

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Rumbles in the jungle: Boxing, racialization and the performance of masculinity

Journal Item

How to cite:

Woodward, Kath (2004). Rumbles in the jungle: Boxing, racialization and the performance of masculinity. *Journal of Leisure Studies*, 23(1) pp. 5–17.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/0261436042000182281>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Rumbles in the Jungle: Boxing, racialisation and the performance of masculinity

Kath Woodward

Open University

Abstract

Men's boxing is a sport with successful, high profile and affluent participants and one that includes many of the very much less well off. It has traditionally involved high participation by men from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The sport is beset by contradictions, between racism and opportunity, discipline and excess, beautiful bodies and those that are fractured and damaged, and between traditional and alternative presentations of masculinity. The negotiation and presentation of raced and gendered identities have a strong presence, especially in terms of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity might be enacted. My research is about racialised masculinities in boxing and links ethnography at a Sheffield gym which has produced some very well known boxers, with exploration of popular, media narratives about this particular performance of masculinities and the discursive location of boxing as a sport. It looks at the enactment of masculinities at a site that might appear to offer particularly essentialised and polarised versions of masculinity, race and class. It examines the ways in which men participate in boxing at a variety of levels and the interconnections between the public and the private stories that are told about men and boxing.

Introduction

Boxing is a sport and a cultural phenomenon which resonates with the very public stories of heroes and legends, of 'big fights' - like the Ali versus Foreman contest in Zaire in 1974 from which the title of this article is taken - and the very real, very material experiences of danger and injury that are features of competitions, as well as a part of the daily routine of training. My 'everyday stories' are from a gym in Sheffield in the north of England and what I aim to do in this research is to bring together some of the everyday stories of those who participate in men's boxing and the narratives of the super heroes through whose lives the boxers make sense of their own.

Methodology

This research project interrogates masculinity as a gendered identity at a particular site which is one where masculinity has largely been assumed rather than stated, expressed and investigated. Gender identities are relatively under-researched in the context of boxing although the situation is changing. Laurence de Garis (2000) suggests that a new masculinity is being forged through the intimacy of sparring practices in boxing gyms. However, there is a nervousness about boxing on the part of sports journalists as well as sociologists. Boxing is an area where the protagonists and aficionados have to be on their guard, whether in the context of the punches being delivered by the press, the health lobby and medical practitioners or of the very real physical dangers which beset those who take part.

My research is based on ethnographic studies, combining interviews with observation, of a boxing gym in Sheffield and the personal stories that this research has yielded, along with analysis of the public stories manifest in media representations of boxing as a sport which occupies a contentious place in public debates.

Most ethnographic research into boxing has been carried out by men, who have 'joined in'. Indeed they are usually very proud to include tales of their own sparring endeavours in the account of the research. Loic Wacquant, (1995a), Geoff Beattie (1997) and Lawrence de Garis (2000), all describe with some pride their own participation. Personal involvement is a key means of gaining access and one of ethnography's major strengths. However, participation is not everything, nor does it necessarily access a more authentic 'truth' than observation and interviewing. As Belinda Wheaton (2002) has pointed out, few ethnographies of sport by male researchers acknowledge or make visible the researcher's gendered identity; maleness passes unquestioned. Wheaton argues for the critical distance that is also a vital part of ethnography.

The gym I visited is in Wincobank, a run down area of Sheffield, close to the M1 and the Meadowhall shopping mall. The gym is in a boys' club, formerly a school, with very limited facilities. The main space has an area for doing punch bag work with a ring for sparring at the far end. At one end of the room was a large (for a long time cracked) mirror. There is a range of different ethnic groups represented at the gym with about a 50:50 black white balance, African Caribbean and some Yemeni Arab people, not many South Asia men, mixed race, white Irish (like the trainer), white

Sheffield, other white Yorkshire, and others from different parts of the UK, usually following up the reputation of the trainer.

