Warriors of the South Side: Race and the Body in the Martial Arts of Black Chicago

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Abstract:

For four decades, the Asian martial arts have been a part of life on Chicago’s South Side. In the two South Side schools, or dojos, that are the focus of this ethnography, the rituals of the Asian martial arts have been given new meanings—meanings that resonate with people living in poor, black communities. Through the highly ritualized physical training that is unique to the martial arts, members of these dojos have forged an expressive cultural form that aims to counter the oppression experienced in everyday life. The training in these dojos is a means of recouping a sense of agency over a body that is burdened by racist depictions of being unruly and out of control. These sites suggest that physical, bodily activity can be an important aspect of agency on both an individual and collective level. Bodily practices can empower individuals as well as contribute to the construction of a collective identity that intends to oppose oppression. There is a transformative aspect of bodily practices that links the body to resistance, suggesting that the coordinated, collective, physical action of individuals can shape their relationship to each other and to the larger social world.

Introduction

A giant black fist clutching a lightning bolt dominates the storefront window of the Scorpion School of the Martial Arts. Located on the southwest side of Chicago’s loop, this now defunct black martial arts school held classes in karate and kendo for nearly twenty years. A few miles due south, in one of Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods, the dilapidated home of the Black Dragon Slayers is still standing. The drawings of young black men, replete with generous afros and karate uniforms, breaking boards and flying through the air, only hint at what must have gone on when the Black Dragon Slayers were in their prime. But the history of the martial arts on Chicago’s South Side is one that stretches into the present. Today, there are at least a dozen schools, or dojos, on the South Side offering classes several times a week. Students can be found training in storefronts, churches, mosques, schools, community centers, and even the YMCA.
So what accounts for the popularity of the martial arts in the South Side of Chicago, and many other black communities? Why have the Asian martial arts been so enthusiastically adopted and adapted by some blacks?

Part of the answer lies in what has made the martial arts popular all across America irrespective of race, namely, the appeal of pop culture heroes from Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan. But in the South Side dojos that are the focus of this paper, the rituals of the Asian martial arts have been given new meanings—meanings that resonate strongly with people living in poor, black communities. For the teachers, or senseis, who founded the two dojos in this study, martial arts instruction is not just about developing athletic prowess in their students. These senseis see their work as a way to rebuild selves destroyed by racism and life in the ghetto. Through the highly ritualized physical training that is unique to the martial arts, members of these dojos have forged an expressive cultural form that aims to counter the oppression experienced in everyday life.

What links the martial arts training, as it is practiced at these sites, and the forms of oppression it is designed to address is the body. Both dojos are spaces where bodily activity takes center stage, and the work that is being done to instill self-esteem and discipline is primarily work on the body. The body is also central to racist discourse about blacks. Black men are represented as unruly and black women as promiscuous; bodies out of control. Such "othering" is material as well as representational, with the physical segregation and economic marginalization of blacks living in the South Side of Chicago a stark testament to attempts at isolating and containing black bodies.

My ethnographic evidence indicates that the physical, bodily activity of martial arts training provides a powerful means of contesting such forms of oppression. The students and teachers at these dojos have made the martial arts their own, tailoring them to address the issues of life in poor, black communities. But as this paper will make clear, the two dojos have slightly different missions. The Mt. Olive School is focused on individual empowerment, attempting to give young people the skills they need to survive in their dangerous environments. While the other school, the Typhoon School, has a more inward focus, using the martial arts to build a community within the dojo. What the Typhoon School illustrates is that bodily practices, when performed collectively, open the door to the creation of a collective identity, one that intends to oppose domination.

1 All the of the names have been changed to protect the identity of the subjects of this ethnography.
from above. As this ethnography will demonstrate, there is a transformative aspect of bodily practices that links the body to resistance, suggesting that the coordinated, collective, physical action of individuals can shape their relationship to each other and to the larger social world. Even at society’s margins, where the effects of domination would seem most determined, the body emerges as a source of both individual and collective agency.

The fieldwork for this ethnography was conducted over a twelve month period. Twice a week I attended classes at two dojos on Chicago’s South Side, observing at one school and participating on the mats at the other. Such participant observation was necessary to gain insight into the everyday life of the dojo and negotiate my status as an outsider. This approach was also crucial for analyzing bodily practices – practices that are significantly non-verbal and best studied as part of the life of the dojo. Through this fieldwork I was able to establish some lasting relationships and create what Burawoy refers to as a “dialogue” that allows us to “change our biases through interaction with others” (Burawoy 1991: 4).

The Community of the Dojo

Although it was the middle of a Chicago winter, I was sweating profusely, wiping my eyes with my brand new karate uniform. It was the beginning of my weekly jaunts to a lonely stretch of East 75th Street on Chicago’s South Side for karate lessons at the Typhoon School of the Martial Arts. Martial arts training was something new to me, and I was self conscious of not only my awkward gestures, but of my white skin in this all black martial arts school.

The Typhoon School has been in existence for over twenty years, always located in poor, black, South Side neighborhoods. Its current location is a commercial block in South Shore, a mixed-income neighborhood that has been nearly 100 percent black since the 1970s. Although there are more prosperous middle class families in the area, most of the streets are marked by the vacant lots, shuttered storefronts and gang graffiti that scar black, South Side neighborhoods. As the exterior of this school attests, it has a rich and colorful history. In its most recent incarnation, it is housed in a dilapidated old storefront, with hand painted drawings of tigers, yin-yang’s, and mysterious Japanese characters covering the exterior. To ensure that even the least observant passerby notices the establishment, KARATE SCHOOL is scrawled across the top of the building in bold, black letters.

