Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer
The Taste and Ache of Action

Preface to the U.S. Edition

Nihil humanum alienum est.
-Baruch Spinoza

This book is both a kind of sociological-pugilistic eildungsroman retracing a personal experience of initiation into a bodily craft that is as notorious for its heroic symbol ism-Muhammad Ali is no doubt, ahead even of Pelé, the most famed and celebrated man walking the planet-as it is mysterious in its prosaic reality, and a scientific experiment. It aims to provide a demonstration in action of the fruitfulness of an approach that takes seriously, at the theoretical, methodological, and rhetorical levels, the fact that the social agent is before anything else a being of flesh, nerves, and senses (in the twofold meaning of sensual and signifying), a “suffering being” (leidenschaftliches Wesen, as the young Marx put it in his Manuscripts of 1844) who partakes of the universe that makes him, and that he in turn contributes to making, with every fiber of his body and his heart. Sociology must endeavor to clasp and restitute this carnal dimension of existence, which is particularly salient in the case of the boxer but is in truth shared in various degrees of visibility by all women and men, through a methodical and meticulous work of detection and documentation, deciphering and writing liable to capture and to convey the taste and the ache of action, the sound and the fury of the social world that the established approaches of the social sciences typically mute when they do not suppress them altogether.

To accomplish that, there is nothing better than initiatory immersion and even moral and sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation,
construed as a technique of observation and analysis that, on the express condition that it be theoretically armed, makes it possible for the sociologist to appropriate in and through practice the cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, and conative schemata that those who inhabit that cosmos engage in their everyday deeds. If it is true, as Pierre Bourdieu contends, that "we learn by body" and that "the social order inscribes itself in bodies through this permanent confrontation, more or less dramatic, but which always grants a large role to affectivity," then it is imperative that the sociologist submit himself to the fire of action in situ, that to the greatest extent possible he put his own organism, sensibility, and incarnate intelligence at the epicenter of the array of material and symbolic forces that he intends to dissect; that he strive to acquire the appetites and the competencies that make the diligent agent in the universe under consideration, so as better to plumb the inner depths of this "relation of presence to the world, and being in the world, in the sense of belonging to the world, being possessed by it, in which neither the agent nor the object is posited as such," and that nonetheless defines them both as such and joins them by a thousand complicitous ties that are all the stronger for being invisible. So much to say that boxers have a great deal to teach us here, about prizefighting of course, but also and above all about ourselves.

It would however be artificial and misleading to present the research of which this book offers a first account in a predominantly narrative mode (as prelude and stepping-stone to a second, more explicitly theoretical work) as animated by the will to prove the value of carnal sociology and to concretely put its validity to the test. For in reality it is the opposite that occurred: it is the need to understand and fully master a transformative experience that I had neither desired nor anticipated, and that long remained confusing and obscure to me, that drove me to thematize the necessity of a sociology not only of the body, in the sense of object, but also from the body, that is, deploying the body as tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge.

I landed in the Woodlawn boxing gym by default and by accident. At the time, I was seeking an observation point from which to scrutinize, listen to, and touch up-close the everyday reality of the black American ghetto, which I had undertaken to study at the invitation of, and in close collaboration with, the eminent African-American sociologist William Julius Wilson? but of which I did not have the slightest practical apprehension, having grown up in a middle-class family in a small village in southern France. From the outset, it seemed to me impossible, for reasons both ethical and epistemological, to write about the South Side of Chicago without getting at least a rough sociological grasp of it at ground level, considering that its grinding poverty was spread out beneath my balcony (literally, since the University of Chicago had assigned me the very last available apartment of its student-housing stock, the one that nobody had wanted precisely because it was located right on the demarcation line of the black neighborhood of Woodlawn, on a border marked out every fifty yards by white emergency telephones used to call out the cars of the university's private police in case of need). And because the normal sociology of the relations between class, caste, and state in the U.S. metropolis seemed to me riddled with false concepts that obscure the reality of the ghetto by projecting onto it the racial (and racist) common sense of the national society, beginning with the tale of the "underclass," a bastard neologism that conveniently allowed scholars to absolve white domination and the ineptitude of the authorities on the social and urban fronts by focusing attention on the ecology of poor neighborhoods and the alleged "antisocial" behavior of their residents.

After several months spent in a vain quest for a place where I could insert myself to observe the local scene, a French friend who practiced judo took me to the gym on 63rd Street, a mere two blocks from my abode but on a different planet, as it were. I signed up immediately, out of curiosity and because that was obviously the only acceptable way to hang around there and to get to meet young men from the neighborhood. And right after my first boxing training session I started an ethnographic diary, without imagining for a second that I would attend the gym with increasing assiduity for three and a half years and, in the process, amass some twenty-three hundred pages of raw notes by religiously consigning to


2. Our collaboration, which lasted for four years, commenced as Wilson was finishing his major book of the 1980s, The Truly Disadvantaged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

paper for hours every evening detailed descriptions of the events, interactions, and conversations of the day. For once I had entered the Woodlawn Boys Club, I found myself confronted with a triple challenge, in spite of myself.

The first challenge was brute and even brutal: Would I be capable of learning this roughest and most demanding of sports, of mastering its rudiments so as to carve out for myself a small place in the simultaneously fraternal and competitive world of the Sweet science of bruising, to weave with the members of the gym relationships of mutual respect and trust and thereby, eventually, carry out my field investigation of the towsy fraternal and competitive world of the Sweet science of bruising, rudiments so as to carve out for myself a small place in the simultaneous ysticate and refined my judgment of the Manly art to the point where the old trainer DeeDee asked me one day to replace him as "cornerman" for a major bout fought by Curtis, Woodlawn" star boxer, taking place overseas. DeeDee was also fond of forecasting that, down the road, I would open my own boxing gym: "An' you gonna be a helluva coach one day, Louie, I know that."

I had no sooner overcome this initial barrier and fulfilled the minimum condition necessary to lodge myself durably in the milieu than I was called back to a second challenge, that of my original project: Could I grasp and explain social relations in the black ghetto based on my own experience? My long-term immersion in that little boxing gym and my intensive participation in the exchanges it supported day-to-day have allowed me-in my eyes at least, but the reader can judge for herself on the evidence-to reconstruct root and branch my understanding of what a ghetto is in general, and my analysis of the structure and functioning of Chicago’s black ghetto in post-Fordist and post-Keynesian America at the end of the twentieth century in particular, as well as to better discern what distinguishes this terra non grata from the neighborhoods of relegation of other advanced societies. For starters, I recused the false idea, deeply rooted in the American sociology of the relations between racial division and urban marginality since the earliest works of the Chicago School, that the ghetto is a "disorganized" universe, characterized by lack, want, and absence. The gym enabled me to link theoretical work with ongoing empirical observation and thereby to effectively question the "Orientalizing" vision of the ghetto and its denizens, and to restore to the heart of its study the power relations that characterize it as such, that is, as an instrument of economic exploitation and social ostracization of a group stripped of ethnic honor, a manner of "ethnoracial prison" in which America’s urban pariahs are forcibly confined.

There remained the third challenge, the most formidable of all, which I would never in a million years have imagined to be facing one day when I walked in through the gates of the Woodlawn Boys Club, and to which this work provides a first, partial and provisional, answer (as are all scientific investigations, even when they disguise themselves as narrative): How to account anthropologically for a practice that is so intensely corporeal, a culture that is thoroughly kinetic, a universe in which the most essential is transmitted, acquired, and deployed beneath language and consciousness-in short, for an institution made man (or men) situated at the extreme practical and theoretical edge of practice? To put it another way: having understood what the craft (metier) of boxing is, in the sense of occupation and social state but also ministry and mystery (according to the etymology of the word mestier), "by body," with my fists and my guts, by being myself caught, captured and captivated by it, would I know how to retranslate this comprehension of the
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senses into sociological language and find expressive forms suitable to communicating it without in the process annihilating its most distinctive properties?

The organization of this book according to the principle of communicating vessels, the proportion of analysis and narrative, of the conceptual and the depictive, gradually reversing through the pages (so that a profane reader can work her way backward, returning to the sociology from the "lived experience," albeit a lived experience that has been sociologically constructed), the braiding of genres and modes of writing, but also the strategic use of photographs and personal notations taken from my notebooks, all answer the concern to make the reader enter into the daily moral and sensual world of the ordinary boxer, to make her palpitate along with the author so as to give her both the reasoned understanding of the social mechanisms and existential forces that determine him and the particular aisthesis that illuminates his intimacy as fighter. By entering into the manufacture of the boxer, by elucidating "the coordination of these three elements, the body, the individual consciousness, and the collectivity" that mold him and make him vibrate day to day, "it is life itself, it is all of man" that we discover. And that we discover inside ourselves.


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Any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it.

