

## **The Tyranny of the Male Preserve**

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### **Abstract**

Within this paper I draw on short vignettes and quotes taken from a two-year ethnographic study of boxing to think through the continuing academic merit of the notion of the male preserve. This is an important task due to evidence of shifts in social patterns of gender that have developed since the idea was first proposed in the 1970s. In aligning theoretical contributions from Lefebvre and Butler to discussions of the male preserve, we are able to add nuance to our understanding of how such social spaces are engrained with and produced by the lingering grasp of patriarchal narratives. In particular, by situating the male preserve within shifting social processes, whereby certain men's power is increasingly undermined, I highlight the production of space within which narratives connecting men to violence, aggression and physical power can be consumed, performed and reified in a relatively unrestricted form. This specific case study contributes to gender theory as an illustration of a way in which we might explore and understand social enclaves where certain people are able to lay claim to space and power. As such, I argue that the notion of the male preserve is still a useful conceptual, theoretical and political device especially when considered as produced by the tyranny of gender power through the dramatic representation and reification of behaviours symbolically linked to patriarchal narrations of manhood.

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Drawing on data collected during an ethnographic study within a boxing, weight lifting and mixed martial arts gym, I think through the continuing academic merit of considering sport as a male preserve. My aim is to provide a more nuanced grasp of how social enclaves explicitly marked by the lingering grasp of patriarchal social relations are embedded with and produced by ideas about gender. This specific case study contributes to gender theory as an illustration of a way in which we might explore and understand spaces where certain people are able to lay claim to space and power within late modern Western society. The analysis brings together Lefebvre's (1991) and Butler's ([1993] 2011) commitments to undermining the abstract, conceptual separation of social power from the bodies and spaces of everyday life. Following Foucault (1980) I will claim that the tyranny of gendered power (Doan 2010), in the form of narratives and representations about boxing, violence and men, is reified within routine experiences inside the male preserve. To provide some context, I begin by exploring the theoretical background of the male preserve.

### **The Male Preserve**

Forty-two years ago Kenneth Sheard and Eric Dunning published one of the first sociological research articles about sport in which gender was explicitly explored as the central theme. *The Rugby Club as a Type of Male Preserve* (Sheard and Dunning 1973) quite astutely placed their account of rugby subcultures within historically shifting patterns of gender and sport in England. Around this time, through a specific focus or in dedicated sections, other works also began to deconstruct the previously assumed and accepted inequalities in sport (Boutiller and San Giovanni 1983; Hoch 1973; Sabo and Runfolo 1980), and added theoretical (Dunning 1986; Willis 1982) and political (Theberge 1985) weight to the initial empirical explorations. The notion of sport as a male preserve quickly gained conceptual purchase and became something of an academic orthodoxy. In highlighting the gendered dimensions of the historical development, ideologies, participation levels and administration of sport, these scholars effectively demonstrated that such social enclaves provided "dramatic symbolic proof" (Messner 1990: 204) of heterosexual men's physical and psychological superiority over women and "other" (read effeminate, gay) men. And as such, these gendered spaces were crucial elements in the rearticulation, reiteration and reification of social power.

Yet within a recently republished variation of the male preserve article, Dunning (2008) acknowledges in the post-script that the cultural and academic landscape has changed since the first forays into the area. Indeed, the original work in part predicted such a development:

It appears likely that, with the increasing emancipation of women and the altering focus of marriage and family life, the old-style rugby player will become just an historical curiosity. All the signs seem to indicate that he is gradually being replaced by a much more restrained model, one who is more "conformist" with respect to the dominant social standards and much more serious and dedicated to his approach to the game (Sheard and Dunning 1973: 21).

Dunning's (1986: 83) later work did much to theoretically and empirically situate the male preserve, especially its connection to violence, here he argues that "modern sport emerged as part of a 'civilising' transformation one aspect of which was an equalising shift, however slight, in the balance of power between the sexes." Continuing this focus on shifting social processes, we can see that the proceeding years have resulted in an obvious empirical challenge to claims that "sport" represents a clear-cut space exclusively reserved for certain men. Take, for example, the movement of women into

previously presumed male sports (Bryson 1990; Caudwell, 2003; Channon and Matthews 2015a; Fields 2008; Paradis 2012), and the increased acceptance of gay athletes within a variety of settings (Anderson 2005; Channon and Matthews 2015b). Such evidence could lead scholars and the public alike to suggest that the principles upon which the male preserve was originally proposed have largely been undermined.

