Body, mind, and community in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

AN HONORS THESIS
Presented to The Department of Anthropology
The Colorado College

By
Adriane Berenson
May 2015

Approved: ________________________

Date: ____________________________

Approved: ________________________

Date: ____________________________

Abstract

The martial art of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is a transformative and self-defining activity for many participants. This ethnography explores how Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu becomes a transformative practice. Through the use of thick participation and theories of embodiment this thesis proposes that Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu's intense physicality facilitates community building. This thesis considers the role of gender within this community and suggests that re-learning the body through ritual and embodied knowledge can lead to an altered body-mind experience.

Keywords: Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, thick participation, embodiment, community building, body and mind.

Honor Pledge

On my honor, I have neither given, nor received, any unauthorized aid on this honors thesis. Honor Code upheld.

Contents

Acknowledgments

Walking to lunch one day in January of 2014 I saw a flyer for a free Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) seminar at Colorado College, and thought I might give it a try. I had no idea this would come to profoundly impact my academic and personal life. I thank the Colorado College Tiger Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu club for introducing me to the wonderful world of BJJ.

I am grateful to everyone at Prime Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu for welcoming me as a student and researcher. Professor Marcelo Motta has supported me in this project and always provides excellent BJJ training. I thank the students whose interviews guided my research. To my training partners, I sincerely thank you. I have become a stronger person because of you all. I give special thanks to the pre-teens who are always kind after choking me out for the umpteenth time.

At Colorado College, my advisor Professor Esteban Gómez was invaluable in supporting my research and guiding me through the ups and downs of this process. Thank you for your patience, knowledge, and impeccable deadpan humor. My second advisor, Professor Sarah Hautzinger, was tremendously helpful in the conceptual and editing stages of this paper. Professor Devaka Premawardhana guided me to embodiment theory, and Professor Jonathan Lee helped me with phenomenology. I would like to thank Brenna Swift for her tireless editing help and Clara Grillet for translation help.

Though I came to Colorado College late in my undergraduate career, I have grown as a student, anthropologist, and human being during my time here. I am grateful to the professors and students at this wonderful institution. I would like to thank the Arts & Crafts Center, specifically Jeanne Steiner, for giving me a home at this school. Without that creative outlet, I may not have survived writing this thesis. The only thing left to say is #BJJ4Life.

Glossary

BJJ: Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

Belt system: BJJ uses a belt and stripe system to show skill and experience.

The belts progress from white, blue, purple, and brown to the highest honor, black belt. Stripes are awarded to show progress between each belt. Progress is slow in BJJ; it is said that it typically takes 10-15 years to receive a black belt.

Gi: BJJ is practiced in a uniform with heavy cotton jacket and trousers. It is similar to the karate kimono. The gi is tied with a belt indicating rank.

Joint-lock: Hyperextension of a joint to defeat an opponent.

Mats: BJJ is practiced on thick mats. The word is also used to signify the gym or training space.

No-gi: BJJ is also practiced without the gi uniform. Students wear a rash guard and shorts.

Professor: Black belts who teach are addressed as professor.

Rolling: The live full intensity practice characteristic of BJJ. This practice is also referred to as sparring or, in competitions, as fighting. Rolling can be used as a noun: a roll.

Slap and bump: The slap and bump refers to the handshake before rolling or competing. It signals the opponents' readiness for the roll and respect for each other.

Student: There is no standard term for a person who practices BJJ. In Portuguese the terms *atleta* (athlete), *estudante* (student), and *lutador de jiu-jitsu* (jiu-jitsu fighter) are all used. I have chosen to use student because of my experience as a new learner and the belief that those who practice BJJ are always learning. I will use the term "opponent" when discussing the competition or self-defense aspects of BJJ.

Submit (submission): Defeating an opponent through a choke or joint-lock.

Tap-out: Yielding to a submission or ending a fight by tapping on the opponent's body is referred to as "tapping" or a "tap-out."

Introduction

> At the end of class I rolled with Logan (a higher blue belt), and I felt incompetent. I couldn't really do anything, and it felt frustrating. So far I've learned how to do specific moves from specific positions, but I haven't learned how to get to those positions well. Or at least I haven't committed them to memory.
>
> Field Note: August 6, 2014.

I had practiced Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) at that point casually for seven months and seriously for one month. After seven months learning to ski or bike, I could become quite proficient, but I was still at a complete loss with similar training in BJJ. While my notes show a great deal of negativity, I did not feel unhappy. Driving home from the gym that day and countless others like it, I felt a kind of lightness alongside the feeling of incompetence.

I started BJJ like many students; I watch the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and, while I cringed at the concussion-causing head kicks, I was intrigued by the mysterious ground fighting. How did a muscled-up macho-man lose a fight to someone delicately tweaking his arm? I learned this was called an arm-bar, in which an opponent's elbow joint is hyper-extended (see Appendix 6). I was instantly hooked the first time I used this to defeat a man twice my size. "Addicted to BJJ" is a common saying.

I did not do martial arts as a kid. I can hardly be called athletic. I had never had an urge to kick, punch, or hurt someone. But something about BJJ attracted me. What is that *something*? How did fighting become a positive, transformative experience? That's where this investigation begins.

Entering the gym I had to give up all pretenses of knowing what I was doing or what I was capable of. I had to reconfigure my relationship with my body. I developed relationships with other students both on and off the mat. Along the way I found and created a community. I have felt a significant change within myself that I struggle to describe. I call this transformation a philosophical meditation. I am learning a new way of being through live fighting as I reconstruct the way I am in my body and my mind-body connection.

Martial arts involve body, mind, and practice where a student experiences change in all three (Zarrilli 2004). A common metaphor for learning BJJ is that of learning a language. My first few months of study I struggled to pronounce sounds. Now I am learning words and trying to commit them to memory. This struggle is indicative not only of the physical practice but of a more complex individual and interpersonal journey.

My thesis is an ethnography of an action-and movement-based culture. I will present an immersive exploration of the world of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and show its practiced culture through my own personal narrative. This thesis contributes to the small but growing body of anthropological scholarship exploring martial arts. Bryan Hogeveen (2013) provides an excellent academic interpretation of BJJ. His methodology is based in sociological analysis. My thesis adds a more ethnographic perspective with a greater focus on personal transformation. It contributes a first person narrative interwoven with implicit academic interpretation.

BJJ is, for many students, a transformative and self-defining activity. This thesis explores how it gains such importance in students' lives. While it could be assumed that a martial arts activity is a self-contained hobby for North American participants, I show how BJJ has a much greater impact and importance for many students. I propose that through BJJ's intense physicality students relate to others in new ways and this facilitates community building. I then propose that students redefine their bodies and minds through ritual and embodied learning. This thesis is a case study or example of how BJJ can become a transformative experience. I will explore several mechanisms of how this complex and deep process occurs.

My writing follows my own exploration of BJJ. I first planned out how to study BJJ; once starting my immersion, I contemplated physical intimacy and gender and explored how these facilitated community building. I then experienced and investigated personal transformation and rituality in BJJ. This thesis presents BJJ as a philosophical experience capable of altering the mind-body connection.

Thick participation in a BJJ community

An inherent challenge with my thesis is producing a written academic product out of an embodied physical practice. My goal was to gain a practical knowledge of BJJ and translate it into discursive knowledge. This thesis is a product of personal participation and subsequent external verbalization. It is, as martial arts ethnographer Jaida Samudra describes "[a] cultural knowledge recorded first in the anthropologist's body and only later externalized as visual or textual data for purposes of analysis" (2008: 667). My ethnography of the Prime Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Center community is an attempt to translate bodily knowledge into a written form.

Knowledge through participation is a familiar concept to anthropologists, but it must be further developed for the exploration of sociality surrounding a physical activity. Traditional thick description takes the anthropologist into the details of a culture to interpret social discourse (Geertz 1973: 20–21). Thick participation, however, puts the anthropologist into the details from a first person perspective (Samudra 2008). The anthropologist has an insider's experience of shared social discourses instead of an observer's point of view. Thick participation was crucial for this ethnography because the knowledge of BJJ is held in the body. Thick description, in this context, would only provide cursory, superficial knowledge on social interactions. I delved into the personal bodily experience and shared social interactions by engaging in the participatory aspect.

