"MOVING LIKE A BOXER"
A STUDY OF CAPE TOWN'S BOXING YOUTH

Simon Sender SNDSIM006

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Social Anthropology

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2015

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: S. Sender Date: 31st July 2015

"MOVING LIKE A BOXER"
A STUDY OF CAPE TOWN'S BOXING YOUTH

ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to investigate the topic of 'community' boxing gyms in the city of Cape Town. Broadly, it asks the question: what is it about boxing (and particularly boxing) that seems to dictate its co-occurrence with scenarios of social precarity? To answer this question, the study uses ethnographic methods to consider questions of socio-political history, precarity, embodiment, structural violence and physical violence. In the final analysis, the thesis argues for the clear benefit of having community boxing gyms in South African informal settlements or other typically violent locales. Research was conducted at two boxing gyms in the Greater Cape Town area.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge, first and foremost, my participants, whose patience, generosity and spirit inspired me to do as accurate, honest and rigorous research as I am able. Secondly, I give thanks to my supervisor, Dr Susan Levine, and all the other people who have been kind enough to read my work, advise me and provide feedback. In particular, I am thinking of Sally Frankental, Divine Fuh, Mugsy Spiegel, Loïc Wacquant and my parents. Lastly, my greatest thanks are reserved for my wife, Kelly Jane Rosenthal, whose encouragement and support are the secret ingredients that made this research possible.

The unmistakable door to *Grassroots Boxing Club*, Makhaza

Sisonke Boxing Club mid-session

The hands of a master: Coach Jongi's scarred knuckles are evidence of years in the boxing trade

Ring of Bodies: at *Sisonke Boxing Club*

Boxers do abdominal exercises in a ring around coach Bongile and a young boxer, as they do pad work in the middle

Sisonke Boxing Club in action

A boxer surrounded by his entourage of *amagwija* singing support, just before a bout at the Western Cape Provincial Championships

Jongi stands in the ring with Breakfast whilst they await the judges' decision on his fight during an amateur tournament in Dunoon informal settlement

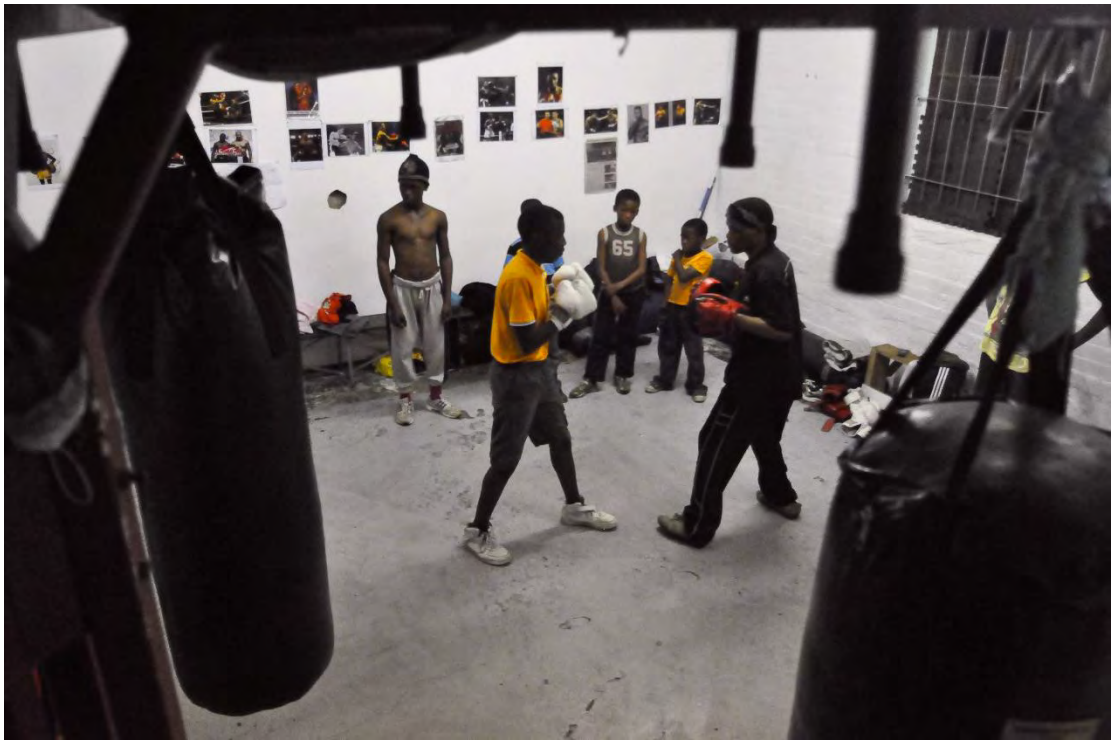
Practitioners praying at the *Rivers of Life Outreach Congregation*

The *Rivers of Life Outreach Congregation* pose for a group photo in their church/*Sisonke Boxing Club*

Jongi in his days as a super middle weight boxer in Gugulethu, 1995. Jongi stands with his coach, Shamba, a corrupt but affable man who would often try to trick his boxers out money for their fights. This photo shows Jongi after his rematch with Sithembile R—— over 6 rounds. Jongi won by majority decision

Jongi poses against a zinc wall at *Grassroots*

Bongile poses beside the beach in Hout Bay



The view from the frame: Bongile takes Bafana through some padwork while young members of the class watch on

Support for the boxers line up on benches behind the ring during a tournament in Dunoon

Junior middleweight bout at Khayelitsha military barracks

Parents and other interested members of the community attend a meeting at *Grassroots*

Boxing fans sing and dance at a tournament in Mew Way, Cape Town

Members of *Grassroots* pose for a photo during a day off from training

A classroom in Dunoon township is appropriated for use as a changing room during one of Xayo's professional fights

An exhausted boxer puts his face in his bandaged wrapped hands at the end of a three round amateur bout

CONTENTS PAGE

"In the service of an anger and of a love and of an indiscernible truth"

James Agee ('Let Us Now Praise Famous Men' 1939: 9)

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Preface

There is little question in my mind that living in South Africa has contributed much to my political awakening. Whether this owes merely to the daily experience of living in a headwind of systemic inequality, or the knowledge that this extreme proximity of capital to poverty is inextricable from the country's recent political past, is hard to gauge. Perhaps it is these two things combined with the stubborn division of wealth and labour along colour lines, which persists in the nooks of crannies (and crooks and nannies) of the apartheid planned metropolis of Cape Town? Or perhaps the answer to that particular question is less important than the asking of the question itself. More important to me is the following realisation: that to recognise the turbulence of South African social life without engaging with the politics of the country is to slip into a state of Orwellian 'double-think.' Consigning the daily routines of the urban majority to background noise is fine – just so long as one is willing to simultaneously forfeit one's right to be considered critically aware.

The emergence of this realisation, coupled with my initiation into the department of anthropology at the University of Cape Town, has made absolutely certain that the political aspect to our discipline and the insights it offers are impossible for me to overlook. Just as Socrates derided the *unexamined life*, so too ought we, as the privileged readers and writers of academic theses, deride the life that is devoid of critical awareness. In the case of South Africa in 2015, this necessarily warrants serious engagement with history and politics - or in true anthropological parlance, 'context.'

With exposure to postcolonial discourse through the scholarship of Archie Mafeje (1976), Bernard Magubane (1973), Achille Mbembe (1992), Elizabeth Povinelli (2006; 2011), Jean and John Comaroff (1997), and many others, I have come to see the social life of the world I inhabit in forms that finally make a little sense. The nebulous landscape of beautiful diversity; townhouses and townships; *Maserati* cars and mielie meal, has been refocused for me by the lens of ethnography and scholarship in ways that I did not envisage when I arrived in the city almost three years ago.

Having written an Honour's thesis in the UK, which was a rather generalised and non-political homage to walking, path-making and pilgrimage, I felt compelled to investigate something which would engage me more politically, economically and historically – not just for the sake of my MA thesis, but for the sake of my general sanity. In a sense, this thesis has been a way of gaining my sea legs on postcolonial waters that have a capacity to make others quite sea sick (or worse still: to rock them completely to sleep).

Prologue: Reading the Signs[1]

"*To the untrained eye most boxing matches appear not merely savage but mad…*
One does not (consciously) know, but one knows. All boxing fans, however accustomed to the sport, however many decades have been invested in their obsession, know that boxing is sheerly madness, for all its occasional beauty. That knowledge is our common bond and sometimes – dare it be uttered? – our common shame"

Joyce Carol Oates ('On Boxing' 2004: 9)

At least, that is the template, and it should be stated from the very start that this dissertation is not an attempt to refute it. Nor is this dissertation an attempt to argue that boxing intrinsically makes one a 'better' person - Mike Tyson, Edwin Valero[2] and countless others could immediately put paid to that declaration. However, what this thesis does attempt to argue is that, under certain circumstances, boxing (and *particularly* boxing) has the capacity to protect, insulate and guard individuals from the ragged edges of life at the economic margins of late capitalist society. In such scenarios, the gym is to boxers what a temple is to believers: a hallowed community, a place to hope, and a crucible of potential salvation.

[1] This title is borrowed with gratitude from an excellent paper by Raphael Samuel (1991)
[2] Valero was an iconic Venezuelan champion whose short, brilliant boxing career ended abruptly after he killed his wife in a hotel room and committed suicide using his jogging bottoms in a police cell in 2010.