Furthermore, this is part of a broader process in which movements toward equality have challenged patterns of gender that ideologically frame certain men as powerful, whereby changes in the institutional organization of politics, education, the workplace, governance, religion, media, and the family have eroded assumptions about the legitimacy of the traditional patriarchal order (Atkinson 2011; Faludi 2000; MacInnes, 1998; McDowell 2003; Merchant 1983; Morris, 1990). This breakdown of modern cultural institutions constitutive of male privilege has penetrated, splintered, and fractured stories that had traditionally imbued bodies, identities, and social stratifications with specific forms of gendered significance (Atkinson 2011). It would appear, then, that late modernity has seen shifts within the broad, gendered landscape of society, and also specifically within spaces that have traditionally been characterised as male preserves.

Boxing, with its *sportif* roots in often brutal, but "gentlemanly" combat (Downing 2010; Sheard 1997) has not been excluded from this process. The "manly art", which has a long history of female involvement (Hargreaves 1997; Jennings 2015), still occupies a central position as a dynamic signifier of often valorized narrations of manliness, men's identities and male bodies (Boddy 2009; Chandler 1996; Heiskanen 2012; Jefferson 1996; Oates 1987; Matthews 2014, 2015; Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2006, 2012). As Downing (2010: 348) suggests, eighteenth-century Englishmen needed "situations in which to find, hone and demonstrate their courage and self-control. As violence receded from the streets and was significantly reduced in daily life, it was in the boxing academies and the network of informal bouts and formal prize fights that men found this opportunity."

The cultural residue of this historical development still discursively patterns contemporary experiences of boxing in important ways. This is especially the case when narratives about gender are combined with notions about the working classes (de Garis 2000; Fulton 2011; Heiskanen 2012; Jefferson 1996; Rhodes 2011; Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2006). However, an ever-increasing body of work highlights the ways in which women are occupying such spaces (Channon and Matthews 2015a; Halbert 1997; Heiskanen 2012; Lafferty and McKay 2004; Lee 2009; Mennesson 2000; Paradis 2012; van Ingen 2011; van Ingen and Kovacs 2013; Woodward 2012) and the complexity of men's identifications with the sport (de Garis 2000; Woodward 2006; Matthews 2014). The recent inclusion of women's boxing in the 2012 Olympic Games (Woodward 2014), the broad acceptance (at least within media reportage) of the first openly gay boxer Orlando Cruz, and boxers such as Anthony Ogogo and Luke Campbell posing in gay magazines, provide further evidence problematizing any simplistic link between stereotypical notions of men and boxing; such evidence supports de Garis' (2000: 87) argument that gender relations in boxing "are historically diverse and actively negotiated and interpreted, with significant variations in subjective experiences."

When taken together, these preceding comments suggest that any exclusive or essential link between (heterosexual) men and boxing (and male preserves more broadly) cannot be assumed *fait accompli*. Rather, as Dunning (1986: 83 emphasis in the original) suggests, shifting patterns of gender might contribute to the making of "certain spheres of symbolic expressions of *machismo*." Indeed, we might expect an

entrenchment into performances of violence, aggression and physical power in these social enclaves (Matthews, 2014). Such sites, where one might still reasonably suggest that the majority of “women do not venture into with great gusto” (Atkinson 2011: 63), no longer, overtly at least, institutionally exclude women and gay men; instead, they can now more appropriately be understood as *symbolic spaces* where increasingly undermine narrations of manhood (Atkinson 2011; MacInnes 1998) can continue to be practiced. As such, the existence of a pugilistic male preserve is dependent upon the narratives lived out within such spaces (de Garis 2000; Matthews 2014; van Ingen 2011; Woodward 2006) and these enclaves are themselves liable to be affected by changes in broader cultural contexts (Dunning 1986; Theberge 1985; Willis 1982). Given shifting social patterns and the time that has passed since scholars first developed the notion of the male preserve, I argue that more recent theoretical contributions can help us to develop our understanding of the continued production and maintenance of such space.

### **The Production of Space and Bodies**

Following Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (1994, 2005), space is understood here as produced by social relations rather than simply a site for them, that is, social processes, interactions and discourses shape and frame the very nature of space. Furthermore, spaces are considered as fundamentally social and political in nature in that they are produced within unequal power relations, whereby the powerful are able to lay claim to space more easily than the relatively powerless and this process reinforces such inequality. Sporting spaces, then, might reasonably be considered as sites where discourses shaped by gendered power become *writ large* upon the bodies, actions, experiences, feelings and stories which make up everyday life (Caudwell 2003; Matthews 2014; van Ingen 2011; Waitt 2008), and importantly, this process is productive of such social enclaves (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994, 2005). If we accept this point, we can consider male preserves as produced through the reification of social power. The following brief theoretical discussion broadens these points.

