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# CHASING RX:
# A SPATIAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE CROSSFIT GYM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Kinesiology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Matthew C. Crockett

December 2015

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

# CHASING RX:
# A SPATIAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE CROSSFIT GYM

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF KINESIOLOGY

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December 2015

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# ABSTRACT

## CHASING RX:
## A SPATIAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE CROSSFIT GYM

by Matt Crockett

CrossFit is a group fitness program that incorporates a variety of weightlifting and gymnastic movements performed at high intensities. Although there is growing research on CrossFit's physiological and behavioral outcomes, few studies have qualitatively examined the program's psychological and sociological characteristics. Drawing from Henning Eichberg's (1998) work on spatial geography, this five-month ethnographic study examined the space and place of two San Francisco Bay Area CrossFit gyms as an introduction to a broader discussion on CrossFit subculture and evolving discourses about the body, health, and fitness. Specifically, three major themes about the CrossFit space emerged from the participant-observation data, including: a place to experience hard physical labor in an otherwise sedentary and technologized society; a place that encourages all genders, ages, and abilities to participate equally as long as one pays the premium membership; and a hyper-competitive place that inadvertently leads to wild and untamed bodily movements. Results of the study suggest that CrossFit's popularity is related at least as much to psychosocial factors as it is to the physiological benefits derived from participation. The gym's location, layout, and open arrangement of moving bodies reveal underlying social patterns that allow for a more complex interpretation of CrossFit space as a place that blurs the line between exercise and menial labor, and elite sport and recreational activity.

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## Introduction

The following journal article describes the space and place of CrossFit, a popular group exercise phenomenon that has emerged over the last decade to challenge mainstream fitness norms (Fainaru-Wada, 2014). The program incorporates a variety of weightlifting and gymnastic movements executed at high intensity, with an emphasis on competition and social comparison among its members regardless of gender, age, or ability (Glassman, 2007). Relying on field notes from 5 months of participant observation at two unrelated CrossFit gyms in the San Francisco Bay Area, the following article discusses CrossFit's unique use of space, including the gyms' locations and layouts, as well as any discrepancies between intended and actual uses. These architectural concepts provide links to broader issues such as CrossFit's aggressive subculture and its sociohistorical context within physical culture. The discussion incorporates theory from German sociologist and historian Henning Eichberg (1998), whose ideas on physical culture provide a compelling framework from which to interpret the CrossFit gym. His work argued that the sporting body and the space of sport are historically and socially constructed, and inseparably intertwined. His work asked a simple question: "How did the space surrounding sport's moving bodies constitute itself, and what does it tell us?" (Eichberg, 1998, p. 48). Likewise, this article explores how CrossFit space is constructed and what it can tell us about the moving bodies it contains.

### Statement of Purpose

This study's purpose was to conduct a participant-observation ethnographic study in order to interpret the space and place of CrossFit gyms in the San Francisco Bay Area

as an introduction to a broader discussion on CrossFit subculture and, secondarily, on evolving discourses about the body, health, and fitness.

**Significance of Study**

This examination of CrossFit may inform the ongoing debate over the program's safety and efficacy by helping explain the social phenomenon underpinning its extreme popularity. This knowledge may consequently better equip trainers, coaches, and health professionals who interact with CrossFit participants or who are faced with questions about CrossFit by interested parties. As Fahlberg, Fahlberg, and Gates (1992) argued, the psychosocial characteristics of exercise behavior are as important as the physiological ones. Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of literature within sport studies that has used Eichberg's (1998) work to analyze how the geographical spaces of sport and fitness relate to, and sometimes even dictate, human movement.

**Definitions**

1. *CrossFit* is a fitness regimen that consists of constantly varied functional movements performed at high intensity in a group environment (Glassman, 2007). The program combines gymnastics, weightlifting, and other athletic activities into a class-based format intended to elicit competition and camaraderie.
2. *CrossFit box* is the colloquial term used by CrossFit participants to refer to a CrossFit gym. The name originates from the fact that CrossFit gyms are frequently located in old warehouses with an open, box-like interior. There are over 10,000 affiliated CrossFit boxes worldwide (Fainaru-Wada, 2014).

3. *WOD* is an acronym for workout of the day. CrossFit gyms will typically post one workout each day that attending members will complete. CrossFit participants often use the WOD acronym both as a noun, as in “That was a difficult WOD,” and as a verb, as in “Are you WODing today?”
4. *Rx* represents the prescribed exercise standard for a specific WOD. This could entail how much weight is required, what type of movement should be executed, and how one should perform the WOD. For example, a popular WOD known as “Fran” calls for a barbell squat-press movement with Rx weights of 95 lb. for men and 65 lb. for women. Any person who completes the WOD using those weights and movements can claim the Rx tag when the WOD is recorded on the whiteboard or on social media.
5. *Space* is defined as the physical and tangible site of an activity, including natural and manufactured objects and boundaries (Vertinsky & Bale, 2004). For example, the space of a CrossFit gym consists of its physical location, interior, and exterior, as well as how the equipment is physically arranged.
6. *Place* is defined as the use of a space in such a way as to give it a distinct character, feeling, or emotion (Vertinsky & Bale, 2004). For example, CrossFit participants produce a CrossFit place by using space in a way that creates unique memories and meaning.
7. *Artificial sport space* represents the idea that modern sporting spaces have become increasingly contained, manufactured, and enclosed (Eichberg, 1998). This notion includes physical artifice via man-made boundaries, fences, and

buildings, and also metaphorical artifice via rules, governing bodies, and competition standards.

8. *Green wave* is defined as a movement in physical culture that attempts to relocate the site of sport from artificial spaces to more natural and open areas. Henning Eichberg (1998) outlined how these waves are cyclical and typically indicate changing social beliefs about health, fitness, and the body.
9. *Trialectic model* is a method of theorizing space created by Henning Eichberg (1998). The model emphasizes the convoluted nature of human movement in that it acknowledges that sporting space, despite a designer's best intentions, can simultaneously produce drastically different experiences. Eichberg envisioned three interconnected spatial goals in sport: achievement, discipline, and experience.
10. *Achievement space* is one of the three spatial paradigms within Henning Eichberg's "trialectic model" (Eichberg, 1998). This type of space emphasizes competition, timekeeping, and exact standards of movement. The modern synthetic track is the quintessential example, with precise racing lanes, exact timing technology, and a standardized distance. These elements allow, and even artificially manufacture, a quest for records and competition.
11. *Disciplined space* is one of the three spatial paradigms within Henning Eichberg's "trialectic model" (Eichberg, 1998). This type of space emphasizes cleanliness, discipline, and self-monitoring. For example, the modern health club encourages

members to keep their physical form in line with societal norms via full-length mirrors throughout the space and overly hygienic locker rooms.

12. *Experiential space* is one of the three spatial paradigms within Henning Eichberg's "trialectic model" (Eichberg, 1998). This space supplants the strict order of the other two spaces in Eichberg's model by highlighting the physiological experience and social sensuality of physical activity. Eichberg explained that jogging through a forest could foster a greater commune between body and nature than does the other two spaces in his model.

**Delimitations**

This study is delimited to the following instruments:

1. Interview guide (Appendix A).

This study is delimited to the following participants

1. Participants of licensed CrossFit gyms.
2. CrossFit participants residing in the San Francisco Bay Area who agreed to participate in this study (Appendix B).

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study include the following:

1. As part of requirements imposed by the Institutional Review Board, the researcher had to disclose his status as an ethnographer as well as discuss the purpose of this study with participants, albeit in very general terms. This disclosure, while understandably necessary to safeguard participants' rights, may have had some

degree of impact on the researcher's interactions with the participants and participants' willingness to share their experiences honestly.

2. Focusing on only a few gyms in the San Francisco Bay Area, this study may not have been generalizable to the majority of CrossFit gyms worldwide.

# Chasing Rx:
# A Spatial Ethnography of the CrossFit Gym

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CrossFit is a group fitness program that incorporates a variety of weightlifting and gymnastic movements performed at high intensities. Although there is growing research on CrossFit's physiological and behavioral outcomes, few studies have qualitatively examined the program's psychological and sociological characteristics. Drawing from Henning Eichberg's (1998) work on spatial geography, this five-month ethnographic study examined the space and place of two San Francisco Bay Area CrossFit gyms as an introduction to a broader discussion on CrossFit subculture and evolving discourses about the body, health, and fitness. Specifically, three major themes about the CrossFit space emerged from the participant-observation data, including: a place to experience hard physical labor in an otherwise sedentary and technologized society; a place that encourages all genders, ages, and abilities to participate equally as long as one pays the premium membership; and a hyper-competitive place that inadvertently leads to wild and untamed bodily movements. Results of the study suggest that CrossFit's popularity is related at least as much to psychosocial factors as it is to the physiological benefits derived from participation. The gym's location, layout, and open arrangement of moving bodies reveal underlying social patterns that allow for a more complex interpretation of CrossFit space as a place that blurs the line between exercise and menial labor, and elite sport and recreational activity.

CrossFit is a group fitness program that incorporates a variety of weightlifting and gymnastic movements performed at a fast pace (Glassman, 2007). In slightly over a decade, the program has exploded from a single gym in

Santa Cruz, Calif., into a network of over 10,000 affiliated facilities worldwide (Fainaru-Wada, 2014). Although CrossFit gyms utilize the same class-based exercise structure seen in Zumba, yoga, and boot camp programs, CrossFit differs dramatically by emphasizing competition and comparison among members, regardless of gender, age, or ability. During a typical hour-long CrossFit class, an instructor will lead a group of as many as 30 participants through a warm-up and stretching period, a weightlifting or gymnastics session, and a culminating intense workout called the "workout of the day." This final workout, colloquially referred to as the "WOD" by CrossFit participants, changes daily in length and exercise selection, and can vary from as short as 2-3 minutes to longer than 45 minutes. Despite its creative composition day-to-day, the WOD's constant attributes are maximum intensity and effort. Instructors urge participants to complete the prescribed movements as fast as possible and with as little rest as possible, and even encourage members to compete for the best time. Every WOD is timed, scored, and sometimes even judged for movement proficiency by a coach. These measurements are then publicly recorded on whiteboards posted in the gym and on social media sites. Although every affiliated gym shares these similar characteristics, each facility is independently owned and operated, and is characterized by unique member compositions and cultures (Glassman, 2012).

