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Boxing Bodies and Everyday Routines

This chapter examines another of the distinctive properties of boxing, namely the primacy of bodies and the flesh in the sport. It explores another aspect of the interconnections between global, transnational aspects of boxing and local practices by looking at embodied everyday practices. My focus is upon understanding boxing bodies and their routines. The enfleshed selves who train in local gyms are regulated by the apparatuses of governance and bureaucratic systems. These governing bodies are features of globalization which pervade sport as it aspires to achieve respectability and legitimacy, but boxing bodies are also living, breathing bodies which are subject to pain and damage. The phenomenological idea of embodiment has had considerable currency in social studies of boxing, especially because this theoretical approach engages with the lived experience of boxing and immersion in its everyday routines. The ideas of Merleau-Ponty have been particularly productive in exploring some of the puzzles posed by boxing, notably why anyone should take up the sport in the first place and subject oneself to pain and injury and to access what boxing means in the everyday lives of boxers.

Boxing is practised round the world in different ways by different people. It may be too simplistic to endeavour to explain the attractions of boxing by the exigencies of economic and social disadvantage. Generalizations about boxing and poverty may be too simplistic. Studies of boxing have contributed to productive ways of thinking about bodies. Boxers keep going in the ring even when they are clearly injured, which poses questions about the relationship between minds and bodies and the possibilities of mind over matter as well as the matter of choice. Boxing is about routine embodied practices and working out in the gym, which are the zones of body techniques (Spencer, 2011) as well as competition whether as an amateur or as a professional. Boxing is also a spectacular sport which has global events that attract huge media coverage as well as the interventions of governance which impact upon and connect to everyday embodied routines.

Boxing bodies

Bodies are central to sport, none more so than boxing, where the ultimate contest is between the bodies of two people on the ring. Boxers are classified by their body weight and fighting out of one's weight category can present additional dangers. The rationale for weight classifications is to avoid the injuries that an unequal fight might involve and to ensure both fair play and an exciting competition. The precision of these categories makes it worth noting how specific they are and the range of different classes (Boxing Weights, 2012). This also demonstrates the specificities of the centrality of bodies to boxing. Flesh is implicated in the one-on-one combat in the ring and in the training sessions and sparring in the gym but it is also weighed, and to participate boxers have to comply with the regulations.¹

In the culture of boxing, within these classes, heavyweights carry the highest status (Oates, 1987) although there have been golden ages of boxing when other classes like middleweights have been dominant. Some of the best contests have taken place in lower weight class however, as for example in the case of great flyweights like Jimmy Wilde (1910–1923) or more recently Ricardo Lopez (1985–2001). One of the best ever bantamweights was the Brazilian Eder Jofre, whose crouching style won him 72 out of his 78 fights. Panamanian Roberto Duran dominated the lightweight class in the 1970s and Sugar Ray Robinson is called the greatest ever pound-for-pound boxer (Boxing Weights, 2012). Boxers like Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran and Thomas Hearns all stepped up a class to join Marvellous Marvin Hagler in the middleweight class demonstrating the desire to achieve at a heavier weight. Within boxing, heavyweights can be seen as slow as and less agile than lighter weight fighters, although the incomparable Muhammad Ali, who could float like a butterfly and sting like a bee (Hauser, 1991), challenged any such allegations about the lassitude and cumbersome clinging-on by heavyweights, with his dazzling speed. Other fights, like the memorable occasion when Mike Tyson, in his prime, knocked out Michael Spinks and when he defeated Trevor Berbick, also demonstrate the amazing agility and movement of the heavyweight class.

These are stories told by those inside boxing culture. It remains the case that heavyweights can carry more weight and pack the strongest punches, which has generated the wider discourses of evaluation; heavyweights have come to mean any person who excels or has considerable influence and substance whereas a lightweight is someone who is unimportant. Punching above your weight may be foolish in boxing but suggests achievement that might have been expected in

other fields. It is the corporeal capacities of boxing which generate this culture of valuing the heavyweight, especially when allied to a tradition of traditional masculinity.

Sex gender

Boxers constantly have to meet weight criteria, which may involve restricted diets and limitations of food and fluid before a weigh-in. Sporting bodies are also categorized by gender and serious mixed competitions are less common and often contentious, especially in boxing, although there is public debate on all sides and information about mixed fights are available on the internet (Women's Boxing Archive Network, WBAN, 2012). The categories may be called gender in sport, but distinctions are often made on the grounds of anatomical sex in terms of body size, strength and stamina (Hargreaves, 1994). Gender difference is constituted through the classification of bodies and such ordering is based on social and cultural factors: sex and gender; the material and the social.

Men's boxing retains a high degree of cultural dominance and the genealogy of the sport is strongly configured around its associations with masculinity, which is enmeshed with the corporeal properties of muscle, flesh, weight and height. Oates expresses this powerfully as 'Boxing is for men and is about men, and is men' (1987:72). Her comment is not only an empirical observation about the people who most visibly take part, but also an expression of the powerfully gendered metaphors of the sport. Boxing bodies inform language also because the metaphoric use of heavyweights not only connotes superior status, but also suggests that these gendered attributes draw upon the legacies of hegemonic masculinity.

Women's boxing has a long history and the sport has achieved considerable popularity among women, especially in the USA in recent years along with kickboxing and MMA in Europe and the USA as well as in Japan, Thailand (as Muay Thai) and China. It is men's boxing especially that recreates legends of heroism and constructs the myths of masculinity in which practitioners and followers make attachments and identifications such that en fleshed qualities of men's bodies elide with the cultural attributes of masculinity. Boxing offers a site where sex and gender are central to an understanding of the field, because the sport demonstrates the importance of sex gender as inseparable, rather than seeing sex as biological and gender as cultural. Boxing is not just about men; it is about masculinity and the processes through which attachments are made to particular versions of masculinity. Flesh and culture are part of the mix.

