

The Body in Pain and Pleasure

*An Ethnography
of Mixed Martial Arts*

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Umeå University, Umeå 2015

Ethnological Studies 60
Department of Culture and Media Studies
Umeå University

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Legislation (Act 1960:729)
ISBN: 978-91-7601-325-0
ISSN: 1103-6516
Electronic version provided at <http://umu.diva-portal.org/>
Printed by: Print & Media Umeå
Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden 2015

For Ann Enström and our daughters Aja, Elza, Paulina, and Olivia forever

CONTENTS

THE PAPERS IN THE THESIS	III
FOREWORD	V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
ABSTRACT	IX
1. SCOPE AND AIMS	1
1.1 <i>Background</i>	1
1.2 <i>Aims and Research Questions</i>	3
1.3 <i>Fieldwork</i>	4
1.4 <i>The Fields and the Localities of Mixed Martial Arts</i>	6
1.5 <i>Background of Martial Arts, Combat Sports, and MMA</i>	7
1.6 <i>Combat Sports</i>	9
1.7 <i>Previous Research on Combat Sports and MMA</i>	10
1.8 <i>The Papers</i>	11
2. METHODOLOGY	15
2.1 <i>Participant Observation</i>	16
2.2 <i>Autoethnography</i>	19
2.3 <i>Reflexivity</i>	20
2.4 <i>Performance Ethnography</i>	20
2.5 <i>Concluding Methodological Reflections</i>	22
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	25
3.1 <i>Flow</i>	25
3.2 <i>Performativity and Performance of Actions</i>	28
3.3 <i>Violence Through the Act of Performance</i>	30
3.4 <i>Phenomenology: MMA and the Gap in a Violent Theory</i>	32
3.5 <i>Materiality</i>	34
3.6 <i>The Masculine Turn: Across Combat Arts and Gender Borders</i>	36
4. MOMENTS IN THE GYM	39
5. CONCLUSIONS	49
APPENDIX 1: Mixed Martial Arts Terminology Index	53
APPENDIX 2: Comments on the Research Literature	65
REFERENCES	67
<i>Interviews and Observations</i>	67
<i>Literature</i>	67
<i>Internet and Blogs</i>	75
<i>Film, Media, Television and Videos</i>	75
<i>Newspaper Articles</i>	75
Sammanfattning	77

THE PAPERS IN THE THESIS

Paper I Just Be Natural With Your Body: An Autoethnography of Violence and Pain in Mixed Martial Arts. Submitted to *International Journal of Martial Arts* (Accepted with minor revisions). Authors: Magnus Stenius (1st Author) and Ronald Dziwenka (2nd Author). 2015.

Paper II Actors of Violence: Staging the Arena in Mixed Martial Arts. *International Journal of Nordic Theatre Studies* 23(1): 86-97, Nordic Theatre Scholars, Stockholm (Published). Author: Magnus Stenius. 2011.

Paper III Hybrid Masculinity in Mixed Martial Arts: Gender, Homosociality and Homoeroticism. (Resubmitted to *Men & Masculinities*, SAGE Publications). Author: Magnus Stenius. 2015.

Paper IV The Legacy of Pankration: Mixed Martial Arts and The Posthuman Revival of a Fighting Culture (Published; version 2014 (2013 online), *Journal of Combat Sports and Martial Arts Science* 13(05): 40-57, International Combat Martial Arts Union Association ICMAUA. 2014. Author Magnus Stenius 2013, 2014.

FOREWORD

On 21 November 1993, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) held its first prize-fighting event in Denver, Colorado, called *UFC 1: The Beginning*. The event was arranged by Brazilian jiu-jitsu instructor Rorion Gracie, whose son Royce emerged victorious from the eight-man-strong tournament (Downey, 2007, 201). The champion had to win three matches in a single night to take home the 50,000-dollar prize.

While the promoters publicized the first UFC events as a no rules, “anything goes”, affair, there were in fact exceptions: no hitting below the belt and no fish hooking, i.e. face gouging (Spencer, 2012). The combatants came from a wide variety of martial arts backgrounds, including boxing, judo, karate, Thai boxing, and even professional Greco-Roman and sumo wrestling. Each bout continued until one contestant was knocked unconscious, the referee stopped the match, a fighter signaled surrender by tapping out, or the fighter’s corner threw in the towel.

Critics reacted harshly to the event’s sensational campaign, its imbalanced match-ups, and its liberal rules. Traditional martial arts enthusiasts were more stunned by the outcome (Bolelli 2008; Downey, 2007, 202). Following the victory of the smallest fighter in the tournament, who went on to win two of the next four tournaments before finally fighting to a draw with American Ken Shamrock in the *UFC 5* finale, the paradigm of martial arts fighting shifted dramatically. Royce Gracie had defeated bigger, stronger challengers using grappling techniques alone. He had not thrown a single blow against any opponent.

At the same time *UFC 1* took place, I was nineteen years old, somewhere out on the Baltic Sea, doing my mandatory military service in the Swedish Marines. A week after the event, one of the soldiers brought aboard a bootleg copy from the United States featuring *UFC 1*. The next evening, all of us marines watched the fights in the ship’s dining hall. Some of us were both shocked and disgusted by what we saw. Some were thrilled, while others were just staring at the television, some amused and some excited.

What was so striking was that some of us did not know how to react at all. Personally, I felt a sort of sickness by watching the event, and since that day I have kept it in my memories. What really happened and what went on, and why did this sport have such an impact on me?

The following text in this thesis is a discussion of these thoughts. I shall try to give both a closer picture and an overview of a phenomenon that has hit the popular cultural market, humans fighting humans for sport.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a lot of people I want to say thanks to because without their support this thesis would not have been written. To the staff and graduate students at the UCGS research school, thank you for your helpful comments and opinions on my papers. Thanks also to my colleagues at the Department of Culture and Media Studies. Dr. Alon Lischinsky for helping out with the articles from the beginning. Ann Enström for everything, especially for reading my manuscripts and providing such positive feedback. My supervisor, Professor Marianne Liliequist, for her guidance in the last phases of the thesis, words are not enough, and to Associate Professor Håkan Berglund-Lake for his positive inspiration and “ethno wisdom”, a huge thanks. Ann-Louis Silver, thank you.

Professor Bo Nilsson worked with me in the first years, and without him I could not have reached this far, thank you. Professor emeritus Billy Ehn, for not giving up on me ever, and for passing on his extensive “ethnofield” knowledge, thanks always. Associate professor Roger Jacobsson, thanks for the moral support. Kristina Hellman for assistance, Dr. Torkel Molin for good vibes, and Lena Danielsson and Gunilla Öhman for helping out whenever needed. Dr. Peter Åström, final seminar reader, thanks. I also want to thank my colleagues at the seminar of ethnology who have helped out with constructive criticism. Karin Ljuslinder and Kerstin Engström, thanks.

A great extra thanks goes out to Professor Orin Starn for his kindness, providing me a workspace and a desk at the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University in the US and for reading my texts and always supporting me. Associate Professor Kevin Sobel-Read, at University of Newcastle, Australia, for reading my articles and the introductory part to the thesis, and for letting me stay in his home with his family in Raleigh in the US when he worked at the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University, thanks.

I would also like to thank the Wennergren Center, the Wallenberg Foundation, the Ax:son Johnson Foundation, and Umeå University for travel grants and FAS for providing financial support to allow me to conduct my studies in the US as a visiting guest scholar in the fall of 2013 and in the spring of 2014.

Also thanks to Professor Naomi Sheman for her help on the project with good ideas and comments on the draft in the earlier stage of my doctoral studies. And to my first anthropological teacher at Stockholm University, Professor emeritus Ulf Hannerz who helped out with writing a recommendation letter to the US Embassy for coming to the US. I also want to thank Inger Enström for babysitting and helping out during my research time. Fredrik and Julia Färjhage-Enström, thanks. For taking care of me in my childhood, Marie Birgander, my foster mother, and to Stig-Åke Skoglund, the closest to any father figure who supported me as a young boy, and thanks to Patrik, Anna, Alexander, Cecilia. Thanks to my friends, Ari Allansson and Rasmus Sellberg.

Finally, a great thanks to the staff at the *One Gym* in Hong Kong, *Renyi Gym* in Umeå, Sweden, *BJJ* in Umeå, *X-Ring MMA* Umeå, *Hilti Gym* in Stockholm, *MO Gym* in Macau, *Daido Juku* in Japan, *X-Gym* in Rio de Janeiro, *Tactical MMA and Kung Fu* in Durham, and the *UFC* in Las Vegas, and to all of the fighters. To UFC veteran fighter Tor Troeng for his generosity, being so open about his MMA career, thanks. To martial arts legends Andy Hug, Mike Bernardo, and especially to the Swedish fighter Martin Holm, one of the greatest fighters ever, whose martial arts skills and performances and competitions in combat sports deserve great recognition. For these achievements, his memory lives on forever, RIP.

I am also of course in great debt to all of my informants, training partners, and participants who freely took part in my observations and without whom this study would not have been possible. Thus, in the meetings that have crossed the borders of academia and the everyday life and world of the gym, formal structures have been done away with in this experimental autoethnography. I have immersed myself among fighters – both amateurs and professionals – participating in all the phases of the MMA from strenuous preparation, to drills, to sparring, to fighting. Thank you for your patience and all the hours you’ve spent with me in the gyms, training with me, and teaching me your knowledge of the MMA practice. Thanks to all the battling and struggling bodies that I trained with throughout this “autophenomenological” ethnography. To the friends in the mixed martial arts community, Tor (who was the one who invited me to the world of MMA), Andreas, Alex, Chris, David, Jonas, Jessica, Linda, Nico, Thomas, Louis, Alyssa, Ahmed, Mohammed, and Ali, thanks for all your instruction, help, and encouragement. Lastly, to Edmond Lin Yiu-fai in Hong Kong, a one-time student of legendary Bruce Lee’s teacher, Yip Man, extra thanks for teaching me the ropes.

Umeå, Berghem, September 2015
Magnus Stenius

ABSTRACT

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a sport on the rise within the field of martial arts in which competitors fight in a cage and utilize full-contact movements using their fists, elbows, and knees as well as kicks, other strikes, and submission techniques to defeat their opponents. MMA has become a modern social movement in combat sports that has become globalized in a short time and is the fastest growing sport in the world.

MMA encompasses disciplines from various martial arts and Olympic sports such as boxing, kickboxing, karate, kempo, jiu-jitsu, Muay Thai, tae kwon do, wrestling, sambo, judo, etc. The rounds are five minutes in length and there are typically three rounds in a contest, unless it is a championship fight in which case the contest lasts five rounds.

The aim of this study is to analyze the bodily constructions and productions within the MMA culture and especially the constructed human violence associated with the sport. Based on autoethnographic participation in three Swedish MMA clubs, as well as shorter fieldwork case studies conducted in Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Brazil, and the US, this thesis investigates the interrelationship between MMA, excitement, sensationalism, and the spectacular physical violence that stains the participants' bodies.

Concepts taken from performance ethnography are applied to an analysis of what is reconstructed bodily. This is followed by an analysis that attempts to outline what body-violence means and how this understanding of the informants' bodies, as well as of the researcher's body-knowledge, reconstructs the definitions of MMA.

A phenomenological approach to the concept of fighting is also included in relation to the MMA landscape. Thus, I present how the body learns the cultural enactments in fighting and how these forces shape the fighters' gender, habitus, and way of resisting the discourse of critical opinions on MMA practice.

Moreover, in trying to grasp the inner sense of MMA, I argue that the physical phenomenon of MMA is dependent on an intersubjective engagement and on the control of one's inner coordination, which teaches a fighter how to deal with power, pain, suffering, aggression, and adrenaline flows.

Keywords: abject, adrenaline, anthropology, athletes, autoethnography, body, combat arts, culture, desire, embodied, enculturation, ethnology, fieldwork, field-making, flow, fighting, full-contact, gender, harm, homosociality, intercultural, interobject, intersubjectivity, martial arts, materiality, masculinity, MMA, method, pain, personal, performance, performativity, phenomenology, pleasure, posthuman, postmodern, power, ritual, risk-taking, rush, self-reflexive, sportive, sport, stained, struggle, suffering, thrill, *UFC*, violence.

1. SCOPE AND AIMS

1.1 Background

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a fairly new and popular form of fighting that has recently eclipsed boxing and wrestling as the favored combat sport among young men (Lafayette and Hibberd 2006). MMA is an extreme form of competitive fighting in which two men (or women) – wearing only shorts (the men) and small gloves – fight in a cage or a ring with the goal of knocking out, choking out, or otherwise forcing their opponent to submit (Cheever 2009). The sport began in November of 1993 as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), a single elimination, tournament-style competition with very few rules featuring martial arts athletes from a variety of martial arts backgrounds.

The UFC was launched by Rorion Gracie, its creator, who wanted to prove that his family’s special branch of Brazilian jiu-jitsu was superior to all other martial arts forms, and the tournament showed that “free-fighting” was no longer dependent only on hitting, kicking, and striking blows. The new combat martial art form revealed that, in addition to standing fights, ground techniques such as wrestling and grappling from martial arts styles as judo, jiu-jitsu, and shooto had an important effect on full-contact fighting (Buse 2006).

However, due to sanctions and pressure from politicians, who condemned the sport as “barbaric and non-human”, the sport went underground in the late 1990s (Syken 2005). In 2001, the UFC came back and created a new profile by adding rules to protect the fighters and having them sanctioned by the Nevada State Athletic Commission¹; MMA competitions were then allowed in 34 states in the US. Since then, MMA has been fuelled by televised cable programs on TV, including the UFC’s reality show *The Ultimate Fighter*, which rapidly spread the combat sport all over the world.

MMA has been featured on the cover of the world’s leading sports magazine, *Sports Illustrated* (28 May 2007), and MMA events are now appearing on prime-time television on a variety of channels in Sweden as well (TV 4 Sport, Eurosport, TV 10, FOX Sports, TV 4 Play, and many more). Access to MMA has been made easier lately due to different Internet channels streaming events live via pay-per-view options (Seungmo et al. 2008).

Fighters have become celebrities, stars in a violent genre, and they are presented as combat warriors appearing on reality shows and scripted programs and various media news segments (Cheever 2009). Thus, MMA athletes are modern superstars, existing today, for instance, in video games for Xbox, Wii, Sony PlayStation, and more and

¹ The Nevada State Athletic Commission (located in Las Vegas) governs and regulates combat sports in the US and provides fighters with clearance to compete in contests. It also operates an anti-doping program and regularly interviews UFC fighters, turns up in different gyms without notifying the athletes, etc.

featured by big company names such as EA-Sports, and this has created a new UFC gaming platform.

In Sweden, MMA athletes have struggled for two decades to achieve a legitimate breakthrough for MMA as a sport and a culture. It is only just recently that MMA athletes have been able to start talking about a situation in which they are associated with the normal standards of sportsmen and sportswomen.

In Sweden, MMA fighting culminated in the event at the Ericsson Globe Arena on 14 April 2012, when the UFC organization entered the arena and broadcast the matches live worldwide. The main card of the fights that night was between Swedish fighter Alexander “The Mauler” Gustafsson and his Brazilian opponent Thiago Silva. The Globe was sold out in only a few hours following the release of tickets. Some 18,400 spectators attended the event, which was one of the UFC’s best successes outside the US. In 2013, the UFC came back in a new event in Stockholm, with the main event featuring Illir “The Sledgehammer” Latifit vs. Gegard Moussasi because Alexander “The Mauler” Gustafsson had to pull out of the event citing an injury. The event indicated that MMA as a combat sport is on the verge of becoming mainstream and that the MMA style of full-contact fighting is no longer an underground phenomenon or a subculture.

Nowadays, MMA attracts many practitioners from a variety of martial arts backgrounds. People across the world with basic training in martial arts are increasingly signing up to join MMA clubs for further training. Many martial athletes take part in MMA training because the sport is closer to “real” fighting, thus testing fighters’ skills as much as possible (Sánchez García and Malcolm, 2010; Mayeda and Ching 2008). MMA displays the “extreme” and sensational aspects of free-fighting/unarmed combat styles and has therefore served as a vicarious thrill for the fans of violent sports (Cheever 2009).

Roughness and violence in sports enhance the enjoyment in MMA, and the actions taken in battle serve to produce aggressiveness – the more violence there is and the rougher it is, the better. What components attract people to such activities and why? Downhill skiing and “martial arts-games” are similar in that they are thrilling to watch, so is there really a difference? Sports allow for a wide range of very physical activities to challenge the pre-understanding of extreme activities, including the risks of participating in such activities (Guttman 2004).

Furthermore, because MMA fighters are highly specialized in their combat skills, MMA is performed by highly trained athletes matched by weight classes and skills (cf. Jetton et al. 2013). Spectators might find it highly enjoyable because of these factors (see Seungmo et al. 2008). Characters that are similar to oneself are more attractive and can be potent role models (Strasburger and Wilson 2002). Hence, there is a risk of prejudice here because the idea of men consuming ferocious combat sports is often supposed to be a natural part of many men’s interest.

The nature of the sport implicitly creates a close bond between members of a male-dominated arena in which men can show off their stamina, power, and bodily strength (Jones 2002, 41-3). However, women are more active on the MMA scene today than

they have ever been, and they participate actively in fights and have to follow the same rules.

MMA fighting, a violent sport that displays an extreme form of athletic aggression along with mutual respect in staged arenas, engages people in exciting and violent activities. Extreme sensation seekers might turn violent fighting into their own practice of risk-taking to fulfill their martial arts dreams (e.g. Ek and Hultkrantz 2009). MMA therefore continues to provoke debate about what the human being is allowed to do with her/his own body and to others' bodies/minds when they are interacting together in physical combat with those who have the same interest in fighting (see Kjölle 2013 on consent).

1.2 Aims and Research Questions

This thesis is a sociocultural analysis of MMA fighters' and my own experiences in the MMA venue. It investigates how elite martial arts athletes are formed and how they develop their bodies through participating in full-contact training. I will focus on how experiencing full-contact fighting myself has affected my bodily re-formation in learning the regimen of MMA fighting. Related to this autoethnographic discussion of martial arts practices is the notion of bodily constructions in full-contact fighting and the way fighters relate to the culture of fighting, martial arts practices, and, in particular, the sport of MMA in itself and the violence associated with the discipline.²

The aim of the study is therefore twofold. First, because I intend to examine how fighters define violence and at the same time analyze how they construct their bodies, I investigate how bodies are sites of violence and how definitions of violence are performed, gendered, and materialized. Second, I study how my own bodily re-formation affects my understanding of the physical actions of fighting and whether the researcher's body can be used as a valuable tool to identify MMA's culture of knowledge and meaning.

As part of this search, and in bringing notions of knowledge together from my ethnographic fieldwork, I will try to outline how to define this violence in combat fighting. I will also show how bodies are affected by their cultural origin in terms of being labeled, and how brutal, sportive³, dramatic, spectacular or sensational excitement can bring us knowledge of how MMA fighting is perceived from an emic point of view.

² The typological definition of violence from WHO reads: "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (www.who.int).

³ Allen Guttman (2004) has attempted to explain the process of an athletic phenomenon becoming a sport through the sportification system where sportiveness contains different steps.

Through the work on this thesis, I took the opportunity to study the fighters when undergoing intensive training, and I analyzed what these bodily forces and powers mean and produce in MMA practice when they are in a combat situation. I concentrate in this thesis on how the directly observable ethnographic quest to understand MMA can provide important awareness about aspects of MMA culture and the ways in which the embedded researcher can contribute to and collaborate with his or her field. Thus, this (auto)ethnographic fieldwork offers an opportunity to study how fighters (my fellow informants) construct their bodies in the elite world of combat sports where martial arts practice and competition are centered on participating in the UFC.

By approaching my informants' bodily expeditions (the journey of changing a habitual process over time) in fighting while reflecting on my own embodied full-contact trip within the MMA field, I want to emphasize that a bodily context like my fieldwork has to be acknowledged from a cultural perspective. Hence, I point to fighters as key actors; they are not only my informants but they also operate as actors of violent conduct in a broader sense. Specifically, I aim to target how these constructed bodies are sites of violent stereotypes that are engaged in a combat sport that is extremely questioned and, as such, how my informants resist such unacceptance.

Given this cultural interpretation of the violent body, the implementation of my corporeal acquaintance with MMA fighting suits this thesis's target in terms of grasping and utilizing what bodily violence consists of rather than portraying bodily violence from a non-bodily standpoint. Drawing on this carnal experience of the researcher's attempt to obtain first-hand knowledge of his/her field's "cultural conglomeration" (McGee and Warms 2012, 534), the main target of this thesis is to answer the following research questions:

How is violence perceived in MMA practice by its practitioners?

