence after he said this. I asked him what’s that like. I cannot remember if he expressed any feelings about what it was like to work with sex offenders, but I clearly remember him saying “…they’re [just] normal people. Just like you and me are attracted to women, they’re attracted to kids. They can’t help it.”. His comments indicated that he felt and knew that it was a problem/wrong, and that they were dangerous, but at the same time it was clear that he had some sympathy for them in that it was out of their control; it was biological. At that point ‘H’ spoke up and quite surprised me in a way by saying that he agreed with ‘PO’. He said that he used to be all like “…they’re all just evil bastards!”. But after talking to people who work with them (is that ‘PO’ he’s referring to?) he’s changed his mind.
and opinions. “Carl. It’s like those blokes who just can’t stop sleeping with their mate’s Mrs.”. He said. “They just can’t help themselves… I reckon they should all be just castrated. They even say it themselves don’t they. That if they had the chance they’d have it done.”. I noticed ‘PO’s’ expression. He was in the shower and just bent his head like he wanted to say something but chose not to. I said that I don’t think you could have a society that did that, and immediately on saying this ‘PO’ agreed, “Yeah, I don’t think that’s an option!”’. ‘H’ made a joke about it all and then left. I had been dressed and ready to leave for a while but I had stayed as this was a really interesting conversation. I said goodbye to ‘PO’ and then left the changing room. The next session was already well underway.’

This fieldnote provides a further example of those type of conversations that give a sense of the form and complexity of the interactions that take place in this BJJ setting. Here we find a serving prison officer tactfully raise his feelings regarding a special session he was attending the following day that would focus on child sex offenders. What was significant about this conversation for me in particularly, was the way in which ‘PO’ conceptualised paedophiles as just the same as everyone else, apart from the fact of the objects of their sexual attraction. “They’re just normal people…”. By drawing upon broad principles (Lamont & Aksartova 2002) in order humanise the sex offenders he would be working with, ‘PO’ was no doubt preparing himself for what would undoubtedly be a difficult experience (his expression and the ensuing silence would suggest that this was so).

Furthermore, this attempt at humanising, as well as in conjunction with other such conversations and insights between ‘PO’ and ‘H’, had brought about a reappraisal of these offenders by ‘H’. What possibly surprised me most from this discussion was ‘H’s’ attitude towards these offenders. Although his analogy concerning paedophiles and men who sleep with their friend’s partners violently overrides the marked differences in consent, coercion, and power at play, I realised that I might have been guilty of stereotyping ‘H’ as someone who possibly held illiberal views on matters like this. His idea to castrate these men possibly highlights a previous mindset, which had been potentially changed by his relationship and discussions with ‘PO’.

Regardless of the intricacies of these exchanges however, what this sensitive discussion does underscore is how the spaces of BJJ can be seen as sites of a form of masculinity that in many ways stands in opposition to the emotionally and intellectually circumscribed forms that fall under the traditional hegemonic canopy. Accordingly, while my ethnographic research does
support the view that BJJ spaces and the masculinities that are practiced within them can be viewed as inclusive and predominantly unmarked by the illiberal traditional form, it is also very aware of how this inclusivity can by extension also exclude. As clearly outlined in the previous chapter, in the same way that a traditional practice of gender relations subordinates so-called effeminate and unmanly masculinities (like those that US MMA enthusiasts perceive to be embodied by BJJ fighters), BJJ can also be guilty of excluding and marginalizing.

Indeed, as was detailed in the previous chapter, certain bodies within BJJ spaces can potentially be misinterpreted and essentialised according to physical qualities which are associated with a form of masculinity that is both subordinated and marginalised within a culture of BJJ. And so while BJJ provides a positive example in terms of its practice of gender relations, those very same qualities that are a feature of its inclusivity can also trigger specific affectual processes that can incorrectly essentialise specific categories of bodies as problematically embodying a traditional hegemonic form.

It is also worth remembering that complicit masculinity (Connell 1995) suggests that because the inclusive form is hegemonic within BJJ spaces, practitioners who do not necessarily display or practice this inclusivity outside of these spaces will align themselves with this practiced form as they benefit from this association. Therefore, some practitioners who appear to practice this open and inclusive form of masculinity inside the spaces of BJJ might, in reality, be much closer to the closed, traditional form once free of BJJ’s institutional structures and out of the sight of their BJJ peers.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined BJJ practitioner interactions that take place both conceptually and physically away from the rigours of a BJJ class. The first part of this chapter examined practitioner interactions through the concepts of cosmopolitanism and conviviality. It highlighted how BJJ practitioner interactions reflect the ordinariness and the banality of living with difference within and across the spaces of UK multiculture. Furthermore, it also showed how these interactions reflect the complexity and the grittiness of contemporary
social life, wherein rehearsals of conviviality are always being negotiated against the backdrop of exclusionary and defensive social fault lines.

The chapter then analysed a configuration of gender practice within the chapter’s wider convivial framework. The research identified a more inclusive form of masculinity that is practiced within BJJ spaces. This contextualised form contrasts to the traditional hegemonic model that is associated and perceived to be embodied by MMA practitioners. While this more liberal form of gender practice is to be welcomed for its progressive and more expressive embodiment of masculinity, its subordination and marginalization of the traditional hegemonic form can in turn create possibilities for the misrecognition and essentialization of specific bodies which is at odds with an ostensible ethos of inclusivity and openness. The spaces of BJJ and the interactions that take place within these spaces, therefore, reflect the contrasting and often contradictory nature of conviviality and of the social lives and relationships that are constitutive of UK multiculture.
Chapter 6 – The BJJ Canopy

Introduction

This chapter examines the ways in which the overarching canopy of a global BJJ culture contextualises local BJJ spaces and practitioners in the UK, West Midlands. This chapter seeks to unpack the core features of what I’ve termed ‘The BJJ Canopy’ in order to understand how localised practices and practitioners embody the culture’s core elements. Drawing on the work of Jose Cairus and the history and contemporary development of BJJ to provide a critical understanding of its foundations, this chapter highlights BJJ’s relationship to forms of cosmopolitanism. It discusses the factors involved in BJJ’s globalisation and the power dynamics between institutions that seek to retain a Brazilian dominance and those that reflect new centres of influence. This focus also helps to provide a necessary appreciation of the connection between BJJ’s historical development and the various ways in which a global BJJ culture contextualises and shapes local UK practitioner embodiment in the West Midlands.

The following chapter is structured through three interrelated themes. The first theme to be explored is the history and development of BJJ. This section maps BJJ’s global and contemporary cultural contours. It examines in detail the relationship between BJJ’s early development and its contemporary worldwide status to understandings of cosmopolitanism. It highlights how, through Brazilian and globalised networks of relations, BJJ became a global MACS that reflects hybridity and its cosmopolitanism roots. The chapter here also highlights how the US is increasingly gaining dominance over Brazilian institutional and symbolic authority, and the subsequent nuances and contestations in the sport that this has created.

The chapter’s next theme narrows this broad global focus onto the local spaces and practices in the West Midlands, and on the institutional authority of the BJJ coach and club. The chapter here examines the ways in which global flows interact with the local sites and cultures, helping to mould and define the institutional nature of local BJJ teams and gyms. It highlights the relationships between lineage in BJJ, to localised symbolic and institutional
power. Significantly, it shows how lineage can be a site of both distinction and of contending sites of global power relations. The chapter here also explores the significance of coach authority as it is exercised across the local spaces. Its examination of this form of authority looks to the similarities and differences with how authority is exercised within the Brazilian martial art of Capoeira. Furthermore, this section highlights the importance of coach authority in maintaining a safe and inclusive environment. It also briefly discusses the potentiality of this authority in terms of its impact on the lives of BJJ practitioners.

The chapter’s third theme analyses how local practitioners reflect global BJJ discourses and trends. It highlights the ways in BJJ practitioners embody the globalised and increasingly North-Americanized BJJ culture. The chapter here also explores the relationship between this global BJJ culture, its localised practices, and the medicinal plant of cannabis.

All of these themes in their totality provide a comprehensive analysis of a wider BJJ culture and its localised, UK forms. ‘The BJJ Canopy’ is therefore the final piece of an ethnographic jigsaw that attempts to sociologically understand the ways in which corporeality, difference, conviviality, and cosmopolitanism, all interact to mould a distinctive, localised culture and its associated interactional practices.

The History & Development of BJJ

A Brief History of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

The history of sport is a relatively autonomous history which, even when marked by the major events of economic and social history, has its own tempo, its own evolutionary laws, its own crises, in short, its specific chronology (Bourdieu, 1993:118).

BJJ does, of course, have its own history, one that is marked by events and individuals that are unique to its own chronology. However, the history of BJJ, like the history of any sport, also reflects and is intimately tied to the social and political environment from which it developed. This unique history of BJJ begins against the backdrop of Brazil’s new multi-racial democracy (The First Brazilian Republic 1889-1930).
Japan’s celebrated victory in the *Russo-Japanese War* (1904-1905) served as successful publicity for the original Japanese Jiu-Jitsu which had been brought to Brazil by Japanese immigrants during the Amazon rubber boom. Cairus (2011; 2012) describes how in cosmopolitan Brazilian towns this martial art took hold with a particular section of Brazilian society who looked to Japan’s modernist progress as an example for Brazil to follow. The sons of a local circus owner and fight promoter whose family, The Gracies, were descended from Scottish aristocracy, but who were now one of the many ‘déclassé descendants’ (Cairus, 2011:113) of colonial families who struggled to retain their status in the new Republic, began to train under the instruction of the most successful of the *Kodokan*\(^{32}\) Jiu Jitsu fighters\(^{33}\) who toured Brazil performing in exhibitions and arranged fights.

Partially freed through physical and cultural distance from Japanese institutional and authoritative oversight, the Japanese instructors in Brazil adapted their style to their new surroundings. Brazilian students were taught with little reference to philosophical concepts or with little regard for a strict pedagogical framework. There was also no strict adherence to the Japanese belt ranking system which constituted one of the pedagogical foundations of the Kodokan school. In addition to a less structured and traditional environment, the growing specialisation in standing techniques\(^{34}\) by Japanese fighters also opened up a space into which their Brazilian students, primarily the Gracies, would eventually fill. Before long, these Brazilian students left their Japanese instructors to set up their own schools teaching fellow Brazilians. In the upcoming years, these Brazilian fighters would create a new hybrid art that fused the original Japanese Jiu Jitsu with a Brazilian focus on ground combat that would soon rival and challenge the dominance of the Japanese.

**Cosmopolitanism & BJJ**

The relationship between the development and the historical growth of BJJ and particular forms of cosmopolitanism (Wise & Noble, 2016) becomes clearer through an examination of the ways in which ‘a particular segment of Brazil’s elite reinvented a Japanese cultural

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\(^{32}\) Kodokan Judo school Japan  

\(^{33}\) Mitsuyo Maeda was a Japanese judoka and prize-fighter who taught the Gracies Jiu-Jitsu  

\(^{34}\) An off-shoot of Jiu-Jitsu, this specialisation in standing combat was to become what is known as Judo.
element in its own image during the process of construction of a national [Brazilian] identity’ (Cairus, 2012:8). Importantly, the cultural hybridity and fluidity involved in the process of change from Japanese Jiu-Jitsu to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, perfectly embodied the political discourse in Brazil at that time.