The interior of the school is equally unique and enigmatic. Pushing through the cracked and broken wooden front door, you find yourself in a
dark and cluttered office space. The walls are covered with photos of students, and the shelves are filled with a dizzying assortment of knickknacks, including a golden Buddha, a porcelain tiger, and most intriguing, what appears to be a white, bloated, human hand floating in a large mason jar.

Deeper into the space, along a pitch black, narrow hallway, there is an odd little tea room. Sliding back the half broken wood and paper door reveals a small, square space with a raised wooden floor and plain wooden walls. The floor is covered with tatami mats, and there are a couple of bean bag chairs filling up the corners. A few large metal incense urns hang from rusted chains, and some fake flowers sit covered in dust in the ice tea bottle that serves as their makeshift vase.

Beyond the tea room is the main training area, where I found myself sweating and panting on many Tuesday nights. The cluttered room is lit with very dim, sickly green, fluorescent lights, and heated by two large propane heaters. These heaters fill the dojo with a strong scent, and are the only source of heat for the entire building. The floor of this large room is covered with torn and faded mats, and as students and teachers fill the space it quickly becomes warm and stuffy. Littered along the edges of the mats are a wide assortment of odd training materials, including piles of broken cinder blocks, huge logs, tattered gloves and pads, long bamboo poles, and even an arsenal of fake AK-47 automatic rifles.

That winter night when I started my training was fairly typical for the Typhoon School. With my pale hands and feet sticking out of my ill fitting new uniform, I certainly felt uncomfortable stepping on to the cold and damp mat. But much to my surprise, no one seemed too taken aback by the presence of a white student in the dojo. Marc, an older teacher around forty, was in the front of the class, granting each student permission to enter the class, making sure they bowed and then somersaulted on to the mat. I followed the strict protocol carefully, and took my place in line with the other beginner students.

Like most nights, the dojo slowly filled up with students of varying ages and abilities. Marc was in charge of the younger, and less advanced students, while another teacher worked with a group of older male students in their twenties and thirties. Both groups focused on refining techniques for punching and kicking, throwing our fists and legs in the air, striking imaginary opponents. As I quickly learned, it was assumed that everyone would try to move in synch, punctuating our kicks and punches by yelling “ki-ah” in unison. Everyone was following the teachers’ leads carefully, focusing very seriously on executing the moves
properly. At times, there was little verbal instruction, and the only noises that could be heard over the heaters were feet gliding over the mat, the snap of a gi, and the occasional “ki-ah.”

Although the training was strenuous, I was finding the repetitive movement meditative, and almost hypnotic. But this rather pleasant state was interrupted as a young boy ran into the dojo to make an announcement. “Sensei Tanaka wants everyone up front right away. Right now,” he yelled across the dojo. Everyone immediately stopped what they were doing and quickly made their way to the front. In Japanese, “sensei” is teacher and “tanaka” is mother, and at this point even I was aware that it was James, the founder and head instructor of the Typhoon School, that wanted everyone’s attention.

As all twenty of us rushed up front, we found James in his usual spot behind his extremely cluttered desk. Now in his late fifties, James is a very large man, and the white plastic desk curved around his rotund body like a gigantic life preserver. Everyone stood perfectly still and waited for James to speak. “I have called all of you up here to tell you that we are moving into a more intense phase of training now,” he said to his completely quiet, captive audience. James continued, “We will begin to train with weapons, and start the final era of this school. We are moving into the last era now, and it will be the most intense era yet. I may not be here much longer, so we have to move fast and begin our final, most intense phase.” After this brief address he reached into a cardboard box, and pulled out a six inch plastic knife. Each student was handed, or more accurately, bequeathed, a knife. I seemed to be the only person who found this theatrical presentation odd, with all the other students seriously accepting the “weapon.” Once we were all armed, we were told to return to the mats and resume our training. As we reassembled into our groups, both teachers picked up where they left off, but integrated the knives into the exercises.

Forty blocks north of the Typhoon School is another dojo that holds classes at exactly the same time. This school is located at the northern end of the notorious four mile long corridor of public housing that stretches up through Chicago’s South Side. Unlike the mixture of stores and residential bungalows found in South Shore, this neighborhood is dominated by looming high rise housing projects. Only the occasional convenience store breaks up the oppressive monotony of block after block of six to twenty story utilitarian brick buildings. Although there are more middle income families to the east of this school, most of the residents of these projects are the working poor. And like the South Shore neighborhood, nearly everyone is black.
Twice a week, dozens of African-American children from the surrounding projects descend on Mt. Olive Church for two hours of martial arts training. In stark contrast to the Typhoon School, classes are held in a bright, clean, and sparsely decorated room in the church’s community center. Yet there is the same emphasis on protocol, with the senseis treating the space like a dojo. Students are required to ask permission to enter the space, and they must bow before finding a spot on the imaginary mat.

This school was founded by Nate, an energetic, middle aged man who has been practicing the martial arts for most of his life. Like James at the Typhoon School, Nate is recognized as the head of the dojo, and he determines how the martial arts are taught at the school. Unlike James, however, Nate places a good deal of emphasis on training for the many tournaments that are offered throughout the year.

At about the time I began my visits to the Mt. Olive School, Nate was working to prepare some students for tournament competition. When I stopped by the dojo one evening, I found Jimmy, Nate’s assistant teacher, going through the usual training exercises. The majority of the students are under twelve, and a good deal of Jimmy’s attention is devoted to a very strict form of crowd control. If the students talk, laugh, or deviate from the training, they face Jimmy’s wrath. Stalking around the dojo with a leather paddle in his hand, he watches the class closely, yelling furiously at any student who gets out of line. For the more difficult cases, Jimmy resorts to mild corporal punishment, smacking kids on the behind with the paddle.