What kind of bodily culture is reproduced through competing in MMA?

How can the researcher's embodied participation in MMA sparring be useful in understanding the sport?

What is MMA fighting saying about the way fighters form and re-form their bodily use of violence?

Does fighters' practice of MMA engender a particular reproduction of masculine attitudes?

1.3 Fieldwork

When starting this project, I sought to obtain my empirical data solely in the practice of the martial arts gym. Studying MMA for almost three years has made this aim even more important. As I have come to understand that MMA practice is primarily a shaping and sharpening of the body within the gym, I have been strongly focused on spending my time within these gyms. Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (2001) has discussed how the researcher must make use of his/her field and track down its informants by getting close to those localities where they can be found and observing the essence of

the empirical findings where they are taking place. (In the next chapter, *Methodology*, I give more information about the fieldwork and my use of different methods.)

Research fields are never static, and they are continually modified by what the participants in the study choose to do. As Ulf Hannerz notes (2001), fields and localities during ethnographic work are more or less translocal; they are constantly on the move, develop rapidly, and transpose from one place to another space (ibid, 26). It is therefore essential for the participant observer to follow in these tracks (Behar 1996). This is due to the fact that informants' bodies change, and the bodily progression of my own embodied re-formation in relation to the field and understanding of violent practices has provided me and them (the participants in my study) with new places and new bodies of meaning, intent, and knowledge.

Following this experience of doing fieldwork, I had to reconsider the fact that the interviews were mostly conducted at the gyms. Even though some of my interviews were carried out at my office, I felt that the researcher's own "field" is not an appropriate place in which to get well-grounded knowledge. Because the informants are more comfortable in their own habitat, they are more likely to respond and give comprehensive and spontaneous replies about their essential practices in MMA situations.

Given this background in the relationship to the fieldwork sites and settings, the localities of my study have thus included three major fieldsites that I have observed intensively over a long period of time (Arvidsson 2001, 101). These three gyms are located in Umeå, Sweden, and are very near to my home, and this gave me easy access to the training areas of MMA. I have also conducted semi-interviews – with questions prepared in advance at my office – centering on the lives in the gym, training, and motivation for being an MMA athlete at an elite level. Additionally, I have had spontaneous conversations during sparring session and during and after training with the participants in the study.

In addition to these gyms, I have also conducted translocal studies in MMA gyms at three places in Southeast Asia. I spent two months in 2008 in Hong Kong (China) training with and interviewing practitioners of MMA, Thai boxing, and kung fu at One Gym under the supervision of Pierre Ingrassia. In 2007, I spent time in Macau following two mixed martial artists from Europe (one from Italy and one from Greece) who were there to compete in an MMA event at the Casino Golden Dragon. In Japan in 2011, I had the opportunity to conduct two weeks of "action based" ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Gupta & Ferguson 1998) interviewing MMA practitioners in a gym in Osaka.

The fieldwork continued in the US where I followed two UFC fighters preparing for upcoming fights in the autumn of 2013 (October and November) at Durham and Raleigh in North Carolina.

I also had a short visit to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for 12 days in February 2014, training at the X Gym and interviewing five practitioners. The gym sessions were focused on Brazilian jiu-jitsu, so-called "grappling" with submission techniques. The reason for this orientation towards wrestling on the ground with my informants is the

enormous amount of ground control required in MMA and that makes up a major part of the drills at the gym training sessions.

Collecting and producing ethnographic data was central to this study because my goal was to highlight the informants' motivation and reason for engaging in full-contact fighting. Alongside the informants'/participants practices in the MMA environment, my bodily experiences of embodying fighting are analyzed and refined in contemplation of what it means to be a representative of a specific culture and a social group that engages in full-contact fights. A field site that is viewed as an extreme platform of combat arts practice must be understood from an emic point of view (Gupta and Ferguson 1998, 23-5). The ethnographer studies his/her locality of the field site and tries to grasp an understanding and produce knowledge about the phenomenon, nuancing the cultures of those people residing in the site and giving perspectives, insights, and significant thoughts about the findings in the subculture.

1.4 The Fields and the Localities of MMA

When starting this project, I aimed to find my data solely in the practice of martial arts gyms. Studying MMA for almost three years has made this aim even more important. As I have come to understand that MMA practice is primarily a shaping and sharpening of the body in the location of the gyms, I have been strongly focused on spending my time within these gyms so as to obtain an understanding of this phenomenological and habitual process.

Fields are never static and they are continually modified by what the participants in the study choose to do, and therefore it has been a very important process for me to internalize the fields and to collect the material from an inside perspective, and to be a part of this process. This is due to the fact that informants' bodies change, and the bodily progression of my own embodied re-formation in relation to the field and of understanding violent practices has provided me and the participants with new places and new bodies of meaning and knowledge.

Following this experience of doing fieldwork, I had to reconsider the fact that the interviews were mostly conducted at the gyms. I felt that the researcher's own "field" is not an appropriate place in which to get well-grounded information. Because the informants are more comfortable in their own habitat, they are more likely to respond and give comprehensive and spontaneous replies about their essential practices in MMA situations.

Insightful experiences throughout the years have presented me with many social situations in which I have felt included, excluded, other, and deviant. While in the field, searching for knowledge of cultural science in order to gain an embodied sense of the world of martial arts and, in particular, MMA fighting culture, I have come to share informants' places and spaces of bodily production in MMA combat. But do they really need me to perform research about MMA? In regards to the field's dichotomy, the struggle of a sport being too violent or not, perhaps then yes, I might be useful to some

degree. Discussions on “going native” or becoming a spokesperson are very common in the ethnographic field, and this has been no different for me in the MMA gyms (see Kostera 2006, 57).

MMA can also be said to share a culture from another angle, where the gym’s places and spaces are meeting me, on their own terms, and not the opposite (see Appadurai 1996). I am the observer that has witnessed the development of MMA over the last five or six years and has visited the MMA localities searching for answers to the research questions proposed earlier. The direction and perspective from which these empirical answers are obtained can differ in many cases (see Meneley and Young 2005). There is no solid fixed ground that allows the observers to look upon the ethnographic site of the gyms (in my case). The gyms are the spaces in this thesis that hold the empirical material within their walls (cf. Øygarden 2000, 213-4). I claim that this embedded method is one of the main paradigms in autoethnographical work (see Ehn 2011). This means that it has been vital for me to be able to utilize my own body in the field’s realm, to be there, in real-time, picking up the lived and ongoing experience.

During my many gym visits, I wrote notes, took visual recordings with a video camera, took pictures with my smartphone, and conducted interviews with my audio-recorder at hand. A major aspect of these embodied field studies is the development that I as a researcher have gone through and the progress that I have witnessed among my informants at the training camps and around the gyms. Being a part of these different training sessions in several places instead of just one has given me an enormous amount of important data. Instead of just centering around one gym and one spot, which would run the risk of the study becoming a bit static, my ethnographical site works have instead given this thesis numerous dynamic contributions as I have been able to scrutinize the feedback from many different athletes, places, spaces, countries, and, ultimately, different people from different cultures and backgrounds (see Gupta and Ferguson 1998, 161).

1.5 Background of Martial Arts, Combat Sports, and MMA

Martial arts have been practiced for many thousands of years. Born out of unarmed combat on the battlefield, martial arts have become an extremely popular form of sport. Each region of the world has its own historical martial art, with its own primary style and principle goals of intent and meaning (Kochar and Mann 2005, 444). One of the first sports in the ancient Olympics was the ancient Greek form of martial arts, *pankration*, which was introduced in 649 BC (Poliakoff 1995). The name of the sport came from a combination of two Greek words, *pan*, meaning “all,” and *kratos*, connoting strength and power (ibid: 2005: 444). Described as a mixture of Hellenic boxing and wrestling, pankration is considered to be the origin of MMA (Buse 2006, 62; Gautier 2009). Some of the first ever pictures of martial arts come from the time of Alexander the Great around 325 BC (Kochar, and Mann 2005). Over the past hundred years, masters of multiple martial arts have realized that no one martial art is superior

and that a fusion of techniques from all styles makes the student more adaptable and successful (Krauss and Aita 2002). Since 2001, interest in UFC in the US has grown dramatically, attracting a wide variety of martial artists to events staged all over the world (Seungmo, et al, 2008). The story of MMA, from its initial perception as a violent aberration to its current state of worldwide popularity means it must be taken seriously as a new corporeal science and strategy for success in the arena.

Free-fighting, or full-contact fighting, is not a new phenomenon in martial arts practice and it has a rich historical background, e.g. pankration, and combat sports have developed over time to suit modern tastes (Poliakoff 1995). Fighters across the globe have been involved in the process of actively preparing their bodies through competitive training. Seen from the point of view of traditional fighting arts, we can see that the globalization of MMA and the development of combat sports are a manifestation of modernity and have come to signify a new era in martial combat (Mayeda and Ching 2008, 138-9).

Still, free-fighting arts⁴, as they are being re-born and modernized, are certainly regarded as brutal and harsh when they pop up in different societies from time to time. The phenomenon is of course not new in either historical or modern terms. It is interesting to follow the history of martial arts and how they have developed and diverged into shifting branches and specialties and to understand why martial arts are seen as so controversial and unlike any other sport⁵ or as an anti-sport (ibid, 231). When MMA started in 1993 it had very few rules, and this was similar to its historical background with few rules and no taboos (Bolelli 2008). Because the competition was originally constructed to determine the most effective martial art or fighting style in an open fighting event, rules were minimized and competitors had very little to worry about in terms of rule infractions (Mayeda and Ching 2008, 145).

The most notable features of the early years that helped define MMA as barbaric were the allowable head butts, hair pulling, and groin shots. For some time, there were neither weight classes nor time limits, and there were no standardized equipment requests, including no requirement for gloves. Not much was prohibited, and this made the early fights of the UFC very similar to authentic street fighting (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010). Eventually this changed when the organizers brought in a referee, weight classes, and time limits in order to provide MMA with more suitable sportive conditions and to meet the requirements of the US athletic commission's restrictions and laws on martial arts competitions (Bolelli 2008). The Nevada State Athletic Commission in the US is now the governing body of the MMA rules. The "sportification" process is instrumental in its limitations and restrictions and is built on ethical and moral principles to protect participants from being injured. Pain is a key

⁴ The free-fighting arts are those considered to be built on ancient combat and the full-contact attack against the enemy (see Poliakoff's (1995) discussions on combat arts as a way of attacking and defending).

⁵ I refer to the long process of Ultimate Fighting (MMA) becoming a sport as opposed to being more of a spectacle.

topic here; humans have always been both attracted to and afraid of pain, and the fascination with pain has been widely studied (see Frykman et. al. 1998).

1.6 Combat Sports

It is important to understand MMA fighting in a context that is suited to a wider perspective when trying to grasp and place the practice in relation to its background. Thus it is vital to understand the historical paths that have led to the creation of MMA. Because MMA practice has become an emergent branch in the combat culture of fighting, and has become a widely popular practice in such a short amount of time, MMA fighting needs to be outlined and compared to the concept of culture in martial arts. Daniel Bolelli explains in his book *On the Warriors Path, Philosophy, Fighting, and Martial Arts Mythology* (2008) that MMA is a sport that is based on full-contact sparring. Regular practice, Bolelli explains, unfolds under a more philosophical side of practice (Bolelli 2008, 130). This is something that even ethnologist Ann-Helen Sund (2007, 190) touches on in her study of ultimate fighting in Finland.

According to Bolelli, combat sports are defined in terms of “what will happen when two contenders meet up and fight” (ibid). Because the target in MMA is explicitly based on a physical level of impact, such as intending to knock the opponent out or to strangle the opponent into submission, MMA fighting is very close to reality and to “authentic fighting”, mirroring mock fighting or street fighting (Gentry 2005; 2011). What Bolelli adds to this is how MMA fighting came to radically change martial arts’ history of progression through its open and harsh style of fighting (Bolelli 2008).

Martial athletes were amazed by the new martial art form that hit the world’s martial arts culture back in 1993 (Poliakoff 1995; Arvanitis 2003). There were now safety rules, and many martial arts fighters compared ultimate fighting/MMA with an ancient gladiator game (ibid Arvanitis 2003). The somewhat new discipline of MMA – or “shoot-fighting” (from the Japanese, meaning to dive, throw down, get down) as it was often called at the beginning of combat sports’ epoch – was acknowledged worldwide as a dominant physical confrontation between martial artists (Jones 2002, 229). Earlier “combat sports”, such as the Japanese kumite, Muay Thai in the world-famous Lumpini Stadium, kickboxing, savate, vale tudo, sambo, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu were swift-moving, exhilarating events that, in their heated clashes and their extreme and intense thrusts, burned away illusions and pretenses on the trainee’s part. Combat sports illustrated graphically how well or how poorly the lessons of the dojo had been learned (Jones 2002, 228-29).

The up and upcoming MMA turned the tables on what was often an illicit activity and allowed the pedigree of martial arts’ history to be seen in a different way via the UFC live events (see Jones 2002, 228). The groundbreaking shift in combat training resulted in MMA athletes becoming full-time professionals and gaining semi-contracted warrior positions in different martial arts gyms (so-called “camps”, where elite fighters train, eat, and sleep together).

In his ethnographic encounter with boxers, ethnologist Geir Angell Øygarden (2000) recognized this shift when he joined a boxing gym and performed his own ethnography among the fighters. Øygarden calls this process “full-contact sociology”, which fits well with the element of direct contact with informants. He was a link between informants and he maintained persistence and effort by joining in the daily routines of the gym (ibid 2000). Body culture thus demonstrates both the danger and the illumination inherent in the human martial experience. Combat sports form a global community that has been integrated on many levels, and perhaps this will guide the MMA sport in a direction in which more participants can take an active part in its symbolic expression of war, and perhaps the realm of the gym can provide insights into the body and the powerful actions it is capable of (Jones 2002, 27).

1.7 Previous Research on Combat Sports and MMA

Previous research on MMA and combat sports and full-contact sports has challenged the idea of traditional martial arts being subject to a “single-minded process” (see Klens-Bigham 2002, 230-1). In short, these sports can be seen as the unity of spirit and technique.⁶ Today, martial arts, and in particular MMA, are considered to be a collaboration of mind, soul, and body, and hence spiritual sounds, such as the mental *kiai* (where fighters use breathing to attain inner power) and *katas*, used by earlier fighters, no longer belong in the cage (see Sund 2007).

Dale C. Spencer (2009; 2012), Kyle Green (2013), and Greg Downey (2007) have all studied MMA from a sociological perspective. One thing they have in common is how they base their idea of MMA on being subject to a “real fighting culture”. These researchers show how the violence and perceived realness of the cultural model of MMA provide a platform for extracting empirical data (see also Sund’s discussion on *realness* in “Ultimate Fighting” 2007, 199). Basically, Sund stresses that the violence in MMA belongs to the sports culture.

Surely, MMA features the “classic” brawl, which is why earlier research back in 1993 recommended that the UFC be banned (e.g. Hopton 2007; Ching and Mayeda 2008). Hence the featured “organized rage” in the cage from the early days in the mid-90s of the UFC showed a somewhat ambivalent take on structured violence in sports culture, which is something that is omnipresent in any combat sport such as boxing, kempo, sambo, kickboxing, Muay Thai, K1 or vale tudo, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu (Øygarden 2000).

Today, research on MMA and, in particular, combat sports science has turned against the idea of pure violence and is now conducted in terms of sportive denotations, and this suggests the presence of ambivalent discourses concerning violent

⁶ Allen Guttman (2004), when writing about sport, unifies and juxtaposes the secular process of sports in order to understand the risks associated with violent behavior in sportive terms. This is something that needs to be problematized further in MMA.

actions (see Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010). This opinion on violence emphasizes the relentless physical and mental training and an appreciation of the ultimate effect of such an activity on the inner state of the individual that is reminiscent of the approach of the MMA sport.

Ethnologist Mats Hellspång wrote in his study of athleticism and boxing that sports are the bridge between rules of play, seriousness, and the game, but also signify a difference from “real life” (Hellspång 1982, 210-12). According to Hellspång in his analysis of Swedish folkloristic culture in sports, athleticism is mostly an affair for young healthy men to build their prestige and to gain and maintain their reputation (Hellspång 2000, 259-60; Stejskal 1954). Sund draws on this in her ethnological study of “Finn-fights” in Finland, where young men still try to show their stamina and skills in combat and fighting, following certain rules (Sund 2007, 193).

Ethnologist Jesper Fundberg, in his fieldwork among young boys playing soccer, also emphasizes the rules and laws implicitly hiding in sports culture and how they teach young boys to understand athletics as negotiating and taking responsibility for their bodies and their health while following a socially typical masculine growth process (see Fundberg 2003). Jonas Frykman (1998) adds to these cultural ideas of males doing macho things, reinstating their masculinity by absorbing danger and pain, taking risks, pushing limits, and constantly challenging themselves.

1.8 The Papers

The present thesis is built on four peer-reviewed papers.

In paper one, *Just Be Natural with Your Body, An Autoethnography of Violence and Pain in Mixed Martial Arts*, I and Ronald Dziwenka investigate how the researcher’s own bodily understanding of the phenomenon of MMA can be studied from an inner perspective. The aim is to examine bodily experiences in MMA.

Because MMA is a sport under debate in Sweden (see Ingvar 2009; 2015; Yelverton 2014) and in general elsewhere (see, for example, Kochar and Mann, 2005), and because outsiders claim that the practitioners are violent and brutal in their fighting performances, we wanted to gain “inside” knowledge to map the sportive experience of the violent phenomenon of MMA combat.

Thus, we analyzed how the researcher’s practice and his experience of extreme force and violence compares with the informants’ understanding of forceful actions. Is MMA combat essentially just violence that is displayed in front of us? Or can we report that something else is going on? How can the violence and MMA be understood if the researcher is embedded in the fighting milieu?

Firstly, the article examines what bodily experiences mean in an autoethnographic fieldwork in a Swedish MMA club from the researcher’s point of view. In what way is the autoethnographic method related to the researcher’s bodily experiences of pain and euphoria?

Secondly, the article describes and analyses what these experiences mean in relation to an understanding of MMA as a social and cultural phenomenon, especially in terms of the violence associated with the sport. Can the researcher's own bodily experiences explain how the violence functions within MMA?

With the help of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and Phillip Zarrilli's intersubjective approach to the concept of the lived body itself, the article argues that fighters construct their bodies and minds in a way that allows them to cope with and adjust to the brute force. By using an inner discipline, fighters manage and script the pain they experience; likewise, the researcher benefits by having important knowledge about how to deal with full-contact fighting.

The aim of paper two, *Actors of Violence, Staging the Arena in Mixed Martial Arts*, is to examine how MMA fighters perform a theatrical drama, making their bodies sites of excitement and the use of violence and, in relation to the audience, establish an embodied contract of staged "fighting performances" between each other (Berghaus 2005, 133-5). By carrying out this spectacular performance of body-violence, fighters transcend their bodies into a kind of fictive "warrior" figure, a fighting athlete.

In studying the dramaturgy of MMA fighting, the analytical approaches are concerned with role-play and the sensationalistic spectacle that takes place in the cage/octagon (Schneider 2006; Schechner 2013). The investigation is focused on the theatrical space, the cage in which the actions of the MMA phenomenon occur, as a context in which the fighters' bodies become artistic figures via the use of disciplined self-control and actor-oriented staged performances.⁷

I argue that MMA fighters can be regarded as "actors of violence" because they are in an extreme situation of combat fighting where they are dramatizing their bodies. This is juxtaposed with an aspect of the notion of performativity, namely that fighters' bodies are involved in a partnership in which violence is transferred in a reciprocal manner (Schneider 2006, 145).

Fighting is thus a landscape of ambivalent positions where full-contact combat is carried out in a way that entails brutal behavior coexisting with the sportive aspects of the martial arts game. It is therefore important to analyze how these in-between positions are handled, managed, and scripted while fighters are performing dramatic bodily scenery and actions live on stage. In this way it will be possible to understand the seemingly chaotic violence that takes place in the ring during the bouts (cf. Sauter 2006 and Schneider 2005).