CrossFit's unorthodox training methods and overall approach to group fitness have elicited strong reactions from fitness professionals and spurred public debate about the program's safety and efficacy (Bergeron et al., 2011; Fainaru-Wada, 2014; Paine, Uptgraft, & Wylie, 2010; Petersen, Pinske, & Greener, 2014). Likewise, the scientific community has focused almost exclusively on CrossFit's training effectiveness and potential injury risk (Hak, Hodzovic, & Hickey, 2013; Smith, Sommer, Starkoff, & Devor, 2013; Weisenthal, Beck, Maloney, DeHaven, & Giordano, 2014). Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of literature exploring the sociocultural characteristics of Crossfit (Dawson, 2015). Despite the program's tremendous growth and polarizing position within the fitness industry, scholars have applied only physiological and behavioral approaches to CrossFit, which Fahlberg, Fahlberg, and Gates (1992) argued are unable to fully describe the complexity of exercise behavior.

Therefore, this paper moves beyond the well-trod debates over CrossFit's methods and safety, and instead examines CrossFit through a sociocultural lens. Following the classic work by Klein (1993) and others (Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Fusco, 2005; Johnston, 1996; Spielvogel, 2002) on gym subcultures, this ethnography investigates the space and place of CrossFit as an introduction to a broader discourse on CrossFit subculture and, secondarily, on evolving discourses about the body, health, and fitness.

In the sport studies literature, space and place are common themes that provide a tangible way to discuss social power relations within sport, such as which groups are included or excluded from sporting spaces (Bale, 2003; Bale & Vertinsky, 2004; Friedman & van Ingen, 2011; van Ingen, 2003). As Fusco (2005) argued, "Paying attention to the geography of sports means being vigilant about how the sociocultural organization of space produces and embodies constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and nationhood" (p. 305). Thus, investigating what types of bodies are included or excluded from the CrossFit space can help answer the question, "who can be (Cross)fit?"

Spatial analysis has frequently served as the entry point for investigations of physical and sporting subcultures, including queer running clubs (van Ingen, 2004), skateboarders (Drissel, 2013), British bodybuilders (Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005), female bodybuilders (Johnston, 1996), long distance runners (Howe & Morris, 2009), Japanese fitness clubs (Spielvogel, 2002), ultimate frisbee leagues (Griggs, 2009), and surfers (Booth, 2004; Waitt, 2008). Additionally, The *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (IRSS) dedicated a special double issue in 1993 to the space of sport, including work on the development of the modern stadium (Bale, 1993), the sporting facilities in Spain (Puig, del Castillo, Pellegrino, & Lambert, 1993), and use of urban spaces by informal sports (Bach, 1993).

Despite this topical variety, the overall aim of spatial-focused work examined moving bodies within space, including how they used, produced, and are produced by the surrounding physical space (Friedman & van Ingen, 2011). Although spatial scholars have investigated community gyms and health centers (see Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Fusco, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Newhall, 2013; Spielvogel, 2002), the majority of scholarly attention has focused on more economically impactful urban sports areas such as stadiums and large urban parks (e.g., Bale, 2003; Bale & Vertinsky, 2004; Fusco, 2009; Gaffney & Bale, 2004; Puig, del Castillo, Pellegrino, & Lambert, 1993; Silk, 2004). Furthermore, Andrews, Sudwell, and Sparkes (2005) highlighted the need to examine the smaller divisions of sport space within gyms and other fitness sites. Vertinsky (2004) decried this lack of analysis, arguing that local gyms "are often seen as too commonplace and ubiquitous to make meaningful study, yet they reflect particular notions of the training and education of the body while their various orderings of space embody constructions of race, place, gender, and identity" (p. 13). For example, Spielvogel (2002) found that the spatial layout of Japanese fitness clubs reflected a guilty conscience about historical ideas of bodily training, which traditionally occurred outdoors in Japan as a way to harden the body and teach it to withstand the elements. Using tanning beds and beauty salons, the sterilized clubs allowed members to reap the social benefits of training outdoors but without

the extra effort or grime. Similarly, Fusco (2005) showed how a health club's locker room operated in accordance with dominant desires for hygienic space, as well as clean and athletic bodies. As these studies and others argued, the spatial layout and division of sport space is more a social question than an architectural one.

Furthermore, the relationship between sport space and the (re)production of normative bodies emerged in part from Foucauldian ideas of discipline, surveillance, normalization, and self-monitoring (Foucault, 1977; Markula & Pringle, 2006). The architecture, layout, and division of sport spaces were interpreted as disciplining forces that subtly encourage, or even blatantly coerce, the body to function in line with normative discourses. Vertinsky (2004) posited that a social group's ability to influence space, whether through planning, design, construction, or use, is an integral means to augment and disseminate such discursive power. The CrossFit gym, with its use of a space that was arguably never intended for exercise, presents a unique opportunity to examine the social contradictions that emerge from this dichotomy of design versus actual use.

Therefore, using informal interviews and participant observation sessions over a five-month period, the current study critically examined how social qualities and beliefs are written onto the social geography of CrossFit gyms,

including their locations, participants' use of inanimate objects, the arrangement of space, and how moving bodies shape, create, and secrete the CrossFit place.

## Theoretical Framework:
## Spaces of achievement, discipline, and experience

This study draws from German sociologist and historian Henning Eichberg, (1982, 1990, 1998) whose ideas on physical cultures and the spaces in which sport and physical activity occur provide a useful theoretical framework from which to interpret the CrossFit gym. Following Bale and Philo's 1998 publication of English versions of several of Eichberg's essays, Anglophone scholars more frequently incorporated his ideas in sports studies, the variety of which are indicative of Eichberg's range as a thinker: technology (Butryn & Masucci, 2009), sport history (Parry, 2006), and space and place (Bale, 2003; Spielvogel, 2002; Vertinsky, 2004). This study is primarily concerned with Eichberg's ideas on space, which posit that the sporting body and sporting space are historically and socially constructed, and inseparably intertwined. His work asked a simple question: "How did the space surrounding sport's moving bodies constitute itself, and what does it tell us?" (Eichberg, 1998, p. 48). In other words, Eichberg used the geography of sport as a social map to discuss larger sociohistorical issues within physical culture.

Eichberg refused simplistic either-or dualisms of physical culture, arguing instead for a more complex interpretation of sport as the manifestation of societal and historical beliefs about space, time, interpersonal relations, and the body. While other scholars employed a more traditional cartographic approach to sport space that reduced people to data on a map, Eichberg sought a more critical and humanistic view that prioritized the meanings inherent in the relationship between the moving body and space (Bale & Philo, 1998). It is this theoretical diversity that prompted Brownell (1998) to argue for a wider use of Eichberg's work: "Eichberg provides us with innovative ways of thinking about the movement of bodies in space, and also the position of bodies within human relationships, which can provide conceptual links between body culture and larger social-historical issues" (p. 24). Likewise, this paper argues that the popularity of CrossFit spaces is more a function of the psychosocial needs of exercisers than of any potential physiological benefit, and therefore provides evidence of a larger discursive evolution governing the body, health, and fitness.

At the center of Eichberg's work is his trialectic model (Bale & Philo, 1998), which emphasized the complexity of physical culture and rejected oversimplified categorizations of sport as either a competitive activity or a recreational pastime. His model rejected traditional assumptions of 'what sport is' and instead described sport space as the site of many different configurations of

the human body. He envisioned three spatial paradigms that governed the moving body: the space for achievement, discipline, and experience. Space for achievement, such as the modern synthetic track, encouraged competition, timekeeping, and exact standards of movement (Eichberg, 1982, 1998). Disciplined space, such as the sanitized health club, subtly coerced users into becoming healthier and more productive bodies through the Foucaldian methods of surveillance and self-monitoring. The third category – experience – supplanted the strict order of the other two by highlighting the physiological experience and social sensuality of physical activity. However, Eichberg was quick to mention that a space designed primarily for achievement, like the running track, could also provide a spiritual experience through the monastic lifestyle required to achieve victory. Thus, Eichberg argued each of these spaces, while geographically very different, could elicit an equally important sense of place and meaning within the sporting body. Whether designed for competition or for leisure, sport spaces often diffuse into each other in convoluted ways, meaning that any space could be described by any aspect of Eichberg's model based on the particular form of bodily movement produced. Eichberg's model provides a way to think beyond the "institutional parceling" of physical (sub)cultures into "stale positivistic categories," and instead fully explicate the complex relationships between the moving body and space (1998, p. 117).

Finally, Eichberg's work showed how to parse human movement in space in such a way that accounts for, or rather depends on, the social and physical contradictions of human beings. As Brownell (1998) noted, "Eichberg's opus reflects more than simple methodological or topical prescriptions: it is a way of seeing, a guide to thinking. Like the modern bourgeois order of things, Eichberg's work is temporally, spatially, and directionally unbounded" (p. 42). This paper argues that the CrossFit gym and its unique physical culture, much like Eichberg's ideas, are also complex and unbounded.

Although the unique structure and function of the CrossFit gym makes it an excellent candidate for multiple theoretical approaches – Foucauldian-based inquiries, neoliberal investigations, and gender-focused work to name a few – this paper delimits its theoretical discussion to Eichberg's work on sport space. Eichberg's trialectic model did incorporate Foucault's (1977) ideas on discipline and self-governance, but in a much narrower, sport-specific context. This paper argues that Eichberg's work, although a much more specific application of Foucauldian ideas than is Foucault's direct work, is a more apt framework for CrossFit considering this exercise phenomenon is yet in its analytical infancy and thus demands a more sport-focused theory. Although this paper will discuss ideas surrounding Foucault, neoliberalism, and gender, it will do so only briefly to maintain the cohesiveness of using a singular theoretical approach in such an

exploratory study. It is my hope that further inquiries can and should build on this work by applying a variety of theories.

