The Allure of Mixed Martial Arts: Meaning Making, Masculinity, and Embodiment in Suburbia

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

Kyle David Green

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Douglas Hartmann, Teresa Gowan

AUGUST 2015

© Kyle Green, 2015

Acknowledgements

Thank you friends, family, loved ones, colleagues, co-authors, and intellectual mentors. You have inspired and supported.

Thank you to the Department of Sociology for generous and continued financial support (and being generally great to me). I could not have asked for a better place to spend my graduate years.

Thank you to The Society Pages. I owe my vision of public sociology, my appreciation of the larger discipline, and my passion for podcasting to my time as part of the graduate board.

Thank you to the amazing people who have shared my office and put up with my many approaches to distracting.

Thank you to the people who have shared a table with me at a local coffee shop and put up with my many approaches to distracting.

Thank you to the people who have shared time with me at the library and put up with my many approaches to distracting.

Thank you to my advisers (Douglas Hartmann and Teresa Gowan). You are the reason I am in sociology.

Thank you to my committee (Josh Page and Arun Saldanha) for continued guidance and inspiration.

Thank you to the TASC crew. So this is how a big collaborative project is done?

Thank you to all the people outside of academia who accepted my weird writing hours and constant state of being busy.

Thank you to all the people who shared time on the mat, sweat, pain, blood, and conversation. You inspired me to write a book.

Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to Marsha.

Abstract

This dissertation builds on my six-year ethnographic immersion into the mixed martial (MMA) scene in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan region to contribute to our understanding of pain, intimacy, meaning making, and masculinity. In training alongside men who devote their time to learning MMA, whether for hobby, local and regional competitions, or dreams of "making it big," I move beyond mainstream spectacle and media-fueled public crisis to further understanding of a site where a painful brand of carnal knowledge is exchanged daily. I pursue a classic sociological and anthropological goal of making sense of the seemingly bewildering, explicating the allure of the embodied, violent practice to the communities of men that fill the schools that dot the often-suburban landscape to exchange energy, pain, sweat, and blood with little hope of utilitarian reward. In doing so I expand sociology's theory toolbox through engaging traditions and writers generally overlooked within the discipline.

In each chapter I take seriously a different facet of the appeal of the sites and practice. With each exploration I begin with the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and the carnal sociologists he inspired before encountering the limits of this dominant approach to physical practice. To overcome these limitations I turn to scholars often relegated to the fringe of the discipline and place into conversation bodies of literature that rarely speak to each other. In particular, I draw on affect theory as I discuss the manner that the participants seek to discover their own corporeal limits through painful exchanges; the writings of Georges Bataille to understand an intimacy formed through shared transgressive moments and physical vulnerabilities; and scholars of storytelling as I argue that the discursive and the carnal are mutually constitutive. Taken together, my work not only offers a corrective to theories of embodiment and practice, but also tells the story where the excesses of contemporary American masculinity, in particular contemporary suburban masculinity, reveal themselves in the punches, chokes, hugs, and narrative explorations that take place on the mat.

Table of Contents

Section I. Introductions: What, How, and Why

A Moment on the Mats ………………………………………………… 1

1. Preface ……………………………………………………… 3

Mark's Stories …..……………………………………………………… 8

2. A Longer Introduction …….………………………………………… 9

And Then the Talking Began ……………………………………………… 37

3. Letting the Gym Speak: Fighting to be Affected & Tales from the Mat… 39

Section II. Pain, Intimacy, Community, and Meaning Making

Returning to the Gym/Reuniting with Pain …………………………………… 80

4. It Hurts so It is Real: The Multiple Allures of Pain……………………… 83

Buffering Differences and Muting Annoyances ……………………………… 135

5. Finding Georges Bataille: Intimacy and Community in the MMA Gym 140

Everyone has a story 181

6. Telling Stories and Making Meaning (a choke is never just a choke) 184

Section III. Concluding Thoughts: Playing with Masculinities

Masculine Movements …..…………………………………………… 235

7. Masculine Reflections: Towards Fluidity and Embodiment …………………….. 237

Bibliography ……………………………………………..………… 249

A Moment on the Mats

The grappling coach finished demonstrating the move of the day, a more advanced transition from back control to a choke that involved hooking the other person's leg while they are crouched on all fours, and then sort of somersaulting over them, taking them with you and exposing their back and neck. After a few demonstrations, and again breaking down particular aspects of the positioning of the leg that would make the move work or fail, it was our turn. The instructor divided us into pairs while hitting play on his mp3 player, letting the mid-90s rock signal that the time for talking was over. The pairs were generally chosen by weight and skill. The only exceptions to this was the partnering of the only two women in the class—one a tall, black teenager whose dad brought her to her first class the week before and a smaller white woman in her late 20's who had trained for over two years out on the east coast—and Farid and I. Due to being the only women in the gym, Camille and Laura were almost always training partners. Farid, the lone Arab-American in the gym, was a relative newcomer, and he outweighed me by at least fifty pounds. No one there knew exactly what Farid tipped the scale at as he seems self-conscious of his weight—usually wearing a baggy sweatshirt throughout the class even on a sweltering hot day like this one and possessing the type of stare that dissuades people from asking questions—but guesses usually fell in the 230 pound range.

Farid volunteers to let me drill the move first, getting down on the mat on all fours. This is not a surprise since his talent was only matched by his lack of confidence and whenever he learned a new move he would let his partner figure it out first. The first time, my foot gets caught in his baggy shorts and I manage to aggravate my long injured big toe—a common malady for those training in MMA. I make a joke about how his baggy shorts give him a defensive advantage, and, after he realizes it is a joke and not an accusation, we share a laugh. I try the move four times, feeling like I am only turning him over because he is letting me—no, assisting me. Then, it is his turn. He drills his moves with an unspoken seriousness, getting a little more fluid each time, and always seeking assurance after with a quick "that feel right?". Between the moves, as Farid plays out what he is going to do in his head before moving into action, my attention drifts to the group next to us.

A short, stocky computer programmer with a baggy shirt covering his big belly is laughing loudly with his two partners—a tall classically trained pianist in a form fitting rash-guard and a gangly teenager with unkempt hair who is recovering from a self-described "severe" meth addiction. As I try to follow the piano player's story about getting in a wrestling match at a fancy NYC wedding, Farid's weight brings me back to the matter at hand. Each time he begins the move I feel a sharp ache and get a sense of the impending collapse of my lower back. I focus on tilting my hips forward to better strengthen my posture, hoping he will transition to the roll quickly and not stall with his weight directly on top of me while figuring out how our bodies might connect. The instructor walks over to the laughing group to see if they need help with the move but soon he too is drawn into the story and laughing along with them. He seems much more entertained by the re-telling of the rapidly escalating event—now involving an additional wedding party member, rain and mud, alcohol, and torn dress pants—then by the others groups following his instruction and repeatedly drilling the technique that he had shown.

Again my attention returns to the task at hand as I am flipped over and a strong forearm slides across my throat, lifting up my jaw and finding space to forcefully stop the flow of

blood to my brain. I tap his arms quickly, three times, signaling that the move worked. He releases me and I return once again to all fours, a little slower than the previous time, wishing that I was training with someone much lighter and a little less sweaty, or that the drilling would come to an end. As I wait once again, bracing myself for the impact, I note that the chorus of the Pearl Jam song emerging from the boom box seems strangely fitting for the moment at hand, if a bit clichéd:

> I, I'm still alive
> Hey I, but, I'm still alive
> Hey I, boy, I'm still alive
> Hey I, I, I, I'm still alive, yeah

July 2012 – Immortal Mixed Martial Arts and Grappling Club

1. Preface

The above scene took place at a small mixed martial arts (MMA) school located on the outskirts of a suburban town about a half-an-hour drive from Minneapolis. Sandwiched between an economy hair salon and pet store in a strip mall, the owner dreams of moving to a new location to escape the muffled barks of dogs and passive aggressive emails from the owner of the hair salon who is always exceedingly polite when mentioning that products have a way of falling off shelves when people are slammed into the wall they share. The participants who make their way to the strip mall during lunch hour and after work include a mixture of active and retired affluent business men, lawyers, janitors, traditional martial arts converts, artists, industrial plumbers, college students, and younger, almost-out-of-high school guys looking to eventually compete in the cage. And, while the "fat-burning" kickboxing class draws a number of young and middle-aged women, there is next to no crossover with the MMA and grappling crew.

The following chapters are the result of my six-year ethnographic attempt to take seriously what happens inside the walls of the MMA gym. While I would not claim the label of grounded research or entering the site with blank intellectual slate to be inscribed upon, throughout this project, I let the multiple allures of mixed martial arts guide my theoretical inquisition and extensions. As I immersed myself in the gym, more questions, paradoxes, and theoretical quandaries emerged. Some are rather obvious and will not surprise the reader; for instance, why are people willingly subjecting themselves to something that hurts so much and can lead to permanent damage to the body? Or, is this just some sort of violent reclamation of masculinity project, as popular critics are quick to claim? Other questions emerge from the less expected qualities of the site, such as, why

are there so many stories? Soon my experiences on the mats had me travelling down more abstract theoretical paths: What is the connection between the experience of pain and intimacy? What is the relationship between the physical practice and the narrative? What is the allure of feeling somewhat out-of-place and what can the liminal qualities of the gym help us understand about masculinity? Does the spatial and temporal qualities of the gym help us understand anything about the particular masculinities performed in the site?

In some ways this is a personal story and project. My first exposure to mixed martial arts (MMA) came in 1994, soon after it was brought to the United States by a famous Brazilian martial arts family and an American business man and media entrepreneur. My older brother heard about the seemingly absurd event from other members of the college wrestling team and managed to find the VHS tape for UFC II at one of the local video stores. As a young fan of action movies and video games that pitted exotic fighting styles against each other I was both shocked by the brutality and drawn to the spectacle of the event. And, as many participants of the site were quick to mention in their origin tales, I was enthralled by the ability of the smallest fighter in the competition to dominate large street fighters and martial arts masters without throwing a single punch.

There was something rawer and less rule-bound about this particular practice – an attribute that was central to the rapid surge and subsequent crash of the first wave of MMA. An arena packed with fans screaming in delight as one man pins another down and elbows him repeatedly in the face was at some level different than other sporting options. Even with medical studies proclaiming that boxing, football, and hockey all had greater connections with injury and brain trauma, the aesthetic qualities of MMA

suggested otherwise. Although the overtly bloodthirsty crowd disturbed me, I accepted and, on some level, was even drawn to the violence and blood of contests. It soon became a ritual for my father and his two sons to make the trip to the local video store whenever a new UFC was released.

My interest continued as a fan, a curious spectator, and eventually an academic interested in culture, sport, gender, and the body. I followed the public outcry that led to "blackout" years of MMA when the sport could no longer be found on paper view broadcast and VHS tapes became even harder to find. And, I witnessed the resurgence and massive growth of the sport. When I finally entered the gym as a potential researcher I found myself sharing many qualities with the others who occupied the site and was, at the very least, sympathetic to many of the aspects of the site that I also found deserving of critique. During my time conducting research I continued to negotiate my complicated relationship with the violent practice and the somewhat contradictory feelings I had towards it. I was drawn to the same spectacular violence, power, and drama that caught the attention of famed literary figures including Joyce Carol Oates, Jack London, Norman Mailer, and fans that pack bar and stadium. I was disturbed by the brutal aesthetic that fueled cries to ban the practice and led many within the walls of academia to express disgust or ask me whether the sport's exponential growth was a "good thing" when I shared that I was researching the topic. And, I appreciated the competitive challenge of pitting one's skills against a sparring partner inside the walls of the gym even as I questioned my engagement in the activity during my multiple trips to the doctor as a result of my time on the mats.

The project is also personal in a more academic sense. I first encountered the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant while working on my Masters degree in cultural geography. Here was a theoretical orientation that took seriously physical practice and the seemingly obvious, but too often ignored fact that we possess and are guided by our bodies. Even better, Wacquant's theories were shaped by his brief but passionate love affair with the pugilistic arts. Bourdieu's dense writing and Wacquant's detailed accounts of his sensuous immersion in a boxing gym in South Chicago served as guides as I entered the fields of both sociology and mixed martial arts. In a sense, each of the following chapters is a different story of me encountering the limitations of my intellectual guidebooks and seeking additional theoretical tools and perspectives to better understand my encounters and observations.

Taken as a whole, my exploration of the pain-filled exchanges, forged intimacies, discursive constructions, acts of meaning making, and mixing of masculinities provides insight into the seduction of physical practice and limit testing—all areas far too often ignored in the social sciences. Through sharing stories, observations, and encounters from my physical and intellectual journey, I hope to move beyond the mats and demonstrate the value of theoretical orientations that shift attention to the transgressive, excess-filled, base elements of community as well as the more mundane interactions that occur on the mats. I hope to provide insight into basic sociological questions about what brings group together and how meaning is constructed. I hope to offer a base to understand the rapid growth of pain-based communities, extreme exercise groups, team-building obstacle races, and even natural birth among middle and upper-class women. I hope to apply theories in a manner that demonstrates how they could also be used to understand the

intimacy felt by participants in SM communities, body modification groups, or mosh pits. I hope to offer yet another insight into the "deep play" that perplexed Jeremy Bentham, and has fascinated scholars ranging from Clifford Geertz classic study of the Balinese cockfight (1973), to Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's musings on flow and rockclimbing (2000), and Colin Jerolmack's recent ethnographic exploration of pigeon rearing and racing (2013). And, I hope to offer insight into the manner that mixed martial arts gyms facilitates a transformative bonding that can lead to both the positive and extremely ugly.

Mark's Story

Mark was 5'10, around 165 pounds. He kept his dirty-blonde hair short and dressed in a casual, non-descript style—usually arriving wearing at the gym wearing a zip-up hoodie, relatively new jeans, and skateboard style shoes. He was 28 years old when I first met him, and had just finishing his second year training in MMA. As was the case with many of the men, Mark was reserved he first entered the gym—changing his clothing, unpacking his gear, and exchanging the perfunctory greetings with others. The conversation opened up a little more as he worked to loosen his muscles to get ready for class through some active stretching and light cardio movements. However, after 20-30 minutes of grappling on the ground, trying to choke or joint-lock his opponent while avoiding the same, or exchanging punches and kicks, his eyes would light up and his demeanor would change to something giddier. It was then, lounging on the rubber mat next to pools of sweat that offered a patterned map of what had just transpired, that the talking began.

I did not expect to find so many "Marks" when I first entered a mixed martial arts gym. After six years of research he became an emblematic figure of what drew me to the research site, both as an academic and a participant. By emblematic I do not suggest that he was the best of the best, impressing all around him with his physical skill and devotion to the craft—an icon of what others hoped to find and accomplish. Rather, he was one of those guys that took up space on the mat, but didn't stand out. And, whenever I found my way to a new gym, I would almost certainly find some version of Mark.

Sometimes Mark would discuss his job in graphic design that "paid the bills" but did little else, reminiscing about the artistic dreams he used to have. Other times he would share stories about how surprised his co-workers were when they found out he trained in MMA. It seemed he took pride in not "looking like a cage fighter." For, although he was in very good shape, he was not heavily muscled and on multiple occasions he referred to his deceptive appearance when wearing clothing—commenting that his now long-time girlfriend was very pleasantly surprised the first time he took his shirt off. He also was a frequent member of the group complaints about the "wannabes" who spend their time bulking up in the gym (upper-body only) and wear the flashy, skull-laden clothing from brands that sponsor professional fights—the guys that people associate with MMA but have never actually stepped foot in a gym and do not know how to actually fight. From time to time he would attempt to engage with larger social or political issues. Usually these discussions began by noting that his time learning to fight either helped reveal those issues to him or served as an antidote to whatever ills modern society brings before they spiraled off into grand statements about the modern social condition. Frequently he would expound upon whatever new bodily practice he was experimenting with—kettle bells, Olympic-style weight lifting, yoga, CrossFit for a short period, the occasional experimentation with Yoga, or a Paleo-inspired diet. Often this new form of exercise would provide yet another base for expounding on where our society had gone wrong and why we had found our way to the MMA gym.

As was the case with many of the men at the gym, Mark did not *need* to be in the site and had no plans of reaping financial reward. But he was competitive. And, for brief stretches, his commitment (and skills) would rival local fighters or, at the very least, show the potential to rival the skills of the more committed. These periods of more intense physical commitment were almost always accompanied by verbal reflection that ensured

that those who shared the space took part in building the narrative about his increased time on the mat.

Mark would also often disappear from the scene. Sometimes the absence would be for just a few weeks, and sometimes for as long as a few months. The cause of the absence varied. Sometimes testing out the aforementioned workout fads took up his time and energy, and other times personal matters got in the way. However, more and more frequently, the time off was caused by injury. First it was a knee, then a shoulder, then a wrist, and so on. The injuries were adding up and suddenly the celebratory stories of how MMA taught him to use his body were being infiltrated by concerns of what his body would feel like in ten or fifteen-years. The discussions of new workouts were now replaced with discussions of new methods of recovery— taking ice baths, consuming ginger root, particular stretches, and so on. The last time he left he wasn't sure if he would return. But then, a few months later, I stepped through the gym doorway to find him laying on the mats, rolling up-and-down over a three-foot piece of PVC pipe to loosen his back before a day of light sparring.

Each time he returned he would enter the gym with a chagrinned look on his face, before being greeted warmly by all the people who remembered him from before his time off. And, each time he returned, during that exhausted, sweat-filled period of openness on the mat, he would reflect out loud on the reasons for his return, working through his current motivations with others providing stories of shared experiences and feelings. One time during the post-training openness he had said he realized that it was time to get serious and get to the point where he could take his first fight (a fight that never happened). The next time he had decided that he wanted to get serious about his grappling and maybe even get to the level where he could teach Brazilian jiu-jitsu someday. He explained that he wanted to get back to the basics and had been thinking about the first time he entered the gym—nervous, excited, and inspired by the successes of Royce Gracie. He had never cared about belt ranks and achieving the traditional signs of moving up the hierarchy of belt ranks but suddenly it drove him. Most of the time it was possible to see the influence of whatever available cultural repertoire he was using to justify his current return in the way he spent his time on the mat. In this case, he was suddenly training in the gi (the outfit common to many traditional martial arts including karate, judo, and jiu-jitsu), something he had previously been dismissive of because he did not plan on getting in a fight while dressed in only his "bathrobe."

Another time, he cited health as the driving factor for his return, patting his belly while he shared this new explanation, and not mentioning his previous concerns about his partially torn rotator cuff and surgically repaired knee. Most recently, after nearly a year away, he simply said that he missed it.

2. A Longer Introduction

In just two decades, mixed martial arts (MMA) has experienced a boom—growing from a violent niche competition accurately perceived to have little to no regulation to a global sport televised on major networks. Athletes have gone from working second jobs to support their "profession" to gracing the cover of *ESPN Magazine* and receiving sponsorship from Nike and Gatorade. While it was once difficult to find a place to learn, much less compete in MMA, training schools are now located in most American metropolitan areas. The sport's growth, however, has not come without controversy. Popular media has demonized MMA as dangerous "play" for the maladjusted, and state hearings on sanctioned professional events have seen it described as barely a step above "legalized assault and battery" and containing "extreme violence and brutality" (O'Kasick, 2007; McNeill, 2013).

Yet, within the generally suburban locales in which the training schools are located, this is not the whole story—nor, I will argue, the primary story. Rather, from the moment I entered a MMA gym as a potential researcher and a potential participant, I found a site of overwhelmingly apparent and unexpected openness and intimacy. The mats were filled with reflective men, and the occasional woman, from an array of social backgrounds learning about the limits of their own and each other's bodies through use of painful, martial-arts techniques—an exchange reliant on high levels of trust and a willingness to expose one's vulnerability.[1] Even more surprising was the continuous chatter and dialogue that surrounded the physical practice. In between drills, after sparring, and while

1. I use masculine pronouns to reflect the high percentage of men in my sample. While the number of women participating in mixed martial arts (MMA) is growing, they remain an extreme minority in both competition and gym membership.

getting ready to head home or back to work, members of the gym engaged in weaving together complex, generally masculine, and sometimes contradictory narratives. Commonly these tales were explicit attempts of making sense of their commitment to the practice. Even more often the narratives oriented both outwards to explain society and inwards to connect with their shared experience in the MMA gym.

The intimacy, narrating, and community that accompanies the violent practice remains unexplored and under theorized. For, whether in times of collapse or rapid growth, little attention has been given to the local practitioners of MMA. Critics and proponents alike have instead focused on questions of morality at the national level and economics at the regional level (e.g., Shapiro 2008). Stories have often taken the form of either celebrations of top competitors or moral outrage that conflate all forms of "no holds barred fighting;" discussing brutal fights staged between recently released convicts and unregulated high school fight clubs (Urie, 2008) in the same context as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (the most successful MMA promotion). However, for every Pay-Per-View event or backyard fight club, large numbers of affluent men fill MMA gyms to exchange blows and risks injury after work and during lunch breaks. This provides further indication that the story of MMA is not a simple one of participants seeking a means to an economic end, nor can it be adequately understood as the actions of out-of-control youth and the maladjusted.[2]

---

2. Earning a steady income through fighting is difficult. Fighting careers are short, smaller promotions run by the fighters often lack capital, and larger promotions are notorious for underpaying all but the top fighters. Fighters often fight for free or at a loss to build the reputation necessary to demand larger payment. Most fighters are aware of the difficulties of their career choice and acknowledge that it is in large part a labor of love.

I draw on my six year inculcation into the scene, training alongside men who devote their time to learning MMA, whether for hobby, local and regional competitions, or dreams of "making it big," to move beyond mainstream spectacle and media-fueled public crisis and further understanding of this site where a painful brand of carnal knowledge is exchanged daily. I pursue a classic sociological and anthropological goal of making sense of the seemingly bewildering, explicating the allure of the embodied, violent practice to the communities of men that fill the schools that dot the often-suburban landscape to exchange energy, pain, sweat, and blood with little hope of utilitarian reward. In doing so I seek to not only demonstrate the potential application of theoretical traditions and writers generally overlooked within the discipline but also contribute to our understanding of pain, intimacy, meaning making, and masculinity.

In each chapter I take seriously a different facet of the appeal of the sites and practice, directing me to different bodies of literatures, and entering me in conversation with different groups of scholars as I seek insights into each particular piece of the puzzle; including explorations of the significance of pain, intimacy built on shared transgressions and vulnerability, the abundance of storytelling and the relationship of the stories to the embodied experience, and the gym as temporary escape from suburbia. My follow-the-appeal approach will also lead me to shifts in scale of analysis as I move from actions on the mat, to the community within the gym, to links to the daily experiences of the men.

While I treat each section as an independent exploration into a different element of the site, three underlying sets of questions guide my quest for understanding even as I switch between theoretical lenses and scales of analysis. First, how do these spaces

function? In other words, what do people actually do within these sites and how do they themselves understand their participation. Second, what does training in MMA provide for the participants? Beginning to answer this question is a fundamental step towards making sense of abundant numbers of people, in particular white men, of varied social and economic background choosing to spend their limited leisure hours investing time, money, and energy in a practice where pain and injury is common. And, third, I make links to the geographic and social context through asking how the pain-filled, ritualistic practice fits within the American, suburban landscape.

However, this discussion is to some degree guilty of placing the theoretical cart before the empirical horse. Before continuing on to my research it is worth taking a moment to share a brief history of the rise of 'mixed martial arts' in the United States as a way of providing context for the study as well as the gyms and the participants that fill them.

What is Mixed Martial Arts:

"MMA also easily could be described as MMM, as in mixed martial mayhem -- not that far removed from street-fighting. You put two guys (usually heavily tattooed) in a ring enclosed by a cage, surrounded by a howling mob, and just watch the blood flow as they pummel themselves into submission, or occasionally break a bone or three. That's entertainment?" (Shapiro 2008 - Washington Post)

"Instead of being carnivals of gore, UFC fights looked strangely like ... sex. Almost all fights ended on the ground, one man mounting the other in missionary position, the pair of them wiggling mysteriously along the canvas for five, 10, even 30 minutes. There were few spectacular knockouts. The referee--yes, there was always a referee--stopped many bouts, and in most others, fighters "tapped out," surrendering to mild-looking but agonizing chokes and joint locks. It was not barbarism. It was science." (Plotz 1999 - Slate)

On November 21st, 1993, the American public was introduced to the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and its violent form of combat sport. The competition pitted representatives of different martial arts styles against each other with boxers, Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioners, karate black belts, sumo wrestlers, and Muay Thai specialists all testing their skills in an octagonal cage with the goal of proving their disciplines superiority through forcing an opponent to submit or rendering him unconscious. The event shocked the public with its displays of spectacular brutality and grappling skill, as karate masters removed teeth and consciousness from sumo wrestlers and the smallest competitor, Royce Gracie, dominated his much larger opponents, often without throwing a single punch or kick, by dragging them to the ground and forcing them to submit through an array of choke-holds and joint-locks.

Questions over the morality of participating, watching, and sanctioning MMA (at this time called No-Holds Barred fighting) followed almost immediately. The opposition was led by politicians, including John McCain who labeled the practice as "human cockfighting" (Silverman 1998), and boxing and traditional martial arts communities who sought to ban the sport due to concerns regarding safety of participants. The social outcry led to the temporary blacklisting of the event by all major cable providers (Krauss 2004) and many state and local bans (Varney 2009). The ban led to a time commonly referred to as the "blackout years" where both training schools and spaces for competition remained unregulated and off the grid (Gentry 2002, Plotz 1999). In this case, the lack of regulation and coverage encouraged a shift towards spectacle rather than sport (Varney 2009). Bars would put on events that fighters describe as "freak shows"—massive men were sometimes matched with lightweights in so-called David vs. Goliath battles and

there are accounts of trained fighters taking on multiple volunteers from the audience (Gentry 2002). The lack of venues also contributed to the increase of underground "fight clubs" hosted in basements, cornfields, or abandoned sites (personal communication with local fighters, Snowden 2008).

The sale of the nearly bankrupt UFC to the Vegas-based company Zuffa provided the opportunity to revise the format and seek acceptance among key players in the sports broadcast world. With the introduction of more restrictions, weight classes, and timed rounds came state regulation and increased popularity and visibility.[3] The shift was also marked by a move away from the rather ominous descriptive title, No-Holds Barred, in favor of the now-more apt and socially digestible title, Mixed Martial Arts.

Now, only two decades removed from the first UFC event, the company has become a global enterprise valued at over one billion-dollars (Miller 2008), is broadcast on network television (Sandomir 2011), and has attracted mainstream sponsors seeking to attract the allusive 18-34 male demographic that are drawn to the UFC's particular brand of "perfectly packaged violence" (Wall Street Journal 2009) including but not limited to Budlight, Harley Davidson, Microsoft, Gatorade, Adidas, and Reebok.[4] Of course, even with the rapid growth, social acceptance and understanding lags behind. At the same time

[3] For an excellent overview of the reformation of MMA and the struggle for acceptance see Varney (2010). Garcia & Malcolm (2010) provide a larger scale discussion of the international expansion of MMA as well as its existence in the ever-moving zone between real and sporting violence. It is important to note that these articles tend to overstate the impact of 'sportization'. Even with increased regulation and acceptance, unsanctioned and very loosely monitored cage fights remain surprisingly easy to find.

[4] The UFC has successfully held events in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, England, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Poland, and Sweden. It is important to note that during the height of Japanese promotion of MMA and kickboxing, professional events achieved popularity still yet to be matched in the United States. In 2002 a show cross-promoted by *Pride Fighting* and *K-1* drew 71,000 fans, the largest audience ever assembled for an MMA event. To present the spread of MMA as simply emanating from the United States outward does a disservice to scholarship and delays understanding of the practice.

as the UFC on FOX events draw between 3-6 million viewers (TV by the Numbers 2013), the practice retains elements of a fringe or sub-cultural interest. And, the majority of articles, whether popular news media (e.g., the NYTimes [Wachter 2008] or the Washington Post [Shapiro 2008]), sports magazine, or academic paper, still begin with a lengthy explanation of what MMA consists of and its rapid growth. As will be discussed later, the less than mainstream understanding and acceptance of MMA plays a key role in shaping the gyms and participation.

Most importantly for this story, the boom in visibility led to increased economic viability for sites training members in mixed martial arts (or any of the bodily techniques that proved successful in competition [Downey 2006]) and marked a dramatic shift in the martial arts community. From the first introduction of the UFC to the general public, long held views on martial arts were challenged. The shoddily produced broadcast of the inaugural UFC, in which most fights resembled barroom brawls rather than the stock-reel footage produced in Hollywood called into question the tales of deadly techniques employed by masters that had long been exchanged in dojos. There was no death touch, the one-inch punch made famous by Bruce Lee was not utilized, and chi seemingly had little value. This was a paradigm shift for the combat arts, to employ a Kuhnian use of the term (Kuhn 1962). Martial-arts dojos were forced to reckon with an increasing skepticism and could no longer parade themselves as the universally dominant fighting practice while holding onto traditional approaches and legend alone.[5] This was a simultaneously a

[5] Some participants in the gym described this in terms of a shift from religion, where technical superiority was a matter of faith, to science, where beautiful techniques had to be tested in the cage. This understanding of a more scientific model can be seen in Downey's examination of no-holds-barred fighting as a site of corporeal knowledge exchange that is repeatedly adjusted and improved through painful, physical practice. Adam, one of men that I trained with during my time conducting this study, provides an example of how this rupture in the path of fighting played out

rejection of the reliance on myth and the dramatic commercialization and orientation towards competition that was part and parcel of the sportization of traditional martial arts. [6] People simply understood fighting in a different manner then they had only a few years prior and were asking new questions about how to employ the techniques being taught.[7] Some traditional schools adapted through incorporating Brazilian jiu jitsu, wrestling, and Muay Thai or western boxing to improve their fighting arts. Many traditional martial artists turned to discounting MMA for either being overly brutish or too rule-bound (see Channon 2012), effectively leaving MMA adrift in a sort of violent limbo; critiqued for being too much of a sport from traditional martial arts practitioners and criticized for not being sport-like enough by athletic commissions.

Part and parcel to the paradigm shift was a demographic transition. Older, often affluent, and usually white, men who wanted to learn how to fight "for real" (Gentry 2002, 62) were entering spaces that had been filled by children. In an effort to capitalize on increased demand, old training schools attempted to diversify and new schools opened. The traditional single discipline training sites (often karate or taekwondo) are frequently located in strip malls adjacent to affluent suburbia—a location that allowed them to capitalize on the *Karate Kid* boom of the 1980s where children could learn the discipline

---

for participants. In one of the interviews I conducted at a local coffee shop, Adam told me how after watching some of the early UFC events he asked his old Karate Sensei what to do if he got taken to the ground in a fight. Up to this point he had never before questioned the skills being taught in the gym. When his Sensei's only answer was "don't get taken down" he realized that he was not actually learning how to fight and instead taken part in a system based on legend and faith. He went looking for an MMA gym the next day.

[6] The sportization of traditional martial arts is often, and I would argue rightfully, associated with the globalizing process. However, the sportization can also be observed in the Asian homelands of the respective martial arts practices, e.g., judo (Sato 2013), karate (Nagamine 1976), Muay Thai (Kitiarsa 2005), and taekwondo (Capener 1995).

[7] The rapid shift within the martial arts community could even be viewed in the fight choreography of popular action shows on television (e.g., *Banshee*) and blockbuster movies (e.g., *Fast and the Furious*) where joint-locks and ground-fighting became exceedingly common). This is, unfortunately, a topic that has not yet been systematically studied.

and ‘traditions of the east’. New schools catering specifically to MMA are often located in abandoned warehouse spaces that allow cheap conversion into massive training centers and easy access from surrounding suburbs. In the inner city, the traditional location for boxing gyms, MMA schools remain less common. While there is variation in the activities within schools, all share in serving two basic functions: to transform the bodies of members into functional fighting tools, and to provide a space to experiment with newfound corporeal skills against other members.

An Origin Story:

It is difficult to claim a single site of origin or a moment of birth for MMA. As we will see later, this plays a role in the rather ambiguous qualities of the field and the many stories and worldviews that can be attached to the physical practice. The difficult of making such a claim is in part due to the *mixed* nature of mixed martial arts. Participants train in an array of skill sets with particular geographic origins (e.g., Muay Thai, karate, Greco-roman wrestling, boxing, Brazilian jiu jitsu); however, each carries particular rules about what can or cannot be done (e.g., you cannot punch someone in the face in a wrestling match and you cannot choke someone in boxing match). The difficulty in claiming a singular origin is also due to the primitive quality of a sport organized around two people fighting each other with as little restrictions as socially acceptable and promotionally manageable. This is not the type of rule-set that can be traced to moments of creative inspiration as found in a more structured physical competition like basketball or baseball. In other words, it is hard for anyone to claim that they were the first to come up with the idea of two people fighting while others watch. It is important to appreciate

that the emergence of MMA is a culmination of many different paths of development, rather than something entirely new.

The American version of Mixed Martial Arts or MMA can be traced most directly to the Brazilian combat sport known as *value tudo*, a Portuguese term loosely translated as ‘anything goes’. Vale tudo contests have taken place in Brazil since the mid twentieth century. In their original form, vale tudo contests had no rounds, the outcome of the fight was determined only by knockout, technical knockout or submission and competitors wore no protective equipment while the only prohibited moves were biting, eye-gouging, fish-hooking (grabbing and twisting the cheek with the fingers) and, usually, striking to the groin (Gentry, 2002). Many of the popular accounts of the growth of the sport describe the first Ultimate Fighting Championship as a marketing opportunity designed by the Gracie family to showcase the strength of their grappling-based martial art that had achieved great success in Brazil. This assertion seems particularly fair considering the event was the result of a partnership between Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG), the advertising executive Arthur Davies, and Rorion Gracie, the most prominent proponent of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu in the United States. Most importantly, this historical trajectory attaches submission-oriented fighting to Brazilian, rather than Asian men.

Others have traced MMA’s origins to professional wrestling in Japan that featured real matches between the wrestlers using submission holds and incorporating techniques from karate and judo alongside the fixed matches that we associate with the heavily-scripted and spectacular version of professional wrestling that gained popularity within the United States (Hewitt, 2005). The Japanese professional wrestling leagues also attracted and was influenced by a number of well-known American and Western

European "catch-wrestlers" who developed their own system of brutal system of joint holds, chokes, and submissions to incorporate with traditional folk-wrestling. This version of "real" professional wrestling achieved such success in Japan that in 1976 Muhammad Ali received $6,000,000 to fight the most successful Japanese wrestler of the era in a special rules match (Bull, 2009). Not surprising considering this history, during the rapid rise of MMA, Japan was home to many of the most popular MMA organizations (Yokoyama 2009).

Others have traced the origins of MMA all the way back to pankration, a Greek form of wrestling introduced to the Olympics in 648 BC. In pankration, the most popular event in the Olympic Games and across the Hellenic world, the combatants combined boxing and wrestling with the goal of winning by knocking the opponent unconscious or forcing him to submit (Gentry 2002). While the rules varied from city to city, ancient accounts suggest that commonly the only rules of the sport disallowed biting and eye gauging. According to Tony Perrottet, biting and scratching was common and "the more brutish participants would snap opponents' fingers or tear out their intestines," and competitors were celebrated for accepting death rather than surrendering (Perrottet 2004, 36).

Outside of MMA lineage tracing, the mixing of fighting techniques has historical precedence: different combat and martial arts have been in existence since Ancient times. As the development of the martial arts were predominantly for the purpose of warfare, a degree of hybridization has always existed in the form of adapting and borrowing elements of different fighting styles in order to develop a more effective form of combat that would improve the chances of victory on the battlefield (Jones 2002). This

hybridization can also be found in particular martial arts traditions. For instance, in examining the international evolution of combat sports in the 1900s, Sanchez-Garcia and Malcolm point out how Eastern and Western combat disciplines became co-mingled when Japan opened up to the West after developing in relative isolation (2010).

It is safe to say that the practice can be justifiably traced to a number of previous forms of combat sport and their respective locations. It is also safe to say that the truth falls somewhere in between—although attempts to connect the modern practice to the brutal Ancient Greek sport seem particularly precarious. I share this rather muddy origin story in part because it contributes to the currently amorphous nature of the field, which as will be further explored in the later chapters of this text, in particular *Chapter Six,* which I orient around the storytelling in the gym. Appreciating the lack of a clear origin is also an important step to deconstructing the efforts by practitioners or promoters to promote a particular historical path and make links to specific populations. As Michel Foucault famously argues in his lectures on race and biopower (1997), one must pay particular attention to discursive constructions of legitimacy through connections to the "right" populations. When effort is made to trace modern MMA back to Ancient Greece, a specific story is being told about what type of society celebrates combat. This is also made most apparent when legislators seeking to maintain the ban on MMA link the practice to the gladiatorial combat of an about-to-fall Ancient Rome, the dangerous "streets" of Rio de Janeiro, or dark alleys where drunken bar patrons throw down, rather than the martial arts traditions of East Asia, or amateur wrestling, historical paths more respected by the gentry and the sporting world. Similarly, when Dana White, the outspoken figurehead of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, declares, "I don't care

what colour you are, I don't care what country you're from. We're all human beings, fighting's in our DNA. We get it. And we like it" (Kelleway 2014), he establishes a particular discursive framing of the growing popularity of MMA.

One must also pay particular attention to "experts" who ignore the many threads that led to the emergence of MMA to justify overly-simplistic claims about the masculine and racist nature of participants and fans whether in popular media, on the senate floor, or within academic journal (e.g., Hirose & Pih 2009).[8] Again the selection of a particular origin tale underlie and reveal key assumptions about the nature of the physical practice, as will be explored in chapter seven.

Why an Academic Analysis of Mixed Martial Arts?

In addition to the immediate questions and paradoxes that drew me to the practice, the local mixed martial arts gyms provide me the opportunity to study a newly emerging and rapidly growing gendered community that is oriented around a violent physical practice. I do not suggest that mixed martial arts is a completely unique case study and therefore worthy of research simply due to its existence and the lack of research on the phenomenon. I agree with Robert K. Merton here that "idle curiosity" alone is an inadequate justification for sociological research on any topic (2002). Rather, I argue that an ethnographic study of these communities gives chance to explore the allure of physical and transgressive experiences while also shifting attention to the manner in

[8] Hirose and Pih's aforementioned article (2010) offers an example of how a particular origin story can be employed to justify an otherwise weak argument. In this paper, Hirose and Pih ignore the popularity of striking martial arts in Japan, the centrality of Brazilian jiu jitsu, and the dominance of American wresting. The inclusion of any of the three complicates their division of the hegemonic Western striker and feminized Asian submission artist as well as the relationship between regional masculinities and interpretations of fighting styles. They also choose to ignore the hybridization of fighting styles that has occurred throughout the history of martial arts.

which meaning is constructed in and through embodied cultural forms. Due to the exaggerated qualities MMA possesses—an extremely physical, violent, and hypermasculine aesthetic, a rapidly changing field, a shifting demographic among participants, practitioners with different goals and skill levels training side-by-side—the site presents an excellent opportunity to examine how men understand and engage in the construction of masculinity, and contrast the feeling of being exhilaratingly out of place to other elements of their daily suburban lives. And, because of the relative youth of the practice it is possible to witness the sedimentation of the field and construction of the narratives about what MMA is both by participants at the local level and the UFC and other MMA companies at the national (and now global) level.

While I save my review of the bodies of theory I engage with for the individual chapters, the nature of study is such that theorizations of the body underlie every chapter even as there are no chapters devoted to the topic alone. That we have bodies, and therefore are embodied beings, would be a rather unsatisfying conclusion, especially considering that the point has been repeatedly established since the late 1980s (although swaths of scholars have managed to ignore the trend). Instead I *begin* from a perspective that we touch and are touched, that we smell and are smelled, that we create and exhaust energy, that a conversation involves the feeling of speaking of listening, and that we extend and contract. Each chapter takes this underlying understanding in a different direction and to a different conclusion. The focus on the material body manifests in the following chapters in at least four specific manners. First, I always treat humans as feeling, urge-driven, corporeal creatures when attempting to understand the experiences they seek out, why they do so, the meaning attached to them, and the lessons learned

from participation. Secondly, I explore the relationship between practice, discourse, and embodiment rather than remaining at the textual level. Or, to state this more clearly, how larger ideas are filtered through the felt experience, how stories come to be attached to particular physical pursuits, and how the feeling of participating in those physical activities shapes, guides, justifies, and even generates story. Strangely, this connection is rarely examined from both those who prioritize narrative and those who prioritize the phenomenological. Third, it is the embodied experience of receiving and giving pain that provides a basis for participants to "know themselves" and the encounter others. Fourth, it is the transgressions of corporeal limits that generates intimacy in the MMA gym.

This necessarily corporeal emphasis also offers an important correction to studies of both sport and masculinity. The lack of the embodied experience in academic examinations sport seems somewhat paradoxical considering that sport is necessarily about bodies performing and in action, and other areas of the discipline turned increasingly towards the body from the late 1980s through the early 2000s. The silence is even more deafening, for in muting the feelings of engagement, the researcher reduces what is the central allure of the sporting act.[9] Writing from a disembodied starting point allows easy critique but little understanding—the 'Deep Play' is understood from Jeremy

[9] It is important to note there have been approaches that moved towards appreciating the excitement of engaging in sport. Notably, Norbert Elias provides a framework appreciating the desire to engage in an activity of this sort. However, while his work provides a social model it lacks in empirical examinations.
Understanding sport sites as a liminal space also provides this opportunity. However, studies, in particular American studies, rarely draw on this framework and those that have tend to treat sport as an escape. While I can see the attraction of this framework, I believe it is the connections between the liminal space of the MMA gym and the day-to-day that are particularly fascinating. Lyng's edgework (1990) provides one approach to this; however, as Newmahr (2011) reminds us, Lyng falls into the same masculine understanding of edgework as the participants he researches and removes emotions other than adrenaline and the quest for excitement. As, I explore in later chapters, the local MMA gyms provides a location for men to work, and rework, and envision, and re-envision, what manhood means, and to do it in an ongoing way that allows them to relate that to very specific concerns that unfold in daily life – and this is part of the appeal (for both them as participant and me as researcher).

Bentham's perspective (an inconceivable waste of energy and time) rather than as an important cultural performance, as Clifford Geertz would claim (1972), or an important community forming moment as Emile Durkheim, Victor Turner, and Georges Bataille would all suggest.

Similarly, studies of masculinity have remained removed from the experiential and embodied. Unlike feminist theory, that has already gone through a wave of taking seriously phenomenology, and a wave of scholars trying to both critique and build upon the ideas of the Merleau-Ponty inspired theorists, studies of masculinity remain at the textual or dramaturgical level. This results in a rather sterile and cleanly determined picture of social relations—the joys, desires, doubts, fears, confusions, and bodily reactions do not exist.[10] And, as Evers (2006) reminds us, there is often a marked difference between "what men say, and what they do and feel in the heat of the moment" as well as between "what ought to be done and what is done". In short, there remains a lot of work to get at how masculinity is done, and what bodies feel like as men play sport, work, learn, and enter into relationships.

Studies of sport and masculinity also share a history of scholars limiting the reach of their work by treating the respective object of study in an overly bounded manner. Sport sociology has a long history of treating the practice as worthy of study in itself (Karen and Washington 2001). Too often this results in a thorough explanation of how X (race, class, gender, professionalization, training) operates within a specific sporting context but fails to make any claims about what sport teaches us about how X operates or how sport plays a part in generating the social understanding of X (Carrington 2010).

[10] Pascoe's *Dude, You're a Fag* (2007) remains one of the few texts to capture the less-determined and set elements of masculinity as well as the work performed by young men to figure out how to perform the 'proper' version of masculinity.

Studies of masculinity have too often reduced RW Connell's influence to justifying a series of examinations of males fitting, and maintaining, *a particular* masculinity. And, since RW Connell has arguably influenced studies of masculinity more than all other scholars combined, this is a problem. Part and parcel of the dominance of Connell's 'masculinities' is that the relationships between men of different social backgrounds sharing the same space have not been adequately explored. Within the gym I have encountered a whole gamut of 'masculinities' ranging from the hardened Navy Seal, to the yoga obsessed lawyer, to the rifle-shooting country boy, to the New Agey IT consultant. One of the potentially illuminating qualities of the MMA gym is the mixing of men with differing levels of skill, and with different goals of participation. This forces an examination of what happens when men with very different understandings of masculinity and differing expectations are placed in rather intimate relationships. Similarly, this provides the opportunity to examine shifting performances and feelings during movement between fields that support different variations of masculinity.

My dissertation addresses these inadequacies through giving attention to the practice itself and the affectual allure of the gym, and then working outwards to examine the geographic location of the sites, the ways that the participants in the site engage in place making, the direct interactions of men from different walks of life, and the way men resolve potential contradictions between their general habitus and the specifics of the field. I also pay attention to the way the gym provides a site to filter, perform, and explore mainstream discourses on masculinity, including the UFCs presentation of the relationship between men and fighting. This orientation will help avoid the too common trend of masculinity appearing as focus, cause, and effect and help me ask the basic

question, what makes these actions 'masculine' in this particular context and why are the sites filled almost exclusively with male-bodied people. These questions are particularly relevant in this site, as many of the participants who occupy the gyms do not fit the mold that prior literature would predict. I also diverge from prior work in emphasizing how these unexplored qualities may be a significant part of the seductive pull of the MMA gym.

Literature on Mixed Martial Arts:

MMA has attracted recent academic gaze; however, publications remain minimal. The majority, as Spencer (2013) critiques, has been conducted predominantly from an Archimedian perspective, giving little attention to the lived experience of the MMA fighters (e.g., Hirose and Pih 2010; Van Botttenburg and Heilbron 2006; Buse 2006). Many of these studies are concerned with developing an understanding of the contested place MMA has within the sporting world and how its emergence was situated within the wider socio-historical developments of sport in the West (e.g., Van Bottenburg 2006; Garcia and Malcolm 2010). In doing so the majority of the participants in the MMA gyms have been ignored. Strangely, the popularization of MMA through the Ultimate Fighting Championship has also gone virtually without examination. This leaves unanswered the most fundamental question, "why are people seeking out and spending time and money in sites like this?".

Notable exceptions to this trend include Downey (2007) who explores the transmission of bodily knowledge and Spencer training alongside fighters to understand the "body callusing" undergone to produce the proper *habitus* (2009) and masterfully

reveal the rhythmic and sensory experiences of the gym (2014). However, while Spencer does a good job accounting for the training a fighter goes through to prepare their body for the violence of a cage-fight, little to no effort is made to engage with the discursive or understand the meaning of making bodies fight-ready for the people engaged in the habitus-forming actions. Abramson and Modzelewski (2010) differ in their efforts to move beyond the emphasis on professional competitors to understand the allure of the sport for the white, middle-class practitioners. Their conclusion that the underlying morality of the MMA subculture appeals by allowing middle-class participants to realize many of the ideals celebrated in the United States including meritocratic success and "voluntary communities" is an important contribution to the research on MMA participation but remains limited to participants with competitive goals.

Others have focused on the gendered qualities of MMA. Hirose and Pih (2010) argue that MMA is a site of hegemonic masculinity, where a standup, brawling style is seen as the way 'real' men fight while the loser suffers the risk of emasculation. Their argument is compelling and theoretical framing convincing; unfortunately, the articles empirical basis and engagement with MMA is sloppy at best, and intentionally misleading at worst.[11] Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe (2011) reveal the "backstage" emotion work necessary to cope with the fear of entering a cage fight while simultaneously maintaining an intimidating and confidant exterior. While the Goffmanesque approach fits well to the site, their contribution would be unsurprising to any scholar that has read the work of RW Connell, in particular, *The Men and The Boys*

---

[11] In the course of my ethnographic work, I have witnessed an appreciation for all aspects of fighting, and entering the cage is seen as an act of valor, win or lose. Furthermore, as Spencer argues, "viewers are now more informed of what goes into becoming a MMA fighter. In addition, with the increased infusion of American style freestyle wrestlers into MMA, there is an increased appreciation for ground styles amongst fans and competitors alike" (2013, 18).

(2001), West and Zimmerman's often-cited "Doing Gender" (1987), or played in a competitive sport.

Most recently, Weaving (2014) has explored the fine line that women must tread through in an examination of the UFC's marketing of Ronda Rousey, the most popular female fighter, and Mierzwinski, Velija, and Malcolm (2014) use interviews to understand women's experience in the MMA gym. Both offer important first steps toward answering the call for greater engagement with the experience of women in MMA (Paradis 2014).

In focusing on the serious competitors and the fans, the hobbyist, falling somewhere between the two, has been ignored—a trend that follows the professional focus of previous research on combat sports (e.g., Sugden 1987; Wacquant 2003). However, it is the hobbyist that provides revenue to the gym, serves as training partner for those who dream of reaching higher levels, and shapes the meaning of the practice. And, it is the hobbyist that exemplifies Clifford Geertz's "deep play" (1972)—investing time, energy, pain, sweat, and blood with little hope of utilitarian reward. Taking seriously both the hobbyist and fighters calls for an appreciation of the loosely defined nature of the site, the formation of community, the meaning-making that occurs, and how that becomes a key element of the allure of the practice. The emphasis also forces the researcher to take seriously the violent, physical nature of the site—something easily ignored when focusing on the practice almost strictly as athletic pursuit.

A Case for a Non-Hierarchal Model

Before ending this introductory chapter I would like to briefly discuss the aforementioned

format of the dissertation. My goal is to have each chapter exist independently—each operating as a freestanding exploration of a particular element of the allure and each pushing a different theoretical conversation. While I have arranged the chapters in a manner that builds progressively outwards in scale from the most embodied elements to engaging with the larger suburban context and stories that take the meaning of what takes place on the mats far beyond the gym walls, the chapters do not explicitly reference each other or require insights from previous sections. In other words, there is no clear heirarchy or move towards a totalizing theory. The earlier chapters offer beginnings, endings, and theoretical contributions of their own and are not building towards a stunning conclusion that provides a cap to the grand narrative arc.

From a pragmatic perspective, this format allows readers to choose the order that they engage with my work based upon their own theoretical and topical interests. If a reader comes to this text interested particularly in my argument for a more fluid and spatially oriented understanding of masculinity then they should begin with *Chapter Six* and *Chapter Seven*. If they are interested in pain and vulnerability, *Chapter Four* offers a better point of entry.

More importantly, I write in this manner as a result of letting the site itself, in particular, the *mixing* elements of mixed martial arts, guide my writing. In the moniker "mixed martial arts," the mixing refers to the utilization of techniques from a wide array of martial arts disciplines. However, with the combining of martial arts, participants also place in contact, and *mix*, different traditions, regions, and meanings that are attached to the physical techniques. Even further beyond the more literal interpretations of mixing, the site also facilitates the meeting of a spectrum of social backgrounds, multiple tenants

of masculinities, divergent paths that led to the mat, competing and contrasting justifications for participation, and different goals within the field. And, finally, within gym, the multiple allures that make up my chapters are also brought into contact and woven together.

To further complicate the matter, the term *mixed* is itself rather misleading, as it suggests past action. More accurately, although admittedly more awkward, would be the title of *mixing* martial arts; all of the above juxtapositions are continually in the state of contact, combination, and connection, but never fully processed and synthesized. This is not only true of the various martial arts disciplines and techniques, but also of the various motivations and allures. For instance, not everyone is drawn equally to all of the elements of the site. For some, the escape from suburbia seems most important, others clearly are drawn to the performance of masculinity, and still others are seduced by the painful brand of play. Conversely, not everyone is drawn to the gym to experience risk or physical masculinity, not everyone needs to find community, some engage in other practices to "encounter their limits", and not everyone is an active participant in the meaning making. Even within the narrative construction that I explore in chapter eleven and twelve, the stories that provide high levels of discursive charge to the practice for some, may do little for another.

I hope that this approach also offers a contrast to studies of gender that use masculinity as the starting point, the topic of study, and the conclusion. Far to commonly, studies within the umbrella of masculinity studies offer us the circular argument that men are people who act masculine and masculinity is what men do. For example, a hypothetical argument about MMA that would fit this tautological mold is that MMA is a

masculine practice because the majority of practitioners possess male bodies, and male bodies are attracted to MMA because it is a masculine practice. Therefore, every symbol, feeling, and performance related to MMA is necessarily always already about masculinity and should be read through this lens.

In presenting independent chapters that juxtapose, place in contact, allow mixing, but neither hierarchize nor homogenize, the focus remains on the practice, the gyms, and the allures. While I draw inspiration from classic ethnographies that build a narrative around central characters, this is not my approach. Readers will learn some details about the people who occupy the site, and some characters will end up with more screen time than others. However, this story is not about them. Rather, much like a person entering the gym, they will be exposed to a wide-array of affects including brief sensory moments with the people in the site. This is not a series of biographical tales of the most entertaining participants who take up space on the mats that I happened to spend time. This is a story of the allusive allures that drew them all to the site to share blood, sweat, and words with each other.

