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Battling the body capital: My experience of Gold's Gym.

Adjusting my stinging eyes to the brightness of my phone, I check the time, *'Oh wow its only 5am, I've got another two hours till I need to get up!'* Flying into LA the night before, I had only had a few hours' sleep. Too excited, I laid back down restless. I had checked the class timetable at Gold's Gym the previous day and the only available spinning class for the duration of my short research trip was scheduled in for 9.30am on the Saturday morning. Shoving down a piece of toast and using my google maps, I dragged my dehydrated jet-lagged body to the metro stop, eagerly traipsing onto the metro where I was eventually one step closer to reaching my destination. Jumping off at the right stop, I was relieved I was on time and quite impressed that I wasn't lost! A powerful black and gold sign dominated the corner of the street *'come see why we are the most famous gym in the world'...* I'm not that far away now!

Walking eagerly to the gym, I was anticipating what the building was going to look like; I hadn't looked on the internet to see what the building or surrounding area looked like, nor had I seen what the equipment or inside of the gym was set up like. I had big hopes to be astonished, seeing as this was considered 'The Mecca' of bodybuilding and that many at the gym back at home followed Arnold Schwarzenegger and admired his training and bodybuilding lifestyle.

I had already read much literature surrounding the history of gymnasiums and also as part of my PhD thesis had written a historical timeline of gyms too. Always, somewhere within the literature, the original Gold's Gym and muscle beach had been mentioned. Sam Fussell in his book 'Muscle', described his bodybuilding journey how he moved from England to California, just so he could train with the 'big boys' at Gold's Gym. He had stated that knew he



had made it big time by doing so - Gold's Gym was the ultimate place to go and see the hard-core body-builders train. And now, I had made it too!

I was immediately greeted by a golden **GOLD'S GYM** sign placed on the front of the building. Flash cars were parked up outside and even though it was still relatively early, many people were walking in and out (some even doing 'the walk'! ¹). Smiling to myself as I walked to the main entrance, I noticed the main art work of the well-known Gold's Gym sign and, as I entered, a wave of anxiousness flooded my body.

I was instantly thrown into a jungle of weights and bars. There was no music playing and the clanking of metal and human grunts filled the room. The reception was immediately in front of the door and to my left was a shop with all the original gold's gym attire for sale while to my right was a Wi-Fi and seating area. As I approached reception, looking around in awe 'The Mecca' sign was dominating the room above the mirrors. I noticed a few cardio machines being used on a second tier next to 'The Mecca' sign and thought, *'pretty decent size, all weights no cardio – proper gym just like I've read.'*



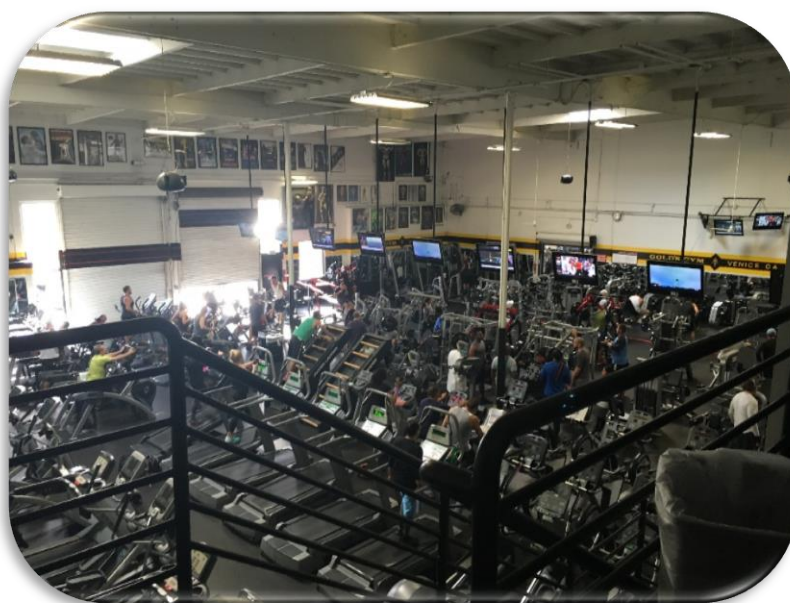
Whilst I was waiting to pay, a guy in front of me was wearing a snapback, his muscles were bulging and protruding from his top and shorts. He asked the receptionist when the least busy time to come was, *'it used to be full of the hard core people down here, now it's just full of f*cking tourists'* he grunts. The receptionist agreed and starting talking negatively about 'tourists' too. Keeping my head down and feeling slightly disappointed by the welcome, I stared at the floor not wanting to give my 'tourist' status away, although I knew as soon I opened my excited mouth, my British accent would be obvious and I would give myself away. I was wearing a bright pink top and shorts and was

