

Fighting with race: complex solidarities & constrained sameness

Abstract

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted at an East London Kickboxing/Muay Thai gym, this paper explores how fighters at Origins Combat Gym seek to reject race as a discursive category in favour of constructing each other as the same, bonded by years of intimately training alongside one another. Drawing upon Bourdieu (1977, 1984), I conceptualize a racial habitus to argue that such processes are constrained; my field-site is not a racial utopia, even if it does allow for new possibilities. Nonetheless, my interlocutors' attempts to reject the logic of ethnic absolutism (Gilroy 1987) through forging complex localized solidarities offers hope in anti-immigrant times (Back & Sinha 2018).

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Introduction

Brexit was 'intimately bound up with questions of race' and framed as a vote to reject immigration (Virdee & McGeever 2018) to preserve the 'future' of a supposedly racially and culturally homogeneous 'white British' nation (see Kaufman 2016 & 2018). These discourses serve to fracture potential solidarities through wrongly asserting that sealed off racial groups cannot share space without conflict, which ignores the social and historical contingency of racial categories and pays no attention to how communities have historically expanded the borders of inclusion to create broad coalitions (see Gordon 2016 for example). In the context of such resurgent ethno nationalisms in Europe, North America and further afield, there is an urgent need to reaffirm the contingency and instability of racial categories to create conditions for 'complex and versatile solidarities that refuse the strategic divisions that race would impose' (Wolfe 2016; pp. 272).

Responding to this climate, this paper uses ethnographic data to demonstrate how racial categories are subject to contestation within the Fighters Class at Origins Combat Gym (pseudo-anonymised), a Polish owned Muay Thai/Kickboxing gym in East London where the majority of fighters are either Polish or Black. Muay Thai is a combat sport originating from Thailand that incorporates punches, kicks, knees, elbows and clinching, whilst kickboxing has a similar ruleset, albeit elbows are illegal and clinching is

limited. Participation in the Fighters Class thus requires intimate bodily contact as well as engagement in the 'rituals of restraint' (Wacquant 1992; pp. 76) as when preparing for fights fighters must train hard, go on regular long runs and take-up 'draconian diets' (Wacquant 2004; pp. 138) to fight at an agreed weight. Fighters assist one another in these processes which fosters solidarity and mutual respect as people bond over a shared experience of sacrifice and hardship. I argue that this, coupled with the diversity within the space (White-British people are a minority), creates a social context where race can be locally stripped of discursive meaning as fighters construct solidarities that espouse the falsity of what Gilroy (1987) referred to as ethnic absolutism.

I subsequently engage Wacquant's claim that boxing gyms (in this case, a Muay Thai/Kickboxing gym) have the potential to 'deracialize bodies and social relations' (Wacquant 2005; pp.452). To do this, I draw upon Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990) to conceptualise a racial habitus that is 'durable, but not eternal' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), as I argue that racial ways of thinking, feeling and acting, can be suspended locally, but that the racial habitus prevents my interlocutors from permanently escaping race.

To begin this paper, I introduce some of the emergent literature on race, identity and sport, before outlining how I will work with habitus within this paper. I then outline my methodological approach before introducing empirical data to highlight how people attempt to renegotiate the imposed boundaries of race to construct complex solidarities. Although ultimately, I argue that my respondents are unable to permanently vacate race and are incapable of altering how racial subjectivities are produced, sustained and policed in the world outside of Origins Combat Gym, their wish to cast race aside and envisage one another as the same, should offer hope.

Brief review of literature

The social contingency of identities has been the focus of increasing academic attention over recent decades. Perhaps the most significant contribution has been Stuart Hall's 'new ethnicities' model, which challenges us to 'decouple ethnicity, as it functions in the dominant discourse, from its equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state' (Hall 1988; pp. 227). Hall subsequently sought to foreground how identities are positional, 'never unified', 'never singular', but 'in the process of change and transformation' (Hall 1996; pp. 4). Although broadly theoretical, Alexander (1996) and Back (1996) took the new ethnicities model into the field through undertaking ethnographic research on identity formation amongst young people in London. In doing so, Alexander problematised homogenous depictions of the 'black community' through demonstrating how black British youth identity was 'an "imagined"

construction, which is constantly reinvented and challenges traditional notions of essentialised cultural or racial entities' (Alexander 1996; pp. 199). Back's ethnography in South London was likewise a vital intervention as he explored the production of 'neighbourhood nationalisms', whereby a commitment to the locality replaced other identity markers such as race (Back 1996; pp. 55).

