



'You either go on the gang life, or you go on that football life': class, race, and place in imaginaries of South London's sports cages

Stephen Crossley, Fraser Curry & Luke Billingham

To cite this article: Stephen Crossley, Fraser Curry & Luke Billingham (2023): 'You either go on the gang life, or you go on that football life': class, race, and place in imaginaries of South London's sports cages, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2023.2226597](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2226597)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2226597>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 21 Jun 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

'You either go on the gang life, or you go on that football life': class, race, and place in imaginaries of South London's sports cages

Stephen Crossley^a, Fraser Curry^b and Luke Billingham^c

^aDepartment of Sociology, Durham University, Durham, UK; ^bDepartment of International Development, King's College London, London, UK; ^cDepartment of Social Policy and Criminology, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

In considering the *spatialization of race* and the *racialization of space*, this article explores dominant media representations of sports cages in the UK. To date, media interest in these cages, often found on social housing estates, has revolved around the role they have played in the childhoods of a small number of young, almost exclusively Black, footballers, primarily from London. In the first academic article to engage with these issues, we adopt a critical approach, examining white spatial imaginaries which promulgate the naturalisation of poverty, and which produce and reproduce social pathologies associated with Black communities, and young Black men in particular. The enduring racialised tropes of lone parent families, gang affiliation and violence, and Black footballers being skilful and athletic but 'difficult' or 'lacking' in tactical acumen are discussed. We highlight examples of commodification, exploitation and glamourisation of these spaces. In addition, the reasons for the centrality of cages in the lives of large numbers of young Black men in London, rarely examined in media representations, are explicated. We end by proposing potential areas of research that are worthy of exploration.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 6 February 2023
Accepted 12 June 2023

KEYWORDS

Marginalisation; South London; sports cages; spatial imaginaries

Introduction

In the lead up to the 2002 FIFA Men's World Cup, Nike released an iconic 'Secret Tournament' advert, with games of 3 v 3, played in an industrial style cage (complete with heavy duty link chain nets). Each team composed of elite footballers from around the world, and the action was soundtracked by a thumping electronic remix of an Elvis Presley song. *Time* magazine called it a 'futuristic, pared-down game' whereby 'soccer becomes a game of trick shots, small goals and fancy footwork' (Porter and Robinson 2002). The advertising campaign was supported by local tournaments in several major cities around the

CONTACT Stephen Crossley  Stephen.j.crossley@durham.ac.uk  Department of Sociology, Durham University, Room 003, 29 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

world, involving an estimated 1 million children and young people playing the same game with the same rules (first goal wins) in similar cages at special venues, including the Millennium Dome in London. In the intervening twenty years, 'cage football' has become an increasingly important feature of the football landscape, especially in urban settings and amongst young people. The association with intricate styles of play and trickery has remained.

Sportswear giants such as Nike and Adidas sell street football shoes, and the introduction of the FIFA VOLTA mode on the hugely popular EA Sports computer game FIFA 2020, which includes sportswear 'collections' and offers players the opportunity to 'go back to the streets', highlights the global reach and commercial interest in street-based or cage football. Cages, or courts, often located on public or social housing estates, are thus a global phenomenon, often catering for multiple sports and leisure interests and activities. Despite a growing interest in associated topics such as informal urban sport (Aquino 2015; Vieyra 2016) belonging amongst marginalised urban groups (O'Connor et al. 2022), and leisure and multicultural spaces (Aquino et al. 2022), there has, to date, been little academic engagement with the role of sports cages in the communities that house them, the value they have for the young people that access them, or the ways they are depicted in popular culture (see Van den Bogert 2023, for an exception).

To date, dominant media representations of sports cages in the UK have revolved around the role they have played in the childhoods of a small number of young, almost exclusively Black, footballers, primarily from London. Young players such as Jadon Sancho, Eberichi Eze and Ademola Lookman have become synonymous with cages and numerous newspaper articles and TV segments or programmes have been produced about them. A LexisNexis newspaper database search highlights 30 articles from UK newspapers between July 2017 to July 2022 that include the words 'football' and 'cage'. The references come from tabloid newspapers and broadsheets and refer to male and female professional players. The one constant is that almost all relate to cages in London, often South London. The Manchester United player Jadon Sancho is referred to as a 'cage warrior' who would be bringing his 'cage football skills' to the 2020 Euros (King 2020). Eberechi Eze, a professional at Crystal Palace, who features in more than five of the articles, talks of how the cage 'toughened' him up (Burt 2021). The Arsenal striker Eddie Nketiah 'may have been nurtured by the Gunners but he was formed in the streets of Lewisham in Southeast London ... [and] is able to battle with the best, having spent a childhood playing no-holds-barred football in a cage' (Roddy 2019). The majority of the articles are about Black players, but a small number reference white players such as Chloe Kelly, the scorer of the winning goal at the 2022 Women's Euros who credits time spent 'playing cage football on an estate in West London' with improving both her physicality and technical aspects of her game (Harrow Times 2021).

This focus leaves other, more mundane aspects of the daily life of cages, and the role that they play in the lives of young Black men (it is usually men) in disadvantaged urban communities largely neglected or overlooked (see Hollingworth (2015) for an examination of a 'football crowd' and performances of Black working-class masculinity in urban secondary schools in London). Drawing on work by McKittrick and Lipsitz, amongst others, on the centrality of spatial matters when considering racial matters – or the *spatialization of race* and the *racialization of space* – we consider the often limited, narrow focus on cages in South London as being 'talent factories' (Williams

2022) or as ‘proving grounds’ (Smith 2017) for a relatively small number of young people who become professional footballers. Adopting this approach enables us to examine the naturalisation of poverty and its ahistorical depiction, and to examine how social pathologies associated with Black communities, and young Black men in particular, are produced and re-produced by journalistic and televisual accounts. The enduring racialised tropes of lone parent families, gang affiliation and violence, and Black footballers being skilful and athletic but ‘difficult’ or ‘lacking’ in tactical acumen are discussed. We highlight examples of exploitation and glamourisation of these spaces, and consider the reasons for the centrality of cages in the lives of large numbers of young Black men in London. In doing so, we contribute to and extend the literature surrounding the commodification of practices and negotiated identities borne from exclusion amongst young Black communities in the UK and beyond (see Bakkali 2022 for a discussion on ‘road life’ and White 2020, for an example of young people negotiating their lives which are affected by racism, neoliberalism, and austerity).