Similarly, this is not a story about me. While I fully immerse myself in the site as a way to gain both access and understanding, this is not a text crafted around the challenges I faced, the way I overcame them, the way the site accepted me, and the lessons I learned through doing so. This can be a useful narrative device, as seen in sociology success stories like Sudhir Venkatesh's widely-read *Gang Leader for a Day* (2008) or in Longhofer, Golden, and Baiocchi's effort to discover the qualities of the rare sociological writing that extends beyond disciplinary walls (2010). However, in this particular case, the novelty is lacking, as it has repeatedly employed by both scholars and popular writers

in studying the pugilistic arts. A short, but no means comprehensive list of popular and academic author's entering the carnal worlds of the boxing and MMA gyms include, but are no means limited to Loic Wacquant's journey into the urban boxing gym (2003), Matthew Polly and Sam Sheridan's respective paths to an MMA fight (2012 and 2007), George Plimpton sparring Archie Moore (1977), Paul Galico being knocked out by Jack Dempsey for the sake of a story (1937), Joel Stein's entrance into the cage to demonstrate his manhood to his son, and most recently Jonathan Gottschall's aptly-titled book *The Professor in the Cage*. Even as the resulting texts offer valuable insight, they are filled with moments of self-indulgence and self-congratulation as page upon page is dedicated to establishing that few men of their type—white and well-educated—dare enter such a physical space. Perhaps most disappointing, is that in all cases, a more reflexive engagement of why the gym is so seductive to the author himself would have been a particularly useful and compelling substitution for the many words celebrating being accepted by such a rough-and-tumble group. In contrast, my experiences are shared as insights but not celebrations. I am affected by many of the same seductions as the others who train beside me (and the aforementioned authors). My encounters illustrate, sometimes guide, and often introduce but are never *the* story.

The Chapters

My dissertation can be divided into three sections. In the first section, *What, How, and Why,* I include the preface, an introduction, and a chapter devoted to methods. It is a bit late to summarize the preface and introduction, so instead I will just say, I hope you enjoyed them and found them somewhat useful and compelling. In the methods chapter, I make two arguments through explaining two fundamental methodological decisions. First,

I choose to train in mixed martial arts rather than conduct the research as an observer. To do so, I draw on the work of carnal sociologists and affect theorists. However, unlike scholars in these two respective academic camps, I also argue for the value of treating the narrative and discursive as a key part of the carnal experience. Second, I argue for the importance of site-based interviews. By conducting interviews on the mat, I allow the place itself to affect the participants and elicit responses. This choice offers a middle-ground of sorts between interview and ethnography (a recently heated divide—see Jerolmack and Khan (2014)), while taking seriously the importance of place to understanding identity and performance.

I include three chapters in the second section, *Pain, Intimacy, Community, and Meaning-Making*. This section is where my most valuable empirical and theoretical work is located. I orient *Chapter Four* around the multiple roles that pain plays for participants in the site. In particular, I examine how pain ensures participants of the "realness" of the practice, provides an avenue to discover one's own limits, and facilitates an encounter with another in a vulnerable, exposed state. In exploring the multiple unexamined roles of pain, I illustrate the value of employing an affect-oriented approach rather than the more dominant disciplinary approach of carnal sociologist. I also offer a corrective to affect-theorists by also exploring the moments where the limits of the body are enforced rather than being caught up in the excitement of pleasure and flow. In *Chapter Five*, I draw on the under-used theorist, Georges Bataille, to explore how the transgressive elements of the site helps build intimacy between the men exchanging sweat, touch, pain, smell, microbes, hair, and blood. Here I follow the site in calling for an appreciation of allure of the liminal and excessive and offer an alternative reading of the Durkheimian sacred and

profane. In the final chapter of this section, *Telling Stores and Making Meaning* or *a choke is never just a choke,* I explore the relationship between the abundant stories told in the site and sensory experiences that take place on the mats. The interplay between the two is essential to understand the meaning making process and the manner that potentially contradictory tales and fragmented bits of discourse work together to provide significance to the shared carnal experience. In exploring the many tales told on the mats, this chapter also introduces connections to larger discursive themes and bodies of knowledge that the participants bring to the gym and use to extend their experience outwards.

In the concluding section of this dissertation, *Playing with Masculinities and Dangerous Intimacy,* I offer two short reflections and extensions. First I look more specifically at the allure of performing masculinities different from what participants perform in other aspects of their life and interacting with men from different social backgrounds. Here I specifically place the project within the contemporary historical moment and ask to what degree the men entering the site should be viewed as engaging in a project of reclaiming masculinity (as has been in vogue in recent academic discussions of fashion, gun ownership, and sport fandom). I then conclude the dissertation through a discussion of the recent controversy surrounding violent actions of well-known members of mixed martial arts community as a way of explicitly engaging with the "good" and "bad" that the mixed martial arts gym facilitates. I argue that the prior chapters help us understand the significance of the site for the men who occupy the mats. Precisely because of the seductions of the site, the intimacy created through

transgression, and opening for meaning making, the owners and trainers have a profound ability to influence the participants for better or worse.

I precede every chapter in the dissertation with a short vignette to not only introduce the topic but also allow the reader insight into qualities and moments that inspired the theoretical and methodological choices that guided my exploration. I also hope that these chapters provide the reader a more experiential encounter with the mixed martial arts gym.

And then the talking begins…

I finish watching John explain a few adjustments that can be made to the hook kick to increase the fluidity of the technique and increase the power generated before returning over to the sparring side of the mat. It is not a technique I could ever imagine using so I let the others who more interested in the flashy, movie-style approach start practicing on the standing thai-bag. The rhythmic thud of their kicks following me as I find an area to sit down and begin some light stretching and movement to stay warm and keep my muscles loose.

Jim is standing above me shadow boxing in the mirror, working his jab and marching forward, head bobbing right and left to avoid where the imaginary return punch would come, “wanna go”?

Me: “gloves?”

Jim: “yeah, we don’t work standup enough.”

Although this was the choice I was hoping for, I would have breathed a sigh relief if he chose to just work just wrestling and jiu-jitsu. I am comfortable grappling but still experience fear and nervousness when striking is involved. It seems more real. I am also, without a doubt, a much better grappler and adding punches and kicks takes the training further outside of my control. Jim is one of the people who goes a bit rough no matter whether it is just drilling a technique, grappling, sparring, or going all out. It isn’t that he is out of control, rather he seems particularly competitive and demonstrates no hesitation at inflicting moderate level of pain on his training partner. As he states (on multiple occasions) in regards to grappling, ‘I am slower so if you try a fancy submission the only thing I can do is slam the fuck out of you’. This isn’t what a semi-professional golfer, with a reliable car, and a family he is proud of is supposed to be like is it?

I feel a bit tense as I wrap-up my hands. The process gives me time to relax a bit and think about my strategy for the sparring that was about to occur. There is something meditative in trying to get the perfect tightness on the wraps--tight enough to provide wrist support and protect the knuckles but not so tight that blood flow is cut off. Wrapping down, I bite down on my mouthpiece and pull on my MMA-style gloves, that are now overly snug with the wrap below them. We find a section of the mat where we will not interfere with Jonah or Kevin who are also sparring. It is clear Kevin and Jonah have worked together frequently and are at a more comfortable and technical level. They move fluidly and exchange strikes at an intensity that lets the other know that they made a mistake but leaves little risk of getting hurt in any serious way, something that is strong possibility with the small gloves we are wearing and activity we are engaging in. Their intensity picks up when the action is on the ground, but the punches are still muted.

Jim and I nod at each other, slap our gloved hands together and begin. It is clear that Jim’s greater experience sparring has given him greater confidence in hitting and being willing to hit. He confidently marches forward, much like he was in the mirror, looking for the opportunity to exchange punches and land a straight right or his favorite punch, a left hook to the body. In contrast, I hesitate to be hit, rarely commit to my strikes, and either back away or immediately clinch and go for takedown, pulling him on top of me or trying to execute a trip to end up on top. On the ground I am able to threaten him with variety of submissions but find myself becoming exhausted quickly. I cannot maintain the calm, even breathing I am able to have when only grappling. The fact that a mistake might

result in a blow to the head or body, even if not with thrown with the intention to injure, is enough to make my heart rate rise. I am soon picking my moments. When he postures up to create distance between our bodies or finds enough balance to throw a punch, I go at full speed and find strength to pull him back and down and avoid a stinging shot to my face. I breathe deeply and try to conserve strength when I am in safe position, for instance on his back or with him on top of me with my legs and arms wrapped tightly around his body, trapping him to my chest. There is a constant shift between moments of unspoken mutually agreed upon rest and moments of struggle at these points. During these moments of temporary safety and closeness I can feel his chest expand as he takes deep breaths and my rashguard begins to absorb the sweat that has now soaked through his old grey college t-shirt.

I'm better at moving between positions than going for submissions and sometimes I find myself hesitating to aggressively go for a choke or joint-lock. However, with Jim, the threat of the punch helps me push past my unnecessary restraint—especially when he catches me directly in the nose, making my eyes water, during a moment where I think I am safe. Each time I submit him he shakes his head, we catch our breath, exchange a nod, perhaps a word or two, stand up, hit the knuckles of our gloved right-hands together, and start again.

He is slowing but also becoming more aggressive--throwing single shots but throwing them with power as he seeks that one clean strike to end our sparring on a clear positive note. At one point he catches me in a hip-toss and my breath is knocked out of me as we hit the floor and his full weight lands directly on me. I try to ignore the pain in my ribs and again hold him close while I regain my breath. My body has adapted since I first entered the gym and no longer goes into shock at the impact of being thrown to the ground. When he tries to tighten the headlock he has on me, I manage to squeeze out the backdoor, my ears and nose being crushed along the way. As soon I make it back to my feet I am caught with a strong leg kick—his shin digging into my thigh. Jim doesn't kick much but he committed to this one. It stuns me and I feel the dull pain work its way deep into the muscle.

Without thinking I lunge forward, any pretense of proper technique long gone, grabbing him around his hips and dragging him down. As I try to control his body, get on top, and find a place to stall, he manages to get both of his feet on my hips and he shoves me back. As I regain my balance he scrambles up again. We each look at each other and without speaking, lower our guards, knowing that the last frenzy took all of our remaining energy.

I sit on the ground in the butterfly stretch position, rubbing my leg where it is already beginning to tighten up from the kick. He sits next to me on a folding chair taking deep breaths, arms behind his head to open his chest. Both of us seem content with what had just transpired and are in no rush to move. Our big smiles seem at odd with our exhaustion and physical suffering. The talking begins…

3. Letting the Gym Speak: Fighting to be Affected & Tales from the Mat

This is my methods chapter. In this chapter I will offer insight into basic logistical decisions I made during the course of the research process as I grew to have a better sense of how the field operates and what questions I wanted to ask. However, a chapter that is purely composed of the nuts and bolts of entry into the field, shared interview guides, and discussions of analytic approaches is not only an effective remedy for insomnia, only suitable to be shamefully hidden away as an appendix to the book, but also effectively masks the manner that methodological decisions are always already tied to larger theoretical understandings of the object being studied, of the relationship of the researcher to the field, and of the larger construction of knowledge and goals of research. With this in mind, I also use this chapter to discuss the guiding bodies of theory that shaped my key methodological decisions as well as the potential methodological contributions that I make.

First, I introduce carnal sociology, non-representational theory, and auto-ethnography to argue for the value of immersion into the community and practice in question. Authors who claim membership to one of these three respective bodies of literature rarely acknowledge the existence of scholars from within the other two. In bringing together these bodies of literature, I am guided by my desire to best understand the potentially counter-intuitive allures of participation, a task that requires drawing out the sensual qualities of the lived experience that are often pushed to the margins of academic writing. Placing the three bodies of literature in conversation with each other effectively draws out their particular strengths and limitations.

Second, while discussing the previous limitations of these approaches, I suggest the potential value of the carnal- and affect-oriented approaches for understanding the stories told in the site. Employing this methodological approach to an area often studied as disembodied text reveals the mutually justificatory relationship between the narrative and the experiential. This effectively shifts meaning-making from the realm of textual to the embodied.

Third, building on my interest in the telling of stories, I argue for the value of conducting interviews on the mats and in the gym. Not only does this take advantage of the openness through sharing in the physical practice, but it also elicits more nuanced, sensual, and representative narratives. As with photo elicitation in which pictures are used to evoke information, feelings, and memories (Harper 2002; see also Rose 2011), the smells, sounds, and textures of the gym guide and draw out stories and memories. Conducting interviews *in situ* offers an alternative approach to interviewing that allows for affective reflection stimulated by the space itself and reduces the prevalence of the "attitudinal fallacy" in which situated behavior is erroneously inferred from abstracted and decontextualized verbal accounts. The approach also offers an entre into recent, rather polemic, methodological discussions (see Jerolmack and Khan 2014) that place ethnography and interviews in opposition with the goal of determining the methodological approach that offers the greatest ability to predict behavior. In the course of my research, I found that site and practice-based conversations offers a powerful tool to gaining insight into the construction of meaning around the lived experience—one of, if not the most, fundamental goals of ethnographic work—and offered something

between conducting lengthy interviews in a local coffee shop and the carnal approach that silences storytelling through emphasis on corporeal training.

Taken together, the methodological discussions serve as a friendly reminder to take seriously the relational and place-based nature of meaning-construction and the lived experience. While this claim is by no means new, too often sociological writing operates at the level of structural forces or the individual agent. Too often we seek to label, categorize, and make static. And, too often it is the relational or place-based aspects of social theory that is forgotten as we seek inspiration from the influential theorists of the field—for instance, habitus becomes a concept that operates exclusively at the level of the individual (Paradis 2015), the influence of the setting is suppressed as scholars offer a more agentic reading of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model (Power 2011), key spatial components of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power is suppressed (ibid), and even R. W. Connell's hegemonic model of masculinity (1995) is reduced to cataloguing different types of men with little attention to the spaces they occupy and the potential for movement (Pascoe 2007). An emphasis on field and place also serves as a way of avoiding the hubris-filled writing that has often graced the pages produced by "full immersion." For these self-aggrandizing "ethnographic cowboys," to borrow a term from Lucia Trimbur and R. Tyson Smith (Smith 2014), the researchers pride in the ability to join a sub-culture or enter an ominous space overshadows their own reflexitivity and discussion of their own position in the field.

Most importantly, I hope that my discussion of entering the site and my reflection on a few of the key methodological decisions provides a foundation for the chapters that follow and further clarifies the goals of my research.

Chalk on the Board and Basic Methodological Quandaries

I am not someone who subscribes to the principles of grounded research.[12] I do not make claim, nor seek, to be the objective observer speaking Truth and building theory from the data gathered in the field. My past experiences, including the books I have read and training I have received during my many years within the educational system, have fundamentally shaped the way I see the world. In the summer of 2007, when I entered the lone semi-formal MMA gym in a medium-sized city in central New York to test the possibilities of a MMA-based research project, I was by no means a blank slate (nor could I have been!). From an academic perspective, I was a geography graduate student with a background in ancient philosophy and an interest in the flows of culture and acts of place making. I also possessed a newfound passion to better understand the visceral performance of gender having recently discovered the feminist theory of Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, and Doreen Massey—three scholars who profoundly shaped the way I see the world.

In other key ways, I remained a relatively unformed academic that would be shaped ethnographic immersion into a new physical practice. Only a year earlier I had never before heard of Foucault and was confused why graduate students in the hall spoke his name with such reverence, thought Bourdieu referred to a wine-producing region in France, had never attempted to navigate the writings of Deleuze, and did not even realize that the goal of objectivity within the pursuit of science was a subject of debate. Entering the field guided me towards the theories that worked for what I experienced in site,

[12] See Glaser & Strauss (2009 [1967]) for the foundational formulation of this methodological approach.

pushed me to reject literature-guided expectations that did not hold, and provided inspiration to continually refine my approach to methodological approach.[13]

As discussed in the preface, I was not a stranger to the practice when I first began the project. My knowledge and gaps in knowledge of the practice, as much as the academic theories I brought to the field, offer an important framing for this project. My

---

[13] Too often we fail to acknowledge the manner that our own lived experience and biographic history guides us towards particular theories and away from others and are quick to attribute a level of freedom to the researcher that we would never attribute to our subjects. For example, take Peter Henning's excellent book, *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine* (2008). While I find Henning's (2008) use of Swidler's tool kit model of social knowledge (Swidler 1986) to be a useful metaphor and foundation for arguing that multiple theoretical approaches are required to present a holistic picture of the object of study, I believe it suggests an undue level of choice (as well as ambivalence towards underlying contradictions between different theoretical models). In other words, the questions we ask, the methodologies we employ, and the theories we are drawn to cannot be attributed solely to rational choice. As students of the social world it would be strange to think that our social experiences, desires, or biological urges do not guide us. When one learns about Pierre Bourdieu's rural upbringing and his uncomfortable transition to an elite French university, it makes sense that he developed an astute eye for the way cultural upbringing shapes the social tendencies that underlie class distinction. Similarly, Michel Foucault's biography provides us a great understanding of the impetus to theorize how power relates to sexuality. And Immanuel Kant's failing body and self-imposed strict physical regiment provides insight into his philosophic celebration of the rational mind over the weak body.

As I reflect back upon my life it becomes clear that I have devoted a seemingly inordinate amount of time and energy to sport and physical exercise as a participant, fan, and now student. reading about sport and the more physical practice of boxing, and grappling. Yet, my relationship with sport was not perfect. During this time elements of sport also became a source of unease. In the rural area that I grew up, the basketball team was a source of pride and excitement—the annual 3-on-3 tournaments rivaled the local fair as a significant annual community event. By the time I graduated I had learned to despise the pressure and expectations that the town adults placed upon the boys who made up the basketball team. I had also grown to dread the hour-long bus rides where the boys lived up to the stereotypes associated with hegemonic or dominant masculinity in their actions and choice of conversation.

My early initiation into the sporting field, has taken on an added significance as my interests have shifted to the more academic. The time I spent dribbling along a dirt road, playing two-hand touch football in a field, falling just short at the state championship, being annoyed on the way to the game, playing intramurals at the college level, suffering and managing injuries, and cheering for my favorite teams, has ensured that I have a healthy respect for the social significance that sport plays, both positive and negative. And now the uncomfortable feelings I once harbored can be read as precursor to the insider/outsider mix that ethnographers so cherish.

I hope this is not read as self-indulgent reflection and instead seen as an attempt to offer a biographical situating of my knowledge (Wolf 1996) and avoiding the allure of "the god-trick" where the researcher presents themselves "as seeing all from nowhere" (Haraway 1991). My biographical trajectory is necessarily infused throughout my work. It has provided empirical knowledge and a level of understanding that has shaped the observations I make when conducting my ethnographic work. It has also guided me towards a set of topics and particular theoretical approaches that are perhaps not as surprising considering elements of my biographical past.

first encounter with MMA had occurred in the mid 1990s when my older brother brought home a VHS of the second Ultimate Fighting Championship. I continued to pay attention to the violent practice through times of success and times of intense criticism. Having followed the shift from an underground spectacle to an emerging sport as a curious onlooker and fan, I entered the site with preconceptions about what I might find and with the belief that there would be some sort of story to tell about violence and gender. On some level, I believed that the extreme nu-metal, tattoo-heavy aesthetic that the UFC and MMA-related apparel companies sold was more than a marketing decision and imagined that the gyms would be filled with intimidating bruisers in this mold.

Yet, even with a belief in the extreme qualities of the site, I had briefly considered training in MMA—an interest that had been stimulated when a mild-mannered college acquaintance and intramural doubles tennis partner surprised me by sharing that he drove to an MMA gym at least twice-a-week and was planning on taking a fight soon after graduation. As the New York State Athletic Commission did not (and still does not) endorse MMA, the event was to be held in a cornfield somewhere outside the city of Rochester. According to my friend, the small town officials were aware of the fights but preferred to have the aggressive competitors and drunken audience contained in at least a semi-structured environment—often the police and firefighters were right there in the crowd, having paid their $10 for access to the keg and the fights.

While I did not find my way to a MMA gym or the cornfield at that time, I was increasingly intrigued by the subculture and curious about the happenings inside a MMA gym. Entering the space had become even more of a possibility and less of a strange curiosity. On some level I wanted to see how I would fare in what appeared to be a

bastion of physicality and masculinity. I occupied a seemingly contradictory space: I was fan, curious onlooker, and skeptical critic—intrigued by the skill, violence, and spectacle, but also horrified by the fundamental violence of the competition, the blood-thirsty behavior of fans, and the gothic, masculine aesthetic associated with MMA.

When I finally did enter a MMA gym, just over three years later, I was surprised to find a group of men eager to discuss the value of MMA on a physical, spiritual and emotional level and offer reflexive examination of their own participation in the practice without any explicit provocation on my part. They were also incredibly welcoming as soon as I demonstrated that I willing to engage in the practice and that I would not shy away from either the potentially awkward or painful contact. One of the longer tenured members of the gym took me under his wing without any hesitation; guiding me through the training session, interspersing technical advice with his own story of ending up at the gym, asking questions about how I found my way there, and ensuring me on multiple occasions about the quality of the gym that I had found my way into. By the end of the hour-and-a-half training, I was fascinated by the complexity of the bodily movements that were taught in the site, drawn into the array of constantly under-construction narratives, and proud about impressing the instructor with my aptitude for learning the submission-hold being taught that day. I was also intrigued by how rapidly I shifted from awkward, hesitant outsider to intimate confidant for men I just met.

As I drove home, my body covered with an unfamiliar musk and a crust of dried sweat that was only partially mine, I realized that there was a story to be told. With that realization I faced a fundamental question that has long plagued researchers of social life: How can I best understand what is going on here? More particularly, what methods

should I employ to understand a cultural practice where the actors actively reject the division of mind and body, or at least the prioritization of mind over body? How can I begin to comprehend the seduction of what seems to be both base and corporeal but also outward looking towards society? What ontological and epistemological assumptions underlay the discipline's dominant methodological approaches and did these limit my ability to accomplish one of the primary ethnographic goals of understanding the construction of meaning and the lived experience of members of the group? And, how what decisions needed to be made considering that the narrative and embodied experience was so evidently tightly entwined?

Situating the Researcher's Body and Becoming More than a Fly

I quickly realized that my initial plan of an interview-based research project would not be sufficient and that the story I wanted to tell was one grounded in the experiential qualities of the gym itself. It was also apparent that access would be an issue. Gym owners were generally uncomfortable with the idea of me sitting on the side of the mats and taking notes, perhaps out of fear of alienating potential customers in a business where profit was slim at best. The fear was justifiable considering that only an incredibly small percentage of the participants were seeking fame and attention or had achieved a level of success where observers on the sideline made sense. For the majority, my presence, pad in hand, would only serve to disrupt their temporary sanctuary.[14] The first two gym owners I spoke to in Minnesota also seemed hesitant due to popular characterizations of MMA

[14] R. Tyson Smith's experience researching low-level indie-professional wrestling provides a telling counter to my experience (2014). While some wrestlers expressed interest in Smith giving the training a try, his presence as strictly an observer was welcome and seen as providing a validation for the importance of the practice. In this sense, Smith's methodological decision fit perfectly with the men's driving desire for recognition.

participants as brutish and savage. They explained that they were excited that a graduate student thought MMA was worthy of study, but they also wanted the story to be fair and complete. As Chris, the first gym owner I spoke to concisely explained, "you won't get it until you try it. No one does."

Soon after, my naïve flirtation with attempting to become what Michael Agar termed, a "professional stranger" (1996) was called into question as I found myself rolling on a sweat-stained mat with a stranger trying to gain the opportunity to choke me. Was this research? At the time, Joao Costa Vargas' ethnographic musings quelled my concerns. As he cleverly remarks on the fly-on-the-wall approach in anthropology and sociology, "…even those who try to be insects are at the very least already influencing the social environment in which they conduct their fieldwork" (2006, 18-19). At the most immediate level, participation was a prerequisite to access. But, soon, I embraced my subjectivity as a testimony to the strengths of ethnography and my positionality as extending, not just limiting, my investigative radius.

More important was the realization that removing and isolating individuals would kill the excitement, complexity, and fundamental allure of what was occurring. The practice itself was central to creating to building the intimacy of the space, and only through engaging in the act and throwing myself into the sensual world could I move past my status as skeptical researcher to still skeptical but also active and enthralled participant. My own body had to be a part of my heuristic; and, my own fears, pains, desires, joys, doubts, and pleasures, part of the data. It is here that the work of carnal sociologists, non-representational theorists, and to a lesser extent auto-ethnography provided valuable guidance.

Before exploring these inspirational theoretical and methodological approaches that guided my research it is important to briefly situate the significance of their orientation towards the sensual and subjective. Within philosophy, Rene Descartes, provides the most influential separation of mind from body. Although to be fair, he was part of a rich lineage including Plato and Socrates and later, Immanuel Kant who characterized the emotional, messy body as a hindrance of mankind's progress towards a society of mind-dominant, rational beings. The influence of this tradition upon the sociological canon is evident. Emile Durkheim (1938) explicitly defined the interests of the discipline in opposition to psychology's focus on the individual 'organico-psychic' factors. Max Weber contributed to the silencing of the body through separating out affect and habit-based actions from meaningful social action, which is oriented towards the behavior of others (1978, 24-26). And Karl Marx viewed man through their ability to transform and produce from Nature (1974). Collectively, the founders of the discipline effectively relegated the body to the spheres of nature and the individual, and outside of disciplinary concerns.[15]

Methodological design followed the larger disciplinary effort to remove the body (Shilling 1991). Durkheim (1938), in particular, argued that sociologists must separate themselves from the messy and corporeal to gain access to social facts.[16] Generations have since agreed that a floating, emotionless intellectual essence would be ideal. The

---

[15] Marcel Mauss stands out as an important outlier in the project to distinguish sociology from other disciplines through the separation of the social man (Durkheim's 'homo duplex') from a biological man. Mauss writes in 1924 that what interests him "is not simply what concerns consciousness, but rather *the relations between consciousness and the body.* In reality, in the way we practice sociology, there is no such thing as a human being divided up into separate faculties. We are dealing with the corporeal and the mental in their entirety, given once and all at the same time" (1973, 303 cited in Noland 2009).

[16] *Suicide* (1951 [1897]) serves as a tour de force example of Durkheim's ability to transform a particularly emotional event into data ready for statistical analysis.

researcher should transform into Simmel's 'Stranger', possessing an objectivity "defined as freedom: the objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given" (Simmel 1976).[17]

Feminist theory has provided the longest-running critique and alternative path to claims of universal, disembodied objective knowledge. While both carnal sociology and non-representational theory have failed to acknowledge the role that feminist theory has played in the formation of the respective theoretical approaches, it remains an important precursor to any form of embodied, situated knowledge. In particular, Donna Haraway and Dorothy Smith provided a foundation for a more visceral grasp of the social world. Haraway (1991) offered well-known critique of the "ideological doctrines of disembodied scientific objectivity," titling the scientific approach to universal knowledge a god-trick and deeming it an illusion (1989). And Smith wrote in length about the importance of situating what we know in a process that begins with "making our direct embodied experience of the everyday world the primary ground of our knowledge" (1991, 377).

These two critiques have pushed feminist researchers to recognize the importance and role of emotions in research (eg., Bondi, 2005, Kleinman and Copp 1993, Laliberté and Schurr 2015) and embrace emotional connection as yielding important insights (Witz 2000, Bondi 2005). Beyond this, feminists have addressed the underlying gendered (and racialized) logic at work in the epistemic privileging of mind over body, rationality over feeling, and abstraction over practice (Pitts-Taylor 2015).

[17] Bryan Turner (1991) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994) have argued the dominance of early sociology by men played an essential role in prioritization of mind over body, with the body being viewed as the container for the much more interesting human mind that received and processed information (Turner 1991; Grosz 1994).

Despite Haraway's description of situated knowledge as materially embodied, feminist thought has eschewed the material aspects of the flesh (ibid). Feminist thought has been heavily influenced by a Foucaultian brand of poststructuralism, with its emphasis on discourse and representation, and has held a historical suspicion of biological materialism (Grosz 1994). Often work has remained at the level of the textual and, to varying degrees, "mistaken transformations of representations for transformations of conduct" (Stein 1989, 10). Thus Wacquant's warning against "fall[ing] back into the textual or hermeneutic vision of the social world" describes feminism as well as it does sociology (Pitts-Taylor 2015, 21). It is with this in mind that I turn to carnal sociology, non-representational theory, and auto-ethnography.

Three Methods: Auto-ethnography, the Carnal, and Affect

I foreground three approaches within the social sciences that have been on the forefront of the recent "sensual turn" in the social sciences and the humanities (Thorpe 2011) and build upon the researcher experiencing the field on a physical and emotional level: (1) the self-described carnal-oriented strains of sociology that draw heavily on the embodied elements of Bourdieuian theory; (2) the affect-oriented research that has gained popularity in anthropology and geography, in particular those interested in the 'non-representational'; (3) the autoethnographic—while practitioners of the first two respective approaches rarely reference the other, it is common for each to attempt to separate their respective approach from auto-ethnography and the trap of subjectivity.

On the surface, the three bodies of literature look similar in both goal and practice. However, when looking closer, key differences emerge as a result of their respective theoretical foundations and disciplinary locations.

Within the social sciences the carnal and non-representational approaches fall on the "heavy theory" end of the spectrum. The language employed by sociologists and geographers in justifying the respective approaches often presupposes a reader with a background in contemporary philosophy rather than training in the social sciences. I attempt to draw out the divergent understandings of the role of the researcher, the definition of the subject/body, the potential for Truth and objectivity, the ability to generalize, and the goals of writing while simultaneously keeping in mind Andrew Abbott's (2004) urging for methodological decisions to be guided by use value and heuristic creativity rather than simply deeper ontological debate. Admittedly, this is a rather tenuous balancing act, and one I attempt through returning at the end to asking how the theoretical debates translated into methodological practice.

Autoethnography: Autoethnography is the most well known, and also most derided of the three approaches. In this variation of the ethnographic method, the academic gaze is directed towards the researcher herself. The autoethnographer embraces the phenomenological nature of experience, using the autobiographical to better understand the way a certain field, experience, or structural force has affected them. While the purpose and substance of autoethnography varies (far more than critics characterize), situated knowledge and the more sensuous elements of the lived experience are almost always the focus (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

In practice, autoethnography differs from the standard ethnographic models of the researcher entering the field, studying the field, exiting the field, and then reporting to others about the field. Here, the researcher is part and parcel of the field. They are the subject of the work and therefore do not ever definitively enter or exit the field. This potentially places great strain upon the researcher. As Brydie-Leigh Bartleet expresses when reflecting upon her autoethnographic study of being a conductor, "it happened anywhere, anytime, and never seemed to end. This fluidity meant there were very few boundaries between my creative work and my personal life" (2009, 715).

In embracing subjectivity, the autoethnographer disavows goals of scientific objectivity. Instead the goal becomes captivating the reader through sharing the intimate knowledge possessed by the researcher and allowing them to experience the subjective experiences of the insider (Ellis 2004). To convey the lived experience, autoethnographers have turned to a variety of evocative and creative approaches including poem, song, and even theatrical performance (see Ellis 2004).

Within sociology, autoethnography remains marginalized and little respected. This is due to the inward looking nature of the practitioners, and their non-traditional approach to both writing and knowledge construction. However, many autoethnographic elements that were at first derided are slowly becoming staples of mainstream ethnography (Contreras 2015). For instance, an emphasis on reflexivity and discussion of one's emotions and positionality have become common in mainstream ethnographies—often through the autoethnographic approach of sharing personal stories from the field. I also draw inspiration from the autoethnographic vignette as a way to illustrate the sensory experiences of the field—the sights, the smells, the sounds, the aches, the doubts, and the

surges of excitement—that are difficult to capture in analytic writing. However, in attempting to make larger claims that move outside of the subjective limitations of the autoethnographic, I turn to lessons from the carnal and non-representational approaches.

Carnal Sociology: Not surprising considering the self-ascribed title, "carnal sociologists" make the most direct claim to researching the *embodied* experience. The label has been applied to scholars who focus on bodily practices as part and parcel of self-reflexive identity work (e.g., Giddens 1991, Shilling 2003), and those who make effort to take seriously the emotional experience when researching topics as diverse as driving (Crossley 2006), crime (Katz 2008), and fire fighters (2006). However, the title of carnal sociology is most loudly claimed by, and most aptly applied to, the ethnographic works of Loic Wacquant and scholars inspired by his writings on the Chicago boxing gym. Due to Wacquant's influence on this approach and numerous articles and chapters detailing it, I will focus heavily his work in discussing the carnal methodology.

Within this more corporeal-oriented strain of sociology, French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a theoretical foundation. In particular, it was Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Cartesian dualism through emphasis on the phenomenological experience of being-in-the-world and an organism's corporeal adaptations to the lifeworld it inhabits (1996) that inspired Bourdieu to locate one's social position and composite of past encounters within the body (Bourdieu 1984). Through his concept of habitus, Bourdieu brings together the objectivism of social analysis and the subjectivism of the phenomenological approach. In doing so, Bourdieu effectively issues a methodological call as he contends that "we learn through the body" and that the "social

order inscribes itself in bodies through this permanent confrontation" (Bourdieu 1997[2000], 141).

Loic Wacquant famously put Bourdieu's concept of habitus into practice as both an object of study but also a methodological tool through his ethnographic immersion in a boxing gym in south Chicago (2011). In doing so, Wacquant emphatically underscores the fact that the social agent is, before anything else, a being of flesh, nerves, and senses. To understand the social and symbolic structures of a field, the research is urged to "'*go native armed'* that is, equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools" (Wacquant ibid, 8). To understand is, therefore, to do; and by doing, the researcher embraces the methodological need for "deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge"(Wacquant ibid, viii).

The goal of the researcher fully immersing themselves in the practice of interest is to "clasp and restitute this carnal dimension of existence...through a methodological and meticulous work of detection and documentation, deciphering and writing liable to capture and to convey the taste and the ache of action, the sound and the fury of the social world" (1998, vii). And, in doing so, explore habitus even as it "operates *beneath the level of consciousness and discourse* (Wacquant 2004, 5). In attempting to translate the unspoken and sensual to the page, carnal sociologists, much like writers of auto-ethnographies, explore forms of writing not common in academia. For instance, Wacquant turns to "a quasi-theatrical mode of writing" (ibid 10) and offers a detailed first-person account of attending fights and competing that masterfully mixes together analytic sociology, depictive ethnography, and short story.

Considering the researcher-centered qualities of this "sociology of flesh and blood" (Wacquant 2014), it would seem fair to lump the approach with the auto-ethnographic (e.g., Contreras 2014). However, Wacquant is characteristically harsh in dismissing the comparison. He explains that this is not the "fall into the bottomless well of subjectivism into which auto-ethnography joyfully throws itself" (2011, 8), adding, the carnal approach is "quite the opposite: it relies on the most intimate experience, that of the desiring and suffering body, to grasp *in vivo* the collective manufacturing of the schemata of pugilistic perception, appreciation, and action that are shared, to varying degrees, by all boxers, whatever their origins, their trajectory, and their standing" (ibid). The goal is then, not to fully embrace the subjective through situating and positioning knowledge, but rather go "against those currents of contemporary anthropology that have become so obsessed with tropes, positionality, ethics, the openness and multiplicity of sites and the foibles of professionalization that they have reached a state of ethnographic paralysis by meta-analysis" (Wacquant 2014). Both the disembodied, objective gaze and the situated, feeling researcher whose claims are necessarily bounded by one's own positionality are rejected. Instead "objectivity comes by way of reflexivity, not by way of indifference" (Desmond 2009).

The argument and demonstration is compelling. As a result, Wacquant has effectively inspired a new generation of researchers of combat-related sport, including Downey (2007), Bar-On Cohen (2009), Spencer (2009), my earlier work (2011), and Channon (2012), as well as an array of contributors to Sánchez García and Spencer's edited volume (2013). All who have submitted themselves to the pains and pleasures of the gym to better understand the sensual world the fighters inhabit.

However, in both Wacquant's and his disciples' demonstrations of the carnal approach, key limitations are revealed. As both Randall Collins (2014) and Elise Paradis (2014) eloquently argue, even as Wacquant theorizes the many meanings and applications of habitus (from topic, to tool, to multiple scales, to cognitive, conative, and affective elements), his demonstration emphasizes the *individual* internalizing structure. However, As Collins notes: "Wacquant's description of what happens in the gym, it seems to me, is much more about solidarity than about skill…many of the exercises boxers do could be performed at home, alone; but performing them together at the gym makes them much more efficacious" (Collins 2015). Indeed, as Paradis critiques, "Wacquant's learner appears to be an asocial being whose learning is multifaceted but solitary" (2014, 102). Focusing on the singular transformation of the novice to the hardened boxer not only obscures a key strength of Bourdieu's formulation of the relationship between habitus and the larger field (Crossley 2013), but also obscures a central allure of the gym: "When the optimal number of people are working out in the gym—somewhere between about 6 and 15—there is a palpable feeling of being in the same rhythm. Everyone is pumped up, mutually focused, bodily entrained, energized. These are revealing micro-details" (Collins 2014). These relational moments matter and must be considered a strength of both the carnal and the auto-ethnographic. These moments transcend both the individual and the traditional methodological focus, as captured by the autoethnographic writings of Brydie-Leigh Bartleet: "the blood pumping through my body at a rapid pace. In this split-second moment my internal dialogue stops. I am no longer in my mind, but deep within my body. As my arms move in an upbeat I

breathe with my musicians. Our eyes connect in that moment and we are living and breathing together" (2009, 726)

In engaging in carnal sociology, many researchers drifts dangerously close to presenting themselves as the "ethnographic cowboys" critiqued by Trimbur and Smith (2014). This is in part due to a methodological turn to the individual experience and the process of conditioning the corporeal structure while simultaneously turning away from the subjectivity of the autoethnographic and the reflexive awareness of power hierarchies in the field that is emphasized in feminist theory (see Wolf 1996).[18] Without specific attention to the manner that the researcher fits or does not fit the field, what qualities the researcher shares or does not share with other participants, and attention to how the researcher's presence may have altered the field, the writing that emerges drifts towards the self-aggrandizing. Instead of entry and participation simply serving as the "*the manifold methodological vehicle"* as claimed (Wacquant 2011), there is a celebration at the success of the academic overcoming spatial, economic, racial, and class-based barriers to gain full access and become a fully-accepted and fully-understanding member of the site—a charge that Wacquant has faced on numerous occasions (e.g., Adler & Adler 2014, May & Buford 2014, Sanders 2014). The seemingly celebratory quality is even more exaggerated by the heavily masculine spheres this approach has been used to

[18] Feminist theory has long been at the forefront of examining the power relations and separation between the researcher and researched, and how they alter the 'field' as well as the production of knowledge. Wolf's edited volume *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* (1996) provides a collection of nuanced reflections on the ethnographer in field. As Wolf claims "the most central dilemma for contemporary feminists in fieldwork, from which other contradictions are derived, is power and the unequal hierarchies or levels of control that often maintained, perpetuated, created, and re-created during and after field research" (ibid 2). Researchers must thoroughly reflect upon their positionality and how that determines the claims that can be made as well as the potential for generalizability.

study—whether boxing, mixed martial arts, fire fighting, or gang life.[19] Similarly, while Wacquant's distinction between the subjectivism of auto-ethnography and objectivity of the carnal approach is stated strongly, there is less clarity in how Wacquant actually achieves this objective (Crossley 2014).

Of course, this is not a full condemnation of the methodological orientation. The strength of engaging in a long-term *apprenticeship* leading to "moral and sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation" (Wacquant 2004:vii) far outweigh the weakness. Instead this is an important reminder that, as Pitts-Taylor argues, the "practice of 'turning yourself into the phenomenon you are studying' must be particularly sensitive to the limits of the embodiment" (2015, 23). Ethnographers must not forget that even as they experience the same thing as their participants, they are always already guided by their social background and life history, that following Bourdieuian logic, is buried deep within their bodies.[20] These differences between the ethnographer and others in the site should not be hidden and considered the source of failure! Wacquant's excitement at leaving the (white) walls of academia to journey into (black) boxing gym to take up a violent, physical practice can aid us in our understanding of this social world. And, while Wacquant, in both book (1998) and methodological article (2004), is eager to acknowledge the seduction of the Sweet Science and share that it almost lured him permanently from academia, this is allure seems to bear more in common with my participants. For, as Wacquant demonstrates, other members of the gym view the space as

[19] This masculine celebration also has the tendency to blind the researcher. For instance, while Matthew Desmond (2005) skillfully takes us into the world of the wildland firefighter, he also shows a great deal of pride in his ability to negotiate both the academic setting and the fireline. Perhaps as a result, he allows sexist language and practice to be dismissed as a case of "that is what they do, it should not be judged."

[20] See Contreras (2015) for a discussion of how his social background shaped his carnal ethnography of young Mexican gang members in East Los Angeles.

a site to temporarily escape the chaos and violence of everyday life and work on transforming their own bodies into monetary gain.

Instead, as a reader, I am left with little insight into the seduction or pleasure of the sport itself unless it fits into the larger world schema of the athlete—an important silence considering that I study a site where I must ask why the person performing in the local symphony, providing legal advice at a law firm, or bartending at an uptown eatery would seek out a mixed martial arts gym during their free time. Even as Wacquant attempts to move beyond the rational actor model and orients towards the corporeal, the body is presented as a clean object to be attuned to the process hand without messy and unfettered desires. To better understand the messier desires and the relational and sensual experiences that transcend the individual, I turn to the affect-based literature in geography.

Affect/Non-Representational: Despite the recent corporeal turn in the social sciences and humanities, it has been argued that the body has served simply as a "screen for the social" (Evers 2006, 233)—the body is treated as yet another slate for power to be inscribed upon, with experience being reduced to the textual or political. While sociology has done much to reveal the *Körper* – the structural, objectified body – it has yet to take seriously and theorize the *Leib* – the living, feeling, emotion-filled, sensing body (Howson and Inglis 2001, cited in Thorpe 2011). Within anthropology, geography, cultural studies, physical culture studies, and to a lesser degree sociology, it is affect theory that has been at the forefront of "sensual revolution" that challenges "conventional theories of representation" (Bull et al., 2006, 5) and rethink our basic notions of what a body is and what it does

(Massumi 2002). In particular, non-representational theory (NRT) has forwarded the appreciation of the material, pre-cognitive, and interpersonal by placing affect as central. Following Baruch Spinoza (often through Gilles Deleuze [by way of Brian Massumi]), the body is defined by capacities in relationships: the capacity to affect and be affected, the capacity for movement (or rest) with particular speed (or slowness), the capacity for particular intensities and sensations. Affect refers to the properties of the body and the forces that hold the particular combination together and emerge from it.[21] In this manner affect implies an augmentation or diminution of the body's capacity to act. The necessary question becomes - what can be done to *this* body and what can it do? In sharp contrast to the stable lived-body of carnal sociology, here our attention is fundamentally shifted to the fluid and less-stable qualities.

The affect-oriented approach has been directed towards tracing corporeal experiences such as the *emergence* of boredom, the *moment* of fear, *engaging* in therapeutic dance, biking *through* the city, *performing* a séance, nostalgia *invoked* through the family photograph, the *act* of drawing public art, *moving* between coffee shops, *walking* on nature trails, driving *around* the city, and the *rhythms* of airports (Anderson 2004, Saville 2009**,** McCormack 2002, Spinney 2006, Holloway 2006).[22] In all cases, effort is made to give space not just for the humans who occupy the sites and participate in the practice to exert affect, but also the sites and practices themselves.[23] In focusing on the "properties, competencies, modalities, energies attunements, arrangements and intensities of different texture, temporality, velocity and spatiality, that

---

[21] The conceptual definition remains the source of debate with some scholars emphasizing the material (e.g., Thrift 2007) and others placing greater emphasis on the psychological and emotional (e.g., Probyn 2005)
[22] For a comprehensive overview of the NRT see Lorimer (2008) or Pile (2010).
[23] See Macpherson (2010) for an excellent overview of the body-landscape relation.

act on bodies, are produced through bodies, and transmitted by bodies" (Lorimer 2008, 552) priority is given to the pre- or more-than-rational.

An affect-based methodology seeks to capture the very manner that the world presents itself. The central goal of NRT is, as the moniker implies, to move away from academic approaches that seek Truth and claim to accurately represent social processes. An approach is sought that works towards opening spaces for creation rather than closing them off by "presenting the world" rather than representing or explaining. It is said standard process of creating static categories and typologies fails to allow an understanding of life that "always exceeds closure". It is this excessive messiness, avoided in social science approaches that have fetishized 'hard' sciences' ability to eliminate variables and prove theorems that is central to NRT's affirmation of the open ended plurality of the world. Rather than an epistemological focus that emphasizes the known and categorized, NRT offers an approach that allows access to movement, the changing, and the unknown. This "offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values…so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become" (Lorimer 2005, 84).

This sounds a lot easier in theoretical explanation and justification than in practice. In following the NRT prescription, authors are forced to grapple with problems of representation, in that the central subject of their writing is raw experience—the very elements that are often lost in translation from the sensual world to pages of text and then to the reader. It simply is not easy to discuss pre-personal energies and organs being drawn together or repelling in unexpected ways. To do so, much like the previously discussed auto-ethnographers and carnal sociologists, the authors embrace rich

description as well as more experimental approaches to writing with the hope of bringing the experience a little “closer to our skin” (Thrift 2008, 5), allowing the reader to be affected. NRTs move from representation is not a dismissal but rather redefines representations as material compositions that are performative in themselves. Each piece of writing enacts a world of its own, rather than simply shadowing one that is already there. The goal of each presentation, whether journal, conference, or dinner table, becomes the ‘stretch[ing] of expressions of the world’ at varying levels of resonation and intensity. As with some autoethnographies, the author does not seek a reduction of complexity, but instead a celebration.

This potentially perplexing approach is made more understandable in Deleuze’s turn towards the Estonian Zoologist Jakob von Uexkull, a biologist well-celebrated within affect-oriented circles. Von Uexkull, known for his attention to how an animal relates to its environment, defines organisms as an intersection of drives that engage with its specific lifeworld (2010). For instance the tick, the parasite that sucks the blood of mammals, is defined by the three affects: “The first has to do with light (climb to the top of the branch); the second is olfactive (let yourself fall onto the mammal that passes beneath the branch); and the third is thermal (seek the area without fur, the warmest spot)” (Deleuze 1988, 124). Von Uexkull does not define the tick by biological genus or species; it is not reduced to a rigid category. Instead the tick becomes a temporary home to specific affects. The body is composed of this combination. Through subscribing to this approach knowing how bodies can or cannot enter into combination with other affects is a step toward understanding the composition of the organism’s reality. An expansion of affect is an expansion of the world.

While theoretically exciting, this leaves the researcher in a rather difficult position for it is easier to present the tenants of the approach in the literature review than actually placing them into practice. The researcher must capture and share the non-representational without freezing it into the more static and frozen world of categories; she must use her experience without reifying the idea of the acting subject. And as the researcher attempts to embrace her own "tickyness", it is difficult to avoid the "self" indulgence and celebration that also haunts the auto-ethnographic and carnal approaches. Again, the researcher is the conduit for the experience. For example, in taking an affective approach to cycling in the city, the researcher highlights that "of the sixty or so people working in the office...I was the only one who came to work by bike" (Jones 2005, 32). In the end, this is neither the claim to objectivity through subjectivity of carnal sociology nor the embracing of the subjective as in the case of auto-ethnography. Rather it is the embracing of the researcher as a spatial and temporal zone for affect to be negotiated.

It is not surprising that affect as a theoretical and methodological orientation has found less traction in sociology than neighboring disciplines. The approach orients attention to the very qualities and actions dismissed by foundational sociological figures such as Max Weber (1978) as being outside of disciplinary interest. Even more radically, the approach asks us to reconsider the prioritization of the rational, bounded actor navigating life in a coherent and consistent manner. While difficult, attempting this approach to sensual research has been a productive one and allows access to elements of social life blinded by other approaches. In researching the mixed martial arts gym, I give attention to the particularities of the gyms and multi-sensual, somatic, and affective

encounters that occur within the spaces. The individuals are components of the space—mixing their experiences, bodies, and desires. I also am part of the space; affecting and affected—both important steps to sharing the allure.

Silences in the Literature and Listening to What People Say

All three of the approaches prioritize the phenomenological and affective experiences. These are methodologies that are often self-described as "letting the body speak." Unfortunately, in letting the body speak, other forms of discourse, talk, narrative, and storytelling are devalued and silenced. Wacquant's study of boxing in inner-city Chicago, *Body & Soul*, serves as example: by emphatically underscoring the fact that the social agent is a being of flesh, nerves, and senses, he is able to explore habitus even as it "operates *beneath the level of consciousness and discourse*" (2004, 5). In doing so, the boxing gym is presented as seemingly void of discourse. While Wacquant shares that there are tales passed down about the greats, and conversations about how to live life right, these are portrayed as having little importance. No connection is the made to the practice and the corporeal training. Instead attention is given to the repeated conditioning and body callousing that the fighter undergoes (Spencer 2009).

The silence reinforces a long running separation between the narrative and carnal, or epistemological and ontological, that has been enforced on both sides of the divide. The narrative turn in sociology that marked much of the 1990s is seemingly void of any discussion of *experience*. Foucaultian theory is one of the lone exceptions; however, for the Foucaultian scholar, it is usually a one-way arrow with the discursive shaping the material. The lack of discussion of the material, effectively reduces culture to a collection of textual messages (Schudson 1989). A reduction that Somers (1994) argues is a result

of social scientists' hesitation to move from the epistemological to the ontological, which she considers a necessary step to understanding the manner in which "people construct identities . . . by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories" such "that 'experience' is constituted through narratives" (614).

The non-representational approach offers a potential solution. Stories and narrative can be perceived as yet another affect within the site. The discursive have the potential to connect or fail to connect, and to augment or to diminish. Yet, with the exception of Julian Holloway's examination of enchanted spaces of the séance (2006), the NRT crowd has virtually ignored talk. This is most likely due, in part, to the association of text with the representational, and the joys of revealing the more material connections when studying dance, rock climbing, or biking.

I again take methodological inspiration from both bodies of literature. However, I hope to add to these literatures by employing the carnal approach and non-representational when seeking to understand the stories told in the site. In doing so, I focus on "natural" as opposed to "artificial" data and emphasize the interactional production of stories (Wilson and Stapleton 2010) and the messy process through which discourse coalesces and takes root in the experiential. Or, in other words, I illustrate what makes stories stick (Loseke 2007) through exploring how the epistemological explanation is built through the ontological experience.

Taking this approach to studying the construction of meaning as both an embodied and narrative process sidesteps and offers an important reminder to the qualitative researchers involved in the recent slue of intense debates over who has the superior method. In particular, Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan's provocatively titled and

written article, "Talk is Cheap" (2014), has garnered a great deal of attention, Jerolmack and Khan ask what is the value of conducting interviews when what people say they do so often fails to match up with actual behavior. The question is an important one. However, both the initial framing and subsequent responses effectively reduce the study of culture to the prediction of behavior. The argument also rests on the assumption that the measure of a method is how accurately it captures "truth" (Lamont & Swidler 2014). Lost is attention to the intersubjective exploration of meaning that occurs through behavior and talk—one of the fundamental goals of both ethnography and interviewing. While my work offers a critique of interviews removed from context and experience, I also take an approach where predicting behavior or looking for a single causal explanation for why someone engaged in an activity is the least interesting thing I could find. Instead I seek methodological approaches that help me extend beyond the immediate situation and allow me to make what was once the bizarre and alien seem more understandable through making sense of the many allures of the field and providing insight into how the participants do the same.

In the Field: Sparring, Talking, and Reflecting

My methodological approach emerged from the interplay between my experiences in the field and my growing familiarity with the theoretical and methodological writings of the carnal sociologists and non-representational theorists. Upon returning to Minnesota, after my successful test pilot in the small college town in central New York, I began to explore the local mixed martial arts scene.

In a fortuitous turn, my graduate school was located in an ideal setting for the study. The Midwest, in particular Minneapolis, has been one of the epicenters for MMA in the

United States—more than twenty schools operate within a forty-five- minute drive, many with members competing in cage fights. While this number does not seem overwhelming, this offers a sharp contrast to other cities of a comparable size in many regions of the country.[24] The majority of these schools are located outside the urban centers of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Instead, they find home in suburban strip malls, abandoned warehouses and difficult to fill, recently built business complex conglomerations on the outer edge of affluent first and second ring suburbs.

The suburban location, as well as the high monthly fee for participation, between $99 and $200 a month, limits participation to the affluent or devoted. White male participants made up over 90 percent of gym memberships. In this manner, MMA bears more in common with serious leisure pursuits like mountain climbing or surfing than combat sports like boxing, a sport long popular among marginalized, ethnic groups, or football (see Wheaton 2013).[25]

The majority of fighters were in their mid 20s to late 30s; although the age range stretches from early teens into the late 60's. The spectrum of the "type" of men in the site and fields of work represented was surprisingly broad. Wrestlers missing the physicality of sport, police officers hoping to enhance their job-related tool-kit, past dabblers in the more traditional Asian martial arts looking to learn a more "fighting"-oriented style, fans

[24] For example, when I was first beginning this project I travelled to Washington D.C. for a conference. When I was there I decided to check out a local gym and was surprised to discover that, at the time, there was only two legitimate MMA training schools in operation (dcmma.com, 2010).

