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“Yeah, and What’s the Problem?” Embodiment, Cultural Practices and Working out in a Dutch Gym

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Abstract: In this paper, I present empirical data from ethnographic work carried out in a Dutch gym, where people, especially students, from different countries work out, interact and explore ideas and practices related to their cultures and to other people’s cultures. I will analyse and explain four things: first, the social skills required to successfully interact in a multicultural space; second, the cultural and physical skills that people who have worked out in this gym for a long time have embodied; third, the skills and culture that foreigners have to quickly learn; and finally, how this affects the relationships and the activities considered important in this gym.

Keywords: gym; embodiment; body language; Amsterdam

1. Introduction

Nowadays most people know what a gym is, and what activities can be carried out there. Getting fit is a globalised body culture (Helps 2007; Landa 2011; Sassatelli 2010). Different research has shown the reasons that motivate people to become members of a gym (Arbinaga and García 2003; Monaghan 2001a; Crossley 2006a); others have pointed out the behaviour and norms of specific groups in the gym, such as bodybuilders (Brown 1999; Monaghan 2001; Scott 2011), elderly people (Tulle and Dorrer 2012; Andreasson et al. 2016) or gyms for women only (Craig and Liberti 2007; Valdés and Fuentes 2010). However, little has been said about how different people and cultures adapt in the same gym. What happens when, in a closed space, people of different ages, beliefs, religions, economic status, body shapes, and nationalities come together? How do people position themselves in this multicultural space? How does the corporeality change/adapt due to working out in a gym?

Amsterdam is an interesting city to observe how people from different cultures relate to each other. This multiculturalism can be observed in gyms. Being aware that multiculturalism is polysemic, in this article I use it to refer to “situations in which people who hold ‘different’ habits, customs, traditions, languages and/or religions live alongside each other in the same social space, willing to maintain relevant aspects of their own difference and to have it publicly recognized” (Colombo 2015, p. 801).

This paper presents empirical contributions to the theories of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty 2013; Csordas 1990; Csordas 1994; Csordas 1999; Crossley 2006b). It posits that culture does not reside only in objects, language or representations, but also in bodily processes, and in perceptions and feelings about life. The body is a biological material entity and embodiment is an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experiences and by modes of presence and engagement in the world (Csordas 1993). I follow a cultural phenomenology in which it is recognized that corporality is the existential substrate of culture and that embodied experiences are the starting point for analysing human participation in the cultural world (Csordas 1993). For instance, (Mol and Law 2004) have said that we all have and are a body, but we also do (our) bodies. Therefore, a person who considers himself an athlete seeks to achieve an athletic body; someone who has always been thin and after pregnancy

has an increased body weight, can point out that her current weight is not her “real body”, and she will work out in order to align the body that she has with the body that she is.

Every society and every culture outlines a unique knowledge about the body within their worldview, thereby giving it a unique sense and self-worth (Le Breton 1995). We have all adjusted our bodies to our context. (Koch 2011) points out that when an event is originally experienced, the underlying sensory, motor, and introspective states are partially stored. Later, when knowledge of the event becomes embodied, these original states are partially simulated. Thus, remembering an event arises from partially simulating the sensory, motor, and introspective states active at the time of the event. Depending on the situation, embodiment may range from simulation to traces of execution, to full-blown execution. These embodiments are not merely peripheral appendages of social information processing; they constitute the core of it. However, when someone changes their environment or culture, perhaps the same events take on another connotation that the subject must learn about and adapt to.

This paper presents empirical data from ethnographic work in a Dutch gym (Saturn) where predominately—but not exclusively—students and foreigners work out and interact. I will identify and explain the situations through which cultural difference is produced and negotiated, the social, cultural and psychical skills that people who have worked out for a long time in Saturn have embodied, the skills that foreigners have to learn, and finally, how this affects the relationships and activities in Saturn.

There are over 180 different nationalities living in Amsterdam. This diversity is reflected in the fact that 45% of Amsterdam’s residents have non-Dutch parents (Deben et al. 2000; De Waard 2012). In this sense, Saturn exemplifies two things: firstly, the cultural and racial diversity among foreigners living in Amsterdam; and secondly, it is an ideal place to illustrate the physical, psychological and behavioural skills needed to interact successfully with people of other cultures. In the same way as (Pelzer 2010) showed with the simple act of cycling (in the Netherlands the bicycle was a tool of nation-building in the century before the Second World War, it has become a symbolic transportation mode for the environmental movement in the United Kingdom (UK), and a sign of resistance against capitalism and conservatism in the United States (US)), people working out are also working on their inner selves and are giving their own meaning to this process. Cycling or going to the gym is full of personal, historical and cultural connotations.

This paper explores the embodied knowledge and processes involved for those who work out in Saturn, and the social adaptation processes involved when working out with people from different cultures. These topics are interconnected throughout the whole article. Nevertheless, the paper is structured as follows: firstly, there is the methodology; secondly, a description of the gym; thirdly, the skills that my respondents have embodied in Saturn; fourthly, some cultural practices are exposed, and finally, an analysis of cultural practices and embodiment.

2. Methodology

This work is based on ethnographic research conducted in Amsterdam during two years. For this particular paper, I will refer to the data from a gym where I did fieldwork between September 2014 and December 2014. I carried out a carnal/embodied ethnography (Wacquant 2004), which means that, through performing the activities that the subjects perform, fieldwork can become an instrument of theoretical construction, a method of obtaining “carnal knowledge” and a way of becoming an insider within the group. I believe that our bodies can be the empirical window through which to understand better, lived experiences, meanings, and practices and how those experiences are articulated in socio-cultural relations (Wiest et al. 2015). Other researchers have come up with interesting data by carrying out carnal/embodied ethnography (Turner 2000; Spielvogel 2003; Wacquant 2004; Crossley 2006b; Sassatelli 2010).

