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The pugilistic point of view: How boxers think and feel about their trade

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Man, the sports commentators an' the writers and stuff, they don't know nuthin' abou' the boxin' game. They ignorant. I be embarrassed to let somebody hear me say somethin' like that, or write somethin', or print somethin' like tha'. (chuckles in disbelief) "Boxing teach you violence" ... Tha's showin' their ignorance. For one thin', they lookin' at it from a spectator point of view. You know, like seein' a singer an' stuff: he's out dere singin' his butt off an' we lookin' at it 'cause we spectators an' stuff. We his fans, but we don't know when he's out dere, when he's up on the stage, how he – we on the outsi' lookin' in, but he's insi' lookin' out.

Black lightweight, 28,
part-time janitor, 7 years in the ring

Prelude: Re-constructing the boxer's point of view

In the clamor of opinions that erupt periodically to puzzle out with unfailing fervor and righteousness the perennial question of the *anomaly* that the existence of professional boxing seems to constitute in a presumed "civilized" society – its (im)morality, the brutality it exemplifies and displays, the exploitation it thrives on, and the destruction it spells¹ – one voice is invariably drowned out and lost: that of the fighters themselves.

The debate swirling about the Manly art thus typically turns on the concerns of outsiders to the game, such as the reasons why people should not box, as opposed to the *reasons why they do* – or, to formulate it more rigorously, the pathways through which they come to perceive and experience pugilism as a meaningful avocation to take up

and a viable career to pursue. It focuses on the negative determinants, from economic deprivation and school failure to family disorganization and social isolation, that allegedly funnel them into the ring by constricting other options, to the neglect of the *positive attractions* that the trade exerts on its members. And it authoritatively imputes a host of individual motivations to boxers, such as a thirst for material success, worldly anger, or masculine pride, but seldom inquires into the *collective dispositions* that find in this odd craft a public theater of expression and incline some young men from working-class backgrounds to devote themselves to it.

Testimony about boxing, whether for or against, is characteristically gleaned from the pronouncements of champions, past and present, famous and infamous, as dutifully filtered and refurbished by journalists and sports writers. Occasionally one hears the views of the elite of the coaching corps or those proffered with resounding conceit by top promoters and managers, chief profiteers of this callous commerce of dreams and pain that is professional prizefighting.² Only by exception do visions of the Manly art issue from the mouths of the rank and file, the “preliminary” boxers, club fighters, prospects and contenders, journeymen and opponents, trial horses and bums, who constitute the overwhelming majority of practitioners and without whom the boxing economy would instantly collapse, even while they share only its crumbs.

The present article breaks with this externalist, top-down, individualistic perspective on the Sweet Science by taking seriously what ordinary boxers have to say about their occupation: how they think and feel about this harsh trade to which they are willing to give so much, what virtues it holds for them, and how it affects their life and self. It highlights selected facets of prizefighting from the “inside looking out,” as my gym mate Curtis puts it in the epigraphic quotation, in an effort to capture the *positive moment of pugilism*, that spelled by craft, sensuality, and morality.

Yet this article is emphatically not, appearances to the contrary, premised simply on an empathetic “thick description” of the lived experience of prizefighting, an interpretive dissection of “the native’s point of view,” to recall the words of Bronislaw Malinowski made famous by Clifford Geertz. At minimum, it is questionable, first, whether one can pinpoint a single, generic “native” point of view, as opposed to a range of discrepant, competing, or warring viewpoints,

depending on structural location within the world under examination. Second, one may query whether the so-called native may be said to have a “point of view” at all, rather than *being one with* the universe of which he partakes – and thus bound to it by a relation of “ontological complicity”³ that precludes a spectatorial posture. And third, one must seriously ask whether such a point of view, if it exists, can be discursively explicated: ethnomethodologists have argued, rather forcefully, that such a project is internally contradictory in that it implies treating as a “perspective,” a set of perceptual events, precisely what members experience as inherent, necessary, and therefore (at least partly) imperceptible features of their extant environment.⁴ My chief caveat here is more that “thick descriptions” are, as a rule, *disembedded reconstructions* by the analyst that do not fully recognize themselves as such.

Rather than a depictive re-counting, then, the following essay is a *(re)construction* of the “pugilistic point of view,” that is, the synthetic view of professional boxing one can gain from the various points that may be occupied within the structure of social and symbolic relations that make up the pugilistic field. As such, it involves, necessarily, “analyzing the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviors – in terms of which [boxers] actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another,”⁵ but it does so firmly on the basis of knowledge of (i) the objective shape of that structure and the set of constraints and facilitations it harbors; (ii) its location in the wider social spaces of the ghetto and the city; and (iii) the social trajectories and dispositions of those who enter and compete in it.⁶ In short, the ensuing sociological hermeneutic of the boxer’s *Lebenswelt* is informed, indeed rendered possible, by prior recognition of the specific social necessity that inhabits his professional universe.

Adopting the (constructed) standpoint of the fighter, this analysis seeks, however imperfectly, to convey something of the passion, in the double sense of *love* and *suffering* (the etymological meaning of *patio*), that ties boxers to their trade by explicating what it is that they find – or make – *desirable* and worthwhile about it. I use the erotic (or psychoanalytic) notion of “desire” advisedly here because, as will be seen below, these “bonds of love”⁷ have deep-seated sensual (and sexual) roots and they are inseparable from the production and validation of a public (hyper)masculine self that is one of the immaterial yet very real personal profits of boxing. I say that boxers “make” boxing desirable to emphasize that the process under analysis is not a passive one of “reception” but, rather, entails an indefinite series of micro-

scopic, mostly unreflective and unnoticed, *acts of appropriation* of the extant social world and of the possibilities it harbors by those endowed with the proper categories of perception, appreciation, and action – and by them alone.

The fact is that there is a *romance of pugilism* that cannot be elucidated on the basis of the ecological antecedents and putative financial benefits of prizefighting. Given how little money most fighters earn and the multifold privations they must endure in the monastic day-to-day preparation for fleeting moments of glory or agony in the squared circle, economic payoffs fall woefully short of accounting for the seductions of boxing. To understand what drives fighters, their quasi-*sacrificial giving of themselves* to their occupation, one must heed and disclose the latter's moral and sensual attractions, elucidate the experiential foreground and dynamics of prizefighting as embedded and embodied social action.⁸

This article is based on a large body of observational, life-story, documentary, and experiential data produced in the course of an ethnographic study of the social world of professional boxers in the black ghetto of Chicago. From August of 1988 until October of 1991, I trained and hung out regularly at the Stoneland Boys Club, a “traditionalist” boxing gym located on a dilapidated stretch of one of the main thoroughfares of the city's South Side. The atmosphere and mode of functioning of professional boxing gyms vary considerably with the personality, pedagogic style, and authority of their head coach, and secondarily as a function of their ethnic recruitment and status in the local or national boxing economy. Stoneland's gym (a pseudonym) was directed by a world-reputed trainer “from the ole school” who tolerated few if any violations of the “sanctity of immemorial traditions” (Weber) as handed down by predecessors. And it occupied a central position in the hierarchically structured space of gyms in Chicago as one of the main suppliers of fighters for the city's boxing “cards.” It thus offered an ideal site for vivisectioning the culture and economy of prizefighting.

At the Stoneland gym, I not only learned the craft and took part in all phases and aspects of the boxer's Spartan regimen.⁹ I also socialized and evolved solid friendships with a number of fighters, trainers, managers, and other “fight people” whom I followed in their daily round. This long period of immersion allowed me to observe boxers and their entourage in their natural habitat and to experience firsthand the process of inculcation of the pugilistic *illusio* – the half-inarticulate,

quasi-organismic belief in the value of the game and its stakes, inscribed deep within the body through progressive incorporation of its core tenets. As I was simultaneously conducting research on the social structures of marginality in Chicago's inner city,¹⁰ I was also in a position to trace out the economic, cultural, and moral roots of boxing as a (sub)proletarian bodily trade providing a supplement or an alternative to more conventional avenues of livelihood and mobility such as the school, the low-wage labor market, and the informal street economy of the ghetto.¹¹

In this tentative and partial sketch of the pugilistic point of view, I draw especially on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 50 fighters (36 African-Americans, 6 Latinos, and 8 whites), comprising very nearly all of the professionals active in the state of Illinois during the summer of 1991. These face-to-face interviews, typically lasting close to two hours and yielding some 2,000 pages of printed transcripts, were conducted in settings ranging from boxing gyms and automobiles to local diners to the residence of the boxer or investigator.¹² They are complemented by, and interpreted in the light of, extensive notes from my field diary as well as information culled from innumerable informal conversations in gymnasia, at weigh-ins, during or after boxing shows throughout the Chicago metropolitan area or "on the road," as well as in the neighborhoods and homes of my fighter friends. Because I had been part of the local landscape for almost three years at the time of formal interviewing and had proven my genuine interest in the game by "paying my dues" in the ring, I could establish a relation of trust and mutual respect with the boxers. Because I had by then become fully conversant with their cultural idiom, I was able to phrase my questions in a manner congruent with their occupational concerns and thus elicit candid and meaningful answers, which I could also confront with extensive direct observation and check against related accounts by strategically situated informants (friends, trainers, managers, et al.).

Finally, my first-hand and scholarly knowledge of the daily tribulations of boxers in the ghetto allowed me to probe and confront (or triangulate) these answers and to elaborate a variety of leads so as to get as close as possible to each fighter's lived understanding of his trade.¹³ Having established myself as a member (albeit of a marginal sort) of the guild, then, was the basis of my ability to develop an "intuitive and provisional representation of the generative formula of each specific interviewee," just as it was critical in enabling me to get the latter to cooperate in unveiling this formula more fully so as to pinpoint its invariants.¹⁴

It should be stressed that, in about a third of the cases, these interviews, coming at the end of three years of intense “observant participation,” were not the product of a fleeting and superficial encounter but one link in an extended chain of routine interpersonal exchanges. Even those boxers and trainers who did not know me personally when I approached them at this stage were aware of my “insider status” and could situate me on the local pugilistic scene (“Yeah, I seen ya at d’fights, you one of [coach] Rickey’s boys”). Any other approach would have generated enormous distortions likely to mutilate, if not destroy, the object to be constructed, through a combination of diffidence, self-mystifying miscommunication, and deliberate mythologizing.¹⁵

One last prefatory qualification is in order. For reasons of analytic strategy (and space limitations), this article deliberately brackets the objective factors and material forces that bear upon the lifeworld of professional boxers and give it its peculiar structure and feel. It does not address the broader matrix of class inequality, caste exclusion, and plebeian masculinity that continually replenishes the supply of fighters and the asymmetric system of positions and transactions that define the division of labor undergirding this “political meat market”¹⁶ that is the boxing business. Thus it remains, on the face of it, agnostic as to whether the views and beliefs of pugilists are ultimately beneficial to them or to what degree they partake instead of a “collective self-deception,” to invoke Marcel Mauss’s formulation, to which boxers are both unwitting participants and consenting victims.

This question, whose resolution is here postponed, is not a mere analytical conundrum – and its evocation a discursive gesture of complicity aimed at those social theorists concerned with the fashionable puzzle of “structure and agency,” or submission and resistance. It is one that tugs at the kernel of the pugilistic cosmos and tears, however furatively, at the soul of each of its inhabitants. As adumbrated in the concluding section, prizefighting is a social universe riddled with ambivalence, a turbid, double-sided, Janus-faced world suffused by dubiety and suspicion even as it trumpets its certitude and proclaims its time-honored truths with an air of unbendable defiance.

Fighting the trope of violence

Boxin’ doesn’t jus’ teach you violence. I think, boxin’ teaches you discipline an’ self-respect an’ it’s also teachin’ you how to

defen' yourself, so, it's really great to box. It's a lot of fun. Anybody who feels that it teaches you violence is a person tha's really a, a real incompetent mind I think. Someone tha' their min's thinkin' real low.

Kenny, black middleweight, 24,
night security guard, 8 years in the ring

If there is a single set of recurrent images and narrative strategies – what Arjun Appadurai, in a different context, calls a “strong trope”¹⁷ – that dominates the public representation of boxing, it is no doubt that of violence: the unmediated, unbridled fistic onslaught of man upon man is unquestionably the most graphic picture spontaneously associated with prizefighting. Savage blows hurled to the head of a defenseless combatant, blood squirting from mouth and nose, cut eyebrows and shattered bones, battered bodies crumpled in pain on a stained ring mat as the crowd clamors for more: even people who have never set foot in a gym or witnessed a live fight are well acquainted with these visions.¹⁸ From a distance, boxing resembles nothing more than a miniature realization of Hobbes’s state of nature, a “warre of every man against every man,” a brutish clash of bodies governed by “force and fraud.”

This common perception is not without grounds. Of all combat sports, boxing is, along with wrestling, the one in which physical confrontation is the least aestheticized and euphemized. As a “percussion sport” involving direct, agonistic corporeal contact, pugilism distinguishes itself sharply from “prehension sports” such as judo in terms of both means and ends:¹⁹ competition in the ring aims not at thwarting or coralling the moves of the opponent but at delivering potent blows to his head and upper body so as to inflict superior physical damage and, if possible, render him incapable or unwilling to sustain the contest. When he was asked during testimony before a congressional commission if he knew he had Jimmy Doyle in trouble during their 1947 fight that ended tragically with Doyle dying from the sequelae of a brutal knockout, Sugar Ray Robinson could only answer in his equanimously gentle voice: “Sir, they pay me to get them in trouble.”²⁰ The total subordination of form to function that turns the body into the weapon and target of deliberate assault inevitably results in real physical erosion amply documented by biomedical studies of boxing.²¹ Injuries and bodily deterioration are not incidental to the game, they are the necessary outcome of proper professional exertion. One plays basketball and

even football; one does not “play” at boxing. As my old coach phrases it: “Ain’t no such thing as ‘recreational boxing’, Louie. You get in d’ring, this is serious biz’ness: somebody’s up in there tryin’ to tear your head off.”