[25] During my research I briefly trained at three boxing gyms to compare the demographic. During the early part of my study, Latino and black youth, and Latino and black men predominantly filled the boxing gyms I attended. For instance, of the eleven in the first boxing class I took attended, only one other student was white. This did vary by gym. For instance, one boxing gym in the area has made a name by catering to affluent white men and women seeking aerobic exercise and the thrill of the boxing workout. However, even in this gym, there is a clear difference in the racial makeup of the competitive boxers and the member with little to no intention of ever entering the ring.

of Dungeon & Dragons and fantasy novels with little sporting background, self-prescribed philosophers happily philosophizing in a new space, doctors who popped dislocated toes and fingers back into socket free of charge, graduate students seeking a "more honest form of debate," and a local fashion designer whose ever-shifting hair style was a continued source of conversation all shared the mats. The variation extends to economic and educational backgrounds: some had not finished high school, some lacked permanent work, and some considered the monthly fees a financial burden. However, the fields that are most heavily represented in my sample are legal, information technology, and financial. For the majority, fighting was neither an economic investment nor a full-time pursuit, a characteristic also noted by Abramson and Modzelewski (2011).[26] Instead, the majority of "hobbyists" trained in the six to ten hours a week range, only increasing their time in the gym before a grappling tournament or a cage fight.[27]

As the project unfolded, I drew inspiration from Howard Becker's argument for a sampling strategy that pays attention to the self-described "less-important" members of a group (1998). Rather than focusing all my attention on the successful professional fighters and the occasional youth filled with talent and drive (or attending the rare fight camps that cater exclusively to this group), I gave time to the other ninety-percent that took up space on the mats. Previous focus on serious competitors and fans has ignored

[26] Even with the increasing visibility and success of major MMA promotions, earning a steady income remains difficult for the small percentage who take this path. Smaller cage fighting promotions run by the fighters themselves often lack capital and larger promotions are notorious for underpaying fighters. Fighters often have to fight for free or at a loss to build the reputation necessary to demand larger payment. Making it to the biggest stage is not a guarantee of financial reward. For example, I was shocked when a local fighter told me after training that he suffered a net loss after his debut fight in the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

[27] During the research process, I visited gyms around the country, in both urban and rural areas, and found "the hobbyist" participant in all locations. I also used online MMA forums (e.g., sherdog.com and mma.tv) to validate my characterization.

the hobbyist, who falls somewhere between the two—a trend that follows the professional focus of previous research on combat sports (e.g., Sugden 1987; Wacquant 2004). It is the hobbyist, however, who provides revenue to the gym, serves as training partner for those who dream of reaching higher levels, and shapes the meaning of the practice. It is the hobbyist that exemplifies Clifford Geertz's "deep play" (1972)—investing time, energy, pain, sweat, and blood with little hope of utilitarian reward. Studying both the hobbyist and the fighter tells a story about a desire for intimacy, community, experiencing the body, and the sharing of both mundane grandiose tales that is lost with emphasis on the athlete creating the fighting body. In talking to the "ordinary" men—the type who would begin our conversation by mentioning the fighter in the gym that I "should" be talking to—I tell a different, and in my mind more surprising, and more complete story.

In many ways I was not that different from this group. I certainly fit the demographic in terms of age, race, gender, and even body type. And, as someone who had participated in sports throughout high school and was still attempting to remain physically active as I entered the less corporeal world of academia, the escape to the site did have a particular allure. To my surprise, even my lack of experience with actual fights was a characteristic I shared with many of the participants—some who explicitly referenced the "need" to know what it felt like. I even shared the most common discovery of MMA story, having also been drawn to the violent practice by the astounding success of Royce Gracie in the early UFCs and his ability to confused and submit much larger opponents. I was well positioned to employ the carnal approach, immersing myself in the field and craft to take on elements of the MMA habitus. But to truly commit to the project

I also required acknowledging the less desirable qualities I shared with others in the site. This was not some form of “ironic slumming” (Smith 2014, 166), instead the emotional difficulty would be that in examining the participants I also was examining myself.

There were also key differences. First and foremost, was my continued underlying motivation of conducting research. That my car ride home was filled with thoughts about how the practice might be sexist or Orientalist in nature matters; this shapes my experience in ways I can certainly not extend to all participants. Even at the height of my seduction into the practice, I would ask myself what I learned that day as I drove home. And, on the occasions where a lengthy break from MMA had a certain appeal, the need for “more data” kept me from staying away for too long. There were numerous times when I felt uncomfortable hurting a training partner or opponent, or I recoiled from a particularly offensive, illogical, or ridiculous story told in the gym. And, after my most recent MMA injury related surgery, I found myself laying in bed the first few nights, waiting for the prescribed sleep-aid to kick in, wondering if it was worth it.

In time I came to realize that these doubts and hesitations should not be suppressed. As Staci Newmahr (2008) demonstrated so effectively in her study of sadomasochism, the tensions I encountered within myself as a sometimes-hesitant participant were significant to the research. These are key insights into the manner that the field affects and failed to affect. Furthermore, as I would discover, other participants shared many of the same doubts. And, they were happy to expound upon them in great depth after hearing my brief reflection on these hesitations. In a sense, this was yet another point of connection and intimacy.

And so, armed with my curiosity and guided by my methodological muses, I committed myself to the field. Over the course of the first two years I split my time between two sites, the Fighter's Cove, one of the oldest and most successful gyms in the area, and Premium Mixed Martial Arts (PMMA), a smaller school transitioning from teaching children karate to adults MMA.[28] In both locations, classes rarely had more than fifteen people, allowing ample opportunity for frequent interaction. In both, a small core remained throughout my research while others came and went because of an array of reasons, including injuries, money, general interest, or changes to job or relationship status.

I selected these schools because of their contrasting approaches. Fighter's Destination relies more on tradition. For instance, instructors frequently reference the "Brazilian way" of doing things and treat the Gracie family with a reverence generally reserved for the spiritually enlightened, a hierarchy is enforced with members wearing belts to signify their rank, and participants bow upon entering and exiting the mat. PMMA is less structured, with little formality or set routine. It is often difficult to know whether a day will include learning new moves, drilling techniques, light sparring or grappling, in which two people will wrestle, attempting to catch the other in a choke hold or joint lock, or more serious combat. And other times people simply work "focus mitts," a padded glove used to train boxers. The looser atmosphere provides the opportunity for "lazy" training, during which the majority of participants' time is spent stretching, talking about the everyday, and debating why they train—always on the verge of a more intense workout. However, even with the relaxed atmosphere, the reputation of PMMA far

[28] As with participants, I use pseudonyms for the schools to protect their identity.

exceeds its size and age—attracting local fighters preparing for regional competition, veteran fighters looking to jumpstart their careers, and even a Japanese fighter training for his UFC debut.

Over the next few years I continued to extend my network. In total, I spent significant time at eight local gyms, including one notorious for aggressive training and producing cage-fighters known for their toughness and brutal-style rather than technical acumen, and another that taught all of the skills associated with MMA but actively rejected the cage-fighter mentality in favor of creating a fun, relaxed atmosphere for all. I also took advantage of conference travel to train at gyms around the country. While the capital-seeking and competitive nature of the schools presented a barrier to easily moving between local sites I was able to facilitate the movement through reminding gym-owners that this was, at some level, a book project.

I would train two to three times a week, attend local fights, and join gym members at a local bar or house to order the occasional UFC event. I competed in grappling tournaments; winning first-place in my first tournament and then never again equaling my auspicious beginning. I also took part in local Muay Thai "smokers"—events arranged for members of local gyms to compete against each other and gain experience without taking an official amateur or professional bout. I was offered and encouraged to take multiple MMA fights by local gym owners, and considered taking the rather intimidating plunge. On both occasions injuries, first a dislocated rib and then a broken orbital bone, took the decision out of my hands. I filled in at a gym when an instructor was unable to make it to class numerous times and I turned down three offers to be employed as a coach—a position that I considered myself far unqualified for. I also had a

number of periods of inactivity. Sometimes this was a result of injury, sometimes time was lacking, and in other cases, a hard training session was simply the last thing I wanted to do.

My dedication to the scene, as well as my increasing aptitude in the practice contributed to a greater level of respect and openness from other participants. Being able to enter a new gym and demonstrate a general proficiency would place potential participants in my study at ease. Having a well-known member of the scene be able to vouch for my commitment as a *participant* first and foremost also held value on a number of occasions. As Ian Cook observes, "*wanting* to study a particular community does not easily translate into *being able* to study it, because this access has to be negotiated through various gatekeepers who can control this" (1997 original emphasis). I turn to an excerpt from my field notes to illustrate this point:

> As the final fight of the Ultimate Fighting Championship broadcast came to an end the transition to loud dance music made it clear it was time for the bar to transition to its normal sleazy downtown persona. John, Kevin and I wandered to the streets accompanied by the trickle of large, Affliction t-shirt and designer jean wearing white men. On the street John and Kevin see Caleb, one of the top local fight promoters smoking a cigarette. He is easy to spot due to his bright-red Mohawk and always present sports coat. Caleb recognizes John and Kevin. "When are we going to get you in the cage?" John says he is ready and trying to get down to 170. John gestures to me and says that I've been giving him problems in the gym and need to get in the cage soon, something I am not in agreement with. Caleb looks over, "155? 145? What you fight at?" "Probably 145 but I am not looking for a fight yet…So…I am a sociology graduate student and doing research on MMA in Minnesota. Think we could talk sometime?" "Yeah, for sure. Get my number from John…when we getting you in the cage?"

It is also important to note that at no time did I encounter people who refused to trust me or had no interest in talking to me if I was not a decent grappler or striker. Rather, as I will discuss in the following chapters, the greatest moments of intimacy and unprompted sharing occurred after sharing in competitive, creative, or hard training. As I

improved I had access to these shared moments with a wider range of members including people of different sizes and levels of proficiency.

Of course, the other qualities I shared with the men in the site should not be ignored. In particular, being a white, able-bodied man in my mid-twenties (at least when the project began!) facilitated access to conversations that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to witness as a woman. For, I remained "one of the guys" even when not actively participating in a conversation.[29] Again, it is important to note that even though an increasing number of women are entering MMA gyms, they remain a small percentage of participants and were almost nonexistent in the gyms that I conducted my research.

My status as a both a white-male and a participant also allowed me to breach otherwise difficult subjects, point to silences in the narrative, or call out participants when a statement seemed incomplete. Often I would do through explicitly reflecting on my own experience training in MMA. Most notably this occurred when discussing the role that pain played in the site and sexual stigma associated with the close contact. Many topics which seemed particularly sensitive—including health, money, family, ethical quandaries, use of illegal substances, unhappiness with life decisions, and spiritual musings—all were shared freely.

My chosen methodological approach and site of research made note taking a rather difficult proposition. It was simply in poor form to ask a training partner to stop hitting pads while I detailed how the impact of his kicks were hurting my arms or write down a comment he had just made. Breaking from the action would also serve as a barrier to my full participation in training and sparring. Instead I would dictate key

[29] See Paradis (2014) and Woodward (2008) for a discussion of the difficulties faced by women researching the combat sport field.

observations to my phone on my drive home and turn these into field notes as soon as I was clean and well fed. These notes included reflections on my own sensory experience, emotional reflections, descriptions of interactions, theoretical musings, and, importantly, description of all the talking.

Early in the project, I made the decision to focus on the stories told on the mats. Instead of bringing the participants to a new location to record the storytelling, I took advantage of gaps during training to engage with other participants. In some cases, another participant and I would end up sitting on the side of the mat long after class ended and everyone else had left the gym (with the owner or instructor being kind enough to just ask me lock up on the way out instead of interrupting). The richness of these informal, completely unstructured discussions came to include life histories as well as expositions on MMA. It is significant to note that the more intimate and exploratory conversations would occur between and after sparring rather than when people first arrived at the gym. Repeatedly sparring or rolling with someone would leave us both eager to reflect on what had just transpired and open to sharing much larger thoughts. In this sense the shared energy, pain, and sweat presupposed and set the stage for the discursive.

To ensure that my conclusions were not the result of faulty translation from wrestling mat to laptop, I later discussed the patterns I was observing in lengthier interviews outside the gym. These “fact-checking” sessions (twenty-six total) gave participants an opportunity to provide context, expand upon, or deny statements they made in the gym. Initially, I thought of these conversations as a chance to incorporate the more classically structured interview into my research. However, I quickly realized that

my interest was not in the more structured and safe narratives that were shared at the local coffee shop. Here, I once again draw methodological inspiration from Bourdieu and his emphasis on situating interviews in the field (1990), affect-scholars who take seriously the provocative power of place, as well as Goffman's foundational sociological writings on the significance of setting (1959). The location of these conversations mattered. More often than not, other members of the site came in-and-out of the conversation—asking questions, injecting expertise, or pushing the person to share a particular story. This was a relational construction. Other times during the conversations that followed training I could see the tangible affects that the gym exerted. I observed an older man pause and place their hands on the wrestling mat before seemingly absorbing inspiration, a well-known fighter switched from slow stretching to seemingly subconsciously enacting the moves discussed during our conversation, another participant sniffed the air to both demonstrate and find words, and a woman fighter's tone markedly changed as she stepped from the folding chairs back onto the mats, lightly hitting a small punching bag while talking about her experience. The setting transformed, guided, provoked, and affected.

This serves as a key example for how my methodological decisions were determined not just by the literature, but rather listening to the site. Encountering the excitement and honesty of the shared stories on the mat was one of my biggest "a-ha" moments in the research process. To take the story to the coffee shop was to get a more polished story about the stories. This would remove the communal nature of the narratives and the way people worked together to build something from an array of sometimes poorly fitting discursive fragments. This would clean up the sweaty, bloody

glue that holds it all together. It would silence the topics that provoked the embarrassed laugh and occasional blush from my coffee-shop interviewees before they acknowledged that they did say what I thought they said. It would shift my unit of analysis to the individual rather than the site and practice. And, it would transform the stories into explanations or framing rather than part of the practice and part of the allure.

A Brief Reflection

I would like to end with some brief reflections on the three approaches and my own experience in the field. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I believe that an ethnographer seeking to understand the phenomenological experience and the construction of meaning in a site would benefit from reading and drawing on all three of the outlined approaches. In a step even further away from the polemical, I suggest that the limitations to each of the methodologies is remedied by the other approaches and they should not be considered mutually exclusive. I follow Becker (2001) and Abbott (2004) in emphasizing the communal nature of knowledge and the manner in which, even while methods are based on competing epistemological grounds, each should serve to supplement others rather than existing as a denial of the others validity. Or, to quote Lamont and Swidler, "a communal effort toward a methodological pragmatism is more likely to lead us in a fruitful direction than the tit-for-tat that can be fed by methodological tribalism.

The autoethnographic approach is an honest one. The employer of this approach embraces the necessary elements of subjectivity and focuses on the lived experience that she knows best—her own. Both the moments of hubris and weakness are laid bare for the reader. It would be neither wrong, nor insulting, to classify a good autoethnography as a work of art. The work masterfully weaves together descriptions of personal experience

with reflections of the significance of those experiences, freed from the burden of the 'unbiased', 'objective' approach. I see the approach as one that should be looked to for inspiration, even if I do not classify my research as such. It should not simply be ignored or presented as a sacrificial lamb to garner appreciation for the less 'subjective' approach.

Affect-oriented research, in particular non-representation theory, shows the value of treating the researcher as a tool to be subjected to the difficult to capture affects that are commonly ignored in focusing on representational forms of power. This approach gives us access to the over-abundance of life – the more open, more vital, and more populated forms of analysis that avoids rigid taxonomic categorization – leaving the fuzziness, incompleteness, strangeness, and the unpredictable nature of life intact. And, it shifts the unit of analysis beyond the individual or even the rules of the field. In doing so NRT allows me insight into the allure of a site that should not simply be explained by one's habitus or the desire to increase capital. And, I am pushed to write in a manner that affects and not just represents.

In understanding the body as fluid, the NRT scholars extend Foucault's death of the subject from the discursive realm to the material. This presents a conundrum as I am used to speaking in terms of more stable subjects, whether acting or being acted upon. And, at times, the theoretical formulation does not seem to fit in my site where participants actively seek to explore the *limits of their* bodies. It is difficult to discuss physical experience and emotions without entering the realm of humanism; however, the approach is a constant and useful reminder to not get stuck focusing on the particular individuals in the site but rather the way they too are swept along by and take part in building this cultural form.

Carnal sociology shows the value in treating the lived body as a unified collection of nerves, habits, and desires - the manner that one's habitus is shaped and altered through repetition and training matters. The self-based model found within carnal sociology, while perhaps not as radical as the non-representational approach, provides ground for a claim-making approach that takes seriously the corporeal. In this site it simply makes sense to acknowledge the feeling, acting, subject. However, following Wacquant, effort is made to not get lost in the allure of the subjective and begin to make broader and grander claims that emanate out from shaping my habitus in a manner befitting the field. In a sense, this Bourdieuian based approach provides a starting point for the project, even as I push beyond it both theoretically and methodologically in each of the chapters.

The sharp contrast in the claims-making approach of three demonstrates how ontological and epistemological assumptions are connected to the research process. For instance, carnal sociology stands along in holding the desire for claims to Truth. However, as much as I find the theoretical debate stimulating, I call for a relaxing of theoretical rigidity in attempting to explain the social world. This step is particularly tenuous due to the latent pressures of academia that seemingly haunts the practitioners of these methods as they move into the realm and politics of emotions, physical experience, and affect—a fear of being seen as researching the silly, nice and cuddly, and touchy-feely or celebrating the crude and masculine. It is in the moments where the researcher lets her guard down, that the results are most compelling—the moments when practitioners of all three of the approaches answer Wolf's call (1996) to acknowledge that ethnographers love being in the field.

Returning to the Gym/Re-Uniting with Pain

I had delayed my return to the mixed martial arts gym for a while. To be honest with myself, the break was longer than the knee surgery required. But the surgery definitely did provide a great excuse. Once you are out of the gym, the inertia builds and it is easy to find reasons not to go back—not being in good enough shape, too much writing and reading to finish, my schedule this week isn't quite right but the next should be good, and so on until days turn into months. Who knows how long it would have been if it wasn't for the text message from Sam, an old training partner, telling me that he was loving the new gym he had recently started going to?

I remember Zach telling me about this feeling when he returned after a whole year off but I didn't truly understand it at the time. Of course, the words made sense, but I didn't really get what he was saying until I felt it myself. Reflecting back on that conversation, with the aid of my field notes, he had been surprisingly eloquent in capturing what I was now feeling when he explained, "the longer you wait, the more you miss it [MMA] but also the more you dread it." In many ways it is the same qualities that make MMA stand out and keep people in the gym that impose a sometimes conscious and often subconscious hesitation to return; in particular the physicality, the need for repeated training to improve, and the wear on your joints. At a deep level my body both craved and dreaded the contact, the adrenaline, the suffering, and the full body exhaustion that follows the 48-hours after an intense training session.

So, there I was, back in the MMA gym: triple checking that I had all my gear before getting in my car; checking the clock and driving time to make sure that I arrived on the early side, wondering what the training atmosphere would be and whether this would be the type of place where new guys were forced to "prove themselves"; and generally feeling a mixture of nerves and anticipation that I had not experienced in a long time.

When I entered the gym it felt right and familiar and some of the nerves and tension slipped away. Of course, there were some key differences. In particular, the place was much nicer than the gyms where I had spent most of my time. The owner, a veteran of the local kickboxing scene, had clearly either managed his business quite well or he had a wealthy backer (most likely both). There was a large room specifically for boxing and Muay Thai with every variety of punching bag one's heart could desire, the grappling mats were new, well-maintained, and a high-quality brand (Zebra Mats), and they had a small cage for people to become better acclimated for their amateur and professional MMA fights. They even had a separate room to teach women-only cardio and self-defense classes. This was the first time I had seen a spatial rather than temporal divide and I took it is as a sign that this was probably not the type of brutal place "where the weak are weeded out" through being pushed past their limits by being thrown directly into sparring sessions that fall more on the fight side of the spectrum. It was also a sign that this was part of the newer wave of gyms where the owners clearly saw the place as an investment and not just a project of passion.

But even with the particularities of the gym, on some level, I knew the place. When I heard the thud of fist, elbow, and shin hitting Thai-pads rhythmically responding to the combinations called out by the trainer, I felt my body shifting and changing as it connected back to the environment. I was quickly drawn back into the pacing of the gym, designated by the high-pitched, extended beep that signals the end of the three or five-minute round and the beginning of a new one—the same annoying but powerful sound that inspired arguably the most artful passages of Loic Wacquant's ode to the boxing

gym. And, the smells. There is a particular odor that emerges from sweat, bacteria, and mat mixing and bonding, day after day, week after week, that can never quite be washed away. Each time I encountered that familiar musky scent—first in entering the locker room, second when slipping my rashguard over my head, and a third time when starting to warm-up on the mats—I found my doubts and hesitations become a more and more distant memory as they were replaced by excitement and a nervous tension as I found myself being pulled deeper and deeper into the site. It seems gross, but there is a reason some fighters and grapplers smell their gear as they pack their bags to head to the gym or to inhale deeply to get in the right mindset before sparring or fighting.

However, as much as I was drawn back into the gym through the sensory connections and triggers, both my body and mind had forgotten what, to an outsider, must seem like the most obvious quality of training in MMA. It hurts. And, I'm not just referring to the obvious causes of pain. Of course getting kicked in your leg or punched in the stomach hurts. But, when you first start training, or when you return after time off, it all hurts.

I didn't even spar with strikes. But I drilled moves in a grappling class. And, somehow I found myself sticking around after to help someone prepare for an upcoming fight by training takedowns again the cage. I was asked not because of any particular expertise, rather I happened to be the exact same size and build as his opponent. The experience was a succinct reminder that the body really does adapt and harden. It was also a quick lesson that the body really does lose that conditioning. During warm-ups when my partner and I took turns dropping down to our knees to shoot in for a takedown, my kneecaps felt the stiffness of the mats and I wish I remembered my kneepads. Later, in the open mat portion of training, when I tried to advance to "side-control," a position where I would be partially beside and partially on top of my opponent, he attempted to hold me in place with "the lock down", figure-fouring his legs around my shin, attempting to keep me in place but also placing pressure on my shin and calf that left my leg throbbing even after I escaped the grip. And when I used my head to block his elbow from being brought back down beside his body so I could move into an "arm-triangle" choke where his own arm is used to apply pressure to their neck, my face scraped along the adhesive surface, my nerves firing angrily as a trail of skin was left on the mat, leaving my forehead red and raw. These are the pains and annoyances that probably wouldn't even make a list of how MMA hurts. Similarly, when I exhaustedly struggled to escape from under a larger training partner as he transitioned into knee-on-belly (a position where the person on top controls the person on the bottom through driving one knee into their stomach and chest while keeping their other leg to the side for balance), the pressure on my ribs seemed more severe than I remembered—every bit of my being seemed to be sucked into the crushing feeling and I had to struggle to recover my awareness and push the knee aside just enough to free my body. Worst of all were the repeated takedowns against the cage that left my back raw from getting dragged down against the hard, vinyl-coated links that look so forgiving on television.

In returning, there were also the pains that were expected and more directly related to the brutal nature of the game we were playing. However, they seemed magnified. This was never more evident then when I finally matched up with my old training partner who had invited me to return to the MMA gym. After smiling and exchanging a few pleasantries, it took little time for it to be made clear that the advantage I once held over him was gone. He was aggressive, capitalizing on every hesitation to move to a better position, and content to use pain to create opening—twisting my head to open my throat for a choke, and crushing my nose by dragging his forearm across my face when I

resisted. By the end of our “happy” reunion I was left coughing to clear my throat after having my airway constricted, pressing the back of my hand to my nose to make sure that I was not bleeding, and opening and reopening my mouth to loosen up my jaw.

The pain was not left in the gym. My head throbbed as I drove home—most likely a result of somersaults and chokes. It was difficult to shower when I arrived home because the water and soap burned the top of my right knee, foot, and toes where they were raw from being repeatedly dragged across the mat. The next morning it was difficult to turn my neck, muscles ached from being used in ways they had grown unaccustomed to, it hurt to swallow as a result of a rear-naked choke that was applied aggressively and incorrectly, my left shoulder throbbed from having an old grappling injury re-aggravated, and yellow and brown bruises mapped the path that my opponents shins had travelled along my calves, shin, thighs, and biceps. Some of the pains were sharp and immediate, while others were dull and aching. Some skimmed along the surface, while others found home deep within the joints and muscles. Throughout the day a slightest movement or shift could call attention to one of the types—providing a constant reminder of the cause and also of that which awaited me on my next visit to the gym.

4. It Hurts so It Is Real: The Multiple Allures of Pain

J: Punch me in the head. (He smiles, tapping the front of his head with his sparring gloves)

Me: Really? (I hesitate)

J: Yeah! (He puts his hands down, and lowers his head, rolling up his shoulders while bracing his body)

Instructor: That is a good offer. (He is laughing at the pairing of J's excitement and my clear lack of desire to comply.)

I give a light jab to his forehead. The top of his head is surprisingly hard and the contact sends vibrations up my arm.

J: Harder.

I hit him with a slightly harder right cross. He returns to the same position and I hit him again, knocking him backwards a step. He seems satisfied. Attention shifts back to the task at hand. Everyone begins to spar.

The appeal of paying money to engage in a practice that involves subjecting oneself to pain and injury while attempting to inflict pain and, at the very least, threaten injury on another seems perplexing. Yet the recent boom in mixed martial arts (MMA) schools that teach hobbyists a medley of skills taken from traditional disciplines and providing the space necessary for the participants to test their newfound abilities on each other builds on this very principle. Even more perplexing is the celebration of the painful moment itself—as participants commonly state variations of, "you don't know yourself until you get hit," and "you know you are alive when you get hit." A celebration that is perhaps not as surprising to anyone who has participated in any activity that tests one's physical limits and resolve—whether through violent sport, exercise, or another physically grueling endeavor. In this chapter, I seek to better understand not what pain is (a question outside the purview of a sociologist) but instead what it does, and what affects it has upon the body, and how it facilitates the a body's encounter with the world and other bodies

that inhabit it. I explore the multiple roles of pain in the MMA gym. In doing so, I engage with scholarship on embodiment, physical practice, and affect and suggest further attention to the inward contraction of the body and the establishing of limits—the moments where pain forces the body to retreat in upon itself, becoming a united mass of flesh and nerves—rather than just the outward extension.

Pain remains understudied and under-theorized within the social sciences. While recent scholarship has sought to expand the discussion beyond a purely physiological perspective (e.g. Bissell 2009; Messner 1996; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Smith 2008; Wacquant 1998), it generally remains confined to the health field and medically oriented social sciences. Those that have most famously broached the subject of the seduction of pain have focused on the abstract or textual. Both Deleuze's Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch-inspired defense of masochism (1971) and feminist critiques of sadomasochism (SM) are primarily theoretical. As Newmahr (2008: 626) explains, until recently, studies of SM have failed to even address who engages in the practice and what they actually do. At the very least, the seductive and communal elements of pain have been not been adequately studied and few, if anyone, within the discipline has built on Emile Durkheim's writing in the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912 [2008]) that pain, when it does not occur naturally, creates communal bonds in part becasuse "suffering creates exceptional strength". The willingness to endure the suffering means that it must have been worth it, and becomes a sign of membership from participants.[30]

[30] It is worth noting that through citing Emile Durkheim and taking up some of his foundational interests I officially establish that I am a sociologist.

Within sociology, when pain has been studied, it is explored both as a pressure and demonstration of masculinity. In particular, within the sporting context, the ability to inflict pain and stoically receive physical violence has been explicated as central to gaining the respect of others in the field. Violence becomes a natural part of the game, where the body is expected to destroy and be destroyed (Sabo 1994). The discourse surrounding these acts effectively asserts that the men are "built" to inflict pain and receive physical damage without acknowledging the suffering. Each incremental step of athletes being bigger, stronger, more violent, and more resistant to suffering offers further proof of the sex-based difference between men and women (Messner 1990). As male athletes age they are left to negotiate the dissonance that rises between their now damaged and pain-filled bodies and an identity based on this body-centric form of masculinity (Sparkes and Smith 2002). While these well-read and extremely well-cited pieces offer important critiques of the role of violence in sport and the relationship to masculinity, the experience and seduction of the experience is left simply as an assertion of masculinity and the pain simply something to be overcome.

Often, within this literature, physical violence is associated with lower and middle-class masculinities (Connell 2000), often from marginalized outcast groups (Alexander 2005). This holds true in the larger discipline as well, where sport, sociologists have tended to equate violence and pain with poverty (Jackson-Jacobs 2013). In particular, violence and fighting has been associated with lower-class masculinity and youth-culture. Whether among the working-class British lads studied by Willis (1977) or the poor, urban Philadelphians studied by Anderson (1999), fighting and ability to withstand and inflict violence and pain emerges as a way to establish a

"masculine reputation" and save face. Similarly, in Wacquant's (2004) examination of boxing in inner-city Chicago, the men he studied viewed the gym as a site to temporarily escape the chaos and violence of everyday life and work on transforming their own bodies into monetary gain. In all of these texts, a prowess in violent activities can translate into cultural (and sometimes economic) capital, but it is generally specific to a field inhabited by lower-class men. And again, we are left without a sense of what the pain and physical does or allows beyond the goal of gendered performance and more utilitarian displays of toughness and physicality.

The absence of real engagement with the painful experience is even more glaring within academic discussions of violence and torture where there has been little engagement with *the body* in pain. Conversely, sociology of the body scholars have little to say about violence or torture. Also missing is a discussion of the experience of the torturer who encounters the other's body through inflicting suffering. These silences accentuate the manner that the work on the body has focused on bounded entities that are a collection of particular qualities and types of knowledge. These are bodies that are disciplined, express identity, and reproduce social position. These are not bodies that touch each other. And, these are not bodies that hurt and are hurt. I do not use the lens of violence as a central way of exploring the mixed martial arts gym due to the mutual agreement and expectations of participants.[31] However, those familiar with the literature on violence will see important points of intersection and the limitations of this approach

[31] Here I am influenced by Randall Collins (2009) who labels mosh pits and boxing "pseudo-violence" given the mutually agreed upon nature of the physical action and the lack of tension and fear from bystanders. In other words, violence is not that which can be welcomed. While this definition does not seem perfect when one thinks of some of the damaging and physical actions that occur, for instance, on the football field, it is a useful specification.

are particularly revealing of the need to take seriously this topic.[32]

Surprisingly, at least to me, the few recent studies that have taken up Emile Durkheim's interest in the social bonding that results from shared pain have been conducted either in the lab or through controlled experiment. For example, social psychologist Brock Bastian and his colleagues (2014) demonstrated that is possible to create a sense of solidarity among students who had never met before through simply having them share a painful experience (coincidently the students were asked to hold wall squats and endure icy water—two common activities in the MMA gym). Similarly, Dimitris Xygalatas and his co-authors have demonstrated that rituals with higher degrees of pain and physical endurance are associated with higher degrees of affinity (measured by financial generosity) towards the religious temple that the ritual was conducted (2013).

Within geography, the growth of non-representational theory (NRT) turned the discipline's gaze towards practice and affect. The theoretical orientation allows the theorizing of the body with the world (and other bodies) as a set of intensities, both positive and negative. This approach seemingly dovetails with the manner in which pain has been used to move past the mind/body dichotomy (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) and the subject/world separation (Scarry 1985). However, even with this potential, geography joins the other social sciences in leaving pain as a topic of study that has failed to build momentum, with virtually no attention given to the cases where pain is sought.

[32]This will be particularly evident to fans of the too-rarely translated German sociologist, Heinrich Popitz. Popitz (1992) defines violence as an action of power that leads to the intentional bodily injury of another. The narrowness of the definition makes it a useful working tool to better theorize the corporeal impact of the experience of violence but also limits application to situations of structural or symbolic violence. I also hesitate to enter this discussion due to the many competing definitions of violence within the literature.

This chapter builds upon my six-year sensory immersion into the MMA scene in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota as well as the surrounding metropolitan area). In particular, I draw on my time on the mats to allow insight into the experiences that escape language and the carnal processes through which the exchange of pain becomes central to participants' lives. In this chapter, I juxtapose reflections on my participation with stories from other members of the community. By becoming aware of the field's affect on me and patching together a number of bodies of theory to gain purchase on the topic, I am able to appreciate the role of pain in returning focus to the corporeal it's multiple meanings and allures.

I suggest that pain attracts participants through serving three purposes within these fight-based schools: (1) it provides confidence that the experience is 'real' and build confidence in one's ability to handle and understand pain; (2) it is itself an avenue to encounter the body as a united 'self' with clear limits and boundaries; (3) it facilitates shared vulnerability and trust. Of course, this argument cannot be isolated from the particular historical moment and gendered context. I conclude the chapter through reflecting on manner that the painful encounter found in MMA, and other extreme physical practices, provide a physical felt experience not present in the lives of the men that fill the training sites. This illustrates the affective allures of pain as well as the affective moderation of life outside the gym. While I do not seek to answer what *is* pain—a question outside the purview of sociology—the seductive elements of the contraction of the hurt body demonstrate the need for theorists to not only ask 'what can a body do', as the affect-oriented suggest, but also 'what does a body seek to have done to it.'

Affect and physical practice

Within sociology, it is the self-described carnal-oriented strain of sociology that has produced the loudest calls to reject the Cartesian mind-body divide and have presented the clearest path to an academic appreciation of the sensual and corporeal. The approach draws heavily on the embodied elements of Bourdieuian theory and has been championed by Pierre Bourdieu's protégé, Loic Wacquant. Wacquant's study of boxing in inner-city Chicago, *Body & Soul*, is by far the most well-known example and thorough application. In this "enactive ethnography," (Wacquant 2015) he emphatically underscores the fact that the social agent is a being of flesh, nerves, and senses, and he explores habitus even as it "operates *beneath the level of consciousness and discourse*" (2004, 5). To do so, Wacquant turns to his own body as a tool for research, putting to practice Bourdieu's contention that "we learn through the body" ([1997] 2000, 141). His work, as well as those who it has inspired, effectively demonstrates the importance of a deeper, fleshier grasp of embodiment, and a more embodied sense of social life.

The carnal sociologists understanding of bodies in the world is particularly well suited for research on the repeated drilling to improve and condition the athlete. For instance, Dale Spencer trains alongside fighters to understand the "body callusing" undergone to produce the proper *habitus* (2009) and masterfully reveal the rhythmic and sensory experiences of the gym (2014). Here the body transformation appears a utilitarian task engaged in by subjects who have the goal of increasing the capacity of their body to inflict damage and withstand pain. This follows Wacquant's discussion of creating a hardened shell that can withstand impact in the case of inner-city boxing (1998). The capital-seeking process of hardening the body can have leave the athlete riddled with

injury by the end of his short career. Within habitus-inspired or carnal sociology there is an emphasis on the subject engaging in a physical practice with the goal of improving their stable, lived body. This makes sense for the fighter with professional aspirations, or the boxer seeking to escape the inner city. However, for hobbyist practitioners in the MMA sites I have examined, there is little to no capital-building imperative, in the monetary sense, to increase the bodies' capability of pain. While the tough, hardened "shell" may become a source of pride, it is the sensual experience itself that becomes the allure. And, even as Wacquant turns our gaze towards the sensory, the emphasis remains on the individual acquiring "capacities to act and the dexterity to do things competently" (2014). Lost in this orientation is the connections that extend beyond the individual, the energy that floats throughout the gym, and the moments that seem beyond or even below the self.[33]

To understand my encounters with pain while training in MMA and the dialogue that surround the difficult to discuss experience, I look beyond the Merleau-inspired carnal sociology, and outside the disciplinary walls of sociology. Turning to affect, I foreground a "body's belonging to world of encounters or; a world belong to a body of encounters" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). In the gym, it is through the painful encounter that the skin and surface is revealed as both that which contains us but also that which

[33] As Randall Collins (2014) astutely notes:

> Wacquant's description of what happens in the gym, it seems to me, is much more about solidarity than about skill. He points out that many of the exercises boxers do could be performed at home, alone; but performing them together at the gym makes them much more efficacious. The gym divides time into 3-min segments, marked by the ringing of the bell: a few boxers are sparring, while most are skipping rope, hitting the heavy or light punching bags, or doing stomach-building sit-up exercises. When the optimal number of people are working out in the gym—somewhere between about 6 and 15—there is a palpable feeling of being in the same rhythm. Everyone is pumped up, mutually focused, bodily entrained, energized. These are revealing micro-details."

allows us to contact and impress upon others. It is only in these moments of impressing and being impressed that the limits are felt. Therefore bodies are always, at some level, brought about through the imposing and exposing of the internal and external by and through others. The body should never be understood as a bounded, self-contained entity independent to the outside world. The body is always relationally constituted. It is in the touching of something hot, or the rubbing of sandpaper or tree-bark that we experience the reconstitution of bodily space—this is *my* surface, that is *its* surface. It is through the hurting that our bodies our revealed.

Since the rise of humanist geography in the 1970s the study of emotion and affect have had a place in the geographic discipline (e.g. Tuan 1977). Feminist geography deserves the majority of the credit for pushing the study of the body as well as politicizing the humanist exploration of self and place (see McDowell 1999; Nast and Pile 1998). While NRT would benefit from a more thorough engagement with established literature on embodiment in feminist geography, it builds upon specific elements of feminist theory by foregrounding the material, non-discursive and interpersonal elements of experience.[34] Following Spinoza (often through Deleuze), the body is defined by

[34] The degree of influence, and the acknowledgement of that influence, remains a point of contention between feminist geographers and NRT. To be fair, appliers of NRT have earned their reputation for citational silences. Within feminist theory, performativity, identity, and the fluidity of the body have remained at the center of disciplinary debates, in particular in the writing of Butler, Fraser, and Grosz (Fraser 1997, Grosz 1994). Butler's work is cited due to Thrift and McCormack's fascination with dance and performance but is brushed quickly to the side. The lack of engagement with Elizabeth Grosz's work is even more surprising as Grosz, through taking seriously materiality and rethinking feminist theories' relation to cultural theorists (including but not limited to Nietzsche, Freud, Deleuze, and Lingis) offers a broad challenge to post-structuralism that parallels NRT's project.

The carnal approach bears more in common with affect-theory than just an interest in the fleshy and sensual. Much like affect-theorists, carnal sociologists, most notably Wacquant, have effectively ignored the tradition of feminist work calling for attention to the embodied and situated experience. Instead, like affect theorists, Wacquant turns to the writing of philosophers and

capacities in relationships: the capacity to affect and be affected, the capacity for movement (or rest) with particular speed (or slowness), the capacity for particular intensities and sensations. In this manner affect implies an augmentation or diminution of the body's capacity to act. The necessary question becomes—what can be done to this body and what can it do? Building on this, it is important to also ask, where does one seek out and build the capacity for particular affective intensities, and what is the allure of these particular sensory connections and experiences of the world?[35] It is this emphasis on the affective, preconscious dimensions that inspire my examination of pain and MMA in this chapter. It is also this emphasis that I question and refine throughout my dissertation by looking at the interplay between the discursive and the embodied.

The affect-oriented approach has been directed towards tracing corporeal experiences such as the emergence of boredom, fear, and love, as well as practices including dance, cycling, and religious séance (Anderson 2004; Holloway 2006; McCormack 2002; Saville 2008; Spinney 2006).[36] It has also provided a fruitful lens for insight into experiencing the urban and rural environment (often by foot) (e.g. Middleton 2010; Pile 2005; Pinder 2001; Wylie 2005). In all cases effort is made to give space for the sites and the practices to exert affect and priority is given to the pre- or more- than-

---

neuroscientists. See Victoria Pitts Taylor's article in *Qualitative Sociology* for a longer discussion of this unfortunate silencing (2014).

[35] Those familiar with actor network theory and the writings of Bruno Latour will see more than a passing similarity with affect-theory. Both attend to the thingness or materiality of subjectivity by focusing on how social relations and categories acquire meaning/substance through the connections made and new assemblages formed. There is also a shared understanding of bodies as a relational production of the assemblage of materials. The emphasis on extension and movement found in NRT is also pursued from within ANT. However, much like NRT, ANT is silent in regards to pain, contraction, and what Elizabeth Scarry (1985) describes as the severing of connections.

[36] For a more comprehensive overview of the NRT, see Lorimer (2008) or Pile (2010).

rational.[37] The goal is to get at the feeling of the experience itself. As Obrador-Pons discusses in studying nude beaches, '[d]rained of life, sensation and enchantment—what really matters—the beach becomes an irrelevant and meaningless space in which there is nothing to grasp' (2007: 124).

Studies of sport lend themselves to approaches that take material practice and the embodied experience seriously (e.g. Alter 1992; Evers 2006; Wacquant 1998). Athletes devote their time to becoming tuned into the corporeal at levels far beyond the general public as they attempt to increase what their bodies can do and have done to them. Unfortunately, even as Thrift (2000, 2005) alludes to the studies of sports, in particular extreme varieties such as climbing, there has been little effort to extend inquiry into more popularized sport within NRT. Perhaps because of the associations with masculinity, corporations, and conservative ideology, or the lack of cultural cache, attention has instead remained on previously mentioned categories of dance (e.g., Thrift 1997, McCormack 2002) and the everyday and mundane such as walking (Wylie 2005) and cycling (Jones 2012). Martial arts, in particular, demand an approach that emphasizes the sensuous experience. Within training sites the explicit goal is to recode the body, increasing somatic potential to affect, and to be affected. To be practitioner (or researcher) of martial arts 'involves immersing oneself in an entire world-of-meaning, a new cosmological order composed of movement, senses, emotions and inter-subjectivity' (Cohen 2006, 76).

Flow, long a subject of fascination in ethnographic writing on sport, both popular

[37] See Macpherson (2010) for an overview of the body–landscape relation.

and academic, provides a point of commonality with NRT. This can be seen in the writings on mountain climbing (Thrift 2005) and parkour (Saville 2008). Flow can be understood as the feeling of connecting and fusing with the world to a degree where higher control is reached while the self seems to dissipate. Breton (2000: 3), following Csikszentmihalyi (1975), explains, "nothing can interfere, time loses its importance. The individual dissolves into movement, far from the worries that normally weigh on him, there is a melting of self into the action, a union with the rock face while climbing it or with the team in group games." This bears more than a passing resemblance to the Deleuzian emphasis on a fluid, never-static body in the moments where 'there is no longer any discernible "I" that negotiates or plans paths around objects, rather there is a body that knows at each moment what to grasp, how to slide through space unhindered by obstacles' (Sudnow 2001, cited in Saville 2008: 908). This experience requires a mastery, or 'equality between individuals' resources and the field in which they are employed. There is creativity but little sense of a self that is negotiation and reflecting upon the challenges that are presented. However, if the demands of the undertaking exceed their wishes, instead of flow, "they will mainly experience the sensation of being *crushed* by the event" (Breton 2000: 3, my emphasis).

Pain calls into question the emphasis on outward expansion and the diffusion of self. Pain has an immediacy that pushes inwards; the self is lost and discovered through contraction. In MMA the crushing that Csikszentmihalyi and Breton warn of as the negative outcome of an unbalance between skill, technique, and challenges faced, becomes desired. These instances are not completely absent from affect-based research; however, in seeking the moments of flow and expansion, the potentially oppositional

moments are often relegated to side-notes. John Wylie's account of a single day of walking on the South West Coast Path in North Devon is emblematic of the revealing powers of the orientation but also the manner that pain persists as a necessary and unavoidable complication, emerging at sometimes unexpected and undesired times. Wylie masterfully allows the field to exert its presence, simply passing through as 'the woods emerge as immediately endless spaces' (2005: 238). However, when his feet begin to ache he is no longer able to dissolve into the sublime experience, 'the landscape no longer takes shape as a set of readily affording surfaces for purposive and smooth motion. Instead, the world contracts and the subject splits' (Wylie 2005: 244).

Getting pain to get pain

> English, which can express the thought of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache . . . The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. (Virginia Woolf 1967, cited in Scarry 1985: 4)

The study of pain is made difficult by the very qualities that make it worthy of study—and, in this case, in a seemingly counter-intuitive manner, desirable. Pain is too raw, immediate and internal to be expressed to another. It is for this reason, as Elaine Scarry explains in canonical exploration of pain, that we only know another's pain through crude metaphors or representations that turn to the tool or cause of pain rather than the impact or experience.[38] The language and world-destroying qualities of pain are fundamental to

[38] Both relying on the reference, or an "as is" format are problematic for "the first specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictures as producing the pain; and the second specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain. Thus a person may say "It feels as though a hammer is coming down on my spine" even where there is no hammer' ... Physical pain is not identical with (and often exists without) either agency or damage, but these things are referential; consequently we often call upon them to convey the experience of pain

the experience of pain. As Scarry notes, '[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through resistance to language' (1985: 4). The encounter itself, leave one struggling for any semblance of language; forced to resort to cries and monosyllabic exclamations. In contrast, according to Scarry, desire and pleasure inspires language and narration. To take seriously pain, is therefore to take seriously the manner that pain escapes altogether the bounds of representation and operates at a level of immediacy that refuses relegation to a mere signifier. I seek to understand what the 'world-destroying' and language-defying elements of pain offer to the participants who populate MMA sites.

Sarah Ahmed's suggestion to consider pain "as an affect, rather then effect" (2002, 19) offers one potential path to moving past the limitations of previous empirical work and build upon Scarry's theorizing. Pain seemingly fits well with the theoretical framework of non-representational theory for, as David Bissell argues, "pain, both physical and emotional, is nonrepresentational in the sense that it stubbornly refuses to be represented discursively. It is pure, pre-personal, intensified sensation that eludes and escapes the confines of language" (2009: 911). Scarry herself demonstrates a similar understanding of the self as NRT; as with affect theory she discusses the making of the self and of the world as involving a process of extension into material objects which lift us from the 'mute facts' of sentience of the body into the shareable, social world. We project our body power into the making of material artifacts (e.g. boxing glove), which in turn transform the body (the boxing glove magnifies some abilities of the hand while limiting others). We create and transform the self and the world through acts of extension

---

itself' (1985: 15). The process effectively lifts the pain from the suffering body and places the focus on the metaphorical device used to present the pain.

or projection (of the body into the making of objects) and reciprocation (the objects transform the self and the world). As in NRT, it is these attachments to materials that extend the body into the world and give meaning or substance to the self. However, unlike NRT, Scarry also attends to the painful severing of these material attachments. The body in pain is the unmaking of the self and of the world; pain is the inversion of making. Considering these qualities, as well as Scarry's disciplinary background in literature, it should not be surprising that her work remains in the more abstract, theoretical realm. It quite simply is difficult to study, make sense of, and write about qualities that are language and world destroying, and direct inwards rather than outwards.

Following Ahmed's demonstration of treating pain as affect, and building upon Scarry's theoretical writings, allow me to better make sense of the previously ignored roles that pain plays. I am given a basis to take seriously the exchanges of pain and the ways it allows and closes particular connections and movements. I am given the foundation to see the way pain reveals the skin as a bodily surface, re-inscribes limitations upon the self, and establishes boundaries between the internal and external. Here pain is more than something to "get over" or ignore, as it is commonly treated in the aforementioned literature on sports, masculinity, and violence. Instead I can understand how pain has the capacity to enhance or deplete life.

The elusive qualities of pain, in particular the often-repeated and emphasized words in the previous paragraphs—embodied, affect, non-representational, language-defying—demand particular methodological considerations. Of all of the allures of the practice that I explore, this is the one furthest from what a classic observation and interview-heavy approach would allow. In this chapter, I am seeking to understand the

most raw and experiential—the very elements that are often lost in translation from person to researcher to text and, finally, to reader.

It is here that the work of carnal sociologists, affect theorists, and to a lesser extent auto-ethnography, provided valuable guidance. As Wacquant states, "'go native armed" that is, equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools" (2009: 8). This acceptance allowed me to embrace the methodological need for "deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge" (Wacquant 2003: viii) and shift understanding of my own body from "an obstacle to knowledge and to turn it into a bountiful resource for social scientific inquiry" (Wacquant 2014). In some ways I was well situated for this undertaking. I was not that different from this group. As a white male who had played sports throughout high school and was still attempting to remain physically active as I entered the less corporeal world of academia, the escape to the physical site where I exchanged strikes and submissions did have a particular allure. I could feel my body changing, becoming more accustomed to the movements practice, and more resistant to the bruising and battering. I could also feel the discussion of pain that surrounded the experience shaping the way I understand the experience of being hurt and hurting others. And, as demonstrated in Newmahr's entrance into the world of sadomasochism, I would also pay particular attention to the tensions I encountered within myself as a sometimes-hesitant outsider (2010).

Affect-based theory provided confidence for my following of pain into the more-than-rational realm, and gave me confidence that it was a worthy pursuit. Following the wave of non-representational theorists entering the field to study a wide range of affect-oriented practices, I would submerge myself in site, letting the field affect me and guide

my questions (e.g., Anderson 2004, Saville 2009, McCormack 2002, Spinney 2006, Holloway 2006). And, while this seems somewhat vague, upon entering the site it became abundantly clear that the site and practice would speak quite clearly to me if I only listened. The noises, urges, desires, aches, smells, movements, connections, disconnections, and confusions all guided me. And, I repeatedly found, that the loudest of the many guiding voices in the site was pain.

At the most immediate level participation revealed the degree that mixed martial arts training revolves around being hurt and hurting. Everything hurts, even the parts of training that look like they do not hurt. In both sparring and training there is a constant, usually unspoken, negotiation of pressure and intensity resulting in a shared connection and awareness of one's own vulnerability and the other's vulnerability. There was also a shared narration and reflection on injuries, both small and large. Training alongside and being in direct contact with the men in the site provided an experiential base for me to push when participants turned to accepted but rarely explained sentences like, "you don't know yourself until you get hit" or went to the edge of reflecting on the allure of pain before falling silent. My experience also provided direct insight into the ways that pain permeates the practice, both on the mats and extending long beyond the time spent in the gym.

The fluid and personal nature of the discussions on the mat that emerged from and surrounding the painful experience was initially surprising. Perhaps most revealing was the repeated experience of sparring or rolling with someone leading to an eager and unrequested reflection on what had just transpired. I attempted to capture this excitement and honesty as much as possible by limiting the majority of my discussions to the side of

the mat during or directly after training. I use the interviews outside the site as a chance to for participants to engage with the stories, experiences, themes, and conclusions that I found from conducting the research.

This chapter benefits from my lengthy immersion in the field, as well as my growing list of injuries. The continued time in the mixed martial arts gyms allowed me direct access to a variety of encounters, types of painful experiences, and also a shifting relationship with pain. The early stages of my ethnographic immersion were most often marked by confusion and stimulation. My field notes were filled with page-after-page of detailed accounts of new pains and bodily damage, as well as reflections on my simultaneous hesitation to hit and hurt another while simultaneously being drawn to a practice where the infliction of pain was central. I was embarrassed by, proud of, and concerned about the bruises and swelling that marked my body (even turning to online medical sites to ensure myself that a doctor's visit and blood work was not necessary).

As I became more immersed in the field I also became more resistant and more comfortable with the pain. Pain remained central but these were not knew experiences, and the emphasis of my relationship shifted to reading, mitigating, avoiding, and employing. Some pains became mundane, others marked key moments, and some became expected and only somewhat unwelcome travelling companions during my time away from the site.

During times of more severe injury, the dull aching pains and body parts that no longer worked as smoothly as they once did were indicators of what was at stake through continued participation and frequent reminders of my past time in the site. And, after a

lengthy time away from the gym, pain provided a rather harsh and enlightening welcome back to the site—offering a clear indicator that body conditioning fades, that mixed martial arts hurts, and, to risk the melodramatic, that I was mortal.

Each encounter and relationship was essential to revealing the qualities of pain and the allure of those qualities. It was only through pain that I began to get pain.

It hurts, so it is real: confidence through pain

After training I walked over to my friend's apartment, which was only a few blocks from the MMA school. Perhaps it was the non-academic audience; maybe it was the skepticism in his tone when he asked if it would help me in a fight after I told him I was researching (and training in) MMA; but within minutes I had rolled up my pant leg and took off my sweatshirt to show him the bruises that covered my shin and bicep. Some were fading from contact now longer past, others were in the process of emerging in darkening. Taken collectively they made up an ever-changing map of past contact. Part of me was actually taking pride in this . . .

Pain makes the experience real. If there is blood, if skin and muscle are bruised, if bones are bent, if ligaments are stretched, something must be occurring. The core pursuit of MMA is creating the most effective fighting style for both the street, and even more importantly, the cage. Without the ability to employ tradition and tales of the almost mythical successful applications of the skills, as found in traditional martial arts gyms, pain and 'real' contact are used to build confidence that skills learned in the site will translate outside the walls of the gym. As instructors at the schools I attended repeatedly emphasized, it is essential to envision how a specific move would work in *any* environment. Because pain is involved during and after intense sparring, practitioners can maintain that they are pushing, testing and expanding their physical limits.

