



CAPACIOUS

Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry Vol. 3 No. 1

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ISSN: 2816-9913

ISBN-13: 979-8850440350

capaciousjournal.com



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BJJ'S DIARY: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW NORMAL

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Situation

A situation is a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life. It is a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event.

—Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011, 5)

On 23rd November 2019, I sent a WhatsApp message to my *escrima*¹ instructor: 'I have had to pause all commitments for the time being because my daughter has an attachment disorder and needs 100% of my time at the moment. [...] I'll be back when I can.' In response, he offered to look after the *escrima* class I was teaching. But, I replied: 'I've cancelled everything.' Then:

I don't know what my future looks like anymore. Nothing is predictable one moment to the next so I can't commit to anything. Something that was meant to help me deal with stress was just becoming a source of stress, so it had to go. If and when [the situation improves] I'll pick stuff up again. For now it's just batten down the hatches.

After a few more exchanges over the next week or so, one of my last ever messages to him, on 18th December 2019, was this:

Sorry I couldn't make it [to the Christmas meal]. But evenings remain very difficult. Anyway, after having this break and taking stock of my life, I have decided I will also be taking a break from *escrima*. I am not able to fit it in and I've been thinking more about what I want and need at the moment. I've always wanted to learn BJJ and I've found a lunchtime class that fits with my life, so I'm doing that for the time being. If things change, I will get back to you. But for now, I hope all goes well. Best wishes, Paul.

We realized that one of our adopted daughters had complex psychological and emotional problems early on, before she was two. We began to speculate that she had an attachment disorder when she was three. Over time, she has been formally diagnosed with this and other issues.² In 2019, she was thirteen. By that time, we had locks on bedroom doors and kitchen cupboards. Even though they were both teenagers, our daughters could not be left at home alone, for many reasons. My partner and I had both, at different times, had breakdowns. I was diagnosed with anxiety and signs of depression, and prescribed antidepressants (a prescription I never collected). We saw more of social workers, psychologists, therapists, counsellors, teachers, and the occasional police officer than we did of our friends. I had given up trying to go out, other than for exercise, and even then, plans to get out for an hour or two for exercise were always likely to be scuppered. I became used to planning work trips and even organizing conferences, only to have to cancel at the last minute. Work commitments were hard to honor, especially if they meant being out of the house later than usual. We relied on the understanding of our employers. We needed our families to help us if we were to get any kind of break. Yet stress arose at work and cracks and rifts developed in our families, as our relatives could or would not believe or comprehend what we would tell them about our situation. It was tough. My messages to my *escrima* instructor in late 2019 coincide with it all coming to yet another head.

Perturbation

Perturbation is Deleuze's word for disturbances in the atmosphere that constitute situations whose shape can only be forged by continuous reaction and transversal movement, releasing subjects from the normativity of intuition and making them available for alternative ordinaries.

—Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011, 6)

I took my first Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) class on the lunchtime of Tuesday 17th December 2019. I was 48 years old. BJJ can be described loosely as a ground-fighting, grappling, or ‘wrestling’ style of martial art. Until that first class, I had only practiced striking-based martial arts, and tai chi (*taiji*). So, BJJ was a massive change for me. My wife was shocked that I even wanted to try it, and even more shocked when I liked (loved) it. She reminded me that for many years I had vociferously critiqued, disdained, scorned, disparaged and even ridiculed BJJ. I have no precise memory of this, but I believe her, as it aligns with my memories of my *escrima* instructor’s often vehement outbursts about it.

In weapons-based styles like *escrima*, one invests a lot of faith in the idea of devastating an opponent with your weapon, fists, feet, knees, or elbows, before they could get anywhere near being able to grab hold of you and grapple you to submission. Because of this investment, critiques of BJJ by weapons-stylists are frequent. They are also predictable and symptomatic: they express a way of thinking and reasoning required for pugilistic practice. The main version runs like this: there are many good reasons to avoid ‘going to the ground’ in a fight; therefore, a style that embraces going to the ground *as its first principle and overarching strategy* is reckless, or even ridiculous.³

The catch is that, if one takes this idea to heart, then one might marginalize or reject training for ground-fighting. As a consequence, one develops no ground-fighting skills and this can become a source of anxiety—because many fights (both in combat sports and in the ‘real world’) *do* go to the ground. Therefore, the principled rejection of training for ground-fighting may be the thing that turns out to be reckless.