Boxing is a true “blood sport” in ways that few if any other athletic activities are, as reflected in the hypermasculine ethos that underpins it. The fistic trade puts a high premium on physical toughness and the ability to withstand – as well as dish out – pain and bodily harm. The *specific honor* of the pugilist, like that of the ancient gladiator, consists in refusing to concede and kneel down. One of the visible outward signs of that much-revered quality called “heart” said to epitomize the authentic boxer is the capacity not to bow under pressure, to “suck it up” and keep on fighting, no matter what the physical toll.²² A pug who quits in the midst of battle is branded with the mark of infamy and suffers a veritable symbolic death. Accordingly, the occupational idiolect of boxing gives pride of place to military expressions and metaphors: valiant fighters are “gladiators” who go to “war,” throw “bombs” at each other, and exhibit “ring generalship” in implementing their “search and destroy mission.”

Last, there is no denying that the intimate familiarity with violence that comes with growing up in a poor urban neighborhood rife with crime constitutes good preliminary preparation for the ring in that it raises one’s threshold of tolerance for belligerence and inclines one to a radically instrumentalist conception of the body well-suited to professional pugilism.²³ My coach was quick to detect such qualities as a means to estimate the future ring potential of a novice:

I stayed late for this new guy last night but, boy, was it worth it! . . . He real tough, *he been shot, he been stabbed three times*, so he tough, he can take pain awright. He been in jail, tha’s where he learn to box. Then he stop for two years but he fight on d’sstreet. He aggressive, he’s quick. He got bad balance but he can hit you, *boy he can hit!* Anybody he hit with a right hand, he gonna put’em away, knock’em cold as a milkshake.

Yet to equate pugilism with physical aggression *tout court* – as historian Jeffrey Sammons does when he writes that the very existence of boxing “reflects society’s fear of and need for violence”²⁴ – is a distortion bordering on disfigurement in that it arbitrarily reduces a multifaceted bodily occupation to only *one* of its aspects. And to an aspect that is especially salient and objectionable to *non-participants* in the specific universe.²⁵ It contradicts, nay defiles, the lived experience of fighters

who disagree forcefully and unanimously with the idea that boxing is a school of brutality. Indeed, many can scarcely contain their indignation at such a notion and retort that it testifies to the ignorance and disrespect of those who hold it. "It's mostly probably people who have nothin' to do with the sport that would probably think that it's a violent sport," reflects Roy, a black middleweight who gave up a stable job as a cable installer for a suburban television company to devote himself full-time to his fistic calling. "They don't look at the aspect where it's *keepin' youth, young men off the street*. It's a way to *benefit* yourself if you're *not* in college or you don't have a great payin' job – if you can fight, if you're good with your hands, it's a way to success, too."²⁶

The suggestion that boxing should be banned because it is brutal strikes fighters as both incongruous and hypocritical. Why single out sport from a myriad activities and objects that are considerably more destructive, yet fully legal and quite commonplace, such as guns, automobiles, or the consumption of addictive substances?²⁷ "I think we should protest," amplifies Eddie, one of the trainers at the Stoneland Boys Club. "I say if we close down the gym, let's close down the liquor stores, also. Let's close down the lounges also, 'cause that creates a lotta violence. I say: *don't stress on one point*." And why in addition unfairly single out boxing of all sports? Fighters correctly point out that their trade is no more violent than other, more "mainstream" athletic pursuits that have captured the fancy of the American public, such as football, in which high rates of both chronic and acute injury are quite normal,²⁸ and even basketball ("Basketball has gotten very physical right now, that is the winnin' right now, through physical play: look at the Detroit Pistons!"), not to mention stock car racing and more exotic sporting quests such as parachuting and hang gliding. True, one can suffer grievous physical damage, even ruination, in the ring but, as they note, "you can *get hurt* doin' anythin'": one can walk outside and get run over by a car, or get mugged and clobbered to a pulp on the street. The fact is, most boxers reside in segregated and degraded neighborhoods where violent crime is a basic fact of everyday life and where physical insecurity infests all spheres of existence.²⁹ Against the backdrop of such a harsh urban environment, boxing can hardly seem particularly violent.

Pugilists are also quick to underline that anyone who wants to dispense brutality has only to pick up a gun, a knife, a brick, or a baseball bat to be in a position to mete out physical punishment with much greater ease and effect than with gloved fists. Consider the differences – as

marked as those “between night and day,” my coach was fond of saying – between boxing and street fracas. Fighting in the ring is governed by strict rules, upheld by a neutral authority, that curb the scope and level of aggression and substantially attenuate its impact. Free-style fighting on the street, by contrast, has no clear boundaries regarding location, duration, means, and participants, as Bernard, a black light-heavyweight employed as an X-ray technician in one of the city’s most prestigious hospitals, explains:

Streetfightin’, I’ll prob’ly, half-kill a person. Boxin’ is *skill*. You got gloves on your hands an’ you can’t really kill a person, as quick as you could with your hands. [In streetfighting] you don’t have any rules. You can pick a bottle up. You can go home an’ get a gun an’ come back, you know, or tell a big brother. You know, a frien’ coul’ jump in an’ double-team you. You ha’ rules. I don’t look at boxin’, you know – there’s a lot of articles abou’ boxin’ shoul’ be banned an’ thin’s of tha’ nature, but boxin’ to me is a sport. It’s not tryinna knock, tryinna kill a person, it’s jus’ tryinna accumulate punches an’ beat this guy an’ knock him down, but *en route to tha’*, if it gets a lil’ more serious, then you have to do what you have to do, but it *is* a sport. It has *rules* and there is a point of sportsmanship involved in boxing. It differs vastly, you know, from street fightin’.

In fact, there are grounds for arguing that boxing does not fuel but rather *depresses the level of interpersonal and public violence* by channeling aggressive impulses within an organized, collective framework that rigidly regulates its display and endows it with structure, purpose, and meaning.³⁰ First, daily “roadwork” and training in the gym drain the energies out of fighters and likely absorb whatever *Angriffslust* they might hold. “In my opinion, it *relaxes* the fighter that’s in you ’cause you releases it an’ it just makes you a calm, all-around better person,” comments Keith, a quiet, surly 24-year old welterweight who works part-time as a radio-station announcer and has not got embroiled in a single street confrontation since signing up at Stoneland. Tony, a truck driver from one of the city’s white ethnic neighborhoods who campaigns in the light-heavyweight division, adds:

It’s a *skill*, it’s a sport to be better than a person. I don’t think violence and all, (shakes his head vigorously) I don’t agree with that. I tell ya the truth: ever since I started boxing, I’ve been more of a mellow person. I’ve been more relaxed. Like I said, I’m not, all my aggressions are taken out. In the gym I work out, I come home, someone come up to me and say “yer an asshole,” I’m like, (with a smirk) “you’re right!” You know, I’m *mellowed out*. I’m way mellowed out.

One need not subscribe to the “hydraulic” theory of violence according to which (male) human beings have a natural propensity toward

aggression, a predetermined quantity of which has to find an outlet somewhere – if not in war, crime, public disorder, and domestic violence, then in combat sports or vicariously through the spectacle of destructiveness in the media³¹ – to understand that a young man who gets up at five in the morning to run four miles in the cold and spars eight hard rounds in the afternoon is unlikely to roam the streets at night looking for trouble.³² Second, by the very nature of their activity, boxers acquire a great deal of personal confidence and a sense of inner assurance that militates against recourse to violence in interpersonal relations. To function in the ring, pugilists must bring their emotions under firm stewardship, vanquish their most intimate fears and learn continuously to monitor themselves – their physical state and mental moods, their sleep and eating habits, their sexual and romantic involvements, their family and social life – in ways that cannot but increase their feeling of self-mastery.³³ A journeyman heavyweight who works as a prison warden and had to overcome a deep streak of timidity to join the brotherhood of Fistiania expresses this view tersely: “When you have confidence, you’re not afraid of people, you know, you don’t lash out at them, you just – you’re secure in yourself, and you don’t need to lash out at the world.”

Third and more generally, the microcosm of the gym in which fighters spend much of their waking time forms “a vast tissue of reciprocal activity” – to borrow Cooley’s definition of society³⁴ – that tends to deflect and contain forms of interpersonal bellicosity, owing to the norms of civility, fairness, and reciprocity that hold sway within it.³⁵ A properly-run boxing gym is one where boxers are required to behave in a courteous and respectful manner toward each other and their entourage and where no fights or scuffles occur outside the ring. If boxers have conflicts and grudges to settle, they are invited to do so between the ropes and according to the rules of the trade (i.e., wearing a head guard, mouthpiece, and heavily padded sparring gloves, and in three-minute rounds). The gym constitutes a *small-scale civilizing machine* in Elias’s sense of the term:³⁶ it simultaneously imposes strict taboos on certain forms of violence, lowers one’s threshold of acceptance of disorderly behavior, and promotes the internalization of controls and obedience to authority. So that immersion in the “personal community”³⁷ formed by the gym membership and broader boxing fraternity tends to reduce that “lust for attacking” that prizefighting appears to exemplify and thrive on.

Last, as I show below, pugilists value their technical know-how and the “professional” status that it imparts to them. A central component of the occupational ethic of pugilism, which coaches impress upon their charges from the first stages of initiation on, holds that fistic prowess must be reserved exclusively for display in the ring against properly prepared opponents. It is not to be squandered by unregulated and irregular usage in an improper setting (such as the streets) or debased by being directed at persons untutored in the pugilistic idiom and devoid of skill or strength, and even less so against persons *statutorily unfit* to respond on an equal footing to a methodical fistic attack, such as women.³⁸ This is the reason why prize fighters (try to) shun street altercations and situations that might require them to come to blows with others. Some will go to extremes to avoid “wild” fights and are even willing momentarily to lose face to prevent a challenge from escalating into a full-blown clash. Others use a “bodyguard”; – generally a muscular or heavysset friend or relative – for close personal protection in order to lower the odds of a confrontation in public places.

“If somebody tries to pick a fight on the street,” advises Ishmael, a Puerto-Rican middleweight who toils as a grade man laying asphalt all day before coming to the gym, “you gotta back away, you back away, you can never start a fight, I mean you know, the dude could be cussin’ you out, your mother, your daddy, you gotta back away ’cuz you’re a registered fighter and you cannot touch ’em, *unless* they lay a hand on you.” Such reserve is recommended in light of the risk of injury, escalating retaliation, and legal complications that might ensue, but more fundamentally it is a question of professional morality and self-respect. Muhammad Ali recalls how he resisted getting drawn into a physical confrontation during a racist incident in a Louisville restaurant shortly after winning the gold medal in the 1960 Olympics: “I had already signed for my first professional bout. It’s part of the pride of a truly professional fighter not to indulge himself, not to be caught dead or alive in a free-for-all.”³⁹

“A technician type of thang”: Pugilism as a skilled bodily craft

Boxin’ is like, it’s like uh, electrician. It’s a skill. It’s a’ art. I mean, how many people can take wire an’ rewire this whole buildin’, an’ then you gotta ask yourself how many people can box? It’s jus’ a skill. It’s a plus.

James, black heavyweight, 29,
informal day labor, 6 years in the ring

Fighters conceive of boxing not as a springboard for aggression and an exercise in violence but as a skilled bodily trade, a competitive performance craft requiring sophisticated technical know-how and an abiding moral commitment that will enable them not only to improve their material lot but also, and more urgently, to construct a *publicly recognized, heroic self*. Boxing is the vehicle for a project of *ontological transcendence* whereby those who embrace it seek literally to fashion themselves into a new being so as to escape the common determinations that bear upon them and the social insignificance to which these determinations condemn them.

Such is the fundamental paradox of prizefighting: to outsiders it stands as the penultimate form of dispossession and dependency, a vicious and debasing form of submission to external constraints and material necessity. For boxers it represents the potential means for carving out a margin of autonomy from their oppressive circumstances and for expressing their ability to seize their own fate and remake it in accordance with their inner wishes. There is no room here adequately to address the nature and social foundations of this paradox. Suffice it to note that, while they universally denounce the abuse and exploitation to which they are exposed, boxers nearly always deny also that one can be coerced into the ring and they vigorously claim (at least partial) responsibility for their fate between the ropes, as my sparring partner Shante does when he clamors that

it's up to the fighter to fight, Louie: *cain' nobody make me fight! Cain' nobody make you fight!* You come in there with d'understandin' of whatever y'know you gon' do. If you ain' prepared, tha's *your fault*.

The ring affords boxers a rare opportunity – the only one that many of them may ever enjoy – to shape to a degree their own destiny and accede to a socially recognized form of existence. This is why, in spite of all the pain, the suffering, and the ruthless exploitation it entails, of which fighters are painfully cognizant, boxing can infuse their lives with a sense of value, excitement, and accomplishment.

Prizefighting is first and most evidently a *working-class job*, that is, a means of earning a living or, to be more precise, of augmenting other sources of income⁴⁰ by exchanging the only tangible asset that those bereft of inherited wealth and educational credentials possess: their body and the abilities it harbors. “It’s a job, tha’s how I make my money, tha’s how I get paid,” avers Aaron, a black lightweight from a northern suburb of Chicago with an undistinguished record of four defeats in six

bouts. “Doin’ it for money and stuff, it’s *like a second job*, like the other guy’s a fighter, he’s doin it for money, you’re doin it for money. That’s the way I see it,” chimes in Ishmael. Drake, a 32-year old journeyman welterweight who first “gloved up” at age twelve and has accumulated 45 fights in his eleven years as a pro, agrees:

It’s somethin’ I do jus’ to – *I box because it’s a payday*, y’know what I mean, I feel then as, you know, how, it put somethin’ in my pocket and add *more luxury to my life*, man. I figure, if I get in the ring now, I’m able to do it now *but*, I do it, I does it only ‘cause at the moment I *get paid* to do it and it’s somethin’ I can do and I enjoy doin’ it.

