

## Abstract

This article deploys Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus to examine how fighters at a Muay Thai/Kickboxing gym in East London challenge their taken-for-granted thinking about race (their racial doxa). I argue that through training to fight, people experience "hysteresis" as they find themselves within situations where their habitus - and relatedly their doxa - no longer adequately guides them. This results in a questioning of racial doxa that previously went unquestioned, which Bourdieu refers to as "heterodoxy"; an alternative to doxa. This article subsequently offers empirically informed theoretical insights by establishing a relationship between habitus, race and racism. It argues that the reproduction of racist thought and action is not inevitable, as people find ways to break habitual practices in their everyday life.

**Key Words:** Bourdieu, Habitus, Race, Racism, Ethnography, Kickboxing

## Introduction

Questions of racial difference remain mired in essentialism, despite the now widely accepted orthodoxy that race is not biologically real. Ethnographers seeking to explore race and the production of racism have at times<sup>1</sup> been guilty of falling into this trap, as racism is often understood as the inevitable and justifiable outcome of groups sharing space with one another. Dench et al (2006), for instance, offered a sympathetic account of White populations in London's East End who were angry at the "rapid settlement of ethnic minorities" which they argued "severely undermined traditional local identity and solidarities" (Dench et al, 2006; pp. 22). Their account failed to contextualize why this racism emerges, nor did they pay heed to how new solidarities might emerge between migrant populations and longer standing communities. In a bid to turn away from these approaches ethnographers have offered alternative framings, such as the "everyday multicultural approach" (Neal et al 2013; pp 320). Yet, these approaches rarely go further than acknowledging the production of a tentative peaceful co-existence (see Wessendorf 2014), as less attention is paid to how racism might be overcome altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> For notable exceptions see Back 1996, Alexander 1996, 2000.

In this context, this article makes use of ethnographic methods to foreground the ways in which people make sense of their own preconceived racial stereotypes in order to find ways to overcome notions of racial difference. To do this, I engage Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of habitus to discuss how and why fighters at Origins Combat Gym, a Polish-owned Muay Thai/Kickboxing Gym in East London, attempt to challenge their taken-for-granted thinking about race, their racial doxa. This article builds on Wacquant's (2004a) instructive theorizations developed from his own use of Bourdieu in his ethnography of a Chicago Boxing gym, and extends arguments I have made elsewhere (Singh 2021a). I argue that through training to fight in a highly diverse social environment, conditions are created for both "hysteresis" and "heterodoxy", moments where fighters' doxa is challenged and subsequently suspended. This results in fighters casting aside previous practices and ways of thinking. Whilst I must stress that these processes are limited and localised, this article argues that there is nothing inevitable about racism, as people find ways to break habitual practices in their everyday life through bringing to consciousness the falsity of pre-established racial thinking, feeling and acting.

I begin this article by outlining Bourdieu's conceptual tool habitus, and how it can be applied to the study of race and racism, through foregrounding a "racial habitus." Having situated my field-site and outlined my methodological approach, I offer empirical reflections to elucidate the complex ways in which fighters attempt to challenge pre-established practices through pursuing dialogue with fellow fighters and through an active process of unlearning racial thinking. Whilst remaining attentive to the structural realities of race, in highlighting how race and racial difference are experienced differently within different social contexts, this article will aim to highlight how the production of racism is not an inevitability, as what is learnt can - in the right conditions - be unlearned.

### **Habitus, Doxa, Race & Racism**

Habitus can be understood as a "social orientation" (Bourdieu 1984; pp. 468) that functions "beneath the level of consciousness and discourse" (Wacquant 2011; pp. 87) to guide people as they move through the social world. Although Bourdieu conceived of habitus out of his early field work in Algeria, race and racism have not been the direct focus of his work since, leading to perceptions that Bourdieu is a theorist of class who ignores the racialised dimensions of class (see Puwar 2009 for discussion, Stoler 2016 for example). Yet, in acknowledging that Bourdieu's theoretical tools offer space to explore the unconscious reproduction of social norms,

numerous scholars have begun to apply habitus to study both race and racism (see Bonilla-Silva 2003, Bonilla-Silva et al 2006, Sallaz 2010, Perry 2012, Singh 2021a, Singh 2021b). Whilst conducting my doctoral research, from which this article derives, a conceptualisation of a racial habitus presented itself to me as the only way to explain the processes I saw unfold, as I sought to examine how “people experience their race as a socially constituted identity but one that still constrains them” as they move through a social world shaped by histories of colonialism (Singh 2021b; pp. 6).

