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University of South Australia

Amelia Walker

Evils of banality in barbell-based group fitness classes: A creative writing-based inquiry through autoethnography and discourse analysis

Abstract:
This article approaches group fitness as a textual practice and site for creative writing research analysis. Through autoethnography and discourse analysis of cues from instructor DVDs, I demonstrate how choreographed barbell fitness classes appeal to people uprooted by personal and/or socio-economic upheavals. My treatment of uprootedness connects Hannah Arendt's writings on twentieth-century totalitarianism with Simone Weil's account of "the need for roots". These I read in the context of moral philosopher Elizabeth Minnich's call to revive Arendtian theory via attention to "the evils of banality". The resulting reflections position group fitness as a practice that reflects and reinstates cultural attitudes. I also consider how analysis of group fitness can inform understanding of human responses to uprooting situations including 2020's COVID-19 outbreaks and global financial challenges of the early twenty-first century. Observing that group fitness operates together with popular music, team sports, and fashion, I conclude by emphasising the need for ongoing critique of fitness alongside these and other ordinary-seeming aspects of our always-already unprecedented, never-normal lives.

Biographical note:
Prior to her academic career, Amelia Walker worked in nursing and group fitness instruction. At present, she lectures at the University of South Australia. Her published research articles are thematically diverse, but all in some way engage creative writing as a method for thinking through problems and developing knowledge outcomes.

Keywords:
Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, group fitness, discourse analysis, autoethnography

Prelude: "Super(hu)man Syndrome"

The following "research poem" (Prendergast, 2009, p. 543) rearranges cues from the instructor learning video for *Body Pump* #84 Track 7 (LMI, 2013a). All text is transcribed verbatim except for the title, which cites the cueing's allusions to flying. Slashes indicate different cues. Italicised text indicates repetition not included in the original.

> *Can you remember when you were five*
> *and you thought you could fly? /*
> Pick up the plates / Load your legs /
> Sink into squats / But listen:
> Doing the same old same
> will not improve your game /
> Take a challenge, make a change /
> More pressure in the legs,
> more challenge through the core /
> We're going to jump
> like we've never jumped before /
> To get more, bring your back thigh parallel
> to the floor / Drop and Stop / Rise /
> Feel the legs load like springs /
> Lock and load / Load and explode /
> Higher / Reach full height – Higher! /
>
> *Can you remember when you were five…? /*
>
> Take a challenge,
> make a change.

Introduction

The research poem "Super(hu)man Syndrome" assembles instances of metaphor, alliteration, rhyme, and poetic wordplay in group fitness (GF). The poem reflects GF's prolific use of creative language, which underpins this article's approach to fitness class cueing as a textual practice and a site for creative writing research. I write as a former GF instructor (GFI) turned creative writing researcher. My focus is choreographed barbell fitness classes – particularly *BodyPump* (henceforth *Pump*), a GF program produced by New Zealand company Les Mills, and *RIP,* by US competitor Group Rx (Power Music).

I aim to problematise GF instruction as a practice, the language of which, when scrutinised, appears "implicated in issues such as power and ideology" (Waugh et al., 2016, p. 72). Connections between fitness and ideology are recognised in studies regarding the historical interrelations between gyms and Christianity (Hoverd, 2005) and/or the fitness industry's

involvement in regulating social privilege and oppression (Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2006; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). GF-specific studies have considered Pilates (Markula, 2008), yoga (Nair & Singh, 2020), and aerobics (Garlick, 1995). But choreographed barbell GF remains relatively underexplored.

Creative writing research is known for "interdisciplinarity" (Messer, 2012, p. 1). As this article's methodology section explains, my inquiries into GF combine autoethnography (Rambo & Ellis, 2021) with discourse analysis (DA) (Waugh et al., 2016) and concepts of the political from both Hannah Arendt (1951/2017; 1958/2018; 1963/2006) and Simone Weil (1949/2005). Following methodology, two analytical sections interweave autoethnographic recollections with critique of cues from GF DVDs. The first analysis section observes how fitness cues cater to "the need for roots" (Weil, 1949/2005, p. viii). The second considers cueing's socio-cultural effects. A closing section then reflects on GF as one among many discursive sites at which to confront the "evils of banality" (Minnich, 2014, p. 158).