Boxing has a long history of traditional masculinities, although these might have passed unstated and have been taken for granted. In the late twentieth century assumptions about the norms of the male body and its aestheticization were deconstructed and challenged (Connell, 1995, 2002). Men's bodies became more explicitly the subject of the female gaze and the gaze of other men. Boxing is specific and distinctive but it is also part of the wider social landscape. Boxing is a homosocial activity in its networks; the gym or the club permits and enables non-sexual same-sex relations because the gender differentiation of most boxing clubs means that it is male bodies that are interacting in these spaces. Theories of embodiment have been used to explore how men embody prevailing codes of masculinity according to variations of class, race, sexuality and able-bodiedness. As Robert A. Nye notes in his review of literature on masculinity,

Men are no longer the invisible, unmarked gender, the Archimedean point from which all norms, laws and rights flow; men are themselves the objects of the gaze of women, of other men and of a new critical scholarship that is deeply informed by the feminist insights ... and scholarship of pioneers in the study of masculinity.

(Nye, 2005: 1938)

Empirical categories of sex and gender, often based on visible difference, have always been central to sport but there is still more limited awareness of sexual difference among the practitioners of sport, especially those in the privileged position of able bodied white men. Even in boxing, however, there is an emergent acknowledgement that it is not only women who are marked as being gendered. Not only have men's bodies been incorporated into critiques of 'the body' but also the particularities and differences of those bodies have become the subject of a theoretical gaze.

Boxing presents a particularly powerful mix of material embodiment and the limitations and celebrations of the flesh which highlight both the centrality of the binary logic of sex gender and the extremes of corporeality and demand recognition of material enfleshed qualities along with local and cultural capacities. Boxing is also both ordinary and spectacular.

Beautiful bodies: Broken bodies

One of the 'ordinary affects' (Stewart, 2007) of boxing in its routine embodied practices, which is an iterative part of its everyday culture, is injury. Damage can be the routine hand injuries which are the most common form of impairment,

or they might take more dramatic forms. The juxtaposition of the beautiful and the broken body has particular resonance in boxing because of the sport's body practices and indeed the *raison d'être* of fighting.

Not only is boxing distinctively marked by corporeality, but it also manifests some of the most extreme versions of embodiment through the beautiful body and the broken, damaged body. In boxing, it is particularly difficult to read the body as a text which is solely socially constructed and a site of inscription (Foucault, 1981). The boxer's body demands acknowledgement of physical materiality, and fragility. The beautiful body incorporates not only physical fitness, muscle, skill and good looks, but also a whole set of physical experiences through which this version of embodiment is forged. Muhammad Ali at his peak must be one of the best examples of this beautiful body, but the ill health which has dogged his later years, albeit which he denies to have arisen from his boxing experience, presents another dimension of embodiment. Similarly, Mike Tyson in his prime appeared both invincible and physically perfect whatever his emotional shortcomings (Jefferson, 1996, 1998, Oates, 1987, 2002, O'Connor, 2002). Ill health is one aspect of impairment; damage in the ring or, although less dramatically, even in the gym is another. Beautiful boxing bodies might be said to comply with an ideal that equates physical beauty with health, success and strength, both moral and corporeal, but they are always subverted by the threat of damage and the broken body, as well as being particularly configured in boxing.

The tensions, as well as the interrelationship between beautiful and damaged bodies and the excesses of violence, haunt boxing in complex ways. Fear is not usually expressed directly in the everyday practices of the gym (Heiskanen, 2012, Wacquant, 2004, Woodward, 2006, 2008). Damage ranges from the more personal experiences of minor injuries to public accounts of death in the ring in the global media, such as that of Bradley Stone, and brain damage as in the case of Michael Watson. The year 2005 saw the first death of a woman in the ring when Becky Zerlentes died at the age of 34, after being knocked out in an amateur bout in Washington. Pain and damage through the infliction of physical aggression are intentional and not incidental or accidental in boxing. The main aim of the activity and its embodied practices is to inflict pain on your opponent and avoid it yourself. The artist Sandor Szenassy, whose work includes boxers as subjects and whose patron was the boxing promoter, Frank Warren, is quoted as saying, 'People think we live in a civilised society. Boxing hurts our sensibilities; it reminds us that we don't' (*Independent on Sunday*, 16 July 1995). Boxing hurts our sensibilities because of its enfleshed materiality and public display of hurt bodies, which are implicated in the criminal and corrupt practices which

impinge upon boxing and are another aspect of the links between the embodied practices and the culture of the sport and its social world (Heiskanen, 2012).

Boxing abounds with stories which challenge civilized sensibilities. Oliver McCall suffered what was described as a nervous breakdown in the ring at his WBC heavyweight fight against Lennox Lewis in Las Vegas in 1997. 'At the end of the fourth round, when McCall threw just two punches, he was crying ... and needed just 55 seconds of the fifth to see that the man's problems were deep-rooted and mental' (Mossop, 1997:S7). McCall's body refused to respond from round four. This is conceptualized as 'mental failure' but what was evident is that McCall could not fight. This example illustrates the passive rather than the active synthesis of mind and body which is visible in the broken body in the ring in an unusual scenario. McCall became an object of pity and not of desire in what was perceived to be a loss of control of his body, in an unstated acknowledgement of the enfleshed capacities of the mind as well as the body. The infliction of pain may be intentional as opposed to accidental; nonetheless, the will may fail and the capacity to act intentionally may be lost as in this case.

A more familiar incidence of the broken body is the damaged, injured body. For example, in the famous case of the collision between Nigel Benn and Gerald McClellan in February 1995, has been described as Benn's greatest and his worst night (Mitchell, 2001, 2005). For McClellan it was the worst night; a night from which he never recovered. McClellan remained in an induced coma for eleven days after the fight while doctors eased the blood clot on his brain. McClellan, who is looked after by his sister, no longer knows anything about boxing titles or records and is now blind (Mitchell, 2003). Much of the debate has been framed within a moral dilemma about whether the film of the actual fight should be shown, for example on television after the event, but it also raises issues about the materiality of the broken body in boxing which so often constitutes a broken self. Boxing bodies are enfleshed selves where flesh and self are one, but this is not an individualized flesh; the frailty of the flesh is common to all practitioners and is part of the culture of boxing. YouTube has opened up possibilities for the unregulated display of such cruel boxing encounters along with great fights and big moments (Woodward, 2011, YouTube, KO, 2012).

