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**Brazilian Jiu-jitsu as a
Marker of Whiteness and Anti-Blackness**

Embodying Inclusive Conservative Conviviality in Rio de Janeiro

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Brazilian Jiu-jitsu as a Marker of Whiteness and Anti-Blackness: Embodying Inclusive Conservative Conviviality in Rio de Janeiro

Raphael Schapira

Abstract

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) practitioners often perceive their sport as a discrimination-free space, stating: “On the mats, everyone is equal”. However, this belief in equality can sometimes obscure the fact that BJJ has been predominantly associated with Whiteness. This paper explores how the Gracie and Fadda lineages – crucial for the sport’s development – have distinctively constructed BJJ as a White sport, each for their own purposes. The Gracie lineage, associated with the city’s affluent South Zone, employs Whiteness to reinforce their distinguished position and supposed superiority in BJJ. The Fadda lineage, working in social projects in Rio’s low-income North and West Zones, uses anti-Blackness to avoid the association of their disciples with drug trafficking in favelas, aiming to offer them new life perspectives. I argue that Whiteness and anti-Blackness are constitutive elements linking the appeal of Bolsonaro and neoconservatism with communities typically expected to instead support other political forces more interested in progressive socio-political change. To analytically grasp the ambivalent conviviality of both BJJ lineages in today’s political current, I introduce the term “inclusive conservative conviviality”, which turns out to be crucial for understanding Brazil’s reactionary moment.

Keywords: Whiteness | race | Brazilian jiu-jitsu | conviviality

About the Author:

Raphael Schapira (Mecila Junior Fellow, 2022) holds a PhD in anthropology and sociology from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. His research encompasses the anthropology of sport, embodied research, Whiteness, mobility, religion, and urban anthropology. Drawing from fieldwork conducted in Rio de Janeiro among Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioners, he has published works exploring topics such as evangelical Brazilian jiu-jitsu, urban sociality, inequality, and infrastructures of (im)mobility. As an avid Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioner, he finds fascination in martial artists’ ability to (re-)create and embody broader social processes through movement. Passionate about merging anthropology’s self-critical and transformative potential with community engagement, Raphael Schapira participates in sports and educational projects in Brazil. He also organizes webinars that connect social movements and artists, fostering meaningful dialogues between European and American audiences.

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1. Introduction

Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) originated in Brazil in the early twentieth century and has roots in traditional Japanese jiu-jitsu, which arrived on the country's shores with Japanese immigrants and sailors. As a martial art and combat sport focusing on grappling and ground fighting techniques, BJJ practitioners typically seek to control their opponent on the ground and apply various techniques to gain a dominant position or submit their opponent by applying joint locks or chokes. During fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro in September 2022, I witnessed two Brazilian jiu-jitsu competitions. The first competition occurred at a military compound in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone. It involved about one hundred children and teenagers from social BJJ projects and was aptly called "Social Fight". The organizers, a small Brazilian jiu-jitsu federation, wanted to give young athletes from the city's periphery, often living in *favelas*, the possibility to participate in a well-run competition that would generally be too expensive for them to join. To achieve this, the participation fee was set at only 85 reais (USD 17) for individuals and 50 reais (USD 10) for social projects. Most coaches taking part shared a common identity and goal: as members of the Fadda jiu-jitsu lineage, founded in 1950 by Grandmaster Oswaldo Fadda (1920-2005) in Bento Ribeiro in Rio de Janeiro's North Zone, they aimed to continue the grandmaster's social work, keeping youths off the street and making BJJ accessible to differently-abled persons.¹ By teaching traditional jiu-jitsu values like respect, discipline, and hierarchy – understood to have been handed down through generations of first Japanese and then Brazilian grandmasters – they hoped to give youths at risk a different perspective in life so that they would stay out of trouble and not accept "job offers" from drug gangs, and become good citizens. Nevertheless, despite the event's focus on economically-disadvantaged athletes, which, given the racialized divisions in Brazilian society, meant that Black and Brown athletes predominated, its racial implications went largely uncommented.² Coach Orlando Silva summarized the shared perception by organizers and coaches understanding the event as colourless

1 A martial arts lineage refers to a community of instructors and students who can trace their shared practical, intellectual, and philosophical teachings back to a common founding master (Brown 2014).

2 Here, I use the racial categories as proposed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE): *Branco* (White): This category refers to people who identify themselves as having European ancestry. *Preto* (Black): This term is used to identify people who see themselves as having African ancestry. *Pardo* (Brown): This is a broad category used in Brazil to refer to multiracial individuals who do not classify themselves as being exclusively in one of the other categories. It often includes people of mixed European, African, and Indigenous ancestry, but the specific mix can vary widely. *Amarelo* (Yellow): This category is typically used for people who identify as having East Asian ancestry, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and others. *Indígena* (Indigenous): This category includes people who identify as having Native Brazilian or Indigenous ancestry IBGE (2022).

and egalitarian by saying: “For me, jiu-jitsu is very democratic. It’s neither a White nor a Black sport; it’s simply sport”.³

The second competition I observed occurred later that month at the Clube Municipal, close to the world-famous Maracanã stadium. The professional and established event named “Carioca” was organized by the Jiu-Jitsu Federation of the State of Rio de Janeiro (FJJ-Rio) and was much more mixed regarding race.⁴ Its higher participation fee of 140 reais (USD 27) and its location closer to the city centre made it more difficult for poorer athletes to participate.⁵ Nevertheless, several dedicated athletes from social projects who had also participated in the “Social Fight” competition were also present, as they had obtained the necessary funds through raffles, selling sweets, or sponsorship. This time, however, they were not competing in a Fadda context but at an event marked as belonging to the Gracie lineage, whose key protagonists are widely recognized as essential in developing and diffusing Brazilian jiu-jitsu in the twentieth century. Visually, the event was dominated by a large banner showing the pictures of three elderly Brazilian jiu-jitsu legends: Carlos Gracie (1902-1994), his younger brother Hélio Gracie (1913-2009), and Carlos Gracie’s son Robson Gracie (1935-2023), long-time president of the FJJ-Rio. Symbolically, the banner affirmed the Gracies’ claim of having created BJJ and established a line from these founding figures to the competing athletes who, like benevolent grandfathers, watched their heirs competing. However, it also conveyed White superiority associated with the Gracies by showing only White men who had belonged to Rio’s elite. Despite this symbolic marking, Carolina Santos, the event’s coordinator, claimed that BJJ is a democratic sport because “on the mats, everyone is equal”, citing the participating athletes’ racial diversity as evidence.

The two vignettes show how Brazilian jiu-jitsu coaches, functionaries, and practitioners generally hold that BJJ is free of discrimination based on race, class, gender, and ableism. Although men still dominate Brazilian jiu-jitsu numerically and hold key

3 Places and people’s names have been anonymized, except for grandmasters and famous athletes considered public figures.

4 I use the term “race” to highlight social inequalities rooted in racism rather than implying a prior assumption of distinct human races. According to Kabengele Munanga, race, while not a valid biological category, is a significant social and historical category inherited from colonial times (Munanga 2019: 22). Although racial differences seem to be based on obvious visible biological facts, the categories through which these differences are perceived are more the product of ideological efforts than biological facts. Consequently, the ideology of race has been used strategically to classify and rank individuals and groups, leading to systemic inequalities and discrimination. Munanga emphasizes recognizing and addressing these historical racial disparities as a means to promote social justice and equality.