My argument, in a nutshell, is that often these roughshod, thinly equipped gyms represent proverbial lifeboats in a veritable ocean of insecurity. Moreover, I mean to draw attention to the apparent irony that it is boxing – an ostensibly violent sport – which provides the antidote to a much greater brutality that loiters, so to speak, on the other side of the ropes: that is, the structural violence of the societies in which they exist.

* * * *

My introduction to Cape Town boxing gyms began in mid 2012 when I joined a fee paying boxing club in Woodstock, a rapidly gentrifying district on the outskirts of the city's central business district (CBD). This was a "white collar" boxing club in the tradition of Gleason's Boxing Club in New York City, where largely corporate and media professionals[3] meet to undergo intense training, with the end goal of competing in one of the 'Fight Nights' that occur throughout the year. The fight nights themselves are gala type events, with skimpily clad ring girls (hired from a local modelling agency); an all night DJ; licensed bar and catering. In the name of authenticity (authentically what, one might ask), the boxers also select their own music for their ring walk and a fight name.

It was as I was training for one of these fight nights, that I became increasingly curious about the 'semiotics' of white collar boxing in South Africa. What began as an amusing pastime (a Geertzian exercise in decoding social phenomena, if you will), eventually led to a feeling of vague unease. At that time the gym was beautifully adorned with two full size rings, both heavy and light punch bags, a speed bag and a weights room, not to mention four equipment cages full of boxing gloves, hand wraps, groin protectors and headgear. The walls were decorated with mirrors, posters, and framed portraits of the trainers (almost all black African males from Zimbabwe, Congo, Tanzania and South Africa). There was also a state of the art sound system, male and female changing rooms, and a wood panelled reception area with lockable glass display cabinets.

[3] Or as stated more generally on their website, "the Jimmy Choo booted, Paul Smith suited" men and women of the citysphere. (http://www.armouryboxing.com/ last accessed 17/05/2013).

In short, my Geertzian impulses were in no way deprived of places to start rummaging. What was the real *meaning*, for example, of a gym in which poorly paid black bodies were celebrated for putting handsomely paid white bodies through a gruelling routine of sweat and pain on a daily basis? What was the *meaning* of all of that stunningly modern equipment at the service of hobby boxers who could often barely use it? What was the *meaning* of a white-collar gym, which explicitly delineated itself along lines of class ("white collar") and finance (R600 a month membership fee), to practice a prototypically working class sport? These questions and more, slowly began to dominate my experiences of the gym.

Thus, when I learnt from one of the coaches, that aside from coaching at this relatively upmarket institution, he also had his own gym in the city peripheral settlement of Khayelitsha, I was instantly intrigued. I soon arranged to train at his humble, thin-walled, zinc-roofed gymnasium, and it was there that he said something that took my research away from white-collar boxing and into its current direction. He told me that in selling his labour as a boxing coach in Woodstock, he was also under the impression that he was required to "sell an illusion." Realising that his clientele in Woodstock were motivated to pursue boxing for different reasons to the boxers at his own gym, he had at some point come to understand that his role was not so much to skill his white collar fighters for a potential fighting career, but to provide them with *an imagined sense that this was so*.

Ruminating on this exchange led me to a series of questions and finally made me shift the attention of my research to more community-based[4] boxing clubs elsewhere in the metropolis - where illusions were *not* sold as a matter of course and the practice of the sport seemed vital as opposed to simply recreational. The chief reasons for researching boxing at all are discussed more fully below, so for now it is enough to say that boxing is a characteristically (yet increasingly overlooked) South African pursuit, with its roots in the country's working classes and a social history that reflects the country as a whole. Ultimately, it was in the space where boxing meets an urban economic fringe that I wanted to position myself for this research, and due to the bleak legacy of apartheid urban planning, this meant doing my fieldwork at two sites in townships around the city.

[4] By this I mean boxing clubs which do not charge a membership fee; that subsist on the goodwill of members of a locale; and which take members of a local residential community and enskill them with the techniques of a boxer.

Just as the effects of apartheid ricocheted through civil society, so too did they reverberate through the world of sport. As will be clear from the history section that follows, the connections between boxing and politics; boxing and society; and boxing and anthropology are virtually "irresistible" to those who wish not simply to know about the sport, but to properly *understand* it in all its local flavour (Evans 2002: 161).

In the end, we are permitted through our research to gain only a glimpse of the bigger picture. As Clifford Geertz famously stated, "small facts speak to large issues" (1973: 23), and arguably the greatest success of ethnography has been its ability to flesh out in qualitative detail the very minute but revealing aspects of social life which, when compiled, constitute the grand tapestry of human experience. It is from this perspective that I selected sites of research that would allow me to illuminate a small but intimate facet of South African society; one which has been anthropologically understudied maybe, but can no longer be said to have been overlooked.

Framing the Question

This thesis is an attempt to understand the appeal of boxing gyms for marginalized Capetonian youth, and to assess whether such places offer a means of social security, as well as the other functions that a boxing gym might be seen to traditionally serve.

Throughout my writing I employ the terms 'marginal,' 'peripheral' and 'fringe' almost interchangeably. These terms are not necessarily used to reference the economic output, political significance or even geographical situation of my fieldsites, but rather to index their relationship to power. In the words Janice Perlman uses to describe the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, these are explicitly not places that are economically and politically irrelevant, but are "exploited, manipulated, and repressed; they are not socially and culturally marginal, but stigmatized and excluded from a closed class system" (Perlman 1976). Indeed, if one were to select criteria such as population density, political activism or labour, areas such as Khayelitsha would undoubtedly constitute the city centre (see Perlman 1976 and Wallerstein 1983).

It should be stated outright that there are numerous other institutions attended by marginalized youth of Cape Town. Football clubs, for one, are a hugely significant, and probably more popular, type of establishment in terms of sheer numbers. By a similar token, boxing clubs also exist and are hugely popular amongst the moneyed middle class occupying the opportunities-rich suburbs and city bowl. The following study does not intend to overlook these facts or even downplay them. In concentrating on the areas of exploitation and material want, however, it seeks to understand the allure of boxing gyms (of all places), and whether the skills learnt, time committed, and meanings made in a township gym amount to something more significant than a mere sum of their parts.

Historical Context

South Africa's first *organised* boxing matches can be said to have taken place in the fledgling mining towns of Kimberly and Johannesburg from around the 1850s (Greyvenstein 1981). Prior to this, bareknuckle fighting was almost certainly a pastime that arrived with the British troops during their first occupation of the Cape in 1795[5] and became popular amongst the miners, miscreants and racketeers who laid the foundations of South Africa's first industrial cities. It was not until 1899 though, that the first truly major (indeed, *intercontinental*) fight took place between a seasoned Scottish/South African gentleman by the name of J. R Couper and a Jewish Cockney challenger shipped over from England, by the name of Woolf Bendoff. This fight was the first of its kind to be sanctioned by the government of Paul Kruger, and drew a relatively large crowd of 500 ticket holding punters plus nearly 1000 'non whites' and other "impecunious miners and burghers of the Republic who had no intention either of missing the event or paying to see it" (ibid: 27). The event, which ended after 27 bloody rounds and proved to be the swansong of the victorious Couper, cemented the place of prizefighting in South Africa - nonetheless, it was ultimately another 24 years before professional boxing was put under parliamentary control (ibid 425).

[5] As a point of interest, rugby, that most quintessential of South African pursuits was introduced to South Africa no earlier than 1861.

Whilst it is true to say that the sport of professional boxing in South Africa was brought over from Europe and reborn in the badlands of Johannesburg in 1889, it is certain that some form of hand-to-hand combat existed here long before that.[6] The point at which boxing also became popular amongst non-white practitioners is uncertain. In Chris Greyvenstein's comprehensive anthology of South African boxing from 1857-1980, the first reference to a black South African fighter is in 1888 (a lithe, young featherweight by the name of Young Pluto, who went on to do most of his boxing in Australia). However, the references to non-white boxers thereafter are scant until 1977, when 'mixed' bouts were finally sanctioned in the face of rampant institutional racism. It took another two years for the 'White, Black and Supreme' titles to finally be abolished in favour of a colourless belt, and while this was surely a profound threshold to cross, one would be naïve to consider that it signalled the end of racism in the sport. Six years later saw Jacob 'Dancing Shoes' Morake beaten to death in the ring by Brian Mitchell under the nonchalant gaze of the white murder and robbery policeman-cum-referee, Colonel Wally Snowball; judged by a majority of white judges (appointed by a white board), in front of a racially divided crowd in a Sun City casino (Evans 2002). Thus when Greyvenstein wrote in 1980 that "racial discrimination, for so long the wart on the nose of South African boxing, has been removed and the scar of the operation is barely visible" (1980: 427), he was regrettably, wide of the mark.

Filling the Literature Gap

Two formative books guided this research. The first, a boxing history/memoir entitled *Dancing Shoes is Dead* (2002), by Gavin Evans, paints in vivid colours the legacy of apartheid on the world of boxing in South Africa. The second, *Body and Soul* (2004), by Loïc Wacquant, represents the first study of its kind of a working class boxing gym in Chicago, Illinois. The first book sparked the idea that investigating boxing gyms in South Africa, would be, *de facto*, a way of investigating all manner of contemporary,

[6] Stick fighting and not bare fist fighting is the most traditional form of close quarter combat practiced in South Africa (see Carton & Morrell 2012). Today in Limpopo, however, there exists a thriving annual bare-knuckle boxing tournament every December – though the origins of this practice remain unclear to this author.

politico-economic, socio-historical issues facing South African citizens. The latter study offered a good model for how to do it.

