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“Carnal conviviality” and the end of race?

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to address some confusions and contestations surrounding Paul Gilroy’s conceptualisation of conviviality. In particular, it seeks to argue that conviviality cannot be reduced to mere tentative co-existence, nor does it designate the absence of racism. Rather, it aims to demonstrate the messy complexity of everyday life, as people attempt to build lives alongside one another as they find themselves throwtogether on the margins of society. It does this through the qualitative exploration of fighters at a Polish-owned Muay Thai/Kickboxing gym in East London, where fighters enact what I refer to as “carnal conviviality”, a form of intimate, bodily togetherness constituted through training to fight that bonds fighters across racial, ethnic, religious and gendered lines. Although inherently local and messy, I argue that the production of social relations that see the human in the other are essential in times of mounting crises.



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Introduction

It is nearly 20 years since the publication of Paul Gilroy’s seminal *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004) wherein Gilroy develops his conceptualisation of conviviality, which broadly refers to people’s capacity to be at ease with difference. Since the publication of *After Empire*, there has been a groundswell of work utilising conviviality as a frame through which to examine multicultural exchanges and cohabitation within European post-colonial cities, broadly seeking to show how multicultural interactions are not spectacular, but are part of everyday social life (see Back and Sinha 2018; de Noronha 2022; Rogaly 2020; Singh 2022; Valluvan 2016).

Yet, perhaps as a result of its popularity – having become, per Wise and Noble “one of the latest groovy things” within academia (Wise and Noble

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2016, 423) – conviviality is hotly contested, widely misunderstood and has been “thinned out theoretically” (de Noronha 2022, 166), often stripped of its radical and political potential as part of the so-called “convivial turn” (Neal et al. 2013). Some of this contestation surrounds Gilroy’s arguments against race (2000) as he suggests that “conviviality” and “convivial culture” can lead to racial and ethnic differences becoming “unremarkable”, “insignificant” and “banal” (Gilroy 2005, 105). Critics such as Saldanha (see also Carter and Virdee 2008) have subsequently accused Gilroy of believing “too easily in the possibility” of race’s “transcendence” (Saldanha 2006, 9). Others argue that Gilroy does not take racism seriously enough within his rendering of conviviality, despite the fact that Gilroy’s work has always been deeply concerned with examining the histories and social structures that produce racism, whilst also attempting to plot a path forward (see Valluvan 2016 for discussion).

Yet, regardless of the confusions and contestations (which this paper will address), conviviality, in the form proposed by Gilroy, remains as politically salient as ever. Questions of race remain mired with essentialism and popular racial nationalisms continue to be reconfigured in post-Brexit Britain (and much of the globe), with notions of Britishness continually bound up with questions of race, regardless of the racial make-up of the ruling government. Whilst the state continues to enact a series of “moral panics” (Hall et al. 1976) that rest on essentialised notions of race, ethnicity and nation, constructing a diverse group of “figurative scapegoats” (Tyler 2013) who are supposedly to blame for our moral ills; Asian child-grooming gangs, an amalgamation of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants, and a multi-racial constituency of working class benefit cheats. In such a socio-political context, there is an urgent need for us to find ways to see the human in the other to enable us to pave the way to constructing wide-ranging solidarities that cut across supposed racial lines to help us forge a more hopeful present and future.

In calling for a focus on radical forms of togetherness this paper offers qualitative insights from an ethnographic exploration of fighters at a Polish-owned Muay Thai and Kickboxing gym in East London. Developing arguments made elsewhere (Singh 2021; Singh 2022), this paper foregrounds the intimate bodily connections formed through training to fight that are not reducible to the reductive logic of “race thinking” (Gilroy 2000) or “ethnic absolutism” (Gilroy 1987), nor do they gloss over the realities of racism; quite the opposite, I empirically show how the emergence of racism within these bodily convivial encounters represents the messiness of everyday life as people attempt to grapple with – and overcome – emergent racism to maintain the rich “carnal convivial connections” they forge through training to fight alongside one another. To do this, it puts Wacquant’s notion of “carnal connections” (Wacquant 1995, 2004, 2005), to work with conviviality

(Gilroy 2005) to conceptualise the emergence of what I term “carnal conviviality” amongst fighters. I argue that though specific to training to fight, the emergence of such intimate bodily togetherness points to how difference can be flattened out, as people’s acts of friendship become far more important than notions of racial and ethnic difference.

Conceiving of “difference”: racist apologetics & everyday multiculturalism

Before drawing out some of the complexity of Gilroy’s model of conviviality, it is worth briefly highlighting the other ways of conceptualising difference. Some believe that it is not possible to meaningfully live with – or be at ease with – difference as any influx of non-White and foreign people into Britain will inevitably result in schisms between supposedly “native” and “foreign” communities, who are innately different and are thus inherently incapable of living in proximity to one another. David Goodhart, for instance, has argued that “too much diversity” causes “cultural loss” for Britain (Goodhart 2004), and that anti-immigrant sentiment is the natural result of a “human instinct to notice difference” (Goodhart 2013). The recent “moral panic” (Hall et al. 1976) over asylum-seekers being housed in hotels in Britain, and the related protests against so-called “asylum hotels” offers a contemporary example of this logic; One White British protester in Cornwall told the BBC that “it’s not racist to stand up for your own people, that’s all I can say. We advocate for the white British people” (*The Guardian* 2023). Such narratives echo Eric Kaufmann’s argument that Brexit was a justifiable vote to preserve the “future” of the “White British” nation (see Kaufmann 2016 & 2017) as he similarly declared that “racial self-interest is not racist” (*Ibid.*).