Men's boxing gyms are very difficult to access for women. Mothers deliver small boys on Saturday mornings for training but many gyms have a ban on women, which was the case with the gym in Sheffield at which I carried out most of this research. I was only able to gain entry to the gym through making a television programme there in 1997. The observation, interviewing and filming formed the first stages of my research and I conducted the first 16 semi-structured interviews with 9 black and 7 white men, all at the gym in the following year. I returned two years later to conduct follow up interviews with 12 of the men, 7 of whom were black and 5 white. There is some transience in this population, although I was able to speak to some people who had been coming to the gym for a very long period of time. The first set of interviews focused on life histories, participation in the sport and the men's views on fitness, health and the impact of boxing on their understandings of the body. The second set of interviews included coverage of their views on women's boxing and public debates about the sport. I spoke to boys and men aged between 9 and 59. The majority were working class men in their twenties, although I did interview three men in white collar work who trained at the gym but did not take part in any competitive fighting. The gym used to be predominantly white but is now more mixed.

The ban on women is explained in terms of the distractions they might afford in a quaint, biologist, but quite ubiquitous, understanding of women as taking men's minds off the job in hand. This view has resonance across many sports where men are not permitted to spend time with their sexual partners (coded female within a

dominant heterosexist framework) before major competitions. Wacquant (1995a) reports that the ban on sex before fights is reported by his respondents as the main disadvantage of their participation in boxing. The boxers themselves, almost universally saw women's boxing as dangerous and unacceptable. This was expressed through a discourse of chivalry and protection.

It isn't right. It isn't natural. They might get hurt

(Dave)

You wouldn't want your daughters to do it would you?

(Brian)

On the scale of participation to observation, my approach was all observation. There was a complete separation between the researcher and the subject and I also had to negotiate my identity as a white, middle class woman and as an outsider. In this instance gender as well as ethnicity offers an additional dimension to the relationship between researcher and the people being researched and complicates the issue of 'ontological complicity' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In this instance the researcher has a spectatorial position. I have not sought to access any kind of 'authentic voice' of those who engage in boxing, but rather to explore the intersection between their stories and those which occupy the public arena in order to reach some understanding of how masculinities are constructed and experienced at this site. Public debates are more frequently concerned with the dangers of boxing, its negative components and risks or with the triumph of the big fighters and the millions they earn than with the perceptions of those who practise the art and seem to have chosen so to do. Private stories might concur or they might counter the public stories and especially the heroic

legends which dominate them. The researcher as outsider avoids the privileging of 'insider knowledge' but this may have to be countered by the more limited access to the understandings of those who box. De Garis (2000) describes revelations and intimate exchanges in the showers which are not, of course, accessible to a woman in this context. My point here is to indicate the gender specific experience of the researcher and to illustrate both positive and negative, gendered dimensions of ontological complicity.

There are different strategies which a researcher such as I was able to adopt. One is to be the maternal figure, an extension of mother/family figure, who is thus not threatening and largely asexual. The other is as the gender neutral outsider, which was also possible in this context. Distancing had to be embraced as my distinction as researcher was as outsider in terms of gender, class, biography and locality. Looking 'middle class' provided access to some of the gym's more famous members since they thought I must be from a TV company or a national newspaper. The approach adopted relied on interview material and observation, including informal discussion with the trainer and some of the boxers whilst sitting in on gym sessions. I conducted discourse analyses of the interview data and of the rituals and practices as well as the public and local narratives that permeate the culture of the gym.

Boxing is for Men?

Men's boxing carries different meanings from women's boxing in all sorts of ways, for the participants, the spectators, the media and perhaps most significantly the promoters. As Jennifer Hargreaves (1997) argues, women's boxing, although in many

ways set apart from women's other sporting activities, is another example of women's activities being marginalized and undervalued. Whilst women's boxing, especially prize fighting historically, has been associated with a subversion or even a distortion of dominant versions of femininity, men's boxing invokes hegemonic masculinity. My research focuses on men's boxing as a site at which racialised masculinities might be enacted and produced and aims to interrogate some of the dominant assumptions about masculinity and boxing. Boxing, one might expect, could offer a space in which a traditional, physically aggressive, even hegemonic masculinity would dominate.