Race should be understood as constituting part of our primary habitus, as these “sets of dispositions” are acquired early on in our lives (Wacquant 2014; pp. 7). For the context of this article, a Muay Thai or Kickboxing habitus would be a secondary habitus that members of my field-site, including myself, have acquired over time. Race, however, is inscribed upon us more or less from birth (see Perry 2012), making racial dispositions and sensibilities more durable and difficult to shift (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; pp. 134). Working with a notion of a racial habitus involves remaining attuned to “the durability – but not inevitability – of pre-established ways of thinking, feeling and acting upon/about race” (Singh 2021a; pp. 4). This allows us to acknowledge the socially constituted nature of racial identities, whilst appreciating the materiality of race, in how it is lived and experienced (Singh 2022)

Central to Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of habitus - and of central importance to this article - is what Bourdieu refers to as “doxa”, our taken-for-granted knowledge of the social world, “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma” (Bourdieu 2000). Our doxa is shaped by our early experiences (Grenfell 2008) and through histories and discourses that pre-date us; habitus is “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history - is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (Bourdieu 1990; pp. 56). Bourdieu gives us a direct example of doxa at work in noting how a man who raises his hat to appear polite is “unwittingly” drawing upon norms from the Middle Ages when soldiers would remove their helmets to demonstrate they had peaceful intentions; “this re-enactment of history is the work of the habitus, the product of a historical acquisition which makes it possible to appropriate the legacy of history” (Bourdieu 1981; pp. 305).

Within this article I focus on the salience of “racial doxa”, which refers to the common-sense, taken-for-granted thinking about race that people hold at an unconscious level, as conditioned

by their sites of origin and early life experiences; “different conditions of existence produce different habitus” (Bourdieu 1984; pp. 166). A conceptualisation of racial doxa how racial thinking is not inevitable or innate but is produced through “descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we can ‘take-for-granted’” (Hall 1981; pp. 9). This “common-sense” taken-for-granted racism involves re-producing colonial racial thinking, as “the attitudes of superior/inferior, responsible/irresponsible, mother/child, barbarism/civilization, etc. provide a reserve of images upon which racists and racism can play” (Lawrence, 1982; pp. 59).

Many of those drawing upon Bourdieu in the study of racism (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2003, Bonilla-Silva et al 2006) emphasize the durability of racial thinking, through stressing how racism is reproduced in the context of post-racial societies (see also Sallaz 2010). However, far less attention is paid to how we can use Bourdieu to examine everyday attempts to overcome racism, or racial thinking. Although Bourdieu is often regarded as a structuralist, he does offer room to examine how doxa can shift within certain contexts. As Fram notes, doxa “is arbitrary and interest-serving. Yet, since it can only be sustained by its everyday acceptance, it is open to change” (Fram 2004; pp. 556). Bourdieu refers to instances where the natural order can be questioned as “heterodoxy” (Bourdieu 1977; pp. 164), which occurs when one begins to question the previously accepted naturalness of social norms.

Usually heterodoxy occurs during crisis (Bourdieu 1977; pp. 164), but in this article I argue that conditions within my field-site allow for doxa to be “apprehended, embraced, and by some, finally rejected” (Fram 2004; pp. 556) as people are able to - temporarily at least - reject pre-established “race thinking” (Gilroy 2000; pp. 27) through training to fight alongside one another. This experience of training to fight within a highly diverse social context renders people as “fish out of water”, as they enter a new social context where their primary dispositions do not guide them. Bourdieu describes situations where “dispositions which are out of line with the field’, and with the ‘collective expectations which are constitutive of its normality” (Bourdieu 2000; pp. 160) as “hysteresis”. Broadly speaking, hysteresis occurs (or at least was conceived) amidst significant social transformation and the subsequent breakdown of traditional ways of life, e.g. as a result of colonialism (Bourdieu & Sayad 2015) or rapid urbanisation (see Bourdieu 2008). Yet, within my field-site I argue that hysteresis is induced through training to fight amidst a very specific social context as people must intimately lend their bodies to one another within a highly diverse combat sports gym, against the backdrop of egalitarian discourses around training (Wacquant 2004a, Singh 2021a).

Although I argue that the social context within my field-site opens up space to challenge pre-existing racial norms as people forge new practices, it must be noted that this does not alter the broader structures that confer race in the world outside of the gym and subsequently produce racism. As Ruth Wilson notes, “racism specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Wilson 2007; pp. 28). Regardless of what occurs within my field-site, as positive as it is, fighters have no control over the “state-sanctioned or extralegal production” of racism and thus their ability to forge new racial practices and ways of thinking cannot extend beyond the interpersonal as there is a distinction between how we experience the world around us and how that world is structured.