Lefebvre (1991) breaks down the abstract separation of spaces from society to think past any simplistic notion of pre-social space. Indeed, he argues that space is produced by and embedded within social relations of power. He suggests that, “space is a social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure” (1991: 94). Foucault (1984: 246) similarly states, “it is somewhat arbitrary to try to dissociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves. If they are separated, they become impossible to understand.” Echoing this intertwining of the social and the spatial within her discussion of materiality, Butler ([1993] 2011: 9) writes, “there is no prison prior to its materialization... The prison comes to be only within the field of power relations but more specifically, only to the extent that it is invested or saturated with such relations, that such saturation is itself formative of its very being.” Spaces can then be considered as produced and maintained by power rather than simply as sites where interactions between certain people might express, gain or lose power.

Such an understanding of space and power also resonates with Butler’s ([1993] 2011) attempts to dissolve the abstraction of material and socially constructed bodies. In *Bodies That Matter* she weaves a path between notions of a pre-social body and deterministic use of social construction to bring the physical body into being. In reconsidering social construction as the formative process of materiality, where bodies are made to matter in that they are given cultural meaning *and* physical form through iterative social performances, Butler highlights the necessary intertwining of the social and biological. She argues that bodies should not be considered simply as sites for the

inscription of cultural texts but rather that they are given the illusion of a fixed biological essence through the repetitive performance of socially coded narratives. Here, unequal social relations which guide ideas about the body are stabilized and reified within the iterative performance of social scripts. Thus, Lefebvre (1991) and Butler (2011 [1993]) both theorize space and the body as inseparable from social power.

Doan (2010) draws attention to this process by describing the tyranny that certain spaces occupy within her life. As a transgendered woman, she has to negotiate the tension between her transitioning body and the heteronormative ordering of spaces such as public transport, classrooms and public toilets. Her provocative use of the term "tyranny" has a political motivation that forces readers to confront the oppressive nature of gendered power. Following Foucault (1980: 39), I would argue that power is tyrannical due to its "capillary form of existence, the point where [it] reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes, and everyday lives." The pervasive nature of such power is not only embedded and weaved within the "stuff of life" but also becomes manifest through reiterated performances within social spaces. Attempting to politically and theoretically grasp the tyranny of gender then, requires us to consider the formative and constituting effects of power in both bodily and spatial form. Stated differently, the male preserve and other social spaces are produced, in part, through oppressive power relations reified through bodily performances. So while the empirical world explored here is different to that described by Doan (2010), I employ the notion of tyrannical power to help draw attention to unequal social power.

### **The Tyranny of the Male Preserve**

Considering this theoretical framing, Dunning and Sheard's (1973) work detailing the male preserve can be read as one of the first politically orientated explorations of sport as a space for the reiteration and reification of dramatic representations of men's power, and with it the continuation of what Butler (1990) calls the heterosexual matrix. Within such an enclave the apparent paradoxes of gender (Lorber 1994) that might characterize men's understandings of themselves and their bodies within late modernity can be represented as common-sense, matter-of-fact ontological realities (Atkinson 2011; Dunning 1986; Matthews 2014; Willis 1982). Indeed, boxing has been one of *the* cultural spaces within which the symbolic representations evidenced and predicted by Dunning (1986) have been forged. Woodward (2006: 91) neatly details the junction at which social narratives and identifications meet within the sport:

Personal stories told in the gym elide with public representations expressed through media stories and the images and mythology which permeates the sport at all levels . . . The myths and legends of boxing provide both stability and excitement in creating a sense of location as well as security.

As such, the symbolism embedded within stories about boxing and boxing gyms provides discursive tools from which people can attempt to make sense of themselves within increasingly fragmented late modern worlds. Here, despite women's growing inclusion in the sport, the spectacle of boxing remains heavily coded by narratives about men and manhood. Importantly, this discursive connection to ideas about a patriarchal story of manhood means that such spaces can offer the promise of stability to people living within the fluidity, uncertainty and psychic insecurity of late modern social worlds where notions about gender, in particular, are undergoing rapid change (Woodward 2006; Matthews 2014). Sporting spaces, and it is argued here, boxing in particular, can be considered as sites produced by the performance of behaviors that are symbolically

associated with patriarchy and are increasingly restricted outside of these contexts. As such, it is possible to borrow Doan's (2010) notion of the tyranny of gender to explore such spaces and help to cast in sharp relief the making of such unequal power relations. Before exploring this theoretical framing, let me briefly consider some issues connected to methodology.

