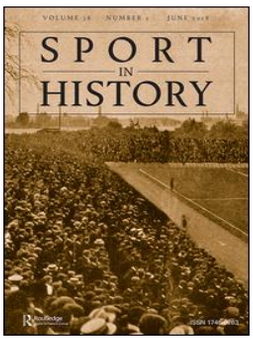

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Sport in History

ISSN: 1746-0263 (Print) 1746-0271 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsih20

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To cite this article: Paul Bowman (2020): In toxic hating masculinity: MMA hard men and media representation, Sport in History, DOI: 10.1080/17460263.2020.1756394

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2020.1756394

Published online: 24 May 2020.

SPORT IN HISTORY
https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2020.1756394

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In toxic hating masculinity: MMA hard men and media representation

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ABSTRACT

This article begins by focusing on the presumed relation between the toughness fostered by mixed martial arts (MMA) and the maintenance of traditional 'hard man' forms of toxic masculinity. However, it adds an extra dimension to this discussion. It argues that (first) the UFC and (thereafter) MMA *as a whole* were in very tangible ways invented within and thanks to reality TV. As such, it contends that MMA's often debated relation to 'real' fighting needs to be approached in full awareness to the implications of its indebtedness to media representation. Because of this debt, it argues that media representation itself ought to be understood as playing an active role in the invention, maintenance or modification of gendered representation. Finally, it proposes that if a kind of 'MMA toxic masculinity' is regarded as being a problem, then the solution may not simply be to 'change MMA'. Rather, both the problem and the solution may more precisely be located in the *kinds* of media representations that circulate about MMA subjects and subjectivities.

KEYWORDS Toxic masculinity; MMA; media representation

Introduction: MMA as 'Mediatised Martial Arts'

MMA (mixed martial arts) is a combat sport whose principal appeal in relation to other martial arts and combat sports is its status in relation to the notion of 'real fighting'.[1] By comparison, other martial arts and combat sports involve more obviously 'artificial' restrictions and limitations: for example, boxing reduces the potential weapons of combat to the gloved fist, which may only be used in specific ways; taekwondo chiefly encourages the use of the feet (and only to a much lesser extent the hands), targeted cleanly and precisely at specific targets on a well-padded opponent's torso and head; and wrestling and judo entirely prohibit strikes. Furthermore, in their Olympic incarnations, in order to differentiate wrestling from judo,

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very prescriptive rules ensure that these two potentially similar-looking grappling practices look as different as they possibly can from each other: Olympic rules oblige judo to be primarily a standing and throwing sport and wrestling to be mainly ground-fighting and grappling. By the same token, 'traditional' martial arts (especially those that are not competition-focused), in contrast to combat sports, can be accused of operating without the checks and balances of 'real-world' pressure testing, and hence without any verifiable relation to 'real fighting' at all.[2] Similarly, even military (or militaristic) 'combatives' such as krav maga can also stand accused of a verification deficit. This is because, no matter how life-and-death-reality-oriented they may seek to be, such training necessarily requires elements of simulation.[3] MMA, by contrast, allows full-force, full-contact kicking to many parts of the body, grappling of almost any kind, and multiple forms of hand strike, many more than boxing's few sanctioned punches. In addition, MMA allows a range of elbow, knee, arm, leg and body strikes, as well as sweeps, throws, chokes and holds. It is for these reasons that MMA is often regarded as a combat sport that is as close to the reality of 'real-world' or 'street' hand-to-hand combat as it is possible to get in sport.

Unsurprisingly therefore, MMA as a practice is often aligned with aggressiveness, violence, and hence forms of 'tough' and even toxic – implicitly masculine – subjectivities.[4] Of course, MMA is increasingly practised by women and non-cis-gendered people, as well as those of any and all kinds of sexual orientations and identities.[5] This is why it potentially raises all manner of interesting questions for social, cultural and gender studies.[6] But the principal focus in this article will be on MMA's sometimes presumed, sometimes contested relation to forms of masculinity that are so 'hard' that they seem almost ineluctably connected with the 'toxic' – especially when toxic masculinity is understood in terms of a macho resistance to or rejection of complex emotionality, especially any potentially 'feminising' emotions or emotional dispositions, along with a refusal to express intellectually or vocally any potentially 'feminising' thoughts or feelings.[7]