That boxing is a working-class occupation is reflected not only in the physical nature of the activity but also in the social recruitment of its practitioners and in their continuing dependence on blue-collar or unskilled service jobs to support their career in the ring. It is indicated also by the fact that fighters consider training not as avocation and relaxation but plainly as *work*: “It’s a job before’s anything else, an’ it’s entertainment when you in that ring. But the *trainin’s* your job,” insists Roy. “Work, work. I’m goin’ to work, shovel the dirt: this yo’ job,” corroborates Ned, a colleague from the South Side who is attempting a come-back after a two-year layoff. Yet professional prizefighting differs from, and is deemed preferable to, low-wage labor in several crucial respects.

First, unlike factory jobs for instance, fighting is a form of physical work that boxers seek out and appreciate because it grants them a high degree of *control over the labor process* and unparalleled independence from direct supervision. True, the occupational ethic of “sacrifice” demands that they submit to a rigorous regimen of training and to the strict authority of their coach.⁴¹ And if they are at all serious about getting ahead in the game, they will also have to bear the tutelage of a manager. But this disciplinary framework is one they consent to by the very fact of entering the trade and one they perceive as ultimately beneficial to them. What is more, it leaves them a good measure of autonomy in designing and executing the daily routines that make up their professional duties. Fighters maintain that they cannot be made to train and fight against their will: they have to desire to be in the ring. Nor do they have interest in “slacking off,” given that they are the ones who will suffer the consequences of a lack of dedication and intensity in the ring. Boxers place great value upon being their “own boss” and in claiming accountability for the outcome of their occupational efforts.

Second, although it may not appear as such to the untrained spectator, boxing is a highly *skilled activity* that requires mastery of a complex and multilayered corpus of knowledge.⁴² The view that fighting in the ring is a matter of naked strength and raw aggression is a gross misperception, one that Henri, a black light-heavyweight who has fought professionally for over a decade in addition to holding a highly-paid job in a chemical factory, is quick to put to rest:⁴³

It's a *thinkin' man's game*, but the outside doesn't see that. The on'y thin' they see is jus' two guys throwin' punches, you know. Well, uh, you gotta think about *what* you gonna do, *when* you gonna do it, and *how* you gonna do it. See, this is what you gotta think about . . . [Through training eventually] it comes natural. When I see you, I know exactly what I got to do. See, I'm always lookin' for the openin', I take what you give me. I always have to beat you from your mistakes.

A well-known gym adage holds that boxing is “seventy-five percent physical and seventy-five percent mental,” which is to say that fighting requires not only bodily strength and technical prowess but also moral resolve and tactical intelligence. Because a bout is a quintessentially *strategic and interactive contest*, mastering the basic punches (jab, hook, cross, uppercuts) and moves (feints and parries, pivots, blocks, and so on) and being versed in the intricacies of ring generalship is far from sufficient. A fighter must also develop the ability to combine and integrate these elements afresh during each bout to resolve the practical conundrum posed by his opponent's repertoire of physical, technical, and tactical tools. Once between the ropes, you must instantaneously identify the strengths and weaknesses of your antagonist, adjust to (or disrupt) his rhythm and decide, in a matter of a split second, “how you execute punches, when you're gonna do it, what timin'.... It's not like *two chicken fightin'*,” insists Jeff, a 29-year-old white welterweight entering his seventh year as a pro. “I mean you *box* an' you movin' around an' you're thinkin' about what you gotta do an' what you're gonna execute, you know. Double up on your jabs, get the guy goin' backwards or jab, hook off your jab.” An Italian-American trainer from a West Side gym elaborates:

It's jus' like when you play like a game, Monopoly or somethin': it's who *out-smarts* the other guy . . . I tell 'em in the ring, it's who's gotta be the better man, you know: you gotta use *strategy*, sometimes you gotta use *strength*, sometimes you haveta use *movement*, you know it's – it's jus' not gettin' in there an' jus' beatin' up the other man, *it's an art*, like dancin', you know: you learn steps, you learn moves, you go through *a lotta* trainin' for it, (gesturing with his hands) you don't jus' come in there an' in three days have a fight.

Much like the activity of an electrician, a welder, or a potter,⁴⁴ pugilism requires an indexical, context-sensitive, embodied competence that is not amenable to being extracted from its natural setting and grasped outside of the concrete conditions of its actualization. It is a *kinetic technique* consisting of trained physical, cognitive, emotional, and conative dispositions that cannot be handed down or learned via the medium of theory but must instead be practically *implanted*, so to speak, into the fighter through direct embodiment.⁴⁵ This means that it takes years of arduous and intensive training, as well as extensive ring experience, to acquire proper command of the game. Most trainers estimate that a minimum of three to four years are necessary to produce a proficient amateur fighter and an additional three years to mold a competent pro. “There’s no short cut in boxin’ and learnin’ *how* to fight is not easy progress,” remarks my old trainer, “Yeah, because you take a hundred guys come in d’gymnasium, maybe *two* may become fighters.” Which in turn helps explain the highly distinctive value of the fistic vocation: anybody can pick up a job in a factory or peddle drugs on a street corner; not everyone has the mettle to step into the ring but even more so the “spunk” to retire into the gym for years and put up with the unflinching discipline of mind and body this demands.⁴⁶ Genuine commitment and love of the game are indispensable to sustain a fighter over time. In this respect, as well as in terms of both autonomy and skill, boxers resemble the artisan more than they do the classical proletarian of Marxian theory: they are small entrepreneurs in risky bodily performance.

Third, unlike most of the low-paying, dead-end, deskilled jobs to which young men from the inner city are being massively relegated in the new urban economy,⁴⁷ boxing offers the *prospect – however illusory – of a career*, that is, the possibility of advancement through a sequence of hierarchically ordered positions on an ascending scale of status, prestige, and income. Even better: for a few, those who somehow succeed in assembling the winning package of heart, talent, and “the right people behind them,” it holds out the promise of striking it rich and escaping once and for all “the life of the urban serf.”⁴⁸ From unknown club fighter to prospect to contender to champion, every trail of sweat and blood promises to lead to Las Vegas and the “big time,” the one “payday” that will make it all worthwhile – and more. Over 80 percent of active professional fighters in Chicago subscribe to the idea that boxing offers a viable avenue out of poverty. And, incredibly, virtually all of them (upwards of 85 percent) believe, at least at the outset of their careers, that they have a chance to rise all the way to the top and

become world champion.⁴⁹ At minimum, and in contradistinction to standard wage labor in which exertion and remuneration are blatantly uncorrelated, boxing promises that persistent effort will ultimately be rewarded: “It’s a skill to learn, somethin’ in life that you like doin’, it’s like ... it’s like really like *bein’ on a job*, eight hours a day in the gym – an’ it pays off, an’ it pays off in the long run,” assures Matt, a black cruiserweight from the South Side who twice fought for a world title.

Last, and relatedly, boxing is a *glamorous profession*, highly prized not so much by the broader society as by what Tocqueville called the “little society” of relatives, peers, and neighbors. The prestige of the Sweet Science in low-income neighborhoods is based essentially on the fact that it gives a dramatized public expression to the virile values (such as hardness, pugnacity, and physical bravery) that compose the common bedrock of working-class cultures across ethnoracial divides.⁵⁰ A 32-year old black middleweight from the Stoneland Boys Club with over a decade of ring experience has this comment on the topic:

Everybody knows a boxer is a *tough individual* an’ anytime you climb in the ring and put yo’ life on the line, people pat you on the back because you doin’ somethin’ tha’ you coul’ win’ up (gravely) gittin’ hurt, seriously wounded or even murdered, so they give you praise and glory for you to be a warrior like that, go in the ring and come out.

His gym mate Ed further expounds: “It is *admired*, I mean, jus’ like how folk go to professional fights an’ see two fighters step in the ring: there’s that fear, that (guttural grunt) ‘*HUUUN!*’, that *awe*, okay?” The auratic pull of boxing is reinforced by its association with the wider media-dominated constellation of professional sports, arguably the single most alluring sector of individual achievement today among lower-class youths, and in particular black youths.⁵¹ The ring could prove to be a springboard to stardom and a bridge to the enticing, other-worldly universe of VIP’s and “celebrities.”⁵²

The symbolic capital attached to being a professional athlete is all the easier to appropriate owing to public ignorance of the abysmal differences in earnings and career patterns between “name fighters” and club fighters.⁵³ Taking their cues from the million-dollar purses they read about in newspaper stories on high-profile – but highly atypical – heavyweight title fights, most people believe that preliminary boxers collect large purses, in the thousands of dollars and more, when in fact they are barely scraping up a few hundred dollars for weeks of onerous preparation. A black welterweight who supports himself by combining

boxing with a range of “hustles” on the streets of the South Side ghetto, confesses with embarrassment: “It’s like [I’m] *a idol*, I got a lotta peoples in my neighborhood, know I’m a good fighter, they wanna idolize me, (in a shrill voice) an’ I ain’t even makin’ no money!”⁵⁴

As several of the foregoing quotes clearly evince, the pugilist’s conception of his craft is not entirely shorn of an aesthetic dimension. Not, to be sure, in the “high-brow” sense of a detached concern for the expressiveness and coherence of forms and a celebration of their finality; nor even as a “grounded aesthetics” woven into the fabric of personalized acts of cultural consumption.⁵⁵ The boxer’s specific sense of beauty resides in a critical and knowing appreciation of the instantaneous strategic mastery of a tangled set of techniques, constraints, and contingencies requiring poise, dexterity, sureness of judgment, and pinpoint accuracy, as well as trenchant intervention toward the attainment of one’s goal. Ed, a 36-year-old black cruiserweight who doubles as a correctional officer and counselor in a halfway house and who came to boxing after an abbreviated career in professional football, verbalizes it thus:

I mean, to be able to stand before a man, a *massive* man, an’ he punches you an’ he goes through efforts to hit-an’-harm you, an’ he’s unable to even touch you an’ you’re no more than uh, (whispering excitedly) twelve inches away from him: that, that, it takes an art to be able to do that . . . That’s to be able to have *your rhythm*, to put forth your own individual *style*, and have it portrayed and presented to the public, uh to be able to, I mean, *have an art*, and have it appreciated, you know: it’s very beneficial.

What makes boxing an art for prizefighters is not, as sports writers and scholars contend, that it constitutes a “symbolic dialogue” (as C. E. Ashworth would have it) and, even less, a “conversation” that pugilists would hold by way of “their physiques” (to invoke the inimitably self-obsessed idiolect of Norman Mailer).⁵⁶ It is “the techniques you haveta go through, the trainin’ you gotta go through,” and the unique fusion of body and mind, instinct and strategy, emotion and rationality that must be demonstrated *in actu*, in the effectual *doings* of combat. Pugilistic beauty resides in the practicalities of the fight itself, not in what it signifies, as the following comment by Jeff makes obvious: “Bein’ able to deliver a punch jus’ the way you picture it in your head, how you gonna do it, you know: I mean *that’s an art*. Jus’ the *right timin’*, the *right speed an’ everythin’*, it’s, (raving) it’s a helluva feelin’ after you been trainin’ all this time an’ hit somebody with that perfect punch.”

If pugilism may be said to be artistic, then, it is less in the sense of Kant's aesthetics, as an expression of a pure disposition to "differentiate" and "appreciate" beauty rooted in one's inner sensibility, than as a manifestation of what Thorstein Veblen called the "instinct of workmanship": an interested, this-worldly appreciation of the "efficient use of the means at hand and adequate management of the resources available for the purposes of life."⁵⁷ For my gym mate Lorenzo, a 24-year-old welterweight who broke into the world rankings after toiling six years in the amateurs and three years in the pros, fighting is just such "a *technician type of thang*, it's a *beautiful thing to do*, you know: I like to watch tapes of boxers at work." And he goes on to reject the trope of violence and to assert instead the theme of love:

Everybody, a lotta people look at boxing as a fightin', brutal sport, but you know it's not *that* to me. I done uh seen all the pretty boxers in the world fight you know so to me it's a technician art, you know, it's beautiful boxin'. [There is an aspect of beauty in boxing?] Yeah, I feels it in the ring, that's why I like it, *I love it so much – not like it – I love it so much exactly*. I love what I do.

"An affectionate love" or, the sensual rewards of prizefighting

"You gotta love it. I walk it, talk it, sleep it, act it, look it. Some people don't believe me when I say I'm miserable as hell around the house if I'm not doing anything," once revealed Marvellous Marvin Hagler.⁵⁸ Much the same is true of club fighters and journeymen who will never enjoy a fraction of the wealth and fame attained by the bald-headed middleweight champion. For boxers are bound to their trade by a profound, multifaceted, sensuous relationship of affection and obsessive devotion, an organic connection (*sympatheia*) akin to a religious allegiance inscribed in their whole being – or, better yet, a form of *possession* born of the thorough refashioning of their "lived body" to accord with the specific temporal, physiological, and cognitive-emotional stipulations of the game.⁵⁹ Fighting is not simply something that they *do*, an instrumental activity, a pastime and a side job separable from their persona. Because it demands and effects a far-reaching restructuring of the self as well as an integral colonization of one's life-world, boxing is what they *are*: it defines at once their innermost identity, their practical attachments, and everyday doings, and their access to and place in the public realm.⁶⁰ The reason why boxers seem unable to retire from the game on a clean break, submits Vinnie, a white "prospect" supported by his manager who has run up eleven victories in a row since his twentieth birthday, is "because it becomes *part of their*

inside, it becomes part of their *heart* like you might say, they might wanna quit, they might not wanna come to the gym, (passionately) but it's *always* a part of 'em: *they're a fighter man!*"

So much to emphasize that material insecurity and the attendant project of economic betterment can scarcely account for the fervor and depth of the commitment that binds pugilists to their craft. Proof is that few of them would trade their bruising occupation for a secure job in the wage-labor economy, even one that would allow them to provide adequately for themselves and their family. Also, a good many boxers sacrifice immediate occupational opportunity and advancement to their pugilistic ambitions, leaving jobs either because they are physically demanding and consume too much of their energies or because of conflict between their work and training schedules. Asked whether they would "hang it up" if they found a "good job" (however they chose to define it), two-thirds of the Windy City's pugilists answer in the negative. "No, I *love* boxin'," intonates Dave, a 26-year old janitor who just turned professional after nine years spent battling in the amateurs. "Boxin' is my first priority, y'know, it's *my life, it's a job for me, it's a career.*" A young black heavyweight from the far South Side entering his third year as a pro echoes:

I don't know, I don't think, it'd have to be a real goo' job. Have to be a real goo' job. Be makin' a lot of money an' havin' a lot of benefits, 'cause *I don't see shit makin' me quit boxin'*. I don't see nothin' coul' make me quit boxin' right now. Not even a goo' job. I woul' try to work a goo' job an' *still* box. I like it.

