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## The Prizefighter's Three Bodies

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**ABSTRACT** *Based on three years of participant observation and apprenticeship in a black boxing gym on Chicago's South Side, this article reconstructs the prizefighter's lived sense and experience of corporeal instrumentality, aesthetics, and ethics – the 'three bodies' that together define the distinctive 'aisthesis' of pugilistic practice as corporeal craft and ghetto trade. This serves to argue that professional boxing offers not so much an opportunity for economic betterment as the promise of social difference and even transcendence: the professional ethic of sacrifice enables boxers to tear themselves from the everyday world and to create a moral and sensual universe 'sui generis' wherein a transcendent masculine self may be constructed.*

**KEYWORDS** *Body, habitus, culture of the self, morality, sacrifice, desire, masculinity, black American ghetto*

The big thing he has to sell, I thought, is his body. It is one of the wonders of the world, this body of a good fighter. Think of the things it must do when the mind orders it, and because it can do these things it bought this house and the furnishings in it and the clothes you all wear and the food you eat. A month from now this man is going in there with that body against another man. There will be much written and read about this, and there will be many thousands of dollars involved. Throughout this country people will watch it in their homes and in bars, and after it is over they will read about it and, if it is a good fight, think about it and talk about it. All of this, I thought, depends upon this body. *The Professional*. W.C. HEINZ

**H**ow can one be a prizefighter? To answer this seemingly prosaic question, it is not enough to expound the extraneous constraints – of class subordination, racial exclusion, and masculine hubris – that bear upon those who enter this gory yet glorious trade. For, contrary to professional ideology and popular images alike (Collins 1991), the pugilistic vocation is not a direct, unalloyed, precipitate of the 'dull compulsion of economic life' and of the sheer will to carve a route out of urban marginality. And *Homo pugilisticus* does not take after the 'social moron' of neo-classical

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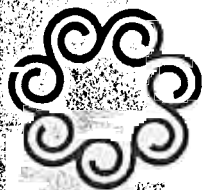
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economics (Sen 1977), an automaton programmed blindly to maximize an abstract notion of utility, pushed and pulled about by material forces as scrap metal in a magnetic field.

### In Foro Interno

True, boxers come nearly exclusively from the working class and quite often from poor families – fighters of middle-class extraction or status are rare anomalies, ‘freaks’ who get asked endlessly what they are doing between the ropes. In the United States, as in other countries, the profession has long been the virtual preserve of subordinate ethnoracial categories led, in succession, by the Irish and Central-European Jews before mid-century, Italians and African-Americans in the postwar decades, and more recently Latinos (André & Fleischer 1987). There is no denying that entering ‘pro’ boxing partakes of a project of material uplift and economic mobility. An intimate acquaintance with hardship is a powerful ingredient in the genesis of the fistic calling. The prospect of financial gains, large or small, the (statistically improbable) hope of astronomical ‘paydays’ that will allow you to buy a house, retire, and provide for kin and kids are prominently featured in the ‘vocabularies of motives’ (Burke 1991) that fighters deploy to explain, to themselves and to others around them, why they are in the business of hard knocks. A black lightweight from a poor Chicago suburb with a dismal record of five defeats in nine fights speaks for many of his colleagues when he exclaims:

Me, [I box] ‘cause *I’m gonna get that motel, hotel, or Holiday Inn, whatever comes first* an’ I’m gonna do good for ma family, I’m make that money, I’m gonna get that belt, an’ I won’t wanna be one of-em guys that say (desultory) *‘I coulda-shoulda-woulda did this.’*

Yet material denudement is evidently not a *sufficient* condition of engagement in the pugilistic trade. First, boxers do not, as public and professional lore would have it, issue uniformly from the most dispossessed segments of the urban or immigrant lower classes. Indeed, their social profile compares rather favorably with that of the overall male population of the ghetto<sup>1</sup>: the ‘pros’ at work in the main gyms of Chicago in the early 90s were, as a group, more likely to have completed high school, to be employed and married, and to own a car and a checking account than young residents of the city’s South Side (Wacquant 1992a:232–233).

Moreover, close examination of the pathways of boxers through the hierarchized tracks and levels of the pugilistic field suggests that those who per-

sist and achieve in the trade are not, on the whole, plucked from the lowest rungs of the social ladder. As seasoned coaches admit, apprentices reared in broken families without a minimal notion of security and regularity of life are unlikely to have the sense of personal centeredness, frugality, and regimentation required to withstand the daily demands of training. The occupational myth of the ‘hungry fighter,’ according to which pugs who ‘come up from the gutter’ have a greater chance of success is just that, a myth.<sup>2</sup>

Second, and more importantly, not all poor adolescents from the ghetto are drawn towards the ring. In point of fact, only a minuscule and decreasing fraction of the sons of the urban (sub)proletariat elect to ‘glove up’ and fewer still go on to cross the line between amateur and professional boxing.<sup>3</sup> Thirty years ago, some three thousand fighters lined up to ‘slug it out’ in the Chicago Golden Gloves, the city’s most prestigious yearly meet for amateurs. In 1990, a paltry 130 pugs signed up and two victories would have sufficed to put me in the tournament’s finals in the category in which I was competing. Likewise among the pros: in the sixties, two dozens fighters would hang around at the morning weigh-in before a ‘card’ to offer their services in the event of a last-minute defection; today, the local matchmaker often has to scramble to find a ‘live body’ when one of the contestants fails to show up (Wacquant 1998a).

Fact is, there exist more attractive avenues to try and escape poverty for an athletically inclined teenager in the contemporary inner city. Team sports built into the academic cursus of high school and college such as football, basketball, and baseball – the three most popular sports in America – are a much better bet than boxing. The odds of success are not that much greater, say, in basketball, but ‘hoop dreams’ are socially more acceptable, the NBA is more glamorous, earnings in the pros and semi-pros are considerably higher, the physical toll much less heavy, and one can at least pick up a scholarship and the pretense of an education on the way (Joravsky 1995).

But it is the illegal sector of the street economy that provides the most varied and lucrative opportunities for ‘fast money’ and poses a third challenge to a strict materialist account of the pugilistic avocation. Fencing stolen goods and selling faked jewelry, gambling and prostitution, arson and assault, burglary and robbery, working as personal bodyguard or ‘enforcer,’ and the myriad income-generating activities that are the mainstay of gangs stand within easy reach of enterprising youth willing to take physical risks to get ahead (Wacquant 1998b; Donaldson 1993). Noting that athletes from low-income areas possess many of the features of ‘defiant individualism’ that lead other adolescents to become solid gang members, Sánchez-Jankowski (1991:

355-356) emphasizes that 'although society applauds this avenue of success, the probability of success [through sports] is much less than through crime.' A black light-heavyweight who moonlights as security personnel in a hotel laments the fact that the lure of the streets has taken over in his West Side neighborhood:

That's the thing, to be a *gang-banger*, to be a *drug-dealer*. An' that's what they doin', hangin' there, sellin' drugs, an' rippin' off people - that's *they art*.

Entry-level jobs in the drug retail sector are not only plentiful, reliable, and readily accessible (Adler 1995); they pay more in a week than what 'club fighters' make in months. The wage-scale for run-of-the-ring pugs is light years removed from the million-dollar paydays trumpeted in media headlines on the occasion of 'big-time' fights in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. In Illinois, the customary base rate is a paltry fifty dollars a round but a preliminary boxer typically gets a purse of 150 dollars for a four-round bout and a solid pro headlining a card commonly earns less than a thousand dollars for a ten-rounder. Considering that most pugilists get to fight about once per quarter at best, it becomes obvious that pecuniary gain cannot be the sole or even dominant motivative factor in operation here (in the 1980s, only four or five boxers in Chicago made enough in the ring to live strictly off it).