Elsewhere, some of the best commentary about the sport has come from the Arts. Perhaps this is unsurprising for a sport that also lends itself strongly to performance, theatre, dance and poetry. This connection has certainly not been missed by Hollywood, and if ever one needed reminding of the ethereal beauty of the ring, one need only watch the opening credits of *Raging Bull*. It is unlikely that even the most vehement boxing critic could not help but be moved by the protagonist Jake La Motta dancing (there is simply not another word for it) upon the simple, smoky canvas to the sound of Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*; hooded Prometheus; archetypal tragic hero; and hubristically flawed Everyman all rolled into one, preparing to face down his demons of fear and the unvanquishable loneliness of the ring.

Photographically, the sport has been well documented by the likes of Vathiswa Ruselo, Juan Stockenstroom and Kurt Campbell in South Africa, and countless other artists and sports photographers elsewhere in the world (see, for example, the work of Sue Jaye Johnson). In other media, the artist Johann van der Schijff (2012-2013) has worked in South African schools to help children create leather punch bags depicting highly creative designs of their own making, as a means of exploring polemic ideas of violence in the Western Cape. Also worth mentioning is Clifford Bestall's 2012 documentary about boxing in Hillbrow, which gives a strikingly visual description of boxing's place within a context of inner city destitution. In the film, one gets a sense of both the hope and hopelessness embedded in the realities of the sport as well as an insight into the plight of apartheid era black boxers in South Africa. Alongside Evans' book, Bestall's film helps provide a sense of the atmosphere surrounding the sport in South Africa.

Just as these interpretations and meditations on boxing have fed my own understanding and appreciation, they are also an honest reflection of the media that influence popular responses to the sport. This is not an unimportant point. Part of the challenge of doing this research has been to confront the facile bracketing of boxing as 'violent sport' or even worse 'bloodsport' (see Smillie 2003; also Jeffery Sammons quoted in Wacquant 1995: 496). The reasons for this are numerous, but perhaps the greatest is that boxing, as

discussed in chapter four, may be exactly the kind of antidote to actual violence that stands a good chance of working in a context such as Khayelitsha.

In the social sciences, not a great deal has been written about boxing in South Africa (Njabulo Ndebele is the exception), but outside of the country, scholarship on the subject does exist. The most prominent scholar in this regard is Loïc Wacquant, who apart from having written extensively (almost obsessively) about questions of poverty (2002), social exclusion (2008), and the penal state (2009), is one of only two authors to have produced an academically rigorous ethnography of boxing.[7] His ethnography, mentioned above (ibid 2004), focuses on one urban gym in downtown Chicago and the capacity of its members to realise their ambitions through the medium of professional prizefighting.

Similarly to Wacquant, my twin research interests are broadly: boxing as sport, and political economy. Theoretically, Wacquant tends towards an understanding of South Chicago prize-fighters as frustrated agents pitted in a struggle against extremely powerful structures. This Bourdieuian type reckoning has also been an important backdrop for the research presented here, although it does not constitute the chief refrain of my thesis.

Boxing, like everything else in Cape Town, exists against a backdrop of apartheid urban planning, with its multiple "structurally embedded relations and systems of inequality" (Pieterse 2008: 141). On a certain level, my research has necessarily had to engage with this social fact. Thus, it should be noted that anything I would say about boxing exists upon a foundation of socio-political theory that is widely applicable to all South Africa, if not uniquely concentrated here. The main framers of my research in this regard have been Johan Galtung (1969, 1990), Paul Farmer (2002, 2004) and Slavoj Žižek (2008) on the subject of structural violence; Achille Mbembe (1992, 2003) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) on the subject of "necropolitics," "resilience," and life at the margins of the postcolony; and the Comaroffs (1997) when it came to understanding the nuances of South Africa's exclusive socio-political history. Also not without significance have been Gramsci's explication of hegemony as the "moulding [of] personal convictions into a replica of prevailing norms" (see Femia 1981: 24) and Bourdieu's account of habitus (1977, 1990).

[7] The other ethnographer being Trimbur (2013).

The dichotomy between labour and leisure has been another necessary consideration during the research, revealing as it does vast patches of grey in the world of professional sports, where it is far from clear which category athletic practices fall into. In a sport like boxing, where promoters are concerned with business 'pure and simple' (see Wacquant 1998), the slippage between labour and leisure is especially acute. Although my own research has concentrated more upon the lives of amateur boxers, Wacquant's ethnographic data clearly support the view that sportsmen themselves can easily come to see their own personhood reduced to mere 'flesh' to be 'peddled' (see in particular *A Flesh Peddler at Work*, 1998 and *Whores, Slaves and Stallions*, 2001).

In the context of life at the fringes of late capitalist society, there is a certain analogy waiting to be drawn between the dispensable flesh of the working class sportsman and expendable wage labour. Whilst most of the participants in this study were too young to find themselves in the labour market, they all come from a social milieu where the prospects of long term, well paid, socially dignified employment are ever slim.[8] Thus, while feelings of exploitation did not (yet) feature explicitly in the lives of participants, the spectre of exploitation almost certainly had an influence on their "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004).

Incidentally, the capacity to aspire, Appadurai writes, "is not evenly distributed in any society" (2004: 11). While Bourdieu's reckoning of habitus and Gramsci's explanation of hegemony both stop a long way short of suggesting a fully deterministic cosmology, they do imply that one's lived conditions have an undeniable effect on how one *is* in the world, including to some degree, how one thinks (and therefore by extension, how one aspires). Furthermore, these ideas suggest that despite possessing the capacity to "outlive the economic and social conditions in which they [are] produced" (Bourdieu 1990: 62) people, generally, do not. Contemplating Appadurai's analysis with these notions in mind has thrown up a series of questions about community boxing clubs in Cape Town. For

[8] Information from the *Ikamva Youth* website: "Khayelitsha is estimated to have between 500 000 and 1 000 000 residents and most families live on under R1000 per month. The 2001 Census data from Statistics South Africa showed that the community of Makhaza…had less than five people with post-graduate qualifications, less than one percent with degrees, and only 1.6% of people had other qualifications such as diplomas and certificates.

example, what exactly influences the dreams and desires of South African amateur and would-be professional boxers, and why do these desires seek satisfaction on the canvas of a boxing ring?

Research does exist concerning the role of gyms for marginalised men (see Wacquant 1998, 2001, 2004; Trimbur 2011, 2013); and life on the margins for impoverished youth (Swartz 2009), but there is little available ethnography regarding the youth membership of marginal gyms. This is remarkable given that the composition of many such gyms, at least in Cape Town, tends to be concentrated amongst boys between the ages of 8-16. One recent attempt to break the mould is a psychology report on a pilot project in Johannesburg that assessed the effectiveness of a parallel boxing training and cognitive behavioural therapy group at a centre for youth offenders (see Draper, Errington, Omar, and Makhita 2013).

Other psychology reports are also instructive. For example, Dr Kaminer and Dr Harrison's expert testimonies to the *Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Police Inefficiency and a Breakdown in Relations between SAPS and the Community in Khayelitsha* (2014) paint a devastatingly lucid picture of life at the edges of the city. Elsewhere, Weierstall, Hinsberger, Kaminer, Holtzhausen, Madikane, and Elbert (2013) offer insights into the causes of violence in Khayelitsha, offering a psycho-social handle on the commonly cited 'crisis of masculinity,' which is said to undergird much of the antisocial behaviour in South African townships (see also Morrell 1998; Carton & Morrell 2012). Other psychologists such as Ward, Martin, Theron, and Distiller (2007) have helped to elucidate theories regarding the long-term effects of violence on the developing brain, by conducting local, empirical research. Ward et al.'s research also flags questions about resilience (who copes, who doesn't and why?) that have been a useful framing mechanism for this thesis – especially in the final chapter, where boxing is considered as a potentially efficacious form of resistance in the face of socio-economic instability. Lastly, Seedat, Mohamed, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, and Ratele's work (2009) provides a comprehensive list of potential interventions that the authors posit would help to reduce violence in South Africa. The list is long and includes suggestions ranging from tighter gun laws to paid paternity leave.

Outline

From here, the dissertation is organised into three main sections. The first section is the remainder of this chapter, and presents the context, background, methodology and ethics of the research. The second section includes chapters two to four, which cover the presentation of findings. The final section is dedicated to a conclusion.

In chapter two I look primarily at the processes that go into becoming a boxer in the two field sites of my research. Beginning with the body as the primary site of action in the boxing gym, I go on to describe the intricate training regimes that boxers undergo in their quest for improvement. The notion of the boxer as an individual is challenged, and the concept of "porous" bodies is introduced as a means of explaining the communal atmospheres of the gyms and tournaments I encountered. Lastly, ideas of embodiment and bodily inscription are discussed in relation to the making of boxers' bodies, and I consider the features of training sessions and tournaments that contribute to their profound sense of social cohesion.