A journeyman lightweight who joined the ranks of the professionals in his early twenties after a mediocre amateur career in the military and who aspires to "a job paying fifteen bucks an hour" that would mark a substantial improvement over his current employment situation – he works some seventy hours a week as a carpenter in his brother's shop for scarcely a thousand dollars per month – would not give up the trade for that: "Nope, I *gotta go*: once you put your mind to somethin', you gotta stick with it, no matter how many bumps you take along the line, you gotta stick it out, you gotta stick it out. We make it."

Pugilists commonly call forth biological metaphors of drugs and contamination to articulate the *visceral infatuation* they nourish for their occupation and the moral compulsion they feel to give it all that they have. "I wouldn't wanna say it's a disease," ponders Jesse, a 29-year-old Latino policeman who entered the gym at age fourteen and has fought

almost uninterruptedly since. “I don’t think it’s a disease, it’s jus’ an *affectionate love* that I have for boxin’.” Fighting, they expound, is “something that’s in your blood,” that you cannot “get out of your system” once you have had a taste of it, even though it may threaten ultimately to destroy you.⁶¹ Boxers also borrow from the lexicon of romantic love to express the fondness and reverence they hold for the Sweet Science, speaking of the latter as one would of a difficult but sultry lover or, better yet, a voluptuous and feisty mistress, ever covetous and trying but whose magnetism cannot be forsaken or evaded. “You put in so much of yer time, you know, blood and sweat all them years, you know – how could you jus’ walk away from it?” rhetorically asks a 26-year-old white middleweight entering his third year as a pro. “I don’t know many people that just *divorced* it an’ never looked back, so I think it’s too hard.”⁶² Boxing does in many ways constitute a structural counterpart and rival to the pugilist’s lover in that it causes a diversion of his time, energies, and mental and emotional investments from the domestic (and erotic) sphere, in effect arrogating to itself the fighter’s libido. Revealingly, fighters who “break training” by missing a gym session or by engaging in sexual intercourse before a bout often say that they feel guilty of “cheating,” as if boxing was their true life companion and their girlfriend or wife a passing liaison.

As with singing, dancing, preaching, and kindred body-centered performance trades that traditionally occupy a pivotal place in working-class culture, especially Afro-American,⁶³ pugilistic prowess is considered by many to be a sacred “gift,” a charismatic skill bestowed by a higher authority whose possession carries with it the moral obligation to cultivate and use it well. Like verbal dexterity in the case of the black preacher, fighters hold that boxing is something that they have “in them” and that it would be unconscionable not to exploit such inner treasure and to fail to realize the destiny it might hold for them. The carnal attraction of pugilism is so potent that boxers can lose their ability to conceive of themselves apart from their ring activity.⁶⁴ Indeed, in many cases fighting grows so entangled with their sense of self, so intricately braided into the emotional and mental fabric of their individuality that they simply cannot envision life without it.⁶⁵ Says an unemployed black middleweight who migrated to Chicago from a small Southern town four years ago to chase his dreams of pugilistic glory:

I get in the ring, it’s more of a, it’s a emotional combine with the *skills*, combine with somethin’ I wanna do. It’s, it’s jus’ somethin’ I like to do, it’s make me feel like *I’m me*. It jus’ gonna make Willie M- gittin’ in the ring. It make Willie M- Willie M-. Right now, if I wadden in the ring, Willie M- woul’ ha’ to

fin' somethin' else to do. Right now, the ring is what make Willie M- be Willie M-. I feel at home in the ring. I feel like this is *my* environment, this is where it's me. Jus' like them jobs, tha's what I am: I'm a boxer.

Kenny has taken a night job as a security guard to reserve his day for training. He works from eleven to seven the next morning, comes home, sleeps until early afternoon, and then heads out to the gym. He would not have it any other way:

I love boxin'. I know the fundamentals of the sport, you know, this what makes me happy. If I didn't do this, I *woul'n' be happy, man!* I be out there doin' somethin' wrong. I think I prob'ly *die*, you know, (cheerfully) 'cause it's what I live for, it's jus' a great sport to me. I jus' love doin' it.

Boxers feel that, by stepping into the squared circle, they can achieve something inaccessible or forbidden to them outside, whether it is wealth, fame, excitement, a sense of personal control and moral proficiency, or yet simply the unspeakable prosaic joys of being caught up in a thickly knit web of tensionful activities that valorize them and imbue their life with élan, drive, and significance. Most importantly, all these rewards can seemingly be attained *under their own powers*, as an outcome of their individual choices and strivings, *volens et libens*, thus attesting to their operative faculty to elude the common constraints that limit others around them. In summary, predilection for prizefighting is not so much (or not only) a reaction to material deprivation as a recourse for elaborating, and then responding to, an *existential challenge of one's own making*, under conditions such that the ring appears as the most attractive arena in which to wage it.

Boxing is, to borrow Goffman's terminology, "where the action is": a universe in which the most minute behavior is "fateful," that is, problematic and highly consequential for the individual engaged in it.⁶⁶ By entering an occupation that hinges on "the willful undertaking of serious chances,"⁶⁷ boxers decisively realign the structure and texture of their entire existence – its temporal flow, its cognitive and sentient profile, its psychological and social complexion – in ways that put them in a unique position to assert their agency. For with risk comes the possibility of control; with pain and sacrifice, the eventuality of moral elevation and public recognition; and with discipline and commitment, the existential profit of personal renewal and even transcendence. Through the ministry of boxing, fighters' ambition is to remake themselves and the world about them.

Professional pugilism enables its devotees to escape the realm of mundanity and the ontological obscurity to which their undistinguished lives, insecure jobs, and cramped family circumstances relegate them and enter instead into an extra-ordinary, “hyperreal” space in which a purified and magnified masculine self may be achieved.⁶⁸ It does this first by thrusting them in the midst of a *luxuriant sensory landscape*, a broad and varied panorama of affect, pleasure, and dramatic release. By virtue of its closure to the outside and the severe psychophysical regimentation it requires, the pugilistic universe features a unique “tension-balance between emotional control and emotional stimulation” that generates unparalleled excitement and offers ongoing “emotional refreshment” to its participants.⁶⁹ Set against the monochromatic tone of everyday life in the shadow of urban marginality, even the highly reiterative and predictable routine of training is animated and alluring due to the shift it causes in the “balance of the sensorium”⁷⁰ and to the continual kinesthetic, visual, tactile, and aural stimulation it procures.

For the boxer, working out daily is like an interminable journey of exploration across the vast expanses of his corporeal territory. Through endless repetition of the same drills (shadow-boxing, punching an assortment of bags, skipping rope, sparring, and calisthenics), he learns to dialogue with, and monitor, different body parts, striving to expand their sensory and motor powers, extend their tolerance to strain and pain, and coordinate them ever more closely as his organism slowly imbibes the actional and perceptual schemata constitutive of the pugilist’s craft. Turning one’s body into an impeccably tuned fighting machine is an absorbing and rewarding process in its own right. “When you get outa the gym you feel like a brand new person. Some people like t’get high an’ *that’s my high*,” muses a Mexican-American middleweight who has spent over a decade patrolling the rings of the Midwest. “That’s a great feelin’, that you’re in shape an’ you live a disciplined life, there’s nothin’ like it in the world – you’re *on cloud nine*,” confirms Jeff.

Over the long-winding cycle of emotional “highs and lows”⁷¹ spanned by weeks of preparation for a bout, boxers weave a delicate tapestry of affective materials mingling anxiety and anger, aggression and fear, impatience and elation. Riding the pugilistic roller-coaster gives life a sparkle and zing that it would scarcely have otherwise. Danny, a Puerto Rican cruiserweight with a record of two defeats and two draws for only one victory, discloses that he steps into the ring “to have fun, it’s, it’s *thrillin’*: *you don’t know what’s gonna happen in the ring an’ I love it*. I *hate* bein’ *bored* with the same thing over an’ over. An’ the boxin’

everytime – I could spar with you ten times an’ ten times it will be a different fight.” And he refers in stride to the so-called greatest upset in boxing history, namely James “Buster” Douglas’s stunning knockout of hitherto invincible Mike Tyson in Tokyo in the winter of 1990, as proof that anything can happen between the ropes.⁷²

The emotional acme of the boxer’s life, however, is reached not in training but during the official bout itself – and in the hours and minutes before and after confrontation between the ropes. The fight is a sensory microcosm unto itself, characterized by a drastic narrowing of one’s sentient receptivity, high-speed processing of stressful stimuli under acute urgency so as to impose order on a complex and entropic perceptual field verging at times on complete chaos, and a virtual merging with the task at hand leading to the euphoric experience of “flow” and an intense sensation of self-possession. Like other “edgeworkers” such as test pilots, high-speed boat racers, and sky divers,⁷³ boxers insist that fighting has ineffable qualities that cannot be captured and conveyed linguistically to outsiders. And they doubt that any other pursuit could give them the thrill of fistic battle. You have to experience in your own *flesh* the coeval anguish and excitement of “going toe-to-toe” as the culminating trial of weeks of taxing training to grasp fully boxing’s sensuous magnetism. Marty, a 22-year-old white featherweight who turned pro at seventeen, recounts the conclusion of his last bout:

There’s no explanation for the feeling you got when there’s, y’know, two thousand people screamin’ your name, y’know, and you got your hands up. Right then it’s just a feeling that, you just can’t even *explain*, I mean I get the goosebumps just thinkin’ about it! You – you can’t explain it. It’s *better’n sex for me*, I think. I mean, I, there’s nothin’ I could even compare it to.

The emotional profile of the post-fight phase is no less rugged, mixing ever-fluctuating doses of relief, pride, shame, and joy. Always present, so long as the boxer prepared dutifully and “sacrificed” as prescribed by his profession’s ethical code, is a radiating sentiment of personal competency and accomplishment: “Afterwards, win or lose, you know you jus’ go an’ shake hands an’ you compliment the guy that you fought an’ it’s jus’ the *greatest, greatest feeling*,” nods Roy. Fighters frequently compare the solace that fills them after a bout to reaching a mountain-top from which they can dive back into the tranquil flow of everyday life and savor the mundane delights they have been foregoing for weeks: watching television late at night, feasting on cheeseburgers and milkshakes, going out and resuming amorous intercourse. One South Side pug compares the feeling to “takin’ a safe off your back,” another

likens it to “gettin’ a orgasm,” while a third prefers a parallel with celebrating Christmas or a surprise birthday party.⁷⁴ One thing that boxing is definitely not for its practitioners is indifferent or dull.

The morality of boxing

“The voluntary taking of serious chances is a means for the maintenance and acquisition of character,” writes Goffman in his pioneering analysis of fateful action.⁷⁵ A second major immaterial attraction of professional prizefighting is that, being premised on a logic of agonistic challenge and strict obedience to an all-embracing ascetic life plan, it supplies a highly effective procedure for publicly establishing one’s fortitude and valor. Between the ropes, one can be proven beyond dispute to be a man of strength (*vir fortis*) but also, and perhaps more importantly, *a man of virtue*. Boxing, it is said amongst the fraternity of pugs, “tells the truth” about a person – and not only about his public and professional side as a ring warrior but about his inner worth as a private individual as well.

The homology set up in and by the ring between physical excellence and moral standing rests first on the idea, enshrined in the ubiquitous notion of “sacrifice,” that success in the fistic arena hinges on the adoption of proper personal habits and conduct outside of it. It is believed that an ordinary boxer who conscientiously abides by the commandments of the pugilistic catechism, as they apply in particular to nutrition, social life, and sexual activity, stands every chance of toppling a more talented but dissipated foe: “It’s good fighters get beat by guys tha’s not good as they are because this man that *did right*, he’s the better man,” philosophizes Stoneland’s old coach. A veteran manager of a dozen boxers makes such principled behavior in everyday life his main criterion of recruitment:

If [a fighter] don’t *respect* himself, an’ he (adopting a reproachful tone) like to be in bars, he like to be usin’ drug, he like to party, well you, *you don’t need that fighter*, because you not going nowhere, he can be the bes’, but he jus’ not going *nowhere*. But you got this kid here, he’s not maybe *the greates’*, but (turning laudatory) he *always in the gym*, he’s *clean*, he always have his mind clean, you know: he can *go places*, because one day, you gon’ to face these two fighters, an’ he’s a better fighter, but this [one] is in better shape, an’ he gon’ to win the fight.

