



On pugilistic piety¹

Sobre la devoción pugilística

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Writing about prizefighting and reconnecting with my gym mates three decades after my novitiate in the sweet science has brought back mostly happy and nostalgic memories. It plunged me into a cottony mood of pugilistic remembrance and motivated me to return to my field materials. I gingerly reopened the dozen dusty black binders containing my typed fieldnotes and surfed giddily across the 1,556 files distributed in 38 folders created at the time in my computer for that research project. From piles of documents I excavated lost pictures and a hand-drawn map of 63rd Street recording every vacant lot, abandoned building, storefront church, and commercial establishment sprinkled along the desolate mile connecting Cottage Grove Avenue to Stony Island Avenue that instantly evoked in me myriad events and emotions, both public and intimate.² I digitally scanned the thousand-odd slides I shot in and around the gym over three years, rediscovering urban landscapes, ordinary scenes of train-

ing, fretful sorties at amateur tournaments and professional shows, and assorted personal encounters. And I unearthed more unfinished texts, raw notes to myself, outlines of planned articles, and thematic drafts than I care to count or dare mention.

How does this biographical “revisit” of the Woodlawn Boys Club through the life trajectories of its key members complicate or alter the portrait of the manly art I drew back in 2000?³ Each reader can assess for themselves the empirical congruence and analytic consistency between the earlier, forward-looking, account of the fabrication of the pugilistic habitus and the later, retrospective supplements on its deployment in and beyond the ring. Regardless, one source of difference lies squarely with the author and his viewpoint as a view taken from a point in social space. I wrote *Body and Soul* very quickly, almost in a trance, to capture and convey the sensual and moral magnetism of prizefighting by

¹ Excerpted from *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, expanded anniversary edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

² On the uses of pictorial and scriptural forms in the imaginative logic of ethnographic discovery, see Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

³ For stimulative reflections on the pitfalls and profits of revisiting a field project, read Michael Burawoy, “Revisits: An Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography,” *American Sociological Review* 68, no 5 (2003): 645-679.

enwrapping the reader inside its social microcosm, thereby mirroring in the very structure of the book the irresistible *phenomenological closure and engulfment* that boxers themselves experience as they progress in their moral and professional career.⁴ Even though I was a decade removed from my Chicago days, I had continued training intermittently (at the Somerville Boxing Club near Boston, the Times Square Gym in New York City and King's Boxing Gym in Oakland, near the Fruitvale BART station) and, in the feverish months of writing, it was easy for me to become entranced again by the world I was painting—which I take to be a necessary condition for fleshing out (literally) the full carnal account I put forth. Also, in assembling the book, I reworked texts that had been written contemporaneously with my apprenticeship and were therefore soaked in that experiment.

Three decades later, not only do we get a reckoning of the *via dolorosa pugilistica* perceived, not through its enchanted promise at the start, but from its utterly prosaic end points. The author is also socially and existentially much further removed from the pugilistic cosmos as well as from his former gym comrades. Living the privileged and monkish life of the scholar—which, Pierre Bourdieu never tires of reminding us, comes from the Greek *skholé*, meaning leisure—no doubt changed my perspective on the fistic vocation, its immediate allure, and its pressing determinants. I have

now resided for decades in an “emotional community”⁵ that sacralizes bodily integrity and whose threshold of tolerance for pain and displays of interpersonal violence is at a historical nadir, and thus at complete loggerheads with the affective profile of prizefighting.

I became aware of this chasm when, while drafting this postface, I took to watching old fights from the 1970s and 1980s on YouTube, starting with the titanic battles of the “golden generation” of heavyweights, Ali, Frazier, Norton, Foreman and Holmes. Late at night, eying my tablet, I was *shocked* and nearly *sickened* by the *brutality* of their clashes—I keep stumbling over the word “brutality,” because it is fundamentally antithetical to the pugilistic point of view of craft, honor, and morality as I constructed and experienced it myself, but I cannot find a better one to express my hushed revulsion at the methodical and willful mutual battering of huge muscular (black) men in the ring.⁶ I kept thinking of the physical damage thus inflicted upon, and indeed of the impairment suffered by, many of my Woodlawn mates decades after their rumblings in the ring. And, *at the same time*, truth be told, part of me is viscerally admiring of the skill, cunning, and courage of those same men. And so I have kept on watching, but with a turbid sense of disquiet that suggests that, in shifting from touch to sight in my primary mode of sensory entanglement with the trade, I may well have lost my pugilistic piety.⁷

⁴ This was the rationale for backgrounding the structural analysis of class, race and space in the black American (hyper)ghetto, which is taken up in the companion volume to grow out of this project, Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

⁵ I borrow this notion from the medieval historian Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), who stresses the plurality of such communities in any society and the resulting tensions between differing sets of “norms of emotional expression and value” (p. 2).

⁶ Wacquant, L., “The Pugilistic Point of View”. This emotive reaction became clear to me during my weekly dominical conversations with Chris Muller, whom I thank for pushing me to share this postscriptural reflection.

⁷ This is in keeping with the theoretical arguments of both Émile Durkheim (in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) and Norbert Elias (in *The Civilizing Process*, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell [1939] 1994), for whom particular standards of cognition and emotion are anchored by distinctive social structures: remove those structures and the corresponding standards will appear shocking, improper, or downright nonsensical.