### **Methods: Immersive Ethnography**

This fieldwork data comes out of a wider ethnographic project focusing on the Fighters Class at Origins Combat Gym (pseudo-anonymized), a Polish-owned Muay Thai/Kickboxing Gym in East London. Muay Thai and Kickboxing have similar rule sets and are thus often conflated with one another and referred to interchangeably.<sup>2</sup> Muay Thai is a combat sport originating from Thailand that involves kicks, punches, knees and elbows, as well as clinching (limited stand-up grappling). Kickboxing developed more recently - in the 1950s - in Japan as a hybridization of Karate and Muay Thai<sup>3</sup> and thus has a similar ruleset to Muay Thai, albeit elbows are illegal and clinching is limited. There are, however, important differences. Muay Thai is heavily influenced by Buddhist cultural practices and beliefs, as reflected through ritualistic elements that are not present in kickboxing, such as the Wai kru ram muay<sup>4</sup> that takes place before fights. However, many of these ceremonial aspects are increasingly being stripped away in Britain<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the cultural differences between the two sports are often minimal in the West. Fighters at Origins Combat Gym, as is increasingly typical<sup>6</sup>, compete under both rulesets.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, despite the title, the popular 1989 Jean-Claude van Damme film *Kickboxer* was about Muay Thai/Muay Boran, not kickboxing.

<sup>3</sup> See; <https://karatejutsukai.com/kickboxing/history/>

<sup>4</sup> This involves the fighter circling the ring three times before kneeling and bowing three times as a sign of respect to God, man and his teacher.

<sup>5</sup> There are perceptions that the Wai kru ram muay, and the use of serama music (traditional Thai music that plays throughout Muay Thai fights) is not fan friendly.

<sup>6</sup> Kickboxing pays more which has led to many leading Muay Thai fighters competing under kickboxing rules to earn more money, alongside competing under Muay Thai rules. See example of Sittichai

Origins Combat Gym is located in a highly diverse part of East London, that is notable for high levels of deprivation, as well as more recently gentrification. These processes of gentrification have been reflected in Origins Combat Gym as prices of membership have increased (although fighters do not always pay<sup>7</sup>) and there are now noticeably more White, middle-class professionals in the 'beginner' classes. Despite these shifts, the Fighters Class, which is the focus of this ethnography, stands in contrast to this as there is a notable absence of White-middle class fighters. The Fighters Class is dominated by a large constituency of Black (predominantly Caribbean) fighters and 'Eastern European' (predominantly Polish) fighters. The broader study included 16 fighters and two coaches to reflect these demographics. This included participants of all genders and two openly queer members. Fighters compete in a binary as either 'men' or 'women' and as such the participants in my research comprise of 10 people who fight as 'men' and six people who fight as 'women', plus two male coaches. The field-work took place over a period of eight months and involved semi-structured interviews with each participant, plus continued dialogue through informal conversations and through spending time with fighters before, during and after training within the Fighters Class.

I was able to access my field-site as I have been an active participant in the Fighters Class since 2016, long before I began the doctoral project that this work derives from, having begun training at another gym in East London in 2011 (where I had amateur fights and coached various levels of fighters). I have not fought for Origins Combat Gym and I don't coach there. Rather than ignoring my own subjectivity, I sought to actively engage it in acknowledging that my own experiences as a prior member of Origins Combat Gym and as a researcher of colour exploring race and racism mediate my own "schemes of perception" (Bourdieu 1990) and thus contribute to the knowledge produced within this article, making this article "inherently impartial - committed and incomplete" (Clifford 1988; pp. 7).

My prior involvement within the Fighters Class and my experience of training and competing within the sport enabled me to undertake this immersive, ethnographic project that involved my

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Sitsongpeenong here: <http://fightland.vice.com/blog/sittichai-sitsongpeenong-and-the-economics-of-fighting-abroad>

<sup>7</sup> Teaching one class a week results in free membership (anything on top of that is paid) whilst allowances are made for those who cannot afford it. There is not a strict payment system such as one would find at commercial gyms or such as imposed on the "beginner", "general" and "fitness" classes.

own regular engagement in training and sparring. I do not believe it would be possible to conduct a project of this nature without an understanding of the sport, and also the capacity to train. Wacquant makes a similar argument to justify his own immersion into his ethnographic project at Woodlawn Boxing Club;

To understand the universe of boxing requires one to immerse oneself in it firsthand, to learn it and experience its constitutive moments from the inside. Native understanding of the object is here the necessary condition of an adequate knowledge of the object (Wacquant 2004; p. 59).

My position as a member of the Fighters Class compelled people to generously offer their thoughts. It also meant that I did not need to spend time building rapport or attempting to identify appropriate respondents, nor did I need to rely on select informants to refer “future contacts”, which can create limitations “due to cleavages within groups” (Duneier 2011; pp. 3). Some of my respondents also divulged that they would not have felt as comfortable discussing race or racism were I myself White, which contradicts the problematic view that White researches are better placed to conduct research into both White and non-White communities (see Carrington 2008 for elaboration).