Jimmy’s routine usually lasts forty five minutes, and then the students move on to one on one sparring. But on this particular night, Nate wanted to try something a bit different. Nate had the entire class sit in a large circle, and he called one young boy, around 8 years old, into the ring. This boy was going to compete in the tournament, and Nate wanted him to practice his techniques in front of the entire class. Unfazed, the boy confidently stepped into the circle, and announced his name, martial art style, and the technique he was going to perform. Striding back into the center of the ring, he paused to gather himself, and then went through a long, choreographed series of punches and kicks. The class of sixty children was completely still, and the boy was extremely serious and focused. Every punch and kick was accompanied by a loud grunt, as he moved methodically and confidently from one move to the next. At the end of his routine, he bowed to Nate, stepped out of the ring, and was greeted with a loud round of applause from his fellow students. After this
brief performance, the class moved on to its regular format, and the sparring began.

These martial arts schools are just two of many all black dojos found in the African-American communities of Chicago’s South Side. Although James’ and Nate’s classes are unique in many ways, they are indicative of the general popularity of the martial arts in black communities throughout Chicago, and the United States as a whole. With the success of hip-hop groups such as the Wu-Tang Clan, who make vivid use of martial arts imagery and terminology, the connection between black culture and the martial arts has reached the mass media. But the emergence of martial arts in the black communities of Chicago stretches back decades before the Sugarhill Gang jump-started rap with “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979.

Both James and Nate received their martial arts training from the first generation of black martial artists in the United States. Many of these early senseis were first exposed to the martial arts during post-World War II military service in Japan. When they returned to the States they brought with them their knowledge of these Asian art forms and began exposing a younger generation to the martial arts. In the 1950s, Chicago legends such as Jimmy Jones and Preston Baker were some of the first blacks to seriously pursue martial arts training. Known as the “Father of Karate in the Midwest,” Jones was instrumental in exposing poor blacks to the martial arts, and it was through Preston Baker’s programs that James and Nate received their training. So by the 80s and 90s, the once foreign martial arts practices had become part of the cultural fabric of Chicago’s South Side, and both the Mt. Olive School and the Typhoon School are important parts of this rich history.

Both Nate and James have cultivated a devoted cadre of students. On a given night as many as sixty students will make the trek from their housing projects across contested gang territory to participate in classes at Mt. Olive. Many of these students have trained with Nate for over a year, and a few of the older teenage students have worked with him for many years. Several adults also participate on a regular basis, training side by side with their children. But it is not just attendance figures that indicate how compelling this space is for the participants. A surprisingly large number of Nate’s students, both young and old, appear to take the training quite seriously. These students follow Nate’s instructions very closely, working diligently to refine their skills, and showing a good deal of frustration when they perform poorly.

Although only approximately twenty people would currently call the Typhoon School their dojo, the students and teachers identify very closely with the space. Some come from the immediate community to
train, while others come from neighboring poor, black communities on
the South Side. For many of the members the dojo is very much a home
and fellow participants their extended family. When on the mats, there is a
religious adherence to protocol, and any deviation from the highly
ritualized practices is not tolerated. Students show all the instructors a
great deal of respect, both on and off the mats, and everyone defers to
James’ authority as the elder statesman of the dojo. Several members of
the dojo volunteer many hours a week to facilitate classes, and in times of
financial need some donate what little extra money they have saved.
During a recent financial crisis when the school nearly lost their space, a
former student who had just returned from years of service overseas in
the military offered his entire relocation allowance to cover the thousands
of dollars in unpaid property taxes.

So both James and Nate have built on their personal interest in the
martial arts to create successful dojos on Chicago’s South Side. But
James and Nate are connected in a more subtle way as well because both
see their work as a way to resist racial oppression and discrimination.
According to both senseis, martial arts is not simply athletic training, or a
form of recreation, but also a means of coping with, and confronting, the
forces that make life in poor, black communities so precarious. When
asked why he volunteers eight hours a week to teach children martial arts,
Nate replied, “I see the need for the martial arts in the black community
as a vehicle for organizing the youth in the black community. Also a
means for giving self esteem and discipline for those children that have
low self esteem and come from broken families, or drug afflicted
families.” A similar question posed to James gets a similar response,
“Learning the martial arts provides a discipline. Living in the housing
projects if you were going to be anything other than what the housing
project turned people into it took a strong will and a lot of discipline.”

Both James and Nate have adopted and adapted the discipline of
the Asian martial arts to address the needs of blacks living in poor, South
Side communities. While their specific goals are different, and the
atmospheres within their dojos distinct, both James and Nate are
attempting to mold martial arts training into their own particular form of
community activism. Although they are not engaged in an active political
struggle to redefine the social forces impinging on their communities, they
are focused on altering the lives of individuals within the community of
the dojo. As their own statements attest, both James and Nate see their
work as a way to address, and in some ways resist, the oppressive living
conditions endured by blacks on the South Side. They are working to
rebuild the selves destroyed by racism and the oppressive conditions
found in the underclass communities of Chicago’s South Side.
There are many possible approaches to this work of rebuilding selves, but these senseis believe the physical training of the martial arts offers something unique and powerful. The two schools do have their differences. Most significantly, Mt. Olive has a much larger, and much younger, student body. Yet despite these differences, both are spaces where bodily activity takes center stage, and the work that is being done to instill self-esteem and discipline is primarily work on the body. Although teachers at both dojos incorporate some form of verbal instruction, most of the teaching occurs through non-verbal bodily gestures. Training manuals and written materials are ignored, with all of the instruction occurring on the mats. Teachers demonstrate techniques and students mimic their movements again and again. Week after week, students practice the same techniques, making once awkward gestures seem natural. So it would appear that the changes that have occurred in individuals at these dojos are attributable to prolonged, physical training on the mats. The body is central to how the senseis accomplish their task of rebuilding selves, and it is the bodily rituals of the martial arts that make these spaces so compelling for both students and teachers.