Whilst today it is no longer such a radical proposition to examine how intercultural exchange can emerge in multicultural settings, there has been a worrying increased focus on the particularity of white identities, which serves to justify and excuse racism as the inevitable result of white populations sharing space with immigrant communities of colour (see Dench et al 2006, McKenzie 2017, Kaufmann 2018). The potency of such work reaffirms the urgent need to foreground the contingency of racial categories to open up space for wide-ranging solidarities and new modes of identification.

Although work on race and identity has proliferated within the academy, literature focusing on race and sport remains marginal (see Long & Hylton 2002, Carrington 2012 for elaboration). There are notable exceptions (see Back et al 2002; St Louis 2005, 2007 2009; Carrington, 1999, 2002, 2008, 2012). Yet, there has been little focus on racial subjectivities within combat sports gyms. Trimbur's analysis of Gleason's Gym, a famous Brooklyn based boxing gym, did explore class, gender and racial dynamics within the boxing world, but exploring what training to fight specifically did or did not do to pre-established racial categories was not examined. Whilst Wacquant's (2005) aforementioned observations on race were secondary to his focus on the 'pugilistic habitus' as he left his position as a white researcher somewhat underdeveloped (see Carrington 2012). My approach differs significantly from Wacquant's due to my direct focus on race and my position as a researcher of colour, whilst Woodlawn Boxing Gym was almost exclusively African-American. In contrast, my field site is dominated primarily by Black and Polish fighters.

Much of the literature on combat gyms has focused on boxing. As such, I lean into Wacquant (2004) and Trimbur (2013), whose work offers insights into the egalitarian nature of the training environment and the deep bonds fighters forge. Whilst, although Muay Thai and Kickboxing remain under-studied, McNaughton (2012) offers a helpful exception as she notes how her first Muay Thai coach 'saw a fighter—not a woman, not a female fighter, but a fighter. Gender-free' (McNaughton 2012; pp. 9). McNaughton does not detail how the training environment enables one to become 'gender-free', nor does she explore racial subjectivity, but this framing is useful when examining whether race can be vacated through training to fight. In examining racial identities within a combat sports gym, I aim to contribute to the emergent sociological literature seeking to explore 'the extent to which sport provides a contested

arena through which competing definitions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and region are articulated' (Carrington 2008; pp. 424).

Habitus and racial identities

Bourdieu's conceives of habitus as 'a system of durable and transposable dispositions which, integrating all past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (Bourdieu 1977; pp. 261). Habitus 'tends to produce practices patterned after the social structures that generated them' (Wacquant 2016; pp. 67). This framing has led to accusations that Bourdieu is 'a structuralist with an 'oversocialized' concept of the individual, who... is destined to become what he/she 'always already' was' (Lovell 2000; pp. 15). Yet, these perceptions represent misreadings of Bourdieu's complex (and at times unclear) positions on agency. Habitus was, after all, proposed to address the dichotomy between structure and agency (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), which lends itself to studying racial identities that continue to be understood in essentialist terms despite the now widely accepted orthodoxy that race is not biologically real. Habitus can thus be used to explore how the 'sociosymbolic structures' of a society shaped by histories of colonialism 'become deposited inside persons' (Wacquant 2016; pp. 65) manifest as 'a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu, 1990; pp. 69). Significantly, the racial practices and knowledge we acquire and embody are not universal but are socially and historically contingent; 'different conditions of existence produce different habitus' (Bourdieu 1984; pp. 166).

There has been a recent increase in Bourdieu-inspired work on race within the UK, particularly drawing upon his notion of capital (see Rollock 2014, Rollock et al. 2015, Wallace 2016 for examples). Yet, those who propose a relationship between race and habitus (See Bonilla-Silva 2003, Bonilla-Silva et al. 2006, Sallaz 2010) tend to focus on the durability of racial identities and the inevitability of racism. Less attention has been paid to how the non-essential nature of racial identities leaves them open to the possibility of constrained contestation. It is here where my intervention lies as I aim to offer empirically driven insights that draw out the complex nature of racial identities in arguing that within highly contingent social contexts, fighters can work against their racial habitus through vacating race as a discursive category by becoming fighters. Yet, habitus also offers a means to explore how these processes are constrained due to the pull of the habitus and the related durability - but not inevitability - of pre-established ways of thinking, feeling and acting upon/about race.