In paper three, *Hybrid Masculinity in Mixed Martial Arts: Gender, Homosociality and Homoeroticism*, I scrutinize the inner world of how gender, sex, and, in particular, masculinity unfold within the training sites of MMA. I argue that men's structured and

⁷ I mean that the octagon (the eight-sided space where bouts take place) in MMA produces special incitements that cultivate MMA's unique styles and thereby serves as a platform for sensationalism, drama, and artistry to enhance the bout.

reproduced violence created through sports should be revisited and seen from a new angle.

The aim of the paper is to explore how practitioners of MMA react to the masculine and homosocial representation of full-contact fighting (see, for example, Alm and Yu 2014). Because MMA is a controversial martial art under debate in the media (McCabe 2011 et. al.), which often describes ultimate fighting as a brutal sport that consists of nothing but substantial malicious violence, fighters themselves are often keen to speak about this characterization, claiming something else: that MMA fighting is built on discipline and executed by highly motivated and trained athletes (see also Alm 2012).

To only use the concept of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell 2001; 2005) to probe the field of men engaged in combat does not do the subject justice in the long run. There have to be more ways of analyzing the empirical material and data obtained from the different fieldwork sites.

The translocal fields of MMA in which I have taken part show that the MMA gym and the fighting men who are active there are closely and emotionally intimate with one another, nurturing and feeding each other's bodies. MMA is basically a world of homosocial intersections where a man needs another man to become victorious in the cage.

I thus claim, although many do not agree with me,⁸ that the MMA industry is a place in which men need to guard their gender status. This is done through an apparatus that connects their macho-culture with a *homoerotic stance* that I call "hybrid masculinity" and through which I outline a way to interpret the androcentric world of MMA fighting (Messner and Sabo 1993).

Thus, hybrid masculinity is a "softer" way of describing how men can be intimate and in need of other men when competing, fighting, and winning and how they can conquer them without being subject to homosexuality. This is the homoerotic and homosocial setting in which the masculine identity is broken into several parts (see Sund 2007).

In paper four, *In Legacy of Pankration: Mixed Martial Arts and the Posthuman Revival of a Fighting Culture*, I try to describe how combat sports have evolved throughout history by looking at how the legacy of cultural subgenres has affected combat sports.

It is crucial to understand that the MMA fighting systems are comparable to the various pankratons and other historical systems that have been developed by warriors (see Poliakoff 1995, 91-7). Looking back on earlier types of combat and martial arts (see Øygarden 2000; Bolelli 2008 and Poliakoff 1995), there has been a desire to acknowledge the revolutionary part of the violent body and to demonstrate the mastery and discipline required for one to compete at an elite level in the specific martial art. In particular, David Jones emphasizes this evolutionary and revolutionary perspective in his anthropology of martial arts disciplines (see Jones 2002).

⁸ For instance, some informants and promoters of MMA organizations, events, and competitions.

In the article, I look at how performativity theory can be used with informants' descriptions of MMA's reality to reveal significant ideologies about power, violence, and modern culture. The fact that MMA fighting is a force that can be stretched and interpreted to fit into practically any philosophy makes it tremendously adaptable (see Fundberg 2003, 19).

The demeanor of combat sports, including codes, honor, and performative martial acts within the competitive arenas (as within MMA) have recently shifted from previously focusing on Asian standards to being focused more on a Western model.⁹ The literature of the fighting arts has deep roots in Asia, with its traditions, ceremonies and a wide field of study spreading from the oriental area, and this has led to ethnocentrism towards Asia and Asian fighters (Hirose, Akihiko and Kei-Ho Pih 2010). Therefore, I stress the importance of getting a broader understanding of the ideas, ideologies, and values surrounding the background of the combat arts.

In focusing on the earlier notions of pankration and the informants' perspectives on martial arts and on MMA, I try to show how mankind has taken incremental steps in the combat sports by learning the drills and the routines from ancient warriors until now. In this article, I followed the mapping of my participants' comprehensive knowledge of full-contact fighting arts.

⁹ Despite their significance, momentum and elation are particularly underdeveloped aspects within the anthropology of sports. Connected to this progression is the desire to reach one universal standard of martial arts competition as seen in earlier historical overviews of the combat arts (Spencer 2013, 125).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken from September 2009 to November 2014. I was first invited to visit Renyi MMA gym in Umeå, Sweden, in the fall of 2009. I attended training sessions there for a whole year, starting with taking photos, videos, recording interviews with informants, and watching from beside the gym mat. I came every Tuesday and Thursday at 18.30 and left at 22.30.

After one year of watching the fighters, I decided to step forward and take active part in the training and practicing MMA myself. I started to train with a new-beginners class every Tuesday at 18.30 in the fall of 2010. Then in the fall of 2011 after a year of training I started to practice in the advanced group every Tuesday from 20.30 until 22.30.

I then continued training in the US for three months in Raleigh, North Carolina, close to Durham, at the MMA center there. I trained every Monday with the advanced group for three hours a day for one semester. Additionally, I also had two weeks of extensive training in Japan in the summer of 2011 practicing in Osaka with five other practitioners.

I conducted five months of translocal fieldwork in Japan, Hong Kong, and Macau, carrying out interviews in three MMA clubs. In Hong Kong, I stayed for two months training at One Gym three days a week sparring and competing with eight different fighters. Lastly I spent two weeks in 2014 in Rio de Janeiro training in both Brazilian jiu-jitsu and grappling with four other practitioners. All together I have trained for almost three years with twenty-five of the participants in this study.

The fieldwork thus consisted of translocal fieldwork in five different countries (Sweden, Japan, the US, Brazil, and Hong Kong). Instead of just focusing on one location. This way of collecting information from several gyms around the globe follows in the footsteps of MMA.

I conducted around thirty interviews with professional and semi-professional MMA fighters during training/pre-training and after matches. In addition to this, I used visual Internet ethnography (Pink 2009). I followed in particular two major Swedish Internet sites, Kimura.se and MMANYTT.se. These sites contain a huge amount of information on MMA fighting in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe and on the UFC in the US. By following these sites, I was able to read about and analyze what the informants had written, their replies in the homepage's guestbook, comments from other website visitors, and all sorts of articles about MMA fighting.

I also watched all episodes of the UFC on the Internet, from episode 1 (UFC 1 in 1993) to the current episode UFC 190 (ending with Ronda Rousey vs. Beth Correia). These YouTube channels contain more than 600 hours of fighting videos. These movies were important because I was able to be updated on MMA competitions. I likewise gathered video data from Nordic and Swedish competitions in MMA fighting.

They cover 14 events with approximately 50 hours of fighting. Listed events include Superior Challenge (Sweden) 1–7 and Battle of Bothnia 1–3 held in Umeå, Sweden.

I also went to the event at the Globe Arena on 14 April 2012 when the UFC came to Sweden. I observed all matches, especially the main event of the evening between Alexander “The Mauler” Gustafsson and Thiago Silva from Brazil.¹⁰

Starting in January 2009, I collected all articles written on MMA in Swedish newspapers, listened to debates on TV, and followed online blogs about MMA in relation to all aspects of the sport.

I saved all interview data on my computer and divided them into categories. Observations on bodily techniques were entered into a special folder with topics such as masculinity and violence. Reviewing my notes, I tried to avoid any answers based on preconceived notions in order to give an accurate description of the gym. The interviews were later analyzed using thematic coding.

2.1 Participant Observation

My fieldwork consisted of participant observation filtered through an autoethnographical method. The autoethnographical method emphasizes the researcher’s own subjective knowledge in relationship to his or her informants’ world. In this way, the researcher explores his or her experiences of the field. This methodology is qualitative and in this case was mainly based on my own bodily reflection while taking part in MMA practice and training.

The bodily descriptions and analyses in this study are based both on participant observation and on visual ethnography by watching Internet videos on MMA fighting and reading MMA blogs (Pink 2009). Like Geir Angell Øygarden (2009) in his study of boxers I also used my body in full-contact practice as my main working tool.

When I began exercising at the local MMA center, I was totally fatigued, but when I ended the fieldwork almost a year ago (at the beginning of June 2013), I could keep up with the advanced class at my local gym. During my investigations in the field, I gained more than 26 lbs. as a result of my intense and strenuous MMA exercise. I also increased my cardiovascular stamina immensely by training hard. This was a small but important measure of what MMA training has done to my body. My body is thus a representation of MMA as a gymnastic and chaotic form of viciousness, which I used to keep my body in excellent shape (e.g. Wacquant 2004, 120)

My methodology was carried out in real time because I am my body, and I collected data using my corporeal understanding. I was left to trusting my body’s ability to grasp and comprehend valuable knowledge, insights, and perceptions at the gyms (Øygarden 2000).

¹⁰ I also attended the UFC events of Latifi vs. Mousassi 2013 in Globen, Stockholm and Gustafsson vs. Johnson in Tele 2 Arena in 2014, Stockholm. In these two last events I did not take part backstage, just as a spectator.

The choice to undertake a qualitative study was made because the narratives and voices of fighters in MMA are best heard from an insider's perspective. MMA fighting is still lacking in terms of its participants' stories being told, thus I wanted to explore the meanings and implications of fighting culture as it is experienced and interpreted by people who have first-hand knowledge of MMA. This made interviews conducted with participants during fieldwork the obvious choice of method.

The empirical study focused on male fighters who are part of an MMA club and who train and take part in MMA fighting contests. This empirical method is a tool that is used to expose the complexity that sets MMA fighters in their own habitat and relates to their character.

Furthermore, the ethnographic method was suitable for the specific aims of my study because the relationships between the field sites and their inhabitants are closely mixed and bodily connected. Using my self and encountering the field with my own body became important while communicating with the study's participants. Thus, in this thesis I will concentrate on how to gain the most knowledgeable meaning from the available resources, which in this case were generated from the autoethnographical perspective in my fieldwork.

In this thesis, I acknowledge that there are several aspects of structural power that need to be taken into consideration when producing knowledge based on an autoethnographic encounter. I am aware that MMA fighters who willingly share their experiences with me have no opportunity to control which narratives and interpretive perspectives I choose to present in my textual work. This is similar to what Norman Denzin (2003, 18) describes in his work on doing performance ethnography pedagogically. I am the one who chooses the methodologies, the narratives to be presented, and, ultimately, the textual contents of the thesis (Aull Davies 2004).

Thus, it is important to acknowledge my research position in relation to the participants of this study. I am related to this thesis in many ways, such as when I was conducting participant fieldwork combined with autoethnographical encounters, and I often found myself to be sharing "bodily stories" (Muncey 2010). However, these bodily stories did not cover all of the personal understanding that the different informants gave to me during the fieldwork operations.

The often silent and mutual contract made via my MMA bodywork during the fieldwork gave me sufficient material to work with. My data collection was that of a bodily workout, of being there, with the body as an absolute requirement for participation.

Though I have made a division between my working place and my field space, separating them into two different worlds, I wanted to relate to my informants both on and off the field site so as to experience my informants outside the gym's space.

I carried out this study without forcing anyone to take part in my project. I asked people if they wanted to participate, to which some declined and some agreed. All of my respondents were notified in advanced about my research in MMA practice and my presence in the gym and the dressing room and about the purpose of my study. I also

spent time with them discussing the topic covered in this thesis outside of interview situations, and their narratives were especially important for this thesis and its aims.

I intended to perform a thorough analysis of the interview transcripts, which are representative of the contributions made by those who were key informants, so as to avoid the charge that my qualitative research was used to simply select a few unrepresentative quotes to support initial prejudices.¹¹ I do understand that I was not successful at all times, and I always felt more or less as an outsider, never really getting into the core of my informants' lives and bodily realities (see Woodward 2008; 2012).

In relation to this, my methodological approach was especially guided by my own progress in bodily learning while carrying out MMA practice in the gym. Because the gym is the exclusive place where one practices mastering violent fighting techniques, training localities were fundamental for gathering the empirical findings in this thesis.

I claim that embedded ethnography among the fighters provided me with the necessary material for the description and analysis of the MMA phenomenon. This is more or less obvious because the people taking part in the MMA gyms are the bodies that I as the ethnologist have to associate with to embrace the life of combat arts (see Kjörling (2014) on the MMA reproduction).

Without my physical involvement, there would be no direct line into the participants' reality in this study. Participating in the gym's activities made my attempt to understand MMA easier than it would have been if I were just an outsider witnessing from a distance (see, for example, Woodward (2009) for further reading).

In addition to my informants' martial arts skills and bodily characteristics, the MMA culture of practice and narrative preconditions has to be reached through a body, my body. I, the researcher, cannot step outside from my own body and train in MMA without my body being in the gym. My body has to be there, to take part and interact actively and be open to the bodily production of MMA.

Hence, the main method used in this study meets the demands of a participant observer who is entwined with his/her informants' bodily stories and who examines this process through an autoethnographical perspective. In the end, it is the researcher who must produce knowledge and overcome the obstacles in the field sites and draw out the conclusions of the ethnographical findings. I stress that internalizing my own body with those of the informants allowed for the best observations of MMA practices. Empirical ability, awareness, and facts start and end with the informants (Meneley and Young 2005; Øygarden 2000). Thus, one cannot set aside the importance of how the researcher chooses to pick out parts from the empirical data of the MMA milieu. This has to be addressed here in relation to the thesis in terms of how and why I sought to make these kinds of choices in relation to the field sites.

I have tried as far as possible to record material from my gym sessions across the globe by writing my observations in my field book. This MMA diary was my lifeline in

¹¹ The translation of pain into power is ultimately a transformation of the body into a voice (Scarry 1985, 45). The storytelling experience is vital to get the "thick" descriptions and not end up in a descriptive analysis (Crapanzano 2004).

which I have sought to obtain perspectives in relationship to the exotic life of almost bare bodies in gym cultures (see Klein 1993; Spencer 2013). By writing down my experiences during and after sparring sessions in the gym, I have obtained deep information from my ethnographic field sites (see Denzin 2007). Keeping a notebook and a diary at hand has allowed the “jottings” from the field experiences to be an integral part of the data for this thesis (Van Maanen 2011).

2.2 Autoethnography

The choice of autoethnography was based on the presumption that the fighters’ lives and perspectives are of vital importance for the questions this thesis sought to answer and that they are a source for the production of knowledge that is found in the contrasts between me and the fighters, who all share unique experiences (Smith 2001). Autoethnography implies that I as the researcher can contrast the fighting culture through a lens of my own subjective and valuable source of knowledge in the field of martial arts (Muncey 2010).

Instead of engaging in traditional ethnographic fieldwork that emphasizes the distance between the researcher and the “researched”, my ambition was to develop a perspective in research methods that connects the “beholder” with the “other”. It is not enough merely to use a classic perspective in which the focus of the research mainly targets only the informants’ lives and realities (Van Maanen 1988). Thus, this method has been developed to create a relationship that is based on dialogue and closeness that pinpoints the extremely poignant and embodied aspects in the MMA setting.

As part of this methodological departure, I consider a qualitative model to be suitable for my particular autoethnographic endeavor because it meets the aims and the demands of a physical and complex field such as martial arts (Chang 2008; Meneley and Young 2005; Denzin 2007). Gathering the field data through the autoethnographic lens suits MMA because it is such a lively, authentic, physical, and performative-oriented phenomenon.

Another aspect of finding knowledge is being aware of my own cultural and social position. I have to carry the researcher’s process into the field and speak of it openly in a mutual interchange when describing the lives of the informants (Meneley and Young 2005). By doing this sort of “representation”, I could grasp the direct, intimate, and sensitive autobiographical narrative of understanding from those among whom I was practicing fighting, and in this thesis I am “cultivating the narratives” of the fighters’ lives (Denzin 2003, 75).

In addition, throughout the study I was also partly the ethnographic subject, and I often found myself in a position between subjective places. I was also an interested party and a collaborator in an endeavor (ibid, 230). The autoethnographic method allowed me to be able to immediately respond to the informants who assessed the development of my fighting skills. Thus, in the case presented in this thesis it would be

quite difficult to perform the fieldwork without physically taking part in the bodily practice.

2.3 Reflexivity

It is important to find the “blind spots” of my field-site reflexivity, which refer to the researcher’s embedded aims and presuppositions (Ehn and Klein 1994). Reflexivity refers to the researcher acknowledging her/his position and in what way it might affect her/him when studying in the field.

The positioning in the field is a part of the situatedness of knowledge in and between the cultures of the “researcher” and the “researched”. When connecting with my autoethnographical story, I as the ethnographer must take into account the demands and the assumptions that we transfer to what we study (Denzin, 2003). I therefore insist on the embodied aspect of doing participant ethnography.

The empirical “breakthrough” in my field was the realization that body power is not just a matter of strong muscles, and MMA techniques place an emphasis on balance, rhythm, and flexibility, which are seen as particularly important for the effective delivery of different techniques. The MMA athletes obtain a greater sense of power and security as they acquire new bodily dispositions that challenge the social image of the sexualized masculine body.

In the fieldwork, my informants and I were equal and could interpret the empirical martial arts scene collectively as numerous voices that are entwined and based on systematic rules and guidelines (see Kaijser and Öhlander 1999, 19). This means that I could work towards gaining an interpretive understanding of our subjective meanings and formulating and reclaiming the empirical world as it is experienced from an insider’s perspective. Drawing on Denzin’s work (2003) on self-reflexive awareness in doing performance ethnographical work, the MMA gym becomes an important space where the self-reflexivity has to be performed over and over until the researcher can recognize the similarities and differences between the participants and the observer.

2.4 Performance Ethnography

In relation to my ethnographic progress, I kept a research diary during my fieldwork in which I took notes during interviews and made notes about other things (such as writing reports in the gym, etc.). However, in taking the approach that the field is based on bodily interpretation and embedded knowledge, I have used the notion of performance as a key tool of ethnographic research in analyzing my material.

Following my participant observation during the fieldwork, I acknowledged the turn to performance ethnography.¹² My ethnography includes the term “creative analytic practices” to describe the many different reflexive narrative forms. These include not only performance autoethnography but also short stories, conversations, fiction, and one’s own body, which blurs the boundaries separating text, representations, and embodiment (Denzin 2003).

In each of these forms, the researcher, as a performer, is self-consciously present (ibid 2003). Emphasizing Denzin’s definition of performance ethnography, the writer uses his or her own cultural experience “reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions” (Bochner and Ellis 2002, 740; see also Kincheloe and McLaren 2000, 301).

In the case presented here, performance ethnography, in which one’s body’s acts and doings are deeply embedded in the participants’/informants’ fighting culture, becomes apparent in the gym, because MMA presents opened bodies in an otherwise closed and regulated milieu. This means that there was a shift in the way I as the researcher had to conduct my participant fieldwork. I needed to get down on the floor in trunks myself to grip MMA.

Denzin (2003) observes that fields are connected to ethnographic writing in that they are blurred, enlarged, and altered with drama. The concept of performance ethnography, then, is realized in the moment of bodily action. Taking part in movement, acts, and explicitly violent conduct links personal stories of compassion, joy, and love together. I, the researcher, can never get rid of this perspective when working in the field and when interpreting what people’s storytelling says to me (see Arvidsson’s discussions on tales in the field and folkloristic narratives and meaning, 2007). Tacit information from the body as well as muted and/or open verbal speech from the fields provides access to the gym’s inside games and to the daily routines and performances in the fieldwork (see Arvidsson 2001, 77).

Autoethnographic fieldwork can make sites of performance activities visible in this process, just as my body affirms the values of self-determination and the mutual solidarity that is a silent contract between my informants and me (Pink 2009; Clair 2003). Most of all, however, flow and performance and the body as a tool of performance become vital to this study. Flow in itself is a major way of learning to adequately experience moments and events through one’s own body.

The body is a tool that can be used to clarify and understand cultural codes (cf. Misje 1999, 10). This conjoining of thought and practice has been achieved through intense ethnographic research (see Spencer 2013; Green 2011; Chang 2008, 67) and is theoretically central because it opens the gates to the promises and perils of what Loïc Wacquant (2004a, xiii) calls a “carnal sociology”.

¹² Performance ethnography, as used when studying the potential movements in MMA via the instrumental body, suggests that embodied practice is necessary for conducting anthropological analysis of physical activities (e.g. martial arts) in order to avoid relying solely on dialogical and textual techniques (Stenius 2015, 81-2).

In performance ethnography the researcher concentrates on what might exist, what might be achieved, and what might function between the observer and the observed (Chang 2008). This is a central perspective to postmodern performance ethnography, where anthropology and “ethnography are socially conducted in the midst of play, performance and agency, and where experiments in ethnographic representation are encouraged, and the ethnographic objects are always multifaceted” (Kuper 2005, 188).

