

# Whores, Slaves and Stallions: Languages of Exploitation and Accommodation among Boxers

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A notion commonly invoked by critics of professional boxing to explain the sport's continued existence is that fighters are naïve, overcredulous, incomprehending or ill-informed as to the real nature of their occupation – in short, dupes (or dopes) in this 'show business with blood' to which they devote a good chunk of their lives and limb(s). In reality, far from harboring any illusions, professional boxers are, if anything, hyperconscious of entering into a universe of no-holds-barred exploitation in which deception, manipulation, concealment and mistreatment are the normal order of things, and bodily damage and personal disrepair a customary consequence of the trade. One member of the gym on the South Side of Chicago where I apprenticed for some three years describes relations between ring associates as follows: 'Everybody tryinna outdo everybody an' everybody tryin' to hurt everybody an' everybody don' trust nobody.'<sup>1</sup> The tangible proofs of the corporeal ravages and personal misery that the profession entails are everywhere for boxers to see, notes a black middleweight from the city's West Side: 'All you gotta do is go to d'gyms and look around: you got lotta guys, they *legs are shot*, y'know, they jus' hang around d'gym and well they not doin' anything. An' you look at they career when they were comin' up they were doin' pretty decent, then afterwards, *tchhh!*, (sullen) they have nuthin' to fall back on, and it's *bad*.'

Fighters are unanimous in holding the view that the game is rife with 'crooked managers' ('It's like a ton of them, they out to make a quick buck') and they take it as axiomatic that promoters and matchmakers are 'fleshpeddlers' who will not

hesitate to dispatch them to ‘fight King Kong for a dime’ so long as it is in their pecuniary interest.<sup>2</sup> ‘When you a fighter an’ especially when you don’t have like *high people* around you’, explains an African-American lightweight who works occasionally as an electrician after a brief stint in the Marines, ‘it’s like you in a *big bowl with a lotta sharks*, you know what I’m sayin’, an’ they’re all like (sibilating in mock delight) “yeah you look juicy, I’ll take a bite outa your ass!”’ A young Puerto Rican light-heavyweight who moonlights as a security guard has this telling expression: ‘*They’re the ones walkin’ around with the leather shoes, we’re not, yeah, so . . . ’cuz* as a promoter, you never get a punch thrown at you, unless you’re a real bad promoter. An’ you got the money an’ you don’t gotta work hard for it.’

### Idioms of Corporeal Exploitation

The boxer’s consciousness of exploitation is expressed in three kindred idioms, those of *prostitution*, *slavery* and *animal husbandry*. The first likens the fighter–manager combo to the duo formed by the prostitute and her pimp; the second depicts the ring as a plantation and promoters and matchmakers as latter-day slave masters and drivers; the third intimates that boxers are treated in the manner of dogs, pigs, stallions and other commercially valued livestock. All three tropes simultaneously enounce and denounce the immoral, indeed inhumane, merchandising of disquieting live bodies.

According to the first language, pimp and manager would have this in common that, under the pretense of promoting the financial interest and protecting the physical (or emotional) integrity of their respective ‘partner’, they use and abuse them in a ruthless quest for lucre. Much like the prostitute offers her female body’s capacity for sexual performance for pay on the street, the fighter retails his male body’s trained ability to dish out, as well as to withstand, physical punishment between the ropes, and managers and promoters, standing in the wings, are the ones who reap most of the monies generated by this commerce of manly flesh.<sup>3</sup> An older ring ‘warhorse’ who has trekked across continental Europe many times as an ‘opponent’ for local fighters<sup>4</sup> put it in this cutting way:

All boxers, are what they call, figure of speech: they’re *fucked over*. You know, you see, they’re *pimps*, the promoters, you know. And boxers is like the *whores*, you know, so you pimp him. Yeah, that’s the way that go, I’m pretty sure. They don’t really have the bes’ interes’ in the fighter, you know. They jus’ goin’ for the gusto, *the gusto is the money*. (dejected but matter-of-fact) They jus’ goin’ for the money.

