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THE INVISIBILITY OF RACE IN BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU: THE GRACIES VERSUS CAPOEIRA AND JUDO

ABSTRACT

This research article examines why the racialization of Brazilian jiu-jitsu has so often been invisible to non-Brazilians. It argues that Brazilian jiu-jitsu emerged in a highly racially stratified context and looks in particular at challenge matches that the Gracie family engaged in with fighters who practiced capoeira or judo. It argues that through these competitions, not only was Brazilian jiu-jitsu located within Brazil's racial hierarchy, but it was often positioned as 'white,' though usually in an unspoken manner. The 'invisibility' of Brazilian jiu-jitsu's racialization is connected to Brazil's hegemonic racial system where race is both of central social importance, yet is often not spoken about, and a context where whiteness is both privileged, yet also variable and not directly identified.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION: BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU MEETS BLACK LIVES MATTER

In June and July of 2020, as protests against police violence and racism were roiling cities across the United States, the community of people who practice Brazilian jiu-jitsu in the United States had its own moment of racial awakening. A Brazilian who is a prominent jiu-jitsu teacher and former Ultimate Fighting Championship competitor tweeted that during protests, police officers were being ‘overly patient’ with protestors and that the police were right to respond with violence.¹ At this same time, a well-known American jiu-jitsu fighter, a three-time winner of the ADCC (Abu Dhabi Combat Club) competition, considered the most prestigious international grappling competition, became vocal on social media voicing his antipathy to the Black Lives Matter movement, and posting messages that many saw as openly racist.² Jiu-jitsu-related social media accounts, including the Facebook and Instagram accounts of several people I train with, were quickly inundated with people criticizing this person.

In some ways, that many jiu-jitsu practitioners would side with the police is not surprising. Brazilian jiu-jitsu academies often market their techniques to police, the military and private security companies. Many police officers train at the gym in Chicago where I trained jiu-jitsu. It is perhaps inevitable that there were sharp disagreements among jiu-jitsu practitioners who are involved in law enforcement and those who are not. Yet for many people, open displays of what was taken as racism were shocking. In jiu-jitsu forums on the social media site Reddit, dismay about actions and social media posts that people perceived as racist were common. One person, in a lengthy post, said that he had trained for over ten years at an academy affiliated with one of the people cited above, but because of that person’s racist comments, he had decided to stop training there, even though there were no other jiu-jitsu schools in his town. In the gym that I trained at in Chicago, people also began to speak openly about incidents that they perceived as racist.

Brazilian jiu-jitsu is, of course, not somehow detached from the social worlds in which it is embedded. Yet, this moment was a revealing one. Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioners, especially in the United States, seemed to suddenly become aware of racism in their sport. This is particularly surprising because Brazil has one of the largest populations of African-descended people in the world and has been deeply shaped by the legacy of slavery and entrenched patterns of racial inequality. Most Americans who practice jiu-jitsu know a story about how the martial art developed, most commonly a version which stresses the role of the Gracie family. Yet the ways the history of Brazilian jiu-jitsu is

situated within the larger context of racial inequality is largely invisible to most people outside of Brazil.

In this article, I focus on how Brazilian jiu-jitsu evolved in a highly racially-stratified Brazilian society, and how the Gracies, a Brazilian family who traced their origins to Scotland, positioned it as ‘white’ through challenge matches with people who practice other martial arts. This article examines the challenge matches that the Gracies fought with people who practiced capoeira, and with Japanese judo fighters. A different article examines fights with practitioners of *luta livre*, a Brazilianized style of wrestling (Penglase, forthcoming). These challenge matches served various purposes for the Gracies. Most notably, they were a marketing strategy that the Gracies used to promote their Japanese-derived martial art. The visibility and notoriety that they gained through these challenge matches not only brought the Gracies fame and economic prosperity, but they also allowed the Gracies to maintain and develop a style that they claimed was different from judo.

These challenges also altered the style of the jiu-jitsu practiced by the Gracies. A common story is that the Gracies, through these matches and other unofficial fights, developed techniques that are particularly effective in actual physical confrontations. In a popular book about the Gracie family, the author Kid Peligro states that the Gracies ‘took what had been an extremely formal style of fighting and turned it into an art that could win the street fights common in Brazil’ (Peligro, 2003, p. 1). Other analysts have made more specific arguments, pointing out that the Gracies used these matches to focus on the *ne waza* (or ground fighting) aspects of judo, perfecting these techniques (Laydner, 2014). In particular, the Gracies structured the rules of many of these competitions to allow them to focus on fighting from their backs, in the ‘guard’ position, which Brazilian jiu-jitsu has turned from a largely defensive position into an offensive one (Laydner, 2014, loc. 1587). José Cairus argues that in a larger sense, the Gracies developed a style that had few of judo’s philosophical elements, transforming their brand of jiu-jitsu into a ‘hard’ style that eschewed the bowing, rules, and formalities of ‘softer’ styles of jiu-jitsu (Cairus, 2020).

Building upon this analysis, this article will draw attention to a less visible but crucial aspect of these challenge matches: how they positioned Brazilian jiu-jitsu within Brazil’s racial hierarchy and, in particular, how they marked jiu-jitsu, usually in an unspoken manner, as ‘white.’ As many analysts have observed, ‘whiteness,’ like all racial categories, has no inherent substance, but is built at least in part through a process of comparison. As Howard Winant argues: ‘whiteness is a relational concept, unintelligible without reference to non-whiteness’ (Winant, 1997, p. 86). Following from this, this article will show how the ‘whiteness’ of Brazilian jiu-jitsu was relationally constructed as the Gracie family

¹ I am not naming this person, because the point is not to single out an individual. But many people who practice Brazilian jiu-jitsu may know who this is.

² In one Instagram post, this person wrote the following (misspellings in the original): ‘statistically police do kill other races more than african Americans per year- fact. being a different skin color other than white doesnt give you an excuse to be a lazy shit bag.’ I am also deliberately not naming this person.

deliberately sought to compare it to martial arts which were more explicitly understood as non-white.

Yet the racialization of Brazilian jiu-jitsu has often been 'invisible' to non-Brazilians. This essay seeks to ask not only how did the highly unequal racial context within which Brazilian jiu-jitsu developed shape the martial art, but also how did the Gracies position their style as 'white'? In a much larger sense, why have so many people who participate in jiu-jitsu absorbed a story about a particular family, the Gracies, yet have paid relatively little attention to the larger Brazilian social, political, and inevitably racial, context within which jiu-jitsu emerged? This is very different from how Westerners relate to Asian martial arts, whose foreignness imbues these styles with symbolic prestige (Donohue, 2002).

The invisibility of race, and indeed of 'Brazilianess,' from Brazilian jiu-jitsu also contrasts deeply with how non-Brazilians understand and participate in capoeira, one of Brazil's other home-grown fighting styles. As Lauren Miller Griffith notes, 'authentic capoeira continues to be associated with being black and Brazilian' (Miller Griffith, 2016, p. 4). Brazilian jiu-jitsu, though, as Angela da Rocha and her collaborators have noted, is by now fully globalized, and whether a practitioner is Brazilian is rarely relevant for group identity (Rocha et al., 2015, p. 414). Capoeira is so deeply embedded in Brazilian, especially Afro-Brazilian, culture, that its language of instruction, songs, music, nicknames give to participants, and even bodily movements are seen as deeply Afro-Brazilian (Delamont & Stephens, 2008, p. 66). Miller Griffith notes that this a common aspect of many globalized performance genres, where 'the seat of power still resides in the place of origin' (Miller Griffith, 2013, p. 7). By contrast, Saulo Ribeiro, a famous jiu-jitsu instructor and successful mixed martial artist, has even suggested, perhaps only a little facetiously, that the word 'Brazilian' should be dropped from the name of the martial art (BJJEE, 2020). How is that the racial, national, and historic context within which Brazilian jiu-jitsu developed, and the persistent effort of the Gracie family to tie their brand of jiu-jitsu to a white, elite, clientele, become so invisible?