## Methods

The findings of this paper are based on five months of ethnographic work at two CrossFit gyms in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although my research formally began in early 2015, I was contracted as an independent personal trainer and Olympic weightlifting instructor at "CrossFit Achieve" for over two years prior to the start of this ethnography. I was not involved in the CrossFit side of the business, but my employee status afforded me an intimate perspective of the inner-workings of the gym, including staff meetings about the structure and function of the space. My access and familiarity with the coaches allowed for candid conversations about CrossFit that would never have occurred when members were around. However, as a non-CrossFit trainer the majority of gym members viewed me as an authority figure and outsider, which somewhat excluded me from fully sharing in their CrossFit experience. Therefore, to complement this quasi-outsider role at this site, I also joined nearby "CrossFit Compete" as a paying member, where I assumed the role of a full-fledged CrossFitter. I chose this gym specifically because I did not know any of the members, nor did they have any knowledge about my athletic experience or coaching background. This allowed

me to experience the lifecycle of CrossFit membership, including how I earned social acceptance and entry into their nuanced subcultural space.

In accordance with the Institutional Review Board's requirements, I informed participants about my study and obtained each person's verbal consent for participation in the study. Although my status as a researcher was made very clear at both gyms, the participants at "CrossFit Compete" had no knowledge of my occupation as a personal trainer or weightlifting coach. This allowed me to fully embrace the role as a fellow CrossFitter and interact with these participants without the complicated relationship that characterized my client-trainer relationships at "CrossFit Achieve." This dual research perspective followed Spielvogel's (2002) study, which describes her work as an aerobics instructor at two clubs in Japan, while attending a third club as an exercising member. As an employee, she was privy to hidden or unobvious information, had access to all areas of the club, and could easily interview club members. As a member, she could interact with patrons without the social complications inherent in her role as an employee.

This ethnography employed observational techniques used by Spielvogel (2002) and Fusco (2005) that privileged the importance of space in social interactions. As Scholl, Lahr-Kurten, and Redepenning (2014) remarked, "the openness and inchoateness of the ethnographical approach makes it compatible to

the messiness, contingency and fluidity of the spatial and the serendipity of spatial encounters" (p. 52). In other words, this ethnography considered the CrossFit space a living character equal in importance to the moving bodies within the space.

For example, Fusco's study of race construction within health club locker rooms made special recognition of the dialectical nature of space, emphasizing equally how locker rooms were produced architecturally as well as how individuals came to know themselves within those spaces. She used observations and photographs of locker rooms, textual analysis of related documents, and interviews with designers, users, and managers of those spaces. Her multidimensional methodological approach mirrored the complexity of the relationships among bodies, spaces, and discourses of behavior.

Similarly, I collected data from a variety of sources and in many different forms to elucidate how the gym's space – its layout, location, and function – affected participants' social behavior and interactions. I recorded field notes and drawings about where and how participants placed themselves throughout the CrossFit space, including any spatial patterns in group behavior based on social factors such as athletic ability, race, gender, or otherwise. I also observed how each participant acted during the exercise class, including mannerisms, movements, or other eccentricities. I combined these observational data with my

own personal reflections on CrossFit as well as notes from informal conversations with participants and coaches. I made a deliberate decision to focus on informal conversations rather than more formal interviews for several reasons, the primary of which was the privileging of data collection *in situ*, or within the living and breathing CrossFit space. In other words, if this study truly considered the CrossFit space equal in importance to its participants, then interview data needed to be as raw and unsanitized as the space itself. For example, a breathless, sweaty conversation after a strenuous WOD yielded spoken data not bound by the sterile confines of a sit-down formal interview. These unplanned interactions allowed participants to emote naturally and comfortably, not only with words but also through physical mannerisms, facial expressions, and other non-verbal forms of communication.

As such, throughout my ethnography I remained wary of favoring visual epistemologies in the interpretation of CrossFit spaces. As van Ingen (2003) remarked, "maps are important tools for 'framing' particular spatial scales but only offer partial representations" (p. 205). Therefore, I sought to experience the CrossFit gym through as many senses as possible, not only seeing and mapping the space, but also tasting, smelling, and touching the CrossFit gym such that my body became an instrument for data collection. de Garis (1999) called for such sensuality in sport ethnographies by incorporating sources other than visual

communications and allowing the researcher's physical presence to be reflected within the ethnographic text. He argued, "as an epistemological framework, a sensuous ethnography is also performative ethnography; it is a lived experience framed by a lived body" (p. 73). Indeed, much like Spencer's (2014) body, which bore the physical marks of his MMA ethnography, I put my body forth as an instrument on which to inscribe the marks of CrossFit – calluses, blood, sweat, dirt, and chalk – in a way that pen on paper could never fully capture. Thus, the current study prioritized ways to viscerally describe the CrossFit space and the kinetic bodies that move, sweat, and grunt within its walls.

In order to preserve the natural environment and flow of both gyms, I covertly typed quick field notes on my smartphone in the bathroom or other secluded areas, and recorded longer observations into a voice recorder as I drove away. I also captured photographs and videos of each gym's physical layout and function, in addition to personal reflections on my transformation into a CrossFitter. I transcribed these notes, voice recordings, film, and photographs into a coherent field journal entry after every ethnographic session. A sport studies scholar with expertise in qualitative research methods and I read the complete field journal several times before, leaning on the theoretical framework described above, I drew out common themes in accordance with analytical techniques described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2005). These techniques began with the

process of open coding, whereby I categorized and grouped small segments of the field notes into specific analytical dimensions. From there, recurrent themes and connections began to emerge, allowing for further coding of the field notes with a more focused lens toward these themes. I then combined these disparate themes and meanings with Eichberg's theory into a cohesive analytical narrative.

## Results

Despite each being independently owned, CrossFit "Achieve" and "Compete" shared similar characteristics, including their locations, spatial layout, and class structure. Therefore, the following sections will refer to a singular "CrossFit gym" unless otherwise noted, following Spielvogel's (2002) example with multiple clubs in Japan. This will simplify the discussion of CrossFit subculture, and should better preserve the anonymity of each gym and its participants. The first section begins with a discussion of gaining social acceptance in the CrossFit space, both in how I personally gained access and how a potential new member would join the gym. The following sections describe and discuss the gym's industrial location and layout, its distinct social dynamics, and its hyper-competitive attributes. The discussion is focused on exploring how these unique spatial characteristics connect to Eichberg's trialectic model as well as how they influence social interactions and bodily movement within the space.

## Gaining Access

My initial experiences with CrossFit several years ago formed the foundation for this study and also allowed me to acquire the physical skills needed to masquerade as a full-fledged CrossFitter. This familiarity with the exercises allowed me to skip the prerequisite beginner course and immediately attend the general CrossFit classes. Despite this relatively easy access, I still faced the difficult task of earning my fellow participants' acceptance. My various roles as researcher, new member, and experienced CrossFitter provided unique opportunities to witness this process, which illustrated the qualities and characteristics valued within the CrossFit space.

Although ethnography has always had to negotiate the inevitable view of the researcher as an interloper (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2005), my time as a participant observer within the CrossFit space was met with little resistance. For example, the owners of CrossFit "Compete" seemed bothered more by my occupation as a coach than my role as a researcher. They instructed me to keep my coaching background entirely hidden from the participants, lest I appear to be advertising for another gym. Additionally, whenever I introduced myself as a researcher most participants were excited to share their own CrossFit stories.

Although my role as a researcher was met with little resistance, my presence as a new member elicited subtle displays of intimidation from other

participants and yet my exhibition of athletic ability prompted a show of deference. Consider the following excerpt from my field journal describing my first class in the CrossFit space:

> The instructor told the class to grab a bar and load it up to a warm-up weight for thrusters, a barbell movement that combines a front squat with a shoulder press. She would then start a running clock and we would do one thruster each minute with weight increases of 10 lb each minute, until we were unable to increase the weight. Although I felt perfectly capable of starting with a heavier weight such as 135 lb, I deliberately chose a lighter weight – 115 lb – to hide the nature of my past athletic experience and in deference to a taller man behind me who had immediately loaded up his bar to 135 lb. After loading my bar, I went over to gather some more small plates that I could use to increase my weight when the timer started. As I turned around, I was surprised to see the taller man saunter over to my bar and, without even looking at me, reach down and easily lift the bar for a few warm-up reps. He chucked the bar back down to the ground with an air of disgust.
>
> However, because I started lighter than he did, I was able to continue adding weight each minute for a few minutes longer than he was able to. After failing at 205 lb, I began removing the weights to put them away. To my surprise, the taller man and another male participant suddenly grabbed some of the plates out of my hands and began helping put them away. "Hey thanks," I shouted. "No problem," the taller man cheerfully replied.
>
> It is interesting to note here that my ability – both strength and technique – served as my entry ticket to this specific tribe. At first, the group paid me no attention and even avoided making eye contact with me. I could have been invisible. However, that cold attitude quickly warmed when I displayed CrossFit-specific ability and showed my worth as a new addition to this workout group. The taller man acted as the "Alpha" initially but quickly changed course and extended to me some respect once I showed that I could match, or even exceed his ability. His demeanor shifted from one of hostility and ego to one of friendship and camaraderie.

Although there were other equally light barbells in the vicinity, I read the man's predatory procurement of the weights I was using as a subtle display of prowess directed toward a new, possibly threatening competitor in the space. This gym behavior is nothing new, as Klein (1993) described similar situations in a bodybuilding gym. Larger and stronger lifters would ask to "work-in" on a machine with an obviously weaker lifter, eventually forcing the weaker lifter to give up when the weight got too heavy.

