Sensing violence: An ethnography of mixed martial arts

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Abstract
This article describes the sensory experiences of fighting through an ethnography of mixed martial arts (MMA). MMA is an emergent sport where competitors in a ring or cage utilize strikes (punches, kicks, elbows, and knees) as well as submission techniques to defeat opponents. This sensory ethnography involves, inter alia, the documentation of the rhythms pertaining to the cadence of drills, the flow of sparring and grappling sessions, the attunement of bodies to other bodies through touch, the beat of music accompanying training sessions, the smell of sweat and flatulence, and the throbbing pain that is registered through taste. This article relies on 45 in-depth interviews with mixed martial art fighters and participant observation over a four-year period.

Keywords
senses, violence, sport, mixed martial arts

Logan is circling me and peppering me with his jab. Some are getting through my guard. I am chasing him around the mat trying to time the rhythm of his hands so that I can get in a few shots of my own. Suddenly, Logan shoots in for a takedown. I thrust my hips to the ground, driving his head to the mat as he grabs for my legs. Breathing hard, I drive a hard hook into his kidney area and he gives up on his takedown attempt and pulls me into his guard. We are on the ground and his legs are wrapped tight around my waist and his right hand is cupped around the back of my head trying to pull me down and control my posture. My head is drenched with sweat so I easily slip my head out of his grip and quickly, with my right arm, drive two quick punches to his ribs and then a couple to his face. Logan’s face is smeared with blood.

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red oozing out of his nasal area. He yanks down on the crown of my head and over-hooks my left arm. I can hear Felix [my coach] yelling at me, ‘Keep your posture [Dale], don’t let him pull down on your head!’ My head is buried in Logan’s chest; the smell of liniment and sweat fill my nostrils. Pushing off of the mat, I get my posture and again begin to deliver punches to Logan’s ribs and face. ‘Ding, ding, ding’, the bell rings to signal the end of the round. We are both breathing hard and, in robotic fashion, I stand up. I extend my arm to Logan and pull him off the mat to his feet. We give each other a half hug and simultaneously utter, ‘nice work’ and turn to get off the mats to get some water. I lift the nozzle of the water bottle to my mouth and squirt the water in. Nothing ever tasted so good. [Field notes from late 2008]

It was in and through the perception of the rhythm of my opponent’s hands, sight of bloody noses, taste of water, sound of the coach and ringing bell, smell of sweat, and the feel of my opponent’s legs around my waist that I came to comprehend and know the sport of MMA. In the context of combat sports and martial arts, illuminating the senses in action offers an ‘inside-out’ view (see Downey 2005), revealing the training regimens, perceptions, behaviors, and their effects on fighters. In this article I offer an inside-out view of MMA by elucidating the sensorium of fighting.

This ethnography is inspired and guided by the work of Loïc Wacquant (2004) and Greg Downey (2005), who have examined the embodied experiences of combat sports and martial arts using their bodies as instruments of data collection. The primary aim of this study is to go beyond the public vision of MMA that is found in the media and offer a depiction of this sport at the level of the senses. This sensory ethnography of fighting explores the touch, sight, smells, tastes, and sounds associated with participation in the training regimens and fighting associated with MMA. Sensory ethnography (Pink 2008, 2009; Stoller 2004) can be seen as part of a recent fragmentation of approaches to ethnography (Atkinson et al. 2007). As an ethnographic approach it involves the description of the senses and sociality of research participants through traditional techniques such as field notes, participant observation and in-depth interviews as well as photographing and audio and video recording, alongside and with research participants.

To date, research on MMA has been from an Archimedean point, with very little exploration of the lived experiences of MMA fighters (see, for example, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; Buse 2006). What goes on behind closed doors of the MMA club – the backstage – is largely based on media depictions or simply ignored (for notable exceptions, see Green 2011; Spencer 2011). In addition, Akihiko and Kei-ho Pih (2010) have argued that MMA (especially in North America) is recognized by its participants and viewing public as only for ‘real’ men and, using the abstract notion of hegemonic masculinity, they argue that there is a valorization of stand-up styles of fighting that resemble images of a bar fight.1 By offering an inside-out view of MMA, this article shows that MMA fighters’ draw to and continued involvement in the sport is far more complex. Here I show how the sensory experiences of MMA animate involvement in the sport.
Through the sensory experience of training and combat, fighters build up a technical competency (a sensitivity) that allows them to participate in MMA. The senses serve as the primary mode by which fighters engage with and comprehend MMA, including the space and temporality of the MMA club, the experience of MMA contests, and sociality amongst fighters. It is through the senses that fighters build up a sense of members of their fight team and opponents, engaging in intimate interactions and forming bonds with each other, behaviors that clearly defy the notion that only real ‘stoic’ men engage in MMA.

This article is structured in three main sections. In the following section, I review some of the past literature on the senses, violence, and sport. In the subsequent section, I discuss the contours of this ethnography. In the final section, I analyze the sensorium of MMA. I delve into the extreme and unsavory aspects of MMA training: the smells of liniment, jock straps and flatulence; the taste of blood and sweat; the sound of screams and counting repetitions; and the sight of (primarily male) MMA fighters trying to exert their will on their training partners. This article also entails an analysis of the cadence of doing drills, the flow of sparring and grappling sessions, the attunement of bodies to other bodies through touch, to the beat of music accompanying training sessions, and to the throbbing pain that is registered through taste.

The senses, sport and violence

The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on empirical observation, marked a shift towards the primacy of sight and a distrust of the lower senses like smell and touch (Stoller 1997; see also Mellor and Shilling 1997). The distancing that comes with emphasis on sight assumes an Archimedean point, with knowledge production determined by such a position. Whereas the ocular-centric bias can still be found across all academic disciplines, there has been an upsurge in interest in the senses in the social sciences in the last decade (Pink 2009; Westhaver 2006; Stoller 2004; Howes 2003). This growing attention is due, in part, to the recognition of the primacy of all the senses in our day-to-day lives.