Irrespective of whether such justice prevails in actuality, pugilism is a “system of education” (*disciplina*) that endows the boxer’s life with

moral tenor by the simple fact that it regiments it and submits it to a soldierly discipline exceptional for its extensiveness and austerity.⁷⁶

Second, boxing “tells the truth” because it subjects its practitioners to the probing scrutiny and public judgment of like-minded others, both members of the guild and the broader community of fans. It is essential that the contest of pugilistic craftsmanship take place before an audience, for only the latter can ascertain the worth of the combatants by its very presence and collective response. Standing in the public’s eye, at the center of attention, having one’s name announced, recognized, spoken of, be it in awe or disdain, eliciting “the roar and appreciation of the crowd” is a prized objective and ample gratification in itself. Bernard readily owns up that he boxed “for the *glory*, man: to be seen, the limelight. The limelight. One thin: the limelight. I made it right there in the center of the ring on television, you know. Who can tell you they been on television, like me?”⁷⁷ The occupational vernacular acknowledges this in the antinomic contrast it establishes between “marquee fighters” (or “name fighters”) and the anonymous “opponents” and “bums” (also called “no-name fighters”) who supply so many interchangeable bodies as cannon fodder for better sponsored peers who are “going somewhere.”

Indeed, boxers see themselves as *entertainers* and like to compare their craft to that of performing artists such as movie stars, dancers, and singers for whom the impersonation of character is pivotal and whose stature is set by the compass of their popularity. “I can almost consider myself *an actor almost*,” muses Marty, “because I’m tryin’ to look good not only for myself but for everyone else an’ get the job done, you know what I mean? So yeah, it’s almost like an actor, I think that’s what actors do, right? They try to impress themselves an’ everyone else.” The secret fantasy of my gym buddy Curtis was to become “the Michael Jackson of boxing,” that is, to forge a ring personality that would “blossom like a flower throughout the crowd” and enthrall worldwide audiences with stunning exhibitions of grit, tenacity, and fistic virtuosity.

Prizefighting is tailor-made for the *personalized construction and public validation of a heroic manly self* because it is a distinctively individualistic form of masculine endeavor whose rules are unequivocal and seemingly place contestants in a transparent situation of radical self-determination. Unlike team sports, where success is of necessity a function of the temperament and actions of others, boxing is a one-on-one clash of virile will and skill in which one depends on nobody and

nothing but oneself.⁷⁸ Surely, your cornermen assist you during the one-minute intermission between rounds, and their expert advice and support are not without bearing on the fight; but once that bell sounds, you must surrender to the trial of splendid solitary combat. And you cannot turn away, for there is “no place to hide” in the ring. As in the Roman amphitheater where gladiators fought to the death with no possibility of outside succor or recourse, one cannot “feign valor and survive by cowardice”⁷⁹ in the squared circle. Correlatively the fighter receives the undivided recognition that befits his fistic deeds, rather than having to share accolades with teammates who may not equally deserve them.

For all these reasons, public vindication of personal fiber and dignity in the ring assumes a strength and purity rarely attained in the outside world, where the struggle for life (and masculine honor) is comparatively ambiguous and uncertain, if not patently biased. What boxers accomplish in the ring, however little it may be, is something that is uncontrovertibly theirs, and will be theirs for as long as they live – and beyond in the case of the happy few who do become champions, be it at the city, state, or regional level. And whatever their subsequent life course, merely stepping in the ring is a personal acquirement that no authority can snatch from their rightful authorship and ownership. Looking back over his seven years as a pro after five seasons in the amateurs as he ponders the possibility of retirement, Jeff expresses few regrets about his career, even though he never fulfilled his dream of fighting for a world title:

It's an accomplishment, I can look back through my high school years an' say I did this you know, I got these trophies an' awards. I was champion about five different, six different times in the amateurs, (insistent) open divisions, not novice titles an' uh, I can always go back, . . . you're gonna look up [in the local record books] an' it's gonna say Jeff R-. An' it never changes, that's mine, forever. You can't take it away from me, I've got somethin'. No I didn't play high-school football team, an' I wasn't star runnin' back you know, but really who remembers them? I mean that's it, I was the champion, you know: no one can take that from me – I'll take that to my grave.

Boxing offers a theater of controlled peril and virile prowess wherein one can defy the odds and prove oneself publicly in a way that will compel even doubters and detractors to revise their opinion. Many club fighters could make theirs this confidence by former heavyweight titlist Leon Spinks (who, sadly, tried to resurrect his career at the Stoneland Gym in the early 1990s after having squandered all his wealth): “See, my dad said I’d amount to nothing. He would tell people that. And it hurt me to hear him say it. It stayed in my mind. Why’d he

say that? What for? Call me a fool out of the blue. Not to my face but to people who'd tell it to me. And that became my thing – to be somebody.”⁸⁰ The same yearning for recognition is articulated by a thirty-year-old journeyman from southern Illinois who walked out on two part-time jobs as pizza delivery man and armored car driver to apply himself full time to boxing, though his record of nine defeats in thirteen fights hardly presages a rosy future in the business:

I'm gettin' in the ring 'cause I'm gonna make a believer outa some folks that say I can't do it. That's why. I'm gonna make it, goin' to the top, (very quietly, almost meditatively) *startin' at the bottom, goin' to the top, shock Springfield and the world*: everybody be shocked an' everybody be wanna know, how much did you make it, and read it in the paper.

Together, then, the gym and the ring provide a scene whereupon personal uprightness and merit can be forcefully affirmed and exhibited through skillful and stalwart self-determining action.

Yet it is in the high regard and wide approbation that professional boxers receive from their proximate social milieu that the local morality of pugilism finds its most palpable expression. In their families and neighborhood, fighters are not only revered for their toughness and bravery as noted earlier; they are also hailed for projecting a positive professional image of hard work, discipline, and perseverance. The respect and support they draw is immediately perceptible in the prideful care with which parents treat them and the special attention that friends and associates accord them, in encounters in which acquaintances inquire about an upcoming fight or solicit their commentary on a recently televised bout, as well as in the gleeful admiration of the children who follow them around or vie to carry their bag on the way to the gym – not to mention those they enlist as new recruits. Of all the signs of acclaim he has received, Lorenzo is most proud of making converts: “Through the years of boxin’ I done brought up about fifteen guys to d’gym, you know, on an’ off, an’ everybody respects that an’ respects me on d’sreet where they talk to me about boxin’. An’ I give alotta lectures an’ I tell ’em how boxin’ *help men*, you know how it learned me alot, jus’ keeps me off the streets.”

Pugilists relish being “role models” for other youths and adults around them: what greater affirmation of one’s *acceptance in a moral community* could one register than being considered an example for others to emulate? “You want kids to look up to you,” avers Vinnie, “’cause then you feel that you achieve somethin’, you’re *somebody*, and bein’ a

role model, you know you're somebody."⁸¹ Even drug dealers, this vanguard of the new class of street entrepreneurs in the inner city,⁸² openly acknowledge the boxer's normative precedence over them: "They look *up* to me. Because they see, that I jus', I *picked somethin'* an' I *stuck with it* an' I became somethin' an' they look up to me," claims a black light-heavyweight raised in a high-crime area of the city's West Side ghetto on the border of which he is now employed as a hotel night watchman.⁸³

Neighbors and kin esteem professional fighters for their stout refusal to bow to social necessity, for fighting – literally – to make a better life for themselves, and for resisting either succumbing to dependency and demoralization as befalls so many ghetto residents or, worse yet, turning to criminal activities as a means of material sustenance and advancement. They are grateful for the fact that, contrary to the sinister figure of the dope seller, the pugilist's industry is oriented, if tenuously, towards the "legit" side of society and adds to the community's commonweal rather than subtracting from it. This is why Rodney enjoys mingling with his "people" during his periodic visits to the South Side from Las Vegas, where he now trains and fights thanks to the financial backing of his manager:

They look at it as me doin' *somethin' positive*, doin' somethin' *good*, doin' you know, as if I'm tryin' to do, do somethin' *for me, myself*, you know. They see I'm not hangin' out in the streets an' hey, hey! (glowing) they all look up toward me, I'm doin' right, I'm goin' the right route, so. I never take, sell no drugs, or gang-bangin', or none, nonovat in my life.

Matt, who parlayed his pugilistic feats into a steady job as an instructor with the municipal park district, is proud of standing before the teenagers of his "stomping ground" as living proof that one can make it out of the infamous public-housing complex of Stateway Gardens through hard work and dutiful abnegation: "I showed them that I lived in the projects, that I was determined, they can be determined too, so they can look forward to that, 'cause you get lots of 'em say 'I wanna be like Matt!' – you can be like Matt, [but] you gotta be dedicated like me."

If for no other reason, boxing is experienced as a positive force in the life of those who make it their career by dint of the *prophylactic function it plays with regard to street crime* and related social ills. Even when they make little or no money and end up in an occupational impasse, shorn of readily transferable skills and useful contacts for professional reconversion,⁸⁴ the gym and the ring have taken them off the streets

and sheltered them for the time being from the dangers these harbor. So that fighters have at least *avoided the worse fates* too often visited upon their non-boxing peers and childhood buddies, encapsulated by the macabre triptych of imprisonment, drug abuse or trafficking, and violent death. And they have done so, it appears, through a defiant display of individual volition and moral propriety, as my friend Curtis adduces in this characteristically ornate piece of oration:

It's so easy to fuck up, man, and so har' to do good. I wanna do good, I don't wanna go d'easy way. Boxin' is d'only way out for me, d'only way. I know I can go an' steal, sell drugs or kill an' rob people. I don't want that life, Louie, I don't want dat for me. I don't wanna go that route ... I don't wanna live dat life, I don't wanna have ta look over my shoulder the rest of my life worryin' 'bout, (whispering as if frightened) somebody talkin' 'bout I sol' 'em dis, I sol' 'em dat n' the police lookin' for me – I just don't want dat reputation: I don't wanna be known as (muttered with disdain, with a raucous emphasis on “drug”) “Curtis de drug dealer.” ... I have seen a lotta ma frien's an' stuff, lotta guys that I be grew up with, tha's been of age before I have, I seen a lotta 'em use drugs n' deal drugs and did various thin's to try ta fix they habit. Get theyself, you know, some dope, or put some money in they pocket ta try t'take care of theyself. I know tha's the life that they wanted t'live but I choose the opposite.

That choosing the profession of prizefighting, and sticking with it in the face of disillusionment and sometimes outright failure, can be a way of asserting their moral superiority over those who opt for – or give in to – the shady trades of the informal economy, is clear upon asking fighters where they would stand today were it not for boxing. The most frequent answer by far points to the malevolent figure of “The Street” and its all-too-familiar procession of joblessness, dereliction, and destruction. “If I wouldn't-a found boxin' I probably would be jus' another one a-them guys on the street,” mulls Dave in a response that condenses the views of many of his compatriots. “I wouldn't-a took nothin' serious at that time uh, it gave me a sense of *responsibility*, a sense of somethin' to do to respect myself an' you know not, not to run the streets an' run in gang fights 'cause it wasn't gettin' me anywhere ... I learned that I can go to the gym, fight, learn the trade an' get paid for fightin' than fightin' in the streets an' gettin' nothin'”⁸⁵

Trainers likewise construe their work partly as a civic venture that benefits not only the boxer and his family but the broader society as well. Stoneland's assistant coach Eddie delivers a vibrant sermon on the moral mission of pugilism when queried about what motivates him to clock in daily at the club before going on to take up his shift at the steel mill: “When I come to the gym, *this is my way of fightin' the drugs*

on d'street an' my way of expressin' myself towar's society deterioratin' teenagers ... 'Cuz I can't go out and just be a vigilante and take a chance on goin' to jail. So this my way of doin' that, you know. And when I come to the gym, I feel that way: I feel I'm out fightin' all these vices out there. That's why I put so much in it."⁸⁶ As for those who would not need an antidote to the lure of the street, prizefighting offers a (temporary) reprieve and distraction from the drudgery of manual work that would otherwise bring them down to the lowest common denominator of their class – undifferentiated labor power – as Danny makes plain:

If I hadn't found boxin', I be in some trade school as a mechanic or some kind of a laborer, or maybe in a factory. 'Cause that's the only thing for me, (joyfully) I mean, *I'm lucky I found boxin'*. 'Cause you know I'll be (with a touch of bitterness) like the rest of the minorities in Chicago, y'know: jus' workin' in some factory or doin' somethin' laboral to make do.

No wonder few professional boxers express regrets about entering their bruising trade. Of Chicagoland's fifty pugilists, only four hold that they would be better off today had they not embraced the profession of hard knocks, and virtually all reckon that the latter has helped them and enriched their life.

Coda: A disquiet and ambivalent passion

In this article I have sought to draw in rough outline a picture of the pugilistic planet as its main inhabitants see it, or like to imagine it. The resulting sketch is admittedly incomplete and one-sided in that it deliberately accents the beguilements and virtues of prizefighting⁸⁷ in an effort to recapture the point of view of the boxer and his grasp – in the double sense of comprehension and embrace – of the fistic occupation as a skilled bodily craft. I have argued that to understand the calling of the pugilist, its allure and resilience, it is not sufficient to identify the (negative) background factors that “push” boxers into the ring from without. One must also, and indeed as a first priority, explicate the (positive) foreground dynamics that “pull” them through the ropes from within and keep them there. For this it is necessary to attend to the lived contours of professional boxing as a self-enclosed moral, emotional, and sensual cosmos in which the skillful and fateful engagement of the trained body offers a “space of forgetting”⁸⁸ from restricted everyday lives and a scaffolding for the public erection of a heroic hypermasculine self.