- Erving Goffman, Asylums (1962)

Subjective difficulties. Danger of superficial observation. Do not "believe." Do not think that you know something because you have seen it; do not pass any moral judgement. Do not be surprised. Do not get angry. Try to live in the native society. Choose testimonies carefully.... Objectivity shall be sought in exposition as well as in observation. Tell what you know, all that you know, and nothing but what you know.

—Marcel Mauss, Manuel d'ethnographie (1950)

**Prologue**

In August 1988, following a combination of chance circumstances, I enrolled in a boxing gym in a neighborhood of Chicago's black ghetto. I had never practiced that sport or even considered trying it. Aside from the superficial notions and stereotyped images that everyone can gain of boxing through the media, movies, and literature, I had never had any contact with the pugilistic world. I thus found myself in the situation of the perfect novice.

1. This combination was set off by my friend Olivier Hermine, to whom I am forever grateful for having taken me to the Woodlawn Boys Club. I would like to thank Pierre Bourdieu for having supported me from the outset in an enterprise which, because it requires putting one's physical person on the line, could not have been brought to fruition without constant moral sustenance. His encouragement, his advice, and his visit to the Boys Club helped me, in my moments of doubt (and exhaustion), find the strength to persist in my investigations. My gratitude also goes to all those, colleagues, relatives, and friends, too numerous to be named here, who succored, stimulated, and comforted me during and after this research: they know who they are and what I owe them. Thanks are due also to Thierry Discepolo, for the boundless energy and patience with which he worked on the production the original French manuscript. Finally, it goes without saying that this book would not exist without the generosity and fraternal trust of my "gym buddies" from Woodlawn and of our mentor, DeeDee: I hope that they will see in it the sign of my eternal esteem and affection.

For three years I trained alongside local boxers, both amateur and professional, at the rate of three to six sessions a week, assiduously applying myself to every phase of their rigorous preparation, from shadowboxing in front of mirrors to sparring in the ring. Much to my own surprise, and to the surprise of those close to me, I gradually got taken in by the game, to the point where I ended up spending all my afternoons at the Woodlawn gym and "gloving up" with the professionals from the club on a regular basis, before climbing through the ropes for my first official fight in the Chicago Golden Gloves. In the intoxication of immersion, I even thought for a while of aborting my academic career to "turn pro" and thereby remain with my friends from the gym and its coach, DeeDee Armour, who had become a second father for me. Following in their wake, I attended some thirty tournaments and boxing "cards" held in various nightclubs, movie theaters, and sports arenas in the city and its suburbs, in the capacity of gym-mate and fan, sparring partner and confidant, "comerman" and photographer, which earned me access to all the stages and backstages of the theater of bruising. I also mentions among others Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, Dashiell Hammett, Nelson Algren, James Farrell, Ring Lardner, Norman Mailer, and Ralph Ellison, joined lately by one of very few women, novelist Joyce Carol Oates, to whom we owe the beautiful On Boxing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987).

3. As is attested by this note, among many others of the same ilk, written in my field notebook in August 1990: "Today I had such a ball being in the gym, talking and laughing with DeeDee and Curtis sitting in the back room and just living and breathing there, among them, soaking up the atmosphere of the gym like a human sponge, that I was suddenly suffocated by a wave of anguish at the idea of having to leave soon for Harvard [where I had just been elected at the Society of Fellows]. I feel so much pleasure simply participating that observation becomes secondary and, frankly, I'm at the point where I tell myself that I'd gladly give up my studies and research and all the rest to be able to stay here and box, to remain 'one of the boys.' I know that's completely crazy and surely unrealistic but, at this very moment, I find the idea of migrating to Harvard, of going to present a paper at the ASA [American Sociological Association] meetings, of writing articles, reading books, attending lectures, and participating in the tutli frutti of academe totally devoid of meaning and downright depressing, so dreary and dead compared to the pure and vivacious carnal joy that this goddamn gym provides me (you've got to see the scenes between DeeDee and Curtis, they're worthy of Marcel Pagnol) that I would like to quit everything, drop out, to stay in Chicago. It's really crazy, PB [Pierre Bourdieu] was saying the other day that he's afraid that I'm 'letting myself be seduced by my object' but, boy, if he only knew: I'm already way beyond seduction!"

accompanied the boxers from my gym "on the road," going to fights organized in other Midwestern towns and in the glittering (but seedy) casinos of Atlantic City. And I gradually absorbed the categories of pugilistic judgment under DeeDee's guidance, gabbing endlessly with him at the gym and dissecting fights on television at his place at night, the two of us sitting side by side on his bed in the kitchen of his little apartment.

The friendship and trust accorded to me by the regulars of Woodlawn were such that I was able not only to blend in among them in the gym but also to accompany them in their everyday peregrinations outside of it, in search of a job or an apartment, hunting for bargains in ghetto stores, in their hassles with their wives, the local welfare office, or the police, as well as cruising with their "homies" from the fearsome housing projects nearby. My ring colleagues allowed me to share in their joys and sorrows, their dreams and their setbacks, their picnics, evenings out dancing, and family excursions. They took me with them to pray in their churches, to get a "fade" at their barber shop, to play pool in their favorite tavern, to listen to rap until I had gotten my fill of it, and even to applaud Minister Louis Farrakhan at a political-religious meeting of the Nation of Islam-where I found myself the only European non-believer among ten thousand entranced African-American faithful. I lived through three funerals, two weddings, four births, and a baptism with them, and I witnessed, at their side, with unfathomable sadness, the closing of the Woodlawn gym, condemned in February 1992 and razed a year later as part of an urban "renewal" operation.

Nightly after each training session I consigned my notes to my field notebooks for several hours, initially to help me overcome a profound feeling of awkwardness and physical unease, a feeling no doubt exacerbated by the fact of being the only white member of a gym frequented exclusively by black athletes at the time of my entry. Together with the observations, pictures, and recordings made at the fights in which members of my gym performed, these notes provide the materials for the texts that follow.

4. One will find an ethnography of the matrimonial festivities of Anthony and Mark in my article, "Un mariage clans le ghetto," Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales 113 (June 1996): 63-84.

5. These ethnographic observations made day-to-day and in and around the gym were complemented and triangulated at the end of the research journey by the systematic collection of the life stories of the main members of the Woodlawn Boys Club, over one hundred in-depth interviews with professional pugilists then active in
From the outset it was clear that, to have any chance of escaping from the preconstructed object of collective mythology, a sociology of boxing has to renounce the facile recourse to the prefabricated exoticism of the public and publicized side of the institution-the fights, great or small, the heroism of the social ascent of the excluded ("Marvelous Marvin Hagler: From Ghetto to Glory," eloquently proclaimed a poster taped onto one of the walls of the Woodlawn Boys Club), the exceptional lives and careers of champions. It must instead grasp boxing through its least known and least spectacular side: the drab and obsessive routine of the gym workout, of the endless and thankless preparation, inseparably physical and moral, that preludes the all-too-brief appearances in the limelight, the minute and mundane rites of daily life in the gym that produce and reproduce the belief feeding this very peculiar corporeal, material, and symbolic economy that is the pugilistic world. In short, to avoid the excess knowledge of spontaneous sociology that the evocation of fights never fails to conjure, one must not step into the ring by proxy with the extra-ordinary figure of the "champ" but "hit the bags" alongside anonymous boxers in their habitual setting of the gym.

The other virtue of an approach based on participant observation (which, in this case, is better characterized as an "observant participation") in a run-of-the-mill gym is that the materials thus produced do not suffer from the "ecological fallacy" that affects most available studies and accounts of the Manly art. Thus none of the statements reported here were expressly solicited, and the behaviors described are those of the boxer in his "natural habitat," not the dramatized and highly codified (re)presentation that he likes to give of himself in public, and that journalistic reports and novels retranslate and magnify according to their specific canons.

Breaking with the moralizing discourse-that indifferently feeds both celebration and denigration-produced by the "gaze from afar" of an outside observer standing at a distance from or above the specific universe, this book seeks to suggest how boxing "makes sense" as soon as one takes pains to get close enough to to it to grasp it with one's body, in a quasi-experimental situation. It is for this reason composed of three texts of deliberately disparate statuses and styles, which juxtapose sociological analysis, ethnographic description, and literary evocation in order to convey at once concept and concept, the hidden determinations and the lived experiences, the external factors and the internal sensations that intermingle to make the boxer's world. In short, the book aims to display and demonstrate in the same move the social and sensual logic that informs boxing as a bodily craft in the contemporary black American ghetto.