However, I remain aware that the asymmetry of research encounters is reinforced “every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital, cultural capital in particular” (Bourdieu et al 1993; pp. 609). In certain cases my gender subjectivity, university education, class position and citizenship status cannot be ignored. Whilst it is not possible to completely erode the barrier between researcher and researched, this project aimed to do so as much as possible through taking a reflexive approach, as well as through the immersive nature of the research. What follows is a snapshot into how people construct and deconstruct difference against the backdrop of racism, gentrification and migration in a post-colonial context. A snapshot that is mediated through my lens, conditioned by my knowledge of the social world around me; “my preconceptions and my presuppositions” (Pierre Bourdieu 2001, in Adnani and Yacine, 2002: pp. 240, quotation from Wacquant 2004b; pp. 397)

### **Polish Gym or Black Gym?**

Origins Combat Gym was established by Artur in 2005. Artur was born in Krakow and came to London aged “18 or 19” on what was supposed to be a two week holiday, but has called London home ever since. He had a successful career as a Muay Thai fighter at another East London gym, until he retired to set-up and run Origins Combat Gym. In part, because of Artur, when the gym opened in 2005 the majority of fighters who came through the gym’s doors were Polish.

Artur: There used to be massive Polish community here but that’s because they bring each other. They say a Polish guy owns it but it’s not just because of me.

Over the last 10 years, the demographics within the gym have shifted significantly, most notably due to an influx of Black fighters. Christian, a Black-African heavyweight who joined Origins Combat Gym in 2012 witnessed some of these shifts first hand;

Amit: What was the gym like when you joined?

Christian: It’s two different gyms! The gym when I started was pretty much an Eastern European gym... They were close-knit, speaking their own language.

Amit: So who did you chill with?

Christian: My jack jones! I started befriending other people and throughout time I befriended the Black dudes and the atmosphere changed

Amit: How did it change?

Christian: Based on the early-stage group, the early adapters, Myself, Steve, John, Nick. A few of us came in and our personalities shone through... And now it’s less Eastern Europeans. Artur and Matis took the change. The others didn’t really. Some of the Polish dons and them didn’t take well to change.

Christian describes the gym that he first entered as an “Eastern European gym”, which stands in contrast to how he conceives of the space today as he goes on to describe how the gym has shifted due to the influx of Black fighters (himself, Steve, John and Nick). Christian argues that some of the longer-standing “Polish dons” did not embrace the changes and presumably



stopped attending. All of these factors contributed to a cultural shift, as did the success that many Black fighters had within the sport. Christian quickly rose the ranks and became the UK no.2 heavyweight by 2015. His fighting ability facilitated the changes within the gym, as he was able to impose himself on the space and physically garner respect from longer standing Polish fighters. This was also true for other Black fighters, such as John, who is 6'5 and weighs around 100 kg.

Amit: Do you think your fighting ability helped you get respect?

John: Listen, when I first came to the gym. I'm a big guy you know?! So these big Eastern Europeans would go hard on me. Like proper lay in to me! Throwing hard shots! But as time went on I banged these guys in sparring. Humbled them. Proper. Once I sparred with them and laid them out, they got scared and gave me respect. Saying all "you cool, you cool?" when they see me... Some would come hard, but then when you put it on them, they'd be like "oh you're really strong, good spar". But before they're all moody and grumpy, grunting, no bants! [Black-Caribbean fighter].

John's account highlights how demonstrating fighting acumen can help render race irrelevant as within the folk logic of combat sports gyms, fighting acumen matters above all else. Thus, rather than arguing for reformulation of the "contact hypothesis", wherein it is argued that merely sharing space will reduce prejudice (Allport 1954), I argue that the successful acquisition of a secondary Muay Thai/kickboxing habitus is absolutely central to fostering acceptance and destabilising prior assumptions. This works through the Fighters Class being an egalitarian space, where everyone is trained in the same way (see Wacquant 1992; pp. 235), at the same time, whilst dressed the same in the gym's kit. This creates a specific social context where ascriptive traits such as race, sexuality or gender are not overtly relevant as people select training partners based on size and experience, which is what made John an appropriate training partner for several "big Eastern Europeans".

The emergence of Black fighters such as John, Christian and Nick led to a large Black constituency within the gym as it is now predominantly Black fighters who are representing the gyms at shows across the country and abroad, where previously the majority of fighters were 'Eastern European'. Despite this, there remains a perception that the gym is, at least in part, a

“Polish” or an “Eastern European” gym. The owner is Polish and the gym’s top fighter, Matis, is Lithuanian. The gym is thus neither a Black nor a Polish gym. It is a space shared by a largely Polish Eastern European constituency (including members from Lithuania, Russia and Romania) and a Black constituency (from Africa and the Caribbean). Whilst the lack of White-British fighters means that the Fighters Class stands in contrast to the social world outside the gym, where White-British people dominate social fields (Ahmed 2007). As I will go on to outline, this ‘diversity’ and the aforementioned nature of training, create a unique social context whereby racial thinking and feeling can be destabilized. Lukasz, a Polish fighter in his late 30s points to this in noting;

Lukasz: We got whole spectrum of Londoners. Immigrants, women, people of different sexualities, religions. But, no dickheads. These type of people don’t last. We train hard, it’s intense. The focus is on getting better, always getting better. The way to get better is to listen to other people. Maybe this makes it easier, because the people who stay at the gym for longer are the ones that are more open and more interested in other people  
[White-Polish fighter]

### **Heterodoxy & Disrupting Racial Thinking**

Bourdieu broadly argues that someone’s primary habitus inclines them to only share space with those from similar backgrounds as habitus guides people “towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position” (Bourdieu 1984; pp. 468-9). For instance, in applying habitus to race and racism, Bonilla-Silva and colleagues found that their White respondents unconsciously racially segregated themselves, despite expressing a willingness to befriend Black people (Bonilla-Silva et al, 2006; pp. 247). This is the habitus at work.