Contrary to Gerald Early's assertion that boxing is "anti-intelligible,"⁸⁹ I contend that one can make eminent sense of the seemingly senseless profession of prizefighting, provided one forsakes the view "from the outside looking in" of the detached observer – and the moralizing stance that often derives from scrutinizing a lowly trade from above – to palpate firsthand the tissue and fabric of the boxer's life by submitting oneself in their company to the petty contingencies, calculated risks, and grand illusions to which they are themselves subject. Once we have registered the lure of professional pugilism through the eyes and sentient body of the fighter, the task of analysis then becomes one of disassembling the social machinery that ongoingly (re)produces this peculiar concatenation of love, rage, and commitment that causes young men from the lower regions of social space to construe and adopt the Manly art as a conduit for achieving the dignity and redemption that is otherwise denied them. Put briefly, it consists in explaining the collective genesis and deployment of the *pugilistic libido*, that particular variant of "socially constituted interest"⁹⁰ that impels those it inhabits to accord value, and surrender themselves body and soul, to the fistic ministry.

To recognize that the boxer is linked to his craft by a *quasi-religious relation of giving*⁹¹ is simultaneously to discover how strained and begrudging that devotion is. One does not have to dig very deep to turn up cracks in the wall of pugilistic faith; traces of misgivings and intimations of doubt about it all run like capillaries under the skin of belief. The passion that fastens fighters to their trade does not beget the state of bliss and serenity, the "absolute wealth in feeling" (Hegel's definition of love) they yearn for. Instead, it is shot through with ambivalence and disquietude, even resentment in some quarters. For it is laced with the barely repressed, yet also embodied, knowledge of the dark side of pugilism, what one Chicago pug, in a moment of Freudian candor, calls the "barbaricness" of the sport: the "daily grind" and "torture" that one has to go through in preparation for a fight; the physical abuse that can "make scrambled eggs outa your brains" and the dread of that one punch that will make you "look like Frankenstein for the rest of your life"; the ruthless exploitation that spontaneously brings forth vituperative analogies with slavery and prostitution ("fighters is whores and promoters is pimps, the way I sees it") and threatens to reduce you to a "piece of meat"; the despotic control that small coterie of managers, matchmakers, and promoters – "them with the leather shoes" – exercise over the allocation of the monetary returns of prizefighting.

It is not simply that boxing is “not a well-professionalized occupation,” as Ed observes with a studied sense of understatement, in which subterfuge, deception, and treachery are the normal ways of conducting business, a “racket” in which fighters are often treated with the care and consideration befitting “a bar of soap” and where chances of making money are both minuscule and extremely unevenly distributed from the start.⁹² Underneath it all, there is the obscure(d) realization that, had one not been born near the bottom of society and enjoyed instead the privilege of inheriting an aptitude and liking for school (or even for other less punishing sports), one might have never put on gloves. “Don’t nobody be out there fightin’ with an MBA, Louie”: professional boxers are well aware that their “Cruel Profession” is but a “Poor Boy’s Game,” to recall the crisp wording of James Baldwin,⁹³ and thus that theirs is a *coerced affection*, a captive love, one ultimately born of racial and class necessity, although it rises hardily over and against it.⁹⁴ “I wish I was born taller, I wish I was born in a rich family, I don’t know, wish I was smart, an’ I had the brains to go to school an’ really become somebody real important,” avows Vinnie when asked what he would have liked to change in his life. He is gratified to box “for the people” around him because he hopes it will enable him to give them everything he has lacked so far, and victory in the ring makes him happy beyond compare. Yet he takes sufferance to his own love of boxing: “For me I mean I can’t *stand* the sport, I hate the sport, [but] it’s carved inside of me so I can’t let it go.”

No boxer, not even the most successful and entranced of them, is fully immune to the nagging feeling of uneasiness and foreboding rooted in the obdurate fact that those who swipe the monies generated by this extravagant spectacle of disciplined lower-class male fury that is prize-fighting are precisely those who, given the liberty to evolve a truly free love of fighting, did not. In the aftermath of recapturing the heavy-weight title in an improbable and epic bout against George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire, at the zenith of his success and fame, Muhammad Ali could not forbear this confession:⁹⁵

True, fighting was all I had ever done, but there was always something in me that rebelled against it. Maybe it was because those who profited from it didn’t think the fighters as human or intelligent. They saw us as made just for the entertainment of the rich . . . Then there was this nightmarish image I always had of two slaves in the ring. Like in the old slave days on the plantations, with two of us big black slaves fighting, almost on the verge of annihilating each other while the masters are smoking big cigars, screaming and urging us on, looking for the blood.

Finally, the pugilist's love of his craft is tinged with rancor because of the pained awareness, however submerged, that this love will not, indeed *cannot*, be unconditionally reciprocated. For to elevate a chosen few, the Sweet Science of bruising must of necessity deceive and debase the great many, and durably so. And how easy it is to cross the invisible frontier between self-possession and dispossession! Fighters know from experience that boxing "can *hurt* you jus' as bad as it can help you," to quote Vinnie's pithy words again, that "it can make you the best in the world, it can make you the worst in the world." Boxing may uplift you and snatch your existence from the jaws of absurdity and obscurity, but it can just as well push and entrap you further into the very world of marginality and misery from which it beckons to rescue you. Deep within lurks the suspicion, then, that the vista from the top of the mountain of fistic manhood may not be worth the agonizing climb to get there. So that the most dedicated and loving boxer cannot but be haunted by the possibility that the enchantment of which he partakes is in truth a curse, and that the bonds of pugilistic love are so many chains that keep him inside a prison of desire and suffering of his very own making: "If I got a regret in boxin'," allows Nate, "I regret puttin' on the first pair of gloves. Now I won't tell you (whining) 'man, I'm sorry I put these gloves on' but if I [had said], (bluntly) 'hey man, I ain't puttin' no gloves on!', that way I wouldn't have that *urge to box*, man: see (lowering his voice) that urge is hard to get rid of."

In the end, there is no escaping the fact that, whether victorious or vanquished, a boxer leaves bits and pieces of himself in the ring. Every fight, every round, every punch that connects chips away at the living statue of aggrandized virility he is striving to sculpt with the clay of pain, sweat, and blood. At some level, deep down, boxing is horrifying even to fighters (and trainers) and it violates their sense of humanity, though they learn not to feel and show this, including to themselves, as an imperative requirement of their membership in the Durkheimian "church" of prizefighting. The boxer's passion is thus torn asunder by the inescapable contradiction around which the pugilistic planet revolves, and which is but one avatar of the contradiction constitutive of all worldly provings of masculinity,⁶ namely the demand that fighters erode, nay ruinate, that which it teaches them to value above all else to the point of sacralization: the violent male body, their own and that of their likenesses.

This is why, for all the affection they vow their craft and the unmatched joys and real benefits it brings them in their own estimation – from

dignity, respect, and recognition, to discipline, self-confidence, and temporary immunity from the “fast life” of the streets and its hazards – the overwhelming majority of fighters do not wish to see their children march in their footsteps. Over 80 percent of Chicago’s pugilists, roughly the same proportion who see in boxing an escape hatch out of poverty, would prefer that their sons not enter the trade. It is also not uncommon for fighters who reach a high level in their profession to try to prevent their younger brother(s) from following their example.⁹⁷ And one in four is adamant that he would do everything in his power to abort such an occurrence. Danny enunciates this intuitive, gut-level reticence as well as any of his peers:

No, no, *no fighter wants their son* [to box], I mean you could hear it, you hear it even in [Jack] Dempsey’s age: you never want your son to fight – *that’s the reason why you fight, so he won’t be able to fight* ... It’s too hard, it’s jus’ too damn hard.

LW: But you like it, you said you get so much excitement out of it and you don’t want to give it up?

Danny: Right, but uh, before I got that excitement, I had to pay with a lotta bloody nose, black eyes, uh, there was a lotta pain before I could enjoy that. If he could *hit the books* an’ study an’ you know, with me havin’ a little background in school an’ stuff, I could help him. My parents, I never had nobody helpin’ me.

If boxers recoil at the idea of exposing their loved ones, the flesh of their own flesh, to the pitiless ordeal of the ring, it is because they know too well, in a sense, everything that they cannot concede, for doing so would obliterate the very foundations of their faith in the pugilistic *illusio*. Perhaps only its sacrificial aura and the hope that *others* will recognize and reap the benefits of their participation – “I’m takin’ enough punishment for everybody”, “I’m doin’ it so my son don’t gotta do it” – can buttress the belief that this skilled corporeal trade that is *also*, on another level, a gruesome tourney of mutual and self-destruction is worth entering at all.

The boxer’s attachment to his craft, then, is a *skewed and malicious passion*, ever tainted by the suspicion that one may be paying too steep a price for the opportunity to make oneself – steeper, at any rate, than anyone else who enjoys access to other avenues of ontological realization and social recognition is willing or asked to shoulder. Fighters confusedly comprehend somewhere, somehow, with this sixth sense they have honed while risking their bodies in the ring, that they are, as it were, casualties of their desire for virile brinkmanship. Only by unpacking

the logic of boxing's material and moral economy can one hope to disentangle how power and submission, constraint and agency, pleasure and suffering mingle and abet each other in such a manner that prizefighters may be at once their own saviors and their own tormentors.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Vinnie "Nitro" Letizia. He wanted to "become champ of the world and to be financially set so that no one in my family ever has to box or go through hard labor again, and if they want something, my family, my kids, when they get older, they can have it." A motorcycle and a slippery road on a cold winter night decided that he would not be allowed to "go as far as he could to back that dream."

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Notes

1. "Professional boxing is a throwback, a vestige of our dark, irrational past. That's one reason it is usually under sharp attack in a society that likes to believe it has evolved very different and superior values. You surely cannot reason people into an appreciation of boxing" (Sam Toperoff, *Sugar Ray Leonard and Other Noble Warriors*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987, 185).
2. The "insider" literature on boxing is voluminous and comes in a great variety of genres, shapes, and shades, of which only a small sample can be given here. For a selection of the views of five celebrated fighters, see Joe Louis Barrow, Jr., and Barbara Munder, *Joe Louis: 50 Years An American Hero* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), on Joe Louis; Sugar Ray Robinson and Dave Anderson, *Sugar Ray* (New York: Da Capo, 1970), on Sugar Ray Robinson; Muhammad Ali and Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), on Muhammad Ali (a.k.a. Cassius Clay); Sam Toperoff, *Sugar Ray Leonard and Other Noble Warriors*, on Sugar Ray Leonard; and Peter Heller, *Bad Intentions: The Mike Tyson Story* (New York: New American Library, 1989) on "Iron" Mike Tyson. A revealing collection of interviews of "old timers" from the trainer's guild is Ronald K. Fried, *Corner Men: Great Boxing Trainers* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991). For an archtypical expression of the litero-journalistic viewpoint, consult A. J. Liebling's vastly overrated *The Sweet Science* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1956] 1982); a less pretentious and more perceptive ringside account is given by Ralph Wiley in *Serenity: A Boxing Memoir* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989). Another angle, but always with a focus on the glamour world of elite fighters, is provided by the "ring doctor" Ferdie Pacheco, *Muhammad Ali: A View From the Corner* (New York: Birch Lane Press Book, 1992). The experiences of a leading matchmaker are chronicled in Teddy Brenner and Barney Nagler, *Only the Ring was Square* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981).
3. To use the expression of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).
4. E.g., Eggon Bittner, "Technique and the conduct of social life," *Social Problems* 30/3 (1973): 249–261; also Robert M. Emerson, "Observational field work," *Annual Review of Sociology* 7 (1981): 356–357.
5. Clifford Geertz, "From the native's point of view: On the nature of anthropological knowledge," in Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, editors, *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1976] 1979), 228.
6. For a terse yet exemplary illustration of this mode of analysis anchored in the analytic triad position-disposition-field, see Pierre Bourdieu's construction of "Flaubert's point of view," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988): 539–562, esp. 554–562; a more extended discussion is in Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
7. The expression is Jessica Benjamin's, cf. "The bonds of love: Rational violence and erotic domination," *Feminist Studies* 6/1 (Spring 1980): 144–174.
8. Much as Jack Katz unearthed the sensual and moral attractions of criminal activity in his germinal book *Seductions of Crime* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), showing how explanations of criminal violence remain incomplete so long as they neglect its internal constitution by the agent to focus solely on external conditions and precipitants.
9. I started literally from scratch, with no knowledge of the game and precious little

“raw talent.” Indeed, I was so awkward and incompetent at first that Shante, a rising welterweight unbeaten in ten straight fights who would later become my closest friend and sparring partner, used to ask the coach when I was training to come take in the hilarious spectacle of ineptitude I was offering daily from the back of the gym. But with tenacity, dedication, and the sage pedagogic guidance of the gym’s veteran head trainer, I eventually improved enough to spar on a regular basis with “pros” and to compete in the 1990 Chicago Golden Gloves tournament. I also worked as a trainer’s assistant and generally observed up close all facets of the game, from dieting, refereeing, and weigh-ins to contract negotiations with managers and transactions with promoters.

10. This research was carried out under the guidance of, and in close collaboration with, William Julius Wilson (as part of the University of Chicago’s Urban Poverty and Family Structure project), whom I would like to thank for his intellectual support and personal stimulation during this entire period.
11. See Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “The social logic of boxing in black Chicago: Toward a sociology of pugilism,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 9/3 (September 1992): 221–254, for a fuller discussion of the method and data used in this study, and idem, “The new urban color line: The state and fate of the ghetto in postfordist America,” in Craig J. Calhoun, editor, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 231–276, for a sociological picture of the surrounding ghetto.
12. Two of them were done by telephone due to intractable problems of transportation and scheduling. Several were prolonged by follow-up interviews and informal conversations (most often in the gym) that were taped, transcribed, and appended to the original interview.
13. At the same time, such an endeavor comes up against a well-nigh irresolvable problem: how to communicate with words, on paper, in an intellectually coherent and intersubjectively resonant manner, an experience that is as profoundly organismic, sensual, and submerged beneath (or is it *beyond*?) the level of discourse as prizefighting? There can be no satisfactory resolution of this question, only practical attempts at answering it. Yet to reduce it to a mere problem of “poetics” (as recent “postmodern” anthropology has been wont to do, cf. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) and to propose a rhetorical remedy – say, to concoct a melange of representational strategies mixing realist, surrealist, and impressionistic tropes in a “dialogical” or polyphonous key – is to miss the real issue, which is: are there not things about human social practice that we understand as practitioners, through *carneal knowledge*, that we cannot communicate in a scholarly (or scholastic) idiom, through the mediation of symbols? And if so what are we to do with them?
14. Pierre Bourdieu, “Comprendre,” in P. Bourdieu et al., *La misère du monde* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993), 911. Such focus on the invariants of the boxer’s point of view preempts analysis of variations on grounds of ethnoracial category, age, career track and stage, economic returns, etc. At any rate, an elucidation of the diverse ways of be(com)ing a prizefighter presupposes a prior understanding of what these experiential paths hold in common.
15. Of the kind perpetuated by newspaper and literary accounts in particular, due in no small part to the scorn in which journalists and writers are held among members of the “fight game.” For a discussion of friendship and interpersonal trust as a necessary social condition for the production of non-artifactual ethnographic data in oppressive social settings such as the black American ghetto, see Loïc J. D.