To answer this question, I combine what D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge have called 'cross training in the library' – in particular a culturally-informed historical analysis – with training 'on the mat' (Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011, p. 7). In the 'library' mode, I place the history of Brazilian jiu-jitsu's development, particularly that related to one family, the Gracies, in a larger racial context. To do this, I draw upon my experience of studying Brazil as an academic anthropologist for over twenty years. I also draw on a perspective from 'the mat,' including over twelve years of practicing Brazilian jiu-jitsu in both the United States and Brazil, over twenty formal interviews, and countless hours of training and informal interactions.³

To be clear, I am not claiming that any member of the Gracie family was, or is, racist. Nor am I engaging here in the debate about whether Brazilian jiu-jitsu is its own specific style or simply a branch of Kodokan judo, with which it shares many similarities. Rather, I am interested in the strategies that the Gracies used to promote their art. Instead of focusing on the identities or beliefs of particular individuals, I examine how jiu-jitsu was racialized, or the processes through which it came to have racial meanings and to be situated within Brazil's racial hierarchy. I argue that Brazilian jiu-jitsu developed within the context of a deeply racially divided society, with effects that linger today. Viewing race in this context, though, means substantially widening the analytical angle with which Brazilian jiu-jitsu has usually been analyzed, and locating it within Brazil's complex racial ideology.

BRAZIL'S RACIAL COMMON SENSE AND 'COMFORTABLE' CONTRADICTIONS

The invisibility of race in Brazilian jiu-jitsu is connected to how race is often invisible in Brazil more generally, despite deeply-entrenched patterns of racial discrimination. Brian Owensby has argued that in Brazil race 'both seems to exist and not to exist, depending on the situation or the angle from which it is being viewed' (Owensby, 2005, p. 321). Viewed in contrast to the United States, as it so often has been, Brazil's hegemonic racial ideology is often characterized by three elements: the fact that Brazilians often do not use clear-cut criteria for racial classification; that Brazil has tended not to have explicit legal structures of segregation; and that nationalist rhetoric in Brazil has glorified the *mestiço* (mixed-raced person) as the national character. In a perceptive analysis, João Costa Vargas has argued that these features have led to a contradictory racial formation whereby Brazilians are both hypersensitive about racial classification, and yet also often deny that race plays an important social role (Costa Vargas, 2004).

Livio Sansone argues that racial relations in Brazil have long been characterized by the absence of clearly distinct and bounded racial groups, and the idea that Brazil is free from the sort of racial animosity and divisions that characterize other countries (the so-called 'myth of racial democracy') (Sansone, 2003, p. 2). Analysts of race in Brazil have long noted the tendency of Brazilians to use a wide variety of terms to classify themselves and others, terms which tend to refer to differences in *cor* (or color) rather than differences of *raça* (or race) (Telles, 2012). Carl Degler observed that Brazilians classify themselves according to an 'amazing array of gradations,' which are the product of a 'Brazilian emphasis on appearance rather than upon genetic or racial background' (Degler, 1971, p. 103). In addition to appearance, social factors can determine how a person is racially classified in Brazil. Education, wealth, and employment can impact how a person is classified,

³ The participant-observation research for this article was conducted with the formal approval of my institution's Institutional Review Board (as project #1178).

with markers of greater social status locating a person on the 'lighter' end of the spectrum. Sansone also notes that daily social life in Brazil, particularly among lower classes, includes 'minimizing color difference in social practices, ... [and] moments of extra-racial intimacy' (Sansone, 2003, p. 2).

Beginning in the 1930s, as populist politicians and intellectuals in Brazil sought to craft a common nationalism, racial relations in Brazil have also been centered around the celebration of *mestiçagem* (or racial mixture) and the idea that the mixed-race *mestiço* person represents the apotheosis of the 'Brazilian race.' Roberto DaMatta argues that Brazilians commonly explain their society by referring to the 'fable of the three races' (DaMatta, 1997, p. 1). In this mythic history, propagated by intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre, the Brazilian people originated from the 'mixture' of three different groups: Portuguese, Africans and Indigenous people. Brazilians, and Brazilian culture, in this view, are inherently racially-mixed. Sansone argues that despite substantial evidence of continuing racial discrimination, this myth 'is accepted by the large majority and is reproduced in daily life' (Sansone, 2003, p. 4).

Scholars have consistently pointed out that while Brazilians often do not use clear-cut racial distinctions, Brazil's system of racial classification nonetheless privileges whiteness. Edward Telles notes that while markers of greater social status, like higher levels of education, 'whiten' a person, leading them to be classified by 'lighter' terms, less education can 'darken' a person (Telles, 2002, p. 417). Further, the phenomenon 'whitening' Telles notes, tends to occur mainly with people who are already classified as '*pardo*' (the Brazilian census term for mixed race) and not those classified as Black (Telles, 2002, p. 435). Even Degler, who argued that racial relations in Brazil were less conflictive than in the United States, also noted that 'pejorative attitudes towards blacks are rather widespread in Brazil' (Degler, 1971, p. 113). Substantial research has shown that racial inequalities in Brazil are deep and lasting. Black and mixed-raced people face entrenched patterns of discrimination in the areas of education, housing and employment and especially in the criminal justice system (Adorno, 1999; Hasenbalg, 1985; Hasenbalg & Silva, 1999; Silva, 1985).

This combination of a nationalist ideology which celebrates racial mixture and a classificatory system which tends not to emphasize clear-cut distinctions, on the one hand, and deeply entrenched patterns of racism and white superiority, on the other, produces deep contradictions. Race, in this sense, is acutely felt and socially important, and proximity to whiteness confers clear advantages. Yet, in what Costa Vargas terms the 'hyperconsciousness/negation of race conundrum,' racial discrimination is also rarely openly discussed (Costa Vargas, 2004, p. 443). Jennifer Roth-Gordon has likewise noted what she calls Brazil's 'comfortable racial contradiction,' with pride in racial mixture and racial tolerance coexisting with structural racism and notions of white superiority and black inferiority (Roth-Gordon, 2017, pp. 4-7). One effect, she argues, is that ideas of race are often

signaled not by explicit reference to phenotype, but through other markers, such as language use, bodily movement, social status, and urban space (Roth-Gordon, 2017). In this way, race in Brazil seems to 'not exist' if viewed from the angle of explicit discussion, yet it exists as a variable that centrally determines people's lives. It is this combination of acute racial awareness, yet the denial that race is itself an important factor in Brazilian society, that is a major reason why the racialization of Brazilian jiu-jitsu has so often been invisible.

Following from this, if race in Brazil is centrally important yet not often openly acknowledged, 'whiteness' is equally complex and contradictory. Whiteness, like race, must be understood as socially constructed and variable, and not simply the product of a person's appearance or ancestry. Rather, following Ruth Frankenberg, whiteness can be thought of as a 'location of structural advantage' connected to a set of social practices (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). Lia Schucman notes that in the context of European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade, whiteness came to be 'an ideological position of power in which white people turned their identity into the norm' while other groups came to be seen as deviations (Schucman, 2021, p. 174). As an unmarked norm, whiteness is often 'invisible.'

Here, though, a problem of false universalities emerges which has often shaped perceptions of Brazilian jiu-jitsu. 'White' and 'black' – and indeed race – erroneously appear to be trans-historical or 'transcendent' concepts which mean the same thing in different historical and social contexts (Da Silva, 1998). But who is classified as 'white' and according to what criteria, and indeed how racial difference is articulated and constructed more broadly, can vary dramatically between, say, Brazil, the United States, and the United Kingdom. As in many other places, whiteness in Brazil is often unspoken, articulated through reference to qualities such as modernity, progress, self-discipline and rationality.

Yet Brazil's racial 'common sense' values racial mixture, not 'purity'. Because of this, whiteness is complex. Sean Mitchell notes: '*Branco*' (white), like '*negro*' (black), has extraordinary contextual variance in Brazil' (Mitchell, 2017, p. 122). The apparent 'flexibility' of vernacular Brazilian racial terms, and the tendency of Brazilians to favor terms that are not on the 'extremes' of the racial continuum, such as *branco* (white) or *negro* (black), seems to downplay the importance of whiteness. Yet the tendency to 'lighten' people with greater social status reveals that whiteness is still privileged (Mitchell, 2017, p. 122). Patrícia Pinho likewise notes that in Brazil, who is classified as white, how, and to what degree, is highly variable. Whiteness in Brazil, Pinho argues, 'is not defined only by skin color; it requires a much wider economy of signs' (Pinho, 2009, p. 40). The ideology of *mestiçagem* (intermixture) in Brazil means not only that there are no clear racial dividing lines, but also that there are 'degrees of whiteness' including people who are 'white but not quite' (Pinho, 2009, p. 40). Thus, not only is the 'whiteness' of Brazilian jiu-jitsu a matter of degree, but to make it visible requires reading a wide variety of

signs, and understanding whiteness to be built out of many other social practices and attributes. As I will show, the Gracies rarely spoke openly about race, much less whiteness, yet the messages were often clear to those who could look from the right angle.