Despite this and other displays of skill, my initial days in the CrossFit space were met with suspicion. I surmised the members had to grant me the deference afforded to an experienced CrossFitter but they could not yet accept me because I was not one of their specific tribe. More experienced CrossFitters were typically harder to befriend, and usually their observation of my athletic skill precipitated a social breakthrough. However, as the weeks passed my continual displays of skill earned me social capital within the space. Participants greeted me by name when I entered, and several participants began publicly expressing their intention to compete against me during WODs. Some members even began asking for my advice on certain weightlifting movements, although I had to be careful not to allow my coaching background to show and destroy my pseudo-anonymity. Suffice to say, my demonstration of skills within the CrossFit space hastened social acceptance.

The traditional path to membership for a non-CrossFitter is a much longer and painstaking one that includes several chances to drop out. The price alone can be a significant obstacle as monthly memberships are priced at around $200, although the gym does offer significant discounts for couples, students, and law enforcement and military personnel. A would-be member must initially inquire about membership over the phone or via email and then participate in an individually scheduled complimentary session. One member remarked that after his complimentary session he was so tired he could barely drive home and actually had to pull over to throw up.

Assuming one still wants to join after such a difficult first session, the new recruit must complete a month-long beginner's course that introduces the CrossFit movements. Introductory courses typically start once a month, meaning that patrons seeking new membership may have to wait a few weeks for a new beginner class to start before joining. Participants in the beginner course are segregated from the normal classes, use separate equipment, and generally are only allowed marginal amounts of space along the fringes of the gym. As a result, they rarely interact with full-fledged CrossFitters and are only truly initiated into the gym's community upon graduation from their beginner course. Even then it takes a few weeks for newbies to fully integrate with the ebb and flow of the general CrossFit classes, and it is not rare for dropouts to occur at this stage of the

CrossFit lifecycle. For example, when talking about a recent graduate of the beginner course, a coach remarked that he was surprised the participant was still attending because she seemed uninterested in the classes and somewhat aloof. Furthermore, I observed that out of each new graduating class, there were one or two participants that slowly stopped attending after a few weeks. They faded into the background and eventually were forgotten by coaches and members alike. When news of these dropouts came up at staff meetings, coaches dismissed them as not being cut out for CrossFit. Thus, the CrossFit space is wrought with physiological and social obstacles that naturally weed out participants not "motivated" enough to join the gym's elite community. Indeed, one CrossFitter compared his beginner course to hell week with the Navy Seals, and after he had "survived" he finally felt worthy of the "CrossFitter" label.

## The Box: A Place for Physical Labor

CrossFitters affectionately referred to their gym as the "Box," a name that originates from the fact that many of these gyms inhabit old warehouses and assume many of the same rough and gritty qualities that typically characterize those industrial spaces. Vestiges of the previous tenants can be seen throughout the space – grease stains mar the cement floor and rusted bolts indicate where huge machinery used to sit. In fact, an outsider driving by the gym's huge garage door would have difficulty distinguishing this space from its industrial neighbors,

which include auto repair shops and manufacturing facilities. Signage is limited to a small decal on the office door, which is readable only when right in front. Except for BMWs, Audis, and other high-end cars driven by CrossFit members, the alleyway adjacent to the gym features a constant parade of rumbling tow-trucks and delivery vehicles that send dust and exhaust billowing into the gym. This lone outpost of leisure camouflaged among rows of industrial warehouses often led to clashes between the users of each respective space. For example, every few weeks the owner of an adjacent auto parts store came into the gym complaining that someone had parked a car in front of his business' door, impeding a delivery vehicle. Furthermore, at one point the coaches resorted to walking members to their cars after a belligerent drunk harassed several passersby in the darkened alley.

A conspicuous lack of amenities inside the space matches the gym's exterior industrial décor. Although the gym does have a perfunctory front desk and office space, most members bypass this entryway by coming in through one of the space's three giant roll-up doors. There are no friendly greeters handing out complimentary towels at the front desk or staff selling new memberships, amenities that typically are found in modern exercise spaces (Spielvogel, 2002). In fact, upon walking into the CrossFit space a visitor may not be able to distinguish trainer from member or even recognize where to sign-up for an introductory class.

There are only two small unisex bathrooms and two small showers, but members are required to bring their own towels, soaps, and shampoos if they want to shower after a workout. A water cooler is provided, but members must bring their own water bottle. Even the exercise equipment is spartan and industrial; there are no nautilus machines or fancy treadmills cluttering up the space, the majority of which is open and undivided. Mismatched rusty barbells hang on racks drilled into the walls, while roughly hewn wooden boxes sit jumbled in an adjacent corner. A black steel jungle gym is bolted into the floor on the far side of the gym beside piles of black rubber weights. There is a very real sense of purposeful chaos and unabashed rawness within the space that seems to reflect, or perhaps also produce, the wild and unpredictable body movements that the box contains.

There are no studios or separate rooms designated for special modes of exercise such as Pilates or yoga. In fact, there are hardly any invisible or visible boundaries within the space governing who can move and where. Consider the following excerpt from my field notes describing differences in the use of gym space by CrossFitters compared to weightlifters:

> The gym's layout consists of a large rectangular space covered by 4'x6' rubber mats on one side, and a series of wooden weightlifting platforms on the other side. This unique layout means that participants in the weightlifting classes are facing the participants' in the CrossFit classes, and vice-versa. During today's early CrossFit class, the participants were practicing handstand walks, which entail flipping upside down onto one's hands and trying to take small "steps" on the hands. After the coach explained the movement, he told the participants to spend about 15 minutes

practicing the handstands on the matted area. Subsequently, a young man flipped onto his hands, wobbled back and forth for a few seconds, before coming crashing down on the rubber mats. He instantly jumped up, shook his head, and sighed loudly. He repeated this spectacle multiple times, tumbling out of control without any respect to those around him and coming frighteningly close to the weightlifters on the platforms trying to concentrate during their practice. The man seemed unaware and unashamed about his handstand antics, despite blatantly invading the weightlifters' space and disrupting their concentration with his loud sighs and determined grunts. After a few minutes, one the weightlifters moved her barbell and turned around to face the wall to avoid looking at the CrossFitter.

This juxtaposition of two different athletes practicing a skilled movement highlights the unique attitude of CrossFit towards the use of space for practice and motor learning. The rubber mat designated for CrossFit is wide-open, boundary-less, and largely without overt displays of etiquette. For example, the young man flailed wildly, stumbling back and forth unpredictably, invading and occupying the space around him without regard to presumed ownership of said space. And, just as there are no clear divisions within CrossFit space, its shared borders with non-CrossFit spaces are equally nebulous. Despite having a huge expanse of rubber flooring on which to move, the man encroached upon the weightlifting space by practicing his handstands only a few feet in front of a female weightlifter, who became distracted by his wild flailing and had to turn around.

In fact, CrossFitters seem to view all space as potentially "CrossFit Space" and it is this fitness-obsessed Manifest Destiny that often creates clashes between CrossFit populations and the surrounding non-CrossFit community. Within the gym, CrossFitters regularly invade the weightlifting space without any regard to etiquette or safety, often walking directly in front of someone trying to lift a heavy weight. This phenomenon occurs daily, and as a weightlifting coach in a CrossFit space I've learned to ignore these intrusions as the cost of doing business with CrossFitters. However, it should be noted that this behavior would be not be tolerated in a pure weightlifting space and those intruders would be immediately rebuked. Outside of the gym, CrossFitters invade the industrial frontage road, forcing delivery trucks and other drivers to slow or stop as they run past. About a year ago, the landlord of the mobile home park sent the owner of Achieve a formal notice warning him to stop having members pull sleds outside on the concrete. The constant grating of metal on concrete understandably

> annoyed the residents. It is intrusions like these that illustrate that all space can be claimed as CrossFit space, whether natural or industrial. In that way, CrossFitters are fitness colonists. They are well-muscled conquistadors who consume a space and repurpose its materials for their own exercise purposes.
>
> Weightlifters practice their skills with a similar respect and discipline that is used to craft their expensive barbells and plates. CrossFitters practice their skills wildly and without method, which also reflects the chaos and unabashed rawness of their exercise environments and equipment.

Thus, instead of a gym made up of several highly specific and unchangeable sub-spaces seen in other modern gyms (Johnston, 1996), the CrossFit space is entirely modular and multifunctional, serving not only as the site for CrossFit but also for yoga, Olympic weightlifting, personal training, and even private parties of gym members.

The CrossFit space is, quite literally, an empty concrete box that can be used and reused for all forms of bodily interaction. It is the epitome of utility, and is even more functional than Eichberg's quintessential modern sport sites (1998). Those box-shaped spaces, he argued, were constructed to allow only one standardized form of movement and body organization within their boundaries, such that a yoga studio cannot dually function as a weight room. However, the CrossFit space adopts equipment and exercises from a variety of these modern spaces to create a "super-functional" space, including rings and climbing ropes from gymnastics gyms, barbells and bumper plates from Olympic weightlifting

spaces, giant tires from strongman sites, and caged squat racks from powerlifting dungeons. Furthermore, the rubberized flooring is reminiscent of bootcamp and yoga studios, while the ever-present clock reminds one of track and field. Thus, CrossFit space can be read as merely a messy amalgamation of spatial attributes borrowed from a variety of different physical disciplines, ranging all the way from simple work to elite sport. For example, the gym's industrial characteristics are emblematic of menial labor, while its fixation with time and measurement embody the spirit of professional sport. With this variety then, the CrossFit space becomes a place that allows and even encourages any form of physical activity. The emphasis is not on the type or quality of the movement, but rather the act of moving itself. For the CrossFit box, any movement is acceptable as long as the human body is moving; the only excluded form of movement is not moving.