- Wacquant, "Un mariage dans le ghetto," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (1995): in press.
16. Expressions drawn from the occupational lingo of professional pugilism are placed in quotation marks. Emphases in the interview excerpts are those of the boxers unless otherwise indicated. Names and other identifying characteristics have been altered or removed whenever necessary to protect the privacy of informants.
 17. Arjun Appadurai, "Putting hierarchy in its place," *Cultural Anthropology* 3/1 (February 1988): 36–49.
 18. The main source of this surface familiarity today is the complacent (and wildly exaggerated) staging of gory scenes of ring demolition in countless motion pictures, of which Sylvester Stallone's fictionalized fistic heroics in the *Rocky* series are one particularly popular exemplar.
 19. Jean-Pierre Clément, "La force, la souplesse et l'harmonie: étude comparée de trois sports de combat (lutte, judo, aikido)," in Christian Pociello, editor, *Sports et société: approche socioculturelle des pratiques* (Paris: Vigot, 1987), 285–301.
 20. Cited in Ralph Wiley, *Serenity: A Boxing Memoir*, 121.
 21. Robert Glenn Morrison, "Medical and public health aspects of boxing," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (1986): 2475–2480; Robert C. Cantu, editor, *Boxing and Medicine* (Urbana: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1995).
 22. Much like the drama of *pankration*, one of its premodern ancestors in ancient Greece, boxing turns on the "the ostentatious display of the warrior virtues" (Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Leisure and Sport in the Civilizing Process*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 138): "Victory or defeat was in the hands of the gods. What was inglorious and shameful was to surrender victory without a sufficient show of bravery and endurance." After noting that former title holder Hector "Macho Man" Camacho "took so much punishment in his 12-round points loss to Chavez in September 1992 that he is probably finished as a serious contender," the boxing newsletter *Flash* commends him for showing "the grit of a champion in surviving [the bout] by never going down" (*Flash*, 131, 20 December 1993, p. 3).
 23. I have shown elsewhere that boxers view their body as a weapon, a tool, and a machine, in short, as the specific capital and instrument of labor they invest in the pugilistic economy: Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "A sacred weapon: Bodily capital and bodily labor among professional boxers," in Cheryl Cole, John Loy, and Michael A. Messner, editors, *Exercising Power: Making and Remaking the Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
 24. Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 251ff.
 25. Indeed, this section drew the brunt of the criticism of one of the anonymous reviewers of the article, who simply could not accept that boxing might be something other (or more) than a violence. So much so that he or she was willing to array her own commonsense view and standard media representations over and against the assertions of the boxers. That (certain forms of) physical aggression might not be experienced as violent is profoundly repugnant to middle-class individuals, for whom the sanctity of the human body is a defining feature of the self (as the work of Erving Goffman demonstrates). To make the topic researchable in the present case, one should at minimum start from the premise that "many sports include legitimate, socially sanctioned forms of violence, which is quite distinct from simply saying, with approval or distaste, that these sports are violent" (Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, 120).

26. Only 6 percent of Chicago fighters concede that “all that boxing teaches you is violence, how to beat up another man.” A comrade from Stoneland’s gym exclaims: “Those are *ignorant people!* Those are ignorant people! Put that in your book, Louie.” And a seasoned Latino welterweight who once had a taste of the “big time” in Las Vegas explains the halo effect that associates boxing with unruliness and aggression: “I know where you git it from, lotta guys that are boxers, professional fighters and they git in trouble ba-ba-bah, but mosta time, lotta the boxing guys, they come from (derogatory tone) *ghettos, proje’ts* and all the, y’know, they’re in *gangs*, ba-ba-bah. They’re like, Mike Tyson, okay? For example, Mike Tyson: why is he the way he is? ‘Cause he was brought up that way, *right?* He was on the street, is it because he boxes? No, he was like that, tha’s how it is with a lot of these guys.”
27. Dean, a former fighter and referee who runs an amateur gym in one of the city’s Chicano barrios, rails: “Boxing, *it saves lives*, it saves lives. (a tad exasperated at the question) If you’re going to ban something, (forcefully, each tirade gushing forth with increasing conviction) *ban alcohol, ban cigarettes, you know, ban coffee* – I’m a drug addict, I gotta have a cup of coffee in the morning. You know, ban that stuff. That’s worse for you, you know, especially cigarettes! Jeez, what a killer that is! Uh, *ban automobiles!* Uh ... automobiles kill you, *the fumes, look at what they do to the air!* There is other things they should ban beside boxing, I don’t know. No, no, boxing is good for a kid.”
28. Injury is an institutionalized aspect of professional football. “Playing hurt” is a banal, expected, and even publicly valorized (and glamorized) aspect of the game. Every week NFL teams are required to release a “report card” on their health status, including a roster of players in various states of physical disrepair (probable, doubtful, on injured reserved, on non-football injury list, etc.). Injuries routinely suffered in a game include concussions, cuts, torn ligaments, dislocated limbs and joints, deep bruises and fractures. Unlike boxers, who are automatically suspended for 90 days following a knockout, quarterbacks are known (indeed expected) to return to action shortly after being taken off the field due to a concussion (LA Raiders passer Jeff Hoffstetler was celebrated for his bravery after doing so twice in the same game in the fall of 1993).
29. Loïc J. D. Wacquant “‘The zone’: Le métier de ‘hustler’ dans le ghetto noir américain,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 92 (June 1992): 38–58, and “The new urban color line,” esp. 239–242.
30. A parallel argument is made in the case of soccer hooliganism in England by Peter Marsh, Elizabeth Rosser, and Rom Harré in *The Rules of Disorder* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). For a broader reflection on this topic, read Norbert Elias’s classic essay, “Sport et violence,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 6 (1976): 2–21; also Eric Dunning, “Sociological reflection on sports, violence, and civilization,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sports* 25 (1990): 65–82, and Michael D. Smith, *Violence and Sport* (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983).
31. This ancient, pseudo-Freudian nostrum has recently been revived and given a new pop-psychological twist by the self-styled advocates of the “mythopoetic men’s movement”: “If a culture does not deal with the warrior energy, ... it will turn up outside in the form of street gangs, wife beating, drug violence, brutality to children, and aimless murder” (Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1990, 38).
32. According to the trainer-in-second of the Stoneland Boys Club, “when a kid leaves that gym from trainin’, he don’t feel like doin’ anything else: he’s tired. He don’t

have that energy to get out on d'street and stick som'body up or somethin'. He just wanna go home and get some rest." My personal experience confirms this: the most strenuous and anguishing aspect of conducting ethnographic fieldwork among boxers was not to step into the ring to "rumble" but to sit at my personal computer at home upon returning from the gym for hours of note-taking in a half-comatose state of extreme physical and mental exhaustion.

33. This is argued more fully in Wacquant, "A sacred weapon: bodily capital and bodily labor among professional boxers."
34. Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, [1918] 1966), 28.
35. Wacquant, "The social logic of boxing in black Chicago," 235–236.
36. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1937] 1982).
37. Barry Wellman, "Personal communities," in Peter V. Marsden and Nan Lin, editors, *Social Structure and Network Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982).
38. Long after his retirement, "Smokin'" Joe Frazier put the gloves back on to give a good "ass-whuppin'" in the ring to his son and successor Marvin (who later challenged for the world heavyweight title) after the latter had punched a young woman. Marvin recounts (in Phil Berger, *Punch Lines*, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993, 17): "[He said:] 'I'll teach you what to be sorry for, you sissy'. He got mad. I haven't hit a girl since." Coaches consistently warn their fighters against using their fists on their spouse or lover (which, of course, does not mean that it does not happen). A member of the Stoneland Boys Club was expelled from the gym immediately after a trainer caught him slapping his girlfriend at the back of the building. Again, this is not to say that boxers are immune to spousal abuse and other kinds of domestic violence (or less violent than non-boxers: the proper counterfactual here is what *the same individuals* would have done had they not become prizefighters); only that they are less likely to engage in it to the extent that they are firmly attached to the occupational fraternity and subjected to its professional ethic, for which physical confrontation with women offers no aggrandizement.
39. Muhammad Ali and Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, 66.
40. Few fighters can survive solely on fight purses, which are very minimal at the club and regional levels: between 150 and 500 dollars on average for preliminary bouts from four to eight rounds, and between 500 and 1,000 dollars for most ten-round "main events" in the midwest. Nor can they rely exclusively on support from their managers, when they do have one who agrees to pay them a "weekly salary" to train (of, say, 150 dollars per week). Thus a majority of boxers maintain full- or part-time employment as they fight (50 percent and 12 percent respectively in Illinois).
41. Wacquant, "Pugs at Work," *Body and Society* 1/1 (March 1995): 65–94, especially 75–82.
42. Much the same was true of gladiators in ancient Rome, where it was a skilled trade whether or not the public recognized it: "Gladiatorship was not to be reduced to a sordid butchery: it was an art of the sword. Indeed, the military theorist Vegece liked to extoll the skills of his gladiators to the soldiers of the legions in order to stimulate them" (Jean-Claude Golvin and Christian Landes, *Amphithéâtres et gladiateurs*, Paris: Publications du CNRS, 1990, 168).
43. Vincent, a black middleweight who recently moved back to Chicago after a disappointing foray into the west coast boxing circuit, concurs: "My mentality is that it's a *science*, it's a *work of art and beauty*: I like to make a man miss, you know, *counter-punch*, show my superiority by speed and skills, not so much by goin' out and say 'I'll just show I'm a stronger brute and more of a *macho man* than you, and

jus' beat the hell outa you and *bust you up*' and things of that nature." And Anthony, a 27-year part-time athletic instructor going into his second year as a pro, puts it this way: "I look at it as a way of life, it's somethin' *to do*, it's somethin' to master, it's a technique of your whole body: see you might master a computer or a calculator, somethin' like that. Well I master how to use my arms as somethin' that was made from scientists or fightin' goin' back to the eighth dynasty – they're the ones that thought up boxin', karate, these arts, so I'm bringin' out what they invent a long time ago an' *masterin' it the proper way*."

44. See, e.g., Robert Linhart, *L'établi* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1976), and Carla Needleman, *The Work of Craft* (New York: Knopf, 1979).
45. Wacquant, "The social logic of boxing in black Chicago," 236–249, and "Desire, bodily work, and rationality: Practicing and theorizing the craft of boxing," paper presented to the Department of Sociology, University of California-Los Angeles, April 1992.
46. The veritable social incarceration that boxing requires is admirably rendered in W. C. Heinz's novel *The Professional* (New York: Harbor House, [1958] 1984, introduction by George Plimpton).
47. Roger Waldinger and Thomas Bailey, "The youth employment problem in the world city," *Social Policy* 16/1 (1985): 55–59; Mercer L. Sullivan, "Getting Paid." *Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
48. As Gerald Early writes of Joe Louis and Sonny Liston: "They understood each other well because they knew the fates they would have suffered had they not become boxers, the fates of working-class men, black and white, who lived anywhere: a life of crime or a life of ordinary manual labor, the life of the urban serf" (Gerald Early, "American prizefighter," in *Tuxedo Junction: Essays On American Culture*, New York: The Ecco Press, 1991).
49. To account for this extraordinary figure (few elective professions feed unrealistic career expectations with just this kind of ferocity), one would need to analyze both the structural bases of occupational oneirism (such as the dyadic and intransitive nature of boxing hierarchies, the lability and impermanence of bodily capital, and the corresponding fuzziness of evaluative criteria), the recruiting trajectory of prizefighters (many of whom enter the trade burdened with the disillusion of aborted careers in other sports), and the relentless work of collective mystification necessary to sustain commitment to the game.
50. David Robins and Philip Cohen, *Knuckle Sandwich: Growing Up in the Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978); Ruth Horowitz, "Masked intimacy and urban marginality: Adult delinquent gangs in a Chicano community," *Urban Life* 11 (1982): 3–26; Douglas E. Foley, "The great American football ritual: Reproducing race, class, and gender identity," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7 (1990): 11–135; R. W. Connell, "Live fast and die young: The construction of masculinity among young working-class men on the margin of the labour market," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 27/2 (August 1991): 141–171.
51. William J. Rudman, "The sport mystique in black culture," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3/4 (December 1986): 305–319, and, in a more narrative mode, the journalistic account of H. G. Bissinger in *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).
52. Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
53. This capital is especially high among young lower-class women who, according to boxers, are prone to be impressed by their credentials as "professional athletes," as

Vincent relates: "A lotta women won't admit it and so forth, but I think they look at that, you know, you're a fighter because – *first of all, most people are in this fantasy world* that all fighters have a lotta money, or make a lotta money. And then they think that you're the tough guy, the guy they can look to for *protection*, and so forth, and it's like – especially if you're one that's been on television, and so forth, like I was in the Los Angeles area, and it felt like you're walkin' around with a big star or somebody that's on his way."