The following section briefly introduces scholarship on racialized spatial imaginaries. The two subsequent sections focus in turn on dominant white spatial imaginaries of cages and more peripheral Black spatial imaginaries. A final section highlights some issues that remain largely untouched in media representations of cages and proposes potential research areas that are worthy of exploration.

Racial and spatial matters

Katherine McKittrick (2006: xii) observed that ‘Black matters are spatial matters’ and that ‘Black lives are necessarily geographic’, and intersections of race and space have been well documented by geographers in recent years (McKittrick and Woods 2007; Pulido 2017). Here we draw on the work of George Lipsitz and the concepts of Black and white spatial imaginaries to explore the racialization of space and the spatialization of race (Lipsitz 2007). These imaginaries are summarised before we turn our attention to critical scholarship that has examined the racialised imaginaries of ‘playground’ basketball or ‘streetball’ in the U.S.A.

Writing about urban sites in the U.S., Lipsitz (2011: 52) argues that ‘racialized space has come to be seen as natural’, despite it being the result of numerous policies and practices that ensure that people of different races often inhabit very different, usually unequal spaces. The ‘taken-for-granted’ nature of these divisions means that ‘these sites serve to produce and sustain racial meanings; they enact a public pedagogy about who belongs where and about what makes certain spaces desirable’ (2011, 15) and, by extension, what makes others undesirable and to be avoided. Lipsitz (2011: 6) explains the profound effects on the lives and life chances of the people who inhabit them:

Racialized space shapes nearly every aspect of urban life. The racial imagination that relegates people of different races to different spaces produces grossly unequal access to education, employment, transportation, and shelter. It exposes communities of colour disproportionately to environmental hazards and social nuisances while offering whites privileged access to economic opportunities, social amenities, and valuable personal networks.

He suggests that the white spatial imaginary ‘idealizes “pure” and homogeneous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behaviour’ (2011: 29)

and that it 'often relies on misdirection, on creating spectacles that attract attention – yet detract our gaze from the links that connect urban place and race' (2011: 13). In contrast, the Black spatial imaginary 'that emerges from complex couplings of race and space promotes solidarities within, between, and across spaces' (2011: 69) and attempts to 'turn segregation into congregation, to transform divisiveness into solidarity, to change dehumanization into rehumanization' (2011: 19), and to promote ideals of community, democracy, and egalitarianism.

Lipstiz's work involves binary categories that can potentially over-simplify the complexity and fragmented nature of the discourses and representations surrounding urban spaces and practices. We are mindful of this critique, but we do not see the concepts as 'absolutes' or as entirely distinct from each other. Both Black and white spatial imaginaries are subject to the influence of the other and are subject to changing social relations and norms. As Oates (2017: 96) observes, 'research focusing on the role of sport in the white spatial imaginary offers an opportunity to examine the complex, at times contradictory, meanings it produces', and examples of both imaginaries can be found in the texts we examine.

Scholars examining the 'streetball' phenomenon in the U.S. have drawn on Lipsitz's work to explore the ways in which young Black urban basketball players have been depicted by mainstream media and corporations (Woodbine 2016; Oates 2017; Wallace 2020). Much of this work has resonance for the examination of the representation of cages in the U.K., and the assumed characteristics of young people who use them.

Streetball or 'playground' basketball is viewed as more performative and individualistic than 'traditional' basketball, with the score being of secondary importance to the successful completion of tricks and skills designed to humiliate or embarrass opponents. It thus 'operates as a distinct cultural practice, possessing its own internal norms, logics, transgressive potentials ...' (Wallace 2020, 2) 'in opposition to the "White man's rules" of traditional basketball' (p4). According to Wallace (2020: 1):

streetball is depicted as illustrative of the perceived pathological and inferior nature of Blackness; romanticized and divorced from the structural contexts of its production; and materially and symbolically exploited by corporate commercial entities'.

Oates argues that this form of basketball, often practiced and developed in neighbourhood basketball courts without adult guidance or tuition, became an important aspect of the lives of many young Black men in urban locales across the U.S. It subsequently became a subject of interest to mainstream audiences through 'the white-dominated commercial media complex' (Oates 2017, 95) with journalists, marketeers and video game manufacturers bringing the phenomenon to the white middle-classes who may never have seen or visited one of the courts where the game is played. Wallace (2020) draws on three texts to explore the commodification of 'Black expressivity', identifying three key ways in which the commodified depictions are harmful to Black communities. The first, as noted above, is that streetball is used as an indicator of the inferiority of Blackness, despite none of the texts engaging with race directly or explicitly. Instead, Wallace (2020: 5) argues that 'all three texts implicitly drew upon and further reproduced cultural tropes that positioned streetball as indicative of the imagined deficiency, degeneracy, and inherent inferiority of Black culture.' The second is that the performance, style and aesthetics of streetball and the spaces where it is practiced are separated out from wider

relational and structural contexts that both create and constrain them. Finally, the third aspect highlights the contradiction that the commodifiers of streetball benefit from the distinctiveness of the style that they also help to devalue and promote as inferior or superficial.

Of particular relevance to our argument here is Wallace's observation that structural disadvantage and marginalisation are cast as natural obstacles to be overcome by talented individuals in search of their dream:

In other words, the implication is that *poverty is okay as long as it produces something good*, such as the expressivity and creativity embodied in streetball. The glamorization of disadvantage suggests to the popular imaginary that *disadvantage is acceptable as long as it serves as motivation for a performance that is entertaining, as long as its transcendence makes for an evocative narrative* (emphases added).