Clearly, a perspective centered on 'background' factors and limited to 'negative' determinations - how and why boxers are excluded from other life avenues - tells us too little to make sense of the craft of prizefighting.<sup>4</sup> To do so, we must take (temporary) leave from what George Herbert Mead calls 'the world out there' to probe the inner, workaday, universe of the pugilist. We must strive to grasp boxing as a social, moral, and sensual cosmos, a body-centered *Sinnenkultur* (Weber 1958:92), that offers action and possibly redemption in the very movement whereby it threatens destruction.

For, like any social agent, the boxer is a sensuous, impassioned being of flesh and blood, a purposeful bundle of drives and desires, who feels compelled to devote his energies to an occupation that offers not so much an opportunity for economic betterment as the promise of *social difference and even transcendence* (Wacquant 1995a). The fistic profession gives he who enters it a meaningful world and a chance to seize his own fate, to fashion himself into a worthy social being, even as it threatens to ruin the only tangible asset he holds and treasures: his manly, martial, belligerent body.

To apprehend the existential attractions of prizefighting, then, one cannot be content with an externalist view of its social antecedents and correlates

(Sugden 1987). One must imperatively enter *in foro interno* and attend closely to the daily lived experience of training and fighting. Only by prying into the sentient, perfervid, suffering body (Scheper-Hughes 1993) of the fighter, this 'wonder of the world' through which he feels, thinks, and actualizes his life project, can we begin to explicate of the profession of pugilism.

To sketch salient features of the contours of prizefighting as bodily craft and sensuous venture, this paper draws on ethnographic and experiential data produced in the course of intensive field work in an all-black boxing gym of Chicago's ghetto (Wacquant 1995b:75-78). During my three-year sojourn at the Stoneland Boys Club (August 1988 to October 1991), I learned the ropes under the tutelage of a world-reputed coach from the 'ole school,' sparred on a regular basis with both amateurs and pros, attended local cards and tournaments, and generally imbibed the culture of the guild by hanging around my gym buddies and assorted 'fight people'.<sup>5</sup> I kept a detailed diary of my protracted novitiate, recording nightly after each session my observations and impressions on the myriad events and activities that weave the fabric of everyday life in the gym. (I also trained briefly at three other professional gyms in Chicago and visited clubs in several other cities in the United States and overseas.) Having established myself as a member of the gym's inner core, I collected the life stories of my ring mates and interviewed nearly one hundred fighters, trainers, managers, cornermen, referees, and other officials in the greater Chicagoland, including the entire cohort of pros in training in the summer of 1991. Finally, I scrutinized televised fights, sifted through trade magazines and newsletters, and canvassed the 'insider' literature of memoirs and (auto)biographies as well as journalistic, literary, and scholarly depictions of boxing.

Because the tendency to *over-intellectualize* social action leads to grievous analytical mistakes that threaten to obliterate its immanent dynamics (Bourdieu 1990), the account that follows is deliberately cast so as to foreground the bodily doings and feelings of fighters in their natural surrounding of the gym.<sup>6</sup> In-depth interviews, naturalistic observation, and phenomenological accounts from personal apprenticeship are combined to throw light on the fighter's conception of bodily instrumentality, aesthetics, and morality; together these 'three bodies' define the distinctive *aisthesis* of pugilistic practice. Elucidating the 'corporeal recognition' (Merleau-Ponty 1945:93) that the boxer has of his occupational praxis and world will help render intelligible the specific 'profit of action'<sup>7</sup> that this trade bestows upon those who dedicate themselves to it.

### A Machine, a Weapon, and a Tool

It is well-known that ideas of the body are highly malleable, having changed throughout history as each age put forth different paradigms for representing its constitution and purposes (Synnott 1992). Cross-cultural studies have also amply documented the extraordinary variability of the meanings the human organisms acquire in different mundane and ritual settings (Feher *et al.* 1989). But conceptions of the body also vary *across and within bodily crafts*, depending on the complex of rules and techniques that defines them, the social properties of their practitioners, and thus the specific form of 'human excellence' they promulgate. For instance, in early twentieth-century France, track runners embraced one of two models, an animalistic comparison with thoroughbred horses in the case of amateurs from the upper classes and a mechanical likeness with the steam train in the case of professionals of underprivileged background (Bruant 1992; see also Alter 1992).

How do boxers conceive of their body? What store of meanings do they borrow from to construct and convey their experience of simultaneously *being* and *building corporeal capital*? And what terms do they use to describe the day-to-day *bodily work* they accomplish to this end (Wacquant 1995c)? Not one but three images come up insistently in the interviews and myriad conversations I conducted in and around the gym with professional pugilists, which alternately or simultaneously portray the body as a machine, a weapon, and a tool. In all cases, this body deserves devoted care and calls for incessant 'maintenance work' verging on a veritable profane cult. Indeed, it is common for boxers also to call upon the religious idiom of church and shrine to express the sentiment of sacredness with which they envision and treat their own organism.<sup>8</sup>

The most common metaphor fighters employ to talk about their body is that of a *machine* or an *engine* that constantly needs to be 'tuned up' and taken care of in the proper way, its parts checked, tried, and replaced on time, its filters cleaned, its fuel tank replenished, so that it is kept in perfect running order. The automobile is a favorite analogue, as the following quotes indicate:

I say it like a *engine*: it need motor oil in it, without oil, it not gonna run right, right kinda oil or it ain't gonna run right. You can't, like see you got a turbo, you can't put lawnmower oil in the motor, you know, it messes up. (black welterweight, 25, full-time boxer supported by his manager)

It's like a car, jus' *like a car*, you know, you *give it a tune-up* an' you gotta work hard, you gotta work hard (Puerto Rican supermiddleweight, 30, bus mechanic).

It's a well-tuned machine and you try not to git the machine *hit on* and you can last a long time out there in boxin'. An' to see yourself git in shape is when you can (quickly) see a guy, duck outa the way, dance away and you not tired, you jus' feel good – tha's when the machine is well tuned. (black supermiddleweight, 32, firefighter)

Trainers adopt a similar terminology to explain how they dose the mental and physical preparation of their charges as the bout nears: 'What I do,' expounds a coach from the Stoneland Boys Club, 'I'll try put just a lil' more pressure on certain issues. I tell 'im to put pressure on yourself, so when fight time come, you'll be relaxed, you'll be ready: *it's like fine-tunin' a car* – you'll be razor-sharp.'

It may seem paradoxical to invoke an inorganic, intransitive metaphor to designate a living entity such as the human body but in this boxers follow a long strand in Western culture going back to Descartes and Hobbes (Leder 1984).<sup>9</sup> This metaphor is also well suited to capturing the structured complexity and interdependency of the various components that make up the fighter's body as a self-regulated, adaptable system of perceptual and motor powers. Yet it must be stressed that this 'whole machine made up of flesh and bones' (Descartes 1971:104) is not an inanimate entity but a generative matrix endowed with its own agency, a special form of wisdom and a real, if limited capacity for self-guidance in the pugilistic cosmos (Wacquant 1992a:241–249).

A second series of corporeal images coalesce around military metaphors of *weaponry* and *armory*. And, again, for good reason. First, the body of the boxer is at once his weapon of attack and the only protection he has against the blows struck by his opponent. Pugilists like to picture themselves as modern-day 'gladiators' or 'warriors' who engage in 'hand-to-hand combat' with one another, and a particularly action-filled fight in which each contestant takes the best shots of the other will commonly earn the laudatory appellation of 'war.' The boxing vernacular is peppered with military terms such as 'ring generalship,' 'firing punches,' 'landing bombs,' and 'to outgun' one's opponent with 'heavy artillery.' This militaristic idiom is also prominently featured in the *noms de guerre* that fighters adopt: three Chicago pugs chose (or were given) as ring moniker 'Rifleman,' 'Machine Gun,' and 'Minicannon.'