5 On average, Black or Brown athletes had to use a higher percentage of their monthly income to participate than their White counterparts. In 2021, the average monthly income of employed White individuals was significantly higher at 3,099 reais (approximately USD 485) than that of Black individuals at 1,764 reais (roughly USD 276) and Brown individuals at 1,814 reais (about USD 284) (IBGE 2022: 3). Calculations are made using an average exchange rate for 2021 (1 USD = 6.3825 BRL).

decision-making positions – a representative survey from 2013 found that 2.2% of Brazilian men practice Brazilian jiu-jitsu compared to 0.4% of women (Ministério do Esporte 2015) – women are progressively claiming more roles as practitioners, coaches, and professional competitors in Brazil and internationally (Knijnik and Ferretti 2015; Kavoura et al. 2015), as well as taking on administrative roles. However, the symbolic construction of BJJ as a White sport is seldom problematized. Whiteness turns out to be an unmarked and unnamed category of power in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, which, I argue, makes the sport attractive in distinct ways to members of different social strata. Drawing on Patricia de Santana Pinho’s concepts of “injured whiteness” and “aspirational whiteness” (Pinho 2021), I discuss how affluent BJJ practitioners employ BJJ to defend their White symbolic supremacy while lower-income practitioners use it to distance themselves from Blackness. The paper centres on understanding and contributing to the analysis of Brazil’s reactionary moment, which became evident with the election of former President Jair Bolsonaro, by exploring Whiteness as a constitutive element within this context. Drawing from ethnographic research, I argue that the discourses of social inclusion presented by both the Gracies and the Faddas, amid pronounced social inequalities, offer valuable lessons to be learned about the nexus between conviviality and inequality (Costa 2019). Furthermore, this analysis sheds light on the ambivalent “everyday processes of how people live together in mundane encounters, of how they re/translate between their maintained differences and how they re/negotiate ways of being in the same locale” (Heil 2019: 1). I propose to grasp the specific character of conviviality emerging in Rio de Janeiro’s BJJ circles with the term “inclusive conservative conviviality” to highlight the contradictions of the conservatism of parts of Brazil’s upper and popular classes believing in social inclusion for everyone while maintaining, through strategies of Whiteness (higher income groups) and anti-Blackness (lower income groups), the frame of the “anti-Black city” (Alves 2018), in which the state protects and values Whiteness while Blackness is perceived as potentially delinquent and dangerous.

This paper is based on a total of three months of fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro between June and September 2023 among jiu-jitsu practitioners, during which I engaged in embodied participant observation, recorded eleven formal interviews, and conducted five informal interviews lasting between ten and sixty minutes. Additionally, it draws on qualitative research conducted in 2018 and 2019 in Rio de Janeiro. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, while the informal interviews were written down as part of fieldwork notes (Becker 1998). Moreover, I took pictures and recorded videos, which were analysed on the premise of co-authorship between the person taking the picture and the person in the picture (Pink 2001). Being a Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioner myself, I actively participated in BJJ training sessions, employing embodied participant observation methods (Giardina and Donnelly 2019) to use my senses as an additional

research tool to “access areas of embodied, emplaced knowing and to use these as a basis from which to understand human perception, experience, action and meaning [...]” (Pink 2009: 47). Furthermore, traditional participant observation was employed when accompanying my interlocutors participating as athletes, coaches, or bloggers to BJJ competitions. The transcribed interviews and fieldwork notes were coded and analysed based on the tools of the grounded theory approach to identify recurrent topics and key issues in the material (Charmaz 2014).

In the following section, I will discuss the concepts of Whiteness and anti-Blackness to establish the analytical lens used to look at the history and contemporary practice of Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Afterward, I will demonstrate how the Gracie lineage established BJJ as a sport catering to the White elite by distancing it from its Japanese and Afro-Brazilian roots and how this constructed image continues to be perpetuated in the present. Subsequently, I will delve into the Fadda lineage and its approach to Brazilian jiu-jitsu, which seeks to create an egalitarian ethos and embraces BJJ’s Japanese legacy. However, I will also explore how it falls short of addressing the issue of colour-blindness in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. In the conclusion, I will pick up on the concept of “inclusive conservative conviviality” and briefly discuss it in the light of the aforementioned analysis of Whiteness in the ambit of Gracie and Fadda Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

2. Whiteness and Anti-Blackness as Analytical Tools

Researchers have pointed out that former president Jair Bolsonaro won the 2018 presidential election because he managed to transcend traditional cleavages under the banner of economic and socio-cultural fear. People across the social classes felt an existential threat to their way of life, and were afraid of losing their jobs, lives, religion, or social standing (Pinheiro-Machado 2019). Among the reasons for this fear were the economic crisis initiated in 2014, which had not yet ended in 2018 (Nobre 2020: 30), and the “progressivist shock” (Rocha 2021) during President Dilma Rousseff’s first term of office between 2011 and 2014, which had put parts of the Brazilian society under moral distress. Elements of this shock were the National Truth Commission investigating state crimes during the military dictatorship, the recognition of same-sex marriage, the partly legalization of abortion, the confirmation of the racial quota system in public universities, the strengthening of labour rights, and the boosting of feminist ideas (Rocha 2021: 18). The reactionary response to these changes was a mass movement whose key characteristics Gabriel Feltran (2020a) identifies as police militarism, (evangelical) anti-intellectualism, and entrepreneurial monetarism. According to Feltran, these three aspects brought together divergent social groups by producing “political-moral affinities between people from the poorest sectors and factions of the elite, [including] professional, military, religious, middle-class, financial,

influencer, and entrepreneur groups in general” (2020a: 17). Although classical political cleavages regarding status, race, gender, and sexual orientation continued to operate, for the new far-right movements, these were not significant because for them, there “are no black or white people, they claim: only Brazilians” (Feltran 2020a: 18).

Brazil’s contemporary far-right movement claims that Brazil is a colourblind nation in which race plays no role in the construction of national identity. In support of this claim, they reference foundational national narratives like that of *mestiçagem* (miscegenation) and *democracia racial* (racial democracy) (Schwarcz 2019), which supposedly created a “monocultural Brazilianess” (Costa 2007: 151) as a national character. To say that no racial differences exist between Brazilians is an old trope of modern Brazil, which likes to think of itself as a society free of racial discrimination. It is grounded in the racial democracy discourse,⁶ popularized by Gilberto Freyre (2006) during the first half of the twentieth century. It portrays a vision of racial harmony and equality which is imagined as having come into being thanks to the transcendence of racial conflicts through miscegenation and the absence of segregating laws. Inside the normative frame of racial democracy, people are supposed to “take pride in racial mixture and demonstrate a lack of interest in racial difference” (Roth-Gordon 2017: 37) and understand their country as having emerged from the fusion of the three foundational groups: Indigenous, African, and European. This discourse is often criticized for omitting the historical gender- and race-specific violence against Blacks (Gonzalez 2020) and “disguising racial hierarchy with a false idea of harmony” (Ribeiro 2019: 20). It has resulted in justifying colourblind policies and attitudes and allowing people to live in a state of “comfortable racial contradictions” (Roth-Gordon 2017), in which individuals assume racism to exist but without acknowledging how actions can contribute to reproducing racial disparities; even in supposedly humorous language practices (see Bonilla-Silva 2006; Moreira 2019: 31). As a result, Black and White Brazilians generally perceive themselves as cultural and moral equals in everyday life despite the “strong racial inequalities, which manifest themselves by the persistence of racial inequalities in educational achievement and income” (Lamont et al. 2016: 124). This makes Brazil a country “with strong social boundaries between racial categories, but weak symbolic ones” (Moraes Silva 2016: 797).