The media focus on South London in the texts that we examine bring the intersections of class, race, and place to the fore (see Shildrick, Blackman, and MacDonald (2009), for a previous Special Issue of JYS on young people, class and place). These issues are, however, rarely interrogated, serving only as background context for the successes of the professional footballers discussed.

White spatial imaginaries

This section follows Wallace's (2020; 4) lead in using textual analysis (Fursich 2009) to examine media depictions of 'streetball', noting its capacity to aid 'understanding how commercial media mobilizes language, visuals, symbols, and technology to produce meaning and shape popular perceptions of Blackness'. We draw on four key texts, which were chosen according to the following criteria: audience reach and prominence; variety of origin and medium; the focus on South London; a focus on spatial aspects of cages (rather than on individual footballers associated with them); and intertextual links that could be drawn between them.

The texts are: a three-part documentary series (and accompanying website article) called *South of the River* (*SotR*), narrated by ex-England and Manchester United footballer Rio Ferdinand, which aired on national and cable television (ITV and BT Sport); two newspaper articles – one from *The New York Times* and one from *The Independent*; and a magazine article from *The Blizzard*, which styles itself as 'The Thinking Fan's Choice' (*The Blizzard*, no date). Database searches (Lexis Nexis & Google News) and popular websites (Google, Youtube, Twitter, Vimeo etc.) were used to search for relevant newspaper and magazine articles and short films or television programmes. Similar searches and 'snowballing' techniques were used with academic texts relating to informal and urban leisure, spatial imaginaries, and young people's leisure.

Marginalisation, exclusion, and the threat of violence are discussed in all the texts. A feature article promoting *SotR* on the BT Sport website states that the 'tragic dichotomy between earning a [professional football] contract and falling into crime is a prevailing theme' of the docuseries which 'explores the exponential rise of players from the area and takes an unflinching look at the associated social problems including knife crime, gang culture and funding cuts' (Williams 2022).

In an article for *The Independent* titled 'It's not easy to survive': How cage football shaped a generation of Premier League players, Tom Kershaw (2020a) writes that 'London's cages

have become a breeding ground of raw potential, children bonded by class, adversity and often race'. In an article for *The Blizzard* magazine, Ben Welch (2022, 162) uses the same metaphor, arguing that 'London has become the most prolific breeding ground for elite talent in England.' Rory Smith, the lead football correspondent for *The New York Times*, in an article called *Premier League Proving Grounds* (Smith 2017), suggests that London's most significant contribution to the future of football can be found 'in the ball courts and cages that dot the urban sprawl of South London'. He goes on to write:

The boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham are gentrifying rapidly. Property prices are soaring. Artisanal coffee houses and trendy pop-up restaurants are flourishing. The hipsters, the artists, the writers and the start-up entrepreneurs started arriving a few years ago, a sort of flat-white expeditionary force. Now the financiers and the lawyers are starting to follow, claiming traditionally working-class areas and immigrant communities as territory for a booming London. The transformation, though, is only skin deep. The concrete bleakness of the area's run-down housing projects still brushes up, uneasily, against the new glass-fronted apartment complexes.

This racialized segregation and inequality articulated by Smith is portrayed as natural and passes without further comment. In the opening moments of *SotR*, Rio Ferdinand explains that 'you can be from South London into the West end in around ten minutes. Couple of miles. The difference is crazy'. *SotR* includes numerous menacing dramatisations involving young people in hoodies with faces covered, including chase scene that originates in a cage. Other audio and visual representations which highlight or indicate violence and danger include sirens wailing, CCTV footage, statistics about knife crime and gang-related murders (which are repeated in Welch's article), and Ferdinand talking about young people having increased desire to 'get out' of the area. One young footballer explains that 'There's only two pathways that you have when you're from South London. You can either go on that gang life, or you go on that football life'. Young Black working-class men are therefore portrayed as 'out of place' in the artisanal coffee shops, mixing with hipsters, financiers, and lawyers, but as being entirely 'at home' on 'dangerous' council estates, 'areas untouched by change' or on an 'AstroTurf field enclosed by a wire mesh fence' (Smith 2017).

Cage footballers are described in both newspaper articles as being 'rough diamonds' in need of refinement. In Smith's article it is the head of youth recruitment at a South London professional football club who uses this term, with Smith paraphrasing his view of cage footballers as 'often lacking knowledge in some of the more formal, perhaps less fun, aspects of the game, like man-marking and positional discipline, even if their talent is not in doubt'. The trope of Black footballers being athletic, possessing 'rhythm' and 'balance' (Carrington 2010, 131), but lacking understanding, tactical acumen, or the ability to do the unseen but essential work of football – 'a racialized typology of behaviour invoked to locate the player 'outside' of football's implicitly white, normative codes' (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001, 173) – has a long and undistinguished pedigree. For example, the former Crystal Palace chairman Ron Noades, was particularly forthright in a Channel 4 documentary in 1991:

The problem with Black players is they've great pace, great athletes, love to play with the ball in front of them ... when it's behind them it's – chaos. I don't think too many of them can read the game. When you're getting into the midwinter you need a few of the hard white men to carry the athletic Black players through. (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001, 175).

These archaic views can still be heard today (see Campbell and Bebb 2022) and the texts are laced with mentions of an athletic, skilful, individualistic playing style. Kershaw refers to 'exaggerated feints, the relish of one-on-one scenarios, the tricks designed not just to beat opponents but even to embarrass them', whilst Smith notes that 'speed and strength are paramount, but the emphasis is on individual brilliance, imagination, technical mastery'. A local player refers to a 'definite South London style'. Jadon Sancho, in the first episode of *SotR* says 'From my area it was about nutmegging people, trying to embarrass people' whilst Rio Ferdinand notes that 'I see stuff in their game, and I think 'Yes! South London.' Welch (2022:, 161) suggests that social media and smartphones mean that the 'prospect of Insta-fame and a pro footballer commenting on your video is enough to incentivise that derring-do approach' (see Stuart 2020 for research into questions raised by young men in Chicago uploading images and video clips to social media in order to profit from voyeuristic interest in gang violence).