For such commentators, the emergence of racial tension (racism) is justifiable, resulting from innate differences manifest as cultural clashes, as well as competition over already sparse jobs and resources, which was a central dynamic in the Vote Leave and Leave. EU’s Brexit campaigns (see Fitzgerald et al. 2020; Narayan 2019). In these terms, “native” populations are believed to have a greater right to access welfare provisions, ignoring how Britain’s welfare state was funded by taxes collected within the colonies (see Bhabra 2022 for discussion). Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young’s *The New East End* (2006) offer us a pertinent pre-Brexit example of this. They sympathetically expressed how their “White” working-class respondents in London’s East End felt displaced by the “rapid settlement of ethnic minorities” which “severely undermined traditional local identity and solidarities” (Dench, Gavron, and Young 2006, 22), as one of their respondents declared; “there’s no white shops here now, it’s all Pakis. Whitechapel – it should be called Blackchapel” (*Ibid.*, 174).

Rather than problematising this emergent racism, or offering a more complex account of local change, the authors argued that any racism was the result of increased competition for welfare, such as housing, benefits and jobs. Here, an exclusively White working-class are posited as the true victims of globalisation and multiculturalism, not the Bengali communities excluded from accessing resources and subjected to violent racist abuse (see Begum 2023). Similarly, Lisa McKenzie, writing in the context of Brexit described a specifically White working-class as “The Other Other” (McKenzie 2017, 207) who are “sick of being called ignorant or racist because of their valid concerns” (Mckenzie 2016). Such a framing does not point us in the direction of alternative modes of togetherness forged along multi-racial working-class lines. Relatedly, it suggests that problematising racism and promoting cosmopolitanism are inherently bourgeois and elite ideals. Echoing Rogaly, I strongly contest the problematic “idea that being at ease with racialised difference is characteristic of so-called ‘comspolitan elite’, out of touch with ‘ordinary’ (often a euphemism for ‘white’) working-class life” (Rogaly 2020, ix).

In part as a response to these defeatist discourses, there have been attempts to offer alternative framings within the academy, often as part of the so-called “convivial turn” (Neal et al. 2013), wherein scholars have increasingly sought to situate conviviality “as an analytical tool to ask and explore the ways, and under what conditions, people constructively create modes of togetherness” (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014, 342). Such approaches, indicative of the “everyday multiculturalism” approach (Neal et al. 2013), tend to focus on how people can exist in proximity and even share space without conflict (see Anderson 2011; Wessendorf 2010), but often without developing meaningful relationships, as they continue to go about their daily-lives after brief exchanges, which usually take place within public spaces. Although often making use of Gilroy’s notion of conviviality, such approaches do not represent the rich convivial culture which Gilroy sought hope in, that goes far beyond mere co-existence as he places emphasis on cross-cultural production and cultural hybridity. This paper seeks to return to the radical potential of Gilroy’s model, which I will outline in the following section.

Conviviality & the end of race?

Gilroy’s conceptualisation of conviviality refers “to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere” (Gilroy 2005, xi). Rather than simply emphasising the capacity to live together without overt conflict, Gilroy’s model is intended to focus on how the emergence of convivial culture can render racial and ethnic differences “unremarkable” (Gilroy 2006, 40), as people living in proximity to one another discover that

“the things which really divide them are much more profound: taste, lifestyles, leisure preferences” (Gilroy 2005, 39). In formulating conviviality, he hopefully highlighted the emergence of a “Little England” where within the multicultural encounter “racial difference is not feared. Exposure to it is not ethnic jeopardy but rather an unremarkable principle of metropolitan life” (Gilroy 2005, 105). For many working-class people living amongst difference in cities such as London (where avoiding difference is only reserved for the city’s most wealthy residents), it is far too simplistic to situate race as the sole defining feature of everyday social interaction or relationships; people find themselves connected (often along class lines) or disconnected from one another, in far more mundane everyday ways (e.g. “taste, lifestyles, leisure preferences”). As Gilroy argues, “the radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention towards the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification” (Gilroy 2005, xi).

Gilroy’s rendering of conviviality is thus, like much of his work, “characterised by a restless critique of all forms of racial and national closure” (de Noronha 2022, 161). This critique of race, or attempt to work against race (Gilroy 2000), is motivated by the reality that race is born out of colonial racism and violence, and cannot be separated from this history. He subsequently sees contemporary configurations of difference as unsustainable and unproductive. Relatedly, conviviality was partially conceived out of a critique of failed state sanctioned multiculturalism and the drive for “minority recognition” that went with it, that as Valluvan notes, are inherently “inadaquete” because they do not “substantially remake the ideological terms by which those identities of difference come about in the first place” (Valluvan 2016, 207). Thus, a truly alternate rendering of difference occurs only in a context where “ethnic differences do not require accommodation, remaking or respectful recognition vis-à-vis the white majority, but should simply cease to require scrutiny and evaluation in the first place, i.e. conviviality” (Valluvan 2016, 208). For Gilroy (and others) it is only within this context that a sustainable, inclusive and hopeful multicultural can emerge.