If CrossFit space does not fit Eichberg's (1998) modern ideal, then it must be more emblematic of one of his historical "green waves," in which he saw exercise move out of the sterile container and into the unbounded countryside. However, instead of moving into the forest CrossFit is appropriating and colonizing postindustrial spaces, resorbing these monolithic facilities back into something more natural and unbounded. Once home to blue-collar workers' skilled, efficient, and highly disciplined body movements, the space now encourages wild and untamed movements such as intense jumping, swinging, and

running. These potentially dangerous exercises almost appear to mock the careful and safe activity emphasized in real industrial sites. For example, while the adjacent machine shop's workers wore heavy boots to protect their feet from dropped items or other mishaps, some of the CrossFit gym's participants wore minimalist barefoot-like shoes. Although an industrial injury would be cause for stopping work, the coaches urged participants to keep exercising despite ripped callouses, bloody shins, or tender joints. Ironically though, the corporeal markings often purposefully, and even proudly acquired through CrossFit are strikingly similar to those accidentally incurred by menial labor – torn hands, scraped and bloodied limbs, and sore muscles. While construction workers, for instance, do not seek out sliced fingers or bruised knees CrossFitters will revel in their wounds as badges of effort. Many of the CrossFit members proudly displayed their flogged arms after several failed jump rope attempts, while others posted to social media about their ripped callouses or bragged about their overly sore legs.

Thus, CrossFit can be read as reclaiming the space of fitness from exercise physiologists and their humming treadmills by simplifying the science of training to mere real physical work. Pick up something heavy, whether intended for exercise or not, and move it over a long distance. This reductionist view of fitness and health is similar to Terret's (2004) reading of the modern swimming pool. Its rectangle shape, standardized depth, and clean water eliminated the physical risk

and lack of hygiene found in open water areas such as lakes and oceans. The modern pool reduced the benefits of swimming into an easily palatable package for casual exercisers. Swimming was no longer the hardy pastime of fishermen and divers; the development of the modern pool allowed swimming to become as simple as following the black line on the bottom from end to end repeatedly. Likewise, the CrossFit space allows for the sampling of hard labor – pushing, pulling, and lifting heavy awkward objects.

In this sense, the CrossFit space is exactly like Spielvogel's (2002) health club in Japan – both spaces provide members with a place to manufacture and hew a desired physical form that is, at least to the untrained eye, emblematic of physical movement that was more sociohistorically revered. In Japan, traditional forms of training incorporated exercise outdoors as a way to harden the body and teach it to withstand cold, wind, and other elements. The health club, Spielvogel argued, provided members an easier way to appear as if they had trained outdoors, when in fact all they did was run on a treadmill and lay on a tanning bed. Likewise, CrossFit space provides a way for members, many of who come from a workforce that is well-educated, wealthy, and increasingly sedentary and technologically dependent, to achieve the marks of menial labor without the drudgery or low wages. These blue-collar physical characteristics – rough hands,

sore muscles, and sweat-stained skin – typically belonged only to farmers, factory workers, and other industrial laborers (Eichberg, 1998).

In all of these examples, the result of bodily movement, whether in pursuit of work, leisure, or some complicated blend of the two, remains the same: increased endurance, muscularity, tan skin, confidence, and general health. However, the medium to achieve that physical appearance has increasingly become artificialized, removed both temporally and spatially from the natural course of life and work. In terms of CrossFit, the tech employee at a nearby startup must leave her office at lunch and drive to the gym to complete bodywork that is left unaccomplished during her normal work and leisure activities.

This paper reads the CrossFit gym as a contradiction that speaks to a conscience that is, if not guilty, at least highly conflicted about the roles of work and leisure in this increasingly technologized society. Although CrossFit gym resists the modern ideal of sanitized space in terms of amenities and actual hygiene, it follows in artificial sport spaces' well-trod pattern of sanitized physical activity. In other words, the CrossFit space makes menial labor more palatable for the masses. In this way the CrossFit gym could also be read as having colonized the remains of dying industrial spaces, appropriating blue-collar factories and warehouses for faux blue-collar work but for a vastly different goal than the space's previous inhabitants. Much like Raitz's (1995) interpretation of sport

hunting in aristocratic America, which tamed the wild landscape and its beasts for manufactured thrills rather than for life-sustaining nutrition. Once occupied by physical labor for economic gain, CrossFit's postindustrial spaces are now occupied by individual bodywork for personal gain.

## Who can be (Cross)fit?

Unlike the community health centers in Spielvogel's (2002) and Fusco's (2005) studies, the CrossFit gym is comparatively inaccessible in terms of socioeconomic status, but not along the lines of the familiar disciplining themes such as gender, ability, ethnicity, or age (Vertinsky, 2004). Spielvogel pointed out that all fitness centers, regardless of the size or type, tend to attract a self-selected membership, including those who have both sufficient means and motivation to exercise. The CrossFit gym is especially selective considering its intimidating spatial layout and its expensive membership structure. With monthly passes offered at around $200, the CrossFit gym amasses a membership base primarily from upper-middle or upper socioeconomic classes. Post-WOD conversations trended toward discussions about the best tropical vacation resorts or the latest CrossFit accessories and clothing. Suffice to say, the CrossFit space is a place that is reserved for, if the not the wealthy, then at least those motivated enough to commit over $2,000 a year on exercise. This is especially ironic given the industrial location of the gym, which presents an affordable, even cheap, façade.

However, those who work and live in that same industrial neighborhood likely cannot afford a CrossFit membership, and instead must drive to a cheaper health club a few miles away. Adding to the irony, that club offers many more amenities than the CrossFit gym at almost a quarter of the price, including a pool, sauna, separate male and female locker rooms, and exercise machines.

No vignette illustrates the CrossFit gym's socioeconomic disparity and the neoliberal body-projects that are beyond the scope of this paper than the events of a previous winter, when a freak weeklong rainstorm caused excess flooding in a neighboring mobile home park. The CrossFit gym, however, stayed dry save for a few leaks in the old wooden dome roof. City engineers later attributed the flooding to a gradual slope that allowed the water to run away from the gym and down into the mobile home park. Compounding this was the fact that proper drainage pipes were never constructed for the park. While the mobile home park residents fought to save their belongings, the CrossFit classes carried steadily on and the participants were only inconvenienced when the city closed the alley road, forcing members to park farther away and walk through the rain.

Therefore, CrossFit space can be read as a new form of social ranking much like sporting halls in the 16th and 17th centuries, which determined who could participate in aristocratic sports such as tennis or fencing (Eichberg, 1990). Instead of hitting balls on perfectly manicured courts, today's aristocrats are paying a

premium for the privilege of an hour of faux menial labor in a dusty industrial warehouse in a seedier area of town. The question of "who can be (Cross)fit?" is then answered in terms of class (upper) and wealth (rich). As Dworkin (2001) showed in her examination of two differently priced fitness clubs in Los Angeles, the exclusion of lower socioeconomic classes from exercise space connotes the idea that fitness and health is a luxury reserved for the wealthy. Although it was socially difficult to broach this subject directly with participants, coaches offered some insight into the makeup of the gym's members, which were jokingly referred to as "desk jockeys" in reference to the fact that most worked an office desk for 8-10 hours before attending an evening WOD. A few coaches confessed they felt the WODs were too difficult for the majority of participants, most of whom did not possess any athletic skills or background before jumping into CrossFit.

One might expect this lack of socioeconomic diversity to limit the racial and ethnic diversity of the space, but I actually found the membership to be representative of a variety of different backgrounds that seemed emblematic of the Bay Area's international population. For example, the CrossFit class I regularly attended included participants from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, as well as transplants from Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and South America. However, this ethnic diversity among the participants belied a clear socioeconomic uniformity. Almost all the members were well educated with well-

paying careers, many of them in Silicon Valley's technology sector. This finding may not be generalizable to CrossFit gyms in other parts of the U.S. simply because each region's higher socioeconomic classes will have varying levels of ethnic and racial diversity.

Despite this relative socioeconomic inaccessibility of the CrossFit gym, once one became a paying member, the space was highly inclusive and rejected the most common exclusionary or disciplinary themes typically seen in exercise spaces, including subtle segregation of different genders (Brace-Govan, 2004; Dworkin, 2003; Markula, 1995; Vertinsky, 2004; Spielvogel, 2002) or abilities (Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005). Unlike those gyms, the CrossFit gym does not contain subdivisions of space that coerce the body to function in line with normative discourses. In other words, any body – male or female, "fat" or skinny, athletic or clumsy, old or young – is welcome to exercise in a CrossFit class, as long as they have the requisite determination and means to afford a membership. For example, whenever a new member completed all classes in the introductory course, the owners hosted a small ceremony to celebrate the person's initiation as a full-fledged CrossFit member. The member was then free to attend any CrossFit class, regardless of their current ability, gender, or age. In fact, most classes featured a mix of different body types, and there were no special classes for women, or severely "out-of-shape" people. Everyone exercised at the same time,

in the same space, and with the same movements. This complete lack of bodily segregation is drastically different than the disciplinary techniques described in other gym studies, and may indicate a renegotiation of what types of bodies can be fit and muscular.

Vertinsky (2004) described a college gym that marginalized space for women, such as fewer changing rooms and activity areas, blatantly reinforcing unfounded beliefs that the weak female body should be excluded from sport and exercise. The CrossFit space, however, was comparatively less explicitly gendered. In fact, it completely lacked any overt parameters that designated specific usage: the bathrooms and showers were unisex, and the equipment was shared equally among both men and women. Although there were specifically manufactured barbells for each gender – thicker, heavier bars for men, and thinner, lighter bars for women – the bars were only labeled as "45 lb." or "33 lb." I observed both men and women using either type of bar, rejecting the manufacturer's intention for a gendered use. This spatial desegregation also affected how gendered bodies moved throughout the space. During partner or team WODs, I worked together with both men and women to complete an exercise circuit, sometimes even using the same weights regardless of gender. Competition within the CrossFit space also occurred in spite of gender differences. For example, an experienced female CrossFitter would consistently compare her WOD

results with other men in the class including myself, and in response to my feigned indifference jokingly chided, “don’t act like we’re not competing against each other…”

Even the much subtler, yet more pervasive, forms of gender discipline described by Spielvogel (2002), Brace-Govan (2004), and Johnston (1996) do not seem to extend to the CrossFit gym. Those studies showed that modern weight rooms functioned as bastions of male strength and muscularity, reinforcing hegemonic attitudes that the female body should be slender and toned. Conversely, the CrossFit space encourages (often sexualized) muscularity in all participants, regardless of gender. Posters of ripped half-naked male and female CrossFit celebrities are plastered on the walls, while female coaches wear tight shorts that showcase massive quadriceps and powerful hamstrings. Although male ogling of female bodies did occur within this space, the conversations tended to be more about a female member’s strength and ability than her beauty or appearance.