A younger colleague from a West Side gym who gave up a solid job as a TV cable installer in a satellite city to move to Chicago and pursue his career in the ring full time with the financial backing of the gym’s new owner seconds this view:

Oh yeah, it's a lot of managers tha' you can jus' say they're *pimps*: like they like to pimp a fighter, you know. They put 'em out there an' throw 'em in there with anybody, jus' for the money an' take mos' the money an' leave a fighter broke or with jus' enough to barely make it. It's a lot of managers like that who *use* fighters, jus' like a pimp will use a whore – the same way. (scornful) It's a lot of managers tha' are jus' hustlers. They jus' lookin' for any fighter to make a dime off 'em an' don' really care too much about the fighter's health or nuthin'.

The second idiom in which the visceral sense of exploitation and subordination to external dictates is expressed borrows from the historical experience of slavery. For obvious reasons, analogies to this institution of forced labor and 'natal alienation' (Patterson, 1982) are endowed with a unique resonance and high emotional charge for African-American boxers. My gym buddy and regular sparring partner Ashante, then an rising junior-welterweight with a long string of dead-end jobs on the side, recounts a particularly brutal fight which awakened him to the built-in economic inequity of boxing:

If you go in dere with a *nice tough fight, man, rewar' dis man*. I tol', I saw Highmower fight dis boy, man, *man!* (chuckle) I hated fightin', *I hated boxin' ever since*, I'm serious. Because, Louie, (incensed) Highmower an' dat boy nearly *killed each other*. Man, d' crowd wen' crazy, Ralph [the matchmaker] – I's, I's like, 'Look at dis shit!' Boy, *this is slavery all over again*. I mean, look at dis shit! Dese men is seriously killin' each other for (lowering his voice and whispering in joint disbelief and disgust) for a hun'ed dollars (stressing each word to dramatize his point) Highmower-cut, that-man-cut, they-all-wen'-down, three-an'-four-time-a-piece. Botha'em wen' to d'hospital, fer what, fer two hun'ed dollars, *hun'ed each man?* I said (shaking his head vigorously), 'No, that ain't – tha's not right.'

In the course of voicing his resolute opposition to governmental regulation of the trade, which he claims would 'effectively destroy boxing', the president of one of the major so-called 'federations' which sanction world titles bouts<sup>5</sup> (an African-American former fighter I interviewed in Atlantic City in the early 1990s), conceded that there do exist '... some promoters who wanta *deviate*, who wanta get an advantage or an edge up on another guy, who don't want to have the mandatory fight [in defense of a title] because they're afraid their fighter *might lose*. Or who want to *tie up a fighter* indefinitely with five or six options – *slavery went out with Lincoln* and they want to make some of these fighters *slaves* and that's not good.'

The third language of exploitation among prizefighters conjures up animal and farming metaphors that debase boxers to the rank of beasts to be reared, fed, trained and displayed – even devoured with cannibalistic cruelty – at the will and whim of those who hold the economic levers of the game. One evening, as he was showing me the various spots near his apartment that served for the open-air sale of drugs, Luke abruptly launched into an angry tirade about the tangled disputes between his trainer, his manager and Ralph, the white matchmaker who exercises

near-monopolistic control over the city's boxing economy. He resented in particular the fact that his coach had sided with Ralph when the latter maneuvered underhandedly to prevent Luke from fighting out of town for bigger purses:

I's like, dey want me to fight when Ralph want me to fight. Like, like, like if *I'm a horse in a barn, I get up ev'ry mornin', my trainer take me out an' run me, dey clean me, dey feed me, an' put me back in my, back in my barn room, and den, Ralph come by and say* (in an exaggeratedly jovial voice), 'Hey, how you're doin'?' He stops an' he, y'know, in d'office: (in a mellifluous voice, imitating a white inflection) *'How that black stallion doin'?' You know, 'He doin' okay.' An' den, they'll pick a few of the guys who's gonta fight, keep me in my stable, I'm runnin' an' I'm trainin' right? Den he say: (sternly) 'Never gonna let him fight.'*