In my own case, I think my criticisms of grappling and ground-fighting had arisen as part of a quasi-obligatory, almost ritualistic, catechism-style proclamation of faith in the kind of *escrima* that we practiced.⁴ As in: ‘We don’t train for/like *that* because we believe it makes much more sense to train for/like *this*’. Nonetheless, this mantra could not fully silence a nagging, unresolved issue: I didn’t know *how* to grapple or fight on the ground; so what would happen if I ever had to? Hence, both the anxiety and the curiosity.

Furthermore, a number of factors conspired one day to make me realize—with a clarity and force that had hitherto eluded me—that, *really*, I personally was unlikely, in future, ever to need to fight in an *escrima* style (i.e., hitting), and that,

really, by far the most likely form of physical conflict I might find myself involved in would mainly require me to subdue the physical aggression of someone—and most likely someone I know and love. As a matter of fact, a number of tense and explosive situations at home had led me to realise that *everything* that *escrima* trained me to do was a really bad idea in most situations. I realized that my *escrima*-trained flinch reflex would cause me to react in exactly the wrong way in tense, surprise, or ‘physical’ situations. At that point, it was like a bubble burst in my belief system, and I had a complete perspectival transformation.

So, my switch from *escrima* to BJJ was not *merely* a ‘martial arts matter’. It was not an ‘internal’ matter of a subjective choice between one hobby and another. Rather, it was strongly connected to the perturbations I was experiencing and the situation unfolding in my family life. I also remember my cessation of *escrima* feeling like a renunciation – a necessary purge, part of a transformative rethinking and almost revolutionary reconfiguring of my values, orientations and daily life practice. In the run up to this moment, I had perhaps been in the situation that Lauren Berlant (2011) in *Cruel Optimism* calls ‘impasse,’ in which I slowly realized that my established attachments were becoming ‘cruel.’ Orientations, attachments, values, and practices that I had long been deeply invested in were no longer *enabling* but were now *actively obstructing* my flourishing. To combine two of Berlant’s terms, this amounted to a kind of crisis of optimism, and hence a crisis of desire, fantasy, investment, attachment, and ultimately also identity.

Cruel Optimism

In Berlant’s (2011) terms, “attachment is optimistic” (1). It is a “force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying something that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene” (1-2). In other words, for Berlant, attachment is *promissory*. Initially, this can involve excitement about “the change that’s gonna come” (2) thanks to this new investment. But this will quickly settle down: if the optimism endures and the attachment continues, it will become incorporated into (either structured by or structuring within) everyday life. In Berlant’s (2011) words: “one of optimism’s ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality, that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formu-

late” (2). However, attachment becomes what Berlant (2011) calls “cruel” when a situation emerges in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1):

It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially (1).

Strictly speaking, then, Berlant’s approach would be more likely to identify the proper issue here as the dynamics of family life, parenthood, adoption, and their connection to enduring fantasies about ‘the good life’. Indeed, her organizing question at the very beginning of *Cruel Optimism* is: “Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies – say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work – when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?” (2). From here, the key question might seem to be: why stay attached to an adoptive relationship, or the fantasy of parenthood as promising the good life? However, this is the same as asking: why stay attached to a child, who needs to be looked after? The sheer volume and weight of answers giving very clear and compelling reasons why one should not give up on a child in your care would be deafening.⁵

Moreover, Berlant (2011) does not actually pursue her first question, and instead explores a second, rather easier, field of enquiry: “What happens,” she asks, “when those fantasies start to fray?” (2). She suggests that there are a range of likely responses: “depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash” (2). Certainly, during our years as adoptive parents, we have experienced each of these, in different ways, at different times. Nonetheless, what I will be concerned with in what follows is when, in late 2019, I made a change in an apparently minor, apparently unrelated part of my life. In effect, I identified my hobby practice of *escrima* as being a now-cruel attachment, one that was actively impeding my aims. Shortly after, I identified BJJ as a new source of optimism—a new promissory place and project. A *kind* of ‘solution’ to my problems—even if only in the therapeutic (Marxists might say ‘imaginary’) form of helping me to cope with my situation, and even if only by giving me an occasional enjoyable break from it.