Despite this growing recognition of the importance of the senses, they remain poorly studied in social studies of sport and exercise. In his review of the sport studies and exercise sciences literature, Sparkes (2009) has indicated that despite the fact that people’s knowledge of themselves, others and the world they inhabit is inextricably linked to and shaped by their senses, research on sport and exercise has not sufficiently engaged with the senses. Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007) also find it peculiar that, despite the primacy of bodies to sport, they are addressed at the abstract, theoretical level with relatively few accounts grounded in the corporeal realities of the lived sporting body (see also Rinehart 2010). Both Shilling (2007) and Klein (2002) affirm such a diagnosis, citing the lack of consideration of bodily practices within the sociology of sport (see also Allen-Collinson 2009). While the engagement with the senses has been sporadic in the sociology of sport, there have been recent exceptions. In relation to long-distance running, Hockey (2006) has
shown the importance of listening to runners, in relation to their breathing, to
gauge their own performance as well as other competitors. In relation to smell,
Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007: 122) have evinced the connection between
sport and sweat and ‘a certain kind of pungency that permeates the sporting
body’. Clayton (2012) analyzed the many stages of sport initiation in male college
soccer, narrating the manifold sensory experiences of the rituals associated with
team hazing.
Elsewhere in social studies of violence, the senses have received periodic atten-
tion. In his formative work on the seductions of crime, while primarily concerned
with the emotional dimensions of violence, Katz (1988) describes rage and humili-
ation as being felt all over the body. He describes humiliation as moving ‘through
the body by warming the top of the head; then moving to the face, where its
acknowledgement may create the blush of shame’ (Katz 1988: 27). The experience
of humiliation is registered along the surface of the skin. Drawing on his fieldwork
in Northern Ireland, Feldman (1991, 1997) offers a noteworthy engagement with
the sensory dimensions of political violence. He shows the optical and auditory
components to surveillance and its interconnection to political violence. In Collins’
(2009) recent work, he analyzes the situational characteristics of violent situations.
He shows how fighting is often a means by which groups are organized and form a
sense of group identity. In Collins’ careful analysis, he reveals some of the sensory
dimensions of violence. For example, in his analysis of hitmen, he describes the
‘auditory tunnel’ that hitmen take on prior to killing their victims, where they
vividly notice every tiny detail at the moment of confrontation (Collins 2009: 435).
In relation to combat sports and martial arts, which can be seen as the inter-
section of the aforementioned fields of study, two notable scholars have explored
the role of the senses. Greg Downey’s (2005) ethnography of capoeira draws atten-
tion to the salience of sound and the way bodies move and feel their way through
the music of the berimbau. He shows how the bodily conversation between capoeir-
istas is ‘simultaneously cooperative and competitive, aesthetic and agonistic’
(Downey 2005: 2). Downey does not fixate on the meaning and symbolism of
capoeira, but more on the training, perceptions, appearances, behavior, and their
effects, which are sometimes phenomenological, physiological and neurological.
Grounded in sensory experience, his work is from the ‘inside-out’, looking at the
world from the perspective of a capoeirista practitioner.
Loïc Wacquant’s (2004) ethnography of boxing highlights the sensuous intoxi-
cation that is key to the apprenticeship of the boxer. Advocating for the position as
an ‘observing participant’, Wacquant describes the feel of pain resulting from
blows, the embodied proficiency gained through repeated drills and sparring ses-
sions, and the sounds of the ‘rhythmic puffing, hissing, sniffing, blowing, and
groaning of each athlete’ (2004: 71). He learned the ability to sense violence, bob-
ing and weaving away from punches and feeling when to punch. In addition, he
participated in the form of sociability that is particular to the culture of the boxing
club. What is made evident about Wacquant’s boxing apprenticeship is that he
came part of the gym, a player amongst the gym’s stable mates.
Wacquant’s and Downey’s respective studies show the salience of the researcher immersing him- or herself in the worlds of fighters. This insider position not only allows for a documentation of the practices related to participation in combat sports and martial arts, but also the sensory experiences that dominate the crafting of the fighter’s body. In taking on the position as observing participant, the senses emerge as the means through which the researcher comes to know their object of study, the bodies of other combatants and their worlds. Their engagement with fighting in an embodied way allows for the thick description of the sensoryscapes of their respective combat styles. In what remains, I offer a thick description of the sensoryscape of MMA.

The study

While boxing has been understood in the West as the most violent and physically demanding of sports (Wacquant 1995, 2004; Trimbur 2011), since the early 1990s a new and equally violent and taxing sport has emerged that challenges this conception. MMA competitions feature competitors in a ring or a caged-in area, inflicting pain on their opponents, inter alia, by punching, kicking, elbowing and kneeing their opponents into submission. While men have primarily participated in MMA competitions, women increasingly enter into these contests. MMA fight organizations within Europe, North and South America, and Asia regularly host competitions. Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in the US, Canada and Great Britain draws crowds of 20,000, in addition to millions of television viewers worldwide. The UFC brings trained MMA fighters from all over the globe, offering a spectacle sport like no other. Despite public backlash against MMA in the United States, the UFC has progressed to the point of televising their competitions on multiple cable networks and Fox Sports. MMA has now eclipsed boxing in popularity.

In May 2006, I joined a MMA club in a major Canadian city based on prior interest in combat arts. In June of the same year I decided to convert what was initially a hobby into an ethnographic study. I attended classes and/or trained two to five times a week; this intensified to seven training sessions a week, training in the morning and the evenings on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In the spring of 2008, I trained Muay Thai (see below) for two months in San Kampang, Thailand.

The club where I trained consists of approximately 80 members with four fighters preparing for an upcoming fight card at any one time. The club focuses on and has structured classes in two primary styles – Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and Muay Thai – with additional semi-weekly freestyle wrestling classes. Brazilian Jitsu is primarily a ground fighting style that focuses on arm and leg submissions, sweeps (flipping over an opponent into a disadvantageous position), chokes and defending oneself while on one’s back. Training of this particular style is done through repetitions of individual techniques (or a combination of a few) or in real-time competition through a practice called ‘rolling’.