In chapter three, the focus is on the social architecture that holds the space of a community boxing gym together. This chapter is divided into two parts: the first looks at the notion of the community in the gym, where bodies sweat and produce pain together for a higher purpose, building unique social ties and earning social capital as they go. In the second half, the chapter centres more upon the place of the gym in the community in both Makhaza and Imizamo Yethu. Throughout this chapter I employ the notion of 'rings of influence' as a heuristic device to contrast the impact of community boxing gyms with the impact of the structural violence that surrounds them. The final section considers the elements that make boxing an attractive pursuit, and acknowledges the deep undercurrents of masculinity, which are inextricable from the sport.

Lastly, chapter four aims to synthesize the arguments presented in the previous two chapters by offering a short paean to the work of community boxing gyms in providing stability to their localities. Here I consider the psychological as well as ethnographic data to argue that having boxing clubs in neighbourhoods that are "incubated in violence" (Kaminer cited in the *Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Police Inefficiency and a Breakdown in Relations between SAPS and the Community in Khayelitsha 2014*) may significantly benefit

young men and reduce their chances of engaging in masculine centred violence. In short, I look at the positive societal effect of having freely run, dependable and friendly boxing gyms in the centre of dangerous parts of the city.

Theoretical Underpinnings

South Africa in 2015, is a country somewhat at odds with itself. The euphoria of 1994 is a memory and the gains in political inclusivity are counterbalanced by a government increasingly reliant on apartheid era strong arm tactics in order to get its way (see Davis 2015). Since the beginning of the democratic era, significant improvements have been made to the lives of those living in poverty, though a devastating amount remains the same. A lack of income and assets at individual and community levels; widespread malnutrition; HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis; low literacy levels; high incidences of violence and violent crime, high school drop-out rates; teenage pregnancies, gang formation; gender based violence; xenophobia and racism are just some of the seemingly intractable ills that continue to stipple the lives of the many (Burnett 2010: 33). And what is true for the country at large, holds no less true for its cities.

More than twenty years after the end of apartheid it is still common, and largely accurate, to think of the city of Cape Town as "a city divided" (Samara 2011: 2); "monocentric" (Turok 2001); or something constituting a mixture between a "fortress" and an urban ghetto (Davis 1990; Robins 2002). There is also a broad consensus that socio-economic conditions for the majority have not dramatically improved since apartheid's end, with a strong case to be made that with the introduction of neoliberal macroeconomic policies (see McDonald and Smith 2004; Bond 2001), conditions have actually become worse (Levine 2013; Stokke and Oldfield 2004; Robins 2002; Becker & Roth 2011). Before ploughing headlong into the data thrown up by my own research, it bears thinking a little more deeply about what these descriptors actually mean.

First of all, they mean that of the approximately four million residents who populate the city, roughly twenty per cent live in one of the many informal settlements (2011 census figures) which tend to emanate concentrically from the centre of town according to the strictures of malicious apartheid laws and short-sighted urban planning. In contrast to

the lifestyle apartments proliferating along the city's Atlantic seaboard, or the middle class suburbs to the south, conditions in informal settlements are markedly less secure. Sociological data reflects this: more than 38% of people living in Khayelitsha are unemployed compared to the Western Cape provincial average of 17% and the average annual income per household is in the region of R21 000 compared with the provincial average of R76 000 (data taken from www.capetown.gov.za).

The notion of the divided city therefore extends well beyond the mere apportioning of urban space and racialisation of geography: it also describes a gulf in economic possibility, curricular potential, vitality and the capacity to aspire (see Robins 2002; Swartz 2009; Samara 2011; Appadurai 2004; Ross 2010).

Despite the end of apartheid, it is still shockingly straightforward to imagine the city of Cape Town as neatly divided between the 'haves-and-have-nots.' In the coarsest terms, the 'haves' live in the CBD or the formal suburbs and the 'have-nots' live in informal settlements or on the street. As over simplistic as this might appear, if one were to draw a magic line dividing the city according to the criteria above, the two locales which are the subject of this thesis would absolutely, irrevocably fall into the category of the 'have-nots.' The tenor of life in both Makhaza and Imizamo Yethu is unstable in all of the ways alluded to above, or to use a concept that is currently popular, life in these places is filled with *precarity*.

Over the past five to ten years, precarity has become something of a catch-all phrase for social, economic, physical and psychic instability (see Allison 2012; Standing 2011; Butler 2010; Neilson and Rossiter 2009). That lives on the socio-economic margins of capitalist society should be described as 'precarious' hardly requires much comment. Unpicking exactly how precarity manifests, on the other hand, is a worthwhile task. Many authors distinguish quite carefully between 'precarity,' 'precariousness,' and the 'precariat' (see Butler 2010). For the purposes of this dissertation I am, however, less concerned with the important semantic differences between these definitions than I am with the way in which precarity manifests in the two fieldsites at hand. Having said that, I would like to comment on a distinction between what Butler calls "the more or less existential conception of 'precariousness'" (2010: 3) and the overtly political notion of 'precarity.' Whilst there *is* a clear difference between the systematic (political) neglect of human life,

and the existential wear of being socially and economically dispensable, the two effects are certainly not mutually exclusive. An example might make this clearer.

In describing the current spike in suicides amongst young Japanese NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training), Anne Allison refers to her subject as the 'precariat.' Essentially she proffers this description to conjure an image of socially isolated proletarian citizens who occupy a social strata in which they are literally struggling to stay alive – in essence as shorthand to describe a working class with rickety social foundations. Allison's interest in the Japanese precariat centres principally upon the vapid prospects for employment that seem to propel young people into a despair so deep that it frequently kills them. Central to her analysis is the fact that precarity also means existential hopelessness; a precarity of the "soul" even (2012: 349).

In contrast to South Africa, precarity in Japan relates more to a poverty of human relationships than to anything obviously material; it consists at least equally of "a sense of existential emptiness and social negation" (336) as it does of a lack of employment opportunities. As work prospects dry up, so does social life. As Allison puts it, Japanese youth are "not so much anti-social as non-social" (355). Such a thing could seldom be said about the majority of South African unemployed. Precarity in Tokyo compared to precarity in Khayelitsha or Imizamo Yethu connotes a very different form of survival. Whilst populations in both Japan and South Africa are engaged in "a politics of survival" (Allison; 350), the social isolationism that so afflicts NEETs in Tokyo is not the standout problem in the context of Cape Town.

Ubuntu is a word from the Xhosa language that literally translates as 'human-ness,' but essentially conveys a sense of humanity towards one's fellow humans. Though something of a cliché in contemporary commercial South African society (see Comaroff & Comaroff 2009), the concept of *ubuntu* is a lived reality in Xhosa speaking circles, and possibly one factor which mitigates the existential fragility that so affects Allsion's youthful Japanese precariat. This, however, remains a question for another day. The important point is that lives in South African informal settlements are precarious in some, if not all of the ways touched upon above.

We all live in 'biopolitical' times and life in Cape Town is no exception. Foucault spoke in the 1970s about a future in which biopolitics would have become so normalised that the capacity for civilian life to thrive or perish would be exclusively in the hands of the state. In other words, the state would not only have the capacity to "foster life" but just as easily the capacity to "*disallow it to the point of death*" (my italics)(Foucault 1978: 142). Whether South Africa exists in the middle of this Foucaultian prognostication or not requires the consideration of a simple question: are there some lives in South Africa that *can be disallowed*? To answer this, perhaps the 2012 massacre of miners at Marikana provides a clue; perhaps the infant mortality rate due to preventable diseases in informal settlements provides another; the rate of unemployment and homelessness another. In short, if one is asking, whether the state has "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe 2003: 27), the answer must be 'yes.' In Mbembe's phrasing, South Africa has moved beyond the realm of mere biopolitics, and is caught in a web of postcolonial 'necropolitics' instead. In other words, life and death are so intermingled that "living has the form of a partial death to which human meaning cannot be ascribed" (Ross 2010: 4).

This is all to say that in the two contexts of my research, the lives of the majority are uncertain in many more ways than one, and in the midst of all this vulnerability, or uncertainty, or precarity, or whatever one wishes to call it, are the boxing clubs – the subject of the next section.

Two Gyms / Two Fieldsites

In the context of all of the above, I wish to narrow my focus down to the lives of two small, fringe but enduring boxing clubs that I have been fortunate enough to attend for the last 18 months.

I made an unorthodox ethnographic decision when completing this research to do my fieldwork at two separate locations. I did this because it meant I could train both during the week and at the weekend, but also because it seemed to provide an extra dimension to my observations, allowing me to bounce ideas between the two places and check that my assumptions were not limited to one off occurrences.

Collecting the data from two different sites, evidentially, was the easy part! Compiling it into a cohesive whole from which to draw empirical conclusions has proved more of a challenge. Ultimately, I have opted to provide a brief yet broad description of the two fieldsites, including their associated trainers and members here, and in the remaining chapters I have drawn on field notes and observations from both sites to illustrate a range of arguments. An overview of the two fieldsites is provided below.