The possibility of pain is reified through the pastime of listing injuries that have been experienced or observed. I encountered this early on in my training after I

unwittingly triggered a group session by asking an older practitioner why he wore wrestling shoes. His answer that it provided protection for a broken toe triggered a discussion of how wearing the shoes can increase the chance of a knee injury, which led to a recounting of all the people in the school who had torn or damaged ligaments in their knees, which enforces the importance of countering leg locks quickly and tapping when in danger because 'it is not a game.' Soon every member was taking part in relating his favorite injury moment—smiling and demonstrating proper concern, often rubbing the appropriate body part during the description.

In this regard the discussion of injuries comes to resemble professional wrestling where listing injuries is seen as countering the 'fake' label (Smith 2008: 139). The potential for injury is seen as separating the practice from other physical games or, in case of professional wrestling, theater. Here pain is the path to validate the practice to outsiders who may equate MMA with traditional martial arts dojos ("so you are learning how to karate chop" or "you fighting with little kids") or judge the men for seeking out a place to engage in intimate contact with other men ("playing with sweaty guys" or "rolling around and hugging some muscular dudes"). Mark, a UPS driver, encounters this skepticism and mockery from his co-workers. And, while he dismisses their remarks as being the result of either ignorance or not wanting to acknowledge that he could beat them in a fight, he tells me that he has occasionally shared the damage that occurs to his body to let them know it isn't just "playing." When I ask for some more examples he tells me that there have been a few times that he put someone in a submission hold to show them what it felt like after he reached the limits of his ability to handle hearing that MMA guys "are pussies for giving up." He explains that, "they usually shut up after feeling it."

More commonly, the experience of pain provides validations for the participant. Jed, a public relations representative for a local company and an active local musician, left aikido and began training in MMA for this reason: "I liked the system and the way they taught things, but even if it would work, too much was choreographed. Training wasn't like sparring, it was like dancing…sometimes I got trouble for not *helping* my partner do a move on me!" In contrast, he explains, "when you get choked [in MMA] you know the technique works." When I ask Jed if his concern is being able to fight outside of the site he clarifies, "I have no plans to get in a fight. But, if you train for years, you want to think that you could." He continues to explain that, "when I was training [in aikido] I used to think I could, then I saw a UFC fight and started to have some doubts." This type of story was common from those who with a background in traditional martial arts. While aikido practitioners were the loudest, ex-karate practitioners would often complain of sparring that did not allow punches to the face and training methods that attempted to remove rather than embrace physicality. However, it was not limited to those who had participated in traditional martial arts. Cris, another musician, views pain in a similarly utilitarian manner: "it [pain] is an important. part of training, you need to make sure you don't just freak out. You know I don't enjoy the standup." At this point he laughs because just minutes before he immediately followed sparring with me by rhetorically asking the rest of the gym what he was doing with his life after a series of clean jabs left his nose bleeding. He then continued "but I need to know I can get to where I am comfortable. I can't panic if someone attacks me. I have to take the fight where I want it to go."

The newfound or reclaimed confidence in the body through engaging in the physical, practice bears more than a little in common with self-defense classes. Much like

the women who take these courses (see McCaughey 1997, Rentschler 1999, De Welde 2003), the men find strength and power in their body that they previously unaware of. And, both groups actively seek to find confidence in occupying public spaces perceived as dangerous and a source of fear. However, for the women, the mats that the lessons take place on offer a space for women to challenge traditional gender narratives of women as non-agents or passive victims (De Welde 2003). In contrast, the men growing confidence as a result of learning skills that would translate outside the gym fits masculine expectations and pressures. Time in the gym is more a reclamation of social gender norms than a challenge with men even sharing stories of not only protecting themselves but also protecting others (see Chapter 12). For both, the painful experience is central to the practice seeming real and not a rehearsed routine that builds false confidence.

Pain not only builds confidence in the ability to act when encountering violence but by testing one's abilities to respond to pain and danger, it also builds confidence that one is discovering and expanding the limits of the body. This follows the age-old creed 'no pain, no gain' and appeals to both participants who plan on competing professionally and the hobbyist athlete. Here the lengthier discussion of the body hardening techniques of professional fights by carnal sociologists makes particular sense (e.g., Wacquant 1998, Downey 2007, or Spencer 2009). However, the experience is equally important, and perhaps even more profound for the hobbyist practitioner. For this group, the manner that affect-theory subtly shifts the question to what a body can do and also what it can have done to it (and the desire to extend the capacity of both) is particularly useful. Keith, a young, successful attorney captures the appeal when he explains, "when I can contort my body to escape [from a submission attempt] or do a handstand guard pass I know I've

done something." He continues to further illuminate the affective joys of experiencing and overcoming exhaustion and pain: "Or in an awful position where I am trapped and being hit, and am completely exhausted, and somehow I reverse. I've made my body able to do that. It is the only time where I feel like I have really accomplished something." Similarly, I experience my own feelings of affective growth as my ability to absorb and return pain grows. The first time I sparred and was caught by a series of jabs I was disoriented and shocked by how much they stung. My world collapsed around the stinging of my nose and my eyes watered. Shame forced an even further contraction. Now I am able to be frustrated by a clean jab but not by affected in the same manner. Similarly, the crushing pressures of having someone sitting on top of you looking for openings to land a punch is no long incapacitating—whether through pain or awareness of intentions disappearing under the corporeal assault—and instead I also begin to feel opening and be able to exert pressure at the proper moments to escape. As the kicks I throw become faster, crisper, and more subtly disguised, I am able to slow my partner's movements through battering their thighs. I *took,* and I *gave* pain. I *did* something and I am getting better at doing something. The pain legitimates.

MMA is far from the lone site of testing limits, through pain and fear, to create a sense of accomplishment. This is a point of commonality with other (extreme) amateur sports as well as intimate physical practices. Moving outside of the realm of combat sports, Breton discusses how '[m]any amateur sportsmen in the West have today started undertaking long and intensive ordeals where their capacity to resist increasing personal suffering is all important' (2000: 1). This is seen in cycling (Spinney 2006), women's and men's boxing (Lawler 2002; Wacquant 1998), in SM (Newmahr 2010), and in ballet

(Turner & Wainwright 2003). In this manner, like in MMA, pain is an essential part of the pleasure because it symbolizes passing a barrier and provides confidence that some sort of growth, whether physical or spiritual, is occurring as a result of "real" dedication and commitment.

Much of the work in affect theory and carnal sociology downplays or silences the narration that occurs around the corporeal. In examining the role of pain in MMA it becomes evident that it is difficult to separate from the web of meaning that surrounds it. The experience of pain is part and parcel to the discourses about practices having 'value' or 'meaning' because the ideas can attach to the material experience of being hurt. However, to stop at the level of discourse and not appreciate the importance of the experience would leave us with a hollow understanding. Through immersion in the site I was drawn into an experience that is a messy combination of discourse, ritual, practice and feeling. Repetition of the listing of injuries gradually began to exert its impact upon me. People rub their legs when hearing about knee injuries because, through a combination of the words and past pains, it affects them. The stories are yet another affect circulating the site, making the experience feel real. I really could get hurt, I really could hurt someone, and not taking this seriously could have a lasting impact upon my body. Escaping from a choke hold with barely enough breath to remain conscious or taking a leg kick while continuing to pressure forward for the takedown are the moments when I was drawn in to the practice. It is the experience that provides the sticking point for the discourse and confidence in its truth.

It is important to acknowledge the temporal nature of the pain at this point. In contrast to the chronic pain eloquently examined by Bissell (2009), these pains are

transient and temporary, brought to the body through controlled, planned, and perhaps most importantly, sought acts. The bruising and dazing blows that shock the system are more instant, unexpected, and fade with some residual pain lingering for a few days as a reminder that something 'real' happened, before eventually disappearing. In contrast, chronic pain is not only world-destroying, but agency removing and life altering. As with Sara Ahmed's previously mentioned discussion her mother's suffering, the permanence of the pain isolates more than it connects. This provides an important counterpoint to the pain found in the MMA gym. Within the context of MMA, while the chronic pains that result from continued participation in the physically demanding practice is far from desired, the "making real" qualities of the pain remains. A lingering injury may force questions about whether there body can handle the demands of participation, as was the case after I dislocated one of my ribs. However, even this was evidence that I was participating in a "real" act that would be unwelcoming to many. And, even if the torn ligaments in the knee result in a life-long limp, or broken orbital bone never fully heal correctly, the chronic pain is a constant reminder of a decision made to fight. The war story remains along with the suffering.

I was reminded of this towards the end of my fieldwork during a flight to the east coast. I was seated next to a rather unremarkable looking middle-aged white man in a t-shirt and worn blue jeans. While nothing in particular stood out, I began to notice a number of small indicators that he had some experience with fighting. There was a residual scarring around his knuckles, his nose had a slight crook indicating past break, and his arms retained a sinewy musculature. He also exuded an indescribable element of roughness and tension. Eventually, after the perfunctory small talk common to the tight-

shared spaces of air travel, I mentioned the subject of my research. He began to share story after likely exaggerated story of his time spent in gyms when "people were still calling it no-holds barred—and they meant it." He detailed how he would travel around to the traditional martial arts gyms and show the black belts that all their "fancy kicks" didn't work when you grabbed them and "dirtied up" the fight. Then he would show all the big guys out on the street and at the bar who thought they were tough that "they didn't know shit." More often than not, the story was punctuated by a description of the moment of feeling pain, received or given. His knuckles would tighten into a fist as he relived digging his knuckles sinking into someone stomach and he doubled over to the side slightly as if he still could feel the kick to the ribs that he walked through. At one point he pounded his own bicep and gripped my arm to demonstrate that his body still retained some of the hardened qualities as he talked about absorbing punishment. Before the drink cart had cleared the aisle I had received a comprehensive list of his injuries with evidence where possible—a scar on the side of his head or a knuckle that protrudes more than it's neighbors. It was apparent from the beginning that the injuries were an offering of assurance to me that the stories were not just stories. However, as he continued I realized that recalling a blow that cut open his eyebrow or demonstrating the way it hurt to completely straighten his left arm was serving the same function for him. The injuries that we shared—a broken orbital bone that still aches when a storm is coming or a hip that doesn't seem quite right—offered a space for connection and acknowledgment. It was only in those shared moments of injury-produced pain, and not my attempts to interject my own thoughts on useful fighting techniques, that I broke through his inward-looking soliloquies to make him aware that I also spent time in the MMA gym and was

not just an interested audience member.

The inward collapse: discovering 'self' through pain

I sat on the side stretching while I watched Cris and Jim roll. They were rolling very lightly, working on technique. After a few minutes Jim passed Cris's guard and went for an advanced arm-bar technique that Cris barely managed to escape from through allowing his arm to bend slightly in the wrong direction as he twisted his body to pull his elbow free. They stopped, each smiling, and began to talk about the sequence and the techniques, being extremely complimentary of the other. I could not help but feel like I was watching two children playing war games and for the first time I encountered doubt and wondered why I was there—didn't I have a better use of my time, a few chapters in need of reading? Barely five minutes later I was defending myself from a choke, all negative thoughts suddenly gone—it was just me and the forearm trying to stop the flow of blood to my brain. As my last attempt to pry open his grip failed I started to feel my world sink in even tighter around me, I tapped.

For many MMA participants the pursuit can take on a distinctly spiritual feel in the midst of a life that never seems quite right or under control. Within these accounts, pain is seen as a path to discovering and 'knowing the self.' Mirroring popular literature and documentaries about combat sports, local participants described making this discovery through being hit as a fundamental allure of MMA. In this context self takes on the multiple related meanings of: (1) what is left once distractions are stripped away, leaving only the most basic elements; (2) the resilient element that survives assault; and (3) the temporary encounter with the core that remains 1 and 2. It is the moment of pain that enforces the limits of the body and leads to the encounter. This desire to have one's body retreat in upon itself necessitates an expansion of affect-based theorization of the body, as well as a move beyond a more utilitarian approach to studies of training in a physical practice.

As discussed earlier, pain is not the easiest subject of study. The world-destroying elements, as Scarry labels them, makes productive discussion difficult, for 'to have pain

is to have certainty; but to hear about pain is to have doubt' (1985: 13). In attempting to engage in a dialogue about pain during interviews I repeatedly encountered eager participants who voiced, or confidently agreed with my assertion, that pain was important but were simply unable to find a way to describe the experience that satisfactorily captured how. Instead, as Scarry discussed, they drifted into the language of what pain represented. The drift itself was sometimes a source of frustration as participants were aware of the shift into the rhetoric of confidence rather than a discussion of the mechanism. Eventually many settled with describing the pain as providing something like a centering quality or referenced others who made similar observations. During one such conversation with Cris, the aforementioned musician, I asked if the centering he was trying to describe was at all similar to the flow found in other sports. Cris responded with the great clarity: "there are elements of MMA that are like that—when you are moving really well and you just know what the person is going to do. But this is when all that just stops."[39]

While the disappearance of everyday concerns is also found in discussions of flow— when the self is absorbed into the event—the process of world destruction through pain seems markedly different. Rather than increasing awareness by becoming one with the environment, it is a process of forced reduction. Participants often described the experience as being forced to 'live-in-the-moment,' a term that has gained notoriety

[39] In focusing on the allure of pain and the central roles it plays for participants, I do not want to be seen as dismissing the desire to achieve flow state. As in other sports, the moment of flow is seen as an ideal that is only achieved during moments of temporary mastery. Rob, a web designer and frequent participant in comedy open-mics talks about the rare times where he feels "more like a passenger then a pilot. You are just going and you are doing it right, and you are responding, and you know what that person is doing next and you just are always ahead of them. And you don't even know who deserves credit for it." Bob, a gruff veteran of the scene, describes flow as when "it all slows down."

due to its use in pop philosophy/psychology. However, from my own experience, I can say with certainty that description is more than simply the recitation of popular discourse. The moments of higher intensity and the times when I am 'caught' by a strike or submission make thoughts of the past (including lessons on how to escape the submission hold) and concerns of the present, and doubts on the future much less immediate. For instance, when I am sparring with Alfonso, a decorated boxer turned MMA fighter, and he catches me repeatedly with hard downward hooks to the stomach, each successive strike further reduces me to the debilitating pain swelling in my abdomen and breaks down any thoughts of how I should respond and destroys my efforts to project any semblance of confidence and being OK. As psychologists Chris Eccleston and Geert Crombez argue in the aptly titled article "Pain Demands Attention," (1999) pain is an interruption of all else. The only thing that matters at that moment is the source of pressure, pain, and threat—whether that comes in the form of repeated strikes, constricting limbs trying to stop the flow of blood to your brain or ability to breathe, or arms twisting your limb in a direction it should not go.

While potentially negative, as characterized by Bissell in his aforementioned writing on chronic pain as the anti-affect where 'the intensity and longevity of chronic pain therefore dampen other more enjoyable and pleasurable intensities and serve to stifle creativity' (2009: 920), temporary bouts of pain are seductive to some. As a martial artist from the UK suggested in an interview with anthropologist Tamara Kohn, there are 'layers and layers of "crap" or excess that we as individuals accumulate through life and that we need to painfully (literally, through the pain of hard training) peel off and let go of' (2003: 147). For Jim, a relatively inexperienced MMA practitioner, rolling forces him

to forget all the outside distractions, "if someone has an arm it is all about getting that arm back . . . If they get mount and start hitting you all that stuff just isn't there. All that matters is stopping from being hit . . . Sometimes that carries over and when you are having a tough time you just want to go back and train." For Ben, a large Minnesotan who helps strategize fundraising for local non-profits, the intensities found in the MMA site took on an even greater importance after the unexpected death of his father. Ben explains that sparring and rolling are some of the only times that he can focus. An avid weightlifter, Ben turned to the weight gym for solace, but found even during intense lifting sessions he would be unable to escape the complex emotions and doubts that surround grieving and he would often cut sessions short. The desire to be forced to live-in-the-moment and in-the-body is seen as one of the most appealing elements of the practice.

Again, Scarry (1985) provides us an avenue to understanding the inward movement of the body in pain. For Scarry, pain is the unmaking or emptying of the self. While other states of consciousness/feelings/emotions are for something, or about something that makes us extend outside the boundaries of the body, pain makes us shrink into the body. As seen in Ben finding respite from the lack-of-control that comes with mourning the loss of his father, the physical encounters when training in MMA limits other affects. Pain is characterized by its overwhelming presence and totality—it destroys everything. If the self is made through connections with materials that lift us from the sentience of the body, the unshareability of pain ruptures these attachments to the world; to have pain is to lose (materials for) one's self and to be emptied of a self. While I agree with Scarry's accounting of pain; my time in the site also suggests that this is not just a

loss and emptying, but also a path to encountering what is perceived as the self.

The manner in which pain unites the body, both spatially and temporally, has attracted the attention of an eclectic mix of theorists, often forcing them outside their system of understanding. For instance, in *Matter and Memory* (2007 [1912]), Henri Bergson, who is often read as a champion of multiplicity, discusses pain as the moment when a complex organism whose parts and functions exist almost independently are forced back into a shared relation as one organism. Precisely because the pain is localized, the body as a whole struggles at a disproportionate level in relation to the danger incurred by the living being (2007 [1912]: 56). Valérie Fournier also notes the transformational qualities of pain in argue that pain and violence underlie the corporeal experience of being a woman. The context of Fournier's work, for obvious reasons, results in a negative reading but similar discussion of the moment: 'One becomes trapped in a colossal mass of hurting flesh falling endlessly down a dark abyss, in which everything one tries to hold on to, to reach to, to prevent the fall dissolves' (2002: 65).

At the core of the potential appeal is the retreat into the 'mass' of united flesh—the 'me' element of pain.[40] This is the 'centering' or 'reduction' that occurs during sparring. While this is often lost in literature that emphasizes movement and flow, the Deleuzian framework is not a necessarily barren landscape for discussion of the retreat inwards. For instance, within Deleuze's writing shame has played a similar role (1993).

[40] In using "me" I in no way intend to invoke the "I" and the "me" of George Herbert Mead (1934[2009]). In fact, the "me" that people refer to here could be read as an effort to escape Mead's "me"—an internalization of the social expectations and reactions—and discover something more raw and fundamental.

While lacking the same intensity as a painful blow, shame also draws out the body's materiality. Through the rushing of blood to the head and the increasing temperature as we blush, our presence is forced upon us. Elizabeth Probyn draws on Deleuze in explaining, that through this reading we can understand that 'shame is simply that which remakes us human' (2000: 25). In asking what a body can do, we must also ask how we find the limits of that body and why the affirmation of that body may become sought. To have these limits enforced is to feel real and to experience being. It makes sense that in reflecting on chronic pain, Bissell relates, 'since this pain happened to *my* body. It interrupted *my* life. . . It is my chronic headache and demands *my* attention' (2009: 911, original emphasis).

It is the emphasis on 'my' that is at the heart of the seduction that people describe as knowing yourself. And, it is they 'my' that you hold onto even as everything else is disappearing under the assault of punches or a choke cutting off blood or oxygen. More common are the less dramatic, even more temporary discoveries of "my". A quick jab stings and my focus quickly orients around "my nose", an elbow digs deep into "my thigh" as my opponent attempts to pry open my legs that are wrapped tightly around his waist, and when forced into a state of exhaustion the whole world collapses around "my lungs" that suck deeply and to little avail as "my limbs" become heavy, less response, and more strange to my retreating body.

Inside the MMA gym, the moment of pain is not sought in isolation, as this would contradict the utilitarian value discussed in the first role of pain. One rarely simply allows someone to strike them—another key contrast to Smith's professional wrestlers (2014). Pain happens while you are attempting to mitigate the possibility of it occurring or you

are taking it with the goal of inflecting a more devastating response. In my personal experience, the goal is to create a map of my body and its most vulnerable spots. I must remain aware of this grid and protect myself based on it—when striking, hands must be high to protect the face, stomach tightened and elbows in to protect the sides, weight always centered, never too far over the front leg as to avoid a leg kick and never falling to either side. When I am hit, the effect of a blow remains briefly before the pain disperses outwards along the surface or deeper inward. In response, my body pulls towards that spot, trying but failing to react to the localized surface attack. In receiving damage I may lose awareness of the grid except for the point of recent contact. In this manner pain also provides me an increased sensitivity outwards even as it focuses inwards. Like Wylie's raw feet (2005), my sore shin or stinging nose is transformed into a super receptor. When contact does occur it is just me, the spot of contact, and the force. This is unlike other perceptual experiences, such as desire, fear, and hunger, because its object does not go outwards into the external world but rather retreats inwards (Scarry 1985: 161). I am left alone, a united, feeling organism.

Again, it is the temporary fleeting pain that is sought—the type that briefly shocks the system, forcing a retreat inwards, before fading away, leaving only a dull ache that serves as a reminder. This is in contrast to the more sustained pain that comes with serious injury. This is made even more apparent when I have been "lucky" enough, at least from my perspective as a researcher, to experience a series of more serious and difficult to heal injuries. For instance when I dislocated my floating rib while training, the lingering pain kept me out of the site for two months. Sleeping, laughing, coughing, twisting, or lifting anything of note suddenly became a struggle and the invasive sharp

stabbing a reminder to the damage done to my body and how it occurred. While similar in affect to other pain experienced at the site, this is not the type sought by participants. The sustained pain does not make the world of worry disappear. It brings it crashing back: How will this affect my life? What is wrong with my body? Should I be doing this? Do I have health insurance and will it cover this?

Over the long-term, as participants become more familiar and acclimated with the pains of the site, the relationship between pain and encountering the self becomes more nuanced and even strategic. Along with the moments of intensity that lead to the body contracting are the many moments of limit testing, and learning—this hurts, that doesn't, this movement works, that one doesn't. In other words, feeling pain means don't do that again, and also establishes that maybe you should try to do that to someone else. For instance, Joe, a seasoned grappler and occasional fighter doubted the effectiveness of the "Japanese necktie" submission hold until he was caught in it himself. After feeling how the position "chokes, crushes, and cranks" all at the same time it became one of his favorite moves to attack others. Through extended time in the site, Joe has become an expert in making sense of pain. His expertise helps reveal how the amount and quality of pain we feel is also determined by the context of the experience, our previous experiences, and our ability to make sense of the felt experience. In this sense, even as pain defies and destroys the social, it is always already social—even pain cannot be reduced to a simple one-to-one relationship between eternal (or internal) stimuli and the sensation.[41] Most

[41] While scholars of pain often point to the medical field for example of an overly simplistic approach (e.g., Scarry 1985), this has become something of a straw man argument. Medical literature now takes seriously the complexity of pain, the wide array of potential causes, as well as the manner that psychic past plays a role into shaping and interpreting the experience of physical stimuli (e.g., Melzack and Wall 1996).

importantly, in this case "it hurts, so it is real" not only applies to the realness of what hurts but also the realness of what causes the hurt.

In a seemingly counter-intuitive manner, encountering pain also is cited as a key moment towards working to improve the self and an increased interest in health. For those with competitive goals this makes particular sense as athletes seek to build their future capacities to act and be acted upon in the manner detailed in nuance by the aforementioned works of Wacquant (2009) and Spencer (2009). For others in the site, the pain offers a frequent reminder of the seemingly obvious point that they are embodied beings. When I'm sharing some of the ideas I am writing about, Rich, who works in an accounting department, talks about how after college he had fallen into a state of not caring, not using, and not relating to his body: "I spent all day just slumped over at my computer…I would just eat whatever--chips and a soda for lunch. Sometimes I just forget to eat." He continues to explain that the only part of his body that was getting exercise was his thumbs from videogames and his forearms "since I wasn't doing well with the girls." He continues that the lack of romantic interest wasn't surprising considering that he "he looked like he was three-months pregnant" and "if they made a cologne [based on him] it would have been a mix of weed, Cooler Ranch Doritos, and BO [body oder]." Training in MMA provided him something to work towards and a path to getting in shape but the pain provided a constant reminder that he "had a body" and was doing something with *his* body.

The pain that remains offers a constant reminder of the past and future affects. Rich explains that the way his muscles ached to the point that he could barely move the first few times he trained was a wakeup call. Now, when he sits at the office, the bruises

and injuries remind him to correct his posture and not "eat garbage" for lunch. Nick, a white man in his mid-30s who never talked about his job but always shows up in a dress shirt and tie, joins in by talking about how he always feels like a weirdo because he hates the pain but can't help but touching the spots that hurt throughout the day. He explains that he used to do the same thing in high school: "after they tightened my braces I would always touch my teeth with my fingers and bite on things just to feel that ache." It is the trace that is left behind that reminds of the affect that happened and again will occur.

The discourse surrounding the painful experience is often heavily gendered. Learning to fight and testing oneself is something *men* should do. For instance, Nick shares the common story that "we live in the softest time ever…we aren't fighting off animals or Vikings." It is suggested that due to this shift in society, men need to find ways to not only release the combative energies that are buried deep within them and exorcise their cowardice and insecurities. The MMA site presented as a site that both offers release but also shapes and improves the men who occupy the site. For others, the masculine discourse builds even more directly on pain, in a manner that fits the prior research on sport on violence (e.g., Messner 1994, Sabo 1990). Will, an affable server at a local restaurant, talks about how the other *men* he works with will complain about the tiniest bit of physical discomfort and avoid anything that tests their bodies even the slightest. While Will is rather progressive by most measures, he often expresses his embarrassment and disgust at their "hipster softness." However, underneath the overtly masculine discourse that channels larger cultural representations of a new generation of soft men more concerned about irony, popular culture, and fashion than hard work, is the same emphasis on discovering the self and one's limits. As Rich asserts, "you just get

rag-dolled and your ideas of who you are changes. You know what I mean? You have this big guy on top of you and he is just crushing you so you have give up your back and he sinks in the choke. You've got nothing left but the tap. It sucks but you learn who you are…How many 'tough' guys out there who have never fought have this crazy distorted view of who they are?" Similarly, for Will, his co-workers would benefit from physical contact, adversity, and some pain in their life. When I ask what would happen if he convinced them to try MMA he laughs: "They wouldn't step a foot in here…Who knows what they would do? The first time someone punched them in the nose? [he laughs] If they didn't quit it would probably be the best thing that ever happened to them…[they] would find something deep they didn't even know they had."

To completely separate the seduction from the utility of knowing the self through pain would be an injustice to the practice. With knowing the limits of the body and how it can be affected also comes a greater understanding of the capacity to affect another body. This experience is difficult to communicate at best. As Keith explains about training in MMA, 'You can watch all the videos out there, have an instructor show you the move for a year, drill it on someone, but you can't understand it until you feel what it does to you.' In drilling moves the body learns both what it can take and what it can do. We only know the limits on our body through repeated testing. In martial arts, the utilitarian value of experiencing pain doubles as a way to understanding how to inflict pain on your opponent and understanding the Other in a manner rarely available. It is the experience of the Other, even as the body contracts, that I explore next.

Pain, vulnerability, and encountering the Other

Kevin was one of the guys who was held back by wanting others to perceive him as tough. He was always around—hitting pads, taking part in the Saturday conditioning class, using the weights, or hanging out with Mark and talking up how he was lining up a fight for the end of the summer—but he almost never took part in the any of the classes where he actually would be tested and placed into the gym hierarchy. Since we were about the same size I was the one who welcomed him into MMA sparring. He wasn't good, but he was aggressive and made it about as close to a fight as possible. He took shot after clean shot and kept coming. And, after the first time he landed a sloppy but hard kick to my body it dug into me and my inhibition to hitting someone quickly disappeared. When I landed my right cross as he came forward, recklessly his hands down and chin up, I could feel how solid the connection was. He staggered back for a second and I could tell it both dazed and surprised him. I hesitated. I was unsure of what happens next—should I follow up? It was the hardest I had ever hit someone. He stopped coming forward and was hesitant to exchange. I was content to move around, throwing a few jabs to stay active, until the round ended. He comes forward and partially hugs me and partially holds onto me for stability as he rests his forehead on me.

A few nights later, I was biking home and heard someone call out "Professor"—the nickname Kevin had taken to calling me after I told him that I was in graduate school and researching mixed martial arts. I was surprised to see him and pulled my bike over. I had my laptop bag and was dressed in a decidedly not "tough" manner. Both Kevin and his larger friend were wearing tank tops that displaying their heavily tattooed muscles and backward hats. Kevin introduced me to his friend and then excitedly went into how I hit hard. It felt like it was his way of vouching for me to his friend. I awkwardly switched the conversation to how Kevin was going to do great in his next fight but he again switched back to talking about how I had his "rung his bell" and that I needed to get in the cage soon. When we ended the short conversation I asked "see you Tuesday?" he replied "For sure." Then he laughed, "I'll get you back then." We shared a quick, aggressive, back-patting hug and I continued on my way.

The extension and compliment of not knowing yourself until you get hit or experience pain is knowing the other through hitting them and them responding. It is the experience of pain, the very same pain that forces the contraction of the world, which facilitates encountering the other. During time in the site, three moments emerged as particularly sacred and defining: (1) the first time being hit or hurt; (2) the first time hitting or hurting another; (3) the moment after exchanging painful techniques. In this final section I examine how the exchange of pain, in particular hurting another, facilitates discovering your opponent and a connection among participants in the moment that follows. In the

next chapter I will specifically explore the manner that the shared transgressions, including painful encounters with others in the site, build intimacy and community.

Many of the participants highlight the difficulty of learning to strike another as one of the most difficult to overcome inhibitions when beginning to train in MMA. When Joe, an elementary school teacher reflects back on how it took him months before he could accept and really understand the instructor's message that you can't "play" at the fight game and get used to actually hitting his training partner, others on the mat nod their heads to express that they had a similar experience. He continues on to explain that it goes against his peaceful inclination and understanding of how he is supposed to act.: "my mom taught me well…takes some time to chip away all those lessons." Again the others on mat nod in agreement with the exception of Zach, an ex-Marine, who laughingly retorts, "aren't you the one teaching our kids that lesson?!" I relate to Joe, having been long hampered by the same hesitation to place real power behind punches, kicks, and particularly vicious submissions. In particular, when training with an inexperienced person I find myself reducing my power and feeling an uncomfortable mix of guilt and pride when a clean shot lands. When I land a punch or move into an uncomfortable position like knee-on-belly, I can see them wince and feel them recoil from my force. I am hurting someone intentionally, and for what?

In Lucia Trimbur's research on boxing she finds that this is more common among women first entering the boxing gym (2013). While I have observed this to be true, I have witnessed the same hesitation from men across class and racial background. The exceptions were often the participants who saw training in MMA as a career path. For them, giving pain and potential injury was *the* utilitarian goal—hurting another was

simply how you won. However, even members of this group would often talk about how it took repetition for the act to no longer seem weird. The even more rare exceptions—those who seemingly felt no remorse or hesitation at hurting another—were quickly disliked, avoided for obvious reasons, and become subject of bitterness from other gym members. While rumors of gyms that cater to individuals who take delight in hurting those less skilled themselves are common, I have not set foot in such a space.

When people break through inhibitions and cause pain in another it is presented as a moment of both discovery of the self and the other. Will, the aforementioned restaurant employee, states that he "tapped into something" that he was unaware he had the first time that he really "let it go." Similarly, Rich, also met earlier, reflects on how he never had gotten in a fight in his entire life and did not actually know what he was capable of until the first time he strapped on the gloves and protective headgear and squared off with another person in the gym. Looking back, he recounts, that the first round was embarrassing: "I was scared of getting hit and I was scared of hitting…I remember I just kept grabbing Mark [his opponent] or covering up." He continues explaining that in between rounds he was exhausted, embarrassed, "and almost didn't come back out…I think part of me knew that if I didn't keep going I'd never come back [to the gym]" But when round two began he decided to channel his frustrations about his poor performance into actually doing what he had been practicing: "I said 'fuck it' and I said to myself, 'throw the right hand into the double' and I caught him clean and went right into the takedown. I was probably more surprised than anyone but then I went right into mount. I felt like St. Pierre [the top MMA fighter at the time]." He laughs. "I bet the others watching weren't mixing us up!" He continues to explain that he could sense that Mark

was hurt by the punch and the takedown and he began to hesitate, "then Mark got half-guard back and that bastard punched me right in the nose from the bottom! [laughing] His ribs paid for that!" When I ask him to elaborate on his feeling of surprise when he landed his first clean punch he takes time to gather his thought and reflect on the question before answering: "I just didn't know what would happen. I mean, I had hit the bag enough time to know how to throw it. But I didn't know what would happen if I landed it. And, I didn't know what it would feel like to have a person at the other end of it. Like, I had imagined it. But, for all I knew, I would hit him and he would laugh or something."

Beyond putting into action the skills learned and testing one's increased ability to affect and hurt, these moments are seen as an authentic form of learning about the person you are exchanging pain with. Sparring and putting in rounds on the mat becomes a process of encountering and understanding the other—I hit him and I see him react, I grab his arm and he moves in a particular way to stop me, I bend and twist his leg I learn how much he can take and how he responds. Through trial and error, I map out the limits of others and how I am able to affect them. For veterans this process reaches point where the inhibition is gone and the goal is to damage those limits in the most effective manner. As Rick, a well-known fighter and trainer explains to me: "when I look at the body I see all the ways I can hurt it, I know I can put pressure here and here [touching a few spots along my leg] but that you can probably tough it out. But if I put pressure here or here [touching the inside of my knee and my Achilles], you're not walking away if you tough it out." There is a joy that oozes from Rick's words as he illustrates his craft. Similarly, John, a seasoned Muay Thai competitor tells me that when he is fighting he is "looking for the soft spots." While this utilitarian emphasis fits the manner fits well with the

Spencer (2009) and Downey's (2007) respective writing on training techniques to build fighting skill and embodied knowledge, the ignored, both underplay learning the limits of not only the self but the other. I am not just toughening my body and increasing my ability to affect; I am affecting something through channeling the kinetic energy, muscle, and technique I have increased through hours of repetition with force directly into something else. I cannot help but feel the connection between my body and the other body, whether facilitated by foam-and-leather covered knuckle, padded shin, or sweaty, choking arm.

The connection exceeds that of simply knowing that there is another person at the end of the strike or submission. Doug Anderson—one of the hosts of the travel-based, martial arts show Fight Quest—reflected after losing a fight, 'it is kind of cool, the bond that develops so quick between fighters, you know . . . when you are fighting someone, for a second it's like your souls clash; you understand each other like no one else does' (season 1, episode 7). This seemingly outrageous statement is reiterated time and time again in the gym, and can be seen in the apparent bond between two participants immediately after a pain-filled round. When I ask Will, Rick, and Joe, a 40-year-old manager of an information-technology services company, about this at the end of a training session, they offer two valuable insights. First, as Will explains, in hurting your opponent, you "find out what they are made of." He continues "you learn a lot about someone when you are beating them up, probably more than when they are beating you up…a lot of people are great hitting the pads or bag but got nothing when the bag hits back." When someone shows resolve, you know they are overcoming the world-destroying elements of pain because you yourself have been through the same test. The

aforementioned seasoned-veteran Rick comments that sometimes the toughest guys "break when they get it put to them because they've always been the bullies and then some…[laughs]…professor takes a beating and shows up again the next day." He continues that you learn "the essence of who the person is…They can act however they want and put as many layers on top of it as they want. No one will know. But when you fight someone you know." In the MMA gym, much like the football field, or other masculine, physical practices, just as much, if not more, respect can be earned through being tough in losing as winning.

Relatedly the pain reduces your opponent to a vulnerable state that allows a more direct connection that requires a trust rarely found in other arenas. As Joe responds to me asking about the immediate friendliness that follows rolling or sparring, "look, that guy just choked me. He made me give up by trapping my head between his legs and squeezing. Not much pride to protect after that." When I follow up to ask if it is about vulnerability, Joe agrees: "getting someone to tap is them saying, if this were real, you killed me. Then next time they catch you, and you are like, tap, tap, tap [hitting the floor to demonstrate], 'please, don't kill me!'" Will adds, "or when you just land perfectly, and you see them get rubber legs or you catch them with one of those body shots where you can tell they are trying to act like they are ok but they have that look where you know damn well they are not. You choose what happens next…Yeah they are vulnerable." What Will describes is an encounter that I am all too familiar with both as the person on receiving and giving end. In inflicting pain on another, I force the same inward contraction and self-discovery explored in the previous section. It allows me to see, and experience, my opponent at the most basic

level. I witness as they attempt to resist, control, and recover. This is a vulnerable state we rarely encounter, or share with another. Especially, willingly sharing this state with someone we barely know. And, even more especially for men under the ideological pressures of maintaining a sense of masculine independence and stability. The body in pain is no longer an object that is hit, but someone who is dealing with pain inflicted upon them. As Alphonso Lingis explains, "in pain the other sinks back into his or her body . . . The flesh in pain is anything but an object; sensibility, subjectivity fill it, with a terrible evidence" (1994a, 236).

Following the moment of shared vulnerability is shared recovery. It is here, laying on the mat, attempting to deal with what has just occurred, that the participants come together. Considering the argument I have made about pain, it may seem counterintuitive that I am now arguing that it provides the basis to encounter and build immediate connections with others in the gym. Yes, pain forces the body inwards—it is for this very reason it is often represented, at least within Western culture, as a very lonely thing (Grosz 1994). It is this inwardness that makes pain social. Pain is a profoundly solitary act. To share another's pain is to share the most intimate affect. Often, bearing witness and recognizing the pain of the other is thought of as close as one can get due to the isolating qualities. As Sarah Ahmed recounts of living with her mother who suffered from transverse myelitis—"her pain despite being the event that drew us together was still shrouded in mystery. I lived with what was, for me, the unliveable" (2002, 23). To give pain to the other, and experience a reciprocal exchange is to not only encountering the other sinking back into their self, but also to be responsible for them at their most vulnerable state—a state that occurred as a result of your action. It is to be presented with

the other and be able to directly affect them, whether increasing the intensity or reducing the intensity to allow the other person to recover.

The re-assemblage that follows the pain-forced contraction is the opening where connections are made, for, turning to Scarry once more, "to be present when the person in pain rediscovers speech and so regains his powers of self-objectification is almost to be present at the birth, or rebirth, of language" (Scarry 1985: 172). I observe this when I am grappling with Tim, a more-advanced practitioner, and catch him in a triangle choke. Perhaps due to pride or because the choke was not perfectly applied, Tim continues to struggle until the moment where his world begins to go black from the lack of blood travelling to his brain. As he taps my leg to signify that he is giving up, I let go and he tumbles over, coming to as his face hits the mat. He displays a strange mix of confusion and excitement as he pieces together what happened. His words are almost jumbled together as he explains that he had never gone out before and tries to make sense of the world around him that still seems slightly askew. I guide him along, sharing in the absurd excitement of what just transpired. It is this moment that writer Marcel Proust (2013 [1922]) dwelled on; describing the most immediate and defining experience of self as occurring in moments of recovery and re-discovery. For Proust, it is in the "waking" that one first senses and begins the act of recognizing *oneself and* pulling *oneself* together again. I have also been in the position of recovering. For instance, when caught in an aggressive joint lock that twists my shoulder before I can react, I find myself only feeling the strained tendons and tapping the ground rapidly to save the join. After I am rubbing my shoulder, moving my arm, and then slowly working outwards. In the moment of pain, there is pain, then there is the emergence. Or, as Jonah, a young trainer states in one of

his many poetic post-sparring moments, "you need to gather yourself, and then you realize the other person is doing the same thing. You are the cause and result. You gather yourselves together."

Conclusion: experience and touch

> Any ethics worthy of the name must confront the promise and the threat contained in the sensation that today we may no longer, or may not yet, sense anything at all. (Heller-Roazen 2007: 290)

Pain has a rich history of emerging in profound ways and providing an important, sometimes surprising, and often-unwelcome reminder of the manner that the body connects with and is part of the world. Philosophers, in particular, have a treasured past of getting hurt and getting inspired. The pain in Rene Descartes' foot famously made it into his musings on the body/mind relationship (2013). For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the hurt foot played an even more central role in building his theory of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty famously muses on the manner that "my foot hurts" means "*my* foot hurts" or even more importantly that "*my* foot" that is part of *my* body has been affected by the world. Even Immanuel Kant may have been motivated by his own struggles with physical maladies and pain. It has been argued that Kant's prioritization of the rational mind over the messy body cannot be separated from his obsessive avoidance of any experience that violated his autonomy and brought him crashing back to the world of senses (e.g., Benbow 2003).

For Aristotle, pain offered a reminder that flesh was the medium in which sensation occurs. It is through flesh that we contact another, and it is through contact that

we became aware of flesh (Heller-Roazen 2007). French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac Condillac, is particularly helpful in our exploration and significance of pain "If our statue is not struck by any body," the philosopher explains, "and if we place it in a tranquil, temperate air, where it feels its heat neither rising nor falling, the statue will be limited to the fundamental feeling, and it will known its existence only by confused impressions that result from the movement to which it owes its life." It would not sense or know any spatial division. It will not discover the presence of its own body.

Perhaps most illuminating, is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's encounter with a large Danish dog. As Rousseau accounts in Reveries, one day while strolling the streets lost deep in philosophical thoughts, Rousseau was knocked senseless when run over by the large creature. When he recovers he writes about the process of coming to his senses, recounting that in the post-blow period he found "a wonderful calm, that whenever I recall this feeling I can find nothing to compare with it in all the pleasures that stir our lives." Rousseau continues to describe the moment as a time where he could "sense nothing but himself." This moment is often interpreted as a period of confusion; however, as Daniel Heller-Roazen argues "It was no accident that he philosopher comes to himself in being thrown to the ground. This was an event of destruction and survival of the self" (2007, 217). It was through the trampling from a wooly dog that forced Rousseau to declare that there must be something "exterior to oneself."

In this chapter I have set out with the humble goal of providing insight into the role pain plays in attracting participants to the MMA gym. I argue that pain not only helps build confidence that something 'real' is happening, but that pain also tests limits and leads to an inward movement that cuts through preoccupations leading to what

participants describe as the discovery of 'self.' The shared movement inwards also sets the stage for encountering a vulnerable and open other. All three of pain's roles build upon and enable the others. I hope to have helped the reader understand the manner that pain has become a part of people's search for the body and connection that so often eludes us. This turn inwards as a path to discovering the 'self' and the inward turn as a basis for connection highlights an element rarely emphasized in affect-oriented research or in examinations of physical practice.

My research sample, methodology, and positionality offer particular limitations. This chapter is written from the perspective of a heterosexual, white man who has been drawn into the practice of MMA. The focus of this chapter is a group of men, predominantly white, often affluent and almost always identifying as heterosexual. The context and demographics matters—the claims cannot simply be translated to all sites, practices, or groups. Many of these men work in the service or technical industry where they do not engage in physical labor on a daily basis. Many of these men are seeking a type of contact and intimacy that is not present in their lives and they have the time and income to seek it in this manner.

While there are there limitations to the study, the growth of MMA sites where participants can share in painful exchanges of newfound fighting knowledge speaks to the increase of communities oriented around experiences that test the limits of the body. Often affluent adults seek the experience of being alive through extreme 'sports' (Breton 2000) and adolescents strengthen group ties through risk-filled contests (Breton 2004). Women are drawn to boxing clubs to experience something 'that is so raw and emotional' (McCaughey 1997: 114), returning home 'battered' with 'trophies of toughness [bruises]'

(Lawler 2002: 46), and reclaim the abilities of their body (Trimbur 2013). Skateboarders bond over the falling, bruising, and hurting that results from their aggressive masculine performance (Borden 2001). Intimate communities are formed around the communal transgression and sexual exploration of self that is SM (Newmahr 2008). And modern-primitivism has risen in various forms, spreading practices of community building and spiritual growth through body modification and ritualistic events such as public acts of piercing, branding, or scarring (Klesse 1999; Pitts 2003). In the majority of these cases, like MMA hobbyists, these are not people generally associated with exposure to pain. These are not people who engaged in religious rites involving pain or sacrifice (e.g. Eliade 1964) nor are they residents of areas where physical confrontation is a daily concern. In short, this is a search for the lived experience.

Calls for an appreciation of the lived experience have been made. Lingis (1994b, 2000) demands the celebration of the experience of life in his exploration of the wrinkled hand of the laborer and the calloused hands of the fighter. Theorists of the body are increasingly paying attention to the manner in which large portions of the population no longer make things and must make an effort to even 'use' their bodies (Orbach 2009). Within the social sciences, NRT provides space for an appreciation of the lived experience through the emphasis on affect. It serves as a call to be 'open to play, as a practice that can enrich and redefine our existence, one which encourages contact, wonder and the willingness to place a hope in fear' (Saville 2008: 909). However, as Scarry highlights, 'to have a body, a body made emphatic by being continually altered through various forms of creation, instruction (e.g., bodily cleansing), and wounding, is to have one's sphere of extension contracted down to the small circle of one's immediate

physical presence' (1985: 207). It is the crushing, not only the flow, that is the lived corporeal experience. There is a desire to not only affect but to be affected. Pain is a signaling system. When we encounter it we learn about our body—it is a moment of forced reflection upon an organism united.

Again we should return to the demographic limitations of the study as they are also quite revealing. The collective of participants speak to a discontent with the manner that the western, middle-class sensescape is increasingly managed, sanitized, and commodified (Edensor 2007). From transportation technology (Bijsterveld 2010) to the shopping experience (Jones 2012) to eating (Berg and Sevon 2014) to the city as a whole (Edensor 2007), effort is made to minimize any unpleasant smells, sounds, or even vibrations. Increasingly, the visual is prioritized as the sensory experience of choice (Pallasmaa 2005). The non-visual senses, perhaps because they reveal the difficulty of separating the interior and exterior and instead highlight the porosity of the body, are treated as something to be increasingly controlled and regulated (Paterson 2009, Irigaray 1993). Those with the capital can increasingly escape to sites of sensory control with neutral temperature, smell, humidity, and even sound while sites of *indiscipline* are occupied by the lower-class (Jones 2012). Intense stimulation is seen as either undesirable because it interferes with consumption, or as something to be regulated and sold (see Thift 2005 on the developing market of controlled affect and the "experience economy").

Many in the gym occupy social and geographic space that has allowed them many of the affect-controlled comforts of modern living. Within this increasingly regulated context, sites of controlled de-regulation and intensive sensory experience become

desired, and, increasingly commodified and sought. This can be seen in the allure of lifestyle sport (Thorpe 2011, Evers 2009), more extreme versions of sport (Breton 2000), sexual communities (Newmahr 2010, Frank 2013), and even escapes into industrial ruins (Edensor 2005). For the men who pay to temporarily occupy the mats in the MMA gym, the desire to affect and be affected is further compounded by intersection with masculine homohysteria (McCormack and Anderson 2015) and expectations to be stoic and limit contact with other men to the context of sport or violence (Kimmell 2013).[42] At a very basic level, paying to be trained in MMA, is paying to touch and be touched; paying to feel and be felt; paying to affect and be affected.

Pain, with all of its debilitating and world-destroying qualities, also creates an opening to connect with and connect with the world. These positive qualities are only recently capturing the attention of social psychologists. Returning once again to the work of Brock Bastion (Bastion et. al 2014), who demonstrates that the painful experience of dipping one's hand in icy water results in not only a higher appreciation of chocolate biscuits, but also the ability to better discern a variety of tastes. The pain, which forces inward concentration, leaves a heightened sense of awareness and enhanced perception of the surrounding world (Leknes & Bastion 2014). In the case of MMA, instead of intense awareness of the complex flavors of a succulent chocolate biscuit, you share a space with the sweaty people who share the mats, including the one who was recently the source of your pain. And, as will be discussed further in Chapter Six, the eagerness and enhanced

[42] See John Ibson's *Picturing men: A century of male relationships in everyday American photography* (2002) for an historical examination of the decrease in intimate contact and affectionate touching among men from 1850 through the mid-twentieth century.

perception also applies to discursive construction and shared storytelling. Here, the language-destroying qualities of pain sets the stage and provides opening for the language that follows to mean something.

The body, as the increasing attention to the corporeal in cultural studies, feminist theory, geography, sociology, and anthropology continues to show, is not simple or stable. Our bodies—substances of pleasure seeking to extend outward and beyond, increasing capacities to act, fastening onto voluptuous surfaces—are also substances of pain, which can be marked and regulated. There is a joy 'reserved to being of tender flesh, whose feeling surface is always ready to come apart. They are never so hardened as to be untouched by the untouchable in which they move, nor so thoughtless as to be indifferent to the sweetness they may fail to sense' (Heller- Roazen 2007: 300).

I do not seek to romanticize MMA or prioritize the practice as the avenue to the lived experience. MMA is undeniably a heavily masculine site, and also an increasingly commodified pursuit. Rather, by taking seriously the role and seduction of pain in MMA, I highlight areas of potential extension of affect-oriented theory, and demand attention to not only expansion outwards, but also contraction inwards. We must continue to make inquiry into the capacities of what bodies can do, what they can have done to them and what they seek to have done to them. We must examine the spaces people seek to reunite with a body that has been lost to them. In conclusion, I return to a statement Cris made during our discussion of his participation in an inherently painful practice and the moment when a painful blow forces a retreat inwards: 'We do seek the feeling of being alive. It definitely is different than "being in the zone" or "flow", and maybe it is the lesser of the two, I am not sure. But it is something.'

I. Muting Annoyances

The following is an excerpt from a recorded interview that occurred outside of the gym with Isaiah. Isaiah is a high school physics and earth science teacher. He was 35 years old at the time of the interview and had been training in the gym for five-years. He wrestled in high school and his first two years of college. He has spent most of his time in the gym grappling but had recently been boxing more and was even considering competing in an amateur MMA match.

Kyle: This trust you are talking about. I'm really fascinated with how it builds so quickly. You train with someone two weeks, you don't even know them, then you are offering to help them move or something.

Isaiah: I would say even faster. Sometimes even if it is someone you don't know and you end up having a competitive or long or hard roll. Sometimes even immediately after. There is some feeling of you know…something…

Kyle: Connection?

Isaiah: Yeah

Kyle: Do you have an example of that?

Isaiah: Yeah…There is this one guy. He had this reputation for being really good, really technical and stuff. An Indian guy. I'm not sure why I said that. It has nothing to do with the story. But, anyways, my only experience was when he came to this seminar. And, I was annoyed because there is this thing a lot of places do, where after a move is shown the instructor goes "1, 2" and everyone claps together as a sign it is time to go do that move. And, I don't have anything against it but I am not a huge fan of adults being told that they need to clap. It is just a small thing. So the thing that annoys me is that after Marcelo [the guy leading the seminar] showed a move he didn't have people clap because he is more a laid back. And people started to practice. But then this guy got up and said "Guys! Guys! What are you doing?!?" And Marcelo is looking at him confused. And then he is like, "lets try this again… 1, 2" and then he gets everyone to clap. I'm thinking, what are you doing? Whether it is annoying or not, you are not teaching the seminar. Anyway, the point of the story is that I don't know that guy very well, but from my limited interaction I thought he was really annoying. A little while after that he came to teach a class here. And after the class was done we had time for a lot of rolling and some take downs against the cage. Before that my only feeling was irritation at him. But then after I noticed that I felt completely different. He probably still was an annoying guy. I noticed before we rolled, that when he was just teaching and made a joke I would say "that is a stupid joke; he is really annoying." But then after I wanted to talk to him. Before I was just standoffish.

Kyle: Does this also apply to the cases you mentioned earlier? When you were talking about the people who had views that seem really opposite of yours? Maybe the Facebook examples?

Isaiah: I think so. When I go to class sometimes, and somebody just posted something, like, defending cops for shooting a twelve-year old or something like that, it is still on my mind. It seems like rolling with somebody gives a temporary or short-term erase. But it

doesn't last forever. If you haven't seen them in a while, it comes back. You start to think this person is a lot different than me.

Kyle: So. This person is an idiot but they sure have some great chokes. Maybe they aren't so bad?

Isaiah: Yeah [laughing], exactly. I find it especially when there is someone you have some minor thing that annoys you. If you do particularly well against them or you catch them with some big shots or submit them, it tends to amplify it, well you don't want me to get into explanations.

Kyle: No, that is great. Share any ideas you have.

Isaiah: In these studies, when chimps fight, the winner will often extend the hand to the loser to make peace or whatever. That seems to happen a lot mentally. If you submit someone you feel more willing to accept or forgive something. Even if that something has absolutely nothing to do with jiu-jitsu or boxing.

Kyle: Do you always get that feeling of closeness or forgiveness always? I am asking because in my own experience I feel it more when there is some back and forth, with each person being really pushed. When you go with someone amazing and they just choke you ten times in a row it doesn't end in the same way. Or the opposite.

Isaiah: Yeah, I agree. I think part of it is being threatened. If you are a lot better than the person you don't have that. But if you are threatened and then you overcome it, it really amplifies.

Kyle: Do you think that feeling will lessen when you have been training for, say, twenty years?

Isaiah: When you first start out, you are really scared of being choked. It is this real primal thing. This person is trying to kill me! But after a while it isn't there as much. Then you are just doing moves.