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Muay Thai or Thai boxing (also known as the science of eight limbs) is a standing striking style where practitioners utilize their fists, shins, knees and elbows to strike their opponents. Clinching and delivering elbows and knees to a standing opponent is also a central feature of Muay Thai. This style is practiced in a way similar to traditional boxing with pads and punching bags. Techniques associated with freestyle wrestling are used to take down opponents to the ground and strike their opponent’s mid-section and head with fists or elbows. This practice is referred to as ‘ground and pound’. Twice a week, trainers run arduous MMA training sessions where the three styles are combined. These sessions are primarily for serious fighters who are either training for an upcoming fight or helping other fighters to prepare for their fights.

When I decided to convert my hobby into an ethnographic study, I began to casually take field notes after structured classes and informal training sessions at the club. This usually took the form of what Emerson and colleagues (1995) call ‘jottings’ in my field book, which were later converted into longer narratives. The jottings correspond to particular events that illuminate the themes of the study. Keeping with the mandates of sensory ethnography, this study involved my own multisensory, emplaced experiences of MMA (see Pink 2009; Richardson 1997). Photographs and video recordings of training sessions and MMA events were used in the production of field notes (Pink 2008; Becker 2007; Katz 1999). The combination of photography and video helped me to describe the sensory experiences of MMA training in situ; this amalgam contributed to the production of thick descriptions offered in field note excerpts (see Katz 1999). Field notes also involved reflections on my embodied experiences of aspects of MMA (Rinehart 2010; Clayton 2010; Willis 2000; Richardson 1997).

In September 2006 I began interviewing fighters from my home MMA club. Two months later, I started to interview fighters from other clubs in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec and the state of Florida to enrich and support the accounts offered by club members. Forty-five interviews were conducted with MMA fighters (43 men, two women). Interviews were primarily with fighters who have participated in one or more professional MMA events and those training for their first MMA fight. A small number of amateur MMA practitioners were included (n = 3). Pseudonyms have been assigned to all interviewees and certain descriptive information has been taken out of the responses to ensure confidentiality and the anonymity of fighters.

The semi-structured interviews focused on manifold issues related to mixed martial arts. The interview guide was continually modified based on observations and experiences in the field and previous interviews (see Corbin and Strauss 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1990). All interviews were face-to-face and lasted between 35 minutes and 95 minutes, with the average interview being around 60 minutes long. Interviews were in fighters’ homes (n = 15), offices in MMA clubs (n = 25) or, in a small number of cases, in coffee shops or bars (n = 5).

Interviewees were gathered through a variety of techniques. Following the mandates of theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I traveled to various MMA
clubs in Ontario, Quebec and Florida and sought out professional fighters that train at a particular club to be interviewed. Using snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), I also asked fighters to recommend other fighters to be interviewed. In other cases, I used Facebook (see Onwuegbuzie et al. 2010) and their personal websites (see Walby 2010; Pruitt 2008) to contact fighters and ask them if I could interview them at a time and place most conducive to their schedules.

Research participants were asked specific questions regarding their experiences in the sport of MMA, the training they engage in outside of the MMA club, their perceptions of the current state of MMA in terms of its development, and their everyday lives outside the sport. These questions were formed out of my experience of MMA and what I assimilated through informal discussions and formal interviews that, in turn, acted as a feedback loop to my interview guide. Interview transcripts and field note vignettes were coded according to a set of themes related to, inter alia, violence, gender, and the senses. However, statements made by respondents did not necessarily fit into only one discrete category; therefore, open coding was also used to better capture the complex and blended meanings often inherent in the statements made by the respondents (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Ainsworth and Hardy 2004).

Sensing violence

Movement, sight and touch of fighting

Bodies learn in particular ways to move across space, and this movement is a product of habits developed throughout our lives (see Merleau-Ponty 1962; Young 1990; Spencer 2009). The focus on movement brings the question from what a body is to what it can do. As Sheets-Johnstone (1999: xxxi) states, ‘thinking and movement are not separate happenings but are aspects of a kinetic bodily logos attuned to an evolving dynamic situation’. Bodies creatively become attuned to situations and move according to the situations presented to them (see Shilling 2008). Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007) are correct to assert that movement in sport (in order to be successful) requires the development of a particular sense of movement and timing. An embodied sense of movement necessitates a developed awareness of sensations emanating from organs (including the skin), ligaments, tendons and muscles as they move (cf. Serres 2009). The culmination of sensations is experienced in the real-time of sport. This is the case in MMA, where timing and interpreting movement is the difference between hitting an opponent and being hit.

To be successful in the sport of MMA requires the ability to anticipate the actions of one’s opponent through sensing an adversary’s future actions. This anticipation is registered both at the level of touch and sight and involves sensing an opponent’s movements as cues to particular actions. This happens at such a fast speed that, at times, it requires a level of improvisation by thinking bodies (cf. Manning 2007; Blackman 2008; Wilson, 2009). Fighters must be attuned to their opponents’ movements in a way that allows them to avoid being hit by their
opponents.9 Fighters learn (or not) to ‘feel out’ their opponents and strike their opponents at opportune times. The following interview illustrates this aspect of stand-up striking.

Walter: You can kind of read your opponent. You can tell if he is ready or not. You cannot fake that. You can tell right there, you are sizing him up. When you first get in your thoughts are a mile a minute. Can’t think. So what I will do is stick out a jab and move around. You move around and you get composure. ‘Now I feel it, now here it is; now I’m ready’. Then I step inside to engage. At first a lot is going on and you step inside and engage. If he is not moving, you give him something to move with, to see how he reacts. That is how you base your game plan. Because, beforehand, you have a game plan going into the match. When you are out there and you see how he reacts, that is when you decide to keep strictly with the game plan or if he has changed up. My opponent this week I know what punch he is going to throw, because he does it all the time. He sticks his arm out and then comes with a looping one. So I am going to step in and see if he is going to give me that same look. If he gives me that same look, I am going to eat him up. If he gives me another look, I am going to step back and come through and eat him up then. I know every move he is going to make before he makes it.