I have been working out for 16 years in Chile and been studying gym culture since 2012. Therefore, some of my thoughts and considerations about what is familiar or strange are based on my own

experiences as a gym user in Chile. To go to the gym, and to look like a person who works out, has helped me to be an insider and to better understand the experiences and body practices from my respondents. As far as possible, I not only interviewed my respondents but I also worked out with them. In this way, I could understand certain practices which are difficult to verbalise, and it especially helped me to win the trust of the participants, and more importantly, it was helpful for the problem facing any researcher; to increase the validity of the material gathered (Moeran 2007).

I went to Saturn six days a week, for at least four hours a day during four months. I held interviews, had short chats and workout sessions with my respondents, and carried out participant observation and observation with participation. My respondents were mainly, but not exclusively, students from The Netherlands and abroad. Even though I talked to everyone at the gym, my core respondents were seven men and seven women. They were interviewed at least once with an average duration of 1 h. All of them were given prior information about the objects of my research, and they gave their express consent to participate in the research. My observations were carried out in the changing rooms, in the fitness area, in the sauna, and in the studios where group lessons were held. For reasons of confidentiality, I refer to the gym with the pseudonym Saturn, and have modified a few details in its description. I also refer to my respondents by their country of origin, while being fully aware that an ethnography has no way of making representative claims based on the behaviour, statements or nationality of participants.

3. Saturn Gym

Saturn is located in a student area in the east of Amsterdam. It is a large and well-equipped gym, and the cost of membership is modest, especially for students. It provides many activities both inside and outside the gym. In this paper, I will refer to the activities in the fitness area and in the studios where group lessons are held. The gym accepts people of all ages and conditions. For instance, it has access for people with disabilities, and it has special activities for children. It is always busy and full of activities because it is cheap, well-equipped, and caters to students. Everyone tends to call it *gezellig*, a Dutch word roughly translated into English as “cosy”.

One enters the gym through a revolving door into a hall where there are receptionists who supply information about the gym. One can also pay for a membership at the hall, rent a towel or buy different kinds of souvenirs with the name Saturn on them. Saturn has three levels. The first level (downstairs) has different studios where group lessons are held such as Zumba or Spinning. The changing rooms, tanning rooms and the sauna (accessible by both genders) are also on the first level. On the second level, there is the hall with the receptionists, and on the third level (second floor), there is a big, open-plan space with areas divided into different zones dedicated to different activities. There is a large zone where abdominal and stretching exercises can be done, an area with a Life Fitness Synergy360 facility, two areas with cardio machines, an area with strength-building equipment, another for free weights and an area for Olympic weightlifting.

Saturn is open from Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. All of its trainers speak English to a very high standard, and half of them are not Dutch. These trainers have particular skills in certain areas such as powerlifting or boxing. Therefore, some of them tend to be closer to certain users of the gym. They are also more familiar with certain types of training. Most of them also work out in Saturn in their free time (and even during working hours). Music is not always played and when it is, it is not loud. Using a towel is mandatory and most people try to keep the gym clean and tidy.

Working out in Saturn and Embodying Knowledge

An awakening moment in my fieldwork happened with a Chinese man. It was a Thursday evening. After spending around 5 h in Saturn, and while heading to my bicycle parked outside, I realised the complexity of understanding multiculturalism in Amsterdam, and especially at the gym. Walking to my bicycle with headphones in my ears I came face to face with a Chinese man who was

on his way to the gym. I said hello without stopping. When I got to my bike, I looked to my side and saw the same man next to me saying something that I could not hear because of the music in my ears. I took off my headphones and looked at him in puzzlement. I said, *“Sorry, I didn’t hear what you said”*, and he looked at me surprised, then replied, *“You said hello”*. I did not quite understand what was happening so I said: *“Yes, I said hello”*. There was an awkward silence and neither of us really understood the situation. He turned around and left.

Did he think that I wanted to talk to him? Did he have a question that he needed to ask me? Why did he follow me? I do not have an interpretation for this. It took me by surprise and from that moment on I began to analyse how small gestures such as smiling, greeting, looking into the eyes, were perceived in different ways in Saturn. Saturn illustrates the complexities of interacting with people from different countries very well. The mere act of entering Saturn has to be figured out. Do I enter alone through the revolving door or do I enter behind someone else and share the small space? Can I push the door to make it faster or should I just wait? Once I have entered the gym, should I greet everyone or at least introduce myself to the trainers? How should I greet? Shake hands, or kiss? If I should kiss, is it one, two, or three kisses? Should I look into someone’s eyes when talking to them? About what topics should I talk? How can you make friends? If a woman smiles at you, what does it mean? What does it mean if a man smiles at you? What is even more complex is knowing how to react to different odours, gestures and body forms. Normally the types of clothing, brands worn, hairstyle, makeup, prosthetics, implants, decorations, tattoos, and piercings can reveal social origin, cultural background, and the age of their bearers, but in Saturn, this is not so easy to decode.

