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The Scholar's Body: Mixing It Up with Loïc Wacquant

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High expectations are both blessing and curse. Few ethnographies of the past year have been anticipated as has Loïc Wacquant's *Body and Soul* (2004), his first full-length account of his time in a boxing gym in Chicago's South Side. On the other hand, as the product rarely matches the fantasies that audiences have of it, such work is fated to disappoint. Few works shape the world, despite the fondest hopes of authors and their readers. The expectations surrounding Wacquant's text has two primary sources. First, many American social scientists, enthralled with Pierre Bourdieu's theories, have speculated on what Wacquant would make of them in his first extended solo outing. The association between the two men is well known, stemming from their co-authorship of *An Invitation to a Reflexive Sociology* (1992). Wacquant has been perceived as Bourdieu's favored student, and with the death of the Old Man, one wondered how the Young Turk would fill his shoes. In addition, Wacquant (2002) has made some boisterous and critical diagnoses of mainstream American urban ethnography, attacks that implied that his own empirical research would provide a distinctive antidote.

The surprise of *Body and Soul* is that it is not designed to please in either regard. It declines to sit for our imaginary tests. Yet, in its own terms it stands as a startling and effective document of both ethnographic realism and autoethnography. Wacquant, a graduate student in Hyde Park at the time of his data collection, weaves a strikingly gentle and romantic narrative in which the "perfect novice" finds himself in a perfect netherworld of Otherness. He writes that the gym was "a mere two blocks from my abode but on a different planet" (p. ix). Combine extravagant expectations, a reputation for braggadocio, and the book's unwillingness to confront the ambitious standards set forth in his critiques of mainstream

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urban ethnography, and a symposium on Wacquant's work can too easily degrade into a debate about misplaced ego and personal failure. All books have strengths and shortcomings, and we gain insight when we learn through both.

In this essay, we float just slightly above the fray of unmet or unrealistic expectations, assessing how the virtues and shortcomings of this book inform both our understanding of a social world and its affiliated small groups (boxing), sociological theory (especially of the body and emotion), and the rhetoric of qualitative methods. The first author (Hoffman) has conducted his own ethnographic research on a youth boxing program, and, as an active coach of amateur boxers in the Chicago area and a life-long observer of the sport, stands with foot and glove within the empirical world that Wacquant describes.

Body and Soul is both a realist account of an exotic activity and a personal memoir of what it takes to build the competent body of a boxer from the unformed clay that was a French graduate student in Middle America. Wacquant insists that to understand boxers, one must become one:

> To understand the universe of boxing requires one to immerse oneself in it firsthand, to learn it and experience its constitutive moments from the inside. Native understanding of the object is here the necessary condition of an adequate knowledge of the object (p. 59)

In portraying his attempt to be of the tribe at Woodlawn, he builds a "carnal sociology" that infuses his sociological imagination and rhetoric with a sense of the physical and mental engagement he experienced as a boxer.

The first section, "The Street and the Ring," draws heavily from Wacquant's previously published empirical work on boxing as he describes the Woodlawn Boys Club and its members. This section reads as archetypal realist, small group ethnography, beginning with a short and relatively detached section on the structural context of boxing programs such as Woodlawn. No shocking news here. Wacquant argues that the dynamics of the gym life generate their meaning as an "island of order and virtue" in relation to the depleted social institutions and dangerous chaos that characterize its host community ravaged by post-industrial labor market decay and municipal neglect (pp. 17–31). The argument will ring true to most involved in local-level boxing, many of whom subscribe to a common inspirational idiom that suggests, "It's better to sweat in the gym than bleed on the streets," underlining the separation of these places into a moral dichotomy. The situated isolation of these men makes them a prototypical example of a "tribal sociology" (Fine 2003).

Wacquant exaggerates the cultural closure of gym from current events, politics, and popular culture:

> The gym offers a relatively self-enclosed site for a protected sociability where one can find a respite from the pressures of the street and the ghetto, a world into which external events rarely penetrate and onto which they have little impact . . . This collective closure, which borders on "claustrophilia," is what makes life in the gym possible and goes a long way toward explaining its attraction. (p. 26; see pp. 26–31).