Yet, people enter the Fighters Class from a range of different social backgrounds and geographic locations, united by their shared ambition to train to fight. Fighters subsequently find themselves within a highly diverse social context where they are forced to intimately share space in ways that they would not need to - and with people whom they might not necessarily meet - outside of the Fighters Class. This involves people lending their bodies to one another through sparring and “suffering side-by-side” (Wacquant 2005; pp. 451) amidst intense daily (sometimes twice daily) training. Fighters must also assist one another with the sacrificial

elements of the sport, such as intense dieting and going for runs outside of training times (Wacquant 2004, Singh 2021a). This facilitated a social context whereby new practices can emerge that result in the development of what Wacquant terms “carnal connections” (Wacquant 2005) and what elsewhere I’ve referred to as “convivial carnal connections” (Singh 2021a; pp. 17). As Nick, a Black-Caribbean fighter told me;

Nick: Sparring, knocking holes out of each other is a good way to make friends. You have to trust each other when you try new techniques on each other

Training to fight thus creates conditions for heterodoxy to occur as through training alongside one another so closely, “mainstream assumptions about the way things should be” (Fram 2004; pp. 554) can be contested, as people find themselves within a social context where their pre-established racial practices and doxa may not adequately guide them. This confronts fighters with new possibilities, as they are able to cast aside orthodox thinking about race and develop an “awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs” (Bourdieu 1977; pp. 164).

Amit: Why did you join Origins Combat Gym?

Nick: I saw K-1 on TV, Kyshenko<sup>8</sup> fought and I thought it looked cool. Jah blessed me and I ended up here.

Nick, who was raised by his Jamaican mother a short bus ride from the gym, joined Origins Combat Gym at the age of 16 after watching Artur Kysehnko fight on TV. Origins Combat Gym was his most local gym and as such he soon found himself in a space that challenged his pre-existing racial doxa, as when he joined in 2009, Black fighters were in the minority.

Nick: As a kid I mainly hung out with Black kids cos I went to school with them but then when I came here I met more people, people from all over... Me and Kacper were close friends. We went to Holland together, we trained together... he invited me to Poland but to be honest I’m a bit scared... because as a Black guy in Poland I fear for my safety! We used to make combinations up. He dropped me once with a big punch... But he

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<sup>8</sup> A brilliant Ukrainian kickboxer; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artur\\_Kyshenko](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artur_Kyshenko)

made me better! One day I'll go to visit him... Kacper was my age, but there were also older guys. Men with families. I had alcohol with them for the first time. We went bowling and they gave me a JD [Jack Daniels] and coke and then I used to drink that because of them

Rather than unconsciously racially segregating, like those involved in Bonilla-Silva's aforementioned study, Nick "mainly hung out with Black kids" due to his race and class subject position, as he went to school in a predominantly working-class Black area. This upbringing shaped Nick's practices, as he subsequently experiences "hysteresis" within the gym, as he was confronted with a new social context that his primary conditioning had not prepared him for. Through joining the gym in pursuit of learning to kickbox, Nick began to socialize with "people from all over", especially Polish people, who dominated the space. This required him to develop new dispositions and sensibilities which facilitated his close friendship with Kacper. It also required Nick to cast aside his doxic belief that Polish people are particularly racist, as reflected through his fear of travelling to Poland. Nick's interpersonal encounters with Kacper resulted in the overhauling of his doxic beliefs through the establishment of heterodoxy, as he realised the falsity of his previously held assumptions.

Rather than allowing this experience of being a 'fish out of water' to deter him, Nick embraced these new social surroundings.

Amit: I would have struggled as a 16 year old in that environment. Was it daunting?

Nick: Nah. I'd never encountered Polish people before, but it wasn't a problem. It was good, it was fun. I loved it! They were cool. They looked like football hooligans, like racists. But they were all cool. Helped me with training. Didn't ever smash me up... It was just whatever, it felt normal.

Once more, Nick's account highlights how he is instantaneously able to make value judgements that were then challenged (and overcome), as through training alongside these "Polish people" he was able to unlearn his pre-existing stereotypes, as his doxa informed him that these people looked "like racists" but his pursuit of the sport enabled him to learn that "they were cool" as these people helped him to improve his fighting abilities. Thus, Nick's naturalised knowledge

that all Polish people were racist, was denaturalised through his experiences of training, which enabled him to see “an alternative to doxa” (Fram 2004; pp. 557).