As Brazilian jiu-jitsu travelled internationally, the specificities of how it was shaped by Brazil's racial hierarchies became even more invisible, and were, in a sense, lost in translation. Peter Fry has pointed out that the apparent translatability from Portuguese into English of terms like *negro* (black) or *branco* (white), or indeed *raça* (race), and how these terms are used both analytically by scholars and descriptively by the subjects of analysis, can 'effect an elision between the Brazilian situation and the North American one' (Fry, 2005, p. 185). In this process of translation, Fry argues, what is often lost are the social and historical particularities of how race operates in Brazil. Many non-Brazilian practitioners of jiu-jitsu may have assumed that race in Brazil and the United States are equivalent. Further, because the 'whiteness' of jiu-jitsu was so often unspoken and only implicitly marked – through contrasts and comparisons within non-white people and practices, and signified by reference to non-phenotypical qualities such as efficiency and rationality – it too often went unseen.

THE GRACIES, CHALLENGE FIGHTS, AND RACIALIZED CONTRASTS

The development of Brazilian jiu-jitsu is inescapably connected to one Brazilian family, the Gracies. Carlos and Hélio Gracie, respectively the eldest and youngest of five brothers, are often credited as having developed Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and then passing on their knowledge to their many sons and grandsons.⁴ While Carlos, Hélio and their brothers were the third generation of Gracies to be born in Brazil, Reila Gracie, in her biography of her father, states that Carlos's 'last name and appearance didn't hide his Scottish ancestry, leading to him often being seen, ever since he was young, as European' (Gracie, 2008, p. 17). Abundant research has shown that the Gracies were not the first people to teach jiu-jitsu in Brazil, that other jiu-jitsu academies emerged at the same time that the Gracies set up their first school in Rio de Janeiro, and that other jiu-jitsu fighters engaged in 'challenge matches' that popularized the style.⁵ Nonetheless, Riqueldi Lise and André Capraro argue that the idea that the Gracie family created Brazilian jiu-jitsu is so widespread that it constitutes a 'hegemonic narrative' (Lise & Capraro, 2018, p. 319).

The Gracies are often seen as the primary, or perhaps sole, inheritors of 'traditional' Japanese fighting styles. Sometime around 1916, Carlos Gracie, the eldest of five brothers, is said to have learned jiu-jitsu from Mitsuyo Maeda, a Japanese immigrant to Brazil (Cairus, 2011, p. 112). Maeda had trained at the Kodokan

Academy in Japan, where Jigoro Kano developed judo. After leaving Japan, Maeda had extensive experience with prize fighting and is said to have had a more 'combat-oriented' fighting style than Kano. Maeda also seems to have had little interest in the philosophical aspects of Kano's judo. Carlos studied with Maeda for several years in the Amazonian city of Belém until, in 1922, the Gracie family moved to Rio de Janeiro (Lise & Capraro, 2018, p. 322).

This narrative runs into the face of substantial evidence to the contrary. The Gracies were not the only people in Brazil to learn 'traditional' jiu-jitsu, nor was Mitsuyo Maeda the only Japanese immigrant who taught the Kodokan-derived Japanese fighting styles in Brazil. When Japanese immigration to Brazil began in 1908, Japanese immigrants brought judo with them. Further, Maeda did not only teach jiu-jitsu to Carlos Gracie, but also to several other Brazilians, most prominently Jacyntho Ferro and Donato Pires dos Reis (Pedreira, 2014, pp. 133-134). Roberto Pedreira claims that it was Jacyntho Ferro, and not Carlos Gracie, who was said to be Maeda's best student (Pedreira, 2014, p. 133).

As a result, in order to distinguish themselves from competitors, the Gracies needed to claim that they were the sole inheritors of a unique and particularly effective martial art style. As they sought to publicize their style of jiu-jitsu, the Gracies seized upon a pre-existing tradition of challenge matches to distinguish their brand from three other martial arts styles which were already present in Brazil: capoeira, Kodokan-derived Japanese judo, and luta livre. In all three cases, these challenge matches served at least two purposes.

First, and overtly and explicitly, the Gracies sought to use these matches to market their art, and to show that it was superior as a form of self-defense. In the context of doing this, they had to claim that their techniques were distinct and different from the other three fighting styles. This was most challenging in contests between the Gracies and fighters trained in Japanese judo, from which Brazilian jiu-jitsu grew. As part of this marketing campaign, the Gracies also sought to link their art to Brazilianness. Here, the challenge the Gracies faced was distinguishing their style of jiu-jitsu from capoeira, which had clear and deep connections to Brazil's history. In addition, luta livre also had strong claims to being a home-grown, or at least Brazilianized, art.

Less overtly, though just as visible for those who knew how to read Brazil's often unspoken racial clues, was how these contests placed Brazilian jiu-jitsu within the context of Brazil's racial hierarchy and positioned it as white. Reila Gracie notes that as they sought to promote their martial art, the Gracies had 'along with their knowledge of jiu-jitsu, a last name which was known and respected in Carioca society which, along with their refined

⁴ Carlos and Hélio alone had 19 sons, by multiple different women. Of their many daughters and grand-daughters, only Kyra Gracie has achieved prominence in the sport.

⁵ An early example of this literature in Brazil for a non-academic audience is Marcial Serrano's multi-volume *O Livro Proibido do Jiu-jitsu*, or 'The Prohibited Book of Jiu-jitsu' (see Serrano, 2013). A more recent, and nuanced, take is jiu-jitsu teacher Robert Drysdale's book *Opening the Closed Guard* (Drysdale, 2020).

upbringing and European appearance, distinguished them from other fighters' (Gracie, 2008, p. 74).

The contrast with capoeira, which was clearly identified with Afro-Brazilian culture, now seems to be the most obvious. However, if race is seen as the historical product of social practices and processes, and as dynamic and shifting, rather than a timeless and ahistorical trait, this contrast is less of a foregone conclusion. As Matthias Röhrig Assunção has argued, capoeira's current racialization, and explicit marking as Afro-Brazilian, can be seen not as inevitable, but as a product of its interactions with jiu-jitsu (Assunção, 2014). Reciprocally, if 'whiteness' is understood, as Winant and others argue as a relational identity (Winant, 1997; Dyer, 2017), defined as what it is not, the clashes between capoeira and Brazilian jiu-jitsu also served to position Brazilian jiu-jitsu as white. Whiteness here could be unspoken exactly because of how, through its meeting with jiu-jitsu, capoeira's ties to blackness became more pronounced. Likewise, in challenges with Japanese judo fighters, what was at stake was not simply the relative effectiveness of the Gracies' jiu-jitsu, but how they could use these matches to show that they had inherited an Asian fighting style, but had transformed it into something different, and non-Asian. Here, as I will show, whiteness was 'spoken' through its association with modernity, technical skill, and individual courage.

JIU JITSU VERSUS CAPOEIRA

As the Gracies sought to promote their jiu-jitsu, some of their earliest challenge matches were against *capoeiristas* (people who practice capoeira). This is not surprising, since the Gracies were not the first jiu-jitsu fighters to challenge capoeiristas. In 1909, a travelling Japanese fighter named Sada Miyako fought a challenge match against a Black Brazilian capoeirista nicknamed Cyriaco. The capoeirista surprised Miyako with a spinning back-kick, knocking the Japanese fighter out and winning the fight (Cairus, 2011, p. 102; Lise & Capraro, 2018, p. 323; Pedreira, 2014, pp. 49-50). Cairus notes that this victory of capoeira over jiu-jitsu was seen in deeply nationalist terms. After his victory, Cyriaco was 'hailed as national hero' (Cairus, 2011, p. 102).

Cairus stresses how these early encounters between capoeira and jiu-jitsu were shaped by debates among Brazilian elites about modernization, race and national identity (Cairus, 2011). The fight between Cyriaco and Miyako occurred in a context where elements of the Brazilian elite, and especially officers of the Brazilian navy, saw Japan as an example of a 'modernizing' non-European nation, and hence a possible example to emulate. Other factions of Brazil's elite, though, were more narrowly nationalist. They saw capoeira as a home-grown art, and not only hailed Cyriaco's victory as a victory of the Brazilian nation, but in the process attempted to describe both Cyriaco and capoeira as 'mestiço,' whiter and hence more socially acceptable.