My ‘good life’ fantasies in one realm of my life (parenthood) were well and truly fraying, but I could and would not let go. Instead, I jettisoned other aspects of my life, and replaced them with new attachments. This putatively ‘minor’ change in

one realm had profound knock-on effects in all others. It actually felt like a kind of 'conversion', as described by Peter Sloterdijk (2013) in his long philosophical reflection on discipline, training, conversion, and embodied change, *You Must Change Your Life*:

All increases of a mental or bodily kind begin with a secession from the ordinary. This is usually accompanied by a forceful rejection of the past – not infrequently assisted by such affects as disgust, regret and complete rejection of the earlier mode of being. (217)

Feel Notes

Certainly, starting BJJ instantly felt profound and transformative. After my first class, I suspected it would be important to try to capture my thoughts and feelings, as I encountered them. So I started a diary. I had no clear picture of its point, purpose, or potential future use, but I just had an inkling that something important was happening and that I should be capturing the changes I was feeling. I knew this would not be a *training* journal, in which I reflected on lessons or techniques. Nor would it be some kind of formal ethnographic 'field notes.' Rather, it would be what I came to think of as 'feel notes.' So: not '*field* notes', but '*feel* notes'. Neither an ethnography nor an autoethnography, but reflections on the often perturbing, often revelatory new feelings I was encountering in starting this new practice, one that was in many ways astonishing to me.⁶

To me, the term 'feel notes' evoked not only anthropological field notes but also—and more importantly—Raymond Williams' important notion of a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977). Williams offered the term 'structure of feeling' as a tool to help orient those interested in sensing, mapping, or capturing an unfolding present. In my case, this would be the experiential transformations that might soon be lost and forgotten simply by receding into the tapestry of the unremarkable and hence unremarked ordinariness of a new everyday life. I wanted to capture what it felt like before BJJ became regular, familiar, and normal to me—to capture what was new and remarkable in BJJ as a field of experiences and transformations, before those became something else, fell from view, and hence became invisible to me.

How it all *felt* seemed to be the most important dimension that I needed to capture. This is unsurprising if, as Berlant (2011) argues, "the present is perceived, first, affectively"; if it is "not at first an object but a mediated affect"; if it is "a thing

that is sensed and under constant revision” (4). It may develop a kind of ‘form’, although this will always be a ‘sense’ – or, indeed, a structure of feeling – and if its “conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now” (Berlant 2011, 4).

Beginning

An immediate consequence (that surprised me) of ditching *escrima* and starting BJJ was an emotional outpouring. This is very present in the first entries of my feel notes. I wrote my notes on the train or bus to and from my BJJ lessons. I named the file ‘BJJ’s Diary’. I did this because I liked the sonic and syllabic allusion this made to *Bridget Jones’ Diary*. I think I was drawn to this title because I wondered whether I might end up writing some kind of memoir anchored in taking up BJJ at 48 years old. This idea itself was no doubt connected to the spontaneous outpouring of emotion that overwhelmed the first few entries. I seemed angry, and I directed that anger towards my former practice, or rather, my former instructor.⁷

At the same time, my new practice instantly led to an explosion of new enthusiasm. On 31st December 2019—New Year’s Eve—I went training. In my diary, I noted that I would ‘never have voluntarily gone to *escrima* over the festive period. That’s because the pleasure in *escrima* is a principled pleasure. It’s the satisfaction of telling yourself you’ve done the right thing. [But] BJJ is [...] inherently pleasurable all the way through.’ So, I actively *wanted* to do it. There was no ‘should’: only ‘want.’ I also noted a new concern about hygiene, both personal and environmental: ‘toenails must be trimmed too. And clean. And do my feet smell? What about between the toes? In the shower every day I have been cleaning with considerably more diligence.’ Similarly, because BJJ requires flexibility, ‘I am tending to want to stretch. This means hands on the floor and face closer to the floor. So I am seeing more dirt. So I am cleaning.’ I speculated about the origins of *feng shui*, and invented an exercise-based creation narrative.