MMA's potential connections with toughness or hardness, both inside and (more problematically) outside the training gym and competition arena makes it prime for evaluation in terms of its connections with hard and toxic masculinity. Similarly, commentators, critics and academics have recently been debating its apparently growing appeal among toxic, masculinist, violent, racist, nationalist and fascist groups.[8] One question arising from these debates is whether MMA has *inherent* qualities that overdetermine the perceived affinity, magnetism, attraction or alignment with toxic forms of subjectivity, from abhorrent political ideologies (racism, fascism, violent xenophobia, etc.) to abhorrent forms of subjectivity per se (toxic masculinities *tout court*).

This article will traverse some of these debates. However, it primarily seeks to draw a different relation into focus, one that has hitherto been under-considered – even though it is perhaps the most visible dimension of MMA. This is the relation between MMA and media representation. While this crucial matter has not been *overlooked* by scholars entirely, it has certainly been *neglected* in discussions of MMA, subjectivity and identity. This is why I want to begin with the deliberately provocative argument that the MMA-media nexus is not merely important, but that it is actually *constitutive* of MMA as such. I emphasise this argument at the outset for three reasons: first, to point out the importance to MMA's existence of its media representation; second, to recall the important role that media played in the historical genesis of MMA; and third, to draw attention to the power of media representation in the production of cultural identities of all orders.

This is not a controversial argument to make. Media representations constantly invent things. Arguably, 'martial arts' itself – as a term of popular culture and a category within which to place a range of cultural practices – is an invention of 1970s media culture.[9] This suggests that media discourses can change other – 'real', embodied, lived, performative – discourses. And, certainly, no identity, no relation, no association is set in stone, immovable, unchangeable. As such, a key question is: if media representation invented MMA, and associated it with potentially toxic forms of masculinity, might it be able to *reinvent* both MMA and associated subjectivities *differently*? I argue that it can, that in places it already has, and that it could easily do so much more, in many more ways. But first, it is important to clarify the sense in which it is possible to argue that the media invented MMA.

Reality (and) TV

Media representation is often regarded as secondary – as the *re*-presentation of something independently present and existing before its secondary re-presentation.[10] However, as I argue, the very existence of MMA as a discursive entity was *primarily* determined by its media existence.[11] MMA was invented in media discourse. The first uses of the term 'mixed martial arts' (which quickly became shortened to MMA) occurred in a media context. The self-identification of practitioners with this term followed from its mediatised dissemination. This is 'as real as it gets' – as the early media hype for the UFC (the Ultimate Fighting Championship) put it: the invention of MMA was a media event.[12] Still, both inside and outside of the media realm, the question of whether MMA is the most realistic martial art or combat sport is often debated.[13] Whatever our conclusions, it is clear that ideas such as 'real', 'realistic' and 'reality' have played an important role in its history – specifically in the context of its first emergence within and thanks to the institution of the UFC.

The UFC was not the first and is not the only regularly recurring mixed martial art contest, but it is the most well-known, widely recognised, lucrative and globally dominant arena for MMA competition.[14] In its earliest days, the UFC was heavily marketed and characterised by expressions such as 'no-holds-barred', 'anything goes', 'no rules', 'as real as it gets', and even 'bare knuckle' fighting.[15] Inevitably though, for many reasons, over time, UFC competitions came to include more and more rules, regulations, safety considerations and, some have argued, more inducements to fight in spectacular, camera-friendly, or crowd-pleasing ways. Accordingly, the idea that UFC MMA is 'as real as it gets' must be appraised within the context of its complex relationship not only with sporting considerations but also entertainment values, and the fact that, to be a successful media product it was forced to be organised as a media spectacle. This line of thinking has led many to argue that, because it is dominated by rule-governed sporting considerations, sport MMA cannot be considered 'real' or even 'realistic' in relation to 'actual fighting' as it exists 'in reality'.[16] The sense is that the sporting rules, within a safety-conscious, rule-governed environment and the camera-oriented entertainment considerations at play in televised sporting events such as the UFC eternally consign sport MMA to the category of being a simulacrum of real combat.[17]