Despite Gilroy’s work being orientated around a critique of race, it is not aimed at depicting a utopian fantasy, rather it is aimed at moving away from the defeatist and reductive understandings of race that foreclose the potential for the sorts of spontaneous social relations we see all around us. It is worth reiterating that Gilroy is not saying that “racial, linguistic and religious particularities” (Gilroy 2006, 40) are absent, nor does he downplay the significance of racism; he clarifies that conviviality “does not describe the absence of racism ... Instead, it suggests a different setting for their empty, interpersonal rituals, which, I suggest, have started to mean different things in the absence of any strong belief in absolute or integral races”

(Gilroy 2005, xi). Thus, when deploying Gilroy's conceptualisation of conviviality one must offer a complex account of everyday life that is attuned to the realities of racism and the emergence of race, whilst emphasising the emergence of new forms of social relations that are inherently "unruly" (Gilroy 2005) and are not always, all the time, reducible to the logic of race.

Going forward there are four main strands to my use of conviviality that will be expanded upon throughout the paper; 1) conviviality cannot be reduced to mere co-existence, or acknowledging the Other in public, before returning to a segregated private life. It must represent something far more profound than this, such as the emergence of friendships that make a mockery of the logic of "ethnic absolutism" (Gilroy 1987); 2) Convivial culture is not a bourgeois disposition, it is inherently a non-elite (Rogaly 2020) politics from below, often forged by those who are thrown together; 3) Conviviality does not represent the absence of racism, emergent racism is reflective of the complexity of multi-cultural exchanges; 4) Relatedly, convivial encounters are fraught with tension and must be worked upon and negotiated.

Methodological note

The empirical data presented in this paper comes out of a wider immersive ethnographic project undertaken at a Polish-owned Muay Thai/Kickboxing gym in East London, pseudo-anonymized as Origins Combat Gym (Singh 2022). Muay Thai is a combat sport originating from Thailand that involves a combination of punches, kicks, knees and elbows, whilst kickboxing is a derivative of Muay Thai, developed out of a hybridisation of karate and Muay Thai in Japan in the 1960s, which has a similar but modified ruleset and different scoring criteria. For our purposes they are very similar and fighters in the West typically train and fight under both rulesets.

Origins Combat Gym was notable as a space of working-class multicultural overlapping due to the absence of White-British fighters, a large constituency of Black fighters combined with a large constituency of mainly Polish Eastern European fighters, to the point that people debated whether the gym was a "Polish gym" or a "Black gym" (see Singh 2022). The project included 19 people who trained to fight – reflecting a cross-section of fighters – as well as the gym's owner, Artur and one other full-time coach. The research involved a combination of ethnographic methods; in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant (usually around 60–90 minutes in duration), my own regular engagement in fighters training, informal conversation – which entailed regular conversations and catch-ups about the ecosystem of the gym both inside and outside of the gym – a lot of what Geertz describes as "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998) and participant observation.

As I've noted elsewhere (see Singh 2021, 2022), I have been an active participant in the Fighters Class at Origins Combat Gym since 2016, having

previously trained at another East London gym from 2011–2016. The arguments presented herein emerge out of – and are framed by – my prior experiences training to fight alongside my respondents, as I witnessed first-hand (long before my “academic career”) how people navigated difference within the intimate setting of a combat sports gym. These complexities – combined with my immersion in the sport – were at the heart of my undertaking the PhD research from which the theorisations offered below emerged.

Conceptualising “carnal conviviality”

In this section, I will outline what elsewhere I have termed “carnal conviviality”, to refer to the deep bonds of friendship forged out of training to fight in an environment where people from a range of social and geographical locations are forced to intimately share space, lending their bodies to one another in pursuit of becoming fighters (Singh 2022, 90). These emergent carnal convivial connections, which cut across racial and gendered lines, result in racial (and gendered) differences being rendered insignificant, “ordinary and banal, even boring” (Gilroy 2006, 40) as what defines people – and their relationships to one another – is mutual experiences of training, suffering and sacrificing alongside each other on the gym floor (Singh 2022; see also Trimbur 2013; Wacquant 2004).

As well as leaning into Gilroy’s conceptualisation of conviviality, my formulation of carnal conviviality owes much to Wacquant’s observations from his own immersive-ethnographic research at a Chicago boxing gym (Wacquant 1995, 2004, 2005), where he observes the emergence of bodily friendships forged through training, which he refers to as “carnal connections”:

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 2005, 451).