II. Blood on the Gloves

I never liked John. He didn't seem like a bad person, he was always polite and friendly, and he never did anything particularly wrong. But of all the people I had met at the new gym he was the only one that I just didn't like and I generally did not enjoy talking to. It is funny how with all the emphasis on reflexivity, positionality, and subjectivity, you simply don't hear ethnographers talk about not liking people and how that might play a role in their reading of the site. John just happened to carry many of the social qualities I found grating. He made particular effort to ingratiate himself to the instructors and top fighters in the gym and he loved to revel in stories from his private school, fraternity days. Also, his effortless charm became particularly thick when around the occasional woman participating in the boxing class. Even his fashion choices came to bother me: dress shirt, khakis, brown loafers, and well-groomed, parted hair. And, he seemed like the type of guy that would make sure everyone around him knew that he was training at an MMA gym. Yet there I was at the end of class, wrapped in his strong embrace, his absolutely drenched his shirt sticking to me, the blood from his nose adding color to my white t-shirt, feeling like we just shared something meaningful. Then each of us were getting fist-bumps, and congratulatory slaps to side of our gear protected heads. Justin, the boxing coach, in his gruff, slightly joking manner commenting to John, "I didn't know you were such a bleeder," nodding at my gloves that had a fresh splattering of red all over them, with Michael, the Chicano studies professor, wryly adding "a regular Jackson Pollack."

It began when only John and I expressed an interest in sparring after the boxing class ended. I had assumed that it would be a repeat of the previous week where Justin had alternated in sparring between the two of us. Even though he far better than me, having a spotless pro-record at the time, Justin was closer to my size and knew how to pull his punches. I was unaware that he had aggravated a pre-existing rotator cuff injury and was resting his shoulder. I had planned on avoiding boxing with anyone who had more than twenty-five pounds on me after I had my orbital bone broken sparring with someone well outside my weight class in what was supposed to be a light exchange focused on technique. In other circumstances, I would have backed out, but the combination of pride and simply not liking John kept me from doing so. I wanted to show that I was better than the bigger, louder, more self-promoting man. For once I actually cared about the gym hierarchy. I didn't want to back down to him of all people. Pride, foolishness, and getting caught up in the less admirable qualities of the field—three other aspects far too often absent from an ethnographer's repertoire of reflections.

So there I was planning my strategy while tightening my headgear, biting down on my mouthpiece, strapping on the bulky belt favored by boxers that covers and protects the groin and lower abdomen, and securing my gloves. John was big, and had a long reach, but he was slow. I would just dance around the outside, landing my jab before he could respond and avoid any exchanges where he could take advantage of his size. I tried to convince myself it would be easy but I felt tense.

The final wait before sparring is always the worst. Watching the timer countdown the remaining seconds from the previous round before the piercing beep marks that it is time to begin. John had sparred less than me so Justin was giving him final words of advice in a low tone that I could not hear. I just focused on breathing. My legs suddenly felt heavy, my arms like wet noodles. Where was my energy?

The three-minute round began and we met in the center of the "ring," an area demarcated by black tape on the ground rather than ropes. We hit our gloves together,

engaging in the expected perfunctory good luck ritual, then each put up our gloves to protect our faces while beginning to each circle the other. Quickly I found that my plan was not working. His movement was not graceful and his shots were telegraphed, but his reach was long and his jab was beating mine. When I came forward to land a punch I would be met with a stiff punch. My nose stung and my eyes began to water. Even worse my attempts to increase the pressure by doubling up with my jab was met with a right cross over the top that somehow repeatedly found its way through my head gear battering my left cheek and previously injured eye. How were his arms so long? Justin called out thirty-seconds and I attempted to finish strong. Increasing the pace but again finding little success and taking a clean shot to the left side of my head that rattled both my brain and confidence.

The beep sounded and I made my way to a nearest weight-lifting machine. As I leaned against the leg-press machine, Michael, who had stuck around to lift weights sprayed some of his water in my mouth. It was an especially a kind gesture considering how annoying it is to take off your gloves, take out your mouth piece, drink water, and then put back in your mouth piece and pull your gloves on while the short rest period rapidly vanishes. Also, I probably had blood all over my lips, which makes sharing a water bottle less appealing. I took deep breaths, focusing on expanding my chest and slowing my rapid heart rate. I think of the calming techniques cornermen use on their fighters between rounds and imagine I am George St. Pierre. I see Justin congratulating John and urging him to keep doing more of the same. I knew I had to do something to negate his reach. The previous round was an unexpected disaster.

The second round begins. Instead of remaining on the outside I worked my way to the inside, landing a flurry of shots to his body and then coming over the top with hooks. I had been scared to do this due to his size but found that his long arms were now a disadvantage and I was actually safer on the inside than the outside. He wasn't able to catch me at the end of his punch. His punches were slow. I felt like I could see them. They were heavy and moved me around even if I blocked them, but they were easy to see coming. The strategy was exhausting but the success pushed me. I could feel the occasional shot sink into his softer midsection, propelling the air out of his body or eliciting the unintentional grunt. And, when a hook to his head landed clean he would grab me, holding me tight until Justin told us to break. His hands were dropping and face was open. I almost felt bad after easily landing a direct shot to his nose as I made my way back inside his jab. When Michael, who had been drawn completely away from his exercise, gave the thirty-seconds call John gave up on his effort to replicate his strategy of last round, and any semblance of defense, instead putting everything into trying to respond to my punches with heavy shots of his own. I had been in physical exchanges before. I had been hit hard, and also hit people hard. But I had never been in a situation where both of us threw with such abandon. I generally had a lot of difficulty hitting someone. In this case I was swept up in the momentum of the moment. We stood inches apart. First he would throw—hooks that battered my arms and gloves as I shielded my head and body. Moving me side to side with the weight of each punch. Then I would return, digging into his body before finishing with a left hook and right cross to the head. Then he would return shots while I rotated the angle of my body slightly and moved my shoulders and elbows the required distance to block his punches from landing clean. Then, again, it would be my turn to attempt to break through his defense. It was as if we had reached an unspoken agreement about the rules of the game, and in a sense we had. It was also pragmatic, as we would both throw everything we had and then are body required a moment to recharge. However, neither of us moved back and gave the

space to rest that both of us needed. Perhaps it was due to our pride, or our legs being exhausted. It was also knowing, as unimportant and low-level as this sparring was, at that particular moment, *we* were putting on a show for the few people who had stuck around. There was a thrill of being part of the type of exchange that boxing commentators would reward with clichéd compliments. Back and forth, John taking clean shots to both his head and body but never retreating until the piercing beep signaling that we had one minute to recover, find resolve, and begin the final round.

Again Justin counseled John while Michael offered me water. And, again, I sought to calm my heartbeat and slow my breathing. There was definitely blood in my mouth, my left shoulder throbbed, and my legs were far heavier than they should be after just two rounds of action.

We met again in the center of the ring, again touching gloves. This time the ritual seemed to mean something. He had a big smile. I might have too.

I forced myself to move from side to side, hoping that if I moved like I had energy my body would find a hidden reserve. John lacked the energy to even act. He plodded forward. His arms and hands again dropping from the proper position where they could both protect his face and set him up to strike. The strategy I had hoped to employ from the very beginning finally worked. I bounced around the outside, coming in to land a jab and retreating. Other times landing a combination and moving out. His nose was bleeding and when I landed a clean punch it would spread the blood across his face. He touched his face with his glove and nodded. Acknowledging something—perhaps that he was bleeding, perhaps that I had landed a good shot, perhaps what we were doing. I snuck glances at the clock and continued my strategy. John continued to march forward. Absorbing punishment while seeking to land a weary counter-punch. When one of his punches did land the snap was gone. Whenever he threw his jab he would just let his arm drop after, leaving his face wide open. My hesitation to hurt had returned but there remained a certain pride and thrill in the craft of finding just the right timing for a lead right hand and staggering or knocking back my bigger opponent.

The beep marked the end of the round. Justin exalted, “that’s what we do!” John and I looked at each other. The blood from his nose had spread around his face and onto his headgear. He spit his mouth guard onto the rarely cleaned mat. A bloody string of saliva hung from his mouth. We hugged.

5. Finding George Bataille on the Mat: Intimacy, Transgression, and Community in the Mixed Martial Arts Gym

My first time training at a mixed martial arts (MMA) gym left me surprised and confused. It was not the level of physical contact required for drilling moves; although I was not expecting the road map of bruises that decorated my shins, biceps, inner thigh, and torso the following morning. Nor was it the violence I witnessed as one fighter prepared for his first cage fight through 'entering the shark tank'—a training ritual where other experienced members of the gym took turns going three-minute rounds with the lucky victim until surviving rather than fighting became a more accurate description of what he was doing. On some level this was what I expected. These actions generally fit popular conception of mixed martial arts, whether coming from supporters, fans, major companies like the Ultimate Fighting Championship, or those who labeled the practice barbaric—'a gladiatorial combat that marked the fall of our civilization' (e.g., Bongiorno 2013). Rather, it was the tight-knit feeling, seemingly complete openness, and warmth that permeated the gym and the members that temporarily inhabited it. And perhaps even more astounding was the depth of trust that was extended after just an hour of punching, kicking, and rolling on the ground; exchanging sweat, energy, and pain. Members of the gym shared vulnerability—not only on the mat where they often found themselves trapped in position to be choked, have joint broken, or be hit repeatedly, but also in discussion where I quickly learned who was going through a divorce, who was unhappy with work, who had doubts about their chosen life path, and who was feeling in need of a new exercise regiment or dietary changes.

Equally surprising, was how quickly and surely the level of trust extended beyond the cement walls of MMA gym after MMA gym, in city after city. As I became both

researcher and practitioner, I would make a point of training in local gyms whenever I travelled—generally during a block of less-than-exciting talks at an academic conference. In every instance I would clarify to both the owner and members of the gym that I was only visiting the city and was just looking for a place to work out for a day or two with there being no possibility of me becoming an official paying member. But, without fail, exchanging punches and submissions quickly led to surprising generosity—being treated to lunch at the favorite barbeque spot of a Brazilian mechanic after a few rough rounds in a Boston gym, being offered a ride home after a fast-paced grappling session with a lawyer in Atlanta, and getting a late night tour of the Las Vegas strip from a limo driver who just hours before was struggling to choke me unconscious.

This was a bond, while not different in type than that found in among participants in a pickup basketball gym or a casual tennis match, was exaggerated in intensity to a point almost beyond recognition. Even more, not a single participant met my request to "talk some more about their participation in the gym over a coffee or some food" with anything but a willingness to share and eagerness to help.

In this chapter I draw on my ethnographic immersion into the MMA gym to explore the intimacy forged between the men who occupy the mats. In doing so I add to our understanding of the allure of physical practices and transgressive activities and make call for analytical attention to be given to the carnal roots of intimacy and community—an area that remains understudied within sociology and the larger social sciences. I turn to the writings of Georges Bataille to provide a foundation to make sense of the difficult to explain, seemingly non-rational importance of the moments of *contact* and *exchange* and how these play a key part in communication and the forming of intimate connections.

Bataille's writings demand, and also provide the tools for considering the implications for how we understand the social relations and the tensions at the limit where one body-subject encounters another, the spacing inherent in any such relation, and the dual movement of coming into contact and moving from contact that this presents (see Nancy 2000; Abrahammson and Simpson 2011). While this may seem a bit on the academic or theoretical side, Bataille allows us to move past the overly individualistic focus on athletes and fighters transforming their (masculine) bodies into weapons (Messner 1994) to also taking seriously the inter-subjective experiences that lead to the "band of brother" mentality so commonly celebrated on the mats.

In reading the MMA gym through Bataille I use core elements of his theory to provide an orienting framework with the experiences of the participants who fill the sites providing empirical example and material grounding. I include a discussion of the many types of transgressions that the site facilitates before arguing that the community found in these sites is built upon those shared breaches. In doing so I hope to offer a demonstration of the potential value of Bataille's theories to scholars of physical practice, serious leisure, sport, risk-based subculture, community, and most importantly, intimacy.

Mixed Martial Arts: Rapid Growth & Academic Interest

In just two-decades since the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) introduced MMA to the American public, the practice has gone through periods of sub-cultural interest (Sheridan 2008; Gentry 2002), controversy (Varney 2010), ban (Plotz 1999), sportization (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010), and rapid growth.[43] The initial combination of

[43] See Van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006), Downey (2007), Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010), and Varney (2010) for a more detailed discussion of the development of MMA.

brutality as men representing different martial arts disciplines engaged in combat and the unexpected early dominance by lightest man in the tournaments through his utilization of the grappling-based Brazilian jiu-jitsu followed later by the wide-spread exposure and popularization of a truly *mixed* version of MMA led to waves of people, mostly men, seeking to learn the successful techniques. The waves of new participants included doctors, lawyers, information technology consultants, graduate students, construction workers, bar tenders, musicians, insurance sales people, and the occasional high school student—many with a degree of affluence, and the majority white (Green 2011; Abramson and Modzelewski 2011). And, while all participants shared in their desire to learn how to "fight", MMA gyms have housed a wide array of often-divergent interest, goals, and justifications for participation in the new, physical, and still somewhat controversial practice (Green forthcoming). For the majority, the investment of time, energy, money, and corporeal health was clearly not with the primary goal of economic reward.

Perhaps due to the extreme qualities of the practice—violence, masculinity, and youth—as well as the many indications that MMA is here to stay, academics have begun to take notice. To this point, research on the practice has come from either "an Archimedean point, with very little exploration of the lived experience of MMA fighters," to quote Spencer (2013), instead focusing on the representations attached to the burgeoning practice and how to make sense of the success of the violent sport (see, for example, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010; Hirose & Pih 2010) *or* from a more embodied, experiential perspective (see Green 2011; Spencer 2011; Spencer 2013), taking methodological inspiration from Loic Wacquant's

"carnal" exploration of boxing (1992; 1995a; 1995b; 1998; 2004; 2011).[44] The latter, more micro-oriented approach has done an excellent job in capturing the ache, feel, and even smell of the gym. However, little work has moved beyond a focus on the individual sweaty body encountering another individual sweaty body to instead examine the intimate community that emerges, the allure to the hobbyist practitioner who does not *need* to be the in site, and the connection between the physical practice and their socio-economic and geographic position. It is in this pursuit that I turn to work of George Bataille.

In particular, I seek to build upon the respective explorations of the role(s) of pain by Downey (2007) and Spencer (2009; 2011; 2012), as well as my earlier writing (2011) and previous chapter. While Downey and Spencer both explicate the manner that mixed martial artists condition their bodies to both perform and withstand pain-producing techniques, I explored how practitioners seek out the experiences in the gym, including the painful moments, as way to transgress their normal boundaries and build intimate connections with others in the site. In many ways, the previous works offer a foundation to build upon in arguing for an appreciation of the inter-subjective.

It is important to note that my goal is not to dismiss previous examinations of violent sport or martial arts. The gym provides host to many seductions. When conducting research I have observed evidence for characterizations of the gym as site for middle-class participants to realize the American ideals of meritocratic success and "voluntary communities" (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011), for the assertion of a racialized-brand of hegemonic masculinity (Hirose and Pih 2010), for creating a fighting

[44] See Channon and Jennings (2014) for an excellent overview of research on combat sport.

body (Spencer 2009), and for wanting to encounter one's own body and feel alive (Green 2011). And, in training alongside the group of practitioners who have dreams of professional success, I have seen justification for reading the gym as a site for the neoliberal project of transforming body into capital (Wacquant 2004). Rather, I seek to explicate an underlying appeal and force within the gym that has not been addressed and helps explain the community forming powers of the liminal space.

Literature: Intimacy, Community, Edgework

Both intimacy and community remain poorly understood within sociology and the larger social sciences—the former being a case of neglect and understudy, and confusion over the latter resulting from over-use and under-definition. Both are central to understanding the allure of membership in an MMA gym and the limitations of both illustrate the value of Georges Bataille to the larger social sciences and humanities.

Community, as Douglas Hartmann reminds us, is "one of the most common and multivalent concepts in the social sciences" (2005, 359). It is an essential element of sociology, a discipline that has been described as foundationally a study of the "dialectic of solidarity and scarcity" (Turner and Rojek 2001). Yet, the term comes to mean both everything and nothing—few scholars have the courage to claim to understand the concept and instead critique those who use the term for being naïve or overly romantic.[45] It seems that community is one of those things that everyone wants, but no one really

[45] See Miranda Joseph (2002) for a particularly scathing critique of the reoccurring invocations of community. In seeking to reclaim the potential of community, Joseph argues that first we must acknowledge the mutually complicit relationship between capitalism and current celebrations of the term both inside and outside academia.

agrees on what it is or how to get it. As a result, as scholars, and perhaps a larger society, we neglect and minimalize the need for companionship and community (MacIntyre 1999).

Sport has long been celebrated, at least in non-academic circles, as the way to find and build the ever-so-allusive community (see Hartmann 2005). People at all scales—school districts, towns, cities, nations, ethnicities, and so on—are said to be brought together by sport. And, if we use McMillan and Chavis's (1986) well-cited four-part definition of community—membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection—the link between sport and community does not seem so outrageous. However, little work has been done to appreciate the latter two parts of the definition that suggest the affectual needs and emotional roots underlying community.[46] And, for that matter, even less has been done to consider the role that transgression may play. In short, the mechanisms and desires underlying the intimate communities that are forged through and around physical practice has been ignored—an absence that becomes particularly clear in thinking about the communities that form around risk and excitement.

The lack of engagement with the ontological also pervades the sociological writing on intimacy. In this body of literature, the experiential moments are ignored in favor of a more Simmelian examination of the nature of relationships between actors. The most widely cited book on the subject, Anthony Giddens's *The Transformation of Intimacy,* provides illustration. For Giddens, following earlier psychological work, intimacy is understood as self-disclosure—a healthy willingness to sharing information that is both

[46] The majority of research on community has emphasized the first two elements of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) definition. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2005), Putnam's influential examination of bowling as a stand-in for civic engagement provides a well-read example. This trend directly follows Weber separation of affect and habit from meaningful social action, which he defines as being intentionally oriented towards the behavior of others (1978, 24-26). This foundational division is part and parcel of sociology's inability, as Shilling critiques "to acknowledge explicitly the fact that humans have bodies which allow them not only to see, listen and think, but to feel (physically and emotionally), smell and act (1993, 20).

special and private. In other words, intimacy operates as networks of appropriately open communication that strikes the right balance between "autonomy and dependence" (1992: 139). Giddens's work is not an exploration of the feeling, experience, or nature of intimacy, but rather a large-scale examination of the shifting nature of sexual relationships in modern times. Within this macro-oriented study, Giddens chooses not to delve into the embodied, erotic, or transgressive aspects of intimate exchanges. Tellingly, when a women in the study explains that she seeks out SM relationships because it "goes beyond the barrier of niceness that so many women build around themselves" (154) Giddens chooses not to dwell on the significance of the physical transgressions that occur. Instead he uses the opportunity to explicate how relationships have become less intimate as sex has becomes less guarded. Simiarly, even as Giddens supports the popular assertion that men are not good with intimacy though asserting that male friendship lost much of the qualities of intimacy during the Victorian period when they began a process of relegation “to marginal activities, like sport or other leisure pursuits, or participation in war” (1992: 43), he chooses not to dwell on the topic or explore this intimacy.

On the other end of the spectrum of potential avenues for exploring intimacy and community is “edgeplay”. A term coined by Stephen Lyng (1990) to explain people seeking out extreme experiences and risk. Edgework is understood as the intentional entrance into experiences at the border between sanity/insanity, order/chaos, self/environment, and at the most extreme, life/death. Following Lyng edgework generally consists of battles against nature, putting one’s body at risk while attempting to conquer challenges with the proper mix of skill and technology. The risk and intensity of the experience comes to serve as a proof of the authenticity (Lyng 1990). The practices,

or least those studied to this point, have been heavily classed, raced, and gendered (See Fletcher 2008). Generally participants are white, middle to upper-middle class men facing risks independently while performing a context-specific version of hegemonic masculinity—a characterization that holds true for an array of risk-based pursuits including base jumping, mountain climbing, and motorcycle racing (e.g., Laurendeau 2008; Robinson 2008; Wheaton 2004).

In focusing on the individual, the group dynamic and the emotional qualities of edgework are generally ignored and under-theorized. Staci Newmahr serves as a rare exception of moving past the focus on the singular man. Newmahr (2011) builds upon the aforementioned works of Giddens and Lyng through her conceptualization of emotional-edgework, or the manner in which participants in the sadomasochism subculture situate themselves on the transgressive "line between emotional chaos and emotional order, between emotional form and emotional formlessness, between self and the obliteration of self" (2011: 163). Like extreme sport, sadomasochism requires the testing of one's physical *and* psychological limits. However, sadomasochism, much like MMA (see Green 2011) demands a consideration of the mutual nature of the exchange. For Newmahr, the essential intimacy and transgression comes "from the interaction itself—it lies in *the doing to*, and being *done to by*, another person" (2011: 164). The intimacy is a result of the violation that occurs—whether consensual and desired or not.

Newmahr provides a valuable contribution to understanding the way transgression can serve as a foundation for intimacy and community. Yet, she still faces difficulties in discussing the importance of the sharing, and/or, witnessing people engaging in edgework or participating in liminal space. In a sense, she offers us a masterful

ethnography—in my mind the best work on the topic—but is constrained by limits of the theories she engages with. It is here that the work of Georges Bataille provides value. For, at its core, Bataille provides a theory of communication achieved through excessive expenditure of energy and the transgression of the taboo.

Before re-entering the MMA site through the lens of Bataille, it is important to briefly situate his work. Engagement within the social sciences has been minimal. And, the few cases within the sociological discipline have remained at the level of the abstract (e.g., O'shea 2002). On one hand, the absence is perplexing: Bataille's theorization of the loss of 'intimacy' builds upon the work of Emile Durkheim (2001)—sharing a common interest with the ritualistic and sacred moments where humans find something larger and more significant; directly engages with Marcel Mauss's well-examined study of "the gift" (Mauss 1954); can be read as responding to and building upon Max Weber's exploration of the increasingly routinized and dulled day-to-day; shares philosophic underpinning and focus of analysis with Nobert Elias and the theory of sportization as part and parcel of the civilizing process (1986); explores ontological security and reconceives ethics in a manner bearing much in common with Emmanuel Levinas (O'Shea 2002), a French philosopher in the midst of a resurgence; and, has been described by Michel Foucault as shaping his writings on sexuality (see Foucault 1977). His influence is also evident in the works of such scholars as Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy—earning Bataille the sometimes-used moniker "the father of postmodernism" (Smith 2000)

On the other hand, the general aversion to Georges Bataille within the social sciences also makes sense. Bataille is not easily categorized. He has been described as sociologist, philosopher, librarian, art historian, poet, pornographer, and surrealist

(Hegerty 2000). His interest in the violent, erotic, chaotic, and mystical as central to social theory has pushed him to the fringes and resulted in dismissal by "more serious" scholars. In particular, his examinations of the transgressive, the grotesque, and the transgressively grotesque have marginalized his work as it pushes against academia's hesitancy to engage with the messy, fluid, and sensual (Binnie 2004) and move beyond the calculative and utilitarian (Giulianotti 2009). Even more damning were his own attempts to live in a manner befitting his theories of excess (see Hegerty 2000).

Further, while Bataille shares a great deal with Durkheim in terms of questions asked and topics of his interest, his conclusions do not always mesh well with a the Durkheimian perspective. He has been described as "Durkheim turned on his head" (O'Shea 2002) and said to "engage with Nietzsche's warnings about the 'death of God' from a Durkheimian concern with the collectivity" (Shilling and Mellor 2010, 440). Both seek to theorize the nature of the sacred moments that bring society together. However, while Durkheim understands the sacred as elevated above and mutually exclusive from the profane, Bataille finds the sacred within the profane.

After briefly discussing my entrance into the research site and the methodological choices I made in response to the qualities of the MMA gym, I walk through Bataille's understanding of intimacy and community through transgression with my ethnographic research providing empirical grounding. I conclude by reflecting on potential extensions as well as limitations in answering some of the sociological disciplines most fundamental questions.

Methods: Accessing Transgressions

I first entered a MMA gym in the summer of 2007. From the very first day it was made abundantly clear that MMA is a physical, painful, sometimes violent, sensual encounter. I quickly realized that any attempt to understand how the transgressive, corporeal practice relates to intimacy would require an engagement with the practice itself. Rather than being the stranger seeking objectivity, I embraced my subjectivity as an avenue to understanding the practice and turned to it as a positive aspect of ethnography rather than an insurmountable obstacle to conquer. In choosing to be an "observant participant," to use Wacquant's useful turn-of-phrase (2011), I draw methodological inspiration from those who have taken seriously the experiential aspects of social life. In particular, I turn to the self-described carnal sociologists, who follow Bourdieu's teaching that "we learn through the body" (2000: 141) and Wacquant's call to use Bourdieu's habitus as both object of inquiry and methodological approach (2011). This orientation has been particularly fruitful for students of combat sport including Alter (1992), Wacquant (2004), Downey (2005), Bar-On Cohen (2009), Spencer (2009), Green (2011), and Channon (2013).[47]

For six-years I trained at multiple schools around the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. These included schools more oriented towards the MMA fighter with dreams of making it big as well as gyms that catered to the hobbyist who spent time training when time and motivation allowed. Most schools are located in suburban strip malls or converted warehouses on the outer edges of the metropolitan region. The location, as well as the monthly fees (between $99 and $200 a month), limit participation to the devoted or affluent with white participants making up at least ninety percent of

[47] See García and Spencer's edited book, *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports*, a text consisting of various contemporary ethnographies of combat sport experiences for further example and discussion of this methodological approach.

gym memberships. In this way, MMA bears more in common with serious leisure pursuits like mountain climbing or surfing than boxing, a sport long popular amongst marginalized, ethnic groups as a potential path to economic gain.

The surface qualities I shared with other participants—being a white, able-bodied man in my mid-twenties—shaped my research. In particular, my gender facilitated access to conversations that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to witness as a woman. Being "one of the guys" allowed be breach and even question subjects that would have been difficult otherwise.[48] This was particularly important when attempting to understand the transgressive and the intimate. These similarities also facilitated access into the social extensions beyond the walls of the MMA gym—whether going to watch a UFC event at a local bar, attending a local fight, helping to coach a fighter in a local grappling tournament or cage fight, or a night out on the town. Because the gyms, and therefore my observations were exclusively, or at least predominantly, filled with men. While the number of women training in MMA is growing, there absence remains common, especially in smaller schools. For this reason, the majority of the participants I introduce, and claims I make, are oriented towards the men participating in the practice.

Scholars with roots in affect-based theory also provide inspiration as they push our attention beyond emphasis on the individual and the rational actor. Effort is made to submerge oneself in the site, letting the field affect and shape the research and the questions asked. The affect-oriented approach has been directed towards tracing an array of corporeal experiences including boredom, fear, and love, as well as practices including dance, cycling, and religious séance (Anderson 2004; Holloway 2006; McCormack 2002;

[48] Paradis (2012) and Woodward (2008) have discussed the difficulties women researchers face in entering the combat sport field.

Saville 2008; Spinney 2006) with priority always given to the feeling of the experience itself. And, as Newmahr (2008) illustrates in her aforementioned study of SM, these feelings must also include the tensions the researcher encounters when engaging in a practice as a sometimes-hesitant outsider. Here I am pushed to not only consider the "body callusing" process through which the body is transformed into a fighting instrument (Spencer 2009) but also the times I am swept away by the experience and overridden with pride, doubt, accomplishment, disgust, confusion, pain, fear, aggression, and even distance. It is through embracing these fleeting but shared moments and utilizing the body to access this sensual data that one can begin to understand the encounters and moments from which community is formed.

The following relies predominantly on observation, conversation on the mats, and reflection on my participation. The emphasis is particularly important, for as Evers (2009) aptly reminds us in his writing on surfing, what men who surf say, and what they do and feel in the heat of the moment, can be markedly different. This was particularly true in discussions of intimacy and closeness where participants often turned to humor as a means of deflection. To truly appreciate the intimacy developed during training and sparring, and be able to ask sometimes-uncomfortable questions about it, participation was a must.

Because of the nature of the practice, taking detailed field notes was simply not possible. Instead, during the drive home, I would dictate important observations to my cellphone, which would then be turned into field notes upon arrival. I would then conduct interviews with members of the site that would double as an opportunity to learn more biographical detail about the participants and also allow members to expand, provide

context, or reject the claims I was making about the site. In building this argument, I draw on these out-of-site interviews more than any other chapter. This is due to the complexity of the theory and its orientation around the difficult to express and hard to process.

Georges Bataille in the Mixed Martial Arts Gym

Expenditure & Waste

While Bataille is best known for writings on the erotic, the sovereign, and the transgressive, it is his interest in the excessive and wasteful expenditure of energy that resides at the core of his thought. Here, Bataille draws direct inspiration from the increasing biological knowledge of the time, emphasizing the manner that organisms always produce more energy than they need for simple survival and reproduction. This energy, he argues, is generally invested in expansion through increasing territory or offspring; however, when the available space is filled, an organism continues to generate energy resulting in a surplus (Stoekl 2007). It is what is done this surplus—whether it takes the form of lavish decorations of temples, symbolic battles of Indian tribes, or the stock piling of arms and military expansion—that is worthy of study (Bataille 1988). Bataille turns to the sun, the ultimate symbol of expenditure—giving source to life through the brilliant expulsion of energy as it heads towards a violent burnout—as he provides favorable judgment of the glorious, useless, and wasteful while condemning hoarding. This expenditure for the sake of expenditure may take many forms. However, Bataille is particularly concerned with the *somatic* limits of experience and theorizations thereof, directing attention to openings to and from the body—the mouth/laughter;

vagina/eroticism; eyes/tears; anus/waste.

In a manner that invokes both Norbert Elias's writing on the civilizing process (1978) and Max Weber's linkage of bureaucratization and modernity (1978), Bataille details the manner that the individual is limited by the moral and ethical restraints of a world that is increasingly barren of enchantment and meaning. The link between morality and the useful and productive is part and parcel of the problem as the ethical life comes to mean a life of self-improvement and investment through prudence (Weber 2002). Bataille, however, argues for the necessity of useless, nonproductive, violent outpourings of energy, "a draining-away, a pure and simple loss, which occurs in any case" (1988, 31). Failing to recognize the surplus ignores who we are at the deepest levels (Bataille 1991). When the emphasis is shifted towards the future or material value, we are drawn back into an individuated self. The key to the possibility of an ethics for Bataille is that in transcending our inhibiting morals, we can see some acts of deviation and even violence as preferable. Morality therefore, again invoking Elias (1986), must be phrased as "a question of acceptability, not utility" (Bataille 1988, 31).

For many practitioners, MMA operates as a space of excess, expenditure, and waste. Inside the gym, the actions certainly fit these concepts in the most literal manner. While training approaches often vary by day and by gym, the one constant is taking bodies to the state of exhaustion. Whether repeatedly punching, elbowing, kneeing, and kicking pads held by one's partner, practicing wrestling and judo-based takedowns, struggling through multiple rounds of submission-grappling, or sparring sessions that incorporate both the striking and grappling elements, hearts are pushed, massive amounts of sweat is lost, and lungs ache. Bill, a garbage collector shares the sentiments of many

when as we rest on the side of the mat near the chain linked cage, propped up on our elbows, a trail of sweat leading from the center of the mats where we had just been grappling to our new location, his shirt almost see-through: "I never knew I could be *this* tired." It is a common statement to hear. There is a way the gym both calls upon energy reserves deep within the body before taking them as sacrifice. When grappling each person is forced to their limits by the others attempts to gain dominant position, trying to slide their hands beneath the chin to find a way choke, resisting their strained effort to separate limb from body to threaten joints. Because of the direct contact of the body the most imperceptible ebbs and flows of energy can be felt. Grip strength begins to weaken, movements come in bursts, and a position where you are not being pummeled or twisted is a time to rest (while squeezing the other person to keep them in position to rest). When talking to Bill after class as we each pack our gear into our bags on the side of the mat I follow up with him about the exhaustion and how much energy he uses when training, wondering how it compares to other sports and activities. He looks up at me and laughs, stating that he has been taken to levels of exhaustion that he did not know were possible. He explains "like, the other day. I just let John stay in position where he could hit me in the face. Repeatedly. I knew what I had to do. I just didn't have anything left." He laughs again and continues. "I think was so tired that I didn't even care if I got punched in the face. As long as I didn't have move." I point out that there certainly is less at stake when choosing not to run down a ball in tennis or play hard defense in basketball. He laughs again and looks over at the owner of the gym who is listening, "that is what we pay the big money for."

Others talk of how they have changed their diets and rearranged their schedule to

maximize their energy and how hard they can go in the gym. In conversation, this is initially attributed to a desire to improve performance. However, when the talking continues, it almost inevitably leads to a description of how good it feels to able to not worry about immediate exhaustion and to be able to go full intensity. Luke, a musician in his late 20s, talks about how after he gave up cigarettes and started eating right he would "just destroy that bag. Moving around. Combinations. Power. Whap whap. Whap whap whap. WHAP." He gets up and is doing what I think is an attempt at the Ali shuffle. I ask him to say more. "The best is when the sweat is dripping down my face and it is like flying off me like a Gatorade commercial and I [he smiles indicating he is at least partially joking] can't be stopped!" He breaks back into the awkward movement, throwing jabs into the air. Georgi, a Ukrainian computer technician in his fourties, known for his heavy sweating, tells me how he tries to always go until he doesn't anything left in the tank but now he can roll for a good twenty to twenty-five minutes instead of just five or ten. He explains he drinks less and is having a shake to start every day. He continues "I think I'm leaving a bigger sweat puddle!"

Excess and waste are fitting descriptions for the production of fluids in the gym. As both Georgi and Luke referenced, there is a never-ending supply that seems to covers virtually every surface in the gym. Streaks on the mat and bags mark where people had just trained. On muggy summer days, by the time class ends, it often looks like a rainstorm had passed through leaving everyone soaked. Sometimes there is blood. Usually it comes from noses and sometimes from the mouth. On occasion it is a cause for concern but in most cases it drips freely and is even celebrated. The last time I participated in the aforementioned shark tank, I recall waiting in line as "shark" after

“shark” descended, stunned at the amount of sweat, blood, and even drool that the “victim” had produced as he entered the surviving rather than fighting back stage. By the time it was once again my turn to become the killer fish, of mixture of the three excretions had made his face slippery against my skin.

The class and social positions of many who fill the gym provide an important context. The majority of participants are hobbyists who are attracted by the allures of MMA and have no plans of economic gain. Nor do they seek an increase of social capital that will translate easily outside of their newly found gym-based network. Many express efforts to hide their participation or at least guide the impressions of others. A high school teacher shares with me that he still worries what parents would think of their students being taught by a “cage-fighter,” although he does admit that he let his pastime slip to a disinterested student who loves the UFC. Similarly, Joe, a twenty year old shares how he dreads the bruises that raises questions from fellow students at the elite liberal arts college he attends, even though he seems thrilled by the attention his first black eye earns him on the mats. Mark, a thirty-three year old chef adds that he even tries to keep the details from his wife, “she doesn’t like the violence. Actually [laughing] she is probably ok with me being hit, just not hitting someone.” The hesitation to advertise participation and the lack of accolades success in the gym garners in other areas of life is something I can sympathize with as I too have often found myself hesitating to share my research topic with people both inside and outside academia. However, as Cris, a classical musician jokingly reminds me during one of the off-mat interviews, “I can’t tell them [the other members of the orchestra] that I’m doing this for research.”

One evening, while I sit on the side of the mats watching a successful contractor

and a lawyer engage in a competitive sparring session, I ask John, the owner of the gym, if the backgrounds of gym members ever surprise him. After thinking for a bit he explains that when he first got into MMA he expected a lot of “movie villain” tough guys but that expectation did not last long. Now he is more surprised when someone from a working class background with goals of becoming a professional fighter lasts in the gym, “they sign up but don’t last long. Learning MMA messes with your ego, you have to be willing to not be the alpha.” He continues to say that it is more likely for a new member to have never been in a fight than to be the type of guy who gets in a fight every weekend. When I comment about the array of well-paying jobs represented in the gym he adds, “Sitting at a desk all day. These are the guys with the pent up energy.”

This view is validated by Ray, a stocky Latino who takes pride in being “the longest running Mexican in the game,” having started back when MMA fights “were in people’s basements.” When watching an MMA event at a local bar he asks a friend of mine who does not train: “Doesn’t being pent up all day get to you? When you get home doesn’t your body just want to move? When I’m not training I just don’t feel right.” When my friend says that he is “tired after work and needs to get ready for the next day,” Ray exclaims: “you’ve got all the energy you need! What good is it doing you? Just let it go!” Looking back on this conversation, he practically channeled Bataille’s claim that to live fully is to waste, even and often at the expense of survival (2012). As the conversation continues I find myself reflecting on how I sleep better after an intense night of training and how even during the rest of the world I find myself less distracted by the world and less restless when I am able to keep up my MMA schedule.

During a break in the training at one of the smaller, more hobbyist-oriented gyms

I attended, I decide to ask the two of the middle-aged men resting near me directly whether they consider their time in the gym to be "wasteful" or "excessive." This marks one of the few cases where there was not an immediate answer. After a pause, George breaks the silence with a joke, "my wife certainly thinks so every time she says the credit card bill!" Jim waits a bit more, clearly thinking deeply about the question: "No. It isn't a waste. It costs money. I'm exhausted when I get home to my family. And my shoulder isn't getting any better. But there isn't any substitute…I don't know what it is, but it is not a waste." The two continue with the conversation beginning to shift into larger lessons learned through participation, but is briefly cut off when someone asks me to grapple. Minutes later I see Jim putting on putting on his gear for a round of sparring in the cage with one of the younger men in the gym (a recent high school graduate) even though just the other week he had been expressing concern about brain damage.

Later, in the same training session I ask Jim, a doorman at a local gentleman's club (a job description and location he annunciates with exaggerated precision), the same question. He seems to find my word choices amusing: "Excessive? You think a little face punching with a friend is excessive?" He continues, "if you compare it to checking the NASDAQ...I kind of suck as a person when I miss out on the face punching. Plus I'm in the business of excess [he laughs while moving his hands to imitate the act of showering a stripper with dollar bills]."

I continue with my approach of directly asking about waste and excess (a directness motivated by the chapter you are reading). The answers vary with many turning to the many complicated narratives justifying participation that I will discuss in the next chapter. Only one person speaks in terms of fighting being a money-making

investment. It is clear that for most this is not the neo-liberal project that is the inner-city boxer working towards the utilitarian goal of transforming one's own body into capital (Wacquant 2004). A few reference their time at gyms that had more of a train hard and survive or leave mentality and talk about how their was an excessive level of contact and violence; however, these gyms are presented in contrast to the current one. The desire to impose a larger purpose seems clear, as does the cultural aversion to labeling something as excessive or wasteful.

Just as striking, is the manner that no one describes the happenings in the gym as play—although the laughing mess of limbs, muscles, sweat, hair, and spandex that rolls into me during one of my final conversations on topic, unwinding to reveal a thirty-year old carpenter and the nineteen-year-old college freshman who both apologize before slapping hands and beginning again, suggests otherwise.

II. Transgression & Risk:

For Bataille, the sacred is found in moments of excess that transgress social rules and taboos. This is not a call for the abolition of rules. Rules provide important signposts for social functioning but are not ethical absolutes; rather, to turn to age-old adage, rules are made to be broken. In this sense, the rule and the transgression imply and exist within each other (O'Shea 2002). The sacred moment relies on the general subjection to the rules of the profane (Bataille 1962, 1992), just as the rules are dependent on the transgression they are designed to prevent. The speed limit provides example—the law is justified by the existence of immoral speeders who exceed the recommended limit, while one can only engage in 'speeding' with a limit in place to be exceeded. While, this likely

invokes Durkheim in the minds of the sociologically trained, here the sacred is not a transcendent exception to the everyday, but rather found within the excesses that are always imminent (Shilling and Mellor 2010).

As example Bataille turns to a potpourri of his favorite cases of mass expenditure of energy and sacred transgression including ritual, mystical fervor, feast, orgies, bull fights, public executions, and war, as well as more private encounters including love, sex, marriage, joy, laughter (Bataille 1989). While the transgressions of the MMA gym lack the magnitude, explicit link to death, or the extreme sexual taboo of many of Bataille's examples, the practice offers its own slew of transgressions ranging from the most corporeal and intrapersonal to operating against larger social expectations.

The most immediate transgression is of corporeal integrity. MMA is, at a fundamental level a disruption on the limits of the body and the separation between individuals. As Dale Spencer details in his reflection on training in MMA, it begins the moment one sets foot in a gym, and is a multi-sensory experience: "[w]hen entering into the MMA club, one is struck by a collage of the thick salty odor of sweat and sweet smell of mat cleaning products…The change rooms are almost entirely drenched with the smell of muscle liniment and sweat" (2013, 13). The assault on the olfactory continues on the mats where, again turning to Spencer, [f]latulence in the MMA club seemed to be a constant, with rotten eggs and manure filling the air" (ibid).

While some owners specifically remind members of the gym of the importance of proper hygiene, the pungent smell of crotches and armpits is unavoidable due to the close contact and positioning that MMA requires. Overtime you begin to recognize the smell of training partners—appreciating the scent of deodorant or soap, and dreading the less

hygienic. For instance, when grappling with one of the classical musicians in the site, I dread being trapped between his legs, even if in an advantageous position due to the strength and sourness of the smell emanating from his crotch—a smell that could only be produced by the accumulation of bacteria and sweat that comes with infrequently washed training gear. Some take even take joy in inflicting suffering on the senses of others in the gym. Bob, a grizzled ex-Marine in his late fourties with a steady banking job takes pride in rarely cleaning his gi-pants and is notorious for his excellent top-control game where he will trap his opponent on their back while sitting on their head: "I'm in no rush. I just take it nice and slow. They usually give me the submission just to get my ass and balls out of their face." A claim I can validate having suffered in that very position and made that very decision.

Beyond the olfactory is the more direct transgressions of bodily integrity. Fingers wiggle and strain trying to sneak along your throat. Eyes get unintentionally poked. Forearms put pressure on tendons inflicting pain and damage or constrict the flow of blood through vessels. Unintentional blows land heavily on the groin. Punches swell the face and open the nose and lips. Knees make internal organs temporarily seize. And skin is chafed and burnt constantly—whether through being ground against the mat, being grazed by a boxing glove, having your own gi or someone else's forcefully dragged along your throat, or having an opponents prickly beard scrape against your face as they work tighter for a choke. In more extreme cases, the skin might be broken open by a knee or elbow, inadvertent or intentional, allowing the blood to escape the body.

The skin abrasions and wounds open the body to dirt, bacteria, fungus, and infection. During my time training, staph infection became a near constant concern after two

fighters were hospitalized for multiple nights. In contrast, ringworm and other fungal infections became expected guests at the gym, thriving on the infrequently washed mats and passed between training partners. During the drive home I would often count the minutes until I could make it to the shower to thoroughly scrub my body with tea tree oil soap to return my health and bodily integrity. With the shower length increased on nights I rolled or sparred with someone with the surreptitiously placed skin-colored round Band-Aid on bicep, thigh, or hand that indicated a healing ringworm infection. Surprisingly, many gyms do not have showers.

The aforementioned abundance of fluids are also exchanged, shared, and mixed—transgressing any sense of personal space. By the end of a hard training session you are covered in a training partners sweat. Less common but not surprising, is to also have their saliva and/or blood coating your shirt, gloves, forearm, and neck. This presents an initial barrier to some. Jake, a mild-manner deliveryman comments that the first time he was in the gym he was matched up with Georgi. As earlier mentioned, Georgi is known for his heavy sweating. Jakes explains, "I am matched up with this hairy Eastern European dude for the warmup drills. I think he did a cardio class before or something because he was already soaked through." He continues to explain that they were working on an armbar warmup drill where you take turns moving your hips back-and-forth to setup the move on your opponent. He continues, "I'm looking around trying to figure it out and I start to move sideways like I see other people doing and his sweat drips in my eye. So now my eye is burning and I am blinking, trying to do this move. And then more goes right in mouth. Directly. I don't know what to do so I just swallow it. Fucking [Georgi]. Not the last time I've had his sweat in my mouth. Fucking [Georgi]."

When I bring this topic up with Jonah over a latte he tells me the story of his friend bringing him to train one of the "fight club" style gyms out in an affluent town about an hour from the Twin Cities. "They go from this really light warmup, like jog and touch your toes, to putting on the clock and doing hard rounds." He continues explaining that he missed the first round since he had to run to his car to get his mouth guard. When he gets back the second round is just about to start and he is matched up with a squat muscular guy running back from the bathroom: "I don't know what happened but he has blood all over his face and toilet paper stuck in his nose and he is running back to the mats with a smile. I'm like alright, so is how they do it. All he says is 'I'm a bleeder' and then we touch gloves and he just comes at me…I think by the end of the day everyone at the gym had his blood on them. It was like a dog marking its territory."

The exchange of sweat, spit, blood, grime, and bacteria is particularly significant considering the aversion to bodily excrement, dirt, and fluid. Norbert Elias provides a detailed historical mapping of the increased disgust about what comes out of the body and the increased awareness of the boundaries between bodies (Elias 2000). The process of increasing 'individuation' was part and parcel of the (ontological) experience of the modern self as an encased, separate body (Burkitt 1999). Body orifices became especially problematic because they were weak points in the security and impenetrability of the body—they are the points where things enter or exit, where fluids and substances can cross in either direction. The hyper-awareness of germs and odors within the USA and UK, where to be clean is to be germ free, and to be dirty is to be sick (Howson 2004), could be read as a logical step in the 'civilizing process'.

In *Purity and Danger* (2003), Mary Douglas famously details the manner that dirt

takes on particularly cultural significance—representing a site of vulnerability and danger to the social and individual systems. Fluids, in particular, disgust due to the manner they seep and infiltrate, revealing the weaknesses and permeability of the body. Julia Kristeva (1982) builds on Douglas's work through her writing on the abject, and the process through which the proper social body is established as one that has no excess production or waste. To roll together in a pool of sweat, stink, and even blood is to together transgress through embracing the abject.

The contact required in MMA transgresses social understandings of touch and closeness. Even at the most superficial level, MMA requires a degree of physical contact not found in striking-based martial arts due to its incorporation of grappling techniques from Brazilian jiu-jitsu and wrestling. Drilling moves requires constant touching and frequently training partners end up in potentially awkward positions. MMA fights often involve one scantily dressed man mounted on top of his opponent or trapped between his legs. This has resulted in numerous queer interpretations of the practice that have been put forth by comedians (e.g., Conan O'Brien and Jimmy Fallon), gay magazines (e.g., Wanshel 2008), and athletes in rival sports (generally boxers).

For those beginning training, this can be a barrier to entry. As Jude, a tough soccer player turned aspiring fighter comments: "I brought other girls from the [soccer] team. They didn't like getting touched *or* touching like that." When I ask if th awkwardness was a result of training with men, she explains, "no. We worked with each other. They weren't ready to touch each other like that." This is a sentiment I have encountered on countless occasions when training with a new person. There is a hesitation to lay down between another man's legs, to squeeze someone tightly from

behind while forcing them facedown on the mat, or to trap someone's head between your legs and thrust up your hips to cut off their air supply. However, as one increases the intensity of training, and the contact becomes more rough and threatening, the awkwardness disappears in a rush of adrenaline, strategy, and survival instinct.

The touching of bodies also goes against gendered norms on what contact is appropriate contact. As Clifton Evers explains in his account of surfing culture: "It reaches the point where my mate's blood is the same as mine. The brotherly love that you feel is physical-as long as the touching stays in the right places. Homophobia is rife in the surfing culture" (2009). During my time in the MMA gym, I witnessed a constant negotiation of the how actions were read, and the displacement of any homophobic interpretation through jokes, including a local gym favorite "it's not gay if you don't make eye contact," which was also a popular message board meme featuring two of the most famous professional fighters engaged in an embrace, one behind the other, both with huge smiles. Or, as Mike, a middle-aged teacher jokes after class: "you guys probably know my body better than my wife at this point!"

As discussed in the pain chapter, the act of hurting and getting hurt is itself a transgression. While violence, both inside and outside of the sporting context, is associated with masculinity, many of the men in the site have never had a fight, or engaged in this type of action. Some explicitly seek out the physical encounter. For instance, Luke, the successful pianist, blames an upbringing that was "too perfect!" Having never fought "he needed to know if I could take a punch." For Luke, like many others in the site, learning to hit and hurt was a more difficult threshold to cross. "It goes against everything I was taught by my parents and my teacher…I don't want to get lunch

detention!" He continues, "It is not like I am angry or something. I only beat up people who are nice to me." But, once his body is under attack, it changes: "suddenly I'm not worried about lunch detention [laughing] and I'm an animal just trying to remember what I've been taught that day!"

With each crossing of the boundary, the transgression becomes less difficult but, in also, in a strange way, less rewarding. When Jonah, one of the instructors, jokes to a new member that he should "enjoy his first time. It will hurt but it will never be the same again." There is an element of truth to the statement. The more you train, and the more you spar, the more it becomes skill acquisition and refinement and less of a dangerous activity centered around fighting. Tom, a veteran of the scene, tells me how he gave up sparring to protect his brain but will get back in the cage with some of the young guys twice-a-year or so to remember what is like. The time off "resets everything. I get the jitters and adrenaline again." Again, the practice has a feeling of risk, and the thrill of engaging in an unnecessary and dangerous act returns.

III. Intimacy, Communication, and Community

> Intimacy cannot be expressed discursively. The swelling to the bursting point, the malice that breaks out with clenched teeth and weeps; the sinking feeling that doesn't know where it comes from or what it's about; the fear that sings its head off in the dark; the white-eyed pallor, the sweet sadness, the rage and the vomiting ... are so many evasions. What is intimate, in the strong sense, is what has the passion of an absence of individuality, the imperceptible sonority of a river, the empty limpidity of the sky: this is still a negative definition, from which the essential is missing.
> (Bataille 1992, 50–1)

It is in moments of risk that sovereignty, described as a freedom from the rule bound, normative existence, is said to be achieved (Habermas 1984). Bataille's sovereignty can be conceived of as the other of reason for it must exist purely in the moment, outside any

forward-looking system of rules and rational. It is in this instance, when the self is abandoned, that one can achieve independence. For Bataille, to reach a sovereign status the expenditure must come at the expense of survival needs. To live fully means to blind ourselves of consequences and ignore utility. Bataille's purpose is not to discount base, ordinary existence but rather to remind us the importance of looking to moments where actions exceed or operate outside our rational understanding of the value of accumulation. As evidence of the truth of his model, Bataille offers us the seemingly inexplicable corporeal draw towards that which is labeled immoral—sex, drugs, violence, and ritualistic displays of wealth.

It is in the midst of these sovereign acts that the self is realized through its encounters with the external world. According to Bataille, rather than an isolated, complete subject, the "reflexive being can only come to understand itself as reflexive through its lived experience" (O'Shae 2002). In particular, it is encounters that re-establish the fragility of the self that provide reflexive discovery. Similarly, the other is only recognized through encounters with the self. It is in this dialectic with the other that Bataille's Hegelian influences are most clear (and perhaps most off-putting to Nietzschean scholars). This move is particularly important for Bataille because it forms the basis for both intimacy and communication.

Intimacy is best understood as the shared moments of sovereignty and the basis for communication. They are achieved through excessive expenditure of energy and the transgression of taboo. It is only through encountering one's own death-boundness that one can achieve sovereignty and escape the rule-bound isolation of self. Although seemingly abstract and potentially confusing, Bataille provides grounding for

communication in his focus on the body. Hence a common theme is his graphic and repeated explorations of the many openings of the body as avenues to transgress the border of the individual. His fictional works, in particular, the *Story of the Eye*, serve as extreme examples of the exploration of the role that excrement, tears, semen and blood can play in propelling individuals beyond the self. In examining religion, Bataille uses the symbol of Jesus on the cross as an example of communication occurring through lacerations and suffering (Bataille 1992).

Community is created through a shared escape from the self. In these temporary moments of risk, sovereignty, described as a freedom from the normative existence, is achieved. This can be conceived of as existing outside any rational forward-looking system, "what is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but this present time" (Bataille 1991: 199). Only in this instance, when the self is abandoned, can one achieve independence. At this moment, to use Bataille's language, communication takes place between sovereign beings that share a temporary release from isolation, escaping their separate bodies and encountering the Other. This is the basis for community.

The MMA school is a site that facilitates intimacy. Even at the most superficial level, as discussed above, MMA requires a degree of physical contact not found in striking-based martial arts due to its incorporation of grappling techniques from Brazilian jiu-jitsu and wrestling. However, the intimacy and community found in the site extend beyond the degree of comfort necessary to allow such direct contact. As one increases the intensity of training, the awkwardness that results from contact disappears in a rush of adrenaline, strategy, and survival instinct. The transgression of norms through rolling on

the ground with your opponent, sweat mixing, while you attempt to explode into movements to submit or control them opens up a type of intimacy not readily available in everyday life and can provide the basis for a rapidly-formed but intensely connected community within the gym.