It is hard to generalize from a single case, although Wacquant doesn't have many reservations. In contrast, Sugden's (1994) ethnographic work on several boxing gyms emphasizes symbiosis over separation by discussing the "masculine currency" that boxers find redeemable between both the gym and street life. Likewise, Hoffman's (2001) study of a youth boxing program did not find a marked collective closure from otherworldly concerns. Rather, micro-level status distinctions connected gym and neighborhood. Boxers routinely spoke of family, school, and community life while in the gym, some relayed stories of getting in street fights (acts that were generally admonished by the head coach unless the boxer had been critically provoked), and discussions of pop and hip hop icons were routine. Parents, friends, and intimates visited the gym on occasion. Even politics and current events were more casually discussed than the image provided of Woodlawn's culture. Wacquant himself presents a montage of images at the Woodlawn Gym that includes an eclectic mixture of boxing snapshots with images of political meetings, religious ceremonies, and personal relations (pp. 31–32). Surely there are moments for discussing current events and popular culture in a boxing gym, just as there are times to get serious about the task at hand. People are remarkably adept as oscillating between both (Fine 2004). In the context of Woodlawn gym, we gain the impression that while the gym and host community are structurally symbiotic, they exist on wholly opposing moral and cultural planes. Perhaps this is true to a greater extent with adult boxers than with youths, as adults have more fully matured into the symbolic closure of social spaces. More likely, this depiction mystifies the isolation of the gym for ambient effect. Either way, we are not provided an organizational theory that can take into account when and where different types of interaction occur within the gym.

This initial section does provide a rich, nose-first explication of Woodlawn gym, its members, and their daily routines. We learn about boxers' social background (Wacquant rightly points out that the majority of boxers come from the lower working-class, not the destitute poor, although he does not comment on why a visible minority of professional and amateur boxers are from middle class backgrounds), their training routines, their ethos, their microculture, and their code of conduct inside the gym. We also learn about the institutional organization of low-level amateur and professional boxing in a major metropolitan area that exists outside the professional boxing hubs of Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and New York. Wacquant's descriptions, while largely lovely and on point, are mediated by the perspective of his key informant and trainer, the moral exemplar DeeDee. The descriptions could have benefited from greater reflexivity and qualification, as DeeDee, while well respected, is remembered by many in the Chicago boxing scene as bitter and jaded (we get a whiff of this reputation in the interactions between DeeDee and his star boxer Curtis Strong).

The second and third sections of *Body and Soul*, "Fight Night at Studio 104" and "Busy Louie at the Golden Gloves," are both the most innovative and

problematic. They move along more briskly than do the thick, more systematic descriptions of the initial section. Wacquant's ease in switching between the rhetorical prose of a social analyst and the spritely style of a memoirist is impressive. Here his sociological eye is turned inward in portraying two "days-in-the-life": first a professional fight involving one of his gym mates and then his own amateur match at the Chicago Golden Gloves. We learn of the detailed organization of the day leading up to a competitive boxing match, and most impressively, to the collective management of a boxer's psyche leading up to a fight.

Body and Soul is most poignant when it coveys a visceral sociology of the body and emotion. The reader suffers with Busy Louie and his gym mates as the daily routines of their regimen take a toll on their mental and physical resolve. In glorious detail, we are shown the look, smell, and feel of the gym—a taste of ethnographic things (Stoller 1989). His lengthy depictions of the mundane workout illustrate a profoundly sensuous experience.