Participatory, practical knowledge is what Samudra calls "knowledge in the body" (2008). There is no textbook of BJJ; its information is held in the professor's body. Professors transmit technical knowledge to students through demonstration. Students then attempt to replicate their movements. Students repetitively practice or drill a technique, while professors offer adjustment and clarification. Professors know BJJ in and through their bodies, so they must work within bodily language to instruct students.

While humans share language that can be spoken and written, the language of the body is not so clear. It can, however, be brought into dialogue through participation and practice. "The communications of the body can be verified even when not encoded into language because they work in practice" (Samudra 2008: 667). I needed to go through the bodily dialogue to understand the language of BJJ.

I engaged thick participation as an anthropological method, and it formed the epistemological basis of this study. As Michael Jackson, a scholar of embodied anthropology explains:

> To break the habit of using a linear communicational model for understanding bodily praxis, it is necessary to adopt a methodological strategy of joining in without ulterior motive and literally putting oneself in the place of another person: inhabiting their world. Participation thus becomes an end in itself rather than a means of gather closely-observed data which will be subject to interpretation elsewhere after the event (1983: 340).

Through my embodied experience I developed an understanding of the physicality, emotional responses, and social interactions in BJJ. I composed an analytic narrative of my thick participation and personal experiences. My experiences were crucial to this study, but I also relied on narratives from students. I used interviews and personal conversations to gain insight into their journeys.

This study focuses on a BJJ gym in Colorado Springs called Prime Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Center (henceforth referred to as Prime). Prime is growing rapidly. Classes for both kids and adults are offered. There are usually 10-20 students per class. The student population is diverse; there are a wide variety of professions and ages represented. Prime has an approximately 80:20 male-to-female ratio, which is typical of BJJ according to Prime students. I joined Prime under the leadership of Professor Marcelo Motta. Professor Marcelo is a native of Brazil and third-degree black belt, which indicates that he has held the highest rank in BJJ for nine years. I began BJJ in January 2014. I decided to study it six months later and practiced it ethnographically from July 2014 through January 2015 by attending approximately four classes per week. This thesis is an exploration of the contentions I discovered in the transformative experience of the BJJ fight during my ethnographic experience.

BJJ as a "real fight"

BJJ is a martial art of grappling and submission with an emphasis on ground fighting. It is based on using leverage and body mechanics to subdue an opponent on the ground. It has three related components: martial arts, self-defense, and competition. BJJ promotes the idea that anyone, regardless of size, strength, or age, can learn to defend themselves through leverage and movement. The students in my study were drawn to BJJ for a variety of reasons. Intensity, authenticity, and creativity were three trends that were mentioned most often.

Students noted a distinction between the “forms” practiced in martial arts such as karate and the active grappling techniques of BJJ. This full intensity, live fighting practiced in the gym is called rolling. Ali Varallo, a blue belt, or second level rank, recalled the first time she tried BJJ:

> Ali explained: That was the first time I ever wanted to do any martial art.
>
> I responded: *Really?*
>
> Ali continued: Nothing, like I always thought, my brother did all the karate, tae kwon do. I thought they were lame. It's like they don't work. They look fake.

Ali wanted the experience of live fighting. She was searching for the authenticity of a “real fight” without hurting anybody. For Ali and other students at Prime, BJJ fulfills this desire with the ability to roll at full intensity. While there are other martial arts that can be practiced with the full intensity of a live fight, many students at Prime expressed the idea that martial arts based on striking are too dangerous to be practiced at full intensity in the gym. As John Herrera, a purple belt, or third level rank, and instructor at Prime explained,

> If you're doing other martial arts, a lot of it is based on striking and really aggressive full contact. And jiu-jitsu is the only full contact martial art you can do every day and not end up with these crazy brain injuries and broken bones, you know what I mean? It's safe to do, full contact, every day, and it's active. You still get your aggressive rolling without having to hurt anything.

Individuality and creativity are embedded in the structure of BJJ. It is often said within the gym that there is no wrong way of doing BJJ. Any technique is acceptable as long as it does not put students in danger. In effect, BJJ allows for limitless innovation. This is in contrast to what Zarrilli (1984) calls “traditional martial arts” in which “artists perform specific strips of codified behavior passed on to them by their master teachers. Or, if they improvise, they do so within such a restricted field of choice and with such a precise vocabulary of techniques that the parameter of the actions are strictly prescribed" (191). BJJ students are expected to develop their own "game" or way of rolling. It is known throughout Prime that John Herrera likes to roll backwards onto his shoulders as a defense mechanism and that another purple belt, Tim Varallo, uses "deep half guard", where he attacks from underneath his opponent while controlling his or her legs. Professor Marcelo favors neither of these styles. His nickname is *Guardinha*, little guard, signifying that he prefers controlling his opponent with his own legs from the bottom position (see Appendix 1).

Although students at Prime tend to speak of self-defense as a secondary component of their motivations, it is still crucial in BJJ. Professor Ethan Day, who teaches at Prime, typically references self-defense tactics in his classes. He said at the end of one class: "We are all here for losing weight, self-defense, healthy lifestyle. There's a reason that safety is at the bottom of the pyramid of needs. If you know you can defend yourself, then you carry yourself with more confidence, and you know that you can defend yourself if you need."

There is no single reason for joining BJJ. It attracts a variety of people and influences them in a multitude of ways. BJJ is distinctive in allowing for individuality within strong group dynamics. It is also unique in the degree of physical contact between strangers.

Physicality and gender

BJJ is a physically intimate martial art. It originates from Judo, a Japanese martial art, which is founded on throwing and tripping opponents. BJJ, however, plays out on the ground with students embroiled in each others limbs searching for ways to choke or joint-lock their opponents, or, in competition, winning through a point system based on dominant body positioning if no submissions occur. The goal is to force an opponent to end the fight by “tapping out” or signaling their submission by tapping on the opponent’s body. Students try to trick opponents into defeat through technique instead of through brute force. This is done by keeping opponents tight to the body and maneuvering their limbs or necks into a weak position. BJJ is practiced in a “gi” or “kimono” uniform made of heavy cotton. The gi is used to pull and control an opponent. Leaving no space, as is commonly said, means using proper technique to block opponents from moving effectively (see Appendices 1-4).

The physical intimacy of these positions cannot be overlooked. It pushes some students away, yet, for students who are habituated to the non-sexuality of the positions, it is a driving force of creating community. Ali Varallo described the physicality of BJJ saying:

> You're so physically close, it goes beyond the normal experiences of human acquaintanceship. It's more than a hug. I have to trust that the person I tap to will let go, and they have the same of me. You can't trust people not to kill you or seriously harm you without developing deep bonds.

BJJ puts me, as a female in a male-heavy sport, in close physical contact with men. For me, it has rarely been a concern. My first time trying BJJ, I was paired with a man to learn the triangle choke (see Appendix 5). I mention gender discomfort at only two points in my field

notes:

> Donald also put me in a triangle while I was trying to break out of guard. He taught me to stack him and grab his butt to twist out of it. I had hesitation to grab his butt, but when I grabbed the gi pants near his butt he corrected me to actually grab his butt. This is the first time that I have felt any gender discomfort in BJJ. I'm not even sure to what extent it was gender based versus just crossing the boundary of where you normally

> touch anyway. I've never grabbed someone's butt in a non-romantic situation. It felt weird. I'm sure I would get used to it after another time or two, but I didn't like it this time. It is something that I need to learn quickly though.
>
> Field Note: August 22, 2014

I separated my sexual body from my BJJ body. The women in my study shared a similar sentiment, yet each had a different conception of her body[1]. Ali Varallo describes how she was initially uncomfortable with the intimacy:

> It took probably about two months until one day it [gender] just stopped being important. At first I hated the idea of being that physically close to people... One guy, and I'd been doing it for maybe like a month, he started to do that [gi technique] but it was literally he opened my gi, and I thought I was going to have a fucking heart attack. I was like, shit, what, that, he opened my clothes! Oh god no! And then, I guess one day I just, it had been desensitized. It didn't matter anymore.