In a widely read portrait in *Life* magazine published on the occasion of his epic confrontation with Muhammad Ali in 1971, Norman Mailer described heavyweight champion Joe Frazier as the 'ultimate war machine.' Of his mindset in the ring, Mike Tyson (cited in Oates 1988:252) once said: 'I'm a boxer. I'm a warrior. Doing my job.' It is not by happenstance that boxing has

long been the one sport most heavily sponsored by, and practiced in, the military. And to this day, 'if you walk into a shop selling comics you will find a stunning array of violent heroes: cops, cowboys, supermen, infantry sergeants, fighter pilots, [and] boxers' (Connell 1989:196).

Second and relatedly, in most states the fists of professional boxers are legally registered as arms and a fighter who gets involved in a street brawl or scuffle is liable to be charged with assault with a weapon. Boxers know this and take pride in explaining that they would rather walk away from a public confrontation anyway. For they establish a sharp demarcation between boxing and street-fighting and insist that their professional skill ('it's a technician-type of thang') not be confounded with the latter (Wacquant 1995a: 501-507).<sup>10</sup>

It's my tool, my *weapon*. My weapon, an' I have to keep my weapon clean an' I have to keep my weapon oiled. When I work out, I'm oilin' my weapon. When I live clean, I'm keepin' my weapon clean. (his eyes lightening with glee) When I fight, I'm usin' my weapon. (black heavyweight, 27, supported by manager)

I look at my body as a shield, as a *armored shield*: it has to be *hard*, uh, I want it to be *shiny* where, that it *glows* and shows that, you know, when this other fighter looks at me, that I'm a well-tuned conditioned athlete, you know, that, uh, you're gonna have to really have somethin' to *go through me* - I mean, this is my *barrier* and you're just not gonna get in and run over me, and so forth. (black middleweight, 29, stockman)

Boxin', ninety percent, ninety-five percent is bein' in good shape. If you're not in good shape, how you gonna win the fight, you-know-what-I-mean, Lou? Uh, *when your body's in shape, it can absorb the punishment...*

You git hurt, you git hit with good punches and all that, you're in shape. You can *take it*, or you might git hurt, you're gonna come back in a matter of seconds (snaps fingers)... It's a *weapon and a shield*, you know, at the same time, you know, 'cause you're gonna git hit. It's part of the game. (Mexican lightweight, 23, forklift driver)

The 'ring names' that boxers don, early in their career, frequently make reference to specific physical assets they possess, such as hand speed, punching power, or upper-body strength, that make their weaponry more potent: thus Meldrick 'TNT' Taylor, Roberto *Manos de piedra* Duran, and 'Iron' Mike Tyson, to cite but three recent champions. The monikers of fighters from the Chicagoland area included 'The Rock,' 'Thunderstorm,' 'Speedy,' 'The Dart,' and 'The Snake.'

A third prevalent view of the body assimilates it to a *tool* - an instrument

of work that must be continually refitted for its designated purpose: 'It's my tool, my money-maker,' adduces a 37-year old aluminium factory worker who has battled in the squared circle for nearly two decades to supplement his wages. 'I mean, it's a *tool* that you're usin', it's your object, it's your *ultimate object* of survival, okay, an' you must be intuned to it, as much as you can,' echoes a cruiserweight who counsels youth at a detention center. As with assembly-line workers, the sheer repetition and nauseating monotony of the fighter's daily regimen, with its endless succession of exactly identical drills, iterated temporal cycles, and singsong sounds and sensations, does much to encourage this view.<sup>11</sup> Like the machine or the weapon, this body-tool must be maintained and used in proper fashion lest it loses its precision and becomes ineffectual and eventually worthless:

The reason why I lost those fights, I believe, I was only able to throw two-punch combinations, I wasn't able to throw five- or six-punch combinations. I was *burnt out*... I was burnin' the candle from both ends, or I wasn't takin' time to sharpen, *sharpen the saw*: (mimicking a sawing movement with his hands) you saw and you saw and you saw and it's become dull! And y-y-know you can saw as hard as you want but if it's not sharp what's it gonna do: nothing! That's what I was doin'! (white middleweight, 31, supported by his ring earnings and incidental wage work)

I try to look at [my body] as a tool, a tool where, in preparin' for boxin', is somethin' I haveta take care of. I can't let, I can't let Father Time or the years, (grimacing) you know *dog it out*, I can't let you know or let life itself dog it out, I haveta be really careful of the body, you know: you can't get another one anyway so. (black welterweight, 29, unemployed)

All three of these images converge to solidify a radically *instrumentalist conception* of, and relation to, the body. This is not surprising of a 'percussion sport' in which the body itself constitutes the basic implement of the trade (Defrance 1995:53-54). It is also a conception that boxers find congenial because of its immediate affinity with the one they already owe to the conditionings of their proximate social milieu. Everyday life in the ghetto, with its stress on play time, 'messing around,' and the valuation of assertive forms of plebeian masculinity (including, most significantly, street-fighting) which find a primary outlet in sports (Folb 1980; Rudman 1986), the prevalence of predatory behaviors associated with 'hustling' and the ubiquitousness of public violence (Wacquant 1998b), all contribute to predisposing male youth from the inner city, or from low-income areas more generally, to view their body as a means they can harness to monetary ends.

A majority of Chicago's black fighters grew up in and around the ghetto in areas where insecurity was endemic, street crime as much part of the landscape as crumbling buildings and vacant lots, and bodily trades linked to the lower end of unskilled labor market, entertainment, sports, and the underworld an all-too banal way of making a living. Of the 36 African-American boxers polled on the topic in 1991, 25 had witnessed a killing firsthand, 23 had personally been the victim of a shooting or stabbing, and 22 considered that they came from a 'rough' neighborhood. Six in ten used to fight on the streets before they embraced the Sweet science. And nearly all had fathers who had manual occupations: truck driver, construction worker, welder, delivery man, soldier, mailman. My gym mate Leo, who held an Associate degree in radiology and fought for seven years before 'hanging 'em up,' spent his childhood on the city's South Side. Both of his parents had received primary education and toiled all their life in the mills of U.S. Steel. One evening he reminisced as we sat 'conversating' in his kitchen:

I was at Fifty Sixth an' Normal. It was like gangs, man, y'know like gangs an' y' know, *shootin'* they be stan'in' on d-street corner, y'know, shootin': ping-ping! (imitating gun shots) Days at Cooley High, y'know, like all d-older guys were out on the street drinkin', y'know, shootin', an' y'know, pressure us lil' guys to (hoarsely) get into gangs, y'know, an' we get into it an' the weak guys woul' maybe kill somebody or go to d-penitentiary, and get real deep or be involve' into d-*core* of the gang.

In an environment where one must at all times be ready to 'bite or be bitten' because such is 'the law of the jungle,' as my sparring partner Ashante was fond of saying, and in which physical ruggedness and gumption are at a premium, it is no wonder how one comes to experience the body as a potent means of intimidation and serviceable hardware.