Fighting, in its rawest form, is a shared encountering of one's temporality through giving and receiving pain. As Bataille emphasizes, one is forced to let go of plans for future action and live in the excess of the moment, revealing the exposed self to the Other and encountering the self through the Other's impact. The experience of Bataille's theoretical musings is captured by quote from Nik, a white, muscular former wrestler who tells me after my first day training at roughest, most-physical MMA gym in the area: "I *know* who each and everyone of the people in the gym really are." When I ask him to say more he struggles with the words but explains that outside of the gym people project images of who they are and it is impossible to know what is underneath. He continues, "after you go hard with someone—I don't care if it is just grappling or boxing or full MMA style-training—you just *know* what they are. If it is real." Matt, another wrestler, joins the discussion to help Nik out: "even if you don't know anything else about them, when you are on those mats, you share something with that other person that maybe no one else in the world knows." Again, I push him by asking for an example of forming a connection through this type of experience. He smiles, "last week. I was going with him [Nik] and we were kind of going 50% but he caught me with something that I thought was too hard, and then I slammed him and he thought it was too hard…Then we were both like, 'fuck it' and just went. No difference between the mats and the cage…That is why are brothers."

When Jacob, a fighter at a decidedly less brutal gym, talks about his last cage fight he expresses a similar feeling of encountering the other. He explains that he was backstage going through the "what the hell am I doing here, am I really going to do this stage of my preparation. You know, the stuff that real fighters like me do" He continues that he ran into his opponent who was showing no sign of nerves. "Sometimes I think some people are too dumb to get it. Like they don't get nervous before sparring or even a cage fight." But, as he explains, that changes when the fight begins: "You are in there with them and it is only the two of you. We are each trying to kill each other... He had me hurt, like I didn't even know what I was doing, but I kept going. After we're hugging and shit…We did something together. You don't want it to end…He got it." Fighting, in its rawest form, is not a Nietzschean affirmation of being, rather it is a shared dialectic of encountering one's temporality through giving and receiving pain. Much like in erotic communication that Newmahr (2010) explores, a deep connection is established where our individual being is for a while suspended and lifted. It is the shock of being hurt and responding that brings the two fighters together, sharing in profane transgressions and experiencing Bataille's sacred.

The seduction of violence remains within the body, not only as a means to break past the rule-bound world, but existing as a drive to transform and discover the self through pain and pleasure, blood and sweat, self and other. The intimacy is brought about through the destruction and reduction that takes place. It allows the other to see, and experience, their opponent at the most basic level. When we feel exposed planned presentations of the self are minimized as we shrink inward and are laid bare to feel the affect of another—'mired in oneself in pain, one's forces deal with the impression left on

one by the aggressive blow struck from the outside, with the aftereffect or image of that blow, and now with the aggressor who has passed on' (Lingis 1994a: 100). We build intimacy through shared vulnerability and toughness, the two extremes. This is the bond that is forged through pain, as discussed in the previous chapter, and this is the power of the transgression discussed in the previous section.

The communal element occurs as the moment of transgression becomes a shared recovery. This is the other side of the temporary nature of the experience. This builds an intimacy rarely available, or acceptable within the normative standards of masculinity, to the men outside the MMA site and often leaves participants eager to share any, and all, thoughts. As an instructor explained to the Muay Thai class at one of my training sites, 'when you train hard you build friendships that are different than any others. I have never been a soldier but I think I understand the whole Band of Brothers thing.' Or as Jim, the aforementioned doorman, shares on his Facebook account after being out of the gym for almost a year: "People are fake. It makes me miss the gym more than ever. Nothing more honest than a choke and a knee to the gut. Love you guys."[49]

The power of the bonding can be seen in the manner that it brings together people from different class, religious, and political backgrounds. After sparring, I too found myself hugging strangers, and after training, I also found myself experiencing an openness with people who had done little to warrant it. When I spoke to Wade, a biology teacher, in one of the coffee shop interviews, I brought up this as one of the topics that interested me as a researcher. I explained that the speed and intensity of this bonding was one qualities of the site that surprised me the most. He was quick to agree and expressed

[49] Author's permission to share has been received.

that it was something that he had been thinking about a great deal recently: "The other day Mark came in all excited to show off his new tattoo. So we gather around and he takes off his shirt. And it is just this huge Jesus on the cross. Nails through the hands. Blood dripping. Pretty gruesome. And some verse number, or whatever you call it." He gives an awkward laugh. "I'm a biology teacher, right. In any other situation this is the guy I joke about and he probably wouldn't be too happy with what I'm teaching his kids. But he is one of the guys that I know would do anything for me." He sits reflecting for a minute. "Seeing that tattoo made me think about it a lot. I knew he was religious, but…I normally wouldn't even run into a guy like him. But here we are…We are the same size and belt rank…I've had more mat time with him than anyone else." I ask him if it is just that he is a good training partner and ask if it is like a double's partner in tennis. Wade shakes his head no, "I don't know. No tennis partners have choked each other unconscious…Maybe they would be better partners if they had!"

While others lack the thoroughness and elegance of Wade, the level of trust is a constant refrain. Numerous participants express how they trust people they trained with on a level rivaling, or even surpassing, people they have known for years and years through work or even friendship. They echo both Wade's statement that it outweighs ideological differences that could be insurmountable in other cases and Nik's earlier statement about how the connection seems "real". Often the language of sharing is used, but when I ask what is shared it is less clear with answers including the more literal: blood, sweat, pain; and the less literal: a connection, souls, something deep, and the real you.

The illustrations of the community formations are plentiful as Wade and Mark are far from the only "odd-couple" who take unquestionable delight in seeing each other and express a deep trust for the other. There is Jeff, the leftist fashionista and purveyor of all that is hip, and Ralph, the maintenance man, frequent bar fight participant, and outspoken libertarian. There is David, the composer, Mike, the rugby bruiser, and Sam, the recovering drug addict and part-time quarry worker. And, for that matter there is my relationship with Tom, a proud conservative who uses Facebook to proclaim his confusion about why poor people simply don't lift themselves up by their bootstraps. While our views of the world clearly do not align, Tom admires my fighting style and seeks me out as a training partner. After a series of back-and-forth training matches, I have become a confidante for intimate details of his life and he displays overwhelming generosity and trust—showing no hesitation in letting me borrow his truck, cabin, or any other of his worldly possessions.

I would be remiss not to mention that for some, the intensity of the connection hides a more tenuous reality. For instance, when I happen to run into Alexandria and Marcus on two separate occasions, both express a sense of disappointment and loss. Alexandria was forced out of the gym due to a series of back injuries. During her time training she was one of the most committed members to gym—competing in every tournament, helping to coach the kids program, and showing up to every UFC viewing event. However, as soon as she was out of the gym "all these people I was close to just disappeared." Marcus, who also was forced into a lengthy time away from the gym due to the accumulation of injuries shares in Alexandria's sense of loss but explains, "it turns out all that intensity in the gym was hiding that the only thing we had in common was the

gym." Both effectively illustrate the importance of renewing the physical connections and transgressions to maintain the intimacy.

It is also to important to acknowledge that while not the focus of this chapter due to rather material orientation of Bataille's theorizing, there is a clear and important discursive part of this story. This is seen when I ask participants about whether the excessive and wasteful use of energy and they attempt to find a framing that makes sense for what they are feeling. In some cases this takes on an overtly gendered tone—for instance, Jim, who trains alongside Nik and Matt, explains that there is trust because they "beat the pussy out of each other." And, for others the feelings provoke a more spiritual search for meaning, as when participants discuss souls clashing and finding a deeper self.

Even more significant is the way that the shared transgressions and intimacy provokes and allows the narrative exploration--whether the heavily masculine or the spiritual, the talk is inspired by the leftover excesses of desire and pleasure. The constant exploratory storytelling that follows training and hard sparring sessions is, at least partially, the men, still filled with energy, attempting to make sense of the excitement and allure of what just transpired.

Conclusion: Disciplinary and Topical Extensions

J. Hyppolite: While you never attain communication through a moral project; you attain communication only through expenditure...If it through expenditure, through surplus, that I obtain communication with other beings, what is essential for me is this communication. Expenditure is only a means, or rather, is expenditure the main points?

G. Bataille: It seems that, in real life, it is impossible to separate these notions since, in expenditure, desire brings a being that is other and, consequently, no longer expenditure itself, but communication.
(Bataille 2004; 65)

On some level, through shared transgressions, the MMA gym offers a new social strategy for community and transcendence. Participants engage in actions that contrast with normality though "unproductive, un-*use*-ful spending" (Bataille 1949:23-45) such as the exchange of violence, excess, pain, touch, dirt, and fluid. The shared transgressions amount to socially playing with the subjective and even ontological limits: questioning, confronting, passing, and acknowledging them. It is only here that participants are said to feel truly "alive". This is a search that, for Bataille, indicates a societal failing: "Man is the being that has lost, and even rejected, that which he obscurely is, a vague intimacy" (1992: 57).

The longing for intimacy that Bataille narrates is a longing for social connectedness and community: the 'absence of individuality'. This is a notion of community that is offered without the negative associations of submission and servitude to an authoritarian leader, or associated with the short-term violent goals of the 'crowd' or 'masses'. It also offers a critique of a neutered form of community that exists within the bureaucratized and capitalist context. Today's capitalist society is thereby constipated, its economy is restricted rather than general, it cannot waste, it cannot give, and it cannot expend, certainly not in a way that re-gathers and infuses society with the sacred symbolic. Bataille's interest is therefore in the possible emergence of those phenomena that might exhibit waste, unproductive expenditure, the potlatch, and therefore the sacred symbolic: 'laughter – tears – sexual excitation – poetic emotion – the sentiment of the sacred – ecstasy' (Bataille, 2001: 160). In the intimacy of the sacred symbolic realm man improves in a qualitative sense, man is rescued from being reduced to the mundane. It is

in transgressive that they affirm they are not simply a thing (Drury 1994).[50]

However, I believe, that it would be in error to read Bataille as being as scholar of resistance or agency. Bataille's anthropology of transgression strikes to the core by examining processes through which practices of corporeal violence and excess take center stage and acquire meaning through violation. Contrary to popular readings, and sometimes over-romanticization of transgression, these are not necessarily acts of resistance nor subaltern protests against the state nor rebellious safety valves taking the pressure off authoritarian societies (Groes-Green 2010). Instead they represent a creative violation of rules and norms nurturing in participants an experience of subverting existing hierarchies, if ever so temporarily, and of achieving what Bataille terms 'sovereignty'. In the case of the MMA gym, this is temporary experience that occurs within an increasingly commodofied space.

In reading MMA through Bataille and finding Bataille through MMA, I hope to introduce him to the larger discipline. I also offer a renewed call for the discipline to take seriously excess, desire, the erotic[51], and the profane as a central part of social life.[52] I

---

[50] In prescription, Bataille bears more than a passing similarity with Norbert Elias. It is justifiable to read him as a more radical version of Elias with less faith in progress and more willingness to offer evaluative judgment. For Bataille, our lives *are* made worse by overly restrictive or puritanical regulation. However, like Elias, at points, Bataille seems to celebrate the value of actions that *"suspend* moral prohibitions in order to substitute less damaging acts for the more violent alternatives" (Itskowitz 1999: 21).

[51] As Staci Newmahr (in a move that Bataille would approve of) explains in the context of her study on SM "[a]ll carnal experiences contains within it elements typically recognized as erotic. Flow closely parallels that which we recognize as erotic. If all instances of flow are necessarily 'about sex' then sex as a hermeneutic device warrants further exploration." For instance, in MMA, the sexual is not an appropriate lens, but the erotic, following both Bataille and Newmahr is. The shared transgression of boundaries is an erotic moment, and an important step towards the intimacy and community that follows.

[52] The burgeoning popular literature on violent leisure activities has succeeded where the academic studies have often failed through capturing the material qualities and draw of participation in violent acts. Hunter S. Thompson's expose of the Hell's Angels, Norman Mailer's

agree with and attempt to respond to Shilling and Mellor who accurately state: "[e]roticism is an issue of vital importance for the discipline's enduring concerns with an order and meaning, yet it remains a problem for sociology and one that deserves to be given greater attention" (Shilling & Mellor 2010, 448).

Approaching MMA from this angle also sets the ground for two potential interrelated extensions, which I return to in my reflections on masculinity in the concluding chapter. First, the location of these gyms suggests that geography matters and that the spatial must be considered in discussions of masculinity. The gyms provide liminal sites for the exploration of masculinity—both performing a type of traditional action that is outside of the daily expectations for the participants and for finding an intimacy and closeness that in many ways is constrained by gendered expectations. This is also a chance for the research to avoid the "freeze-framing" of subjectivity that too often happens in studies of masculinity (Keith and Pile 1993). The importance of the relational and spatial in this particular cultural practice supports the need for finding a more fluid definition of masculinity through exploring different masculine performances at the work place, home, and spaces of leisure (Robinson and Hockey 2011).

Second, Bataille offers us a theory of excess, transgression, and the erotic. This does not necessarily need to take the form of celebration. This type of community formation can be seen in a wide array of situations ranging from the mild—trust falls at an office retreat or a funny icebreaker involving borderline inappropriate jokes on the

---

documentation of the 1974 heavyweight title fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, Earnest Hemingway's fascination with death and bullfighting, and Don Atyeo's examination of all forms of violent sport, capture the difficult to capture gritty, raw elements that draw the participants and spectators together. When Joyce Carol Oates (2009) writes that "Free' will, 'sanity', 'rationality' - our characteristic modes of consciousness - are irrelevant, if not detrimental, to boxing in its most extraordinary moments," she captures an embodied form of knowing outside that which is normally captured by academic studies of sport.

first day of class; to the subcultural—tattoos, body modification, and piercing; to more deplorable—hazing rituals in a fraternity or on a sports team. Reading these actins through Bataille means we can better understand the allure and power of such ritual.

This is particularly relevant when thinking through recent questions on whether the MMA gym cultivates violent, dangerous behavior in light of brutal domestic abuse crimes from semi well-known professional fighters. While Bataille cannot directly help us answer what led to the heinous actions perpetrated by these particular mixed martial artists, he can help us understand the powerful intimacy and sense of community formed within the gym. And, how this intimacy provides the foundation for cultivating positive or toxic understandings of the world.

Everyone has a story

[Premium Mixed Martial Arts Gym – 3 years into the ethnography]

There is a common expression that states “everyone has a story to tell.” Participants in the MMA gym certainly provide evidence for the truth of these words.

Today, Cris and I had to do everything we could to make sure that the time spent training and working on new techniques came close to equaling the time spent talking. I found myself torn between being a researcher with an interest in the stories being told (although to be honest I had heard this particular set of stories on more than one occasion) and a researcher who at that moment had a strong interest in getting better at grappling. On two occasions Cris, who was preparing for a grappling tournament, had to literally grab Jonah, who was running the class, and start wrestling with him to cut the narration short.

In this particular case, it was the entrance of a new person to the field that triggered even more talking than normal. This was Jim’s first grappling class. Jim is a tall, white, recent college graduate who I quickly learned had played division III basketball and built a 7-0 amateur boxing record during his four-years of higher education. At 6’5, he makes for a pretty imposing figure and I think Jonah took special delight in having him as the audience for his weaving together of the essence of fighting, the body, and life. Jim’s physicality and impressive sporting background also might have explained the heavy infusion of more overtly masculine assertions of strength and fighting prowess than normal. For instance, when Jonah was explaining the proper posture to initiate the clinch and control one’s opponent while also opening up space for strikes, he explains in detail about how teachings from yoga have helped him understand the importance of the proper angle and position of the body—“it is called warrior position but when you are in your uptown yoga class no one is even thinking about where it came from”. But after discussion of ancient wisdom and analysis of the lessons learned about breathing and posture, he concludes with a long story of how he used those principles in encounters with “drunk frat guys” during his stint as a bouncer at a local club and gave a detailed narration of the one time he had to control “a huge black guy—even bigger than you!”

Jim was a good listener but it seemed like the amount of talk caught him by surprise. When he asked Jonah whether he had many cage fights, it was clearly a polite way of testing whether the gym was a legit place to learn how to fight. However, instead of a receiving a quick run through of Jonah’s fighting resume, he received a reflective self-examination of why one would fight. Jonah’s lengthy exposition included details of how he took his first fight in an attempt to find himself after a series of difficult life experiences. The reflection then built into musing on how so much of life is guided by fear: “fear of what people think of me, fear of what I think of myself. Everything is dictated by this big ball of fear inside me. Talking to the girl at the movie store. Same fear.” He continued by expanding the argument, “all of life is a negative reaction. When do we do stuff because of desire? We do things to avoid the fear in us. We go to work because we are scared not to work. Not because we desire money. We trick ourselves.” At the end of this narrative arc was fighting, which in Jonah’s words, “chips away at that ball of fear inside us.”

Jim's politeness and friendliness made it difficult to determine his reaction to Jonah's introduction to the gym (which, now that I reflect on it, was about as accurate preview of what he would receive if he became a member as possible) and I felt some obligation to engage with him on the more physical level while Jonah talked to Mark, the owner of the school about some upcoming scheduling changes. We took turns holding thai pads for each other and talked about the differences between western boxing and the traditional Muay Thai stance (and I tried to not acknowledge how his harder kicks sent shock waves through my forearms). He recommended particular boxing combinations that had worked well for him and I gave advice on how to turn his hips to generate power in the kick. We also began to share bits of our past—Jim on how the basketball players admired but also tested him because of his reputation as a boxer and me on my experience at different gyms around the Twin Cities.

After the pad work, Mark called over that Jim should try out some light grappling with me. It generally followed the expected pattern of grappling with a new person. At first he was somewhat tentative (maybe because he was not aware of what would was expected, perhaps he had not yet developed a sense of what would hurt, me being smaller also might have made him hesitant, or it could be simply that it was a type of contact with another person/man that he wasn't used to), but soon he was straining, grabbing for submissions, and thrashing around to escape whenever I threatened him with one. I had a chance to feel how strong he was and test my ability to control (or at least cling to) someone bigger than me, and he had a chance to see how exhausting, frustrating, demoralizing, and effective grappling could be.

I never looked forward to being the person to "introduce" a new person to grappling—catching a new person in a series of submissions was not worth having to deal with having someone grabbing a limb or neck and using all their strength trying to get a submission they didn't know, or the accidental elbow or knee to the face that occurred from them not having developed a kinesthetic awareness of how our bodies move in relation to each other. It is even worse when striking is involved and you have person swinging wildly for an adrenaline fileld minute-and-a-half before their lungs and muscles give out. There is also the added pressure of demonstrating the value of training at the school. However, it was after these exchanges that you would see that moment of excitement that comes immediately after first experiencing that type of encounter with the self and other. And, almost without fail, the person would just open up.

As we sat on the folding chairs by the edge of the mat (left behind by the room full of parents who had come to watch their 8-12 year olds test for karate belts earlier in the day), Jim shared a story of drifting without purpose after college, and remaining in a state of uncertainty about the future. He talked about how lucky he was to living with his girlfriend who made good money and didn't make him pay rent, but also shared his unhappiness living outside the cities and fear that taking a job at the company his girlfriend's dad owned would cement his status as a working suburbanite. And, he expressed his desire to test himself in the cage. I listened and even drew on the little life course work in sociology I had been exposed to in attempt to offer some wise commentary. I expressed how impressed I was by his hand speed and power and gave an optimistic reading of what he could do if he committed himself to the gym. I then shared a narrative arc of my own that traced my path from interested fan to being in the MMA gym as a researcher and a participant. Together we joked about the book I would write someday and how I would describe him. I shared stories of training with top guys in the area, reflected on my growing interest in taking at least one cage fight, and tried to

theorize why the violence at local shows seemed so much more extreme than what was seen on television. I even shared some tales of my basketball past and regrets that I no longer played the game.

There was an excitement to the conversation and what could only be described as a genuine a connection.

I never saw him again.

6. Telling Stories and Making-Meaning on the Mat (a choke is never just a choke)

From the moment I entered an MMA gym as both researcher and participant, I found reflective men from an array of social backgrounds weaving together complex, often masculine, and sometimes contradictory narratives. Of all of the qualities of the site, it was this abundance of talk that surprised me the most. While I did not expect the many roles of pain discussed in *Chapter Four*, or the centrality of transgression to formation of community as discussed in *Chapter Five,* I would have been guilty of possessing an exceedingly high-level of naiveté to be surprised about the prevalence of pain or the manner that the physical violence required the participants to move past and outside of the socially accepted. But, I did not expect the stories. This was not the perfunctory exchanges found on the sidelines of a pickup basketball game, the friendly banter between sets on the tennis courts, nor the funny locker-room tale to lighten the mood. In the gym, I found participants making sense of their position through orienting the narratives both outward to explain society and inward to connect with their shared experience in the MMA gym. In each case, the corporeal serves as evidence for the validity of their claims. In this chapter, I take advantage of my time training alongside men who devote their time to learning MMA, whether for hobby, local and regional competitions, or dreams of "making it big," to provide insight into the symbiotic relationship between the sensory experience of training and narrative exploration by taking seriously the stories told on the mats and the manner that physical practice allows the meaning-making.

Again, it is the writings of Pierre Bourdieu that provides an intellectual starting

point as he offers a powerful template to understand the structural constructions of taste and participation in particular classed (and gendered) physical practices. It is in this chapter that I engage most explicitly with Bourdieuian theory, as well as the limits of the theoretical orientation, as I attempt to make sense of all the narration that takes place on the mats and the allure of engaging an activity seemingly outside of what one would expect from the participants who occupy the site. I also find that that the shared carnal experience provides something material for the stories stick to while the material practice simultaneously receives a discursive charge. This demands an extension of key Bourdieuian concepts including habitus, field, and hysteresis, the patching together of literatures generally not placed in conversation, and engagement with other foundational scholars of culture.[53] In this sense, my lengthy immersion in the field has not only reshaped my own understanding of MMA but also forced me to reconsider foundational sociological theory and understandings of the relationship between narration, discourse, physical practice, masculinity, and culture.

In this chapter, I also offer a clear contribution to scholars who have given attention to MMA. As discussed earlier, academic interest in MMA is growing rather rapidly. However, researchers have failed to engage with the construction of meaning that occurs within the site. The majority of the work, as Spencer (2014) critiques, has occurred from a predominantly Archimedian perspective, giving little attention to the lived experience of the MMA fighters (e.g., Hirose and Pih 2010; Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; Buse 2006). Here attention is instead given to the significance and social meaning of

[53] In particular, this project facilitated a great engagement with model of culture as a resource or justification in the manner that Ann Swidler (1986, 2001) employs it and the model of culture as meaning and representation as seen in the works of Clifford Geertz and Jeffrey Alexander, among others.

MMA at the cultural level. Examples include examinations of the violence of the sport (e.g., Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006, Sanchez Garcia and Malcolm 2010), interpretations of race and masculinity (e.g., Hirose and Pih 2010), and the growth of women's mixed martial arts and the coverage of Ronda Rousey, the most dominant female fighter (Mierzwinski, Velija, & Malcolm 2014). In all cases, the participants themselves have no voice in the interpretation of the meaning of the physical acts they engage in.

Both Downey, who explores the transmission of bodily knowledge (2007), and Spencer, who trains alongside fighters to understand the "body callusing" undergone to produce the proper *habitus* (2009), and reveal the rhythmic experiences of the gym (2014), move beyond the Archimedian. However, neither engages with the narratives that surround and emerge from the corporeal experience. Abramson and Modzelewski (2011) offer the lone exception to the silence that surrounds the practitioners. In entering the gym, they give attention to what is said by fighters. However, their conclusion that MMA appeals to participants by allowing middle-class participants to realize many of the ideals celebrated in the United States, including meritocratic success and "voluntary communities" indicates a practice where participants seek a site to employ a larger cultural discourse rather than also engage, filter, and reconstruct.

The construction of meaning that occurs, and is even brought about by entrance into the site is further obscured by the previous focus on serious competitors and fans. This emphasis ignores the hobbyist, who falls somewhere between the two—a trend that follows the professional focus of previous research on combat sports (e.g., Sugden 1987; Wacquant 2004). It is the hobbyist, however, who provides revenue to the gym,

serves as training partner for those who dream of reaching higher levels, and shapes the meaning of the practice. And it is the hobbyist that exemplifies Clifford Geertz's "deep play" (1972)—investing time, energy, pain, sweat, and blood with little hope of utilitarian reward. Studying both the hobbyist and the fighter demands an appreciation of the loosely defined nature of the site, the resulting meaning making through narration that occurs, and how both are key elements of the allure. This also offers yet another answer to the paradox of deep play that has long intrigued and the fundamental empirical puzzle that the MMA gym offers.

In this piece of my ethnographic foray into the MMA gym, I focus on the narratives that emerge as participants of different social backgrounds, motivations, and expertise, use their time on the mat to reflect on participation in the controversial sport. I present six themes: (1) "it is a violent world"; (2) masculine urges; (3) emulating the exotic; (4) an embodied spirituality; (5) redefining success; and (6) the body as a project. All themes were present in every site with active engagement from participants on a regular basis. It is important to note that none exist as static, mutually exclusive entities; the narratives are always bleeding together, sometimes fitting and other times antagonizing.

Through sharing these multiple interlocked thematics, I hope to accomplish multiple goals. Most immediately, by providing a "thick description" of the respective narratives people use in the site, I provide insight into the webs of meaning that are spun (Geertz 1973: 16) and the authorities and discursive fragments drawn upon. For each thematic, I offer a short analysis, making connections to sociological literature that helps explain their respective cultural significance in this particular historical moment. More importantly, I offer insight into the process through which the men actively engage with

fragments of larger cultural discourses—combining elements of evolutionary biology, spirituality, exoticism, popular culture, and pop-philosophy—to explain the world at large through validation of their participation. This is an attempt at a carnal sociology that takes seriously how the construction and consumption of stories charges the lived experience. And this is a narrative analysis that takes seriously the role of the body in the construction and consumption of the stories. Finally, I explore how the relative youth of the practice and not-yet-defined field facilitates stories that never quite work together. This effectively maintains an element of disjunction that encourages continued reflexivity. I argue that this ambiguity and not-quite-right feel, or moment of *hysteresis* (Bourdieu 1977, 1990), becomes part of the attraction.

Theoretical Orientation: Physical Practice, Reflexivity, and Storytelling

To understand the construction of meaning that occurs in the MMA gym, it is necessary to take seriously *both* the physical practice and the narration, areas that are too often treated as separate spheres.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* has provided the framework and inspiration for countless examinations of practice and sport. Situated between the objectivism of structural analysis and the subjectivism of the phenomenological approach, Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus connect the specific logic and power structures of the larger social context to the body and its practices. In the most basic sense, habitus refers to our way of being in the world. This includes our ways of thinking, acting, and

moving, as well as our ability to act within various social fields (Bourdieu 1984). Our habitus guides us toward certain fields through our tastes and skills, and we, in turn, reify the rules of the field as we participate in the accumulation of recognized knowledge and skills, or cultural capital. Social tastes, mannerisms, and body type reflect one's location within society, as the body takes on the skills and understandings necessary to operate within the social field, even as the individual seems unaware of the process. Through this lens, sport appears as yet another site for the reproduction of social position. For Bourdieu himself, sport operates as a class-establishing practice, with the more physical, rough bodily practices—wrestling and boxing for instance—regarded as "lower class," while the more time intensive, formal practices—golf and tennis for example—are the pastimes of the affluent (Bourdieu 1984).[54]

Within Bourdieuian theory, gender can be read as an essential part of one's habitus, and as a critical determinant of someone's cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2001 [1998]; Laberge, 1995). The gendering of the habitus is a process of internalization of

[54] The term 'habitus' can be traced back to Norbert Elias (Shilling 1993), Marcel Mauss (Noland 2009), further back to Aristotle (Mahmood 2005), or simply shifted from its Latin form to the easier to understand habit (Crossley 2014). While Mauss's *habitus* shares a great deal with Bourdieu's, he gives greater attention to the experience of learning and performing physical action. He also helps us appreciate how it the subject who, even while governed almost entirely by directives from larger social networks, feels the physical strain from executing them and reproduces culture in distinctive ways (Noland 2009). Aristotle also provides a greater appreciation of the process through which one's *habitus* is formed. In leaving aside the pedagogical elements of *habitus*, Bourdieu loses the chance to examine how specific conceptions of the self require different kinds of bodily capacities. In contrast, "the Aristotelian notion of habitus forces us to problematize how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articular different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world" (Mahmood 2005, 139). In Mahmood's ethnographic research, Muslim women in Egypt are consistent with how Aristotle understands *habitus*, "conscious training in the habituation of virtues was itself undertaken, paradoxically, with the goal of making consciousness redundant to the practice of these virtues" (ibid 139). This provides an important reminder, and counter to the dominant Bourdieuian logic, that we need to also pay attention to the acts and norms that do not fit the reproduction/resistance binary.

externally defined social practices. Gendered practices and learned schemes of perception and appreciation define masculinity and femininity differently, reinforced by a set of symbolic dichotomies: man/ woman, inside/outside, strong/weak, active/passive (Bourdieu, 2001 [1998]; Laberge, 1995). Writes Bourdieu, “the masculinization of the male body and the femininization of the female body . . . induce a somatization of the relation of domination, which is thus naturalized” (2001 [1998]: 55). In other words, the gendered field is reproduced because of a “primordial investment in the social games (illusio), which makes a man a real man” (ibid, 48)

The role of sport in reproducing gender norms has also been widely studied. Sport is said to be a bastion for traditional masculinity: a site where the “vestigial” elements of masculinity that lack a place off the field (Wenner and Jackson 2009) and fit poorly within a rule-bound, “civilizing” society (Elias and Dunning 1986) are celebrated and instilled through repeated affirmation. In this sense, sport has served as a site for men to pass on knowledge of what it means to “be men” (see Burstyn 1999; Connell 2000; Messner 1992) and to form a gendered habitus (Paradis 2014). Sport is essential to the construction of gender, for, as Bourdieu explains, “ manliness must be ‘validated by other men . . . and certified by recognition of membership of the group of ‘real men’” (2001 [1998]: 52).

Importantly, even with celebration of sport as an inclusive space (Green and Hartmann 2013), sport participation in the United States remains classed, gendered, and raced (Sabo and Veliz 2008; Carrington 2010). This is particularly true of alternative sport (Thorpe 2011) as well as violent sport (Heiskanen 2012), where lower class males often choose or are directed toward participation in aggressive contact sports (Messner 1992; Sparkes

2004). It is worth nothing that this equation of violence with a lower-class brand of masculinity, with fighting providing a path to establish a "masculine reputation," fits the trend of the larger discipline (Jackson-Jacobs 2013).

Considering this context, the largely middle-class group of men who have come together to exchange violent, pain-filled techniques seem out of place—something that my participants themselves made clear. This draws attention to the potential for reflexivity, for, if one's habitus guides taste at a pre-reflexive level, people should not seek to act in unexpected manners (Alexander 2003; Sewell 1999). If there are moments of reflexivity, they occur "in situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to field" (Bourdieu 1990, 108). This may be a result of changes within the field where the inertia of the habitus results in a lag time between the shift and the adaptation, or in the experience of a new field in which one's habitus does not align (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In other words, when things simply do not seem right, the hesitation necessary for creative action occurs (McNay 1999). I extend this concept through exploring the possibility of the MMA gym facilitating an extended out-of-place reflexivity.

The abundance of storytelling is also unexpected, especially considering previous ethnographies of combat-sport gyms, wherein lengthy dialogues about life are rare (Wacquant 2004; Paradis 2010). In contrast, within the larger sociological discipline, such storytelling has been recognized as a powerful tool that imbues events with greater meaning and as a central cultural resource through which social actors interpret, navigate, and (re)constitute the social world (Alexander 1993; Somers and Gibson 1994). As Alexander (1993, 156), explains, "People, groups, and nations understand their progress

through time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and anti-heroes, epiphanies and denouements, dramatic, comic, and tragic forms." Stories, then, simultaneously increase coherency and staying power (Ewick and Silbey 2003) and allow people to grapple with complexity and ambiguity (Polletta et al. 2011).[55]

Unfortunately, analysis of narrative often remains at the level of the tales told, while how stories shape *experience* is ignored. This effectively reduces culture to a collection of textual messages (Schudson 1989). Somers (1994) argues that this is a result of social scientists' hesitation to move from the epistemological to the ontological, which she considers a necessary step to understanding the manner in which "people construct identities . . . by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories" such "that 'experience' is constituted through narratives" (614).

The separation between the narrative and carnal, or epistemological and ontological, has been enforced on both sides of the divide. Wacquant's study of boxing in inner-city Chicago, *Body & Soul*, serves as example: by emphatically underscoring the fact that the social agent is a being of flesh, nerves, and senses, he is able to explore habitus even as it

[55] Over the last two decades, narrative has emerged as a major topic of inquiry within sociology (see Abell 2004 and Poletta et al. 2011 for comprehensive overviews). Sociologists have turned to narrative to theorize and research diverse topics such as identity (Black 2009; Braunstein 2012; DeGloma 2010; Ezzy 2005; Loeske 2007; Smith and Sparkes 2008; Somers 1994), social movements and political action (Gamson 1992; 2001; Poletta 1998; Tilly 2002), policy legitimization (Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007), political conflict and war (Smith 2005), nationalism and the democratic imaginary (Calhoun 1993; Perrin 2006), religion (Ammerman 2003; Wuthnow 2007), organizations (Czarniawska 1998) and knowledge (Ainsworth and Hardy 2012; Williams 2000).

Even with this increasing attention to narrative, the definition of the term itself varies across disciplines and is used in a variety of ways within academia (often without explanation). Interested readers might turn to Smith and Sparkes (2008) for a nice discussion of some approaches to studying narrative. Narrative has also been used interchangeably with other terms. In this case, the manner in which I use the term narrative as providing a template and justification for practice has much in common with Edgell's use of "rhetoric" (2006) and Gowan's use of "discourse" (2010).

"operates *beneath the level of consciousness and discourse*" (2004, 5). In doing so, boxing is presented as seemingly void of discourse. By examining storytelling in the context of the MMA gym, I highlight the mutually constitutive elements of narratives and physical practice. Or, in other words, I illustrate what makes stories stick (Loseke 2007) and how the practice achieves a discursive charge by exploring how the epistemological explanation is built through the ontological experience.[56]

Methods: Sparring, Resting, Talking

In this chapter, as the title implies, I rely almost exclusively on tales told on and surrounding the mat. My decision to pay attention to these stories was a result of my methodological decision to enter the MMA gym and immerse myself in the practice. It was only through sweating alongside and sparring with other participants that I gained access to and realized the abundance of narration. Conversely, many of my key methodological decisions were a result of my encounters with groups of reflexive men

[56] In seeking to understand the relationship between the narrative and the embodied, the work of Michel Foucault offers a potentially fruitful path that I have chosen not to proceed down. In the Foucaultian system of thought, bodies are understood through the discourses that produce them - with discourses being understood as specific grids of meaning which underpin, generate, and establish relations between all that can be seen, thought, and said (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). The body provided a site for Foucault to explore how the 'micro-physics' of power come to operate through 'progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions' (Foucault 1980, 151). This is not the voluntaristic, autonomous subject of Erving Goffman. Rather, the subject is formed by the available discourses and technologies of the time that defines the practices and moral code the subject should seek to self-cultivate. Like Nietsche, who Foucault owes a stated debt to, the body does not pre-date our classification system of knowledge and thus the body is nothing more and nothing less than a social construct (Turner 1989).

While this approach provides insight into the relationship between discourse, power, and practice, there is a danger that the body itself is reduced to blank slate to written upon by society rather than a determining or active biological entity in itself (Grosz 1994). Shilling, for example, argues that Foucault silences the body and reinforces the nature culture dualism by reducing the body to an inert mass controlled by the discourses centered on the mind (1993). While this critique is particularly harsh, at the very minimum, the Foucaultian approach tends to deny the importance of the phenomenological world and ignore the material feel of having a body by focusing on the textual.

who rarely stopped talking.

As detailed in prior sections of this text, I entered the gym as one of the legions of young scholars who had been seduced by Loic Wacquant's immersion into the sensual realities of a South Chicago boxing gym and found inspiration in his application of Bourdieu's habitus as both object of inquiry and methodological approach (2011).[57] The approach fit well with my theoretical interests in affect and the approach utilized by the (often young and British) scholars seeking to take seriously the non-representational. However, I quickly realized that the stories told were a key part of the *affectual* and the *carnal*. Much like the heat of the sun and grit of the sand is essential to understanding the allure of beach (Obrador-Pons 2007), the discursive fragments that filled the gym shaped the *sensual* experience. And, much like sit-up after sit-up and mile after mile of roadwork hardens the body and shapes the manner that the boxer encounters the world (Wacquant 2003), the repeated act of consuming, contributing to, and telling particular narratives also conditions and shapes an organism's phenomenological state. I employ the carnal approach to better understand not just the physical "body callusing" that takes place in the site (e.g. Spencer 2009), but also how the stories impact the embodied state.

This chapter is based on the stories that I observed and took part in from 2007 to 2013, at the five MMA schools that I immersed myself. The qualities I shared with other participants shaped my research. In particular, being a white, able-bodied man in my mid (at the start of the research) and late (by the end) twenties. My gender facilitated access to conversations that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to witness as a woman.

[57] See Sánchez García and Spencer's edited volume, *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports* (2014), for a concrete example of the influence of Wacquant's journey into the boxing gym.

For, I remained “one of the guys” even when not actively participating in a conversation.[58]

As I was exposed to the practice and the stories, I attempted to treat my own growing attraction to participation with the same level of reflexive analysis that I treated the actions of others in the site. As Newmahr (2008) demonstrates in her study of sadomasochism, in entering communities where the felt experience is central, this is a valuable source of data. And, like Newmahr, the tensions I encountered within myself were also significant to the research: What stories repelled? What stories did not stick? Was it the way they were told, who told them, or perhaps the timing? Was my aversion to them present in the site or only upon exit from the gym? Or perhaps they were more compelling off the mat? In a sense, I was still turning to my own body as a tool for research, and following Bourdieu, who contends that “we learn through the body” ([1997] 2000, 141). However, here rather than the celebration of successful immersion, it was the moments of failure that provide a data too often ignored in the application of “habitus as topic and tool”.

Outside of my methodological decision to participate in the practice, the object of research itself afforded little opportunity to become “the professional stranger” (Agar 1996). Instead, I took advantage of gaps during training to engage with other participants. These informal, completely unstructured discussions came to include life histories as well as expositions on MMA. It is significant to note that the more intimate and exploratory conversations would occur between and after sparring rather than when people first

[58] Again, it is important to note that even though an increasing number of women are entering MMA gyms, they remain a small percentage of participants and were almost nonexistent in the gyms that I conducted my research. I also recommend reading Paradis (2014) and Woodward (2008) for a discussion of the difficulties faced by women researching the combat sport field.

arrived at the gym. In this sense the shared energy, pain, and sweat presupposed and set the stage for the discursive.

As it was not possible to take notes during training, I would dictate key observations to a recorder on my drive home. To ensure that my conclusions were not the result of faulty translation from wrestling mat to laptop, I later discussed the patterns I was observing in lengthier interviews outside the gym. These "fact-checking" sessions (twenty-six total) gave participants an opportunity to provide context, expand upon, or deny statements they made in the gym. In this article, I place emphasis almost exclusively on the tales from the mat rather than the more structured and often safer narratives shared at the local coffee shop. My goal was not to locate some sort of "Truth." Rather I sought to better understand the relational process through which meaning was constructed and the cultural frameworks and discursive fragments drawn upon (e.g. Swidler 2001).

Here, I once again draw methodological inspiration from Bourdieu and his emphasis on situating interviews in the field (1990). In doing so, I focus on "natural" as opposed to "artificial" data and emphasize the interactional production of stories (Wilson and Stapleton 2010) and the messy process through which (masculine) discourse coalesces and takes root in the experiential. This chapter offers a story of the stories themselves, rather than a story about the stories of the stories. I also taking inspiration from Clifford Geertz in offering a "thick description" of the narratives people use in the site, with the goal of providing insight into the webs of meaning that are spun (Geertz 1973: 16). However, unlike Geertz, I find that the participants themselves are attempting to figure out how to interpret the text rather than the wise anthropologist. Here a

discussion of how the practice is a "model of" and "model for" society seems part of the practice itself.

A Typology of Stories from the Mat

Violent World

> Yeah, I got my mace right here [patting his coat pocket], and I got my asp (a collapsible baton carried by police) in the car [he flicks his arm to simulate swinging it]. You can get in trouble for having a gun, but you know, it is good to have something just in case . . . [he smiles happily]
>
> —Jeremy, 11.12.08

Participants discussed the potential of violence in everyday life to an extent I had not witnessed before. MMA was presented as providing the training necessary for one to react in the proper manner, whether in the cage or on the street. The men who contributed to this narrative would often stress that if life were completely safe then there would be no utilitarian purpose in learning how to fight. For instance, when I ask John, a high school special education teacher, about whether training is fun, he hesitates before answering: "Yeah . . . but, I don't know. Video games are fun. Right? This is useful. . . . I'm not playing *Call of Duty*." Since the majority of the men occupy social positions in which the threat of violence is minimal, the storytelling establishes and maintains a specter of danger through repeated discussion of the threats one *might* encounter and the ways one, implicitly a man, *should* respond.

The bar or club provides a frequent setting for the stories of violence. At the Fighter's

Destination, the presentation of the threat comes in the form of a hypothetical question posed by the instructor: "What would you do if you are at the bar and some guy ____ (throws a punch, grabs you, tries to head-butt you, pulls a knife)?" If the move-of-the-day is a choke, then "you grab their hoodie" and apply the choke. If you are working on your Thai clinch, then that is the answer. Fighter's Destination is explicit; they do not teach for competition alone. In contrast, at PMMA, tales of actual, not potential, barroom confrontations supplement the drill. In the midst of a lesson on the importance of posture and leverage, Dan, a middle-aged banker and friend of the owner, launches into a long story about a time where his training helped him avoid violence in a downtown club. Through pacifying the threat, he ensures that the techniques work: "I got my underhook. I got my angle. And I got my wrist control." During the storytelling, he uses his body to illustrate every step, letting the story possess him: "pushed him up against the nearest wall and just held him there like a little kid until he calmed down. And he was angry. Had 50 pounds on me and never even got a punch off. . . . The bouncers loved it."

Members actively contribute to the narrative. During open gym, when members have a chance to spar or drill moves, I would often overhear participants exchanging personalized "what if" hypotheticals. Craig, a muscle-bound, retired Special Forces soldier, and John, a grizzled-looking doctor, commonly engaged in discussion of the proper way to react in an array of dangerous situations from someone attempting to pull you from your vehicle to an assailant attacking from behind. Sitting together on the mat, each provides a rapt audience for the others' storytelling, each validating the potential danger so effectively that I begin to think about how I would react, even though I know that the occurrence of violent crime is extremely low, especially in the suburbs where the

schools are located. This stands in sharp contrast to, for example, the black boxers that inhabited the boxing gym where Wacquant conducted his ethnographic work. For this group, located in the South side of Chicago, violence was so common that tactics of avoidance were almost mundane. During training only a few weeks later, Cris, a successful classical musician, reflected on his own strategy for dealing with a dangerous circumstance, "I've stayed in some kind of shady areas when I was traveling with the orchestra. If my wife and I were confronted, and someone demanded our money or instruments, I would have to try to take them to the ground. I don't want a standup fight, I'm not big enough—too risky." Again, the hypothetical justifies the training while simultaneously affirming Cris's ability and need to perform the properly masculine position of protector of both himself and his wife.

Much like in women's self-defense classes (De Welde 2003), confidence is an essential part of the product being sold. And, as with women's self-defense classes, the training and empowerment that occurs within the gym opens activities that would otherwise seem daunting and threatening (McCaughey 1997, 1998). The instructors, as well as other participants, serve as role models, demonstrating physical confidence through self-referential stories. Allen, who teaches at Fighter's Destination, contrasts his mother's worries about his plans to travel through Mexico City with his lack of concern: "Of course they [my parents] are scared because of all the drugs and stuff. But I know how to handle myself." He laughs. "Good luck trying to kidnap me." Here, knowing how to fight is the foundation for freedom and independence, with the practice imbuing a corporeal certainty.

Jonah, a tall, skinny instructor, is particularly convincing because of his slender build.

He sees himself as representing unassuming men when entering hypermasculine environments like a bar or club. “I have never thrown a punch. I just call out the cocky people who usually get away with bullying . . . big guys who stare everyone down and do what they want. I show them they can’t do that.” He continues, “I don’t go out thinking I am going to teach people respect. It is an ego thing for me also—to prove something.” For others, this takes a more playful tone. For instance, Luke, a twenty-eight-year-old composer and keyboardist from a wealthy Northeastern family is excited to tell me about wrestling his wealthy cousin at a wedding: “He heard I started training so he started joking around and acting tough. So we went outside onto the lawn. Just like that—rear-naked choke. Then he gets all angry wants to go again. Same thing. When we went back in no one believed me until George [his cousin] came in and was going around yelling about it.” He continues to tell me that it validates the skills learned in his first year because it “shows how easy it is against people who don’t train. He is a big guy. Not like a bodybuilder or anything. But he lifts weights and looks muscular. And it didn’t mean anything. . . . He couldn’t figure it out. He was supposed to beat me up.” For Luke, much like Jonah, joy is found in turning the tables on the more traditionally dominant man.

In other cases, this narrative takes on a more vigilante brand of masculinity, with the men taking lessons from the actions heroes of their childhood (Jeffords 1994). It is here that the racial aspect of this narrative becomes more visible as the mostly white participants allude to men of colors in characterizing threats. In some cases, this occurs through geographic reference, as the dangerous inner city or streets are invoked. In other cases, racially coded language is used. Walter, a white, athletic, thirty-two-year-old, Minnesotan mixture of libertarian and liberal (“my mom was the tree-hugging type” and

"my dad owned a lot of guns") serves as example. After sparring, he tells the audience with great pride how he traveled to a town outside the cities with some friends because "thugs from the city had been heading down and mugging drunk people outside the bars. We jumped them before they jumped us." In response, Lance, a successful fighter and personal trainer, nods his approval and contributes to the overt superhero characterization, "It's our job to defend the defenseless. To protect the people who can't protect themselves!"

These cases reveal "a logic of masculinist protection," that as Iris Marion Young eloquently argues, is too often ignored in favor of focusing on masculinity "as self-consciously dominative" (2003, 4). Here as Young describes, the men are not bonding together over the harassment or sexual objectification of women (although there are elements of this in other aspects of this narrative!) but instead "the gallantly masculine man is loving and self-sacrificing" and "faces the world's difficulties and dangers in order to shield women from harm…The role of this courageous, responsible, and virtuous man is that of a protector" (ibid). The men in the MMA gym often employ language that bears a striking similarity to the "good men" of Stroud (2012) and Carlson's respective studies of gun culture. Like the men in Stroud's sample, the violence of the white vigilante is noble and heroic in contrast to the aggressive, violent racial threat in the form of the "thug," the dangers found in the urban environment, or areas of poverty. If one simply replaced any discussion of the body as a weapon with an actual weapon, the conversation between Walter and Lance would transplant perfectly into Carlson's account of men seeking to maintain a sense of importance in the midst of economic decline and societal shifts.

The transformative power of this narrative was evident both during “fact-checking” sessions and my own reflections on the manner that the practice and storytelling had affected me during my immersion in the field. For instance, when I discussed my observations with Luke, the aforementioned keyboard player, he queries, “do you ever find yourself looking at a stranger and planning out what you would do in a fight with him?” I give a chagrined nod and he continues, “I don’t know when it started. I don’t even think about it. But now when someone comes in the door I think about what I would do. Like how to take down a tall guy or maybe set up some knees or something.” Even though I found the individual components of this narrative to be far from compelling and lack a history of physical altercation, I too had caught myself evaluating the bodies and movements of surrounding strangers. Here, as Newmahr (2008) compellingly argues, the manner that the field affected me provides key insight into the power of the practice to perception.

In MMA, I witnessed the storytelling process justify training through reifying the potential for violence. The men validate each other’s beliefs that public spaces are potentially dangerous. This admission of vulnerability both seems at odds with and validates the pressures of normative masculinity; for, if we follow Day’s argument “not being targeted by such fear is part of [men’s] ‘right to public space’” (2005, 583). The gym is a site where fear is not only acceptable, but provides motivation to strive to be the “ideal,” confident man who lives without concern, whether through maintaining “face” in the bar setting, as Jonah discusses, pacifying a threat through strategic action, as the more militaristic, justice-oriented Allen would prefer, or embracing the responsibility of protecting others from aggressive, less-controlled expressions of masculinity. In either

case, doubts about a loss of traditional masculine status are both revealed and curtailed through the embrace of a more traditionally hegemonic narrative of men as protectors, training bodies and mind to be always ready for and unafraid of potential violence (Messerschmidt 2000).

Satisfying Masculine Urges

> It is the same as the correct fighting stance. You stand at a 45° angle, you have one foot forward, and you lean back slightly. You are leaving yourself open, but not exposed. A girl isn't going to pay attention to you if you stand there all awkward, squeezing your drink like it is protecting you.
>
> —Jacob, 9.30.08

The second narrative also reinforces the masculine qualities of the practice as men turn to discussions of gender to explain the allure of participation. The "proper" masculinity is reinforced through tales of men "acting as men should"—in particular, meeting, attracting, and going home with "girls." This masculine ritual is not unique to the site. Examples range from schools (Pascoe 2007), to the workplace (Quinn 2002), to the sport locker room (Curry 1991), to serious leisure practices (Robinson 2004). However, here the desire to fight and the urge to have sex are effectively gendered, linked, and naturalized. Through discussing expected actions outside of MMA, the assumed heteronormative qualities of the space are established, creating a sense of safety for some, silencing others, and generating potential unease for the few women participants. Again, MMA allows men to confirm their masculine status while simultaneously reaffirming the need to do so.

Within this thematic, there is explicit engagement with sexual identity. While on the mat, methods of attracting women are shared in great detail and success stories relived with explicit thoroughness. Those who live or desire a promiscuous lifestyle narrate while the audience of married men and teenage boys listen intently as they are transported into bars, strip clubs, and bedrooms. In some cases, the age range becomes a source of humor, with married men bemoaning their own commitment or commenting that the high schoolers "will do *good* in college with all this knowledge." Those who do not partake in the narrative wait in silence or start drilling moves. And, similar to the "laddish" masculinity found in lifestyle sports like windsurfing (Wheaton 2004) and snowboarding (Thorpe 2011), the attractiveness of girlfriends and ability to "go home" with women becomes a path to approval. While on the mats, I frequently overheard one man bragging about the body of a woman one of the *other* men went home with the night before. It would not be a stretch to say that impressing peers mattered more than the act itself, something noted in previous research on male professional athletes (Connell 2000) and in subcultures of lifestyle sport (Wheaton 2004).

Perhaps because of the level of physical contact required during grappling and the numerous queer interpretations of the practice that have been put forth by comedians (e.g., Conan O'Brien and Jimmy Fallon), gay magazines (e.g., Wanshel 2008), and athletes in rival sports (generally boxers), efforts to keep the specter of homosexuality at bay seems particularly high. Most commonly, the act of distancing comes through men pointing out the way a position could be sexual and laughing to demonstrate the ridiculousness of the idea—an approach eerily reminiscent of the high school halls (Pascoe 2007). However, for some, the specter is more haunting. This is more common for new members, as with

Jake, who expresses being uncomfortable when another member laughs throughout a grappling session: “He is having too much fun. Maybe he is gay or something? And he always tries to grapple with me . . . I try to avoid him.”

Interestingly, explicitly homophobic comments were not as prevalent as found in mainstream sports culture (Anderson 2005), and when issues such as gay marriage were raised, the overwhelming majority expressed support. Some took a libertarian approach to the issue—for instance, Lance, a grizzled army veteran expressing that the less the government interfered with people’s personal lives the better—while others contributed money to the marriage equality movement and attended the annual LGBT Pride celebration. While seemingly positive, this points not only to larger cultural acceptance of gay rights, but also to the varied social location of members and provides further example of the shift from derision of gay men to the derision of “weak” or “effeminate” men (Pascoe 2007; Anderson 2011). And even in progressive moments, the thorough narration of encounters with women told in the MMA gyms continued to neutralize any potential erotic bond between men “through the displacement of the erotic toward women as objects of sexual talk and practice” (Messner 1992, 96).

Again, confidence is a central theme. Here, the importance is reinforced as fighting is used to explain interactions between men and women, and vice-versa. After a training session, Jacob, one of the more active bar-goers, fills the silence while people pack up their gear with an unrequested lesson, “you have to make the girl come to you. Act like you own the place, talk to everyone. The worst thing to do is buy her a drink.” He continues by drawing a more direct comparison: “You have to go forward but not be too obvious, be relaxed, make them commit, and be able to counter. You just rush in, and you

get caught." Jacob's celebration is not just in "getting the girl," but rather the skillful navigation of the particularities of the game. This not only reduces women to objects of pursuit but further builds the connection to fighting. Jonah, the instructor, provides reinforcement, using his time in front of the class to explain, "being the strongest fighter or the best looking or richest guy in the bar is nothing special. Good job. You didn't show anything. Just like the super big athletic dude winning a fight. Real great job." He pauses to clap slowly, "show me you get the system."