Cairus highlights how Brazilian nationalism and Brazilian intellectual perceptions of identity sought to incorporate the three main racial groups of Brazil: ‘white’, ‘black’, and ‘indigenous’ (Freyre, 1934). The embrace of Brazilian mestizaje\textsuperscript{35} by the Brazilian cultural and political elite was a process that attempted to mould a national identity that both embodied and celebrated hybridity and cross-cultural and interracial miscenation. Jiu-Jitsu, for its part, perfectly reflected the qualities of fusion and hybridity that had been outlined in the Manifesto Antropófago\textsuperscript{36} (Andrade, 1928 cited in Cairus 2012:70). The Brazilian students of the original Japanese masters had enthusiastically eaten foreign influences and had regurgitated them in a Brazilian form. The Gracies, in particular, represented ‘Brazilian cannibalism at its best’ (Cairus, 2012:70) as they had succeeded in creating a local Jiu Jitsu culture by refusing to abide by the technical, philosophical, and cultural prescriptions of the Japanese. This Gracie-Brazilian project embraced and refined those elements they deemed useful and discarded the elements they thought irrelevant. This clear process of absorbing and adapting the Other had created an entirely new martial art form which was to become known as Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ).

The ability of Brazilians like the Gracies to pick and choose, to appropriate certain aspects of an immigrant culture is an example of how appropriation by a dominant culture occurs through means of both symbolic and actual manipulation. Those soft, symbolic elements such as jettisoning the Japanese insistence on bowing (rei-ho) and the rules governing fights were also underpinned by changes to the hard elements of the art’s actual corporeal structure and focus (Cairus, 2012). This rationalization helped constitute a specific localised form that was codified (Bourdieu, 1978) and overseen by the Gracies. This adaption, or manipulation, became fully cemented as these ex-students of the Japanese fighters challenged, fought, and, ultimately, gained victory over their old masters in well-publicised prize-fights. This both

\textsuperscript{35} Mestizaje refers to a person born to a mixture of different ethnicities.

\textsuperscript{36} Manifesto Antropófago The Cannibalist Manifesto, written by Oswald de Andrade (1890 – 1954), was published in May 1928.
cosmopolitan, but also nationalist project’s process of eating the other was a visible success. The Gracies and other Brazilian’s had successfully absorbed and positively transformed a martial practice of Japanese culture into a new form that reflected its Brazilian cultural surroundings. Brazil had consumed Japan and, in doing so, had not only taken on Japanese special characteristics, but Brazilians had also ostensibly enhanced them.

Problematically, there is an obvious act of violence at the heart of such processes as,

…forms of cross-cultural engagement are always politically charged and result in obvious contradictions. On the one hand, projects [like BJJ] are about experiencing and consuming difference and potentially positive in their potential to construct forms of ethical cosmopolitanism, and on the other they are a form of appropriation, whereby cultural difference is consumed, subsumed, and ultimately dominated (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007:739).

This appropriation was arguably never more so than in the case of the development of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. The adaption of a Japanese art by the Gracies, involved the utilisation of their cultural and economic position within the context of a multi-cultural social setting that drew on wider nationalist imperatives to forge a specifically local Brazilian practice and culture.

Chapter 1 detailed the abstracted, Eurocentric and often unrealistic premise of certain readings of cosmopolitanism (Gilroy, 2004; Bhambra, 2010; Berg & Nowicka, 2014). The wide-eyed form of cross cultural engagement that can lie at the heart of the concept can therefore potentially overshadow its negative side of appropriation and fetishization. The mainstream official history of the development of BJJ [too] is guilty of such elisions (Danaher & Peligro, 2002). Instead of fully acknowledging the significance of the role played by the Japanese or offering a more critical examination of its roots and growth, Robert Drysdale highlights how the ‘official narrative’ of BJJ uncritically reflects a process of ‘revision, rearranging, editing and redacting’ that lionises the Gracies (2020:15). This official narrative overlooks how the Gracie’s particular form of Jiu-Jitsu became closely aligned with the repressive apparatus of the nationalist authoritarian state that had dissolved the Brazilian Republic in 1930. It also ignores how it was under this strong nationalist influence that the Gracies replaced Japanese rituals with putatively local, Brazilian cultural traits (Cairus,
Rather than embracing this history, the official narrative centres a nationalist deification, a hagiography of our greats, centred around a story of a Brazilian family of uniquely gifted individuals (The Gracies), who entirely by themselves created an original art form from their own inherent special qualities.

‘One of those chilled, not very busy Saturday morning classes. Chatting on the mats with ‘Z’, ‘KF’, ‘FB’, ‘V’, and ‘C’’. ‘KF’ mentioned that he’s started training in Judo. The conversation got onto the Samurai and how ground-fighting - ‘NeWaza’, was vital once they’d fallen off their horse and lost their weapons. I remember ‘KF’ saying something along the lines of that the reason the Samurai trained and were warriors was actually because of love – in violent, feudal Japan being a Samurai was about protecting your loved ones and your family. ‘C’ spoke about the history of BJJ, with ‘KF’ saying how Judo is an off-shoot of the original Jiu Jitsu. He also mentioned something about there being another non-Gracie history of the lineage of BJJ but as he spoke ‘FB’ said, ‘Helio wasn’t very strong so he had to figure out a way to fight bigger guys…’. The conversation then turned to the Gracies with ‘V’ saying how he’s trained at one of their gyms in California.’

This fieldnote highlights two interesting points. Firstly, it speaks to an orientalist fetishization of the Samurai and the mythologization of the Samurai code. Undoubtedly, as ‘KF’ claims, many Samurai would have been driven by the desire to protect one’s family, but, in the same way as any other human would. This type of deification and canonization of their spiritualized warrior credentials, which claims that the Samurai were distinctively motivated by love is an oversimplification and essentially a myth – one where Japanese nationalist mythology meets Orientalist reverence. In reality, the Samurai were just hired swords and mercenaries used by the Japanese ruling class to maintain their power through the use of violence. Like any other mercenaries which did take on certain caste-like characteristics, their allegiance was tied to who paid them, not to some higher spiritual values. This uncritical acceptance of Samurai and Bushido myths very much echoes contemporary naiveties surrounding so-called mafioso ‘men of honour’, or, similarly, the nationalist’s uncritical support for ‘our boys in the military’, even when those soldiers are guilty of war crimes.

Secondly and most importantly, the excerpt also highlights how the official narrative of BJJ

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37 The Bushido code is a relatively recent term used to describe a moral code and the rules that the Samurai supposedly lived by.
can drown out the possibility of a more nuanced and critical articulation of its development in Brazil. ‘C’s knowledge on BJJ’s history might have served as a way for the group to have explored the hidden, unfamiliar details surrounding its past. Instead, ‘FB’ repeated the popular official narrative that due to a delicate physical condition of one of its first Brazilian practitioners (Helio Gracie) and his subsequent uniquely scientific (Danaher & Peligro, 2002) inquiry, the secrets of ground-fighting and BJJ were opened up. This is the widely held common knowledge that most novice and many advanced BJJ practitioners alike have in relation to BJJ’s formation and history. Whereas, in actuality, the main reason for this Brazilian focus on ground-fighting was because this was the only way that the Gracies had found that they could beat the Japanese (Cairus, 2011; 2012). Specialising in Ne Waza ground-fighting, while their old Japanese instructors perfected the standing throws and trips that would become known as Judo, offered the Gracies a gap which they would successfully fill.

The limited knowledge of many BJJ practitioners is partially the result of the unique gatekeeping position of the Gracie family within a global BJJ culture. Their social, economic, and racial status in Brazil has arguably afforded them a prominence and position from which they have proactively marketed themselves and closely guarded their family’s role. This memory practice (James, 2015) has resulted in the partial silencing of versions that do not fit into a particular creation myth and has foregrounded a version of reality in which they are the sole bearers38 of the BJJ mantle. In this way the BJJ cosmopolitan project was clearly marked by unequal power relations and processes of appropriation and fusion.

The development of BJJ did involve a coming together, a learning and ultimately a consuming by the Brazilian establishment of a minority immigrant cultural element. Supported by their economic and cultural status, and their political and media connections, the Gracie BJJ project and their family’s public fights with the Japanese came to represent a confident and virulent Rio-centric Brazil. The minority Japanese immigrants however symbolised Sao Paulo’s immigrant and multicultural essence. Thinking about Gilroy’s

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38 See Drysdale (2020) for a comprehensive non-Gracie dominant outline and chronology of the history and development of BJJ that highlights silenced lineages such as the Francisco Sa lineage, which has a more traditional, self-defence, not competition focus and which comes from Brazil’s ‘black’ populated North East (2020:33).
critique of cosmopolitanism here - the concept always retains imperialist traces. Therefore, in relation to the BJJ project, its interplay between global and local allegiances (Appiah, 2002) meant that a minority cultural element like the original Japanese Jiu-Jitsu was to always find itself devoured by a dominant culture fascinated with the exotic Other. Indeed, we subsequently find that such contradictions lie at the heart of BJJ’s genesis. Desire, celebration, and fascination of a particular immigrant culture, coexisted side by side with its domination, appropriation, and exclusion.

And so it was that through their elite networked relations (Urry, 2002), the Gracies continued to cement their position as the foremost Brazilian martial artists. Subsequently, the Gracie family sons were able to set up private, elite dojos in Rio’s upper-class shoreline neighbourhoods where they taught the art to their strictly ‘white’ upper class peers, along with members of special police and military units (Cairus, 2011; 2012). Over the next few decades, the dissemination of BJJ among upper and middle class practitioners became associated with the lifestyle of a new generation of Gracies in which they,

…combined naturalist dietary habits, beach culture and martial practice without the rigidness of Asian disciplines and provided the practitioners with a great instrument to enhance their masculine performances in the public sphere (Cairus, 2012: 209-210).

The rise in interest of Eastern martial arts throughout the West in the 1970’s (Channon, 2012) had the effect of helping BJJ to take root outside of Brazil. The global pathways and trans-global migration flows that the Gracie’s cosmopolitanism network opened up for them was a crucial factor in BJJ’s successful global dissemination. The ‘hypermobility’ (Urry, 2002: 257) of privileged ‘white’ males like the Gracies helps facilitate and/or shape globally networked relations. And so it was from this global reach that BJJ left the beaches and exclusive neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro and established itself on the Californian coast. Here, as they did in Rio, the Gracies transmitted their particular form of Jiu Jitsu to a similar clientele of police, military, and the relatively affluent sections of society.

Subsequently, through the impact of the Gracie family’s success at the beginnings of the worldwide, highly mediatised sport of MMA, BJJ would achieve global recognition. Once again, using their cosmopolitan global connections and migration pathways, the Gracies and
other Brazilians then facilitated the spread of the art to places like the UK. It is important to note here that by the time BJJ arrived in the UK, it had already begun to take on a distinctly North-American cultural tone. These west coast, surf culture traits have subsequently become strongly associated with a global BJJ culture that now embodies Japanese, Brazilian, but also North American qualities.