The beautiful body draws upon an aesthetic that has a long history, especially in bringing together notions of physical beauty, fitness and rectitude. Men's bodies have been understood as natural, as well as the norm, their constitution being a biological preserve linked to hormonal balance, but separate and distinct from the rationality of the mind, which, in the mind/body dichotomy, was accorded much higher status and largely coded male. Whatever the higher value

accorded to the mind and rationality over the body and its practices, in boxing it is flesh which is central. Boxing is the sport which, par excellence, creates and reproduces the greater value accorded to 'mind over matter' and the devaluing of physical capital. Boxing celebrates physical capital, but the sport as a field of inquiry generates paradoxes. Bodies are everything, but in the knowledge society of postmodernity, bodies are less highly rated than minds. The polarization of beautiful and damaged bodies is, however, embedded in the genealogy of boxing and in its configuration of masculinities.

Boxing reminds us that flesh presents constraint and limitations as well as possibilities. The body breaks down and is damaged and impaired and is constantly subject to the very material threat of severe damage as well as of routine stress and pain in training. Recognition of this is core to training. Avoidance of being hurt, being able to get out of the way and act defensively are key to the training regimen. The body practices through which such defences operate are implicated in the defensive strategies that are adopted to secure the boundaries of the embodied self and pre-empt damage.

Boxing may appear primordial in its practices but the sport is subject to technological and scientific interventions which can detect damage. Professional boxers undergo regular brain scans which visualize and identify, but do not prevent such impairment. Athletes, whilst having to negotiate the legal constraints of pharmaceutical interventions, combine the natural and the social in the process of becoming cyborgs (Haraway, 1991). Donna Haraway's work, although not concerned with sport, highlights the transformations of bodies made possible through the merging of boundaries between humans and technology. She has not simply deconstructed the divisions between the organic and inorganic, but has problematized the category of being human, which is manifest in sport in attempts to enhance athletic performance and go beyond the boundaries and constraints of the flesh. Technological advances blur the boundaries of the closed human body and open up all sorts of liberatory possibilities (1992). Boxing reminds us of the constraints on these promises.

Women and men and gendered bodies

Boxing bodies are measured by weight but weight categories are not sufficient to keep women and men apart. Boxing demonstrates the cultural and social sex gender binary when body practices and cultural forces are inseparable. For example, the controversy over Ann Wolfe in 2005, having successfully defeated

her female opposition then seeking male opponents, invited strong arguments which open up questions about the categories around which boxing is organized. Debates about women fighting with men in the ring are linked to the performance of masculinity and femininity as well as to the embodied practices of boxing. Women boxers may be seen to be performing masculinity when they fight each other but the matter of how women are implicated in the embodied performance of masculinity is brought into stark relief when they actually fight with men. This presents a problem for the categories of sex and gender, which have been addressed in different ways.

Distinctions have been made between sex and gender. Some second-wave feminists, notably Ann Oakley (1972), usefully argued that sex and gender were frequently elided to women's disadvantage, whereby cultural expectations of what was appropriate or possible for women were attributed to some biological law. The notion that women should be relegated to second-class citizenship, or even no citizenship, because of anatomical difference from men, in particular the possession of a uterus, has a long history. Women have been excluded from activities ranging from sport (Hargreaves, 1994) to membership of the professions and posts in the military, because of their sex, which was claimed to be generative of dire outcomes such as Aristotle's 'wandering womb' or the psychic phenomenon of hysteria. It is apparent that there are difficulties in separating out some of the capacities of the bodies of women and men and in disentangling flesh and culture, sex and gender. More recently the idea of an oppositional distinction between sex and gender has been challenged. Sex too is a cultural construct (Butler, 1993). Donna Haraway also points out that the sex gender dualism cannot accommodate differentiation unless we can ensure that:

the binary universalizing opposition that spawned the concept of the sex/gender system ... implodes into articulated, differentiated, accountable, located and sequential theories of embodiment, where nature is no longer imagined and enacted as a resource to culture and sex to gender.

(1991:148)

Bodies in boxing are not just enacted, they are enfleshed and material. The meaning of sex is strongly mediated by cultural understandings that make it impossible to differentiate between sex and gender. The use of gender permits an acknowledgement of this powerful cultural and social mediation (Price and Shildrick, 1999), but may over-socialize the flesh in ways that dematerialize the boxing body. Boxing, more than any other sport, shows the need to be attentive to material enfleshed qualities and properties as well as those of cultural and social

processes. The use of sex gender retains the materiality and intransigence of flesh with the plasticity, as well as the endurances, of culture (Woodward, 2012a) and acknowledges that flesh can be manipulated and transformed too, through practice, such as training regimes and through the interventions of science and technology.

Boxing raises some interesting questions about sex gender. Binary logic informs boxing culture as well as flesh. It is not chance that Joyce Carol Oates reiterates her analogy between men and boxing and women and childbirth (1987, 2002). Childbirth and prizefighting are both experiences which can involve pain and, as Loic Wacquant argues of boxing, they are situations where the body takes over. In childbirth there is no going back; the body takes over entirely, although contemporary medical practices intervene and provide a merging of nature and culture which parallels sporting interventions, legitimate and not so legitimate. Agency only operates through going with the body, whereas in the ring a boxer can make decisions and can even opt out and stay on the stool. Each is an embodied activity which generates a range of associations which would appear to derive from the embodied experience. For example, the aggression linked to pugilism and the nurturing that is claimed to go with childbirth. The body creates social and cultural affects and social forces affect the body. It is a two-way iterative process.

Boxing is also clearly organized on the basis of the body, for example, in weight categories, the contact of the sport and its bellicose culture and language, all of which are associated with men and masculinity. Boxing is even called 'the Manly Art', not only in historical accounts such as Elliot Gorn's 1986, *The Manly Art. Bare-knuckle prize-fighting in America*, but these are also the words frequently used to refer to the sport in ethnographic research (Wacquant, 2004). Women might participate in the Noble Art, but the Manly Art highlights the exclusionary ethos of the sport and suggests that women who box are joining in as pseudo men, 'doing masculinity' but as pretend men. Of course, childbirth and boxing are very different areas of experience, but each is constitutive of gendered identity and there are useful parallels that can be drawn in relation to the role of the material body in securing, shaping and regulating the ways of being that are available.