I was struck by my new perspectives on practices I once thought I had abandoned. I had practiced yoga twenty years before, but became bored of it. Now, however, because BJJ requires flexibility, I returned to it, with fresh eyes, and gusto. But most of all, I was struck by the profound physical intimacy of ‘rolling’ (the term for BJJ’s specific type of sparring). This intimacy was simultaneously a source of worry (related to both hygiene and ego), and competitiveness, but also bonding. For, BJJ rolling provides a rare form of physical intimacy among

adults. From the outside, it might look *only* like competition or combat; but from the inside, within the activity, there is teaching and learning, joking alongside choking, care, collaboration, and concern. All of this, in modern everyday life, is both incredibly rare and also deeply affecting.

In these early experiences, I was struck by the renegotiation both of personal boundaries and also of relationships. In BJJ, you are always physically connected with your partner. This may be one grip on a collar or wrist, but it is more likely to be all of your or their body-weight pressing into anywhere and everywhere on your body. Nowhere is off-limits. Everything comes into contact with everything, and skin is only separated from skin by either a loose cotton 'gi' (uniform) or very thin Lycra or Spandex (when training 'no-gi').

There are also various forms of fear, discomfort, and sometimes terror. This is not just because of the frequency of pain and its proximity to potentially lethal consequences. It often relates to the spectral presence of a violent sexual dimension. Facing the new experiences of body clamped against body is not just a matter of combat. It can initially feel like sexual aggression. As such, it is immediately necessary to learn new meanings for certain taboo areas of the body and their movement. Normally, in life, the groin, hips and butt mean sex, micturition, and defecation. They are the very nerve-centre of intimacy and privacy. But in BJJ, that entire area means weight, strength, power, control. The genitals and the anus are present, sure, but they are surrounded by the largest muscle groups in the body: thighs, lower back, glutes, core. This area is also the body's centre of gravity. So, in BJJ, this entire region becomes functional as the principal centre of power in combat. Learning that it is *this*, and learning to ignore all of the ingrained intensities of feeling about this area and sex, micturition, and defecation, is an enormous but necessary task.

Translated into the terms set out in the famous opening paragraph of Deleuze and Guattari's (1984) *Anti-Oedipus*, you might say that, in BJJ, the "private parts" of a body—a machine that at other times also "shits and fucks" (1)—become parts of a very different kind of machine: the overarching BJJ machine is made up of grappling, wrestling machines. In these, BJJ "is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts" (1). Closer inspection reveals "machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections" (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, 1). One

part attempts to reconfigure parts to become a levering-machine, turning another part into a fulcrum. One part “produces a flow that the other interrupts” (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, 1). And so on.

We could read the entirety of *Anti-Oedipus* in this way, and find apt redescriptions of BJJ’s transformation or reterritorialization of intimate and taboo body parts and connections into publicly acceptable machinic relations. But, when I was on page one of learning BJJ, it is as if I was also on page one of Brian Massumi’s (2002) *Parables for the Virtual*, whose opening observations echo and amplify exactly where I was ‘at’:

When I think of my body [...], two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?