Introducing *Grassroots Boxing Club*, Makhaza (Khayelitsha), Cape Town

Grassroots is the name of the gym mentioned earlier in this introduction, owned and run by head coach Jongi Kamko, a former middleweight South African champion. The gym was established by Jongi in 2007, following a traumatic brush with tragedy in which Jongi contracted a severe infection in his leg, which an assemblage of doctors at the local clinic informed him would have to be amputated. Instead of listening only to the doctors, Jongi sought a second opinion from a *sangoma* (a natural healer) who managed to heal his leg completely, and in response to this Jongi made a sacred pledge that he would do something significant to help the youth of his community. Thus, with the financial backing of one of his clients from the white collar gym in Woodstock, *Grassroots* was built in a zinc and timber shack on Jongi's fiancé's property, which is where the gym remains today. The entrance to the gym is marked by a gnarly old boxing mitt nailed to the front door. It is a small, dimly illuminated space that always requires a few seconds for one's eyes to adjust upon entering. Against the far wall stands some roughly constructed shelving containing boxing gloves, groin protectors, sparring headgear, odd pieces of padding and a set of floor mats, all of which are hand-me-downs or donations from other gyms or clients that Jongi has trained. There is also a rickety exercise bike, a rusty bench press machine and one miscellaneous piece of gym equipment with pulleys and weights attached whose use and provenance were never made clear and remain a mystery to me.

Hanging from the roof beams are four extremely heavy punch bags, filled with wet sand and on the corrugated iron walls are pictures and posters of a youthful Jongi in the ring with his trainer and of Xayo Myolisi, Jongi's only non-amateur boxer, friend, and fellow coach at the gym.

Grassroots exists in the shacklands of Makhaza in Khayelitsha. This is a part of the city that was created explicitly to manage the urban influx of migrant workers during apartheid in 1985, and to facilitate the removal of black residents further away from the white populated zones. It extends for 43.5 square kilometres to the southeast of the centre of town, beginning beyond the airport and approximately 30km from the CBD. Typical struggles involve gangsterism, crime, problems with service delivery and transport strikes. This part of the city was at the centre of Cape Town's notorious 2013 'poo protests,' in which buckets of human waste were dumped at critical sites across the city in order to protest the dire sanitation issues facing the residents (in 2015, 48 000 Capetonian residents continue to use the 'bucket system,' see www.capetownbudgetproject.org.za). Andile Lili, one of the principle organisers of the protests lives so close to the gym that when he was shot in the stomach in November 2014, Jongi heard the gunshots as if they had been fired within his fiancés living room.

The boxers who use the gym are boys, girls, men and women. There are roughly 25 members who regularly attend and of this number 15 regularly participate in amateur boxing tournaments around the Western Cape. The average age of the boxers is fourteen and a half years; the majority being boys between the ages of 10 and 17. Jongi has one professional boxer in his stable, Xayo Myolisi, who has 8 professional fights under his belt and a record of 6 wins, 1 draw and 1 loss. Training takes place in the early morning during weekdays (from 5-7) and on Saturday afternoons.

Introducing *Sisonke Boxing Club*, Imizamo Yethu, Cape Town

The second fieldsite of my research, *Sisonke Boxing Club*, is situated on the side of a valley overlooking the pristine and beautiful harbour village of Hout Bay, approximately 20 km from the centre of Cape Town. *Sisonke* is located in the informal settlement of Imizamo Yethu, an area of Cape Town less notorious for violent crime than Khayelitsha, but an area of high crime nonetheless.[9] The gym has been in existence for approximately 20 years and run by various coaches during that time. The current coach, Bongile and his assistant MacDonald have been coaching there since 2001. The gym itself is a small room

[9] At the time of writing, Imizamo Yethu was experiencing a fresh spike in crime, including xenophobic attacks, murders and gang related violence (see *Weekend Argus* July 11th 2015).

(35 square metres approx.) in a much larger community complex at the top of Imizamo Yethu. The complex is called *Sijonga Phambile*, which also contains within its confines a computer lab, a day-care nursery and two weights rooms. The gym has windows along one wall (too high to peer into from the outside), with several panes broken, and a ply board wall which separates it from the adjacent weights room. There is a freestanding frame which supports two small heavy boxing bags. Behind that is some clutter on the floor, and in the opposite corner are two more heavy bags on the floor which serve as stools for the smaller children when they are not actively training. There are two pairs of cheap white 8oz gloves, two communal gum shields, two items of headgear, and a pair of training mitts. That is all the equipment I ever saw during my time there. On the innermost wall is a thin mirror with a bench to the side, and on two of the walls are pictures of various famous boxers either fighting, weighing in, or otherwise posing for the camera. These include the Klitschko brothers, Evander Holyfield, Lennox Lewis and various others. The room has no ventilation at all, and whenever I trained there, no matter how much or how little I was wearing to begin with, I instantly perspired through my layers. On the ceiling is a fine patina of condensed sweat.

Bongile is a slight looking man who works at the local BP garage and lives locally. To coach he wears a beanie and torn up tracksuit bottoms. He manages the whole training session himself, keeping one group totally occupied with physical training (squats, star-jumps etc.), while he plucks students out one or two at a time to give them pad work. He is occasionally assisted by a younger coach, MacDonald, whose competitive fighting days are not as far behind him as they are for Bongile.

There are approximately 20 boxers who regularly attend the gym, which offers classes every weekday from 5-7. The fighters are all young boys between the ages of 9-16. Occasionally girls do show up to train, normally in twos or threes, but they rarely compete in the amateur tournaments. At the time of my research there were no professional boxers at the gym. Younger children sometimes attended the classes too but there is no separate regime for them. Everybody in the class trains as a group. At *Sisonke* I have frequently shadow boxed with an eight year old, followed by Bongile, followed by a 15 year old, quite seamlessly and without difficulty.

Neither gym has an actual boxing ring in which to practice sparring.

Methods

My research began in earnest in May 2013. Not long after deciding to dedicate myself to the study of boxing, I started training at the two gyms described above. I began to train between 1-4 times weekly for the next 4 months. I have continued to occasionally train at one of those gyms since my 'official' period of fieldwork ended. Sometimes I'd train at both places in one day. The specific training regimes at each gym would vary according to the day, the mood of the coaches and the composition of the class. The details of these sessions shall receive due discussion in the chapters that follow.

The methodology I have followed throughout this research is explicitly grounded in 'participant observation,' or as others have more simply termed it, 'attentiveness' (see Ross 2010). In the context of my enquiries, this has taken the form of seemingly innumerable hours of footwork drills, shadow boxing, calisthenics, road running, hitting punch bags, listening to pointed instructions from various coaches, and sparring with other boxers. Throughout this time I have been mindful of Wacquant's preparedness to step back intellectually and allow the rigours of embodied practice inform his mental formulations (see 2009). This has meant that his notion of the body - not merely as a vehicle for habitus, but also as a vibrant tool for sociological research – has also become central to my methods. Wacquant calls this, "carnal sociology"(2005), which is a fairly good shorthand for "a way of doing and writing ethnography that takes full epistemic advantage of the visceral nature of social life" (Wacquant 2005: 445).

His analogy of fieldwork to the work of an apprentice has also been an extremely useful tool for thinking - not least because physical and sensual practices do seem to proceed, as Wacquant notes, "beneath the level of consciousness," before language becomes available to express them (2009: 121). It is partially to Wacquant, therefore, that I owe my seemingly insatiable tolerance for getting beaten up by informants in the field.

This methodology was supplemented by attending various meetings between coaches and various community members, and a handful of amateur boxing tournaments around the city. Much of the data used has come from informal conversations with coaches and boxers as I chauffeured us between locations or to and from boxing competitions. Road running also provided the perfect context for conducting informal interviews with

boxers and coaches. In Khayelitsha these runs normally lasted between 4-6 kilometres, from the centre of Makhaza up to Macassar sands and down to the wide expanse of Monwabisi beach, which stretches all the way to Muizenberg (a good 30 minutes of conversation time).

Language and Limitations

While this research was conducted in the most rigorous fashion possible, inevitably there are areas in which it could be improved, or that a future researcher might consider tightening. The first of these areas concerns language. Although I can speak and understand a smattering of Xhosa, I am not a native speaker. In both of my field sites, this represented a limiting factor in how much I was able to glean from certain situations, especially when it came to songs and spontaneous instructions given from coach to boxer in the gym. In lieu of being linguistically proficient, the contribution of a native Xhosa speaking research assistant would have been extremely helpful.

Naturally, longer-term research would allow time for stronger relationships to build between researcher and research subjects, as well as time to cultivate more complex social networks. Given the finite time frame of my fieldwork, however, this was a fairly unavoidable constraint.

Last of all, as I did not use a control group (e.g. to see if the boxers brawled in the street more or less than non boxers), there will necessarily remain an element of doubt to the findings herein. On the other hand, using a control group would suggest the existence of a hypothesis to be tested, which by the very nature of this research, there was not. Nonetheless, a researcher from a different field (psychology or sociology, say) might legitimately wish to consider shining another disciplinary light onto these findings by using a control group or groups.

Ethics

The Anthropology Southern Africa guidelines for Anthropological Research (2005) and the University of Cape Town's codes of conduct (2012) were diligently perused before commencing any research.