The claims which feminists have made about the devaluing of women and women's bodies through a reduction to their biology can be similarly applied to boxing, which mostly carries more cultural, financial and economic status than childbirth, but still manifests the same essentialist associations. The only difference is that what is in operation here is hegemonic masculinity. The reductionism of the associations between body and identity still works in favour of masculinity in sex gender binaries.

The sex-gender divide, however, operates powerfully in the routines and lived experiences of sport. Whilst the presence of women in men's boxing gyms has largely, although not universally, been seen as disruptive (Sugden, 1996, Woodward, 2006), or only peripherally included (Boddy, 2008, Wacquant, 1995 a, b, c, 2004) the women who box have also been construed as threatening. This is changing and recent ethnographic studies suggest progress (for example Heiskanen, 2012). Boxing is not an activity that signifies cultural capital of any magnitude for practitioners. Loic Wacquant says of the men at the gym – which he, like Gerald Early, describes as 'proletariat' – are those who attend, 'to commune in the plebeian cult of virility that is the Manly Art' (2004:14). The language may be somewhat overblown but the sentiments are not. Not all male bodies are assumed to be gender neutral nor do they represent a homogenous group set in superior opposition to the gendered bodies of women.

How does this resolve the question of what is happening when women engage in an activity like boxing that does not conform to expected embodied gendered practices, as is sharply indicated by the controversy arising from women and men fighting together? Sex differences which reside in the body are usually what is invoked as the reason for excluding women from a sport or insisting upon specific regulations for women and men. 'Sexual difference... is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way marked by discursive practices... The category sex is, from the start normative; it is what Foucault called a "regulatory ideal"' (Butler, 1993:1).

Butler's concept of performativity suggests that bodies are materialized through iterative and citational processes through which what is discursively produced is named (Butler, 1993). Butler explores the regulation of identificatory practices and seeks out the challenge of transgression of binary categories, for example through disidentification with regulatory norms in the parodic performance of drag. Although Butler's examples relate to sexuality as well as sex and gender and there are clearly dangers as well as benefits in applying theoretical approaches across empirical fields, but in relation to women engaging in traditionally masculine sports like boxing, there are comparabilities concerning the transgression of expected embodied norms. In boxing, women might often be seen to be 'doing masculinity' and transgressing the norms. To paraphrase Iris Marian Young, women might be refusing to throw like a girl (Young, 2005) and want to punch like a boy. However, women's boxing is a very different form of transgression from drag and transgender which is the focus of Butler's critique. Women's boxing does invoke reactionary controversy. In the run up to the London 2012 Olympics and even during the games themselves,

the very notion of women boxing competitively was deeply disturbing to many people (Woodward, 2012a). Boxing is not just playful or ironic as cross-dressing or drag might be construed. Boxing is corporeally real.

Butler's Foucauldian approach also has limitations through its over-emphasis on the discursive regulatory regimes through which bodies are produced; such bodies may be somewhat disembodied in the actualities of corporeality. The lived experience of everyday encounters may, however, be far removed from such abstract theoretical approaches (Woodward and Woodward, 2009) which is part of the attraction of phenomenological explanations of the routine experience of boxing.

Lived bodies: Situated bodies as situations

Merleau-Ponty views the body as animate, sensible and sensuous. His phenomenological approach seeks the meaning of experience as it is embodied and lived in context rather than looking for essences so that the subjective and objective merge, emphasizing both the primacy of people's own experience and the routine practices in which the embodied self engages (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). It is not surprising that developments over Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment have been most influential in sociological accounts of boxing. Empirical studies of boxing are largely based upon participant observation, at various stages along Raymond Gold's continuum from mostly observation to full participation (Gold, 1958). Most boxing ethnographies owe some debt to Merleau-Ponty, in some cases via Pierre Bourdieu (Wacquant, 1995, 2004). We do not reflect on our bodies, as if we were outside them; we live them (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Feminist work, such as Young's, in developing an understanding of how the lived body is gendered, has drawn upon Merleau-Ponty to challenge dualistic conceptualizations of the relationship between the mind and the body. Young challenges the universal account of the gender neutral body implied by Merleau-Ponty and claims that the female body is not simply experienced as a direct communication with the active self, but it *is* also experienced as an object. She suggests that there are distinctive manners of comportment and movement that are associated with women (hence 'throwing like a girl' as the title of her work). Young attributes these different modalities, first, to the social spaces in which women learn to comport themselves. In terms of sport this involves constraints of space and learning to act in less assertive and aggressive ways than men, which has particular purchase in boxing, where pugilism appears to demand

aggression. Second, Young suggests women are encouraged to see themselves through the gaze of others, including the male gaze, in order to become more aware of themselves as objects of the scrutiny of others. Like Butler's concept of performativity, routine practices are crucial processes through which bodies and selves are constituted.

Simone de Beauvoir argued that not only are bodies situated, for example through social, economic and cultural forces, but also bodies are themselves situations (de Beauvoir, 1989). The idea of the body as itself a situation provides focus upon the flesh and blood actualities of the bodies which engage in sport, especially a sport like boxing. Thus the human body is ambiguous, subject to natural laws and to the human production of meaning:

It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject becomes conscious of himself [sic] and attains fulfilment - it is with reference to certain values that he valorizes himself. To repeat once more: physiology cannot ground any values; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them.

(de Beauvoir, 1989:76)

In boxing, these routines are measured, categorized and recorded. Bodies which are represented as marginalized also experience themselves as such and are crucial to an understanding of selfhood and the processes through which people position themselves and are positioned within the social world.

the body is not a thing, it is a situation ... it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for projects.

(de Beauvoir, 1989:66)

This approach provides a way of bringing together the enfleshed, material body, the experiences of embodied selves and the situations, which include representations, practices and policies, which recreate the lived body, which has particular resonance in boxing. Although boxing appears to be the most enfleshed set of sporting practices, its culture is also markedly constituted by its representation, imagery and imaginings; how the sport is understood and experienced include how it is reported, recorded, researched and imagined. Bodies are not 'just' in a situation, nor are they just objects of empirical inquiry; bodies are more than this. De Beauvoir's analysis of the 'lived body' provides a means of enabling:

a situated way of seeing the subject based on the understanding that the most important location or situation is the roots of the subject in the spatial frame of the body.