Research methodology

This fieldwork data comes from a wider immersive ethnographic project focusing on the Fighters Class at Origins Combat Gym, a Polish-owned Muay Thai/Kickboxing Gym in East London. In a broad sense, ethnography involves 'capturing and re-presenting the subjects' own understanding of their world' (Alexander 2006; pp. 400). My project involved a combination of prolonged contact - through my immersion within the Fighters Class - 18 in-depth semi-structured interviews, regular participant observation inside and outside the gym, informal conversations, and what Geertz describes as 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998). It would have been possible to utilise alternative methods for this project, such as relying solely on in-depth interviews, but ethnographic methods allowed me to examine the difference between what people said and what they did.

Those involved in the Fighters Class are either active fighters or have recently finished fighting but continue to train. The study included 16 fighters alongside the gym's head coach and owner, plus one other coach. This involved one Slovakian fighter, five Polish fighters, 10 Black fighters (eight of whom identified as Caribbean, two as African), one Polish coach (the gym's owner) and one Black coach. Fighters compete in a binary as either 'men' or 'women', and as such, the participants in my research consist of 10 people who fight as 'men' and six people who fight as 'women', plus two male coaches. Origins Combat Gym and the participants included in this study have been pseudo-anonymized as they shared intimate personal details with me relating to experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia.

I was able to undertake an immersive ethnography due to my prior membership at Origins Combat Gym, having been a member of the Fighters Class since 2016. I began training in Muay Thai in 2011 at another East London gym for whom I had several amateur fights and coached multiple classes per week at various levels. Three under 16s I helped to train won regional and national titles and as part of this process, I cornered many fighters at multiple levels from amateur to professional fights. I have not and do not intend to fight for Origins Combat Gym, nor do I coach there. Since joining, my main involvement has been to assist active fighters as they prepare for fights through sparring and regular training. Since I do not intend to fight and because I was trained at another gym, I exist more on the fringes of the Fighters Class, which provides me with proximity but also enough distance to analyze. Yet, it is worth acknowledging that my position as someone who regularly trains alongside many of my respondents undeniably facilitated this research. People were trusting and generous in helping me out with my project, whilst I did not need to spend time building a rapport or selecting informants as I already had - to varying degrees - relationships with those involved in this study.

Although it is not usual to conduct research with people you have prior relationships with, Bourdieu has argued that 'social proximity and familiarity' are necessary conditions to address the asymmetry within a traditional research encounter (Bourdieu 1993; pp. 609-610). In attempting to address these dynamics and through my immersion into my project, this research stands in stark contrast to work where the researcher begins as an outsider, even if they can foster relationships with their subjects, only to then return to the academy and embark on a new project (see Behar 1996). Importantly, it would also not be feasible to undertake a project like this without an intimate knowledge of the sport and a capacity to engage in it. I subsequently thread my insights, as someone well versed in the sport, throughout this paper.

Training to fight: equality & egalitarianism on the gym floor

Due to the dangers associated with fighting sports, one must leave no stone unturned when preparing to enter the ring. To succeed, one must embrace the 'rituals of restraint' (Wacquant 1992) through undertaking 'draconian diets' (Wacquant 2004; pp. 138), twice daily training sessions, avoiding late nights and abstaining from alcohol. Fighters assist one another in these processes, fostering a deep sense of solidarity and mutual respect, as fighters bond over a shared experience of sacrifice and hardship. As Wacquant notes reflecting on social life at Woodlawn Boxing Club;

The fleshly companionship that arises in the course of years of daily training and suffering side-by-side, and especially sparring together—which implies entrusting one's body to the other, and another increasingly like oneself—is conducive to developing such carnal connections (Wacquant 2005a; 451).

Suffering and a sense of sacrificing alongside one another plays a central role in the production of these 'carnal connections', as this 'encapsulates a world vision in which one must pay with one's body for everything one gets' (Wacquant 1992; pp. 76). What one achieves within the sport is believed to be earned through sacrificing where others might not be willing to do so, as the fighting 'self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible' (Giddens 1991). Becoming a fighter is thus situated as an active choice rather than something determined by broader social structures. Fitz, a Black-Caribbean fighter, captured this;

Fitz: It's about discipline and control... What separates fighters is, a lot of people like the idea of it [fighting], but don't have the discipline to go through it or do what it takes.

A central part of the appeal in becoming a fighter is the belief that one 'can succeed on the basis of their own level of determination, rather than the social or economic capital they possess' outside (Trimbur 2013; pp. 37). Fighting ability is thus not seen as innate to anyone, or any race, but as something anyone can consciously earn through hard work and sacrifice, as fighters seize the opportunity to harness their 'bodily capital' (Wacquant 1995) in pursuit of their fighting and training goals. This framing differs starkly from other sports where race is tied to perceptions of playing style and ability (see Long & Hylton 2002).