Besides this, there were certain site-specific ethical implications to this fieldwork. In no particular order, these are listed below:

i) Safety. Given the higher likelihood for violent crime to occur at night, I undertook (as far as possible) to conduct research only during daylight hours. Although I drove my own car to all of the field sites listed in this study, the car itself, and occasionally my camera were the only item of significant value I ever had about me. The other safety concerns were centred around the practice of boxing itself. (For these, see below).

ii) Harm to myself/harm to informants. Fortunately, the rules of sparring ensure that one's personal safety is seldom compromised due to the extensive protection provided by headgear, mouth guard and (wherever possible) thick 16oz gloves, as well as the tacit understanding between fighters that one spars to learn, and therefore rarely at more than '50%' (i.e. softly).

iii) Prejudice. Before beginning research, I was not unaware that there was a possibility that my presence in certain of my field sites could prejudice some neighbourhood members against others. Fortunately, to the best of my knowledge this did not occur, but was nonetheless an important consideration to bear in mind during this fieldwork, as it would be for any fieldwork of a similar nature.

iv) Studying down. Whilst I harbour my own personal quibbles with this notion (principally, in whose eyes and to what criteria does the up/down dichotomy refer?), it is a question that necessarily crops up in research of this kind. This is not to say that I am oblivious to the implications of a white, male and relatively affluent researcher doing all of his research in poorer, marginalised,

black areas, but merely to challenge what I consider poor terminology. Clearly, researchers from privileged backgrounds who choose to study subjects from less privileged backgrounds should grapple with this issue and attempt to unpack it, regardless of whether trying to do so heralds any kind of conclusion. In the end I can say that I take the ethics of my research very seriously in this respect and ultimately justify it on the grounds that it reduces the distance between the ivory towers of academia and the proletarian experience of daily life.

v) State of my thesis in the public arena. Copies of this thesis shall be made freely available to all of the participants who made it possible. Where participants have indicated a preference, I have either omitted referencing them by name, or used a pseudonym instead.

vi) Informed consent. Having the consent of all of my informants was of paramount importance to the ethical integrity of this project. Therefore, despite having already obtained oral consent from everybody I intended to work with before fieldwork began, I endeavoured to remind them of the purposes of my work as the research progressed, and allowed them to withdraw from my research at any time with no obligation to provide reasons.

The last set of ethical concerns that pertain to this research are about semantics. There is a risk from the social sciences of condemning an entire population group within the space of a few misguided words. For instance, when scholars preface their research by first describing an undistinguished backdrop of "poverty, crime, anti-social behaviour and civil apathy" (Burnett describing the challenges of implementing sport in poverty stricken South African settings, 2006: 128), it appears they do themselves and their participants a disservice by ignoring context and hardening common mis/conceptions. The same might be said of referring vast swathes of a national population as "the poor," not to mention the problems affecting said "poor" (also see Wacquant's critique 2002). This is a question of factual accuracy over political correctness and, to the best of my ability, I have avoided exercising such habits here.

* * *

What follows are the findings and analysis of my research, described as logically and succinctly as I am able. I have, to the best of my ability, described things as accurately as I have experienced them and hold only myself accountable for any inaccuracies contained herein.

CHAPTER 2: On Embodiment: the Work of Becoming a Boxer

Introduction

Within the context of global socio-economic forces, there is South Africa; and within South Africa there exists this quintessential city of contrasts, Cape Town. Within Cape Town, there are numerous urban boxing gyms, and within these boxing gyms are moving, sweating, focused bodies. Our bodies are the infallible registers of what life does to us and what we do to ourselves. It is with this perspective in mind that this chapter seeks to understand the embodied practices of individual agents as they hone their craft in the boxing gym. This not only entails a consideration of how pugilistic literacy is attained or how a boxer manufactures a fighter's physique, but also of how one forges an identity and a meaning from the 'furnace' of the boxing gym (see Wacquant 2005). As shall be seen, training practices often challenge the idea of the bounded 'individual' pitting themselves against an imagined adversary, and are better understood in terms of a collection of 'porous' or 'fractal' bodies that are constantly sweating, dancing, learning and bleeding together. I conclude the chapter by arguing that the boxing gym is a place of extreme *communitas* (Turner 1967), and that this gestures to a social cohesion that extends above and beyond the gym itself.

Moving 'like a boxer' – the Habitus of a Fighter

Marcel Mauss, in 'Techniques of the Body' (1934) speaks of divergent cultural modes of doing similar activities, which vary from place to place, between epochs, and between societal strata. These particular learned forms of behaviour, are what he termed "habitus," and though this remains a word usually reserved for generic social behaviours such as speaking and eating (see Bourdieu 1977; 1990), it is clear that within the walls of a boxing gym a kind of "pugilistic habitus" is also produced (Wacquant 2005). By a wilful effort of conditioning, one tries to mould one's command of the body into something that can be used both to sustain the attacks of an adversary in the ring, and to launch devastating attacks oneself. The requisite level of efficiency required to do these two things well cannot be simulated – or at least, faking it is of no use whatsoever in an actual boxing bout. Thus, when one sees a member of the gym really "moving like a boxer," (as Bongile was forever wont to encourage his charges to do), one is aware of the hours of time and pints of sweat that have gone into that effort.

One of the first things one notices when looking at Jongi's hands (apart from their brawny dimensions), is a wide band of scarification covering each set of knuckles. I once asked Jongi how this came about and with a playful cackle he told me of his old training technique, which was to pound the punch bag without gloves on until his hands were cut and bloodied. It was a procedure his coach encouraged him to repeat every day until he eventually built the scars upon scars that he proudly exhibits today. Boxing is not a sport for the faint of heart. In the course of becoming a boxer, stories of brutal training regimes, punishing diets, blood and breakages are not uncommon. In order to prepare for the punishment of a fight one must undergo the necessary punishment of the preparation, and training is thus approached with the same seriousness as a competitive fight. Whilst the preparations for professional boxers are undoubtedly more strenuous than the preparations for amateurs, both forms seek to turn the body into an unimpeachable weapon. It is through repetitive conditioning that boxers' bodies are transformed, implicitly, into expressions of circumstantial resistance. The mechanism of the body is, in a sense, a direct manifestation of the mind's desires. The willpower that commands one to resist defeat and strive for victory transmits its fiat via embodied practice and mental resilience. The product of this is writ large in the form and facility of the fighter's body.

The routines of the boxing gym are repetitive and monotonous, yet this is precisely the point. Boxing is a discipline and a "skilled bodily trade" (Wacquant 1995: 501) in which one improves by slow degrees of graft and thin layers of hard gained experience. Expertise can be judged by how a boxer moves their feet, controls their hands, selects their punches and by the ever so subtle body mechanics that govern their every motion in everything they do in the gym.

Whether at *Grassroots* or *Sisonke*, the training sessions consisted of a combination of footwork drills, conditioning exercises, pad work, bag work, and sparring. During my fieldwork at *Grassroots*, this was often preceded by a road run of approximately 4km, which the boxers I accompanied frequently undertook wearing full tracksuits, woollen hats, gum shields and a polythene bag with arm holes underneath, just for good measure.[10] The most important thing at the start of each class was to build a sweat - the order of the pad work, bag work, conditioning and footwork was largely interchangeable, although unless someone was training for an imminent bout, sparring almost always came at the end.

At *Sisonke*, where resources were so limited that two was the most there was of any item of equipment, the classes normally began with most of the boxers shadow boxing in pairs; one person skipping (with the only skipping rope); and one or two boxers hitting the punch bags. Normally this continued for approximately five rounds of three minutes and then the class came together in a circle for conditioning drills which were led by Bongile's nephew and the club's greatest talent, Sandiso, or the assistant coach, MacDonald, whilst Bongile stood in the middle and did pad work with one student at a time.

By this arrangement, everybody in the class could learn from the lessons enacted by Bongile and his charge in the centre of the ring of bodies. Whilst Bongile took each member of the class in turns in the centre of the ring, the rest of the class drilled strength

[10] The point of wearing so many clothes, evidently, is to sweat off excess weight. I have even witnessed boxers smother themselves in *Deep Heat* beneath the polythene bag to further this effect, and in 30 degree Celsius heat no less. Xayo even used to wear on top of this, a steel-plated vest bearing the legend 'DOG UNIT,' which he had procured from his job with the South African naval services.

and conditioning exercises which ranged from simple press ups to sit ups to star jumps and included every variation in between. Lacking any matting for the floor, all ground-based exercises were done on the hard concrete surface. This was the case for children of the age of ten, like young Jerome (of whom more later) and adults like myself, of whom there were only ever one or two at the most. Indeed, often the hardness of the floor was something to be embraced rather than mitigated, as when we did press ups on our knuckles, or jumped from our knees to a squatting posture (both standard routines).

A typical evening at *Sisonke* looked like this: a person on the edge of the class might do twenty minutes or so of continuous cardio and strength training until the person in the middle of the ring of bodies took off the communal misshapen, steaming gloves and passed them on to the next combatant, who immediately slipped them on and went four rounds with Bongile. During these four rounds, Bongile gave relentless commands and clipped instructions. "Jab in. Jab out. Double. Four. One-Two. Jab in. Combination!" which one keeps up with on pain of being left behind or being *wohlulekile* (one who gives up) in front of the rest of the room. I have had vivid premonitions of vomiting down my sopping shirtfront after round two and knowing, somehow, that I had to go on.