Race and the Body

At this point it should be clear that it is the work on the body that is most important to the members of these dojos. But a key question is why the body carries such meaning in the African-American community. Following Abu-Lughod (1990), we can use resistance as a diagnostic of domination to see how the activities in these dojos illuminate both the way power operates and how people respond to power. Resistance here is understood as a response to power dynamics, and it can be individual or collective, conscious or not. Labeling the activity in the dojos political resistance, however, is somewhat problematic. What is occurring at the dojos does not directly confront macro-structural forces that are bearing down on black communities. Members are not engaged in an active political struggle to redefine the social forces that define the communities in which they live.

But to dismiss the work of Nate and James as apolitical would be as problematic as interpreting it as a conscious, organized form of direct political resistance. Although not often stated in explicitly political terms, there are elements of resistance in their dojos. And as their own statements attest, both James and Nate see their work as a way to address, and in some ways resist, the oppressive living conditions endured by blacks on the South Side. Clearly, then, the activities at these dojos are connected to issues of resistance, and provide a way of exploring the structures of power and domination.
If racism is understood as an ideological code in which biological attributes are invested with social value and meaning (Miles 1989) then the body is central to the way racism functions. Facial features, skin color, and the texture of one’s hair have become imbued with meaning through racist discourse and used to justify racist sentiments. Thus the body is a focus of resistance in some black communities because racist discourse converges on the black body. The black, male body is represented as violent, unpredictable, hyper-sexual and in need of control; the black, female body as dangerous, sexual and unruly. However, racism is not simply a discursive practice; there are very material aspects to power as well. In the United States, institutionalized racist policies have concentrated many poor blacks in underclass ghettos. This physical isolation is coupled with the very real threat of police violence designed to contain and control black bodies. These material and representational effects of power are mutually reinforcing and together give the body its heightened significance in the dojos of Chicago’s South Side.

Although the connection between racism and the body may appear self-evident, there is little theorizing explicitly linking the body and race in the contemporary United States. One area where connections have been made between race and the body is the writing on colonialism.

Winthrop Jordan stresses how certain English predispositions served to problematize their first encounters with Black Africans. Jordan (1974) argues that certain biological characteristics had been given cultural values that led the English to racialize their contact with Africans. Although Jordan often discusses values as immutable and trans-historical, his analysis highlights how representations of the black body as impure and soiled played an important role in the origins of racism.

This theme of the black body as foreign and unhealthy is also central to the Comaroff’s (1992) work on colonial South Africa. They connect the development of British colonialism in Africa to the

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2 Miles’ insistence on racism as an ideological phenomenon is not without its problems. By banishing racism to the realm of ideology, Miles reduces the causal significance of race, making it secondary to more basic class and economic relationships. Although he does stress the need to contextualize the impact of racism within class relations, Miles remains reluctant to accord much power to race. I am more sympathetic to Paul Gilroy’s (1987) notion of racial identity, that sees race as part of an on-going process of social formation. Like Omi and Winant (1986), Gilroy argues for an understanding of race as a process that cannot be reduced to economic relations. However, when attempting to find connections to race and the body, Miles’ formulation is helpful.
development of Western medicine, drawing out the biological component of the civilizing mission. What is important here is their recognition that these "probes into the ailing heart of Africa" were premised on representations of the black body as "the very embodiment of dirt and disorder, his moral affliction all of a piece with his physical degeneracy" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 216). David Arnold (1993) draws similar connections in his work on nineteenth-century India, showing how Western science was used to justify racist otherings that depicted natives as diseased and morally degraded.

This work on colonial othering is important to contemporary theorizing on racism because it draws out the connection between race and the body. As Radhika Mohanram (1999) argues, different meanings of the black body at different times are metonymically linked. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century colonial categories of race were used to justify the massive social upheaval produced by the colonialists, while contemporary Western nations are the product of perceiving some citizens as "being out of the place to which they "naturally" belong" (Mohanram 1999: xiii). In both cases biological traits are used to rationalize a racist world view that places certain bodies in certain spaces, giving some bodies power while making other bodies subject to domination.

Roediger’s work on the white working class in nineteenth-century America indicates that the dynamics of racial othering in the colonies operated similarly in the metropole. Whiteness is shown to be a fragile consensus held together in part by "the idea that blackness could be made permanently to embody the pre-industrial past that they scorned and missed" (Roediger 1991: 97). Roediger’s work highlights the dialectical nature of such otherings, with a disembodied whiteness created through an embodied blackness.

The anger elicited by such racist othering is illustrated in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). His writing on racist objectification centers on how racism problematizes the relationship between black bodies and the social world. For Fanon, racism works by destabilizing the connections between blacks and their bodies, replacing a bodily schema with a "racial epidermal schema," thereby turning subjects of history into objects of history (Fanon 1990: 110). For Fanon racist representations of the black body sever his connection to his own corporeal body. So in an odd way, the close connection between race and the body precludes any connection between the two for Fanon. The physical body exists for Fanon, but his own connection to it is shattered by racist representations of the black body.

What connects all these writers is an emphasis on linking race, and racism, to the body. Whether it is in the colony or metropole, the
eighteenth-century or the twentieth-century, racism is a process by which certain biological traits are endowed with meaning in order to create the other. It is through this process that blacks become embodied and whites disembodied. This is not to say that racial categories do not have any positive valuation, but it indicates how central the body is in racist discourse.