Boxing offers a site where men have power over women who are largely excluded from the sport (Hargreaves 1997) and certainly from the higher echelons of financial success. There is hegemonic status afforded to heterosexual masculinity and the subordination of other masculinities, especially those constructed as weak or fearful and lacking courage. This version of traditional masculinity in boxing has been given its strongest expression in the work of the writer Joyce Carol Oates, who highlights the machismo of boxing, quoting the WBO lightweight champion, Hector Macho Man Commacho, 'What time is it? Macho time' (1987: 70). This claim is supported by ethnographic research, such as that of John Sugden, who states that he never met a woman at a boxing gym in the whole of his extensive fieldwork (1996: 193).

Oates stresses the 'reality' of this masculine sport, 'Boxing isn't a metaphor it's the thing itself', whilst acknowledging its violence, 'it violates a taboo of civilization', in that it is 'akin to pornography' (1987: 105). However, she denies the primacy of its theatricality, 'it's not theatrical...rehearsed or simulated the damage the pain are unfeigned' (1987: 106). Boxing is spectacle but it is *not drama*; it is real, according to

Oates. This is one aspect of the enactment of masculinities in boxing that my research questions, especially as indicated by my observation in the gym and through the merging of tales of heroism in public and private narratives. What is crucial in Oates' account is the competitive, hierarchical masculinity of boxing, in which, 'No two men can occupy the same space at the same time...Boxing is for men and is about men, and is men' (ibid: 72). This version of masculinity is reinforced through the weight classifications of boxing, ranging from the flyweights under 112 pounds to heavyweights, who have no upper limit but have to be over 195 pounds. The imagery and imaginings of boxing are the prerogative of heavyweights. Heavyweights carry more status; they earn more and their images dominate the media.

This construction of boxing is one that depends heavily on binary oppositions, especially one between women and men. This view supports essentialist claims to exclusivity and focuses on what Judith Butler (1993) calls anatomical sex. Whilst theories of identity, especially the theorising of gender identities become ever more concerned with intersectionality and the interrelationships between different dimensions of identity (Woodward 2002), boxing is ever more constructed around resistance to the rhetoric of transgression and interconnections and remains entrenched in a binary logic. This reached new heights, or perhaps more accurately depths, in June 2002, with the Lennox Lewis/Mike Tyson heavyweight world championship fight in Memphis, post facto, being coded the triumph of 'good' over 'evil' (*Guardian*, June 10th, 2002). This dualistic thinking pervades the rhetoric of boxing in the press and in the gym; strong/weak, big/small, success/failure, pro/amateur, brave/cowardly all have to be negotiated by the men who participate in its practices.

Boxing might offer a traditional masculinity but this is an historical moment when traditional masculinities are threatened and it may be ‘cooler’ to be a caring father who is into football, a ‘new’ masculinity, embodied, for example, in the England football captain David Beckham. In boxing it is quite difficult to present the caring, angst ridden, self-deprecating face of new masculinity. Boxing offers a site where the private and public stories through which we make sense of who we are, are so closely interconnected that it is very difficult to disentangle the personal and the social in the construction of these identities (Woodward 1997a). Identity presents the interface between the personal and the social, the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ (Woodward, 1997a, 2002). Personal stories indicate the psychic investment made in these identities of masculinity, which are produced within material, economic, social and embodied circumstances. Masculinity at this site is particularly experienced through the body and produced through understandings of the body which is deployed to create differences, notably a most polarised difference between women and men. These are masculinities that are intimately concerned with negotiating the relationship between what is inside, the psychic, and what is outside, the material and the social and between the natural and the cultural. The boxers have to make powerful psychic investments in masculine identities in the context of a sport that appears to be characterised by considerable violence.

Boxing Stories: Gender, racialisation and class

As Paul Ricoeur (1991) argues it is through the stories we tell that we make sense of our lives, but they are linked to the wider narrative, to the social context. We do not have complete control, because as Ricoeur (1991) suggests, we may be the heroes of

our stories but we are not the authors. One aspect of the way in which people endeavour to synthesize the disparate components of their experience to produce a more coherent story is the way in which we draw on the more public stories that have currency at the time. Personal stories link us to the broader social framework in which more public stories are told. In this sense narrative can be used to explore the interrelationship between the personal and the social that forms the basis of identity.