Performance ethnography will always be a dynamic resource for the observer to connect with if they want to get deep into the field (Hendry 2008, 106). To sum up, ethnography performed in environments that are based on profound bodily activities and not focused on what has been done must be the first perception to take (Denzin 2003). Otherwise there is a risk for the observer to become blinded to the relationships in the field-site, and understanding what is going on right here, right now, is fundamental to obtaining real-time data. I argue that this evaluation of ethnographic work is the most honest way to collect and classify material from participant observations.

2.5 Concluding Methodological Reflections

In the field, I have been aware of the limits of my ability to control the interactions in participant fieldwork that are supposed to lead to meaningful discourse. My informants were not “my” participants; they are their own personal and subjective carriers of identity, personality, and participation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In an extension of this, the researcher must earn her or his informants’ trust in order to be welcomed into their world.

I do not believe it is possible, or even desirable, in this case to strive for empirical facts that are based on empirical knowledge cemented as scientific truth. The accumulation of cultural and social data has therefore been done by way of personal experience. It has been achieved through engaging in a fighting process over time, which has influenced the ways in which I can express myself and my understanding of the social phenomenon and how my claims on knowledge reflect various relationships between my informants and me.

The presentation of the material in this study is therefore grounded on continual dialogues between me (researcher) and my fellow participants. With regard to the fact that there are many ways of interpreting and examining the material, there are, nevertheless, a number of cultural aspects that differ between my informants that I have analyzed, including my own participation.¹³ Thus, the data presented in this thesis is culturally and socially constructed according to the many and varied situations experienced in the field.

¹³ I have tried to reach the most valuable insights possible by connecting in an embodied way to the MMA community. Drawing on these bodily data, I could then start breaking down the barriers between myself and the participants in this study.

The material that I collected during the years that I spent gaining experience in the MMA environment is based on an inclusive and sameness agenda. I collected my field data while trying to understand the life of MMA fighters and MMA culture and by experiencing the embodied narratives of the participants and by being close to them (Moore 1999).

I emphasize that this assessment of assembling material in the MMA gym is important because I am the one who felt the blows to my body and I am the one who gave back strikes, punches, and kicks towards my informants' bodies as cultural targets (see Downey 2014). The gym and the dojo are comparable to "civilizing workshops", or what cultural anthropologist Orin Starn (2015) calls spaces for "market research and critical ethic places" where area studies are done.

Qualitative observation is a substantial part of acquiring knowledge of the field because it deepens the bond between the informants and the researcher (Muncey 2010). As for me, in this thesis, the bodywork of my own process deeply influenced the way I gathered data. Because MMA practice has been the fundamental way of gathering my informants' bodily stories, fieldwork has been dependent on my personal bodily experience. This interpretation has meant that it was very useful for me, the researcher, to get close to and to become intimate with my informants during the fieldwork studies. MMA has enhanced the embodied data from two different perspectives. Through my own bodily involvement, I have received vital knowledge about MMA violence and the MMA fighting culture. By using my own recollections and "turning the tables around" and learning the regimen of MMA, I have had profound insights into this phenomenon. Body-art, body-work, and body-motion are all ingredients used in this thesis that unfold in close affinity with limited violence.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Studying a subject matter like MMA is especially suitable for gaining an understanding of the human and social nature of the epistemic, effective, affective, and moral dimensions of embodied practice (see Sánchez García and Spencer 2013, 2-3). I have selected my theories based on the empirical findings and the ethnographic data that have been collected from my embodied fieldwork.

In the following, I account for my theoretical points of departure. This section starts with theories about flow, performativity and performance. I found this to be of vital importance for understanding how, in particular, brute force and violence operate in MMA practice and how they are produced, transferred, and altered in movements and in relationships among the participants in my fieldwork (see Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 1997).

Finally, I will deal with how flow and movement affected my own body's presence in the gym sessions. The theory of performance studies is used in these field sites because it can be productive in showing how a performative (see Butler 1990) part of our embodied situation occurs when we try to grasp events that occur in a specific context and with interfaced beings (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006).

3.1 Flow

Martial artists can go into and out of a state that is called a flow mode. It allows them to thrust forward extraordinary powers, orchestrate sensational adrenaline rushes, and force strong and powerful mental feelings into existence while they are engaged in a fighting situation (Csikszentmihályi 1998). Flow as a concept is closely allied with the powerful as well as dangerous capacity of the body for performance and allows us to change and alter our mind, soul, and body from the way they are in our ordinary and mundane lives (Douglas 1966, 62).

I claim that MMA fighters get a full-on rush of blood to the head during their performance, which includes violence and powerful action filled with movements and body shots that glorify the body as beautiful and destroyable, and that they get pleasure from their inner powers (Foucault 1972, 56).

Fighters' use of pain, and the hyper-masculine ethos that amplifies and dramatizes the conception of manly honor to give and take suffering and pleasure, feeds into the state of flow mode. Pain and bodily harm are key concepts in understanding how a strategy of an embodied and reflexive body withstands pain and turns it into pleasure and lust (see Foucault 1972, 56).

Fighters can thereby, via "flow injections", produce fluidity by altering their inner stance. This gives power over consciousness and the ability to gain access to the

sensitivities of pain and bodily harm transformed by the involvement of a strong habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 167). This results in a sense of feeling, of being emotional, that generate a coherent dialogue between participants in an activity.

Juxtaposed with extreme sports and action sports, MMA has a high level of inherent danger, which in turn creates self-confidence and allows one to get into the “groove” by dramatizing the own, the self, and the identity. To test one’s limits, one might seek confirmation in different contexts. To seek the adventure, the high, and the adrenaline kick through artificial means is a meaningful way to escape from a mundane life and emptiness. Exposing themselves to danger and risk-taking gives the fighters a sort of liberation.

Getting in the flow mode thus allows the ethnologist to taste the pain and to experience the action that is occurring. When contemplating over this, I realized that flow, getting in there and being close to the ring, allowed me to capture an ethnomethodological understanding of human practice (see Wacquant 2004a). The mental game of reaching conceptual and theoretical understanding comes with the body and mind releasing the flow mode. In MMA, the moving rhythm of the body is crucial to avoiding injury and minimizing danger to the body.

Theoretically, MMA is close to the flow concept as the fighters mentally “glide” through their own bodies as they seek to manipulate their opponent with force, while at the same time they try to avoid being harmed (they maximize their inner stamina, strengths, and powers by charging these forces with flow). This is well illustrated in a fight as the fighters go back and forth in the struggle for victory. Their stance is almost dancing, and choreographically they “slide” in the octagon, using their tempo, speed, sensibility, and rhythm to identify how the opponent reacts to their stance. One can argue that flow is the main catalyst that arouses the martial artist.

In the book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (2008) Mihály Csíkszentmihályi outlines his own conceptual flow theory model, which is that individuals’ capability to move their bodies is charged by adrenaline. This is the most pleasurable feeling when they are in the flow mode – a state of absorption or complete captivation with the bodily activity and the corporeal scenery around them. This ceremony of mind, soul, and body correlates in particular with the activities of martial arts’ embodied practicality (Csíkszentmihályi 1998, 78-9).¹⁴ Csíkszentmihályi in particular stresses the importance of martial arts as a product of ultimate control of the body’s flow and that it is through our senses that we get into the body of flow. Senses can activate us in connection to a purposeful experience and to the consciousness of pleasure and enjoyment (Csíkszentmihályi 2008, 103-4). In this way we cultivate our body into joy (ibid).

Flow mode is a state of body and mind in which people are so involved in a carnal activity that nothing else seems to matter to them, such as occurs in activities such as MMA, dancing, sex, sports, playing chess, etc. The flow mode state is a peak of involved bodily stimulus in which the human (a fighter in MMA or in action-filled

¹⁴ For an MMA artist, the flow-mode is a way to create the level of concentration, focus, and adaptation needed to absorb the ramifications of the MMA bout.

combat) is completely immersed in what he or she is doing bodily (cf. Csíkszentmihályi 1998; Wulff 1998).

Flow is a major sensation that everybody experiences now and then in their lives, and it is considered to be an emotional power of inordinate preoccupation, commitment, bodily satisfaction, and channeled skill. Throughout the body, the senses that create temporal apprehensions (time, food, ego-self, the I, the it, the inner motion, etc.) are typically overlooked but compelling (ibid Csíkszentmihályi 1998).

Csíkszentmihályi described the famous flow mode model as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The self decreases, time disappears, our actions, movements, motions and thoughts monitor inescapably from the preceding one, like doing *martial arts*. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost” (2009). His emphasis on martial arts is important to affirm this connection between flow and the combat arts.

Csíkszentmihályi considered eight conditions for accomplishing the deep flow mode, including “challenge–skill balance, merging of action and awareness, immediate and unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, paradox of control, transformation of time, loss of self-consciousness, and the autotelic experience” (Csíkszentmihályi 1998).

To attain a state of flow, stability must be maintained between the activities of the body and the proficiency of the performer. If the activity is too tranquil or too challenging, flow cannot occur and the individual will not experience “becoming one” with the activity at hand. Both ability level and the activities must be coordinated and must be extraordinary (i.e. similar to the MMA fights). If skillfulness and the challenge are lacking, then indifference to the activity will develop.

One flow mode that Csíkszentmihályi investigated was that of the autotelic bodily disposition. The autotelic character is a person who performs powerful acts because they are essentially satisfying the person's ego rather than only achieving external ambitions. Csíkszentmihályi describes the autotelic behavior as a characteristic controlled by individuals who can learn to enjoy activities that most other people would find objectionable.

Research has shown that the autotelic persona is associated with imagination, determination, and self-effacement.¹⁵ The autotelic motion is one in which actions take place automatically without the person having to think about them (see Spencer 2013).

The interconnections between my informants are organized through their bodily re-formations and polished via the violent conduct of a combat fighting flow-mode. It is important for my field research to acknowledge the empirical facts that correlate with the notion of gender, performativity, and phenomenology. Although processes of performativity cross bodies, particularly in the field of MMA fighting, they

¹⁵ In relation to the production of MMA competency, I refer not only to ethnographic research that discusses these concepts but also to research that is focused on the embodied acquisition of specific martial arts or combat sports as its main concern (see Jones 2002).

simultaneously lead to a further distinction amid bodies because they are polarized between the researcher and his fellow participants in the site of the fieldwork.

It is the strong adrenaline rush and the highly emotional aspects of MMA that charge my informants' and my own body with "electrifying" flows (see Ahmed 2004; Wulff 1998). The flows come alive via action-packed and violent activities as sentiments in movements and physical training exercises (Downey 2014).

Loïc Wacquant (1995; 2004) has documented the ordinary routines and technical learning of the gym, which is the main site of his fieldwork, but, most importantly, he captures the suffering, the pain, the joy, the lust, and the pleasures that intermix in the mutual and self-production of the fighter's flow-mode (see also Green 2015).

With a distinctive cultural and social theory, and with close-up observations and experimental detection, I also try to illuminate all that constitutes the MMA universe, including those things that usually go undetected or are unintelligible to a distant observer (see Sánchez García and Spencer 2013, 5).

One aspect of this study is how cultural inscriptions on bodies are formed and transformed via violence. Another important aspect is how categories such as gender, in particular the notion of masculinity, are changed and constructed through MMA fighting culture (cf. Hopton 2002). Closely related to these categories are concepts such as violence, performance, and bodies. The ways in which fighters construct violence, their bodies, and the social premises in which brute force is acceptable help to construct their cultural view on what we are allowed to do with our bodies. Performativity theory provides an important theoretical background for these issues.

3.2 Performativity and Performance of Actions

Closely related to the notion of performativity is the concept of performance, and the term "performance" holds a dynamic importance in relation to actions (Fisher-Lichte 2008). Performance means that whoever is engaged in actions is also constituted from others' bodies, and from a spectator's point of view (something that paper II in this thesis emphasizes) we are all part of building the conditions for movement.

The layers of MMA culture come from a wide range of different disciplines (some of which have been mentioned before), such as judo, aikido, kendo, shaolin, wing chun, Greco-Roman wrestling, freestyle wrestling, sumo, kempo, sambo, and drunken boxing. They have all affected mixed martial arts practice and contributed to its composition by way of fighters developing their skills (Bolelli 2008, 117). Hence *flow-performance* is a term that injects fluidity into movement, elasticity, and internal body awareness (Wulff 1998).

According to martial artist and researcher Jennings, martial arts practice can be divided into the following categories: 1. Performing Arts, 2. Internal Arts, 3. Weapons Arts, 4. Self-Defense Arts, and 5. Combat Sports, Grappling, Striking, and Combined (Jennings 2013). Added together – and filtered through the performance of violent acts that are carried out in explicit agency with the goal to deliver action-packed infliction of

pain and adrenaline and mutual movements of drill, dance, and rhythm – they reveal the apparatus of performativity that is done to the opponent in battle (Bolelli 2008, 118). The apparatus of performance injects the body with flow; it makes us move and fills us with empowered feelings of joy.

I use performance and performativity theory because my fieldwork is dependent entirely on bodily actions and an embodied understanding from a researcher's point of view. The embodied behavior among gender, class, and ethnicity demonstrates how the social field has been outlined.

I am dependent on my bodily framework while doing qualitative research, where it is obvious that I reflect on my own interpreted voice and narrative in carrying out violent activities (cf. Spencer 2012, 131). My performance with a body that is open to my informants' powers and actions provides great motivation for a theoretical approach that particularly encompasses performative strategies in analyzing full-contact fighting culture (see Schneider 2008; Schechner 2006).

The term "performative" was coined by John L. Austin (1962). He introduced performative theory as a complement to language philosophy in his lecture series held at Harvard University in 1955. Initially, Austin used the term "performatory"; he then favored "performative", which is more tractable and more traditional in formation when it comes to applying the concept to cultural actions (ibid). Something that is more relevant for my use of the notion in this thesis is that when we give voice to our own body work of reconstruction and re-formations by undertaking full-contact fighting art routines we share reciprocal movements that morph into our bodies and aid in their social cultivation (see, for example, Mauss 1934; 1997, 100).

Martial arts styles that focus their attention on the aesthetic appeal of the art can be considered performance arts. In this thesis, MMA is considered instead to be a realistic combat technique. The bulk of MMA training revolves around performing martial-style movements. Performance arts on the other hand combine gymnastics, acrobatics, and martial arts into what is better termed "martial arts dance". The combat sports belonging to this category are usually quite spectacular and require excellent athletic abilities (Bolelli 2008, 119).

I emphasize that performance is to be regarded as an explicitly bodily and social act in line with the fact that the body performs active agency at the very moment that actions are taken towards another person or object (Schneider 2006). Performativity, as it applies to my own field, means that the people present in a given situation (in this case an MMA fight) represent violence, for example. It does not simply validate my status or confirm me as a researcher only because I am engaged in the performative act of MMA fighting (ibid). Austin stresses that the term performative means "I do" (Austin 1962, 4-5), and this taps into my "autophenomenological" approach to MMA preparation.

Moreover, the performativity does not represent who I am in terms of what I have done with my body (Denzin 2003). A performative action demonstrates what I am doing with my body or what others (the informants/participants in this study) are doing to my body. Given this distinction between performative actions and

performance of the body, I emphasize that my body is making imprints in the field because my body is performing in real time (Schneider 2006, 45-9).

My informants are the explicit location for my intentional use of force, and, likewise, the participants are those who inflict my body. This empowerment of the participants, in which they “supply” me with their own authentic flesh and bone, is of great importance, of course. This is the performative inclination of violent attacks that hit and strike our interfaced skin, blood, and sweat directly on the gym’s floor and mold and that blend us together.

Performativity is thus a buzzword, a term frequently recycled to designate the capability of communication and verbal actions in particular, as well as other non-verbal forms of expressive action, to become a type of being. It is a forum, a performative act, a ritual, and a cultural and a social action that is ubiquitous and without restriction; it extends culturally and outside the restrictions of systems or social structures (Turner 1969, 132). It is the production of bodies, identities, or situations made through active expression. MMA fighting is a profound example of a performative act – with bodies clashing and colliding, evolving and erupting, staining and soiling – through controlled violence among the practitioners. Hence, fighting seen from this angle transforms into another perspective in which violence is enhanced and means something totally different from a street fight or a brawl (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010; Stattin 1990).

3.3 Violence through the Act of Performance

The notions of performance and performativity stem from the idea that verbal and oral acts affect us just as much as physical acts. J. L. Austin did not himself practice the terms “performativity” or “performance actions,” but he did give the designation to settings (such as full-contact fighting) where we are doing meaningful things with our body actions (Austin 1962, 5-7). Performativity here derives from fighting being “stuck” in the middle of real versus fictitious modes of full-contact combat.

An “enactment expression” with the body, Austin (1970) claimed, cannot be understood to be either correct or incorrect. In the case of direct full-contact fighting, it is hard to decide whether the violent force that takes place is supposed to be real or unreal because the performance is partly rehearsed. According to Austin’s performance theory, MMA fighting can be seen as either an “authentic”/controlled performance or as an “unauthentic”/uncontrolled and chaotic performance (Austin 1962; 1970).

By this logic, the performativity of actions and the performance of a violent body can provide meaning for the use of full-contact force in MMA fighting. In MMA, the bodily actions are almost all intended to operate as an attack or as a defense against the opponent’s attacks. The violence is defined by its potential inner meaning in MMA practice, thus there is no single meaning of the term “violence”.

Performativity has been subject to widespread debate in sociocultural spectacles such as sports, theatre, film, philosophy, literature, and anthropology. Judith Butler

(2003) and Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick (1985) are among the major academic scholars who have elucidated and contested Austin's ideas from the standpoint of social-deconstruction, feminism, and queer theory. For them, the theory of performativity/performance has played an important role in discussions of cultural and social change in our postmodern society.

In trying to grasp and understand how an outside perspective of MMA often ascribes a conspicuous and often-prejudiced role to violence, it is vital to reconstruct the essence of the concepts that lead to such an interpretation in relation to the practice of full-contact combat. When the term violence is applied to MMA fighting, something changes in the term's recursive and discursive role. How it is perceived and interpreted varies. What is it that media, the public, and positivistic research read into MMA and fuse with something else so that MMA is seen as something other than just being a martial arts specialty (Ingvar 2015; 2009 and Kochar and Mann 2005)?

Apparently, MMA is controversial because it challenges the concepts of what bodies are allowed to do in a performance. A key topic seems to be what bodies are approved to do when performing actions that engage with another human being both willingly and freely (see O'Reilly 2009, 160).

The hypothesis of performativity/performance has also been tested in numerous science and technology studies. The materiality theorists Michael Callon and John Law (1995) proposed a study of the performative/performance aspects of anthropology, and Karen Barad (2007) has argued that science and technology studies should emphasize the performativity of symbolic semantics in order to explore the performativity or performance of matter within our culture. Likewise, I use the term performativity to examine and utilize how violence is put into play when it is enhanced and lifted from ordinary mundane life and takes place in a harsh martial arts milieu.

As Karen Barad notices, language is a carrier and a building block of cultural actions, and people can connote and symbolize active agency just by the use of forcible words. Similarly, MMA fighting is analyzed in my study (paper II) through the performative/performance notion,¹⁶ and I describe how the very intent to use brutal and vicious actions in combat games is read, in terms of its outward appearance, in the features of MMA athletes (see James et al. 2013; Massey et al. 2013).

The use of the concept of performativity/performance in the cultural and social sciences embraces the everyday performance (or representation) of individuals based on social norms, ideals, identities, gender, ideologies, and customs. In her breakdown of human gender as well as in her analysis of linguistic powers, Judith Butler has oftentimes used the perception of neutral performativity acts. Linking this with MMA fighting, performance actions balance the apparent agency of how MMA athletes fight.

¹⁶ Violence is not only restricted to physical attacks, it is also part of the verbal speech and the oral communication that is such a large part – especially for the UFC – of weigh-ins and post-match press conferences, open training, and the othering in "non-muted actions" (see Moore 1999). In the language of MMA, to intimidate someone, or "mock" before a bout, is sometimes a regular part of the game. Ways with words serve to break down the integrity between fighters' social spheres as a way to gain respect.

In MMA there is an explicit offensiveness of the bodily and performative acts that take place during the fighting, and this comes from athletes' performative agency of violence (Moore 1999). MMA fighters are therefore agents performing objective and subjective acts, but the meaning of sports violence constantly varies. The nuances of defining violent actions change with peoples' use of such actions.