already standing out like a sore thumb. I never usually wear shorts back home at my gym, but these shorts would definitely fit in here.²

Paying \$25 for a day pass and signing myself in electronically, I had unlimited use of the gym and exercises classes. I was told that to get to the spin room I needed to continue walking through to the third room where the studio would be up the stairs in the corner. *'Third room? I thought this room was it!'*

Walking through the rest of the gym feeling absolutely overwhelmed with the vastness of it, I was also aware that many eyes were looking my way. The people working out were tanned, very toned and a variety of ages. *'Wow I'm so skinny and pale'*, I thought to myself as I looked down and gave my body the once over. I had been hoping that I might actually look like I was a frequent gym goer in the eyes of the gold's gym members.³

Creeping into the second room and popping my head around the corner, I was immediately immersed straight away into another room full of free weights and resistance machines. *'Holy sh*t, I literally cannot believe the size of this place – look at all the weights ...and muscles!'*. Eventually reaching the third room, I was overwhelmed with the amount of cardiovascular equipment that was available to use. This room alone was the same size of my whole gym back at home! I chuckled, thinking back to my initial thoughts about the lack of cardio in the first room. The buzzing of the equipment and stomping of feet echoed around the room. *'This is bloody impressive, this IS a gym!'* Reaching the top of the stairs by the spin room, I turned



around and took a deep breath. I had made it through the whole gym and now I was waiting for a spin class. *'I've made it, I'm just about to workout in Gold's Gym!'* Not knowing where to focus first, my eyes flitted around the room. Just off the cardio room were shutters and when a member of staff lifted these

up, light flooded the room to reveal that outside there were numerous ropes and huge tyres. Every single space was filled and being used.

After participating the spin class, sweating and flushed, I felt slightly more confident to walk back through the gym. Still aware of being watched, I decided (with a mild panic) that I didn't want to lift a single weight. Instead, and in a slight hurry, I paced back through the gym, keeping my head down while feeling very anxious about being on watch. ⁴



Stepping outside of the gym, the warm air and sunshine bounced off my face and body. Leaving the metal jungle behind, and eagerly anticipating what Muscle Beach had to offer. I began to walk slowly back towards the metro, stopping midway to look back at the gym. I had experienced and survived The Mecca - and I had a t-shirt and towel to prove it!

Notes

1. 'The Walk' – 'The weightlifters waddle'. Where bodybuilders sweep their arms out to necessitate their muscles or 'lat wings', and burrow their heads slightly into their shoulders to make their neck look larger – Fussell, S. (2015) *Muscle: Confessions of an unlikely Bodybuilder*. Open Road Media.
2. Bourdieu's concept of 'body capital' describes the values that are attached to individuals attractiveness, appearance, or physical abilities which might be exchanged for other forms of social, economic, or cultural capital – Boudieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
3. Dolezal describes how shame is an individual and necessary body experience, resulting from intersubjective relations, and is always contained in a nexus of political and socio-cultural norms. It also reveals our most personal parts - our hopes and aspirations - Dolezal, L. (2015) *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lexington Books.

4. Foucault acknowledges a discipline of power termed 'self-surveillance'. In Gold's gym I constantly worked on surveilling my own exercise practices (and body) and turned this into a technique of discipline. This in turn unintentionally controlled me, I panicked and did not lift a single weight in the gym. Power here was exercised continuously and with minimal expense, due to the inspecting gaze from the other gym goers being directed into myself - Foucault, M. (1991) *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. London: Penguin Books.