Boxing is deeply implicated with social structures of gender, race and class and, especially with the social and cultural meanings that are accorded to masculinity (de Garis 2000). Involvement with this particular sporting activity has particular resonance for presenting oneself as 'tough' and as a 'real man' in the tradition of a particular form of physical, dominant and dominating masculinity (Oates 1987). It might be seen as offering a particularly good example of an embodied hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1985). This is not to say that boxing is not also widely implicated with race and class and location (Early 1994), but these articulate with masculinity in the production of gendered identities in relation to the sport. Boxing is both ethnicised and racialised through the articulation of class and gender, although in many critiques class has been accorded a stronger emphasis than gender and racialisation. Loic Wacquant observes, 'That boxing is a working class occupation is reflected not only in the physical nature of the activity but also in the social recruitment of its practitioners and in their continuing dependence on blue-collar or unskilled service jobs to support their career in the ring' (1995b: 502). This follows Pierre Bourdieu's claim that 'the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste' (1984: 190). According to Bourdieu (1984) different social classes operate with different tastes and life styles and have different and unequal access to cultural

capital. Bourdieu (1978) has argued that working-class bodily types constitute a form of physical capital that has a lower exchange value than that which has been developed by the ruling classes. Working class people have more limited access to the means of converting physical capital into cultural capital and their physical capital is predominantly devalued. Thus boxing could be seen as a largely male, working class engagement in converting physical capital. Boxing is a sport which has massive capital investment and very high earnings at the top, but for the vast majority of those who are involved at the local level, there are very limited financial returns (Sugden 1996). Brian, who is white, from Sheffield and aged 23, described his ambition to support himself by becoming a professional boxer:

I've been out of work for a bit and I'd rather be a pro and have a proper job and not be getting hand outs... Well I'll give it a try... It's what boxing's about, having respect, looking after yourself, having a job and having respect.

Masculinities are produced within specific material circumstances, but the notion of 'looking after yourself' is particularly powerful within the discursive field of the sport. Race, class and gender intersect to produce these versions of masculinity with considerable emphasis being placed upon self-respect and looking after yourself against the odds. For example many of the boxers tell of their decision to go to the gym and to learn to box because of being bullied, and for the majority of the black boxers having been subjected to racist abuse, while still at school. Whilst the white boxers expressed more concern with being bullied because they were small, the black boxers were much more likely to voice their experience of racism:

They was calling me names. You know Paki and that (John)

I used to get bashed around and pushed about at school (Dave)

Boxing illustrates some of the contradictions in the formation and presentation of embodied identity. There is some primacy accorded to gender in relation to identity, but these are complex connections, which are experienced in different ways and cannot be simply read off as aberrations in the civilizing process. Boxing practices illustrate elements of self-control and of the need to negotiate identity through exercising agency over the body, by taking control.

I weren't much good at football at school, but boxing's different (John)

I'm not a right big lad (Brian)

The more public story of the champion Naseem Hamed, who came from a Yemeni family living in Sheffield, having been 'discovered' as a small boy, when the trainer, looking out of the window of a bus, saw Naz fighting his corner in the playground, has been elevated to mythological status. This story involves the narrative of 'looking after yourself', through skill and perseverance, and the possibility of fighting racist taunts and harassment, even for someone without the body of a heavyweight.

The public stories of boxing are often more racialised than the private accounts. References to racism were made in relation to the childhood experiences of black boxers but were not reported as part of the gym culture. The only aggression, outside the parameters of boxing, that I witnessed, was between two brothers. In one sense the gym affords a safe space. There are conscious efforts made at the gym to combat the racist taunts that might be made in the world outside. Time is spent developing

strategies for countering the racism of spectators in competitions. The trainer endeavours to equip his boxers to deal with the racist taunts they are likely to meet at competitions, as well as the racism on the streets, by deploying such taunts himself. This strategy is explicit and recognised as such.

It's just so's we know what to expect. We've got to be prepared. That's why he does it. He's Irish. (John)

The strategy is perceived as necessarily supportive and there is recognition that whiteness too is heterogeneous - with separate categories, white Sheffield, Yorkshire, other white British, Irish - with an understanding that discrimination and exclusion operate across categories of visible difference. The racialisation of boxing is both dynamic and contingent, although it still draws on traditional discourses of racist categorisations. I found the trainer's repetition of racist chants disturbing, although it was explicitly designed to equip his boxers to deal with the 'reality' of the competitive world outside the gym.