If you start from an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation, the slightest, most literal displacement convokes a qualitative difference, because as directly as it conducts itself it beckons a feeling, and feelings have a way of folding into each other, resonating together, interfering with each other, mutually intensifying, all in unquantifiable ways apt to unfold again in action, often unpredictably. Qualitative difference: immediately the issue is change. Felt and unforeseen. (1)

In BJJ, what moves you to notice your own body movements (and limitations) and your own sensations, and even your own memories, in entirely new ways, is the other person’s body. On Tuesday 7th January 2020, I reflected upon my claustrophobic panic upon feeling crushed under a heavy body and struggling to breathe. I noted that, each time I found myself crushed under a heavy man’s body, the experience always reminded me of hiding under the bedclothes as a child, to shield myself from the ghosts and monsters, whilst always taking great care to preserve a clear air-way through the sheets, in order to breathe fresh air.⁸ On Sunday 12th January 2020, I speculated that learning BJJ is like learning a foreign language with one’s body. Working out how to get one’s body to do new things, to move into new positions, to distribute weight, and to do *this* while also doing *that*, is an immense task. I reflected on the relationship of this to the important work of words and phrases, realizing that I *need* words and phrases. I use words and phrases to orientate myself, or to give myself ‘handles’ to cling to. I wrote in my journal that I craved more phrases to ‘fight to’ while sparring: ‘Little conceptual handles to grab onto and try to implement [in order] to clear the haze and cloud and smoke over the biomechanics of fighting [...] Giving conceptual maps, networks, grids.’

Sloterdijk (2013) argues that the apparent silence of those in training, whether in monastic orders or meditation, belies a whole world of 'endo-rhetorical' practice, in which the subject-in-training repeats to themselves the key words and phrases required to practice well. Ultimately, for Sloterdijk, any adoption of any kind of disciplined 'practicing life' is ethical.

In my diary, I also reflect on the ethos. I know one must not generalize an ethos from an instance. But if, in my former *escrima* class, there had been an ethos that involved disparaging BJJ because BJJ did not seem to face up to certain aspects of combat (which *escrima* insists is structured around violent strikes), so, in my first BJJ club, certain other pugilistic martial arts and self-defence approaches were equally or correspondingly disdained. In my first club, the coach confided that he felt compelled to watch and then become agitated by the social media output of a particular school of 'street' self-defence:

Before class, as we sit around in a circle doing independent stretches, pre-formal warmup, [coach] holds forth on the hilarity of [these street self-defence] videos. [...] He discusses [their] approach to being attacked, and notes that at one point the narrator says something like 'so you take out your knife and...'. [Coach] recounts this and, with a laugh, says that if you are carrying around a knife then 'perhaps you are part of the problem and not the solution'. Loved that. Very concise and precise.

My delight in this, I realize now, attested to a profound perspective change happening in me. In *escrima* circles, there is sometimes discussion about what kinds of things a person could legally carry, that could function, if needed, as weapons. From my BJJ coach's perspective, that very logic, that direction of thinking, already signalled a problem: if you are considering (or are already) carrying a weapon—even if justified by an appeal to (potential)⁹ self-defence—you *are already becoming the problem*. This resonated well with my recent rejection of all pugilistic responses.

The Joy of BJJ

But one question vexed me more than others: what—*precisely*—was I actually enjoying about BJJ? My long entry for Tuesday 14th January 2020 is dominated by a reflection on whether or not I might apply to my university's research ethics committee for permission to carry out a formal research project focusing on BJJ,

and whether my rambling and disorganized notes were already somehow a part of it, or whether any subsequent research project would take a different form. It was in this entry that I first use the phrase ‘feel notes.’

After some reflection on whether my diary was the basis for either a memoir, an ethnography, an autoethnography, or something else, and after some reflection on the paperwork and guidelines used by my university in its ethical approval processes for research projects, I pose the question of enjoyment directly. I wrote: ‘Anyway, there I am, under some massive lump of a bloke, who is inching his way all around me, looking for an arm bar or a choke [...]. And I’m thinking, “what is it about this that I am enjoying?” And it’s definitely hard to pin down.’ I entertain a number of possible answers: am I merely enjoying learning something completely new? Am I enjoying something that takes me back to childhood play-fighting? Is this a kind of play therapy? Am I enjoying learning things about my body and using it in a very different way? Is it a fantasy of invincibility? Or is it something to do with the immediate and enforced friendship caused by such bodily intimacy? Is it a sense of feeling physically alive? Wrestling with young strong people and surviving (or not)? Is this about male bonding, or about escaping the confines of normal gendered boundaries?