This style allegedly stays with the players, no matter where they end up, with Smith noting that 'all of them carry with them the stamp of the ball courts, the tell-tale signs of where they came from': 'kids from South London are built different' in the words of the closing quote of the final episode of *SotR*. Such a reductionist view of cage footballers ignores the success of players that exhibit different skills (Ferdinand himself was a stylish defender credited with an excellent reading of the game), hinting at a 'racially determined positional segregation' (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001, 175). It also marks out the alleged impact that racialised space has on individuals, and vice versa. C. Wright Mills, in *The Racial Contract* (1999, 42) argues that 'for subpersons [this] becomes a circular indictment: 'You are what you are because you originate from a certain kind of space, and that space has those properties in part because it is inhabited by creatures like yourself.'

This narrow focus also ignores other influences on the lives of young people, and interests and experiences that are not connected with cages. By way of example, many of the professional footballers that feature in *SotR* and who are synonymous with cages had been affiliated with professional clubs from a young age, including Jadon Sancho who was signed by Watford at the age of eight and moved out of South London and into accommodation provided by the club and a new school at age 12 (Stone 2018). Ademola Lookman achieved eight GCSEs at A or A* (Pitt-Brooke 2017) and Ferdinand himself used to have ballet lessons four times a week for four years having won a scholarship to the Central School of Ballet in Farringdon. Speaking of the experience in an interview in 2008, Ferdinand noted that 'I always as a kid wanted to do something different. I'd get bored very easily – even playing football or hanging around with my mates. So, travelling away from home, meeting new people ... I enjoyed it' (Llewellyn Smith 2008). These examples are not to undermine the importance of the cage, football, and estate-based friendships to young people, but they are helpful in highlighting the essentializing nature of some of the representations discussed.

Kershaw observes that 'Cage football is not a new phenomenon, it's just that whereas it was once an outlier, it's now a dominant ingredient in a player's development.' He suggests that there are several reasons why this is the case, including 'social deprivation, multiculturalism, the infatuation with skills in the age of the highlight reel', before settling on the 'mainstream breakthrough' being primarily a result of 'coaching's own evolution', with 'an instinctive and off-the-cuff style' now being celebrated when once it 'jarred with

academies intensely focused on structure and discipline'. One coach suggests that there are 'more of these street players coming through because more and more coaches are giving them the freedom to express themselves' (Welch 2022, 165). Kershaw further elaborates on this with the help of a coach from a foundation who work with 'hundreds of prospects in high crime-rate areas in London':

Sadly, 10 or 15 years ago, I think there was a stigma towards young Black players in football. A lot of young players were lost because of the idea that they were trick ponies and showboats. It's an old-school mentality that's changed as coaching has become more scientific. Players from a cage footballing background might have an ego or a chip on their shoulder, but people now understand that's not always a negative.

Improved scouting techniques and an 'appreciation' of the circumstances of many young Black men growing up in South London are also highlighted as reasons for the increase in professional footballers coming from the area. Welch (2022, 162) quotes one talent scout suggesting that 'the kids from London would have come from more challenging, single-parent backgrounds and as a result, they had more hunger, passion, and desire. They would do anything to succeed.' Southampton Football Club are described as 'forward-thinking' following a decision 'to set up camp in London so they could cast their net over the capital's cage football arenas' (Welch 2022, 162), bringing to mind the narratives of intrepid exploration and 'breaking of new ground' when middle-class journalists and philanthropists went 'slumming' in the East end of London in Victorian times (Koven 2006).

If progress against negative racial stereotypes in football is being made (and these quotations hint that it may not be), it is presented as being a by-product of 'multiculturalism', more extensive scouting practices, and a more accommodating attitude within the 'controlled environments' of professional football academies with their 'predictable patterns of design and behaviour' (Lipsitz 2011, 29). Young Black working-class men may still be labelled as being difficult or arrogant, but these are now apparently viewed as potential positive attributes, at least amongst the small numbers who might make it as professional footballers, as a result of coaching becoming 'more scientific'. Struggles against discrimination, impoverishment and both explicit and implicit racism within sport and wider society are at best marginalised in the sources discussed here and, at worst, seen as adding value to the development of young people, cast as 'mere plot points' in their 'origin story' (Wallace 2020, 2: 10).

Black spatial imaginaries

In a recent book examining how Black footballers have shaped contemporary football in the U.K. called *A New Formation*, Calum Jacobs (2022, 15–17) discusses the 'hyper-white world of football writing' and the ways in which the 'white imagination ... determines and misreads' Black experiences (see also Lindsey 2001). Smith, Kershaw and Welch are all white, as is Tim Williams the author of the feature on *SotR* for the BT Sport website, and three of the four producers of the *SotR* series are also white (Ferdinand being the exception).¹

Glimpses of a Black spatial imaginary can be found in all the texts, as well as in other depictions of cages, (see, for example, Adang and Boulanouar, 2016), but they are usually

mediated by a white spatial imaginary. The focus of the *SotR* docuseries may be on young footballers attempting to make it as professionals but there are some discussions of wider contexts, alternative portrayals of cages, and the role they play in everyday life. Williams, for example, writes of South London 'being in the grip of austerity and crime', and he argues that the series 'takes an unflinching look at the associated social problems including knife crime, gang culture and funding cuts,' and 'shines a light on the importance of social cohesion as a driver for change.' Kershaw, in his article for *The Independent*, notes how 'cage football has become an epicentre for positive change, whether as a hotbed of talent or simply a distraction' with cages 'fostering a spirit that characterises today's generation of players: freedom and risk, aspiration born out of deprivation, hardship shrugged off in a blur of stepovers.' Welch (2022, 162) argues that there is a 'troubling paradox' at work: 'On the one hand it's a curse, as a dangerous and stressful environment, and on the other it's a blessing, providing conditions that cultivate grit and ingenuity.' These quotations, and the case studies of both professional and aspiring footballers in *SotR*, provide exemplars of Wallace's (2020, 10) observation of 'the insidious trope of recasting poverty as a romantic struggle that is justified to the extent that it generates toughness, resilience, and dedication'.