## Methods

The data in this study was obtained by combining participant observations and interviews recorded during ethnographic fieldwork. The study set out to explore the experiences of participating in sports violence. Following the method of "observing participation" described by Wacquant (2004) and others (de Garis 2010; Heiskanen 2012; Paradis 2012; van Ingen 2011) I trained and socialized at Power Gym (a pseudonym along with the names of participants in this study) on most days of the week during a two-year period (Sept 2009-Sept 2011). This allowed me to form relatively close relationships with some frequent users of the gym while also developing my own ability to engage in the sport. Over time, the position I adopted within the gym became increasingly involved. I formed some close and trusting relationships with the regular users of the boxing area while investing large amounts of time and energy learning the skills and tactics of the sport. I found myself navigating a path between researcher and gym native for as de Garis (2010: 936) notes, "communities such as boxing and wrestling are defined largely (though by no means exclusively) by a physical practice, the ethnographic demarcation of self and other can become blurred. One can, at least marginally, become a 'boxer' or 'wrestler' by the act of boxing or wrestling."

Indeed, I did become a boxer of sorts. As my ability developed and I began to be accepted as a regular within the gym, I was able to join in with the established group of boxers in sparring and training sessions. Here, my status as a heterosexual man in his late twenties with roots in the local area, with an ability to engage relatively competently in most sports, was key to my fitting in socially and becoming accepted within this potentially exclusionary social space. This increasingly involved position enabled but also limited, the interactions that were possible within the gym. I did not, for example, get to know key members of the gym who spent more time weightlifting than boxing. My focus on boxers meant I did not get to learn in detail how other groups and individuals experienced this space. Being a heterosexual man allowed me to easily fit in with the established group of boxers, but my membership within this group certainly limited my ability to access the stories of the small number of women who used this space. As such, my account is limited to a small group of men who, while being heavily involved in setting the tone for daily life in and around the boxing area, are not representative of all of the gym's members.<sup>1</sup>

In all, I interviewed 25 men of varying ages and ethnic and racial backgrounds; this number represented the majority of those who regularly used the boxing area, and a selection of men who frequented the gym less often. Interviews were conducted in a quiet corner of the gym before or after training sessions, and away from the gym in a space agreed upon with the interviewee. Interviews conducted inside the gym, despite taking place in a private space, may have encouraged the respondents to live out their gym identities more fully than if they had taken place elsewhere. As no claims are made within this study to know these men's "true" identities, such possible location bias serves to demonstrate further the significance these men place on certain narratives while in the gym space. Permission was granted to record the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim.

After an initial period of participant observation, emergent themes and theoretical insights were interwoven with discussions during interviews. As such, interview transcripts offered additional and confirming evidence that enabled explanation and clarification of observed phenomena. Initially, a semi-structured interview schedule was used to frame discussions; however, as time progressed, interviews became extensions to informal chats that had begun during training. As such, the use of a schedule became increasingly restrictive and at odds with the trusting relationships that were formed with the men at the gym. The flexible interview process enabled me to develop further rapport with the interviewees. In the subsequent analysis of the data thus gathered, field notes and interview transcripts were categorized into salient and theoretically informed themes. In the remainder of this article, I focus on aspects of these themes which detail a selection of narratives, representations and routine performances observed within this particular male preserve.

### **Power Gym - Narratives and Representations of the Male Preserve**

Lefebvre's (1991) model of space – as conceived, perceived and lived – helps us to understand the production of the male preserve. While the gym was not purpose built (previously it had been a retail space), a degree of planning had shaped the choice and layout of equipment and exercise spaces. The representation and perception of these activities and their location within the gym helped to frame social narratives associated with the space. I explore this process by describing the resonance between the gym space and narratives and representations that dominated social life in and around the boxing ring. Here, we can begin to grasp the manner in which the symbolically male-marked terrain of Power Gym was produced by and embedded with the tyranny of gendered power.