In staking these claims Wacquant pointed to the emergence of convivial cultures within the gym (without naming them as such), as he argued that ascriptive traits such as race and class could be rendered irrelevant as people submit themselves to the sacrificial rituals required in becoming fighters (Wacquant 1995), noting that “what matters most at ground level is people’s doings, how they relate to one another in recurrent interpersonal encounters, rather than how the broader society categorizes and treats them” (Wacquant 2005, 405). In addition, he observed the “pronounced color-blindness of pugilistic culture” (Wacquant 2004, 10–11) and describes the way in which training “tends in manifold ways to deracialize bodies and social relations” (Wacquant 2005, 452). These claims were not the core focus of

Wacquant's enquiry, and have been subject to critique, yet they offered useful frameworks for my research within Origins Combat Gym and lent themselves to a more thorough empirical investigation of the formulation of what I termed "carnal conviviality" (Singh 2022) to capture the bonds forged within my particular field-site.

My field-site differs significantly from Woodlawn Boys Club (the site of Wacquant's ethnography), not least because women were banned from training and competing at the time of his research, whilst the gym was not particularly diverse; It was an almost exclusively African-American gym, with a minority of Latino fighters. Whereas, as previously noted, Origins Combat Gym is a hyper-diverse space, characterised by a large constituency of Black (mainly, but not exclusively Caribbean) and White-Eastern European fighters, with a handful of Asian fighters (myself included). This diversity was embraced by fighters:

Nicole: It's great.. Everyones different, different ages, nationalities, ages, different sexes. From the outside looking in it's like a mix-up! My sister said that to me when she first came here. I like that[open-strick]. [close-strick][-Black-Caribbean fighter]

Katarina: What I like about it is there are different age groups, different back-grounds, Black, White, Asian, different countries, not everyone speaks super English.. And people who don't speak English properly and they're all really welcome and I think it's a really really good mix [White-Slovakian fighter]

Within the gym people experience a sort of "throwntogetherness" (Massey 2005) that goes far beyond notions of "superficial acceptance" (Wessendorf 2014), as fighters are forced, by the nature of training to physically engage those of different ethnic, racial and linguistic backgrounds (often all three, not to mention gender or sexual preference) in ways they would not be required to in any other walk of life. In such circumstances, encountering and engaging difference becomes a mundane and unremarkable part of daily life, as due to the egalitarian nature of training to fight, people select training partners based on size and experience, not ascriptive traits. They then train in unison with one another, lending their bodies to each other in the process, whilst reciprocally dishing out physical punishment under the social (and biblical) logic that "iron sharpens iron". The extreme physical contact required in training is specific to combat sports, as within other sports such intimate bodily contact is not required, whilst people are not trained in such egalitarian ways; for instance, in football people are trained differently depending on their position creating a clear distinction between players

that does not occur within the fighting sphere. Rather than creating conditions for violent confrontation or conflict, the mutual respect and trust required within Origins Combat Gym creates conditions for intimate kinship:

Obi: Combat is a unique experience in the way it creates bonds. Not many sports have that level of intimacy and shared understanding of violence and defence. We have to support each other doing this [Black-African fighter]

Fitz: You punch each other in the ring, but outside your friends, and this is a unique bond you don't have anywhere else. A bad tackle in football isn't the same, people react badly. Here, the level of respect you get is huge. With hard sparring, there is never bad blood [Black-Caribbean fighter]

Thus, my respondents shared in the notion that the carnal conviviality was specific to training to fight, as it was this that fostered new forms of social relations, that per Fitz, are not cultivated through other sports such as football. Here, people must lend their bodies to those they would not meet outside of the space, as people widely expressed that training at Origins Combat Gym had introduced them to people from different social worlds.

Mo: I've met people from all backgrounds.. Religions ... it made me see stuff in different ways. Rather than seeing one way. Before Muay Thai all my friends were Bengali and Muslim. Bengali or Muslim view was all I saw. Seeing other peoples views from different countries and what their culture is like [Bengali fighter]

Andrea: I made friends with a lot of straight people.... I dont really hang out with straight people! Laughs ... Yeah ... before I came here i didnt really have any straight friends ... but now! I expanded my horizons and feel straight people aint too bad! I might go straight pride to celebrate them! [Queer Italian fighter]

Lucas: Because of work I only really had work friends and Polish friends. But over here [in the gym] you have absolute representation. Every person. Shit loads of interesting people with a lot of things that you can learn. Everyone is open, sharing a lot [White-Polish fighter]

Mo grew-up and went to school in a part of East London where all of his friends were "Bengali and Muslim". It was only through training to fight that he "met people from all backgrounds" and became aware of alternative

worldviews and cultures, which is something he posits as a universally positive thing. Were it not for him pursuing the sport, he would not have been exposed to difference in such a way. Of course Andrea's account is somewhat light-hearted, but over the years they have developed a close friendship with Filip, a Polish fighter in his early 40s, whom Andrea would never have met outside the space (and vice-versa) due to the social worlds they inhabited. Yet now, not only do they train and spar together, but they also have beers together after training and regularly socialise outside of the gym, demonstrating how people carry their localised convivial friendships outside of the space with them; once more, this is very different from acknowledging the Other in public and then living a segregated private life, as many people do. Instead, here we witness people's lives become intertwined both inside and outside of the gym, which speaks to something far richer. This is also true for Luckasz, who joined the gym at the behest of Filip, whom Luckasz knew from Poland. On doing so, Luckasz opened up his social world to "absolute representation", that he otherwise did not experience.