### Beauty and the Beast

Such an instrumentalist conception does not entirely rule out aesthetic concerns; rather, it subordinates them to technical efficacy. Boxers are exceedingly conscious of their outward appearance and want to look trim, taut and 'hard'.<sup>12</sup> All the more so since theirs is a performance craft that, by definition, submits them to the live visual appreciation of the consuming public: 'Like when you got TV fights, you wanna look good, *you want your body to look good*,' insists a 29-year-old black lightweight from North Chicago who has yet to be featured on a televised show. 'So my body looks pretty *cut up* an' stuff so I like when I take my shirt off, I don't wanna look like *no fat boy*,

you know. You wanna look like you put somethin' into it, you wanna be the best you can be.' Appraisive judgments of bodily symmetry, proportion, and shapeliness are valued not in themselves, as in competitive bodybuilding (Klein 1993), but because they express recognition of the unmistakable outwards marks of the instrumental readiness of the fighter. This conflation of beauty and efficiency is clearly conveyed in the following interview excerpt:

To me [my body] is like a work of art, you know, so everythin' is in place: your body tone, your skin tone be tone', uh, you feel goo', ya know, you mentally an' physically fit. My body's a lethal weapon. It's like a weapon you, you know, (his delivery quickens) when somebody come at you, you know they gotta come at you. You know, it ain' no, it ain't be *half step*: they ain' gonna take you like tha' an' you know it (black cruiserweight, 26, street hustler).

Physical preparedness, in turn, is construed as a reliable empirical indicator of moral commitment and mental resolve. It shows that the boxer has 'done his homework' in the gym and is honoring the code of ethics of the corporation. This tight correlation between bodily propriety and spiritual dutifulness, corporeal countenance and moral standing, the 'physical and the metaphysical' (Synnott 1993:78), explains the obsessive attention that participants in the pugilistic universe accord corporeal appearance and symptoms. Trainers, for instance, watch after the faintest of physical signs, a trembling of the legs, a swelling of the knuckles, insufficient perspiration or a serene respiration, as so many 'body advertisements' (O'Neill 1985:24) for their fighter's professional dedication and forewarnings of their likely conduct in the ring. One referee goes as far as to claim that he can predict the outcome of a fight based on a detailed inspection and comparative hermeneutic of the physique of the two contestants:<sup>13</sup>

How they're build, y'know, *how they look physically*, it tells me, it tells me seventy-five per cent who's gonna be the winner. Sure... A guy that jus' goes in, y'know with lean, *lean an' trim*, y'know an' comes in already warmed up, sweatin', you know he's ready.

In pugilistic culture, it is not the face that cristallizes the sentiment of identity (LeBreton 1992) but the entire organism and especially the torso, seat of the 'heart,' which in the occupational lingo designates that most revered quality of the authentic fighter, unflinching bravery and the palestric capacity 'to gut it up and get up' when teetering on the brink of defeat.<sup>14</sup> Exhibiting a firm, stalwart, bellicose physique in the ring becomes a matter of intense personal



as well as professional pride. 'Think, to see a statue of a man who's big and conditioned like you, you know, say hey! like my next fight my body's gonna look *beautiful!*' confesses my gym mate Eddie as he unwraps his hands after a vigorous sparring session. And he whispers with an obvious sense of self-satisfaction: 'I've had guys that [said of me], (admirative) "man! that guy looks good!" You defeat 'im and you feel that much better, it *adds to your ego*, and tells you to go-to-work.' The intimate association between bodily mien and bodily labor is yet another way of communicating the fusion of the aesthetics and the pragmatics of pugilism. This fusion, in turn, allows the boxer to invest into the care of his own body, a conventionally feminine activity, without being for that 'feminized.'

The other side of the coin of resplendent efficacy is the relentless obligation of corporeal care and the biting anxiety over decay and dereliction. Boxers, trainers, and managers work in close collaboration to preserve and protect the bodily capital of the fighter through dutiful training, virtuous living, and the proper selection and timing of bouts. 'I take care of my body as if I woul' take care of my own kid,' declares a 20-year-old black welterweight who left his job as a security guard to fight full-time after his manager agreed to pay him a modest 'weekly salary.' 'I love my body, so I woul'n' do anythin' to harm it. Yeah, so, as far as drugs an' thin's like that, I wouldn' put it in my body.' Boxers resort to a wide array of techniques of corporeal safe-keeping and maintenance – what Berthelot (1983:127) labels 'practices of perpetuation' – to insure that their daily toil does not impair their body but, on the contrary, increases its skills and potency.

From the way they tape their hands and grease their face, to the creams and ointments with which they rub their limbs before and after training, to the special routines and exercises they execute (squeezing clay balls, neck tractions, abdominal crunches, toughening their skin in brine, etc.), prizefighters must be continually attuned to the oversight and well-being of this veritable *alter ego* that is their body. The strategic parts of their organism such as the hands and face (especially the nose, lips, and epidermis around the eye sockets) are the object of redoubled attention inasmuch as they are those most likely to be damaged, nay put literally *hors de combat* (Wacquant 1995c:83–85).

Boxers who do not trueheartedly safeguard their corporeal assets invariably see their career hampered or prematurely terminated. They are more likely to injure their knuckles in sparring, to get facial cuts during fights, and to see their preparation hampered by nagging hematoma, bruises, and nicks. It is another paradox of this profession hinging on trained bodily assault that it

nourishes among its practitioners an abiding sense of corporeal preciousness, beauty, and pride. Kenny is a 28-year-old light-heavyweight who works part-time as a stockman in a meat warehouse. At the end of one of his punctilious afternoon workouts, he recounts:

I always uh, do a lot of sit ups on my fingers, or my han's. I make sure I don't do anythin' to hurt my han's, 'cause my han's is like *jewels*, (he shows me his large, paw-like hands, extending his fingers outward with a broad, beaming, smile) you know. *See how they shinin' already* and it's kind of like, uh, they are very important, you know. If you hurt anythin', don't hurt yer han's: that can ruin everythin' fa ya.

Pugilists must likewise learn to live with and manage physical discomfort, ache, and injury. Unlike victims of chronic pain who find themselves trapped in a world of non-communication (Kleinman 1988), they have at their disposal a rich occupational vocabulary that enables them to confront pain – especially low-grade, routine pain generated in daily training, as distinct from the acute, punctual pain from the bout itself – not with silent denial but with personal valorization and collective solemnization.

Contrary to a common-held idea, professional boxers do not relish absorbing (or dishing out) physical punishment and they are rightfully scandalized by the stereotype which portrays them as violent men driven by sado-masochistic impulses. A 29-year-old white middleweight who works as an asphalt grader by day rails: 'No, nooo, *boxers don't like pain!* Who the hell likes to get hit in the face? I mean, (dejectedly) you gotta be nuts, nobody does!' A 32-year-old black colleague who makes a living off illegal street hustles chimes in: 'I don't like gittin' hit *at all*. Yes, boxers can endure a pain, but they don't like pain. I know *I don't*.' Dolor is an inescapable correlate of proper professional exertion and an indispensable means to the ends the boxer pursues. Its begrudging acceptance and methodical taming ('It's not *likin'*, it's bein' able to *take it*') is publicly interpreted as welcome evidence of one's growing ability to shape one's destiny by reshaping one's bodily sense and abilities.<sup>15</sup> And the suffering to which boxers subject themselves is predictable, purposive, and clearly circumscribed, so many properties that make it eminently preferable to the dull, suffusive, and haphazard pains arising from the lack of control that characterizes everyday life among the urban working class (Rubin 1976).