Public stories often offer less self-conscious awareness of the construction of racialised meanings than this direct engagement, but these are meanings which nonetheless illustrate the articulation of different components in the construction of masculinity. For example, Mike Tyson's rape trial brought together race and gender in a mix that could not be disentangled and which was significantly informed by long held negative associations between threats of violence and sexuality with black sports men (Jefferson, 1997). There was recognition of stereotyping among black boxers at the gym, although opinions differed about the extent to which this could explain or

even excuse Tyson's actions. Boxing, as a legitimate sport is a highly disciplined activity. It requires dedicated commitment to training and enormous self-control both in training and in the ring. The self-control is demanded in order to comply with the rules of the game and to ensure acceptance, whether as a professional or as an amateur. It is also required in order to avoid physical damage. To be taken off one's guard is to expose oneself to serious injury.

There's no just like free fighting, punching, it's all about learning how to control yourself and ...that's big thing here... It's what it's all about - not getting hit (Brian).

Boxing is about self-control; it is also about fighting. This activity would seem to comply with Norbert Elias's (1983) notion of self-control but the nature of the activity does seem to contradict Elias's (1978) understanding of the historic progression away from individual acts of violence. Whilst the main emphasis of the protagonists, might be the avoidance of injury, the main purpose of boxing is to inflict damage through violent body on body contact. Whilst in the gym, in training, sparring may not involve injury, the training is directed at damaging one's opponent and learning to achieve the ultimate success of rendering one's opponent unconscious. Boxing is also about the excitement of winning. The black, cruiser weight champion, Johnny Nelson has had considerable experience of winning, whereas Brian has not, but both reflect upon the excitement of competition.

I love boxing the training, the fighting, winning. The buzz...

I feel good...Some people drink, smoke, do drugs to get a buzz. Some people
train for it - I do. (Johnny)

It's like one on one you see who's best. (Brian)

This notion of excitement is what links the private and the public stories.

Heroes, myths and legends

Boxing myths include everyday stories which become taken for granted in the sense that Roland Barthes (1972) uses myth to explain the naturalness of knowledge that seems to be unquestioned. Boxing myths also involve heroic narratives. Many of the stories told in the gym echoed those made public in the wider arena, but re-presented within localised culture. They were about the more famous members of the gym such as Naseem Hamed in the late 1990s because he was still training there. One such story, which I also heard in the gym, is related by Donald McRae who describes meeting Naseem Hamed before his bantamweight title fight with Vincenzo Belcastro in 1993. Naz informed him 'I'm gonna be a legend' (1996:140). Boxing abounds with 'legends', stories of fights and fighters, which constitute a particular form of heroic masculinity. The need to identify with a hero permeates the accounts of the men I spoke to at the gym. The reason they give for going into boxing is often because of seeing a particular fight on television, reading the reports, or in the case of Johnny Nelson, the successful cruiser weight world champion, of his older brother, his own personal hero's participation in the sport: 'I started because of my brother, he did it and he was my hero'. Heroes, histories and narratives include public stories about

heroes which interweave with the private aspirations, for example of these two black boxers:

I come down here because Bomber Graham he were always int newspapers.

(Dave)

Chris Eubank came to fitness studio where I were doing kick boxing. He got me into it. (John)

Boxing deploys the language of legends and constructs its own mythological heroes. In June 2002, Lennox Lewis ‘destroyed the myth of Tyson’ according to the *Guardian* newspaper (June 10, 2002). Not only do many of the men identify with heroes, they seek to create their own legends through fantasies of triumph that have resonance with traditional mythology. Such aspirations become part of the training practice. After the fight mentioned above between Naseem Hamed and Vincenzo Belcastro in Sheffield, Hamed was accused of going too far in the shower of punches he landed on his opponent. His defence was that he wasn’t really there ‘I was in Las Vegas, winning a world title’. The trainer, Brendan Ingle, endorsed this, somewhat apologetically, telling reporters after the fight in which Naz attempted to humiliate his opponent, that Naz was lost in a fantasy about being Sugar Ray Robinson outwitting Marvin Hagler at Caesar’s Palace in 1985. The masculinities that are implicated in the practice of boxing are about fantasy, mythology and the invocation of legend. These legends are local as well as global, although the two interrelate through the stories that are told. Heroes and legends form a large part of the narratives through which racialised masculinities are constructed within boxing, but there are contradictions.