Men also manage intimacy with females and other males. It would be highly inappropriate (and reason enough to be thrown out of the gym) to describe sexuality with female students. Patrick Yarlett, a blue belt, describes his view on rolling with females saying, “For me, I've never had a problem with training with other females... I'm not having those thoughts when I'm rolling with someone. I'm like, shit I hope this chick doesn't choke me out.”

Rolling etiquette between men and women is frequently discussed in the BJJ community. The controversy centers on how men use their strength against women. Should a man “muscle her up”, in other words, use his full strength against a woman? The general consensus among women in my study is that men should rely on their technique instead of strength, yet they should not “go easy” on women. Some women, including Mo Black, a blue belt who trains for a career in combat sports, instead prefer when men treat them as equals. “Sometimes they're too gentle with me, and I'm like, okay, I'm not a flower. I'll be okay. My petals won't fall off. Or they just go like ham and try to like, I gotta beat this girl!" Mo enjoys this challenge, and Professor Marcelo sometimes urges men to "muscle her up."

BJJ can be viewed as a gender equalizing activity. Men and women engage in an activity with the same rules and goals. Males and females[2] are, however, separated in competition after the age of 16 and most say they prefer rolling with someone of their own gender. I personally prefer rolling with women because there is no feeling of holding back. Men refrain from using their full strength, and this is noticeable in the roll. With women it feels like a genuine battle, or what Ali Varallo called a "real fight." I heard from some men that they too favor rolling with other men. With men they feel that they can fully exert themselves; that they can fight at 100% intensity. So while the BJJ mat is a space where men and women can engage each other with equal goals and equal abilities, it is not a gender-neutral arena.

Community-building

Regardless of gender, age, size, or ability, BJJ involves intimate physical contact between students. Patrick Yarlett said: "It's an intimate thing, rolling with somebody... But a lot of these guys I feel closer to than my family." I noted a particular bonding that occurred in the gym. I asked, what are these bonds and how does a combat sport foster them? In interviews I asked participants to describe the atmosphere at Prime. Nearly all repeated the same word: family. When I questioned Jonathan Grobstein, a white belt or beginning student, why Prime is a family, he replied, "Because it is! It's shared pain. When two or more people share in a challenging experience, be it emotionally or physically, a bond is formed. When you continue to experience this, that bond strengthens and a familial feel is associated with it.”

The mechanism behind this bond is the trust that is built through the intensity and intimacy of rolling. Ryan Maisel, a recent blue belt, explained:

> You have the potential to severely, severely hurt somebody and your partners do too, and you kinda have to trust them. You have to trust that they're not going to actually choke you dead, to trust that they're not going to snap your arm every single time you're drilling. And that trust can build into friendships really quickly, quicker than normal because you have the trust earlier.

Kyle Green (2011) describes this family feeling as intimacy. He writes in an ethnography of Mixed Martial Arts gyms that “We build intimacy through shared vulnerability and toughness, the two extremes” (390). What Ryan Maisel described above is a physical vulnerability to the training partner. The intensity of a potentially life-threatening roll demands trust between partners, which is a component of all relationships. The intense and intimate contact in BJJ facilitates such trust.

Another aspect of building intimacy is the shared experience of exhaustion. Classes and roll sessions are challenging and draining. When I asked John Herrera why BJJ fosters close friendships he replied, “I guess it's that we suffer together.” Professor Marcelo described the experience similarly saying, “You know, I believe that, a hard time brings people together… I believe that when you go through that hard time on the mat… when there is a difficulty, it tends to bring people together.” Students experience physical challenges together and share an understanding of the embodied sensation of exhaustion.

Shared bodily practices facilitate community building (Samudra 2008). While rolling students’ bodies move together in a kind of opposing synchronicity. Partners’ bodies fall into a rhythm. Students adjust their techniques according to the weight and skill level of their partner. They become aware of their partner's bodily specificities. Their bodies are in tune with each other. These movements can be interpreted as semiotic conversations where students understand and make meaning from of each other's movements.

Eduardo Kohn (2013) calls these conversations chains of indices. He argues for a new definition of index that is alive and involved with the world. Indices do not stand alone but are active in producing meaning. In BJJ each movement is a sign that an opponent interprets as an index of a broader technique. For example, pushing an opponents arm towards her or his body indexes the triangle choke for a student who is familiar with this technique (see Appendix 5). That student will then move to avoid the choke. This back-and-forth conversation is a chain of indices. Indices build on each other to create a semiotic conversation between opponents. Semiosis occurs among students instead of strictly within the individual (Kohn 2013).

This semiotic conversation and shared bodily consciousness creates a shared understanding. From personal experience, I argue that the communal embodied experience is more intense initially than relationships built through words. Knowing a partner's body is an intimate relationship. Students described this as a truly honest interaction.

Danny Garcia, a blue belt, suggested that I start this thesis with the words "slap and bump" and "the mask falls off". In a group interview with Danny, James White, a white belt, said:

> My favorite part of it is just like being able to roll with somebody new. Like the whole like shaking hands before that and afterwards because, to me, it's true honesty. Like you know a person a whole lot more after that experience and that is what creates the family bond. I mean, I've been here a month, and these guys

> being willing to sit down and all of us sharing stories, I know them better than a lot of people in my life. Like doing jiu-jitsu, the masks just fall off. They aren't there. You have to be truly honest.

There is no lying in BJJ, my participants often said. While lying about one's skills is possible in many arenas of life, lies in BJJ are exposed during the roll session. A student can wear a black belt, but her or she must prove those skills on the mat. Green describes the sparring session as exposure of the self, "It allows the other to see, and experience, their opponent at the most basic level. When we feel exposed planned presentations of the self are minimized as we shrink inward and are laid bare to feel the affect of another…" (2011: 390). Partners cannot hide shortcomings from each other. Mo Black explained exposure saying, "Jiu-jitsu is very truthful. You spend a lot of time together. You see people at their weakest and try to lift them up. In a way that's what a family does". Sharing the moment of feeling weak is a vulnerable position. Students must trust that their partners will support them physically and mentally. They must trust that their partners will not harm them and will support them when they struggle.

Physical intimacy, trust, shared struggle, and honesty between partners are the outcomes of BJJ practice. I do not mean to say that this occurs between all partners. Eric LaPorte, a blue belt who has trained at multiple gyms, remarked, "I think the Brazilian style, the culture is what makes it like a family. I think Professor [Marcelo] is way different than any of my other professors as far as making us a family and forcing us to be a family." Professor Marcelo fosters community through his friendly and approachable demeanor as well as gym policies. He insists on a strict gym uniform. John Donohue (1990) explained how gym uniform patches are used to foster a community or group sentiment:

> There is further use of the uniform to express group membership, especially in arts like judo and kendo, where large groups of practitioners get together for tournaments. Patches bearing the name of the dojo [gym] are frequently sewn onto uniforms and are both an expression of pride and membership. Such patches are important expressions of allegiance even within the dojo itself (60).

According to other students the physical mechanics of BJJ work to create community regardless of cultural background or school policies. Anson Park, a purple belt who has also trained at multiple gyms, explained,

> I think a lot of jiu jitsu gyms say that [it feels like a family]… because relative to most other martial arts or forms of exercise, it can be pretty strenuous. Like when you go through strenuous things with people, you tend to bond with them, so I think that's why they talk about it being a family.

Students roll with nearly everyone in the gym and develop relationships with a majority of students. The feeling of family is shared across the gym. I was surprised to find these relationships replicated outside the gym. Ali and Tim Varallo offered me a job taking care of their house and pets. It struck me as odd because they had only known me in the BJJ gym. Why did they hire me instead of a neighbor or professional service? We had established trust from months of rolling. Since the Varallos already experienced a physical trust with me, it was easier for me to trust me with the care of their home.

BJJ facilitates a supportive network. Students trust each other in vulnerable situations, so they are more easily able to give and receive other kinds of social support. This type of group is what Katherine Giuffre (2013), a sociologist who studies communities and networks, calls a support community. Students experience an identity and community allegiance through Prime, what Giuffre calls a *feeling of belonging*. These ties create a network where students lend each other services and support. In my case, with Tim and Ali, this network facilitated a large service, housesitting. Giuffre categorizes support in such networks into five groups (Figure 1). Students at Prime reported receiving and giving support that satisfy all of her categories. This demonstrates the strength of the support network at Prime.