In contests against capoeiristas, the Gracies then faced two challenges: first redeeming jiu-jitsu as superior to capoeira, and second, challenging capoeira's claim to being Brazil's 'true' national sport. In both instances, whiteness was critical. Cairus points out that unlike the jiu-jitsu that Miyako used against Cyriaco, the style of jiu-jitsu that Carlos Gracies was exposed to through Maeda was a more 'modernized' Kodokan version (Cairus, 2011, p. 108). He also emphasizes that the Gracies were descendants of a formerly aristocratic family, and when the family moved to Rio de Janeiro, they not only pursued connections with Brazil's elite, but did so in the country's (then) capital and the 'epicenter of Brazilian nationalism' (Cairus, 2011, p. 116).

What Cairus leaves largely unexplained, though, was how race and whiteness figured into subsequent clashes between the Gracies and capoeira fighters. On the one hand, the class status of the Gracies, and hence their claims to 'whiteness' were at stake in these contests: winning these contests could provide publicity that the Gracies could use to build connections with Rio's white political and economic elite. On the other hand, with capoeira positioned as an example of Brazil's national cultural heritage, they needed to position their brand of jiu-jitsu as an equally appealing and Brazilian art, yet one that was not connected to Brazil's rich Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage. Without it being openly stated, Brazilian jiu-jitsu had to be presented as fully Brazilian, and yet not racially-mixed, or at least, in Pinho's terms, as having a high 'degree of whiteness.'

There were many challenges between the Gracies and capoeira fighters, and they had the most consistent outcomes, with jiu-jitsu fighters almost always winning. Assunção and Greg Downey have argued that these fights had a major impact upon capoeira (Assunção, 2005; Assunção, 2014; Downey, 2002). Viewing this contrast from the perspective of jiu-jitsu, several points need to be highlighted. Seen from a contemporary perspective, the stylistic and racial contrasts between capoeira and Brazilian jiu-jitsu seem self-evident. Currently, there are two main styles of capoeira: Angola and regional. Practitioners of capoeira Angola now often very explicitly connect their art and their own identities to blackness and Afro-Brazilian, and indeed Afro-diasporic, forms of culture. People who practice capoeira regional tend to see the art as having been created in Brazil and hence as more racially-mixed (Downey, 2005). Some scholars, though, argue that the association between capoeira and blackness was not always so clean cut. Assunção argues that the fact that capoeira fighters almost always lost matches against jiu-jitsu fighters deeply shaped the nature of capoeira, pushing it away from an explicit combat-orientation (Assunção, 2014). By contrast, jiu-jitsu came to be seen as a more effective fighting style. Yet none of this was a foregone conclusion. Rather, the 'racialization' of capoeira, and its embrace of elements of Afro-Brazilian culture can be seen, at least in part, as a product of clashes with jiu-jitsu.

Less clearly analyzed – perhaps because it now seems 'obvious' – is how these challenges shaped jiu-jitsu, presenting it as a series of

efficient techniques taught by one particular family. It is exactly this emphasis on 'effectiveness' that was part of how Brazilian jiu-jitsu became racialized as 'white.' If capoeira pursued a path of 'folklorization,' jiu-jitsu came to be understood as effective and efficient; an equally Brazilian, but more modern, superior and hence white, fighting style. In particular, through challenge matches the Gracies managed to position their brand of jiu-jitsu as a 'standard' against which the effectiveness of other combat arts should be measured.

One of the most important of the early challenge matches between jiu-jitsu and capoeira, a fight between George Gracie and Mario Aleixo in December of 1931, illustrates many of these points. Like many fights, this one was an outgrowth of an earlier challenge. A month before, George Gracie – who fought by far the most challenge matches of any of the first generation of Gracie brothers – quickly defeated Jayme Ferreira, who claimed to represent capoeira (Pedreira, 2014, p. 172). Many people, though, doubted how much capoeira Ferreira knew, and insinuated that the Gracies were deliberately picking weak opponents (Laydner, 2014, loc. 1741). One of those making these allegations was Mario Aleixo (Pedreira, 2014, p. 172).

Though Aleixo represented capoeira in his fight against George Gracie, his sporting resume was quite a bit more varied. Aleixo, described by Luiz Otávio Laydner as 'a well-known sportsman,' taught fencing, boxing, and even jiu-jitsu (Laydner, 2014, loc. 1672; Pedreira, 2014, p. 65). It is not clear exactly how much jiu-jitsu Aleixo knew, or where he learned it from. Books about Japanese fighting styles circulated around the world in the early twentieth century, including in Brazil (Pedreira, 2014, p. 28). It's also possible that Aleixo learned some jiu-jitsu from travelling Japanese fighters. Thus, the apparent contrast between Aleixo's capoeira and George Gracie's jiu-jitsu might not have been clear-cut, but the product of how the fight was publicized. Nonetheless, in the fight against George Gracie, Aleixo claimed the mantle of a capoeirista (Laydner, 2014, loc. 1767).

The pre-match meetings to decide the rules were, as always, subject to intense negotiations, and ended up favoring the Gracies and highlighting the differences between their jiu-jitsu and capoeira. The Gracies almost always insisted, especially at this earlier stage of challenge matches, that fighters wear a judogi.⁶ Capoeiristas often objected to this, since they were less familiar with how the uniform could be used to control, and even choke, an opponent. The Gracies also often insisted that fights should only end when one person lost consciousness, quit, or was otherwise unable to continue. This rule also put non jiu-jitsu fighters on unfamiliar terrain: many wrestling matches ended

when one person successfully pinned his opponent's back to the ground. Capoeiristas usually concentrated on tripping their opponents, and had almost no traditional capoeira techniques once a fight went to the ground. Aleixo, perhaps confident in both his capoeira and jiu-jitsu, accepted these rules (Pedreira, 2014, p. 177). The match, though, ended quickly, with George Gracie winning by armbar in the first round (Pedreira, 2014, p. 179; Laydner, 2014, loc. 1774-1776).

The fight between George Gracie and Mario Aleixo was not the last time that jiu-jitsu would meet capoeira in the ring. However, the fight did have a strong impact on the visibility of jiu-jitsu. Laydner states: 'George Gracie's win over Aleixo catapulted jiu-jitsu's fame to new heights. At the same time, criticism from its detractors grew, too, with arguments, not entirely unfounded, saying the regulations (restricting some types of traumatic blows) and the use of the judogi were unfair advantages benefitting jiu-jitsu fighters' (Laydner, 2014, loc. 1777). Clearly, as a strategy to market their version of jiu-jitsu, and use it to improve their class status, and hence their own 'whiteness,' these fights were a success.

Assunção and Downey have argued that these challenge matches with jiu-jitsu in the 1920s and 1930s had a profound impact upon capoeira. Capoeira had been criminalized in 1890, and its practice was particularly repressively quashed in the city of Rio de Janeiro, at that time Brazil's capital (Vieira & Assunção, 1998; Holloway, 1989). Mestre Bimba (Manoel dos Reis Machado) sought to revive the art, but was concerned that the style practiced in Salvador da Bahia, his hometown, was not a 'practical' fighting style (Assunção, 2005, p. 132). Among the changes that Mestre Bimba made to capoeira was the incorporation of technique borrowed from Greco-Roman wrestling and jiu-jitsu (Assunção, 2014, p. 7). According to Assunção, Bimba was on the verge of breaking entirely with capoeira, and creating a fighting style called Luta Regional Bahiana (Assunção, 2014, p. 6).

Other people, such as Sinhozinho (Agenor Moreira Sampaio), went even further. In Rio in the 1930s, Sinhozinho developed a style of capoeira which had none of the Afro-Brazilian ritual or aesthetic components that are now so common in capoeira, such as music and singing (Lussac, 2019). Instead, Sinhozinho tried to use capoeira as the basis of a martial art to train his students for combat.⁷

Yet because challenge matches between capoeiristas and Gracie fighters so frequently ended with capoeiristas losing, this effort to strip capoeira of its more explicit 'blackness' and transform it into a combat style was largely abandoned.⁸ Assunção argues that

⁶ George Gracie would later break with this tradition and accept fights without insisting on wearing a judogi (Pedreira, 2014, p. 171).

⁷ When anthropologist Ruth Landes visited Bahia in 1938, the Brazilian ethnologist Edison Carneiro described capoeira to her this way: 'It's similar to jiu-jitsu and can be very dangerous. I understand that now some academy in Rio teaches it. Up here they've taken the poison out of it by prohibiting the more difficult and violent movements' (Landes, 1947, pp. 91-92).

⁸ One of Sinhozinho's students, Rudolf Hermann, won some fights against jiu-jitsu fighters. Hermann, however, was also a highly-decorated black belt in judo, winning several judo championships in Rio (see Lacé Lopes, 2002).