The first text unravels the skein of the troubled relations tying the street to the ring and deciphers the inculcation of the Manly art as a work of gymnastic, perceptual, emotional, and mental conversion effected in a practical and collective mode, on the basis of an implicit and mimetic pedagogy that patiently recalibrates all the parameters of the boxer's existence one by one. It is based on an article written during the summer of 1989, a year after I joined the Woodlawn club, when getting my nose broken during a sparring session had forced me into a period of inactivity propitious to a reflexive return on my novitiate in progress. I had to resist the temptation to totally revise this early writing effort, as prelude to a more comprehensive analysis of the "manufacturing" of the boxer which is the theme of another book-in-progress especially by investing in it all the results of subsequent works that grew out of two additional years of intensive immersion. I strove instead to enrich the data, to deepen the backdrop, and to clarify the original analyses while preserving their overall economy. For it seemed to me that the empirical lacunae and analytic seminaivete of this text by an apprentice sociologist had

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7. Loïc Wacquant, "Corps et 8me: notes ethnographiques d'un apprenti-boxer," Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales 80 (November 1989): 33-67. It was in writing this article that I understood to what extent the gym constitutes a "strategic research site" (as Robert Merton would say) and decided to make the craft of the boxer a second object of study, parallel to my investigations of social life in the ghetto.

8. The Passion of the Pugilist will address in a more in-depth manner, among other topics, the dialectic of desire and domination in the social genesis of the boxer's vocation, the structure and functioning of the pugilistic economy, the work of the trainer as virile mothering, native beliefs about sex and women, and confrontation in the ring as a homoerotic ritual of masculinization.
in its favor an ethnographic freshness and a candor of tone that might help the reader to better slip into the skin of the boxer.

The second part of this book, first drafted in 1993 and then revised and completed seven years later with the help of audio and video tapes recorded at the time, describes in minute detail the day leading to a boxing "card" at a tavern in a working-class neighborhood of Chicago’s far South Side, from the preparations for the official weigh-in early in the morning at the gym until the return from the postfight festivities late in the night. The unity of time, place, and action makes it possible to set into relief the mutual interweaving of the social ingredients and networks that the first text necessarily had to separate: interest and desire, affection and exploitation, the masculine and the feminine, the sacred and the profane, the routine and the unexpected, the virile code of honor and the brutal dictates of material constraints.

The third part of this book is, if I may be permitted an expression that borders on the oxymoronic, a "sociological novella." Written at the request of Michel Le Bris for a special issue of the French literary journal Gulliver devoted to "Writing Sports," it follows step-by-step the author’s preparation for and performance at the 1990 Chicago Golden Gloves, the biggest amateur tournament in the Midwest, in a narrative mode that aims to erase the traces of the work of sociological construction (to the point where Le Bris thought, wrongly, that he was warranted to characterize it in his preface as a "narrative, all sociology suspended") while preserving the insights and results of that work. The blending of these genres ordinarily kept safely segregated, sociology, ethnography (in the strict sense of the term), and novella, aims to enable the reader to better grasp pugilistic things "in the concrete, as they are" and to see boxers in motion, "as in mechanics one sees masses and systems, or as in the sea we see octopi and anemones. We catch sight of numbers of men, of mobile forces, and which float through their environment and their sentiments."""

10. This text furthermore poses in practical terms the question of writing in the social sciences and of the difference between sociology and fiction, a question that has much preoccupied anthropologists over the last decade, since, shortly after its publication, this article earned me the offer by a leading Parisian publishing house of a contract for my "novel."
13. The Woodlawn gym was at that time one of 52 boxing clubs officially listed in the state of Illinois and one of the four major so-called professional gyms in Chicago (that is, gyms where "pro" boxers train, who are paid for their performances between the ropes, aside from the amateurs who populate all gyms). Most of the prominent boxers from the 1980s in Chicago passed through the Woodlawn Boys Club at one time or another, and the gym was one of the major suppliers of fighters for boxing cards held throughout the region up until its closing. After the end of his career between the ropes, Muhammad Ali, who owns a house a few miles from the gym in the upscale neighborhood of Hyde Park-Kenwood, an island of white opulence lost in the midst of the ocean of black poverty that is the South Side, used to come train there—his appearance never failed to provoke spectacular outbreaks of popular jubilation on the block.

In closing, it is instructive to point out the main factors that made this research possible, the most decisive of which was no doubt the "opportunist" character of my insertion. In point of fact, I did not enter the boxing club with the express aim of dissecting the pugilistic world. My original intention was to use the gym as a "window" onto the ghetto so as to observe the social strategies of young men in the neighborhood—my initial object of study—and it was not until after sixteen months of assiduous attendance, and after I had been inducted as a bona fide member of the inner circle of the Boys Club, that I decided, with the approval of those concerned, to make the craft of the boxer an object of study in its own right. There is no doubt that I would never have been able to gain the trust and to benefit from the collaboration of the Woodlawn regulars if I had joined the gym with the explicit and avowed aim of studying it, for that very intention would have irrevocably modified my status and role within the social and symbolic system under consideration.

Next, I had the good fortune of having practiced several competitive sports during my adolescence in the Languedoc region of southern France (soccer, basketball, rugby, tennis) so that at the time of my entry at the Boys Club I had at my disposal a small sporting capital to start with that was to prove indispensable for my successfully enduring the pugilistic trial by fire. The hazards of geography also determined that I would enroll in a "traditionalist" gym, ruled with an iron fist by a coach of international stature and enjoying an enviable renown in the city since its opening in 1977, such that I was able to learn how to box according to the rules of the art, through contact with competent trainers and fighters. It is likely that I would not have persisted in my endeavor or, worse, that I would...
have suffered grievous damage had I done my apprenticeship in one of the anemic gyms run by the city's Park District. Being the only white member in the club (at the time of entry and for most of my sojourn there) could have constituted a serious obstacle to my integration and thus amputated my capacity to penetrate the social world of the boxer, if not for the conjugated action of three compensating factors. First of all, the egalitarian ethos and pronounced color-blindness of pugilistic culture are such that everyone is fully accepted into it so long as he submits to the common discipline and "pays his dues" in the ring. Next, my French nationality granted me a sort of statutory exteriority with respect to the structure of relations of exploitation, contempt, misunderstanding, and mutual mistrust that oppose blacks and whites in America. I benefited from the historical capital of sympathy that France enjoys in the African-American population owing to the welcome its soldiers received there during the two world wars (where, for the first time in their lives, they were treated as human beings and not as members of an outcaste) and from the simple fact of not having the hexis of the average white American, which continually marks, if against his or her own best intentions, the impenetrable border between the communities. Eddie, the assistant trainer at Woodlawn, explains:

I got respect for you, Louie, for you comin' in d'gym and just bein' one of d'guys and bein' just like everybody else in d'gym... Ain't too many Caucasians who do that with us blacks.

My wife and I, we've lived in Hyde Park [the University of Chicago neighborhood, eighty percent white at the time] for five years now and we never met no Caucasians, never. When they get close to you on d'street, they be lookin' at you scared like you gonna jump on' em or somethin'. So my wife an' I, we never talked to no Caucasians in Hyde Park. [Emotion makes the pitch of his voice go up and his delivery quicken.] Most Caucasians, if you get close to 'em or try to talk to 'em, they back off an' look atchyou like you got a ring in your nose, y'know. Stare atchyou [he rolls his eyes with a fierce look] and you can see somethin's wrong. But you, you don't be doin' that, you be so relaxed in d'gym and when you come with us to d'fights... .

Man! you be so relaxed it's har' to tell you're Caucasian. [Your girlfriend] Liz an' you, d'only way one can tell you ain't black is by the way you talk an' by you bein' a Frenchman of course. But you be down there in d'gym, you talk with'em guys, you be like d'other guys. You ain't tense and worried that you're with us. You're loose, you get along with d'guys and they like you too... See, I respects people who respects me. So I respects you. Louie, you're part of d'team down there. I was tellin' somebody down at my work, "We got the Fightin' Frenchman on our team!" [He roars in obvious delight.] Yep, you're part of d'gym, like everybody else.

Finally, my total "surrender" to the exigencies of the field, and especially the fact that I regularly put the gloves on with them, earned me the esteem of my club-mates, as attested by the term of address "brother Louie" and the collection of affectionate nicknames they bestowed upon me over the months: "Busy Louie," my ring moniker, but also "Bad Dude," "The French Bomber," "The French Hammer" (in reference to my dancing skills and not my punching power), and "The Black Frenchman." Aside from the tokens of solidarity offered day-to-day outside the gym through services rendered and varied interventions with the public and private bureaucracies that govern their lives, the fact of having pursued my initiation to the point of "doing" the Golden Gloves greatly contributed to establishing my status in the club and to sealing my legitimacy as an apprentice boxer in the eyes of the athletes and trainers from the other gyms, who, after my official performance between the ropes, spontaneously recognized me as "one of DeeDee's boys."