The ‘North-Americanisation’ of BJJ

Only once BJJ became established on the Californian coast was it able to subsequently spread across America and then outwards to the rest of the world. Today, while Brazilians and Brazilian-based teams still dominate the elite levels of the sport, US fighters and teams are a close second. Furthermore, new contemporary developments in techniques and rules regarding BJJ have been developed in the US. This sportification of the art includes rule changes to competition formats and new technique innovations that signify a move away from the art’s original essence of self-defence. Drysdale (2020) highlights how this new US sphere of power also opposes Brazilian based regulatory authority and seeks to wrest control away. These ongoing shifts in global power have even led to calls for the term BJJ to be replaced with AJJ (American Jiu Jitsu) or back to just Jiu-Jitsu to reflect this new reality.

This ‘Anglicization of BJJ’ (Drysdale, 2020:49), or what I have termed the ‘North-Americanisation’ of BJJ, closely resembles the Brazilianisation of the original Japanese form. Now though, instead of Brazilians eating the Japanese, it is US practitioners who are devouring this Brazilian art in order to create their own unique hybrid. And tellingly, the clothes, mannerisms and behaviour that embodies this new US-Gracie-Brazilian cultural blend (Cairus, 2012) have even been exported back to Brazil. This has help yield what has been termed ‘an anti-Gracie agenda’ (Drysdale, 2020:37).

What these changes in global BJJ culture have revealed and have arguably widened is a divide between those individuals and institutions who embody a sport-competition style that is associated with certain US-born Gracie descendants, and those who favour a more self-defence fighting focus. Furthermore, these shifts point to how new centres of commercial and globalised power are able to shift the terms by which authority is claimed upon BJJ. And how
that authority flows through channels of mediated and institutional privileges, demonstrating how the ostensibly cosmopolitan coordinates and impulses of cultural exchange and incorporation become structured by imperatives of commercial dominance; dominance being read here as the cultural status and esteem tied to contemporary America.

Local Spaces & Institutional Authority

Introduction

Having provided a detailed outline of BJJ’s development from an immigrant Japanese martial art into a hybrid Brazilian sport that today reflects a globalised, cosmopolitan audience, the chapter now draws this thread into a localised, UK setting. Firstly, it uses the example of UK BJJ spaces to underscore the ways in which lineage reinforces and perpetuates Brazilian symbolic and institutional authority. Next, this section outlines a broad sketch of typical BJJ clubs across the West Midlands, particularly highlighting how various clubs are perceived as embodying contrasting values and styles. The role and influence of the BJJ coach in shaping the institutional habitus of the club is outlined by highlighting the ways the club’s ethos or martial dispositions are instilled. Following on from this, the chapter then explicitly analyses coach authority and the differences and similarities between authority in a culture of BJJ to that of Capoeira. Coach authority is highlighted here as being critical to practitioner safety and the maintenance of convivial relations. The chapter then points towards the potential that this type of natural authority has in relation to the lives of BJJ practitioners before briefly addressing the ways in which authority is managed and maintained among different BJJ coaches.

Lineage & Symbolic Power

The practice of martial arts like BJJ implies an affiliation with a particular tradition or school. This affiliation means that practitioners become part of a lineage that emphasises particular styles or techniques and which has its own pedagogy and philosophy. These lineages are vital in establishing martial art school’s credibility (Cairus, 2012) and in underpinning a coaches’
authority. In addition to whatever individual titles, rankings, or achievements that a particular coach may possess, their lineage provides a symbolic and institutional foundation for their practice. In BJJ, for example, the closer a particular coaches’ lineage is to the Brazilian originators and/or to the most historically decorated fighters, the more symbolic capital a coach will have. This has the subsequent effect that, within a wider global BJJ culture, Brazil, Brazilian fighters and strong Brazilian lineages retain significant amounts of capital. Furthermore, they are often afforded a respect that outweighs that given to non-Brazilians.

“The cult nature of certain BJJ institutions has always bothered me. I was once asked to leave [name of franchised gym] by [name of British instructor] because I refused to bow to pictures of [names of two prominent BJJ ‘originators’]. I said, “throw me out! And he just avoided me for the rest of the class. This was a daytime class over in (name of city in the Midlands) that I had got to by train. There were two well-known Brazilian fighters watching who had come over, and they just laughed. He was trying to suck up to them....”’ (‘C’ 2018).

This fieldnote raises a number of important issues relating to lineages and power within BJJ institutions and a global BJJ culture. The rule that everyone who stepped onto the mats at this particular Brazilian based, globally franchised club had to bow to images of two of its founders, highlights how Brazilian hegemony is established and maintained. Apart from a symbolic nod of respect, enforcing this bowing ritual serves as a form of indoctrination. Over a period of time a kind of un-reflexive idolisation inscribes itself into club members, helping to reinforce and perpetuate a particular partisan lineage narrative.

Furthermore, this example also reveals a glaring contradiction at the heart of BJJ’s own myth creation in the history of the development of BJJ (Danaher & Peligro, 2002; Cairus, 2012). Whilst the jettisoning of Japanese rituals such as bowing and other ritualistic ancient traditions were seen as central to BJJ’s modern and scientific epistemology (i.e. use only what works in a fight and dismiss any esoteric elements - functionality), what we find at this prominent BJJ club, however, is markedly different. Indeed, BJJ’s rejection of those features which supposedly mark it out as different to other martial arts, such as mysticism and institutional rigidity, have become inscribed into this BJJ space’s institutional practices. In this particular case, those ancient traditions have actually been utilised in order to consolidate Brazilian symbolic and institutional authority.
What we find then is that away from its historical home and now franchised to places across the world, this Brazilian based academy, as both guardian and promoter of their specific lineage, have found ways to maintain and reinforce their legitimate authority. New global markets, once created, need to learn brand loyalty and rituals like this, serve to establish it. The fact that it was a British coach at this club that was attempting to enforce this ritual highlights just how well loyalty has been instilled. Here was a non-Brazilian black-belt consciously trying to show the Brazilian visitors how, despite it being the UK, their lineage and club was safe in his hands. From the reactions of the two Brazilians present, it is unclear whether a Brazilian coach would have been so zealous in the same situation. As new geographical centres of power begin to challenge traditional Brazilian dominance, incidents like this reveal the wider power dynamics at play within a global BJJ culture.

The Contours of a BJJ Club in the West Midlands

Sketching out a broad picture of the type and structure of BJJ clubs across the West Midlands, reveals essentially three types of BJJ spaces. Firstly, there are those **Global Academies** that are worldwide Brazilian-originated franchised academies that, due to their recognisable name and lineage, are the largest and most popular clubs. Secondly, there are those **Networked Local Teams**, like that based at the Warks Gym, which are independent, but which also have close connections to the franchised clubs through a shared lineage. These clubs all have a permanent mat space, some within a wider gym space. Thirdly, there are
Local BJJ Spaces - those smaller clubs that might rent out a space for a number of hours per week and which, like the University BJJ club, must lay out their mats before every session and clear them away afterwards. Some of these clubs might be related through lineage to more established institutions and therefore have connections to them, or they may not.

Due to their recognisable name/lineage and the central locations of their spaces, however, it is the franchised BJJ clubs which attract the most practitioners. These more commercial spaces arguably offer a more packaged and regulated environment in which newcomers, especially, might be more confident in visiting. Potentially echoing the findings of Hannah Jones et al (2015) in their study of franchised café spaces that was discussed in Chapter 1, these franchised BJJ spaces might, therefore, be viewed by prospective new practitioners as less cliquie. These spaces might have more cosmopolitan appeal than those less well-known, local spaces that are situated away from city centre and central town locations. Because of their direct link to the Brazilian founders of the art, for UK newcomers to BJJ, this close connection arguably does have a certain appeal. For those BJJ teams such as the one based at the Warks Gym, however, the popularity of these franchised spaces, their corporate nature and their sportified, US inflected form of BJJ, meant that they represented a moral and dispositional contrast to their own values and style.

‘I heard a funny story the other day about [name of BJJ practitioner at franchised club]. He went
from blue to brown belt in two years. He barely competed at blue, only won one match, and didn’t compete at purple. For them it’s just a business. Pay your monthly direct debits, buy the t-shirts, wear their gi’s and you get belts.’ (‘GG’ 2018)

This fieldnote excerpt highlights the process of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) between the Warks Gym’s embodiment of a so-called original, legitimate, self-defence focus in its style of BJJ, and a franchised-business-model, sportified, competition based form. Whereas the average minimum length of time that an average BJJ practitioner takes to get from blue to brown belt would probably take around four to five years, the claim was that at this club practitioners were doing it in at least half that time. For a number of the coaches at the Warks Gym, this unsubstantiated claim simply reinforced their suspicions about one of their rivals. In their eyes, these franchises were largely corporate enterprises that essentially offered a mediatised, global BJJ culture to a naïve and eager public. In contrast, however, the Warks Gym coaches’ unique selling point to novice practitioners (who for a period of time after starting BJJ training were always susceptible to leaving or joining another club) was that they offered a legitimate, fighting focused style of BJJ that reflected a martial, real or old-school BJJ.

“Straight punches, kicks and then BJJ to finish them off. It’s an art for real fighting situations. I want to be surrounded by people who think like me. They might never be champions etc., but they have to compete. They might be hobbyists but still, it’s about having the right mind-set...”. For ‘C’ there’s a definite distinction between real fighters and true martial artists as opposed to what they term the flash, guard-puller, [franchised gym] sycophant. There appears to be a division between those who represent a ‘true’ ‘warrior’ ‘BJJ’ essence and those who, in their eyes, don’t.’

This fieldnote underscores my wider point regarding the distinction between BJJ gyms and teams within the West Midlands. The Warks Gym BJJ club was viewed as reflecting anti-corporate, earthy values, its practices and dispositions being seen as a reflection of this martial focus. Interestingly, what the excerpt also highlights is how a coaches’ own martial arts philosophy has a very real and tangible effect on the practices and those dispositions that are both embodied and acquired by club practitioners. In such a way, we find that the individual habitus acts as a moulding and shaping force that underpins and frames the institutional habitus of an organisation such as a BJJ club.
For clarity, habitus can be understood as ‘a capsule for a dispositional theory of action’ (Wacquant, 2014:5) that highlights how sedimented (embodied) social history acts as both a determining and constructing force, directing an individual or an institution’s tastes or preferences. Habitus, therefore, is ‘both the internalization of the conditions of existence and the practice-generating principle of social agents (Laberge & Sankoff, 1988 cited in Thorpe, 2011:112). Simply put, habitus is embodied history (Bourdieu, 1994) that is active in the form of dispositions and which interacts with the present to shape possibilities for the future.