Bimba, especially after his students lost to other fighters in Bahia in 1935 and 1936, faced a choice: he could adapt his style to the ring and lose connections to capoeira's Afro-Brazilian traditions, or find new spaces for his style, where fighting and the rituals of capoeira could co-exist. 'Bimba,' Assunção states, 'chose the second option' (Assunção, 2014, p. 9). He adopted some elements of Western sports, such as a ranking system and a set of regularized techniques, while also maintaining the art's more 'cultural' or 'folkloric' components. The second great popularizer of capoeira, Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha), went even further in the direction of an explicit embrace of blackness: as he developed his Angola style, Pastinha emphasized capoeira's Afro-Brazilian ritualistic, symbolic and aesthetic elements to an even greater degree (Vieira & Assunção, 1998, pp. 107-108).

The clashes between capoeira and jiu-jitsu led capoeira's great popularizers to emphasize the style's symbolic and cultural elements, especially those tied to Afro-Brazilian culture, and to root it in Brazil's rich folkloric tradition. This occurred in the 1930s, as the populist regime of Getúlio Vargas sought to promote nationalism by encouraging '*brasilidade*' (Brazilianness). If earlier, after Cyriaco's victory, there was an attempt to 'lighten' capoeira, by the 1930s, the art fit very comfortably within a racial ideology that celebrated racial mixture. As many observers have pointed out, blackness in Brazil, and throughout the Western hemisphere, is often tied to 'tradition' (Sansone, 2003, p. 12). By pursuing a strategy of 'folklorization,' both Bimba and Pastinha were locating capoeira within this racial ideology. Indeed in 1953, when President Vargas met Mestre Bimba, he declared that 'capoeira is the only truly national sport' (Assunção, 2005, p. 141).

The effects of these clashes on jiu-jitsu were diametrically opposite. While victorious in the ring, jiu-jitsu could not challenge capoeira's status as a key symbolic element in Brazil's racially-mixed 'national' culture. Instead, the Gracies emphasized jiu-jitsu's connection to their specific family lineage, understood as a family which had European roots, and highlighted its 'efficiency' in combat. Emphasizing Brazilian jiu-jitsu as 'modern' and 'efficient,' aspects frequently tied to whiteness, also underscored its contrast to capoeira which increasingly was 'traditional' and 'folkloric' and Afro-Brazilian.

In short, capoeira came out of the ring losing the fight but gaining a deep association with Afro-Brazilian culture. The Gracie's jiu-jitsu, victorious in the ring, did not win the 'prize' of explicit association with Brazil's nationalist ideology of *mestiçagem*. What it gained instead was less visible but no less important. Jiu-jitsu's victory over capoeira made its whiteness clear, if exactly because capoeira's embrace of Afro-Brazilianness made the contrast so obvious. Yet this whiteness went unspoken, and rather being explicitly acknowledged as an aspect of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, the style came to be seen as a set of techniques transmitted by one family, the Gracies, but which could be learned by anyone regardless of their size or other physical attributes. In keeping with a larger pattern of negating the importance of race, Brazilian jiu-jitsu was

publicly presented as non-racist (or perhaps 'race-blind'). But those looking at it from a larger historical and cultural angle could not miss how within a largely unspoken racial hierarchy, it was also even further marked as 'white.'

GRACIES VERSUS JAPANESE JUDO FIGHTERS

If the challenges between the Gracies and capoeira fighters resulted in a clear contrast, the challenges that the Gracies waged against Japanese fighters were more complex, both in terms of the results and how they were situated within Brazil's racial context. The Gracies claimed that their art was derived from Japanese fighting styles. As a result, they were more interested in proving their style's superiority to non-Asian styles, like capoeira or *luta livre*, than to the style from which they claimed descent. Yet it was one thing for the Gracies to show that their jiu-jitsu was more effective than a very different fighting style like capoeira. It was more difficult to show that the Gracies could defeat Japanese fighters who also knew Kodokan-derived styles, whether they called this jiu-jitsu or judo.

Cairus points out that many of these clashes took place in the 1930s at a time of radical nationalism in Brazil (Cairus, 2020). In this context, the Gracies did not necessarily need to defeat their Japanese opponents, but they needed to show that their art was different from Japanese judo, and hence that they had a greater claim to Brazilianness. He notes that their success in claiming to have developed a truly national martial arts style reveals how white or light-skinned Brazilians still held positions of privilege in a society that was increasingly emphasizing *mestiçagem*.

While the racial identities of the Gracies no doubt helped them publicize their brand of jiu-jitsu, race, and in particular whiteness, played more complex roles. Particularly significant was how the Gracies sought to position their style of jiu-jitsu as more 'modern' and 'technical' than Japanese styles, understood as 'traditional.' In these challenges, the 'whiteness' of Brazilian jiu-jitsu was both a resource, and at risk. On the one hand, simply by not being Japanese, but rather a 'sort of white,' the Gracies occupied a position of privilege, particularly in an increasingly xenophobic populist political context. On the other hand, the Gracies sought to show that their art was different, and unique, building upon and transforming an older, traditional, Asian art. Fights against Japanese fighters might put this claim to uniqueness, and hence whiteness, at risk. What ended up being crucial, though, was the contrast: more than winning or losing, the Gracies needed to show that their martial arts style, while emerging from Asian roots, was different. And this difference was articulated through terms such as 'technique,' 'modernity' and 'courage' that positioned it, in implicit but clearly comprehensible terms, as white.

To understand the racial context within which these fights were situated, it is important to note how Japanese immigrants to Brazil were positioned ambiguously in Brazil's racial hierarchy. Japanese immigration to Brazil began in the first decades of the

twentieth century, in an economic and social context deeply marked by the legacies of slavery. When slavery was officially abolished in 1888, Brazil's government first encouraged immigration from Italy and other parts of Europe both to supplement the labor force, and as part of an attempt to 'whiten' Brazil's population. Yet these immigrants often refused to accept harsh labor conditions on Brazil's *fazendas* (plantations). By contrast, Brazilian policy-makers at the time thought that the Japanese were 'diligent and hardworking' and more liable to work on plantations (Lesser, 1999, p. 88).⁹ Japan also had a positive global image, having defeated the Russian army in 1905. For some of Brazil's elite, Japan's rapid industrialization under the Meiji regime presented an example of a 'modernizing' non-European nation which Brazil could follow. At that time, Japan had a large rural population. An official labor migration program between Brazil and Japan began on June 18, 1908 (Lesser, 1999, p. 85). Migration from Japan to Brazil truly boomed, though, in the following decades: between 1924-1935, over 141,000 Japanese immigrants arrived in Brazil (Lesser, 1999, p. 91).

As the number of Japanese immigrants grew in the 1930s, the position of Japanese in Brazilian society was widely debated. Significantly – and reflecting 'scientific' opinion at that time in the United States and Europe – both those in favor of Japanese immigration and those opposed to it, made arguments based on race (Lesser, 1999, pp. 119-120). Those opposed to Japanese immigration viewed the Japanese as inferior and 'un-assimilable' people. Those in favor of Japanese immigration not only emphasized the productivity of Japanese agriculture in Brazil, but often argued that Japanese were racially 'superior' to Black and mixed-race Brazilians.

This was the setting for the Gracie family's first encounter with jiu-jitsu. Mitsuyo Maeda was part of an early Japanese immigrant community in Belém, in the Brazilian Amazon. By the 1930s, though, as the Gracies sought to popularize their art, elite and government opposition to Japanese migration, and anti-Japanese sentiment more broadly, hardened. In 1934, the Brazilian government radically restricted Japanese immigration to Brazil (Lesser, 1999, p. 120). When President Getúlio Vargas declared a coup in 1937, instituting the repressive 'Estado Novo' regime, anti-immigrant sentiment hardened further. Vargas's populist dictatorship sought greater economic independence for Brazil, and promoted a sense of nationalist unity. The government banned the use of foreign languages in Brazilian schools and pushed immigrant communities to assimilate into Brazilian society (Levine, 1998, p. 55-58). Vargas's policies also had a clear racial component, and one which Asians did not fit. As Darién Davis states, Vargas's nationalism was founded on the idea that the mixture of African, European and Indigenous people produced

a 'racially harmonious Brazilian national family' (Davis, 1999, p. 2).