As interesting as the question of 'reality' remains, it is not my intention to adjudicate these old debates here.[18] I mention them at the outset solely because they set the scene for what I propose is the more challenging consideration of the status of media within reality. Nor do I intend to spend too much time on the deconstruction of the concept of reality. Suffice it to say that, here, reality is conceived not merely as a field of material practice and experience (including, of course, media representations, fictions, fantasies, falsehoods and all manner of ideas, etc.) but also as a source of identity. Reality includes media, and it is the performative, productive, inventive, transformative *power* of media that interests me here.

In other words, I seek to implicate the dominant styles of the media treatments of the hard men of MMA in the performative production of the reality of the masculinities conventionally associated with the practice. I begin at the point at which we acknowledge the complex relationship between the embodied physical reality of MMA, on the one hand, along with its status not merely as sport but actually as media spectacle, on the other. Remaining alert to this relationship is the first stage in perceiving one dimension of the agency of media representation within embodied realities such as MMA practice. From this point, my aim is to take this discussion further, into a consideration of the ways that media texts are not only selective in terms of how they depict reality but also a consideration of their agency in terms of their capacity to produce new fantasies, realities, ideologies and new identities. As such, to

be clear, I will not be opposing representation to reality in any way, but rather drawing attention to the ways that media help to *produce* realities.

The mediatised invention of MMA

To illustrate, let us first briefly consider the most well-known relationship between MMA and media: the official origin story of the UFC.[19] In this origin story, the media success of the UFC is acknowledged as absolutely imperative – a matter of life or death, survival or oblivion. Obviously, getting the UFC on TV neither invented the idea nor the practices of using any and every potential aspect of the body within hand-to-hand fighting, nor did it invent cross-training or the idea of developing hybrid approaches to combat. But the *media life* and *media activity* of the UFC put the notions and concepts of what became MMA out there, into circulation, enabling MMA to coalesce into a *discursive entity*: that is, as a widely recognisable and understood *particular kind of thing*.

This is not actually a controversial claim to make, based as it is on a central 'make or break' facet of the UFC's official origin story,[20] although it is likely to be misunderstood. To be clear, I am not denying the complex multiple origins of what came to be called MMA, and I am not suggesting that MMA-like practices did not exist before the UFC. Rather, my focus is on the fact that the media success of the UFC is what produced and disseminated the idea, the name, and the characteristics of MMA as a practice. Hence the importance of reflecting further on the inventive power of media images.

Perhaps the most radical position on the agency of media images is the post-modernist and/or poststructuralist argument that representations do not *reflect* reality, but actually *produce* it. Applied to the case of the UFC and MMA: the media success of the UFC preceded the invention of the named practice of MMA as such. This is so even though the UFC was not the first or indeed the only limited-rules full contact combat sport fixture. But it was the first Western media success. And it was within UFC commentary that the term MMA was eventually settled upon to describe the practice of the combatants. In this way, MMA was invented as a discursive entity (with an agreed name, stable forms, and recognisable practices), first as an internationally distributed media product and then as a globally proliferating sport. To state it directly one final time: the media presence of the UFC is what fuelled the discourse and the practices that settled down into the recognisable activity of MMA. In this way it can be said that, sometimes, at least, representations produce reality.

Representations about the UFC, in the first instance, and subsequently MMA in general, have overwhelmingly tended to focus on its violence and hence the toughness of its practitioners. But, my question is: is this the only story to tell? Is it even necessary? Or is it something that could justifiably be changed?

Certain martial arts studies scholars have recently been trying to nudge the conversation away from the supposed violence of combat sports, and the supposition of their inevitable connection with toxic homosociality. As an alternative, such scholars draw attention to the emancipatory capacity of martial arts, self-defence and combat training for many different kinds of gendered subjects and the ethical, cultural and political projects and identity work around them (emergent case studies focus on women, ethnic minorities, queer and non-cis-gendered subjects, and so on).[21] Many of these scholarly efforts focus on the scenes and the institutions of martial arts teaching and learning – i.e. on what happens in the training hall, on what is being taught and what is being learned, and asking whether that is 'toxic' or, so to speak, 'emancipatory'. However, at least of equal importance is the status of what is being taught and learned in the media discourse around martial arts and combat sports. Indeed, MMA as a practice (or field) owes its very existence to media discourse. So, there are important questions related to *what that media discourse has been 'teaching'*, what has been learned from it, and whether these lessons can be changed.