On the other hand, not only is physicality more exposed to the gaze of others in Saturn than in regular activities like work, but also the body language, the functions and sensations of the body, such as sweat, fatigue, breathing, grunting, moaning and wincing, and the tool that we have to understand all of this is our culture. For instance, foreigners working out in Saturn have said to me that Dutch people are hard to understand, that emotions, real feelings or judgements to people from abroad, most of the times are hidden behind the facade of *“everything is fine”*. Three quotations from different Dutch respondents are informative here: *“In Amsterdam we are used to seeing people from everywhere, and it’s not that we interact with everyone or that we understand each other. To be honest, we don’t really care, what happens, it’s just we are tolerant”*; *“We have a reputation for being tolerant but individually we are not tolerant, we are passive, even sometimes lazy, that’s different, we judge a lot but we don’t say it. We allow people to be different”*; *“Our tolerant attitude is more a product of necessity than a vision of a multicultural society”*.

My fieldwork showed me that people frequently work out alone, and the few conversations that one can hear are between acquaintances or classmates who train together (with the exception of the weightlifting area, which I will discuss later). People do not usually approach or talk to strangers, and if someone does it, the two people usually speak the same language. Language is one of the first things that bring people together (McMillan and Chavis 1986), and hearing in Saturn tends to be more important than sight; what one hears determines whether conversations are started or not, how to talk, what about and for how long; it provides confidence and clues as to how to converse with others. Waiting for a Zumba class, one of my Spanish respondents commented to me: *“Here comes that Chinese girl. I usually try to avoid talking to her, because when we talk, I don’t understand anything that she is saying, it’s very awkward”*.

In this sense, the first embodied knowledge that many people working out in Saturn have is proficiency in two or more languages. Most people can speak more than one language and can accurately relate accents and sounds to a particular language. In Saturn, I found Chinese or Latino people who have been adopted by Dutch families and consequently look like foreigners but do not speak Spanish or Mandarin. Furthermore, the appearance of a Dutch person and a German person is quite similar, so I quickly learned that nobody approaches or assumes the nationality of anybody just because of the way they look. A German woman said, *“here [at Saturn] just by talking to people or listening them on their conversations, you can learn some foreign words.”*

According to international estimates, The Netherlands is a country with a great command of English. The English Proficiency Index, the world's largest ranking of English skills, places The Netherlands in second place in the world in proficiency in English skills.¹ My Dutch respondents, unlike the quotation from my Spanish respondent mentioned above, have embodied the skill to listen and speak in different languages, and they are sometimes better able to understand foreigners speaking in English than any British or American person is. My English was understood far better in my interviews with Dutch people than with American or British people. For instance, I asked something with the wrong pronunciation, but with a questioning tone and body language, which allowed collaborators to understand perfectly what I meant. I also noticed in Saturn how Dutch people could follow conversations in English with people whose mother tongue was not English better than American or British people could. My respondents are used to hearing people speak English with Italian, Chinese or Spanish accents.

Indeed, my Dutch respondents love to hear different accents and to guess where these people with different accents come from. It is even better if they know some words in that language, as they will say those words without hesitation. Many of the people training at Saturn speak more than two languages. Meanwhile, foreign people will try to sound as English or Dutch as possible (which are the most commonly used languages in Saturn). In activities like Zumba where Latin music is played, music seems to link the Spanish speakers through the songs that those people sing during the lessons, which tends to produce greetings and sometimes chats in Spanish after or before the classes.

The second embodied knowledge of my respondents is related to not always reading body language and maintaining detachment from others. They have learned to stay neutral and distant. As a young Chilean middle-class person, the first thing I do when I arrive somewhere, is to look around and try to figure everything out and to behave according to the context. In Saturn, however, people do not always analyse the environment. It might sound weird, but my respondents go directly to the point, or they just ignore what is going on in front of them. I have heard that Dutch people are direct or even rude, but what I realised in Saturn is that you have to learn to be practical. When there are people from many different countries in the gym and you want to say or ask something, you must do it in the most simple and efficient way. If a person is nodding in front of you, you must not react; maybe that person is listening to music with little wireless headphones, maybe it is a twitch. Whatever it is, one must simply learn to be indifferent. A trainer explained it to me: *"Keep your nose out of someone else's business and you will avoid any awkward situation"*. One way to do this is just to try not to understand everything that is going on. If a person stops to observe the different facial expressions, clothing, and movements of others, they risk not understanding anything or wasting a lot of time looking for possible interpretations.

People try to be polite and to adapt to different cultures in Saturn and the easiest way to do this is by being silent, distant and direct. People greet each other with a *hi*, and if they are a bit closer, they shake hands, but nothing else, and of course they greet people they already know at a closer distance. If a person greets someone who is far away or greets someone whom they do not know, chances are that this person will not greet them back. A Dutch woman said, *"If I don't know you, why should I say hi?"* A Dutch man said, *"I don't know why but we are suspicious all the time. If we see someone who is approaching us, we immediately think, what does he want from me?"* The fact is that exchanging some words with someone at Saturn does not lead to any kind of friendship. If a person greets someone with whom they had a conversation the day before, it is very likely that this person will not greet them back. Among acquaintances of both genders, the greeting is done with a fist-to-fist action. There are those who hug, those who do a little bow, those who give one kiss on the cheek, and those who give three kisses. At first, the greeting can be an awkward ritual. Latinos tend to have more physical contact

¹ Retrieved from: ([EF Education First 2015](#)). It also can be seen in ([Deben et al. 2000](#)).

when they greet. A hug and a kiss are included. Asian people greet only verbally, and the Dutch tend to shake hands or fist bump, but sometimes give three kisses on the cheeks.

The people who attend the group lessons in the studios each week are always the same, but they do not tend to greet each other. In the studios or in the sauna, people only talk to others if they are friends or if they know for sure that they speak the same language. People tend not to look at anyone for too long, unlike in the gyms in my country, Chile. For instance, in Saturn, the showers are shared so the best way to behave is by not looking at anyone, regardless of what they are doing. Saturn is located in a city known for open-mindedness where nudity in certain situations is acceptable and unobjectionable, although people from some other countries are uncomfortable with it. For example, I would not shower in the communal showers with other naked men, and neither would some people from Morocco.