Representations of blacks are integral to understanding the connection between racial oppression, resistance and the body. But it is important to recognize that these discursive factors are symbiotically linked to the very real, material conditions that impinge on poor, black bodies on Chicago’s South Side. As Massey and Denton argue in *American Apartheid* (1993), blacks in Chicago are physically segregated to a such a degree they are most accurately labeled hypersegregated. Through massive public housing projects, the city has been complicit in creating immense, homogenous, poor, black communities, and fueling racist notions that unruly black bodies need to be contained and controlled. The Mt. Olive School is located across from some of the city’s most depressed projects. According to the *Local Community Handbook* (1990) some census tracts have a 99% black population and a median family income of only $4,999. The area immediately surrounding the Typhoon School had a higher median family income in 1990 ($21,845) but was 100% black. Although these statistics seem to indicate some socioeconomic differences in these neighborhoods, I do not think these differences are reflected in the memberships of the two dojos. From my experiences in the field, I believe that the majority of members of both dojos come from some of the lowest socioeconomic brackets in Chicago.

Police brutality is another facet of the very real, bodily threats poor blacks experience everyday. In the summer of 1999, Chicago made national headlines with the police murder of two unarmed blacks in two consecutive days. Similar incidents throughout the country have increased awareness of the epidemic of police violence in America, prompting Amnesty International to begin a human rights campaign against police brutality in the United States. This ever-present threat of deadly force is perhaps the most graphic illustration of the convergence of racism and the black body.

The physical segregation of the black ghetto is also connected to economic isolation. Like most Midwestern cities, Chicago experienced massive de-industrialization in the 1970s and 80s. National economic shifts from a Fordist economy based on full employment, to a post-Fordist economy with institutionalized unemployment, radically changed the economic conditions in Chicago’s South Side communities. Erosion
of the labor market was felt severely in poor black neighborhoods, and struck black males especially hard. Chronic unemployment became more of a threat for black men, and these threats were naturalized by racist discourses undermining the ability of black men to be competent employees and responsible fathers. Such an alleged crisis of black masculinity utilizes racist tropes about the black male body to rationalize the economic despair found in poor, black communities.

The combination of physical segregation and economic marginalization has lead some theorists and activists to claim that blacks in the South Side of Chicago have experienced a form of internal colonialism. Similar analyses emerged in Chicano, Native American and Puerto Rican communities in the 70s (Blauner 1972). Although such perspectives have been the subject of criticism (Burawoy 1974), their strength lies in their recognition of how socio-economic forces combine with forms of cultural domination to produce and reproduce marginalized and alienated communities. The material conditions in these communities are linked to forms of representation that exoticize and marginalize the other. Internal colonialism, then, remains an important way of conceptualizing connections between race and the body because it shows how both discursive and material forces impinge on the black body.

The black nationalist movement of the 60s and 70s drew heavily on theories of internal colonialism, and some activists in Chicago’s black community remain committed to this perspective. I would argue that the continuing pertinence of the internal colonialism thesis springs from its ability to capture the way racism and the body are intertwined, a point of some relevance in poor, black communities. It is also valuable on a more theoretical level because of the way it neatly connects both the representational and material effects of racism to the body.

The body, then, is what links the forms of oppression impinging on black communities to the type of martial arts training practiced at the Typhoon School and the Mt. Olive school. For teachers and students at both dojos, the martial arts is a response to the forms of domination that converge on the black body. Embracing the rigorous physical training and intense discipline of the martial arts challenges representations of the unruly black body and provides some mechanism to cope with the material conditions of the ghetto.

It is important to recognize, however, that racist discourse is gendered and creates different representations of black male and female bodies. bell hooks acknowledges that body imagery animates the discourse around black oppression, but she draws attention to the gendering of these racial constructs as well, arguing:
Historically the language used to describe the way black men are victimized within racist society has been sexualized. When words like castration, emasculation, impotency are the commonly used terms to describe the nature of black male suffering, a discursive practice is established that links black male liberation with gaining the right to participate fully within patriarchy. (hooks 1990: 76)

Because sexism mediates racial domination, some black men, like white men, have come to equate manhood, and the domination of women, with freedom (hooks 1990: 59). Contemporary constructions of the black body, then, should be understood as arising out of a discourse that is simultaneously racist and sexist. This perspective is valuable when analyzing these male dominated dojos and attempting to understand how responses to oppression can resist racism while, at times, reaffirming sexism.

Although men do most of the supervising at the Typhoon School and the Mt. Olive School, women do participate at these dojos, and some of the most serious students at both schools are young women. I found this rather surprising, and it seems to challenge my conception of the dojos as male oriented spaces. For example, one of the highest ranking students at the Mt. Olive School is a woman who has been training for several years. When asked why she likes the martial arts, she says, “I like the feeling of self-control,” and “it is fun to scare the boys.” Even though she is leaving for college, she intends to continue her training, and she, “hopes to be able to open my own dojo some day.”

At the Typhoon School the most intense and dedicated student is a very quiet young woman around seventeen. Off the mat she is soft-spoken and easily slips into the background of this occasionally chaotic space. Yet when she is training she is totally focused, often reprimanding me for not closely following instructions. She also appears completely comfortable with all types of training, including the often brutal and violent sparring that occurs at the Typhoon School. So some women have found a place for themselves in these male dominated spaces where masculine bodily practices are the norm. Although these dojos are gendered spaces that would seem to discourage female participation, women are centrally involved as students and teachers. Even at the Typhoon school, women are not at all marginal, playing an active role despite the gendering.
Martial Arts as Personal Empowerment and the Dojo as Community

Having addressed why the body is central to martial arts training in the black community, it is important to specify what meanings these bodily practices take on in each dojo. Although both James and Nate see their work as a form of community activism, the martial arts acquire very different meanings at each school. Nate has focused the training at the Mt. Olive School on young people, using the martial arts to build self-confidence in students on an individual basis. Nate sees the dojo as a place where each member can learn to maximize his or her own potential. By contrast, the Typhoon School is focused on building a sense of collective identity within the dojo. Unlike Nate, James does not encourage his students to compete in tournaments, but instead focuses on creating unique rituals within the dojo – rituals that bind the members of the Typhoon School together and produce a collective, communal identity.