14. On the "historical affection" of black Americans for France and its origins in the lived experience of a mixedness that was then taboo and violently repressed in the United States, see Tyler Stovall, Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1998).
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pressure on Butch. But he sees that I'm getting bolder and he too kicks it into higher gear just enough to keep me constantly off balance. I attempt a wide left hook, which earns me a sharp reprimand from DeeDee: "What're you doin'? Stop that right now, Louie, I don't know what you be doin' up in there." A second later, I collect a cement-truck right full in the face that makes me meditate on my mistake. Things are speeding up, yet these three minutes are truly in-ter-mi-na-ble. I feel like my gloves are too heavy, too bulky, they hamper me. I'm having trouble seeing behind my guard and following my opponent's movements. I'm always one beat behind, if not two: by the time I've made out that Butch is throwing a jab, it's already landed in my kisser. How to describe the sensation when his fist swoops down on me? I see a yellow saucer that all of a sudden grows bigger and bigger at breakneck speed, completely blocking my field of vision and pow! A stinging, some stars, and the screen clears again. The yellow saucer has pulled away, the light returns. But before I can attempt the slightest reaction, the flying saucer swooshes back to crash into my face again.

I'm getting a first-class ass-whipping. Butch is landing every punch he throws—fortunately he's not hitting hard, otherwise I would have been knocked down and out eons ago. I feel like I'm bleeding and wipe my nostrils with my fist: sure enough, there are traces of blood on my glove but they're dry, so it's not mine. Whew! I try my best to close in on Butch and get him in a clinch. But it's impossible to find a spot to hit: everywhere I run into his big yellow gloves and his arms knotted up with bulging muscles. He, on the other hand, is tossing me around as he likes. I step back and then lunge at him fearlessly—the hell with the jabs in the mug: I've got to get my licks in, too, after all. I manage to land several soft jabs and suddenly, divine surprise, I hit the bull's-eye, a straight right dead center in Butch's mullin. Instinctively, I almost say "Sorry!" out loud to Butch—but it's impossible with my mouthpiece in. Jeez, I definitely don't have a boxer's mentality! I feel vaguely guilty about having bopped him right in the schnoz, since I don't have any intention of hurting him. But mainly I fear his retaliation. And in fact things start moving faster, blows are coming in from every direction now. Butch is circling around me like a buzzard and landing every punch. I feel my fists flailing haphazardly while he lards me with stinging jabs. Suddenly I again feel an irrepressible urge to flee and I even turn all the way around, my back to my partner, to protect myself from the blows raining down on me.

“Time out!” The voice of deliverance!

DeeDee has no sooner hooted the end of the round than I've slipped through the ropes. I've had enough: I am de-ple-fed! I jump out of the ring to collapse into the waiting arms of Eddie, who's chortling with delight. "You still alive? You survived? How many rounds?" "Two, this is the first time I've ever sparred." "No kidin'? First time? You're a big-time boxer now." He's gurgling with pleasure as he unlaces my gloves and helps me extirpate my hands, which are burning hot and moist. It's superexhausting, I truly don't understand how the pros can last ten and twelve rounds, while heaving truckloads of cinderblocks at each other to boot. Butch steps down out of the ring, I slap his gloves as a sign of thanks. Olivier tells me that my face is all red. My brow and nose are flaming, but when I look in the mirror I'm pleasantly surprised to discover that my face isn't as swollen as it feels. Gasping for breath and streaming with sweat, I make my way to DeeDee's office, where the old trainer is discreetly jubilating behind his little goatee. "Tha's good, Louie, jump a lil' rope now." . . .

I close out the session with three rounds of jumping rope and two hundred situps. Afterward Olivier and I go tell DeeDee how pleased we are. "You did awright, botha you. You'll get in there again." "I sure hope so!" It's a lot more fun than working out endlessly on the heavy bag or in front of the mirror. We take leave of everyone with great ceremony, then once again go thank Butch, who's changing back into his civilian clothes in the little locker room. Warm handshakes. "I'm the one to thank you guys, that's a good start. You're gon' learn, learn how to hit and learn how to be mean. It's all about learnin." We leave the gym proud as peacocks and go celebrate by devouring a giant-sized stuffed pizza on 57th Street.

The Social Logic of Sparring

If the typical professional boxer spends the bulk of his time outside the ring, endlessly rehearsing his moves in front of a mirror or on an assortment of bags so as to hone his technique, increase his power, and sharpen his speed and coordination, and even outside the gym eating...
up miles and miles of daily "roadwork," the climax and yardstick of training remains the sparring. The point of sparring—"one also says "putting on the gloves" and "moving around"—is to approximate the conditions of the fight, with the difference that the boxers wear protective headgear and heavily padded gloves and that, as we will see, the brutality of the confrontation is greatly attenuated. Without regular practice in the ring against an opponent, the rest of the preparation would make little sense, for the peculiar mix of skills and qualities required by fighting cannot be assembled but between the ropes. Many a boxer who "looks a million dollars on the floor" turns out to be inept and helpless once faced with an adversary. As DeeDee explains:

Hittin' bags is one damn thing-runnin', hittin' bags, shadow boxin's one thin', an' sparrin' is a hun'red percent diff'rent. 'Cause it's diff'rent use of muscles, so you have to spar to git in shape to spar. Yeah, I don't give a damn who you are, 'less you're a helluva damn good fighter tha's relax'. . . . You gotta be relax', cool, the breathin's diff'ren' an' everythin'. That's what it's all about. That's from experience.

Loiue: So you can't instruct a boxer on how to relax or breathe on the floor?

DEEDEE: Hell no! No, [shaking his head] uh-uh, you can't tell. You can talk abou' it, but it don't work.

Sparring, which has its own tempo (unless he is about to fight, a boxer should "put on the gloves" lightly or at distant intervals so as to minimize the wear and tear on his body)," is both a reward and a challenge. First, it represents the tangible payoff for a long week of hard and dull labor—it is on Saturday that most of the amateur boxers of the Woodlawn Boys Club tangle between the ropes. The gym's trainers pay close attention to the physical condition of their charges and do not hesitate to bar from sparring those who are in their eyes culpable of having neglected their preparation. "Little Anthony ain't puttin' no gloves on today, DeeDee," Eddie brays, one hot afternoon in mid-August. "He don't do no runnin', he got no gas, no stamina. It's a waste-a time to get him up in there. It's a disgrace."

Next, sparring is a redoubtable and perpetually renewed test of strength, cunning and courage, if only because the possibility of serious injury can never be completely eliminated, in spite of all precautions. Two boxers got their noses broken while sparring in the year after I joined the gym. In July 1989, I suffered the same fate as a result of two particularly rough sessions three days apart, the one with Smithie, a light heavyweight who bloodied my face (to DeeDee's guilty dismay, as he had briefly stepped out to fetch a cup of soup at Daley's), the other with Anthony "Ice" Ivory, a middleweight whose crisp and sharp jab I could not find a way to avoid. Some boxers become "punchy" (i.e., develop the medical syndrome of the "punch-drunk fighter," dementia pugilistica, sometimes confused with Parkinson's disease) not so much from beatings suffered during official bouts as from the cumulative effect of the blows absorbed in the gym during sparring. Cuts to the face are rare, owing to the protective headgear worn for that purpose (and not to cushion the shock of the blows), but black eyes, bruised cheekbones and swollen lips, bloody noses, and battered hands and ribs are the habitual lot of those who put on the gloves on a regular basis. Not to mention that every time a boxer steps into the ring, be it to "shake out" with a novice, he puts a fraction of his symbolic capital at stake: the slightest failing or slip-up, such as a knockdown or a sloppy performance, brings immediate embarrassment to the fighter, as well as to his gym-mates who hasten to assist his "corrective face-work" so as to restabilize the fuzzy and labile status order of the gym.66 Boxers have at their disposal a variety of socially validated excuses for this purpose, ranging from minor health hassles ("I been battling the flu, man, it's killing me") to imaginary injuries (a damaged knuckle, a sore shoulder), to the alibi most readily called upon, especially by trainers, a breach of the sacrosanct code of sexual abstinence during the phase of training nearing a fight.67

Here again, one must note pronounced variations among gyms and individuals: some boxers prefer to spar on a regular basis, even when they do not have a fight coming up, either to be ready in case of a last-minute opportunity or because they are particularly fond of "putting the gloves on." Other clubs in Chicago, run by less attentive (or less competent) trainers, give their members more latitude. The municipal gym of Fuller Park, for example, is notorious for its laxity in this matter: according to several boxers who trained there before joining the Woodlawn Boys Club as well as my own observations, sparring sessions involving partners of very unequal grade in which one beats the other to a pulp, without holding back, without even any supervision, are common occurrences.

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Curtis throwing a jab at Ashante during a sparring session

Although it occupies only a small fraction of the boxer's time in quantitative terms, sparring warrants a close analysis because it demonstrates the highly codified nature of pugilistic violence. Moreover, being situated midway between "shadowboxing" and the actual fighting of a competitive bout, sparring allows us to discern more clearly, as if through a magnifying glass, the subtle and apparently contradictory mix of instinct and rationality, emotion and calculation, individual abandon and group control that gives the work of fabrication of the pugilist its distinctive touch and stamps all training exercises, down to the most banal.