Bodily cues serve as the basis by which fighters anticipate the movements of an opponent. Strategies are predicated on the tendencies of fighters – their techniques, rhythms and movements – where fighters attempt to act and capitalize on these tendencies. Here ‘eating him up’ means to either take their opponent down or counter with a strike. In the rhythm of the fight, combatants must engage with the bodies of their opponents, an engagement that is reminiscent of a dance. Bodies circle each other in combat, stepping in ways that are as habituated as brushing one’s teeth. Fights are never so predictable, but bodily cues serve as a basis to act on one’s opponent. When things go awry fighters must, to a degree, improvise in the situations with which they are confronted.

Within the MMA gym, on any given day, barefoot fighters step on the mats feeling the foam compress to the weight of the practitioner. The variously colored mats cushion bodies, as the edges of the mats delimit practice and interactions between combatants. The texture and feel of the mats change as bodies sweat, the space of the club comes to be dominated by the lingering salty smell of perspiration. While on the ground grappling or in the clinch standing, be it with a g10 on or not, a fighter is in constant contact with their opponent – touch is the paramount experience. As I experienced first-hand when I joined, neophytes feel like they are drowning in a bottomless pool when facing an experienced grappler on the ground. Every action is met with a string of techniques that places the beginner in a disadvantageous position. Being ‘tapped out’11 by way of choke or arm bar becomes a painful reminder of one’s position in the club. In addition, for neophytes the mats can feel hard and unforgiving, especially when trapped under a more adept ground fighter.
In the progression from neophyte to master, fighters develop particular styles on the ground. These particular styles are often predicated on the body type of the fighter with techniques lending themselves to certain bodily dimensions. Irrespective of bodily disposition, fighters must learn how to feel the movements of the opponent’s body and execute techniques at opportune moments. Reacting to an opponent involves a level of improvisation where fighters must reach and feel their way through combat. The following field note reflects this reality of ground fighting:

We are circled around George and he is going to be teaching half guard techniques. He has Marion come over and assist him in teaching the technique. Marion assumes his position in George’s half guard. George first says, ‘OK, so you want to keep your hands in front of you to protect your neck [his arms are bent towards his face tight to his body]. You want to be on your side [he is on his right side]. If he is able to flatten you out, you will not be able to attack or sweep him.’ George’s body is coiled tight on his right side and he moves his arm under and between Marion’s left leg. George resumes instruction: ‘You want to hook your arm under his body and shift his weight onto your body so you can control his posture. And notice that I do not have my legs crossed around his leg.’ His knees are pointed towards the ceiling and Marion’s leg is cradled between his legs. ‘Make sure to sink your free hand underneath the leg you have between your legs so that he cannot kimura [arm-lock] your free arm. Then you want to shift his weight back and forth and up and down with your legs’, George remarks. He swings his legs back and forth and up and down the length of his body. ‘You do this to throw his posture off and then you can sweep him and so that you can make sure he cannot collapse you onto your back. You want to feel his body, and if his body shifts forward onto his hands, you want to go back door.’ George then executes the sweep, throwing Marion’s body forth, shifting Marion’s body through his legs over and smoothly transitioning to an advantageous position behind Marion. George then motions for Marion to resume his position in George’s half guard. ‘But if he bases out on his hands when you shift his weight, shift his weight over to the other side. If you turn into him you can sweep him on to his back.’ George rocks back and forth, making sure to keep Marion unbalanced. In a forceful manner George rolls into Marion, putting him on his back. George then shifts his weight onto Marion’s leg that he had trapped between his legs. George explains, ‘So those are two of the techniques that can be used on your opponent when he is in your half guard. It depends on his reaction, what he does. Action – reaction, action and reaction.’

George’s instruction illustrates the bodily sensitivity fighters must develop on the ground in order to be successful. Combatants must feel when to move, a touch sensitivity that is built up over time through practice. Not only must fighters have a heightened sense of their own bodies, but they must also feel their way through the bodies of their opponents. They must become attuned to their opponents’ bodily movement across time and space. This is predicated on a level of presentiment of the future actions of one’s opponent. George frequently stated the centrality of an
action-reaction sequence to grappling. This carried over into his description of
takedowns and of ways to effectively apply submission techniques. Practice is
based on the perceived actions of a typical opponent and strategies are based on
possible reactions to a fighter’s action. In cases of elite-level grapplers, the ground
game is likened to a chess match where fighters attempt to predict and capitalize on
the movement of their opponent (cf. Sheridan 2007).

The aural and combat

In terms of sociality, Simmel (1997 [1907]) notes that the ear is the most selfish of
the senses; it takes and gives nothing back to the other. The ear is not telling like
the eye. In comparison to other senses, the aural has received considerable atten-
tion in the social sciences (see, for example, Rawes 2008; Downey 2005; Chernoff
1985). For example, in Downey’s (2005) insightful work on capoeira, he describes
how, in order to effectively participate in this combat art, the ear must be trained.
Instrumental rhythms are shown in his work to affect how the game of capoeira
unfolds, controls the severity of competition, and sets the style of interaction.

Similarly, in MMA the aural takes on a particular social character that requires
a level of learning. A fighter becomes attuned to the aural aspects of MMA. In the
MMA club, adding to the cacophony of voices in the club and forming a backdrop
to the ongoing activities of classes are the blaring rings of round timers and interval
training timers. Similar to boxing (Wacquant 2004), round-timers are used to cut
up 3-minute rounds of Muay Thai training sessions; they structure punching bag,
pad and sparring sessions. Three bells ring out: the first to initiate the round,
another when there is 30 seconds left and another bell to salute the end of the
round. Bodies take to and cease movement with the timing of the bells and
come to be entrained (Bluedorn 2002; Collins 2004) to the rhythm of other
bodies and the sound of the bells, with an intensification of body technique practice
and sparring in the final 30 seconds. Interval training timers are used during
Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, as well as MMA grappling and sparring sessions, and are set
at 5 minutes with an additional minute rest.