The bathrooms are private places and it may sound logical not to look at others. However, even in other areas of the gym, people tend not to talk to strangers and do not look at each other either. People do not make eye contact; everyone is focused on their own business. Technology helps in this behaviour. People look at their mobile phones, a stopwatch, the televisions that are in the gym, anything but another person, not directly at least. Nevertheless, a few people talk to everyone and try to be close and outgoing. These people tend to talk only with people of the same gender. A Peruvian respondent shared with me the following thought: *"In Latin America, we haven't incorporated silence as in Europe. The silence stresses us, it bothers us, we prefer a thousand more times the music, the noise, than the silence"*.

Another practice that is different from my experiences as a Chilean relates to taking turns on the machines. In Saturn, people do not tend to take turns in using the equipment, but just ask how many sets you have left, and wait for the apparatus to be free or go to use different equipment. However, there are some moments of great interaction between strangers; they are not spontaneous moments but rather moments within a known schedule. One class is Synergy (an activity based on circuits with functional exercises for 30 min) that is held in the Life Fitness Synergy360 area, and another class is the abs workout (15 min) held in the stretching area. These activities are performed in groups, individually or in pairs, with no gender segregation, with both men and women executing the same exercises with the same weights.

One may ask how foreigners see the Dutch. These are some references: *"With the Dutch you never know whether they are happy or sad, as they always have a neutral face"; "the Dutch are not expressive, they don't show their feelings openly"; "the Dutch look direct into your eyes while speaking without much movement of hands or physical expressions"*. These quotations are related to the third embodied knowledge that people in Saturn have to learn, which is to raise awareness of your own behaviour and control of your emotions and body language, from expressions like disgust, shock, politeness, embarrassment to controlling the tone of one's voice or not spitting while talking and learning to express themselves in a foreign language. For those who do not have a good command of English or Dutch, they have to control their nerves when speaking in another language. They have to deal with the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing how to express clearly their ideas, and the discomfort of pronouncing difficult words and strange sounds not found in their mother tongue.

If someone speaks English but makes no sense, the listener must control their physical reactions and present themselves as a neutral person. At the same time, if they do not know the customs, tradition or the way that some foreigners look, they have to learn to be neutral and not to judge right away. If someone who is working out has hair over their whole body, one quickly observes them for a second and expresses nothing (neither with words nor body language). A particularly difficult situation for me was to learn that if a woman is trying to lift or move something heavy without success, it might be better not to help her unless asked. Many women may consider someone rude, weird or presumptive if they help them without being asked. The same applies to people with disabilities. One must first ask if they need help or better yet, just do nothing, and if the person needs help, they will eventually ask for it.

4. Cultural Diversity

Saturn's cultural diversity is apparent not only in differing physical appearance or by the languages spoken, but also by the practices that people carry out. For instance, European women, especially Dutch women, tend to occupy all areas of Saturn. They tend to perform different exercises, and they do strength exercises. If presented with the opportunity (as in Synergy), they will not hesitate to prove that they are stronger than some of the men around them are. Meanwhile, Asian or Arab women tend to train in areas of the gym where there are more women; they even carry dumbbells to these areas and work out there with very light weights. In the case of many Chinese women, they only go to group classes and almost never work out in the fitness area. In the case of men, I have never seen a Chinese man interested in lifting heavy weights. Dutch men practice many types of martial arts and much of their training has to do with hitting the heavy bag, jumping rope, and working on flexibility. They do not tend to look for big muscle development. However, Latin people or Americans are looking to develop bigger muscles. Muslims respect Ramadan, and during this period they do not eat until the sun sets. These users decrease attendance or do not go to the gym during this period.

Cultural practices can also be observed in the use of diaries, whether paper or electronic. They are quite common in Saturn, and Dutch respondents have their schedules and routines. They also write down their progress, and it helps them to keep track of their workouts. A Peruvian person in his early thirties said to me, *"it's the first time that I'm using an agenda and that I'm writing down appointments"*. The sobriety of the Dutch culture is also reflected in the fact that clothing, brands or expensive accessories are rare in Saturn. In order to extend the duration of their shoes, weightlifters and powerlifters carry their special shoes in their hands inside the gym. They mainly get to the gym by bike, wearing normal trainers, and then change their shoes in the weightlifting area. A strange practice for me is that some people inside the fitness area or in the studios train only in socks. When I asked them why, the most common answer was, for comfort. It is also common to see on the Saturn members some patriotic logos, national team shirts, and embroidered flags on bags and jackets as a way of showing their identities.

I have seen many things in Saturn: women working out who were over 180 cm tall; people moving from the changing room to the sauna just in underwear; men at the gym only jumping, skipping, jumping forwards and backwards or, jumping on platforms; women training with very short shorts and tiny tops; men in tank tops and covered in tattoos; women wearing hijab; people with disabilities lifting weights; women doing twelve pull-ups in a row; pregnant women working out; people in plaster casts training; elderly people doing CrossFit; people doing just calisthenics; women boxing every day; and people training for five hours. When I pointed this out to any of my respondents at the time, their common response was, *"yeah, and what's the problem?"*

5. "Yeah, and What's the Problem?"

Statistics show that going to the gym is the most popular way of keeping fit in The Netherlands. There is a social efficiency to going to the gym that is in tune with the life of the Dutch: a visit to the gym is individual and, is relatively short, and can be easily added to any busy schedule (Elshout and Velthuis 2013). In the case of Saturn, given the cultural diversity within and where almost everything is accepted, or is not seen as important, how does Dutch culture affect relationships in the gym? What things matter in terms of behaviours, relationships and why? Three things matter in Saturn: firstly, feeling comfortable; secondly, performance; and finally, the possibility of experimentation.