Scholars within gender studies, motivated by theorists Butler and Sedgwick's notions of "performativity" and "performance" and how these operate in performance acts, attempt to bind their theoretical assertions into restricted ethnographic accounts. Both Sedgwick and Butler argue that gender power works as a performative code in contemporary society. This is, as performance-theory scholars such as Rebecka Schneider (2006), Erika Fisher-Lichte (2008), Deborah Klens Bingham (2002), and others have pointed out, a promising idea for sociocultural interpretations of the violent body's identity.

For Sedgwick and Butler, there is actually no pre-discursive bodily identity because even our understanding of violent bodily actions is discursively shaped in what we decide to do and what has been done with the body in the past, living through our memories and in our bodies. This perception of corporeal location gives more weight to the bodily event itself (i.e. the MMA event), and this requires the researcher to scrutinize how bodies form, reform, and control either feminine or masculine actions in the ongoing production of gendered performative acts in MMA.

MMA fighting is caused by and brought to life in objectively masculine bodies that prejudice masculine hegemonic behavior (see Sund 2007, 196). Gender is seen here as a "controlled and subversive bodily protection in power" that is repeated via the aggressive acts that we continuously perform (Butler 1993, 9). Being involved in the sociocultural MMA field fuels me with vicious acts.

It remains to be seen how ethnographers can test Sedgwick and Butler's theory through an understanding of milieu, context, and society and the diverse cultural conceptualization of agents and agency that comes with the perceived brutal fighting in MMA. We can be sure, however, that Austin's performative/performance concept will enlighten our field in unpredictable ways (Austin 1970, 244-6).

3.4 Phenomenology: MMA and the Gap in a Violent Theory

As noted earlier, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1967; 2002) the body is a sensory tool that can be used to understand the unknown, the alienating part that is missing from us and whose inner essence we cannot seem to grasp. In my fieldwork, when exploring my embodiment through MMA and combat sports, I have struggled to understand sportive violence and to get a good grip on the key concept of inner violence (see Fredholm 2012).

Following Spencer's (2013) partial advocacy of a phenomenological approach to his study, MMA research since the late 2000s has explored the abject, objective, and subjective experiences and auto-embodied insights of long-term practitioners (fighters

in the gym, in tournaments, in the octagon, etc.), including the researcher. More recent scholars owe much to Wacquant's (1995; 2004) often-cited ethnography of boxing in a working-class Chicago gym, which is a leading model of such empirically rich efforts. Following this performative turn to the embodied/subjective aspects of MMA practice, research has sought to understand how practitioners' embodied experiences touch their own lives as well as the wider cultural elements within which they are positioned.

What becomes clear when studying the development of the MMA sports since the early 1990s is that cultural theory fits with the idea of a gap, an empty space that needs to be filled, and that violence, sports aggression, and toughness in videos and films during the 1970s and 1980s and onwards gave us the UFC as a way to encounter "real-life" authentic battles (e.g. Reese and Baloulli 2011; Green 2015; Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006, 277).

With this in mind, the present thesis investigates MMA from a bodily practitioner's point of view. Moreover, it is one of the first studies relating to the sport that contrasts a violent perspective with ethnographic, phenomenological, and ultimately posthumanistic approaches in order to move beyond the "natural" idea that there is "only" such a "thing" as an objective body. The body is inserted into the world and the world is inserted into the body (Spencer 2012: 25).

Hence, we can approach and understand the body from many angles and can take other perspectives into account, perspectives that view the fighting body from both a subjective position and an object view and consider the living body to be much more than a collection of positivistic statistical data – rather it is the holistic outcome of the impacts of powerful forces.

The world does not form an "objectifiable" outside that accompanies the body through life. The body, in its material existence, is inserted into the world of things, and our intimate bodily interactions with things makes the world intelligible. Our animate bodies swell with sense and take on meanings that are spatio-temporally ordered. Merleau-Ponty (1964; 1968) (and later Clifford Geertz 1973) used the term "thickness" to describe this facet of bodies.

The thickness, or as cultural analysts prefer, "stickiness" (Ahmed 2004, 88-9) of the body, far from rivaling the world, is, on the contrary, the sole means of doing things by making the body the world (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 135). Seen as such, the body is thicker than mere bone and muscle. It is full of life and resources that affect the meaning we add to the world by using it in our cultural and social milieu and with the understanding of its possessed subjectivity by its performer's spatiality or its observer's perception (Geertz 1973: 11; Spencer, 2012). In a similar manner, autoethnography makes the researcher's body "sticky", becoming the "glue" that attaches the bodies of informants to the researcher while under the somatic pressure of pain and suffering (Ahmed 2004; Stenius 2012, 88). Sara Ahmed (2004, 88) stresses that it is the transformed interaction between subjects, interobjects, and signs and symbols that allows them to be felt as disgusting as if they were material or objective characteristics. As Ahmed argues, the use of representational symbols and intersubjectivity as embodied language is fundamental to the progression of finding sociocultural abjection.

Thus the core of MMA fighting consists of pain and suffering, where a body becomes attuned to the world (cf. Howe 2001). This is something German anthropologist Gernot Böhme has studied in his *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (2010), presenting what he thinks self-knowledge allows human beings to make of themselves. In an increasingly technological civilization, human values can only be preserved in defiance of the main technological status of the culture – a view that also characterizes Böhme’s philosophy of tacit embodiment. In the task of embodiment, Böhme shows that the body is no longer simply a given; human beings in technologically advanced civilizations increasingly understand and treat themselves and their bodies as raw physical material.

According to Böhme, an existential familiarity with our own body is the only possible basis for the decisions required by human beings undergoing medical treatment if they are to remain autonomous agents (Böhme 2010). The body is recoded to allow more than ideas pertaining to corporeal reality (which neglects the sublime and intersubjective aspect of the powerful and violent body in action) to become visible (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). Gender stories provide the deep focus necessary to see how MMA works and to understand how bodily suffering can fill the combat arts with valid data (Spencer 2009).

In addition, Merleau-Ponty (1963; 1964) views the body of mind and soul as understood only in relation to thinking bodies. As he states in his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, “We have no idea of a mind that would not be doubled with a body, that would not be established on this ground” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 259). Hence a phenomenological, posthuman stance, moving beyond the concept of a specific “human nature” as far as the body is concerned, shows that consciousness or perception is attended by an intentional arc that “projects round about us our past, present and future, or human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 136).

Attributing a cultural element to the bodily and material being of the MMA can reveal necessary critical facts for understanding harm and violence in sports (see Smith and Sparkes 2005). In addition, MMA athletes are ideal contributors to this analysis because they are embedded in and embody the tacit phenomenological experiences of full-contact encounters.

3.5 Materiality

The study of bodily techniques – specifically fighting skills – illustrates the degree to which all forms of embodied tacit knowledge might be similar to other machineries that are affected by social forces and procedural expansion over time (Downey 2007, 202; Spencer, 2012). Even when using no tool other than the human body, it is obvious that a close examination of elite athletic fighting techniques reveals that a major paradigm shift and a new discourse significantly reshaped the sport and the MMA fighters’ skills.

The fighters were adept at making tacit dimensions of practice explicit or at finding ways of using them more effectively (Downey, 2007, 203; Stenius 2012, 87).

New materialistic theory taps into this paradigmatic shift of tacit explicit knowledge as it unfolds in bodily awareness. The discourse of the new view of fighting presents fighters as a possible hybrid of violent forms that is recognized as both sportive and socially acceptable. Hence, the notion of signification in violent behavior through the use of a skilled and technologically advanced body reveals that the apparatus that upholds MMA logic allows another reality to play out before our very eyes (Callon and Law, 1995, 494).

Earlier materialistic theory was keen to adopt human relationships on the basis of technologically implicit symbols, material resources, and models of social theory (Downey, 2007, 203). Bruno Latour (1999) compared human sociality with technological resources and argued that social relationships among human beings necessarily implicated technology because human beings always make use of materialistic symbols. Ultimate fighting, from the perspective of new materialism, proves that the limited violence of MMA appears to be on a “normal” sport level. However on a human or non-human level (e.g. war), MMA violence performed in an octagon is like a “product” (Callon and Law, 1995, 502) that takes the form of gear, events, music, stages, tattoos, and commercials for MMA that in turn generate agents of violence, or, as referred to in paper two, “actors of violence” (Stenius 2011).

Social forces in MMA fighting produce violent norms as something “real” and taking the form of attributes. These in turn localize the culture of ultimate fighting in “changing” human bodies that are restricted to certain places (Callon and Law, 1995, 498; Smith and Sparkes 2008). These are places that in Latour’s argument indicate that technology “plays such an important role in human life that to neglect it in social and cultural theory produces models of sociality only suitable for non-technological species” (Downey, 2007, 203).

Observing the UFC in greater detail, it becomes apparent that a comparable case can be made for corporeal performance. Is the nearly naked body of the MMA fighter a technological artifact? Can we really even say that the human body is an object, an artifact, and if so, how can we interpret the subjectivity of each individual human body? The body is shaped and molded by cultural training and is therefore subject to social subtleties and accumulated practical knowledge.

In order to answer questions like these, we cannot take for granted that the human body is not already a hi-tech “cyborg” (Haraway 1991, 150). The body of the cyborg is our ontological being, a mundane, political artifact, designed by cultural training techniques and calibrated with expertise and modernization (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; 2010; Haraway 1991). The human body is therefore not an empty vessel at birth.

According to Donna Haraway, the body is made from social behavior, and likewise MMA fighters are attuned to changes in UFC rules in an effort to adapt their bodies to its limited-violence regulations in order to perform more successfully while remaining moderately safe (Downey 2007, 204). Reflections on the temporal structure of matches

were conclusive because they showed fighters mitigating their strengths and their bodily techniques in order to adapt to the game plan. Fighters used the material means at their disposal to adjust their skills to changes in the rules (Downey 2007).

Moreover, spectators and commentators were intrigued when new grappling techniques proved effective in counteracting the enormous forces generated by punching and kicking. The emergence of the UFC has had a tremendous impact on our understanding of the martial arts and the culture of fighting. Previously, a technically sophisticated fighter who found himself on his back had little chance, but through exposure to Brazilian jiu-jitsu and various styles of unarmed combat, practitioners were introduced to the “guard”, a position in which the passive fighter holds on to his opponent. From now on, martial artists could adjust to these submission techniques and develop new forms of grappling and chokeholds. The enormous impact of these new trends showed how human bodies could effectively transform our understanding of combat sports (see Sanneson 2002).

3.6 The Masculine Turn: Across Combat Arts and Gender Borders

Most scholars doing research in martial arts and, in particular, MMA practice, emphasize the masculine aspect of combat fighting culture (e.g. Bousfield, 2009; Hirose and Kei ho Pih, 2009). Research in the sociology of sports especially stresses that mixed martial arts are first and foremost based on a violent masculine domain and context, pointing to practitioners’ gender as constructed through a hegemonic masculine formation (Downey 2007). Using this term, researchers in MMA claim that the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”, coined by Raewyn Connell (2005; 2009), is a key notion and a key symbol used to understand the phenomenon of ultimate fighting culture and rough bodies (Downey 2007; Bousfield, 2009; Hirose and Kei ho Pih 2009).

The issue that is the focus of such research is usually grounded on practitioners’ features. Martial artists are mostly young men in their twenties who are often seen as vicious, and they usually have tattoos and military-style haircuts and are portrayed as “postmodern ancient combat warriors” (Hirose and Kei ho Pih 2009; Bousfield 2009). They are examined from a perspective that emphasizes fighters’ characteristics as being muscular and sensationally aggressive (Russell 1992).

Opposing this view on MMA practice, and solely relying on the gendered masculine aspects of MMA practice, I assert that MMA is a sort of play, a drama-production, a game, and a meta-contract between two participants that uses such dramatic qualities in order to enhance the thrilling and sensational appeal of the actorship and agency in the spectacle of fighting events (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010) (see paper II).

I stress that MMA research must include empirical findings that are experienced from within – and found through a participant’s engagement among the practitioners – to be able to support such assertions. To some extent, a masculine presentation of the material might be important. Exposing the informants’ masculinity reveals the

importance of investigating sports and masculinity in parallel with each other (Nilsson 2009, 124).

One cannot ignore the fact that mostly men fight in MMA, thus this thesis aims at the masculine aspects of the sport.¹⁷ However, MMA is more dynamic, more complex, and more fragmented than just relying on hegemonic norms, values, and ideals as the main factors for explaining the full-contact phenomenon. International research seems to have defined these elements as main momentary objects, describing MMA athletes as hegemonic masculine prototypes of a harsh and brutal sport (Krauss and Aita 2002; Krauss 2004; Milton 2004). The masses of men fighting in this sport show that this phenomenon is utterly gendered.¹⁸ Hence, MMA is highly complex game involving norms, gender, and sex. The male domination has however started to loosen up with the entrance of women into the UFC (Ronda Rousey and Cat Zingano are excellent examples).

In this thesis I challenge earlier research that attempts to prove that MMA is best understood in terms of masculine concepts, and I stress the importance of presenting the formed constructions of bodily performances that can be separated from merely masculine responses to the MMA phenomenon.

Given this earlier research on the masculine aspect of fighting, I thus emphasize the significance of studying fighters from a position that does not have as its starting point the masculine spectrum of the martial arts sport. If one believes that MMA is grounded on masculinity, then one is not reflecting on and contemplating research that is open to other explanations of ultimate fighting combat sports.

There is more to MMA than hegemonic concepts. An example of this is how earlier barriers in contact sports are being torn down with the introduction of women's weight classes in the UFC and women's own fighting organization *Invicta FC*. Stars like Ronda Rousey as the UFC's most popular fighter have changed the view on men and fighting in the MMA industry and have challenged the rock-solid gender stereotypes in sports.

To talk of hegemonic masculinity without including a discussion on gender, women, and feminism in MMA shows a lack of a well-grounded perspective that can motivate research in this direction. A rethinking of the reflexivity around masculinity needs to be addressed, and MMA is a good place to make progress in gender studies.

¹⁷ The male body works as the vector of masculine communion between the gym, friends, and the opponent (see Spencer 2013).

¹⁸ Gender issues have been paramount in the autoethnographical work on martial arts and combat sports. Combat arts are often a way to show a higher level of masculinity that can be achieved via an exclusive confrontation between men who have sublimated their heterosexual desire into a homoerotic desire for the martial arts body of another man (see Wacquant 2004a, 463). Thus sex, gender, and masculinity are closely intimate.

4. MOMENTS IN THE GYM

This final part deals with my reflexive work with the empirical data. Here I outline the fieldwork dilemmas between the observer and the participants from several angles. By “semi-returning” to the field once again through interviewing and not bodily taking part in gym activities, and by asking once more about my own presence in the gym, the reflections here try to gain insight into how the field-making took place.

Informants’ voices are heard and the field-diary is discussed in relation to what went on in one gym that I joined. I also try to juxtapose my own experience with the fighters. In taking this “back to the roots” journey, the aim is to fill in some gaps in the firsthand material that I witnessed in the gym. I assert that this methodological approach to the former field site is productive because it can provide additional information from the field site that I was previously working in.

2010, October 6th

Snow, cold, I am on my bike. I can’t find the gym; it was supposed to be on the second level in the basement. I am lost. I have to take a look at my Google map in my iPhone. Ok, I see the door. It does not say much, actually nothing at all. I go down the stairs. The gym is really dirty. I can feel my pulse racing and my heart beating.

Ok, here are a lot of shoes. I don’t know if I am supposed to put my shoes among the other shoes. I call for someone, hello! No answer, I go left, turning down the hall to the end and then to the right, and there I run into Chris, the head coach. I get anxious. “Hi, I am here now,” I say to him. He just looks at me, and then turns his head and yells to the fighters training on the mat, “Ok thanks, you can stop right there”. Then he turns to me again, “What was your name again, and who are you”? I feel stupid, then I explain, and he just points with his fingers towards the locker room and tells me to go and change. In the locker room there are young women in their early 20s. I get embarrassed and walk out from the locker room. Once more I ask Chris, “Where is the locker room?” He looks at me again and he nods his head in the same direction from where I came, “Just where you were.” Ok, fine, I come back after I have changed clothes.

What shall I do now? I sit down besides the mat. The coach just stands leaning towards the octagon and does not give me any sort of conformation. Then suddenly he looks over to me and says, “Great, welcome, you can start by changing your clothes and then just jump right back in”. Ok, I am changed, I am thinking, what does he mean? Then he says, “You can’t have socks and shoes on, and no long trousers”. I look swiftly to my legs and find that I have my long Adidas trousers on, and that I forgot my shorts in the locker room.

So I go back and I don't know if I should say hi to the young women there; one of them greets me with a smile and simultaneously corrects her mouth guard. I look silly staring at her and her friends, and then they run out and start warming up. I follow them onto the mat. I feel awkward, really misplaced, but I am determined to do this fieldwork.

After the training, with summersaults backwards and forwards, I go home with a sore neck, totally exhausted. Oh, the training is severely difficult and I have a hard time keeping up with the other fighters' pace. I understand that my cardiovascular fitness is not good enough. I need to start running soon. I look like a fool in there. Doesn't matter, does it? Of course it does. I want to be one of them, equal, someone they like, or do I? Do they have to like me, or I them?

Four years later, I asked Chris about this evening. What was his impression?

You looked like someone who had taken a wrong gone turn, and that you were not here to train. I actually thought you were a carpenter or an electrician who wanted to fix something in our kitchen, but then I saw your bag with training stuff, and I remember, yes, this was the guy who wrote an email, and then phoned and asked if he could join the training. But after that I honestly forgot about you, because it took another 6 or 8 weeks before you showed up here finally. You were all the time doing your best, sure, going and doing your book, your writing, where you belong, ha-ha. I couldn't make a fighter out of you. I am just kidding you.

Fieldwork reflections

In 2009 I started my ethnographic research for this thesis about MMA. First I looked for an MMA club to observe. I turned to my home town and found one pretty quickly. I emailed the club's staff and received a reply in less than a day welcoming me down to the gym. In 2010 I started to train in another gym. This continued until the end of 2012.

My main concern addressed in this final text of my thesis is on how the MMA participants experienced a participant observer coming to their gym and starting to intervene in the milieu. What kind of impact did it have, and did it affect anyone or at least do something for them? Were they aware of that my main topic was to describe my own emotional impact and experience from the gym? What about the fighters' feelings and impressions of my presence there? Who was I? Really, who was that person, showing up with a pair of trunks and a t-shirt as told? What did the participants of my almost three years of fieldwork think of me when I came and went as it suited me and asked them a lot of questions? Maybe they did not even take notice of me at all?

What follows is an impressionistic story based on extracts from my field diary about some of the fighters' experience of having me in the MMA gym. I also took pictures

from beside the mat. In doing so I could get a good overview of the gym's spatiality and the participants' workout routines. My fellow training partners sometimes took photos of me while doing MMA training. Additionally, in 2014 I went back to the gym and started to watch the training again, this time as one of the spectators in the audience following the fighters' activities in the gym.

I have talked to eight MMA students, six men and two women, who were the most involved with me during my fieldwork. Two of the six men are MMA coaches, and two of the men have UFC professional records. One of the women has a professional MMA record.

All participants are given pseudonyms, and they have all approved that I write about them with this alias. Also, six of them have read all or some of the articles and all eight have approved of this draft being published. Thus all eight have contributed widely to this text with their willingness and with a lot of openness towards me, their former observer. All fighters have agreed that I can show pictures from the gym.

My participants told me afterwards that they just saw me as someone who was there to learn the sport, and they didn't even know my name. This was a painful insight because I had this initial feeling that I wanted them to understand that I was there to help them build a bridge between their sport and people from the outside who did not know what MMA fighting culture was all about. Were they not motivated by me giving them special attention and seeing them?

When calling David and asking him about our training and the conversations we had and the interviews I conducted with him afterwards, he reflected: "Well, I was mostly focused on the training and the coaches' instructions and I sometimes saw you as someone who was in the way, and that I also tried to avoid you at times". This answer was not shocking to me as I sensed this attitude from him on many occasions. It was painful, but also something that I as the ethnographer should respect.

David added as a comment to me on the phone that he was aware of me writing about and researching MMA, but he also was a bit intimidated and afraid of opening himself up and therefore kept his distance from me.

2010, October 20th

I am tumbling around with my neck tight to the ground. On top of me my fellow participant, Jonas, is pressuring me more and more onto the mat, looking for a "neck crank", to force me to submit by clapping my hand to his body three times. I try to sprawl with my legs upwards, bending my way out of his tight grip, but his body is just too heavy. In the background I can hear the Finnish heavy metal music pumping loudly. Then, in an instant, Jonas gets his left elbow around my throat and I'm done. I quickly tap out as the loss of oxygen begins to make me feel faint. "Great work guys," David, the main coach, says, and we are finished for the day.