The Fighters Class is 'self-consciously egalitarian' (Wacquant 1992; pp. 235). No matter who you are outside of the gym, everyone is ostensibly given equal opportunities to excel as fighters train together at set times, where they must perform the same drills in unison with one another. Steve, a Black-Caribbean fighter, encapsulates this worldview;

Steve: In our gym, we have a world champion heavyweight. There are some gyms where that person would get more support and emphasis, but at our gym, you get the same training and you're doing the same thing... We have seasoned white-collar professionals working alongside blue-collar workers and nobody would know any different.

Amit: Why not?

Steve: Because when you take your clothes off and you're in your Muay Thai shorts, it's an amazing leveller. All that matters is how hard are you going to train, how fit are you and how much heart do you have when it gets tough. How much money you have in the bank doesn't matter. That's a great leveller for bringing people together.

For Steve, socially ascribed traits are rendered meaningless due to the aforementioned egalitarianism; 'you get the same training and you're doing the same thing'. He specifically argues that social class is destabilised, noting that blue-collar and white-collar workers cannot be distinguished between as they can outside; 'all that matters is how hard are you going to train' and 'how much heart' you have. Embodying these characteristics supposedly offers people a chance to break with the discursive categories that constrain and define them in the broader social world by allowing them to become something new, a fighter. This comes with an informal uniform, as everyone trains whilst wearing the gym's kit, which Steve argues acts as 'an amazing leveller'. Fighters will usually always have at least one part of the kit on

(t-shirt or shorts) when training, whilst if someone is fighting, people will go to support dressed in the gym's t-shirts or hoodies.

Thus, regardless of who you are outside of the gym, you must follow the coach's instructions and perform the same drills simultaneously as everyone else. This requires fighters to engage their mind and body in unison, as they become solely focused on implementing instructions from their coach/training partner. This is particularly the case when sparring, as a failure to be present could result in being hurt.

John: The reason we train is a lot about escapism isn't it? ... You're in your own headspace. You're not thinking. It's tranquil as they say! Although sparring ain't tranquil! You're kinda focused on the other person... you're focused on them, on yourself, on the next move. Just nothing else... You're just feeling the immediate surroundings... The world outside doesn't matter. I'm in the moment. Escaped from the world [Black-Caribbean fighter]

Training to fight offers people such as John a momentary escape from the broader social world; 'I'm in the moment. Escaped from the world'. This works through training being an embodied practice. I tell John what combination to do; he instantaneously performs the requisite 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1934). This doesn't even always need a verbal command. If I throw a right kick at John when holding pads for him, he instantly responds by blocking the kick and returning a left hook, right cross, left kick back at me as 'second nature', such is the synchronization between training partners. This, combined with the aforementioned egalitarianism of the training environment, creates a social context whereby many fighters, regardless of prior social positioning, argue that everyone within the Fighters Class is the same. This included ostensibly white fighters, such as Filip and Katarina;

Filip: The sweat we share... we go to shows together, we speak together. It's a completely different level of friendship. Here we have something in common, we love the same sport... We are not the people who sit at home and complain. Whatever way of life we're coming from we want to do something, even if you're tired and coming from work, you're still training. This is a characteristic we all have. [Polish fighter]

Katarina: We know how scary it is... How many sacrifices to do. This is a hobby, it doesn't pay our bills. But we fucking love it, we share the same passion. But we all understand what risks this sport brings. If you go to the ring and get knocked out you're all there for each other. We know what you're going through... we all go through the same emotions and that's what makes you

much closer... and also mutual respect and pushing each other... you have someone training with you... really pushing you hard... we share so much love before the fight... after the fight. It's just amazing. [Slovakian fighter]

The collective 'we' both Katarina and Filip spoke of, which included me, was centred around the 'different level of friendship' forged through the sport and the gym; 'the sweat we share', 'we are not people who sit at home and complain'. Filip reaffirms the supposed uniqueness of those who enter the space, arguing that fighters share a 'common' attitude and 'characteristic' which he associates with hard work and not giving up. Whilst Katarina similarly argues that fighters are bound by a unique understanding of what it means to compete in the sport, resulting in 'mutual respect and pushing each other' as well as a deep sense of solidarity; 'we know what you're going through'. This creates conditions for people to forge intimate bonds that supersede ascriptive traits, as they seek to break with their former modes of identification to become a fighter for Origins Combat Gym. This allows Filip and Katarina, two white fighters who were not born in London, to articulate a broader communal identity with fighters who are not white, as people actively set about rejecting the logic of sealed off and separate races (Gilroy 1987). Fitz and Nicole, two Black fighters, offered similar reflections:

Fitz: Some of my greatest friends are from the gym. I've not known them long but due to the sport, due to what we do and the risk we endure, it creates instantly tight connections. I've got friends I've known all my life, but people I'm in the gym with they're there through training camps... They know the struggles I have to go through day to day. People who aren't engrossed in the sport don't see the training, the weight cuts, the blood sweat and tears. They just see the fight and think that's it.