Thus, strength, power, and skill appear to be the defining characteristics for attraction in the CrossFit space. Absent from this space are the spatial and social forces acting to mold female bodies into soft and submissive subjects that previous studies have described. For example, Brace-Govan (2004) showed that female weightlifters breaching the masculine weight room faced intimidation and a lack of support, such as spotting, that was normally afforded male exercisers. However,

I did not observe any subtle cues in the CrossFit space that directed women toward more feminine forms of exercise, such as aerobics or yoga. In fact, the opposite was true: coaches strongly encouraged inflexible men to attend the weekly yoga class to improve their flexibility, thereby reimagining a prototypical feminine activity as simply a genderless way to achieve a more functional and able body.

However, despite the absence of common disciplinary forces on the gendered and aged body, there is an underlying social hierarchy based on skill level, or in spatial terms, mastery of the CrossFit space. For example, there were unspoken rules governing who could use certain equipment, where they could use it, and when. These rules hinged largely on one's ability, regardless of other physical attributes. This is particularly noteworthy considering that ability trumps all other characteristics – except perhaps for socioeconomic access to the space – in determining who is Cross(fit). Even in Brace-Govan's study where women were out-lifting the men, she still found semblances of disciplinary forces acting to discourage visible female muscularity and strength. In the CrossFit space, however, other physical attributes such as gender or visible muscularity did not hold the same power unless they were accompanied by ability – speed, power, and strength. In other words, the CrossFit place values those who are as functional and utilitarian as the space itself.

For example, experienced CrossFitters typically came early and stayed late to do additional exercises or practice special skills, like gymnastics or weightlifting movements. Although this out-of-class time was not explicitly scheduled, it was an unspoken rule that the more "elite" athletes were given free range of the space. Other members deferentially moved out of their way during classes and allowed them to stake the best space for the WOD, which usually meant the shortest distance between equipment stations for faster WOD times. They would also commonly forgo listening to the coach's instructions before the WOD in favor of getting a head start in gathering equipment. Although it might be natural to interpret this behavior as an insult to the coach, it seemed more likely a non-verbal display of prowess directed at the other participants. In other words, those elite CrossFitters possessed so much experience that they no longer needed to listen to instructions. Interestingly, coaches I talked to actually preferred this behavior because the more experienced members could function autonomously, which freed up the coach to pay attention to beginners who needed more help.

Thus, instead of producing machinery or raw materials, the postindustrial CrossFit space has been repurposed to produce members who are self-governing and super-functional (Eichberg, 1998). The coach becomes perfunctory as the member learns to police him or herself during the WOD. Put simply, the efficient CrossFit space is designed to reproduce equally efficient bodies, but only in terms

of ability. Although Eichberg (1990) read this process of Foucauldian (self)-surveillance as a means to produce socially normative bodies in general, the CrossFit space is only concerned with "CrossFit-normative" bodies – bodies that can move faster, lift heavier, and climb higher. The traditional social norms that characterize femininity or masculinity hold little sway in the CrossFit space. Unlike Klein's (1993) classic work where a bodybuilder's size and visible muscle earned him social capital both in and out of the gym, the CrossFit space has no such currency. Ability is the only currency here. It buys one better equipment, more respect, and most importantly, better space.

The CrossFit-produced body, then, is one that is more machine-like than human. In reading NordicTrack exercise machines, McCormack (1999) remarked, "the question of who (or what) is working out who (or what) cannot be answered in a clear-cut, unambiguous way" (p. 169). However, CrossFit space answers this question of cyborgification (Butryn, 2003; Butryn & Masucci, 2009) by positioning the body as the primary machine for exercise and self-improvement. WODs frequently incorporated exercises that required only ones own body, such as squats, lunges, push-ups, and other calisthenics. Furthermore, CrossFitters mocked technology-assisted modes of exercise by disparaging the use of machines such as treadmills, Smith machines, and other cabled apparatuses. For example, one participant wore a T-shirt showing a person on an elliptical machine with the

word “FAIL” written boldly underneath. Therefore, the CrossFit space is entirely about function and utility; it is an industrial site for the production of stronger and faster bodies, or in other words, more useful human machines.

## Chasing Rx: The Quantified, Standardized, and Surveilled Body

Eichberg (1982) argued that the adoption of new technologies in sport – more exact timing tools, universal competition standards, and artificial spaces – stemmed from changes in societal behavior that necessitated not only winners, but also the quantification of victory. Likewise the CrossFit space’s borrowing of spatial elements from competitive sport indicates an evolving exercise mentality that needs statistical assurance of one’s fitness and health. These elements include strict exercise standards, time- and recordkeeping, and the unique spatial arrangement of participants within the gym to encourage rivalry and racing.

The WOD’s central tenet is the prescribed exercise standard known colloquially as “Rx,” a term that connotes the authority and seriousness inherent in a doctor’s medical prescription. This strict benchmark, which is unique to each WOD, dictates the type of movement that one should produce, such as a full squat instead of a partial squat, and the amount of weight that one should lift. The WOD’s designer typically predetermines the Rx weights and movements, and anyone who successfully satisfies those criteria is said to have completed the

workout "as prescribed" or "as Rxed." For example, a popular WOD known as "Fran" calls for Rx weights of 95 lb. for men and 65 lb. for women. This standardization allows for the comparison of results across space and time (Parry, 2006), which in the context of CrossFit could include separate class hours within the same gym or even two different gyms.

The Rx standard originated during the early 2000s when CrossFit headquarters began posting daily WODs on their blog (www.crossfit.com). Participants used the comments section to report their workout times and scores, adding "Rx" at the end of a post to signify that the WOD was completed according to the creator's prescription. If a participant could not achieve the Rx standard, the participant would write how he or she "scaled" the workout with lighter weights and/or different movements. As CrossFit gyms proliferated over the past decade, the virtual leaderboard morphed into a physical one, usually in the form of a whiteboard displayed prominently by a gym's entrance.

During my study, I observed a preoccupation with the public acknowledgment and recording of WOD scores by coaches and participants alike. After every WOD the coach called over the participants as a group and publicly asked them for their workout times and scores one-by-one, marking "Rx" in red ink next to those who achieved the workout's standard. For those who failed to achieve the standard, the coach wrote the exact weight the person used, as well as

any further modifications to the prescribed WOD. A coach mentioned that the recording of these additional details about non-Rx participants was a newer policy at the gym in response to member complaints about the whiteboard. This change, the coach said, allowed members to more accurately compare their scores and times to others', without having to guess at the weight used by non-Rxers. Additionally, the owner had hoped that the public recording of weights would motivate "sandbagging" members to use heavier weights during the WODs. These members had been artificially inflating their WOD scores by using lighter weights, even though they could handle weights closer to the Rx standard.

Although the Rx standard is representative of the increasing importance of quantification and rationality within modern sport (Eichberg, 1982), in actuality it leads to highly irregular forms of movement. Consider the WOD's exercise prescription, which, although defines a strict pattern of movement, only covers specific objective biomechanical positions and excludes any subjective or qualitative evaluations. For example, an Rx pull-up requires the chin to reach over the bar, which is an easily measurable position for the naked eye; the chin either finishes above the bar or it does not. There is no subjectivity required; the movement either is recorded as a repetition or is given a "no rep" and the participant must try again. This all-or-none criteria creates an environment where any movement is allowed, as long is it accomplishes the goal of meeting the

objective standard. Using the pull-up as an example again, I frequently saw participants swinging, flailing, and kicking their legs awkwardly to generate enough momentum to propel their chin over the bar so that they could claim "Rx" on the gym's whiteboard. Thus, achievement of the standard justifies whatever physical means used to accomplish that achievement.

In essence, the CrossFit space reduces the exercising body into an aggregation of data that can be easily ranked, ordered, and tracked over space and time. The coaches recorded only the times and weights used, not whether a participant maintained good form or moved their joints through a safe range of motion, attributes that are difficult to compare across different participants. Thus, the numerical results of the WOD come to represent the exercise almost more than the movement itself. In other words, doing 100 squats was no longer about the biomechanical poetry of knees, hips, and spine working in smooth conjunction (the qualitative aspects), but rather became about the weight hoisted and time achieved (the quantitative aspects). For example, a female participant expressed visible anger after a morning's WOD because she inadvertently used a weight that was lighter than the Rx standard. She blamed the class' coach for misstating the Rx weight and even went so far as to write a comment next to her name on the whiteboard explaining why she did not complete the workout as prescribed. For this particular participant, the WOD seemed to be important only as an abstraction,

a data point that could be ranked and compared to other data points. This attitude is not an accident; rather, it is carefully manufactured by the elements within the CrossFit space, as the program's founder, Glassman (2007), explained:

> In implementation, CrossFit is, quite simply, a sport—the "sport of fitness." We've learned that harnessing the natural camaraderie, competition, and fun of sport or game yields an intensity that cannot be matched by other means. The late Col. Jeff Cooper observed that 'the fear of sporting failure is worse than the fear of death.' It is our observation that men will die for points. Using whiteboards as scoreboards, keeping accurate scores and records, running a clock, and precisely defining the rules and standards for performance, we not only motivate unprecedented output but derive both relative and absolute metrics at every workout; this data has important value well beyond motivation (p. 2).