This discussion of how to meet "a girl" reveals participants binding together fragments of discourse from an array of authorities to construct a narrative about why one fights. Here, in particular, bits and pieces of evolutionary biology are used to explain the gendered urges to "fight and fuck," as one of the more eloquent men describes it. During one of the many at-the-bar conversations, Rick, an elementary gym teacher and semi-accomplished grappler, explains, "the female of the species wants to find the strongest and most confidant male, it is the very nature of evolution." Others commonly reference aggressive mating rituals like rams butting heads. Being able to fight is seen as a key step toward presenting oneself as an "alpha male."

Even as various discursive strands find their way to the mat, the corporeal remains the unifier. This is made particularly clear one day as I sit by Ross, a corporate lawyer and infrequent gym attendee, who is laying in a puddle of his own sweat, trying to capture why he returned to the gym: "sparring some hard rounds. Getting laid. You feel right." Ironically, the majority of these men are far from the assertive alpha-male type that is idealized, and even as they impose biologic imperative, they partake in the narrative construction of an unattainable hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2000).

The gendered biological discourse extends beyond discussions of meeting women. After a hard sparring session, I ask Georgi, a forty-three-year-old, computer technician from Eastern Europe, why he does it. As he wipes the blood from his nose he explains, "It is something all guys need to do, fight you know. . . . I just never had a chance until now." Jeff, a businessman and occasional participant who competed in grappling through his forties, often voices similar sentiments when he refers to something primal and needed in a society increasingly lacking places for men to be men. And, while less common, the inverse is also expressed. Robert, an older sculptor responds to the growth of women's MMA by saying "it just doesn't seem natural. Whenever I see it I just wonder what issues they have." These discussions, which fit seamlessly into many men's magazines, taps into a long tradition of naturalizing gender differences through pop-biology-filled fearful accounts of society becoming "feminized" (McCaughey 2008). The danger of the predominance of a biological account is that, as Brown argues, "aggressive competitive dispositions are all too often rendered as natural traits and, as such, lead to acts of symbolic violence that are excused and rendered as a product of our evolution rather than as socially constructed, rehearsed, and ritually performed acts" (2006, 167). As desires in the gym are attributed to assumed, natural sex differences rather than a larger shared human experience, difference is effectively essentialized (Ridgeway 2009). Through sharing the mats, I am provided audience to an underlying process that allows the naturalizing discourse to stick.

The manner that narratives rely on the gym as a masculine space is never more apparent than in the presence of women. When Nancy, a tough, middle-aged woman who once competed in both karate and muay thai, teaches one of the striking classes, some of

the younger men are clearly uneasy—less jokes are made and the conversation is hushed. Most notably, Jake, an easy-going, twenty-six-year-old deliveryman with an abundance of tales of debauchery, is abnormally silent. The next day, he shares with me that he feels a bit "like a child" when Nancy is the instructor. The shift in the field is made even more evident when a teenager wearing yoga pants and a thin, low-cut tank top shows up for class. Her outfit and look of surprise upon entering the gym made it clear she was expecting an aerobic kickboxing class. And, in a manner that evoked memories of middle-school dances, the men were clearly inhibited, going as far as to work on the opposite end of the mat and quietly sneaking looks. For once, the free-flowing narrative building stopped.

It is important to note that both of the women discussed here were viewed as being outside, or on the margins, of the field—the younger woman seeking an exercise class and Nancy being associated with karate. At the gyms where women regularly trained, their effect on the men's narrative was not nearly as pronounced. However, similar to what has been found in the boxing gym (Trimbur 2013) and traditional martial arts dojo (Channon and Jennings 2013), the pressure was on the women to adapt to the men and "become one-of-the-guys" rather than vice-versa.[59]

Emulating the Exotic

In Brazil they live life right. They go to the dojo all day, they train with whoever is

[59] This highlights the need for future work that focuses specifically on the experience of women in the mixed martial arts gym, a call previously made by Elise Paradis (2014). As discussed before, in this study, few of the gyms had women participants and men overwhelmingly filled these few gyms. The tales from the mat that I discuss in this chapter are not only heavily masculine but also generally voiced by men, even if the occasional woman takes part in the construction or, more commonly, provides audience.

> around. If they are hungry, they pick fruit off the tree. They go to the beach, they surf, they meet some women, and then they go and train some more. Jobs? Who cares about jobs? Jobs . . . it is Brazil!
>
> —Jonah, 9.20.08

Perhaps because of the residual elements from traditional martial arts, the early dominance of Brazilian fighters in the UFC, or love of popular foreign action films, foreign lands are highly charged signifiers. In particular, Brazil and Thailand are romanticized as exotic places where men live life according to the natural inclinations of the body. Even as the enlarged Asian characters and stock karate photos that adorn the walls at Premium MMA are a source of ridicule, others consume stories of training in Thailand and Brazil and tattoo their bodies with koi fish and traditional Japanese art, literally marking their bodies with meaning.

Shared tales of extreme bodily practices reify the visions of training in faraway lands. When Joe is putting on his shin guards before sparring, he mentions that the protection is never worn in Thailand: "their bones are so calloused from kicking banana trees from a young age that there is no need." He rubs his shin while he tells the story. "I didn't believe it until I saw it." The comment establishes that John possesses cultural capital within the field due to his time abroad while simultaneously suggesting differences between how things are done *here* and *there.*

Foreign lands are presented as places where violent rites of passage unite community. Thailand, in particular, is said to give proper cultural respect to fighting as a masculine ritual. Joe, once again, provides example as he frequently laments the lack of domestic

ritual through wistfully telling tales of entire villages celebrating local fighters. In the United States, the story goes, having a cage fight is as good as it gets. Tim, a twenty-four-year-old accountant who frequently offers Joe an audience, describes how when he finished college it seemed like something was missing, “so I took a fight. Didn’t really know what I was doing. But no one does up in Northern Minnesota.” When I ask him when he will fight again, he simply shrugs and expresses little interest, instead referring to his lone, successful fight: “I got my one and o. Everyone thought I was crazy for doing it anyways.” For Tim, the rite of passage had been completed.

Unlike the “violent world” narrative, in which foreign lands are equated with danger, here the emphasis is placed on the chance to pursue natural desires. Time to devote to martial arts is not connected to a lack of economic opportunity, but instead seen as a “freedom” and removed from day-to-day violence. In sharing his view of the ideal gym, Jonah explains, “There are no formal classes, you go, you work on the bag, you ask someone a question, maybe you spar. It is more like Brazil.” As he continues, he weaves in elements of the biological, “It is letting down evolution to just work in a job. I am the culmination of millions of years of development . . . from an atom to what I am now. And I am just going to work in a factory?” In this statement, Jonah frames MMA as an escape from social pressures. Here the participants claim a wide range of class backgrounds, but it is the more affluent who speak with authority based on past time abroad while others look on wistfully.

These idealized stories of faraway lands as explanation of the urge to know the body and fight calls for an Orientalist critique (e.g., Said 1977). However, rather than presenting a weak, feminized “Other” to be differentiated from (e.g., Sinha 1995; Hirose

and Pih 2010), participants look abroad for physical inspiration. Exotic lands are instead essentialized as places that produce practices to be emulated. And, as found in other popular Eastern-based physical practices—yoga, tai chi, massage—this newer strain of Orientalism has little overt emphasis on the rational (West) / irrational (East) dichotomy (Brown and Leledaki 2010). Instead, participants subscribe to the idea that the "Other" is both "out there" and also within—a tale made popular in the often-critiqued writings of the mythopoetic men's movement (e.g., Bly 1990). Men, it is said, should work to unbury their more vigorous and natural masculinity.[60] Within this narrative, it is not the biological nature that is essentialized but rather the daily activities of that population.

Of course, as with the other thematics, this narrative is not unified among all participants. In particular, the narrative is further complicated by the celebration of the "American fighter"—whether in the form of the strong, grinding wrestler or the aggressive, bruising brawler. Here the celebration or critique of a particular style of fighting would sometimes stand in as a proxy for a discussion of the fighting nature or fighting culture of particular ethnic or racial group. During a grappling class, John, a white, burly mechanic with a high school wrestling background, who recently began training, comments that "a punch to the face" is the best defense against a grappler. He continues referring to a fight from a recent UFC where a top-level Brazilian grappler chased his opponent around the cage by literally scooting on his butt and motioning for the standing opponent to come into this guard. John states, "no Brazilian is going to make me look like a fool like that. Looks like a dog scraping his ass. That isn't how you fight!"

[60] The most common example is emulations of the "noble savage" caricature of American Indians. See Kimmel (1996) for a well-cited critique and Churchill (1993) for the most scathing.

However, John's use of this rhetoric is muted as he spends more time on the mat and is repeatedly shown the effectiveness of grappling.

The gym also provides an avenue for participants like John for to encounter the practitioners of the arts they initially dismissed and from the countries they spoke dismissively of. When a Japanese Judo Olympian briefly trains in the gym, John rarely leaves his side and when a Brazilian Muay Thai coach takes over as the striking instructor, John is one of his most eager and attentive students. Similarly, those who maintain a somewhat dismissive stance towards foreign fighters manage to also juggle the seemingly contradictory coding of foreign origins as an indicator of formidability. For instance, Mark, another burly white men with a wrestling background and an impressive collection of guns and military gear, almost exclusively roots for the American fighter when he goes to the bar to view a UFC event. While watching he will share that "no one is tough as wrestlers" or that declare that a win was a result of that "American heart". However, when Mark hears that a rival gym hired a new *Brazilian* grappling coach he privately shares with me that he is thinking of checking the gym out now that they have such a good instructor.

Through sharing time on the mats, it became evident that for participants who embrace this storytelling thematic, prioritizing the body, community, and spirituality through looking abroad was part and parcel of the larger quest for meaning sometimes found in anomic suburbia (see Chaney 1996). It is not a coincidence that this strain of orientalism bears similarity to other predominantly white, identity-seeking subcultures including body modification (Klesse 1999) and participation in the aforementioned mythopoetic men's movement (Churchill 1993). An optimistic reading of the MMA gym reveals

participants exploring and admiring what the body can do through celebrating groups that have tested their corporeal limits. However, from a more pessimistic perspective, the ahistorical emulation is part and parcel of racializing the Other and enforcing a European-mind / elsewhere-body binary that continues a rich tradition of white men building identity through consumption of the exotic.

Embodying Spirituality

Jonah: I like kids. Kids see the world in a more honest way. I appreciate that.

Walter (yells out, grinning widely): Being in the moment!

Jonah: Exactly. I don't feel I need one. I just want to be like one.

The failure of traditional martial arts in the early UFC led many to dismiss the Zen-oriented, Eastern teachings that accompany the physical techniques. While the resulting absence of a spiritual base (and moral compass) became a common source of derision from both martial arts purists and popular media outlets (e.g., Porter 2008; Freeman 2007), the absence of a set belief system provided space for creative construction. The result is a spiritual potpourri of traditional Eastern teachings, Western science, pop-philosophy, and pop-psychology coalescing around the individualist focus on "living in the moment." And again, the specter of the earlier men's movements haunts as participants invoke a mix of popular self-help psychology, and non-Western spiritual traditions to "repair" and build strong, male identities (see Magnuson 2008; Kimmel 1996). However, here the body and the practice serve as the fulcrum, holding together and filtering the multiple discursive strands, and even serving as spiritual lesson in itself for the meaning-seeking men.

The "stickiness" of the corporeal experience is most evident when considering the eclectic nature of the ideas, cultural sources, and backgrounds of the speakers. For example, George, a well-spoken doctor in his sixties, and Steven, a local writer, often reference developmental psychology as evidence for the superiority of grappling, arguing that "martial arts follow the same path as mankind." In contrast, Allen applies lessons learned from the *Art of War* and historical battles. And at PMMA, continental philosophy is invoked because of the college encounters had by Mark, the ex-Marine. Each person's accumulated past experiences guide the way they make sense of the experience on the mat. These respective habitus clearly were formed in divergent social locations. Yet, somehow, on the mat they all work.

The filtering role of the practice is apparent in the prevalence of philosophies that either emphasize the body or mirror the sensual experience. For instance, continental philosophers who actively reject the mind–body dualism have staying power in the gym because the arguments fit the corporeal experience. Nietzsche appears on the mats because his appreciation of the self as an aesthetic project dovetails with the experience of people like Kevin, a successful lawyer, who feels like he "is doing *something* with his time" when he trains and rhetorically asks, "what better project than myself?" Similarly, when I share that I had been reading Georges Bataille, who understands intimacy as the shared waste of energy, Jonah turns to his own corporeal experience to see if he follows the complicated argument: "I know what you mean. Guess that is why I hug everyone I fight?"

Along with providing stickiness and a filtering mechanism, the corporeal also operates as a spiritual Trojan Horse for belief systems. Yoga, breathing exercises, and other

alternative paths to vitality and health commonly find their ways to the mat along with fragments of larger world outlooks. When I talk to Aaron, a veteran in the local fight scene, about how this is not what I expected, he finds it humorous: “Lots of guys looked at me strange when I showed up late because of yoga. Now they are doing the downward dog right beside me.” Pat, the large, proud Irish American firefighter, adds: “Fighting, in particular jiu-jitsu, leads you toward wanting to know your body. Why *wouldn’t* you do anything that helps?” He later explains to me that yoga’s emphasis on posture as foundational to the health of mind and body has had a profound influence on him. Yet another fighter speaks of the forgotten warrior roots of yoga—“it is right there in the name of the pose! [warrior I and warrior II]”—to justify his participation but then elaborates on how he finds peace through the movements. Here, a desire to expand the capacities of what the body can do becomes an avenue for finding meaning for even those who actively disavow tradition and spirituality.

Even as the corporeal tests culture expertise, life helps determine the ideal physical practice. For instance, Allen criticizes wrestlers not because he doubts the effectiveness, but rather because the approach does not cultivate proper character: “Wrestlers simply going full speed, always violent clashes . . . you can’t go through life in that manner. Battle shouldn’t be decided by one brutal clash. It should be conducted with spies and with strategy.” Significantly, this is a point of overlap with more traditional martial arts (e.g., Channon 2012; Levine 2013) and stands in contrast to the assumed connections between MMA, hegemonic masculinity, and a more brutish strength-based form of fighting (see Channon 2012; Hirose and Pih 2010). And, as in traditional martial arts, mastering the physical practice is equated with

inner peace and wisdom (see Channon 2012).

The dialectic relationship between what works for life and works on the mat was made clear to me one day while sitting beside Walter, still drenched in each other's sweat, both observing Jonah train with a UFC prospect. After a few minutes, Walter shares, "he's the best. It's not just an MMA thing. Like the way he rolls. It is like he says, it is not about trying to submit someone. Always just moving, if something goes wrong he just slips out of it. That is a life lesson you know?" Jonah's pop-philosophy-inspired preaching on embracing the chaos is convincing to Walter precisely because he performs a fighting style that is the corporeal expression of his ideas. The physical practice is never simply the physical practice. When Jonah is teaching a guillotine and explains a "choke is not simply a choke" he is right not just because the many variations and countless hours of technical drilling that goes into a choke, but also because the choke is both a metaphor for how to live life beyond the mat and a seemingly profound reshaping of how to understand traversing the world.[61]

Again this thematic offers a reminder that not every theme, nor aspect of a theme, works for everyone. Some are more aggressive in rejecting these narratives. Ray asks, "Talking that bullshit again?" while Cris simply grabs Jonah and starts to grapple. In my field, I find myself documenting repeatedly about being drawn into the seemingly more organic narratives that relate specifically to the practice while at the same time I grow

[61] Here Jonah also offers a play on the well-told Bruce Lee quote that a punch is not just a punch: "all different types of punches punch is not just a punch: "Before I studied the art, a punch to me was just like a punch, a kick just like a kick. After I learned the art, a punch was no longer a punch, a kick no longer a kick. Now that I've understood the art, a punch is just like a punch, a kick just like a kick. The height of cultivation is really nothing special. It is merely simplicity; the ability to express the utmost with the minimum. It is the halfway cultivation that leads to ornamentation. Jeet Kune-Do is basically a sophisticated fighting style stripped to its essentials."

weary and annoyed by the more top down imposition of meaning. Others are just confused. Rob, the always mild-mannered 30-year-old construction worker, responds, "I don't know. I think this reminds me of when I hear people talk about music or art. Everyone can find his own way. It makes me want to just get high and hide in my closet."

Within this theme, the ability of the shared carnal experience to mask contradictions is at its most evident. In a single conversation, Kevin invokes an emphasis on "self-actualization" and long-term improvement; Jonah discusses how we should "embrace that we are all egos burning up" and enjoy, rather than attempt to delay, the inevitable; and Walter preaches the "living in the moment" spiritual narrative made popular in Null's best-selling book (2008). Each bring their own habitus to the field, including the way they speak, tell stories, process knowledge, and interpret the world. Some seem particularly linked to the social location of the teller—for instance, Kevin's interest in projects that lead to "self-actualization" and improvement of the self fits well within middle and upper-class interests (Lamont 1992; Fletcher 2008). However, because the loosely defined nature of the practice, each explanation fits with the gym experience. Potential logical incompatibilities become less important than each man finding the elements that "stick" best to his practice. As narratives mix on the mat, the aforementioned state of hysteresis remains but does not overwhelm.

Boredom, Dissatisfaction, and (Temporary) Critiques of Capitalism

> You know, I'll tell you what I've realized. It isn't about what you want, it is about doing what you do not want and persevering and just working, man. Then being able to

do what you like. Get off all that crazy stuff. You think I like working in an office? "Hey, did you get that memo?" That is shit man, but I do it, and I get my $15 and benefits. Then I go fight.

—Ray, 11.20.08

For many in the gym, MMA is credited with revealing and providing remedy to the drudgery of the everyday. It is more than a temporary escape, for MMA enables the articulation of what is lacking—with the accumulation of boredom and dissatisfaction being said to produce a need to fight. In crafting a narrative that questions normative social expectations, the storytelling men often turn to *Fight Club* (generally the 1999 film adaptation) and its anti-consumerism message. While some in the site share characteristics with the middle-class cage fighters of Abramson and Modzelewski's study (2011) that turn to MMA because of the qualities it shares with the American Dream; many of the hobbyists used the gym to critique the underlying values of the Dream itself. In the MMA gym, I rarely found the classic, celebrated sporting clichés of meritocracy and fair play (see Green and Hartmann 2013) extended beyond the walls of the gym.

The mixture of affluence and the hypermasculine make a critique of capitalism unexpected. However, I found successful men with well-paying jobs, long-term relationships, and health using the mats to express dissatisfaction while performing a physical masculinity not associated with their white-collar compatriots. After a particularly hard training session, as people lay around on the mats, George, a self-described happily married father expresses a sense of being tricked: "First you finish school, then off to college, then you get a job, then you get married, then you have kids

and then you are like, 'I did what I was supposed to, now what?'" Jim, another married man with children, steady employment, and a fast car, agrees: "You know, all week I just wait for the chance to get in here. . . . Not that I don't like the rest." Both are able to reveal an uncertainty, ambiguity, and sense of incompleteness often obscured by the cold façade of masculinity.

While the established and affluent express their dissatisfaction, some of the younger men espouse the joys of remaining unfettered. Jonah serves as the loudest example: "If you have saved up money and possessions, you will do anything not to lose them, you would give your arm to keep that last $100. But you aren't happy. I just get what I need. I wouldn't give that up. I wasn't happy when I had that real estate job. . . ." He continues, "They got it right [in *Fight Club*]. The whole Ed Norton, Ikea-addiction part. Just blow it up and move on."

For other working-class participants, the critique is a source of frustration; it confirms and builds dissatisfaction, but offers no viable alternatives. Rob, the mild-mannered, large blonde-haired, blue-eyed thirty-year-old construction worker explains, "I am sick of destroying my body, I don't like my job. Once I get all my debt paid off, I can leave it. Maybe get good enough to teach jiu-jitsu, but so many people are trying to do that." Jonah is less-than-satisfied with Rob's inability to make the leap of faith and turns to the lessons of *Fight Club* to criticize him: "You are too caught up in the 'comforts.' Don't be afraid to hit rock bottom." However, when I ask Jonah about his need to fight for an income, he answers in a manner that reinforces both his independence and masculinity while continuing the critique: "It is not that I care about the money, but everyone else in society does. There are certain norms expected of me. Girls are taught not to like the guy without a

job."[62]

For many, the critique does not travel beyond the walls of the gym. Instead, time on the mats is enough. Ray, a Latino in his late twenties, and participant in the occasional cage fight, prescribes MMA as a cure-all: "Man, it is what you need, it will change your life. Especially if you are bored with your job. You won't regret it. There is nothing like it. It will make you more confident. Just let you get away." Joe, a surly carpenter who laments the lack of creativity in his workplace, says he heads home from the gym thoroughly exhausted but "feeling right". Within the space, it is difficult to differentiate between those attempting to live the narrative and those seeking temporary respite. For instance, Mark, a young lawyer, is a key participant in crafting this narrative, sharing scathing descriptions of his perfectly capitalist coworkers and the false consciousness of the masses before leaving the gym in his custom-made BMW.

Within the MMA site, there exists a narrative path that channels the joy of fighting into a radical critique of society. However, even as the violent practice is posited as the solution, through allowing a temporary escape for the hobbyist it reduces the need to make a change—the men can laugh at their nine-to-five jobs before returning to them the next morning. In a manner that invites an Eliasian interpretation, the gym provides a safe space for the experience of violence, aggression, and, excitement before returning to the established order (Elias and Dunning 1986). Further, the

[62] By the end of my fieldwork Jonah had ended up supplementing his income with a series of jobs. Occasionally he was forced to sacrifice his time in the gym due to a scheduling conflict. Throughout it all he maintained his critique of the corporate world that he had chosen to enter. He soon took on a pattern of finding a job, celebrating having a disposable income, experiencing increasing frustration due to the monotony of the work and his time away from the gym, and then leaving the job.

narrative allows those members of the group who have *not* pursued permanent employment to take pride in their status, while those who seek a departure from their successful but pressure-filled lives can find solace in mixing with a lower-class, more physically oriented crowd. Again the field is left ambiguously defined. Members can feel united through shared, corporeal experiences and shared narrative construction of meaning and desires that *temporarily* transcend class divisions. It simply *feels* like they are doing more than just talking. This allows the affluent to indulge in not caring about success, claiming that "you realize all that other stuff doesn't matter when you are defending a submission" even as they reap the benefits of their wealth.

The Body as Project

> Jiu-jitsu, fighting, and yoga are all simply extensions of the same principles. Yoga helps me realize at its simplest, it is about your body and gravity. It is what keeps me coming back . . . it means I am doing something with my life.
>
> —Kevin, 10.10.08

While the corporeal experience underlies all other narratives, the body is also reflexively turned toward as a thematic in itself—celebrated as both the source of desire and an object to be manipulated. Stories from the mat frame the drilling and sparring as an opportunity to reclaim a lost corporeal knowledge. And, rather than embrace a certain style of clothing or music, participants vocalize how movement and bodily awareness serve as cultural capital.[63]

[63] In this sense, Hebdige's classic approach to reading style (1979) is better applied to the fans that don flashy t-shirts and bedazzled jeans sold by MMA affiliated apparel companies. While the

Through discussion of methods to increasing fighting capacity—whether through diet, supplements, or exercise—bodies become subject to the expertise of traditional and scientific knowledge. Kevin and Allen provide examples. Allen continually works on his flexibility, fueling his obsession with repeated viewing of Cirque du Soleil. In contrast, Kevin looks to the National Football League, telling detailed stories about the development of sport science and how it has been employed to incredible results. Both tell stories with an improved fighting-body being the happy ending. And, during open mat, both perform movements that require balance and contortion, effectively ensuring an audience for the next storytelling session.

The lack of agreement over the ideal body, and who deserves the cultural capital that it bestows, is a constant source of tension. Mark, the massive, middle-aged, former-Marine provides illustration. His decorated bodybuilding past and bull-like physique commands respect from many in the site, who turn to Mark for advice on weight training and supplement use (both legal and illegal). However, for others he represents the difference between the functional and aesthetic body. After watching Mark's difficulty turning his hips in the manner necessary to throw a simple punch combination, John, a seasoned Muay Thai competitor, and jazz guitarist, remarks, "His body is huge, but it can't move right." He continues to build the narrative through a story of a muscle-bound "Jersey-shore goon" losing a fight to a smaller man who "danced around him like he was in mud." Similarly, Rick, a health-food store manager with an abundance of "Paleo" recipes to share frequently criticizes the men he sees at LA Fitness: "all that muscle doesn't even

fighters reject these consumers as wannabes, they themselves do not hold on to a particular aesthetic style, instead relying on a number of subtle embodied qualities to signal membership in the subculture.

make any sense! All they can do is pick things up and put them back down. Good luck lasting more than two minutes running or fighting. . . . I actually feel bad for their hearts."

The unusually heated nature of the debate over the ideal body can in part be explained through the manner that it stands in for a discussion of masculinity. Rejecting heavy musculature is also a response to what is perceived as the regionally dominant, or hegemonic, version of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and a move toward establishing a different form of gender capital for the field.[64] As people weave stories to justify new methods of improving the body both inside and outside of the gym—whether CrossFit, Kettlebells, bodyweight exercises, or Olympic Lifting, or yoga—a particular tale is told about the ideal (male) body. Strength matters, muscles matter, but it is a particular type of strength and musculature that is oriented towards action.

While the shift to functional strength is also found in other middle-class-dominated risk-based sports (see Fletcher 2008) and martial arts where weight training is the exception rather than rule (see Channon 2012), the dismissal of the aesthetically pleasing body (and masculinity associated with it) also come from working-class participants who tell stories to illustrate the difference between real muscle and gym muscles. The importance of the distinction was never clearer than when at a bar with a few other fighters to watch the UFC. After glancing over at the muscle-bound, Afflication T-shirt-wearing, tanned man at the next table, Paul, a seasoned-grappler and industrial plumber, gives a disgusted laugh, "that is what people think is tough." He then taps his mangled

[64] See Bridges (2009) for an excellent application of the Bourdieuian concept of field to the discussion of gender.

cauliflower ear indicating, this is tough.[65]

Even the carnal act of drilling movements until the body carries the knowledge (see Spencer 2009) is not free of the discursive charge that comes through repeated narration. During training, Cris asks whether fighting movements affect others throughout the day, saying, "I find myself in the shower starting to visualize and go through moves. Even worse, I am shrimping [a jiu-jitsu movement] out of bed." As other members laugh and affirm that they have had these experiences, Allen interjects, "It's like you know 'you are redneck when . . . ,' 'you know you are a fighter when . . . .'" Only two weeks later a nearly identical exchange (and joke) occurs when Rodney shares his girlfriend's observation that his dancing suddenly looks a lot like a boxer's head movement and I share that I have even found my head and shoulders starting that same rhythmic pattern when listening to music and writing a paper late at night. The storytelling overlays meaning even as the narration emphasizes the centrality of no longer needing to think, and instead just trusting what the body has learned. There is a pride in the embodiment of the lessons from the mat—whether it results in a shift in how participants carry themselves outside of the gym, fighting-related movements occurring in unexpected places, or subconsciously breaking down how you would fight a stranger entering the room. The veteran of the scene learns to both trust and listen to the body, and also, just importantly, know how to discuss trusting and listening to the body.

While the body is a central subject of narration within the gym, there remains a

[65] Cauliflower ear occurs when fibrous tissue builds up around ear cartilage. In extreme cases, the ear takes on the appearance of a cauliflower. The most common cause is pressure, rubbing, or strikes. Cauliflower ear is a relatively common occurrence in wrestling, grappling-based martial arts like Brazilian jiu jitsu, and boxing.

multitude of approaches to framing the relationship between the mind/body and trying to better understand the connection or relationship between the two. Much like this project forces me to reconsider the relationship between body and mind, as well as narrative and practice, participants find their participation providing impetus do so as well. Many maintain the Cartesian divide, treating the body as a tool to maximize. Others maintain the divide but seek to free the body and let it speak and guide. In some cases it the same person doing both, in the same day. For instance, there is Tom, a white man from an affluent suburban family with well-manicured blonde hair, striking blue eyes, and a chest covered in tattoos. Tom has a proclivity for the violent arts and is considering leaving his place of employment to focus on making a run at professional fighting. He is perhaps the loudest when talking about the mind-body relationship, drawing on tales from Buddhist temples one day and sport science the next. After drilling moves one day, Tom explained to me, "when you get your mind to lead your body, you have the ability to accomplish amazing things." He continued with a detailed recounting of ancient monks who would sit in silence, fasting, for days and even weeks on end. He then smiles and shifts to another example: "or that tiny Japanese dude who ate all those hot dogs? Sixty or something and he weighs what, like a hundred-and-thirty pounds? Talk about mind conquering body…He competed against a bear!" These two rather different stories—one of extreme consumption and other fasting—provide motivation for him to continue to work towards strengthening his mind and conquering his body. Later that day after Tom finished his time "in the shark tank" where he cycled through multiple sparring partners until he reached state of complete exhaustion, he began working through a series of fluid movements and stretches. As I set beside him, removing my shin pads, he launched into

an explanation that: "It is all about freeing the body. Everyday it becomes more and more constrained—society making it stiff and inflexible. I'm opening up. Letting it go."

This thematic successfully frames the MMA gym as a place *of* the body and *for* the body. At the end of the day, the participant can feel like he accomplished something by engraving another movement into the body memory. And, while the body callousing techniques that participants undergo (see Spencer 2009) bear more than a passing resemblance to the practices of Wacquant's aforementioned boxers (2004), the goals seem markedly different. For those in the MMA gym, especially the hobbyist, the hours of work and care are not oriented toward the neoliberal transformation of the body into commodity. Instead, satisfaction and meaning is found in the body's desires. It is said to crave more, aching to repeat particular movement patterns in the shower, in bed, and at work; always serving as a reminder that the site and training awaits. It is this altering of the phenomenological experience—feeling stronger, better conditioned, and tougher—that makes the stories stick. It is this relationship between the ontological and the epistemological that Somers (1994) urged us to heed.

Conclusion: Narrating Hobbyists

Me: So how do most people answer the question about why they are interested in training at your school?

Adam: "To stay healthy."

*Excerpt from a discussion regarding a survey given to new members, 09.07.09.

In this chapter, we see yet again that MMA is more than just men paying to learn to kick, punch, and choke, risking injury to stay in shape and claim hegemonic masculinity as both prior academic papers and popular depiction (critiques and celebrations) have suggested. During the course of my participant observation, I witnessed the construction of complex, detailed, sometimes contradictory, and often messy narratives justifying engagement in an activity outside the expected. It is only through entering into contact with the practice and giving attention to the narratives that emerge that one can begin to understand the allure of a space where doctors choke lawyers, older businessmen seek advice from binge-drinking twenty-five-year-olds who still live at home, a swollen ear is a badge of honor, and both "living in the moment" and conditioning bodies for the future are driving goals.

The men do not enter the site explicitly seeking a place to critique society. Rather, the critique emerges through participants examining their engagement in the painful and intimate practice. There is no set story to guide the reflection. Instead each draws on different expertise and discursive structures when adding to narratives that form through the fragmented stories coalescing. And, even as members of the group preach a discourse of self-confidence and rugged individualism, they seek constant affirmation from the others that their stories are being woven into the shared webs of meaning. They become storytellers, and the audience truly matters, whether it is Walter looking for affirmation for his worldview ("Is that spiritual stuff too crazy for you?") or Jonah watching his own gesticulations in the mirror as he weaves biology and new-age philosophy together, ensuring he has at least one audience member who appreciates his brilliance. If MMA is a site of play, the play operates as much on the narrative as the physical level.

It is helpful to return, again, to Bourdieu's prioritization of the disjunction between habitus and field as the moment of emerging reflexivity (Bourdieu 1990, 108). A variety of men from different walks of life occupy the site—few seemingly possessing the proper habitus. They have not been raised to occupy this site. In fact, no one has. The field is still being defined. And while Bourdieu provides a brief discussion of the tensions that result from the democratization of sport, leading to contact between "socially different sub-populations that correspond to different ages of the sport" (1984, 211), these cases rely on established traditions to define the way the sport "should be" understood and practiced. In contrast, MMA synthesizes but also rejects, as it exists tenuously between traditional sport, individualist risk-based leisure activities, and martial arts (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010) and thus between class-based masculinities and spatial locations which often map onto these differences. The continuous mixing of men in the site further extends the lack of definition of the field, making it impossible for the sedimentation to occur that allows the formation of a set or appropriate habitus.[66] Here, the dissonance between habitus and field that occurs in the liminal space of the gym provides a *sought* and *temporary* moment of hysteresis.

Swidler's well-cited toolkit model of culture as resources provides an alternative that emphasizes the complexity of culture and the often-contradictory elements (Swidler 1986). Within Swidler's model, cultural meanings and actions are strategically deployed by people even if they do not believe in them. Instead plans of action are constructed

[66] The relational qualities of habitus has been previously noted by scholars (e.g. Crossley 2013; Paradis 2014). While Wacquant also argues that habitus is a "*multi-scalar concept* that one can employ at several different levels of social activity (from the indivual to the civilizational) (2014, 120), his work on boxing has been critiqued for presenting a subject that "appears to be an asocial being whose learning is multifaceted but solitary (Paradis 2014, 102).

from the available cultural resources to respond to the particular institutional dilemma—even if seemingly contradictory (Swidler 2001). This seemingly provides a base to better understand the disjunctions, lack of coherence, and search for words that make sense of what is occurring in the MMA gym. Most recently, Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe have used Swidler's metaphor to conceptualize the way in which professional fighters have "mitigated fear and cultivated confidence" (2011, 433). The approach works well for understanding the emotion management of trained athletes. However, in the end, within Swidler's work, people seemingly pursue the strategies for which they are best equipped (Vaisey 2010) with the more messy desires and meaning fading to the background. In practice, this approach either turns into a model for rational choice of drifts closer to Bourdieu and his focus on often-unarticulated dispositions and orientations.

I found a messier reflexivity. This is not an agent selecting from a "repertoire" of "strategies of action" as much as actors fumbling around for meaning. And if the actors are choosing from their cultural "toolkits," it appears that they are adapting tools to jobs they were not designed for. This lack of clarity is extended by the presence of men from different classes, drawn to different elements of contemporary masculinities that rarely share the same spatial, much less cultural, realm. The hypermasculine is placed in the same context as spiritual reflection, and both are drawn on in rejecting portion of the American Dream. Sometimes the class division is made evident, as when working-class men reacted negatively to discourses drawing on pop-psychology and pop-philosophy or affluent members shook their head at stories of bar fights. However, more often than not, men consumed the narratives they would be least likely to encounter outside the site. For the construction worker, MMA is not just another job that will take a toll on his body; for

the computer technician, MMA embodies a physical masculinity not present in the workplace.

This leaves my understanding of the role of culture in the site somewhere between Bourdieu—where I began the project—and an approach that understands culture as (inter-subjective) meaning (e.g. Alexander & Smith 2003; Durkheim 1983). Here the impetus is on the researcher to seek to understand the way people/groups make sense of the world (e.g. Geertz 1977; Goffman 1972). My interest in the stories in MMA gym has pushed for me to attempt to take seriously cultural motivations, cultural resources *and* the construction of meaning around the embodied experience. This is a carnal sociology that understands that words too are internalized and play a part in the sub or pre-conscious

The men themselves are not naïve to, and some even take pride in, their out-of-place position. One participant half-jokingly brags that "you won't find any other history professors here," and an accountant shares that he is both embarrassed and "weirdly proud" when he shows up at work with bruises and scrapes. Both demonstrate a pride in their ability to carry markers of their occupation of multiple masculinities. In contrast, Wade, a biology teacher, reflects that he "always tells other teachers that he does jiu-jitsu. . . . I don't want to be associated with the brutes they see on TV." And when I talk to Cris about the abundance of "why they are there" discussions, he provides a well-articulated explanation that people seek affirmation for things that are not already accepted, "The [discussion of] 'why I'm here,' is a deep rooted sense of guilt, because people know they shouldn't be violent so they have to explain it . . . you know when someone starts explaining before you ask, it's like 'I never accused you of being late, you are clearly explaining because you feel bad about.'" Cris continues through personal

example, “At the orchestra, of all places, when everyone is like ‘you do *that*?’ I can’t just say I take MMA classes and leave it at that.” And while the middle-class members of the gym may be prone to talk because of their class position (e.g., Sweetman 2003), here we can see the dissonance of the site encouraging the reflexivity.

The importance of the site’s masculine aesthetic cannot be ignored. The gendered surface is key to the allure and production of the stories. An ethnographic examination allows insight into the way the men explore and selectively construct a hybrid form of masculinity. For some, the physicality of the setting allows discussion of emotional issues without fear of appearing soft—“one of the worst things a man can suffer in this culture” (Bordo 1999, 55). Others use the mat to counteract increased docility and briefly connect with the hypermasculine. Rob captures both when he shares his fear of leaving the comfort of his family home and numbing dullness of work. In contrast, he compares being on the mats to classically masculine activity: “it is similar to going into the wild, you have to be aware of what is going on at all times. You can’t just drift through or it is over.” Again the practice allows, provokes, and is shaped by reflexive examination and narrative exploration. And, again, it is men with different backgrounds coming together, provoking each other, and searching for what masculinity is rather than simply playing out previous understanding, even if the final presentation doesn’t deviate far from characteristics of the larger traditional discourse.

In this chapter, more than any other section of the dissertation, it is important to note that my article captures a particular moment. Cultural awareness of MMA is growing, young men that grew up with the UFC and see MMA as a way to build capital (cultural or economic) are joining the gyms, and women are becoming more common on the mat.

Schools now have the chance to become more specialized and further separate fan, hobbyist, and fighter. Whether these changes bring new stories and new discussions, or the narratives become more stable and muted, remains unknown. Both possibilities tell an important story about the nature of transitioning fields. For now, the site remains open for meaning construction. The tension resulting from different backgrounds and expectations sharing the mat is perpetuated because the practice itself provides enough "stickiness" to hold together the many discursive fragments with the transformation of the body providing evidence of their truth. And the narratives themselves seem more "real" because the men took part in the construction.

The research and narrative construction also occurs within a cultural moment perceived as being particularly tenuous for men—something heavily reflected in the discursive fragments woven into the respective themes. While I am unable to map or analyze the effects of the historical change, it is important to place this chapter within the specific moment (Abbot 2004). As Janet Roitman writes, "crisis is the unexamined point of departure for narration. It is a blind spot for the production of knowledge about what constitutes historical significance and about what constitutes social or historical meaning" (2013, 66). The economy, the climate, and the institution of marriage are widely thought of as being in crisis. So, too, it seems, are men. A quick skim through headlines in the paper, popular news magazines, or on the Internet is enough to make clear that American men are perceived as under attack and American masculinity as suffering. The trigger for the incensed proclamations cover the spectrum from the decline of manufacturing jobs, the increasing numbers of women in positions of power in the workforce and political office, the educational successes of young women and girls, the lack of attention paid to

the domestic abuse of men, sexual assault legislation, the rise of the "metrosexual," and perceived lack of space for and celebration of that good old, rough-and-tumble brand of masculinity. All fall under the umbrella of a perceived crisis. And, while the loudest cries often come from the more conservative sources, the crisis of masculinity discourse has shown resiliency and adaptability, regularly returning with new iterations permeating the language of both the left and the right. In particular, popular laments invoking the "Mancession," and the "End of Men," transcend political party, and often the dialogue is both impassioned and personal.[67] This cultural context shows how the men enter the gym already primed to discuss their position in the world and with a particular set of pre-established discourses to draw upon. In the conclusion I will further interrogate whether viewing the practice of MMA as a reclamation project for masculinity in crisis is a fruitful one.

The gyms provide a stark reminder of the necessity to seriously engage with the meaning participants give to and take from sites of *deep play* and *serious leisure.* For, to understand the hobbyist MMA practitioner, one must appreciate how practice can stimulate and gain meaning through weaving together discursive fragments through rich and constant storytelling. I explore how creativity spirals outwards from the body expanding in complexity and scale of analysis, but always returning to the body as site of reflexive construction and reconnection. The practice itself is imbued with meaning from

[67] The "Mancession" is a term that was coined during the 2008 economic crisis, referring to studies showing that the downturn more strongly hit men, with women in the service industry holding onto their jobs (Thompson 2009). This term obscures the racial disparity in unemployment as well as women slower job recovery (Covert 2012b). The "End of Men" refers to the argument posited by Hannah Rosin in her popular book (2012) and article (2010), each bearing the name, that patriarchy is coming to an end due to women's success in the classroom and the workplace.

this process—a choke is truly never just a choke. By embracing this emerging sport's messiness, I provide description that goes beyond previous academic focus on how professionals "build themselves" into fighters. Instead, I offer an analysis that understands how local MMA gyms serve as a place for men to work, rework, envision, and reenvision bigger cultural ideas, to use their engagement in a painful, physical, and intimate act as model of and a model for society, and to do it in an ongoing way that allows each man to relate his embodied experience to the concerns of daily life—and that understands this process as a central allure.

Masculine Movements

Summer 2010

Before I head back to the locker room to pack up my gear I sit on the edge of the mat where we had just been grappling to relax and drink water. It is a great opportunity to observe some of the other classes. I am impressed that the school is able to run, and fill, so many different classes. Especially considering that the school is hidden away in south Minneapolis and is not aggressive in advertising. This moment sitting on the mat provides a clear snapshot of how different martial arts attract different crowds, even when inside the same building with only five feet of empty mat serving as a barrier between the classes. Everyone in the jeet kune do class is white. They also appear less athletic and seem to be from outside the traditional sports/athlete crowd. The kind but awkward guy that I talked to earlier about his love of anime movies is there, and so is the skinny, but muscular guy with dreadlocks and a Bob Marley shirt. There is also the older guy who gave me the welcoming run-down of how the gym works on my first day. He is lean with just a little weight starting to build up on his sides. There is a certain quality to this body that suggests he used to be extremely fit but his body has grown softer as he shifted from high commitment to working through the occasional set of Muay Thai drills. A short, stocky blonde woman who looks to be in her late 40s and possesses a strong Minnesotan accent is helping to instruct the class, walking around and raising an elbow here, moving a foot back a step there. I notice that she makes a point of referencing her time training in Thailand with the owner of the gym whenever the opportunity presents itself – “they taught it like this when we were...”. The black-and-white framed photographs that adorn the wall behind her confirm her time abroad.

Behind me, three African-American teenagers are bouncing around the boxing ring working their head movement and punching combinations while an older black guy holds hand pads for a younger Latino boy. When they start to slow down the trainer yells out in a booming voice, “we don’t stop. We work when they rest. It is what we do.” It is clear from his cadence that it is not the first time he has yelled some variation of that line.

On the mats that I just exited, two white men with wrestling backgrounds are engaged in an intense struggle. They both have the strong, squat bodies of people who have wrestled their whole lives. One is shirtless and displaying his impressive physique. The other is wearing a sweaty t-shirt and MMA-style shorts. The action is back-and-forth and reaches a peak when the shirtless one barely escapes a triangle choke by lifting up the other one and dropping him on his back and head (breaking the unspoken rule that you don’t slam someone during practice, or for that matter, most grappling tournaments). They are two of the top grapplers, and most likely the most athletic members, at a gym that is more known for striking.

Many of the people who I just trained with stick around to watch. The main topic of conversation amongst the audience is the upcoming retreat where members of the gym head north to a secluded cabin for three days of intense training. Comparisons to training in Thailand are abundant. I have never heard of a retreat like this before at the less “traditional” MMA gyms. Others comment admirably on the strength of the two men (“I wish I had that kind of strength in my lower-back,” “not much body fat to lose,” and “someone’s been taking their protein powder) and predict how they each are going to crush their competition when they step in the cage again.

To the side the somewhat soft-looking middle-aged Brazilian who taught the grappling class is giving some tips to a talented white teenage girl on her triangle choke (a move where you choke your opponent by trapping their head and one arm between your legs, cutting off the flow of blood to their brain as you grab their head and pull it down towards your crotch). He has her put the choke on him and then adjusts her leg positioning while he is in the choke to show how to make it more effective. When she makes him tap he takes an exaggerated deep breath of air and they both smile. The Jamaican man who I had just grappled with sits down beside me. His t-shirt still soaked in sweat (his and mine). He looks back and forth between the two wrestlers who show little signs of slowing down and the instructor, wearing a full gi, and the teenage girl, wearing gi-pants and a form-fitting rash guard. Without looking at me he comments, “that is one person I wouldn’t mind being triangled by”. I decide not to point out that only minutes before I had my legs wrapped around his head when practicing that very same move.

7. It Hurts so It Is Real: The Multiple Allures of Pain

This is it, the conclusion. You have made it to the end of my exploration of the many allures of mixed martial arts. In working your way to this point you have been exposed to a number of theoretical additions to the common toolkit employed by sociologists to study physical culture. You have worked your through my attempts to elaborate on the painful, the transgressive, and the narrative. You have read about the methodological decisions I have made, and the inspirations that I have turned to in attempt to understand the role of pain in the site, the experience of transgression, and all that storytelling. Each of these qualities offered a different challenge due to their particular qualities that make them difficult to capture, express, and research. Taken as a whole, you have followed me as I work through how MMA gyms operate as a site of intimacy and meaning making.

However, the chapters overflow with masculinity. It would be fair to say that even the seemingly least gendered qualities of the site were, to some degree, haunted by the specter of masculinity. All of the gyms were filled predominantly (or exclusively) with men, including the gyms with a reputation for being excellent places for women to train. The masculine qualities of the site were not surprising. In fact, I initially expected this to be a story about masculinity and sport—a relationship that I am by no means the first to notice. Scholars have long highlighted the the manner that sport has operated as a "male preserve" (Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Sheard and Dunning, 1973; Messner 1992; Sabo & Panepinto 1990; Theberge, 1987), holding that within such enclaves the recreation of latent patriarchal scripts, increasingly undermined within the majority of other social relations, can persist and be celebrated. Violent sport, in particular, is held up as the most damaging incarnation of this relationship (Atkinson, 2011; Hoch, 1972; Matthews, 2014;

Messner, 1990; Young, 2012); existing at the top of the masculine hierarchy (McBride 1995) and allowing the most direct form of men dominating other men, while resisting domination from others (Pringle 2009).

Specifically, the gendered social location of mixed martial arts is far from ambiguous. As Jonathan Gottschall, author of the celebratory exploration of MMA culture, *The Professor in the Cage: Why Men Fight and Why We Like to Watch* (2015), aptly observed, one only need to meander down the book aisle at Barnes and Noble to notice the placement of mixed martial arts magazines between publications devoted to guns, naked women, fast cars, and big trucks. Or listen to Dana White, President of the UFC, famously declaring that we would "never" see women in the cage[68] and is notorious (and celebrated) for his curse-filled, machismo-fueled rants that have involved the liberal use of the word "faggot". Or, examine the apparel brands associated with MMA that have also sought to capitalize on the gendered associations through pedaling an exaggerated masculinity to the MMA community (or perhaps just the MMA fan and younger fighter as made clear by the participants in my study who took delight in mocking the aesthetic). These brands, including TapOut, Afflication, and Badboy, adorn their t-shirts with skulls, eagles, guns, naked women, flames, and camouflage.

Considering the overtly masculine qualities of the sites, the practice, and the larger national and international cultural associations, this could have easily been a story

[68] Of course, like any good capitalist, he had a famous about face after seeing the potential market for women's MMA. This set the stage for Ronda Rousey to ascent to international stardom as the first champion of the women's division of the UFC. A position Rousey attained through combining brutal dominance of her opponents with Olympic credentials, an outspoken attitude, vocal pride in her strength, and an abundance of swimsuit and glamour photo-shoots.

oriented completely around men and masculinity. There are two fundamental reasons behind my decision not to tell the story in this manner—one an admitted methodological weakness, and one a claimed conceptual strength.

First, the weakness. Following the lead of the carnal sociologists and the non-representational theorists, I sought not only full-immersion into the sensory world but also "practical osmosis" (Wacquant 2005). However, there are potential blind sports that emerge from seeking to "go native" (Wacquant 2011) and these blind spots are often ignored by proud implementers of the methodological approach. To make matters worse, the spots only become larger and more difficult to recognize with the successful alignment of my subjective dispositions to the field of interest. As the training took hold and I entered a state of becoming a MMA hobbyist with occasional aspirations of fame and glory (or at least winning a competition or two), elements of the practice became less outrageous and worthy of analysis. A hard sparring session with a friend that left both our faces bloodied and heads ringing was a cause for celebration rather than a cause for concern and confusion. Comparisons between the skills used to win a fight and meet a woman at a bar was no longer exciting data, but instead annoying gym talk or a banal exchange not worthy of my attention. And, my reflective period on the drive home too often became about the applicability of a technique shown on the mats that day rather than extending or testing a particular theory or claim. While this certainly marked a level of immersion that provided insight into underlying joys and habitus formation, it also certainly blurred some of the (sometimes offensive) happenings on the mat.

In previous applications of the carnal and non-representational approaches, it has most commonly been the gendered qualities of the practice that have been ignored or

even defended by the researcher. While this critique has been leveled at Wacquant's work on boxing, Desmond's skillful entre the world of the wildland firefighter is even more deserving. For even as he uses his immersion to reveal the rural masculinity of the men, he allows sexist language and practice to be dismissed simply as a case of "that is what they do, it should not be judged." While I would often remind myself of the importance of not slipping into this trap, I must acknowledge that any placement along the insider/outsider spectrum offers particular strengths and weaknesses. As you become part of a field, it becomes easy to miss or not realize the significance of a common exchange, occurrence, or outlook—especially when you are complicit in one worthy of critique.

Second, I sought to avoid the reductionary assumption that the allure of the phenomenon should be attributed to gender and gender alone. From the perspective, the gym operates simply as another sport space for men to perform an aggressive, violent form of masculinity to assert their physical dominance. While elements of this story are true, leading with it effectively supersedes and silences the aspects of the site that both transcend and underlie the gendered tale. In a rather ironic manner, assuming masculinity as the central force obscures rather than reveals the nuances of the subject; as the research slips into the all-too common circular argument in which men are people who act masculine and masculinity is what men do. If every symbol, feeling, and performance related to MMA is necessarily always already about masculinity and therefore read through this lens, we end up learning very little.

Instead through letting masculinity emerge while attempting to understand the allures of the embodied practice, it is possible to see qualities of masculinity too rarely emphasized and reveal underlying connections to the violent, transgressive phenomenon.

Reflecting on the lessons learned about masculinity throughout this process offers a fitting conclusion to this text and provide illustration to many of lessons learned about the operation of culture. In addition, this reflection offers an answer to the question I would commonly receive some variation of when presenting at academic conferences, "is this some reclamation of masculinity project?" or "is this just another crisis of masculinity?"—To which I give the classic answer, yes, but…it is more complicated!

In each chapter, masculinity emerged as part of the story when attempting to understand the particular aspect of the cultural phenomenon. In Chapter 4, it became clear that even pain—language escaping and world destroying pain—did not escape the discursive. This was seen in attempts to make sense of the encounter and frame it in terms of discovering an authentic and real version of the self through the painful exchange. Here we can see the relationship between the talk about men enjoying and withstanding pain (Pringle 2009) and the embodied experience of pain. For, buried within this desire to discover one's own body and test one's limits is a verbalized sense that a man must know their own body (Bordo 1999). Tellingly, the language of feeling powerful through an ability to endure pain has been said to be a central form of validation for the "would-be heroic male subject" and "the primary libidinal logic of the white male" (Savran 210).

In Chapter 5, we saw the formation of intimate communities through the shared investment of energy into transgressive acts. This Bataille-guided trip onto the mats offers a counter-story to the more common tale of masculinity, sport, and violence. The sensual, "wasteful," non-forward looking experiences on the mats transcend the desire to simply appear 'hard' and invincible (Doyle 2000). However, this is not to say that

masculinity is not important in this context. Rather, participants transgress accepted norms around appropriate levels and placement of contact—touching bodies with extreme closeness, tenderness and violence. Through violent, ritualistic performances they find a sense of connection not readily available between men outside of physical, competitive, and overtly masculine spaces. This is a story of a gendered intimacy where participants find their own "band of brothers".

In Chapter 6, we paid particular attention to the narrative themes that emerged as participants took advantage of the openness created through the exchange of pain and the intimacy that followed. Here participants collectively wove together whatever discursive fragments fit their experience in the gym, turning to whatever scientific, moral, spiritual, and social authorities available. In doing so, they used their shared live experience to filter and mix the many cultural frames and ideas together into somewhat coherent stories that worked for those participants on that mat. Perhaps not surprisingly, the stories crafted were often heavily masculine both in prescription and in discourse drawn upon. Within particular narratives, the whiteness of the masculine narrative in many of the gyms became strikingly apparent as participants turned to tales of the dangerous urban or international encounter as motivation or celebrated exotic practices from abroad.