Pugilists must also dwell with the perpetual anguish that inevitably accompanies the risk of serious bodily hurt, harm, and spoilage. From experience, they have honed a poignant appreciation of physical frailty and finitude and they are well aware of the ineluctable erosion that comes with duteous ac-

complishment of their occupational chores. Fighters are neither dopes nor dupes: they can see all around them the results of the irreversible 'wear and tear' caused not only by fistic clashes between the ropes but also by the relentless 'grind' of quotidian 'roadwork,' 'floorwork' and 'ringwork' in the gym (Wacquant 1992a:237-246). They know that a couple of tough fights may suffice to exact a ruinous toll, even for he who emerges victorious from physical combat: 'Tha's what people don' understand, Louie,' grumbles my old coach, 'it don' matter whether you win or lose: *both guys are takin' a helluva beatin'*, yep – same diff'rence'.<sup>16</sup>

Fighters age fast, faster perhaps than any other athlete (I was struck – in truth, horrified – when I got to see pictures of my gym comrades dating from a couple of years before they had turned pro, for on them they looked a good decade younger). At 25, Lewis is one of the most successful boxers in Chicago. Five long and obscure years spent boxing on the 'undercard' of local shows have earned him a spot in the world rankings. If he gets a shot at the title and wins it, he plans to 'hang it up' after a short two years, no ifs and buts:

'Cause I'm *gittin' tired of this shit!* (laughs uneasily) Naw, it's not that – I wanna 'spen' more time with the ki's and (somerly) I don't wanna end up *fuckin' punch drunk*... I don't wanna retire (mumbles as if debilitated) *gnah-gnah-gnooo, a goof!* I wanna retire where I can have goo' senses to play with my ki's and teach 'em somethin'.

A theme recurs through the images that fighters project of their body, that of *cleanliness*. Whether it is likened to a machine, a weapon, or a tool, the body must be protected from the temptations, nay the pollutions, of the mundane world such as 'bad' foods, alcohol, drugs, and women – and not necessarily in that order. 'I work my body good, so you know, *a clean body keeps a clean mind*, so, a lotta times my mind is pretty much relaxed,' raps a 30-year-old black middle-weight supported by his manager who has run a string of seven straight victories. The appeal of the religious metaphors that boxers often summon to describe their body – 'it's somethin' very *sacred* an' you take care of it, even when you're not fightin', 'a temple that must be preserved' – derives from their close association with the ideas of purity and separateness.

Training and the manifold techniques of regulation of bodily functions that boxers deploy are akin to a process of worldly disengagement and purification. The boxer's body is indeed a sacred entity in the Durkheimian sense: withdrawn from the profane, it constitutes the object of a 'solidary system' of collective beliefs and ritual practices 'which unite into one single moral

community,' the brotherhood of Fistiania, 'all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim 1985:65).

### Professional Ethics Embodied

In his lectures on professional ethics, Durkheim (1950:52) warns that 'no form of social activity can do without a moral discipline proper to it' and no social milieu thrives long without one. The occupational morality of prize-fighting is epitomized and celebrated by the folk notion of 'sacrifice.' Sacrifice refers to an ensemble of rules designed, first, to restructure and regularize conduct with a view towards optimizing the boxer's bodily capital and, second, to loosen his everyday moorings so as to enclose him ever more completely within the pugilistic cosmos. Together, the work of corporeal fructification and rituals of worldly detachment converge towards the creation of an 'empowered self,' willing and ready for battle in the ring, for whom the external goal of victory has become what Weber (1958) calls a 'mission' (*Sendung*), an inner task such that "deed" and "renunciation" inevitably imply each another.<sup>17</sup>

Boxin's a game a-sacrifice. Guys come in d'gym now an' expect to be big-time fighters but they don' wanna put in d'sacrifice. (nodding nostalgically) *Back then they sacrificed*, yep! To succeed in the game of boxin', it take a helluva man – it take *sa-cri-fice*. Workin' in d'gym everyday and doin' your roadwork, an' learnin' how to eat right an' stayin' away from 'em women. It's a *lotta* sacrifice. It's not too many guys who can do that: sacrifice.

As revealed by this pithy tirade from my coach to a dissipated mate from the Stoneland gym, sacrifice is 'the name of the game.' All participants in the pugilistic world realize and acknowledge this. Trainers view sacrificing as the bedrock of professionalism and the unquestioned prerequisite for *bona fide* membership in the craft. Managers treat the willingness and ability to sacrifice as a deciding factor in their recruitment strategies. Boxers, for their part, continually fret, complain, and ruminate about the topic. Only two of the fifty pugilists I interviewed in Chicago (comprising nearly all of the 'pros' active in that city in the summer of 1991) did not find that boxing involves significant sacrifices for them, and for reasons that readily confirm the latter's paramountcy: the first was a die-hard practicing Mormon who led a monkish existence outside the ring; the second a former street bully who used to terrorize his neighborhood ('I's a one-man wrecking crew') before he took to the manly art and who relied on exceptional punching power in lieu of



subjecting himself to the full rigors of training – and paid a steep price for it when his career took an abrupt and premature downward turn.

The occupational ethic of sacrifice aims not at *suppressing* desire but at making it *virtuous* according to the canons of the pugilistic faith. It does this primarily by effecting a clean break with the mundane world, a break which intensifies material, sensual-emotional, and moral immersion within the professional milieu. This in turn bolsters belief in the prizefighting *illusio* and solidifies the prereflexive acceptance of the stakes it stipulates (Wacquant 1995c:85–88). Pugilistic interest presupposes and produces profane disinterest in a circular movement of mutual reinforcement propelled by the systematic disciplining of the fighter's body.<sup>18</sup> The tightly integrated set of prescriptive and proscriptive rules, recipes, and routines that weave the cloth of the all-embracing *culture of the pugilistic self* – to adapt Foucault's (1984) well-known exegesis of the ancient 'care of self' – distribute themselves along three intersecting planes: nutrition, social and family life, and amorous intercourse.

The first commandment of the pugilistic catechism sets down the *culinary taboos and observances* presumed to maximize the fighter's vigorousness and strength in combat. When he enters the phase of intensive training that precedes a bout, a fighter must follow a rigorous diet of steamed vegetables, white meats, boiled fish, fresh fruits, and tea or mineral water, and avoid at all costs greasy, fatty, and sugary comestibles. What to eat and not to eat, how much to ingest and when to do it: these seemingly trivial matters consume the attention and conversations of pro boxers in the unremitting effort to 'make the weight' for their fight.<sup>19</sup> Much as the 'fat talk' of teenage girls (Nichter & Vuckovic 1994), food talk among fighters is a linguistic measurement of their concern for self-control and occupational proficiency. For many pugs, such as my gym buddy Curtis, Stoneland's star athlete, this is the most tormenting stipulation of their professional existence:

For instance my ki's, they wan'ed a pizza yesterday, so they eat pizza. Pizza, no: I cain' eat that, tomato sauce! cheese! sausage, *aw man!* (exhales in frustration) Crust, *aaargh!* (quick burst of laughter) You know, I cain' eat any of those thin's right here... Then you talk abou' pop: you know, DeeDee my trainer, he ruther for me to have a beer – drinkin' a pop, if he see you with a pop, *aw man* I mean, y'know, (screeching for emphasis) you talkin' 'bout *Worl' War III all over again!*

The occupational lore of boxing features a fine-grained taxonomy of edibles and elaborate theories on the latter's effects upon different body parts and functions. Many pleasurable foodstuffs (cake, candies, and assorted 'junk

food,' for instance) are thought to slow down and weaken a combattant and are therefore viewed as harmful, metaphorical equivalents of drugs. Indeed, fighters often mention food, alcohol and drugs in the same breath as that which they have to draw away from in order to purge and purify their bodies for confrontation in the ring. Beyond their obvious material purpose – to shed excess pounds and bring the fighter down into the contractually-agreed weight range – prandial observances serve to create a double sense, of separateness from the everyday world and *dissociation* from its inhabitants on the one hand, of submersion in the pugilistic plenum and tight *association* with its members, who share and live by these rules, on the other hand. Fasting also contributes to generating a sentiment of self-mastery and elevation that radiates all the way into the ring on fight night.<sup>20</sup>

This sentiment is further subtended by the second precept of the pugilistic ethic, which calls for a *draconian contraction of social and family life* (not unlike that of monks or research scholars) so as to economize physical, mental, and emotional energies. A well-known occupational adage holds that 'you gotta walk, talk, eat, drink, sleep, and shit boxing' if you expect to succeed in the trade. Most champions are believed to have been individuals who literally retired into the gym and dedicated their entire existence to ring preparation. While training in Miami's Overtown district for his historic clash with Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali (in Hauser 1991:57) reflected on the costs of professional dedication:

The hardest part of the training is the loneliness. I just sit here like a little animal in a box at night. I can't go out in the street and mix with the folks out there 'cause they wouldn't be out there if they was up to any good. I can't do nothing except sit... Here I am, surrounded by showgirls, whiskey and nobody is watching me. All this temptation and me trying to train to be a boxer. It's something to think about.