Within the context of a BJJ institution, as in the example above, ‘C’ s own embodied history seeks to attract like-minded others into a specific and distinct form of social and corporeal practice. His preference is for people (practitioners) who share his values or at least for those that can be moulded by these values. This is in fact a very natural process as ‘the habitus tends to protect itself from crisis and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is preadapted’ (Bourdieu, 1990:61). Subsequently, those that do not fit, who are not suited, who have a different way of being, and ‘who do not adopt the requisite categories of perception, evaluation, and action’ (Wacquant, 2014:8) are effectively weeded out. Indeed, as ‘individuals drift away from settings that do not gratify their social libido and gravitate towards settings that do’ (Wacquant, 2014:8), what we are left with is a BJJ club whose habitus is both reflected in the types of martial artists it attracts, the habitus of the established practitioners themselves, the habitus of the coaches, and of the club itself. From this example, we therefore are able to see how spaces take on the shape of those who inhabit them (Ahmed, 2007).

It is important to note here, that although he was second-in-command within the club coaching hierarchy, ‘C’ was, however, the coach who was responsible for most of the teaching and who was also the main point of reference for all practitioners. The club’s only black-belt, coach ‘B’, although ostensibly the head coach, was in fact more of a figure-head whose lineage and black-belt status provided deep expertise and also credibility for the club. Subsequently, it was ‘C’ s way of being that became predominantly reflected in the philosophy of the club and its practices.

In terms of the specific type of dispositional nature embodied by ‘C’ and the Warks Gym, Brown & Jennings assert, ‘there are multiple core dispositions observable within the habitus
of any single given martial art’ (2013:34). Returning to what was outlined in Chapter 1, the so-called *combat efficacy-efficiency disposition* arguably best encapsulates ‘C’ s’ habitus as it is concerned with one’s ability to defend one’s self in a violent situation. Individuals like ‘C’, who display this combat efficacy-efficiency disposition have a past history of street-fighting and view martial arts through this prism. We see here then the direct relationship between a rejection of BJJ’s Americanised competition-sport focus and those who like ‘C’ embody a dispositional fighting focus.

In reality of course, individuals are more complex and do not so neatly fit into this or that bracket. Any formalistic rigidity as regards a theorisation of both individual and institutional habitus (doxa), risks overlooking this complexity. Martial art practitioners and institutions are in reality all marked by a range of dispositions, with some being more prominent at times than others. However, that being said, the Warks Gym and its associated discourse placed the institution firmly within the old-school fighting based camp. Subsequently, this type of club philosophy had direct implications for its practitioners.

‘From the banter that was taking place I gathered that ‘PO’ was no longer with his Polish girlfriend. I asked him what had happened and got into a conversation with him about his week over there. He said that he went to a BJJ club and because he was a foreign blue-belt everyone he rolled with really went for him, (a ‘one off’ attendee like ‘PO’ was not given the same amount of generosity as would be shown a fellow team member). As ‘PO’ was chatting about it, ‘C’ spoke up: “And so after she had taken you to meet all of her family, the future son-in-law goes and dumps her?” ‘PO’ looked really sheepish. “I know and I was drinking with her brothers and family in their house and over there that’s a really big thing.”. He said something along those lines. ‘C’ continued: “And you even missed the British Open for it didn’t you? Or used it as an excuse to get out of it!”’. ‘C’ said accusingly. ‘C’ laughed and ‘PO’ just smiled. I wonder how much truth there was in ‘C’ s’ accusation directed at ‘PO’ concerning him going to Poland just to get out of competing. ‘C’ had said something about this the previous week, that he suspected this was the case. And now ‘PO’s finished with her so soon after? Could it be?’

In this example we see a BJJ coach publicly air his feelings that one of the club’s practitioners was avoiding the fact that as a blue-belt he was going to have to start to address his nerves regarding competing. It was always made clear to novice white-belt practitioners who had started to train regularly and consistently that they were expected to compete for the
club at local and national competitions. ‘PO’ had not yet competed and the accusation was that he was trying to avoid fulfilling this informal agreement. It was even claimed that ‘PO’ had used a trip to Poland in order to avoid competing in the UK’s most important competition. Airing his doubts publicly on the mats in this way, ‘C’ used his position as coach in order to state what he believed had happened. By doing this, he made ‘PO’ and everyone else aware that fighting in competitions was a requirement that the club expected. Subsequently, ‘PO’ did eventually compete within around six months of this incident.

This form of public criticism or correction by the coaches would be common and was essentially used as a way of using disciplining practitioners and reinforcing those values most desired by the club.

‘As ‘TM’ and myself were stretching out on the mats I mentioned how after the injury I want to put in a good six months of solid training. ‘C’ heard and seemed to take umbrage at this, saying that it was the wrong attitude to have and how instead BJJ has to become part of your life. “You’ve got to have a ten year plan!”’. He went on to say that it’s no use being one of those, “I’ve got a comp in six weeks I want to get a medal. Or I want to train for six months straight so that I can get my next belt...bullshit! It’s got to become part of your life and you have to be thinking about your black-belt already. Not like ‘O...’”. He specifically used ‘O’ here as an example. It was all taken in a light-humoured way by ‘TM’ and myself but ‘C’ was serious and he meant it. He was standing tall holding his belt and gesticulating sometimes with his free left hand. There were others on the mats now and they were taking it all in.’

This fieldnote highlights ways in which the coach actively moulds the practitioners under his charge by instilling in them their own core values and martial dispositions (which also reflects the institutional habitus of the club). In the same way that at the beginning of chapter 3, the coach is captured chastising a practitioner who transgressed the rule of going to the toilet bare-feet, this type of public airing explicitly informs everyone about what their attitude should be and the standards and expectations that are placed upon them. In contrast to this form of disciplining, for those practitioners that were seen to be aligning themselves with the club’s philosophy, these disciplining actions could be replaced with moments of public praise and distinction.

‘C’ called out ‘KF’ out in front of the class to show to everyone how to perform the set up to the
triangle choke. “Beautiful!” He said as ‘KF’ smoothly positioned himself and then put the choke on. “...Like that!” He told us to go back into our pairs and try again, this time focusing on ‘KF’s’ transition. Since getting his blue-belt ‘KF’ is getting called out more and more to be used as the ‘dummy’. Gets me thinking - with this institutional habitus, training regularly, having the correct attitude, being seen to be taking on board what the coach is teaching and also those softer elements like challenging beliefs and attitudes. It feels like the coaches’ ethos places expectations, goals, values etc., on us and it is about trying to get as close to these as possible. Those students who are the closest to, or who are seen as striving towards these goals are looked upon more favourably. Who gets the closest? - Belt-ranking and hierarchy.’

Behind the process of moulding a distinctive club ethos, there inevitably lies a particular set of rewards. Ultimately, it is through the awarding of stripes and belts that a BJJ club makes explicit its required dispositions and skills. Although many of the BJJ practitioners whom I met seem to understate or play down their desire to achieve the next colour belt or the ultimate goal of black-belt, in reality however, for most regular practitioners such public and institutional displays served as a conative driving force. Aligning oneself with the dispositional nature of the coach and club, painfully rewiring one’s body, overcoming one’s fears in relation to competing, and being able to take sometimes caustic public criticism, BJJ’s hierarchical rewards helps practitioners to overcome these challenges.

We clearly get a sense from this discussion of the centrality of the coach. The BJJ coach is the gatekeeper to a very exclusive set of rewards. Within the context of a BJJ club, by submitting oneself to the guidance and the authority of the coach, BJJ practitioners gain the knowledge, skills, and status they increasingly come to recognise as having value. The judgements and opinions of a BJJ coach, therefore, has significance and carries a certain weight in terms of how practitioners negotiate these judgments and align themselves with the institutional values and crafted dispositions of the coach.

This section has attempted to lay out a broad picture of the type of BJJ clubs across the West Midlands. It has highlighted a perceived distinction between those worldwide franchised academies and their associated US inflected BJJ style, and those clubs and teams like the Warks Gym that claim to embody the original, Brazilian martial essence of the art. Following this, the chapter then analysed the ways in which the coaches’ own martial philosophy acts as a shaping and moulding force for the wider institution of the club. We find that, through
natural habitual processes, only those with similar dispositions gravitate towards and succeed within a specific type of institutional framework. In addition to this process we also find public demonstrations and examples of what is, and what is not, expected. This, in conjunction with an objective set of rewards in the form of stripes and belt colours, helps to further reinforce these expectations and dispositions.

From these insights into local BJJ spaces and practices, what we find overall is a sense of how authenticity and internalised ethos helps to guard against an excessive corporate or franchised structure. This claim to authenticity can therefore be understood as actively moulding a distinctive club culture that is seen to be the antithesis of the franchised club model. While offering practitioners a chance to experience a real and undiluted form of BJJ, this claim to authenticity places, however, pressures and expectations on practitioners which may punish a more playful, part-time, and more curious sense of BJJ engagement. Those practitioners who do not, or who cannot, align themselves with these expectations will naturally gravitate towards those BJJ spaces that are more suited to them, leaving a space and culture increasingly homogenous in relation to martial dispositionality.

Coach Authority & Its Implications

Having outlined the ways in which a BJJ club’s culture and its practitioners are intimately tied to the dispositionality of those who are responsible for the transference of these practices, the chapter will now explicitly examine the place of the coach in this transference of the art’s pedagogical framework. In doing so, we find that a legitimacy or natural authority born of their BJJ lineage and individual expertise, in conjunction with a set structured rewards facilitates a competitive, but also a convivial social environment for practitioners. Interestingly, the chapter highlights here how this form of authority and status has can have significant implications away from the spaces and practices of BJJ in that it can influence the everyday lives of BJJ practitioners. Furthermore, this section also highlights the ways in which this authority over practitioners is maintained between the coaches themselves.

As Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 both highlighted, in the martial art of Capoeira, Brazilian, or
more specifically, Afro-Brazilian heritage is a significant form of symbolic capital within Capoeira schools throughout the UK, Europe, and America (Delamont, Rosario & Stephens, 2013:104). The situation for BJJ differs in this respect. In the UK most BJJ black-belt coaches are, in fact, non-Brazilians who were themselves students of the Brazilian fighters who arrived in the UK in the 1990’s and early 2000’s. These British coaches’ claim to authenticity and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) comes, not because they are Brazilian, but rather because of their lineage to the Brazilian BJJ fighters who bestowed upon them a visible recognition of an elite BJJ corporeality - their black-belt. This is what Bourdieu, building on the capitals approach, would have understood as modernity’s ability to credentialise expertise and status via the bestowal of formal authentication in a manner akin to the medieval practice of knighting the chivalric orders.

There were times on the mats when, as he was breaking down and explaining a move, the Warks Gym’s ‘white’ British Brummie head coach ‘B’ would relay often humorous stories about his own coach who is a renowned Brazilian multiple BJJ world champion. Through highlighting his coaches’ unique variations on the moves being taught, these conceptual and verbal linkages to his Brazilian teacher would highlight his own authenticity and legitimise his authority through this lineage. Indeed, this authority directly stemmed from his Brazilian coaches’ lineage and from their own superior knowledge concerning the mores and techniques of BJJ.