Documentary reality

My intention is neither to retell the story of the UFC's media-dominated, media-driven and media-determined existence, nor to judge it. That story has been told, and both toxic and emancipatory (along with many other) dimensions might be extracted from it. One of the UFC's own officially sanctioned 'autobiographical' documentaries is 2014's *Fighting For A Generation: 20 Years of the UFC*.[22] Among other things, this documentary officially validates what might otherwise be regarded as my hyperbolic attention to the power of media representations. For, key within *Fighting For A Generation* is the narrative of the UFC's struggle to survive in its early years. There is no ambiguity in the documentary about what saved the UFC from oblivion: it was *a reality television series about it*, called *The Ultimate Fighter* (2005). What 'saved' the UFC and MMA was reality TV.

As *Fighting For A Generation* makes clear, the UFC was in such desperate need of media exposure, that after all other avenues dried up, the company did not *sell* but actually *gave* the *Ultimate Fighter* show to Spike TV free of charge. They also paid the enormous costs associated with the programme. Specific credit for 'saving' the UFC is given to the dramatic finale of season three. Featuring British fighters Ross Pointon and the eventual winner and future champion Michael Bisping, their final fight was so dramatic and riveting that it attracted a significant audience and huge subsequent interest. The effects of this successful reality TV show would play themselves out over time, soon making the UFC and thereafter the practice of MMA into household names.

Combat sports had actually been featured in documentaries and reality TV programmes before. For instance, an immediate precursor was *Fight School*, in 2002. This had been made by Britain's Granada Television, filmed in China, and broadcast in the UK on Sky1. Similar shows for other countries also started appearing around the world at this time, too. In fact, long before reality TV, martial arts and combat sports had often been popularised within documentary television. For instance, in 1983, the BBC screened a lavish television series called *The Way of the Warrior*,[23] which explored the martial arts of East Asia. This was followed up by a best-selling book of the same name in 1984. However, what was unique about *The Ultimate Fighter* was that it capitalised upon the new reality TV format, replete with a 'competitive individualism' structure.

On the back of the success of 2005's *Ultimate Fighter*, 2007 saw the definitive coming of age of 'reality' martial arts programmes and travelogues. Productions in 2007 include the reality TV show, *Last Man Standing* (UK, TV, Gallowgate Productions) and two US documentary-style series, *Human Weapon* and *Fight Quest*. Both programmes involve similar competition journey travelogue hybrids. *Human Weapon* and *Fight Quest* each see two pairs of young white American men taking pilgrimage-like trips to countries outside of the USA. While there, the men train in different local martial arts (*qua* combat sports). Each episode culminates in a competition, which tests the American travellers against indigenous experts.

Over the last two decades, the production and circulation of ersatz-anthropological and quasi-ethnographic reality and documentary programmes and films has proliferated. The expansion of distribution platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and so on, has doubtless been hugely enabling in this respect. Just a few of the most well-known and well-regarded documentary films include *Choke* (1999), *The Smashing Machine* (2002), *The Striking Truth* (a film about George St-Pierre and David Lousieau) (2010), *Jens Pulver: Driven* (2011), *Fightville* (2011), *Once I Was A Champion* (2011), *Bad Blood: Chuck Lidell vs Tito Ortiz* (2011), *Like Water* (Anderson Silva) (2012), *Fighting for a Generation: 20 Years of the UFC* (2014), *The Hurt Business* (2016), *Conor McGregor: Notorious* (2017), and – produced by the UFC but focusing on a once-rival institution (one that the UFC went on to buy out), *Pride Fighting Decade: The Ten Years of Pride* (2017).