The purpose of training this way is not to merely toughen one's body, but to toughen one's whole perspective. There is a tripartite relationship at the heart of gym work. At the three corners of the relationship are the body; the training regime; and the desire for improvement. It is through training that one registers in and on the body the messages of hope and perseverance that initially drove one to join the gym in the first place. When asking boxers why they boxed, apart from the stock answer that they enjoyed it, the response I most frequently heard was that it instilled a strength and a confidence into their everyday lives. Conquering the hard floor, the four rounds with Bongile, the indefatigable punch bags, and one's own desperate inner voice as it longs for rest, makes life outside the gym that much more bearable. This is not to suggest that the boxers I trained with ever intimated that their lives outside the gym were *not* bearable, but it is to say that I believe the boxing gym nurtured those qualities that enable a young person to resist the gangs, drugs and apathy that beleaguered some of their non-boxing contemporaries.

On the surface, the notion of a pugilistic habitus is an uncomplicated product of time and effort; the more time spent rehearsing, the better one learns to perform. Below is an excerpt from my field diary as I watched two of the gym's most seasoned boxers face off during some shadow boxing one evening:

Compared to the more callow members of the gym, Sandiso is a function of systematic precision and control. As I watch him shadow-boxing with MacDonald, I am struck once again by the deftness of his movements. The way he feints and feigns and economises motion is nothing short of masterful and it is suddenly crystal clear that all of the grotesquely difficult conditioning he does is merely to build a platform for this. The two of them shadow box, loudly enunciating each ghost blow with a grunt or some other noise. They never look away and they are perilously quick. Periodically, MacDonald stops Sandiso and offers advice. Sandiso looks straight into MacDonald's eyes when he listens and the advice seems to pour straight in. He's teaching a 'duck-and-counter' technique which requires Sandiso to slip to one side, throw a body shot and hook or throw a straight right to the face; then duck under an arm and repeat on the other side. MacDonald is, himself, remarkably skilled and like all skilled martial artists, there's something cat-like about him.

Sandiso and others' command of their own bodies was extraordinary, not just because of how highly skilled they were, but because everything they had embodied, had occurred in between those four crumbling walls, with not much more than Bongile or Jongi's expert input to guide them.

The training practices of the two gyms in this study can swiftly be explained away as a collection of techniques designed to simultaneously strengthen the body and skill the mind. Yet it would be inaccurate to think that a boxing habitus ceases to function outside of the gym. On a physical level the skills one acquires through boxing are strength, flexibility, speed, and power. On a technical level one learns about the art of attack and defence, as well as all the strategic thinking subsumed beneath the banner of 'ring craft.' And on a third level, less visible than the other two, are the soft skills that accompany one's journey; self-confidence, respect, stamina (as a form of general endurance) and self-knowing. 'Moving like a boxer' was Bongile's own description of pugilistic habitus, and he used it in the space of the boxing gym to encourage his young boxers to embody the correct attitude for success. However, 'moving like a boxer' is also a poignant shorthand for living life outside of the ring too. In imbibing the lessons of good boxing practice, boxers at both *Sisonke* and *Grassroots* were also nurturing a sense of proficiency and confidence that served non-pugilistic ends. The precise degree to which boxing improves

one's soft skills; street smarts; understanding of goals; capacity for self-improvement; regard for abstract authority figures; appreciation of cause and effect; aptitude for rigorous preparation; respect for self and others; realism about life's difficulties (as well as belief that they can be overcome), is inevitably impossible to gauge, but that boxing may improve at least some of these faculties seems difficult to refute.

Moreover, boxing can be seen to serve an altogether more existential purpose, as a means of constructing a "*publicly recognized, heroic self*" (Wacquant 1995: 501). This is especially true of actual competitive boxing matches (as distinct from training regimes), but is also made manifest simply by being a boxer. In this regard, having the label of "boxer" is an important piece of social capital that comes with the territory of belonging to a boxing gym. There is an uprightness, similar to what Ross (2010) identifies as *ordentlikheid* in her ethnography of a Cape Town informal settlement, that accrues with membership of a boxing club.

Boxing Club *Communitas*; Fractal People; Porous Bodies

I take off the gloves and pass them to a smaller boy, who immediately puts them on still steaming and damp. The process repeats for two other boys and meanwhile the rest of us form a ring of moving bodies around Bongile and his charge, corralling them in. We are led through conditioning exercises by Sandiso - who goes about his work with the seriousness of a drill sergeant. Eventually the boy in the middle also joins the ring and the air is thick with sweat-generated humidity (it drips, in fact, from the plasterboard ceiling), grunting, moaning, stamping and singing. Everyone seems to offer their own personal fatigue into some absorptive cavity in the room. The group sings it out, shares it. It becomes manageable. Individuality melts.

I have hopefully given a sense so far of the community boxing gym as a close, intimate space in which training occurs at very close quarters. This image requires some embellishment. As sites of practice, *Sisonke* and *Grassroots* both pose a serious challenge to traditional notions of individuality, especially in a quintessentially individual sport such as boxing.[11] Training at either of these gyms was almost *de facto* a communal process, and

[11] In actual fact, the language that many professional fighters use when talking about themselves gives an insight into the fallacy of this conception. The post fight interviews of many an international boxer make

one example that demonstrates this has already been presented. Given the space restrictions at both fieldsites, it made sense for training to occur more regularly in a circle of bodies, with the nucleus of the circle being either hollow space, or as mentioned in the case of *Sisonke*, a trainer doing pad work with a trainee. Not only did this set up assist in the "practical osmosis and visual mimesis" (Wacquant 2005: 454) necessary for the boxers to learn their craft, but it contributed to a shared sense of commitment. Operationally, it is something akin to Jeremy Bentham's 'panopticon,' the 19th century philosopher's blueprint for a prison that requires only one sentry tower at the centre of a circular block of cells in order to have all of the prisoners monitoring one another for deviant behaviour – albeit a more benign version. For instance, it is much harder to quit in the middle of gruelling conditioning exercises when you feel yourself watched by every other member of the class.

There is, however, an important corollary to this, which is that the fatigue generated in the class had the feel of a *shared* fatigue. It was as though the space in the middle of all of those bodies was a pot into which each member of the class contributed their own precious quota of struggle and strain. This feeling is augmented by the fact that training was seldom a silent affair. Classes were often filled with music from someone's cell phone, or occasionally with the singing of *amagwija* (initiation songs) in isiXhosa. On these occasions the boxing gym felt more like a church congregation than a place to practice fighting.[12]

This excerpt from my field diary perhaps gives a more immediate sense of what I am getting at:

I feel the same sense of religious communitas at both Grassroots and Sisonke. Never have I felt anything close to that at the Armoury (the white collar boxing gym). It's almost a sense of peace. Effort seems to both diminish and increase because you are no longer the only driver of it. You are shunted on by the pace of this new entity you create by doing it all together (which is much more than say, just doing it at the same time). It helps that much of the warm up routine resembles dance more than disembodied squats and lunges; and that the classes always follow a centrifugal path with the coach, like some mitochondrial powerhouse driving the action, most often in the middle.

use of the plural subject pronoun 'we' when ostensibly reflecting on their own performances; as in "*we* had a plan" "*we* just tried to keep attacking the body" "*we're* gonna sit down and look at the options" etc.

[12] By strange coincidence, *Sisonke* was actually used as a church on the Sunday mornings when it was not being used as a gym (see next chapter).

In *The Forest of Symbols*, Victor Turner popularised the term *communitas* to refer to the state (epitomised during ritual practices) whereby there is a temporary yet profound levelling of social hierarchies (1967). *Communitas* describes the effect of ritual on rites of passage, in which a collective of individuals are rendered socially equal in order that they may share equally in important, common cultural experiences. To some extent this is, in a secular fashion, what occurred in the boxing gyms. Routine training at a boxing gym might not constitute a rite of passage as such, but there is nonetheless a sense of communal equality that encourages everybody present in the classes to embrace training as a collective endeavour. If one is prepared to stretch the time frame for a rite of passage to years as opposed to days or hours, one could even legitimately understand the boxing classes as effective pockets of liminality on the path to becoming a completely changed person.

* * *

I trained in Makhaza today (the usual run and some incredible footwork techniques). The footwork we did as a collective – around 10 of us in that hot, closed space, moving slowly around the gym, counter-clockwise. Heads down. Noisy. Xayo leading the singing, and others responding to the call or breathing heavy in their own thoughts. Round and round until eventually we came to be fixed in a small circle with Jongi in the centre. Sweating, panting, unable to stop because we'd become a collective. For ten minutes it felt like we were a group body. It reminded me of the amateurs a few weeks ago who huddled around their peers before they entered the ring – singing to them and keeping them calm. It's a team sport in that instance.

In traditional ethnographic patois, there exists a distinction between 'dividual' and 'individual' modes of being (see Strathern 1988; Smith 2012). However, a more contemporary distinction is that between 'porous' and 'buffered' selves (see Smith 2012). I prefer to use this distinction owing to the fact that it is largely free from the dichotomized western/non-western history (we are 'porous' selves the world over), and due to the fact that there is something especially pertinent to boxing in the framing of

bodies as both porous and buffered. The "fleshly companionship" (Wacquant 2005: 450) demanded by boxing is such that flesh frequently 'buffers' flesh; bodies mingle; and bodily fluid sometimes swaps places. Flecks of perspiration fly from one person to another; the leather on the gloves gets slimy with the sweat of an adversary, and occasionally blood from a damaged nose or cut lip flies away to an unpredicted destination. The skin, that "outer capsule of the person," as Cecil Helman terms it (2014) is no barrier to the influences of another's personhood spilling out (or spilling in). Sweat, breath, saliva and blood all swap places during a bout, and on a very physical level, the concept of bounded individuality necessarily comes into question. At *Sisonke*, this sharing of bodily personality is especially pronounced. For example, as well as the democratic usage of sweat saturated boxing gloves and head guards, the fighters also shared gum shields. During sparring, combatants meld together in ways that even further diminish the space between 'self' and 'other' by internalising the intentions of the other fighter in order to counteract them.