For Nate, the martial arts empowers young people, giving them the self-esteem to overcome the obstacles they are confronted with on a daily basis. “The martial arts in my concept in relation to the political arena,” he told me, “I see it as a vehicle to educate, to organize the youth of today as counter to the ill fates of what is happening in the black community, such as the drugs and gangs and things of that nature.” This emphasis on individual empowerment is echoed by both the students and parents alike.

Kelly is a parent who is particularly interested in Nate’s classes, bringing not only her two children, but several other children from the projects to the dojo twice a week. During class she sits attentively on the sidelines, making sure her children are following the teacher’s instructions to the letter. When asked why she is so interested in the program, she said, “I thought that it was a great idea for my son especially, with all the drugs and gang violence. Something to teach him discipline and self-determination, and teach him to go after something he really wants...And my daughter, I brought her to karate because it’s like she’s not more open, and things she wants to do but she won’t go after them, and I think the karate class will help her achieve that.” According to Kelly, the classes have had a positive impact on her kids, making her son more tolerant of losing and her daughter more assertive.

The students I interviewed at the Mt. Olive School echoed Nate’s emphasis on individual achievement. Although most of Nate’s students are under fifteen, there are a few older students who train consistently at the dojo. Leonard is a young man in his early twenties, with a good job as a surgical assistant. Given his success it was somewhat surprising to hear him discuss how the training has affected his self-esteem: “I feel a lot
more confident in myself, going from white belt to yellow belt. Being able to break bricks, and boards, remembering the different katas and forms, and also even placing in the tournaments. So it makes a really big difference in my confidence.”

The emphasis on individual achievement is also evident in the activities at the dojo on any given night. Students are often singled out to demonstrate their prowess in a particular area, such as board breaking. These are usually solo performances in front of the entire group with Nate evaluating the student along the way. If the student performs well, he or she receives praise from everyone at the dojo. In addition, every class at Mt. Olive ends with a thirty minute sparring session where two students fight in front of the entire group. These small matches last for five minutes and each one ends with a clear winner. Nate makes a concerted effort to give every student a chance to fight each night, which provides every student a concrete assessment of their individual progress as a martial artist.

For Nate, his work as a sensei is a natural extension of his many years of community activism. In the late 60s, Nate was very active in the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Not only did he work closely with Fred Hampton, the chapter’s president, he was also Huey P. Newton’s personal bodyguard. Today he is only infrequently involved with any direct political actions, but Nate’s connection to the Party’s ideology is still strong. On occasion, Nate has used the martial arts to educate his students about the Party’s involvement with radical politics. In 1996, he hosted a tournament in honor of Fred Hampton, even though both the FBI and the Chicago Police made a concerted effort to cancel the event. But the weekly classes at Mt. Olive seem devoid of any conscious attempts to build community, or collective action, through martial arts training. Although Nate sees the training as addressing problems specific to black communities, in practice the emphasis on self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-control is little different than any other dojo. Karate schools in all white neighborhoods on Chicago’s North Side claim to offer the same benefits to their mostly white, professional clientele. Martial arts training is marketed to white women in particular as a way to build self-esteem and confidence as well as a form of bodily protection.

In stark contrast to Nate, James sees building black community as the central mission of his dojo. For James, the martial arts have been a way for blacks to create solidarity, and his school is continuing this tradition:
For those who didn’t want to go into the gang mentality and went into the martial arts they found that it provided military strength. It gave us a relationship of being in the tribe, of being warriors. But even more it gave us family. As a school itself we live as a family. It’s a family of ancient history living in the modern times with our own rules and regulations of governing things.

In James’ mind, the Typhoon School has carved out a small, autonomous niche in an otherwise oppressive society. With the martial arts as a form of cultural cover, or camouflage, the dojo has become a refuge beyond the reach of a threatening, racist world:

So called free liberal society is destructive of anything other than itself. So if we find a discipline in someone else’s martial arts that covers up our desire to be a tribe, and allows us to exist in the same way as we are as a tribe, but comes from something they have accepted, then we exist happily. And we go on to try and achieve the highest levels [in the martial arts] because it won’t matter what they think because we will have found the energies to repress any type of genocide or aggression put against us by the government of any group of people who object to our being.

So for James, the martial arts are not only resources for confronting and challenging racial oppression, but a way to build a separate community based on a mythical tribal past.

Although James is the only member of the dojo who explicitly connects the training to a quest to regain a lost tribal order, other teachers have emphasized the strong sense of family they feel at the dojo. When asked what makes the Typhoon School unique, Dean, a teacher in his early twenties, replies, “Basically everyone is more of a family. Everyone finds someone to cling on to more as a good friend, as opposed to just a training partner.” Fred, another teacher in his twenties, expressed similar feelings about the school:

The uniqueness of our teachings you can see it amongst our students, you can see it within our school. Not only do we run a school we also have a family atmosphere. We continue to socialize with each other. Of course people are going to have little problems. But you can feel the spirit of the school.