While the fights between the Gracies and Japanese fighters had nationalistic components, they also had racial ones. Since the 1930s, at least Brazilian nationalism was itself understood in racial terms, as 'Brazilianness' was tied to the country's racial makeup (Sovik, 2004). If the Gracies could at least hold their own in the ring against Japanese fighters, they could show that Brazilians could hold their own against Asian fighters. Through Gracie jiu-jitsu, a 'traditional' yet 'other,' fighting style could become 'Brazilianized.' Yet the Gracies needed to thread a fine needle: they also wanted to claim that their art was distinct from fighting styles in Brazil, like capoeira and luta livre, which were often seen as Black or mixed-race. Unlike challenges with capoeira, in a sense it was less important for the Gracies to win every match. Rather, they needed to show that their style of jiu-jitsu originally came from Japan, yet that it was distinctive and different and, not by chance, practiced and taught by white Brazilians, who had 'modernized' a more 'traditional' (and Asian) style.

Many of the more high-profile matches between the Gracies and Kodokan-trained Japanese fighters ended in draws or with highly-disputed results. An important early fight was the challenge match between Carlos Gracie, the eldest brother of the Gracie clan, and Geo Omori, one of the most famous fighters in Brazil at that time. Omori, who was born in Japan in 1892, trained at Kano's Kodokan academy, and travelled internationally before arriving in Brazil sometime in the 1920s (Pedreira, 2014, p. 111; Laydner, 2014, loc. 1300).¹⁰ Omori began engaging in challenge matches in Brazil before the Gracies did, winning most, but probably not all, of his fights (some of which might have been 'fixed,' or had their result determined beforehand). Riding his success, Omori opened a short-lived jiu-jitsu academy in São Paulo in 1928 (Pedreira, 2014, p. 122).

The fight between Carlos Gracie and Omori occurred on January 5, 1930, in São Paulo, and ended with no clear winner (Laydner, 2014, loc. 1534). As was often typical of Gracie-promoted fights, there was an extensive argument about the result: Carlos Gracie claimed that he had applied an armbar to Omori and squeezed the hold until he heard the ligaments in Japanese fighter's elbow pop. Gracie then loosened the arm bar, thinking the fight was over, even though Omori didn't tap (to signal that he quit the fight). However, when Gracie released the hold, Omori escaped and then viciously tossed Gracie to the ground, seemingly stunning the Brazilian, just before the end of the second round. Omori complained about the time limits, which allowed Gracie to recover from the throw, claiming that under Japanese rules he would have won (Laydner, 2014, loc. 1581; Pedreira, 2014, p. 137). Regardless of the actual result, Carlos Gracie achieved two key

⁹ Historian Jeff Lesser points out that these stereotypes were not true, stating: 'In the few cases where the immigrants remained on the fazendas, strikes were common and immigrants rarely extended their contracts' (Lesser, 1999, p. 89).

¹⁰ Pedreira notes that there is some uncertainty about Geo Omori's actual name, as was common with many Japanese people in Brazil due to a lack of consistency in the Romanization of Japanese names. He may have been called Omori Jyoji (Pedreira, 2014, p. 110).

goals: he promoted his family's brand of jiu-jitsu, and he showed that a white Brazilian could at least hold his own against a well-known Japanese fighter. This set an early pattern that would persist.

The Gracies did win some of their matches against Japanese fighters. In April 1934, for instance, George Gracie fought a Japanese jiu-jitsu fighter named Shigeo and won after catching Shigeo in a choke (Pedreira, 2014, p. 282). Laydner states that although Shigeo was smaller than George Gracie, the Japanese fighter threw the Brazilian to the ground with ease, but then was less skilled when the fight went to the ground (Laydner, 2014, loc. 2278-2285). Laydner also notes that many of Kano's younger students, such as Shigeo, were more skilled at throwing opponents, and had a less developed 'ground game' than the Gracies (Laydner, 2014, loc. 2288). Similarly, on June 23, 1934, Hélio Gracie fought a Japanese fighter named Miyaki (Pedreira, 2014, pp. 287-289). This fight too quickly went to the ground, where Hélio proved superior to the Japanese fighter, winning the fight by choking Miyaki unconscious (Laydner, 2014, loc. 2302). Though the Gracies won these fights, and clearly were more superior on the ground, some observers claim that neither Miyaki nor Shigeo were top Japanese Kodokan-trained fighters (Pedreira, 2014, p. 322).

After these initial challenges, fights against better-trained Japanese fighters fell into a general pattern: the Japanese fighters, trained in Kano's style of judo, generally had no problems dominating while the fighters were on their feet, usually throwing the Gracies to the ground with relative ease. But the Gracies were often superior on the ground. No doubt this was due to the changes Kano was making to Japanese fighting styles: while Kano's judo did not neglect grappling on the ground (or *ne-waza*), it emphasized throwing techniques executed when standing (or *nage-waza*), with points being given for different types of throws. The Gracies, however, usually insisted that the only criteria for winning a fight was if one fighter succeeded in making the other quit or lose consciousness. Given these stylistic differences, many of these fights ended in draws, or with disputed results.

Typical were a series of fights between the Gracies and Takeo Yano in 1935 and 1936. Yano was a graduate of Kano's Kodokan academy, who arrived in Brazil in 1931 (Pedreira, 2014, p. 313; Laydner, 2014, loc. 2377). Unlike several of the Gracies earlier 'jiu-jitsu' opponents, there is little doubt that Yano was well trained. On September 28, 1935, Yano fought George Gracie (Pedreira, 2014, p. 315). The match lasted five rounds, ending in a draw. Though Yano dominated the match when the opponents were standing, throwing Gracie to the ground multiple times, he was unable to finish the Brazilian (Laydner, 2014, loc. 2417). The following year, Yano fought George's younger brother, Hélio Gracie. The result was similar: Yano flung Gracie around the ring, throwing him to the ground six times in the third round alone. But Yano avoided grappling with Hélio Gracie on the ground, and

the match ended in a draw (Laydner, 2014, loc. 2454; Pedreira, 2014, p. 333).

The overall pattern in fights between the Gracies and well-trained Japanese Kodokan fighters is clear: while the Gracies often lost to the Japanese fighters, they also used these matches to publicize their jiu-jitsu, in particular, to show how it was different than Japanese judo. Pedreira states it this way: 'Neither George nor Hélio had the skills to stand up with legitimate Kodokan graduates, such as Omori, Yano, and the Ono brothers. That wasn't the only reason why they emphasized ground fighting, but it was one reason' (Pedreira, 2014, p. 318). Using these matches, the Gracies could carve out their own space in the martial arts world: perhaps not able to match Kano's judo fighters while standing, but just as skilled, if not more skilled, when the fight entailed grappling on the ground. Simply staying in the ring and surviving was seen as an achievement.

In this regard, no fight is more symbolic than Hélio Gracie's legendary fight against Masahiko Kimura in 1951. By the 1950s, the position of the Japanese within Brazil's racial hierarchy had yet again shifted. After President Vargas decided in 1941 that Brazil would enter the war on the side of the Allies, anti-Japanese sentiment was pervasive (Lesser, 1999, pp. 136-138). But when the war ended, Japanese immigrants seemed to no longer pose a threat. And in the wake of the Nazi horrors that accompanied the war, the notion that Brazil was somehow free of racism reached its peak (Skidmore, 1993, p. 209). The Gracies, by now, had also spent two decades challenging Japanese fighters. As a result, whether or not Hélio Gracie won the fight against Kimura was less important than showing that a white Brazilian could hold his own against a highly-trained Japanese fighter.

When Kimura travelled to Brazil in 1951, he was perhaps no longer the best judo fighter in Japan, but he was certainly the most skilled that a Gracie had yet faced (Laydner, 2014, loc. 3206; Pedreira, 2015, p. 43). Kimura started training judo in 1927, at age 10, when Kano's style was firmly established, and by 18 he was a five-dan black belt (Laydner, 2014, loc. 3194). Kimura went on to win multiple national judo championships, and he was briefly involved in an unsuccessful attempt to professionalize judo in Japan (Laydner, 2014, loc. 3194; Pedreira, 2015, pp. 38-40). Perhaps most importantly, while all high-level judo fighters trained in ground grappling, where the Gracies often had an advantage, Kimura seems to have particularly specialized in this aspect of judo (Pedreira, 2015, p. 38).

When the fight between Hélio Gracie and Kimura occurred, on October 23, 1951, at Maracanã stadium in Rio de Janeiro, there was little doubt about the outcome (Laydner, 2014, loc. 3317; Pedreira, 2015, p. 57). Kimura was not only highly trained, but was also quite younger than Hélio. And unlike other Japanese fighters that the Gracies had faced, Kimura was not at all reticent to fight on the ground. After throwing Hélio Gracie and then dominating the Brazilian on the ground in the first round, in the second round Kimura once again threw Gracie to the ground and

finished the fight with an *ude garami* armlock. The end result of the fight was clear: while Hélio himself did not quit, Carlos Gracie, in his brother's corner, threw in the towel, ending the fight.