This overall account of training demonstrates how race - and difference - can become insignificant (Gilroy 2005) as people trained to fight and likewise sought to help one another improve. Wacquant similarly observed at Woodlawn Boxing Club;

In the daily round of the club, ascriptive and positional traits, such as class, ethnicity, nationality and occupation, proved to be less relevant than interactional properties manifested in repeated face-to-face encounters (Wacquant 2005; pp. 455).

Through these “repeated face-to-face encounters” within the gym and specifically in the training environment members are able to cast aside previous dispositions and challenge their pre-established racial doxa, which otherwise guides them.

Christian like Nick, went to a school where most of the students were Black and subsequently had not had the chance to meet anyone from Eastern Europe before joining Origins Combat Gym. Within his account, he identifies how he attempted to challenge the doxic racial thinking of others.

Amit: Did you have any friends from Eastern Europe before you came here?

Christian: No, none!

Amit: So was it a surprise to make friends like that?

Christian: Yeah, I thought they were all racist. The head coach, this big fighter, I thought they don't like Black people, but after a year or two, you see they don't know how to engage... Cos of the stigma they hear, they approached with caution. After a year, year and a half they started coming out of their shells. And you realise it's a cultural thing and then we created our own culture.

Amit: Can you tell me more about that?

Christian: It was pretty much trying to understand where each other come from. They had their preconceived thoughts of how a Black person or teenager would behave. And they expected me to act and behave a certain way, and when I didn't it was like "oh how come?" And when you explain and interact with them and say "we don't all do this, or that, x y z". It kinda opens it... I went out of my way in explaining. Not expecting them to behave a certain way. But pursuing communication...

Artur - "the head coach" - and Matis - "this big fighter" - are now among Christian's closest friends, yet he initially assumed "they were racist" as he notes that they used to barely acknowledge him when he first started training. In his attempts to explain their inability to interact with him, Christian offers an account of how doxic racial thinking operates as unconscious, taken-for-granted thinking; "they had their preconceived thoughts of how a Black person or teenager would behave." For Christian, this doxic knowledge about Black people guided Artur and Matis beneath the level of consciousness, inclining them to treat Black people with suspicion.

Yet, once more, through training to fight in proximity to difference, we see how the naturalisation of racial knowledge can be questioned, through the emergence of heterodoxy, as Christian took it upon himself to personally denaturalize doxic thinking through "pursuing communication"; "when you explain and interact with them and say "we don't all do this, or that, x y z". It kinda opens it". The heterodoxy that followed resulted in a rejection of racial doxa and the production of a localised hybrid culture (Hall 1991). This involved both groups engaging in dialogue and subsequently attempting to cross a cultural divide in order to better understand one another. Christian's account highlights how the social conditions within the Fighters Class foster heterodoxy as the "social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon" which allows fighters to question and challenge previously accepted "social facts" (Bourdieu 1977; pp. 169) through forging new ways of thinking and doing.

Christian's account was also indicative of an emergent trend within the field-site, whereby many Black fighters believed that through sharing space they could actively challenge the racist stereotypes Eastern European's might have of them.

Amit: Is the mixing of groups a good thing?

Marvin: It's a good thing. If you did hold any views then this is the time when it can be challenged. You know what I mean? People be like "all Black people are so aggressive" and you go in the gym and it's all smiles and hugs and for some people that's their opportunity to mix. They can mix too with Black people, like I mix with them. It works both ways. [Black-Caribbean fighter]

Like Christian, Marvin has an acute awareness of the doxic racial imagery that people hold about Black men, particularly relating to violence and aggression, as he sees the Fighters Class as a space that can induce heterodoxy as people are forced to see how these views do not stand up to reality; "it's all smile and hugs". Thus, what was once accepted as orthodoxy, can be dismissed. Here, there is an active attempt to work against race (see Gilroy 2000, de Noronha 2021). Interestingly, rather than seeking to problematize the roots of these racist stereotypes, Marvin and Christian take it upon themselves to challenge these stereotypes through pursuing dialogue and communication. This works to disavow notions of racist victimhood as fighters embrace the chance to make new choices through challenging their own taken-for-granted beliefs as well as the taken-for-granted beliefs of others. It also demonstrates how the practices people of colour develop are framed by societal racism and racist stereotypes, even if they are seeking to work against these.