1. Choosing a Partner

Everything in sparring hinges on the choice of partner, and for this reason it must absolutely be approved by DeeDee. The matching of opponents has to be adjusted in a manner such that both boxers benefit from the exercise and the risk of physical injury is kept below an acceptable level.

Considerations of honor reinforce these technical reasons: ideally, one does not spar with an opponent who is too superior for fear of "getting a good ass-whuppin'," or one so feeble that he cannot defend himself (for fear of being accused of taking advantage of a weakling). However, vagaries in attendance and divergences in the training and fighting schedules of club members can make it difficult to find a steady partner who fits the threefold rubric of weight, skill, and style. So it is good policy to strive to maintain amicable relations in the gym with the one(s) you have, spare their feelings by respecting a degree of balance in the encounters (a boxer who gets "whipped" repeatedly in front of his mates will refuse to go on boxing with the fighter who inflicts such humiliation on him), and to always be ready and willing to "give back" a sparring session to someone who bailed you out on another occasion. In sum, sparring partners are part of the specific social capital of pugilists. This is why asking a boxer to "glove up" with you is always a delicate matter: it means interfering in the network of reciprocal obligations that ties him to his current and past partners; it is better not to ask if you surmise that the answer will be negative.

In the absence of adequate sparring partners, one turns to boxers of lesser caliber to make do, or even to beginners as a last resort. Nonetheless, one must always maintain a measure of equilibrium, even if it requires deliberately handicapping one of the protagonists. In the case of an overly uneven matchup, the more experienced fighter tacitly commits himself to "holding back" his punches and to working on his speed, footwork, and defensive moves while the weaker boxer concentrates

68. The personality and coaching philosophy of the head trainer is decisive because it determines the main parameters for the social management of ring violence. In more impersonal, even anomic, gyms (such as many "park district" facilities) devoid of a clear authority structure and formal membership, the rules that govern sparring are much looser and less strictly enforced. I witnessed numerous sparring incidents in these gyms that would be unthinkable at Woodlawn. In one of them, a hunky black teenager walked in off the street into a predominantly white gym and, though he had never "smelled a glove" before, dared a veteran white fighter to slug with him. The coach validated the challenge and let the boastful youth step into the ring in his civilian clothing, whereupon the professional boxer proceeded to dismantle him in less than a minute of merciless punching, eliciting general laughter. In another gym, I observed a welterweight sparring with no head guard on with a heavyweight who himself did not wear handwraps under his gloves and unsuccessfully tried to "take his head off" for four rounds. In some gyms, spectators bet small sums of money on the outcome of sparring sessions, thereby increasing the incentive to excessive violence.
When one of the fighters is a novice, it is essential to select an "initiator" who has a perfect command of his punches and emotions. If DeeDee waited almost eight weeks before letting me enter into the "lion's den," it is not only because I needed to improve my conditioning and gain a handle on the basics of the craft but also because he had to find me an appropriate partner. "Gotta be somebody who can control himself. I don' want just any guy to get up there without and knock the hell outta you, Louie. He gotta know how to control hisself." Certain boxers have a style or a mentality that makes it difficult to "move around" with them in the ring because they do not know how to adapt to their partner.

As I was talking ring tactics with Curtis, DeeDee thought that I wanted to spar with him. He calls me off the floor and warns me sternly: "No way you gonna spar with Curtis, you got me, Louie? Not even to play around in the ring!" . . . "Why?" [Irritated at my feigned ignorance: he's repeated this prohibition to me a hundred times] "'Cause he don't have an ounce of sense in the ring, tha's why. He ain' got no sense, you know that damn well, Louie. He would knock you out cold as a milk shake." [Field notes, 6 March 1989]

Sitting in the back room, we're watching Mark work out on the heavy bag. He's made tremendous strides and his movements are technically very good; his combinations flow, he looks like a real pro. I ask if I can "move around" with him. DeeDee responds in the negative: "He hit too damn hard. He's too strong. Look at his body, his legs. He only weigh 125 pounds but he ain't got no legs, look how thin they are. Tha's why he's so light with the strong upper body he got. He's stronger than all them other guys in this gym. Real strong." [Field notes, 17 April 1989]

Much as one does not spar with just anyone, one does not spar just any old way either. The brutality of the exchanges between the ropes is a function of the balance of forces between partners (the more uneven the balance, the more limited the brutality) and of the goals of the particular sparring session, that is, its coordinates in the twofold temporal axis of training and competition. As the date of the fight draws nearer, sparring sessions become more frequent and last longer (up to eight or ten rounds a day during the final week, with a letup in the final two or three days to make sure that you "don't leave your fight in the gym"), the confrontation more intense, and inexperienced boxers are temporarily kept away from the ring. On the eve of an important bout, sparring can become almost as brutal as the fight itself. While gearing up for his much-awaited confrontation with Gerry Cooney, the latest "Great White Hope," heavyweight world champion Larry Holmes offered a bounty of ten thousand dollars to the sparring partner who would send him to the canvas, as a way of enticing them to slug away without compunction. Yet, as with every well-run training camp, those sparring partners had been carefully selected to give Holmes a clear advantage so as to preserve his strength and bolster his confidence for the fight.

2. A Controlled Violence

During a session, the level of violence fluctuates in cycles according to a dialectic of challenge and response, within moving limits set by the sense of equity that founds the original agreement between sparring partners—which is neither a norm nor a contract but what Erving Goffman calls a "working consensus." If one of the fighters picks up his pace and "gets off," the other automatically reacts by immediately hardening his response; there follows a sudden burst of violence that can escalate to the point where the two partners are hitting each other full force, before they step back and jointly agree (often by a nod or a touch of the gloves) to resume their pugilistic dialogue a notch or two lower. The task of the coach is to monitor this "fistic conversation" to see that the less accomplished fighter is not being silenced, in which case he will instruct his opponent to diminish pressure accordingly ("Circle and jab, 'Shante, I told

69. If a far superior boxer, either in weight or ability, fails to restrain himself and inflicts a beating on his sparring partner, he is sure to be vehemently reprimanded by DeeDee. The light heavyweight Smithie thus was sharply berated for continuing to box me after having busted my nose and covered me with blood during the particularly rough sparring session mentioned earlier (all the more so since he had already knocked out my friend Olivier the week before).

70. Hauser, Black Lights, 199.
72. One would need to analyze here, from a perspective inspired by Goffman, the "interaction rituals" specific to sparring that serve to reaffirm periodically the measured and playful character of the violence it enacts, to solemnize the mutual respect between fighters, and to trace the shifting boundaries of their revels.
you not to load up! And you keep that damn left hand up, Louie! ") or that the two partners do not let the intensity of their exchanges drop too far below that of a fight, which would defeat the very purpose of the exercise ("What you be doin' up there, makin' love? Start workin' off that jab, I wanna see some nice right hands and counters off the block").

I return to the back room and ask DeeDee, who is finishing a pre-cooked noodle soup in a plastic cup, comfortably seated in his armchair: "DeeDee, Saturday, if I can, I'd like to put on the gloves. Maybe I can move 'round with Ashante?" "I dunno, Louie, I dunno 'cause them guys are gettin' ready for that card next week [at the Park West], so they don' need to be playin' around right now: they need to be hittin', and hittin' hard." And he punches the palm of his left hand with his clenched right fist. [Field notes, 1 December 1988]

Standing in the office, DeeDee, Eddie, and I are watching Hutchinson, a sort of human control tower (at more than 6'8" and nearly 280 pounds, he fights in the super heavyweight division), spar with Butch. Butch himself is a fine specimen, but he looks like an overexcited dragonfly next to the giant's placid and impregnable body. Hutchinson moves around slowly and holds his guard up high, with his fists extended far in front of him. Butch has a terrible time getting to him, so long is Hutchinson's reach. It looks like he's going to smash himself to pieces against him. DeeDee warned Hutchinson to hold his punches, given the height and weight difference between him and his partner of the moment. "I told 'im not to hit hard. If he starts hittin', I'm d'one who's gonna come out of here and beat him with a baseball bat. He's too big. He better watch out! " All of this said in a lively and vigilant tone. At the end of the three rounds, Butch comes out fairly well worked over (and yet his partner seemed to have just grazed him): his lips are swollen, his face reddish, and he's out of breath. But not a word of complaint. [Field notes, 11 November 1988]

The principle of reciprocity that tacitly governs the level of violence in the ring dictates that the stronger boxer not profit from his superiority, but also that the weaker fighter not take undue advantage of his partner's willful restraint, as I discovered at the end of a vigorous sparring session with Ashante. On 29 June 1989, I am dumbfounded to learn that Ashante complained to DeeDee that I hit too hard and that he is forced to respond by firing back solid shots right in the mug. "He told me he..." cain't have fun witchyou no more, you hit too hard. You made enough progress now, he gotta be careful not to let you land your punches or you can hurt him. If you hit him clean, you can knock him down. He was complainin', you don't back off and you don't never stop throwin' punches when he's backed up against the ropes, you keep on throwin' hard punches. You nailed him with a right, if you'd follow up with another one, you would've sent him to the canvas. See, when you started out, he could play witchyou without worryin' but now you're gettin' stronger, he gotta watch out." I am so surprised that I make him repeat and confirm that Ashante was actually talking about me. "Yeah, he wanted me to tell you to hold your punches 'cos you could hurt him now.... You know how to punch now. Tha's why he gotta rock you with a good one from time-t'time. It ain't that he wanta hurt you, but he gotta show you he mean business and he gotta pay you back to make you control yourself a lil' better."