Boxing is both elevated through its public stories of heroism and haunted by its ghosts. One of the greatest ever boxing heroes, Muhammad Ali describes how he could never avoid thinking about the relationship between boxing and slavery. After his defeat of George Foreman in the ‘rumble in the jungle’ in Zaire, he is reported as saying:

Then there was this nightmarish image I always had of two slaves in the ring. Like the old slave days on the plantations, with two of us big, black slaves fighting, almost on the verge of annihilating each other while the masters are smoking bit cigars and urging us on, looking for blood. (Ali and Durham 1975: 247)

There is also some dissonance between the performance and practice and the emphasis on control and regulation in all the personal accounts. What offers most rewards and most satisfaction seems to be the personal engagement in disciplining the body and in managing anxiety, whether the fear of bullying that drew them into the gym in the first place or the fear of being hurt that haunts them once they have started boxing. The emphasis at this gym is on not getting hit. The gym itself however takes on the air of carnival and of spectacle even though this is where they are training and not competing.

Boxing as carnival

Boxing is increasingly entertainment. Its most public stories are told at venues like Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas, where vast resources are spent on producing spectacle.

Boxing involves display and spectacle as well as what may at times appear to be a parodic masculinity. It is a good example of the carnivalesque in its display and parody of masculinity. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984/1965) uses the term carnival to describe hedonistic activities characterised by excess and the symbolic overthrow of hierarchies and social order, such as were experienced in medieval fairs. Such activities included overt sexual displays and excessive consumption of food and drink. The display of the fight with the associated trappings of popular culture present an activity that could be construed as contemporary carnival in its excess, if not in its lack of control, although there are myriad stories of excess which result from lack of control in the ring, some of Mike Tyson's heavyweight bouts being good examples (Jefferson, 1998). Boxing is also an entertainment which is attended by a high paying audience, who sometimes enjoy dinner while they watch the display. This highlights the embodiment of class difference and demonstrates starkly the divide in the investment of physical capital by the largely working class protagonists in the drama of the fight, which at this particular site is viewed by those who are more affluent. This is an uneasy and unequal relationship between spectator and those involved in the spectacle, strongly echoed in Ali's reflection on his fight with Foreman in Zaire in 1974 (Ali and Durham 1975).

However, what about the gym? This is where the *work* of boxing takes place; the dedicated hours of training in the run down premises. I had expected hard labour and sweat, but not really entertainment. The metaphor of dancing, expressed by Muhammad Ali's transcendent agility and deployed in some of the balletic sequences in the film *Raging Bull* is reconstructed and transformed in the gym through the rhythmic, staccato punches and pulsating beat of dance music; all performed in front

of the huge mirror. Sparring in the gym is accompanied by popular music, presenting a display not that far removed from a night club (Woodward 1997b). Music is selected by the boxers, with priority accorded to the highest ranking boxer in the gym at the time. There is a contradiction between the bodily practices that are geared towards aggression and destruction and the carnivalesque that is invoked by the music.

Another feature of carnival according to Bakhtin, is the display of grotesque bodies. Whilst the Bakhtinian grotesque body is characterised by excess rather than the frailty which belongs to the mutilated body, the grotesque body still occupies a place in the narratives of boxing. It is the tension and the interrelationship between the beautiful and the grotesque with its excesses of violence that haunt boxers in the practice of their art. Damage ranges from the more personal stories of injuries, such as Jimmy's detached retina and Karl's concussion (neither of which stopped them boxing altogether) to global accounts of death and brain damage. In the case of Oliver McCall at his WBC heavyweight fight against Lennox Lewis in Las Vegas in 1997 he suffered what was described as a nervous breakdown in the ring (*Sunday Telegraph*, February 9th 1997:S7). These are the ghosts that haunt all boxers, whether they engage in competitive fighting or even if they only spar at the gym, although it is at the level of professionals that this is most powerful. References to these fears were brief.