But Wacquant does not stop there, and *Body and Soul* occasionally reads like the vast majority of the dramatic literary treatments of the sport in its strikingly romantic and totalizing descriptions. At times, his romance with boxing and boxers holds more affinity with the devotional writings of George Plimpton, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, and Joyce Carol Oates than to the classics of his ethnographic heritage. For example, Wacquant argues that boxing is an opportune site for demonstrating a "carnal sociology" because it demands of its disciples a commitment of "every fiber of his body and his heart" (p. vii). While such sentiments convey a sense of moral virtue, they make less sense of commitment as a social phenomenon. In fact, a routine problem faced by a boxing coach in practice is how to work with prized athletes who do not fully subscribe to the prescribed virtues of discipline and conditioning. Many simply revel in the thrill of the competition and glory rather than in an ascetic sense of commitment, denial, or self-restraint. Similarly, the popular lore of boxing is filled with accounts of champions who struggle to balance desire for material and social excess with the need to maintain commitment to their training regimen. Notable recent cases include former champions Roberto Duran, Riddick Bowe, and Ricardo Mayorga. Duran and Bowe were both well known for unhealthy eating habits and lavish lifestyles. Mayorga relishes arriving at weigh-ins eating greasy pizza and smoking cigarettes. He even lit a cigarette after a recent bout, parading around the ring and blowing smoke on his audience. While these transgressions underline the moral boundaries of commitment and restraint, they also indicate that ideology does not neatly channel behavior.

A coach's ideal pupil, much like any instructor's, is one who commits "every fiber of his body and his heart" to doing his best, but this is a rhetorical flourish with little applicability to the world in which we all reside. Throughout much of *Body and Soul* it is hard to discern whether the normative statements of the coaching staff and the boxers at Woodlawn—dietary proscriptions, sexual denial,

and devotion to routine—reflect their behavior. A key frustration for many boxing coaches is how often athletes stray from the preached gospel. In his desire to move from "perfect novice" to perfect member of Woodlawn, Wacquant downplays the underside of training, excising the range of ways that boxers find thrill and shame in breaking the rules. Had Wacquant done so, we would have a more elaborate discussion of commitment as a variable.[3]

Wacquant's romance of boxing and boxers imbues his analysis. He writes that there is a "monastic, even penitential, character of the pugilistic program of life" (p. 15). He champions DeeDee, the head coach of Woodlawn, as his "second father," and follows his coach with a devoted son's earnest zeal. Rounding out his female-absent family-by-choice, his gym mates provide a "virile fraternity." These are not disingenuous descriptions. They do, however, typify a quality of romantic exaggeration on the part of the ethnographer that systematically downplays a more complex and nuanced account—the boring, the jaded, the unfriendly, and the unmotivated—that may not conform neatly to a "carnal sociology."

However, the strategy of exaggeration is not Wacquant's alone. In "Fight Night at Studio 104," Wacquant buys into the blustery exaggerations of Herman Mill (158), talk that many in the Chicago boxing world would discount as bluff. His acceptance of Mill's braggadocio hint at Wacquant's cultural naiveté, but, more significantly, reveals a difficulty with seeing bragging, boasting, and playful deception as sites for theorizing in the world of boxing. The stories that boxers tell constitute the world as much as the blows that they give and receive. A good narrative can easily replace many bouts that prove mundane, disagreeable, or bruising to one's identity. Similarly, boxers and coaches often de-emphasize the consequence of competitive losses in order to refocus on what the fighter can learn from the experience. Neither are they above lying about results and championships, especially to those unequipped to know otherwise. Bragging, exaggeration, and white lies incorporate disappointing competitive results into the simulated routines that make up a boxer's training regimen in a way that minimizes their damage to the psyche of the boxer and the collective morale of the gym (Hoffman 2004).

Key to both the problem and promise of *Body and Soul* is its universalistic ambitions. Wacquant suggests that the goal of the book is to "make the reader enter into the daily moral and sensual world of the *ordinary boxer*" (p. xii, italics added). Yet Wacquant's descriptions lean less toward the "ordinary boxer" and more toward a masculine romance of the sport. Wacquant unreflexively draws upon

[3] Wacquant spends a few pages describing the opposing training habits of two boxers at Woodlawn. He notes that Butch trains regularly and consistently. Curtis, on the other hand, tends to be more irregular in his routines and does not always deprive himself of those pleasures that go against the normative boxing credo. His explanation of this difference draws on an unsatisfying Marxist essentialism. He suggests that because Butch holds a regular job and Curtis only manages irregular employment, they embody a "classic opposition" between the dispositions of the proletariat and subproletariat. (pp. 130–131).

a litany of literary terms of endearment borrowed from a long history of writers enamored by the sport's masculine cache—the sport is described, interchangeably, as the "manly art," the "sweet science," or the "theatre of bruising": transforming brutality into the arts and sciences. Such expressions may have pleased his late trainer. They are numbingly familiar to the sport's frequent observers. Used as analytic metaphor, however, their repeated usage lack the rigor that we expect of a critical ethnography.