Not only is this a space where people encounter those whom they might not otherwise meet, it is also a place where people can learn about difference, through exposure to different ways of living. During Ramadan, for instance, people express genuine interest in why people are fasting and what it all means, whilst displaying admiration for those who continue to train without eating or drinking water.

Yacine: People show admiration. They say "credit to you for training through it". They see it must be tough. People are a bit more aware and less ignorant, they talk about it a bit more, they know i can't really give 100% when im fasting. The gyms accepting of my faith. But it doesn't come into play that much. That's as far as it goes and as far as it needs to go [Black-African fighter]

Mo: People can't believe we don't eat and then are training. But you see they respect that and don't tell me to push harder when I couldn't. Artur gives us a bit of leeway [Bengali fighter]

Yacine emphasises how within the gym people develop a greater cultural understanding of Islam than in the wider social world, that is characterised by increasingly normalised Islamophobia (see Kundnani 2014). At the same time, he emphasises how his faith is not the most important or defining feature in the gym, noting that "it doesn't come into play that much". Their religious beliefs are not demanded or demonised. People show interest and offer encouragement, but at the same time, they are also not that relevant, as what bonds people is the shared pursuit of their fighting goals, not their

religious leanings. The primary focus within the space is the mutual pursuit of honing the fighting body and aiding one another in reaching this goal.

Thus, people do not imagine themselves as innately different within the sphere of the gym, rather, they see each other as intimately connected through the corporeal mechanisms of training alongside one another in pursuit of their fighting goals. One's fighting goals are believed to be intertwined with the Other/other, as harnessing one's fighting potential involves lending one's body to the other through training, sparring and sacrificing side-by-side, all of which is conducive to the development of carnal convivial connections. What is most important then, is one's commitment to the sport, which resulted in my respondents situating one another as the same, as fighters, a category that superseded ascriptive traits (see Singh 2022); everyone was believed to have paid their dues on the gym floor, earning respect and recognition from others in the process. Unlike within a boxing gym, where fighters wait to be trained individually by the head coach (particularly for pad work), within a Muay Thai/Kickboxing gym, training partners take turns holding pads for one another; essentially stepping in as de facto trainers for each other whilst the head coach oversees the session. This reinforces a sense of mutuality that does not occur within other sports; as people strive to be good training partners for each other, fighters emphasised the importance of "collective learning" (Wacquant 1995) and mutual care (Trimbur 2013) for one another that is developed through the intimate, bodily interactions that occur on the gym floor, creating the conditions for the emergence of convivial social relations.

Thus, carnal conviviality and carnal convivial connections refer to the deep bonds that emerge through intimate close contact, fostered, in this case, through the hardships of training to fight in a highly diverse social environment where difference is not just unavoidable, but must be physically engaged within the non-hierarchical, egalitarian auspices of the fight gym (see Singh 2021, 2022; Wacquant 1995). In the Fighters Class people develop intimate bonds of friendship with those whom the logic of "ethnic absolutism" (Gilroy 1987) would suggest are impossible and dangerous. Crucially, the aforementioned convivial friendships are not contained within the field-site, as people carry these friendships with them outside of the space, regularly socialising outside of the gym, going to one another's homes, spending time with each others families, spending Birthdays together, going to dinner, watching fights together, or even just getting a coffee after training. In this sense, the emergence of carnal conviviality differs significantly from conceptualisations of "tolerance" that might occur locally within a specific environment, but are then not manifest into anything more meaningful and do not carry outside of a specific localised environment. In contrast, through the cultivation of carnal conviviality, the distinction between in the gym and outside the gym is blurred, as people's lives become intimately

intertwined, bleeding in to one another. For many fighters (such as Mo, Filip and Luckasz), this resulted in them moving from living monocultural lives, to living lives framed by multicultural. Yet, as I will go on to show, the emergence of this carnal conviviality does not mean the absence of racism.

The messiness of the everyday

Despite the richness of the social relations outlined above, Origins Combat Gym is no utopia, nor is it my intention to depict it as such. The carnal convivial connections fostered within the gym were forged against the wider backdrop of societal racisms and the shadow of Empire. In line with Gilroy's sensitivity to the complexity of the everyday, my conceptualisation of carnal conviviality remains attuned to the messiness of lived working-class interactions and exchanges that are inherently "unruly" and "spontaneous" (Gilroy 2005), even amidst a social situation where people develop an "indifference to difference" (Amin 2013). As Valluvan reminds us, "it is certainly not the case that interactional routines of convivial multicultural are not prone to misfiring or free of communitarian contestation" (Valluvan 2016, 219).

Such misfirings were common place within my field-site, as they are in any settings where multicultural interactions are necessitated, ranging from harmless misunderstanding and misguided banter, to at times out-right racism. Yet, as I will argue, the misfirings did not undercut the broader carnal convivial spirit developed through fighting; they simply reflect the reality of the "metropolitan paradox" (Back 1996), where attempts at anti-racism and transculturalism co-exist amidst the emergence of overt racism.