Exploitative relations are not limited to those linking fighters to managers and promoters. They can extend, capillary-style, to trainers, gym mates and rivals, and to the collection of characters who hang in the entourage of boxers and that the lore labels 'gym rats'. Phonzo is a loner who never complains about anything ('I never dwell on the negative, people don' bother me, nobody bother me. Not even you: *no one*') and who has enjoyed unusual success in the squared circle: he is one of a handful of fighters from Chicago who have conquered a world title over the past two decades. Yet, when we reflect upon the economic upshot of his career, sitting together in the gym's backroom, everything about him, his demeanor, body torque, tone and glare reveals that he is filled to the brim with bitterness. After many long years of 'sacrifice' abiding by the ascetic regimen of the prize-fighter, running and training daily, following murderous diets, and curtailing his social and sexual life, he finally got to strap on a champion's belt.<sup>6</sup> But what should have been the apotheosis of his professional life and motive for personal exultation turned out an empty and joyless moment.

Phonzo: You find that through *finance an' money* – money is power here in America – so, since money's power, money can make you a lotta enemies, also money can make you a whole lotta impostors frien's. (visibly pained by the remembrance) So hum, I thought I had frien's, still now. . . . But when the money started gettin' decent, (his voice and gaze turning cold) those frien's turned to *scavengers*. An' when a frien' turn to a scavenger, they pick your bones *clean*: they use you, take a 'vantage of you, abuse you, jus' like you were a *pig* or anythin'. They *eat you alive*. So when I came to a position of that happenin', I didn' have the same people that when I started out, I was a very unhappy person. So when I won the championship I didn' win it with the people that *I trusted*. And the one's you trusted'll sometimes turn against you, y'know? An' uh, winnin' the championship was a satisfaction, but it wasn' d'same.

Louie: Not bein' with the people that you wanted to be with took the joy away?

Phonzo: Took the joy, right.

Louie: Is that somethin' you regret?

Phonzo: I don' regret nuthin' in life. Only God know what happen in life an' why it happen. . . . It's jus' when people look at you like bein' like *a bar of soap* an' not a human bein', they lose respect for you. An' when they lose respect for you, you lose respect for them. An' when

you got two people who's doin' bus'ness that ain't got no respect for each other, you don' have a good bus'ness plan. Or you don' have a good bus'ness . . . situation. (very tense and quickly, bitterly, without taking in a breath) '*Cuz everybody tryinna outdo everybody an' everybody tryin' to hurt everybody an' everybody don' trust nobody an' when you got a situation like that, you got (grave and guttural) chaos, an' when you got chaos, well, for a game, in like boxin', you got a problem like this, you got more problems than you got to handle 'em.*

So that was the reason, I don' complain: I'm glad that I got out the game, 'cuz I get out without no cauliflower ears, wi' all my teeth in my mouth, without havin' broken ribs – only thing I had broken several times was my han's, that's because I hit so hard.

These three languages of exploitation are in no way incompatible with one another and, in point of fact, boxers often deploy them together in varying combinations. In his testimony during the 'Hearings on Corruption in Professional Boxing' held by the US Senate in summer of 1992 following the media uproar caused by a grotesquely biased decision that deprived him of a world title in a nationally televised bout, Dave 'TNT' Tiberi, a white middleweight from Delaware, took the anthropophagous metaphor one step further when he declared to bemused senators that 'the majority of fighters, depending upon their respective levels of talent, are viewed by their promoters as prime ribs, others pork chops, and the least talented scrapple, but rarely are they recognized as human beings'. Explaining that the International Boxing Federation had allowed him to challenge for the belt of its champion James Toney only after he had first relinquished his own crown with the rival International Boxing Council and signed a three-fight option with Toney's promoter, Tiberi shifts register: 'Thinking back on the circumstances, it was like being bought at a slave auction (. . .) I sometimes find it hard to consider boxing a sport. For many promoters, it has become their private legalized slave industry' (US Senate, 1992: 10, 11). The accompanying deposition of James Pritchard, the IBF Intercontinental cruiserweight titlist, adds a vampiric touch to the haunting vision in which the lifeblood of fighters is being drained out of them to be consumed by parasitic profiteers. Pritchard has worked under three managers, all three of whom he characterizes as 'bloodsuckers': 'Like a mosquito bite, he bites you and sucks your blood. That is what they do. When they latch onto you, they just suck everything out of you they can possibly get' (US Senate, 1992: 30). Blood sucked, flesh picked, bones cleaned, vitality sapped and stolen: these expressions vividly convey the boxer's carnal appreciation of being an undervalued and endangered bodily commodity.<sup>7</sup>