While the legacies of slavery, racism, and socio-economic disparities affecting marginalized groups have been studied in Brazil for decades, it is only since the year 2000 that scholars have begun more systematically to analyse the role of Whiteness in maintaining these power imbalances (da Silva 2017: 25). By making Whiteness an

6 Following Sérgio Costa, I refer to the miscegenation concept as a discourse instead of using the term ‘ideology’, as is often the case. In the Marxist tradition, ideologies can be classified as true or false. However, miscegenation and racial democracy establish unique truth regimes and are, therefore, better designated as discourses (Costa 2007: 150 n. 3).

object of study, scholars have managed to understand better how White subjectivity operates as an unmarked and unnamed category of power, contributing to the perpetuation of unequal social, political, and economic dynamics in seemingly non-racialized contexts, often referred to as White privilege (Müller and Cardoso 2017: 13). But Whiteness as a concept is not only useful for studying Whites. The history of *branqueamento* (Whitening) as a state-sponsored strategy (Lesser 2013: 12) has contributed to a complex racial hierarchy and deeply ingrained colourism in Brazil. As a result, lighter skin and Whiteness are often associated with higher social status and seen as desirable, while darker skin and Blackness are commonly associated with lower social status and viewed as undesirable by White and Black Brazilians (Devulsky 2021). Therefore, Patricia de Santana Pinho proposes to understand Whiteness not just as a social identity, condition, and practice but also as “an ideal, promoted discursively as a major social value to be preserved, by those who already possess it, or acquired, by those who do not” (2021: 64–65).

Whiteness can be reinforced through “colour-blindness”, which refers to ignoring or negating the importance of race as a crucial category of social stratification. Proponents of colour-blindness often argue that class differences are more important in explaining variances between White and non-White populations than racial divergences, for example, regarding spatial segregation and occupational position. However, Edward Telles’ (2006) research has shown that racial discrimination can manifest in various ways, including in education, employment, income, and social status, and that these disparities persist even when controlling for other factors, such as socio-economic status and education. Carrillo (2021) argues that supposedly race-neutral organizational rationality used in sugar-ethanol mills as a managerial tool can reproduce racialized social structures that subordinate the non-White workforce. This is also the case in the Brazilian police force, which is predominantly White in high-ranking positions and racially diverse among street-level officers (Alves 2018: 65). However, given that “police practices in Brazil should be located within the ‘historic-racial and bodily schema’ that structures urban imaginaries of crime, order, and fear [...] it is irrelevant that the police force in Brazil has become more racially diverse because, at the end of the day, the bodies to be protected and the sources of threat are clearly defined” (Alves 2018: 66).⁷ Published by the *Rede de Observatórios da Segurança* (Security Observatories Network), the data on fatalities in police actions in seven Brazilian states in 2021 reveals that the police’s “racism without racists” produces mostly Black victims:

7 Despite the existence of structural racism, positive examples exist that can reduce its harmful effects. For example, the initial success of community-oriented policing at the beginning of the Pacifying Police Unit (UPP) program opened the possibility of changing racist policing practices in Rio de Janeiro. Due to the lack of a more profound police reform, however, the UPP’s initial progressive character was only short-lived (Soares 2019) and eventually turned into an example of a militarized “penal state” (Franco 2018) and “imperial statecraft” (Salem and Bertelsen 2020).

Blacks account for 97.9 percent of those killed in the states of Bahia, 96.3 percent in Pernambuco, 92.3 percent in Ceará, 87.3 percent in Rio de Janeiro, 75 percent in Piauí, and 68.8 percent in São Paulo, when the cases without information on the victim's colour are excluded. These shocking numbers are even more disturbing, given that they are almost independent of the population's racial distribution in these states (Ramos et al. 2022).

In Brazil, the degree of an individual's alignment with phenotypical characteristics and cultural markers linked to the social category of Whiteness or Europeanness affords them both structural and individual privileges (Ribeiro 2019: 33). The closer a person's appearance or cultural identity aligns with these notions, the more privileges they tend to receive. This system highlights the prevalence of discrimination against those with darker skin tones while granting privileges to those with lighter skin or closer ties to Whiteness. Colourism categorizes non-White individuals based on their supposed physical or cultural proximity to Blackness or Africanness (Devulsky 2021) and White individuals based on their assumed closeness to being White, meaning having experienced minimal Black or Indigenous miscegenation (Schucman 2016). White persons generally do not reflect on what it means to belong to this social group, given that debates about race typically focus on Blackness (Ribeiro 2019: 31). Nevertheless, Whiteness as an ideal is part of the symbolic matrix through which Brazilians generally interpret and make sense of the world around them. It has an outstanding importance for the symbolic ordering of national identity and social structure because in addition to being a "social identity, a social condition, and a social practice [...] whiteness functions also as an ideal, promoted discursively as a major social value to be preserved, by those who already possess it, or acquired, by those who do not" (Pinho 2021: 65–66).

People typically seek to attain Whiteness by distancing themselves from Blackness. In her examination of Whiteness and Blackness in Rio de Janeiro, Roth-Gordon (2017: 51) argues that young *favela* residents frequently engage in strategies of "*boa aparência*" ("good appearance"). Historically, this term was euphemistically used in job advertisements to imply a preference for White candidates, but Roth-Gordon adopts it to illustrate the ongoing societal pressure to conform to Whiteness. The notion of good appearance encompasses not only personal grooming and hygiene, but also cultural and linguistic practices associated with affluent White Brazilians. This includes employing polite and refined language, being well-versed in standard Portuguese, and refraining from using slang to create "situational whiteness" (Roth-Gordon 2017: 52). However, the temporary racial status of situational Whiteness:

does not entail "feeling" or identifying as white, and it does not mean that poor dark-skinned youth are ultimately viewed as white. However, gaining situational whiteness improves their chances of acquiring citizenship rights and future

employment in a society where blackness continues to be stigmatized and where black people continue to suffer from structural racism, earning less pay, completing fewer years of education, being sent to jail, and finding themselves targeted (and threatened) by police officers far more often than their lighter-skinned peers (Roth-Gordon 2017: 52).

Young Black and Brown Brazilian jiu-jitsu athletes in Rio de Janeiro's periphery can use their embodied sporting identity to create situational Whiteness because Brazilian jiu-jitsu has been historically constructed as a White martial art. In the following section, I will show how the Gracie lineage established BJJ as a sport representing White superiority from the 1930s on and give an example of how this image is still reproduced.

3. Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu as a Marker of Whiteness

Sports and martial arts like Brazilian jiu-jitsu are codified forms of movement cultures that constantly interact with their social, political, and economic context (Besnier et al. 2017; Green 2003). Processes of "sportization" (Elias 1986) have been dominating the martial arts since the invention of modern sports around the second half of the nineteenth century, turning them into measurable and comparable movement practices, which are often associated with the nation-state given that "fighting" is not just done metaphorically, like in most sports, but also practically (Gaudin 2009). Brazilian jiu-jitsu developed out of the teachings of Japanese judo and jiu-jitsu experts coming to Brazil as immigrants, sailors, and travellers at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ferreira 2019; Santos Júnior 2022; Green and Svinth 2001). Jeffrey Lesser explains that public opinion regarding Japanese immigration oscillated between approval and rejection during the first half of the twentieth century (Lesser 2013). At times, Japanese immigrants were portrayed as even more modern and Whiter than Europeans, at times labelled as unable to assimilate based on "nativist arguments about stealing jobs and land, racist arguments about biological pollution, and militarist arguments suggesting that Japanese imperial aspirations in Asia would soon move toward Brazil" (Lesser 2013: 164). Such changing opinions can be traced in newspaper reports about Japanese jiu-jitsu martial artists who were, depending on the current juncture, either portrayed as inferior or superior to local Black capoeira fighters (Santos Júnior 2021). One strategy to resolve racial anxieties regarding Afro-Brazilian capoeira and Japanese jiu-jitsu was to Whiten these martial arts by transforming them into official Brazilian movement cultures that fit into Brazil's racial hierarchy. Capoeira changed from being perceived as a menace by White authorities to being seen as a national sport (Desch-Obi 2008; Vidor de Sousa Reis 1994), while Japanese jiu-jitsu morphed from representing a threat to White superiority and masculinity after Japan's imperial

wars to being vernacularized as Brazilian jiu-jitsu (Cairus 2020; Santos Júnior 2021: 3–4).