As Delamont highlights in relation to authority within a culture of Capoeira, ‘authority is performed, emblazoned, embodied, and even, on occasions explicitly announced as a fact’ (2006:165). Importantly, coach authority is exercised through bodily performances where they demonstrate their superior skills. This physical superiority that both Capoeira teachers and BJJ coaches have over their students is therefore the ultimate source of their authority (Delamont, 2006). Apart from acting as the basis of the pedagogical framework, the necessity of this physical capital could be brought into sharp focus by the presence of a high ranked, over-zealous newcomer and the challenges that this raised in terms of coach authority, status, and also practitioner safety.

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39 A Brummie is a colloquial term for someone who was born in or is a resident of the city of Birmingham.
‘There was a new guy at the nogi class that I’d never seen before. ‘V’ said that he was a purple-belt from a gym in Birmingham. He had broken nose and cauliflower ears. As soon as ‘D’ saw him he whispered: “He looks a bit handy.”. In sparring the guy was really going for it with ‘Y’ and ‘Z’. He looked like he was being way too competitive. I could tell that ‘C’ had been watching what was going on as he rolled with me, and so at the end of our roll he called this guy out to spar. ‘D’ and myself paired up but we just watched. ‘C’ ended up submitting him twice. Afterwards, ‘C’ just sat and chatted with him for the remainder of the class. I could sense some unease from ‘Y’ who said afterwards that this guy had a bit of a reputation.’

Through this fieldnote we see how the physical capital of a BJJ coach underpins his authority. In this example we find that a ranked fighter from another club has turned up and begins to dominate some of the club’s senior practitioners. This in itself is not necessarily a problem, however. Rather, it was the manner in which this fighter was doing it that was the issue. This fighter represented a challenge to ‘C’s’ authority as he was the senior coach and the senior practitioner present. By taking up this fighter’s implicit challenge and then subsequently physically dominating him, ‘C’s’ authority was explicitly announced as a fact and was reinforced in the eyes of his own practitioners and teammates. Moreover, as this authority was exercised over a fighter from another club, it therefore also served to highlight ‘C’s’ and by extension the Warks Gym’s status and credibility within a wider regional BJJ network. In contrast, had ‘C’ lost this challenge then both his and the gym’s credibility would have suffered. Over time, had this not been rectified, this loss of status could have possibly damaged both the institutional authority and natural authority that ‘C’ embodied.

These explicit challenges to a BJJ coach’s authority could also arise from within the club itself. Perceived aggression, practitioners who were maybe too verbose and loud, or who made sexist or racist remarks which were disguised as banter (Burdsey, 2011) also presented certain challenges. Indeed, such practitioners not only represented a challenge to the explicit authority of the coach, but also to the wider convivial ambience of the mats and wider gym space. On one particular occasion during the class warm-up, when catching up with teammates, an incident occurred that highlights both the importance of coach authority and the ways in which this authority is exercised within these settings.

The incident occurred at the start of the class just as we were gently jogging around the edge of the mats. A man in his late thirties, a regular at the club and who ‘C’ told me a few weeks
earlier was near to getting his blue-belt, turned around and jokingly said to someone who had accidentally clipped his heels: “Do that again and I’ll give you a Jap-slap!” . From the visible reactions of those practitioners who heard, it seemed as though the comment and incident was taken as just acceptable banter. However, the coach, who at that point was standing in the centre of the mats directing the form and flow, directly called this man out of the warm-up circle and ushered him towards the edge of the mats next to the exit. As the jogging circle rotated around the mats and as I again came into earshot, I heard the practitioner defensively say: “But there aren’t any Japanese here!” . Soon after this, visibly embarrassed, the man rejoined the warm-up. After the class had finished, when I asked the coach about what had happened he informed me that “…there’s previous!”.

Interestingly, despite being on the verge of getting his blue-belt, this man actually left the club within a short time of this incident occurring. While the racist nature of the term Jap-slap is debateable, such terminology does, however, conjure up a lazy cultural stereotype of karate chopping Japanese fighters. The fact that the practitioner did not think the term was offensive because no Japanese person actually heard it, highlights its lazy stereotypical nature more so than its innocence.

Importantly, this incident once more highlights how coach authority is exercised. And it also points to how wider values serve to inform the ethos of the club and the ways in which these values are implemented. Coach authority is clearly shown here as being critical for the basis and maintenance of inclusive and convivial relations between practitioners. Once again, the coach’s public airing of issues and/or individuals makes a clear statement to all those present (and through the practitioner grapevine, even to those who are physically absent) about what is expected and, critically, what is not permitted. In this case, the coach used his authority to identify and challenge a perceived racist incident. By making explicit the club’s inclusive ethos, we subsequently find that this practitioner’s dispositionality meant that he felt unsuited to continuing his training at this particular BJJ site. In this way, the individual was made aware of the coaches’ and club’s values and expectations and chose to leave rather than submit himself to this disciplining.

As we move away from its explicit disciplining nature and instead look towards those nuanced and subtle ways in which this natural authority affects practitioners, it is useful to
think about the potential implications of this type of authority and status. The authority of a BJJ coach obviously extends across the physical spaces to also include the conceptual spaces of the club. Therefore, coach authority can be understood as having an impact on the BJJ careers of club practitioners. However, through this same process we also find that this authority or influence can also extend into areas of the practitioners’ lives outside of this traditional BJJ catchment area.

‘It dawned on me that out of fourteen attendees on the mats, six were either vegetarian or vegan. I asked ‘Z’ if he had he been influenced by ‘C’ and the club. “Well I was vegetarian beforehand, but it’s definitely kept me on track. I also asked ‘AL’ and he said yes and then spoke about how it’s become clear for him that its healthier and more ethical. I then asked ‘H’: “No. No I’m not.”. He said before nodding towards ‘C’ and smiling cheekily. “Give it another year though!”’

The fieldnote points to how the symbolic and institutional authority that is embodied in a BJJ coach can potentially proactively shape and influence practitioners in their everyday lives away from the spaces of BJJ. In this example, we find that ‘C’s influence within the club enabled him to disseminate his own vegan and animal welfare values among club members. This was a process that would begin with him questioning and challenging practitioners beliefs and taken-for-granted views on animal welfare and the consumption of meat products as practitioners began to regularly train at the club. Gradually, over time this questioning, informing, and challenging had the effect of influencing a significant portion of practitioners to either cut down or to give up animal food products entirely. We also get a sense from this fieldnote of how certain practitioners such as ‘H’ are aware of the coach’s influence in this respect and the effect that time and exposure to the coaches’ philosophy can potentially have on them.

‘…This leads me to ponder just how many attendees have been influenced by the coaches’ ideas on ethics/nutrition/veganism? From what I can tell, it seems like there’s a close circle around the club – the more you train and become a regular, the closer you are to this circle and the coaches. The more you talk and build a relationship with them, then you are more likely to be influenced by them and their ideas. They are mentors in this sense. They have the knowledge and skills that you are trying to gain and so if you become one of the regulars (and have the type of character they like) you are going to converse and possibly be influenced by them in ways other than just strictly BJJ related.’
The points made in this fieldnote allow us to think about the broader implications and possibilities that surround BJJ coach authority. Given that we find that the authority embodied in the BJJ coach can affect significant changes in the lives of their students away from the practice of BJJ, this therefore indicates a potential to positively affect people’s everyday lives. This type of potentiality echoes other work that was discussed in Chapter 1 (Vilja et al., 2012; McCaughey, 1997; Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998), that found that those martial art spaces that were underpinned by a feminist ethos helped women to challenge essentialised gender notions that positioned women as weak and men as strong. Without a proactively feminist martial art coach and club ethos, while women martial artists did in fact challenge normative gender stereotypes, any such challenges remained strictly on the individual level. These women did not question wider normative understandings and saw themselves instead as different to and not like other women. These findings suggest then that women’s physical strength, therefore, does not necessarily result in the development of a feminist consciousness. Physical feminism (Roth & Basow, 2004) necessitates that physical development needs to be accompanied by the raising of a feminist consciousness if it has any chance of dismantling notions of patriarchy and constructing a feminist habitus within female martial artists.

In light of these findings, it would appear that a strong ethical and inclusive ethos can, in fact, be proactively engendered in such spaces. Supported by the example of the adoption of dietary habits by BJJ students, tendencies suggest that the authority that is imbued in a BJJ coach can potentially influence their students to adopt changes to their dietary habits and challenge ethical values. Therefore, if martial art spaces that are underpinned by a feminist pedagogy can challenge women’s gendered understanding of themselves and other women, then such influence and authority can also be utilised in the service of other objectives. Might such authority therefore help to actually challenge a practitioner’s racism or sexism for example? A coach who actively implements progressive values, as well as one who authoritatively reacts to any unconvivial moments, might, in light of the evidence, help to facilitate progressive changes in the habitus of the students under their charge.

To conclude this exploration of BJJ coach authority and its sociologically significant implications, I will briefly touch upon how inter-coach authority is managed and maintained in the presence of novice practitioners under their charge. One particular incident provides an
example of this managing. It also opens up a space to briefly examine a popular discourse or myth that relates to this chapter’s discussions surrounding BJJ’s official narrative, and also the previous chapter’s highlighting of antithetical dispositions and racialised bodies in BJJ.

‘One of the coaches contradicted another coach when performing and displaying a specific move in a nogi session. We were all sitting on the mats watching coach ‘N’ while ‘C’ was off the mats talking to someone. “Obviously for this you need technique, but being a fucking beast helps!”. Said ‘N’ (brown belt BJJ coach, English amateur MMA champion and soon to turn pro MMA fighter). Given that we are regularly reminded to forget about strength, I then asked: “So you’re saying strength is important then, not just technique?”’. ‘N’ smiled and swayed his head slightly, seemingly hesitating in his response. “Umm, well let’s say two fighters have equal level technique, who’s going to win the stronger or the weaker? Especially in nogi, you don’t have a gi to play with, strength helps.”. Suddenly ‘C’ appeared on the mats and said: “Obviously at the higher levels where fighters have good technique, strength becomes a factor but even then just 1% extra technique will outweigh strength.”. As he spoke he looked to ‘N’. I felt the look was a kind of ‘think about what you’re saying to them’. “...Yeah technique is the most important...”. Came the reply from ‘N’. I cannot recall exactly what then was said but I remember feeling as though it was a way of limiting any damage that may have been done by ‘N’s comment. White belts are always told to forget strength and that technique outweighs strength in BJJ, so for another coach to contradict this to a group of novices was something that had to be resolved and resolved visibly in front of them.’

This fieldnote highlights the subtle ways in which coaches can smooth-over any contradictions that a novice practitioner may have noticed during a class. The work here between the two coaches maintains a united front from which they can relay an important aspect of BJJ’s corporeality to impressionable newcomers. This work seeks to maintain the legitimacy of their focus on the dispositional ideal of technicality over strength. It also reveals the horizontal nature of the authority across the coaching staff and the work involved in its maintenance. Furthermore, my own eagerness to detect and then to question a perceived contradiction between the coaches highlights the importance of this united front in the face of practitioners who are probing for insights and justifications.