Fred recently returned to the United States after serving overseas in the marines for several years. Immediately upon his arrival in the United States, he began regular training at the Typhoon School, and from an outsider’s perspective it appears that he never left the dojo.

A fourth perspective on the community of the Typhoon School comes from James’ brother Larry, who is also a teacher. Unlike his brother, Larry is a very shy, soft-spoken man, who was rather reluctant to
talk about the school. He says he prefers to let his body speak on the mat, which is understandable, because he is an extremely graceful and agile martial artist. Of all the teachers at the school, he is the most interesting to watch. But from interviews and casual conversations, it is clear that Larry has much to say about the mission of the school:

This school here, in our martial arts adventures, we search out and bring our culture into our environment of the martial arts. You know our pain, our suffering as a people is all in here. That’s why we try to, like the Army says, be the best you can be. We try to be the best martial artists that we can be. Not what society says for us to be but what we feel is the best for us to be. Because society has never depicted us in the right ways. It was always in the negative way, what they want us to be.

Although Larry does not describe the dojo as an ancient tribal order, he clearly shares James’ vision of the school as a space separate, and independent, from society. The dojo is the refuge from the oppressive world where Larry can work through what he sees as society’s racist constructions of black men.

As these stories and statements attest, the Typhoon School has done something unusual, and surprising, with the martial arts. The training is more than simply a resource for building self-esteem and self-confidence, but also a means of creating and sustaining the social ties that bind members to the community of the dojo. Unlike Nate’s emphasis on individual development, the work of the Typhoon School is a collective project, concerned not only with individual transformation but creating community.

The differences between these dojos lead to the question of \textit{how} bodily practices foster collective action. Bodily practices should not be thought of in any essentialist sense, in which the practices themselves have some natural essence that produces certain social relationships. Bodily practices only take on meaning in a social context, and as that social context changes, the meaning of bodily practices shifts as well. In addition, these material, physical practices are not only shaped by their social context, but also play a role in constructing that social context. Social relations give meaning to how people understand their bodies, and the collective, physical action of individuals in turn shapes those social relations.

Returning to the activities inside the dojos, the different meanings that emerge from similar bodily practices can be attributed to the social context in which these practices are performed. Although both dojos draw on a similar set of martial arts practices, the subtle, and not so
subtle, differences in the way these practices are conducted infuse them with very different meanings. These practices have been shaped over time, and now have a life of their own, actively shaping social interactions at the schools. And it is through these practices themselves that Mt. Olive becomes a space centered on individual empowerment, focused on rebuilding relationships between *individuals* and the world beyond the dojo, while the Typhoon School becomes a *collective* project of building community within the dojo.

Because of the intense hierarchy of any dojo, Nate and James play a major role in shaping the social context of the schools. Initially, then, it would seem that their personalities alone would determine what meanings emerge from the bodily practices. If James says the training is supposed to build community, then that is the meaning it takes on at his school. But on closer analysis, it becomes clear that their personalities alone are not determining the meaning the training has for teachers and students. It is in the practices themselves, and more importantly, how they are practiced, that make the meanings created at the dojos so different.

To appreciate how the practices differ at the two sites, it is useful to closely compare the training at the schools. Both dojos place a good deal of emphasis on the proper protocol for entering the training area. At the Mt. Olive School the students are expected to bow once to the teacher and once to the dojo before entering. If they forget to do this they are denied entry until they figure out what they did wrong. The Typhoon School takes this protocol a few steps further. Students stand at the edge of the training mat and wait for a teacher’s permission to enter the mat. They then bow, do a somersault on to the mat, and then enter the class by walking behind any other students already on the mat. No matter who is in charge of the class, these rules are all followed closely.

Warm-up exercises are a large part of the training at Mt. Olive. The first half of every class is devoted to very mundane warm-up exercises. There is a lot of toe touching, squatting and bending, along with a few martial arts stances. The children follow along fairly well, but often drift off after a short while. There is also a lot of moaning on the part of the children. When an exercise gets too demanding the whole class will start to whine and complain.

At the Typhoon School, warm-up exercises are usually fairly brief. Class often begins with some stretches, but even these mundane exercises seem to be taken seriously by everyone. Some of the stretches can be rather strenuous, but the students try not to show any pain, and no one whines or moans. Occasionally, the warm-up routine involves more cardiovascular exercise, with the students running and jumping in place. Everyone counts out loud together, and yells “ki-ah” at the end of every
jump to stay in synch. There appears to be an unspoken, or rarely spoken, rule that everyone should work together, in unison, through the exercises.

At Mt. Olive the warm-up exercises slowly transition into more martial arts training. The students practice punching and kicking, but there is surprisingly little technique training. Rarely will Jimmy (Nate's assistant) make the students go through a series of moves, such as a combination of punches, blocks and kicks. Usually he stresses a single move, and then goes back to more stretching. The older students, however, are usually working with Nate in a separate group practicing punches, blocks, and kicks. These students are all very focused on their activities, and they occasionally get supervision from Nate. They seem pretty detached from what is going on in the rest of the dojo, concentrating instead on their own small group.

The last forty five minutes of every class is reserved for sparring. The entire class forms a circle, and students enter the ring two at a time to spar. Nate judges the matches just like they are judged in a tournament. Each match lasts about five minutes, so nearly everyone gets a chance to spar. The night usually draws to a close after Nate and the other high ranking students have had a chance to spar.

By contrast, much of the training at the Typhoon School is devoted to refining specific techniques. Most teachers start by focusing on one or two specific moves, such as a front kick or a side kick. These moves are practiced again and again before the class proceeds to something else. So much of the training involves repeated exposure to the same movement, with everyone doing the same thing at the same time. The training often involves little or no verbal instruction, and the group just moves in a kind of perpetual motion, accenting certain moves with a “ki-ah.”