Moreover, as well as documentary films, MMA and the UFC are increasingly registered in both fiction film and in a growing number of ways in other kinds of reality and documentary TV shows: from 2007's female-focused version of *The Ultimate Fighter*, *Fight Girls*, to *Religion of Sports: Alpha and Omega* (2016), and Netflix series such as *Fight World*, along with fiction films such as *Warrior* (2011) and dramatised 'factual' bio-pics such as *Stronger than the World* (2016), which dramatically and artistically depicts a phantasmagorical biography of Jose Aldo. Analyses of such texts

(individually or collectively) would cast valuable light on the *kinds* of stories that are told about MMA fighters, their lifeworlds, the industry, and so on. However, care would have to be taken in the face of the question of what is being studied and what is being learned in the process. For, if we study texts about MMA, what we can most precisely learn about is the kinds of texts that are being constructed about MMA. Anything more involves a leap. Nonetheless, these texts are part of reality, and connect with other aspects of it in numerous ways. As mentioned earlier, my aim is not to oppose representation and reality. Rather, my interest is in the agency of the texts as elements of reality – specifically, on this occasion, in terms not of their 'representation' of masculinity, but actually in terms of their capacity to produce of it.

Space does not allow the requisite level of detailed analysis to engage with a range of such texts. So, in the interests of efficiency, I will select only one text, one that both captures many concerns about MMA and masculinity – including hardness, violence and 'toxic' forms of subjectivity and sociality – and yet, at the same time, shows one way to invent MMA masculinity, or MMA subjectivity, differently. The text selected for this purpose is a British TV programme called 'Hard Men' – Episode One of a TV series called 'All Man', written and presented by artist and cultural commentator Grayson Perry.

Hard Men

Most academic studies that take 'masculinity' as their focus must construct their object of attention. 'Masculinity' does not simply present itself as such, as free-standing and self-evident ontological property of the world. Masculinity is rather a discursive or cultural construct: quite what it 'is' or what it is held to be is always largely tacit and implicit to a context. Hence, what it 'is' is always likely to be potentially up for debate. In lived practice, something like 'masculinity' – to the extent that it exists at all – exists *performatively*: acts, practices, habits, activities, attitudes, sounds, movements, and all the rest, are gendered. People perform their gender (along with other aspects of their identities) consciously and unconsciously, deliberately and accidentally, intentionally and unintentionally. Much of this is not conscious, and in many contexts not often spoken, remarked upon, or even noticed.[24] As such, to analyse masculinity in texts about MMA such as documentary film and television programmes almost inevitably requires a path of deductive reasoning, starting from the theory, statement, assumption or hypothesis that there is such a thing as masculinity and that a version of it must exist and be discernible within the text or context in question. Rarely do texts themselves construct 'masculinity' for the analyst.

However, the text in question does precisely that. The entire series is explicitly orientated as an exploration of masculinity, and the episode in question,

'Hard Men', explores the topic of 'hardness', something that the series deviser, writer and presenter, Grayson Perry, proposes from the outset to be a 'quintessential' aspect of masculinity. This first episode begins by staging Perry travelling from London in South East England to Newcastle in North East England. As Perry's opening voiceover narration proposes, the purest expression of hardness is commonly held to be fighting, so to find hard men, he must go somewhere where fighting and hence hardness is ingrained. This opening conceit then stages him 'looking around' the North East of England for stories, moving between Newcastle and former coalmining towns in County Durham.

In the process, Perry finds and presents several emblematic case studies, which are taken as exemplifying northern masculinity. Some of these are tragic, involving unemployment, depression (both economic and psychological), despair, poverty and suicide. Others are more complex and multifaceted. Interestingly, these include case studies found among the committed fighters of what is called the region's MMA 'subculture'.

The key structuring conceit of the show is essentially therefore a stereotype: Geordie men (i.e. men from Newcastle) are fighters. This stereotype of the hard northerner implies its opposite: the soft southerner. Both of these stereotypes are recognisable in British discourse – and both phrases ('hard northerner' and 'soft southerner') continue to circulate freely in British discourse. As such, the binary that organises the text might be rendered: soft and gentle southern artist meets hard northern bruisers. Fortunately, this is a simplification: even though this contrast does structure the opening of the episode, the text is cleverer and less formulaic than this. Grayson Perry has always actively complicated stereotypes. Indeed – although Perry is famous for being a cross-dressing southern college educated Turner Prize winning artist – his voice, manner, attitude and bearing are all organised by recognisably working-class 'masculine' signifiers. As such, Perry plays with different 'positions' simultaneously.