The Gracie family, based in Rio de Janeiro, was crucial in transforming Brazilian jiu-jitsu into a nationalistic project by ousting their Japanese-Brazilian counterparts based in São Paulo. Seeking social and spatial proximity to Rio de Janeiro's political elite, they taught its members their jiu-jitsu (Gracie 2008: 283). In 1930, the same year Getúlio Vargas took office as the head of the provisional government, the Gracies opened their first official gym in Rio de Janeiro near the presidential palace in the neighbourhood Catete (Cairus 2012: 71–72). At that time, the geographical proximity mirrored the Gracies' political alignment with Getúlio Vargas' regime, leading to their appointment to teach their jiu-jitsu to the newly formed special police for political and social security purposes (DESP) (Cairus 2020: 29; Schwarcz and Starling 2018: 423). The new police units were formed in 1933 to create political repression and to defend the dictatorial Estado Novo project against its opponents, for which its head, Captain Filinto Müller, received support from the German Gestapo through the exchange of information and interrogation techniques (Schwarcz and Starling 2018: 423–424). The Vargas regime enjoyed support from a nationalist alliance formed between Rio's traditional elite and emerging power structures originating from oligarchies established in peripheral regions of Brazil (Cairus 2020: 29). Their counterpart was a coalition of industrialists and landowners based in São Paulo – the country's hotspot of Japanese immigration – interested in continuing open immigration policies. The political context aggravated the competition between the Gracies based in Rio de Janeiro and their Japanese counterparts in São Paulo, in which each group came to stand for opposed nation-building projects (Cairus 2020).

From 1934 on, President Vargas's government began restricting immigration and subsequently targeting Japanese and other immigrant groups' cultural outlets like newspapers to foster Brazilianess (Lesser 2013: 164–166). The Gracies effectively responded to the new *Zeitgeist* demanding Brazilianess by disassociating Brazilian jiu-jitsu from its Japanese roots not just on the level of skills but also on the level of moral values, thus permitting their followers to embody a specific idea of the Brazilian nation associated with Whiteness, authoritarianism, and patriarchy.⁸ Cairus argues that by “refusing to abide by the technical, philosophical and cultural aspects of the Japanese matrix”, the Gracie clan set off a process for Brazilian jiu-jitsu akin to the indigenization of British cricket in India (Cairus 2020: 30). According to Arjun Appadurai, cultural forms

8 Parts of the Gracie family uphold this association until today, as evidenced by their closeness to former president Jair Bolsonaro. For instance, in 2018, during the electoral campaign, Bolsonaro received an honorary black belt from Robson Gracie, then President of the FJJ-Rio (Frazão 2018). Also, during the 2022 electoral campaign, Bolsonaro was invited to speak at the headquarters of the Alliance Jiu-Jitsu team (G1 2022) and was supported with a video by famous BJJ athletes, among them the jiu-jitsu legend Royce Gracie (Poder360 2022).

that embody strict rules and competitive structures, such as sports, “encapsulate the core moral values of the society in which they are born” (Appadurai 1995: 24), making them resistant to easy alterations. Appadurai uses the example of Indian cricket to illustrate how its indigenization was a complex and contradictory process that coincided with the emergence of India as a nation separate from the British Empire. Moreover, as cricket was increasingly disseminated through various media channels like books, newspapers, radio, and television, it became not only a symbol of Indian nationhood but also “inscribed, as practice, into the Indian (male) body” (Appadurai 1995: 45).

Like cricket in India, the vernacularization of Japanese jiu-jitsu in Brazil was part of a specific nation-building process that articulated conflicting conceptions about the future identity of the nation. To establish Brazilian jiu-jitsu as Brazilian, the Gracies stripped their martial art style of institutional links, rituals, and movements that had marked it as Japanese. By remaining independent of Japanese institutions like the Kodokan, the governing judo institution based in Tokyo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu federations were free to implement their own rules regarding permitted techniques and the belt system. Accordingly, the Gracies eliminated Japanese rituals like Japanese bowing (*reihō*), replacing it with a handshake, and shifted the focus of their jiu-jitsu style to ground combat (Cairus 2020: 30). However, a classical iconoclasm has been the most visible sign of Brazilian jiu-jitsu’s independence from its Japanese institutional origins. It substituted the picture of Jigoro Kano with the images of Hélio and his older brother Carlos Gracie, who are credited with founding the Gracie BJJ lineage. Nowadays, their pictures are displayed in gyms all around the world. Furthermore, the Gracies referred to their gym as an “academy” instead of using the common Japanese term *dōjō* and gave new names, generally Portuguese ones, to Japanese jiu-jitsu fighting techniques.

Despite the Gracies attempt to “de-Japanize” Brazilian jiu-jitsu, they admired and acknowledged Japanese martial artists and techniques. In 1951, in the context of diminishing anti-Japanese sentiments prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s – sentiments that led to new forms of acknowledgment but also buried traumatic experiences for the Japanese-Brazilian population in silence (Toji 2023) – Hélio Gracie confronted the Japanese Judo champion Masahiko Kimura. Kimura beat Gracie with a judo technique called *ude-garami* (reverse shoulder lock), handing him the first defeat of his professional fighting career. Subsequently, the Gracies started calling this technique “kimura” to honour this exceptional athlete – a name that has stuck until today in international BJJ and MMA circuits (Snowden and Shields 2010: 225). The Gracies also honoured other foreign fighters by calling specific techniques after them. For example, they supposedly named the technique “*americana*”, a shoulder lock also known as *ude-garami* or keylock, after US freestyle wrestler Bob Anderson who visited them in the 1970s (Snowden and Shields 2010: 226).

However, the Gracies' symbolic acknowledgment of elite foreign fighters and their indebtedness to them was never extended to Black Brazilian martial artists in the same way. For instance, although the Afro-Brazilian fighter Waldemar Santana won against Hélio Gracie in 1955, inflicting on Gracie his second and last defeat, his finishing technique was not given the name "santana". Moreover, the Gracies received instruction in specific techniques from Afro-Brazilian martial artists, including the renowned capoeira master Zé Maria in the 1930s. These techniques were persistently employed by the Gracies, extending into mixed martial arts fights in the 2000s (Silva and Corrêa 2020: 299–309). However, despite not providing symbolic acknowledgment to Afro-Brazilian martial artists, the Gracies adhered to Brazil's imperative of taking pride in racial mixture and cordiality. Like their White and well-off contemporaries, they established racial hierarchy through vertical economic inequality while maintaining horizontal social relations (Telles 2006: 12). Given Brazil's strong correlation between income and race (Telles 2006: 107–130), the high membership fees of the Gracie gym ensured that its White male members stayed among themselves. In 1952, Gracie students paid around USD 50 monthly for one weekly session or USD 100 for two. Considering that the minimum monthly wage in 1952 was approximately USD 31, these rates were accessible only to the privileged few (Cairus 2012: 145). Furthermore, White superiority was defended in linguistic practices that used covert terms to designate successful Afro-Brazilians as "socially white" (Roth-Gordon 2017: 45). In the case of the Gracies, Blacks were not excluded from the gym per se, as long as they were considered "clean Blacks", a discriminating code for Afro-Brazilians regarded acceptable among Whites and used by Hélio Gracie to talk about Santana after their fight (Cairus 2012: 159).