Nicole: I have formed very close relationships with my fellow teammates. It's hard not to when you see them every day.... I think this is because we know what each other go through. We know what it's like to train hard, to be hungry, to win and to lose. My other friends from outside the gym don't really get it.

Nicole and Fitz similarly draw upon a collective 'we' as they position their training partners above their other friends who do not understand what it takes to fight as they have not been through it; 'they just see the fight and think that's it'/'my other friends outside the gym don't really get it'. Once more, this highlights the importance of the 'rituals of restraint' in becoming a fighter, as Fitz refers to 'the weight cuts' and 'the blood sweat and tears' associated with gruelling training sessions. As one of Fitz's training

partners, I've previously accompanied him to the sauna on the day of the weigh-in as he attempted to sweat off three kilograms. I had to physically support him on the walk back from the sauna; such is the toll one places upon one's body to fight. Emphasis is thus placed on helping one another overcome these difficulties, which serves to bond fighters together. These 'carnal connections' go far beyond 'neighbourhood nationalisms' (Back 1996), as being in the locality is not enough to be drawn into the 'we'. To be included, one must engage in the sport and be willing to cross racial lines to entrust one's body to the other. A failure to do so means that one cannot understand what the other is going through.

Vacating race

The egalitarianism and unique nature of the training environment creates a social context whereby the pre-existing racial thinking and feeling fighters bring with them into the gym, as conditioned by their habitus, can be cast aside through people seeing one another as the same. As Bourdieu notes, habitus 'is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; pp. 133). The 'experiences' people have of training intimately with one another in this environment suspends people's prior racial dispositions and sensibilities, as the racial logic that structures social life outside of the Fighters Class and subsequently mediates peoples practices loses currency. This is supported by the fact that the gym seemingly inverts societal norms on race; the majority of fighters and coaches are Black, and there is only one white-British fighter. John semi-jokingly told me the reason for this was that 'white people don't have the minerals to fight,' whilst according to Artur, the gym's owner, 'people with proper jobs... don't want to get hit in the face.' Both are alluding to the fact that the primary habitus of white-middle-class people does not incline them to pursue fighting, perhaps due to a lack of financial reward and the dangers associated with the sport (see Wacquant 2004 for exception!). As the late, great former middleweight world champion boxer Marvin Hagler once famously remarked 'it's tough to get out of bed to do roadwork at 5 a.m. when you've been sleeping in silk pajamas' (Quoted in LA Times 2019).

Importantly, it was not the case that fighters believe that race no longer poses a barrier to success outside of the gym, in line with wider discourses on the 'post-race' which 'seek to relativize racism and downplay the salience of its experience for non-whites' (Lentin 2014; pp. 1269). Instead, fighters see the wider social world as being heavily raced, often grounded in lived experiences of racism and discrimination. In contrast to this broader social reality, the Fighters Class is conceived of as a space that offered different possibilities. Nicole, for instance, observed;

Nicole: When you go in [to Origins] it's not just a typical white English person... I used to work part-time in a law firm and you can count the amount of Black people on one hand... And there are no Black female law partners either

Amit: How did that experience in the law firm make you feel?

Nicole: It made me feel that there was a ceiling/cap on what I could achieve. No one that looked like me had senior top-level management responsibilities, there was no role models... I felt it was an elite club unattainable to people like me.

Nicole developed a 'sense of place', attuned by the racist 'social order' (Bourdieu 1984; pp. 471), that led her to believe she could not progress within this 'law firm' due to her racial, gendered and class subjectivity; 'it was an elite club unattainable to people like me'. One's habitus often (but not always) results in people such as Nicole 'refusing what they are refused... adjusting their expectations to their chances' (Ibid; pp. 473). Ahmed's conceptualization of a social world shaped by colonialism can be instructive here, as she notes, 'colonialism makes the world 'white', which is of course a world 'ready' for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach' (Ahmed 2007; pp. 154). In this context, success within white institutions is perhaps out of Nicole's reach. Yet, due to the egalitarianism and meritocracy inherent within the training environment, nothing is out of reach within Origins Combat Gym; there is no 'ceiling/cap' on what Nicole can achieve, as long as she displays the requisite 'heart' and hard work. Thus, the Fighters Class provides people with a microcosmic escape from the white (post)colonial social world, as the pre-existing racist social order - and the limitations this can impose - can be destabilised through the egalitarian nature of both training and fighting.