The Rx standard allows for and encourages what Parry (2006) described as a universal concern for excellence. As an arbitrary set point for what constitutes acceptable physical movement, the prescribed standard allows for the pursuit of personal excellence (beating one's previous score), relative excellence (beating a classmate's score), and absolute excellence (beating everyone's score in a specific class/gym/region). Therefore, the standard introduces a definable metric through

which excellence can be constantly pursued, as implied by the Olympic motto: *citius, altius, fortius* (faster, higher, stronger).

The centrality of the clock within the CrossFit gym further allows for such pursuit of excellence. Three large digital timers hang on separate walls within the gym, allowing one to freely see the clock from any vantage point. Most activities are timed: Warm-ups, strength and skill sessions, and, most importantly, the WODs. Before a WOD, the coach orders everyone to stand quietly by his or her assembled exercise gear before starting the clock's countdown from 10, with the last 3, 2, 1, blaring out in loud beeps. Several participants explained to me that they actually had grown so conditioned to the clock that they experienced nervous pre-WOD jitters whenever they heard a countdown, even when in a non-gym context. Even the WODs are created in a way that highlights their quantification. For example, most WOD rep schemes include some sort of numerical pattern, such as "21-15-9," "50-40-30-20-10," or "100-200-300." These ordered designs reinforce the notion that the WOD is not exercise in the traditional sense but rather a race. In other words, the WOD compares to "exercise" the same way that a 3000-meter track race compares to "jogging."

The centrality of the clock within the CrossFit space can be interpreted as the result of an ongoing behavioral shift within exercise (Eichberg, 1982). It is a symbol of a new combination of striving for achievement, but in a way that

emphasizes the measurement, quantification, and permanent record of said achievement. The CrossFit space transforms every qualitative aspect of exercise into a quantitative data point. For example, the coaches interpreted "being in shape" in the numerical terms of body fat percentage, waist and appendage circumferences, and weight. Exercise was reduced to work: repetitions accumulated, distance traveled, and weight lifted. Qualitative characteristics were at best secondary to the importance of statistical data within the CrossFit space. As Eichberg (1998) argued, the reduction of physical activity into mere data is inherently social, a product of the participants' need for quantification.

For example, most experienced CrossFitters I talked to were acutely aware of the gym's leaderboard and their ranking. They would typically come in before their class and spend a few minutes studying the scores posted by the previous classes, looking for the fastest recorded times. For many of these participants, performing poorly during a WOD was a source of shame and disappointment. One participant reflected on his dissatisfaction with prior WOD results by saying, "You are only as good as your last workout." In other words, his emotional and mental state was intimately tied to his status on the gym's whiteboard. When he performed well compared to the other participants, he felt elated, but when he performed poorly, he suffered depression and regret until his next WOD.

Compounding the effects of quantification and the Rx standard is the CrossFit space's open layout. Like a race, where each participant can view their real-time ranking based on their position relative to the other runners on the track, this layout allows for a similar form of surveillance. There are not separate rooms or machines blocking one's view. Everyone exercises at the same time and within the same space, sometimes even facing each other. For example, during a WOD to see how many jump rope repetitions one could accumulate within a certain timeframe, all the participants exercised in a large circle facing each other. From my vantage point I could watch anyone at anytime, and they could just as easily watch me. This collective surveillance spurred a competitive energy that pushed me to keep jumping even when my legs started to cramp. Two thoughts in particular helped crowd out these feelings of fatigue: "they could be watching me" and "they are going to beat me."

This fits within Eichberg's (1998) description of disciplined space, which incorporates ideas from Foucault (1977). Authority is diffused throughout the CrossFit space such that a participant is compelled to exercise harder simply because he or she cannot know for certain who may be watching and when. This leads to a collective surveillance throughout the space such that each participant begins to monitor him or herself without coercion from a coach. Although coaches informed me that cheating during WODs does occur, it is the exception to the rule.

For the most part, participants counted their own repetitions accurately and recorded their times honestly. It would be easy to simply cut a few reps here and there to finish early, or to shave a few seconds off the recorded time. With 20 people in a class, no one would be the wiser. However, the space's open layout discouraged this behavior simply because it raised one permeating possibility for social embarrassment: they could be watching.

Therefore, the CrossFit space can be read as a modern fitness panopticon, a box of straight lines that coerces the body to move in accordance with arbitrary standards via the diffused authority of the clock and the surveillance of the open space. At the same time, though, these spatial devices converge to produce bodily movements that are wild and untamed, and very much undisciplined. Consider the following excerpt from my field journal describing a mile race during a CrossFit class:

> As we assembled at the crudely spray-painted line in the parking lot, some participants were nervously stretching and bouncing from one foot to the other. The coach announced that the race was an out-and-back course, meaning that we would run half a mile out and then turn around at another spray painted line on the sidewalk. The coach explained that we would have to cross a busy industrial intersection during the race, but that we should just "run through it" and "try not to get hit by a car."
>
> As the race started, several participants took off sprinting into the lead while I settled into a comfortable pace in the middle of the pack. As I made my way back towards the gym I saw an older female participant ahead of me who was running with her large dog on a leash. They had apparently turned back toward the gym well short of the half-mile marker, presumably because of their slower pace. I gained on her rapidly but about

> 50 yards before I reached her, the dog lurched ahead, yanking the leash and sending the woman crashing onto the sidewalk. As I was the first person to reach her, I stopped to help and tried to calm the overly excited dog. However, a female participant that was trailing only a few yards behind me sprinted past both of us, yelling only a curt "Are you OK?" The fallen woman's leg was scraped and slightly bloody but she did not appear to be seriously hurt. I helped her up and walked with her a few feet before she begged me to leave her and continue my race toward the gym. Despite my best effort, the woman who had passed us finished the mile run a few seconds faster.

In this anecdote the body and space are treated with equal contempt in the pursuit of optimum performance. For example, the gym's owners defiled the parking lot and public sidewalk with neon spray paint, essentially transforming a city-owned space into their own synthetic track. Instead of marking the turnaround at an existing landmark, such as a street sign or tree, the gym's coach used an artificially placed mark that was measured to be exactly half a mile from the gym. For the performance to be legitimate the mile course had to be precise, which necessitated the defilement of public property with paint at the exact place where 0.49 miles turned into 0.50 miles. Again, this illustrates that every activity is acutely quantified within the CrossFit space. Furthermore, much like skateboarders (Beal, 1995; Drissel, 2013; Nolan, 2003) and parkour traceurs (Kidder, 2012), the CrossFit participants disrupted the city's rules by sprinting defiantly through the busy intersection, failing to obey the established order of the street signs. Intrusions like these illustrate that all space can be claimed and appropriated as CrossFit space, whether natural or industrial.

The older woman's slip revealed the power of the CrossFit clock's influence in the CrossFit space. As I approached her, I caught myself weighing the consequences of stopping vs. running past her. If I stopped, I would certainly lose significant time in the race and end up with a lower ranking than if I simply ran past her. I quickly came to the conclusion that stopping to help was the necessary thing to do, and the fact that I even contemplated running past was embarrassing, especially considering this was not an elite race. However, the woman behind me did sprint past, perhaps because I had already stopped to help. The clock influences and lords over the moving bodies within the CrossFit space, a constant reminder to move swiftly and with utmost urgency. As Eichberg (1998) pointed out, inherent in the process of timekeeping are the qualities of speed and acceleration, a constant upward trajectory that urges "quicker, quicker, quicker" (p. 150). As I spent more time as a participating CrossFitter, I came to see the WOD less as a method of improving physiological characteristics and more about performance, particularly in terms of social ranking. In other words, health and fitness was merely a positive byproduct of the WOD's main purpose: to compete and hopefully win in a race against fellow participants.

However, at times even the body's health became a hindrance in the pursuit of optimum performance. During a WOD that featured over 50 kipping pull-ups, a movement where one uses full-body swings to generate enough momentum for a

pull-up, I observed a male participant tear a large blister on his hand. Despite the open wound and bloody palm, he completed the workout and then proudly showed off his wound to his fellow classmates. Another participant gladly showed me a series of raised red welts on his arms and legs where his jump rope had whipped him during a WOD. In the CrossFit space, pain and blood are accepted inconveniences on the path to achieving Rx and sitting atop the leaderboard. Performance is paramount; health is ancillary.

A coach explained to me that this abuse of the body is commonplace and even expected in the CrossFit space, where "Rx at all costs" is a celebrated mentality. He sullenly admitted feeling conflicted about CrossFit because of his dual role as fitness professional and CrossFit coach. At one level he felt a duty to encourage a strict pattern of movement with an emphasis on safety, while at the same time he felt obligated to encourage a raucous atmosphere during WODs, replete with loud music and yelling. He felt an expectation to cheer and celebrate the achievement of a movement standard, even if the process leading up to that "accomplishment" was wrought with poor form and unsafe movement. This particular coach made these comments to me in private after watching a male participant struggle through a WOD of heavy cleans, which is a barbell movement that requires the bar to travel from the floor to the shoulders in one fluid movement. Not wanting to scale the weight below the Rx standard, the participant

failed several cleans before awkwardly pulling one attempt high enough to crash painfully on his shoulders. Each successful attempt that flopped on his shoulders was met by raucous cheers and clapping by all those watching, including the aforementioned coach. Later, he expressed derision at the importance placed on obsessing over the standard, despite the potential cost to one's health and body.

Even Greg Glassman, the founder of the CrossFit movement, has encouraged a devil-may-care attitude: "If you find the notion of falling off the rings and breaking your neck so foreign to you, then we don't want you in our ranks" (Cooperman, 2005, para. 20). Thus, the CrossFit space epitomizes the competitive characteristics of achievement sport, namely the public ranking of competitors and the willing sacrifice of the body for performance gain (Bale, 2003). Although these characteristics within sport spaces are not unique, they have largely been featured in the upper echelon of sport, such as the collegiate and professional level, until now. Thus, instead of professional athletes risking their joints in pursuit of fame and million-dollar contracts, the CrossFit space is a place where wannabe pros pay a premium for the opportunity to risk their bodies in pursuit of social glory played out on the gym's leaderboard.