The following two sub-sections will examine a typically harmless example, focusing on the gym's owner Artur, before introducing a potentially more harmful example focusing on Filip, a Polish-fighter who regularly frequents the space. These examples demonstrate how, whilst conviviality does not signal the absence of racism or conflict, it "can be shown to have equipped people with means of managing" conflict "in their own interests and in the interests of others" (Gilroy 2006, 40), as fighters had a shared interest in an overarching community of fighters and thus developed convivial tools (Back and Sinha 2016; Singh 2022) to navigate complex encounters that ranged from the banal to the out-right racist.

"Jamaican's are never on time"

For a long time, me and John would train every weekday morning at 9 am, barring Sunday; the designated day of rest. Often we would be joined by other fighters such as Nadine, Fitz, Obi and Yacine, but at least a few days a week it would just be the two of us. On one such morning when John and I were set to train, I arrived at the gym about 10 minutes before 9 am, with just

Artur for company. We engaged in a bit of small talk, as we always do when it's just the two of us and as the clock neared 9 am, Artur quipped;

Artur: I don't know why you get here early, you know John will be late

Amit: Nah, I back him, he'll make it!

John did not live that far from the gym, but due to the poorly connected nature of East and North East London, John's route to get to the gym involved either two buses or one bus plus an unreliable overground train. As a result, I appreciated that our 9 am slot was somewhat flexible as John was liable to be late. I came early to wrap my hands and because – dependent on whether John caught the right bus – he was sometimes early. On this occasion, John did not turn up at 9 am, so having wrapped my hands I grabbed a skipping rope and started to warm up. Artur put some music on and carried on chatting to me.

Artur: I told you! He's always late. It's because he's Jamaican, Jamaican's are never on time. I used to work the doors with loads of Jamaican guys, they were always late! I'd tell them to turn up an hour before we needed to meet. Then they'd be on time! You need to do the same with John, tell him training starts at 8 then he might make 9! Chris was the same, he'd always be late so I'd tell him earlier!

The notion that Jamaican people (and all non-White people generally) are always late is a very common trope ("Black people time", "African time", "ethnic time" etc.) that does not start or end with Artur. It is a trope I've heard used regularly by people who are not White to describe their own time-keeping or the timekeeping of others. It is also an excuse used by Black fighters within the space, meaning that it is not a stereotype Artur has plucked out of nowhere. Although it is widely seen as harmless (especially when referencing oneself), it does have racist connotations that suggest people of colour are lazy, although that is certainly not what Artur was suggesting; he appreciated John as someone who trained hard and fought bravely, which is why he was so dismayed when John decided to "retire" from fighting to focus his energies on pursuing an access course with the goal of becoming a physiotherapist. So, how can we make sense of this exchange?

It's worth noting that Artur was born and raised in Poland, moving to London over 20 years ago when he was "18 or 19". On moving to London he hustled tirelessly, working in restaurants as a dish-washer, before working as a sous-chef. He did this whilst not only forging a successful career fighting under Muay Thai and kickboxing rules, but also working "on the doors" as a bouncer at many East London bars and clubs. He continued working on the doors for a long time, even after opening Origins Combat Gym in 2005. In attempting to carve out a life for himself, often experiencing

what he described as “racism”, from White-British society, Artur’s life reflects the “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) that occurs in places like East London, where working-class people, migrants and longer-standing Black and Brown British citizens live and work in proximity to one another. As a result, Artur has long been at ease with difference, developing a convivial disposition which reminds us how “non-elite people of all backgrounds show themselves to be at ease with such difference” (Rogaly 2020, ix). The working class multicultural Artur was part of in London was antithetical to his experience growing up in Poland, a largely mono-cultural/mono-racial society:

Artur: In Poland, everyone look like me. In London, everyone look like everyone!

This context is relevant because whilst one might accuse Artur of being racist, it is far more complicated than that. There was no malice in Artur’s tone, he was fondly recalling his times working on the doors. He retains close friendships with many of those doormen and is a very close friend of Chris (mentioned by Artur for also being a poor timekeeper). Chris was a successful Caribbean (though not Jamaican) fighter who came up alongside Artur during the late 90s/early 00s. For years the two of them trained twice daily alongside one another, helping each other get ready for fights, as well as cornering each other when they fought. There are multiple photos of the two of them engaged in these activities adorning the walls of the gym. Today Artur lets Chris take his personal training clients in the gym at no cost (usually personal trainers pay a “rent” fee). Thus, although Artur’s comments may – in some way – draw upon some form of racist logic, they do not contradict the prior assertions of carnal conviviality. Artur lives a convivial life and his comments reflect the messiness that goes hand-in-hand with that. Importantly, this wasn’t a snide comment made behind John’s back. As soon as John walked in (about twenty minutes late!), Artur laughed;

Artur: Finally, he’s here. You’re always late John! I told Amit you’d be late!

John: It’s the busses! I’m ready though!

Artur: It’s that Jamaican timekeeping!