(Braidotti, 1994:161)

Bodies are also situated on the margins through structural factors such as economic inequalities, racialization, ethnicization and discrimination on grounds of gender which feature so strongly in boxing. Bodies are also themselves situations through which people experience themselves, both negatively and positively. 'To claim that the body is a situation is not the same as to say that it is placed within some other situation. The body is both a situation and is placed within other situations' (Moi, 1999:65). This usefully brings together the material body in the gym and in the ring, which is reified as gendered along with its practices and dispositions within the social and culture context, notably the performance of masculinity which is traditionally associated with boxing.

Bourdieu, physical capital

The social classification of boxing and its associations make Bourdieu's analysis relevant, especially in addressing the question of whether boxers are in any sense compelled to participate in the sport because their choices are so limited. For example, in Bourdieu's theory of social class and the distinction of taste (Bourdieu, 1984), boxers have only physical capital to invest as in the case with the labouring proletariat. Bourdieu's work offers one approach to addressing these problems which arise from the relationship between social economic structures and embodied selves. Wacquant makes use of the work of Bourdieu in relation to the routine practice of boxing that is the embodied experience of pugilism both in the gym and in the ring in explaining how it is that the boxer takes the punches and continues to deliver them in spite of the distress and pain he is feeling.

Bourdieu's theory of practice permits a strong sense of the role of the body in relation to social structures through his use of habitus and *illusio* which are set within the wider context of fields which extend beyond the outward appearance of the body and locate the agent. Bourdieu's work is relevant for a number of reasons. First, his concept of cultural capital is particularly useful in explaining sport, developed through his notion of taste as the marker of distinction. This is especially pertinent to boxing, with its association with the working-class participant. Cultural capital can be used in exchange, rather financial capital can be deployed as an investment to achieve further returns. It is in a sense metaphorical in that cultural capital is not lost at the point of investment, for example educational achievement is a form of cultural capital which the individual can continue to capitalize upon; it is not lost at the point of being

invested. Similarly, the physical capital which the boxer has can be invested to obtain financial returns and other social and cultural advantages. For Bourdieu, physical capital is largely a distinctly male, working-class form of capital. Whilst the working-class man who is attracted to boxing may have limited access to any other form of capital, he does have a body which he might be able to use to his advantage, even if this is his only capital. Bourdieu's use of capital and his model of class based on the movements of different sorts of capital through social space provide a means of exploring the details of power relations and inequalities, which are reproduced and renegotiated through symbolic struggles. It provides another route into addressing questions of agency and deception in the formation of identity, especially embodied identity. Wacquant develops Bourdieu's definition of capital as accumulated labour in its materialized embodied form, which, when appropriated on a private, i.e. exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, 'enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour' (Bourdieu, 1984:241).

Wacquant goes further and describes boxers as 'entrepreneurs in bodily capital' (1995b:66). This is used most effectively in his ethnographic studies of boxing, where he offers both extensive detail of the techniques which boxers employ in 'preserving and making one's bodily capital fructify' (2004:128) and insider knowledge, as a practitioner himself, of the imbrication of the physical and mental states, where 'the mental becomes part of the physical and vice versa' (2004:95). Bourdieu's approach has shown the importance of the possibility of focusing upon the kind of capital which participants in sport bring to the activity as well as the ways in which they are able to build upon their investment and, in particular, the class inflections of the processes that are involved. Men's bodies which engage in boxing are expressive of masculinity as a form of cultural capital, but not all masculinities provide the same scope for capitalization and they are not all equally weighted assets. The body practices of sport occupy other axes of differentiation. For example, they are clearly racialized and gendered processes too and are played out in different contexts, although the recent more visible participation of women in boxing suggests not the demise of social class but the promise of social mobility which is played out in boxing. Far from being no longer relevant, boxing demonstrates the continued importance of socio-economic class both in shaping life choices for women and men and as a conceptual tool for understanding social change and the endurance of inequalities.

Wacquant uses the concept of *illusio* to address the question of why practitioners actually engage in the work of boxing with its often violent and distressing outcomes as well as the hard work of the routine practice of the

gym. The notion of *illusio* as ‘the shared belief in, and collectively manufactured illusion of the value of the games (real) men play – becomes progressively instilled and inscribed in a particular biological individual’ (Wacquant, 1995c:173). The pugilistic *illusio* is ‘the *unconscious fit between his (pugilistic habitus and the very field which has produced it*’ (1995a:88, italics in the original).

Illusio operates at the level of the unconscious. The main strength of the concept is its role as a means of explaining how gendered identities, in the case of boxing masculinities in Wacquant’s work, are experienced and enacted through an embodied self. Wacquant uses the concept of *illusio* to address the question of why practitioners actually engage in the work of boxing with its often violent and distressing outcomes as well as the hard work of the routine practice of the gym. This concept is developed to explain boxing as a set of practices, processes and culture which could apply to all practitioners. It is generated by the sport itself. Wacquant’s description of the way in which the subjective state of the boxer is both constituted through and constitutes the objective preconditions of the field is particularly powerful in his earlier work in Chicago (Wacquant, 1995a, 1995b) and in his experience as a competitor himself (2004). Here ‘practical belief’ is not a state of mind but rather a ‘state of body’ (Bourdieu, 1990:68).

The boxers’ *desire* to fight flows from a *practical belief* constituted in and by the immediate co-presence of, and mutual understanding between, his (re) socialised lived body and the game... The boxer wilfully perseveres into this potentially self-destructive trade because, in a very real sense, he is inhabited by the game he inhabits. A veteran middleweight who has ‘rumbled’ on three continents for over a decade and who reported breaking his hands twice and his foot once, persistent problems with his knuckles (because of calcium deposits forming around them) as well as a punctured ear drum and several facial cuts necessitating stitches, reveals his doxic acceptance, made body of the states of pugilism when he fails to find cause for alarm in his string of injuries: ‘Sure you do think about it, but then you regroup yourself, start thinkin’ you can’t, *it’s in your blood so much*, you can’t, you been doin’ it so long, you can’t give it up’.