The coach obviously plays a major role in the regulation of this mutually consented violence. If the boxers from Woodlawn measure their punches with such attention, it is because DeeDee, out of respect for his art, will not tolerate all-out "slugging." But it is also because each phase of sparring calls for an appropriate level of intensity that is useless (and dangerous) to exceed and below which one must not fall, lest the benefits of the exercise vanish. This optimal level cannot be determined before stepping into the ring; it varies according to the partners and the circumstances (fatigue, motivation, time left before the fight, etc.). It is up to the boxers to set it by jointly feeling their way in the literal as well as figurative sense-to it with the assistance of DeeDee. Ever attentive to what is transpiring in the ring, the latter is swift to give a good dressing-down to a pugilist who allows himself an immoderate use of his punching power or to exhort another to display more aggressiveness. If need be, DeeDee does not hesitate to order the sparring partner of a nonchalant boxer to pick up the pace, as when he shouts from his armchair to Little John, who is battling with Curtis: "John, damn it, make 'im keep his left up when he jabs, stick him with a good right since he don't wanna box an' keepin' his hands on his knees like a fool. Ah! I wish I could get up in that ring."

Thus what has every chance of looking like a spree of gratuitous and unchecked brutality in the eyes of a neophyte is in fact a regular and finely codified tapestry of exchanges that, though they are violent, are nonetheless constantly controlled, and whose weaving together supposes...
a practical and continual collaboration between the two opponents in the construction and maintenance of a dynamic conflictual equilibrium. Properly educated boxers relish this ever-renewed duel that is sparring, but they know that this clash is, at every moment, bounded by "non-contractual clauses" and that it is quite distinct from a fight, even though it approximates it, in that it entails an element of "antagonistic cooperation"73 that is expressly banned from a bout. Curtis expresses this distinction thus:

I don't dislike anythin' [about sparring]. I like it all, 'cause ya learn at the same time. In a gym you not tryin' to win a fight, you in here learnin'. It's all about learnin'. Practicin' on doin' what you wanna do when d'upcomin' fight come, ya know.... I cain't hurt my opponent-[smiling coyly] I mean my spa rin' partners. They helpin' me out, just like I'm helpin' them out. They not gonna get in there and try and hurt me.... Here and again, now an' then, ya know, ya have your little flashy stuff, where he might hit you hard, you might get caught with a nice punch and you gonna try and retaliate and come back with somethin'.

Many boxers need a long phase of adjustment before they bend to these tacit norms of cooperation which seem to contradict the public principle and ethos of unlimited competition. As in the case of bicycle riding,74 this "cooperative informal order" is particularly problematic for novices, who, because they mistake the facade for the building, are incapable of calibrating their aggressiveness and rest convinced that they must go all out to prove themselves, as DeeDee indicates in this note from 23 November 1989: "This new kid, he think he can beat up e-ve-ry-body: [in an exaggeratedly belligerent tone] I can whup dis guy, I can kick his ass! I'm bettah than 'im, lemme get in d'ring!" an' he just wanna fight with e-ve-ry-body. We gonna have problems with him. I don' know what to do 'cos I cain't let him spar with that kinda attitude, uh-uh." They will have to be taught in actu how to "read" the discreet cues whereby their partners enjoin them either to back off and to soft-pedal and when, on the contrary, to increase pressure so as to make them work harder.

3. Sparring as Perceptual, Emotional, and Physical Labor

As a hybrid figure between training—which it extends and accelerates—and fighting—to which it is a prelude and a sketch—sparring completes the thorough re-education of the body and mind during which is forged what Foucault calls a "multi-sensorial structure"75 quite specific to boxing that can be articulated or discerned only in action. Ring experience decouples the boxer's capacity for perception and concentration; it forces him to curb his emotions; and it refashions and hardens his body in preparation for the clashes of competition. In the first place, sparring is an education of the senses and notably of the visual faculties; the permanent state of emergency that defines it effects a progressive reorganization of perceptual habits and abilities.

To realize this, one need only track the transformation that occurs in the structure and scope of one's visual field as one climbs the hierarchy of sparring. During the very first sessions, my vision is obstructed in part by my own gloves, saturated by the stimuli that are rushing at me from all sides with neither order nor meaning. The advice DeeDee shouts at me and the sensation of being armored in my cup and headgear, not to mention the muffled but omnipresent anguish about being hit, all contribute to exacerbating this feeling of confusion. I experience then the utmost difficulty in fixing my gaze on my opponent and seeing his fists coming at me, especially as I am uneducated about the clues that are supposed to help me anticipate them. From session to session, my field of vision clears up, expands, and gets reorganized: I manage to shut out external calls on my attention and to better discern the movements of my antagonist, as if my visual faculties were growing as my body gets used to sparring. And, above all, I gradually acquire the specific "eye" that enables me to guess at my opponent's attacks by reading the first signs of them in his eyes, the orientation of his shoulders, or the position of his hands and elbows.

**Slugging it out with Ashante**

3 June 1989. I warm up by moving around in front of the mirror. My body has gotten used to being in boxer's gear and I no longer have that feeling of being shelled in bothersome trappings. I climb the little

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73. I borrow this notion from William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn, 1906) 1940.
75. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 165, my translation (this expression is wrongly rendered as "multi-sensorial perception").
ring stool and slip through the ropes.... Sparring has become routine now. I bounce up and down across from Ashante. He's wearing a pair of tight black-and-green shorts, a black wrestling singlet, and his own superpadded yellow headguard. He's glistening with sweat after the four rounds he's just done with Rodney... . We have a few seconds to observe each other and I still surprise myself by wondering what in the world I'm doing in this ring facing this stocky, nasty little guy who may become welterweight champion of Illinois at the end of the month!

"Time!" Let's get busy! We touch gloves. I move on Ashante right away and badger him with quick jabs, which he parries. He stops me in my tracks to tell me, "if you're comin' at me, keep yo' han's up or I'monna deck you." Thanks for the advice, which I take into account by swiftly raising my guard. I resume my march forward. I'm determined to hit harder than usual, even if this means that Ashante's also going to hit harder—and that's exactly what happens. We test each other out. I try to find my distance. A few jabs and a few rights, blocked on both sides. I land a jab to the body, then jump on him with a left-right-left hook combination. Boom! In the mug! Ashante backs up and immediately counters. Instead of withdrawing, I stand fast and try to parry his punches. He hits me with a straight left flush on my mouth. I get him in a clinch and catch him out thanks to my favorite trick: a feint with the jab and a wide right cross to the face just as he moves to his left to slip away from my left. Pow! My fist pings right into his cheek. He nods "okay" to me. He seems surprised that I'm boxing so energetically and picks up the pace.

Ashante's walking onto me, mouth deformed by his mouthpiece, eyes bulging with concentration. I back up and jab to try to protect myself. He fakes a straight left and throws a sharp right directly to my side: I reel under the blow and beat a hasty retreat. (We smile for a second, both thinking about what he did to my ribs last week.) I chase him down into a corner, jab, right, jab, and catch him with a nice right uppercut when he leans over to avoid my jab. Nonetheless he's blocking most of my hard punches very effectively: I see the opening just fine, but in the time it takes for my fist to get there, he's closed up the passage or moved away by rotating his torso. (Ashante anticipates where my fists are about to go so well that it's almost like we're dancing a ballet together.) He suddenly kicks into higher gear and drills my head with short straight punches that I scarcely see coming. The left side of my chin stings like hell. I stagger under the blows and decide (actually, I don't decide anything, it's just a formula, I do it, that's all! Everything moves much too fast, you react instinctively) to march onto him, but he stops me dead in my tracks with several hard jabs to the body. "Time out!" DeeDee's voice resounds.

We separate, I return to my corner and catch my breath. I'm not too tired, but it's only the first round. Big Earl advises me, "Keep him away with your jab: jab, jab, don't let him get under your guard. Like [Sugar Ray] Leonard. Want some water?" He climbs onto the table, directs the straw of the water bottle toward my mouth and shoots me a stream of warmish water, which I swallow (something a real boxer never does). Come on, let's get it on some more.

