



Fighting with race: complex solidarities & constrained sameness

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ABSTRACT

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

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Introduction

Brexit was 'intimately bound up with questions of race' and framed as a vote to reject immigration (Virdee & McGeever 2018) to preserve the 'future' of a supposedly racially and culturally homogeneous 'white British' nation (see Kaufman 2017). These discourses serve to fracture potential solidarities through wrongly asserting that sealed off racial groups cannot share space without conflict, which ignores the social and historical contingency of racial categories and pays no attention to how communities have historically expanded the borders of inclusion to create broad coalitions (see Gordon 2016 for example). In the context of such resurgent ethno nationalisms in Europe, North America and further afield, there is an urgent need to reaffirm the contingency and instability of racial categories to create conditions for 'complex and versatile solidarities that refuse the strategic divisions that race would impose' (Wolfe 2016, 272).

Responding to this climate, this paper uses ethnographic data to demonstrate how racial categories are subject to contestation within the Fighters Class at Origins Combat Gym (pseudo-anonymised), a Polish owned Muay

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