On 17th January 2020, my ruminations on what exactly was so pleasurable about BJJ continued:

Yesterday I met with [a researcher who practices BJJ and MMA] and we discussed my possible research question of why precisely and exactly BJJ is so enjoyable. He said it is like a near-death experience. Every roll you are fighting for your life, your breath. Every time you come up for air, so to speak, whether victorious or not, you are coming back from the brink. In this sense, his thesis agrees with Alex Channon’s article about ‘edge-work.’¹⁰ You take yourself to the edge. That is thrilling and educational and boundary pushing and limit moving in itself.

This was corroborated somewhat the same day: after attending a lunchtime session at a different club in another town, I found I was hugely disappointed that we had not rolled at the end of the session. I realized that something about the thrill of rolling is definitely a strong dimension of the enjoyment. But, at the same time, much of what surrounds the intensity of the rolls is also important: the sociality, and the almost immediate and palpable improvements in physical health, to name only two obvious things. On 18th January 2020, I wrote: ‘Yesterday, as I was walking home, I felt in my bones that after exactly one month of training, I feel so much more full of energy. I walk faster. I don’t get sleepy as often. I feel stronger. I feel more flexible. More grounded. More mobile.’

Lockdown

The entries discussed above were written in my first month of training BJJ, between 18th December 2019 and 18th January 2020. By the end of the month – approximately six weeks into training – I refer to BJJ as ‘normal’ for the first time. On Friday 28th February 2020, I wrote:

I also think I may have moved out of the ‘this is so weird and unusual phase’ into a ‘this is normal’ phase. The high is the same, but it does not seem connected with profundity. I had anxiety dreams the other night about losing my ability to kick and punch and ‘fight’. I dreamt I was useless.

Little did I know how fleeting that particular ‘new normal’ phase would be. By Friday 13th March, health experts and BJJ luminaries were publicly advocating the cessation of BJJ training because of the spread of Covid-19. On Tuesday 17th March, I made the decision to pause my BJJ training, ‘for a while.’ I thought it might be for three weeks or so. Little did I know that it would last more than a year, until 17th May 2021. During the rest of 2020, and into 2021, I dreamed of BJJ almost every night. Unlike the dreams I was having in February 2020 about losing my other martial arts skills (‘my ability to kick and punch and “fight”’), my BJJ dreams were always about a surprise return to training. These were not unlike the dreams I occasionally still have, since the death of my father in 2003, in which I am filled with surprise and delight to see him, followed by an increasingly sad realization that this can’t be real, because I know he is gone. My BJJ dreams only started to become less frequent after about nine months in the wilderness.

My desolation at the loss of BJJ throughout the first year of the pandemic was profound. I got writer’s block—well, as close to writer’s block as I’ve ever had—largely because of this loss. All my research and writing projects went on hold. I couldn’t focus on anything. I was not someone who used lockdowns as a time to learn a new self-improving skill. I was on pause. Dormant. Eventually, after some time, and with what felt like Herculean effort, I managed to write some short blog essays, and, in due course, one academic article, in which I attempted to capture something of the structure of feeling of enforced isolation as a martial artist in a time when it was not at all certain that group training would *ever* return again (Bowman 2020). It felt like bereavement.

Springtime

Over a year after the first lockdown, the British government allowed a return to indoor sports, on Monday 17th May 2021. I attended the first ever class of a newly opened BJJ club. I immediately joined. The journey to and from this club was a six mile cycle along a rural canal towpath. This mode of travel meant that I could no longer keep a diary while thoughts and experiences were fresh in my mind. But the emotional and psychological effects of cycling through a bucolic landscape actually seemed to remove my desire or interest in keeping a diary at all. I now just felt content.