It takes months and months of mutual respect to earn the confident and trust of the people training in the gym. Jonas reveals that he did not like to speak to me, either

spontaneously or as an interview planned in advance, because it made him nervous and irritated:

I just wanted to be left alone, and I did not want to do this interview either. But you kept nagging and writing emails, and we are raised like this to be polite, that's why I accepted this in the first place. I remember you being nervous, and everyone could see that you played your best looking like you did not care about your presence there, but after some time you improved some. I would say it took some one and a half years before we realized that you were actually serious with this training, and not just like a reporter or a journalist coming to train for a semester. There are a lot of people coming there, both men and women, who think they are going to learn how to kick or strike someone in the face. Forget about it. As you could see, we only wrestle in the beginning. That's why you have to have patience.

Jonas' reflections of my intruding in the gym explains some important facts that I was not aware of at that time. First, he admits I was annoying him and that he was not interested in speaking to me. Second, he tells me that I was being observed myself. Third, he seems to have been a bit insecure about my being in the gym and about what my intent and goal really was.

This approach to the observer from the informant in some regards is very close to the well-known ideas of initiation rites of passage. The apprentice is being watched in secret and has to go through a series of phases in order to pass the test. First I was initiated to the milieu, and then I was definitely separated from the outside and seen in a transitional context, and finally I was approved of and incorporated within the MMA community.

Looking back on this now, I realize that I was being observed my whole time in the gym. Strangely enough, I was not fully aware of this while in the field. In addition, I was so scared of being either too exotic for the field or of going native in the localities and the field of MMA. In the end, however, the field came so close to me that it almost felt like a second home. Today I realize that I was always being measured, negotiated, and thought of by my observers, who in their tacit knowledge of MMA silently followed me with their eyes and ears.

2011, February 24th

I am not so keen to go to the gym today, I write in my field diary. My supervisor at the university pushes me forward to do the fieldwork and asks for more empirical updates. Today something happened, did I cross a line in the gym, do they think of me as an idiot, why does everyone seem to distance themselves from me?

This process of being a novice, "to become" something, established in the gym and among its members, is a painful experience to overcome. I am trying to be friendly –

joking, talking, being social – and I am trying to get answers from the participants. No one seems to be interested in me and my presence there, why? It has been more than one year now so come on! So frustrated. I can recall that I look silly with my mouth guard, should I have it in my mouth or not? Everyone is biting on theirs, don't dare to ask anyone, should I? Are the other training partners using the groin protector? I do, it feels utterly strange.

Same routine as always when I enter the floor. Everyone is laughing, standing, stretching, and talking to each other, seventeen to twenty-five students in a huge circle around the trainer. Andreas, the coach today, gathers everyone, and he does not even look at me. Well, just jump in and start running like hell...

I remember the days in the beginning when I came down the stairs at the gym, every damn time, I was so nervous, and I couldn't let go at all. I wanted the fighters to understand that I am a brave and a good person who is there for their sake, for them. I want to help them with telling people about the sport, why do they not want my help?

I wanted to be brave, and this is what happened, it got me my first black eye. Getting tired of not feeling that I was being absorbed by the members of the MMA community, I challenged Peter, a tall and big guy, to a sparring session with grappling and some shoot fighting (meaning that we are only allowed to use wrestling and no strikes on the ground). When we had finished our warm up routine, I asked him if we could start off like we always do. He did not answer, just nodded with his head in a gesture that I interpreted as a clearance for sparring. Ok, let's do it, I thought.

"Should I start on the bottom of the floor", I ask Peter, who just slams me down to the mat, and lays himself on top of me, and he starts to find a good submission, bending my arms across and here and there. This wrestling accelerates further, and I am getting heated and more irritated. He smells bad, and his Russian accent, as he mumbles some words that I can hardly hear through the music that is always played in the gym. We are getting more and more intense and more and more angry.

Suddenly I can see that more and more people are staring at us, and are starting to gather around us on the mat. I am awfully tired and just want Peter to calm down, and he pushes his elbow in my face, an accident or something, it hurts and I scream some, and then the coach Andreas comes in between and stands us up. He shouts, "Ok, shift partners!" and so we do, no one seem to take any notice of what just happened. Everyone turns their back to us and that's it.

And then I face, Jessica, a world Muay Thai champion. When asking Jessica about this incident that took place between Peter and me she says:

Yeah, well, you did your best, but you were just someone to train with, I did not really know until recently that you were studying fighters. I didn't think of you as such a good training partner because you were not really present in your head.

"Ok," I reply, "but did you not see the effort that I put into the training and that I wanted to get a good picture of MMA, not just being a violent sport?" Jessica looks

around and seems a bit bored, so I quickly change the subject. “Ok, so you are fighting for the amateur fighting championship now in Russia soon? Or was it in Kazakhstan?” She turns to me, with a smile now, and mentions that when I came to the gym, and when I entered the locker room, that she was one of the women there at the time. “You looked really confused, poor you” (laughs), and she changes the subject once more, “Yes, I will fight for the title.” “Ok, nice,” I tell her. And I start to ask her gender stuff. “Do you feel that you are objectified in the field?” “What do you mean,” Jessica asks, looking confused. “Well,” I try, “as a woman, with your body, do you feel the need to be sexy in the gym, good looking, and all?” Now she laughs,

No, no, no, that’s what the guys are more concerned with. They can really be obsessed by their bodies. For us women fighting and training there, we are not trying to be sexy, it’s more the opposite. That’s the nice thing with martial arts; you are sort of free from it.

2012, September 5th

It is so embarrassing for me. I don’t know why, but I really have a hard time being totally naked among men, it just does not feel like proper behavior for me. Standing there, a bit tired, a bit low, I feel melancholic, a bit down, I so much want to be a friend of the training partners and that they open up to me. Argh, why did I tell them in the first place that I was going to do research about this? Why? It has only given me many problems and obstacles to cross in the gym.

I am coming out from the shower, all wet, and Marco comes straight up to my face and he says, “So, good training today”. I am so surprised by the approach that I drop my jaw to the floor, “Yeah, it was great,” I reply. “So, we are going for some coffee, do you want to join us?” “Sure, yeah, I can do that, I just have to call my wife to tell her that I will be late this evening”, I reply, afraid the moment will be lost and that I will not be able to join them.

I cannot believe it! I have done almost two years of training in an MMA gym, and today Marco asked if I wanted to join them for coffee after the shower. I have wrestled him a few times now, he looks Slavic, like a badass mafia from Serbia kind of type. Yes, I know I have preconceptions of my fellow sparring partners. Marco is a person who always attempts to avoid me. Now he is loosening up. I have not been this happy since I don’t know when. Finally, I feel I am in the circle of trust with my friends. I want to call them my friends. Is that allowed? This is the “bittersweet” taste from the fieldwork; you so much want to be a part of your informants’ lives so I did anything in my power to overcome the obstacles there.

When I speak today of these different moments in the gym and about my presence there, Marco tells me that he did not want to appear on any video or photo or audio-recording, and that’s why he was always distancing himself from me. “So, why did you invite me for coffee,” I ask him today four years later,

Nah, there was no special reason. I just thought it would be a good idea to invite you, otherwise it would have feel a bit like bullying because everyone else was going.

2012, September 17th

A lot of fighters from the middle-group with a more advanced training, including more striking and boxing techniques, are gathering around the coach Chris, who leans against the fence of the octagon. He looks sort of relaxed, as usual, and he actually nods his head when he sees me coming down the stairs down into the basement. Because I have been more present in the gym for a longer time, I feel more secure on some levels, like what to do, where to go, how to act in the club, and most of all, how to be bodily active on the gym floor.

“OK, let’s start”, Chris yells out to everyone. And now I do feel the urge to start practicing. It is nice to be there, I can relax more and I can be myself more, not being so stiff or feeling odd and deviant. “Get ready, and when the music starts playing we do the climbing at maximum tempo, so are you ready?” Chris yells. “Yes!!”, we all scream back to him, and I feel special and confirmed because there are many new beginners sitting alongside the mat, like I once did almost two years ago.

Now I can show off, and it is finally my turn to shine and show the skills that I have acquired in the field. It is a powerful emotional impact on my being. Watching newcomers staring at me, wondering who I am, I fantasize about myself while climbing around Niko’s waistline. I am someone to consider now; I know the drills of basic MMA and more, I understand the cultural logos of this place, and it has taken me long time to do that.

We are running around in the gym at high speed and suddenly the music stops. I can hear Chris once more, “Yes, yes, stop, break for water, one minute, one minute that’s it!” His deep voice is loud and he is leaning towards the octagon as always. He is dressed in old grey sweat pants that have seen better days. He is so huge in his overly proportionate body. He must be double my size, I think to myself, and I am six feet one inch.

I stand there daydreaming with the bottle to my mouth; it feels so good, the taste of the fresh cold water running down my throat. So, in an attempt to come closer to my trainer and informant, I try to make a joke with Chris. I say something like, “Yeah, I don’t want to be put in the cage with someone who’s a professional, they would really make dog meat of me, ha-ha”.

Chris looks at me, and he doesn’t say much, he turns his glance away from me, looking at all the fighters sitting, leaning, and talking to one another, and then he screams, “OK, yes, let’s do it, remember to be strong when on the ground, we’re just practicing this, and also, another thing, if you have any sorts of skin problem just say so. Because we use our bodies, and sweat together, we also infect each other with all

kinds of different skin diseases in the gym.” Hearing this feels a bit strange and I look down at my feet; they are not looking nice. They are full of blisters, marks, and something that look like mold. Ok, that’s why, I think to myself.

After the end of the gym session that evening I walk off the floor, and I can’t find my mouth guard anywhere. This makes me a bit freaked out because I feel out of control. And for me in the field, it is so important to have some control. If I can control my body, I can control my feelings of being an outsider.

Fighters are starting to stretch afterwards, and I imitate them. Many are talking; the milieu is very silent in between classes when the mat is empty. I am sitting down now with my legs straightforward, stretching as well. I look up at people, to see if anyone takes notice of me or wants to greet me. Then I see one of the real professionals, Mike, with his long beard and majestic features. He was my first interview subject, and is still my key-informant, or rather, “key-witness” in the field. In an attempt to be brave, I try to greet him as relaxed as possible, “Hi Mike”, I say when he passes me, he looks up, and greets me with a smile, “Hey”. I feel so excited, and I go into the showers to get dressed.

2012, November 29th

I am in the final week of my more than two years of MMA training. I have to end my fieldwork and put all my effort in writing the thesis. My supervisors at the university have been on me to write more about the empirical findings, and I have such a hard time translating the experiences that I have had in this environment. Where do I start? I am both happy and sad at the same time, and I really do not want to leave now, I need more time, more time to explain what I feel, and what my informants feel about this.

I have so much more to do, more things to collect. Where do you stop yourself and where do you put an end to something beautiful that you have learned? I have tears in my eyes. I can’t believe this. I am at home, and there are only two sessions left now. Will they have a farewell party for me? I wish they would, who wouldn’t? I can’t look back, I will promise myself to contact them again once more, this I will, they must all be invited when the book comes out, to my party, absolutely. I want to be seen as decent, and be able to look them straight in their eyes.

Leaving the MMA community of the club is a very powerful feeling of both separation anxiety and happiness of having achieved and accomplished something of great importance. It has helped me to understand many things about the combat arts phenomenon, but it has also left me with important questions that are still unanswered. For example, did I uncover the informants’ realm as truthfully as possible? Did my readings of the informants give me any particular insights that would not have been reachable without going into the field? What important things did I miss? Chris gave me a hint about that:

I just remember that you were looking very intensely at everyone in the gym, and so I thought you really wanted to learn the sport. I think you were so obsessed with

observing that you forgot to be interested with us people training there. Maybe this didn't occur to you, but I think it did to the rest of us. If you are looking too much, you miss the big things.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has used the contents of my ethnographical account to examine the ultimate fighting culture and the martial arts system in the combat sport of MMA. More specifically, it has examined spectacular performances, narratives, and embodied situations surrounding the MMA sport and its events, training sites, and gyms in which I have immersed myself in my fieldwork among its participants (fighters).

I have, on a personal level, faced the drama on the mat while gathering empirical data. Drawing upon not only the MMA events themselves and the exercises in the gyms, but also upon fieldwork involving several gyms' informants, this study has looked at how masculinity is performed and presented and how those spectacular presentations and representations of masculinity are then used as a means of establishing a "hybrid gender".

In addition, by drawing upon the work of "fighting" scholars like Loïc Wacquant, Dale Spencer, and Greg Downey, I have discussed how theories of spectacle and the performance of violence can be used to understand MMA and the UFC and their place within contemporary sports as seen in the media.

Another topic in this thesis is the criticism the UFC has received from medical standpoints (see Bachmeyer and Buot 2013). Many informants felt that the main reason for the criticism of the MMA profession was founded on moral and ethical issues about what we are allowed to do with our bodies. Fighters seemed perplexed by this polarized debate, feeling the urge to explain and defend their dedication to the sport.

This interrelationship between MMA combat fighting, the media, and medical science revolves around the composition of the body insofar as the body is not the product or object of discursive construction or situated within the symbolic order. The existence of the body is, therefore, disclosed in the interrelationship between models of moral and ethical discourse. Commenting on this means that the existence of the body in MMA is culturally and socially constructed in a biased manner that focuses on the role of the body as an external object (Spencer 2012: 25).

I have also studied the progress of diverse mixtures of embodied knowing through a phenomenological and autoethnographic analysis of MMA fighters and myself. My research is a qualitative study of physical culture and incorporates numerous aspects, for example, interdisciplinary methods and phenomenological anthropology. Specifically, it deals with the intertwining of embodiment, sensory awareness, situatedness, lived personal experience, narratives, and knowledge within combat sports from a perspective of bodily systems and the masculine gender issue.

This dissertation has filtered how dominant concepts of hybrid masculinity and gender and homosociality, particularly those dealing with the use of violence, street fighting, and prizefighting, are expressed, not only during a UFC pay-per-view event, but even within the larger UFC "integrated sport spectacles". This includes the *Ultimate*

Fighter reality TV series as well as the UFC prime-time specials used to promote pay-per-view events.¹⁹

I believe that it is important to develop the debate on men by including it in discussions on women and feminism and in other areas where gender is an important topic. Women's and men's everyday lives are affected by the way men in society act regarding gender, and vice versa. If we decide to engage in discussions solely about feminism and gender without seriously debating the life and violence of men in a world that is full of bodily wars, on a micro and a macro level, then we will not be able to resolve how to deal with gender inequality.

I assert that gender identities in MMA are intermediated²⁰, not only by outer cultivation and socialization, but also by the interactions between men and between women and men in the gyms because there is such focus on the image and picture of MMA athletes, as well as on the Internet and in newspapers. Women and men who accept and reproduce the stereotypical image of women or men are rewarded (Spencer 2012). Those who produced a fighter habitus by engaging in competition and building an alternative, active agency, gained a new role that deviated from the societal expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity (see Bourdieu 1977; Klein 1993; Sánchez García and Spencer 2013). This often occurs and satisfies the need for homosocial relationships and supports the dyadic system between men in the gyms regardless of place or country.

Fighters are awarded if they implicitly protect the culture of the sport and the socialization of the gender types that it houses. Powerful people produce powerful symbols. MMA produces both stereotypical gender roles and bodily models, but it also opens spheres where men and women are equal and train and exercise bodily skills with each other. They all share one thing in common, and that is the knowledge of the body's potential power (Kimmel and Plante 2004).

When we understand how violence is associated with gender, we can continue debating masculine tracks and the bodily effects of cultural violence. The war-like nature of human culture, which has existed since the birth of humankind, means that the mythological fighting of the martial art warrior will continue to excite us.

For this debate, I propose that the following general topics are among those that deserve further study:

Racializing, gendering, and/or sexualizing pleasure and pain.

The ultimate fighter and the pleasure and pain of reality TV.

Somatic responses to violence.

The fighting habitus.

¹⁹ In spite of so-called stare downs, brawls, and match-making to make bouts as compelling and spectacular as possible, MMA shows and events are turning more towards being competitions surrounded by dramatized scenery in which one fighter is pitted against another in order to make it more economically viable and to produce rivalries and upsets (see Brent and Kraska 2013; Chen and Cheesman 2013).

²⁰ Because fighting today is streamed on online platforms such as tablets, smartphones, and the Internet, anyone can take part and even vote in real-time act as a judge. This digital interfacing has been called "an ultramodern gladiator game" (Boelli 2008).

Fan motivation and pleasure.
Developing the sporting body through pain.
Motives for fighting.

Providing a sufficient understanding of how violence is played out and culturally “sportified” in MMA in relation to other human activities in which malicious and brute force is implemented can raise the level of future research and debate on culture and sports violence. The desire to provide the body with an adrenaline charge is enormous, and to watch physical confrontations likewise seems to be extremely compelling.

MMA is one of the most ubiquitous sporting activities in contemporary society, and its pervasiveness is substantiated by the size of the primary and secondary involvement in it by people of all ages and social backgrounds. Moreover, MMA full-contact battles offer a spectacular if seemingly chaotic show, which has deepened an understanding of the fighting body as vicious and at risk. Nonetheless, this representation of MMA is not supported by its practitioners, who assert that the fighting is instead instrumentalized in a safe, controlled environment and is no more harmful than any other extreme sport like skydiving, downhill skiing, or ice hockey. Fighters take no unnecessary risks, it is said, because they operate within a tactical framework with the explicit consent of all involved. Bodily risk-taking is thus seen as the experience of controlled, disciplined, and safe bodies rather than their exposure to unpredictable harm, as is often argued by self-proclaimed experts.

The image of a martial artist performing an attack or defeating his/her opponent in a battle connotes a certain idea of what combat sports are and/or should be if they are not based on any biased ideas. Since the advance of MMA, we have seen a dramatic shift in bodily culture. MMA has left boxing behind, which used to be the most popular pugilist sport (Mayeda and Ching 2008).

What flourish most in MMA are the interactions between fans and the industry, where fighters today are closer to their spectators. This reflects an enlargement of this aspect of contact on a cultural scale in which interactions between bodies are analogue and yet digital because of the media scrum they are a part of.

In examining the metaphysical, transformational, and perceptual views of culturally constructed and reconstructed violence that occurs in MMA fighting, the erasure of the distinction between affective and rational forms of violence can be conceptualized as a form of *autotelic* violence (Spencer 2012: 117). Autotelic violence is a form of violence that is self-referential in which individuals engage in violence for the sake of violence as an end in itself.

Therefore, the violence is real, but it is also semi-violent because it is actively built-in, rehearsed, and somewhat choreographed. Viewing the violence of MMA in this sense is an aesthetic approach that seeks to uncover the intrinsic features of violence (Spencer 2012: 117). The conjecture that MMA is a form of autotelic violence does not imply that violence in MMA should remain unfettered. MMA operates as a platform for the practice of secure martial arts in extreme terms. The effect of this more pleasurable

aspect of pain and violence indicates that means and ends become fluid and inseparable concepts.

As such, form and meaning, dangerous or not, are sublimated. As noted, rules are instituted to curb certain forms of violence. In training, there is an accepted normative level of violence specific to each individual club. Fighters must not exceed levels of violence that would inhibit the building of bodies (Spencer 2012).

The present study is an attempt to elucidate adequate parameters of MMA violence and is intended to push beyond traditional approaches to the study of violence. It examines the collective somatic pain and pleasure experienced by MMA practitioners and the consumers invested in the pureness of the sport.

The image of two men or women battling each other in an enclosed cage sparks images of Roman times, as gladiator slaves fought each other to the death for the enjoyment of the *publicum*, who eventually tired of the spectacle and upped the stakes by compelling the wretches of society to do battle with wild animals (see Poliakoff 1995).

However, MMA participants are hardly chattel and the beauty of the sport lies in its simplicity. The rules are so basic and unrestrictive that they lend themselves to elegant exchanges between bodies. These elite bodies have transformed savagery into strategy, barbarism into science, and brutality into sport. More information about injuries incurred in MMA exposes the insufficiency of simply counting stitches and broken bones in analyzing the dangers inherent in the sport (Zetaruk et. al 2005).