"Time in!" Second round, both of us go on the attack from the get-go, without even touching gloves in a display of friendliness. Ashante is boxing faster. I struggle to keep up with his cadence, but I react better and protect myself more effectively than the previous times. He starts to punch for real: three hooks to the sides cut though my guard like butter and knock the wind out of me. Whew! That hurts. I counter with a few jabs but he dodges them by moving his head just enough for my fist not to reach him. Ashante traps me several times against the ropes and lards me with pointed and heavy hooks. One of his attacks even makes me lose my head and I let my defenses down for a second. Luckily, he spares me and interrupts the hailstorm of punches, satisfied with letting me know that I'm wide open. I then launch an awkward attack, as I no longer have good control over my coordination. Ashante greets me with a right-left-right combination flush in the face which reddens my nose; I feel my bottom lip start to swell. I respond wildly, but still manage to sting him in the snout with a right followed up with a short left hook right on target. He always tries to duck down to his right and I catch him with two hooks straight in his headguard. Yahoo! Which makes him react immediately. He cuts the ring off, marching straight onto me, not even bobbing and weaving, to show me that he's going to throw punches and couldn't care less about my counters. He fakes me with both hands in turn until I leave myself open and boom! A wide left hook sends my head snapping back. I stagger under the punch but wave to him, "Okay, it's
all right." We find ourselves face to face again, both a bit surprised at
so much viciousness. Jabs from me, blocked by his fists, versus jabs
from him, blocked by my nose. I'm better able to see his punches
coming but I still don't move fast enough. He lands another punch on
my face, a right that makes my headgear turn sideways. DeeDee
growls: "Move yo' head, Louie!" I'm trying! Things are really heating
up now. Ashante machine-guns my torso, then knocks the wind out
of me with a mean right uppercut to my side (I'll remember that one
for awhile). I get him in a clinch again. He shoots me some short
punches to the ribs and even to the back, as if we were in a real fight
(I think this is the first time he's done that). "Time out!"

We shake each other's fists briefly, to reaffirm the controlled nature of
the exchange. "That's good, Louie, you're doin' good, you're punching
har' today, keep it up." "Yeah, the only problem is I'm not sure I can
hold out for another round at this pace." I'm really worn out, both by
Ashante's punches and by the tempo of the session, which is much
too brisk for me. I catch my breath as best I can, leaning on the ropes.

"Time in! Work!" The third round goes just as fast and I absorb a
bushel of punches.... The level of violence rises little by little, but in
a reciprocal and graduated manner-meaning that, near the end,
when I don't have enough energy left to simply keep my guard up
properly and respond even feebly to his punches, Ashante pretends
to be boxing me but is only hitting me superficially, whereas if he
kept on punching as hard as he was at the beginning of the round,
he would send me rolling to the canvas.... I get him in a clinch again
but don't have the strength to return his punches. Shoot, it should be
over with by now! This round's so damn long! I keep whining to
myself in my head: "Time out! Time out!" Come on, DeeDee! Fuck,
what's the matter, has he forgotten us or what? We must have been
boxing for a good five minutes! "Time out!" Clooofff!!!

Ashante falls onto me and holds me in his arms, patting the back of
my neck with his glove. Wow! It feels so great to duke it out among
buddies! He laughs and seems delighted. "How're you, how you
feelin'?" . . . I go take off my gear in the office. For the first time,
DeeDee compliments me: "You're gettin' better up in there, you
looked sharp today, Louie. But you gotta get out of his way when
he's throwin' his right. Block it or move yo' head more. You're still
takin' too many punches." He forbids me to sit down on the table.

But sparring is not only a physical exercise; it is also the means and sup-
port of a particularly intense form of "emotion work." "Because "few
lapses of self-control are punished as immediately and severely as loss of
temper during a boxing bout," "77 it is vital that one dominate at all times
the impulses of one's affect. In the squared circle, one must be capable
of managing one's emotions and know, according to the circumstances,
how to contain or repress them or, on the contrary, how to stir and swell
them; how to muffle certain feelings (of anger, restiveness, frustration)
so as to resist the blows, provocations, and verbal abuse dished out by
one's opponent, as well as the "rough tactics" he may resort to (hitting
below the belt or with his elbows, head-butting, rubbing his gloves into
your eyes or over a facial cut in order to open it further, etc.); and how
to call forth and amplify others (of aggressiveness or "controlled fury,"
for instance) at will while not letting them get out of hand." In gloving

76. On the notion of "emotion work," see Arlie Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling
Rules, and Social Structure," American Journal of Sociology 85, 3 (November 1979):
551-575.
up at the gym, boxers learn to become "businesslike" in the ring, to channel their mental and affective energies toward "getting the job done" in the most effective and least painful manner.

A boxer must exercise not only a constant inner surveillance over his feelings but also continual "expressive control" over their external "signaling" so as not to let his opponent know if and when punches hurt him, and which one. Legendary trainer-manager Cus D'Amato, the "discoverer" of Mike Tyson, sums up the matter thus: "The fighter has mastered his emotions to the extent that he can conceal and control them. Fear is an asset to a fighter. It makes him move faster, be quicker and more alert. Heroes and cowards feel exactly the same fear. Heroes react to it differently." This difference has nothing innate about it; it is an acquired ability, collectively produced by prolonged submission of the body to the discipline of sparring. Butch explains:

**BUTCH:** You have to stay in control, because yer emotions will burn up all yer oxygen, so you have to stay calm and relaxed though you know this guy's tryin' to knock yer head off. You have to stay calm and relaxed. So you have to deal with the situation.

**LOUIE:** Was it hard learning to control emotions, like to not get mad or frustrated if a guy is slippery and you can't hit him with clean shots?

**BUTCH:** It was hard for me. It took me years-an'-years-an'-years to git that and juuus' when I was gittin' it under control real goo', then thin's, hum, started movin' for me. It works, well, I guess when it was time, it worked itself into place.

**LOUIE:** Is that something that DeeDee taught you?

**BUTCH:** He kept tellin' me to stay calm, relax. Ius' breath, take it easy-but [his pace picks up] I foun' it har' to stay calm and relax when this guy's tryin' to kill ya over in the next corner, but eventually it sunk in and I understood what he was sayin'.

Indeed, the deep imbrication among gesture, conscious experience, and physiological processes—recall Gerth and Mills's distinction between the three constituent elements of emotion—is such that a change in any one triggers an instantaneous modification of the other two. Failure to tame the sensory experience of punches flying at you amputates your ability to act and by the same token alters your corporeal state. Conversely, to be at the height of physical fitness allows you to be mentally ready and therefore to better master the feelings triggered by the flow of blows.

80. Cited by Brunt, Mean Business, 55.

Finally, the strictly physical aspect of sparring should not be neglected on account of being self-evident: one must not forget that "[b]oxing is more about getting hit than it is about hitting": it is "primarily about being, and not giving, hurt."\(^8\) The idiolect of boxing is replete with terms referring to the ability to take a punch and glorifying the capacity to endure pain. Now, beyond one's congenital endowment such as an "iron chin" or the mysterious and revered quality called "heart" (which also holds a central place in the masculine street culture of the ghetto), there is only one way to harden yourself to pain and to get your body used to taking blows, and that is to get hit regularly. For, contrary to a widespread popular notion, boxers have no personal predilection for pain and hardly enjoy getting pummeled. A young Italian-American welterweight from the Windy City Gym who recently turned pro gets indignant when I mention the lay stereotype of the "sadomasochistic" fighter.\(^6\) "Nah, we're human, you know. We're human, you know. We're just like anybody else, our feelings are just as much as your feelin's, we-you can't put us outside, you know, (vehemently) we're no different than you: we're in the same world, we're the same world, the same flesh, same blood, same everything." What boxers have done is to elevate their threshold of tolerance for pain by submitting to it in graduated and regular fashion.

This learning of indifference to physical suffering is inseparable from the acquisition of the form of sang-froid specific to pugilism. The adequate socialization of the boxer presupposes an endurance to punches, the basis of which is the ability to tame the initial reflex of self-preservation that would undo the coordination of movements and give the opponent a decisive advantage. More so than the actual force of the latter's punches, it is this gradual acquisition of "resistance to excitement [résistance à l'émotion]," as Mauss says,\(^8\) which one is hard pressed to ascribe either to the realm of will or to the physiological order, that exhausts the novice during his first sparring sessions as well as inexperienced fighters during their bouts. This is because, in addition to the hyperacute attention demanded by the duel in the ring, one must fight at every moment one's first reflex, which is to shell up on oneself, and forbid one's body to disobey by turning away from one's opponent, coming undone, or running away from his flying fists in a mad dash for safety.