(Wacquant, 1995a:88)

This is what constitutes the everyday practices of the gym and the boxing stories from which women were largely excluded in the twentieth century. Boxing, with its risks, dangers and enfolded realities, has the capacity to re-form and create new associations and links and raises questions about what happens when women join in. Wacquant’s celebration of the bloodied heroism of the boxer in the face of unequivocal risk and danger and the refusal, of the boxer to ‘give up’, is not only clearly located within a particular temporally and spatially specific

gendered discourse; it illustrates the layers of embodiment embedded in the *habitus*. The field demands body practices, active engagement and training in order to participate, which generates labour. Wacquant's approach suggests that this indicates the role of *illusio* to rationalize the practice.

This brings together his thesis about the unity of dispositions of the *habitus* from which engagement in sports is generated and the public distinctions accorded to different sports. Bourdieu's account is based on a conceptualization of heroic working-class masculinity which has considerable purchase in media sport narratives. However, his argument about the processes that are involved in taking up and performing these identities of masculinity fails to question what happens when women box and how transformative this might be. The assumptions about hegemonic, and especially traditional, enfolded masculinity are largely unquestioned in this work, where immersion in the field also involves collusions with the gendered dimensions of its culture (Woodward, 2009).

Yvonne Lafferty and Jim McKay, in their study of the interaction between Australian women and men boxers, draw upon Wacquant's interpretation of *illusio* as 'collective misrecognition' (Wacquant, 2001:10) and 'collective bad faith' (Wacquant, 1995a:86). Wacquant suggests that *illusio* is a means of demonstrating that boxers are not deceived by an exploitative system which compels them to sell their bodies to the pugilistic trade but that they are enmeshed in a powerful belief system which holds onto the honour and nobility of boxing. It is hard to see how women could be similarly implicated since the *doxa* of boxing is one that manifests less cultural tradition of women in kinship groups and social networks having boxing 'in their blood', although individual women may give voice to such commitment. Lafferty and McKay cite a statement by an Australian amateur boxer, Mischa Merz, to support their claim that the concept of *illusio* works for women too (2005:273).

An alternative explanation of Merz's statement that boxing is 'in the blood' is that she is invoking the language of men's boxing in order to be positioned within a discourse which accepts and reinstates the total commitment of the boxer. She is herself buying into the language of boxing and reclaiming some of its heroic subject positions in order to be accepted, but there is also recognition of the properties of boxing itself and its particular body practices and culture. There are different cultural meanings attached to women's engagement in the sport, which suggest that this could be a gendered *illusio* which is specific to the participants in the context of the wider field in which boxing cultures are constituted.

Some of the difficulties arising from these developments of Bourdieu's theories can be identified as, relating to the construction of masculinity which is

assumed and over-deterministic. As Young has demonstrated, power relations, especially those based on gender and racialized differences, are under-theorized in Bourdieu's work (1990) in spite of its focus upon social class. There seems little scope for transformation, especially within the wider arena of social, economic and cultural life within these accounts. However, there are significant advantages in the primacy that is given to everyday experience and detailed accounts of embodied practice, especially in gendering the body. Boxing and its body practices merge with dominant versions of masculinity and, by implication, femininity, which provide explanations of why women have been excluded from boxing culture and often its body practices by public regulatory regimes and why recent participation has not been entirely welcomed or well received. Claims that it is not 'natural' derive from the powerful cultural synergies between boxing practices and masculinity. Although it is not universal, many of the parts of the world where boxing remains popular and has a visible presence, for example through mega events in places such as Mexico, the Philippines, Ghana and Nigeria, are places with traditional patriarchal cultures.

Power relations are implicated in the articulation of gender, race and sexuality. The sporting body and the racialized body have been a particular target of regulation and resistance, especially in boxing, with its long history of attempts to undermine white supremacism, dating back to Jack Johnson's world championship defeat of Jim Jeffries, the 'Great White Hope' and Joe Louis's transformation into a heroic figure for white as well as black fans in the 1930s (Harris, 1998).

Paul Gilroy argues that the racialized body and race as a category are always mediated by technical and social processes. Ontologies of race are not natural and rooted in anatomy but this still creates questions about what is meant by natural and how far the natural is equated with the anatomical body. Gilroy argues that, although it has been useful to employ Foucault's historical explanatory framework, Foucault's own account falls short in failing to accommodate the continued marginalization and devaluing of African bodies (1998). Race too is an object of knowledge, which was inscribed onto the body within discourses of colonialism and science which became intertwined in embodied narratives of nationalism. Gilroy notes the shift from natural science to biology, which is more marked by digital technologies and molecular biology in the contemporary world. Boxing, along with other sports, is characterized not only by bodily risks and the concomitant medical interventions that are thus required, but also by regimes of performance enhancement, within the parameters of the law as well as, sometimes, outside them, which have material consequences for the bodies

involved. New technologies, risk awareness and the creation and regulation of dangers, including those of pharmaceutical interventions, constitute contemporary regulatory practices.

The racialized body has been subject to the techniques of visualization and what Franz Fanon called epidermalization (1967) but also to a whole set of invasions that are constitutive of that whole body and also operate within a framework of scientific and techno-scientific discourses, none more so than in sport where sexuality, gender and 'race' not only articulate together but collide. Sex gender is not only applicable to inequalities and dichotomies about women and men. The concept demonstrates the connections and disruptions between flesh and culture, the natural and the social and shows how the axes of power reproduce inequalities in the mix which makes up boxing culture. Sex gender is strongly weighted in this mix, partly because of the interrelationship between hegemonic and traditional masculinities and particular body practices and the properties of pugilism.

Body practices and practised masculinity

Boxing demands routine practice. Given the centrality of the body in boxing and the vital importance to the boxer of attaining the highest standards of fitness, the major investment made by boxers is in body practices. Body practices present individual and collective ways in which social labour addresses the body (Turner, 1996). The multiple exercise regimes undertaken by the boxer, as by all athletes, are designed to produce gendered bodies. R. W. Connell suggests that such an analysis might imply that the body is a 'field on which social determination runs riot... the body is surface to be imprinted' (1995:50). Connell's work on embodied masculinities, however, offers one of the most useful counter-arguments to the excesses of social constructionism, reinstating the body that lives and breathes (and dies) rather than being a canvas upon which culture inscribes meanings (1995). Connell engages with both material bodies within their economic, social and cultural context as is illustrated by his conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity and with what could be described as the problem of agency, which in phenomenological accounts is often situated within debates about the mind-body split.