Figure 1. Types of support between Prime students

Emotional Aid	• My boyfriend recently went through a health crisis... There were several Prime members that knew what I was going through and they were extremely supportive emotionally and offered any sort of help I needed. (Amber Sathre)
Small Services	• The Varallos have brought my wife and I stuff from the grocery store when we had the flu. (Ryan Palmer)
Large Services	• I babysit [for their kid]. (Mo Black)
Financial Aid	• They understand my struggle trying to be fighter. Marcelo has given me coaching jobs; Ali and Tim, they also give me jobs...They also buy me mentality books, and t-shirts because they know I don't make much money. (Mo Black)
Companionship	• I have a whole community I could fall on if I needed to. It helps mentally to be able to rely on that. (Amber Sathre)

Giuffre argues against the prevailing view that individuals within networks create supportive relationships. Rather it is the activity within the network that creates these relationships. She explains:

> We think we are lucky that the people in our clubs are such a friendly bunch, that our strongest ties are such supportive and nice people… But Wellman and Wortley argue that it is the networks that draw forth these attributes of friendliness and supportiveness from others rather than that friendliness and supportiveness of the other leads us to form ties with them (2013: 58).

I argue that BJJ is a prime example of this concept because it is largely the intimate physical actions of the martial art that foster, even force, these supportive relationships.

Prime therefore provides what Ray Oldenburg (1999) calls a third place, or an informal meeting place apart from work and home with a supportive community. He argues that these places fulfill the need for a type of sociability that can be fulfilled by the local pub or coffeehouse. Prime provides a social space that breaks from the banal routines that Oldenburg argues characterize modern society. BJJ adds another layer because it is not only a social place but also a physical and mental outlet. This feeling of an alternative home is what continually drew me back Prime.

Learning to roll

> It's my first time back since being sick for two weeks. I feel tired after doing the warm-up, drilling, and rolling once. It feels good just to be in this room though. I'm done, and I should go home. Instead I'm "killing time" by sitting and watching. I would rather sit in this overly warm and sweaty room because it feels good to be here.
> I had been thinking about how I felt that I needed to get aggression out. But I'm not an aggressive person. Instead I truly needed to move my body. Even just for 40 minutes. I needed to talk to everyone. They care. There really is a difference.
>
> Field Note: November 1, 2014

I needed to move my body, I wrote, but what about the movements of BJJ felt good to me? BJJ demands that the body move in new and unusual ways. It is difficult to describe a system of movement in words. While most moves have names, they often use simile to describe the look of a move instead of its purpose or mechanism. The flower sweep, for example, describes how the body opens like a blossoming flower to sweep the opponent to his or her back but gives no information on the execution of this technique. BJJ instruction therefore relies primarily on demonstration and drilling. The professor demonstrates a technique while describing it in words. His words, however, try to convey knowledge in his body: move your hips here and bam! Professor Marcelo often uses sounds to show the force and direction of his movements. This discursive instruction on a somatic practice is challenging. A field note from my third month training at Prime shows frustration with my inability to transfer discursive instruction into bodily understanding:

> We worked on the same thing as yesterday, and I struggled so hard at it. I couldn't get the coordination even though it was a relatively straightforward choke (headlock to cross-collar choke on the ground). I got frustrated, and when Marcelo asked how it was I said that I couldn't get it.
>
> Field Note: September 20, 2014

In another note I discuss a movement that requires an inversion and roll that differs from the vertical and lateral movements that are habitual in everyday motion:

> We were doing the granby roll [Figure 2], which I feel almost incapable of doing. I can see it intellectually and understand it, but getting half way through it I stall and my brain and body seem to separate.
>
> Field Note: September 12, 2014

Figure 2. Professor Marcelo demonstrates the Granby Roll

For me, learning BJJ has been a process of experiencing a different way of communicating with my body, a different movement style, and a different way of thinking. Tim Varallo, a purple belt, used an analogy to explain the slow progress of the BJJ student:

> The common analogy you get is the language analogy: jiu-jitsu is a language... and you have to learn to speak it... You're a white belt. You're learning words. You're learning how to say hello, thank you, what this word means. You know, an arm-bar. You get your blue belt. You're learning how to somewhat communicate. You're a purple belt. You're learning how to talk. Purple belts, that level, we say you actually know jiu jitsu... You're a black belt, you can write poetry.

Progress in BJJ is primarily the reconfiguration of the body and incorporation of somatic knowledge. Loïs Wacquant, the foundational sociology scholar of martial arts, explained this process for boxers:

> It is also this corporeal investment over time, the slow process of incorporation of pugilistic technique and of somatization of its basic principles, that marks the boundary between recreational practitioners and regular boxers and prohibits an immediate passage from one category to another. (2006: 143)

Here Wacquant is talking about boxing as a pastime versus as a career, which is not central at Prime (only a handful of students are looking to make a living at it). But the distinction is relevant nonetheless—it is the difference between those who enter the first step of the transformative process but leave for long enough that they must start over when they return. Wacquant's language is important; progress is in*corp*oration, or the transfer of visual and discursive knowledge into somatic understanding. Hogeveen (2013) describes the result of this change saying "[a] grappler's body programme is a way of being-in-the-world that has incorporated the nuances and intricacies of their art" (90). Also necessary is the ability and confidence to replicate these skills under pressure and with appropriate speed while rolling.

BJJ goes beyond bodily reconfiguration; it can lead to transformation in several ways. While the immediate goal of learning BJJ is to defeat opponents, all the students I spoke with recounted physical, social, and mental changes extending beyond the martial art itself[3]. Rituals set the stage for these changes.

Ritual

Rituals help prompt long-term personal transformations. Rituals tell the individual to detach from his or her outside qualms and engage in the present. Ritual here refers to the creation of a delimited space. Rituals create an "as if" space according to Richard Schechner (2003) who borrows Victor Turner's phrase. Rituals indicate the transition into the "here and now" (Schechner 2003: xxvii). The BJJ gym uses rituals that separate outside and inside and engagement and release from the BJJ code. Patrick Baudry (1992) describes the dimensions of ritual in martial art as "[t]he appreciation of a place, the qualification of a territory, an identification of time and an inscription in time, the organization of a relationship with oneself and the other" (145)[4]. Rituals alert the student to the change in their place, time, and self-relationship when entering and exiting the gym.

The BJJ gym has a strict set of rules that establish this delineation between the sacred mat space and everyday life. Students must remove their shoes upon entering the gym. This avoids contamination of the mats but also symbolizes leaving personal and professional life at the door. The mat space is traditionally considered sacred. Students are instructed to bow to the mat when stepping on or off. This demonstrates the student's respect for the learning and fighting space. Bowing, which is a practice borrowed from Japanese martial arts, is also required at the beginning and end of each class. Students stand on one side of the mats across from the professor. Students follow the professors' command to bow and repeat the word *os*, which is a word of respect of Japanese origin[5]. Many students view this ritual as a way of showing respect to the professor. These practices show how BJJ creates a break from quotidian life. They remind the student that he or she is beginning to engage in a philosophical activity.

Dress is another ritualized function in BJJ. It is practiced in a *gi*, which is tied with a colored belt that indicates the student's experience and rank. The *gi* creates a physical sensation of entering into the philosophical mindset. As Baudry explains, "It [the outfit] is not a matter of being functional (nor ornamental), rather a costume required to enter a role and experience the sensation particular to the martial practice" (147)[6].

Finally, rolling sessions and competition matches begin and end with a hand slap and fist bump. This both expresses respect for the opponent and alerts the student that he or she is entering in an intense, dangerous, and aggressive activity. It is a communication between opponents that they engage each other in the roll.

Some students perceive the separation between everyday life and BJJ as so great that it feels like a religion. I heard the church metaphor directly from Prime students. Ali Varallo described the importance of BJJ for her and her husband: “Tim and I, we call it our church.” Religion, at a basic level, is a practice and expression of internal beliefs and ways of thinking. Wacquant creates a parallel between boxers’ devotion to their sport and the tenets and practice of religion:

> By willfully adhering to the dictates of the ethic of sacrifice, boxers tear themselves from the everyday world and create a moral and sensual universe sui generis that 'elevates the individual above himself and 'affords [them] a life very different, more exalted and more intense' than that to which their mundane circumstances would consign them - which is Emile Durkheim's (1975:23) definition of religion (1998: 346).