Fitz: Race isn't seen the same way as it is outside... You look at someone to see how big they are... How experienced they are.

Amit: Do you think of race in the gym at all then?

Fitz: Nah, it's my safe haven. I don't think of that here

Fitz is acutely aware of how race structures social relations outside of the gym, as he positions the Fighters Class as a space that exists in contrast to this; 'race isn't seen the same way as it is outside'. Part of the appeal in training to fight for people of colour is the ability to be something - a fighter - that is not

determined by race or racism. In this context, Fitz sees the gym as a 'safe haven', where he is not defined or confined by societal racism. The racial 'schemes of perception, thought and action' (Bourdieu 1990; pp. 54) that people such as Fitz develop outside of the gym are no longer of use and are thus cast aside, as rather than seeing racial bodies, imbued with histories and discourses, Fitz sees fellow fighters as deracialised instruments of training. Steve echoed this;

Amit: How do you select your training partners, does race factor in?

Steve: Nah, not at all! It has nothing to do with race or gender or any personal characteristics! I like people who put in effort. I don't like people who are lazy or have an expectation that they are owed something.

Amit: So are there any limits placed upon people based on their race?

Steve: No way, not at all! The only limitation is how much effort you're putting in. If I came in as a Muslim Hijab-wearing female, with little confidence, and no experience, but I showed the heart and determination through the training I put in and the words met my action. I'd be given exactly the same support as if I was a white male from England.

Steve's account reflects Wacquant's observations that within combat sports gyms, 'everyone is fully accepted... so long as he [they] submits to the common discipline and 'pays his [their] dues' (Wacquant, 2005; pp. 10) through displaying hard work and 'heart'. Once more, this is in contrast to the world outside where the racial habitus' 'limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production' (Bourdieu 1990; pp. 55), which would constrain a 'Muslim Hijab-wearing female' in ways that would not constrain a 'white male from England'. Within the Fighters Class, the limits and constraints of race and gender are seemingly suspended through fighters displaying the requisite hard work and dedication.

Constrained identities

It's worth noting that Steve's depiction of a passive, submissive Muslim woman draws upon Orientalist tropes, which demonstrates how pre-existing racial doxa - taken-for-granted knowledge about the social world (Bourdieu 1977) - provides a rich reservoir that can be drawn upon by fighters even amidst attempts to imagine themselves - and the Fighters Class more broadly - as de-racialized. The habitus is

durable, even if it is not eternal. Thus, irrespective of whether conditions are created for individuals to conceive of one's racial subjectivity and the racial subjectivities of others differently at an interpersonal level, it cannot be ignored that race continues to structure social relations and determine life chances outside of the gym. The following two subsections will address this complexity.

Nicole: 'It's not a colour thing... you would hope'

Nicole is a 32-year-old fighter who grew up in a Jamaican household in East London. Since taking up the sport in 2014, she quit her full-time job to pursue a career in the fitness industry whilst simultaneously attempting to progress in the world of fighting. Nicole is fully invested in the Fighters Class at Origins Combat Gym, as reflected in her Instagram bio; 'Kickboxing/Muay Thai Fighter @OriginsCombatGym'. Perhaps due to her investment in the space, Nicole initially advocated that race does not matter;

Nicole: Given the sport, you have to have people around you that understand what you're going through... it's not a colour thing. It's not a gender thing... Once you strip that away it's all just fighting. We all fight, we all go through that... you would hope.

This seemingly supports the previously asserted view that fighters share a unique bond that transcends race and gender. Yet, the addition of 'you would hope' perhaps speaks of a desire to escape 'colour' and 'gender' that is not always matched by reality, as Nicole made the following contradictory, or at least complicating, statement;

Amit Do you think race is insignificant within the Fighters Class then?

Nicole: Erm... I'm always conscious that I'm one of the only Black girls here... I don't let it affect me but I know that I'm aware of it and I'm conscious of it... my whole thing is wherever I go people have a stereotype of Black people and Black women so I try to not be that. It is important for me to be helpful, to be likeable and to be approachable.

Amit: Is this a bigger issue outside of the gym?

Nicole: I try not to think about it or dwell on it too much, I have to move forward regardless of the ignorance of others. But race and gender is a massive issue outside of the gym. Within the Black community and the wider community. Black women are often degraded by Black men, you

hear statements like 'I only date white girls' and 'light skin, right skin'. Within the wider community, I think Black people are always seen in a negative light before a positive.