Connell's work, unlike other accounts, such as Wacquant's development of phenomenological understandings of embodiment, foregrounds sex gender and focuses upon masculinities. Not only does the body situate us in the present, it

constitutes our identities through the bodily experiences that are 'often central in memories of our own lives' (Connell, 1995:53). Narratives of sport are often closely implicated in the bodily experiences through which they have been produced and whilst the body occupies a central role, it is not a passive part that is played; the body exercises agency in these pivotal moments, bodies generate affects and are affected by social and cultural forces. Boxing has many such stories, one of the most reiterated being that of the *Rumble in the Jungle*.

Connell's version of social embodiment suggests that:

Bodies have agency and bodies are socially constructed. Biological and social analysis cannot be cut apart from the each other... Bodies are both objects of social practice and agents in social practice

(Connell, 2002:47)

The problem of agency has a special place in boxing, especially given the dominance of determinist arguments about why people engage in the sport. Are they the dupes of a culture which offers aggressive, physically powerful, competent migrant and black masculinities as the only means of attaining recognition? Is it economic factors which drive working-class men to participate in the sport? In what sense do they choose to put their bodies at risk? Connell offers some strategies for dealing with these questions in his discussion of body-reflexive practices.

Body-reflexive practices

Connell poses the concept of material body-reflexive practices as a means of challenging an over-socialized body, with an understanding of the body which nonetheless retains its social dimensions. This concept puts the enfleshed body back into the social, whilst retaining the social in the body, in order to accommodate an understanding of bodies as agentic: bodies that are situated and situations. Thus, the body is both agent and object of practice and it is through these bodily practices that the structures within which bodies are formed and made meaningful and embodied identities are forged, defined and organized. Bodies and enfleshed selves are constitutive and constituted. 'Through body-reflexive practices more than individual lives are formed: a social world is formed' (Connell, 1995:64). Boxing constitutes a social world. The idea of body-reflexive practices permits an understanding of the body as implicated in and addressed by social, temporal processes, without it ceasing to be a material body. Bodies are not matter in the world, individualized as

representing the unique boundary of the self; they are the world and are part of what makes social relations meaningful.

The pugilistic bodily techniques that constitute boxing have been made meaningful and have created a social order aligned with a particular version of masculinity through a set of practices that are more consonant with regimes of truth about masculinity than femininity. Boxing appears to be a limited space, albeit one which includes the most traditional and predictable of the practices associated with masculinity. These practices include those which involve strength, aggression and the ability to inflict pain upon one's fellow combatant and to withstand or preferably avoid pain or damage oneself. However, these activities still operate within the wider social field and relate to other masculinities and other dimensions of masculinity. For example hegemonic masculinity might be associated with heterosexual assertiveness (Connell, 1995), but boxers, like most competitive sportsmen, have been discouraged from engaging in sexual activity in the period before competition. The practice of refraining from sexual activity can be accommodated within hegemonic masculinity through the bodily practice of abstinence along with the explanation that the aggression of the libido is then translated into aggression against the opponent in the ring. The heterosexuality of this masculinity is uncompromised; its force unrestrained and even reconfirmed, just rechannelled. The homoeroticism of boxing is largely denied, or at least passes unstated and unacknowledged, by practitioners, and is the purview of academic critics and cultural commentary (James, 1996, Spencer, 2012). Boxing, however, like other sports, is both coming to terms with homophobia and transforming, now that homophobia has been made explicit as a form of behaviour in sport. The homosocial and democratic space of the gym also has the capacity to transform exclusionary practices into more inclusive and welcoming ones to secure the diversity which has always been a feature of the boxing gym. Boxing is not 'out' in the language of sexual politics, but the gym is both a tolerant and a diverse space in which hierarchies operate according to embodied boxing competence (Woodward, 2011).

The punches directed at the targeted areas of the opponent's body are body practices that are part of the repertoire of the boxer which are situated within a framework both of understandings of masculinity and the regulatory apparatuses of the sport, which, for example, permits hits on the head and upper body but not below the belt. Body practices are so closely implicated with masculinity that women's boxing, howsoever its popularity is increasing, is disruptive. A fight includes the bodies of those in the ring and those of the spectators who perceive some greater authenticity in being physically present, rather than as

television viewers of a disembodied, sanitized event (Oates, 1987), but who are not engaged in the corporeal conflict itself. Spectators, whether at the fight or watching virtually, are nonetheless caught up in the sentient experience of the event (Woodward, 2011).

The corporeal techniques that are practised in the gym and in sparring from the public presentation of boxing in the ring and in its representation constitute embodied meanings about sex gender and sexuality that extend far beyond the ring itself. The physical regime of training with all its privations and routines involves external factors, such as the advice of the trainer, the competitive spirit, including the encouragement to think and act antagonistically towards the opponent, even to the extent of expressing hatred and anger (a common practice at the pre-fight weigh-in). Training techniques also include developing the ability to control pain and to exercise discipline and self-control, not only for boxers as individuals but also as constitutive of masculinity. Pain is a large part of the experience of the boxer, especially in the training regime, largely because of the pressure under which athletes are put when they seek to achieve success in their sport. Body-reflexive practices are not only internal to the individual boxer; they include social relations and institutions such as the regulatory bodies of the sport as well as its whole culture and tradition. Bodies that are damaged and injured and just worn, as well as those that are honed, elite specimens to which all participants aspire, are substantially in play in the practice of sport.

Reflexive body practices mean that, 'with bodies both objects and agents of practice and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined' (Connell, 1995:61). These boxing practices are subject to ambivalences and contradictions and to historical disruption, which has taken a number of forms ranging from incremental shifts in management and regulation to legal, illegal and technological interventions.

Connell proposes a three-fold model of the structure of gender, which can be illustrated by Lafferty and McKay's study of the interactions between women and men in a boxing gym. Connell uses this three-fold model to bring in the interplay between the different elements implicated in body-reflexive practices. First, *power relations* incorporate the structure identified as patriarchy, albeit somewhat simplistically. Sometimes in boxing this is expressed simply, for example in the explicit exaltation of men as 'warriors, thereby "proving" their biological superiority over women' (Lafferty and McKay, 2004:256). Second, Connell uses the structure of production relations which includes the division of labour. In the gym, labour is illustrated by the lack of resources which women boxers are able to access in order to improve their competence and the association of women

with 'soft boxing' and men with the transformation of the body into a weapon (2005:256). Cathexis, or emotional attachment, is Connell's third structure which Lafferty and McKay use to locate the highly sexualized status of women in the sport, especially in the ring as part of the event, as card girls for example. In a mixed gym, they argue, women are presented as sexually tempting to men (2005) which accords with much of the literature on boxing of women being excluded from gyms (Sammons, 1988; Sugden, 1996; Woodward, 1997a, b, 2006).