At the same time, Perry historicises hard masculinity according to a kind of Marxian or Weberian sociology. The argument in the programme runs: being tough was necessary for the habitus of a life of work in a factory, shipyard or coal mine.[25] But, after generations of acculturation, when that industry is gone, when that economic base turns to dust, all that is left are communities living in the repetition of the unconscious performance of obsolete cultural values without, so to speak, an object. This is Perry's argument in the television programme. It bears a striking resemblance to both Weberian sociology and some of the key cultural and subcultural studies arguments produced during the 1970s.[26]

Against this backdrop, Perry observes and interviews men among the 'cage fighter' MMA community, asking them about their lives and their interests in MMA. Surprisingly, some of those with the most fearsome exteriors collapse

and dissolve into floods of tears the moment they are asked about their life histories. One ferocious fighter says that he regards any training session as a failure if he is able to walk (rather than having to crawl or be carried) out of the cage after facing opponent after opponent. Then he says that the only place he is at peace is when he is fighting and that the only 'family' he has are his training partners. He then confesses that when he was younger, the older brother he most looked up to committed suicide. Upon saying this, he dissolves into tears and declares that he has never, up until this moment, told anyone about it.

The fact that this confession and outpouring occurs in front of a camera raises many questions. Some relate to the confessional-performative nature of today's 'reality' media culture.[27] Others relate to the well-worn methodological problem of the inevitable intrusion or intervention of any observer of a context. Personally, I did not read this moment either as an example of confessional media culture or of the interviewer 'leading the witness', so to speak. Rather, I read it as an example of the widely acknowledged peculiarity that it is often easier to confide in and confess secrets to strangers than it is to do so with close family or friends. But, in any case, the 'breakdown' or 'release' is remarkable.

Through this and other examples involving tales of male suicides, the programme moves in the direction of constructing northern masculinity as sedulous, taciturn, unable to communicate or indeed handle many emotions. This type of masculinity is constructed via a kind of denial (or foreclosure) of emotions, arguably even a kind of paranoia about communication as such. In this respect, fighting is not even constructed along the lines of the grim boxer's saying that 'boxing is cheaper than therapy'. Rather, it is: real men don't talk; real men endure; and, if pushed, they fight. Indeed, in many moments throughout the programme, fighting is painted less as therapy and more as only a temporary kind of pseudo-release from a deeper existential pain – maybe in the same way that self-harm or drug use is 'release': i.e. not in a very good way, because the release it gives from the symptoms of being screwed up is chimerical, short-lived, and does not tackle the cause of the problems.[28]

So, in these moments, hardness is actually rendered as a *symptom*. It is painted as both a psychological and a sociological or sociocultural symptom. This is because it is painted as an ideological characteristic of an industrial working-class culture that has lost its purpose, its *raison d'être*, and its way. It has no proper focus. To use the old psychoanalytical Marxian language: no way of leading to sublimation. What may once have been the necessary or inevitable habitus and type of physical, psychological and emotional 'callousing' of a working-class industrial life is now more like a headless chicken, running around after the reason and even capacity for continuing has already gone.

New Men

As such, the programme suggests that inherited ideas about toughness combined with the new social conditions of un- and under-employment inevitably forge new relations to violence and a statistically increased chance of suicide. The implication is that this supposedly 'traditional' working class masculinity is actually a new variant, invented not in the industrial factories and mines of the past, but rather in today's ruins. This type of 'hard' masculinity, constructed from an industrial culture that now lacks the industry that produced it (or its parent forms), must now deal with new and different experiences, pressures and emotions, associated with dwelling in a kind of existential wasteland. But the hard shell, so useful for a predictable industrial habitus, becomes a dead weight and even shatters if asked to change shape under the new conditions of un-, under-, or different-employment.