### Integrity through Accommodation

The overwhelming majority of professional fighters – 88 percent of those plying their trade in Illinois in 1991 – hold that their services are grossly underpaid and

they are quite vociferous in complaining that the purses they receive amount to 'chump change' and 'peanuts'. A full 86 percent of them consider that a 'fair purse' would have to equal or exceed \$100 per round, *twice the going rate* in Chicago at that time (see Table 1). When I asked him if he thought that the city's pugilists are receiving 'fair pay' for their labor, an unemployed black welterweight four years in the business responded with scarcely contained anger:

*No, they're not! No, they're bein' cheated, they're bein' robbed, uh, an' boxin' in Chicago, to me, this is my personal way of speakin', boxers in Chicago, (very loudly) has been ABUSED an' USED an' justice has never revealed in they favor in Chicago, okay? Because uh, the guys are underpaid, an' they're overtrain', an' they can never make the things they need to make in boxin' because uh, no one really cared 'bout them.*

Yet, at the same time as they express a perfervid and often pained sense of exploitation, boxers rarely rise up to denounce their economic fate as a gross injustice. Instead, in their workaday world, they practically reconcile themselves to the distinct prospect, if not actuality, of being fleshly merchandise to be bought, sold and bartered. Three 'vocabularies of motive' (Mills, 1940) enable them to achieve this compromise and to construct a sense of personal and professional integrity, understood as 'taking responsibility for one's own life project, within the limits and pressures imposed by structural constraints, in accordance with consistent conceptions of the right way to live, and in partnership with others'.<sup>8</sup>

The first vocabulary asserts plainly that *exploitation is an inescapable fact of life, a datum brutum* of ordinary existence for ordinary folks with which one has to make do as best as one can. The source of its persuasiveness is obvious: economic exploitation *is* a constant in the nether regions of American social space where boxers and their associates dwell; the only parameters that vary are its phenomenal forms, its intensity and its beneficiaries.<sup>9</sup> Under that angle, prize-fighting differs little from the other social games to which proletarian young men from inner-city neighborhoods have access, given the truncated opportunities supplied by a bankrupt public school system and the long-term marginality

Table 1 What boxers would consider 'fair pay' for a six-round fight<sup>a</sup>

<500 dollars	5	11%
500 dollars	6	13%
600–800 dollars	20	45%
>1000 dollars	14	31%
(total)	(45)	(100)

Source: Author's survey of Illinois professional fighters (1991).

<sup>a</sup>Actual purses range from 200 to 300 dollars.

promised by an unskilled employment market awash with cheap labor (McLeod, 1994; Holzer, 1996). As my gym mate Butch, a firefighter and pug with over a decade of experience in the ring, put it succinctly:

If you have a poor class of people who have nothin', uneducated, the job market is bad and then this guy says, 'Well look, if you two guys fight, I'll give you a hundred un' fifty', *how can he say no?* They taken advantage of yer situation. If he had money in his pocket and a job, he wouldn't git him to go fight. So *yes*, the poor poverty background makes helluva fighters, 'cause they'll fight, 'cause they don't have anythin' else. And once they learn to make money, the causin' pain and injury to somebody else gits to be *easy* money and, they jus' keep doin' it till they can't do it anymore, till they become easy money for somebody else.

Much as in the informal economy of the ghetto, with which the pugilistic economy mixes and merges at many junctures, one must accept taking risks if one expects to beget some profits. The same Afro-American bantamweight who is vituperative over the fact that promoters 'do boxers like dogs, do 'em just like dogs', assimilates them in the same breath to shady operators who, like him, deploy their smarts and guile in the booty capitalism of the street. 'That's not no different than doin' what I's doin': makin' money *hustlin'*.'<sup>10</sup> Isn't life itself an immense ongoing lottery of sorts, anyway? A Mexican welterweight who insists that he is fully conscious of the abuses routinely perpetrated by promoters and yet recently signed a long-term contract with one of the four major promotion houses in the land, clarifies: 'You *take your chance*: you take a chance jus' walkin' down the road, you know, of getting' run ova by a car, or somebody tryin' to rob you, while you takin' your wife to a picnic or somethin'.' Under conditions of pervasive uncertainty, instead of being resentful of promoters and managers, some boxers feel thankful for the chance that the latter grant them to play this queer *lottery with one's skillful body* that is prizefighting. This is the opinion of Surly, an intermittently employed heavyweight from one of the roughest public housing projects from the city's West Side:

I guess a lot of 'em, if they weren't really there, you know, you woul'n' have a chance, you know. It's the chance you have to take. (huffing) It's a chance in everythin'. If you shootin' dice, you takin' a chance on winnin' or losin'. Boxin' is jus' like gamblin' in a sense. You know, but it's jus', aspect of havin' a certain amount of skill too, so, even though *you gamblin'*, *you have a skill abou' what you doin'*.

What is more, the odious reputation of the planet of fisticuffs is such that no one on it can credibly claim that he is genuinely being deceived: every participant knows full well that boxing is like a tank of sharks where he who does not devour others is doomed to become their meal sooner or later (Wacquand, 1998). To enter into the pugilistic economy thus presupposes *ab initio* the acceptance, tacit or explicit, of a subordinate and exploited position. Martin, a black

cruiserweight, who fought 'pro' for nine years while working his way up from meter reader to a desk job in the customer service division of a big utility company, muses:

I knew in life that I wanted to fight an' whether a man comes along call himself a 'promoter' an' you call him a 'flesh peddler', I've already subscribed to that position to be a fighter an' he's the flesh peddler. So, promoters are only interested in you if you can fight, you know – *same as with all jobs*: all jobs only interested in us as long as we are willin' to come to work, if we don't come to work, the job is no longer interested in us. So uh, (shakes his head morosely) I understand my position, understand it clearly an' understand that if such a person as a promoter comes along, that's his job, an' uh, yeah, but they, they are only interested in you if you can fight, if you wanna call it flesh peddlin', yeah, that's what they are. Still I got in the game, *knowin' I would be flesh* (laughs), yeah.

A second force fostering the practical acquiescence of prizefighters to hideously exploitative arrangements is the *spirit of entrepreneurship* that pervades the craft. From the moment they step into a gym, 'manly artists' are fed a steady diet of folk notions and narratives that lionize the defiant individual and portray the boxer as a lone warrior, a modern-day gladiator out to prove his mettle by seizing his own fate, as it were, with his balled fist.<sup>11</sup> This entrepreneurial vocabulary of motive is rooted in the occupational experience of *corporeal self-production*: in training, the boxer uses his own body as the raw materials as well as the tool to refashion that very body in accordance with the peculiar exigencies of the craft; he engages in specialized bodily work aimed at producing a specific type of corporeal capital that can be sold and valorized on the pugilistic market (Wacquant, 1995).

Through endless 'roadwork' (daily morning runs of 3 to 6 miles), 'floorwork' (shadow-boxing, punching an assortment of bags, rope skipping and calisthenics) and 'ringwork' (rehearsing moves and sparring in the ring), the fighter 'develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway' (Marx, 1956: 148). In so doing, he transforms his organism, appropriates its capacities and literally produces a new embodied being out of the old. And he is given a stage on which to affirm his moral valor and construct a heroic, transcendent self which allows him to escape the status of 'non-person' (Goffman, 1959: 151–2) to which (sub)proletarians like him are typically consigned. Last but not least, the particular skills that boxers acquire in the course of their occupational activities are seated in their organism and, as such, constitute their inalienable personal property. Professional fighters are *artisans of the (violent masculine) body* who, much like their counterparts of the Industrial Revolution, glory in the pride of 'having a trade' rather than 'being in a trade' (Hobsbawm, 1984: 262).