Any and all extrapugilistic commitments – at wage work, in the home, or on the streets – must be reduced if not terminated insofar as they detract from the necessary focus on training, resting, and 'keeping your eyes on the prize.' Marriage, for instance, can be a stabilizing force in the career of a fighter but, if it comes too early, it dangerously diverts part of the fighter's time and energy away from the ring. One evening, driving back from a Catholic Youth Organization amateur tournament, one of Stoneland's trainers confided: 'I had me a good fighter, you know Steve, Steve Wooley: he coulda been a real good fighter, fast, clever kid, *but he fall in love*. He and his girl-friend had a baby, (ruefully) so it's over for him.'

The devotional discharge of one's professional duties demands a thorough domestication of the boxer's personal life. My gym colleague Butch is a firefighter for the city of Chicago. He loves his job but fighting is his true passion and he yearns for a championship belt that would repay nine long years of sacrifice in and out of the gym. The roughest demand of the fistic avocation for him has been 'the social life kin' of messin' with you, 'cause I been married eleven years and so you not s'pose ta indulge in any social life and all that, goin' to bed early, tha' kinda bothers me.' <sup>21</sup> But, then again, from strict regimentation springs a prideful feeling of accomplishment: 'Gettin' up an' runnin', eatin' steak, stayin' away from girls. I was jus' – I was jus' the *ultimate warrior* when it came to discipline, gettin' ready to fight.'

To shield themselves from mundane social and emotional demands, some boxers choose to dwell off on their own or escape their familiar environment in the days leading to the contest by moving in with their trainer or manager. The elite of the pugilistic corps withdraws to specially arranged 'training camps' (Robinson & Anderson 1970:79–83, Heinz 1958) where they work out in near-complete isolation till the eve of the bout. Thus Tony 'The Duke' Morrison, of *Rocky V* fame, elected to incarcerate himself at the Virginia Military Institute for the three fights that preceded his clash with George Foreman: 'I like it. It's an all-male campus with a spartan atmosphere. It's heavy on discipline and I need it' (*Flashboxing Newsletter*, No. 114, 31 March 1993:3).

Yet, for many, it is the third tenet of pugilistic piety that is the most difficult to hold on to, namely, the mandate to *cease and desist from sexual commerce*. And this, not for a day or two as in other athletic pursuits, but for weeks before the bout – anywhere from a fortnight to a month for a four- to eight-round contest to three months and more for a ten-round 'main event' or a championship fight. Butch details his personal policy on the matter:

Me, myself, at least, *at the least*, it's two weeks, but if you really wanna get *strong* and eat some bricks, then we talkin' a month – and, (raucously) *man*, I eat up some bricks 'cause I go without, I... *Man!* Shoot!... tha's, I think that's a good set figure, one *solid* month, but if you do two weeks, I think you be mean enough to eat a few *rocks*.

Inhabitants of the pugilistic planet believe that having sex makes fighters physically weak: it 'drains their legs,' takes away their 'snap' and endurance, and impairs their recuperative capacity. Mentally, it 'messes their minds,' makes them 'soft,' and deprives them of aggression and focus – in short, it blunts their 'fighter instinct' – whereas 'staying away for that pussy' gives

them added reserves of rage for the fight. Other than burning up energy the boxer will sorely need between the ropes, explains a trainer from Stoneland gym, amorous encounters also risk arousing the wrong emotions at the wrong time:

So if a boxer is too much with his girlfriend or with his wife, he loses strength? (in an unshed voice, as if in confidence) Then, it don't have to be sex, it could just be, you could become *passionate*. See, the more you be with a woman, the more *passionate* you get, the more *soft* you get. And see, a fighter, in a fight, (forceful) he don't need that. He don't need it: 'cause he'll be passionate towards his opponent an' try to rip his head off with a left hook. (calming down) See, it's mental also.

The overwhelming majority of boxers claim to (strive to) practice punctual abstinence as needed, if only because their entourage continually reminds them of the fundamental incompatibility between erotic activity and professional achievement. There is a time for everything, as a black manager irritated by the dissipated 'street life' of one of his fighters indicates: '*If you wanna look at d'girls, get paid first*. Make some money and move your career, then you can look at d'girls.' In the gym, subtle and not-so-subtle injunctions keep this urgent imperative at the top of the pugilist's agenda and remind him of the dire consequences liable to follow otherwise. This is illustrated by the following field note taken one week before the 1990 Chicago Golden Gloves tournament:

Boxhead John and Mark are sparring together and look sort of weak (no rhythm, no snap, no aggression; they throw lazy jabs, few right crosses, and keep grabbing and holding on to each other). The coach yells at them from the backroom in his baritone voice: 'Come on, what you all be doin'? *How come botha you be so tired? You know you s'posed to leave them girls alone!*'

As John and Mark protest vociferously that they do stay away from their girlfriends, DeeDee roars: 'I dont' know why you doin' somethin' when you're gettin' ready to do somethin' and you know you ain't s'posed to do it. (sententiously) *Them girls gonna be the reason why one of you guys get killed next week.*'

Trainers will go to extremes to monitor the 'cleanliness' of their fighters on this count, questioning them (and their partner) point blank about their nocturnal intercourse, checking on their extramarital entanglements, and sleeping in the same bedroom as their charge when they take to the road ('old timers' have been known to sleep in the *same bed* as their fighter to make sure that they do not elope in the midst of the night). Tales of the night turpitudes

of fighters on the road are a standard fare of pugilistic lore. Hauser (1991) recounts how one-time heavyweight titlist Leon Spinks slipped out of his room under his manager's nose to storm bars and discos and got shot in the rib cage on the eve of his return bout against Muhammad Ali. When all four American boxers passed the first round of elimination bouts in the 1996 Olympics, their success was promptly attributed to the stringent curfew and bedtime discipline imposed by their new coaches.

Trainers are convinced that they can detect a breach of sexual abstinence and they are quick to reprimand their fighter whenever they suspect a lapse has occurred. A long-time coach from Fuller Park gym relates: 'I can tell, I says (in a reproachful voice) I can tell you been with that broad last night or *two days ago*, you can tell it, because the legs are not gonna hold up. See that *sperm* an' everythin' like keeps the strength.'

The bitter irony is that intensive training makes boxers more fit and thus physically more active as well as more attractive. 'That was prob'ly the hardest part,' reminisces Butch. 'Here you are *in good shape like Superman* and yer not s'pose to be bother'd with girlfriends and stuff like that, so tha' was kind of rough.' Moreover, the higher they climb on the pugilistic ladder, the more likely boxers are to seduce women (especially those enamored with professional athletes), yet the more they should forsake such sexual opportunities since the stakes of victory – and thus the costs of defeat – are rising *pari passu*. Understandably, then, this commandment is the cause of persistent frustration among fighters, as well as considerable friction and even discord between them and their partners in love:

It's times when my wife feels she needs lovin' an' (rolling his eyeballs) you will wan' it also, an' it's a critical time, and you're not suppose to have sex for a month. You can't do it. You *wanna* do it, an' sometimes (regretfully) you will fall into those statistics (black welterweight, 23, night watchman).