Nicole: Honestly before this I was... I didn't perhaps favour people from Poland. Especially Polish skinheads... I'd assume they were racist, they were bigots... But I hold my hand up and say before this I would never have associated with them... I wouldn't have had the opportunity to get to know people from there [Black-Caribbean fighter]

Nicole's racial doxa led her to "assume" people from Poland were "racists" as she notes "before this I would never have associated with them". Through sharing space and regularly interacting with Polish people within the training environment, Nicole was able to overhaul her pre-established ways of thinking, to develop new practices. Training to fight thus created a social context whereby what usually "goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned" (Bourdieu 1977; pp. 166) was brought into light, as people found themselves in a social situation where what otherwise went unquestioned must now be questioned. Nicole would not have needed to ask these questions within a different social setting, as she acknowledged that she did not mix with Polish people until she came to the gym. Heterodoxy occurred within this very specific social context.

It's also worth noting that Nicole's account contributed to an emerging discourse wherein several Black members presented their stereotyping of Eastern Europeans as symmetrical racism that was at times as bad as Eastern Europeans having racist ideas about Black people. Yet, the view many members had about Eastern Europeans were not examples of racism, or symmetrical prejudice, but are reflective of an association of fascist politics with the region and those who come from there. This taken-for-granted knowledge about Eastern European's can be situated as self-defensive, as people develop knowledge and practices that lead them to exclude themselves from social interactions that might lead to racism. Whilst the representation of symmetrical forms of racism demonstrate how dominant discourse that reduces racism to de-contextualized inter-personal name-calling and prejudice (see Lentin 2012) enters the space.

### **Overcoming Racism?**

Many fighters emphasized the ways in which they could break with previous modes of thinking in rejecting pre-established stereotypes, whilst others went further in suggesting that the hysteresis and heterodoxy brought on within the Fighters Class created conditions for racism to be overcome. This included White fighters such as Filip, who was born in Poland and moved to London 15 years ago.

Filip: In Poland it's very divided in terms of race and religion. Just White people and hardly different religions. Definitely being in England, especially London, is more multicultural. The gym is the place where I've even met some people who outside the gym maybe they wouldn't be so open to being multicultural. But they share something special so suddenly you can see... On social media, they say "Black people are lazy" but in the gym, they say anything but, they see Black people are the most hard-working in the gym.

Amit: Has this happened for you at all in the gym?

Filip: Yes... I'm embarrassed to say... But... it was a little bit of a breakthrough with regards to Muslim people... I had some bad neighbours and they were very dirty, messy arguing a lot with us... Nothing but headache... And there was a short period of my life when because of my neighbours I thought all Asians are like this... Being here I found



it's just completely different, you don't need to drink alcohol to be a party animal... Muslims won't drink or smoke with you but you can still have a great time and a great laugh with them. That's something I'm very happy I've learnt. I think in Poland if you don't drink you're a boring person.

Filip's account highlights how his racial habitus - and subsequent doxic thinking about race - was forged out of his life and upbringing in Poland, a nation he described as racially and culturally homogenous. He juxtaposes this homogeneity with the multiculturalism he has witnessed since moving to London and joining Origins Combat Gym. In his account Origins Combat Gym exists as a site where racial doxa can be both challenged and overcome as previously unsaid assumptions are proven to be incorrect; "On social media, they say "Black people are lazy" but in the gym...they see Black people are the most hard-working". This doxic racial thinking is brought into sharp focus, leading to alternative ways of thinking about socially produced difference. Once more, processes of heterodoxy are facilitated through the inculcation of a Muay Thai/Kickboxing habitus, which involves a degree of mutuality; "they share something special".

Filip went on to admit - "I'm embarrassed to say" - that he once held racist views about "Muslims"/"Asians", due to an experience of "bad neighbours". This experience occurred within a social context where Islamophobic discourses have proliferated across Europe in recent years (see Kundani 2014), and are increasingly taken-for-granted. Yet, through sharing space with Muslims/Asians within the Fighters Class, Filip's pre-existing views and practices were challenged as he saw how Muslims lived day to day; "I found it's just completely different". Thus, how Filip was conditioned to see Muslims was proven to be incorrect, resulting in an overhaul of this once taken-for-granted belief. This was a remarkably honest reflection, particularly as I, the "researcher" in this encounter, am Asian and thus could have been offended by this admission, due to the interchangeable use of "Asian" and "Muslim", which have become synonymous with one another in Britain (Alexander 2000; pp.6). This admission differs starkly from contemporary accounts whereby people ardently deny they hold racist views (see Gilroy 2019) amidst a belief in the post-racial (see Valluvan 2016). Rather, Filip admits he held such beliefs but is eager to emphasize how he overcame them through a process of unlearning.

Steve, a Black-Caribbean fighter similarly emphasized that conditions within the Fighters Class created a social context where racism could be overcome;

Steve: Some people been to the country for a year or less. They walk in with all of their cultural baggage, into this multicultural melting pot and it hits them for six. And for some people they would never have seen someone who is Black, or women training in an open gym facility next to them...

Amit: Do you think that challenges peoples stereotypes?