Boxers relish being right 'at the point of production', being *self-made men* in the literal sense that they produce themselves through daily bodily work in

the gym and out. Many of them also initially enter the profession out of a combination of love for the game and desire to escape the 'slave jobs' of downgraded manufacturing and the new service economy, in which one has to 'shine somebody shoes' and put up with personal submission, cultural humiliation and loss of masculine honor as a condition of durable employment – and all this to earn a pittance that supplies neither economic security nor chances for promotion (Bourgois, 1995). They correspondingly construe prizefighting as an escape route from the modal fate of 'workin' twenty diff'rent jive jobs' that lead nowhere. Says Vinnie, an Italian-American pug who reluctantly turned pro after a local businessman and family friend offered to underwrite his career:

If I hadn't found boxing, I'd probably be in the streets, either jus' workin' like an average citizen, workin' for a check, havin' to take someone's orders – yeah that *kills me* to think of it!

Louie: Really? So boxing is a way to get away from that?

Vinnie: *Definit'ly*, definit'ly. That's why I say, the kids that aren't involved in boxing or in sports and things, go to school, you don't have to do that! (gesturing animatedly) Be your own, your own entrepreneur, *be your own boss*, don't have to listen to no one, don't take no one else's shit, make your own money.

The forceful affirmation of his individual 'agency' finds its counterpart in the fighter's paradoxical negation – or downplaying – of the economic responsibility of managers and promoters as it deflects attention away from the impersonal arrangements and structured relationships that effectively determine the shape, pace and outcome of boxing careers (Wacquant, 1998).

Lastly, with the interested complicity of his peers, trainers, friends and supporters, every boxer clings to the self-serving notion that he will be the *individual exception to the collective rule*: he is the one who will buck the trend, beat the odds and transgress the universal law of pugilistic extortion. Out of sheer dedication, unbending will and constant vigilance, he will manage to 'get his' without getting spoiled in the process. Such is the position defended by Don, a former 'contender' who has lately turned into a valuable second-tier fighter on the national circuit by virtue of his solid ring skills and white skin.<sup>12</sup> 'My own self, if I'm lookin' out for myself, I don't allow anybody to take advantage of me: (firmly) *I don't allow it*.' This determination is echoed by Roderick, a black lightweight who had a taste of 'the big time' when his manager sent him to work as a sparring partner for elite fighters in the gyms of Las Vegas: 'To me, yes, I agree with that all the way [that promoters exploit people].' 'Yet you got into the game?' 'What, but the only way, *I can fight*, you know: that's the difference, that I can fight. I can back myself up.' 'You don't think someone will use you?' 'Not unless I let 'em, so if I stay aware, *stay alert*, I won't get hurt.'

A gym mate concurs: '*Put it that way: I know it's not goin' to happen, you know, 'cause I'm jus' kinda person if I know it's happenin' I'll go tell you to fuck yourself.*' As for Martin, the black cruiserweight who admits to being 'flesh' to be peddled, he invokes special protection from the heavens: 'I got a *Saviour* that take care of me so I don't worry about how – I know people try to use me but uh, the good Lord not gonna let that happen to me.'

In the final analysis, the responsibility for exploitation is laid squarely on the boxer who is invited to claim the paternity of his eventual misfortune in the pugilistic field alongside that of his deeds. If he wants to boast authorship of his acts in the glory of fisticuffs success, then he must be ready to assume the agony of professional failure, economic defilement and bodily destruction, insists a young black middleweight who boxes by day and works as security guard by night:

I think tha's true, *some* [that promoters exploit poor minorities], you know, not all, it's *some*. I mean, a person can on'y use you as far as you let 'em. A person can on'y hang you out to dry as far as you let 'em. You feel a person is usin' you, I thin' you shoul' stop an' talk to 'em an' fin' out wha's goin' on: you have a right you know. You shoul' have controlin' int' res' in your contrac'. Never let a promoter or a manager have controlin' int' res' in you, (blurting out) because *you the fighter, man, you the one tha's puttin' yer life on the line, not him.*

All told, boxing is nothing but a 'capit'list bizness' like any other and promoters, like any good entrepreneur, are just doing their job when they earn money from the toil and sweat of others. A Puerto-Rican policeman who twice fought for the state title in the lightweight division weaves the theme of the inescapability of exploitation with that of the responsibility of the fighter as an independent operator:

Yeah, I think pretty much, I feel the same, you know, that's their *job*, that's the way they make their livin' you know what I'm sayin'? *You can't blame them in a way* because they haveta make a livin' but you *can* blame 'em in a way because they're ruinin' somebody, they're ruinin' a kid that might have good-good potential. Jus' 'cause that kid has no money behind 'im, he's gettin' used as *bait*, an' that's not right, you know what I'm sayin'? But if the kid was smart enough then he wouldn't let that happen to himself, *I know it ain't gonna happen to me*, you know what I'm sayin', 'cause I know better.