Furthermore, this pseudo-elite environment is artificially constructed, much like today's highly structured professional sporting environments that have their origins in unbounded folk games (Eichberg, 1998). That is to say that the CrossFit

space – the Rx standard, the importance of time and record keeping, and the ever-changing leaderboard – is not natural, but rather a specific production of space and time that produces an equally specific bodily experience. The space uses Rx as an abstract device to manufacture an achievement-focused attitude. As long as the standard remains slightly out of grasp, it achieves its intended effect of incentivizing participants to continually strive towards a common goal, thereby creating the selling points of the CrossFit gym: community, competition, and extreme difficulty. The gym even offered an Rx+ standard for those members who consistently achieved Rx and required an additional challenge beyond the original standard. In response to my question about why he would attempt a particularly difficult WOD using the Rx+ standard, one extremely competitive male participant summed it up succinctly, "Because that's what's written on the board."

## Conclusion

The CrossFit space is a site of contradictory discourses about health and fitness, and its unique body culture provides a tangible link to discuss larger sociohistorical beliefs governing the body. The gyms' location, layout, and open arrangement of moving bodies revealed underlying social patterns that allow for a more complex interpretation of these CrossFit spaces as places that blur the line between exercise and menial labor, and elite sport and recreational activity.

For example, the container shape of each gym, with their collective emphasis on timekeeping and competition, fit neatly into Eichberg's (1998) achievement category. Furthermore, these boxes produced, and were produced by, equally squared bodies characterized by hard muscles and strict utility. The gyms were spatially designed to hew a body utterly useful for menial labor – lifting, pushing, throwing, and pulling heavy awkward objects. Additionally, the gyms' use of "functional" movements, public tracking of scores, and a lack of aesthetic amenities squared out the edges of their achievement-oriented disposition. However, Eichberg's warning against neat categorizations must be heeded; semblances of the other two categories could be found in the intense surveillance produced by the open layout, the rhythm of sweating bodies moving in unison, and the monastic mindlessness of intense workouts. The proliferation of the CrossFit box over the last decade is a prototypical green wave (Eichberg, 1998), in which the place for exercise moved out of artificial buildings into natural areas, and with it disrupting modern sporting society's quest for order, discipline, and boundaries. Indeed, the CrossFit gyms in this study did offer a spartan antithesis to the highly sanitized and disciplined fitness centers described by Spielvogel (2002), Fusco (2005), and others. However, instead of moving into the forest and meadows, these spaces positioned themselves defiantly in the heart of urban modernity, taking over now-defunct industrial warehouses, disrupting city ordinances, and

repurposing manual labor, all for the singular goal of increased work capacity over time. Thus, the CrossFit space appears indicative of an evolving sociocultural belief that the body should be purely functional and utilitarian. Largely absent from this space is any emphasis on adherence to strict masculine or feminine forms commonly seen in other fitness spaces (Brace-Govan, 2004; Klein, 1993). Further research could explore the larger sociohistorical context of this paradigm shift, including why exercisers are more frequently abandoning the comfort of modern fitness clubs for the comparative discomfort of the CrossFit gym.

Furthermore, the open layout of the gyms in this study blatantly forced fierce competition and surveillance among exercisers, many of whom came from a workforce that is well-educated, sedentary, and predominantly white collar. At the same time, this lack of spatial division also fostered community and unexpected connections among participants who would normally not exercise together, particularly for people of different genders, abilities, ethnicities, and ages. This finding stood in stark contrast to the subtly segregated spaces described by most other gym studies (Brace-Govan, 2004; Johnston, 1996; Spielvogel, 2002). While CrossFit's industrial location and lack of amenities created the illusion of an exercise space that is socioeconomically accessible, in actuality the high price of membership presented a financial barrier to all but those who have disposable incomes or are willing to sacrifice other luxuries. However, this socioeconomic

obstacle did not limit the ethnic and racial diversity of the space, which reflected the well-educated international workforce unique to Silicon Valley and the Bay Area. This finding will likely not be generalizable to gyms in other regions, where higher socioeconomic classes may not share the same level of ethnic and racial diversity seen in the Bay Area.

Furthermore, while CrossFit's class structure and open layout forced quick friendships and cooperation, there was an underlying social hierarchy based on exercise ability, or in other words, mastery of the CrossFit space and equipment. Again, the bodily hierarchy here was characterized by functionality and work capacity, not appearance or form. Thus, the gyms in this study were achievement focused and highly disciplined; yet, these aspects also created a place that emphasized the visceral experience of the exercising body and the vicarious experience of menial labor.

Future research on CrossFit could explore the individual experiences of participants and coaches using more formal interview techniques. Although this study found a distinct lack of gender discrimination typically seen in gyms and weight rooms, future inquiries could expand on this finding by focusing specifically on the issue of gender in the CrossFit space. Additionally, the results of this study revealed that CrossFit coaches may face a unique dilemma in balancing the WOD's raucous environment with the safety and health of their

participants. Thus, future studies of CrossFit could examine psychological factors involved in both participants and coaches, and explore how coaches navigate this unique dichotomy.

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## Conclusion

CrossFit has grown tremendously from a niche fitness blog in the early 2000s to a network of over 10,000 affiliated facilities worldwide in 2015 (Fainaru-Wada, 2014). Many researchers within sport and fitness have examined CrossFit only as a physiological phenomenon, the popularity of which they argued must be linked only to the program's training science, risk-benefit profile, or unique combination of exercises (Bergeron et al., 2011; Fainaru-Wada, 2014; Hak, Hodzovic, & Hickey, 2013; Paine, Uptgraft, & Wylie, 2010; Petersen, Pinske, & Greener, 2014; Smith, Sommer, Starkoff, & Devor, 2013; Weisenthal, Beck, Maloney, DeHaven, & Giordano, 2014). However, this binary debate has neglected a crucial piece of the CrossFit phenomenon until now – the program's social characteristics. No longer just the exercise program of extreme athletes or Special Forces soldiers, CrossFit has infiltrated corporate offices and suburban communities to become the exercise mode of choice for sedentary populations. Likewise, trainers and coaches, despite whatever personal thoughts they may have about its safety or efficacy, are faced increasingly with the CrossFit question from clients and athletes alike. Answering that question demands a comprehensive understanding of CrossFit, including not only its physiological effects, but also its sociology, which as this paper argued is more a driving force of the program's popularity than its bodily adaptations.

Quantitative colleagues within kinesiology may gloss over this article's findings and consider them unimportant to their desire for maximum athletic performance. However, understanding the "whys" of an exercise program is as important as, if not

more, than understanding its effects on muscle strength or cardiovascular capacity. In a short amount of time, CrossFit has revolutionized group exercise into something trendy and popular (Dawson, 2015), and in a nation that is struggling with obesity this finding holds promise for promoting exercise adherence and motivation within at-risk populations. Although exercise physiologists can design a foolproof exercise program that sheds fat and grows muscle, it is the exercise psychologists and sociologists who bridge the gap from lab to gym.

Thus, this paper argued that CrossFit, controversial as it may be, has much to teach the fitness community about how the exercise mind works and how an exercise space functions most effectively. Specifically, this paper identified several spatial elements that together created a hyper-competitive environment with high levels of exercise motivation and adherence. These included the frequent use of the clock to time workouts; the public tracking of workout results; the measurement of movement against an objective standard; and the mutual surveillance created by the gym's open layout. These spatial attributes also worked together to force cooperation between participants who would normally not exercise together, specifically in terms of gender, age, race, and ability. Furthermore, the gym's premium membership, industrial location, and grungy interior allowed for the sampling of hard physical labor by a population that is well-educated, wealthy, and increasingly sedentary and technologically dependent.

## Appendix A

## QUESTION GUIDE

1. Tell me about how you got into CrossFit?
2. What were your first impressions of the CrossFit gym?
3. What was your first CrossFit workout like?
4. If you had to describe this gym and how you exercise to a random stranger, what would you say?
5. How do you feel about the competitive aspect of CrossFit?

## Appendix B

## AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**TITLE OF STUDY**
A Spatial Ethnography of the CrossFit Gym

**NAME OF RESEARCHER**
Matt Crockett, M.A. Candidate, Department of Kinesiology, San José State University

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

**PURPOSE**
You have been asked to participate in a research study investigating the space and place of CrossFit gyms as an introduction to a broader discussion about CrossFit subculture.

**DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES**
You may be asked questions about your experience with CrossFit and your socially-relevant behavior while participating in CrossFit classes may be recorded as part of the researcher's field notes. These behavioral observations may include mannerisms, movements, and facial or bodily expressions, but will exclude detailed descriptions of unique tattoos, hairstyles, eccentric clothing, or other identifying characteristics. In the field notes, you will be referred to by a pseudonym.

**RISKS**
Potential risks with this study may include some psychological discomfort as you reflect on your experience with CrossFit.

**BENEFITS**
Potential benefits of participating in this study may include the enjoyment of recounting and sharing your experiences with CrossFit. You may also benefit from the knowledge that you are contributing to a greater scientific understanding of the psychology and sociology of CrossFit.

**COMPENSATION**
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate. If you agree to participate, you have the right to stop at any time. You also have the right to skip any interview questions that you do not wish to answer.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Although the results of this study may be published, no information that could identify you will be included. You will be referred to only by a pseudonym.

**QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, please contact Matt Crockett: mattccrockett@gmail.com or at (650) 759-7798.

- Complaints about the research may be presented to Matthew Masucci, Ph.D., Chair of the Department of Kinesiology: matthew.masucci@sjsu.edu or at (408) 924-3010.

- For questions about your rights or to report research-related injuries, please contact Pamela Stacks, Ph.D., Associate Vice President, Graduate Studies and Research: (408) 924-2779.