5.1. Feeling Comfortable

Saturn's members are faced with a new environment. Most of them are exchange students. Some are people who, after trying different gyms, have decided to train there. Therefore, they must adapt and acquire embodied skills in order to function properly. Some of the things that create a comfortable environment are cleanliness and silence. In Chile, I always used to go to the gym with a 30 cm × 50 cm towel, but in the gyms where I trained it was not normal for everyone to take a towel with them.

However, in Saturn everyone goes with their own towels: they are obligatory, and if you forget yours, you have to rent one for €1. Not only is the use of towels mandatory, but the dimensions of the towels themselves are much larger: bath towels of 140 cm × 65 cm, or even beach towels of 165 cm × 100 cm. The towels are spread on the machines, covering them completely. In addition, in several sectors of the gym and in the studios, one can find a bin and above it a sanitising spray and toilet paper. After using machines, especially for cardiovascular exercise, one should clean them with this disinfectant.

Douglas showed that the social interactions required for hiding or concealing involuntary organic processes like urination, defecating and vomiting have a pejorative label in the formal discourse of Western society (Douglas 2003; Douglas 2007). Similarly, sneezing, or coughing loudly, are uncontrolled signs that are deprived of their natural meaning and may be associated with good or bad manners. As a general rule, the higher the refinement, the bigger the disembodiment: less noise when eating, chewing and talking, breathing more smoothly, walking without noise, more modulated laughter, and more controlled anger. Sweat also communicates bodily horror, contagion, danger, and the possibility of contamination. Even organic processes are affected by the context. An Ecuadorian woman said to me, *“The European women don’t know how to walk, they walk like men.”*

In Saturn, controlling aspects of the body such as laughter or the tone of the voice is important. In addition, sweating heavily is frowned upon; in my experience in gyms in Chile, sweating is considered proof of effort and commitment (Sossa 2013; Sossa 2014; Sossa 2016), but in Saturn sweating can be seen as a sign of a lack of control and therefore it should be wiped away. Interestingly, in Saturn, the idea of cleanliness and good manners has less to do with odours than with hygiene. It is common to smell the strong odour of perspiration, but people never mention it. A Chinese respondent said, *“I don’t get how some people can work out in a smelly place. It’s like nobody smells it. Some western people smell very, very bad; our perspiration doesn’t smell”*.

Saturn’s staff prefer to keep noise at a moderate level in order to create a comfortable environment. If there is music, it is always soft. People do not talk loudly, and it is rare to hear people screaming while performing exercises (men who train in the Olympic weightlifting area, are generally the ones who make the most noise). The trainers of Synergy or other activities held in the studios sometimes shout and try to encourage the participants to shout too, but people do not tend to join in. This silence, like the silence in the bathrooms or in the fitness area, is not muteness but a transformation of language, which is saying something without words. Silence reveals other possibilities of human interaction. This dimension of language makes a phenomenology of the forms of expression possible that incorporates the world of the implicit and goes beyond the privilege granted to explicit-verbal language in our communication processes. Silence, as an absence of speech, or as a tool for linguistic economy, is a way of thinking and communicating (Moya 2012).

Every time people in Saturn use words or whenever they refuse to do so, there is a reason for it. People have to learn when to talk and with whom in Saturn. From my field notes and from my interviews, I realised that silence, as (Casalini 2013) says, is a common language used by women. Women tend to respond to certain behaviours, such as someone showing off or behaving strangely in front of them, with silence and distance. Moreover, the women who practise weightlifting or powerlifting do not scream. In this sense, silence represents three things in Saturn: firstly, respect for others; secondly, it could be a very subtle way of showing disapproval; finally, it is used to keep distance from others; silence is the language with which people say, *“I want to train quietly, and I do not want to be disturbed”*. As a German woman said, *“People who shout or throw the weights on the floor do not come to the gym to work out. They come because they want attention; they want to be seen”*.

5.2. Performance

In Saturn, people are very concerned about performance, not necessarily in a comparative or competitive way, but in relation to personal goals. A Dutch respondent said, *“if I do something, I have to do it well, always; I have to be good at it”*. A Colombian woman said to me, *“I do body power for fun, but here (at Saturn) some Dutch women take it very seriously”*. In order to have a good workout, my respondents,

influenced by the culture in Saturn, like to consider the risks and consequences of everything they do well in advance. They want to have detailed information about what they are doing. They do not ask others for help but read and learn how to work out properly themselves. The most important thing is knowledge about training, eating and resting. This is an embodied knowledge acquired through time and practice. An example of this is that the technique used for weightlifting is more important than the amount of weight lifted, food has to be natural and moderate, and activities, like stretching, using foam rollers and going to the sauna, are part of the process of resting and recovering.