A report the following day in the *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper though, sought to find elements of success in Gracie's defeat (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1951). The report stated that the result 'if not unexpected, fell within the predictions of many.' Particularly significant is how the article contrasted Kimura's strength to Hélio Gracie's skill. The story's headline, for instance, stated: 'Kimura's physique [*físico*] prevailed against Gracie's technique.' Even while acknowledging Kimura's technical ability, the reporter claimed that Kimura pushed the fight aggressively, which 'made it impossible for Hélio Gracie to use his technique.' The article also played up Hélio's courage, even in defeat, stating: 'at no moment did our hero give in, offering stubborn resistance to the Japanese black belt.'

When seen within the context of common racial tropes which associate non-white people with physical attributes such as strength and endurance, and whites with mental attributes such as intelligence and self-control (see Fanon, 1967; Kendi, 2016), the contrast is clear: while the reporter stated that Kimura 'possessed qualities that Gracie had never faced in other opponents,' it was Kimura's brute strength and physical force which prevailed over the 'technique' and 'persistence' of Gracie, who the reporter nevertheless described as 'our champion.'

In the aftermath of the fight against Kimura, the Gracies used their increased visibility to open a new academy in downtown Rio, on the prestigious Avenida Rio Branco. Here, the spatial markers of whiteness were critical, and overlapped with class markers, helping to consolidate the status of the Gracie family. Reila Gracie in her biography of her father Carlos, describes it this way: 'The Gracie Academy was an oasis dedicated to the health of body and spirit in the financial center of Rio de Janeiro and became a sort of meeting place, where executives could take off their sportscoats, put on kimonos, and alleviate their stress' (Gracie, 2008, p. 286). Clearly though Hélio lost the fight against Kimura, the Gracie family solidly consolidated their connections to Rio's white elite.

In subsequent years, why the fight between Hélio and Kimura ended the way it did, and what the larger result was, were spun into Gracie mythology. There is no doubt that Kimura was larger and younger than Hélio Gracie. Though contemporaneous accounts vary, it seems that Kimura probably weighed 85 kilos while Hélio weighed perhaps 65 kilos. This size difference of 20 kilos (44 pounds), though significant, has been widely inflated by those in, or close to, the Gracie family. For example, in the book *The Gracie Way*, a praiseful biography of various members of the Gracie family, Kid Peligro, a close friend of the Gracie family, claims that Kimura 'weighed 220 pounds to Helio's 154,' a much larger difference of 66 pounds, or 30 kilos (Peligro, 2003, p. 29).

Much is also often made of the fact that although Kimura squeezed Hélio's arm until the ligaments popped, Hélio refused to quit. Here too, the contrast between the intellectual and emotional self-discipline of Gracie, versus the brute strength of Kimura, is played up.

Even Hélio's defeat is even sometimes spun into a sort of victory. Long after the fight, Hélio claimed that Kimura stated that the Brazilian could not even last three minutes with him. Since Hélio made it into the second round, this was seen as a symbolic victory (Pedreira, 2015, pp. 61-62). It is also sometimes stated by younger members of the Gracie family that Hélio expected to lose the fight but wanted to learn the Japanese fighter's techniques. Peligro sums up this interpretation this way: 'Kimura had the victory, but Helio had the knowledge – the brilliant armlock that would become an integral part of jiu-jitsu and would be known ever after simply as the 'Kimura' (Peligro, 2003, p. 31).¹¹

Hélio's fight against Kimura set in place several patterns that the Gracies would use when they took their brand of jiu-jitsu to the United States and Europe in the 1980s. Most obviously, Rorion Gracie, to promote his California-based gym and more generally raise the visibility of jiu-jitsu outside of Brazil, organized, along with Arthur Davie, the first Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) event, held in 1993 (Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006). The event, famously pitting martial artists of various styles against each other, was won rather easily by Royce Gracie, Rorion's younger brother (Green & Svinth, 2001, p. 55). Though the first UFCs were seen as ushering in a revolution in the martial arts, they simply placed the 'challenge fights' that the Gracies had already been long involved in onto an international stage.

The larger and deeper patterns, through which the Gracies positioned their art as 'white,' though in implicit ways, were also critical, though less visible. Perhaps most importantly, as with the fight against Kimura, the first UFCs established Brazilian jiu-jitsu's reputation as a specialized set of combat skills against which other martial arts would be measured. In this sense, Hélio's loss to Kimura was less relevant than the fact that by that point 'measuring' other arts against Gracie jiu-jitsu came to be seen as a standard. The UFC would take this approach global.

The Gracies and other early Brazilian jiu-jitsu teachers who migrated to the U.S. and Europe also continued the positioning of jiu-jitsu as 'white,' though in ways that were often invisible (which, as many have argued, is a key component of whiteness). Rocha and her collaborators note that the first Brazilians who took jiu-jitsu abroad tended to be white, English-speaking, and college educated (unlike Brazilians who took capoeira global, who tended to be Black or mixed race and lower-class) (Rocha et al., 2015). While some of the first generation of sons of Hélio and Carlos Gracie had mothers of with lower class, and in at least one case a mixed-raced, backgrounds, due to their social prominence, in Brazil they were likely seen as having, in Pinho's terms, a high

11 Though Peligro describes this hold as an 'innovative armlock' (Peligro, 2003, p. 31), it was in fact a well-established technique in judo (and indeed in catch wrestling).

'degree of whiteness' (Pinho, 2009, p. 39). In the United States, their racial identity, especially given their Brazilian background but 'European' last name, was perhaps even more ambiguous.

As in Brazil, the early generation of Gracies in the United States worked hard to quickly associate themselves with elite supporters. Here, as in Brazil, the Gracies sought to tie their martial art not to a specific racial or ethnic community, but to elite figures in the entertainment industry. For instance, in the 1980s, Rorion Gracie had small parts in U.S. television shows and worked as a consultant in Hollywood for films starring actors such as Mel Gibson (Peligro, 2003, p. 76). These contacts would prove critical to the future success of Brazilian jiu-jitsu in the United States. Prominent martial artists such as Chuck Norris became an early student of Rorion's cousin Carlos Machado, another early Gracie family pioneer in the United States (BJJ Heroes, nd).

Likewise, to expand the accessibility of jiu-jitsu to non-Brazilians, the Gracies in the United States used English as the main language of instruction. This too was built on early connections that members of the Gracie family in Brazil, such as Rolls Gracie, had already made with American wrestlers, most prominently with Bob Anderson, a U.S. Olympic Greco-Roman wrestling coach (Peligro, 2003, pp. 67–69). As Rocha points out, the choice to use English as a language of instruction for Brazilian jiu-jitsu was very different than capoeira, which as it travelled outside of Brazil retained many Portuguese words and terms. This also meant that the first Brazilians who took jiu-jitsu outside of Brazil had to have some familiarity with English and hence tended to be better-educated, middle-class and white (Rocha et al., 2015, p. 414).

CONCLUSION: BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU AS EFFICIENT AND MODERN TECHNIQUES

By the time Brazilian jiu-jitsu exploded in popularity in the United States and Europe, in the 1990s and early 2000s, what the Gracies accomplished was not simply to promote their style of jiu-jitsu on a global stage, but to, in effect, separate it from a larger social or cultural context and present it as a more 'modern' and 'efficient' martial art. Unlike capoeira, which retains deep links to its Afro-Brazilian origins, or judo, which continues to have ties to Japan, Brazilian jiu-jitsu came to be seen as a space where ethnic, racial, national and other forms of difference were largely irrelevant. For instance, it is common on jiu-jitsu social media sites to see posts such one posted on Facebook by the gym I trained at in Chicago, which stated: 'Race disconnected us; religion separated us; politics divided us; and wealth classified us. In Jiu-jitsu we are all the same.' Indeed, and again in sharp contrast to capoeira, which remains closely connected to its Brazilian birthplace, and even other Asian martial arts, which also retain elements of their countries of origin, even the 'Brazilianness' of jiu-jitsu was somewhat irrelevant. Of course, this seeming 'neutrality' is, exactly, a commonly noted aspect of whiteness itself: as Richard Dyer has noted whites are

'overwhelmingly and disproportionately ... placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard' (Dyer, 2007, p. 3).

For many non-Brazilians, the invisibility of race was the product of two particular aspects of the martial art, which the Gracies had worked hard to produce: first, jiu-jitsu came to be seen as an 'effective' and 'modern' set of techniques, transmitted by one family but not tied to any particular cultural context; and second, people who practice jiu-jitsu assess themselves and their instructors not through any particular connection to Brazil, or through their social identities, but in terms of their jiu-jitsu skills.