Methodology and methods

Contingent lived experiences prompted this research, generating a methodological articulation of autoethnography, DA, and political philosophy. To contextualise, I shall sketch some background regarding how my inquiries into GF began via personal questions that led me towards issues of social and political consequence. That happenstance and intuition brought me towards research is consistent with creative writing research methods, wherein knowledge-making frequently occurs "after the fact" or within ongoing processes (Hecq, 2015, p. 8). I began participating in barbell GF in 2005, aged twenty-one, and in 2010 completed instructor training. I taught until 2016, when I quit, disillusioned because I had observed negative outcomes among obsessed participants who sometimes travelled between multiple gyms daily so they could repeat classes undetected – well beyond the recommended two-to-three strength classes per week separated by recovery days (Baker et al., 2006, p. 14). Excessive exercise was affecting my wellbeing, too. Underweight and fatigued, I was growing weaker, not stronger. My wages mostly went on physiotherapy for repetitive strain injuries from teaching excess fill-in classes for sick colleagues. Finally, I quit, vowing never again to take another barbell class. But in 2020, under the first COVID-19 lockdown, despite multiple other home training options, I found myself pulling out my old barbell instructor DVDs. This sparked the personal question that began my research: What made choreographed barbell training so phenomenally appealing for me under 2020 lockdown conditions?

In addition to GF, my major interest in early 2020 was political philosophy. Shocked by global upswings in xenophobic violence and right-wing extremism (Hankivsky & Kapilashrami, 2020), I sought to comprehend what drives humans to hate. Arendt (1951/2017; 1958/2018; 1963/2006) and Weil (1949/2005) – witnesses to twentieth-century totalitarianism's rise in Germany and elsewhere – provided helpful perspectives. My two initially separate concerns (re-attraction to GF, and critical reading) became linked as I noticed barbell DVD cues that

appealed to human needs and insecurities discussed in the philosophical texts. I began transcribing and analysing the cues. My personal question became a socio-politically oriented examination of how GF "reflects, serves, and furthers the interests, positions, perspectives, and values of, those who are in power" (Waugh et al., 2016, p. 72).

Autoethnography demonstrates writing-based ways that researchers can study and depict sites and subjects to which they bear personal connection (Rambo & Ellis, 2021). Compatible with queer-feminist research wherein narratives of lived experience demonstrate how "no one [is] alone with their discrimination and oppression", for "personal accounts" provide "new information that [has] never been archived" (Mitra, 2020, p. 61), autoethnography figures individual lives as socio-culturally situated in contexts involving multiple interconnected subjects, actors, and processes (Rambo & Ellis, 2021). Analysis of subjective experiences can therefore generate findings relevant to other individuals and communities connected with the culture of interest. For this article, autoethnographic methods involved writing in freely expressive ways about my past and present involvements in GF. From the extensive written materials I produced, I selected and polished excerpts to include in this article. They are presented across later sections, in connection with cue analysis and discussion of GF's ideological ramifications.

DA encapsulates multiple methodologies of "problem-oriented interdisciplinary research" (Fairclough et al., as cited in Waugh et al., 2016, p. 71). DA probes "connections/relationships between language use, its producers and consumers, and the social and political contexts, structures, and practices in which it occurs" (Waugh et al., 2016, p. 71). Working from the premise that people typically do not notice the ways language and related parts of discourse influence "how we get around in the world" and "relate to other people", practitioners of DA make writing, speech, and signification "an important source of evidence" about the social, cultural, and political systems with, and in which, we think and act (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, pp. 3-4). As already explained, my DA of barbell class cues began intuitively, then became deliberate. When I started transcribing cues, I selected primarily "motivational" phrases designed to inspire "fitness magic" through metaphor, alliteration, rhyme, or wordplay, which the industry distinguishes from instructional and safety-focused cues (Baker et al., 2006, p. 95). Motivational cues repeated multiple times within the same DVD or across multiple DVDs were of particular note as instances of catchphrases and slogans that reflect and define GF cultures and subcultures.