Lastly, for those who, having sunk in years of intensive bodily labor in the specific economy, possess no other qualifications and no short-term alternative – outside of the no less dangerous commerce of 'hot' merchandise and narcotics – to generate the income required to cover basic living expenses, brute economic necessity takes over. This is the case of an African-American heavyweight who has been hired out repeatedly by his trainer as an 'opponent' on televised shows with virtually no chance of winning and who readily admits that he is being utilized by promoters to further their own ends. Knowing that managers and promoters are exploiters does not stop him from fighting: 'Yeah.' 'Why?' 'Cos I

like it.' 'You don't think you might get used like that?' 'No. Somewhat, to some extent yeah.' 'And you're not concerned about it?' 'Yeah, I'm concerned, but I gotta *make a livin'*, I gotta do it.'<sup>13</sup>

Together, the doxic belief inscribed deep in the bodily dispositions of the fighter, in the normalcy of exploitation, in the 'agency' of corporeal entrepreneurship and in the possibility of individual exceptionalism help produce the *collective misrecognition* that leads boxers to collude in their own commercialization and practically consent to 'sink[ing] to the level of a commodity, and to a most miserable commodity' (Marx, 1964: 120). As for the unusual *intensity* of exploitation in that economy, it is a direct function of the social and ethnoracial distance between exploiter and exploited as well as of the gaping disparity in the volume and types of capital they possess: on the one side, fighters typically own little more than their trained organism and the moral valiance needed to valorize it in a rough and risky trade; on the other side, managers and promoters virtually monopolize the specific competencies and assets required to run the business. The near-total absence of regulation by the bureaucratic agencies of the state, in turn, is an expression of the marginal and tainted status of the trade in the universe of professional athletics and popular entertainment, as well as of the correspondingly low class and ethnic position of its practitioners and consumers, as my gym mate Smithie perceptively notes: 'See it's a profession that if you had *college grads*, if you had *diplomats*, if you had people of, of certain *cultures*, okay, that went into d'game an' was *fighters*, well then they would demand that [more regulation]. But see the callibar of people that you have in d'game, demand that callibar of repore [rapport], okay, that callibar of business okay? So one can reflect upon the other.'

## Notes

This article draws in part on a longer paper titled 'The Passion of the Pugilist: Desire and Domination in the Making of Prizefighters', given as the Morrison Library Inaugural Lecture, University of California, Berkeley, 25 April 1995. It benefited from the encouragement of Jack Katz and from the sharp editorial eye of Megan L. Comfort. A shorter version was presented to the Workshop on Popular Culture, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia Social, Museu nacional, Rio de Janeiro, on 3 May 2000, with thanks due to José Sérgio Leite Lopes, Federico Neiburg and the workshop participants.

1. This article is based on 35 months of ethnographic fieldwork and 'observant participation' (1988–91) in a boxing gym located in Chicago's black ghetto during which I learned how to box (well enough to enter the Chicago Golden Gloves and to spar on a regular basis with 'pros'), attended amateur tournaments and professional 'cards' throughout the Midwest and in Atlantic City, observed and engaged trainers, managers and matchmakers in their natural setting, and generally followed my friends from the gym in their everyday lives. In it, I draw on the 2,200 pages of my diary, my field notebooks, the life stories of my buddies from the Stoneland Boys Club (a pseudonym), and in-depth interviews with all 50 professional boxers active in the state of Illinois during the summer of 1991.

2. See Wacquant (1998) for a detailed analysis of the structure and functioning of the prizefighting economy as a system of exchange and mutual conversion of bodily capital and economic capital made possible by collective misrecognition.