A Dutch powerlifter said, *“If you want to talk about technique and form, well, let’s talk about deadlifts or squats. You know, these are the exercises that everyone should know how to do, and to do well. Squatting, for instance, may look simple but it’s a very complicated exercise. Where are your toes pointing? Are you conscious about your knees, your breath, your back, your chest, your neck, elbows, shoulders, head, abs, hands, glutes, and your trunk position? Do you know how to activate your glutes or to push more with your quads? Are you conscious about these muscles and how your form and technique has to be during the whole exercise?”*

This quote is very illustrative of what Crossley calls “reflexive body techniques”, where reflexivity is a more complex process which does not apply purely to the mind, it is also a reflexivity given to the body, and in which some processes are not necessarily conscious and vary in each person (Crossley 2006a; Crossley 2006b). As (Crossley 2006b) notes, the phenomenon of habit is precisely what should lead us to revise our notion of “understanding” and our notion of body. To understand is to experience a harmony between what we intend and what occurs, between intention and performance. By constantly going to the gym the body enters into the practice and the practice into the body. (Downey 2010) calls it “bodily enculturation”. Some respondents have said things like the following: *“When I started practicing boxing, I was all the time thinking of having my hands up, and chin down, to throw a right hand when receiving a jab, but then it happens automatically. You don’t think about it anymore”; “Two years ago, when doing squats, deadlifts or military press, I always looked at the floor to know where my feet were positioned, I had to check if they were in the correct position. Now, without looking I already know where and how my feet are positioned, I can feel it”; “I’ve discovered my body in a new way. I wasn’t a very sporty person, but now that I work out, I realized that I have more strength than I thought. It’s cool and still surprises me”.*

I asked my respondents who had put their routine or diet together, and they seemed surprised at my question. They replied that they had created it themselves and that they based their routines on books, videos, and even academic papers. In order to verify this, I asked if they could send them to me and, to my surprise, they all did. One respondent even sent me three books and fifteen scientific articles on nutrition, diet supplementation, and training. Going to Saturn for these respondents also involves a process of studying different workouts, diets, exercises and trying to find what works best in their bodies, and in their daily contexts. In one of my conversations with a powerlifter talking about why there are people who continuously go to the gym but who do not achieve improvements in physical appearance or physical strength, he pointed out: *“What normal people pay attention to, if they pay any attention to something while training, is numbers. People focus on reps, sets, the time spent at the gym. But because they don’t really know what they’re doing, they don’t know that numbers don’t really matter, quantity is not the most important thing when you’re working out. What’s important is the quality of the exercise, the proper technique. Some of the things that people do in the gym are not even safe, but they keep doing it because they don’t want to learn, they don’t care”.*

Things are not black and white, in Saturn. Health, beauty, politeness and performance are subjective concepts. Take strength for instance. Some people lift many kilos; there are those who lift their own bodyweight in very difficult postures; some people do powerlifting; others have big muscles and they look strong. However, each of them knows that strength depends on body weight, the activity executed, the speed with which the movements are accomplished, the weight lifted, and, most importantly, a certain performance. Curiously, gender is not so important when talking about strength. Many women in Saturn are stronger than some of the men are. In one of my interviews with a Dutch woman, she explained to me that they were different from other women from other countries: they were taller, heavier. She finally said, *“We’ve been built differently”.*

Powerlifters and Olympic weightlifters are a very close group; they share a certain culture, a subworld (Crosset and Beal 1997; Sossa 2015). Most of the time they are in the same area and they act as if they own the gym. They feel that they are different from the rest because of their knowledge and strength. In my field notes, I have many examples of how group members construct what (Román-Velázquez 1999) called “togetherness”. This group of people dress alike and use similar accessories, talk to each other, share magnesium for their workout, help each other in some exercises, and even film each other in order to check the technique of their movements (and at the same time get some attention on social media and in the gym). Good performance and technique for them is a must. Other members of the gym who do not know how to execute certain movements will not train with them, and would prefer to work out on the machines or in another area of the gym.

Even though performance level is very important to members of Saturn, there is a serious morality encompassing the idea of fair play and real strength. Depending on the exercise, wearing lifting straps or a belt can be considered as cheating. Therefore, even though there is pride in the ability to lift heavy weights, this action should be done in the most natural way possible. This fact is reflected in how products like steroids, which are rarely taken by Saturn’s members, are seen. The majority of these members are students and as (Monaghan 2001) states, the social impact of the gym’s surroundings is a key aspect for understanding drug-using practices. Therefore, being university students, and being aware of the side effects of performance-enhancing drugs, these are considered dangerous and a sign of weakness. However, they do consume other types of recreational drugs such as alcohol, marijuana or MDMA², which interestingly is not considered as a sign of weakness, but as a personal decision. (Andreasson 2013) explains that there are negative images surrounding performance-enhancing drugs, with users seen as “cheaters”, or as being connected to crime and it is described and analysed in terms of deviance. The very few people who confessed to having taken steroids did so very reluctantly, and after more than sixteen months conducting fieldwork with them.

The classes in the studios are based on performances related to different goals, including classes to relax, to sweat, to strengthen certain areas or to stretch. A German woman said of the classes, “*They have to be challenging*”. People who regularly attend the classes seem to form an idea of a group, which gives special meaning to the classes. The dancing, stretching or fighting classes are also linked to the idea of performance and a group. Even though people are doing things individually, they are referred to as a group. At the same time, these activities are associated with certain cultures and associated attributes. Therefore, it is common to hear that if someone performs well in an activity it is due to their origin of birth, their gender or because they have “special genes”. Some examples of this are the notion that black people are genetically gifted to develop muscles. I have heard phrases like, “*He is black. He can gain muscles while playing chess and eating donuts*”; “*I’m white, you know, I have to work out, I don’t have the big bottom gene*”. I asked different men many times, “*Why don’t you do aerobics?*” The immediate response was, “*Isn’t aerobics for girls?*” Another common response was, “*Men do not have coordination*”.