Jonathan Grobstein said of his training partner, Eric LaPorte: “As he says sometimes on Facebook, ‘Going to church aka BJJ.’ At 9am in the morning on Sundays. It's just kind of funny that he said that. I was laughing because I'm reading it as I'm getting ready for church. I'm like, yeah, I understand.” Linking BJJ to religion shows the idea of devotion to the practice and the internalization of a belief system.

Following this analogy, the BJJ gym is a physical space that symbolizes, on a fundamental level, a break from secular spaces and the active engagement in a system of beliefs. It is demarcated by symbolic barriers, which notify the BJJ student that he or she is entering a sacred space. These barriers incite a set of rules that are specific to that space. Entering the gym sets in motion a series of rituals that engage the student in the BJJ mindset.

These rituals are not enumerated on a rules placard. Yet they form the basis from which the student can engage in his or her personal philosophical meditation. Baudry explains the development of interpersonal ritual codes saying: “It is through training and a gradual progression that ritual knowledge is learned: it is contained in a gesture through which one gradually discovers its profound significance” (1992: 145) [7]. Rituals make BJJ more than simple fighting techniques. The transformative power of the BJJ roll originates organically from its rituals and practice. In other words, personal transformation is not an immediate consequence of ritual practices; it develops as the student repeatedly engages in the gestures of rolling.

Personal transformation

John Donohue (1990) asserts that “[t]hese modern [martial] arts are not mere techniques… they are rather systems oriented around the integration of physical training, mental discipline, and philosophical insight for the promotion of spirituality and the development of character” (56). Many students at Prime described experiencing this type of personal development as a result of their practice of BJJ. Danny Garcia described the profound effect that BJJ had on his development: “It sounds like a cliché, but when they say that jiu-jitsu saves lives, well I think it saved mine.” Danny recounted returning from a military deployment in Afghanistan where he lost his closest friend. He believes learning new skills in BJJ helped him cope with depression.

Many students at Prime recounted learning new methods for approaching challenges, experiencing changes in temperament, and adopting new mind-frames. Patrick Yarlett described the changes he experienced:

> I think you learn to deal with being in crappy situations in jiu-jitsu. So like a lot of people when they first start out, they have a real problem with like the pressure you get when somebody's on top of you. You can't breathe and maybe you start freaking out... You get used to that pressure, and those awkward situations, I think, translate in like life situations. When you get in a crappy situation, you take your time, think your way through it instead of trying to freak out.... I don't freak out. I just kinda roll.

Students noted how BJJ taught them to relax in tense and challenging situations. New students are known to "spaz", called the "white belt flail" where they move constantly and try to escape poor positions by throwing their weight and limbs around. Anson Park described it as "a physical expression of both panic and frustration." This method is exhausting and generally ineffective. Anson added, "but it's natural when you are getting dominated I think. It's kind of instinctual." Students are then instructed to relax, breathe, and take their time. Anson described this development as "becoming more relaxed and working your way out of bad positions in a methodical way, instead of flapping around like a fish out of water." High-level students often pause during a roll to breathe and wait for a strategic time to move.

Professor Marcelo reinforced the importance of remaining calm. Sitting on the side during an open mat session, he coached a struggling student by saying, "When you're on the bottom you have to be a master of patience or you'll lose focus and lose." This methodology is institutionalized in sport BJJ; points are awarded in competition only if a competitor can "stabilize" in a position for three seconds. Keeping calm in challenging situations requires practice and inner control. Consciousness of the inner self is a necessary step in BJJ development.

Students at Prime have referred to the mat as a mirror, a place where one experiences their most honest self. I believe this metaphor extends beyond a reflection of one's current self. The mat is an area to learn and practice different reactions. Students arrive with a set of habits and responses. BJJ places them in situations to which they are unaccustomed: being attacked in intimate proximity by a friendly opponent. As students reconfigure their instinctual body movements, they forge new mental schema.

For the first few months the experience of rolling produces fear and the physiological responses of panic. I remember feeling frozen. I could only react to my partner's attacks. My unfamiliarity with the bodily practices of BJJ precluded a calm mental state. The knowledge of BJJ is written in the body, so it took many months of class sessions to develop a sufficient repertoire with which my body could interpret situations. Rolling is dynamic and positions change too rapidly for an analytic observation of one's actions. The ability to engage in a roll is therefore dependent on somatic incorporation of techniques. Even when I could verbally describe the steps to a successful arm-bar (see Appendix 6), I did not know this technique until I could execute it instantaneously during a live roll. While some students at Prime write notes on techniques, most people with whom I spoke believe they best learn BJJ through repetitive practice of a technique and only fully understand when they can use it while rolling.

I have described rolling as a collaborative, team-centered activity, but BJJ is a combat sport whose goal is to submit the partner through a choke or joint-lock. Achievement is forcing the partner to stop the roll by tapping out. The tap-out is egodestroying, humbling, and, for beginners, beyond frustrating. While upper belts repeat the mantra that everyone taps, that it is a necessary part of learning, that you are not improving if you are not tapping every day, it feels like a crushing defeat. Beginners are tapped over and over often by the same movement in the same roll. This repetition is key; frustration builds over the first few taps, but it crosses a threshold where the beginner must accept humility. It is at this point where the philosophical meditation begins. Tapping out becomes a release, a literal, physical release of maiming or deadly pressure and an emotional release of pride and confidence. Learning the feeling of this release teaches the student a new mindset.

A new way of being emerges on the mat. I was terrified at the beginning of every roll: giving up the feeling of control over the situation felt like standing at the top of the high-dive board not knowing how to swim. An emotional lump formed in my throat with every consecutive tap-out. Over time, however, I became more comfortable with losing. I could congratulate my partner on a successful submission rather than cower in self-pity. It never feels good to tap-out. It is exactly this discomfort, however, that creates the space for the philosophical meditation. The student must be brought out of the security of quotidian life to experience a new mental state. Jackson (1983) explained this change saying, “the habitual or ‘set’ relations between ideas, experiences and body practices may be broken. Thus altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas,” (334). The BJJ student must break with the control he or she feels over body and mind to experience losing oneself in the roll, losing oneself to the being-in-the-body that divides BJJ from everyday life.

I have experienced a shift in mental schema coinciding with my increasing physical comfort[8] with BJJ. I still experience frustration. Development does not create complete disengaged ease. Instead change occurs in how one works through the frustration. Does the frustration turn into fear and flailing or into taking a deep breath and working with one's bodily knowledge? As I became more comfortable in this terrified yet calm state of mind and being, my experience of BJJ transformed.

Rolling, in BJJ, is a philosophical meditation. Using the term philosophy invokes a weighty responsibility to an ancient field. Modern Western philosophy is commonly thought to be studied in an armchair deep in thought, but as the 20th century philosopher Pierre Hadot demonstrates, this is not an historical demand. Philosophy is a practice, or as he describes it, a spiritual exercise. He explains an historical point of view that "The philosophical act is not merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being" (1995: 83). Philosophy is a way of being that is practiced in action. I refer to Hadot's conceptions of philosophy because the philosophy of BJJ is not in its discourse (of which there is little) but in its presence of being and actions[9]. BJJ is a philosophical act that facilitates a personal transformation.

Embodied knowledge

BJJ is an embodied practice. Its knowledge is experienced in the body. Talking or writing about these body-centered phenomena is challenging. The vocabulary of the body also goes beyond what oral language can grasp. In similar examples, art and music can be difficult to describe, and words are not always sufficient to convey their meaning (Jackson 1983). A visual or auditory phenomenon can exceed language. Knowledge in the body, however, does not necessarily preclude description.