Insofar as in our day-to-day lives we verbally respond to what we hear from
others, in MMA fighters’ bodies must respond to the commands of coaches and
teammates without verbally responding. As I found out, learning to respond by
doing is not always easy. The following field note excerpt is based on a MMA
training session where my training partners are preparing for a fight:

... Vince passes my guard14 and starts to rain down punches from the half guard.
Scott yells out ‘you got to do something [Dale], you can’t just stay there! Do some-
thing!’ I am freezing and I am very frustrated because I can’t do anything and he is
continuously punching me and I am only blocking some of them. I murmur ‘I can’t’,
to which Scott immediately retorts ‘Don’t talk, get back your guard!’ Without think-
ing I turn to my right side and push on his left knee and wrap my legs around his waist
returning to guard. I lock up both of his arms and try to regain my focus. ‘Time!’ The
round is over. Vince gets off of me and I slowly get to my feet. Immediately William makes his way over to me and tries to get water in my mouth. In a low voice he says, ‘Don’t think about what is going wrong, just listen and do something about it. When you stopped talking and thinking negatively and just listened, you got out of the bad position.’

The preceding field note illustrates the fundamental connection between hearing and embodied action. Where reflection is, to a degree, detrimental to success in MMA, fighters must rapidly react to the violent situations that they find themselves in. They must learn to listen to the instructions of their coaches, specifically, and execute body techniques to be successful as a fighter. Moreover, fighters must learn to listen to the instructions of their coaches and act accordingly without thinking about what they are doing. This aural experience not only implies hearing but listening and doing. The dyadic connection of coach and fighter is coveted and is seen as integral to the experience of and success in combat.

The aural can briefly become the singular sense of combat. With the continuous flow of emotions experienced prior to, within and after combat, fighters are also confronted by the cacophony of the fans whose voices echo in the arenas and stadiums that host MMA events. In fact, many fighters conceded that the sheer volume of the crowd intensified the fear (confrontational tension) experienced prior to combat (see Collins 2009). Hearing can also be limited to the sounds of one’s body. The following interview reflects this singularity.

Right before you went into fight, how did you feel?

Edwin: I was nervous, I was really nervous. My heart was beating, and I had no idea why. But I could feel (pause), I was thinking nothing. I could actually hear my heart beat and nothing was going through my mind. Absolutely a blank. You could say something to me and it would go in one ear and out the other, it was a complete blank.

Here Edwin reflects on confronting the tension customary to the pre-fight experience. He could not think of anything, but became attuned to the sound of the rhythm of his beating heart. Hearing the rhythm of one’s beating heart is not a quotidian experience and reflects the gravity of the event of confronting another body in combat. This demonstrates the peculiar nature of fight events where a fighter becomes lost in the deluge of emotions experienced prior to and during combat.

Downey (2005) aptly points out that before we reflect on music, we are already culturally conditioned to be attentive to and perceive it through bodily habit and comportment. Furthermore, DeNora (2000) and LaBelle (2008) also suggest that music often forms the rhythmic scaffolding for the everyday life of individuals, as individuals latch onto musical frames, thereby generating the means for ordering and organizing a sense of self within varied environments. Forms of ‘auditory latching’ (LaBelle 2008) can be located within musical experience and a relation
to self and a world modulated by musical structures. Musical rhythms, then, operate as devices for entrainment, insofar as they involve the alignment of bodily features with some continuous features in the environment (DeNora 2000). For the present purposes, I consider the relationship between music and how the MMA club is experienced.

In the main, music is played in the background of club practices. Music genres range from rap and techno dance music to heavy metal depending on who decides on the music, which is usually on a first-come-first-serve basis. Musical choice is subject to commentary by the class attendees, be it positive or negative. Many of the warm-up strength training regimes are grueling and it is commonplace for techno dance or heavy metal to accompany such workouts and act as a fulcrum to intensify workouts. Bodies come to be attuned to the rhythm of music and drills are often measured by the songs that accompany them. This form of auditory scaffolding provides the basis of many competition-based, body-centered spaces. Temporally, music signals the type of activities engaged in throughout the class. If the teacher is showing technique, then music is absent, whereas live grappling and striking sessions are accompanied by music. This is mainly due to the fact that while technique is being shown and practiced, teachers must be able to clearly communicate the specificities of the body technique.

In terms of auditory latching, it is apposite to consider the cutting up of musical audio tracks for the purposes of tabata protocol-based exercises. Tabata protocol is a high-intensity training where an athlete does a maximum-intensity exercise for 20 seconds, followed by a 10 second rest and repeated eight to 10 times. With respect to MMA, this form of training is utilized to mimic the nature of fighting where fighters exert themselves at an extremely high level for short spurts and then must recover quickly. Rather than rely on a stopwatch, fighters may splice songs and string them together in accordance with tabata protocol, with high-intensity music for 20 seconds and low-intensity music for 10 seconds. The following extract from a field note reflects how auditory latching occurs in relation to tabata protocol.

...I line up across from the heavy bag and Dane walks over to the other side of the room and yells out ‘You guys ready?’ We both reply with a loud ‘Yeah!’ and Dane presses play on the CD player. He runs back to the open bag and a gun-shot rings out and the heavy metal music begins. We are throwing hard straight punches at the bag as fast as we can while Rory is doing ground and pound on the bag across from us. Ughh, I am feeling the burn in the shoulders already. What is wrong with me? I peer out of the corner of my eye at Nick; wow, he is heaving punches in at that bag faster than me. I better pick up the pace. Every punch I throw my shoulders feel more on fire. The music is still going and I am wondering when it is going to end. I am keenly listening to the sound of the shot to signal the end of this session. By now I am breathing harder and can hear Rory pounding away at the bag across from me. Thud, thud, tap, tap are the dominant sounds in the room. A shotgun rings out and the slow music commences. I must get my breath back quickly...
This example illustrates how bodies can latch on to auditory signals and how music can have additional meanings and purposes beyond the pleasure of listening. Here music can frame the way in which a fighter engages with an exercise, framing the ways bodies perform a movement. While tabata protocol can be just as easily carried out with a stopwatch rather than music, the important aspect to note is that fighters, as the tabata goes on, become attuned to the stages of the song, learning in an embodied way when the high-intensity sections will end (this is equally the case with respect to the rest section of the tabata). In regard to the sound of gloves crashing into bags, sounds can grip the fighter, becoming the dominant sense of training. This sound also serves as an indicator for fighters as they can hear how hard their training partners are training. This often has a disciplinary function insofar as, in the competitive space of the club (Shilling 2008; Wacquant 2004), fighters want to keep up with their training partners.