Throughout *SotR*, there are various examples of the community and 'congregation from segregation' that Lipsitz speaks of, but these do not occupy as much space as discussions of challenges for young people to overcome on the road to stardom. There are numerous shots of young people 'hanging out' in cages, chatting, supporting each other, laughing with and at each other. Robinson, in her research on young people's use of free space, highlights that 'young people are busy conversing, telling stories and planning future activities' when they are free from adult supervision or intervention. She notes that the chance that an 'event' will happen at some point keeps young people returning to the same spaces and that, over time, such spaces act as 'the provider of memories of past interactions – it charts people and contains and triggers memories, anecdotes, hopes and encounters' (Robinson 2009, 507).

In one *SotR* clip, older boys allow younger children to have 'one last game' at 9 o'clock before they are made to go home. Ademola Lookman recalls how he regularly ate at friend's houses because there was no food in his house, or because his mother was often out at work. A comment from an unknown young person highlights that there is a 'brotherhood or sisterhood that goes out the window once the game starts', but these relations are rarely explored in more depth.

Many of the adults interviewed in the series, including professional footballers, youth workers and volunteer coaches, discuss their own journeys and experiences in South London and highlight how they want to support the next generation in their struggles, and prevent them from taking the wrong path. This is a key point of *SotR*, with Ferdinand stating that 'It's great that the area of London I grew up in is getting the recognition it deserves ... I'm proud to be from South of The River' (Williams 2022). There are numerous coaches, many of whom grew up alongside the professional players, or coached them, who are discussed as positive mentors, role models and significant in the lives of young people in the area. Many of these appear to be working in a voluntary capacity or with small community organisations and all of them appear to value the opportunity to work with all young people, and not just elite potential professionals, and to give

something back to the area where they grew up. The desire amongst them to 'get out' to somewhere else does not seem to be particularly strong.

The professional footballers from South London provided role models for young people, a point that is made regularly. Ferdinand has a 'blue plaque' commemorating his youth on the Friary Estate in Peckham, Tammy Abraham was mentoring and supporting the son of a friend of his father, and Jadon Sancho refurbished a concrete cage for the grassroots community club Lambeth Tigers, with the support of Nike, making it safe to use again. Here we see examples of Lipsitz's argument that intersections of race and space promote solidarity and community, whilst we can also note the commodification of cage football by a global sportswear manufacturer. Ferdinand's observation that not many people will make it as professional footballers and that there are many people in the communities being discussed that should be the inspiration for children before any footballer, is particularly striking.

There are also numerous discussions and depictions of the importance of family in the series. Eberiche Eze speaks about wanting to play football professionally to help his family and Joe Gomez, a Liverpool and England player, says his 'mum and dad were key' acting as a 'foundation at home, telling me what was right and wrong'. Parents are shown or discussed as being overwhelmingly supportive, despite their own struggles, including some having to work multiple jobs. Older brothers and sisters are important as well, looking after or out for young siblings, when parents aren't around or when they are otherwise occupied. Almost all the people spoken to on *SotR* recognised and understood the importance of education, even if they did not necessarily excel at school. The importance of faith is also covered, with Ramez, one of the young people followed during the series, speaking eloquently of the beauty of Islam in one episode.

These positive depictions all highlight the disconnect between the dominant media and political imagery surrounding young Black working-class males and their families, and the reality of everyday life for many inhabitants of South London, and similar areas. Following the riots that erupted in London in 2011 following the shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, the then Prime Minister David Cameron (2011) confidently stated that he believed many of the rioters:

come from one of the neighbourhoods where it's standard for children to have a mum and not a dad, where it's normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger.

Such discourses and imagery are not only unsupported by social scientific research, but they help to deflect attention away from structural issues and focus them more on the alleged behavioural shortcomings of marginalised populations. The deflection away from these wider determinants in all the articles and *SotR* highlights the tendency of white spatial imaginaries to 'create spectacles that attract attention', 'detract our gaze from the links that connect urban place and race' (Lipsitz 2011, 13) and strip activities and practices from their wider social and cultural context. This is not to say that there is no explicit discussion of the 'structure of opportunities' in South London, and many of the young people appear acutely aware of the constraints that are placed on their lives and their futures.

Whilst Williams notes that South London is 'in the grip of austerity and crime' little time is spent exploring or documenting these issues. A three-minute section in the first episode

(which runs to 47 min in total) discusses the impact of austerity on the area, and the lack of trust in politicians despite numerous funding programmes ostensibly designed to improve the areas and the opportunities available to residents of them. In the final episode, a youth worker argues that whilst there is a 'crisis in South London', with young people turning to drugs and crime, it is important to focus on the main issues that relate to a lack of government investment in young people and no desire to take action on their behalf. This oration takes place over a dramatisation of a group of young men in hoodies chasing another young man wearing a hoodie out of a cage.

There is also a discussion about the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the finding of the subsequent Macpherson Report that the Metropolitan Police were 'institutionally racist'. Ferdinand and Gomez both recount anecdotes of the unnecessary use of 'stop and search' tactics and there are further references to these practices in other episodes, but these are often in the form of statistics flashed onto the screen for a few seconds before the subject moves onto something else.