In sporting contexts, racial stereotypes regarding Browns and Blacks often refer to the supposedly natural strength of the Black man and the cultural intelligence of the White man (Edwards 2003). Journalists have repeatedly described Gracie fighters as the more intelligent and morally superior men vis-à-vis their Black adversaries to justify their victory or grant them moral victory in the case of defeat. For instance, the renowned comic artist José Geraldo depicted the young Carlos Gracie in a comic book published in 1958. The portrayal presents him as a superhero who completes his development as a courageous, honourable, and masculine young athlete by triumphing over a larger, stronger, and more cunning capoeira fighter (Santos Júnior 2021: 18–19). Similarly, Hélio Gracie is depicted as the morally superior man after losing against Waldemar Santana on 24 May 1955 at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Lapa, Rio de Janeiro. News reports describe the fight between him and Santana as one of savagery against civilization, in which Santana eventually wins the fight by lifting Gracie high up, throwing him to the ground, and knocking him out with a kick to the head (Lemos 1955). Despite Santana's victory, the reporter from *O Cruzeiro*

shows Gracie as the true winner in an article titled “Gracie defeated by a student”. The article cites two reasons: Santana had been Gracie’s disciple and won thanks to the techniques taught to him, and Gracie, despite being smaller, weaker, and older, had managed to stay undefeated for three hours and forty-five minutes against his bigger, stronger, and younger opponent (Lemos 1955). According to the reporter, Santana lost by winning, merely proving the superiority of the Gracies’ fighting style, which allows any frail man to withstand the onslaught of pure force. Furthermore, the report described Gracie as morally superior because he had taught everything he knew to Santana without holding back. Santana then used this knowledge to beat his teacher. Nevertheless, the article also mentions that Santana had received Gracie’s respect for being a great and loyal adversary who had fought like a real man.

The racist commentaries perceivable at the fight between Gracie and Santana did not go unnoticed by acclaimed writer Nelson Rodrigues. In his column “*Drama, Tragedia, Farsa, Comédia*” for the newspaper *Última Hora*, he commented that many spectators perceived the fight as one of Black against White. The racial slurs directed at Santana made Rodrigues realize the fight’s metaphorical importance regarding race relations.

And then, next to me, a remarkable incident occurred, which was this: a guy, blond, pot-bellied, and bloodthirsty, said “*negro boçal*”. “*Negro boçal*!”⁹ From that moment on, I understood everything. For me, the fight lost all its technical and sportive meaning, which could be trivialized. It acquired a new meaning. And if you’ll forgive my emphatic subtlety, I’ll say that I saw the dark Waldemar, not as “a Black man”, but as “the Black man”. He was transformed before my eyes (Rodrigues 1955, author’s translation).

If Santana represented “the Black man”, then Gracie symbolized “the White man”, and the specific type of White man he represented was elucidated by *Última Hora* in another article on the same page. It showed Gracie as a real champion and family patriarch, who was quickly back in control over himself, his family, and his business even after getting knocked out at a fight. The newspaper created this impression by focusing on covering Gracie in pictures and text, showing four photographs of him compared to one picture of Santana and citing Gracie at length, whereas Santana does not get cited at all. This framing even allowed Gracie to win new disciples despite his defeat, who lined up outside his gym (Pereira 1955).

Although celebrated by Rodrigues, the momentarily symbolic inversion of the Brazilian racial order in the ring was quickly revoked by his colleagues. Instead of commemorating Santana for his accomplishment of beating the iconic figure of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, most

⁹ The dictionary defines “*boçal*” as 1. a noun referring to the “newly arrived Negro slave” and 2. as an adjective signifying “stupid” or “rude” (Michaelis 1980).

journalists merely acknowledged his strength. In doing so, they transmitted the idea that White Brazilian men continued being morally and technically superior even if they lost to Afro-Brazilians – a significant trope often used by Whites to explain their privileges compared to non-Whites (Schucman 2016: 120–124). Rodrigues' critical commentary mirrored the cracks in Brazil's academic perception of harmonious race relations at the time. Gilberto Freyre's idea of positive miscegenation, according to which Brazil had managed to create a society free of racism thanks to its racial mixture of European, African, and Indian peoples and cultures, had come under attack at the beginning of the 1950s. Florestan Fernandes, a member of a UNESCO-commissioned research project on the origins of Brazil's harmonic racial relations, questioned the official narrative of Brazil as a racial democracy, concluding that "Brazilian whites were hostile to and prejudiced against blacks" (Telles 2006: 42).

It is a well-documented point among scholars that Brazil's racial democracy discourse has often contributed to the invisibilization or erasure of Black history (Santos 2015: 18). In Waldemar Santana's case, his memory has recently been brought back to the public through a painted mural created by the artist Cazé. The mural, located in front of the YMCA where the famous fight between Santana and Gracie took place on Lapa Street in the homonymous neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, depicts various stations of his life. It is part of a project entitled "Black Wall", which displays vital Black personalities throughout Rio de Janeiro to contribute "to the construction of a social memory that honours the struggles, conquests, and references of Black people in Brazilian culture" (Rajão and Cazé 2021, author's translation). Santana was born and raised in Brazil's Bahia state, where he worked as a marble cutter and became an accomplished capoeira fighter. Most likely, he had also trained in jiu-jitsu and *vale-tudo* before moving to Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 1950s to train with the Gracies (Cairus 2012: 152; Silva and Corrêa 2020: 114). Working and training at the Gracie gym, he turned into an essential part of their professional team, becoming its only Afro-Brazilian black belt bearer until he left the team. Shortly after departing, Santana, nicknamed "Black Panther", accepted to fight Hélio Gracie. Following his victory, Santana's career skyrocketed as a fighter and coach, making him a public figure of his time who was friends with celebrities like Jamelão, the famous samba singer and lead voice of the samba school Mangueira (Rajão and Cazé 2021).

In the realm of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, a contemporary illustration of the perpetuation of White superiority is evident through the utilization of a racist trope. This trope contrasts Black athletes' strength with White athletes' intelligence, as seen in the preface of Rickson Gracie's autobiography, written by renowned movie director José Padilha for the Portuguese edition (Padilha 2021). Padilha claims that Rickson Gracie must be considered a greater athlete than the world-famous Black soccer player Edson

Arantes do Nascimento, better known by his nickname Pelé, because Gracie used his intelligence to become the best fighter of his generation. In contrast, Pelé was a soccer genius because of his “natural abilities”. According to Padilha, “Rickson also inherited physical attributes that determined his path to success. However, unlike the King [Pelé], part of Rickson’s success is explained by the changes he himself introduced in jiu-jitsu [...], creating a series of techniques that [...] gave him superiority on the mats [...]” (Padilha 2021: 10, author’s translation). It remains unsaid by Padilha what he means by Rickson’s “inherited physical attributes”, but he might be enforcing the racist trope of Afro-Brazilians being physically stronger than Whites by referring to Rickson’s Black biological mother, Rosinha, who worked as a maid for the Gracies’ household (Cairus 2012: 149).¹⁰

Gracie Brazilian jiu-jitsu has been constructed as a White and elitist sport from early on in dialog with broader socio-political processes and continues to do so. Given the contemporary context of Brazil’s far-right populism, the analysed examples – Padilha’s preface to the Portuguese edition of Rickson Gracie’s autobiography (2021) and the large banner showing Carlson, Hélio, and Robson Gracie at the “Carioca” competition organized by the FJJ-Rio in 2022 – can be interpreted as contemporary examples of “injured whiteness” intended to defend the dominant position of the White subject (Pinho 2021). By simultaneously claiming BJJ to have an egalitarian character and positing three White men as the sport’s most influential figures, the FJJ-Rio reproduces the discourse of racial democracy. In the specific context of the century-old Brazilian jiu-jitsu history, this discourse reaffirms White supremacy by recurring to old racist narratives, positioning Whites as the only group capable of real innovations, as done by Padilha in praising Rickson. However, despite the Gracies’ dominance over the sport’s narrative, other lineages also claim to have given Brazilian jiu-jitsu a distinct meaning, like the Fadda lineage from Rio de Janeiro. Based on fieldwork among Fadda BJJ practitioners, in the following section, I analyse how social BJJ projects instil into their disciples an identity as good citizen-athletes, which draws on notions of anti-Blackness and racial democracy.