Bachelors often fear that if they do not provide adequate sexual services to their partner, she will cheat on them or leave for a more bed-oriented companion. In most cases, however, spouses or lovers negotiate a mutually agreeable enforcement of the rules of pugilism as they apply to the bedroom.

'They jus' wanna do what's right for you, you know. It's jus' a sacrifice tha' both y'all hafta make. They understan'. They jus' wanna do what's right for you, 'cause sometime I'm like, (growling lustily) '*come-on, come-on!*' and they're like, (with little

high-pitched voice) '*no-no*, you know you gotta fight.' Like that. So they help me out a lot (black heavyweight, 27, supported by manager).

It is of little import that, as medical studies have repeatedly shown, sexual continence exerts no detectable physical effect upon athletic performance. Or that few boxers actually abide by this professional commandment as stringently as they are instructed or pretend to.<sup>22</sup> What matters is that fighters *believe* that they *should* abstain and that depriving themselves of the delights of erotic barter somehow increases their chance of triumph in the squared circle.

Just as the disciplinary practices constitutive of the medieval monastic order (Asad 1982) aimed at transmuting wordly sensual desire, desire for another human being, into an otherworldly 'desire for God' (Leclercq 1977), the pugilistic ritual of abstinence serves to redirect the boxer's sexual yearning from the bed to the ring – and from woman to man. It diverts his (heterosexual) *libido sexualis* away from its habitual object of predilection<sup>23</sup> so as to reconvert it into (homoerotic) *libido pugilistica*, the urgent desire to delve into a violent *corps-à-corps* with another man. Rather than hungering for profane nourishment, a fighter on the eve of his bout should be 'hungry for the gloves,' as my old coach relished saying. Instead of coveting his female companion, he should lust for his male opponent and the climactic moment when he will finally embrace him in battle. Tyson chooses his words well when he describes the long walk towards the ring where the night's rival awaits him as 'going on a date' (in Goodtimes Home Video 1990).

The rules of the pugilistic ethic converge to effect a thorough *heroization of everyday life* that gives the latter a lustiness and zing it would scarcely have otherwise (Wacquant 1995b:85–87). By stipulating a drastic restructuring of the most banal of quotidian doings – nutrition, sleep and sexual activity, emotional dealings, and social and family transactions – they transform life into an endless obstacle course through which a transcendent, moral, masculine self may be constructed. For the peculiar 'civilizing' of the body effected by the occupational ethic of sacrifice is also, and most crucially, a *masculinizing* of the body, designed to accentuate, nay demonstrate, the 'manly' properties of the organism and thereby the virility of its owner. In addition to providing a failsafe, ready-made excuse for explaining (away) poor fistic performance, the dictate of sexual abstention objectifies the dichotomic symbolic separation between (real) men and women as well as the sexual segregation that, together, underpin the collective work of production of agonistic manhood (Gilmore 1990).

It is important to note in this regard that pugilistic sacrifice is also an *act of masculine communion*: communion between the boxer and his trainer who, entrusted with the task of 'virile mothering,' guides and monitors the latter's practices of oblation; communion with and between 'consociates' and 'contemporaries,' and notably with one's opponent, who suffers the very same tribulations; finally communion with 'the world of predecessors' (Schutz 1967), the quasi-mythical ring heroes of yesteryear, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Robinson, Ali, and Duran, whose legendary capacity for sacrifice is extolled by the craft's oral lore. Because they are shared, regulated, and traditional, ascetic practices bind boxers into a community of soldierly glory. And they annul solitude in the very movement whereby they isolate and individualize each fighter.

By willfully adhering to the dictates of the ethic of sacrifice, boxers tear themselves from the everyday world and create a moral and sensual universe *sui generis* that 'elevate the individual above himself' and 'affords [them] a life very different, more exalted and more intense' than that to which their mundane circumstances would consign them – which is Emile Durkheim's (1975:23) definition of religion. By embracing the fistic faith, prizefighters make themselves over into living embodiments of professional morality.

In this respect – as in numerous others – boxers offer us but an exaggerated, idiosyncratic, instantiation of a generic social process. They show *how we learn morality: with and through our bodies*, by attaching deeply felt, visceral, 'prepredicative' reactions of disgust or attraction, rejection or assent, sympathy or antipathy, to definite classes of events, actions, and circumstances; by reshaping our inner sensual and emotive registers according to shared rules creating a sphere of recognition and therefore of collective existence. To put it otherwise, there is morality to (and in) the lived body. The socialized organism must be understood as the site and seat of a *practical, enacted ethics* – as opposed to the discursive, principial morality that concerns philosophers and moral theorists – emerging from 'a conversion in which the whole body is gathered' and worked out through 'tacit transpositions' operating 'from underneath "will"' (Merleau-Ponty 1945:192, 196, 190). This explains why it is so difficult to inculcate, modify, and repudiate moral beliefs, and why individuals who have thoroughly (re)fitted their body, that is to say, their self, to a particular moral universe – as do all social agents involved in 'high commitment' worlds such as the arts, science, or religion – find it nearly impossible to withdraw from it and would often perish in it rather than leave it.

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### Notes

1. Boxing's most famous figure, Muhammad Ali, is a good case in point: though he fancied advertising himself as the representative of the 'little man in the ghetto' (notably in his famed contests against 'Smokin' Joe Frazier), he came from a stable, deeply religious, working-class family which instilled in him abiding notions of discipline, respect, and honesty. His father, an independent billboard painter, recalls that Ali and his brother (who also fought as a professional) were 'good boys growing up. They didn't give us any trouble. They were church boys... And they didn't come out of no ghetto. I raised them on the best street I could [in segregated Louisville]. I made sure they were around good people: not people who would bring them into trouble. And I taught them values' (in Hauser 1991:15).
2. To put it differently: the experience of material hardship is propitious whereas that of social destitution tends to be deleterious. A veteran trainer expounds: 'You can get ten guys come into a gym, and the first nine drop away. The one who stays is usually the quiet, studious, disciplined type who has aggressive inner motivation that comes out when you put him through stress in boxing. The street tough doesn't make the best fighter. They have no discipline, and also with the bully type, the cowardly part of them comes out in the ring.' Recruits from the more established segments of the working class are better equipped 'because they've had something but they don't have everything. They've always had something. They've always had hope. They have a goal. Whereas the have-nots, there's not a lot of hope there... The have-nots don't generally make the best fighters' (cited in Bruant 1987:52–53).
3. The rules of confrontation in the ring, the systems of rankings and rewards, and the social and temporal organization of public performances are so different in amateur and professional boxing as to warrant treating them as different sporting worlds. Only a very small percentage of amateur fighters (likely fewer than one in twenty) make the fateful decision to 'turn pro.'
4. For a fuller analysis of the social locations and trajectories of boxers and of the peculiar relation of 'symbiotic opposition' between the gym and the street that form the backdrop of the trade, see Wacquant (1992a: esp. 225–236, 1995b). The distortions and deceptions of the 'externalist standpoint' are further dissected in Wacquant (1995a).
5. Stoneland is a pseudonym. The names of persons and places as well as minor identifying characteristics have been altered to respect the anonymity of friends, informants, and interviewees. Special care was taken in the transcriptions of inter-