Steve: 100% my friend! The biggest solution to racism is exposure. Racism is a learnt behaviour, so you can expose them to situations where their knowledge of something contradicts the reality... The exposure within our gym has forced many people to move their positions. I know for a fact that there are people in our gym who would never have had close contact with Black people outside the gym, but they're forced to in the gym and have changed from their first interaction from going with a casual nod of acceptance, where now it's full blooded acceptance.

Steve demonstrates the way in which people enter Origins Combat Gym with pre-established practices and ways of thinking that are conditioned by their points of origin; "They walk in with all of their cultural baggage, into this multicultural melting pot and it hits them for six." In Steve's account, this can result in people becoming "fish out of water", which can subsequently lead to cultural misunderstandings and the emergence of racism. Like Filip, Steve argues that the Fighters Class provides a space where such emergent racism can be challenged and destabilized as people are "forced" to challenge their views as a result of the "reality" they witness within the gym. People are conditioned to believe in essential racial difference, but learn to appreciate "banal human sameness" (Gilroy 2000; pp. 29 ) due to being flung together in pursuit of fighting; "The exposure within our gym has forced many people to move their positions".

Steve refuses to accept that racism is innate, as he generously attempts to open up space for taken-for-granted racist beliefs to be challenged. Yet, whilst Steve believes that racism can be overcome through 'exposure' his account fails to acknowledge the structural reality of racism as - in line with mainstream thinking about race and racism - he reduces racism to interpersonal name-calling and prejudice. Such a framing does not acknowledge how racist thinking and feeling are naturalized within the context of wider structures and histories that pre-date fighters

and thus exist outside of their control; certain fighters will still find themselves confronted with the harsh realities of racist policing, a racist labour market and racist violence regardless of what occurs within the Fighters Class. The processes by which the habitus and doxa are destabilized are both limited and localized.

Nicole: I don't know what people go home and talk to their husbands/wives about.. Just cos you look at me and smile doesn't mean you don't hate Black people... Even though I love Filip and I think Artur is great I might walk down the street and see another Polish guy and think "what a c\*\*t". Just because Artur sees me he doesn't judge every Black woman by the standards he upholds me by. But that's the same for me and Artur

Nicole reaffirms how the Fighters Class can offer space for new ways of thinking and feeling about racial difference, yet similarly offers some caution, through pondering whether these positive interactions are translated in the world outside of the gym. Yet, Nicole's account still demonstrates that something different, something exciting even, is taking place as she points to how within the space people can be judged in ways that diverge from doxic racial thinking. Thus, my respondents demonstrate, at the very least, that London is home to pockets of "spontaneous tolerance and openness" (Gilroy 2005; pp. 144) that are oft-ignored within contemporary anti-immigrant discourse that suggest sealed off, separate races cannot share space.

### **Conclusion: Taking Bourdieu into the field**

This article sought to demonstrate how Bourdieu's theoretical tools could be applied to the study of racism, but also how they could open up space for transgressive practices, through arguing that one's racial practices, perceptions and taken-for-granted beliefs (doxa) can be rejected and challenged, as fighters forged wide-ranging convivial connections through training to fight alongside one another. This research attempted to demonstrate how the racial habitus is "enduring but not static or eternal" as dispositions "can be eroded, countered or even dismantled by exposure to novel external forces" (Wacquant 2016; pp. 66). Within the gym, this 'exposure' leads to temporary conditions of both hysteresis and heterodoxy, which results in the context-specific erosion of pre-established racial thinking. In part, this is due to the locality of the gym, the 'diversity' of fighters and through engagement in a sport which requires intimate bodily interactions.

Yet, these processes are both limited and localized. The social conditioning involved in constructing the doxic thought required to enable racism and a belief in essential races occurs throughout our lifetimes and thus cannot be easily escaped, even through social interactions within the gym. Doxic thinking also predates us, drawing upon centuries of colonial thought and practice. Thus, whilst my respondents attempted to reject racism, which is hopeful, exciting and inspiring, one cannot risk overstating the broader implications of this. People can interpersonally resist and reject racial tropes, but altering the broader racialising structures that govern society and exist outside our control, is something altogether more complex. This prevents the emergence of an overarching “critical discourse” to permanently replace doxa (Bourdieu 1977; pp. 169).

However, it is clear that whilst racial thinking and being is durable, it is still subject to shift from the bottom-up. This should offer hope in the context of a rising belief in the fixity of racial categories. Race and racism are not absolute. Whilst our doxa may guide us at an unconscious level it is not totally determining and within the microcosm of my field-site, we can see how people are able to bring to consciousness what was previously unsaid and reject the logic of “race thinking” (Gilroy 2000; pp. 27) to “expand the space of what is possible”, even if such moments might be fleeting and localized.

Finally, I aim for this article to open up space for scholars working on race, racism and anti-racism, to take Bourdieu with them into the field, as his theoretical tools offer rich insights into empirically examining the reproduction of social practices and ways of thinking, but also how they can be subject to contestation.

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