Bodily knowledge has long been subordinated in scholarship. The Western tradition has upheld the Platonic-Cartesian mind-body split. According to this model reason is a purely mental process. The body muddles objective knowledge and should, therefore, be disregarded in the scientific search for understanding. During the 20th century it became clear the Platonic-Cartesian dualism did not capture the breadth of human experience and knowledge (Johnson 1987). With this shift embodied knowledge gained credit. Feminist scholars argued that the body has been subordinated because it is considered female while the mind is male. Kathy Davis (1997) contends that "[t]he female body becomes a metaphor for the corporeal pole of this dualism, representing nature, emotionality, irrationality and sensuality… the female body represented all that needed to be tamed and controlled by the (dis)embodied, objective, male scientist" (5).

Embodied knowledge gained notice through the recognition of the primacy of the subject in knowing. This is, in part, based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical idea of the body-in-motion. He claims that "…no [human being] perceives except on condition of being a self of movement" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 257 in Farnell and Varela 2008: 216). This changes the Cartesian model of "I think therefore I am" to "I can, therefore I am" (Farnell and Varela 2008: 219). These changes gave way to what is known as the *first somatic revolution*.

Michael Jackson and Thomas Csordas, the main figures of this paradigm, stress the importance of somatic knowledge and breaking the logo-centric bias. Jackson argues that culture is a lived experience, and translating it into words does not always convey its full meaning. He posits that "thinking and communicating through the body precede and to a great extent always remain beyond speech" (1983: 328). Anthropology and most academic disciplines favor semiotic knowledge, what Jackson calls the logo-centric bias. Ethnographic data, however, is often written in the body, without a shareable language. Jackson suggests that "[m]eaning should not be reduced to a sign, which as it were, lies on a separate plane outside the immediate domain of an act" (1983: 328). In Eduardo Kohn's language, meaning is found in active semiotic conversations where signs and their indices are wrapped up in the lived world (2013). Ethnographers and scholars should, therefore, derive their ideas from the lived experience.

The *second somatic revolution* critiques Jackson and Csordas for furthering the semiotic/somatic dualism. Brenda Farnell and Charles Varela focus on feeling more than the act of doing. They argue that somatic and semiotic knowledge are not necessarily in opposition. Instead they propose that semiotic knowledge can be somatic and that for social human beings it must be semiotic (Farnell and Varela 2008: 215). This second paradigm of "dynamic embodiment" moves from the first paradigm of talk *of* the body to talk *from* the body.

BJJ is somatic experience, but in my opinion it does not exclude semiotic discussion. It must be approached in a novel way, through experience, and must be addressed in body-centric language. The words put on a page must be guided by the words within the bodily practice. These words can be simple, common sense, or roundabout descriptions. They may resemble analogy or simile in an attempt to convey an experience *from* the body.

The methodology in this study was initially intended to gather participatory data and analyze it with software, but this did not capture the sense of my experience. Reducing it to coded categories was inadequate and created a distortion of the lived experience. I became an ethnographic student of BJJ at first to glean data about the actions and thoughts of other students, but I could only access the superficial knowledge of interpersonal gym relationships through this methodology.

As my field notes shifted in emphasis from what others were saying to what I was feeling, I began to comprehend the philosophical meditation embedded in the BJJ roll. Its essence is complex and deeply personal. My experience is my own, and I make no claim of capturing a universal truth. I can, however, connect my experience to others' experiences through the bodily knowledge that I have shared with my rolling partners. My body-in-motion has become attuned to those of my partners. I learn from them as their movements are inscribed in my body through repeated practice and rolling. The theory of embodied knowledge helps explain the contentment and mind-body integration involved in BJJ.

Mind within body

Many students described "You walk out of here [after rolling] and you're like, *ah*, I feel good." Mo Black described the after-effects of rolling. Students typically leave rolling sessions smiling through the sweat dripping off their faces. The roll clearly results in positive feelings, but how does this intense physical experience make students feel good? I propose that BJJ inverts the typical Platonic-Cartesian mind-body dualism and brings mind and body closer together. This departure from a quotidian mindset brings about contentment.

BJJ enables students to think in a different way. It shifts consciousness and thinking from mind/body to mind within body. In other words, students close the gap of the mind/body dualism. Students' bodies and minds achieve greater unity as they think through their bodies. To arrive at this meditative state students must experience several changes.

BJJ requires a presence of mind attuned to the body. Ali Varallo and I discussed this phenomenon:

> I commented: What's cool about jiu-jitsu for me so far has been that I've been able to, like when you're focusing so much that the rest of your life just kinda falls away.
>
> Ali responded: Yes! Right? Like you are only existing on the mat right now. No matter what is going on outside... They'll say the mat is a mirror. So if you're not focusing on that, you know, it a) it's going to show you the truth about yourself but b) if you're not living right there, you're not going to see what you need to see to do what you need to do. You've got to be right there. If you let your mind drift, you're just going to get choked or arm-bared.

"You've got to be right there," as Ali said indicates the necessity of a quite mind. Rolling requires singularity of thought. Many high-level, World Champion BJJ black belts describe the necessity of not thinking during a roll or being on "auto-pilot" (Hogeveen 2013). Black belt World Champion André Galvão said, "You can't think too much when you're fighting. You just have to do" (2011 quoted in Hogeveen 2013: 85). To describe the mind as not present, however, would be incorrect. "Not thinking" during rolling does not mean a catatonic mental state. Rather rolling engages an altered mental state. This alteration makes thought an act of doing. In other words, this change makes movement precede semiotic thought.

Rolling with a challenging partner obliges the student to be aware of every part of her or his body, without the possibility of a constant conscious body scan. I cannot think about the placement of my toes yet they must be active, digging into the mat, pushing me into my opponent. The student learns this through rolling: my toes do not dig in, I am pushed backwards; my toes are active, I can dominate my opponent. Rolling is fastpaced, however, and consciously thinking about toe movements is too slow. Students learn to execute these movements pre-consciously, without a back and forth between the mind and body. Movements begin to come from the body as the body incorporates techniques and knowledge.

Merleau-Ponty (2002) uses the example of typing to demonstrate this kind of pre-conscious movement, which he calls habit:

> It is possible to know how to type without being able to say where the letters which make the words are to be found on the banks of keys. To know how to type is not, then, to know the place of each letter among the keys, nor even to have acquired a conditioned reflex for each one… If habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action, what then is it? It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort (166).

What Merleau-Ponty describes is thought through the body instead of exclusively through the mind. Hogeveen describes this saying: "It [a BJJ technique] flows through my body instead of being the object on which my conscious mind abides… My body has overcome the halting force of intellectualism" (2013: 92).

The body is subordinate to the mind for much of our Western lives, but the ritualized life-threatening experience of rolling requires immediacy within the body that challenges typical being. It is too simplistic, however, to claim body over mind. I have described this as mind *within* body. The mind exists in the incorporated BJJ techniques that guide muscle movement. To imagine the mind located solely within the skull is incorrect in this context. The mind is in movement, which the body learns to execute faster than words can be formed and sent out to the limbs. This movement is not a verbal conversation ("Ankle, curl to the right"), but rather a conversation within the ankle where it knows and acts based on incorporated habit.

Pierre Hadot (1995) writes, “It [the philosophical act] is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it” (83). BJJ turns the student upside down physically (as in the granby roll, see Figure 1), forcing him or her to rethink the concept of the body in space. But, as I have described, this reconceptualization is not an exclusively logo-centric, mental process. It is a shift of how one exists within one’s body. Body and mind enter into a conversation controlled by muscle impulses and pressure sensitivities. This differs so drastically from habitual life that it has the power to change the student’s life.

The students at Prime do not soliloquize about Descartes, but they are well aware that the roll is a different mind-body state. They readily describe the effects of these meditations. These are tangible and accessible in words. I will use their words to show the before and after of rolling. In the words of several students the feeling of rolling is:

In the moment
Calm
Soul feels better
Free flowing
Cathartic
Pure
Zen
Mental release
Distraction

Returning to Mo Black’s significant comment: “You walk out of here and you're like, *ah*, I feel good. I don't know how to explain it. It's really hard to explain.” Her statement shows the difficulties in describing a body-centered phenomenon. The best attempt to express the mind-body feelings during rolling was replete with not being able to express it. Students resort to roundabout descriptions and metaphors to convey their experiences.