54. Another indicator of the adulation that boxers enjoy in their immediate social circle: people often call them "champ" irrespective of their achievement in the ring, or lack thereof. It is the case even of a mediocre 33-year old black middleweight with only four wins in twelve fights: "They look up, *it's a good feelin'* because when you're runnin' an' people blow their horns at you, I tell 'em like this, when I'm runnin' they say 'go ahead champ!' or blow, blow the horns: that gives me strength when I'm tired an' that lets me know that I got the support an' it makes me work harder."
55. Paul Willis, Simon Jones, Joyce Canaan, and Geoff Hurd, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Culture of the Young* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 48–52.
56. C. E. Ashworth, "Sport as symbolic dialogue," in Eric Dunning, editor, *The Sociology of Sport: A Selection of Readings* (London: Frank Cass and Co, 1971): 40–46; Norman Mailer, "King of the Hill": *On the Fight of the Century* (New York: New American Library, 1971), 87.
57. Thorstein Veblen, *The Portable Veblen*, edited by David Lerner (New York: Viking, 1948), 318. Or, to borrow the words of Mike Tyson commenting on a knock-out victory over heavyweight rival Pinklon Thomas (quoted in Wiley, *Serenity: A Boxing Memoir*, 187): "I threw punches with bad intentions ... I was trying to hit him behind the ear, in a vital area ... Did you see that hook? Ooo, that was nice! That took all the fight right out of him."
58. William Nack, "What's in a name?," *Sports Illustrated* 57/17 (18 October 1982): 80–94, quote p. 94.
59. On the "lived body" (*corps propre*) as a "system of motor powers and perceptual powers" constituted through its unfolding within and toward the world, see Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, section III, esp. 173–179. Wiley (*Serenity: A Boxing Memoir*, 158) gives a capsule description of this all-consuming dilection and how it can overwhelm all other pursuits: "Fighting was [world champion Thomas] Hearn's single abiding interest. He bought a Young Chang grand piano and didn't learn to play a single note. He ordered the construction of an ornate bar in his home, but didn't drink. He built a glove-shaped pool, but didn't swim. He talked of becoming a businessman, while talk of business easily bored him. He said he wanted to be an actor, yet his expression never changed. A confirmed bachelor, he drove a gold 500 series Mercedes Benz. But he was not a carouser. He'd rather spar with you than speak with you." Numerous other illustrations could be culled from my ethnographic diary and from the published biographies of champions.
60. A 30-year old black heavyweight who has slugged with most of the "big names" of his division in the four years of his professional career summarizes the matter well: "Why is it that I get in the ring? Because I have been *trained* to get in the ring, an' I have the *heart* to get in the ring, an' it's a part of my *livin'* so I haveta get in the ring, it's somethin' that I *like*, an' always I'm enjoyin' it." From this angle, boxing may be considered as a form of "identity work" realized not through talk, as in Snow and Anderson's analysis of the techniques of salvation of the self among the homeless,

- but through bodily work and performance (David A. Snow and Leon Anderson, "Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal," *American Journal of Sociology* 92/96 (1987): 1336–1371.
61. As it did physically boxing's most famed and beloved figure, Muhammad Ali, about whom trainer Angelo Dundee remarked: "Muhammad was never happy outside the ring. He loved boxing. The gym, the competition. It was *in his blood*, and win or lose, he loved it to the end" (in Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991, p. 399, emphasis added).
 62. Or, to cite one variation on this theme: "Fighting is like a wife. It can be good to you, if you treat it right. If you don't, then, like a wife it will know, because it's right there with you all the time" (former champion Bobby Chacon, cited by Wiley, *Serenity: A Boxing Memoir*, 135).
 63. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966); Ray Allen, *Singing in the Spirit: African-American Sacred Quartets in New York City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Gerald L. Davis, *I got the Word in Me and I Can Sing It, You Know: A Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
 64. Freud argues in *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, [1930] 1962, 13) that love is fundamentally an experience of blending that entails an illusory fusion such that "the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away."
 65. It is this passionate love, more than cool calculations of economic gain, that impels fighters to seek to return to the ring following a life-threatening injury. Rhode Island's Vinnie Pazienza stunned the boxing world – not to mention his neurosurgeons – when he reentered the fray (and went on to win a world championship) only months after having suffered a near-lethal crushing of several vertebrae in his neck during an automobile collision. On the morrow of a brush with death in the ring from a massive brain hematoma that sent him into a coma and left him partially paralyzed, "Kid" Akeem Anifowoshe defiantly announced from his hospital bed that he would again seek a world title: "I want to get myself back as soon as possible. Believe me, I will do anything to fight again. Slow by slow. Take your time. The dream is not over yet" (in Berger, *Punch Lines*, 39 and 19–23).
 66. Erving Goffman, "Where the action is," in *Interaction Ritual* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 149–270. The Canadian sociologist explicitly lists boxing among the "professional spectator sports whose performers place money, reputation, and physical safety in jeopardy at the same time," which he sees as paradigmatic of "action" (ibid., 174 and 181, and on page 179 he cites Arond and Weinberg's famous 1952 sketch of the "occupational subculture of the boxer").
 67. Goffman, "Where the action is," 167.
 68. For perceptive accounts of a similar quest in other existential realms, read Jack Katz's analysis of the "Ways of the badass," (in *Seductions of Crime*, 80–113) and Fussell's account of his conversion to the cult of muscularity (Samuel Wilson Fussell, *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder*, New York: Poseidon Press, 1992). For further comparison, see Patricia Adler and Peter Adler on the collective production of the "gloried self" among college basketball players (*Blackboards and Backboards: College Athletics and Role Engulfment*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 155–173).
 69. Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 115, 100.
 70. Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 149–154.

71. Barbara Steinross and Sherryl Kleinman, "The highs and lows of emotional labor: Detectives' encounters with criminals and victims," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 17/4 (January 1989): 435–452.
72. Danny continues: "That is the thing I love about boxin': you never know what's gonna happen, especially with the heavyweight, you never know when that big punch is gonna land. A guy could land it to you, you could land it to them, an' it's like *all over*, you know, in a second an' that excitement that goes in, gives you a rush, that excitement, it's like 'wow! this is what I want', a little danger." A cogent case for the potency of such "expressive joy" in motivating risky action is Renato Rosaldo's analysis of the moral-emotional seductions of head-hunting among the Ilongot of Northern Luzon in the Philippines in *Ilongot Headhunting, 1883–1974: A Study in Society and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).
73. On the experience of flow, see Michael Csikszentmihalyi, "Leisure and socialization," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 28/4 (1981): 489–497; on "edge-workers" as a generalized category of explorers of psychoemotional boundaries, Stephen Lyng, "Edgework: A social psychological analysis of voluntary risk taking," *American Journal of Sociology* 95/4 (January 1990): 851–886.
74. Nate, an unemployed black welterweight who has boxed on and off as a professional for five years, voices this sense of accomplishment thus: "Well it's like climbin' up a mountain man: when you get to the top you jus' happy, 'kay, so it's like, like you know, when you win a fight, it's like, (very emphatic) it's like *the mission is done*. I trained for this uh, I had a plan to do this an' it worked."
75. Erving Goffman, "Where the action is," 238.
76. Durkheim lists the "spirit of discipline" as one of the three main components of morality, along with altruism (or group attachment) and autonomy of the will: cf. Emile Durkheim, *L'éducation morale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, [1902–03] 1963).
77. The "limelight" and the public recognition that comes with being active in the ring, in whatever capacity, is also one of the mainsprings behind prolonged careers and comebacks, as Tony indicates: "I'll be hones' with ya, tha's the way, you see all these guys makin' comebacks and stuff like that. It's not the money, it's not the sport, *it's the limelight*. It's the limelight: when you walk into a place and someone says (admiringly), 'hey there's this person. Hey, that's 'im!' you know, that's what boxin's about I think, as far as a fighter looks at it sometimes."
78. Fencing and tennis also entail one-on-one competition but confrontation takes place at a distance, through the mediation of specific implements (sword, racquet and ball). Even in wrestling, bodily contact is euphemized by the wearing of uniforms and the contest "feminized" by direct embrace and more rounded, softer gestures. Boxing is virtually unique for the nakedness and frontality of the corporeal clash it commands.
79. Carlin Barton, *The Sorrow of the Ancient Romans: Gladiators and the Monster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 31.
80. Cited in Berger, *Punch Lines*, 97.
81. Vincent sees it much the same way: "I may not be in the general public's eye, but *there's still somebody out that's watchin' me and looks up to you*, that's whatcha gotta be careful about. And right now I feel I'm a role model, you know. I got *tons* of young nephews and cousins and even, you know, friends and I try to be a role model right now for them. And that's preparing me for one day when I do get into the public's eye and when I've got millions of people lookin' at me." As for Tony, he luxuriates in playing the part of the role model: "Already I think I am, 'cause they all

- look up to me. These kids ask me for my autograph and everything already. Man, it's really, it's exciting and I always git lil' kids coming up to me all the time."
82. Philippe Bourgois, "Homeless in El Barrio: la vie d'un dealer de crack à East Harlem," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 93 (June 1992): 59–68; Martín Sánchez-Jankowski, "The urban underclass in the United States: Aspects of mobility in the underground economy," paper presented to the Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles, May 1993.
 83. One of the great joys of local (i.e., state) champions is to tour the schools of their neighborhood to exhibit their freshly won title belt and give ritualized speeches on the value of education, the scourge of drugs, and the moral imperative of individual effort.
 84. The irresolvable dilemma of occupational reconversion from a trade that progressively erodes the very qualifications it requires is beautifully depicted in this moving scene of Ralph Nelson's *Requiem for a Heavyweight* in which retired ring horse "Mountain" Rivera (played by Anthony Quinn) makes a clumsy foray into an employment office only to be compared to a maimed war veteran or a cripple by a well-meaning job placement officer.
 85. In this regard, boxers are quite representative of their proximate milieu, which remains fundamentally oriented toward the dominant American "focal concerns" of family independence, individual achievement, and material success, notwithstanding recent reports on "race and respectability" in the ghetto based on restaurant chatter and journalistic observation from afar (and without) that have once again refurbished age-old mythologies of "moral collapse" among the (young and bad) black subproletariat, this time under the guise of salvaging the (old and good, if fast declining) traditional black working class.
 86. I could quote pages and pages of interview excerpts on this theme, for the missionary impulse is a leitmotiv of the trainer's occupational culture and self-image. The notion that boxing is a "school of character" that ameliorates society by serving as a crime prevention device has a long pedigree; it is regularly trotted out to counter legal or moral attacks on the Manly art. It is not clear that it is founded on more than commonsense since rigorous empirical studies (taking into account selection effects and sampling biases) furnish little evidence that athletic participation in general results in character building, moral development, and good citizenship (James H. Frey and D. Stanley Eitzen, "Sport and Society," *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991): 503–522, esp. 506). Nonetheless its ideological function for insiders should not obscure its deeply felt experiential (if not factual) veracity.
 87. A forthcoming companion piece will deal specifically with mechanisms and idioms of exploitation in the pugilistic economy (a partial sketch, drawn from the point of view of the "matchmaker" who controls access to public performance, is found in Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "A flesh peddler at work: Money, pain, and profit in the boxing economy," paper presented at the Sixth Annual international conference on Socio-Economics, Jouy-en-Josas, France, July 1994). For a discussion of the realities of risk, injury, and physical debilitation, and how boxers deal with them, see Wacquant, "A sacred weapon." A standard summation of the financial, physical, and moral liabilities of prizefighting is Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 236–251.
 88. To invoke (by way of Nancy Scheper-Hughes) the apt expression of anthropologist Roberto DaMatta ("An interpretation of carnival," *Substance* 37–38 (1983): 162–170) in his analysis of the place of carnival in Brazilian culture and society.
 89. Early, "American prizefighter," 161.

90. Pierre Bourdieu, "L'intérêt du sociologue," *Economies et sociétés* 18 (October 1984): 12–29.
91. At least at the outset of his career, the commitment that the boxer makes of his body to boxing presents all the characteristics of "the gift" according to Mauss: it is "voluntary, so to speak, apparently free and gratuitous, and yet constrained and interested" (Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don," in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, [1923] 1950), 147).
92. However much they strain to believe that the ring is the ultimate locus of meritocracy, fighters cannot ignore that the complex system of patronage and sponsorship that surrounds the ring largely predetermines what happens in it. Thus "protected" boxers (those who, based on a reputation acquired in the amateurs, are granted leeway in selecting inferior opponents to "build up" their record) and run-of-the-mill club fighters (who have to fight whomsoever they get sent against) enter a dual-track system of competition that gives them widely divergent odds of success. And mediocre white pugs, due to the near extinction of their species, look to make considerably more money than more proficient but more populous black and Latino boxers.
93. Baldwin's essay, "The fight: Patterson vs. Liston," from which these words are drawn, was first published in *Nugget* in February 1963 and is reprinted in Gerald Early, *Tuxedo Junction*, 325–334.
94. Boxers are also evidently called to the ring by the existing structure of gender relations that dictates that ("real") men demonstrate "courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery," as well as "adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body" (Patricia Sexton as quoted by Tim Carri-gan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," *Theory and Society* 14/5 (Sept. 1985): 603. But, unlike its caste and class counterparts, the gender component of the pugilistic doxa remains unquestioned.
95. Ali and Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, 247.
96. "Masculinity is structured through contradiction: the more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question" (Lynne Segal, "Changing men: Masculinities in context," *Theory and Society* 22/5 (October 1993): 635). I tried elsewhere to demonstrate this point in more detail in the case of bodybuilding ("Why men desire muscles," *The Body and Society: An Interdisciplinary journal*, forthcoming).
97. Thus Muhammad Ali and his sibling Ramahan, or Chicago's most successful recent boxer Matt (who won a world title) with his brother Kay (who vegetates as a local journeyman).