For many of the people I've trained jiu-jitsu with in the United States, the racial component of Brazilian jiu-jitsu – and even its 'Brazilian-ness' more generally – is largely invisible, or is deemed somewhat irrelevant. Instead, the key criteria are 'skills,' technique, and specific lineages. Many of my training partners in the United States, for instance, talked about their first exposure to jiu-jitsu in terms of seeing the martial art's effectiveness in combat situations. The specific national, racial, or ethnic background of the fighter was hardly ever mentioned. Nor were romantic attraction to Brazilian culture, or even the charisma of the Gracies themselves, key criteria. Rather, in interviews they stated that the primary reason they sought out jiu-jitsu lessons was because jiu-jitsu seemed to them to be more 'effective' than other martial arts. These reactions were particularly common among people I trained with and who had previously practiced other martial arts. For instance, James, a Black American who is now a black belt, and who at the time of this interview had been training jiu-jitsu for 11 years, told me:

I saw an MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) match, where I saw a guy use jiu-jitsu for the first time and I didn't know what it was. You know, I was kind of shocked that he beat this guy, he beat at a bigger guy, basically using Brazilian style jiu-jitsu. I considered myself a martial artist at the time, but I had no idea what it was.

Worth noting here is that there is little of the 'exoticism' that often ties martial arts to non-Western contexts. Sara Delamont and Neil Stephens note that capoeira is 'presented to the students as inalienably and inexorably Brazilian' (Delamont & Stephens, 2008, p. 61). By sharp contrast, most Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioners see the martial art in terms of specific sets of skills and how effectively they are applied. For instance, when I asked one of the instructors at the gym that I trained at in Chicago how he assesses students, he told me:

What we're looking for is how good is your defense, how well can you manage someone who is trying to pressure you, how clean is your technique? Did you just ... [use] muscle and all your might, or were you very strategic, were you smart?

Likewise, the legitimacy of jiu-jitsu instructors, and the way that jiu-jitsu practitioners assess themselves and their fellow students, rarely has much to do with a person's connection to Brazil.

Rather, two elements are key: the person's skills in competition and in more informal sparring matches, and the lineage from which a person acquired their ranking. As I learned rather rapidly in my first few years of training, my knowledge about Brazil, ability to speak Portuguese, and familiarity with the country, carried no particular cultural capital in this setting. The first day I trained, I introduced myself to my sparring partner as having lived in Brazil. He, completely non-plussed, proceeded to submit me multiple times, making the irrelevance of my connection to Brazil frustratingly clear. And while Brazilian teachers would occasionally visit the academies that I trained at, not once was I singled out to them as someone who had lived in Brazil, and I was also never asked to translate from Portuguese to English. Rather, it was only when I could successfully execute submissions in sparring sessions that my status among other students and instructors grew.

Assessing the legitimacy of an instructor, likewise, often had little to do with any direct connection to Brazil. Again, the comparison with capoeira is sharp. Lauren Miller Griffith notes that 'most of the leadership positions within capoeira are occupied by Afro-Brazilian men and popular depictions of capoeiristas are almost exclusively black males' (Miller Griffith, 2013, p. 10). In Brazilian jiu-jitsu, by contrast, what is key is who the instructor received their black belt from, and what larger association a particular academy is part of. While both of these aspects are often connected, at some level, to the Gracie family, their connections to Brazil are rather irrelevant. Beginning in the 1990s, some of the first Brazilians to teach jiu-jitsu in the United States – in particular Rickson Gracie and Rigan Machado, Rickson's cousin – began to award black belts to Americans, creating a first generation of U.S. black belts who are now sometimes known as the 'dirty dozen' (BJJEE, 2024). Such non-Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belts then went on to be prominent jiu-jitsu instructors in the United States. My experience is likely common: the first jiu-jitsu gym that I trained at, in Texas, was run by an American who earned his black belt from Carlos Machado, a cousin of the Gracies. The gym that I trained at in Chicago was run by an American who earned his black belt from Carlos Gracie Jr.. For many jiu-jitsu practitioners outside of Brazil, having not simply a non-Gracie, but a non-Brazilian, as a jiu-jitsu instructor is not uncommon. Again, this is sharply different than capoeira, where the legitimacy of teachers who are not simply non-Brazilian, but not Afro-Brazilian, is often questioned (Delamont & Stephens, 2008, p. 65).

The legitimacy of non-Brazilian instructors is also tied not to their personal connections to Brazil, much less to their abilities to speak Portuguese, but to their skill in competitions. While Brazilians often dominate major international jiu-jitsu competitions, this is no longer necessarily always the case. In 2000, B.J. Penn became the first non-Brazilian to win a major jiu-jitsu championship at the black belt level (Williams 2005). My first jiu-jitsu instructor in Texas, likewise, was an American who succeeded in several prominent jiu-jitsu championships, in both Brazil and the United States. Significantly, even the major

Brazilian jiu-jitsu competition, the International Brazilian Jiu-jitsu Federation's World Championship is no longer held in Brazil: since 2007 the annual competition has been held in California. Here too the contrast with capoeira is significant. Miller Griffith and others point out the symbolic prestige that Brazil has in capoeira, noting that the city of Salvador, Bahia, is 'considered the cradle of capoeira' (Miller Griffith, 2013, p. 2). By contrast, jiu-jitsu is in many ways fully global: while many jiu-jitsu practitioners understand that the art developed in Rio de Janeiro, they are just as likely to travel to prominent academies in California, New York or Texas to seek high-level instruction.

When non-Brazilians who practice jiu-jitsu seek to acquire skills, they do sometimes travel to seek out new, and different, instructors. But this is typically understood as seeking out high-quality instruction, and not necessarily as seeking a larger connection to Brazilian culture. Luis, for instance, who is now a black belt and runs his own gym, told me the following about his initial experiences learning jiu-jitsu:

During the first few years, I was able to travel to California to train there, and then I also ended up going to Brazil. I picked up a lot of the stuff, a lot of the techniques, there. Being able to expose myself to other training methods and teaching techniques was great.

Yet when I asked him about similarities or differences between jiu-jitsu in the United States and Brazil, Luis told me:

It took a little bit of time to adjust. They're very, very fluent and diverse in their movements. But overall ... it was still really similar. Anywhere that I've travelled, I've been able to keep up with the guys that are at the same level, even if it's in a different part of the world.

Likewise, Barry, now a black belt who also runs his own gym, told me that he once went to Brazil to learn jiu-jitsu. He too, though, understood this almost entirely in terms of the skill levels of Brazilians and hence as an opportunity to learn specific techniques which was far more difficult in the United States in the early 2000s. When I asked him about whether practicing jiu-jitsu in Brazil was different than in the United States, he told me:

No, it wasn't. But the fact that you walked into a gym in Brazil and that there were thirty black and brown belts on the mats was amazing. You're going: 'Wow!' At that time, the highest belt in Chicago was purple.

Yet this emphasis on skill and technique both speaks to, and elides, a racial context, and shows how skillfully the Gracies were able to position their brand of jiu-jitsu as white, but as a whiteness that, as Ruth Frankenberg astutely stated, in many cases 'does not speak its own name' (Frankenberg, 2020, p. 417). Having once been a Japanese art, Brazilian jiu-jitsu was separated from that specific racial, and cultural context, and could be presented as a more 'evolved' and 'efficient' set of techniques. Likewise, jiu-jitsu could be compared to capoeira as more 'effective' in a combat setting. In this way, Brazilian jiu-jitsu could be connected to Brazil

and to an Asian art, but possess a high 'degree of whiteness,' as a style that the Gracies had the foresight, intelligence, and determination to improve. Renzo Gracie (the grandson of Carlos Gracie) summed up this process when he was asked about his first MMA fight in Japan in 1997, and stated:

It's a very strange thing, you know, because we learned from them. Three generations ago, we evolved the art so much, and we studied so much, that we were able to improve a lot. It's a case of the son teaching the father (Aldous, 2008).

Seemingly severed from its racial, ethnic, and national origins, Brazilian jiu-jitsu could be seen as a 'modern' fighting style against which others could be measured. As Dyer, in a pioneering analysis, has argued, whiteness is often positioned as a 'norm' against which other races are assessed and evaluated (Dyer, 2017). In the same way, the Gracies managed to position jiu-jitsu as white, though in a way which, especially for non-Brazilians, seemed simply to be an impartial, though also effective, efficient, and modern, 'standard.'

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