**The smell of fighting**

Synnott (1991) asserts that odors delineate the individual, group and place. The smelling of a person’s body odor is the most intimate perception of them. As Simmel (1997 [1907]) states, in smelling another person one penetrates ‘in a gaseous form into our most sensory inner being, and it is obvious that, with an enhanced sensitivity to olfactory impressions in general, this must lead to a selection and a distancing that to some extent creates one of the sensory foundations for the sociological reserve of the modern individual’ (1997 [1907]: 119). The singularity of existence of a person is revealed, in part, through our smelling of another. Our sense of them, their significance to us, and our histories of them are formed in and through smell (Curtis 2008). In addition, meaning generation is formed, in part, through the olfactory sense of the group and space.

When entering into the MMA club, one is struck by a collage of the thick salty odor of sweat and sweet smell of mat cleaning products. Initially, this smell is indefinable. After about a month at the club, I grew fonder of this distinct odor, insofar it came to be associated with training. The change rooms are almost entirely drenched with the smell of muscle liniment and sweat, which can sometimes be seen rising off from the bodies of fighters after training sessions. The smells of these spaces intensify according to the accumulation of bodies. Temporally, the intensification of odors corresponds to the time of classes and the types of training inherent to MMA. While the mats have the faint smell of cleaning products prior to night classes, the smell of sweat takes over and reaches its highest intensity after three hours of grappling or stand-up sparring as bodies shed heat and sweat.

The spatial boundaries between bodies are formed through the senses (Simmel 1997 [1907], 1971 [1911]). The formation and maintenance of the group is, in part, predicated on the individual’s tolerance and recognition of the smell of others (Curtis 2008). At times, odors can also become the preoccupation of the group,
which can affect the activities of the group. The following field note reflects how odors can have this effect:

Twelve of us are assembled in a circle and Richard is orchestrating some strength exercises as part of our warm-up. Everyone is ready to go and Richard yells out, ‘Sit-ups! Everyone counts 10!’ Marion starts out and he is counting out loud with everyone executing sit-ups. He finishes his ten repetitions and Geoff starts yelling out the cadence. He reaches about five repetitions and suddenly I am struck with the smell of flatulence. I look over at Marion and he has a smile on his face. The stench is so intense that I am finding it hard to do sit-ups. I look over quickly at Geoff and Claude and they both have grimacing faces. The sound of cadence is broken when Simon interrupts and says, ‘Who farted? That stinks so bad!’ By now a few of the guys on the far side of the room have their hands over their face and seem to be having a hard time doing the sit-ups. Some of the guys on the other side of the room are laughing at the guys holding hands over their face. Richard yells over at Marion, ‘You have the worst farts!’ Everyone is by now laughing and the sit-ups have slowed to almost a halt.

Flatulence in the MMA club seemed to be a constant, with rotten eggs and manure filling the air. Sometimes it was the topic of humor, with laughs being had all around. The importance of this form of group bonding should not be disregarded. While we form understandings of individuals through smell, odor may constitute the experience of the group. Being part of the group is not just based on skill but on conforming to the humor sensibilities of the group. Part of the conformance to the masculine order of the club involves finding humor in flatulence.

Beyond the more mundane smells of the club, smells can color significant events in MMA. Particular odors come to be attached with particular individuals and the olfactory sense of them may dominate our memories of significant events. Edwin recalls his experience of his first professional fight in the cage.

I: How did you feel when you got into the cage?

Edwin:... so [names coach], is like ‘It’s time to fight. Do what you always do and just kick his ass’. He had really fucking bad breath, [Names coach], he really needs to brush his teeth, especially when he is coaching, holy fuck. That is the only thing I was thinking, he was next to me breathing and the motherfucker has the worst breath, ‘brush your teeth bro’. So that scent hit me.

Here Edwin explains how, upon entering the cage, rather than heeding the advice of his coach, the foul breath of his coach gripped him and dominated his thought process prior to engaging with his opponent. Olfactory sense, while subjective in nature, ‘hits’ us and may dominate our perceptions of others. Smells grip us sometimes against our will.
Dewey (1967) argued that we sense by bringing past experiences to bear upon the present for interpretations of contextual factors. In that respect, odors are ‘unmatched in catalyzing the evocation of distant memories and places’ (Drobnick 2006: 1). Smells are efficacious in evoking memories that aid in possible future actions. In MMA, combat is drenched with the odors of the club. The smells of combat can be evoked in ritualistic form for future MMA events.

Do you have any rituals that you go through before you fight?

Frederick: I do what I used to do in college; it has worked out for me so much, because I train so hard. So no matter how much you wash your outfits, there is still this stench embedded in your clothes. What I would always do, is whenever I would work out, when I go to competition, I would take off my shirt and I would always have a shirt there that I trained with, I would put it to my face and I would take a deep breath in. There is a smell that you get wrestling and training, and that smell gets you in the fight mode, so you are not clean or cold, you are right back there. It triggers you to thinking: this is what I did in training.

Here Frederick reveals the use of smell to evoke memories of combat so that he can compete in MMA events. In line with the findings of Waskul and colleagues (2009), ritual sensations and sense-making rituals are intertwined and situate the self within a particular place and time. Olfactory sensation in this case brings back memories of training that are efficacious for putting him into fight mode. This olfactory-memory recall brings Frederick back to the moment of intensity customary of training. As such, memories are not passive records but acts that shape a sense of bodily self and ground that sense of self into experienced and re-livable sensations (Waskul et al. 2009; Rapoport et al. 2002; Seremetakis 1994).