I try not to think about getting hit (Dave)

You've got to focus on getting out of the way. Of course I'm scared. I don't think about it (Brian)

Boxing permits what Stallybrass and White identified as an ‘alarming conjuncture of the elite and the vulgar’ (1986: 135) and can be seen as combining ‘the attraction of repulsion (ibid: 140). Boxing carries the mark of civilization. It is heavily regulated yet it permits an alliance of raw apprehension, involving flesh on flesh, in the most corporeal of sporting contests, with parodic display. Boxing is however a form of entertainment that can be explained and positioned within Bakhtin’s (1987) notion of carnival, as containing a utopian urge. Carnival displaces the normal social hierarchies. The parodic displays of traditional masculinities within the space afforded by boxing and the gym subvert ‘new’ masculinities and offer some resistance within racialised, classed discourses of masculinity. Carnival is a spectacle that is also gross and vulgar, repressed in bourgeois culture in the modern period, according to Bakhtin, yet there is also voyeuristic pleasure in carnival even if bourgeois enjoyment of the spectacle is voyeuristic and tinged with guilt. Boxing is a spectacle beset with contradictions and ambiguities enjoyed and reviled in equal proportions, probably at the same time. Boxing may illustrate control, but its practices and its criteria of success challenge this notion of the linear progress of civilising customs and practices. The enthusiasm of spectators for damage and at least a knock out, also subverts Elias’s (1978) understanding of the onward march of civilization.

Whilst boxing is concerned with the display of the perfectly honed, fit, beautiful body it also involves the grotesque body of defeat and serious injury. Boxing illustrates some of the contradictions in the formation and presentation of embodied identity. It includes the primacy of gender in relation to identity, but shows that this is a complex connection, which is experienced in different ways and cannot be simply read off as

an aberration in the civilizing process. It indicates elements of self-control and of the need to negotiate identity through exercising agency over the body, by taking control. Joyce Carol Oates' claim that boxing is not drama is questionable. It is self consciously staged for the entertainment of those who watch (Sugden 1996) rather as gladiatorial combat was in Ancient Rome (except for a big fight all the seats are expensive). There is a show with warm-up acts and razzamatazz. Sometimes it is big scale, sometimes it is a smaller venue, spectators might even be having dinner while they watch the 'show'. When I first visited the gym, I was amazed, not only by the lack of resources and the poverty of the actual place, but by the festive atmosphere. Loud dance music was being played and the boxers pranced about. Boxing does appear to be about dramatic presentation through the enactment of the spectacle of machismo in a drama that includes the personal management of fears and anxiety, about the self-respect of having a job, being able to defend yourself or of presenting a secure identity of masculinity.

Conclusion

Masculinity involves more than a series of iterative gendered actions. Masculinity as enacted at the gym is embodied and involves strong investment in and identification with traditional masculinity, as distinguished from femininity which is construed as its psychic opposite. Yet its enactment is contradictory and traditional masculinity is haunted by frailty and failure on the one hand and subject to parodic display and spectacle on the other. This is a masculinity that displays the contingent dimensions of anatomical corporeal sex, gender identity, racialised identity and performance. In a gender identity that might be most likely not to be parodic there is self-conscious

display spectacle and subversion, but the carnivalesque of boxing is characterised by the grotesque and the beautiful bodies which are displayed as part of the spectacle.

The beautiful body of traditional masculinity always has to negotiate the frailty and failure that is threatened by the damaged grotesque body.

Masculinities as forged in boxing are contradictory, frail, vulnerable and fragmented, all of which suggest counter intuitive readings of the hegemonic, traditional masculinity that one might expect to be enacted and experienced in this arena. One would expect a more linear story and while there are congruities between the public and the private stories told in boxing there are also areas of dissonance and disjunctive. Traditional masculinity is both parodied and subverted within this field. Although public stories racialise masculinity in strongly inflected ways the personal stories that are told are often implicated in resisting racism. Acknowledgement of racialisation is uneasy and there are tensions between what is stated and what is experienced. Traditional masculinity is more problematic in its performance within boxing than might have been anticipated. The 'he-man', macho discourse becomes parodied through spectacle and performance and the carnivalesque. At times it appears to be a transgressive masculinity because it parodies that which it appears to re-present. It is a masculinity that is regulated and contradicted by the discipline and control that has to be exercised in the regimes of boxers and their routine practices. It is also a masculine identity that demonstrates vulnerability and ambivalence without incorporating femininity. The relationship between femininity and masculinity that is demonstrated at the gym is one that is exclusive in the management of anxiety. Women are excluded as part of the process of establishing boundaries around traditional masculinity and dealing with some of the anxieties that may beset