Some students use analogies to convey the feeling they know only within their own bodies. Patrick Yarlett used a comparison with running, saying, “When you have really good rolls, you get like that weird, I don't know if you've heard people say it, runner's high… You get like a weird rush.” Students also use terms they borrow from spiritual and psychological sources. Tim Varallo described the mental singularity of rolling saying, “Here it's pure. You're in the moment. So that in terms of mental release, almost a Zen kind of, I've got to deal with this cross-collar choke, I'm not worried about that chest pain last night that I sent home.” Tim is an Emergency Physician, and only during the BJJ roll can he mentally detach from his occupational stresses. He experiences release during the being-in-the-moment of the roll that inverts his typical mental state wherein he continually juggles countless medical decisions. The knowledge he has acquired through years of medical training and experience is quieted during the roll. His being is temporarily defined by how he moves.

This inversion occurs rapidly with the slap and bump handshake. There is no time to slowly contemplate how to meditate. The student enters the roll in a philosophical mindset or stays put in the terror and frustration of a combat battle. Another student, Donald Green, a blue belt, described this feeling as being relaxed: “I'm best when I'm relaxed when I'm training. And I think sometimes my smile gets misconstrued as, well, he's not taking it serious. I need to be relaxed, so I'll smile and have a little bit of fun. When I'm relaxed, there's a good flow for me.” Flow is a psychology buzzword, and Prime students use it to describe the feeling during the philosophical meditation. It is, in fact, appropriate word used colloquially. Flow is an optimal mental state, wherein students are fully absorbed by the present (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009). It is also a physical concept in which the student's body moves without a disjointed back-and-forth between a far-away mind and body. John Herrera also used the term flow saying: "Especially once you start to get the basics down, you start to develop your own techniques and your own flow and your own game and your own way of rolling. It is. It's art. It's art with your body. It's art with chokes."[10]

Catharsis is similarly an idea of inversion and mental change. Donald used this term enthusiastically saying, "There's something cathartic about being choked and choking somebody. Getting choked in the sense that someone could've ended my life or someone could've maimed my knee or my ankle or my arm, but they let it go. There's something cathartic in that experience."

However a student describes the feeling of rolling, the result is similar for many students: it feels good. We return to BJJ to be defeated time after time, to walk away with broken fingers and mat burns, to have our egos punctured by younger, smaller opponents because of the dramatic split from our comfortable, banal lives. It shakes our world upside-down and simply makes us feel good. I wrote in my field notes one day:

> They were great rolls, and I felt happy afterwards. I hadn't pushed myself this hard or sweat so much recently. It felt good to hold Mo off; it means I'm getting better. I've been stressed because I'm so behind on my thesis, and this helped. Even with Esteban [my thesis advisor] there watching I forgot about it. I could be in the moment even for those 6-minute rounds. Really just losing myself in the intensity of not getting choked and trying to throw a submission every once in a while.
>
> Field Notes: December 17, 2014.

This experience is not an immediate step in BJJ; it develops slowly through rolling. This is the philosophical meditation: the student steps into a problem and learns a new way of being through the repeated cycle loss and eventually winning. It is in this act that the student loses him or herself and enters into a mental space unlike the typical Western way of being based in Descartes' basic split. During the BJJ roll, I am *in* and *through* my body.

Conclusion

While this thesis explored and employed phenomenological approaches of embodiment, I hope that it has been an interpretive and academic narrative and not a conclusive explanation. It followed my experience as a BJJ student moving from an introduction of physicality and gender that facilitates community building to personal transformation and the rituality that prompts the philosophical meditation in rolling.

I began this investigation with several questions: what fascinated me about BJJ? Why was I drawn back to rolling even though I experienced repeated loss and frustration? I found two main components in this complex personal and interpersonal experience: community-building and philosophical meditation. BJJ rapidly transcended my individual experience; I forged physical and social bonds with the Prime BJJ gym members and entered their supportive network.

As I returned day after day to feel supported and physically challenged, the repeated frustration of loss transformed the way I moved and felt within my body. While the Platonic-Cartesian mind-body split had previously dominated by embodied experience, the immediacy of rolling forced me to use bodily knowledge. This change closed the dualism that subordinated somatic experience from semiotic knowledge. Semiotic understanding emerged through my embodied experience instead of before it. This transformative experience enthralled me, and I will remain a devoted student of BJJ.

Notes

[1] There are only three women, above the age of 18, who regularly train at Prime. My sample is biased because women who feel uncomfortable with the physical intimacy of BJJ would likely not continue in the martial art and therefore not be included in my study.

[2] I recognize that I interchange gender and sex terminology. I chose to include gender terms because these are used in the gym. I also use male and female because this is the terminology used in BJJ competition. The emergence of trans^{+} fighters is beginning to question and challenge these distinctions.

[3] The tangible improvements and rises in rank within the martial art clearly contribute to mental changes in terms of gains in confidence and self-esteem. I wrote in a field note about an experience that was gratifying:

> At one point Marcelo asked about a move yesterday and asked who had been there to see it. It was only Cooper and I. He motioned for me to come to the center to be his demonstration partner, and I must have made a surprised face because he said, "Yes, you. You're moving up! Moving up on the food chain. That's the cool thing about jiu-jitsu: you can move up. A lion will always eat a monkey, but in jiu-jitsu you can become the lion!"
>
> Field Notes: September 9, 2014.

[4] *L'appréciation d'un lieu, la qualification d'un territoire, un repérage du temps et une inscription dans le temps, une organisation du rapport à soi et à l'autre, telles sont les grandes dimensions de cette ritualité.* Baudry 1992 : 145. Translation by author.

[5] The word *oss* is used as a ritual utterance recited while bowing to the professor at the beginning and end of classes. It is said to be of Japanese origin. It is now used in the BJJ community to show support or approval of any statement.

[6] *Il ne s'agit pas d'habits fonctionnels (ni ornementaux) mais de costume nécessaire pour entrer dans un rôle et éprouver les sensation propres à la pratique martiale.* Baudry 1992: 147. Translation by author.

[7] *C'est au travers de l'entraînement et au fil d'une progression que cette connaissance rituelle s'apprend: elle est contenue dans une gestualité dont on découvre peu à peu la portée supérieure. Un code n'est pas plaqué sur des pratiques: c'est à partir de celles-ci qu'émerge une dimension autre que celle de la simple technique de combat.* Baudry 1992: 145. Translation by author.

[8] I use the word comfort to indicate habituation to the feeling of panic in an intimate physical attack and increasing ability to use BJJ techniques to overcome an opponent. BJJ is not physically comfortable. The positions are strenuous; being choked is disconcerting at best; sweat often drips between opponents; mat abrasions, bruises, broken nails, and

ligament injuries are common. It can be argued that the discomforts of BJJ are part of its glamour; it is a departure from the increasing physical ease of modern life.

[9] The ancient philosophers practiced in an academy, also called a gymnasium. While a small detail, it is not irrelevant that the BJJ gym is, in Portuguese, an *academia*. The emphasis lies on learning and conditioning the body and mind. Similarly, teaching black belts are addressed as *professor* or *master* connoting a transfer of didactic knowledge in the gym. Professors explicitly teach techniques but also cultivate a BJJ mindset or lifestyle. Professor Marcelo of Prime BJJ views belt and stripe promotions as an indicator of behavioral change as much as skill improvement. He has specifically held children back from promotion because of behavioral issues or even shortcomings in school. For Professor Marcelo, advancement in BJJ necessarily involves physical and mental changes.

[10] Art is part of the philosophical meditation. Traditional martial arts are intertwined with aesthetic creation, but BJJ differs from other martial arts in its innovation. Many martial arts are based on perfecting exact movements, what martial arts scholars David Brown and George Jennings call the 'practice—perfection—mastery disposition' (In Sánchez Gárcia and Spencer 2013: 42). BJJ, however, promotes individual creativity. Altering techniques to fit a student's particular body is celebrated. This promotion of creativity with the body is another layer of philosophical meditation: the roll is not formulaic, so the student's body is always alert to new ways of solving the philosophical problem.

References

Baudry, Patrick. 1992. La ritualité dans les arts martiaux. *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*. (92): 143-161.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2000. *Pascalian meditations*. California: Stanford University Press.

Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology. *Ethos* 18(1): 5-47.