Taste, pain and combat

Often tied to the olfactory sense, taste has more recently been studied, in anthropology specifically, as a social sense in its own right (Howes 1991; Classen 1993). On this point, Borthwick (2000) has asserted the primacy of taste for founding forms of sociality. In this section, I explore what taste brings to and initiates in forms of sociality within MMA. While the MMA club is not a locus where food is consumed, it remains a space filled with the sensory taste of the rudiments and products of combat. After and during a long training session, water is transformed into a divine fluid. The mundane taste of water becomes extraordinary.

The consumption of water also forms the basis of intimate relationships that, in turn, reinforce team bonds. In the main, the most coveted relationship is between fighters and their trainers and teammates, especially at MMA fight contests. The fighter confides in her trainers and teammates and is cared for by them at the fights.
Brock explains how, in between rounds of a MMA match, the trainers care for the fighter.

Brock: Just, again simple instructions, the worst is when you come to the corner, your brain is crazy, you’re tired, your mouth is dry, your heart is going like this [rapidly taps his chest] and you tell him a million things. You’re not doing that; one guy pads him down, one guy is giving him water, one guy rubbing his legs and one guy is yelling at him, right.

Brock explains the approach of his trainers during the fight, careful to not give too many instructions and confuse the fighter, but to calm down the fighter through rubbing their legs and making sure that the fighter is sufficiently hydrated. Everyone has a role and is part of the team, even if it is just mundane forms of care. This form of care extends to the pre-fight camp, where trainers and teammates are vigilant in giving their teammates water. When I visited larger, elite-level gyms in Quebec, Ontario and Florida, especially when there was a high-profile fight for one of the stable mates, multiple trainers would actively care for the bodily state of the fighter, ensuring they were properly hydrated between sparring rounds and hitting the pads.

Beyond the necessary consumption of water to keep properly hydrated, the plastic mouthguard remains one of the dominant tastes of the fighter. The taste of the mouthguards range from sweet fluoride to neutral to bitter. Alongside mouthguards, the taste of blood marks the experience of the MMA club and combat. The following part of a field note reflects the significance of the taste of blood.

... All the guys are quickly putting on their equipment, a few guys are stretching over by the crash mats. Scott comes up the stairs and yells out ‘All right, let’s go! Everyone suit up!’ I put on my gloves and start to stretch out my legs again on the mats. Scott switches on the bell and yells out ‘We are starting after this round!’ By now everyone is fully equipped and either stretching or bobbing back and forth on the balls of their feet, trying to get warmed up. Scott again yells out ‘OK, make sure to put your mouthguards in. Everyone pair up with guys close to your same weight!’ I point over at Riley to pair up with him and he nods his head. I put my mouthguard in and the bell rings to start the round. We touch gloves and the sparring begins. He leads with a jab and I pat it away with a parry, he follows with a cross and by then I am circling away so his strike does not hit its mark. I counter immediately with a right kick to his ribs to which he hollows out his rib cage and I miss entirely. I try to regain my stance and he shoots in for a double leg take down. I slow his take down with a sprawl and end up with my back against the padded wall. I push his head down and try to create separation in my hips and legs from his arms that are trying to collapse me at the back of my legs. I prevent the takedown and circle away from the wall. He surprises me by immediately hitting me with a quick left hook–right cross combo. I must have had my hands low for a second. I cover up and grasp for the clinch. I am feeling cobwebs in my head, trying to shake the dizziness off. I grab a hold of Riley with my right hand by the back of the head and with an underhook under his right arm with my left arm; I use my legs to push him against the wall to get my
wits. As I regain composure, I taste iron-salt flavor of blood in my mouth and I don’t know if it is coming from my nose or my mouth. The area around my nose and mouth is stinging. I am now in a bit of a panic as I realize I am in a duel. Pull down on the back of his head; by now the dizziness is starting to disperse. He reacts by pulling up on his head; I use this opportunity to slip in the other underhook. I get both underhooks and turn his body toward my right side. At the same time, I roll my right leg around the back of his left leg and push my weight towards that side. I catch him off balance and I land on top of him, getting the takedown. We get back up with me extending my arm to help him up. The sparring resumes . . .

In many cases, fighters expressed that until they got hit in a match, they did not feel as though they were in a fight. The shock of being hit, the attendant pain and taste of blood signals to the combatant the gravity of the chaotic situation that they are in. The taste of blood, in this sense, both signals the event of battle and characterizes the sensory experience of fighting. The breakdown of bodies is reflected in the taste of blood. Its salty-iron flavor reflects that bodies fissure. Bleeding in combat is reflective of the fact that bodies affect and are affected by other bodies. Blood marks a sense of belonging to the broader community of fighters. To submit oneself to fighting, to bleed in the gym alongside fellow fighters, signifies one’s membership amongst the MMA community.

Sensory reflections

This sensory ethnography has left its mark on my body. On an academic level, it changed how I engaged with my craft. I put my body forth as an instrument of data collection, constantly reflecting on the sensory aspects of MMA. On a personal level, my body is layered with a multitude of technical capabilities that I did not have prior to conducting this study. Sensory ethnography, then, holds the promise of transforming the body of the researcher and how they sense the world.

While this article does not explore all aspects of MMA, it offers grounds to understand the mundane sensory elements in the MMA club and the extraordinary experience of fighting in a MMA contest. Historically, attention has been paid primarily to sight to the neglect of other elements in the sensorium. As such, the senses are analyzed individually in this article so as to not overly privilege one sense over another and to give each due analytical attention. We experience the senses in real time and, in fighting, sensory experiences become particularly acute in ways that are often learned in and through repetition. Contact with other bodies holds the promise of both sensory experiences in the first place but also a proliferation of meanings in the ongoing intermixing of bodies. Social bonds are formed and pleasures are derived in and through sensory contact between bodies.