masculinity at this time. The myths and legends that form part of the common sense understandings about boxing and masculinity draw upon local and global stories and construct heroic figures that are transnational. However, boxing has its ghosts as well as its heroes.

References

- Ali, M and Durham, R (1975) *The Greatest: My Own Story*, New York, Random House.
- Bakhtin, M. (1987) *Rabelais and this World*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Barthes, R (1972) *Mythologies*, London, Cape.
- Beattie, G (1997) *On the Ropes. Boxing as a Way of Life*, London. Indigo, Cassell.
- Bourdieu, P (1978) Sport and social class. *Social Sciences Information*, 17, 6, 819-40.
- Bourdieu, P (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, (trans. R. Nice) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge.
- (1993) *Bodies that Matter*, New York: Routledge.
- Connell, R.W. (1985) *Masculinities*, Berkeley, University of California.
- De Garis, L. (2000) ‘Be a Buddy to Your Buddy’ in McKay, J. Messner, M & Sabo, D. (ed.) *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport*, London: Sage.
- Early, G. (1994) *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on prizefighting, literature and modern American Culture*, Hopewell, NJ: ECCO.

Woodward, Kath (2004) *Rumbles in the jungle: Boxing, racialization and the performance of masculinity*. Journal of Leisure Studies, 23 (1). pp. 5-17. ISSN 0261-4367

DOI (Digital Object Identifier): <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/0261436042000182281>

Elias, N (1978) *The Civilizing Process, Volume 1: The History of Manners*, New York Pantheon Books.

- (1983) *The Court Society*, Oxford: Basil, Blackwell.

Hargreaves, J (1997) 'Introducing Images and Meanings' In *Body and Society*, Vol. 3 (4), 33-49, London, Sage.

Jefferson, T (1997) 'The Tyson rape trial: the law, feminism and emotional "truth."' *Social and Legal Studies*, 6,281-301.

- (1998) 'On muscle, "hard men", and "Iron" Mike Tyson: Reflections on desire, anxiety and the embodiment of masculinity, *Body and Society*,4, 77-98.

McRae, D (1996) *Dark Trade: Lost in Boxing*, Edinburgh, Mainstream.

Merleau-Ponty, M (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, Routledge.

Oates J.C. ([1987] 1997) *On Boxing* London, Bloomsbury.

Ricoeur, P. (1991) 'Narrative Identity' trans. D. Wood, in D. Wood (ed.) *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London: Routledge.

Sugden, J (1996) *Boxing and Society: An international analysis*, Manchester, Manchester University Press

Stallybrass, P and White, A (1986) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, London, Methuen.

Wacquant, L (1995a) 'Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers', *Body and Society*, Vol. 1 No 1, 65-93.

Wacquant, L (1995b) 'The pugilistic point of view: How boxers think about their trade', *Theory and Society*, Vol.24 No 4, 489-535.

Wheaton, B. (2002) 'Babes on the beach, women in the surf' in Tomlinson, A and Sugden J (eds.) *Power Games: A critical sociology of sport*, London, Routledge.

Woodward, K (2002) *Understanding Identity*, London, Arnold.

Woodward, Kath (2004) *Rumbles in the jungle: Boxing, racialization and the performance of masculinity*.
Journal of Leisure Studies, 23 (1). pp. 5-17. ISSN 0261-4367

DOI (Digital Object Identifier): <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/0261436042000182281>

-(1997a)'Concepts of Identity and Difference' in Woodward, K (ed.) *Identity and Difference*, London, Sage.

-(1997b) *Whose Body?* BBC television programme, Open University/BBC.