However, Perry focuses on one MMA fighter whose performance of masculine hardness offers a glimpse of a possible change. This character dresses up for his ring appearances in the pantomime-like manner of traditional British and European wrestling. Perry and he make a connection based on their shared experiences of cultural cross-dressing and dressing up as a mode of finding a kind of deep pleasure, satisfaction, happiness and sense of self. In addition, this man is able to talk about what drove him to fight (in a word: *fear*) and what led him to dress-up and make-up (in a nutshell: an understanding that *identity is performance*).

At this point, something in the logic and the implications of 'MMA as symptom' change. It starts to run against the grain of the earlier picture that has been building up throughout the programme. A new argument is able to start to emerge. The starting point is the same: if people are screwed up because of living in a screwed-up environment that requires the performance of hardness, then it is not surprising that they ritualise and train for this via martial arts and combat sports. But, what we see in this case is martial arts not only giving such people an ability to cope, but also becoming a space to construct new values and new identities. With this comes new perspectives and relations with self and other that enable self-reflection, when and where self-reflection is most needed. In this instance, MMA becomes neither merely the dead-end repetition of hardness nor a symptomatic kind of self-harm, but actually a 'safe' space for redrawing and reinventing masculinity. Men make their own histories, Marx argued, but – as he immediately added – not in conditions of their own choosing. Few would choose to exist among such contextual raw materials and building blocks as an economically devastated social context, but the materials available there can and must be used to build something, undoubtedly new and probably unexpected.

Whatever else is going on here, and despite first appearances and easy conclusions, perhaps the uptake of MMA in impoverished regions like North East

England is not simply what Freud would call a *repetition compulsion* – driven by a symptom and unable to escape from its condition. Of course, it is, a bit, a kind of compulsion to repeat. But it is not *simple* repetition. It is, rather, in Jacques Derrida's sense, 'reiteration' – not a pure repetition of the same, but a reiteration that *inevitably* involves alteration and change. Certainly, one difference that Perry seemed to delight in between the MMA fighters he met when compared with the range of other characters appearing in the programme was the 'freeness' and 'openness' of the fighters – their confidence and ability to talk about their emotions and their understanding of masculinity as performance.

Perry concluded the programme by making a huge banner (his artwork tribute to northern masculinity), and having it marched sombrely, and to the accompaniment of an old colliery marching band, like a funeral procession, into Durham Cathedral, specifically so as to mourn – to celebrate and threnodize – a bygone era, and arguably a bygone masculinity. This was contextually appropriate, perhaps. But my argument is that he could just as easily have constructed a joyful celebration of an emergent self-reflexive masculinity. Admittedly, in certain respects he did do that: elements of the artwork he created for those involved in the programme alluded to the need to change and develop, away from the masculinity not only of the devastated parent generation, but also that of the once-proud grandparent generation.

Conclusion

Emancipatory narratives involving martial arts practice are not rare. Nor are tales of toxic martial masculinity. The former are the bread and butter of practitioners, teachers, institutions and all agencies of martial arts and combat sports. The latter seem easy to invent on any hasty glance at often homosocial martial arts and combat sports training environments. However, what is rare is the discernment of signs of the emancipatory and the progressive within the toxic. Grayson Perry's treatment of hard men is exemplary in this respect, suggesting that hard masculinity is not necessarily toxic, or at least that it need not be or remain so. If one hard and brittle dam of masculinity bursts into floods of tears upon the slightest interest of a sensitive listener, and if another hard man delights in coming out from behind his mask to declare that fear not only led him to don the mask but also thereafter to realise that hardness could be a joyous, ironic, playful performance, then this suggests the existence of a full spectrum of possibilities, and an extremely wide range of stories to tell about MMA and the subjectivities it is capable of producing.

Mainstream film, TV and documentary have arguably been highly selective in their focus so far, organising their MMA tales around well-worn narrative arcs of competitive individualism, rags to riches, or salvation stories. If toxic

masculinity is overrepresented in such textual constructs, then perhaps part of the problem lies not simply 'out there' in the 'real world' of embodied physical practices. Perhaps part of the problem – and surely one of the easiest to change – lies with the orientation of the stories being sought out, constructed, invented and told. This is not to deny the existence of such a thing as toxic masculinity. It is rather to insist that media representation has an important and active role to play in either perpetuating or loosening old forms, both in representation and (hence) in the real world.