4. Anti-Blackness in the Periphery

Fadda Brazilian jiu-jitsu coaches working in Rio de Janeiro’s periphery use their sport to empower socio-economically disadvantaged disciples, aiming to integrate them into

¹⁰ Although Hélio Gracie fathered two more children with Rosinha, her motherhood was not made public until the children were grown up. Instead, Hélio’s wife Margarida assumed legal, public, and affective motherhood (Cairus 2012: 149; Gracie 2008: 257; Gracie and Maguire 2021). The story between Hélio Gracie and Rosinha exemplifies the classist and racist relationship between upper-class White men and Black poor women employed as domestic workers, as analysed by Ribeiro Corossacz (2017).

their community of good citizens and athletes and distance them from the world of crime. Testimonies recounting the fates of killed youths and success stories of people making their way out of poverty are essential to understanding how Brazilian jiu-jitsu in the periphery is seen as having the power to transform lives. Coach Gabriel Carvalho, a factory worker in his early 40s who is on permanent leave due to work-related health problems, established his Brazilian jiu-jitsu project named “Reclaim” in 2016 in the *favela* Gastão’s Hill, where he grew up and still lives. His project aims to inspire and motivate children and teenagers to avoid becoming involved in drug dealing or addiction. In only seven years, the project grew from a few disciples practicing on a tiny terrace, also used to store construction equipment and rubble, into a fully-fledged sports school. Now located in a former garment factory just outside of Gastão’s Hill it provides daily training in several martial art styles to approximately one hundred students from nearby neighbourhoods. The run-down factory is being renovated step-by-step through communal work when financial means permit it. Despite this success story, the project continues to struggle with hardships related to drug trafficking in the area. In the interview, Coach Carvalho lamented that one of his former disciples had died in gang-related violence but underlined the positive impact the project had on other youths evidenced by their social upward mobility:

We recently lost a former athlete of ours who got involved in trafficking. We managed to get him out [of trafficking], but he moved to another city and got involved again, and finally, we lost this boy. We do not accept it, but what can you do? We know that we will have losses. But with the people we manage to [rescue], we are incredibly happy like Lucas, Eduardo, or also Matheus. I also got him out of trafficking. Today, he is a family father, an exceptional guy. I argued a lot with him to make him get out of trafficking. He got out, went to the recovery centre, changed his life, started working, learned a profession, and today he is a very beautiful person; he has his family, his house, his car; for me, this is a great achievement, you know (Interview with Gabriel Carvalho, 20.06.2022).

For Coach Carvalho, losing one of his disciples he had seen growing up was a terrible experience. His sadness was only eased by knowing he had helped others escape the vicious circle of poverty and drugs. Coach Carvalho presented Matheus as an honest worker, family father, and good citizen who had made it by citing status markers like providing for a family and owning a house and a car. From the perspective of “aspirational Whiteness”, Matheus managed to distance himself from feared Blackness associated with drug trafficking and addiction and acquired a position of desired Whiteness associated with an elevated social position (Pinho 2021: 72).

For Matheus to reach the point of being recognized as a good citizen-athlete, he had to undergo training as a jiu-jitsu practitioner. This training generally involves the whole person, intending to change their habitus – the person’s predispositions to perceive and interact with the world around them – through “a process of *Bildung* of the body” (Wacquant 2004: 59). During fieldwork, this broad understanding of BJJ training became evident in how coaches cared for their disciples’ technical development and their “good appearance” (Roth-Gordon 2017) in speech, body posture, and clothing. It also involved instilling into them the specific morality of the good citizen-athlete that would make them part of the Fadda BJJ community and hinder others from identifying them as criminals related to the drug business. In sum, they applied “technologies of the self” which were realized through what has been analysed by Michel Foucault as “certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes” (Foucault 1988: 18).

Another coach I had the chance to visit was Orlando Silva. In his small gym in the *favela* Serra Verde, I observed how he conveyed skills and attitudes through exercises like push-ups while counting until ten in Japanese and jumping over obstacles to overcome one’s fears. Furthermore, he taught the disciples specific techniques and let them spar with one another. To spar, several young athletes paired up and took turns, as the space was not ample enough for everyone to train simultaneously. Silva’s wife used a tablet to note attendance and evaluate the children’s and teenagers’ performance. At the end of class, Silva gathered everyone in front of him and gave a small speech. He urged his disciples to incorporate what they learn in the gym into their daily lives by showing respect to their parents and taking on responsibility within their families. The BJJ-specific acquisition of attitudes was made especially clear in the way a disciple, who had to leave early, said goodbye. First, he bowed to coach Silva and shook hands with him, then did the same demonstration of respect to the author, as the second highest ranked black belt in the room, before passing on to the teaching assistant. After class, everyone remained with their BJJ uniforms on to signal their status as athletes on their way home. Some of those who took off their jacket used their BJJ belt to tie the training jacket into a pack, which they would wear on the back or hang over the shoulder. Like Loïc Wacquant’s boxers, who “tear themselves from the everyday world and create a moral and sensual universe sui generis” (Wacquant 2004: 346), the young BJJ athletes entered into a distinct relationship with their often-violent urban environment by making their Fadda BJJ identity publicly visible allowing them to create “situational Whiteness” (Roth-Gordon 2017) if needed.

Representing the identity of the good citizen-athlete was believed to offer some protection from aggression, both from the police and criminals. Akin to the worker

identity, which is supposed to prevent being regarded as a criminal, “in the restrictive regime of Brazilian citizenship, these categories help to situate those caught in the crossfire between ‘bandits’ and the police in a symbolic universe that protects them against urban violence” (Alves 2018: 14). This is because both police and drug traffickers are supposed to respect the honest worker (Alves 2018: 15). However, *favela* residents frequently complain about police abuses and violence (Machado da Silva and Pereira Leite 2008). According to Alves, “the rampant police violence is an obvious indicator that the status of ‘worker’ fails to prevent one from being killed – one may be a ‘worker’, but skin color overshadows occupational status” (Alves 2018: 67). Therefore, Alves argues, *favela* residents’ investment in the worker-versus-bandit dichotomy is ambiguous and contradicts their interests. However, relatives of victims of police violence often cling to the categories of “worker” and “good citizen” to defend the personhood of their loved ones. This is put into jeopardy by the police, who, trying to justify the killings, denounces their victims of being bandits (Alves 2018: 68).

Reports of BJJ coaches losing their lives to stray bullets resulting from confrontations between the police and drug gangs, or as a result of police incursions into *favelas*, abound (Soares 2019; Teixeira 2020; Vianna 2023), confirming Alves’ observation. However, among my interlocutors such occurrences did not alter the framing of the police and the state as the desired normative institutions able to enforce the state’s monopoly on the use of force. As stated by Pablo Carvalho: “I fight with all my strength to make my disciples understand that the police officer is our hero” (Interview with author, 23.03.2018). Tellingly, none of my interlocutors working with jiu-jitsu projects in *favelas* complained about “spectacular police violence” (Robb-Larkins 2015) as a reason for the high number of killed young Black and Brown men. On the contrary, several of them believed that the good citizens represented by the Brazilian state were at war with heavily armed drug factions trying to establish a parallel rule of drug trafficking. Therefore, my interlocutors saw no other way for security forces but to retaliate with force, even if that meant that collateral damage to civilians could not be avoided, as stated by Maria Renata Souza (Interview with author, 13.07.2019).