3. 'I'm a whore who sells his blood instead of his ass. But that comes with the sport. I never made much money being good lookin', but there's always somebody who'll pay me to take a punch. And I can take a punch, darlin'. It's a natural gift. This piece of granite on my shoulders can absorb a lot of punishment. They don't pay me to be bright' (Randall 'Tex' Cobb, a white journeyman heavyweight, cited in Hauser, 1986: 106). A better analog for the prizefighter across the gender line might be women performers in commercial pornography (Stoller and Levine, 1993; Wacquant, 1997), although that activity is morally reprov'd even in the proximate milieu of porn actresses whereas prizefighting is held in high esteem in the lower regions of social space from which boxers issue.

4. In boxing parlance, an 'opponent' is a skilled but limited (or 'over-the-hill') fighter who is willing to go on the road and fight strictly for money against superior foes. He is typically brought in by a promoter to face (the lingo says: to be 'fed to') an up-and-coming boxer with a view towards improving the record and advancing the career of the latter. Shapiro (1988) draws a sensitive portrait of 'opponents'; Brunt (1987) depicts several of them at work.

5. These organizations, often referred to derisively by boxing people as 'the alphabet bandits', are self-appointed agencies which operate in cahoots with promoters to publish rankings and collect huge 'sanctioning fees' in exchange for giving the championship tag to fights sold to television networks. The three majors are the World Boxing Association (created in 1962), a 'small brotherhood of Latin Americans' which is 'little more than a corrupt joke'; the World Boxing Council (1963), operated as 'the personal fiefdom' of José Suleiman, a Lebanese-born and US-educated industrialist from Mexico in conjunction with Don King Productions (Hauser, 1986: 95, 98); and the International Boxing Federation (1983), recently placed under court receivership after its top officials were charged by federal prosecutors with multiple counts of corruption (including selling their ratings to certain managers and promoters under the table). In recent years, they have faced growing competition from a bevy of smaller self-proclaimed 'world federations', such as the IBC, WBO, IBO, etc.

6. The professional ethic of 'sacrifice' and training regimen of pro fighters is described at length in 'Pugs at Work' (Wacquant, 1995).

7. As pointed out by Orlando Patterson (1982: 388), the image of bones being picked and cleaned is also a frequent motif in the language of slaves the world over: 'You eated me when I was meat, now you must pick me when I am bones.' This sentiment of being 'eaten alive' is also a common form of consciousness among manual workers operating under superexploitative conditions in a physically injurious setting, e.g. most famously in the cases of the tin miners of the Bolivian highlands described by June Nash (1979) and of the Brazilian sugar factory workers dissected in José Sérgio Leite Lopes's (1978) classic study, *O Vapor do Diabo*. The vampiric figure of blood sucking is recounted by Abdelmalek Sayad (1991) in his vivid depiction of Algerian migrant laborers in France.

8. To borrow the characterization of the 'practice of integrity' elaborated by T. Dunbar Moodie (1994: 2) in the case of black African migrant workers toiling in the gold mines of South Africa.

9. This doxic acceptance of exploitation as a constant of life is taken to a paroxysm by this unemployed lightweight from a poor black suburb of Chicago who discerns in present inequity the unmistakable harbinger of future success with almost religious fervor: 'Yeah because *I monna make my money* an' see when it's my turn to make my money, I monna make it. It's, *anythin' that come easy is not worth it, for havin'* so I know I gotta struggle, I gotta *struggle-struggle-struggle*, I got to go without an' stuff like that but *I chose* this field to go into so *I know* it's gonna be rough.'

10. At the end of his interview, in a diner near the gym one summer evening, this boxer-hustler offered to take me to his gambling den and later insisted on trying to sell me an assortment of stolen merchandise, including a used handgun (for \$150) and a submachine gun in mint condition (for \$300).

11. The (auto)biographies of champions, from Papa Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey to Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali and Oscar de la Hoya, are nearly identical iterations of this theme of superhuman singularity and individual success in the face of formidable hardships. In these pre-packaged life stories, boxers emerge as quintessential Horatio Algers of the masculine body.

12. White fighters have become more valued economically as they have become more scarce, especially in the upper weight divisions for which gate receipts and purses are by far the highest.

13. On the motivations of 'bums' and 'tomato cans' to continue to fight absent the prospect of victory and in spite of their utter lack of skills, see Wacquant (1998: 12–13).

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