Davis, Kathy, ed. 1997. *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*. California: Sage Publications.

Donohue, John J. 1990. Training Halls of the Japanese Martial Tradition. A Symbolic Analysis of budo dojo in New York. *Anthropos* (85): 55-63.

Farnell, Brenda, and Charles R. Varela. 2008. The Second Somatic Revolution. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 38(3): 215-240.

García, Raúl Sánchez, and Dale C. Spencer, eds. 2013. *Fighting scholars: Habitus and ethnographies of martial arts and combat sports*. London: Anthem Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Pp. 3–30. New York: Basic.

Green, Kyle. 2011. It hurts so it is real: sensing the seduction of mixed martial arts. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(4): 377-396.

Giuffre, Katherine. 2013. *Communities and networks*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Heidegger, Martin. 2010 (1953). *Being and time.* Joan Stambaugh, trans. Rev. edition. Dennis Schmidt. New York: SUNY Press.

Hogeveen, Bryan. 2013. 'It Is About Your Body Recognizing the Move and Automatically Doing It': Merleau-Ponty, Habit, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu in García, Raúl Sánchez, and Dale C. Spencer, eds. 2013. *Fighting scholars: Habitus and ethnographies of martial arts and combat sports*. London: Anthem Press.

Jackson, Michael. 1983. Knowledge of the Body. *Man*. 18(2): 327-345.

Johnson, Mark. 1987. *The Body in the Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How forests think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the human.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2002 (1945). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. New York: Routledge.

Nakamura, Jeanne, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. 2009. The concept of flow. In Lopez, Shane J., and Charles R. Snyder. 2009. *Oxford handbook of positive psychology.* New York: Oxford University Press: 89-105.

Oldenburg, Ray. 1999. *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. New York: Marlowe & Company.

Samudra, Jaida Kim. 2008. Memory in our body: Thick participation and the translation of kinesthetic experience. *American Ethnologist* 35(4): 665-681.

Schechner, Richard. 2003 (1988). *Performance theory*. New York: Routledge.

Wacquant, Loïc. 1998. The prizefighter's three bodies. *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 63(3-4): 325-352.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2006. *Body & soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

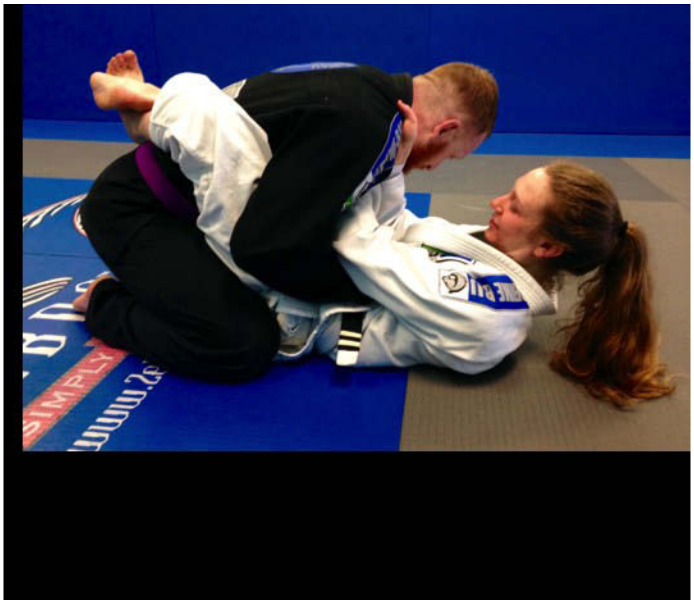
Walder, Marc. 2008. *Essential Brazilian jiu jitsu*. United Kingdom: New Holland Publishers.

Zarrilli, Phillip B. 1984. " Doing the Exercise": The In-Body Transmission of Performance Knowledge in a Traditional Martial Art. *Asian Theatre Journal* 1(2): 191-206.

Zarrilli, Phillip B. 2004. Toward a phenomenological model of the actor's embodied modes of experience. *Theatre Journal* 56(4): 653-666.

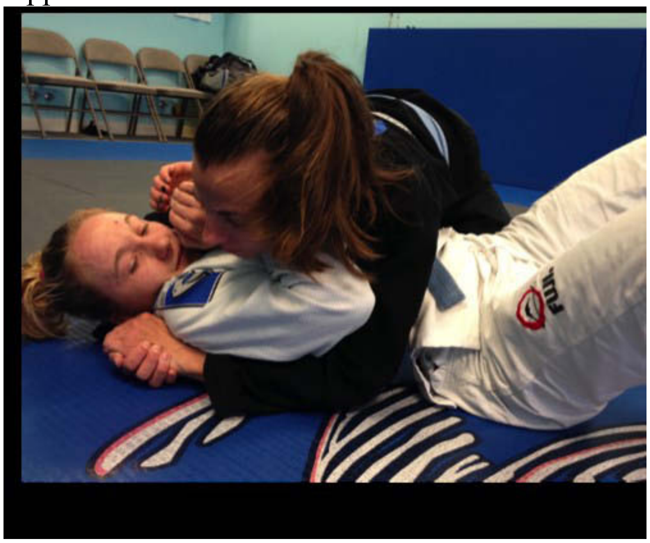
Appendices

Appendix 1. Guard Position

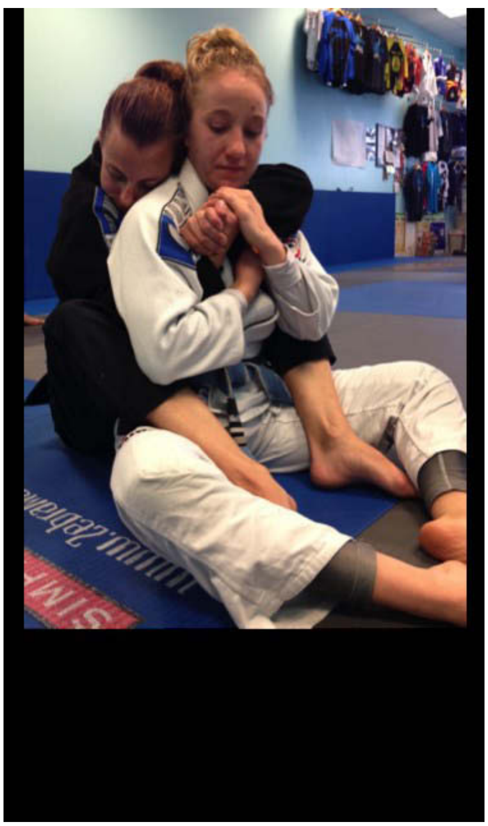


Appendix 2. Mount Control Position

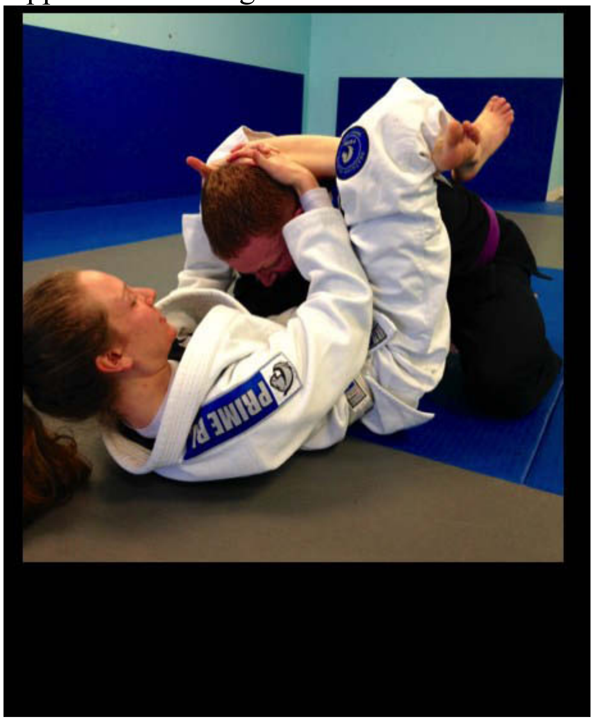
Appendix 3. Side Control Position



Appendix 4. Back Control Position



Appendix 5. Triangle Choke



Appendix 6. Arm-bar Submission