Nicole is torn between wanting to ignore race but also finding race (and gender) to be an inescapable social category that mediates her interactions with the world around her, including inside the gym, as she cannot avoid being conscious of the fact that she is 'one of the only Black girls' within the Fighters Class. In part, this is due to the gaze of others, as 'wherever' Nicole goes, people 'have a stereotype of Black people and Black women', which places expectations and limitations upon her. Nicole's awareness of societal racism - 'I think Black people are always seen in a negative light' - demonstrates how habitus integrates 'all past experiences' (Bourdieu 1977), which subsequently impacts future social practices. This makes it difficult for Nicole to escape the constraints of race, despite her wish to do so; 'I have to move forward regardless of the ignorance of others.'

Nicole thus internalizes these racist, gendered stereotypes, as her habitus is inculcated through her attempts 'to not be that' stereotype. Nicole learnt to do this through developing new dispositions and sensibilities, which would help her assimilate to white cultural and social norms. Her 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1984) is framed by an active engagement with, and internalization of societal racism, which results in self-sanctioning practices. Nicole distances herself from racist stereotypes through attempting to construct herself as respectable, which she associates with being 'helpful', 'likeable', and 'approachable', traits that are often posited as antithetical to black womanhood. In doing so, Nicole seeks to project a different articulation of black womanhood in the context of broader societal racisms that position black women as aggressive and unapproachable. This doxic pull towards respectability is inextricably tied to the European colonial project and the emergence of European nationalist discourses (see Mosse 1985). Through rejecting racist stereotypes in attempting to embody respectability, Nicole's account demonstrates how pre-established racial doxa holds currency within the space, despite aforementioned discourses that it does not, as this racial knowledge informs how Nicole constructs her identity, which highlights the enduring nature of the habitus.

Amit: Why do you think there aren't more Black women?

Nicole: I'm fortunate as I have the time to dedicate this... A lot of Black women are out doing other things... whether we like this or not there is an undertone that we have to be successful, we have to hustle, work ten times as hard... they haven't got the time to allocate to training or dedicate time to what they love... I have a bit more of a safety net. I don't have children. I have

the time and the resources to allocate time to this and am willing to make that sacrifice... in terms of what I was meant to do academically, I've chosen too to focus on what I love doing. Also, it's expensive... This is expensive

In an astute comment on how race, class and gender are co-constitutive (and mutually structure her habitus), Nicole observes how many Black women have other commitments or goals that require focus and financial input and subsequently have less time or resources to put into a sport where there is little financial gain; most of the amateur fights Nicole has competed in have offered no financial return. Nicole's account demonstrates how whilst ascriptive markers such as race, class or gender may be 'stripped away' or become 'levelled out' (as Steve argued), these markers cannot be fully escaped as they govern who enters the space and how they can enter it. This highlights how race can be reinstated as a discursive category, even within the context of everyone being the same. More broadly, Nicole's account demonstrates how despite wanting to escape race by becoming a fighter, the social realities - and her experiences - of racism, sexism and her class subjectivity create a sense that her habitus 'is enduring' even if that does not mean it is 'static or eternal' (Wacquant 2016; pp. 66).

Obi: 'Inside the gym I'm me'

Obi is 37-years-old and was born to Nigerian parents 'down the road from the gym'. He is a 'natural heavyweight', standing at around six foot five inches tall and weighing a solid 110 kilograms. Like Nicole, he offered a complicated account of how race functions inside and outside the space that speaks to a racial habitus.

Amit: Is race something you think about in Origins?

Obi: I think about it everywhere. The gym is a place you turn off the most though because your mind and body is physically engaged which is part of the reason most people go. It's [race/racism] an everyday thing in modern Britain man.

Amit: What about outside the gym?

Obi: It's hard to ignore. Someone crossing the road when they see me... but it becomes prevalent on public transport, nobody wants to sit next to me. People putting their phones in their pockets.

It's automatic, they don't even realise. We ain't even got to the social stuff or work, or housing, or health care... Or the press!

Obi's life experiences have led him to see the social world as structured by race and racism; 'it's an everyday thing in modern Britain'. As with Nicole, experiences of racism inculcate Obi's habitus and subsequently determine how he thinks, feels and acts as he moves through a racialised social world; 'I think about it everywhere'. In part, this occurs due to others attempting to fix him to his race, e.g. through people crossing the road when they see him or putting their phones in their pockets. These incidents occur specifically due to his subject position as a black man, who becomes associated with criminality, theft and violence (see Hall et al. 1978). His experiences of incidents like this and racism more broadly lead him to bring this discursive knowledge with him wherever he goes, including into the gym. Yet, Obi notes, despite thinking about race wherever he goes, 'the gym is a place you turn off the most' as the 'mind and body is physically engaged', which enables him to momentarily cast aside the practices, dispositions and sensibilities that flow from his habitus. This speaks to how within the training environment, race holds less currency, as people perform the aforementioned 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1934) required in training to fight.