Following transcription, I "coded" cues – "coding" being a method for recognising patterned tropes in textual data (Faulkner, 2019). My coding was informed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argue that figurative devices in commonplace language "govern our everyday functioning" and "structure what we perceive" (1980/2003, p. 3). They identify metaphorical categories associated with specific ideologies, one example of which is "time is money" metaphors that involve "spending" and "investing" time in line with dominant "Western" cultural attitudes to work and wealth (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, p. 8). Another example is "argument is war" metaphors that frame argument as a win-or-lose struggle when it could

equally be a "dance" in which everybody's shared goal is "a balanced and aesthetically pleasing" performance (pp. 4-5).

Interconnections between language and thinking are also evident in the work of Weil, who describes how words "expressed publicly … especially by someone whose words are listened to with respect" can encourage "inner transformation" (1949/2005, p. 186). Weil additionally observes ways in which "verbal inspiration" sometimes "passes into the muscles" and "emerges in the form of actions" (p. 193). Likewise indicating language-thought interconnections, Arendt emphasises aphorisms (repetitive catchphrases) as tools of totalitarian coercion (1951/2017, pp. 304-305). As earlier noted, I paid heed to catchphrase repetition in barbell DVDs. Reiteration of the same or similar words and ideas proved prolific: "challenge" leads to "change" through "the rep effect"; "shaking" is a "side effect" of *RIP*'s fitness "prescription"; to succeed, one must "lock and load', "load and explode', and crucially, "stay strong" [1]. Repetition renders GF "banal" by Arendtian terms, which indicates commonplaceness, frequency, and familiarity: "daily cliches, conventions, and other ways of going on autopilot" that "disable our consciences" (Minnich, 2014, pp. 164-165, 168). Reviving Arendt's account of how "the banality of evil" in Nazi Germany coerced ordinary people towards atrocities (1963/2006), moral philosopher Elizabeth Minnich (2014) compels critique of "the evil of banality" (pp. 159-160).

Articulating Arendt's theories with Weil's heeds twentieth-century critic Bernard Crick's recommendation to read the two philosophers in dialogue because they consider similar issues in complementary ways (1959/2015). Studies by Robert Esposito (2017) and Sara McDonald (2019) demonstrate the Arendt-Weil linkage's benefits, which in this article primarily involve the concept of uprootedness. The next section defines uprootedness, then analyses autoethnographic reflections alongside GF cues to demonstrate how barbell classes garner a human "need for roots" (Weil, 1949/2005, p. 40).

Garnering uprootedness

> From my first barbell class foray, I was hooked. Moving in time to music turned working out from a practical necessity into something like a blockbuster film or amusement park ride. Each class, I confronted limits I feared I could not surpass. Yet, time after time, I survived and emerged feeling elated, transformed. I kept thinking, if I could add one more kilo to my barbell, if I could just manage a few more reps, I would prove – to myself, at least – that I was strong and determined enough to push through whatever challenges life kept throwing. (Autoethnographic journal recalling 2005, from a 2020-2021 standpoint)

Through autoethnographic reflection, a commonality between my 2005 and 2020 situations became apparent: uprootedness. Uprootedness is an individual and social condition associated with unemployment, displacement, homelessness, war, precarity, and/or disruptions to once-stable systems (Arendt 1951/2017, p. ix). It juxtaposes with rootedness: "participation in the

life of a community which preserves in living shape" both "treasures of the past" and "expectations for the future" (Weil 1949/2005, p. 40). Arendt cites changing systems of social class and labour as factors driving early twentieth century uprootedness (p. 138). Weil also notes unemployment and displacement as uprooting factors (1949/2005, pp. 47-48), and deems workers with jobs where they feel easily replaceable or deprived of honour similarly at risk (pp. 41-42). Weil treats "honour" as a sense of sharing "in a noble tradition', typically that of one's profession (pp. 18-19). Honour appears among fourteen needs that Weil poses sustain metaphysical wellbeing as food sustains bodies. Alongside, honour, needs include "order', "liberty', "obedience', "responsibility', "equality', "hierarchism', "honour', "punishment', "freedom of opinion', "security', "risk', "private property', "collective property', and "truth" (pp. 6-38). Of these, those relevant to GF shall be defined in connection with autoethnographic reflection and cue analysis. For now, the point is that the fourteen needs collectively stem from and promote rootedness. Like literal nutrition, metaphysical needs are rarely, if ever, perfectly supplied, but adequate satisfaction enables relative wellbeing. If, however, too many needs become too excessively deprived for excessive periods of time, uprootedness takes hold (p. 44).