As a dialectic between pleasure and pain for competitor and viewer alike, and as one of the fastest-growing sports in the world, MMA is caught in the intersection of medical judgment and mediated assessment. For the fighter, giving and receiving physical pain is intrinsic to the art of competition. For the spectator, witnessing this pain evokes a range of embodied sensations, from the thrill of victory to the flinching reflex of avoiding a prolonged gaze at the bloodied, distorted visage of the defeated.

It is obvious that MMA has rules today to encompass the TV-viewers and spectators, and these rules have led to a more secure atmosphere for the participants in the sport. It is for the future to see where the sport will go and how it will continue its legitimization process and continue to balance sportive connotations with resemblances of warriors harming each other.

APPENDIX 1: Mixed Martial Arts Terminology Index

This glossary is partly copied with kind permission from <http://www.fighting-mma.com/mma-glossary.php>

A

Achilles Lock: A popular submission foot lock/hold that can take many variations but is ultimately dependent on manipulating and applying pressure on the heel and Achilles tendon.

Across side: A position used to control the training partners' body where the body of the person on top is chest-to-chest and perpendicular to the persons' body on the bottom.

Armbar: Otherwise known as the cross lock, an arm bar is a joint lock that hyperextends the elbow joint. Most often you will see it applied as follows. Your opponent's arm is trapped between your legs and you hold it either by the hand or the wrist with both of your own hands. You apply pressure by stretching out your body, pressing against your opponent's body with your legs, which can be intertwined at the ankles, using their upper body and your groin to increase leverage. UFC Women's Champion Ronda "Rowdy" Rousey is an expert in this technique.

Americana: Similar to the key lock and kimura is the Americana. This move involves creating a triangle with your opponent's arm and your own. With your opponent's arm bent at the elbow, palm up, near or above his head, your arm goes underneath from the bottom and grabs his wrist, "pointing" downwards.

Anaconda (American) choke: Otherwise known as an arm triangle, the anaconda choke consists of trapping one of your opponents arms with an under hook and clasping your hands on the other side of his neck, squeezing his neck and arm together to cut off the air supply. It is most effective when you are on top of your opponent to the side of his trapped arm. The reverse is called the D'Arce choke.

B

Back control: Your opponent is sitting on or straddling your back. When your opponent's legs are wrapped around you, especially with them tangled between your legs and locked at the feet, this is called "having hooks in". Your opponent can also perform a body triangle by folding the back of their knee over the other leg, cinching tightly to restrict your breathing

Boxing: A traditionally Western sport/fighting style, boxing is dependent on using quick footwork, evasive head movements, and accurate punches. Although not considered a formal martial art, boxing's offensive/defensive techniques and real-world effectiveness are an invaluable part of a mixed martial artist's repertoire.

Brazilian jiu-jitsu: A predominantly ground-oriented martial art, which was originally derived from traditional Japanese jiu-jitsu and judo. Introduced by the Gracie family of Brazil, Brazilian jiu-jitsu's popularity has spread due to its success in MMA contests. The art is heavily based around the development of numerous submission holds (mainly chokes and arm bars), but emphasis is also placed on gaining and maintaining advantageous positions.

Bulldog: Placing one arm around the opponent's neck and pushing and twisting hard.

Butterfly guard: Full guard, but your feet are planted on your opponent's thighs, preventing him from posturing up and getting past your guard into a more dominant position.

C

Can-opener: Virtually the only submission that can be applied in your opponent's guard, a can-opener entails putting both of your hands behind his neck as with the Thai plum and pulling his head towards you. This submission is usually applied to open your opponent's closed guard, though it can lead to a submission against an injured, tired, or inexperienced fighter.

Catch wrestling: A form of wrestling that incorporates submission holds and tends to favor "catching" an opponent's limb for the submission over gaining dominant position.

Choke: A constricting hold applied to the neck in order to restrict blood flow to the brain and/or to inhibit normal breathing. Prolonged application may result in unconsciousness or death.

Clinch: A position in which two fighters are face to face, usually with their arms and upper bodies locked, performed either for a "breather" or to protect against strikes. Some fighters, such as Wanderlei Silva, have mastered the art of the clinch for offensive purposes, throwing effective short punches and/or knees and elbows from this position.

Clinch maulers: Clinch maulers typically utilize the clinch to stifle an opponent's strikes and tire them out. In the process, these maulers will strike with "dirty boxing," knees and elbows, and possibly go for upper body takedowns similar to Greco-Roman wrestling. Clinch maulers tend to employ a combination of underhooks and the Thai

clinch, which have been tweaked to be more effective in MMA-style competition. Several Greco–Roman wrestlers have found success with this style, thanks in part to their background in the extremely taxing style of wrestling. Popular clinch maulers are Anderson Silva and Clay Guida.

Collar tie (single/double): Grasping the back of your opponent's neck; a double collar tie, otherwise known as a Thai clinch or Thai plum, involves clasping your hands together behind your opponent's trapezius muscle. Where your opponent's head goes, their body follows making the double collar tie a valuable grappling hold. A double collar tie is especially useful in pulling your opponent's head down for knee strikes, effectively doubling the force of the knee.

Corner: A fighter's "corner" is the section outside of the ring occupied by individuals who will assist the fighter during the bout. A fighter's corner usually consists of the fighter's trainer, training partners, a cut man, and potentially other motivators. The fighter's corner is responsible for giving a fighter advice during the fight and for fixing a fighter up between rounds. If a cut or other injury is sustained during the bout, it is the responsibility of the corner-men to fix it up to the best of their abilities.

Crackhead control: Jiu-jitsu legend Eddie Bravo calls mission control with two hands instead of one crackhead control. Many of these names are deliberately bizarre so coaches can call them out during a match without the opponent recognizing them.

Crucifix: From side control you pull your opponents arm between your legs and cross your legs, locking it there, and with one hand you pin down your opponents other arm, allowing your free arm to punch and elbow his unprotected head.

D

Decision: When a fight goes the full-allotted time, a group of judges render what is called a "decision" in order to declare a winner. The decision awarded is based upon a number of criteria, which differ from organization to organization. Most often the greatest factors are effectiveness, damage, ring generalship, and aggression. Decisions can be split (some judges select a different winner), unanimous (all judges select the same winner), or draw (judges select no winner, or an even split).

Double-leg takedown: A takedown that is accomplished by driving an opponent up and forward by grabbing both of their legs (or ankles), which leads to both contestants going to the ground. An alternate version is the single-leg takedown.

E

Equal position: A position that has been equalized and is considered a draw. Neither opponent has any kind of dominant guard.

F

Fish-hooking: The act of "hooking" a finger into an opponent's mouth or ears and pulling, much like a fish on a hook. This move is illegal in all MMA contests.

Flattening out: Your opponent grounds you by taking your back and then flattening you out. They do so by jumping onto your back and snaking their feet inside your legs and around your thighs. By stretching out their body, they are able to spread your legs and put pressure on your upper body, eventually leading you to fall to the mat and possibly lay flat on your stomach with your legs outstretched. When the fight goes to the ground it becomes a war of positioning. Some positions are much more advantageous than others, but it all depends on the skill, experience, and comfort level of the fighter. The following are the typical ground positions in an MMA fight:

Full guard: You are on your back with your opponent between your legs at waist level, sometimes known as the missionary position. The most important part of this position is holding onto the back of the neck, the wrists, or bear hugging your opponent to control their movement. It is essential to keep your opponent from improving their position because otherwise you will leave yourself open to ground and pound attacks and possibly submission attempts. A "closed" guard means your legs are crossed at the ankles over your opponent's back, while "open" means your legs are not entangled.

Full mount: The most dangerous position for the bottom fighter to be in. Your opponent is sitting on your chest straddling you with one leg to each of your sides. Low mount is when your opponent is sitting on your abdomen, high mount when their knees are in your armpits. What makes the position dangerous is that it is difficult to buck your opponent off, roll, or sweep your opponent. In the meantime your opponent will likely come down with hammer fists and elbows, or work for a kimura, arm triangle, arm bar, or chokehold.

G

Grappling: A general term used to describe wrestling and ground-oriented martial arts.

Ground and pound: Many wrestling-based fighters favor this style, and the basic strategy is to get the fight to the ground, be on top, and grind away with strikes from a dominant position. Due to a wrestler's natural affinity for takedowns, this style is popular with them. Elbows, short punches, and sometimes knees are all deadly weapons when rained down from the top position. Popular ground and pound fighters include Jake Shields, Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, and Fedor Emelianenko.

Ground control: Ground control is a grappling position that involves one fighter gaining position on the back of their opponent, positioned chest to back with their arms wrapped around their opponent's neck or arm and neck and with one or both legs hooked on the inside of the opponent's thighs. A powerful control position with

control of the opponent's spine and neck, allowing them to utilize strikes and chokes, e.g. the rear naked choke.

Gogoplata: This is usually executed from a rubber guard where the legs are held very high against the opponent's upper back. The fighter then slips one foot in front of the opponent's head and under his chin, locks his hands behind the opponent's head, and chokes the opponent by pressing his shin or instep against the opponent's trachea.

Groin protector: A piece of protective gear used in MMA and a range of other contact sports – such as ice hockey and American football – that MMA practitioners use in competition and often in training to protect their groin area. Groin protectors are equally used by male and female participants in MMA and in many other martial arts specialties.

Guard: Jiu-jitsu term that refers to a specific ground position. Although there are many variations, the most common version of the guard occurs when the fighter on the bottom wraps their legs around their opponent. This technique is used to simultaneously defend against strikes while setting up a sweep or submission.

Guillotine choke: In this maneuver, you are facing your opponent and you have your opponent in a headlock standing or on the ground with your hands clasped together. The choke can be applied more effectively by pulling down on the head while squeezing. Advanced practitioners are able to apply this choke from guard (on your back) or from mount (sitting on your opponent).

Gum shield: A piece of protective equipment used by MMA practitioners that protects the teeth and gums in the upper jaw. It is used to minimize and avoid injury to the teeth, jaw, lips, and gums from the range of strikes used in MMA.

H

Half guard: Similar to full guard, but your opponent has one leg to your side with the other between your legs.

Head butt: To strike an opponent using the head. This move is illegal in all MMA contests, but was legal in "old-school" vale tudo (anything goes) events in Brazil.

Headlock: Wrapping one arm around the neck of your opponent and holding his head between your side and arm. By grabbing your other hand you can tighten the lock, possibly achieving a blood or air choke. On the mat a headlock can turn into a guillotine choke either from your back or in the mounted position.

Heel hook: A popular and dangerous submission hold that is applied on the heel and then fully accomplished by twisting the knee at the joint. This move can cause numerous injuries, including the ripping of various tendons in the legs.

Hip throw: A hip throw is a popular judo and collegiate-style wrestling maneuver where a practitioner uses leverage and balance to throw their opponent over their hips. Achieving a lower center of gravity than the opponent and getting inside their base does this. Judo practitioners often refer to a hip throw as an *uchi-mata*.

J

Judo: A Japanese martial art founded in the 19th century. A derivative of jiu-jitsu, both share some of the same history and techniques, though judo has been refined as more of a sport (striking is not allowed). Judo emphasizes throws and takedowns.

K

K1: A standing fighting organization in Japan, 1992–2005, with no ground fighting.

Karate: Originated from Japan and the Island of Okinawa. Means “Empty Hand” and is one of the most common martial arts style backgrounds of MMA athletes.

Kickboxing: A martial art related to Western boxing, but incorporating strikes with the legs. Various styles of kickboxing exist with Muay Thai being among the most popular.

Kimura: Similar to the key lock is the kimura, which is a very basic submission hold that everyone knows. It is simply bending your opponent’s arm and pulling it in an unnatural direction, putting intense pressure on the elbow or shoulder joint. The hold can be applied from a variety of positions, but is mostly done in side control. The hold is named after the Judoka who originated it.

Knee bar: A submission hold that hyper-extends the leg at the knee. Similar to an arm bar, but focused on the knee.

KO: An acronym for “knock out”, a term typically used in boxing. A KO is the act of a fighter taking a hard strike (usually to the head) and then temporarily losing consciousness.

Key lock: A key lock can apply pressure to the shoulder or elbow of your opponent, depending on how it is applied. It involves holding the forearm and using it to twist the arm. Depending on the direction the arm is twisted in, the standard key lock can become a reverse key lock.

Kumitei: A Japanese fighting event between two standing fighters free sparring.

L

Leg lock: A submission hold that focuses on the leg or ankle. Common leg locks are the "knee bar", "heel hook", and "Achilles lock".

Lay and pray: Lay and pray is similar to a ground and pound style, but instead of striking on the floor the fighter utilizes position and smothering techniques to ride out a decision. Many top wrestlers emphasize this style, oftentimes due to their inability to adapt to MMA rules. Many fighters with a double background in wrestling and jiu-jitsu employ this style to the fullest because their dominating ground games are light years ahead of most competitors. "Popular" lay and pray fighters include Ricardo Arona and Sean Sherk.

M

Mission control: Like rubber guard, only you cross your other hand across your opponent's back and grab your ankle.

Mixed martial arts: A hybrid sport allowing participation by all martial arts and hand-to-hand combat styles. As a result, participants must be well rounded in all techniques in order to be successful. Despite an inaccurate perception by the general public, the safety of the fighters is paramount in MMA events and the sport has proven itself to be much safer for participants than boxing or American football.

Muay Thai: A form of kickboxing originating from Thailand. Unlike traditional kickboxing, Muay Thai allows low kicks, elbows, and knees in addition to punches.

N

No holds barred (NHB): A once popular term used to describe "mixed martial arts" events. Due to the evolution of the sport and implementation of safety rules, the term "no holds barred" is outdated but remains in the jargon among fans.

North/south position: Your opponent is chest to chest with you but in reverse, with his head facing your feet and your head facing his feet, sometimes known as 69. The point of this position is that your opponent can try to sink in a choke directly or use an "alligator roll" (*Peruvian neck crank*) to get his arms around your neck (and arm).

O

Omaplata: This is a more advanced hold that I will let Wikipedia explain for me: "by placing one leg under the opponent's armpit and turning 180 degrees in the direction of that leg, [the leg] moves over the back of the opponent and entangles the opponent's arm. By controlling the opponent's body and pushing the arm perpendicularly away from the opponent's back, pressure can be put on the opponent's shoulder."

Over hooks (single/double): Putting your arm over your opponent's arm, typically at elbow level, and holding his midsection or upper body; two over hooks is called double over hooks and clasping your hands together can lead to a bear hug. Generally, over hooks are less advantageous than under hooks and are primarily used as a defense mechanism against double under hooks.

P

Pinch grip tie: One of your arms goes under your opponent's arm, the other over his shoulder, with both hands clasped together behind his back, also known as the over-under body lock. Both grapplers can achieve this position simultaneously. It is useful for bull rushing and forcing your opponent down onto his back. The over-under position is the same as the pinch grip tie, except without having the hands clasped.

Position: A generic term for various positions that a fight goes through. Includes "standing", "mount", "full-guard", and "half-guard" among many others.

Pulling guard: Jiu-jitsu fighters are often more comfortable fighting off of their backs than anywhere else. Sometimes instead of engaging their opponent in a stand-up war, or attempting to take their opponent down and mount them, they pull guard. Pulling guard means to grab onto your opponent and pull him down into your full guard. This is uncommon in MMA because it practically requires cooperation on the part of your opponent to get into this position.

R

Rear naked choke: A type of choke that is applied behind an opponent upon capturing his back. A rear naked choke is one of the most advantageous types of chokes as far as positioning.

Rubber guard: Full guard, but you twist your leg so your foot is facing your opponent, and you grab your ankle with the hand on the same side, trapping his arm and shoulder between your arm and leg. An effective rubber guard can lead to omaplata and gogoplata submission holds.

S

Sambo: A Russian martial art that combines elements of wrestling and Japanese judo. Sambo is especially vaunted for its leg submissions. One of the most famous practitioners of Sambo is Fedor Emelianenko.

Shoot fighting: A term that refers to "real" fights (as opposed to matches that are "worked" or have a predetermined outcome). "Shoot Fighting" also refers to a hybrid fighting style that incorporates the best elements of other martial arts. One of the most famous fighters to claim "Shoot Fighting" is Ken Shamrock.

Side mount: Otherwise known as side control, your opponent is chest to chest with you with both of his legs to one of your sides.

Single-/ double-leg take down: In wrestling, a single-leg take down is, simply, grabbing one of your opponent's legs at the thigh with both arms and driving forward, knocking him onto his back. The double-leg take down is more effective, with your arms wrapped around both his thighs, pulling his legs together and knocking him over as you drive forward. Lifting while performing this take down can increase effectiveness and also helps to direct your opponent towards where you want to go, be it towards a cage wall or into the middle of the fighting area. Some fighters like to lift their opponent onto their shoulder using the double-leg maneuver and then slam them.

Small joint manipulation: Any variation of submission holds that consist of twisting, popping, or hyperextending a small joint such as the fingers or toes. Such holds are illegal in all MMA contests.

Street fighting: A loose "art" consisting of experience gained by fighting "on the streets." Unlike other martial arts, street fighting places opponents into realistic fight situations, but also exposes them to unnecessary danger and injury.

Striking: The act of hitting an opponent with the arm, hand, elbow, head, foot, leg, knee, or any other appendage.

Submission hold: A choke or joint manipulation that is meant to cause an opponent to submit or "tap out."

Submission wrestling: A hybrid style of wrestling that has many variations. This style combines portions of traditional wrestling with submission holds.

Sweep: A generic jiu-jitsu technique that is used to describe the person on the bottom switching positions with the person on top. This can occur as the result of a failed submission attempt, strike, or scramble, but oftentimes an actual technique referred to as a "sweep" is employed.

Sprawl and brawl: Fighters more comfortable with striking prefer this style of fighting. Unlike standard striking styles, the fighter must adapt their techniques to actively defend against takedowns and avoid the ground game. Due to this, many strikers practice short combinations of three strikes or less, usually power shots, as well as takedown counterstrikes. Some of these, such as a flying knee or rising kick, can result in a KO if a single shot connects. Lately many good wrestlers have learned to strike and have used this style effectively due to their heightened takedown defense. Popular sprawl and brawl fighters are KJ Noons, Chuck Liddell, and generally anyone with professional striking experience.

Slick submissions: Slick submission fighters are all about getting the fight to the ground, and they don't care if they have to pull guard to do it. Most slick submission fighters are just as comfortable off their backs as they are in top position, and they are certainly just as dangerous. Grip control, sneaky submission transitions, and fluid sweeps all play major factors in a slick submission fighter's success. Popular slick submission fighters are Nick Diaz, Rodrigo Nogueira, and Joe Stevenson.

T

Takedown: The act of putting your opponent on the ground via tackle, sweep, Greco-throw, or other technique, typically involving the legs and upper body. This is a staple move of jiu-jitsu and "ground and pound" fighters, as they must get their opponent on the ground in order to maximize their ground-oriented fighting style. Josh Koscheck has some of the best takedowns in the sport of MMA.

Tap/Tap Out: An act of submission or "giving up" in which an opponent, hopelessly captured in a submission hold or being pummeled by strikes, taps the mat or his opponent instead of blacking out or risking bodily harm.

Throw: There is a variety of throws in MMA and martial arts in general. The most common is the hip toss, which is similar to the trip. You hold onto your opponent and step into him, partially putting your back to him while twisting. As you do so you pull your opponent over your outstretched hip, sending him spiraling over your midsection and onto the ground on the other side of your leg. Advanced practitioners don't let go of their opponent during his motion and can transition seamlessly into an arm bar or another similar submission position.

Toe hold: Like the heel hook, but with a focus on the foot and ankle, directly twisting the foot by holding it with one hand at the toes and the other at the Achilles tendon

Transition: Any movements that involve transitioning between two positions such as the across side, north south, back, guard, etc., or in between the different dimensions of MMA, i.e. the stand up, clinch & takedown.

Triangle choke: The triangle choke is usually applied from guard where the fighter on the bottom traps his opponent's head and one arm between the fighter's legs, with one leg tightly overlapping and trapping the other at the back of the knee. One or both of the hands can be used to pull down on the head of the opponent locked in the hold to increase pressure.

Trip: The most common trip occurs when your opponent has you in a body lock. He will step forward, putting his front leg behind your leg, and trip you up with it, sending you falling backwards with him chest-to-chest while you tumble. Sometimes your

opponent will fall forward in order to ensure you will trip over his outstretched leg and foot.

Twister: A cross between side control and half guard, twister involves facing your opponent's feet while in half guard, putting your hand on your opponent's knee and creating space to spin into full mount.