Welch (2022:, 160) notes that 'these pitches are the only spaces many children, often from immigrant and minority backgrounds, have access to', but this observation, like many others, passes without further comment or explication. Why is it the case that, in the words of Eze in a separate interview with Kershaw, 'There wasn't really anything else to do' (Kershaw 2020b)? The particular aesthetics of cage football, with an emphasis on trickery, and close control similarly evade further discussion, 'romanticized and divorced from the structural contexts of its production' (Wallace 2020, 1). A discussion around this might highlight the lack of green spaces or playing fields for young people in South London, or processes of exclusion or discrimination which prevent them from accessing those that do exist, and the subsequent importance of 'grey spaces' (O'Connor et al. 2022). It is to a fuller discussion of the relations that help to produce the wider context of young Black lives in South London that we now turn.

Discussion

Thus far, the focus has been on how the sports cages of South London, and the young Black, working-class men who frequent them have been depicted in media publications and productions. There is, however, a need to situate the cages themselves within their wider context and to promote a more contextualised understanding of their role and value. In this section, we attempt to sketch out some important points that help to bring cages into closer conversation with the social and spatial relations that have helped to produce them, to provide a 'closer appreciation of the ways in which young people's leisure and cultural lives intersect with wider aspects of their biographies' (Shil-drick and MacDonald 2006, 126).

In the first instance, given that cages are usually located within or near social housing, the ways in which they are imagined and depicted is intimately linked to the politics of representation engulfing British social housing and 'estates', and the territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant 2007) they are subjected to. Propagated by mass-media, social housing estates are cast as the stage where spectacles of urban crisis play out (Andrews 2017). Fraught by racialised, classed, and gendered tropes, estates in London often epitomize what Anderson (2012) calls the iconic ghetto: 'the impoverished, crime-prone [and] drug infested area of the city ... where the Black people live' (Anderson 2012, 8). These

are the product of a 'white spatial imaginary,' which harnesses policy, legal, and cultural mechanisms to divert resources away from, or increase scrutiny and control over, Black-designated places. Politicians such as Tony Blair and David Cameron have used high-rise estates in London to make the case for significant policy measures to address an alleged 'workless class' (Blair 1997) or to demolish 'sink estates' that 'entrench poverty' with 'brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways [being] a gift to criminals and drug dealers ... decades of neglect have led to gangs, ghettos and anti-social behaviour' (Cameron 2016). Such estates have therefore 'played an ideological and symbolic role as a signifier of a spatially concentrated and dysfunctional underclass' (Lees 2015, 2).

Butcher and Dickens (2016, 802) argue that through these discursive attacks, and the subsequent punitive policy measures and regeneration/gentrification-induced displacement, young people are disproportionately impacted by a form of 'affective displacement' that results in them 'no longer feeling at home' or 'fitting in' to many parts of their local area and surroundings. A particularly pervasive impact of the wider programme of austerity has been the redirection of funding away from services and resources supporting children and young people, such as play and leisure centres, libraries, community centres and youth clubs, placing greater significance on the infrastructures and informal spaces that remain.

This disinvestment in services for young people has been accompanied by a concomitant disinvestment in spaces for young people, especially spaces and opportunities for sport and leisure. A report examining the community legacy of the 2012 London Olympics found that 'government attention to legacy had waned by 2016' and that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 'did not complete a promised evaluation of the long-term impact of the Games in 2020 and so does not know the full extent of any sporting legacy delivered from the £8.8 billion that the government spent on the Games' (NAO 2022, 7). The London Playing Fields Foundation (2022) states that 'since 1990, London has lost 41% of its grass cricket wickets and 20% of its natural turf football pitches'. More recently, local authorities, housing association and private developers have been exploring ways to build new properties on 'under-utilised space' including ball courts and cages, with local communities protesting these and arguing for a greater appreciation of the value of cages (Grant 2021).

Even before austerity and the associated shrinking of young people's social realm, Ralphs, Medina, and Aldridge (2009, 488), in the aforementioned Special Issue of *JYS*, highlighted that 'living in known gang areas significantly limited the use of space' for young people' in their research, and 'the fear of victimization that resulted [from living in gang-known areas] restricted the mobility of non-gang young people'. In this context, and amidst the latest bout of 'gang fever' (Hallsworth and Young 2004, 12), renewed concerns about a knife crime 'epidemic' (Squires 2009), and the over-policing of communities of colour in the capital, it is unsurprising that local, easily accessible spaces play such an important part in the lives of marginalised, vilified and fearful young (Billingham 2023, 17) highlights that cages 'can be significant places of safety for young people, and places which parents are happy to have their children use, particularly when they have good oversight of the space from their homes.'

Thus, where the privatization of public space, affective displacement, and hyper-policing increasingly envelopes the everyday lives of young Black men in South London and other parts of the city, cages belong to them, serving as important social infrastructures.

Far and beyond simply serving as 'proving grounds' for the display of individual skills and elite football talent, and thus as 'spectacle', cages provide an everyday space to cultivate the infrastructures of comradery, friendship, and respect – the 'congregation from segregation' that Lipsitz has observed in majority Black spaces in the USA.

Conclusion

This is, we believe, the first academic article to substantively engage with sports cages in the UK and the role that they play in the lives of the (predominantly) young people that access them. We have focused here on the racialised spatial imaginaries surrounding cages, particularly in the popular media, and how issues of marginalisation are naturalised, and how Black communities are often both pathologized and exploited. There are, however, a wide range of issues that we have been unable to cover, and that we hope to explore, or see explored. We are particularly interested in the role of cages as social infrastructures – 'the physical places and organisations that shape the way people interact' (Klinenberg 2018, 5) – in marginalised communities. It is also imperative that we hear more from the young people who access them, without a commercial entity as the messenger. Whilst some academic work has engaged with young people and activities that sometimes take place within cages (White 2020), this is an obvious place to start in developing literature around sports cages in the UK and the role they play in people's lives (See Telander (1976) for a 'playground' basketball example of such an approach). A greater and deeper exploration of the heterogeneity of cages, and the activities that take place in them is required: cages are not all of similar size and/or location,, some have access restrictions, and others are used primarily for purposes other than football (Billingham 2023). Issues of gender, sexuality, and disability, alongside race and class, deserve further consideration in these 'tough' but potentially inclusive spaces: cages can be places of harm and risk as well as places of safety and friendship (Billingham 2020; Van den Bogert 2023). The unfolding and ongoing impact of the recent media attention on cages will be of interest, including the role of social media (Stuart 2020), and links with other features of Black identity and culture, such as music and fashion.