In 2005, when I began participating in barbell classes, I was uprooted personally and professionally. My then de-facto partner drank heavily, was frequently abusive, and predominantly out of work. I was nursing for a temp agency. Filling in for sick nurses and wards short of staff, I blundered almost daily into maze-like corridors of unknown faces and protocols. Regular staff frequently reprimanded me for misunderstanding ward-specific procedures. They saw agency nurses as unreliable, incompetent, selfish, and lazy. Exhausted by extra shifts to cover expenses, I stopped socialising and lost contact with friends. When my partner's verbal assaults became physical, I did not know who to tell. My isolation circa 2005 correlates with earlier points about uprootedness afflicting workers who feel expendable. In early 2020, job insecurity and social atomisation worsened dramatically (Nicomedesa & Avilab, 2020). Arendt's depiction of twentieth century uprootedness could easily describe recent times:

> Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest – forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries … as though [hu]mankind had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence … and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives. (1951/2017, p. ix)

Although my 2020 situation was relatively privileged, global uprootedness nonetheless affected me:

> As COVID-19 hit, news stories about racist, transphobic, and xenophobic attacks depressed me: how are humans capable of such things? Just before lockdown, a stranger got annoyed at me for walking on the wrong side of the street. They thought it meant I was a "foreigner" and screamed abuse because "you foreigners brought the virus". That

> same week, I also copped queerphobic cyber-abuse from two people I'd previously trusted. Then my romantic relationship fell apart. And then, the first death of someone close.
>
> Lockdown meant processing grief in physical solitude: I was alone on the suburban outskirts, too far from friends for visits. We video-chatted, but it's not the same. For months, the only living things I touched were plants (my garden flourished). Depressed and anxious, I found myself doing something I'd previously sworn off forever: padding into the spare room, I found the dusty box of old fitness DVDs, selected one, then set up my training equipment and equally dusty DVD player. Pressing play, I let the machine take over... (Autoethnographic reflection regarding 2020, produced 2021)

Uprootedness links 2005 and 2020 – the two points when barbell GF drew me in. In 2005, classes addressed my need for roots. Most immediately, there was a community: regulars typically attended the same classes weekly. Among training buddies, I found respect and my confidence gradually increased. I left the toxic relationship, then quit nursing to pursue a long-held dream: studying creative writing. In 2020, uprooted by COVID-19 lockdown, following old DVDs relieved anxiety by offering predictable routines amid change and uncertainty. That barbell classes play on dissatisfaction is evident in *Pump* training literature, which explains how classes cater for people whose jobs "make them behave like machines" – people craving "any experience that lets them feel human again" (Baker et al., 2006, p. 95). Cues garner uprootedness by promising social inclusion. For instance, GFIs cite that millions of people around the world regularly undertake classes, list global cities in which classes are held, use participant names, and celebrate program longevity (LMI, 2009, Track 1; LMI 2012, Track 8; Group Rx, 2011a, Track 8), rooting participants in both the present community's remembered past and envisioned future. In *Pump* #84 Track 8, the instructor addresses the need for belonging by cueing "we're going to the club – the overhead shoulders club!" (LMI, 2013a). In *RIP* Volume 1.2, following cooldown, presenters invite viewers to connect via social media: "friend us and we'll friend you back" (Group Rx, 2011b). Together with reminders that RIP instructors are "made of the same stuff you are" (Group Rx, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c), this implies same-level participant-instructor relations, targeting needs for "equality" – recognition that "the same amount of respect and consideration is due to every human being" (Weil, 1949/2005, pp. 15-16).