Change is taking place, albeit at an uneven pace which challenges some of the cultures upon which some of these claims are made. One of the most significant disruptions to the complacency of hegemonic masculinity in recent years has been the inclusion of women's boxing at the 2012 Olympics. There is also more diversity across cultures and the hegemony of traditional masculinity is not performed and experienced in the same ways in all socio-cultural situations. For example Benita Heiskanen found that there was little opposition to women boxers in her interdisciplinary ethnographic study of Latino boxers in Texas, USA (Heiskanen, 2012). In this instance women are permitted to participate but are still subject to the same regimes of marginalization and sexualization. Lafferty and McKay suggest that representation, which relates to the glorification of male boxers, in the gym as well as in the wider world, is an additional structure which informs their analysis. This is a useful way of demonstrating how boxing is a gender regime, especially in showing how sport can accommodate 'difference' while not making any changes to its hyper-masculine structure (Lafferty and McKay, 2005:274). This approach demonstrates the possibility of synthesizing routine body practices, representation and the wider cultural terrain. There is, however, limited interrogation of the power geometries of that wider cultural field in which such meanings are articulated.

Bodies in the gym are the sites of these exclusionary practices of a regime of sex gender. However, the separation of the structures through which the regime is practised as deployed by Lafferty and McKay might be somewhat artificial and underestimate the cultural terrain which informs the body practices of the gym; moreover, this regime allows very little scope for agency. It does raise questions about how women might be able to perform masculinity. If it is not the physical body which prevents wider and more successful participation in the sport, then the continuance of masculine domination has to be attributed to the gender regime and primarily to its cultural and social hold. The wider field brings in other routines and body practices, such as those in which participants in boxing networks engage. The dominance of men over women persists in spite of multiple challenges and points at which it has been disrupted. Recent

changes and developments not only put women as boxers into discourses, for example as medal-winning serious contenders, but also subvert the exclusivity of hegemonic masculinity, because women boxers are skilled, competent players; their participation is not playful or ironic, but real. Boxing is a site at which there have been limited disruptions although boxers occupy the wider social and cultural terrain and, as a traditional sport, widely enmeshed with traditional masculinities and regimes of gender exclusion; as some research has indicated even in boxing gyms there are men who are also performing different masculinities in the rest of their lives (de Garis, 2000).

Conclusion

Routine embodied practices shape and reform the materiality of flesh through the transformation of muscle and skin and in enhancing body mass as well as movement, resilience and stamina, through iterative practices in the gym and in training. These practices and the material bodies that are so constituted also make boxing a social world with distinctive cultures. Boxing cultures are reproduced and made through the body practices of the sport and boxing has its own measurement and evaluation of bodies as well as the specificities of practices and techniques. Boxing has the capacity to resist and challenge cultural norms too. Heteronormativity in sport has also been challenged so that boxing as a competitive sport can be enjoyed by those with the physical, mental and emotional capacities to perform outside the wider constraints of social norms relating to sexuality, ethnicity and race as a thing in itself.

Much of the research that has been undertaken into boxing has focused upon ethnographies of local gyms (Heiskanen, 2012, Lafferty and MacKay, 2005, Spencer, 2012, Wacquant, 1995 a, b, c, 2004, Woodward, 2004) with varying degrees of embodied participation; in Wacquant's case as observing participant (2004). This highlights the primacy of the routine enfleshed activities of boxing as well as the accessibility and attraction of the gym and its grassroots networks for many researchers. This focus does demonstrate the importance of bodies and the extent to which material enfleshed bodies are active in producing the culture of boxing. Bodies resist over-socialization in boxing. It is a field in which the flesh fights back. Over-concentration on the flesh for the researcher, however, can immerse him (thus far it has been mostly male researchers who have so participated) in the dominant culture to the extent that it is not possible to acknowledge the situated body and the location of the researcher in the process (Woodward, 2008).

Methodologically, this has led to the application of phenomenological accounts which start with experience and lived bodies. For example, developments of Merleau-Ponty's ideas about the phenomenology of perception, the centrality of accounts of lived experience and embodiment as a way of overcoming the distinction between mind and body have been very productive. Feminist critiques have usefully put sex and gender into this frame and have demonstrated some of the interconnections between bodies and culture which can usefully explain body practices and how gender becomes practised and performed. A major problem of the enfleshed body and of providing a means of retaining its materiality within largely discursive regimes has been – at least in large part – addressed in accounts of the body as situation as well as situated and subject to social and cultural forces, which corporeality can also shape. Boxing offers particular challenges, especially given its specificities relating to damage and the ultimate frailty of bodies, however well-trained.

The concept of sex gender has been used in this chapter to provide an understanding of the connections between flesh and culture and body practices and social worlds and to transcend the limitations of excessive social constructionism. I have also used the combination of sex gender to indicate how different forces of power intersect and elide in the routine constitution of boxing culture. In sport, women usually form an empirical group of people who take part in competitions that are classified by anatomical sex. The concept of sex gender encompasses the enfleshed as well as the social and cultural dimensions of sexual politics and demonstrates not only that sex and gender are inseparable, but also the mix of bodies, culture and social forces in which bodies are shaped by culture and are also themselves situations. Sex gender has wider explanatory application than the descriptive powers of the empirical field of gendered categorization of women and men. Hegemonic masculinity, whatever its local features, retains global purchase and emerges with some persistence through enfleshed and routine practices, but it is not fixed because hegemonic masculinity is itself a series of processes and assemblages which is changing and fluid. These are complex interrelationships which are also dynamic and the connections between flesh and culture, bodies and social worlds take different forms at different times. The next chapter focuses on a particular aspect of culture and at the links between boxing bodies and symbolic systems and cinematic representations which also combine the local and global.