But the training can vary considerably from one teacher to the next, and from one night to the next. One teacher, for example, places a lot of emphasis on strength training, while another is more interested in teaching basic martial arts stances. From participating in and observing the training, one gets the sense that a lot of the training is completely improvised. The teachers are drawing on a wide range of techniques, some traditional and others most likely their own creation, and stringing these techniques together in their own enigmatic ways. The students never question the authority of the teacher, however, and the techniques are still performed in unison by the group.
One of the more interesting aspects of these classes is that for the first half all the students, regardless of skill level, train together. Many of the exercises seem like they would be boring to a black belt, but even the most advanced students are very serious about participating. They seem to find this more basic training as fulfilling as the more advanced training they undergo later in the evening.

Although both dojos emphasize protocol, and rely on repetitive bodily practices in their instruction, there is a special form of ritualized bodily practice that emerges at the Typhoon School. Both dojos are ritualized spaces, but the Typhoon School has placed their own stamp on the martial arts, creating ritualized bodily practices that are unique to their school. Unlike Nate, who has based the training at his dojo on the more generic model of tournament competition, James has created a space where individuals can come together to both create, and participate in, unique ritual practices. These rituals are created, performed, and learned on the mat, through the bodily practices unique to the Typhoon School.

For James, the community of the dojo has emerged out of the specific forms of racial oppression endured by blacks living in the poor communities of Chicago’s South Side. The discipline of the school is a counter to the perils of the ghetto, and the dojo is a community defined in opposition to mainstream society. But this type of opposition takes on a very specific form. Although the dojo is a space for building a collective identity, it is a collective whose attention is focused inward. For James, the mission of the dojo is not to directly challenge and change the forces which impinge on blacks, but to forge an autonomous space within a hostile society. For James, the martial arts provide a way of creating what he has called “a social structure within a structure,” one that does not directly resist the forces of domination, but seeks to exist beyond their reach.

Gender also plays a role in the way the imagined community of the dojo is defined. For James, a return to an ancient tribal order is a return to a world with very rigid gender roles. Men are required to be the traditional warriors, providing for, and protecting their families. These sentiments are echoed in some of Larry’s more personal comments about the school, “I feel I have here my freedom, my sense of manliness and manhood and I won’t let anyone come up on me to try and take that away because I know who I am.” It is easy to see how the masculinized aspects of martial arts training would provide a way to address such gender anxieties. Becoming a warrior is a familiar martial arts trope, and meshes well with the way racist representations of black males have threatened their masculinity.
But practicing side by side with the men at these dojos are women. Although the school is clearly male dominated, women have been encouraged to participate, take leadership roles, and become an integral part of the community of this dojo. Both the men and women seem drawn to the training as a means of improving oneself within the community of the dojo. What this would suggest is that despite the patriarchal overtones of the “tribal order” there may be some continuity in the way women and men participate in, and experience, this space. However, without more ethnographic data that explicitly addresses the experience of women at the dojo, such claims are tentative at best.

Conclusion

What these sites suggest is that physical, bodily activity is an important aspect of agency on both an individual and collective level. It is not only the forces of domination that determine how people understand their bodies and what people choose to do with their bodies. Embodied subjects themselves are also instrumental in shaping their relationships to each other and to the social world. In addition, the Typhoon School illustrates that bodily practices can contribute to the construction of a collective identity that provides some refuge from the oppression experienced in everyday life.

This ethnographic data helps us to move away from notions of the body as a passive, biological entity only animated through discursive representations to an emphasis on an embodied subject whose interaction with the world is mediated through an active, material body. It is here that a sense of embodied agency becomes evident; an agency that has been shown here to take on both individual and collective forms. The Mt. Olive School is a space for individuals to build stronger selves, while the unique rituals of the Typhoon School have forged a collective identity that strives to maintain some degree of autonomy from mainstream society.

In The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Emile Durkheim provides a framework for understanding the importance of ritual in building collective identity. Although not explicitly about the body, Durkheim’s emphasis on ritual is an implicit recognition of the importance of bodily practices to collective identity. For Durkheim, these rituals bring people together, reaffirm their common bonds, and reinforce a sense of social solidarity. In religious ceremonies, the heritage of the social group is maintained and continually revitalized, counteracting those forces which could threaten and undermine social cohesiveness.
When applied to complex societies, Durkheim's framework can also be used to understand the connection between ritual and resistance. The ritualized bodily practices of the Typhoon School can be understood as reinforcing a sense of social solidarity among members of the dojo. Drawn together by a shared experience of racial oppression, the students and teachers participate in bodily rituals that reaffirm their common bonds, and foster a sense of community. Through these bodily rituals, the martial artists are able to produce their community within the dojo and revitalize the social ties that allow it to withstand the forms of racial oppression that threaten its existence. So it is through the ritualized bodily practices that the Typhoon School is able to establish and maintain an oppositional community within a hostile host society.

Similar practices have also allowed Nate's students to strengthen their self-esteem and recoup a self-image that runs counter to racist constructions of the black body. The detachment and withdrawal of the imagined community of the Typhoon School, and the emphasis on individual empowerment at the Mt. Olive School, make labeling these practices a form of resistance problematic, but they allow us to envision the potential for something truly oppositional. In an era when racist discourse converges on the body, and when black bodies are faced with daily threats to their survival, bodily practices emerge as an important way to create and sustain resistant collective action. When a group of individuals begin to see their embodied selves as objects of similar forms of oppression, and when the corporeal aspects of the oppression become evident, bodily practices can emerge as a means of building solidarity and possibly complementing more overtly politicized forms of organizing.

References