Pump gestures to equality by allowing participants to purchase branded clothing worn by master trainers: everybody with money to spend can share in this concerted act of identity expression (LMI, 2009, Track 10). But *Pump* more obviously targets "hierarchism" – equality's reciprocal twin (Weil 1949/2005, pp. 17-18). True hierarchism, Weil poses, does *not* involve unfair domination: it concerns "obligations owed by each man to his fellowmen"; "higher" positions mean responsibility and service to those "below" (1949/2005, pp. 17-18). *Pump* addresses hierarchism via weight selection recommendations for "new" and "old" participants (LMI, 2012, Track 2). Reflecting hierarchism/equality reciprocity, these instructions also pander to "equality" through seeming acceptance of everybody who tries. In *Pump* #84 Track 7, the instructor assures newcomers they can even simply use body weight: "you've done well

enough just to get here" (LMI, 2013a). Another reciprocal pair is "punishment"/"honour" (Weil 1949/2005, p. 19). Weil treats punishment as "respect" to people who have fallen "outside the law", which brings them back "inside" the community (pp. 19-20). Punishment as restitution is implied in *Pump* #84 Track 1 via song lyrics affirming, "it's not about what you've done, it's about what you're doing / all about where you're going, no matter where you've been" (LMI, 2013a). Order and liberty also pair. Liberty is "ability to choose" from a "straightforward" range of possibilities (Weil 1949/2005, p. 9). Order enables liberty by simplifying choices, producing "a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones" (p. 9). Like a villanelle or sestina, a standard barbell class format provides established frameworks wherein small choices about weight selections and exercise variations sustain a sense of liberty via morally non-complex decisions supporting freedom from ethical uncertainty.

Appeals to needs of rootedness in barbell classes offered me an answer to the personal question that triggered my inquiries (my re-attraction to classes during COVID-19 lockdown). But the recognition that millions of globally located people regularly attended barbell GF long before 2020 (LMI, 2009, Track 1) prompted me to consider ramifications beyond my individual situation and the COVID-19 context. The classes' longstanding global popularity indicates that the metaphysical phenomenon of uprootedness has insidiously permeated societies worldwide for decades, at least. The DVDs I analysed spanned 2011-2016. As earlier explained, 2020 exacerbated uprootedness. These cues from years prior signal insidious issues long brewing. 2011-2016 entailed global economic crisis: formerly privileged people experienced joblessness and precarity. Right-wing political and cultural figures gained influence in many nations (Carlquist & Phelps, 2014). As Arendt remarks, an uprooted "mob" will typically "shout for the "strong man" (1951/2017, p. 140). That uprootedness potentially "prepares" people "for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world" (Arendt 1951/2017, p. 628) prompted me to turn from the personal question of my own re-attraction to GF classes towards broader socio-cultural concerns. Beyond the needs the classes address, I began probing effects on thought and behaviour. For discourse does more than reflect its contexts of production: discourse complexly interacts with and shapes social worlds (Waugh et al., 2016).

Tribal individualism, superhuman potentials, and violent metaphors

> 'We are warriors in the battle against sedentary lifestyle
> We are here for the people in our classes
> We honor our program, our peers and our club
> (…)
> By inspiring positive change in our classes we can change the world'
>
> The Les Mills Creed
>
> (Baker et al., 2006, p. 3, original grammar and spelling retained)

The phrase "tribal individualism" here signals reciprocal urges towards mass identification and self-seeking. To clarify the concept, this section begins by discussing ideas from Arendt and Weil. I then provide examples of tribal individualism in barbell GF, which leads into discussion of cueing metaphors involving warfare and weaponry. Tribal individualism redevelops Arendt's (1963/2006) account of how totalitarian movements play on uprooted people by promising glory in two ways. The first is a share in the collective glory of "tribal nationalism"; the second, individual glory via activation of superhuman potential (Arendt 1951/2017, pp. 506-7). Arendt's tribal/individual pairing corresponds with Weil's claim that humans need both private and collective property – private property meaning a liveable home, a small garden, and tools of one's trade; and public property including parks, libraries, and galleries that connect people culturally (1949/2005, pp. 33-34). While Weil refers to conditions that feed wellbeing, Arendt describes problems that Weil alludes towards when remarking that humans deprived of metaphysical sustenance may mistake or knowingly substitute healthy foods with "poisons" (p. 8).