Me and John laugh in bemusement

John was unfazed by this interaction. He simply brushed it off as a relatively insignificant, silly exchange, rather than as something that induced harm. Such comments are mundane and happen routinely within multicultural encounters, requiring navigation from all involved. It reflects the tensions between the existence of latent racisms and something else; something

more positive. Whilst John's dismissal of the incident highlights how people retain an awareness of such realities and seek to manage conflict through understanding where the Other is coming from (socially and geographically), thus enabling greater tolerance of racism and of difference. This example was trivial and banal, reflecting how people regularly engage within the space. These exchanges also cut both ways, with Black fighters often making essentialist comments about/and to Polish fighters; so it is not the case that there is an emergent racial hierarchy with Black people constantly subjected to racism. No Black fighters would situate themselves as victims in this way, and John certainly didn't situate himself as a victim of racial harm here.

Making sense of Filip

Filip is an aforementioned White-Polish fighter in his early 40s. He grew up in "a small town you wouldn't have heard of" (outside of Łódź), before moving to London in his mid-20s, where he picked up work as a labourer on construction sites. He began training relatively late – in his mid-30s – and has since had several amateur fights. He is friendly and social, always offering people a beer after Friday night sparring. He is close friends with several Black fighters, particularly Steve, a Black-Caribbean fighter who has a son the same age as Filip's son. Filip is certainly at ease with difference, revelling in the diversity of the space, which as for Artur, contrasts with his upbringing in Poland.

Filip: There is a lot far-right politics generally in Europe, it is in Poland. I see Polish people on social media make comments. It's mostly on social media. Poland is Catholic country, they not letting Muslims in, blocking the borders against refugees. When I read all that, I am worried going to Poland, what will I see?

Not only does Filip express a willingness to embrace and engage difference, but he also expresses an outwardly anti-fascist (in the sense of being against fascism, rather than an organised anti-fascist) disposition. These declarations were not performative but were genuine and lived in how Filip organises his social world inside and outside of the gym. He does not just go to the gym, train with people of colour and then go home to live a life amidst other White Polish people; he takes the convivial dispositions fostered in the gym outside with him (see Valluvan 2016 also on this). He'll regularly invite me, Fitz and a variety of fighters to his house for barbeques, and is always at social events organised by other fighters.

However, despite the lived embrace of difference as he situates his training partners as a broad "we", who share in sweat, hard work and dedication (Singh 2022, 33–36), Filip is unsurprisingly not immune to drawing upon racial tropes. He was also responsible for one of two uses of the "N-word" within the space (see Singh 2022, 109–113 for direct enquiry), saying it to Fitz as an apparent joke. I emphasise this, not to contradict my wider

argument, but to reaffirm the messiness of multicultural interactions that are neither pure nor perfect:

Fitz: Filip, always gets pissed and will say it in a joke. But, I personally ignore it until it gets too much, and then I'll tell 'im to reign it in ... [Black-Caribbean fighter]

Nobody condoned the use of this language, as within the folk logic of the gym's emergent anti-racism, people universally condemned the use of overtly racist language. However, Fitz's reaction to this was a feeling of disappointment, initial anger and sadness but not really any sense of surprise. He situates this emergent racism as something to live with until it reaches a point where he feels he must intervene, telling Filip to "reign it in". It's worth noting that Fitz is a far superior and much bigger fighter than Filip, so it is not that he was scared in any way to tackle this emergent racism. Interestingly, only two weeks after Fitz shared this with me Filip was in attendance at Fitz's birthday party and nobody said anything about it; they were getting on well, drinking and laughing together like two old friends. Since the incident Fitz, as before, has helped prepare Filip's son for fights, taking him to shows and supporting his progress, and he continues to regularly socialise with Filip outside of the gym. In short, Filip's obviously racist use of the "N-word" was tolerated and overcome with minimal fuss. This of course puts a burden on Fitz to manage this negative experience – which he appears attuned to doing, as when I later asked him how he felt about it all he simply replied; "it is what it is" and shrugged, seemingly not fussed about dwelling on it; as if he is unsurprised by emergent racism, seeing it as something that one must learn to live with.

This incident is reflective of the "atonal infractions – scratches, bumps, crackles and hisses" that are omnipresent during multicultural interactions (Nayak 2017, 290), even in the context of previously forged carnal convivial friendships. Filip is friends with a host of Black fighters, and those friendships mean something to him. His use of the "N-word", in his mind, would have been a harmless drunken joke. This of course does not strip back the potency of a word with racist, violent and colonial history, but is how Filip interprets it, as he maintains not just a convivial disposition, but an outwardly anti-racist (or opposed to racism) worldview, regularly expressing a disdain for far-right politics in Poland and beyond. People were tolerant of Filip's comments, even in their condemnation of them, putting it down to stupidity and cultural misunderstandings, which were accepted due to Filip being a fighter within the space. Steve, mentioned above, shared the following with me, unrelated to the incident itself:

Steve: ... Filip crosses the line. Makes some terrible comments. But if someone in your dysfunctional family had a lack of understanding with different views, where all of their experience had been where those jokes are acceptable, it's

going to take time for the new norms ... We've all done stuff that's not acceptable [Black-Caribbean fighter]

Steve demonstrates remarkable compassion and understanding. His capacity to accept comments he deems as “terrible”, reflects his commitment to the space and the people within it. It also highlights how, as Nayak notes, the fostering of convivial connections requires “deep emotional labour” (Nayak 2017, 299); they are not a given but must be worked upon and constantly negotiated. Such an understanding of the multicultural encounter is antithetical to contemporary liberal manifestations of anti-racism, that seek to dismiss and condemn people for incorrect terminology. Here, Steve and Fitz enact a far more radical form of local politics developed around what they have in-common with Filip; a shared friendship fostered in the gym, resulting in extended greater understanding.