It was common to hear three assumptions with reference to the Zumba classes in Saturn. The first was about a “natural” Latin affinity for dance and rhythm. I heard phrases like “*Latin people can dance because it’s in their blood*”; “*you can dance because it’s in your genes*”. The second assumption was that Zumba was only about Latin music, especially salsa; I heard phrases like “*Zumba is like doing salsa on steroids*”; “*the music heard in Europe is not used for Zumba*”. The final assumption was that dancing was an activity mainly for women. I heard chauvinistic phrases like “*Dancing is something feminine or for gay people*” and; “*Zumba is almost the only athletic activity practised by some women*”. As (Román-Velázquez 1999) has shown, in playing salsa, as in dancing, rhythms have to be learned. Dancing salsa is a learning process that requires a great deal of musical perception and practice, and not all Latin people know how to dance. Therefore, ethnicity or nationality often becomes an issue in situations where cultural contact creates barriers to processes of transformation, particularly when it is

² Methylendioxyamfetamine. Commonly known as ecstasy.

asserted that due to ethnic characteristics certain people can, or cannot, engage in particular practices and activities. Besides, in Zumba, it is common to hear different styles of music such as hip-hop or pop music. Finally, as with any dance activity, Zumba can be performed and enjoyed by both genders. Therefore, there is a cultural context where in certain countries it is seen as an exclusively female activity.

5.3. The Possibility of Experimentation

Sport is relaxing because it is cathartic. It allows for the release of tensions, frustrations and impulses that are triggered in everyday life but cannot ordinarily be acted upon satisfactorily (Wankel and Berger 1990). It allows for situations that are discouraged in everyday life such as screaming, combat or playful enactment (Crossley 2006a). In this sense, objective and subjective features help Saturn to be a place where people explore new areas. Not only do they explore activities that may affect their workouts differently, testing new exercises or new disciplines, but also many of my respondents challenge themselves in a different sense, for instance wearing different clothes, behaving differently, or participating in activities unfamiliar to them.

One Colombian man said, *"In Colombia, I would never have dared to wear these tight pants, as everyone would look at me all the time. Here nobody cares, nobody notices"*. A Spanish woman said, *"Here you can be practical. Nobody comments on how you are dressed; no one says a word about it. So now, I get the most practical clothing for biking and for the cold. Whether I look good or not is just a detail. But, in Spain, that detail really matters"*; an Italian woman said, *"I really like the English accent. I met a friend who is from the UK and for some reason now I want to change my English accent and make it sound a bit more British"*. A tall Dutch woman said, *"Here I feel good with my body, with my size and my strength"*. A Chinese respondent who was doing Zumba said, *"I really enjoy Zumba but it's so hard for me. I'm not used to dancing. I'm twenty-five and I've been just once to a party"*. I asked her, *"So what did you do if you wanted to have fun?"*, and she replied, *"We go out for karaoke or we go out to eat. Those are our parties. But, we don't dance; we never dance"*.

With the exception of Zumba lessons, gender distinctions are not very pronounced in Saturn, and the activities and trainers promote the participation of both genders equally. However, for people who have just become members of the gym, especially foreigners, working out in Saturn is seen as an opportunity to try new things: women practice Olympic lifting or kickboxing for the first time; men try calisthenics exercises or powerlifting. The activities performed in the Synergy class help members to experiment with new things: work out on stability balls (which men tend not to do); exercise with their own body weight (which women tend not to do); work out on steps (which men tend not to do); or do deadlifts (which women tend not to do, with the exception of some group classes where they are required to perform this exercise). For some of the people who are doing these exercises, they are not only new or challenging, but they are also exercises that they would not normally do if it were up to them. A Dutch woman said, *"I don't work out my upper body. I always do legs and abs. So that's why I sometimes do the Synergy class, because I know I'll work out some muscles that I never normally train, and actually, I don't even know how to train them, like my shoulders or my back muscles"*.

6. Embodiment and Cultural Practices

As human beings, we are always learning and adapting ourselves to context. The processes of embodiment are always present and vary from conscious to unconscious adaptations. Firstly, the study of embodied knowledge and its development in bodily practices suggests that gaining bodily skills requires more than "knowledge": it involves changes in physiology, perception, comportment, and behavioural patterns in unsystematic, diverse modes. The people working out at Saturn experience biological changes because of their workout: training may demonstrably bring out physiological changes, cultural changes and biological changes in the brain, nervous system, bones, joints, sensory organs, even endocrine and autonomic systems (Downey 2010).

Secondly, embodiment is related to the state of the body, such as posture, arm movements, and facial expressions, which occur during social interaction and play central roles in social information

processing (Koch 2011). Consequently, my respondents in Saturn are embodying conscious and unconscious aptitudes on their inner selves, bodily practices, skills, shapes and movements.

Finally, the relation between the body and context varies according to each person's life history. For instance, the relationship between body and music is not exclusively related to corporal movements and rhythms, but to specific cultural practices and social meanings, which is why dancing might be more "natural" for some people. The manner in which sound waves are assembled to resemble physical gestures, and that, we as listeners are able to read or make sense of them, is largely because of our lifelong experiences as embodied creatures. Our bodies are experienced through music in the sense that emotions and feelings are often acuter through listening to music. Music can make us experience our bodies in accordance with its gestures and rhythms. This experience is mediated through genre-specific codes, specific social contexts and other socially constructed meanings that are recognised by listeners (Román-Velázquez 1999).