The coaches’ own vying for distinction from the club’s black-belt head coach, B’, meant that there was a certain competitiveness and jockeying for position between the three other non-black-belt coaches; ‘C’, ‘N’ and, ‘Y’. Although ‘C’ was, throughout most of the fieldwork,
the second in-command, this could, and did, change according to these coaches own BJJ progression and their development in the eyes of B’. Therefore, the appearance of this united front also served as a veneer, to mask the rivalries between themselves, and to ensure there could be no traversing this authority by practitioners by opting for this or that coach, depending on their teaching style, or in this case, their preferred BJJ dispositional focus.

This section of the chapter has attempted to convey the features of structure, ethos and authority concerning local BJJ spaces in the West Midlands. Firstly, it highlighted the significance of lineage and how it can be used to reinforce Brazilian institutional authority within UK settings. Following this, the chapter then sketched the contours of local BJJ clubs and the ways in which perceived differences in values and ethos serves to define and shape a club’s sense of self. The dispositionality of the coach was highlighted as being critical to these processes. Using public criticism, but also public praise, as well as structured rewards, practitioners are moulded through, and into, these crafted dispositions. Next, this section explicitly examined coach authority in a culture of BJJ and highlighted the differences and similarities with Capoeira. Coach authority and status was cited as critical in the maintenance of a safe and convivial environment. Furthermore, the section also briefly explored the potentiality of this type of authority in relation to its ability to proactively influence the lives of BJJ practitioners away from BJJ contextualised settings. It then concluded by using a specific example of how authority is managed between and among BJJ coaches. Moving away from a broad institutional focus, the next section of the chapter will now explore individual practitioner embodiment and how these localised features of embodiment can be understood as part of a wider global BJJ Canopy.

Local Practitioners, Global Space

Introduction

This section attempts to outline the ways in which a global BJJ culture influences local BJJ practitioner embodiment. From those ‘moments of co-presence’ (Urry, 2002:261), to foods, clothing styles, deportment, and even bodily callusing, we come to see how a wider BJJ canopy informs and defines local forms of embodiment. Finally, the chapter then explores and examines the relationship between the medicinal plant of cannabis and a global, and local
culture of BJJ. Not only does this part of the chapter reveal an interesting and sociologically informative aspect of BJJ culture, but it also highlights once more those global, cosmopolitanised processes and flows of cultural exchange that lie at the heart of BJJ’s historic development and its contemporary localised forms.

Figure 5: A BJJ competition in the West Midlands.

‘There was a snaking queue outside the ice-rink. Lots of people were already in their gi’s carrying holdalls. I got chatting to a guy next to me who’d come down from near Newcastle (we’d taken the car park lift down together). I remember the security guard who searched all the bags at the entrance joking how she’d never seen so many beards or flip-flops before. There were quite a few Russians who’d come over (I fought a Russian guy who beat me on points). As usual there were lots of Brazilians and international competitors. It was all very professional and slick. Banners, advertising hoardings, and a falafel stand which also sold those acai berry smoothies. Quite a few gi and clothing stands too, one just sold hemp gi’s...’

This fieldnote captures my first experience of entering the UK’s and one of Europe’s most important and largest BJJ gi competitions which for the second year running had been staged in an ice-rink stadium in Coventry’s city centre. Such moments of co-presence take shape in the form of competitions like this or BJJ seminars, for example, that might be hosted by an internationally recognised BJJ fighter or coach. Along with the flows of social media, they are spaces of shared understandings that act as channels for the globalised flow and exchange of information, ideas, trends, and practices. In terms of BJJ’s globalised contemporary form,
such processes are essential for this exchange. From specific techniques and styles to apparel and terminology, localised BJJ cultures are part of an international culture which introduces trends and features that cut across international boundaries.

Thinking about the corporate and cosmopolitan nature of a global BJJ culture that the fieldnote conveys, we find connections with other sociological works that are focused on multiculture and cosmopolitanism. For example, Rhys-Taylor (2014:51) uses the mango to highlight ‘the fruit’s embodiment of colonial routes, collisions, slavery, and movements’ and the cosmopolitan, intertwined histories, biographical memories and multi-sensory emotions that are attached to a mango. Similarly, acai, the Amazonian fruit turned dessert that is now widely associated with BJJ, can also be seen as creating possibilities for intercultural exchange, dialogue, and translation. Indeed, from a staple fruit of indigenous Brazilians in the Amazon region to a product heralded and promoted by sections of the Gracie family to a now sought after, highly priced so-called ‘superfood’ sold at BJJ competitions and purchased online by local BJJ practitioners, we again see at work those global cosmopolitan networks that facilitate these forms of cultural exchange and which are underpinned by capitalism’s thirst for new markets.

Concerning the embodiment of BJJ practitioners, like boxers, BJJ fighters ‘relish the fact that they share membership in the same guild [that] they are different from other people…they are fighters’ (Wacquant, 2004:68). BJJ practitioners express it by proudly wearing BJJ trademarked attire such as hoodies, t-shirts and jackets that bear the insignia of their trade (Wacquant, 2004). And just as the snowboarding body is a symbol of status, a system of social marking and a site of distinction (Thorpe, 2011:109), so too is the BJJ body.

‘S’ entered the reception area looking like the archetypal BJJ player: hipsterfied and innocuous. His long beard, cropped hair, and ears stood out. He was wearing a [BJJ trademarked] hoodie with his

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40 The Gracie Diet is particular diet that prioritises certain vegetables and fruits such as acai and also limits the consumption of specific animal products. While there are BJJ practitioners who follow these dietary teachings, none of the Warks Gym attendees that I spoke to mentioned this diet as a factor for the changes in their dietary philosophy and practices, or, in fact, mentioned the diet at all. This is not to deny that it could have been an influencing factor in practitioner dietary choices. Once more however, it does serve to highlight the ongoing influence that members of the Gracie clan have over present day BJJ culture.
white gi bottoms. We greeted each other and touched fists. I noticed his ears, especially his right. “It looks like a foetus!” I said. He laughed. “I know. This one keeps swelling up and then going down. Bloody hurts!”. As I stood there I thought that I could smell something and just as I was thinking, ‘S’ smiled: “On the walk here.”. He said referring to him having a spliff on his way to the gym.’

Through this fieldnote, we get a visual impression of what can be viewed as a common BJJ look that has been inscribed into and adopted by many BJJ practitioners. The type of loose, trademarked attire, varying lengths of facial hair and the proud display of bodily callusing (Spencer, 2012), all highlight an individual’s cultural commitment to their chosen field of sport. ‘S’s’ beard and cauliflower ears are visual demonstrations of those long-lasting dispositions of the body that are a mark of a BJJ habitus. Apart from the chosen aesthetic quality, the connection between beards and BJJ potentially stems from a practical purpose. Essentially, the hair protects the skin from the abrasions that can occur when tightly pressed against or being rubbed by another body. In relation to ears, just as with rugby players whose grappling inside the scrum disfigures their ears, so too the BJJ practitioner’s ears over time mangle, compress, and swell, resulting what in ‘S’s’ case looked like a baby curled up inside the womb. “It’s funny how some people have months off but come back and their ears are worse than before.” ‘C’s’ words point to how the distinction and symbolic capital associated with cauliflower ears in a BJJ culture can, in some cases, even make practitioners try to cheat their way to the desired look by compressing and thereby disfiguring their ears themselves.

It is clear that social groups like BJJ practitioners ‘distinguish themselves from their competitors by adopting certain bodily gestures, speech and deportment that are embodied tastes’ (Thorpe, 2011:117). This form of cultural coding illustrates how practitioners employ an array of embodied and bodily practice to distinguish themselves from non-practitioners, marginal participants, and each other. Clothing, especially, constitutes an important symbolic marker of group membership in both the BJJ and other sport communities. For snowboarders for example, ‘[b]y aligning themselves with the styles of the historical and contemporary underclass, the mostly white and privileged snowboarders attempted to authenticate their claim to being marginal, deviant, and poor and, most importantly, different from the upper class skier’ (Thorpe, 2011:124). For BJJ practitioners, the hoodies, loose bottoms, facial hair, and for some, the use of cannabis, echo with similarities to the beach and surf culture of Rio de Janeiro and the surf and skateboarding culture of California.
The use and association of the *shaka* with BJJ culture also mirrors these traits. The shaka is a hand sign that consists of extending the thumb and smallest finger while holding the three middle fingers curled and gesturing in salutation while presenting the front or back of the hand (the hand may be rotated back and forth for emphasis). The shaka sign was adopted from surf culture and is actually a hand gesture of Hawaiian origins. Mostly, people know it as a gesture that signifies being laid back and relaxed. It is a positive gesture which is often translated as hang-loose. On any group photo of BJJ practitioners the shaka will often be displayed by some members of the group.

BJJ practitioners and martial artists generally also embody less visible aspects of style such as language. The use of the term “*Oss!*”. Pronounced “*Ossu!*”. Which has Japanese military roots and which roughly translates as a kind of battle cry or acknowledgment of respect, is also used within BJJ culture. Rarely heard during the fieldwork however, the only time it was captured was during a spar between two coaches when another lower ranked practitioner shouted “*Oss!*”. As one of the fighters expertly escaped his opponent’s guard.

From this brief exploration and discussion we get a sense of the interconnectedness of a globalised BJJ culture that exists in localised spaces and practices. We subsequently find a web of stylised authority and authenticity that trades on paradoxical senses of marginality and laid back cultural markers, even when, as we’ve seen in other sections, the sport can be prone to quite hierarchical, highly disciplined, and restrictive senses of the proper way. We also see how a consumer web has emerged, involving select branded clothing etc., necessitating in some sense a whole host of consumer activity to, ironically, maintain the laid back, hang-loose and non-mainstream appearance and ethos.

BJJ’s cosmopolitan and hybrid roots, therefore, can be understood as continuing to actively contextualise and influence contemporary BJJ cultural form. We get a sense then of how a globalised BJJ canopy sketches the outlines of a wider, global BJJ culture, one that informs local practitioners’ experiences and ways of being. Local BJJ practitioners in the West Midlands are, therefore, shown to be an active part of a wider BJJ community in which styles, techniques, forms of embodiment and philosophies, are shaped and shared across globally networked pathways of relations.
BJJ & Cannabis

As has already been detailed in this chapter, contemporary shifts in BJJ symbolic and institutional power have effected changes to the hard elements of the sport such as rules and developments in techniques. This has led to a perceived divide between those who are unperturbed, or even favour this *North-Americanization of BJJ*, and those who seek to retain an original self-defence fighting focus. In addition, these shifts in the balance of power from Brazil to the US have also affected the soft elements of the art. UK BJJ practitioners are increasingly being shaped by a U.S inflected BJJ culture which can be seen as part of a west coast, Californian surf and skateboarding lifestyle scene in which the use of cannabis is commonplace and unremarkable. The relationship between cannabis and the MACS of BJJ is part of the wider Anglicization debate (Drysdale, 2020), which divides opinion. As someone familiar with recreational cannabis use who has participated in a number of different sports and martial arts, I have found that the use of cannabis within BJJ extends beyond just individual use by practitioners. Indeed, cannabis can be seen as increasingly part of the cultural fabric of the sport itself.