Tribal nationalism appeals to people seeking a "substitute for political nationhood" in contexts of "frustrated nationalism" (1951/2017, p. 217). Arendt uses pre-Nazi Germany among her examples, consistent with Weil's description of "a nation of proletarians, that is to say, uprooted individuals" whose defeated humiliation and economic upheavals "infected them" with "moral disease to the acute point where irresponsibility takes possession" (1949/2005, p. 44). Tribal nationalism's incorporation of iconography and narrative takes it beyond mere belonging. According to Arendt, totalitarian movements conjure nationalistic mythologies of stolen glory awaiting reclaim – for instance, that of the supposed Aryan race. Such narratives typically include an othered enemy that strengthens cohesion among a threatened collective self. For instance, German Nazism incorporated features from then influential secret societies like the Freemasons that dichotomously divide their sworn initiates from those outside the society, and hierarchically rank initiates into differing levels of authority:

> [members] are held together by allegiance to a frequently unknown and always mysterious leader … [themselves] surrounded, or supposed to be surrounded, by a small group of initiated who in turn are surrounded by the half-initiated. (Arendt 1951/2017, p. 492)

GFI communities bear secret society elements. In *Pump* instructor training, I swore the Les Mills Creed (see excerpt provided earlier). This passage recalls early teaching days:

> I saw myself as one among a global team of warriors battling to save people from unhealthy living. I took pride in my role, feeling joy when newcomers returned. I loved quarterly updates where international Master Trainers – celebrity figures within the instructing community – were flown in to debut new routines. These were chances for GFIs from multiple gyms to meet, exchange tips, and re-motivate ourselves towards engaging more participants and inspiring greater change. (Autoethnographic reflection recalling 2010, from a 2021 standpoint)

Instructing served my needs for "obedience" and "responsibility" – the former crucially requiring "consent", not "fear of punishment or hope of reward" because "submission may never be mistaken for servility … those who command, obey in their turn" and that all serve "a goal whose importance and even grandeur can be felt by all" (Weil 1949/2005, pp. 11-12). Responsibility meanwhile entails regular opportunities "to take decisions in matters great or small" (pp. 13-14). Recognition that instructing addressed my responsibility/obedience needs became uncomfortable when I read of how Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann tried but failed to join secret society *Schlaraffia* before becoming "blown" like a "leaf in the whirlwind of time" (Arendt 1963/2006, pp. 32-33) towards the Nazi SS. This forced me to contemplate how I, as a woman recovering from domestic violence, was also "swallowed up … against all expectations … without previous decision … quickly and suddenly" (Eichmann quoted in Arendt 1963/2006, p. 33) by a movement for which I assumed responsibilities in obedience to master trainers and program coordinators who led me to lead class participants [2].

Tribal elements in *Pump* include prolific "warrior" references (Baker et al., 2006, p. 3). Māori-esque iconography adorns much Les Mills branded clothing; the cue "*Kia Kaha!*" ("Stay Strong!") is common (LMI, 2013d, Track 8); and Les Mills events often feature the "haka" – "an ancient warlike challenge with fierce movements performed to a Māori chant" – as a "regular custom" to "symbolize the global challenge for our 'warrior-like' instructors in the war against obesity" (Baker et al., 2006, p. 8). Instructors are encouraged to "greet each other with a strong Roman-style handshake incorporating the hongi", a traditional Māori greeting (p. 8). As a non-Māori person who has never lived in New Zealand, I cannot discern whether this reflects celebration and visibility, or exploitative appropriation (but the latter possibility worries me; I hope it shan't seem hyperbolic to mention that the Nazi swastika was also (mis)appropriated from peaceful non-German cultural sources) (Heller, 2000). Nationalism features complexly in *Pump*: DVDs feature instructors from multiple countries, but friendly rivalry ripples through references to international team sports and tournaments (LMI, 2012, Track 1). These maintain country-based national pride while implying that *Pump*-as-tribe overrides geo-cultural borders, supporting rootedness anywhere in the world.