This section sought to highlight the messiness of the everyday. I did this not to contradict my overarching claims, but to re-affirm that there exists no utopia and we must always acknowledge that people are fundamentally messy and complex. Irrespective, both Filip and Artur are undeniably “at ease with difference” (Rogaly 2020, 5), enacting convivial forms of kinship that far transcend mere notions of superficial contact and that are deemed impossible amidst the defeatist logic of ethnic absolutism (Gilroy 1987). Yet, they do so whilst reproducing racisms, because the forms of carnal conviviality and the non-elite cosmopolitanism that underpin this “emerge out of and exist within local contexts where racisms of various kinds are also rife, as well as in relation to a longer British national history of racisms” (Rogaly 2020, 6). In such circumstances, the emergence of racism within these encounters should not be a surprise, they simply reflect the complexity of social life – and how it is negotiated – in the context of the looming shadow of racism and Empire. That still does not mean that race is everything within the social encounter. Here, what matters most is people’s doing, how they interact with one another, what experiences people share and what they have been through together; which is why Steve and Fitz were so indifferent to Filip’s racism and why John didn’t mind the trope about being late.

Conclusion: carnal conviviality & the limits of race

This paper attempted to offer a thorough conceptualisation of “carnal conviviality” in order to reaffirm the complex and myriad ways in which people from a range of social and geographical locations can seek to build lives alongside one another, that are not just proximate but are intimately intertwined. Thus, conceptualisations of conviviality cannot and should not be reduced to simple tentative co-existence, such as merely acknowledging a neighbour before living a segregated private life. Instead, it has to refer to

people's capacity to genuinely live together, to experience intimate entanglement and overlapping, as well as the messiness and potential frictions that accompany this. Within Origins Combat Gym the manifestations of carnal conviviality resulted in people seeing one another as the same, bonded not by supposed racial, ethnic or religious ties, but through bodily training and suffering alongside one another. Such experiences, and the mutuality involved (holding pads for one another, offering support on the gym floor) enabled people to develop deep bonds of friendship that they would not have fostered absent of these experiences of suffering and sacrificing together in the gym.

Rather than representing a bourgeois politics of cosmopolitanism, the production of carnal conviviality re-affirm the existence of what Rogaly would describe as "non-elite cosmopolitanism" (Rogaly 2020), insofar as these were working-class bonds, forged by people who were thrown together in pursuit of their fighting goals. Importantly this carnal conviviality wasn't resigned to the gym itself; people carried these dispositions with them outside of the gym, reorientating their lives around a new-found convivial spirit, living lives that were inseparable from their training partners. Once more, it is worth reiterating that conviviality does not represent the absence of racism, nor does the emergence of racism render conviviality null and void, rather it is reflective of the messiness and complexity inherent within everyday life. Origins Combat Gym was not a utopia, it exists in a social world constituted in the shadow of empire and essential racial thinking, meaning that racism was always lingering. Yet, when racism did emerge it did not – as one might expect – dismantle the bonds of carnal convivial friendship. People found ways to navigate emergent racism, whilst retaining strong bonds of friendship which demonstrates how conviviality and convivial cultures are not a given but must be worked upon (see Nayak 2017).

Although specific to training to fight, the carnal convivial connections I documented could equally have been produced within different settings where people are forced together in such close proximity that differences can be flattened out by virtue of engagement in a mutual task or commitment to a shared goal. Such new, and hopeful social relations must be fostered, but they do also emerge spontaneously all around us, often manifest as everyday forms of working-class conviviality that are "non-elite" (Rogaly 2020) in form and represent people's attempts to see the human in the Other, in ways that bring into question essential notions of racial difference (see also Valluvan 2016; de Noronha 2022).

Yet, there is something inherently localised about the interactions I laid out within this paper, even if my respondents carried their friendships with them outside of the space. As I reflected elsewhere, "no matter what occurs at a local level, fighters are constrained in their attempts to alter the broader materiality of race. Nor can they easily shift the structures of race

that fortify it in the outside world; becoming a fighter does not disrupt racialised labour markets, end racist policing, exclusion or deportations" (Singh 2022, 7). Yet, this does not render my observations redundant, it just emphasises the need to retain an awareness of social structures, even amidst a focus on the everyday. Thus, whilst the everyday interactions my respondents engaged in might not result in the end of race, their carnal convivial friendships highlight emphatically how "race thinking" (Gilroy 2000) cannot capture the complexity of how life is lived, and thus if we want to find ways to live livable lives alongside one another, we must, as Gilroy would urge, work against race, just as my respondents did.

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