Situated on the outskirts of a city within the Midlands region of England, Power Gym had elements in common with contemporary fitness centers, as typified by the consumer-focused chains such as David Lloyd and Virgin Active, but it also had the feel of a spit-and-sawdust boxing and weightlifting gym, made infamous in part by films such as *Rocky* (1976) and *Stay Hungry* (1976). Attended by approximately 200 people<sup>2</sup> at varying regularities, Power Gym was predominately a space for boxing, weightlifting, bodybuilding and mixed martial arts. At the center of the gym, wall-length mirrors, often smeared with sweat and grease from exercising bodies and interrupted by posters of bodybuilders, reflected the gaze of gym goers back upon themselves and their colleagues as they grunted, grimaced and groaned their way through repetitions with dumbbells and other equipment. The boxing ring and mixed martial arts cage stood elevated over one side of the gym, surrounded by large posters from past and future fight cards, along with infamous boxers both real (Muhammed Ali) and fictitious (Rocky Balboa). This highly visible and prominent placing of the boxing and mixed martial arts paraphernalia cast a symbolic, pugilistic shadow over the entirety of the gym.

Alongside the gym's core activities there was also space for spin classes, tanning beds, and a "women only zone."<sup>3</sup> These activities and spaces, which stereotypically at least might be associated with women, could lead us to expect a relatively equal balance in terms of the demographic that regularly attended the space. Yet the overwhelming majority of the gym's users were apparently heterosexual men. During my time there I never met anyone who openly or otherwise identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or transgender. A small number of women<sup>4</sup> frequented the gym, and this minority on the whole tended to occupy a very limited physical space. They could usually be found in either the small, segregated women only zone or using one of the machines in the cardio area. These two spaces were symbolically and geographically located away from the central area that acted as a hub for the otherwise male-dominated gym life. This

geography quite naturally framed the majority of the gym's space as dominated by activities usually associated with men. As with Sheard and Dunning's (1973) description of the male preserve, Power Gym was not devoid of women or potentially feminised activities and behaviors. Nevertheless, this was a site with a specific spatial ordering that reinforced narratives, images and performances culturally encoded with notions of powerful manhood. This male-marking demonstrates the power which is embedded in the ability to set the tone of life within certain spaces (Lefebvre 1991).

Through the gym's large glass frontage, usually opaque with condensation from sweating bodies, one could make out the equipment, bodies and activities that dominated the space. Cultural representations that stereotypically link such imagery to certain assumptions about gender and class acted as signposts guiding gym users' initial and subsequent perceptions of the space. Take the following comment from Darren, a 33 year old doorman with a background in kickboxing:

I knew what this place would be like before coming in. It's not hard to understand like is it? Look at the fucking logo<sup>5</sup> for fuck sakes!, ya see all the tubs of protein and what-not, and that they have a [boxing] ring and you know what sort of shit you're gonna get down 'ere. That's good, no pissin' around, I wouldn't feel comfortable in one of them David Lloyds, that sort of place ain't necessarily that welcoming to lads who wanna get proper stuck in<sup>6</sup>, know what I mean? (Field notes 8/7/2010)

This comment was indicative of many of the boxers I spoke to and suggests that Power Gym, as in Dunning's (1986) discussion of the male preserve, was a space where a clear gendered symbolism enabled gym goers to predict the sort of behaviors and performances they might encounter therein. However, recent research has highlighted the radically different ways in which previously assumed heteronormative spaces, such as Power Gym, might be transformed through embodied practices and discursive subversion (Anderson 2008; Caudwell 2003; Channon 2013; Channon and Matthews, 2015b; Bobel and Kwan 2012; Eng 2008; Pilcher 2012). Therefore, although broad cultural associations acted as important maps to guide Darren and other men to Power Gym, such notions alone are insufficient to explain the production of this male preserve. Indeed, using Lefebvre (1991) and Butler ([1993] 2011) we can understand that these narratives and representations became manifest within daily life and, as such, were formative of this very space

The stories, which infused life inside and around the boxing area often contained a degree of artistic license. Take the following example from my conversation with 27 year old labourer Dave, who came to the gym from a relatively affluent part of town:

Dave: My mates all think this place is full of people injecting 'roids in their eyes n'shit.

Christopher: Classic, I've heard so many stories about this place since I've been coming down. What do you think when you hear shit like that?

Dave: I think it means we get to come down and have the place to our'sens, if everyone thought the place was alright they'd all be down getting in the way and that.

Christopher: So ya think it puts people off from coming down?

Dave: Most people are scared of the place, serious, they might not say they are but they daren't come down. Serious man, all my mates talk about it and then pussy out, they fucking think they're gonna get smashed in or somefing. They all like the idea of it but when it comes down to it, they get scared.

Christopher: Don't you tell 'em it's alright?