In probing the sensory aspects of MMA, I join a line of ethnographers that have analyzed violent situations (e.g. Willis 1981; Katz 1988; Collins 2009). The empirical component of this article also fills a relative lacuna of general studies of violence, as
much of what one finds in the violence literature is theoretical postulations about violence. In a small way, this article further develops sensory ethnography and offers a particular approach to understanding the sensory aspects of data collection.

Future research could explore the experiences of pain and injury that are prevalent in MMA. This can improve the overall understanding of the impact of this sport on the bodily dispositions of the fighters and how this, in turn, influences their temporal, spatial and sensory experience of MMA. Future studies of MMA could also consider how the experiences of fighting impact on practitioners’ sense of self and how it impacts on their interactions with individuals outside of the sport. Research could explore how the constant exposure of MMA on the internet and TV impacts on fighters’ identities. Furthermore, subsequent research could probe how the building of bonds between fighters through participation in the sport impacts on their sense of a MMA community.

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Notes

1. With regard to Hirose and Kei-ho Pih’s (2010) work on MMA, there is a growing appreciation of all aspects of the sport. With the globalization of the UFC brand and the consequent increased popularity of the sport, North American fans have been exposed to styles and other cultures that respond to and value ground fighting styles. With the increase popularity of The Ultimate Fighter TV show, viewers are now more informed of what goes into becoming a MMA fighter. In addition, with the increased infusion of American style freestyle wrestlers into MMA, there is an increased appreciation for ground styles amongst fans and competitors alike. Dana White, the UFC president, has said on many occasions that fighters that cannot fight standing and on the ground do not belong in the UFC. In addition, as I have shown elsewhere (see Spencer 2011), fighters express the need to train in all styles and equal value is placed on each respective style.

2. For an elaboration on the development of mixed martial arts, see Van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006) and Downey (2007).

3. I was involved as a student of a Korean martial art for one year, high school free-style amateur wrestling for two years, eight months in Judo and eight months in Muay Thai in my young adult life. In addition, from the age of 16 to the present day I have intermittently engaged in powerlifting and bodybuilding. This background in various styles gave me a general feel for starting at the club, but after smoking cigarettes for two years my fitness level was so poor that making it through a workout was extremely difficult.

4. This ratio is not particularly revealing. Half the club members are committed members that are either at the club to take classes and to achieve belts in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu or Muay Thai or both. Out of this latter group are a further segment of members that are mixed martial art fighters. Half the club would be considered as occasional or ‘recreational members’ who do not fight or help prepare for the fights and attend only the structured classes. There is what one club owner called a ‘revolving door syndrome’, where women and men will come in, pay for a six month membership, attend the classes
for a month and then are never seen again. Various club owners, members and practitioners expressed that this is primarily because when certain neophytes join and have plans to become professional fighters, they have a particular concept of self (revealed in bragging how tough they are, where they trained before, etc.) that is immediately challenged by the rigors of the training. They, in turn, quit and never return.

5. In rolling, the competitors attempt to master submission techniques through using them on each other in real time. This type of competition has varying intensities as competitors may concentrate on keeping a low intensity (minimal use of strength and force) and concentrating on mastering new techniques, whereas at other times, usually close to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu tournaments, there is an intensification of rolling where fighters are trying to submit each other (using maximum strength and force).

6. A clinch is where, while facing your opponent, you wrap both hands behind your opponent’s head, pulling down and trying to control your opponent.

7. In terms of ensuring the anonymity of participants in the MMA club, pseudonyms have been used and, as much as possible, descriptive information has been changed to protect the participants. In terms of participant observation, the club participants recognized and referred to me as the sociologist and were cognizant that I was conducting a sociological study of mixed martial arts that involved taking notes, pictures and filming (at different times) of the activities in the club. Moreover, I received written consent from my training partners. That said, certain elements of the training regimes that are seen as particular to the broader fighting organization that the club is affiliated with have not been part of field note taking or filming at the request of the club owners. While visiting other MMA clubs I did not take in-depth field notes or videotape the training, as the club members were not always aware of my research. For the most part, the reflections and similarities in practices to other clubs (with my home club) are derived from interviews with research subjects at other clubs. This research received ethics approval from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board.

8. An expanded semi-structured interview was conducted with MMA instructors (who had, in most cases, professional MMA records), focusing on their teaching strategies, club management, and sentiments towards their club fighters.

9. UFC middleweight champion, Muay Thai specialist, and pound-for-pound king Anderson ‘Spider’ Silva is the pinnacle example of possessing the ability to strike his opponent and not get hit. His movement and rhythm allow him to trap his opponents and catch them off balance when they attempt to engage with him in terms of striking.

10. A gi is the pajama-like suit worn in judo, Japanese Jiu Jitsu and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Comparable gis are worn in Karate and Tae Kwon Do.

11. To ‘tap out’ is to tap on your opponent’s body or the mat, indicating that you are submitting to the chokehold or arm bar that s/he has you in. In addition, in MMA, a fighter can tap out when they cannot take any more strikes from their opponent.

12. For example, taller fighters with longer legs tend to be better at triangle chokes as the length of their legs minimizes the time and ease in applying the technique.

13. The half guard is a position where a practitioner has an opponent on top of him/her and wraps their legs around one of their opponent’s legs and uses their hands to control their opponent or defend themselves against their opponent’s strikes. The practitioner can return to full guard (where they have their legs wrapped around the opponent’s waist), sweep their opponent onto their back, or apply a submission.
14. The guard is both a defensive and offensive position (depending on the practitioner) that involves wrapping one’s legs around an opponent’s waist and controlling their posture so as to avoid an opponent’s strikes from the top position.

15. The salience of fighters listening to their coaches cannot be overstated. In season 5 of *The Ultimate Fighter*, Andy Wang failed to listen to the commands of BJ Penn and lost his match on the TV show. In a post-fight interview, BJ Penn is flabbergasted by Wang’s inability to listen to coaching instruction.

16. Some of my Brazilian participants noted an added benefit of having Portuguese-speaking coaches allowed them to listen to the instructions of their coaches without their opponents knowing what was being said.

17. Tabata is named after Japanese researcher Izumi Tabata, who is touted as developing this protocol.

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