‘Got speaking to SH after asking him where he got his gi from. He had a Bob Marley gi on! On the back of the top was that image of Bob Marley as he flicks his dreadlocks back. The gi was white with red, gold, and green. “When we went over for the NAGA (North American Grappling Association) championship, they were selling them at the stalls there. It’s made of Hemp. I got another one when we went over to one of the ‘High Roller’ comps as well…it was top mate!”. I asked did he compete. “Nah. Just watched...we were mashed!’

In this fieldnote we find a ‘white’ British practitioner from the Warks Gym wearing a hemp gi emblazoned with Bob Marley’s image and the Rastafarian colours that he bought at a major BJJ championship in California. ‘SH’ also mentions that he has another similar gi that he bought at another US BJJ competition. In the *High Roller* competitions that take place in US states that have legalised cannabis, BJJ fighters smoke weed together on the mats before they fight. The winner of each competition category wins a pound of weed. The organiser of these competitions and the head of the BJJ team associated with these competitions, is a prominent cannabis advocate within BJJ culture. In fact, despite the legal status of cannabis in the UK, this particular Californian based BJJ team has now opened a franchise in London. While the use of the plant will obviously be restricted by UK laws, the presence of a
franchise that is so associated with cannabis highlights, if not the popularity of cannabis in UK BJJ circles, then at least its widespread acceptance and perceived normality.

Indeed, “I think there’s no sport in the world that promotes smoking weed more than BJJ.” (Glover, 2018). Popular BJJ websites coverage of cannabis is almost always positive in its focus on the potentialities for BJJ practitioners who use it.

In BJJ you can literally do whatever you want so its normal that such a creative endeavour gets connected to Marijuana. Weed sharpens your focus like nothing else. It helps your mind just work on the issues each and every roll presents right there at that moment. Furthermore, it opens up new avenues of problem solving. Weed helps your mind get into that ‘flow’ zone where your rolls are seamless and just keep on going. It is Jiu Jitsu at its finest. (Dzabirski, 2018).

Numerous elite level BJJ fighters also publicly proclaim their recreational use of the plant, arguing that it is possible to be a functional athlete and smoke weed (Gracie, 2018). Despite the obvious issues involved with using any psychoactive substance, the use of cannabis outside of those US states and countries where it is legal has obvious criminal implications. Furthermore, the widespread use of cannabis in BJJ can also potentially act as deterrent to younger potential practitioners whose parents might be put off allowing them to get involved in a martial art so closely connected to cannabis use. Regardless of these issues, however, the reality is that the use of cannabis by BJJ practitioners is widespread. The reasons for its use manifold. Indeed, dried cannabis or cannabis oil, might be used by practitioners to alleviate pain associated with injuries or arthritis. Or for practitioners like ‘TM’, to overcome their nerves in relation to competing.

‘My penultimate roll was with ‘TM’ who spoke about his anxiety issues and how cannabis oil has definitely helped him. “The night before the competition I actually slept. I’d have been up all night worrying before, but not this time...” (2017).

For many BJJ practitioners the use of cannabis and its derivatives can be understood as medicinal. In treating injuries or competition nerves, the dried herb and, especially, the oil was commonly used by practitioners. Indeed, the sharing of cannabis oil, especially the non-psychoactive derivative; CBD oil, by practitioners would commonly take place in the
changing room before or after training. Despite this medicinal use however, in reality, the use of cannabis by practitioners could predominantly be viewed as recreational or simply just for pleasure.

‘I found out that ‘Z’ smokes weed – he has a spliff every Saturday morning before training. He spoke about his time working as a secondary school teacher in Bermuda, when at lunchtimes he’d sometimes go home and have a spliff, and then return. “Right then!” He said, acting like a very serious teacher. “We’re going to spend the afternoon on poetry.” We all had a laugh and spoke about our own experiences of weed. There seems to be a very strong link between weed and some practitioners. Think about what ‘RR’ said when you found out that she trains BJJ: “I aint into all that smoking beforehand though!”’

In this fieldnote recorded at the early stages of the fieldwork, one practitioner ‘Z’ reminisced about his use of cannabis as a school teacher. This then prompted other practitioners, including myself, to share humorous stories and personal experiences relating to our use of cannabis. As I was later writing up this incident recorded in the fieldnote, I recalled a comment by a university researcher that first highlighted for me something that I was increasingly becoming conscious of as I spent time in and amongst BJJ practitioners. Indeed, this comment was the first ever clue for me that there was a relationship between BJJ and cannabis use. It came just before I began the immersive fieldwork as I was attending a sociology conference. After informally explaining my research to a group of post-doctoral researchers, one woman ‘RR’ who had informed me that she trained in BJJ, aired her feelings regarding the amount of smoking that would take place at the gym she trained at in the East Midlands. For her, participating in the pre-training smoking that would regularly take place left her too disorientated to actually enjoy the class. Up to then I had not been aware that there was this connection between the art and the plant. Up until then, for me, cannabis use by BJJ practitioners simply corresponded to the probability of cannabis being used across society in general.

The first time that I actually captured cannabis use in the spaces of my own ethnography was captured in the following fieldnote.

‘In one of the water breaks I saw two of the regular nogi attendees (‘white’ males in their early 30’s) going outside of the gym. On their return they were whispering something of which all I could make
out was. “You’ve just got to go with it...”. I suspected what they’d been up to but it wasn’t until in the changing room after the session when I was alone with them that I found out what had transpired. “So what are you up to for the rest of the day?”. One of them asked me. I replied that I was going to spend the afternoon just relaxing at home. Immediately, the other smiled and said. “That’s what we’ve been doing in the break.”. At first I was unsure what they meant, but from their red eyes and manner I guessed. “What, so you’ve had a spiff outside?”. I asked. They both laughed at first and then one calmed and said seriously. “It’s meant to help you get in the flow aint it?”. I had been aware that a famous BJJ champion Eddie Bravo and his BJJ school were known for their use of cannabis while training and their assertion that it helps to get into ‘the flow’ when sparring...

This fieldnote highlights not only the use of the cannabis by local BJJ practitioners, but also the processes involved in the act of consuming cannabis itself. The work of Howard Becker (1953) and his iconic study of how marijuana users learn to get high is of relevance here. The practitioner’s comment that. “It’s meant to get you in the flow aint it?”. Highlights the learning and the seeking to figure out and to understand the plant’s effects within a specific social context. This statement by the practitioner does seem to indicate, therefore, that seeing and understanding a given kind of behaviour is the result of a sequence of social experiences during which a person acquires a conception of the meaning of that behaviour and which subsequently makes the activity desirable (Becker, 1953).

What I mean by this is that these practitioners were learning, within a strictly BJJ context, ‘the proper way to smoke and experience the drug’ (1953:239). Through their secretive tones, they were helping each other to feel and interpret new aspects of the experience in order to achieve a new conceptual organisation of their world - the mat space. These practitioners were learning to get high, or, more precisely, they were learning to get high within the context of the BJJ mats. They were learning the proper way to smoke and experience the drug, in order to achieve a state referred to in BJJ as the flow (Nakamura & Csikszent, 2009).

Indeed, Becker highlights how an individual will be able to use marihuana for pleasure only when he or she learns to smoke it in a way that will produce real effects, learns to recognize the effects and learns to connect them with drug use, and also learns to enjoy the sensations they perceive. Rather than cannabis use, or any drug use for that matter, being tied to an antecedent, deviant predisposition in the individual, Becker found,
…that the presence of a given kind of behaviour is the result of a sequence of social
experiences during which the person acquires a conception of the meaning of the behaviour,
and perceptions and judgments of objects and situations, all of which make the activity
possible and desirable (1953:235).

Or in other words, the motivation or disposition to engage in smoking cannabis is built up in
and through learning to engage in it. This disposition does not antedate this learning process.
In relation to cannabis use in BJJ, the implications of these findings suggests that cannabis’
popularity within a culture of BJJ is not because it attracts those people who already have a
predisposition to smoking weed. Rather, it is because once these practitioners become
socialised within a BJJ culture that has a close relationship with cannabis, these practitioners
learn to make this connection between the plant, its effects, and its relationship to aspects of
BJJ’s corporeality and wider culture. For those two practitioners in the Warks Gym changing
room, they must have already arrived at the point of willingness to try the plant having
already been familiarised with its use and popularity within BJJ. These practitioners, in their
hushed tones, were actually trying to learn the nuances and recognise the signs of being high
within a BJJ context. These practitioners’ use of cannabis emphasizes the important role of
interaction with other users in acquiring the concepts that make this awareness or knowledge
of the plant’s effects possible.

Indeed, these practitioners were attempting to use cannabis in order to enter what is
commonly referred to as the flow. The concept of flow refers to those experiences in which
individuals are fully involved in the present moment, where they are intrinsically motivated
through autotelic activity and where their experiences seamlessly unfold from moment to
moment as they enter a subjective state (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Loss of
reflective self-consciousness and a distortion of temporal experience mark this flow state.
Given this perceived psychological reality, we can subsequently come to understand the
connection between the flow and the effects of cannabis. Inference between the
phenomenology of the complete absorption in the challenges at hand and the psychoactive
effects of cannabis can easily be drawn. The intercorporeality that is at the heart of BJJ and
the associated phenomenological melding between an inner representation and an outer world
helps then to conceptualise this flow state and also allows us to mark a strong relationship
between a BJJ global culture and cannabis.
Conclusion

This chapter has charted the history of BJJ, its development, worldwide spread, and its relationship to forms of cosmopolitanism. It highlighted the ongoing shifts in bases of institutional and symbolic power and how these changes reflect the increasing North-Americanisation of the art. It mapped how such processes help to mould a specific identity for local BJJ clubs and also situated the role of the coach in the shaping of this identity. The BJJ coach has been shown to act as the vessel through which the institutional authority and dispositions are embodied and relayed, and as being critical in the maintenance of safe and convivial relations between practitioners. A zero tolerance policy to perceived acts of intolerance was found to publicly set and define the boundaries of acceptable and desired behaviour. Furthermore, the coach’s natural authority can be understood as having the power to affect the lives of BJJ practitioners in ways that are outside of the conventional pedagogical remit of their influence and authority. In addition to this, the chapter has also mapped the connections and the relationships between local practitioners and BJJ’s global networks of cultural flow. The significant relationship between medicinal and recreational cannabis use by BJJ practitioners can be understood as in some sense arising out of broader processes of globalisation and consumerism.

Subsequently, local BJJ practitioners were shown to be active members of a global community that is defined through its dispositions, clothes, mannerisms, and significantly, their relationship to this increasingly corporatized American cannabis culture. BJJ, therefore, offers an acute site of distinction and cultural status for its practitioners. In this way, BJJ can be viewed as more than just a martial practice. For its practitioners and for those who have a sociological interest in this artform, BJJ can be understood as offering an identity and a culture that embodies a syncretism, cosmopolitanism, and a dispositional martial bearing that resonates with this contemporary, neoliberal, cultural moment (James 2015a; Stevens 2014).
Thesis Conclusion - Situating difference, conviviality, cosmopolitanism, and corporeality in a culture of BJJ.