In Brazilian *favelas*, it is common to find three different normative regimes coexisting: that of the state, crime, and religion (Beraldo et al. 2022).¹¹ BJJ projects in *favelas* dominated by drug gangs can be said to form an intermediate position between the normative regimes of the state and crime. Because BJJ projects embrace the state’s normative regime and reject the regime of crime, they find themselves negotiating

11 Elsewhere, I analyse the interplay between religion and Brazilian jiu-jitsu in *favelas* (Schapira 2021, 2022). It is not uncommon for BJJ coaches to be also fervent evangelicals who integrate prayers into their classes, creating new religious urban forms (Schapira 2021). In specific cases, the realms of sport and religion even become fused to such a degree that practising BJJ turns into an occasion to praise God, while church services are used to prepare spiritually for BJJ classes (Schapira 2022).

between both worlds. In insisting on the primacy of the state, BJJ coaches working in *favelas* form a countermodel to the normative regime of the “world of crime” and its “marginal conviviality” (Feltran 2020b). In accepting the state’s necropolitics directed at the criminal agency of Black youths and their resistance against the “city’s enduring colonial order” (Alves 2018: 15), BJJ coaches often reproduce the state’s conservative bandit-worker dichotomy by applying “pedagogies of prohibition” focused on “filling up empty time” of children and teenagers with extracurricular activities (Fogarty-Valenzuela 2022: 289). These pedagogies make the individuals themselves responsible for not becoming victims of the “War on Drugs”, expecting them to alter their attitudes and behaviours to avoid being labelled as bandits rather than addressing the need for the state to change its necropolitical approach.

However, instead of buying blindly into the dominant logic of “criminal subjection” (Misse 2010: 18) that frames the bandit as an inflexible social identity, BJJ coaches are intimately aware of the arbitrariness of fateful turns that can lead people to become drug traffickers. Coach João Souza’s testimony of how he would have turned into a drug trafficker had it not been for jiu-jitsu speaks to this awareness. After the birth of his first child, João desperately needed 50 reais to pay for the medicine for his recently born baby. Lacking any other opportunity, he went to his neighbourhood’s “*boca de fumo*” (drug house),¹² where some of his friends worked and which was run by a former disciple of his, to offer his services. However, given his status as the *favela*’s BJJ teacher, the drug traffickers declined his offer and lent him the money without demanding any services in return. From then on, Coach Souza said, he committed himself to helping the *comunidade* (community) (Coach João Souza, interview with author, 22.06.2022).¹³ His commitment consists in using BJJ to broaden his disciples’ perspectives and awareness beyond their immediate surroundings. Highlighting the complex relationship between drug traffickers and civil society in *favelas*, this approach has led coach Souza to participate with his BJJ project in competitions located at special police and military headquarters. Although these represent concrete manifestations of the state’s violent anti-Blackness, they are also venues that have significant symbolic capital for Coach Souza. They bear the promise of a life outside of the “world of crime”, a hope he has for his disciples.

The same holds for Coach Orlando Silva who mentioned that he always wants his disciples to come to BJJ training to prevent them from taking on drug-related jobs, even if they are children of drug traffickers.

12 “*Boca de fumo*” is a Brazilian Portuguese term that translates to “drug den” or “drug house” in English and is commonly used in Brazil to describe illicit drug points where drugs are sold and consumed.

13 *Favela* residents often refer to *favelas* as “community” to emphasize the social connections and solidarity among the residents, highlighting the sense of belonging and shared identity within the group (Birman 2008).

If you don't remember [to pay], I also want you to come to train. What you can't do is stay at home. Sometimes there are mothers who say: "Ah, [he] didn't go because I don't have any money to contribute". Let him come because it's better he is training with us. And here the offer [of jobs in drug trafficking] is huge. We do this work to get these people off the streets. Here, there are other jiu-jitsu projects [run by] teachers who were once my disciples. We have children of traffickers who work with us. Do you understand? We don't discriminate because our idea is to try to show them a different path from the one their parents have taken (Orlando Silva, interview with author, 15.07.2022).

As becomes clear in Silva's account, drug traffickers not only recruit children from early on (Dowdney 2003: 130–131), but they also send their children to BJJ training to become good citizen-athletes, making BJJ a vital tool to attain "aspirational whiteness" (Pinho 2021).

BJJ coaches working in the periphery and in *favelas* hardly ever problematize the racialization of Black bodies, although they count with many Black and Brown disciples given the city's racial segregation and are constantly confronted with the necropolitical effects of "the anti-Black city" (Alves 2018).¹⁴ Asked about the reason for not being more outspoken about the fact that focusing on social projects implies addressing primarily Black and Brown youths, most coaches state that skin colour is inconsequential to them, asserting that racism or other forms of discrimination do not exist within BJJ. When I asked Coach Orlando Silva, who defines himself as Black, is married to a White woman, and works as a delivery driver and security guard, whether his skin colour played any role in his daily life, he explicitly stated its irrelevance and emphasized the lack of racial discrimination.

No! Not in my life. Not in anything I do. In security, I work in a federal daycare centre; I don't see [a different] treatment for being Black. I don't see it. I'm not going to say that there's not much difference, there's no difference at all (Orlando Silva, interview with author, 07.15.2022).

Like Coach Silva, most of my interlocutors perceive race only through the discourse of racial democracy, which posits equality among all people. This perception is backed by their lived experiences of "porous racial boundaries in sociability, which manifest themselves by widespread interracial conviviality and high rates of racial intermarriage

¹⁴ For a visual representation of Rio de Janeiro's racial segregation demonstrating the concentration of Whites in the prestigious South Zone and the concentration of Black and Brown people in the West and North Zones, see Gusmão (2015). Taking a larger geographical area into account that includes the Baixada Fluminense (Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan Region), Telles shows that a large concentration of non-Whites can also be found in the region's eastern parts (Telles 2006: 200).

(especially in lower socio-economic status groups)” (Lamont et al. 2016: 124).¹⁵ My interlocutors’ denial of racism in BJJ, their workplace, and their personal lives confirms Joel Rufino’s observation that “[t]he average Brazilian sees himself as a creature ‘without problems of this kind’” (Santos 2015: 25, author’s translation).

As my interlocutors perceive race mostly through the discourse of racial democracy, they often reject new sensibilities and policies intended to combat discrimination, believing that these measures jeopardize racial equality instead of improving it. At a gathering of Fadda BJJ coaches, one of the leaders criticized the new sensibilities regarding the usage of race-related terms, like the word “*negão*” (big Black) to refer to a Black friend. When I asked one of my interlocutors, who was also present at the meeting, to share his thoughts on the issue, he said that he refrains from using racial terms to refer to his Black friends to avoid misunderstandings. Nevertheless, he believes that the root of the problem lies in government discourses about inequality that instill feelings of inferiority in Black individuals, rather than encouraging them to take pride in their identity (Lucas dos Santos Lima, interview with author, 18.06.2022). Most people I spoke with agreed that affirmative action was counterproductive to racial equality as it only “divided the Brazilian people” (Lucas dos Santos Lima, interview with author, 18.06.2022). In a similar vein, for Maria Renata Pereira, the real problem seemed to be “identity politics”¹⁶ in general:

And what I see a lot nowadays is that [...] something was implanted to separate people: [...] to separate and pit the poor against the rich, Black against White, homosexual against heterosexual, man against woman. This is what was implanted in Brazil, which is why today, there is this total victimization in terms of Blacks, homosexuals, women. As much as it exists, I think it is that they are pushing too hard. The media makes what is a small thing into a huge thing (Maria Renata Pereira, interview with author, 24.09.2022).