Dave: Na, I make it worse, I tell 'em all sorts, fucking crazy shit so they never know when I'm being proper or not. Once right, this lad I work wiv' was asking about where I train and that an' I was tellin' him that when there's a disagreement people just get locked in the cage till it's settled, like only one man leaves the cage, he didn't believe me at first but he don't know shit so by the end he was all over it. Like, "fucking no way man, that's fucking mental."

Here, Dave revels in the dramatic stories which he could create about gym life. Although there is a humorous side to this discussion, it is replete with exclusionary power; through such narrations, the gym could be marked out as a site for danger, violence and drug use and as a space capable of separating those who would, and would not, dare set foot therein. Setting the tone for gym life in this manner maintained it as a space for these men and re-confirmed their privileged position within it. Patrick, a 19 year old college student who played ice hockey for a local amateur team, told a similar story:

Christopher: Whenever I mention that I train here I always get the same responses from people about the place being full of meat-heads<sup>7</sup> and cage fighters, do you get that?

Patrick: Yeah, my mates always say stuff like that to me, they all think I'm a legend for coming down here.

Christopher: Why is that?

Patrick: Well, 'cus [names well-known local fighters] trains down here, and there's always massive fucking guys strutting about.

Christopher: Is that one of the reason you like come down, 'cus of the rep'?

Patrick: It wasn't at first 'cus I didn't really know about it but I do now. People respect you when you tell them you train down here.

Christopher: Why is that?

Patrick: It's the rep', 'cus these lads all think they're hard but compared to the guys down [pause] when people know you train at Power [Gym] they know you can handle yourself. (Field notes 3/3/2010).

For Patrick, Dave and the other men I spoke to, this was a space with a rich symbolic potential which enabled (albeit often tongue-in-cheek) aggressive and intimidating self-representations to be created and experienced. Here, the "symbolic expression of *machismo*" (Dunning 1986: 83 emphasis in the original) could be created in a manner relatively unrestrained from societal discourses of inclusion, equality and antisexism. Such situated cultural codes produced a spatial logic which helped preserve this space as an enclave for certain men.

The signifiacance of this cultural landscape was also not missed by the manager of the gym, who told me the following:

Christopher: When I speak to people about the gym, a lot of them hold very stereotypical views about the place, like it's full of meat-heads or whatever, what do you think about that?

Andy: Well, it true though ain't it, [laughs] we always try and expand our membership and try to get into stuff that isn't our main crowd, but I always try and tell 'em [the owners] that if you go too far from your main crowd you end up pissing people off.

Christopher: So you don't mind people saying stuff, I mean, exaggerating about what goes on in the gym?

Andy: I don't mind it, it's one of those things, it's alright, you can't do anything about it, you just work with it.

Christopher: What do you mean?

Andy: Well, we try and advertise so people know there's more to the place than that, but really, rumours and that are good 'cus you know people are talking about ya. And if they're talking about us people will come down and check it out and see for themselves.

Christopher: Do those rumors attract a certain type of person to the gym?

Andy: Yeah, probably people who'll love it when they get down here [Laughs].

In effect, 37 year old Andy, who trained a number of professional fighters, is discussing rumors shaped by powerful narratives about the gym being good for business. In attracting "the right sort" Power Gym therefore existed as a space which enabled discursive representations replete with dramatic, exaggerated, quasi-fantastical narratives to be lived out in some form, and thus reified its status as a particular type of space. One where stories about "meat-heads" injecting "roids" and "fighting it out in the cage" were thereby created through members' stories, elaborating and capitalising on outsider perceptions and the gym's reputation; this was space created and maintained by the social (Lefebvre 1991). While the men I spoke to were often active in discursively framing the gym as a site where many would "fear to tread," this was not simply a place where disembodied stories of a violent and dangerous male preserve could be told. Rather, it was a space where routine and reiterative daily performances acted to reify such representations encoded by the tyranny of gender. A discussion around training and sparing will help shed light on this process.

### **The Tyranny of Gender in Routine Performances**

"Normal," routine performances within Power Gym were embodied "points of suture" (Hall 1996) between the gendered power embedded in dramatic narratives about the male preserve, men's bodies and performances of self. This was a space where representations of potentially violent and aggressive manhood became the everyday, where experiences of perfecting techniques of ritualistic violence, no longer readily available within late modern life outside the gym, were performed with a monotonous repetition; inside and around the boxing ring, men drilled punches, blocks, combinations and movements that symbolically aligned them with the "manly art" and with it a potentially violent and aggressive narrative of manhood (Matthews, 2014). Yet in so doing, they also reiterated and reified these cultural codes into bodily form. Take the following observation from my field notes where I captured some of the detail of boxing technique:

When guys are talking about technique, they invariably start by discussing the "base." Having a "solid base" is essential if power is to be generated. Then the twist or wind of the body will be used to generate more force. This is followed by aligning the upper body so that the force that has been produced can be transferred into the bag or opponent. All of these descriptions are accompanied by a feeling for a set of bodily positions and movements that are significant for these guys. You see them drilling these movements in the mirror, refining the pattern, ingraining it. When hitting the bag they're rewarded for their hard work by the sensuous experience of matching these actions up, combining them in a bodily continuum of power production and transference. Training on the bag is a means of fine-tuning these actions. Feedback is instantaneous; if it feels powerful, then it's probably good technique and it probably feels good at the same time. (Field notes 13/3/2010)

This routine process of learning the bodily capabilities of punching, balance, physical power, speed and control were refined on a regular basis by the boxers who trained at Power Gym. Producing the physicality of boxing was a regular feeling for these men. The

bodily realities of the male preserve reiterated and reified stories from the history of pugilism, manhood and contemporary tales of boxing; the symbolic link between men and (ritual) violence lived out and made real. As such, these men, in the company of other men, gave their masculine coded bodies and this masculine coded space the illusion of fixity, producing the male preserve through their willingness to align with the powerful logic of the tyranny of gender. In the absence of overt contestation the wrapped hands that repeatedly pounded into worn punching bags, bruised cheek bones, leather skipping ropes, pungent boxing gloves, strained and fatigued muscles, pain resistant noses and sweat-dripping shorts could become the symbols of patriarchy carved in flesh and material. Here, following Foucault's (1980: 39) understanding of power as engrained in individual actions, lives and attitudes, we can see the tyranny of gender as the symbolic connection between men and physical power in the hardened, aggressive, bruised, concussed and fatigued bodies of boxers. While wider social relations of late modernity might undermine such associations, this space preserved the symbolic link between men and violence. And in so doing, existed as both a reification and dramatic symbolism of oppressive gender relations.

Importantly, and at the risk of repeating myself, this is not to suggest that such experiences have an inherently 'masculine' or male quality, but rather that the broad cultural associations linking boxing, fighting and physical power with men became real within the bodies of the boxers in this space. In such an understanding we can situate the production of spaces preserved for men within wider social processes which have challenged patriarchy. Here, the increasingly undermined ideological and material residue of patriarchal social relations, can continue to be carved out in the spaces and bodies that are representative of men's power. In this way, we can appreciate male preserves as more than simply archaic spaces on the verge of disappearing, but as active sites for the reiteration and reification of patriarchy in an albeit contingent and situational manner.

Daily routines at Power Gym contained a dramatic dimension due to their relative "otherness" when compared to daily late modern life; this was a space where normally taboo behaviors became logical. Take the following examples:

Phil: Sometimes you got to just come down and smash the bag in, there's no better way to let it all out. Proper hammering it with big bombs, right, left, right, left, really loading up. Nothing like it, no better way to de-stress then landing some K.O. punches.

Dave: If you just think about hitting a big bag o'leather stuffed with shit, then ya ain't gonna care about hittin' that. But if ya imagin' it's someone, then ya can work on stuff better and it's more of a buzz. It's better for ya accuracy if you imagin' someone's chin on the bag as well. That gets the adrenaline going more than just thinkin' it's a bag. (Field notes 15/5/2010)

The ritualistic performances of violence that Phil, a 28-year-old doorman who stayed in the city after graduating University, and Dave described were typical of the men's attempts to explain their enjoyment of bag work. Power Gym was then a space where narrations about excitement and cathartic release in the form of aggressive and powerful displays of punching were the norm. Indeed, imagining, as Dave did, committing an act of "real" violence while training was a popular means of increasing the "authenticity" of this ritualistic experience. Gary, a 35 year old builder who was a central figure in shaping the banter in the gym and especially in the boxing area, told me something similar:

Christopher: Easy there big guy, [are] you enjoyin' ya sen?

Gary: [Laughs] Yeah, winding up a bit.

Christopher: What is it that we like so much about landing big shots?

Gary: It's getting all that weight from ya toes into ya body and then out in small point on someone's chin.

Christopher: Ya on a bag though?