Amit: How does that make you feel, people crossing the road and that?

Obi: It's not gonna make you feel good is it?! I'm a 37-year-old accomplished man and versus being a 14-year-old boy, he's building a picture of himself that he's dangerous, he's a certain thing... It isn't gonna have a good impact.

Amit: Did that impact on you growing up?

Obi: Yeah, it's impossible to ignore. In the long term, you can't ignore it.

Amit: Do you edit your behaviour because of this, either inside or outside of the gym?

Obi: Yes, not as much as before though. Outside yes. I have to outside. That's normal. In terms of my language, speech, the way I write. But in the gym, Nah. I'm relaxed, it's a safer space if not a safe space... Inside the gym, I'm me.

Obi outlines the impact that racial stereotyping has had on him throughout his life - 'it's impossible to ignore' - particularly as a young person whose 'sense of place' is determined by racial knowledge that predates him. The awareness of his racial subjectivity, mediated through experiences of racism, attune Obi to consciously alter his behaviour in certain contexts; 'That's normal. In terms of my language, speech, the way I write.' Rather than internalizing discourses of respectability, Obi sees this as necessary to navigate the social world more seamlessly. He is aware of how Black men of his physique are viewed within public discourses that he has no control over. He thus develops what Abrahams and Ingram term a 'chameleon habitus' (Abrahams & Ingram 2013) as he learns to adapt to a racist society. This also highlights how, regardless of what happens within the Fighters Class, the weight of racial structures outside of the gym endure, which impacts on how Obi moves through the social world. However, whilst he carries this knowledge with him into the gym, he feels he does not need to invoke this 'chameleon habitus' as he does outside of the space; 'But in the gym, Nah. I'm relaxed, it's a safer space if not a safe space... Inside the gym, I'm me.' Within the Fighters Class, Obi's race takes on less significant meaning than it does in the world outside. This allows him to momentarily shun the dispositions he had developed throughout his life to navigate the racial world outside, taking momentary, fleeting respite amidst the training environment.

Conclusion

This paper offers a fragment of a broader ethnographic project, with wider-reaching conclusions. As such, there are various aspects of these localised identity constructions that could not be explored here. For instance, how productions of sameness work through hyper-masculinity and normative sexualities. Despite these absences, this paper sought to utilize Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus to highlight how racial identities exist in a state of flux, determined by an uneven combination of agency and colonial racial discourses that pre-date us. Rather than offering a durable reading of habitus, I sought to demonstrate that one's dispositions, sensibilities and ways of thinking could be destabilised, even if only momentarily, as the abiding nature of habitus - and the dispositions, sensibilities and ways of thinking that flow from it - prevented my interlocutors from permanently escaping race. Origins Combat Gym is thus by no means a racial paradise; the Fighters Class exists within a wider social world shaped by colonialism histories. This impacts who enters the space, how they enter it and what racial knowledge they bring with them on the way through the door.

Yet this does not mean all hope is lost. Remaining aware of the limitations of the fragments presented here, I aimed to use this paper to demonstrate how people can find creative ways to construct themselves

against the backdrop of dominant racial (and racist) discourses that pre-date them. This occurred within a highly specific field site, which necessitated the production of convivial carnal connections (see Gilroy 2005) that would be unlikely in everyday encounters. In training alongside one another, members set about consciously rejecting race to constitute one another as the same; as fighters. Bourdieu conceived of habitus as the 'meaning-made-body' (Bourdieu 1990; pp. 43), yet in some contexts, bodies could be stripped of racial meaning, as the body of a fighter was constructed through training hard, showing heart and suffering-side-by-side. This created social contexts whereby white fighters drew themselves into collective subjectivity with members who were not white. Whilst for those who exist outside of whiteness, taking up the position of fighter provided a microcosmic escape from a racialised social world that otherwise constrained them. Thus, whilst my respondents have less power to alter the broader structures of race in the world outside of the Fighters Class, there is a longing for utopia or perhaps a promise of what utopia would look like inside the walls of the gym that fighters cling on to. This willingness and desire to vacate race and construct local solidarities, as limited and situational as this may be, is hopeful at a time when identities are fraught, contested and often reified.

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