For Coach Pereira, people complain too much and respect each other too little. In her view, members of social minorities prefer complaining, hoping to be granted benefits instead of working hard to save up the money necessary to fulfil their wishes. Consequently, she does not see socio-economic, racial, and gender discrimination

15 It is essential to note that despite the high degree of racial intermarriage the marriage business does not escape racialized logics. In general, “whiter skin is preferred and persons with the darkest skin, especially women, are largely rejected. [...] Conversely lighter-skinned persons often trade heavily on their Whiteness in exchange for status and other advantages that they receive from darker-skinned partners” (Telles 2006: 193).

16 According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “[r]ather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination” (Heyes 2020).

as the causes of social inequalities but the lack of willingness to work on oneself, thus reinforcing ideas of individual entrepreneurship, racial democracy, and traditional morality reminiscent of Bolsonaro's "far-right neoliberal nationalism" (Iamamoto et al. 2023).

Fadda coaches frequently reference traditional Japanese rituals as a means to embody their ideals for an ideal Brazilian society. As many perceive society as deficient and marked by an inversion of moral values, they use Brazilian jiu-jitsu to create a form of "prefigurative politics" (Boggs 1977) that temporarily realizes an ideal society of citizen-athletes in the present. This is akin to Indian wrestling, where the wrestler's healthy body symbolizes the reformed Hindu nation (Alter 1993). For Fadda members, the everyday ritual of bowing to each other – sometimes practiced even outside the gym – is seen as a sign of mutual respect between higher- and lower-ranked athletes, referencing "Bushido" or "Way of the Warrior" ideals.¹⁷ However, the respect for rank differences coexists with valuing every disciple as holding full personhood. This is sometimes made explicit when coaches and disciples form a circle at the end of class to discuss topics of interest like the importance of staying true to Fadda ideals. The circle itself, referred to as "*otagai*"¹⁸ in Japanese or "*entre nós*" (among us) in Portuguese, represents the ideal of equality among its members. The ritual of the "among us" circle commonly goes together with the saying "*aqui, ninguém é melhor do que ninguém*" ("here, no one is better than the other") and a self-characterization as "*humilde*" ("humble"). The establishment of a "system of persons" in which everyone is respected as "*gente*" (people, person), as analysed by DaMatta (1991: 183), is considered by many Fadda practitioners as their distinctive feature, attributed to the lineage's founder Oswaldo Fadda (DaMatta 1991: 183; Paiva 2019).

As I have shown, the Fadda pedagogy builds upon the idea of educating good-citizen athletes who stay away from drugs and crime and become respected members of society. Despite the highly inclusive character of BJJ sport projects, which integrate socio-economically disadvantaged youths into the urban fabric, they also reproduce

17 Among martial artists, the term "bushido" is generally understood to represent a timeless philosophy and concept related to Japanese martial arts. The term is composed of three kanji letters "*bu*" (武), "*shi*" (士), and "*do*" (道). "*Bu*" means "military" or "martial", "*shi*" represents a "samurai" or a "gentleman", and "*do*" stands for "way" or "path". When combined, these kanji characters form the word "bushido", representing the "way of the warrior" or the samurai code of conduct said to consist of seven virtues. Bushido, often considered an ancient concept, was invented mainly during the late Meiji period (1868-1912), inspired by Victorian ideals of chivalry and gentlemanhood. Its growth coincided with the spread and codification of martial arts, riding the wave of nationalism and militarism after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. This development of bushido and its associated martial arts was part of a broader cultural revival and reinvention, influenced by a nativist backlash against Westernisation and a reassessment of samurai culture (Benesch 2020).

18 The term "*otagai*" translates to "mutual", "reciprocal", or "each other" in English. It represents the idea of mutual action or feeling between multiple parties (RomajiDesu 2023).

the excluding bandit-worker dichotomy. This dichotomy individualizes the responsibility for not becoming a victim of urban violence, commonly associated with Blackness. In my interpretation, by alluding to rituals deemed traditionally Japanese, Fadda BJJ practitioners distance themselves symbolically from Blackness thanks to the high valorisation of Japanese immigration and culture prevalent in contemporary Brazil (Lesser 2013: 183). The Fadda pedagogy of the good-citizen athlete, therefore, forms part of an anti-Black strategy intended to protect disciples from urban violence and low social status. This is done by teaching them a specific BJJ habitus involving new registers related to movement, speech, and appearance, which can empower and deter them from seeking employment in the drug trade. While the ability to perform situational Whiteness is believed to offer certain protection from police abuse, acquiring a BJJ habitus is also seen as a possible path to attaining traditional markers of adulthood and status, such as establishing a family, owning a car, and acquiring a house.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I explored how the discourse of “Brazilianess”, critical during the Estado Novo of the 1930s, allowed the Gracie family to strip the still-developing sport of key Japanese references and rebrand it as a genuine national sport. Parallel to the Whitening of BJJ, which resolved racial anxieties regarding Japanese immigration held by the White elite of the time, it became framed as a sport open to everyone. As the members of the Gracie family turned national celebrities, their fights and lives became occasions to defend White supremacy and the Brazilian system of delegating status according to nearness to Whiteness and distance to Blackness. Unfortunately, White supremacy continues being symbolically defended by leading members of the Gracie family and their friends in the context of Brazil’s contemporary far-right politics. Like their Gracie counterparts, many Fadda members in Rio de Janeiro’s periphery embrace contemporary conservative populist notions of racial democracy, entrepreneurialism, and traditional morality. However, they do so “from below” based on their self-understanding of belonging to the popular classes. The elitist image of BJJ had been challenged from 1950 on by Oswaldo Fadda, who took Brazilian jiu-jitsu from Rio de Janeiro’s wealthy South Zone to the city’s lower-income areas in the North and West Zones. Nevertheless, he and his disciples refrained from challenging the Gracies’ portrayal of the sport as symbolically White. Instead, through embodied references to Japanese martial arts – which regained significant symbolic value after World War II – the Fadda lineage found a way to distance their BJJ from Blackness without having to embrace the Gracies’ elitist Whiteness.

Although BJJ has been historically constructed as White, the Brazilian jiu-jitsu community, as represented by the Gracie and the Fadda lineages, largely believes

their sport is profoundly democratic in the sense of offering equal opportunities to everyone, summarized in the expression “on the mats, everyone is equal”. However, in this paper, I argue, paraphrasing George Orwell, that on the mats, some are more equal than others. To that end, I examined how Brazilian jiu-jitsu functions as a marker of Whiteness for higher-income groups and of anti-Blackness for lower-income groups. To analytically grasp the complex form of conviviality shared by the Fadda and the Gracie lineage, I propose using the term “inclusive conservative conviviality”. This term captures large parts of the BJJ community’s desire for the social inclusion of different groups as regards socio-economic status, abilities, race, or gender and the simultaneous endorsement of exclusionary policies centred on racialized Black and Brown bodies. Moreover, this camp rejects progressive political sensibilities that demand strengthening the rights and recognition of marginalized groups. The term inclusive conservative conviviality encompasses the renewed narrative of racial democracy popular among Brazil’s contemporary political Right – emphasizing weak symbolic boundaries between racial categories and overlooking strong social ones – and its critique of identity politics. Brazilian jiu-jitsu in Rio de Janeiro exemplifies how this ambivalent form of conviviality serves as a bracket, enabling various social groups to perceive themselves as united within an urban democratic society by drawing uncritically on Brazil’s foundational national narratives, like racial democracy.

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