We do not doubt that, despite some of the developments outlined above, there will be evidence of 'the old and the same; of continuity rather than change' (Shildrick, Blackman, and MacDonald 2009, 462) in the structure of opportunities available to young Black working-class communities, and 'the centrality of social class, race and gender to contemporary youth formations' (Hollingworth 2015, 1251). Nonetheless, we hope that this article sparks further critical research which thinks 'from the cage' to grapple with and interrogate the complexities of belonging in marginalised spaces and communities undergoing urban change.

Note

1. We acknowledge our own positionality here, as three white relatively middle-class men. We would emphasise that our critique in this article is aimed at white media representations of sports cages, rather than Black communities use, understanding or valuing of these spaces.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

No funding was received in support of this work.

Declaration of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

References

- Adang, J., and S. Boulanouar. 2016. *Ballon sur Bitume*. Yard Media.
- Anderson, E. 2012. "The Iconic Ghetto." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642: 8–24. doi:[10.1177/0002716212446299](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212446299).
- Andrews, K. 2017. "The Iconic Ghetto on British Television: Black Representation and Top Boy." In *Adjusting the Contrast: British Television and Constructs of Race*, edited by S. Malik, and D. M. Newton, 111–131. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Aquino, K. 2015. "More Than a Game: Embodied Everyday Anti-Racism among Young Filipino-Australian Street Ballers." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36 (2): 166–183. doi:[10.1080/07256868.2015.1008430](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2015.1008430).
- Aquino, K., A. Wise, S. Velayutham, K. D. Parry, and S. Neal. 2022. "The Right to the City: Outdoor Informal Sport and Urban Belonging in Multicultural Spaces." *Annals of Leisure Research* 25 (4): 472–490. doi:[10.1080/11745398.2020.1859391](https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2020.1859391).
- Back, L., T. Crabbe, and J. Solomos. 2001. *The Changing Face of Football: Racism Identity and Multiculture in the English Game*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bakkali, Y. 2022. "Road Capitals: Reconceptualising Street Capital, Value Production and Exchange in the Context of Road Life in the UK." *Current Sociology* 70 (3): 419–435. doi:[10.1177/00113921211001086](https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211001086).
- Billingham, L. 2020. Sports Cages & Multi-Use Games Areas: Places of safety, places of harm, places of potential, Hackney Quest. Available at <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/media/ywlhvcgo/sports-cages-mugas-places-of-safety-places-of-harm-places-of-potential-final.pdf> (Accessed 31 January 2023).
- Billingham, L. 2023. *The Difference a MUGA Can Make: The Value of Multi-Use Games Areas for Young People, Families and Communities*. Hackney Quest.
- Blair, T. 1997. Aylesbury Estate speech, 2 June. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20070626045507/http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/seu/news52f.html?id=400> (Accessed 21 December 2022).
- The Blizzard. no date. About. Available at <https://theblizzard.co.uk/about/>.
- Burt, J. 2021. How cage football helped Eberechi Eze make Crystal Palace his playground, The Telegraph, 12 February. Available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2021/02/12/cage-football-helped-eberechi-ezemade-crystal-palace-playground/>.
- Butcher, M., and L. Dickens. 2016. "Spatial Dislocation and Affective Displacement: Youth Perspectives on Gentrification in London." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40: 800–816. doi:[10.1111/1468-2427.12432](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12432).
- Cameron, D. 2011. PM's speech on the fightback after the riots, 15 August. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots>.
- Cameron, D. 2016. Estate regeneration: article by David Cameron, 10 January. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/estate-regeneration-article-by-david-cameron> (Accessed 21 December 2022).

- Campbell, P. I., and L. Bebb. 2022. "'He is Like a Gazelle (When he Runs)' (re)Constructing Race and Nation in Match-day Commentary at the Men's 2018 FIFA World Cup." *Sport in Society* 25 (1): 144–162. doi:10.1080/17430437.2020.1777102.
- Carrington, B. 2010. *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora*. London: Sage.
- Fursich, E. 2009. "In defense of textual analysis." *Journalism Studies* 10 (9): 238–252. doi:10.1080/14616700802374050.
- Grant, H. 2021. 'London councils under fire for plans to build homes on play areas,' *The Guardian*, 2 June. Available at: <https://amp.theguardian.com/society/2021/jun/02/london-councils-under-fire-for-plans-to-build-homes-on-play-areas> (Accessed: October 2, 2022).
- Hallsworth, S., and T. Young. 2004. "Getting Real About Gangs." *Criminal Justice Matters* 55 (1): 12–13. doi:10.1080/09627250408553587.
- Harrow Times. 2021. Everton Star Kelly Credits Cage Football Upbringing for Superb Form, Harrow Times, 28 November. Available at https://www.harrowtimes.co.uk/sport/worldcup2010/world_cup_news/18067732.everton-star-kelly-credits-cage-football-upbringing-superb-form/.
- Hollingworth, S. 2015. "Performances of Social Class, Race and Gender Through Youth Subculture: Putting Structure Back in to Youth Subcultural Studies." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18: 1237–1256. doi:10.1080/13676261.2015.1039968.
- Jacobs, C. 2022. "Introduction." In *A New Formation: How Black Footballers Shaped the Modern Game*, edited by C. Jacobs. London: Merky Books.
- Kershaw, T. 2020a. 'It's not easy to survive': How cage football shaped a generation of Premier League players, *The Independent*, 16 October. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/cage-football-south-london-eze-osayi-samuel-zaha-maja-epl-b1047480.html>.
- Kershaw, T. 2020b. QPR's Eberechi Eze: 'I always dreamt of finally getting here. There was no other option', *The Independent*, 9 January. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/football-league/qpr-eberechi-eze-interview-profile-championship-transfer-efl-a9276126.html> (Accessed 28 November 2022).
- King, D. 2020. Cage Warrior: England star Jadon Sancho bringing cage football mentality to Euro 2020 and says 'cage skills are tight skills', *The Sun*, 4 July. Available at <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/football/15491491/sancho-england-euro-2020-cage-football/>.
- Klinenberg, E. 2018. *Palaces for the People: How To Build a More Equal and United Society*. London: Random House.
- Koven, S. 2006. *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lees, L. 2015. Public inquiry Aylesbury estate, London witness statement Professor Loretta Lees. Available at: <https://southwarknotes.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/aylesbury-estate-public-inquiry-witness-statement-of-loretta-lees-29-april-2015.pdf> (Accessed: October 3, 2022).
- Lindsey, E. 2001. "Notes from the Sports Desk: Reflections on Race, Class and Gender in British Sports Journalism." In *Race' Sport and British Society*, edited by B. Carrington, and I. McDonald. London: Routledge.
- Lipsitz, G. 2007. "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape." *Landscape Journal* 26 (1): 10–23. doi:10.3368/lj.26.1.10.
- Lipsitz, G. 2011. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Llewellyn Smith, C. 2008. A United Front, *The Guardian*, 1 June. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2008/jun/01/manchesterunited>.
- London Playing Fields Foundation. 2022. Protecting Playing Fields. Available at <https://www.lpff.org.uk/protecting/protecting-playing-fields/> (Accessed 21 December 2022).
- McKittrick, K. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McKittrick, K. and Woods. 2007. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- NAO. 2022. Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity, HC72. Available at <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Grassroots-participation-in-sport-and-physical-activity-Summary.pdf> (Accessed 21 December 2022).