Aside from breaks for occasional minor injuries, holidays, work, and family commitments, I have trained an average of 2-3 times per week since then. On 11th May 2022, I was awarded my blue belt. This felt like the greatest achievement of my entire life. However, BJJ never again felt as profound as it had at first. In fact, as I write these words, it is already hard to remember how it felt before BJJ became my new normal. Nonetheless, if I carry out an introspective inventory of my current constellation of affective responses, values, and opinions, I note some significant changes. For instance, where before I could and would view many different kinds of martial arts with curiosity, interest, and appreciation, I confess that I currently mainly view them with a kind of vague pity. This is not the arrogance of an old man who thinks, conceitedly or tiredly, ‘been there, done that.’ It feels rather more akin to what Peter Sloterdijk regards as an inevitable part of the process of conversion. (Or, as I often hear in my own head, the voice of Forrest Whittaker, quoting from the samurai text, *Hagakure*, in the film *Ghost Dog*: in ‘the practising life,’ you reach a point where you should be able to ‘hear about all *Ways* and become more and more in accord with your own.’)

Sloterdijk (2013) argues that all forms of conversion involve a profound change in affects. He argues that the convert is someone who turns their back on and ‘leaves’ an older form of everyday life, entering into a new realm of practice with inevitably new values: “The leaver cultivates a battle-ready attention to their own interior and retains a hostile suspicion towards the new exterior, which had previously stood for the surrounding world as such” (217). He then continues into his observations about conversion being “usually accompanied by a forceful rejection of the past—not infrequently assisted by such affects as disgust, regret, and complete rejection of the earlier mode of being” (217).

Although his discussion of 'conversion' is informed by images of religious and ascetic practice, for Sloterdijk such realms are only interesting to the extent that they provide *generalizable* examples, that illustrate what happens everywhere and all the time, in all of the various kinds of micro and macro-conversions we undergo in changes in lifestyle and in taking up new practices. After conversion, Sloterdijk (2013) suggests: "The attitude of the correctly practising individual in relation to their earlier existence is described by Hindus as *vairagya*, which translates as 'detachment' and refers to a mildly disgusted indifference towards everyday pleasures and concerns" (219). Certainly, in my case, I have lost all interest in pugilistic practices, and actually, for the first time in my entire life, I now view punching and kicking as crude and inelegant. Unethical, even. This is a radical transformation for me, who has, over the course of many years, invested huge amounts of time training in twelve different martial arts.

Conclusions?

What is the relevance of 'my situation' for anyone or anything else? First, it seems important to state the obvious and propose that 'my' situations and decisions are not entirely my own. An ungenerous reading of my situation might regard it disparagingly, as being primarily about a white, middle-aged, middle-class man taking up a trivial new hobby. However, the aim of this reflection has not been to valorize this or that individual person's (or social demographic's) hobbies. Rather, it has been trying to take seriously Berlant's (2011) idea of "structures of relationality" in attachment and how these relate to structures of feeling, and hence orientations, investments, interpretations and actions. Certainly, one might focus on the extent to which my switch of hobby was a purely individual, idiosyncratic, and trivial matter, from which no wider lessons can be derived. But it seems more interesting to ask whether it casts any light on anything more widely relevant.

One possibility is that my situation intersects with another of Berlant's (2011) concerns. She asks: "how can it be said that aesthetically mediated affective responses exemplify a shared *historical* sense?" (3) Certainly, my turn to BJJ at a time of perceived crisis and a sense of impasse was not entirely random, nor simply individual or idiosyncratic. Yes, a lifetime of personally believing that I 'need' to practice martial arts has a bearing. Other people will choose other things. Yet, my 'individual choice' was neither completely aleatory nor made in a vacuum.

Brazilian jiu-jitsu was in the ascendent in 2019. It had increasingly been said to be the fastest growing martial art (and one of the fastest growing sports) in the world over previous years (Blum 2016; Bowman 2021). So, instead of being connected only to my individual psychology, perhaps my turn to BJJ could be connected to something to do with the *zeitgeist*, or new formations.