In *RIP,* tribalism involves outright U.S. nationalism and local town pride. Instructors cite hometowns ("Jim! You can't quit! You're from Texas!!!") (Group Rx, 2011c), celebrating that *RIP* is "from the South" (Group Rx, 2011b, Track 9). Because early *RIP* DVDs feature exclusively white-skinned instructors, such cues are, intentionally or otherwise, interpretable as identifications with the American South's history of racial violence and ongoing right-wing political tendencies (King, 2017, p. 949). In *RIP Above the Waist* Track 5, the instructor quips, "Let's make those triceps great!" (Group Rx, 2011c), which sounds like the "Make America Great Again" slogan favoured by right-wing political figure Donald Trump (in King 2017). Also notable are *RIP* 1.1's "cowboy" analogies. For instance, "I need an entourage" in Track 6, and "like you're galloping along the prairie" in Track 7 (Group Rx, 2011a). The "cowboy" figure has through film traditionally been associated with invasion, colonial violence, and "manifest destiny" – a myth that destructively positions racist violence as realisations of divine intent (Horsman, 1981).

Reflecting manifest destiny's troublesome glorifications of so-called pioneers rewarded with wealth, barbell classes encourage values of individualism and self-oriented success-seeking. Such values align with contemporary neoliberal ideologies that pitch everybody as master of their own destiny, able to create their own success through hard work commensurate to rewards (Carlquist & Phelps, 2014). *Pump* instructors declare "everyone can do it" (LMI, 2012), and *RIP* instructors chant "we're made of the same stuff you are" (Group Rx, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Though superficially suggesting equality, these cues maintain instructor superiority because the very need to emphasise equality reflects acknowledged hierarchies. Furthermore, such cues ignore visible and invisible disabilities, perpetuating ableism. Individualism thereby naturalises neoliberalism's structural inequalities by erasing genuine differences in opportunity, ladling personal blame and judgement upon those who fail or achieve limited success.

Barbell classes also appeal to individualism through promises of power and transformation. In *RIP* 12 Track 3, the instructor announces, "this is where you go from where you are to where you want to be" (Group Rx, 2014). A commonly repeated *Pump* cue is "take a challenge, make a change", which features twice in Track 7 of *Pump* #84, the source track for the research poem presented earlier. Alongside allusions to super(hu)man potentials of flight, the same track contains two cues not in the poem that worried me especially. The first, which accompanies a dramatic pause before the start of fast single squats, is, "Abs in and brace … (*beat*) – Master Pace!" (rhyming with "master race'). The second comes when the instructor, cueing jump squats, urges participants to "prove white men can jump!" (LMI, 2013a).

Individualism promotes atomisation (Arendt 1951/2017, pp. 69, 96, 415-416), which uproots and drives people back to tribalism as a source of strength-in-numbers (Arendt 1951/2017, pp. 506-507). But tribalism does not actually provide belonging, only mass-identification, which deprives people of any genuine dialogues, connection, or "common world", since these things require "that everybody sees and hears from a different viewpoint" (Arendt 1958/2018, p. 57). Mass-identification therefore produces effects akin to those of "radical isolation": everybody becomes "imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times" (p. 58). The sense of insecurity then drives individualist desire for super(hu)man power, and so the tribal/individual paradox of reciprocity persists. Recalling Weil's "poison" analogy (1949/2005, p. 8), tribal individualism thus substitutes, rather than sustains, human needs for rootedness, fostering desperation that renders people more likely to justify activities they would otherwise decry. Human capacities to commit or condone violence can also be facilitated via language techniques that softens violent acts. For instance, Arendt observed how Nazis used bureaucratic "Officialese" (1963/2006, p. 48), and how they re-labelled mass-murder in terms of "hygiene and health": "collection of skeletons" and "killings by gas" were treated as "medical matters" because they were "prepared by physicians" (p. 69). Passive voice and nominalisation here soften agency, obscuring the actions people undertook and promoting emotional dissociation from outcomes.

As earlier observed, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discussed "war" metaphors as language tropes that reflect and influence culture. Barbell fitness cues frequently evoke weaponry and violence.