Through this thesis I have been able to convey a deep understanding of BJJ’s essential intercorporeality by becoming a BJJ practitioner and drawing on my experiences and knowledge. The chapter ‘On the Mats’ brought into focus BJJ’s corporeal framework and the issues that it presents for novice practitioners. The effacing of personal space through prolonged and intimate touch with diverse strangers and friends was shown to reconfigure affective reactions to the presence of the Other. Through a gradual acclimatisation, BJJ practitioners were shown to lose their ingrained affectual responses and begin a process that crafts a sophisticated ease of being in the intimate presence of an Other body.

‘On the Mats’ was also able to highlight the particular challenges that gender difference presents in relation to this physical intimacy. Importantly, the chapter here was able to not only examine the bodily responses to the intimate presence of a gendered body, but, importantly, it also outlined the ways in which the carnal realities of mixed-sex training environments acts back on practitioners. This interplay was shown to mould not only better training partners, but also as initiating a reflexive process that can reconceptualise men’s understandings of female martial artists and women more generally. These contextualised processes can, therefore, be understood as affording possibilities and of creating opportunities for the deconstruction of men’s preconceived, patriarchally infused notions of gender difference.

The voices of female BJJ practitioners also captured the specific issues that women can face in trying to find a martial art space in which they feel welcome and safe. “It’s really good here!” ‘K’s’ words highlight an important point with regards to any generalisation to other BJJ spaces; one cannot assume or draw the conclusion that inclusivity and conviviality are universal traits that can be associated with all BJJ spaces.

Significantly, ‘On the Mats’ was also able to identify a relationship between BJJ’s intercorporeality, the inherent danger in BJJ’s techniques and a form of mutual care and
consideration for mat partners and teammates. In conjunction with the effacing of personal space, which in turn reveals an essential intercorporeality, the thesis was able to show how BJJ’s corporeality effects a certain sense of community and a mat-based conviviality. Once more however, any generalisation or assumption that there is a natural, unbroken thread from BJJ’s intercorporeality to this type of convivial ambience, needs to be tempered.

Reflecting on this point, what is apparent is that BJJ’s corporeal framework; its tactility, its intercorporeality, and the danger of its techniques, can be viewed as naturally affording this sense of community. In this way, BJJ can be seen as providing or affording an opportunity to build on the communal nature of its pedagogy and essential intercorporeality, in order to mould a communality that is marked by mutual care and a sense of conviviality. However, just as with the construction of inclusive, mixed-sex training environments, rather than this mutual care being a naturally occurring phenomenon, what we find is the importance of other factors in the construction.

In conjunction with BJJ’s corporeal framework, what appears critical is the very nature of the spaces themselves - their physical, communal, bodily, and interactional affordances. These features can be understood as providing the foundation for the emergence of these relations (Jones et al, 2015). Most importantly though, the findings suggest that without the guidance and authority of a coach, this atmosphere of inclusivity and communality would not emerge. Only if BJJ’s corporeality is facilitated by the right kind of spatial dynamics and is framed by a particular coaching style, do these types of affordances give rise and come into being. This finding is significant as it highlights the complex interconnections and relationships that are involved in the construction of BJJ’s inclusivity (Kavoura et al, 2012), its progressive dispositionality and culture. The construction of BJJ’s inclusivity, its progressive dispositionality and culture require effort and purpose.

In addition to these findings, ‘On the Mats’ bodily focus was also able to take a more abstracted point of view and outline significant philosophical and epistemological differences between the art of BJJ and Capoeira (Delamont 2006). While Capoeira was shown to be immersed in the history and culture of Afro-Brazilians, in contrast, no such relationship was detected in BJJ. In fact, what was found was a BJJ developmental history that has attempted to distance itself from its Afro-Brazilian peer by weaving its epistemological bearings
through a strictly modernist, globalised, Western heritage (Cairus 2011; 2012). Consequently, what can be detected in BJJ’s corporeal discourses is a certain racialised affective sensitivity towards conceptualisations of the human-subject.

The chapter ‘Bodies in BJJ & MMA’ took this theme of dispositionality and affect and examined the ways in which this sensitivity leaves open the possibility of [mis]recognition. The thesis found that this potential to pejorative [mis]categorise certain types of body-subjects can be understood as the result of the interplay between early-twentieth-century Brazilian racial politics and localised, UK forms of essentialist racial, ethnic, and class understandings of the human-subject.

In contrast to BJJ’s affective sensitivity, the chapter’s analysis of the wider MMA gym space revealed how racialised understandings of the ‘black’ male body can be understood as having a certain value and status when framed through the existence of a continuing historic racial schema (Fanon 1967) within the spaces of MMA. Furthermore, this chapter was able to frame the Warks Gym space as a cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson 2004/; 2011) as the gym did bring diverse groups of people together in a way that allowed them to lower social barriers and to interact informally while becoming immersed in the artforms of other cultures.

The chapter ‘At the Edge’ continued this focused attention on exploring the concepts of difference, ‘race’, cosmopolitanism, and conviviality, through an analysis of BJJ practitioner interactions. What this thesis found was that the interactional practices of BJJ practitioners in the West Midlands can be understood from within the context of UK multiculture in which relationships and interactions between people from different backgrounds are quotidian. The thesis highlighted how BJJ practitioners employ a sophisticated interactional knowledge that could be inflected with a deep cultural awareness and sensitivity. BJJ practitioners can, therefore, be seen as embodying those processes of cohabitation that are a feature of a convivial societal fabric. Importantly, this conviviality was found to be marked by conflict and a regression into forms of racism, especially with regards to Muslims and the Islamic religion more broadly.

‘At the Edge’ then widened its conceptualisation of conviviality in order to frame those forms of gender relations that are practiced within the spaces of BJJ. Through an analysis of those
conversations between practitioners that was sensitive to the ways in which they related to one another, and which were related to those themes that centred gender identities and/or forms of masculinities, the chapter detailed a BJJ contextualised hegemonic masculinity. This analysis showed how this form of masculinity contrasts with a traditional hegemonic model that is viewed by many BJJ practitioners as being closely aligned with some MMA practitioners. In contrast, this BJJ inflected masculinity can be seen as being marked by an openness towards different forms of gender practices and identities. BJJ’s bender practice can be understood as drawing on broad principles of inclusion in order to humanise the Other. Accordingly, BJJ practitioners can be viewed as practicing this inclusive form of masculinity within BJJ settings. This analysis of masculinity also provided an additional insight into those factors and processes that were previously cited as potentially Othering certain categories of bodies. In this sense, visual bodily signs, such as muscularity, can be read as corresponding to a more traditional hegemonic model and is, therefore, by implication, formatted as embodying an antithetical dispositional nature.

The ‘BJJ Canopy’ coalesced these threads into a much broader exploration of BJJ culture, its institutions, and dispositions. The chapter mapped BJJ’s development and global spread through a reading of cosmopolitanism that was conscious of the concept’s elitist, superficial, and consumerist critiques. In addition, this chapter highlighted those sites of global power relations within the institutions and discourses of BJJ. Significantly, this chapter was able to once more, identify the role of the coach in defining the institutional habitus of a BJJ club and in attracting like-minded martial artists whose dispositions are closely aligned with their own.

This also chapter revealed an intimate relationship between BJJ practitioners and the medicinal plant of cannabis. In doing so, it was able to highlight the ways in which BJJ practitioners are increasingly being influenced by a U.S, consumerist inflected brand of BJJ. The use of cannabis by BJJ practitioners and its association with BJJ culture subsequently sheds light on how this laid-back, easy dispositionality can be understood as complementing and intersecting with BJJ practitioners progressive, inclusive form of masculinity, and as helping to contextualise relations between practitioners, the ambience of the mats and a wider BJJ culture.

Using the martial art and combat sport of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, this thesis set out to interrogate
the concept of a cosmopolitan canopy. The thesis wanted to understand whether, and how, this cosmopolitan framing could contextualise the relations between BJJ practitioners and a broader culture of BJJ. Guided by these concerns, the study was particularly interested in the ways in which categories of difference were experienced and negotiated through interactions and within a wider culture. Importantly, the thesis wanted to understand the role of BJJ’s corporeality in such relations, especially its tactility, physical intimacy and its effacing of physical space between individuals.

The MACS of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) and its spaces in the West Midlands, UK, can be conceptualised through Elijah Anderson’s cosmopolitan framing (2004; 2011). BJJ spaces offer settings in which people from diverse backgrounds can lower the barriers of difference and get to know each other. While this conceptualisation of a BJJ culture and its associated spaces can be viewed as a positive process that brings people together, given the nature of a historico-racial-schema (Fanon, 1967) that has attached specific carnal qualities to ‘black’ and other racialised body-subjects, this coming together can potentially be viewed as somewhat ambiguous in nature. Furthermore, while a wider, global BJJ culture can be viewed as being infused with a syncretism that reflects a Japanese, Brazilian and American heritage, BJJ’s cosmopolitan roots and its globalised contemporary culture can be understood as reflecting processes of appropriation and commercialisation in both its development and its contemporary status as a global martial art and culture.

In addition, the interactions and relations between BJJ practitioners were found to reflect those processes of cohabitation and proximity that are a mark of Gilroy’s conviviality (2004). Interactions between BJJ practitioners were predominantly marked by a normality and ease with difference, but also such interactions and relations could, at times, fall back onto essentialist and racist notions. This form of conviviality in which difference is accepted as a fact of everyday life was also found to be active in relation to other forms of difference, such as gender and gender relations. Within the spaces of the field-sites, BJJ practitioners displayed open and inclusive dispositional practices that can be seen as contrasting with a closed, traditional hegemonic model. While largely marked by an essentialist inclusivity, the form of gender relations with BJJ spaces has the potential to exclude; this exclusion shown to be the result of a historic sensitivity towards perceived dispositions and their meanings.
The corporeality of BJJ acts to rewire BJJ practitioners on a dynamic bodily level. Through the gradual inculcation of BJJ’s corporeal framework, BJJ practitioners become more relaxed in the tactile presence of an Other. Subsequently, this rewiring can be seen as gradually opening up practitioners to BJJ’s dispositionalities, thereby facilitating communal and convivial possibilities. BJJ’s corporeality and the dangers inherent in its techniques, in conjunction with the dynamics of the space in which it is practiced can be understood as affording the possibility of convivial and cosmopolitan relations. Utilised and brought into life by the authority and dispositionality of the BJJ coach, BJJ’s corporeality acts to moulds a culture and its practitioners through a contemporary form of cosmopolitanism and conviviality.

In the bringing through of its corporeal emphasis, this thesis provides new knowledge by allowing for a corrective to the centrality of the cognitive, representational, and symbolic that is generally foregrounded in prevailing debates about convivial and cosmopolitan possibilities.
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