Gary: Imagin' it though don't ya, every shot you got to think about it landing on someone's chin. Putting all your weight through with one shot is the one. (Field notes 27/10/2010)

So while the opportunities to live out narrations of "real" violence and aggression are increasingly limited within late modern worlds (Matthews 2014), Power Gym acted as a space where the "exciting significance" (Maguire 1992) that these men experienced through their discursive and ritualistic alignment with such action could be enjoyed in socially safe performances. The cultural and social residue of patriarchal notions about men's physical superiority was produced and engrained in their enjoyment of working the bag. Generating power using his whole body, Gary repeatedly thudded his fist into his imaginary foe, and his enjoyment of the feeling of force transferring through his body was visible as he rehearsed these motions while describing them to me. Representations about this space and the men inside it became tangible in each blow landed on the punching bag, in each grunt forcibly exhaled and each strike to whoever's face the boxers cared to imagine. Here, the cultural codes of the male preserve linking certain men to physical power and domination, collapsed into the reiterated performances of these men and their bodies in this space.

### Concluding Remarks

Within this largely theoretical discussion I have used short vignettes and extracts from an ethnographic study to help think through the continuing utility of the notion of the male preserve. Specifically, I have attempted to merge together narratives and representations about the gym, men, violence, physical power and aggression with data about routine experiences inside and around the ring to demonstrate the reification of gendered power into the bodies of boxers. Exploring this process helps shed light on the manner in which this space was largely preserved for men. This is an important task given evidence of shifts in social patterns of gender that have developed since this idea was first proposed in the 1970s. Moreover, in aligning theoretical contributions from Lefebvre (1991) and Butler ([1993] 2011) to discussions of the male preserve, we are able to add nuance to our understanding of how such social spaces are produced by and reify the oppressive tyranny of gender power. It is in this that I argue the preceding analysis contributes to gender theory more broadly.

No attempt has been made here to claim sports, or even Power Gym, as *solely* the preserve of men. Any such statement would be overly reductive and based on a caricature of this enclave's more obvious cultural codes. Neither did Sheard and Dunning (1973: 18), writing over 40 years ago, make such a conceptual mistake. Instead they noted that, "great changes have begun to take place in British rugby clubs in recent years. They are no longer clear-cut male preserves." Moreover, there is nothing inherently male about the male preserve; indeed, there is no *essential* link between boxing, Power Gym, the experiences explored here and the socially constructed category of "men." Nevertheless, the social space of Power Gym was dominated in number and symbolism by men.

So while Doan (2010) details the oppressive effects that the tyranny of gender has on her life, I have focused in more detail on the manner in which such inequality is produced and spaces might be preserved for certain men. As Woodward (2006: 157)

argues, narrations about “boxing masculinities offer seductively secure, bounded identities and an intimacy of routine masculinity that is at times untroubled by having to engage with femininity.” As such, the male preserve offered the boxers a space in which to experience a narration of manhood which is relatively removed from late modern life. Thus, while there might be evidence of shifts towards apparent equality in many areas of social life, enclaves still persist in which men can perform latent patriarchal scripts. Rejoinding with Dunning’s (1986) attempts to situate the male preserve within shifting social processes, we can see that within a “contemporary world of change and fragmentation” and with “the emergence of more ambiguous, less traditional gender identities” (Woodward 2006: 2), spaces can be produced where narratives connecting men to violence, aggression and physical power can be consumed, performed and reified in a relatively unrestricted form. We can then think of the male preserve as a site for the dramatic representation and reification of behaviours symbolically linked to patriarchal narrations of manhood. As I have argued, this was a lived experience founded in routine performances saturation in power relations and the political nature of space. And as Butler (2004: 1) suggests, such processes impose “a model of coherent gendered life that demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived.” Appreciating this oppressive gendering of social life and the manner in which it is productive of space and bodies enables us to add nuance to our understanding of the tyranny of power and to further support its breakdown and subversion. Further research might consider the conceptual space that both Lefebvre and Butler maintain for such subversion and in so doing detail the challenging of social power within spaces preserved for men.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Please see Matthews (2014 and 2015) for more detail on the gym and issues and biases associated with this methodology.

<sup>2</sup> This is a best estimate provided by the gym staff based on their knowledge of the membership base.

<sup>3</sup> Surrounded by a six foot black metal mesh which limited visibility and clearly framed this area as separate from the rest of the gym.

<sup>4</sup> At varying times I attempted to count the number of women who attended the gym over the course of a week. This was usually around ten but never more than 20 or less than five.

<sup>5</sup> The gym's logo featured a caricature of an unnaturally muscle-bound man lifting a barbell which has been bent as a result of the weights on either side.

<sup>6</sup> Meaning hard training and perhaps the aggression, sweat and noises which accompany it.

<sup>7</sup> British slang for an excessively muscular, dim-witted and potentially violent man.