Learning from the Crisis

But what of the crisis? As Janet Roitman writes, "crisis is the unexamined point of departure for narration. It is a blind spot for the production of knowledge about what constitutes historical significance and about what constitutes social or historical meaning" (2013, 66). The economy, the climate, and the institution of marriage are widely thought of as being in crisis. So, too, it seems, are men. A quick skim through headlines in the

paper, popular news magazines, or on the Internet is enough to make clear that American men are perceived as under attack and American masculinity as suffering. The trigger for the incensed proclamations cover the spectrum from the decline of manufacturing jobs, the increasing numbers of women in positions of power in the workforce and political office, the educational successes of young women and girls, the lack of attention paid to the domestic abuse of men, sexual assault legislation, the rise of the "metrosexual," and perceived lack of space for and celebration of that good old, rough-and-tumble brand of masculinity. All fall under the umbrella of a perceived crisis.

While the loudest cries often come from the more conservative sources, the crisis of masculinity discourse has shown resiliency and adaptability, regularly returning with new iterations permeating the language of both the left and the right. In particular, popular laments invoking the "Mancession," and the "End of Men," transcend political party, and often the dialogue is both impassioned and personal.[69] It is the strength, pervasiveness, and contentious nature of the discourse that make it both a difficult topic and valuable context to situate this project and some basic lessons learned about studying masculinity and culture.

Scholars, though not particularly convinced by the discourse of men in crisis, have had a lot to say. Some of the most important work has been illustrating that contrary to media rhetoric and public opinion, this is not the first time that American men (and American values by proxy) were declared under attack. In fact, according to sociologists

---

[69] The "Mancession" is a term that was coined during the 2008 economic crisis, referring to studies showing that the downturn more strongly hit men, with women in the service industry holding onto their jobs (Thompson 2009). This term obscures the racial disparity in unemployment as well as women slower job recovery (Covert 2012b). The "End of Men" refers to the argument posited by Hannah Rosin in her popular book (2012) and article (2010), each bearing the name, that patriarchy is coming to an end due to women's success in the classroom and the workplace.

Dworkin and Wach (2009), there have been at least three previous major waves of "the crisis of masculinity." The first occurred at the turn of the twentieth century as a reaction to the rise of first-wave feminism and changes to work and family dynamics. Popular reactions to middle-class women's declarations of boredom with housewifery and demands for political voice included the creation of the boy scouts and greater institutionalization of sports—both providing a space for masculine ritual, a place to escape feminizing influence, and the affirmation that men are different than women (see Kimmel 1996). The second wave crested in the late 1970s and appeared as a reaction to the gains made by women during the second-wave feminist movement and received attention due to the work of men's rights groups like the mythopoetic men's movement and the Promise Keepers (see Messner 1997). The third wave grew during the late 1990s, a time of increased convergence of the social roles of men and women. During this wave the body was attributed as both solution to and cause of the crisis. Gym memberships rose as men sought muscle (and masculinity). In other words, providing historical context to the "crisis" is a way of demonstrating that men are whining about the same old problems (eg Kimmell 1996) and that "fixing" a "wounded" and "threatened" masculinity is actually shorthand for reinstating a masculinity from times past when 'men were men,' the gendered hierarchy was more stable, and roles more defined.

Other scholars have provided detailed examination of the data in the specific social areas seen as part of the crisis (work, education, crime, family, sexuality, health, representations) to show that the crisis is based on misguided reading of trends (e.g., Connell 2000, Adams and Coltrane 2004).[70]

[70] One example comes in the form of recent critiques of Hannah Rosin's announcement of the "end of men." In Rosin's influential essay in the *Atlantic* (2010), she asserts that women's

While scholarly engagement with the crisis does an excellent job undercutting the claim that men and masculinity, in particular white men and white masculinity, are in need of saving, my time in the MMA gym suggests there is a danger in too quickly dismissing such prominent discursive construction. The idea of the crisis shapes the commonsense understandings of many and approaching the phenomena as strictly in the textual realm alone ignores the active consumption, reworking, and production of the discourse from men themselves (Magnuson 2008). Sadly, the attempts to examine the interplay between discourse and practice are few and far between.

The eternal return of the crisis should not be cause for dismissal but rather should serve as a sign of the power of the discourse. And, if men are never crisis-free, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1995) suggests, perhaps scholars should look within masculinity, rather than outside of it, for the source of the problems (Edwards 2006). In each return, the threat and reaction is shifted. In the recent wave of worries, men must demonstrate their masculinity with strong bodies, not just fast cars and big paychecks (Kimmell 2000). On television, the idealized man is no longer the strong but silent Clint Eastwood type but instead the post 9/11 wounded warrior (Nettleton 2009). And instead of escaping into the woods with other wounded men, popular discourse suggests an isolated reclamation project (Van Oort & Green 2014).

The challenge is to find a way to take seriously the power of the discourse while simultaneously avoiding reifying the concept. Yes, it is ridiculous that many men have

---

supposedly innate sensibilities, like flexibility and empathy, make them closely compatible with success in the "new economy" (Rosin 2010). However, critical race and queer theory scholars emphasize that Rosin ignores the maintenance of a white heteropatriarchy (Coontz 2012; Covert 2012a; Hernandez 2010). For instance, Rosin neglects to mention that marginalized women continue to work in service sectors that are often unstable and underpaid (Covert 2012b; Collins 1991; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Parrenas 2008).

turned to cavemen as a source of inspiration, but let us take the time to understand why this particular identity is so compelling at this current moment and how the circulation of evolutionary narratives has found its way "into men's bones" (McCaughey 2007, 81) And, yes, there is a clear contradiction between men's apparent entitlement to power and the sense of powerlessness they frequently experience (Armengol and Carabi 2009); however, the contradiction can only be resolved through first understanding how particular narratives come to "feel right".

To do so requires, once again, for us to return to the work of Pierre Bourdieu as potential way forward for the studies of gender and masculinity. Bourdieu's social theory provides an appreciation of the manner in which the masculine role (domination) and female role (dominated) are deeply somatized.[71] Gender emerges in bodily emotions even when logic or lessons teach otherwise (2002). For instance, being a man is "often visible in a particular way of sitting and standing, a tilt of the head, a bearing, a gait, bound up with a way of thinking and acting, an ethos, a belief, etc." (ibid, 49).[72] These differences are not simply the surface performance a performative or Goffmanesque approach might suggest, for as McCoughey argues "Victorian women *really did* pass out on fainting couches and *really were* weaker than men, but we now understand that they were living out the stereotype their society had assigned to them." (2007, 112). McCoughey

---

[71] Bourdieu has the unfortunate habit, to put it politely, of failing to acknowledge feminist scholars who had previously theorized gender in a similar manner. In the most egregious case, Bourdieu exercises the very symbolic violence he condemns, namely the masculinist practice of silencing women. Burawoy effectively criticizes Bourdieu for doing this in a web-based essay examining the manner in which he crudely characterizes and dismisses the work of De Beauvoir (http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Bourdieu/7.Beauvoir.pdf). However, the phenomenological perspectives that have been influential in gender studies, from Simone De Beauvoir to Iris Marion Young, have been used minimally in studying masculinity.

[72] Bourdieu's debt to Marcel Mauss is quite clear in this section. Mauss similarly wrote about the gendered walk that is instilled into Maori girls (Mauss 2006).

continues, “today many men really do feel like cavemen, but it's too simple a step to assume that feelings reveal an inner biological essence" (ibid).

Beyond Bourdieu’s phenomenological roots, it is his understanding of field that offers the most important conceptual tool to understanding gender and masculinity. A gender-oriented interpretation of field encourages us to move beyond categorizing types of femininity or masculinity, to pay attention to the relational issues, particularly the connections between, and hierarchies among men as well as women. Unfortunately, as discussed in the methods chapter, it is often this relational approach that has been ignored when examining physical practice. And, again, Bourdieu’s theories have limitations when seeking to examine a field in a state flux, filled by men with multiple, dynamic forms of gender identity.

Again, it is affect theory and geographic thought that offers a potential supplement. Affect-oriented theory remains a relatively unexplored approach to examinations of masculinity. However, if one takes seriously Grosz’s claim that bonding is an affective assemblage (1994), it provides the theoretical foundation for appreciating the manner in which (masculine) groups are bound together through sensual connections (Sedgwick 1985). Affect theory allows us to move beyond Connell’s hegemonic framework to one which shifts emphasis to the sensuous experience - showing the ambiguity, vulnerability, and uncertainty - not just the final image of the warrior that is projected at the end (Evers 2009). In a sense, there is potential to bridge post-structuralism’s deconstructive critique of power and discourse and phenomenology recognition of embodiment and lived experience.

The move to affect also provides reminder that place matters. The men in my study take delight in performing and embodying different masculinities at the work place, home, and spaces of leisure. In different contexts the participants identify in different ways, deploying different resources, guided by different desires, and testing different aspects of what their body can do and have done to it. Through this approach we can avoid "freeze-framing" and embrace the sense of "movement and complexity" (Keith and Pile 1993, 28). Bodies are shaped by what they come in contact with. Some of these impressions stick more and others less. Some of the encounters are specifically shaped by gender, or race, or class, but the young men do not always see themselves in these terms (Noble 2007). Theories of masculinity should strive to understand the messy, shifting nature of the lived experience of men, which requires ethnographic studies that allow for and explore the temporal and spatial dimensions of intersubjective being at an ontological rather and not just representational level (Noble 2010).

References:

Abbott, A. (2004). Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences. New York: WW Norton & Company.

Abell, P. (2004). Narrative Explanation: An Alternative to Variable-Centered Explanation? Annual Review of Sociology 30: 287-310.

Abrahamsson, S. & Simpson, P. (2011). The limits of the body: boundaries, capacities, thresholds, Social & Cultural Geography, 12(04): 331-338.

Abramson, C.A. & Modzelewski, D. (2010). Caged Morality: Moral Worlds, Subculture, and Stratification Among Middle-Class Cage-Fighters. Qualitative Sociology Volume 34 (1): 143-175.

Adams, M. & Coltrane, S. (2004). Boys and Men in Families: The Domestic Production of Gender, Power and Privilege. In: M.S. Kimmel, J. Hearn & R.W. Connell, ed., Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities, London: Sage Inc.

Adler, P.A. and P. Adler. (2005) "Lost in Translation?" Symbolic Interaction 28:433–435 (3).

Agar, M.H. (1996). The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography. San Diego: Academic Press.

Ahmed, S. (2012). The contingency of pain. Parallax, 8(1): 17-34.

Ainsworth, S. & Cynthia, H. (2012). Subjects of Inquiry: Statistics, Stories, and the Production of Knowledge. Organization Studies 33: 1693-1714.

Alexander, C. (2005). Embodying Violence: 'Riots', Dis/Order and the Private Lives of 'the Asian Gang'. In: C. Alexander and C. Knowles, ed., Making Race Matter: Bodies, Space & Identity. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alexander, J. C., & Smith, P. (1993). The discourse of American civil society: A new proposal for cultural studies. Theory and society, 22(2): 151-207.

Alexander, J.C. (2003). The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alter, J.S. (1992). The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ammerman, N.T. (2003). Religious Identities and Religious Institutions. In: M. Dillon, ed., Handbook of the Sociology of Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 207-224

Anderson, B. (2004) Time-stilled space-slowed: how boredom matters. Geoforum 35: 739–754.

Anderson, B. (2006). "Becoming and being hopeful: towards a theory of affect." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space.

Anderson, E. (2005). In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Anderson, E. (2011). “Updating the Outcome Gay Athletes, Straight Teams, and Coming Out in Educationally Based Sport Teams.” Gender & Society 25 (2): 250–68.

Andrew, A. (2004). Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences. New York/London: WW Norton and Co.

Armengol, J.M. & Carabi, A. (eds.). (2009). Debating Masculinity. Harriman, TN: Men’s Studies, Press.

Arnould, E.J., Price, L.L. & Otnes, C. (1999). Making Magic Consumption: A study of white-water river rafting. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 28(1): 33–68.

Bartleet, B. (2009). Behind the Baton: Exploring Autoethnographic Writing in a Musical Context. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 38: 713-733.

Bastian, B., Jetten, J. & Ferris, L. J. (2014). "Pain as Social Glue: Shared Pain Increases Cooperation." Psychological science. 25(11): 2079-2085

Bastian, B. Jetten, J. & Hornsey, M.J. (2014) "Gustatory pleasure and pain: The offset of acute physical pain enhances responsiveness to taste." Appetite 72(2): 150-155.

Bataille, G. (1962). Death and sensuality: A study of eroticism and the taboo. New York: Arno Press.

Bataille, G. (1977). Story of the Eye. New York: Urizen Books.

Bataille, G. (1989). The Tears of Eros. (Trans. P. Connor) San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Bataille, G. (1991). Accursed Share: Volume 1. Cambridge, MA: Zone Books. Consumption.

Bataille, G. (1991). The Accursed Share: Volumes 2 and 3: The History of Eroticism and Sovereignty. New York: Zone Books.

Bataille, G. (1992). Theory of Religion. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books.

Bataille, Georges (2001) *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Bataille, G. (2004). The unfinished system of nonknowledge. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota.

Bataille, G. (2012). Literature and evil. UK: Penguin.

Bataille, G. (2012). Eroticism. Translated by Mary Dalwood. UK: Penguin Classics.

Becker, H.S. (1998). Tricks of the Trade. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Benbow, H.M. (2003). "Ways in, Ways out: Theorizing the Kantian Body." Body & Society. 9: 57-72.

Berg, P. O., & Sevón, G. (2014). Food-branding places–A sensory perspective. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy. 10(4): 289-304.

Bergson, H. (2007 [1912]) Matter and Memory. New York: Cosimo Classics.

Bijsterveld, K. (2010). Acoustic cocooning: How the car became a place to unwind. The Senses and Society, 5(2): 189-211.

Binnie, J. (2004). The globalization of sexuality. Sage.

Bissell, D. (2009). Obdurate Pains, Transient Intensities: Affect and the Chronically Pained Body. Environment and Planning A 41: 911–928.

Black, L.W. (2009). Listening to the City: Difference, Identity, and Storytelling in Deliberative Groups. Journal of Public Deliberation, 5(1): Article 4. Available at: http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol5/iss1/art4.

Bly, R. (1990). Iron John: A Book about Men. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Bondi, L. (2005) 'Making connections and thinking through emotions: Between geography and psychotherapy', Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 30 (4), 433–448.

Bongiorno, M. E. (2013). "Too Brutal For NY." Associated Press: March 26.

Borden, I. (2001). Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body. Oxford & London: Berg.

Bordo, S. (1999). The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Bourdieu, P. (2000). Pascalian Meditations. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2001 [1998]). Masculine Domination. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L.J.D. (1992). An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). Outline of a Theory of Practice. (Trans. R. Nice). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). Distinction. (Trans. R. Nice). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). The Logic of Practice. (Trans. R. Nice). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1997). Pascalian Meditations. Cambridge: Polity Press: 141

Braunstein, R. (2012). Storytelling in Liberal Religious Advocacy. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 51(1): 11—127.

Breton, D.L. (2000). Playing symbolically with death in extreme sports. Body & Society, 6(1): 1–10.

Breton, D.L. (2004). The anthropology of adolescent risk-taking behaviors. Body & Society, 10(1):1–15.

Bridges, T.S. (2009). “Gender Capital and Male Bodybuilders.” Body & Society 15(1):83–107.

Brown, D. & Leledaki, A. (2010). “Eastern Movement Forms as Body-self Transforming Cultural Practices in the West: Towards a Sociological Perspective.” Cultural Sociology 4(1): 123–154.

Brown, D. (2006). “Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘Masculine Domination’ Thesis and the Gendered Body in Sport and Physical Culture.” Sociology of Sport Journal 23: 162–188.

Bull, M., Gilroy, P., Howes, D., & Kahn, D. (2006). Introducing sensory studies.The Senses and society, 1(1), 5-7.

Burstyn, V. (1999). The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Buse, G. J. (2006). “No Holds Barred Sport Fighting: A 10 Year Review of Mixed Martial Arts Competition.” British Journal of Sports Medicine 40: 169–72.

Cancian, F. M. (1990). Love in America: Gender and self-development. Cambridge University Press.

Capener, S.D. (1995) “Problems in the identity and philosophy of T’aegwondo and their historical causes.” Korea Journal. 35(4): 80–94.

Carrington, B. (2010). Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora. London: Sage.

Chaney, D. (1996). Lifestyles. London: Routledge.

Channon, A. (2012). “Western Men and Eastern Arts: The Significance of Eastern Martial Arts Disciplines.” Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science 1 (2–3): 111–27.

Channon, A. & Jennings, G. (2013). “The Rules of Engagement: Negotiating Painful and ‘Intimate’ Touch in Mixed-Sex Martial Arts.” Sociology of Sport Journal 30: 487–503.

Channon, A. (2013). "Enter the discourse: exploring the discursive roots of inclusivity in mixed-sex martial arts." Sport in Society 16(10): 1293-1308.

Channon, A. & Jennings, G. (2014). "Exploring embodiment through martial arts and combat sports: a review of empirical research." Sport in Society: 1-17.

Churchill, W. (1993). Indians ‘R’ Us: Culture and Genocide. New York: Between the Lines.

Cohen, E.B. (2006). Kime and the moving body: somatic codes in Japanese martial arts. Body & Society 12: 73 – 93.

Cohen, E. (2009). “Survival, an Israeli Ju Jutsu School of Martial Arts: Violence, Body, Practice and the National.” Ethnography 10 (2): 153–183.

Collins, R. (2009). Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Collins, R. (2015). "Visual Micro-Sociology and the Sociology of Flesh and Blood: Comment on Wacquant." Qualitative Sociology: 1-5.

Connell, R. W. (2000). The Men and the Boys. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Connell, R. W. (1995) 2005.Masculinities. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Connell, R. W. & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” Gender & Society 19 (6): 829–59.

Cook, I. (1997). “Participant Observation.” In: R. Flowerdew and D. Martin (eds.) Methods in Human Geography. Longman: 127-149.

Coontz, S. (2012). The Myth of Male Decline. The New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/30/opinion/sunday/the-myth-of-male-decline.html?_r=0. Accessed 02 March, 2013.

Connell, R.W. (2013). The men and the boys. John Wiley & Sons.

Covert, B. (2012a). Dear Hannah Rosin: I’m Doing Fine! Love, The Patriarchy. The Nation. http://www.thenation.com/blog/170293/dear-hanna-rosin-im-doing-fine-love-patriarchy#. Accessed 02 March, 2013.

Covert, B. (2012b). One Mancession Later: Are Women Really Victors in the New Economy? The Nation. Available at: http://www.thenation.com/article/166468/one-mancession-later-are-women-really victors-new-economy. [Accessed 20 September, 2012].

Crossley N. (2013). Habit and habitus. Body & Society 19(2&3): 136–161.

Crossley, N. (2006). “Mapping Reflexive Body Techniques and the Sociality of the Workout”. Body & Society. 11(1): 1-35.

Crossley, N. (2014). "Embodied Actors, Sociability and the Limits of Reflexivity." Body & Society 20: 106-112.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). Beyond Boredom and Anxiety. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Curry, T.J. (1991). “Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk about Competition and Women.” Sociology of Sport Journal 8 (2): 119–35.

Czarniawska, B. (1998). A Narrative Approach to Organization Studies. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage.

Day, K. (2005). “Being Feared: Masculinity and Race in Public Space.” Environment and Planning A 38: 569–586.

De Welde, Kristine. (2003). “Getting Physical: Subverting Gender through Self-Defense.” Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 32: 247–278.

DeGloma, T. (2010). Awakenings: Autobiography, Memory, and the Social Logic of Personal Discovery. Sociological Forum 25: 519-540.

Deleuze, G. (1971). Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty. (Trans. J. McNei). New York: George Braziller.

Deleuze, G. (1988). Spinoza: Practical Philosophy. (Trans. R. Hurley). City of Lights Publishers.

Deleuze, G. (1993) La Honte et la gloire: T.E. Lawrence, in Critique et clinique. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Denzin, N, and Y.S. Lincoln (2005) Handbook of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks, 3rd ed. CA: Sage.

Descartes, R. (2013). René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies. Cambridge University Press.

Desmond, M. (2007). On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters. London & New York: University of Chicago Press.

Dewsbury, J.D., Harrison, P., Rose, M. & Wylie, J. (2002). “Enacting Geographies.” Geoforum 33: 437-440

Douglas, M. (2003). Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo. Routledge.

Downey, G. (2005). Learning Capoeira: Lessons in cunning from an Afro-Brazilian art. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Downey, G. (2007). Producing pain: Techniques and technologies in no-holds-barred fighting. Social Studies of Science 37: 201–226.

Dreyfus, H. & Rabinow, P. (1982). Michel Foucault: Beyond Structualism and Hermeneutics. Brighton: Harvester.

Drury, S. B. (1994) Alexandre Kojeve: The Roots of Postmodern Politics. London: MacMillan

Durkheim, E. (1984 [1893]). The division of labor in society. New York: The Free Press.

Durkheim, E. (2001). The elementary forms of religious life. Oxford University Press.

Durkheim, E. (2008). The elementary forms of the religious life. Courier Corporation.

Dworkin, S.L., & Wachs, F.L. (2009). Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness. New York: New York University Press.

Eccleston, C. & Geert, C. (1999). "Pain demands attention: A cognitive–affective model of the interruptive function of pain." Psychological bulletin 125.3: 356.

Edensor, T. (2005). Industrial ruins: spaces, aesthetics, and materiality. Oxford: Berg.

Edwards, T. (2006). Cultures of Masculinity. Routledge: New York.

Ehrenreich, B. & Hochschild, A.R. (2004). Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy. New York: Holt.

Eliade, M. (1964). Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. (Trans. W. Trask). Bollingten Series. Vol. 76. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Elias, N. (1978). "The history of manners: the civilizing process Volume 1. New York: Pantheon.

Elias, N. (1986). 'The quest for excitement in leisure', in Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, Quest for Excitement. Oxford: Blackwell.

Elias, N. & Dunning, E. (1986). The Quest for Excitement. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.

Ellis, C. (2004). The Ethnographic I: A methodological novel about auto ethnography. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Evers, C. (2006) How to surf, Journal of Sport and Social Issues 30: 229–243.

Evers, C. (2009) 'The Point': surfing, geography and a sensual life of men and masculinity on the Gold Coast, Australia, Social & Cultural Geography 10: 893–908.

Ewick, P. & Silbey, S. (2003). "Narrating Social Structure: Stories of Resistance to Legal Authority." American Journal of Sociology 108 (6): 1328–72.

Ezzy, D. (1998). Theorizing Narrative Identity: Symbolic Interactionism and Hermeneutics. The Sociological Quarterly 39: 239-252.

Fletcher, R. (2008). "Living on the Edge: The Appeal of Risk Sports for the Professional Middle Class." Sociology of Sport Journal 25: 310–330.

Foucault, M. (1977). A preface to transgression. Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews: 29-52.

Foucault, M. (1980). "Truth and Power." In Power/Knowledge: Selected interview and other writings 1972-1977. In. C. Gordon (ed). (Trans. C. Gordon). New York: Pantheon Books: 109-133.

Foucault, M. (1997). "Society Must Be Defended." Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976. New York: Picador.

Fournier, V. (2002). Fleshing out gender: crafting gender identity on women's bodies, Body & Society 8(2): 55–77.

Frank, K. (2013). Plays Well in Groups: A Journey Through the World of Group Sex. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Freeman, M. (2007). “De La Hoya-Mayweather Will Separate Boxing from Thuggish UFC.” CBS Sportsline. www.cbssports.com/columns/story/10162545 [accessed May 2, 2007].

Gamson, W.A. (1992). Talking Politics. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gamson, W.A. (2001). How Storytelling Can Be Empowering. In Culture in Mind: Toward a Sociology of Culture and Cognition, in K. Cerulo (ed). New York: Routledge: 187-200

Garcia, R.S. and Malcolm, D. (2010). Decivilizing, civilizing or informalizing? The international development of Mixed Martial Arts, International Review of the Sociology of Sport 45(1): 39–58.

Gauthier, F. (2004). Rave and religion? A contemporary youth phenomenon as seen through the lens of religious studies. Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 33(3-4): 397-413.

Geertz, C. (1972). Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. In Daedalus: 101 (1): 1–37.

Geertz, C. (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic.

Gentry, C. (2002). No Holds Barred: The Story of Ultimate Fighting. Ramsbottom: Milo Books.

Giddens, A. (1987). Social Theory and Modern Sociology. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (2013). The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies. John Wiley & Sons.

Giulianotti, R. (2004). Risk and sport: an analysis of sociological theories and research agendas. Sociology of Sport Journal 26(4).

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2009 [1967]). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Transaction Publishers.

Groes-Green, C. (2010). "Orgies of the moment: Bataille's anthropology of transgression and the defiance of danger in post-socialist Mozambique." Anthropological Theory. 10(4): 385-407.

Goffman, E. (1974). Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. Harvard University Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of self in everyday life.

Green, K. (2011). “It Hurts So It Is Real: Sensing the Seduction of Mixed Martial Arts.” Social & Cultural Geography 12(4): 377–396.

Green, K. & Van Oort, M. (2013). We Wear No Pants: Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Super Bowl Commercials. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 38(3): 695-719

Green, K. & Hartmann, D. (2013). "Politics and Sports: Strange, Secret Bedfellows." In The Social Side of Politics, In. D. Hartmann & C. Uggen (eds). New York: Norton: 87–102

Green, K (2015). "Tales from the Mat: Narrating Masculinities in the Mixed Martial Arts Gym" Journal of Contemporary Ethnography.

Green, K. (forthcoming) Talking on the mat: mixed martial arts and the emergence of narrating men.

Gregg, M. and G.J. Seigworth (2010) "An Inventory of Shimmers." In The Affect Theory Reader. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 1-25

Grosz, E. (1994). Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Habermas, J. (2005). "The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille between Eroticism and General Economics." New German Critique No.33, Modernity and Postmodernity: 79-102.

Hannertz, U. (2003). "Being there…And there…and there! Ethnography 4, 2: 201-216.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. Feminist Studies 14(3): 575–599.

Haraway, D. (1989). Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science. Psychology Press.

Haraway, D. (1991). Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. Routledge: New York and London

Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. Visual studies, 17(1), 13-26.

Hartmann D. (2005). "Community". Berkshire Encyclopedia of World Sport. Edited by D.

Levinson and K. Christensen. Berkshire Publishing Group.

Hebdige, D. (1979). Subculture: the meaning of style. Routledge: London.

Heiskanen, B. (2012). The Urban Geography of Boxing: Race, Class, and Gender in the Ring. New York: Routledge.

Heller-Roazen, D. (2007). The Inner Touch: Archaeology of Sensation. New York: Zone Books.

Hernandez, D. (2010). The 'End of Men' Isn't the End of Racism. Colorlines. http://colorlines.com/archives/2010/06/the_end_of_men_isnt_the_end_of_racism.html. Accessed 15 April, 2013.

Hill C.P. (1991). Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge: Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge

Hirose, A. & Pih, K.K. (2010). "Men Who Strike and Men Who Submit: Hegemonic and Marginalized Masculinities in Mixed Martial Arts." Men and Masculinities 13 (2): 190-209.

Holloway, J. (2006). Enchanted spaces: the séance, affect, and geographies of religion, Annals of the Association of American Geographers 96: 182–187.

Hooks, B. (1994). Teaching to Trangress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York: Routledge.

Ibson, J. (2002). Picturing men: A century of male relationships in everyday American photography. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Irigaray, L. (1993). An ethics of sexual difference. Cornell University Press.

Jackson-Jacobs, C. (2013). "Constructing Physical Fights: An Interactionist Analysis of Violence among Affluent, Suburban Youth." Qualitative Sociology 36: 23-52

Jacobs, R.N. & Sobieraj, S. (2007). Narrative and Legitimacy: US Congressional Debates about the Nonprofit Sector. Sociological Theory 25: 1-25.

Jeffords, S. (1994). Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Jerolmack, C. (2013). The global pigeon. University of Chicago Press.

Jerolmack, C., & Khan, S. (2014). Talk is cheap ethnography and the attitudinal fallacy. Sociological Methods & Research, 0049124114523396.

Jones, D.E, ed, (2002). Combat, Ritual and Performance: Anthropology of the Martial Arts. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Jones, P. (2005). "Performing the city: a body and a bicycle take on Birmingham, UK. Social and cultural geography.

Jones, P. (2012) Sensory indiscipline and affect: a study of commuter cycling. Social & Cultural Geography 13(6): 645-658

Joseph, M. (2002). Against the romance of community. University of Minnesota Press.

Katz, J. (2008). Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions in doing evil. Basic Books.

Kellaway, L. (2014). "Lunch with the FT: Dana White." Financial Times. Available at http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/03ccce22-aebf-11e3-aaa6-00144feab7de.html#axzz30BePYJU0. Accessed January 20, 2015.

Kidder, J.L. (2012). Parkour, the affective appropriation of urban space, and the real/virtual dialectic. City & Community 11(3): 229–253.

Kimmel, M.S. (1996). Manhood in America: A Cultural History. New York: The Free Press

Kimmel, M.S. (2013). "Masculinity as Homophoba." In M.M. Gergen & S.N. Davis (eds). Toward a New Psychology of Gender: A Reader. Routledge.

Kitiarsa, P. (2005). "Lives of hunting dogs: Muai Thai and the politics of Thai masculinities. South East Asia Research 13(1): 57–90.

Klesse, C. (1999). "'Modern Primitivism': Non-Mainstream Body Modification and Racialized Representation." Body & Society 5 (2–3): 15–38.

Kleinman, S. and Copp, M. A. (1993) Emotions and Fieldwork. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kohler, J. (2007). Boxers: Seven Women, One Team (a social documentary). Chicago: Kohler Productions.

Kohn, T. (2003). The aikido body: expressions of group identities and self-discovery in martial arts training, in Dyck, N. and Archetti, E.P. (eds) Sport, Dance and Embodied Identities. Oxford: Berg: 139–155.

Kristeva, J. (1982). Powers of horror (Vol. 98). New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1984). Revolution in poetic language. Columbia University Press.

Kurtz, H. (2005). "Reflections on the iconography of environmental justice activism." Area, 37(1): 79-88.

Laberge, S. and Kay, J. (2002). 'Pierre Bourdieu's Sociocultural Theory and Sport Practice', in J. Maguire and K. Young (eds) Theory, Sport and Society. London: Elsevier Science.

Laliberté , N., and Schurr, C. (2015) 'The stickiness of emotions in the field: complicating feminist methodologies', Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography, published online first. Available at http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0966369X.2014.992117?src=recsys#.VLjHu8IWf9o

Lamont, M., & Swidler, A. (2014). Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. Qualitative sociology, 37(2), 153-171.

Laurendeau, J. (2008). " Gendered Risk Regimes": A Theoretical Consideration of Edgework and Gender. Sociology of Sport Journal 25(3).

Lawler, J. (2002). Punch! Why Women Participate in Violent Sports. Terre Haute, IN: Wish Publishing.

Le Breton, D. (2000). Playing symbolically with death in extreme sports. Body & Society 6(1): 1-11.

Leder, D. (1990). The absent body. University of Chicago Press.

Leknes, S. & Bastian, B. (2014). "The Benefits of Pain." Review of Philosophy and Psychology 5 (1): 57-70.

Levine, D. (2013). Aiki Waza Michi Shirube (Aikido Training as a Signpost to the Way): Selected Essays on Aikido and Nonviolent Interaction, 2nd enlarged edition. http://www.donlevine.com/uploads/1/1/3/8/11384462/aiki-waza.pdf.

Lingis, A. (1994a). Abuses. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lingis, A. (1994b). Foreign Bodies. Routledge: London.

Lingis, A. (2000). Dangerous Emotions. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Loeske, D. R. (2007). The Study of Identity as Cultural, Institutional, Organizational, and Personal Narratives: Theoretical and Empirical Integrations. The Sociological Quarterly 48: 661-668.

Longhofer, W., Golden, S. & Baiocchi, A. (2010). "A fresh look at sociology bestsellers." Contexts. 9.2: 18-25.

Lorimer, H. (2008). Cultural geography: non-representational conditions and concerns, Progress in Human Geography 32: 551–559.

Loseke, D.R. (2007). "The Study of Identity as Cultural, Institutional, Organizational, and Personal Narratives: Theoretical and Empirical Integrations." Sociological Quarterly 48 (4): 661–668.

Lyng, S. (1990). "Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk-taking." American Journal of Sociology 95(4): 851-860

Lyng, S. (2005). Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking. New York: Routledge.

MacIntyre, A. (1999). Dependent rational animals: Why human beings need the virtues. Volume 20. Chicago: Open Court.

Macpherson, H. (2010) Non-representational approaches to body – landscape relations, Geography Compass 4(1): 1–13.

Magnuson, E. (2008). "Rejecting the American Dream: Men Creating Alternative Life Goals." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 37 (3): 255–90.

Massumi, B. (1992). A user's guide to capitalism and schizophrenia: deviations from Deleuze and Guattari. MIT press.

Massumi, B. (2002). Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. Duke University Press, Durham.

Mauss, M.(1954). The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies. No. 378. WW Norton & Company.

May, R. and A. Buford. (2005) "Shadowboxing: A Review of Loïc Wacquant's Body & Soul." Symbolic Interaction 28: 429–431 (3).

McCaughey, M. (1997). Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-defense. New York: New York University Press.

McCaughey, M. (1998) "The fighting spirit: Women's self-defense training and the discourse of sexed embodiment." Gender & Society. 12 (3): 277-300.

McCaughey, M. (2008). The Caveman Mystique: Pop-Darwinism and the Debates over Sex, Violence, and Science. New York: Routledge.

McCormack, D. (2002). A paper with an interest in rhythm, Geoforum 33: 469–483.

McCormack, D. (2006). For the love of pipes and cables: a response to Deborah Thien. Area 2006 (38):3.

McCormack, M., & Anderson, E. (2014). The influence of declining homophobia on men's gender in the United States: An argument for the study of homohysteria. Sex Roles, 71(3-4), 109-120.

McDowell, L. (1999). Gender, Identity & Place: Under- standing Feminist Geographies. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McMillan, D.W. & Chavis, D.M. (1984). "Sense of community: A definition and theory." Journal of community psychology 14(1): 6-23.

McNay, L. (1999). "Gender, Habitus and the Field Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity." Theory, culture & society 16(1): 95-117.

McNeill, F. (2013). "MMA Passes Bill in N.Y. Committee." ESPN.com. http://espn.go.com/new-york/story/_/id/9000470/bill-legalize-mma-new-york-passes-state-senate-committee-cultural-affairs-tourism-parks-recreation [accessed February 28, 2013].

Mead, G.H. (2009). Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist. Vol. 1. University of Chicago press.

Melzack, R. and Wall, P.D. (1996). The Challenge of Pain. Hermandsworth: Penguin Books.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1996). Phenomenology of perception. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Merton, R.K. (2002). Science, Technology, and Society in Seventeenth Century England. Howard Fertig: New York.

Messerschmidt, J.W. (2000). Nine Lives: Adolescent Masculinities, the Body, and Violence. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Messner, M.A. (1990). When bodies are weapons: Masculinity and violence in sport. International review for the sociology of sport, 25(3): 203-220.

Messner, M. A. (1992). Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity. Boston: Beacon Press.

Messner, M.A. (1996). The relationship of friendship networks, sport experiences, and gender to express pain thresholds, Sociology of Sport Journal 13: 78–86.

Messner, M.A. (1997). The Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

Messner, M.A. (2000). White guy habitus in the classroom. Men and masculinities, 2(4): 457-469.

Middleton, J. (2010) Sense and the city: exploring the embodiment of geographies of urban walking, Social & Cultural Geography, 11: 575–596.

Mierzwinski, M., Philippa, V. & Malcolm, D. (2014). "Women's Experiences in the Mixed Martial Arts: A Quest for Excitement?" Sociology of Sport Journal 31 (1): 66–84.

Miller, M. (2008) Ultimate cash machines, Forbes.com, [Accessed on 5 May 2015].

Nagamine, S. (1976). The essence of Okinawan karate-do. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle.

Nancy, J.L. (2000). Being Singular Plural. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Nast, H. and Pile, S. (1998). Places Through the Body. New York and London: Routledge.

Nelson, C. E. (1999). On the Persistence of Unicorns: The Trade-off Between Content and Critical Thinking Revisited, in Pescosolido, B.A. & Aminzade, R. (Eds.), The Social Worlds of Higher Education: Handbook for Teaching in a New Century. Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press.

Newmahr, S. (2008) Becoming a sadomasochist: integrat- ing self and other in ethnographic analysis, Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 37: 619–644.

Newmahr, S. (2010) Rethinking kink: sadomasochism as serious leisure, Qualitative Sociology 33: 313–331. Published online 15 June.

Newmahr, S. (2011). Playing on the edge: sadomasochism, risk, and intimacy. Indiana University Press.

Null, G. (2008). Living in the Moment. New York: North Atlantic Books.

Oates, J. C. (2009). *On boxing*. Harper Collins.

O'Kasick, J. (2007). "Contenders or Pretenders?" The Bridge. http://www.bridgelandnews.org/1197 [accessed January 5, 2007].

O'Shea, A. (2002). Desiring Desire How Desire makes us Human, all too Human. Sociology. 36(4): 925-940.

Obrador-Pons, P. (2007). A haptic geography of the beach: naked bodies, vision and touch, Social & Cultural Geography 8: 123–141.

Orbach, S. (2009). Bodies. New York: Picador.

Pallasmaa, J. (2012). The eyes of the skin: architecture and the senses. John Wiley & Sons.

Paradis, E. (2010). "Bourdieu, Bodies and Boxing: The Multidimensionality of Bodily Capital." Paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Atlanta, GA, August.

Paradis, E. (2012). "Boxers, briefs or bras? Bodies, gender and change in the boxing gym." Body & Society 18.2: 82-109.

Paradis, E. (2014a). Sociology is a martial art. Body & Society, 20(2), 100-105.

Paradis, E. (2014b). “Skirting the Issue: Women Boxers, Liminality and Change.” In Fields of Physical Culture: Encounters with and beyond Pierre Bourdieu, In: L. Hunter, W. Smith & E. Emerald (Eds). London: Routledge.

Parrenas, R.S. (2008). The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization. New York: NYU.

Pascoe, C. J. (2007). Dude, You’re A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Paterson, M. (2009). Haptic geographies: ethnography, haptic knowledges and sensuous dispositions. Progress in Human Geography.

Peligro, D. (2003) The Gracie Way: An Illustrated History of the World’s Greatest Martial Arts Family. Montpelier, VT: Invisible Cities Press.

Philip, L. J. (1998). “Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to social research in human geography – an impossible mixture?” Environment and Planning A, 30: 261-276.

Pile, S. (2005). Real Cities: Cities, Modernity, Space and Phantasmagorias. London: Sage.

Pile, S. (2010). Emotions and affect in recent human geography, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 35: 5–21.

Pinder, D. (2001) Ghostly footsteps: voices, memories and walks in the city, Ecumene 8: 1–19.

Pitts, V. (2003) In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pitts-Taylor, V. (2015). A Feminist Carnal Sociology?: Embodiment in Sociology, Feminism, and Naturalized Philosophy. Qualitative Sociology, 38(1), 19-25.

Plimpton, George. (1979). Shadow Box.

Plotz, D. (1999). Fight clubbed: ultimate fighting ought to be a great American sport. Instead, cable companies, Sen. John McCain, and a squeamish public are killing it, Slate, 17 Nov.

Polletta, F. (1998). ‘It was like a fever...’: Narrative and Identity in Social Protest. Social Problems 45: 137-59.

Polletta, F., Ching, P., Chen, B., Gardner, B.G & Motes, A. (2011). “The Sociology of Storytelling.” Annual Review of Sociology 37:109–30.

Popitz, H. (1992) Phänomene der macht. Mohr Siebeck.

Porter, J. (2008). Mixed Martial Arts Makes Its Way to High School. The New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/18/sports/othersports/18mma.html [accessed November 18, 2008].

Power, M. (2011). Foucault and sociology. Annual Review of Sociology, 37, 35-56.

Probyn, E. (2000). Sporting bodies: dynamics of shame and pride, Body & Society 6(1): 13–28.

Probyn, E. (2005). Blush: Faces of shame. U of Minnesota Press.

Proust, M. (2013 [1922]) Swann's way: In search of lost time. Vol. 1. Yale University Press, 2013.

Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. Journal of democracy 6(1): 65-78.

Quinn, B. (2002). "Sexual Harassment and Masculinity: The Power and Meaning of 'Girl Watching.'" Gender & Society 16 (3): 386–402.

Rentschler, C.A. (1999). Women's self-defense: Physical education for everyday life. Women's Studies Quarterly 1/2:152-61.

Ridgeway, C.L. (2009). "Framed before We Know It: How Gender Shapes Social Relations." Gender & Society 23:145–60.

Robinson, V. (2004). "Taking Risks: Identity, Masculinities and Rock Climbing." In Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference, edited by Belinda Wheaton. London: Routledge: 113–30

Robinson, V. (2008). Everyday masculinities and extreme sport: Male identity and rock climbing. Berg.

Roitman, J. (2013). Anti-Crisis. Durham: Duke

Rose, G. (2001). Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials. London: Sage.

Rose, G. (2012). Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials. Sage.

Rosin, H. (2010). The End of Men. The Atlantic Monthly. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-end-of-men/308135/ [Accessed on 20 Sept 2012]

Rousseau, J.J. & France, P. (1980). Reveries of the Solitary Walker. Penguin Classics.

Sabo, D. (1994). Pigskins, Patriarchy, and Pain, in Sex, violence & power in sports: Rethinking masculinity. In: M.A. Messner, and D.F. Sabo (Eds). Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press

Sabo, D. & Veliz, P. (2008). Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America. East Meadow, NY: Women's Sports Foundation.

Said, E. (1977). Orientalism. London: Penguin.

Sánchez G. & Malcolm, D. (2010) “Decivilizing, Civilizing or Informalizing? The International Development of Mixed Martial Arts.” International Review for the Sociology of Sport 45 (1): 39–58.

Sánchez G.R. & Spencer, D. (2013). Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports. London: Anthem Press.

Sanders, C.R. (2005) “The Sweet (Social) Science.” Symbolic Interaction 28: 437–440 (3).

Sato, S. (2013). “The sportification of judo: Global convergence and evolution.” Journal of Global History. 8(2): 299–317.

Saville, S.J. (2008). Playing with fear: parkour and the mobility of emotion, Social & Cultural Geography 9: 891 – 914.

Scarry, E. (1985). The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scheper-Hughes, N. & Lock, M. (1987). The mindful body: a prolegomenon to future work in medical anthropology, Medical Anthropology Quarterly 1(1): 6–41.

Schudson, M. (1989). “How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols.” Theory and Society 18:153–80.

Sebastian, A. & Simpson, P. (2011). The limits of the body: boundaries, capacities, thresholds, Social & Cultural Geography, 12:04, 331-338

Sewell Jr., William H. (1999). “The Concept(s) of Culture.” In Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture, In. V.E. Bonnell, L.A. Hunt & R. Biernacki (Eds). Berkeley: University of California Press: 35–62.

Shapiro, L. (2008). Mixed martial arts set to sully network television, Washington Post, 18 March.

Sheridan, S. (2007). A Fighter’s Heart: One Man’s Journey through the World of Fighting. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Sheridan, S. (2008). A Fighter's Heart: One man's journey through the world of fighting. Grove Press.

Shilling, C. (2002 [1993]). The Body and Social Theory. London: Sage Publications.

Shilling, C. & Mellor, P.A. (2010). Sociology and the Problem of Eroticism. Sociology 44(3): 435-452.

Silverman, A. (1998). John McCain breaks up a fight, The Phoenix New Times, 12 Feb.

Simmel, G. (1903). Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben, Dresden: Petermann [The Metropolis and Mental Life]

Simmel, G. (1976). ”The Stranger” The Sociology of Georg Simmel. New York: Free Press.

Simpson, M. (2008) Fight Club. How did the world's straightest sport become so gay? We head to Montreal's Ultimate Fighting Championship to find out, Out Magazine, 9 July.

Sinha, M. (1995). Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Smith, B., & Sparkes, A.C. (2008). Contrasting perspectives on narrating selves and identities: An invitation to dialogue. Qualitative research, 8(1), 5-35.

Smith, B. & Sparkes, A.C., (2008). Contrasting perspectives on narrating selves and identities: an invitation to dialogue. Qualitative Research 8: 5-35.

Smith, D.E. (1988) The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, D.E. (1990). The Conceptual Practices of Power. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, R. T. (2014). Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling. Duke University Press.

Smith, R.T. (2008). Pain in the act: the meaning of pain among professional wrestlers, Qualitative Sociology 36: 129 – 148.

Smith, T. (2000). 'Bataille's boys': postmodernity, Fascists and football fans. The British journal of sociology 51(3): 443-460.

Solomon-Godeau, A. (1997). Male trouble: A crisis in representation. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Somers, M.R. (1994). "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach." Theory & Society 23:605–649.

Somers, M.R. & Gibson, G.D. (1994). Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other': Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity. In Social Theory and the Politics of Identity, In. C. Calhoun (Eds). Cambridge (MA): Blackwell: 37-99.

Sparkes, A.C., & Smith, B. (2002). "Sport, spinal cord injury, embodied masculinities, and the dilemmas of narrative identity." Men and masculinities 4.3: 258-285.

Sparkes, A. C. (2004). Bodies, narratives, selves, and autobiography the example of Lance Armstrong. Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 28(4), 397-428.

Spencer, D.C. (2009). Habit (us), body techniques and body callusing: an ethnography of mixed martial arts, Body & Society 15(4): 119–143.

Spencer, D. C. (2011). Ultimate Fighting and Embodiment: Violence, Gender and Mixed Martial Arts. London: Routledge.

Spencer, D. C. (2012). 'Narratives of Despair and Loss: Pain, Injury and Masculinity in the Sport of Mixed Martial Arts'. Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise 4(1): 117-137.

Spencer, D.C. (2014). “Sensing Violence: An Ethnography of Mixed Martial Arts.” Ethnography 15: 232–254.

Spinney, J. (2006). A place of sense: a kinaesthetic ethnography of cyclists on Mont Ventoux, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 24: 709–732.

Stoekl, A. (2007). Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Post sustainability. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Stroud, A. (2012). “Good Guys with Guns: Hegemonic Masculinity and Concealed Handguns.” Gender & Society 26:216–238.

Sudnow, D. (2001). Ways of the Hand: A Rewritten Account. London: MIT Press.

Sugden, J. (1987). “The Exploitation of Disadvantage: The Occupational Subculture of the Boxer.” In Sport, Leisure and Social Relations, In. J. Horne, D. Jary, & A. Tomlinson (Eds). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 187–209.

Sweetman, P. (2003). “Twenty-first Century Disease? Habitual Reflexivity or the Reflexive Habitus.” Sociological Review 51 (4): 528–48.

Swidler, A. 1986. “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies.” American Sociological Review 51:273–286.

Swidler, A. (2013). Talk of love: How culture matters. University of Chicago Press.

Thompson, D. (2009). Its Not Just a Recession: It’s a Mancession! The Atlantic. http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2009/07/its-not-just-a-recession-its-a-mancession/20991/. [Accessed 28 January, 2015].

Thorpe, H. (2011). Snowboarding Bodies in Theory and Practice. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Thrift, N. (2000). Still life in the nearly present time: the object of nature, Body & Society 6: 34–57.

Thrift, N. (2004). “Performance and Performativity” in A Companion to Cultural Geography. In: Duncan, Johnson & Schein (Eds). Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

Thrift, N. (2005). Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect. London: Routledge.

Thrift, N. (2007). Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect. New York & London: Routledge.

Tilly, C. (2002). Stories, Identities, and Political Change. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Trimbur, L. (2013). Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym. Princeton University Press.

Tuan, Y. (1977) Space and Place. London: Arnold. UFC.com (2009) TUF draws more young men than the MLB playoffs, 8 Oct.

Turner, B.S. & Wainwright, S.P. (2003). "Corps de ballet: The case of the injured ballet dancer." Sociology of Health & Illness 25.4 (2003): 269-288.

Turner, B.S. (2008). 3rd edition. The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory. London: SAGE

UFC.com (2009). TUF draws more young men than the MLB playoffs, 8 Oct.

Urie, Heath. 2008. "'Fight Club' busted at Fairview High School" Denver News. Retrieved March 13, 2008 (http://www.dailycamera.com/ci_13138561).

Vaccaro, C.A., Schrock, D.P & McCabe, J.M. (2011). "Managing Emotional Manhood: Fighting and Fostering Fear in Mixed Martial Arts." Social Psychology Quarterly 74 (4): 414–37.

Vaisey, S. (2010). What people want: Rethinking poverty, culture, and educational attainment. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 629(1), 75-101.

Van Bottenburg, M. & Heilbron, J. (2006). "De-sportization of Fighting Contests: The Origins and Dynamics of No Holds Barred Events and the Theory of Sportization." International Review for the Sociology of Sport 41:259–282.

Vargas, J.C. (2006). Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Varney, G. (2010). Fighting for respect: MMA's struggle for acceptance and how the Muhammad Ali act would give it a sporting chance, West Virginia Law Review 112(1): 269 – 305.

Venkatesh, S.A. (2008). Gang leader for a day: A rogue sociologist takes to the streets. Penguin.

Von Uexküll, J., & Winthrop-Young, G. (2010). A foray into the worlds of animals and humans: With a theory of meaning. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wachter, P. (2008) Gladiator, New York Times, 23 March. Sensing the seduction of mixed martial arts: 395

Wacquant, L. (1992). 'The Social Logic of Boxing in Black Chicago: Towards a Sociology of Pugilism'. Sociology of Sport Journal 9: 221–254.

Wacquant, L. (1995a). 'The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel About Their Trade'. Theory & Society 24 (4): 489–535. ·

Wacquant, L. (1995b). 'Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labor among Professional Boxers'. Body & Society 1(1): 65–94.

Wacquant, L. (1998). 'The Prizefighter's Three Bodies'. Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology 63(3): 325–352. ·

Wacquant, L.J.D. (2003). Body and Soul—Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wacquant, L. (2004). Body and Soul—Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wacquant, L.J.D. (2009) “Habitus as Topic and Tool: Reflections on becoming a prizefighter.” In W. Shaffir, A. Puddephatt & S. Kleinknecht (eds.). Ethnographies Revisited, New York: Routledge: 137–151.

Wacquant, L. (2011). “Habitus as Topic and Tool: Reflections on Becoming a Prizefighter.” Qualitative Research in Psychology 8 (1): 81–92.

Wacquant, L.J.D. (2014) "For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood." Qualitative Sociology: 1-11.

Waitt, G. (2008). ‘Killing waves’: surfing, space and gender, Social & Cultural Geography 9: 75–94. Wall Street Journal (2009) Mixed martial arts: perfectly packaged violence, 8 Aug.

Wanshel, E. (2008). Mixed martial arts is gay at a Kendall bar, repressed homosexuality can bloody your nose, Miami New Times, 10 July.

Weaving, C. (2014). “Cage Fighting Like a Girl: Exploring Gender Constructions in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).” Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 41 (1): 129–42.

Weber, M. (1978). Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology. University of California Press.

Weber, M. (1978). Economy and Society. In: G. Roth C. Wittich (Eds). University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Weber, M. (2002). The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: and other writings. Penguin.

Wenner, L.A. & Jackson, S. (2009). “Sport, Beer, and Gender in Promotional Culture: On the Dynamics of a Holy Trinity.” In Sport, Beer, and Gender in Promotional Culture and Contemporary Social Life, L.A. Wenner & S. Jackson (Eds.). New York: Peter Lang 1–33.

Wheaton, B. (2004). “‘New Lads’? Competing Masculinities in the Windsurfing Culture.” In Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference, B. Wheaton (Eds.), London: Routledge: 131–154.

Wheaton, B. (2013). The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sports. London: Routledge.

Williams, G.H. (2000). Knowledgeable Narratives. Anthropology & Medicine 7: 35-40.

Wilson, J. & Stapleton, K. (2010). “The Big Story about Small Stories: Narratives of Crime and Terrorism.” Journal of Sociolinguistics 14 (3): 287–312.

Witz, A. (2000) ‘Whose body matters? Feminist sociology and the corporeal turn in sociology and feminism’, Body and Society, 6 (2), 1–24.

Wolf, D. (1996). Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork. Westview.

Woodward, K. (2008). “Hanging Out and Hanging About: Insider/Outsider Research in the Sport of Boxing” Ethnography 9 (4): 536–561.

Wuthnow, R. (2007). Cognition and Religion. Sociology of Religion 68: 341-360.

Wylie, J. (2005). A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path. Institute of British Geographers 30:234-247.

Xygalatas, D., et al. (2013) "Extreme rituals promote prosociality." Psychological science.

Yokoyama, K. (2009) Modern Gladiators: Why Is Total Fighting Becoming Popular in Japan – a Socio Historical Analysis of Violent Combat Sports in Japan with Particular Reference to the Theory of the Civilizing Process. Saarbrucken, Germany: VDM Verlag.