- views and conversations to try and preserve the linguistic idiosyncrasies (idiom, pronunciation, rhythm, tone, emphasis) of the locutors.
6. Readers of a more theoreticist bent, who might not share the view that the best theory is that which is virtually inseparable from the object it brings to light, are reminded that 'no theorizing, however ingenious, and no observation of scientific protocol, however meticulous, are substitutes for developing a familiarity with what is actually going on in the sphere of life under study' (Blumer 1969:38-9).
  7. 'Through the social games it proposes, the social world procures for agents much more and something quite other than the apparent stakes, the manifest ends of action: the chase counts as much as the capture, if not more, and there is a *profit of action that exceeds the profits explicitly pursued*, wages, prizes, rewards, trophies, titles, and positions, and which consists in *escaping indifference and in asserting oneself as an active agent*, caught in and by the game, occupied, an inhabitant of the world inhabited by that world, projected towards ends and endowed - objectively and thus subjectively - with a social mission' (Bourdieu 1982:49, my translation and emphasis).
  8. I add here parenthetically that my apprenticeship of boxing thoroughly transmogrified my conception of, and relation to, my own body and my attentiveness to the corporeal basis and implications of all manners of activities, starting with research, teaching, and (in particular) lecturing.
  9. For useful contrasts between the Western and the ancient Chinese and modern Japanese conceptions of the body, see Lock (1980), Ames (1984), and Zito & Barlow (1994); a brief but stimulative discussion of the natural human body in Indian yoga and Japanese aikido is Levine (1994).
  10. Many boxers I interviewed volunteered that they deliberately avoid street fights not so much because of the possible legal complications entailed as because it violates their ethic of professionalism.
  11. 'A laborer who all his life performs one and the same simple operation converts his whole body into the automatic, specialized implement of that operation' (Marx 1973:339).
  12. A 27-year-old black heavyweight supported by his manager had this to say when I asked why he likes to train at his West Side gym: '(raving) Aw man! it's, it's, *it's beautiful*, man. (very gently) You know, I like trainin', you know. I'm able to keep my weight off. I like workin' with my body. A lotta people tell me, "yeah, you a body builder." I say, (with pride) "naw, I'mma fighter!" I keep my body lookin' goo'. It keeps me feelin' goo'. Know an' I get a lotta stuff off my min', you know, like frustrations, you know, problems.'
  13. Among heavyweights (190 pounds and over), the weight of a fighter is a trusted indicator of the seriousness of his training and serves as an advance notice of inadequate preparation. This is illustrated by the reaction of an experienced Chicago matchmaker upon learning of the excess baggage carried by James 'Buster' Douglas on the eve of his title defense against Evander 'The Real Deal' Holyfield: 'I was taking Douglas [and betting money on him] till I found out he was a fat pig. It's outrageous, isn't it (laughs)? 230, he's 15 pounds heavier [than in his previous bout against Tyson], it's stupid, foolish, *very foolish*. I thought Douglas would win. Now, that variance in weight, (ponderously) that upswing in weight is going to cause me to rethink.'

14. 'Heart is mysterious. It does not mean mindless courage. The man with heart must understand danger and experience fear and still come on, hurtling into the possibility of pain and defeat. He knows he can be defeated but he keeps on fighting. He is a gladiator, and if he must lose, well, then he will be carried with his shield.' (Bennett & Hamill 1978).
15. Acceptance is facilitated by the fact that pain is publicly acknowledged, if minimized, by the culture of the guild. The injurious effects of the collective denegation of occupational pain are evident in the world of professional pianists, within which excruciating hand pains (a major cause of the truncation of careers) are blamed on 'misuse' by doctors, on 'hard work' or the absence of 'genius' by virtuosos, and on 'lack of talent' by teachers (Alford & Szanto 1995).
16. This terse depiction by his doctor of the physical state of Muhammad Ali after the 'Thriller in Manila,' his third and most brutal fight against archrival Joe Frazier, gives a hint of the damage inflicted in the ring: 'Ali was badly beaten up. There were welts and bruises all over his body, and huge hematomas over both hips - collections of blood where Frazier had hit the hip sockets. His face was puffy. He wasn't disoriented, but he was as exhausted as a man can be to the point where he could barely talk. Later, he said that fight was the closest thing to death he knew of. And he was right. It took about twenty-four hours for his brain to recuperate, for his thought process to become complete. And the effects on the rest of his body lasted for weeks' (Ferdie Pacheco, in Hauser 1991:324-325).
17. Harvey Goldman (1993) offers a brilliant exegesis of Weber's implicit theory of the 'empowered self' as 'a countersocialized self' capable of resisting desires from within as well as temptations from without in order to fulfill his mission, a conception that has surprising affinities with Durkheim's treatment of individual moral duty.
18. This movement of mutual reinforcement is not only circular but also cyclical. For the boxer's life is organized into two successive and alternating phases: the one is 'sacred,' when he goes 'in training' for a bout and curtails his worldly concerns to abide by the ethic of 'sacrifice'; the other is 'profane' and is defined by a return to earthly interests and pleasures. A detailed analysis of the sensual and symbolic texture of these two phases would show that the first is homoerotic while the second is heteroerotic as well as heterosexual.
19. When I was in training for my bout in the Chicago Golden Gloves in the winter of 1990, my sparring partner (a rising welterweight undefeated in ten pro fights) fed me daily tips on what to consume, how to prepare and mix the various recommended foodstuffs, and how to rest properly. One afternoon, after our workout, he gave me a flask of honey along with a personal tutorial on when to take a sip from it and with what likely results. During this entire period, losing weight was a compulsive preoccupation, to the point where the quotidian weigh-in on the gym's scale (under the watchful eye of my old coach) became the high point of my day.
20. To the degree that food may be construed 'as a sexual' object of desire' that can 'supply sensual delight and succor' (Bordo 1993:112), culinary abstinence is a modality of erotic dieting or suppression, the object of the third commandment of the pugilistic catechism (as discussed below).

21. A boxer needs regular and plentiful sleep to recuperate from the rigors of training but also to lose weight without having to brutalize his body. How much and how well they slept, including in the hours just before the bout, is a leitmotiv of the biographies of champions.
22. An Italian-American trainer from a West Side gym has this opinion on whether fighters abstain from sex: 'I believe they don't. You might get one outa ten that do but I believe that when that, (smiling queasily) when that scene is there they're not gonna let it go (laughs briefly). [Does it help them if they do or say they do?] I think mentally, jus' knowin' that they can control it, I think it's a big you know mental, mental thing for 'em.'
23. Exclusive heterosexuality is culturally normative in the pugilistic universe, notwithstanding the acknowledged existence of homosexual fighters.

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## Configuring Gender: Male and Female in Mexican Heterosexual and Homosexual Relations

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**ABSTRACT** Mexican mestizo gender imagery is deceptively simple, represented through categorical and essentialist classifications of male and female. However, the essentialist notions which ground gender as unambiguous simultaneously work so as to disrupt the seemingly unequivocal categories of male and female. This article explores the way gendered distinctions are generated by examining the interconnections between heterosexual and male homosexual gender discourses in two Mexican mestizo contexts. Particular emphasis is placed on the significance of sexuality for eliciting meanings of gender, focusing on those cultural phenomena – such as motherhood, virginity, machismo, penetration – which serve to constitute same-sex relations and cross-sex relations differently.

**KEYWORDS** Gender, Mexico, morality, homosexuality

Over the last decade, issues of sex and gender have come to the fore of Latin American research in many different fields. These studies not only reflect the growing recognition of the significance of gender for grasping Latin American realities; they will undoubtedly affect the direction of future research in the area, both with respect to what they address and with respect to what they overlook, i.e., perspectives that have been displaced, muted or relegated to minor positions. Appearing in the wake of the dissolution of master narratives and all-encompassing explanatory paradigms, this body of knowledge reveals shifting analytical positions and gendered perspectives while offering detailed empirical material on local articulations and textual representations of gender relations, sex and sexuality.<sup>1</sup> The more recent focusing on masculinities has been particularly notable, with specific studies of homosexualities contributing significantly to an overall understanding of the workings – and trappings – of gender in Latin American contexts (see e.g. Lancaster 1992; Prieur 1994, 1998;