I think it is important to see such a situation as both singular *and* generalizable—as inevitably but uniquely connected to, reflective of, and interacting with, broader cultural movements and changes. This connection of ostensibly individual sensations and changes with broader emerging forms of new presents is what links affect studies with ideology studies, discourse studies and historical studies. In Berlant’s words:

affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory; the moment of the affective turn brings us back to the encounter of what is sensed with what is known and what has impact in a new but also recognizable way. To think about sensual matter that is elsewhere to sovereign consciousness but that has historical significance in domains of subjectivity requires following the course from what’s singular—the subject’s irreducible specificity—to the means by which the matter of the senses becomes general within a collectively lived situation. (53)

For me, on a personal level, I cannot think of another practice that would nourish my ability to continue parenting two deeply traumatized children, whose ‘issues’ get larger and more present and complex as they grow. No other practice meets my needs and gives me as much resilience and enjoyment as BJJ. And I am clearly not alone. Other martial artists joke that BJJ is a cult, that former friends are ‘lost’ to it. All of which must add up ... to *something*.

A non-affect-sensitive approach to ‘ideology’ or ‘discourse’ might be tempted to take the small step of the giant leap into generalizing statements. For instance, an approach that used Slavoj Žižek’s framework might come to count BJJ among the current “sublime objects” of ideology (Žižek 1989)—as a practice that might *seem* to run counter in many ways to the dominant ideology, but that, as a practice, is ‘really’ what Žižek (2001) might call contemporary capitalism’s “perfect ideological supplement” (12). There is definitely something in this. But totalizing perspectives tend to gloss over specific details. Such perspectives remain half blind to the complexities and potentialities of *situations*. And, as Berlant (2011) puts it: “A situation is a state of things in which *something* that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life” (5), “releasing subjects from the normativity of intuition and making them available for alternative ordinaries” (6). Or, as you sometimes hear people in BJJ circles say: ‘If you don’t roll, you don’t know.’

Endnotes

1. *Escrima* is a Filipino martial art, sometimes alternatively known as *Kali* or *Arnis*. It is most recognisable for its distinctive use of one or two short rattan canes, although it also involves empty-handed strikes, kicks, locks, and throws.
2. I am not a psychologist, just a parent. But in my experience, one quick way to gain a sense of attachment disorders is to look at the Coventry Scale: a table showing the difference in reactions to different social situations between children on the autism spectrum and those with attachment disorders. One version is here: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/virtual-school/coventrygrid.pdf> [accessed 9th November 2022].
3. BJJ is an offshoot of Japanese jujutsu and judo. It became famous and successful by focusing (much more than other styles) on ground fighting (Law 2008; Jose Cairus 2012; José Cairus 2020).
4. Peter Sloterdijk—who we return to in this article—argues that investment in any form of discipline requires the manipulation of words and affects, to orchestrate and manage the active and passionate disinvestment from other possible alternative worlds of practice and their worldviews (See Sloterdijk 2013).
5. Of course, such a chorus might not necessarily reflect what is *best* for all concerned, but may rather constitute a force of what Rey Chow once called “coercive mimeticism”—i.e., constant micro-judgements and expectations that police people’s behaviour into line (Chow 2002).
6. As Sloterdijk notes, the most passionate conversions are those of adults, “who realize halfway through their lives that ordinary human existence is no longer enough. The beginning [of their conversion is] not education but seduction by the amazing. The effects that move humans to secede come purely from the school of wonder” (Sloterdijk 213: 273).
7. On the ‘structural’ generality of this ‘psychological’ dynamic of changes in affect, Sloterdijk (e.g., Sloterdijk 2013, 217) has much to say that supplements the work of Berlant, and indeed Williams.
8. Being ‘taken back’ to childhood is not uncommon for neophytes in BJJ rolling. For instance, DS Farrer describes being crushed under an opponent and remembering hearing his father’s heartbeat when being cuddled as a young child (Farrer 2019).
9. On the consequences of a potential future threat, see Massumi (2010).
10. See Channon (2020). See also Lyng (2005).

Thanks

Sincere thanks to Ben Anderson, Alex Channon, Lauren Griffith, Céline Morin, Daniel Mroz, Susanna Paasonen, and Greg Seigworth

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COVER IMAGE

Vases of the Land of Kafa, from *Histoire de l'art égyptien*, Émile Prisse d'Avennes, 1878



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