We might ask whether the desire to locate a typified, over-generalized character of *the* social actor within a given milieu is not inherently problematic. Read with the eye of a skeptic, what we glean from *Body and Soul* is the select experiences of an excited neophyte who enacts a fantasy of an engaged masculine body among the black urban poor as he moves up a progressively whiter professional ladder that increasingly values the mental over the physical. While his exuberance lends the language of *Body and Soul* a visceral immediacy (i.e. "the intoxication of immersion" or the boxing gym as a "vector of a debanalization of everday life"), it also suggests a theoretical disconnect that undercuts the descriptions of Woodlawn and its social context.

One of the strengths of ethnography is to become immersed enough to see the world from the perspective of an insider. But healthy methodological *verstehen* can bleed into an empirically troublesome romanticism. The impulse to heroize our research subjects rests uneasily with the goal of portraying the complex variety of lived experience. The desire to locate an authentic worldview of the "ordinary boxer" tends to err in the direction of the former, forsaking the latter.

Even that thorny issue of race is transformed into a justification and bulwark for the communion of boxing. Wacquant suggests that a reason he was so readily accepted into the subculture of Woodlawn gym, despite the vast social distances created by his professional class and race, was due to the "pronounced color-blindness of pugilistic culture" (p. 10). There is little doubt that Wacquant heard many of the boxers and coaches at Woodlawn discuss the "color-blindness" of their sport, perhaps more so when an anomalous French academic broached the topic. We do not imply that the boxers at Woodlawn adopt a happy conservative rhetoric that runs contrary to their structural location. Rather, we suspect that most members of any milieu describe themselves in racial egalitarian terms in their local social relations. How race plays out in social practice is another issue. Suggesting that boxing, as a sport and as a realm of social reality, has largely transcended racial difference is both striking and odd coming from a sociologist of race.

Body and Soul's shortcomings also offer an opportunity to think about both the possibility and the efficacy of methodological closeness to our sites of inquiry. Cultural anthropologists scoff at sociologists' flighty empirical commitments. But just how immersed must the researcher become in the field to speak with authority? Wacquant suggests that we rarely get close enough, and therefore miss a range

of deep experience. Yet even in his immersion at Woodlawn, Wacquant cannot shed his own skin, class, gender, or cultural limits. What Wacquant brought to his field site shaped his data, narrowing access to some interactions and opening others. It is apparent that his coach and gym mates never forgot that his goal was to depict them for a world in which they were the outsiders (see p. 190, p. 255). His asserted contemplation of abandoning his academic career in order to pursue a career as a professional boxer, even if true, suggests an attempt to prove once and for all his ardent earnestness, and therefore, how serious his readers should take him as a representative of his subculture. Ethnographic research, especially when portrayed in the narrative style of the memoir, struggles mightily with how to combine a subjective, though lively, rhetoric with a universalistic, scientific rigor.

Despite our critique, *Body and Soul* well deserves the attention that it has received. With its emphasis on the embodied experience of boxing, it ranks as the first true classic based in an autoethnographic sensibility and a uniquely grounded account of how emotions condition and constitute social structure. Despite an occasional error and exaggeration that local boxing insiders might notice, it provides a rich and compelling account of a world that may be small, as all tiny publics are, but is important and consequential in its ability to depict core themes both within its community and within the larger world. By this standard *Body and Soul* is a remarkably wise and compelling work. Consistent with his Golden Gloves bout, Wacquant goes the distance. If he is bloodied in the process, he reveals himself to be a pugilist of his own fruitful imagination.

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