- Oates, T. P. 2017. "Selling Streetball: Racialized Space, Commercialized Spectacle, and Playground Basketball." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34 (1): 94–100. doi:10.1080/15295036.2016.1266681.
- O'Connor, P., C. Evers, B. Glenney, and I. Willing. 2022. Skateboarding in the Anthropocene: Grey spaces of polluted leisure, *Leisure Studies*. DOI:10.1080/02614367.2022.2153906
- Pitt-Brooke, J. 2017. How Ademola Lookman slipped through the academy net before making his £11 m move to Everton, *The Independent*, 6 January. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/how-ademola-lookman-slipped-through-the-cracks-before-making-his-ps11million-move-to-everton-a7512746.html> (Accessed 28 November 2022).
- Porter, H., and S. Robinson. 2002. A Cagey Game, *Time*, 2 June. Available at <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,257070,00.html>.
- Pulido, L. 2017. "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II." *Progress in Human Geography* 41 (4): 524–533. doi:10.1177/0309132516646495.
- Ralphs, R., J. Medina, and J. Aldridge. 2009. "Who Needs Enemies with Friends Like These? The Importance of Place for Young People Living in Known Gang Areas." *Journal of Youth Studies* 12 (5): 483–500. doi:10.1080/13676260903083356.
- Robinson, C. 2009. "'Nightscapes and Leisure Spaces': An Ethnographic Study of Young People's use of Free Space." *Journal of Youth Studies* 12 (5): 501–514. doi:10.1080/13676260903081657.
- Roddy, T. 2019. ED BOY: Arsenal Starlet Eddie Nketiah was Dumped by Chelsea Aged 14 and Learned to Play Football in a Cage, *The Sun*, 20 July. Available at <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/football/9540515/arsenal-eddie-nketiah-chelsea-pre-season/>.
- Shildrick, T., S. Blackman, and R. MacDonald. 2009. "Young People, Class and Place." *Journal of Youth Studies* 12 (5): 457–465. doi:10.1080/13676260903114136.
- Shildrick, T., and R. MacDonald. 2006. "In Defence of Subculture: Young People, Leisure and Social Divisions." *Journal of Youth Studies* 9 (2): 125–140. doi:10.1080/13676260600635599.
- Smith, R. 2017. Premier League Proving Grounds, *New York Times*, 2 June. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/sports/soccer/premier-league-proving-grounds.html>.
- Squires, P. 2009. "The Knife Crime 'Epidemic' and British Politics." *British Politics* 4 (1): 127–157. doi:10.1057/bp.2008.40.
- Stone, S. 2018. Jadon Sancho: Borussia Dortmund's ex-Man City winger living the 'dream', *BBC Sport*, 23 February. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/43147821>.
- Stuart, F. 2020. *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Telander, R. 1976. *Heaven is a Playground*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Van den Bogert, K. 2023. *Street Football, Gender and Muslim Youth in the Netherlands: Girls Who Kick Back*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Vieyra, F. 2016. "Pickup Basketball in the Production of Black Community." *Qualitative Sociology* 39 (2): 101–123. doi:10.1007/s11133-016-9324-9.
- Wacquant, L. 2007. "Territorial Stigmatization in the Age of Advanced Marginality." *Thesis Eleven* 91 (1): 66–77. doi:10.1177/0725513607082003.
- Wallace, B. 2020. "Commodifying Black Expressivity: Race and the Representational Politics of Streetball." *Communication & Sport*, DOI: 10.1177/2167479520945222.
- Welch, B. 2022. "Street Footballers: Is There a Danger That Academies Can Remove Useful Rough Edges?" *The Blizzard* 46: 159–165.
- White, J. 2020. *Terraformed: Young Black Lives in the Inner City*. London: Repeater.
- Williams, T. 2022. South Of The River: BT Sport docuseries explores the greatest football talent factory in the world, *BT Sport*. Available at <https://www.bt.com/sport/football/features/south-of-the-river-story-of-the-documentary> (Accessed 28 November 2022).
- Woodbine, O. X. O. 2016. *Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop and Street Basketball*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wright Mills, C. 1999. *The Racial Contract*. Ithica: Cornell University Press.