Notes

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9. I argue in *The Invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture Between Asia and America* (forthcoming), that the discursive entity 'martial arts' emerged principally within media texts.
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14. The UFC is not just the competitions held under this banner. It is actually a fight promotion company, based in Las Vegas. So, 'UFC' should be taken to refer to everything to do with the promotion of this particular combat sporting fixture, from the contracting of fighters and arranging and promotion of fights between them, to the management of hierarchies and rankings, as well as myriad business decisions, public relations considerations and relationships with media bodies, and so on.
15. Downey, '"As Real As It Gets!" Producing Hyperviolence in Mixed Martial Arts'; Bolelli, 'How Gladiatorial Movies and Martial Arts Cinema Influenced the Development of The Ultimate Fighting Championship'.
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18. I discuss this further in Paul Bowman, 'Instituting Reality in Martial Arts Practice'; see also Kyle Barrowman, 'Dialogue: Conquest of Reality: Response to Paul Bowman's "Instituting Reality in Martial Arts Practice"'. *JOMEC Journal*, (1 June 2014). https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2014.10267; Paul Bowman, *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015).
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20. It is well known that it took quite a while before what competitors in the UFC were doing came to be called MMA. At first, individual stylists competed against each other – so representatives of karate were evaluated against representatives of savate or jujutsu (or indeed jiujitsu) and so on. Over time, more

and more competitors 'cross-trained' in several different martial arts styles. These eventually became referred to as 'mixed martial artists', who practiced 'mixed martial arts', a practice that ultimately became regarded as a distinct field of practice, or a style: MMA. So, competitions such as the UFC *mixed* (i.e. threw together) martial artists. These became mixed martial artists who practiced mixed martial arts, or MMA.

21. Channon and Matthews, *Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports*; Channon and Matthews; Channon and Phipps, 'Pink Gloves Still Give Black Eyes: Exploring "Alternative" Femininity in Women's Combat Sports'; Maya Maor, 'Fighting Gender Stereotypes: Women's Participation in the Martial Arts, Physical Feminism and Social Change'. *Martial Arts Studies*, no. 7 (21 January 2019): 36–48. https://doi.org/10.18573/mas.56; Allyson Quinney, '"The @UFC and Third Wave Feminism? Who Woulda Thought?": Gender, Fighters, and Framing on Twitter'. *Martial Arts Studies*, no. 2 (Spring 2016). martialartsstudies.org.
22. Anchor Bay Entertainment, *Fighting for a Generation*.
23. Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior: The Paradox of the Martial Arts*. London: Century by arrangement with the British Broadcasting Corporation, 1983 (1984 [printing]), 1984.
24. Performances are certainly subject to scrutiny and critical evaluation in threshold periods and contexts such as transitional stages of development (schools, teenage years), especially those characterised by coercive mimeticism and normative homosociality (so-called toxic masculine environments). In such contexts, although 'masculinity' is unlikely to be the operative organising term, it becomes visible or apparent when behaviours that transgress unspoken gendered, classed and raced boundaries are policed back into line, through scolding, mockery, disparagement or comedy, and so on. As such, to think or talk about gender, and within this terrain, masculinity, always involves an effort of interpretation and construction.
25. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985); Horne and Hall, 'Anelpis: A Preliminary Expedition into a World without Hope or Potential'.
26. Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Farnborough, Hants: Saxon House, 1977).
27. Paul Bowman, 'Rey Chow and Postcolonial Social Semiotics'. *Social Semiotics* 20, no. 4 (2010): 329–341. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2010.494386.
28. The question of martial arts and combat sports in relation to, in lieu of, or as 'therapy' is yet to be fully worked out in the fields of cultural studies and/or social science. I began to contribute to this discussion in *Mythologies of Martial Arts* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), and intend to pursue it further in future works on BJJ and health culture. For a very different kind of approach, see D.S. Farrer, 'Brazilian jiu-jitsu is therapy. Shifting subjectivities on Guam', *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 2019: 407–28.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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