Stock cues "lock and load" and "load and explode" recur across multiple *RIP* and *Pump* releases. *RIP* cues also often hook into gun culture – guns being legal and culturally celebrated in Utah where *RIP* is based – including through the cowboy analogies noted earlier, and via "target practice" repetitions to find correct movement range. In *RIP Above The Waist* Track 2, the instructor uses "blowing up" and "gunpowder" to describe the sensations hard training creates, declaring, "this is where you begin to take control of your life'. This implicitly links artillery with empowerment [3]. Figurative cues that use violent metaphors do not necessarily incite explicit violence, but their perpetual usage over time can, I suggest, familiarise it. Familiarising violence does not directly compel it, but if certain circumstances arise, people already familiarised with violence may more readily comply. Arendt (1963/2006) illustrated this via Eichmann – who "never had anything whatever against Jews" (p. 26), yet calmly ordered Jewish people's deaths, exhibiting "sheer thoughtlessness" induced partly via catchphrases, aphorisms, and "banal" language (pp. 287-288).

Conclusion

When the premise of this article first entered my thoughts, I reminded myself of Godwin's law – that any online discussion will, if allowed to continue, eventually arrive at comparisons to Nazis (Moore, 2018). I turned then to my barbell class DVD collection. The identical colour branding schemes of *RIP* and *Pump* declared themselves like flags: white, black, and red flags. GF has sometimes supported my wellbeing. As earlier noted, I drew strength from it while leaving an abusive relationship and pursuing a career change. In 2020, it reduced my anxiety and kept me physically strong. Addressing needs for rootedness is not necessarily bad; it is richly beneficial in cases where people could otherwise succumb to apathy, despair and/or violence. Regarding Weil's "foods" and "poisons" (1949/2005, p. 8), I do not think barbell classes or other modes of GF need to be seen as either/or. They can at once bear multiple positive and problematic possibilities. Each person's experiences contingently differ and change over time. Nonetheless, this examination of a "banal" practice with thought of its capacities for "evil" (Minnich, 2014) has shown me the importance of critical vigilance regarding language and other factors at play in GF. Arendt's key argument regarding the "banality of evil" was, after all, that "thoughtlessness" conditioned via familiarity can lull people into violence (1963/2006, pp. 287-288). The hope-restoring flipside of this is that thinking offers "the highest and perhaps purest activity" human capacities afford: among the most radical ways to confront "heedless recklessness", "hopeless confusion", and "complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty" is "nothing more than to think what we are doing" (Arendt 1958/2018, p. 5).

Writing this article helped me rethink what I was unknowingly doing back in my GFI days – or, what GF cues were doing through me, to others and myself. Ultimately, what I have realised less concerns GF than it does the value of thinking about the habits language and related discourses convey and instil. As I pursued my inquiries, GF's interactions with other cultural processes, sites, and artefacts became increasingly noticeable. For instance, there is music

played in classes, sports referenced in cues, and fashion trends literally woven through class-branded clothing. Each provides its own scope for analyses of the kind Minnich (2014) compels, as do GF programs beyond those I have considered. Need persists to continue thinking about things otherwise easily ignored and to ongoingly critique even (or especially) the most ordinary-seeming aspects of our always-already unprecedented, never-normal lives.

Notes

1. The quoted text is cited from the following group fitness DVDs: "challenge" leads to "change" (LMI, 2013a, Track 1, 3, 4, 7; LMI 2013d, Track 1, 7); "the rep effect" (LMI, 2013c, Notes Booklet, p. 7; LMI 2013d, Notes Booklet, p. 7); "shaking is a side effect" and *RIP* a fitness "prescription" (Group Rx, 2011a, Track 1, 5, 7; Group Rx, 2011b, Track 6, 8); "lock and load', "load and explode', and "stay strong" (LMI, 2012, Track 7; LMI, 2013a, Track 7; Group Rx, 2011a, Track 1).

2. The original quote from Eichmann is "it was like being swallowed up by the Party against all expectations and without previous decision. It happened so quickly and suddenly" (in Arendt 1963/2006, p. 33).

3. Examples of the cited cues are as follows: "lock and load" and "load and explode" (Group Rx, 2011a, Track 1; Group Rx, 2011b, Track 1; LMI, 2012, Track 7; LMI, 2013a, Track 7); *RIP* that hook into gun culture (Group Rx, 2011a, Track 1; Group Rx, 2011b, Track1); "blowing up", "gunpowder", "this is where you begin to take control of your life' (Group Rx, 2011c, Track 2).

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