U

Under hooks (single/double): Putting your arm underneath your opponents arm and holding his midsection or upper body; two under hooks are called double under hooks and clasping your hands together behind your opponent's back is called a body lock. Using double under hooks enables you to maneuver your opponent and possibly slam him.

V

Vale tudo: Portuguese for "anything goes." This term is made in reference to the "no holds barred" fighting events that began in Brazil. Vale tudo events are now illegal in Brazil, for the most part, and are looked upon as a bygone era in MMA development.

W

Wrestling: An ancient sport that dates back to the dawn of man. Contestants use leverage and technique to accomplish takedowns and achieve and maintain advantageous positions. There are many variations and styles of wrestling. Although wrestling is not considered a formal martial art, its techniques for positioning and control on the ground are invaluable in the sport of MMA.

Wild brawlers: Wild brawlers employ a bolo-swinging, cage-slammng style similar to how you would fight in prison or on the street. Their go-for-broke style is usually due to a lack of training, but many wild brawlers fight this way as a matter of choice. This overwhelming style works to their advantage most times, as opponents cannot find a rhythm to counter. Sometimes, usually in the face of a calm technician, this style falls apart rather easily. Popular wild brawlers include Charles "Crazy Horse" Bennett, Tank Abbot, Josh Thompson, and Thomas Denny.

X

X Guard: It is either a form of the open guard or the half guard, depending on your point of view. You end up here a lot when you use the butterfly guard, especially when your opponent posts his foot to stop your sweeps.

Z

Zuffa: The parent organization of the UFC is an American sports promotion company specializing in the promotion of MMA. Station Casino's executives Frank Fertitta III and Lorenzo Fertitta founded it in January 2001 in Las Vegas, Nevada, to be the new

parent entity behind the UFC after they purchased the UFC from Semaphore Entertainment Group. The word "Zuffa" is an Italian word meaning "brawl" or "fight with no rules".

APPENDIX 2: Comments on the Research Literature

Mapping the existing literature on martial arts is difficult because there is no generally established definition of “martial arts”, and the term can be used to describe a variety of practices that have as many differences from one another as similarities (see Channon and Jennings 2013, 2). Such practices could include codified, institutionally governed sporting disciplines such as karate, boxing, tae kwon do, Russian sambo, kempo, and capoeira; street self-defense systems such as krav maga and vale tudo; traditionalist, mind-body disciplines; or “Eastern movement forms” such as kung fu and judo (see Brown et. al. 2014; Chen and Cheesman 2013; Channon and Jennings 2013). Complicated efforts to try to precisely define or categorize these contrasting arts are the acknowledgment that, in individual practice, any given style might blur the conceptual boundaries upon which such typologies are based.

Thus, I have also adopted the aforementioned term “martial arts and combat sports” (MACS), which I propose should be used as an inclusive, triadic model encompassing competition-oriented combat sports, military/civilian self-defense systems, and traditionalist or non-competitive martial arts, as well as activities straddling these boundaries (e.g. Channon and Jennings 2013; Jennings 2013; Massey et al. 2013). MACS are used in Combat Sports science today and are becoming internationally recognized as a beneficial term in MMA studies (ibid Channon and Jennings 2013). These strands of martial arts and combat sports, I claim, are based on embodied interactions.

Overall, however, what binds these differing types of “martial arts” or “combat sports” is a focus on the need to deal with the meanings and the problems associated with physical violence and human combat, which could take place within and between sporting, military, or civilian circumstances and that could also be strategically proactive or reactive to perceived/direct aggression (ibid).

Thus, the fundamental criteria for inclusion within the martial arts and combat sports model here involves the requirement of some form of orientation towards improving/measuring “martial” or “combative” skills regardless of how this is lived out in actual practice. I met the complex task of conducting this review by working collaboratively and sharing bibliographical gatherings with gym sites. Because no single search engine provides complete access to all of the literature, I used a variety of academic search tools, including Google Scholar, DIVA, LIBRIS, and publishers’ own databases, e.g. www.academia.edu (see i.e. Brown et al. 2014; Channon and Jennings 2014).

Academic books, book chapters, journal articles, and a number of doctoral theses from a range of sociocultural science disciplines were included in the analysis, while papers from commercial journals geared towards combat sports audiences (for

instance, *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Archives of Budo*, and *Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology*) were excluded (see Channon and Jennings 2013; Brown et. al. 2014).

I should also mention the contemporary publication of Sánchez García's and Dale Spencer's edited book, *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports* (2013), a book involving numerous present embodied ethnographies from within a broad range of martial arts and combat sports activities. Finally, Loïc Wacquant's pioneering work with the gym culture since the mid 1990s lives on, and two decades later there are numerous combat sports researchers in different areas surrounding martial arts and its inner systems.

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Translocal field interviews with 28 MMA athletes between September 2009 and February 2014 in Sweden, Hong Kong, China, Macau, Brazil, Japan, and the US. Field notes and ethnographic jottings made between 2007 and 2014. Audio-recordings, videotapes, transcribed interviews, and field notes stored and filed on my computer at the Department of Culture and Media Studies. Material is also locked in the office desk.

UFC Sweden, Ericson Globe Arena, 12 April 2012 and 14 April 2013 and UFC 3 in Sweden, Fight Night, 4 October 2014 Ericson Globe Arena (attending the first two backstage and observing fighters preparing and walking out to the octagon. The third one being in the audience with the spectators watching the events from 50 meters). Battle of Bothnia 1–3. MMA events held in Umeå, Sweden in 2009–2010. Sitting close ringside watching the events.

I have visited a total of six gyms in Sweden alone. One of them in particular I have observed and also practiced with on a daily basis for nearly three years. In the US, I visited a gym in Durham for two months, three weeks, and five days during September 2013 until 25 May 2014, training every Sunday, Monday, and Thursday for nearly 2.5 hours every time. In Japan, I visited a gym for 12 days, training for 10 sessions, 2 hours each time. In Hong Kong I practiced for nearly 3 hours a day, three times a week. In Brazil, I visited and observed a lot at one gym. I had short training sessions, mostly getting instruction in Brazilian jiu-jitsu and grappling techniques.

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Sammanfattning

Kroppen i smärta och njutning En etnografisk studie av mixed martial arts

I den här avhandlingen undersöker jag hur våld och maskulinitet formeras inom kampsporten mixed martial arts (MMA). Detta är en sport som väcker starka känslor, både av uppskattning och ogillande. Inte minst har den mött kritik och massivt motstånd från medicinskt håll. Många menar att det är en livsfarlig idrottsgren där utövarna misshandlar varandra. Andra hävdar tvärtom att den lär unga människor att disciplinera sin kropp och använda kontrollerat våld på gym istället för att slåss ute på gatan.

Detta debattklimat har gjort det svårt att som kulturforskare undersöka MMA på ett förutsättningslöst sätt. Strävan att förstå sporten kan på sina håll tolkas som att man tar de våldsamma sidorna av den i försvar. Men MMA är faktiskt mer än bara våld. Därför vill jag med denna studie skapa fördjupad insikt och nansera alltför stereotypa generaliseringar kring denna omdiskuterade sport.

I sin mest utpräglade form är MMA en hårt regelstyrd integrering av kroppsliga upplevelser kämpar mellan – numera både manliga och kvinnliga utövare. Man tävlar under överinseende av domare i en åttasidig bur, oktagonen, och utan hjälm. MMA är idag rigoröst reglerad och innefattar domare, läkarkontroller och invägningar för att få gå en match. Reglerna är tydliga. De innefattar att man får strypa sin motståndare i ”submission choke holds”. Vidare får man vrida varandras armar och ben ur led. Det är också tillåtet att använda slag, sparkar och knän samt armbågar. Det man inte får göra är att slå varandra i bakhuvudet, knäa en motståndare som ligger ner, slå mot genitalierna, peta i ögonen, dra i håret eller ta tag i kroppsöppningar. En stor del av matcherna består av brottning. Ibland liknas MMA vid ett parti schack, ”det är som att försöka sätta motståndaren i matt”, som en kampsportare uttryckte det (Stenius 2014).

Kampsportarna tränar tillsammans i grupper. De stöttar varandra i strävan att bli en så bra MMA-artist som möjligt. Det handlar inte bara om fysisk träning, det är också viktigt med hälsosam näring, goda matvanor, viktkontroll och mycket sömn. Det är många personer runt en MMA-fighter som tar ansvar för att ordna bra träningsläger innan matcherna. Sporten har helt enkelt blivit mer reglerad och är på väg bort från allt det som tidigare kunde förknippas med kriminalitet, våldsverkare och bråkmakare. Den präglas faktiskt också av att utövarna visar omtanke och stor respekt för varandra, både under träning och under matcher.

Idag är kampsportskulturen mer heterogen och inte så könsbunden som den var för två decennier sedan. Fler och fler kvinnor tränar och tävlar nu inom MMA. När detta projekt startade var det nästan bara män. Därmed har sporten genomgått en stor omprövning och gjort MMA till en mer jämställd plats som granskar sig själv i frågor kring genus, kropp och sexualitet.

MMA fick sitt genombrott 1993 genom organisationen UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) i delstaten Colorado, USA. Där arrangerades en turnering av den brasilianske familjen Gracie. Rorion Gracie, huvudtränaren, ville bevisa att hans kampsportstekniker (Brasilian jiu-jitsu) dominerade över alla andra former av mänskligt kroppsförsvar. Där fanns en sumobrottrare, en kickboxare, en street-fighter och så den kortvuxne Roycie Gracie, som var totalt överlägsen och chockade alla genom att med till synes enkla brottnings tekniker låsa fast och fälla sina kombattanter och därefter ”strypa ut” dem. Brasilianaren hade inte utdelat ett enda slag. Många kampsportare världen runt var förbluffade över hur han kunde besegra större och starkare deltagare.

Den nya sporten MMA var född. Det speciella med den kan sägas vara att den mixar olika kampsportsstilar från hela världen. MMA, som i Sverige länge var en okänd kampsport och från början gick under den japanska termen ”shoot” (dyka), blev på kort tid ökad, efter att kvällstidningarna i mitten på 2000-talet rapporterade om olika ”dödsgalor”. På senare tid har detta dramatiska synsätt nyanserats och på kvällstidningarnas sportidor rapporterar man regelbundet från matcher och galor världen över. Sporten växer snabbt. I nästan varje stad i Sverige existerar det nu MMA-klubbar, som tillhör Svenska Budo- och Kampsportsförbundet och därmed också Svenska Riksidrottsförbundet. Idag är MMA-sporten världen över en verksamhet som omsätter miljontals dollar årligen och som lockar tusentals åskådare till sina galor.

Det största genomslaget för MMA-sporten i Sverige kom för några år sedan i samband med att UFC-fightern Alexander ”The Mauler” (stridsyxan) Gustafsson gick en match i Globen 2012. Arenan blev helt utsold på bara några timmar och under kvällen den 14 april kämpade The Mauler mot brasilianaren Thiago Silva. Det blev succé med vinst för svensken och kännedomen om MMA spred sig via sportsidorna. Nu uteblev ramaskriner i medierna (Stenius 2014, 78).

I idrottsgalan en tid efter galan intervjuades Alexander Gustafsson av programledaren för SVT i direktsändning där man inför alla gäster på storbildskärmar visade upp delar av hans titelmatch mot amerikanen Jon Jones. Det blev tydligt att Gustafsson, i likhet med andra elitidrottsmän i Sverige, framhölls som en förebild för unga idrottsutövare. MMA-sporten fick komma in i finrummet, från att tidigare bara ha existerat i undagömda hallar och källarskrymslar (ibid, 79).

Varför MMA? En fråga jag ställt under avhandlingsarbetet är varför många unga män ägnar sig åt denna krävande sport. Ett svar är att den ger dem något som de inte får någon annanstans. Till skillnad från i samhället utanför buren som med lagar, regler och tabun förbjuder människor att använda våld, erbjuder MMA ett utrymme där utövarna tillåts ”spöa skiten” ur varandra under ordnade former. Våldet inom MMA kan visserligen te sig okontrollerat, men i själva verket är sporten omgärdad av en välstrukturerad säkerhetsapparat. Den utövas i ett slags panoptikonsystem, som gör att

minsta avvikelse från reglerna och överenskommelserna bestraffas (Stenius 2014, 79-80).

MMA-sporten har beskrivits som ett sätt att legitimera framför allt mäns ”okontrollerade behov” av att få ut sina fysiska krafter utanför kroppen. Med en sådan tolkning kan man säga att MMA utgör en kulturell arena där denna form av maskulinitet är tillåten och även hyllas – en maskulinitet som alltså även utövas av allt fler kvinnor. Det finns också en viktig emotionell dimension i kampsporten. Att kämpa i en bur tillsammans på lika villkor, med en domare på plats inför en publik och i en idrottshall, skapar en kraftfull upplevelse – för publiken kan det vara som att gå på en rockkonsert (Stenius 2014, 79). Det ger en extrem både fysisk och känslomässig kick. Det är också en uppvisning av konsten att hantera smärta som publiken får ta del av.

I kontrast till de våldsamma holmgångarna i buren och den upphetsade stämningen under matcherna kan man konstatera att MMA-sporten ändå är en relativt säker miljö för sina deltagare. I mitt fältarbete har jag kunnat observera hur kampsportarna skapar en kultur där våld tillämpas under mycket kontrollerade former i en strikt reglerad miljö, där disciplinerade och vältränade utövare visar upp sina kroppsliga förmågor i oktagonerna (ibid, 80).

Mitt syfte med avhandlingen är att som deltagarobservatör analysera MMA-sporten som kroppsligt och sinnligt fenomen och vad framförallt våld, smärta och njutning betyder för dess utövare. Men jag undersöker också min egen roll som både forskare och kampsportare när jag använder min kropp som arbetsmaterial. För mig som etnolog har fältarbetet varit en fysiskt ansträngande upptäcktsresa med syftet att förstå hur utövarna ser på och utövar kroppsligt våld i den här sportkulturen. Detta våld, den fysiska kollisionen mellan två kombattanter, skildrar jag utifrån utövarnas egna upplevelser och erfarenheter, som de har förmedlats till mig genom ord och kroppsspråk – men också inifrån mina egna upplevelser av träning och matcher (ibid).

Projektet startade 2007 då jag som mastersstudent var gäst på Anthropological Centre for Research vid University of Hong Kong där jag studerade kung fu, thaiboxning, shoot fighting och MMA under Pierre Ingrassias ledning (en gång livvakt åt Sylvester Stallone).

Hösten 2009 började jag besöka tre MMA-gym i Umeå, särskilt ett som också arrangerade professionella galor. Efter att ha observerat gymmen under nästan ett års tid började jag själv systematiskt träna MMA. Vidare har jag studerat MMA translokalt på flera olika platser runt om i världen. Det har skett genom kortare fältarbeten på gym i Hong Kong 2007-2008, Macau 2008, USA 2013-2014 och Brasilien 2014.

Fältarbetet bestod av både observationer, egna upplevelser och intervjuer med ett tjugotal kampsportare om deras erfarenheter och uppfattningar av MMA. Fältanteckningarna skrev jag bland annat vid sidan av mattan och vid vattenpauserna. Jag använde alltså min egen kropp som ett redskap för en autoetnografisk undersökning. Dessutom har jag tagit del av dokument om MMA på svenska MMA-förbundet och Svenska Riksidrottsförbundet, jag har följt debatten på nätet och i andra medier och jag har gått igenom en stor mängd forskningslitteratur i ämnet.

Innan fältarbetet var jag orolig för att jag skulle möta en sluten kultur och miljö. Tvärtom har jag upplevt MMA som en öppen och offentlig sport, som är välkomnande och positiv till insyn och inte stänger ute dem som vill undersöka dess förhållanden. Från dag ett har projektet mötts av stor respekt från utövare som själva velat komma till tals och ge sin syn på MMA i dagens samhälle och vad meningen med sporten är.

Materialet som har samlats in har analyserats med hjälp av ett fenomenologiskt perspektiv på hur olika subjektiva kroppsliga levnadsberättelser länkas till normer, regler och identifikationspraktiker som följer med att vara en MMA-fighter. Denna analys har följts upp med en performance-inriktad fördjupning som handlar om upplevelser, rus, adrenalin, spänning, drama och sensationer. För kampsportaren handlar det om att skapa en disciplinerad kropp som ska kunna kontrolleras men som också ska släppas lös och kunna agera för att nedkämpa en motståndare. Det handlar alltså delvis om ett ambivalent förhållningsätt inom sporten, då den å ena sidan bygger på styrka, kraft och fysik, men också på teknik, taktik och struktur.

Avhandlingen består dels av en kappasom beskriver undersökningens syfte och problemställningar, fältarbetets uppläggning och det teoretiska ramverket, dels av fyra granskade (peer reviewed) tidskriftsartiklar. Här följer en kort sammanfattning av dessa artiklar.

Artikel I, "Just Be Natural With Your Body: An Autoethnography of Violence and Pain in Mixed Martial Arts", handlar om hur forskaren, jag själv, går in kroppsligen på gymmet för att delta i MMA träning. Tillsammans med min medförfattare diskuterar jag hur den auto-etnografiska metoden skapar processer av självreflexivitet i mötet med de andra kampsportarna. Den deltagande observationen sammanflätas med en fenomenologisk undersökning av sinnliga och kroppsliga upplevelser av kontrollerat våld.

I artikel II, "Actors of Violence: Staging the Arena in Mixed Martial Arts", ställer jag deltagarna inom MMA i relation till ett event, där platsen för kampen, oktagonen (den åttakantade buren), är en arena för både ritual, spektakel, idrott och uppvisning. Kampsportarens kropp studeras som ett redskap i en performans för att nedkämpa en motståndare inför publik.

MMA-galorna utmärks av en stark scenisk närvaro. Den gör att åskådaren kommer nära matchen i buren, men också att det kan bli svårt att skilja mellan autentisk kamp och instuderat slagsmål. Galorna är gjorda för att publiken ska bli uppspelt, känna spänning och upphetsning. MMA är visserligen äkta kamp, men under en rigorös kontroll som hindrar sporten från att bli kaotisk.

I artikeln hävdar jag att kämparna blir våldets skådespelare på scenen. När de går in i buren är de flera saker samtidigt, deras kroppar blir ett gränsobjekt som också ingår i en ritual i förflyttningen från invägning till match och tillbaka till vardagen. Ur det perspektivet kan MMA ses som både en passagerit och som en kroppslig performans.

Artikel III, "Hybrid Masculinity in Mixed Martial Arts: Gender, Homosociality and the Homoeroticism", behandlar synen på genus och sexualitet kopplat till män (och i viss mån kvinnor) och MMA. Här diskuterar jag hur manlighet omförhandlas och prövas inom gymmet, hur den tar plats, trycks undan eller lyfts upp beroende på syftet. Den kan t.ex. förstärka den manliga homosociala gemenskapen eller trycka undan attribut som kan liknas vid feminina (vilket är ett sätt att skydda den manliga miljön). Då MMA kräver en stark och vältränad kropp i våldsam fysisk kamp är den i behov av att kunna hantera både den homosociala och homoerotiska miljön som präglar MMA-gymmet.

Denna process kallar jag för en maskulin mix, en hybrid av flera olika aspekter som måste hållas i schack för att inte MMA-gymmet ska laddas med en sexuell kontakt mellan de manliga utövarna. Men gymmet är också en plats för öppenhet där (halv)nakna kroppar är avsexualiserade och avdramatiserade.

Artikel IV, "The Legacy of Pankration: Mixed Martial Arts and The Posthuman Revival of a Fighting Culture" beskriver hur MMA-sporten vuxit fram genom att flera kampsportsdiscipliner från hela världen har fusionerats.

Ett annat tema är människors ambivalenta fascination inför våld och kamp. Informanterna i min studie hänvisar till den grekiska antikens "pankration" som var en olympisk gren, och att MMA liknar den sporten på många plan.

I artikeln undersöks också performanskulturen inom MMA, vad utövarna gör mot varandra med sina kroppar, vad detta innebär och hur vi därmed kan tolka MMA i ett teoretiskt (posthumanistiskt) perspektiv. Kampsportarna är omgivna av starka symboliska och metaforiska konnotationer. Det finns både en sensationslysten idé kring MMA som ett event för ett krigiskt spektakel, ett gladiatorspel med människor som slåss i burar, samtidigt som sporten strävar efter att vara en rumsren idrott.

Department of Culture and Media Studies

Ethnological Studies

Umeå University

ISSN 1103-6516

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