23 March 1989. I bump into Ashante slipping on his gloves in front of the situp table. He jokingly calls out to me: "Hey Louie, how you feelin'? Your ribs awright?" [This is in reference to the ribs of mine he roughed up during our last sparring session and that prevented me from training for several days.] "They're okay, you didn't break them, just bruised." He smiles, shaking my hands affectionately between his gloved fists. "I knew I didn't break 'em. But you gotta start doin' some serious situps and get in shape for real, Louie. Gotta do them situps to protect yo' body. See, I worked your body 'cuz I didn't want to hit you in d'face too much, 'cuz you not used to takin' too many shots to d'head yet. That's why I hit you more to d'body. What happen is, yo' body got tired 'cuz you're not used to takin' shots to d'body either. I know I hit you pretty hard, but you was goin' at it pretty hard too, y'know."

To learn how to box is to imperceptibly modify one's bodily schema, one's relation to one's body and to the uses one usually puts it to, so as to internalize a set of dispositions that are inseparably mental and physical and that, in the long run, turn the body into a virtual punching machine, but an intelligent and creative machine capable of self-regulation while innovating within a fixed and relatively restricted panoply of moves as an instantaneous function of the actions of the opponent in time. The mutual imbrication of corporeal dispositions and mental dispositions reaches such a degree that even willpower, morale, determination, concentration, and the control of one's emotions change into so many reflexes inscribed within the organism. In the accomplished boxer, the mental becomes part of the physical and vice versa;

\(^82\) Oates, On Boxing. 25 and 60.

\(^83\) This stereotype can be found in numerous scholarly works, such as Allen Gutman's historical thesis on the evolution of sports, From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989; see 160), as well as non-scholarly works, such as the encyclopedia of academic and journalistic cliches about prizefighting compiled from newspaper and sports magazine articles by André Rauch, Boxe, violence du XXe siècle (Paris: Aubier, 1992). I detail other problems with Rauch's tome in the French edition of this book, Corps et 3me (Marseilles: Agone, 2d expanded ed. 2002), pp. 276-277.

\(^84\) Marcel Mauss, "Les techniques du corps," 385, transl. 123.
body and mind function in total symbiosis. This is what is expressed in the scornful comments that DeeDee makes to boxers who argue that they are not "mentally ready" for a fight. After Curtis's loss in his first nationally televised fight in Atlantic City, the old trainer is fuming: "He don't lose'cos he's not mentally ready. That don' mean nuthin', mentally ready. If you're a fighter, you're ready. I was just tellin' Butch: mentally ready, tha's bullshit! If you're a fighter, you get up in d'ring an' [hissing for emphasis] you fight, there's no bein' mentally ready or not ready. It's not mental, ain't nuthin' mental bout it. If you're not a fighter, you don't get up in there, you don't fight. If you're a fighter, you're ready and you fight-tha's all. All d'rest is just bullshit for the birds." [Field notes, 17 April 1989]

It is this close imbrication of the physical and the mental that enables experienced boxers to continue to defend themselves and eventually rebound after skirting being knocked out. In such moments of quasi unconsciousness, their body continues to box on its own, as it were, until they regain their senses, sometimes after a lapse of several minutes. "I went into a clinch with my head down and my partner's head came up and butted me over the left eye, cutting and dazing me badly. Then he stepped back and swung his right against my jaw with every bit of his power. It landed flush and stiffened me where I stood. Without going down or staggering, I lost all consciousness, but instinctively proceeded to knock him out. Another sparring partner entered the ring. We boxed three rounds. I have no recollection of this." In the famous "Thrilla in Manila," one of the most brutal battles in the history of the Manly art, both Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali fought much of the bout in a state bordering on unconsciousness. Several years later after the third contest between the two great corrivals of the decade, "Smokin" Joe recalled how, by the sixth round, "I couldn't think anymore. All I know is the fight is there. The heat (nearly 104 degrees), the humidity (of the Filipino summer). . . . That particular fight, like, I just couldn't think, I was there, I had a job to do. I just wanted to get the job done. " He would continue to march onto Ali, drunk with punches and blinded by the swelling around his eyes, until his trainer, fearing that he was going to get himself killed in the ring, threw in the towel at the bell calling for the fifteenth and final round.

Boxers and trainers seem on first cut to hold a contradictory view of the "mental" aspect of their activity. On the one hand, they assert that boxing is a "thinking man's game" that they frequently liken to chess. On the other, they insist that there is no ratiocinating once you set foot in the squared circle. " Ain't no place for thin kin' in the ring: it's all reflex! When it's time to think, it's time to quit," DeeDee admonishes. And yet Woodlawn's old head coach fully agrees with Ray Arcel, the dean of American trainers, still on duty at a solid ninety-two years after having groomed eighteen world champions, when he maintains that "boxing is brain over brawn. I don't care how much ability you've got as a fighter. If you can't think, you're just another bum in the park. " The riddle solves itself as soon as one realizes that a boxer's ability to cogitate and reason in the ring has become a faculty of his undivided organism-what John Dewey would call his "body-mind complex."

Pugilistic excellence can thus be defined by the fact that the body of the fighter computes and judges for him, instantaneously, without the mediation-and the costly delay that it would cause-of abstract thinking, prior representation, and strategic calculation. As Sugar Ray Robinson concisely puts it: "You don't think. It's all instinct. If you stop to think, you're gone." An opinion confirmed by trainer Mickey Rosario: "You can't think.... out there [in the ring]. You got to be an animal. " And one must add: a cultivated instinct, a socialized animal. It is the trained body that is the spontaneous strategist; it knows; understands, judges, and reacts all at once. If it were otherwise, it would be impossible to survive between the ropes. And one readily recognizes novices, during amateur fights, by their rigid and mechanical moves, their slowed-down, "telegraphed" combinations, whose stiffness and academicism betray the intervention of conscious thought into the coordination of gestures and movements.

85. Former world heavyweight champion Gene Tunney, as cited in Sammons, Beyond the Ring, 246, emphasis mine.
89. Sugar Ray Robinson is cited in Hauser, Black Lights, 29, and Mickey Rosario in Plummer, Buttercups and Strong Boys, 43.
Thus the strategy of the boxer, as product of the encounter of the pugilistic habitus with the very field that produced it, erases the scholastic distinction between the intentional and the habitual, the rational and the emotional, the corporeal and the mental. It pertains to an embodied practical reason that, being lodged in the depths of the socialized organism, escapes the logic of individual choice. Indeed, one could characterize the strategy of the boxer in the ring by what Hugh Brody says of the Athabascan Eskimo hunters of the Canadian Northwest:

To make a good, wise, sensitive hunting choice is to accept the interconnection of all possible factors, and avoids the mistake of seeking rationally to focus on any one consideration that is held as primary. What is more, the decision is taken in the doing: there is no step or pause between theory and practice. As a consequence, the decision-like the action from which it is inseparable-is always alterable (and therefore may not properly even be termed a decision).

Confrontation in the ring calls for synoptic judgments, stamped by responsiveness and flexibility, made in and for the moment, informed by an embodied pugilistic sensitivity, which are the very antithesis of the systematically planned and measured decisions of "calculating reason." This is what Joyce Carol Oates recognizes well when she writes: "'Free will, 'sanity,' 'rationality'-our characteristic modes of consciousness-are irrelevant, if not detrimental, to boxing in its most extraordinary moments. "91 Once in the ring, it is the body that learns and understands, sorts and stores information, finds the correct answer in its repertory of possible actions and reactions, and in the end becomes the veritable subject (insofar as there would be one) of pugilistic practice.

Successfully learning to box thus requires the combination of quasi-antinomic dispositions: impulses and drives rooted deep within the "biologic individual" dear to George Herbert Mead that may be characterized as "savage," at the borderline of the cultural, wedded to the ability to channel them at every moment, to regulate, transform, and tap them according to a plan that is objectively rational even as it remains beyond the reach of the explicit calculus of individual consciousness. This contradiction, inherent in the pugilistic habitus, explains that the belief in the innate character of the boxer's ability can peacefully coexist with an unrelenting and rigid ethic of work and striving. The native myth of the gift of the boxer is an illusion founded in reality: what fighters take for a natural capacity ("You gotta have it in you") is in effect this peculiar nature resulting from the protracted process of inculcation of the pugilistic habitus, a process that often begins in early childhood, either within the gym itself—where one routinely sees children brought in by members of the club trying their hand at boxing—or in the antechamber to the gym that is the ghetto street.

One could quote entire pages of field notes in support of the notion according to which "You're born a boxer." One will make do with one excerpt (from 1 October 1988) in which DeeDee insists at length on the resulting from the protracted process of inculcation of the pugilistic habitus.

An Implicit and Collective Pedagogy

To an essentially corporeal and little-codified practice, whose logic can be grasped only in and through action, corresponds an implicit, practical, and collective mode of inculcation. The transmission of pugilism is