Based on my experiences in Santiago, the way people feel and perceive things in the gym is different from what happens at Saturn. Sweating in some Chilean gyms is considered as good, fatigue is a goal, and pain is a sign that there will be rewards (Sossa 2013; Sossa 2014; Sossa 2015; Sossa 2016). Conversely, in Saturn, sweating is disagreeable because it is a sign of loss of control. Fatigue or the weight lifted are not as important as technique and pain is important but difficult to measure. Therefore, the main goal after a workout is not to have sore muscles but to achieve a certain goal that can be measured in kilos, repetitions or time. At the same time, in Santiago, it is not so rare to see some men doing Zumba. Furthermore, people share the equipment and take turns using it. Most people talk to each other, and they know how others might react to their jokes or comments. At Saturn, it is unusual to see heterosexual men doing Zumba; people with disabilities work out without any problems; and many people prefer to use the equipment alone instead of taking turns, and they are cautious when it comes to expressing themselves.

Skill learning is not the internalisation of a shared "sense" or transmission of a reified cultural structure. Even when the same people go to the same gym and they do the same exercises, these people share certain norms and physical abilities in different ways and degrees. The people who interact at Saturn are embodying attention patterns, motor control, neurological systems, emotional reactions, interaction patterns, and top-down self-management techniques (Crossley 2006a). Going to the gym requires time commitment and a readjustment of priorities, which might be in conflict with family responsibilities and expectations of appropriate behaviour. The regular gym-goer changes their lifestyle and learns to reframe everyday feelings of stress and weariness to perceive them as signs of a need for exercise. Daily tiredness is interpreted as something that needs to be "flushed out" (Crossley 2006a). In addition, they learn to reframe muscular "burn", stiffness, muscle soreness, a pounding heart, and exhaustion as immediate pleasures and as signs of achievement and well-being (Sossa 2015). A Dutch woman said, *"I know when my stomach hurts it is because I'm getting my period or because I did too many abs"*. An Olympic lifter said: *"The snatch and the clean and jerk are difficult movements. There's no way in hell you can do them without being connected to your body, without trusting your body, without being conscious of your whole body"*. Exercise increases an agent's physical mastery of both him/herself and the world, and thereby transforms their manner of "being in the world", a transformation that is experienced positively. My respondents told me how working out has boosted their self-esteem, and irrespective of whether or not there were any positive changes in appearance, it has made them more confident and happy (cf. (Gimlin 2002; Markula 2004; Markula 1995; Hedblom 2009; Crossley 2006a)).

Some members of Saturn are facing a new culture, which helps them to realise, learn and problematise things that they took for granted before, such as greetings, introducing themselves, talking, and interpreting body language. Being in a different society also helps them to see how certain bodily skills and values are developed through culture. For instance, rhythm is a way of transmitting a description of experience in such a way that the experience is recreated in the person receiving it, not merely as an abstraction but as a physical effect on the organism, on the blood, on breathing, and on the physical patterns of the brain (Román-Velázquez 1999). Consequently, for those who come from a

culture where music and especially dancing is not usual, rhythm is a challenge or something that they have not quite developed, while for others it is completely natural.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, I have explained what scholars like (Turner 1989) and (Paulson 2005) have discussed, how embodiment is an ongoing state, with an inherent drive to develop, which forces humans to act on themselves, others, and the world around them. The meanings attributed to certain sensations or body language are developed within the context of a community that educates about it. I agree with (Paterson and Hughes 1999) who point out that within some studies the term body tends to be used without much sense of “bodiliness”, as if the body were little more than flesh and bones. A myriad of authors (Csordas 1990; Román-Velázquez 1999; Mol and Law 2004; Crossley 2006a) have shown that, the embodied self unifies the phenomena of embodied cognition, perception, emotion and action. Instead of simply asserting that culture is “embodied”, we should engage actively with those disciplines (human biology, neurosciences, cognitive and neuropsychology) which specifically study the human body, as well as with empirical research in order to expose how culture is embodied, its malleability, and the material and symbolic dimensions of these learning processes (Downey 2010; Thorpe 2014).

There is always a cultural construction of bodies; bodies are not neutral biological essences, and the body has to be seen as a state of multiple interpretations and processes. Saturn is *gezellig* or *cosy* not so much because everyone talks to each other, but rather for three reasons. Firstly, it is a cheap, clean, tidy, and well-equipped place. Secondly, nothing that anyone does will be criticised, as long as it does not interfere with others. Finally, because the members have the opportunity to work on their bodies and, at the same time, on their inner selves, they learn more about their own bodies and culture.

My respondents at Saturn are constantly developing and adapting their bodies to the context; they are re-learning skills and nuancing interpretations. As explained by (Downey 2010), the study of sports, dance or similar physical practices makes clear that skill is not simply the embodiment of knowledge, but rather physical, perceptual, neurological, and behavioural changes of the individual subject so that they can accomplish tasks that, prior to having embodied the abilities, were impossible. During my fieldwork, I could see that the experiences of the body as a means through which we relate to the world not only generates knowledge, a mental knowledge but also an embodied knowledge. The body has a pre-reflective awareness, and is able to act without the need to think consciously. However, we are not aware of this until we are exposed to a different culture. People from other countries training at Saturn learn more about their bodies and readjust their knowledge in physical, motor, and emotional ways, in order to adapt themselves to the new context.

The body and music, performance, shapes and skills are informed by specific ideas on gender, sexuality, ethnicity and culture. As (Mauss 1971) and Boulch (in (Acuña 2001)) have explained, the ways of resting, working or walking differ from one society to another. The expressive character of the movements that refers to a person and that shows excitement and emotions, is never a “pure” expression, but an expression in the presence of others, and hence an expression for others. Expressive body movements acquire a social dimension to the extent that they are pragmatic or a symbolic meaning made for others and, in places like Saturn where multiculturalism has a strong presence, what we call common sense is unsettled, and becomes the product of living conditions, experiences, and culture of the people. A tattoo, a smile, a man dancing Zumba, or the silence from someone you just said hello to, are situations that one has to learn to decipher.

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