Aside from the physical sharing of bodily materials, personhood was porous in other ways too. For instance, lacking an actual boxing ring to train in at either gym, the members made do with the next best thing – a ring of bodies. At *Sisonke*, this was literally constructed of members of the gym linking arms to create a contained space within which sparring could take place. This ring of bodies that effectively served as the ropes of a regular boxing ring, were a dynamic alternative that had the advantage of including every member of the class in every moment of each other's boxing education. When the boxers prayed together at the end of a class (a frequent but not fixed occurrence), this was also done in a ring of bodies linked hand in hand.

So far I have spoken mostly about the training regimes inside the boxing gyms themselves. However, this section would not be complete without some discussion of the atmosphere and specific practices that accompany participation in boxing tournaments as well.

Tournament! (Itumentu!)

We are outside a large hall at Khayelitsha military barracks, on the outskirts of the township. The military barracks are a strange counterpoint to the rest of Khayelitsha. They are clipped and orderly, with manicured lawns and a spacious clubhouse replete with a long wood panelled bar and a grand log fireplace. This is in stark contrast to the nearest zinc and driftwood habitations just down the road. Across the backs of a row of Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses a few miles away, some disgruntled citizens have spray painted in thick, angry letters "This City Works for A Few" (a bitter reference at the local government motto "This City Works for You") for all who drive that section of the N2 highway to see.

As we approach, the low drone of a sound system gets deeper and louder until we find ourselves in a converted mess hall where a large, laminate yellow cape is spread across a 12m squared boxing ring and a mural of Table Mountain is painted on the wall behind it. The atmosphere has been raucous since the early afternoon, as approximately 400-500 people gather to spectate, cheer or prepare to fight in the first instalment of this day-long Western Cape amateur boxing tournament. These being military barracks, a few guards are watching from behind gated doors. The music plays non stop from a speaker system on the stage behind the ring and the air is punctuated by a soundtrack of leather gloved fists popping against vulnerable bodies, and the fevered calls of 'sebenza bhuti!', 'jab jab!', 'straight punches!' 'Eweee!' from the crowd.

As competitors make their way to the ring, a prominent aspect of the bouts comes to the fore. The Xhosa boxers rarely enter the ring alone. In fact, most of them enter the ring so corralled by singing bodies, it is often difficult to see the fighter himself. One must look right to the centre of the crowd to see the main character, where he stands, head stooped, thoughts concentrated, and mind relaxed as his metronomic entourage swaddles him in support before he steps between the ropes and finds himself finally alone. This provides the first inkling that Xhosa boxers in Cape Town are networked in such a way that makes their sport seem only superficially individual.

Though sometimes sung in the space of the gym during training sessions, the singing of *amagwija* was always present at boxing tournaments, where clusters of eager supporters surrounded each boxer as they waited to be called to their bout (the waiting can take hours at a big competition), and cocooned them in a protective shield of song.[13] These pockets of singing communion are omnipresent at boxing tournaments and make for

[13] Amagwija, in fact, are much more than mere songs. They are sung in order to imbue listeners with a sense of strength, fearlessness and power. For more on the subject see Mager 1998.

quite an arresting spectacle. What is perhaps most remarkable is how un-alone a boxer is in these moments. The intimate involvement of scores of people in the preparations of a fighter just before a fight seems to obliterate the idea that there is just one person carrying the burden of pressure into the ring. The individual disappears into the group, but the energy of the group also seems to get absorbed into the individual.

Conclusion

Writing about prize-fighters in Chicago, Wacquant describes the boxing gym as an institution which "defines itself in and through a relation of symbiotic opposition to the ghetto that surrounds and enfolds it" (2004: 56). His suggestion is that boxing has a special appeal to the less affluent in urban society. In a world characterised by uncertainty, lawlessness and disorder, Wacquant posits, the boxing gym trades not just in punches, but in discipline, honest values and order (2004: 56). The kind of discipline required to box (restraint, dedication, cool-headedness, and so on) is similar to that which is required, especially in the modern world, to accomplish just about anything. This then is one of the foundations that my research is attempting to test, and this chapter has begun by looking closely at how the act of boxing can be understood as a conduit for certain aspirations and how these aspirations manifest in the body of the boxing gym and its members.

CHAPTER 3: Gym Ecology (the Gym in the Community and the Community in the Gym)

Introduction

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring more fully the social architecture that underlies the success of a community boxing gym. To begin, I consider the material and immaterial forces that make up the boxing gym and the 'two rings' of influence in the lives of young boxers in Khayelitsha and Imizamo Yethu, that is; the physical boxing ring and the invisible socio-economic one that surrounds it. I then consider the crucial roles of the coach and some of the other players involved. In conclusion, I broadly consider the forces that draw young people in precarious settings to boxing gyms and offer one possible explanatory model. First of all, however, it is worth looking specifically at what makes a boxing gym a boxing gym.

Neither Space nor Place in the '*Gymnosphere*'

At boxing gyms that lack very basic infrastructure such as a ring, double end bags, speed bags and all the other accoutrements of the trade, there is, unsurprisingly, little left to identify them as boxing gyms. In the context of describing the 'ecology' of community boxing clubs, this only goes to highlight the fact that if gyms create boxers, then boxers also create gyms. As described in the preceding chapters; the broken, pockmarked plasterboard walls; corrugated iron; miscellaneous bits of equipment; and pictures on the walls are only a part of the gym's stagecraft – really though, the gym's transformation from a space that merely gestures at boxing to a space that richly embodies it, is almost completely contingent on the activity of its inhabitants. The room approximates an entity more dynamic than an inanimate 'space' or a 'place' and, to a very large extent the gym is a product of what happens inside of it. The discovery of a church group that made use of the exact same room as *Sisonke Boxing Club* on Sunday mornings when the gym was not in use, made this distinction absolutely explicit.

The *Rivers of Life Outreach Congregation* is an apostolic group, which due to a lack of other options hosted their weekly sermon in the very same room that *Sisonke* used for training during the week. In order to transform the room from a gym into a ministry, a number

of small interventions were required, these included: draping a large blue curtain across one of the walls; erecting a table with a Bible and synthetic flowers at the front of the room; and arranging the plastic chairs that were normally stacked behind the steel punch bag frame into pews that spread across the breadth of the floor. The rest of the area remained the same, with the same pantheon of boxing greats adorning the walls, the same thin mirror beside the door, and the same patina of condensed sweat on the ceiling. In short, it was not so much the physical space that underwent change, but the use to which that space was put. Nonetheless, on Sunday mornings, with its belly full of nattily clad men and women and its air thick with religious reverence, *Sisonke Boxing Club* was irrefutably no longer a gym for boxing; it was simply 'church' (see Sender 2015).

The Violence within and the Violence without

In the previous chapter I described the ring of bodies that often served as ropes at *Sisonke*. A similar practice occurred at *Grassroots* too, though the boxers' bodies in that gym lined up around the contours of the walls and did not link hands. I spoke both about the way in which this form of training allowed for boxers to closely observe and learn from one another, and how it contributed to a more communal training experience than if the training had taken place inside an actual boxing ring or outside any ring at all. Now I would like to use the idea of the boxing ring to interrogate the idea of 'violent' practice. In particular, I am interested in comparing the violence that occurs *inside* the boxing ring with the violence that occurs *outside* of it; that is, the violence on the streets and institutions that surround the gyms themselves. What can be learnt from a thorough interrogation of this dialectic?

The last stage of tonight's training – sparring. The best boxers here (Sandiso and Sisonke[14]) put on headgear and mouth guards and square up. Everybody else links hands and forms a ring in which the boxers stand. One of the watching boxers puts music on his cell phone (some heavily distorted vocals, a dub beat - strangely sad and beautiful sounding). The boxers box. After three rounds they stop and two others jump in, and this continues until everyone who wants to fight has fought. The last bout is between the smallest boxers there. One of them gets completely dominated for three rounds without respite but without giving in. He's got a big heart, but when they are finished I can clearly see he's on the brink of

[14] The name of the gym was also, coincidentally, the name of one of its boxers.

tears. After his fight I sidle up to him and tell him he's a real fighter and he mustn't give up. He seems heartened by this. At the end I ask Bongile who he is and he just says "Ah Jerome. He's a naughty one."

Within the context of training, this was as violent an episode as I ever witnessed. This is not to say that the sparring was not conducted with real intent, or that the punches thrown were not intended to hurt (or did not hurt). However, real, unmanaged violence was seldom on display. Even at the tournaments I attended it was common for approximately a quarter of fights to be stopped early by one of the boxers' own corner if they felt that he or she was being totally outgunned by their opponent. Of course, in a sport in which two people aim to punch each other in the face and body in order to score a victory through points or by knockout, there is a danger of injury. Nosebleeds and cut lips are common, and in the case of mismatched bouts (like that involving Jerome above), there lurks an element of mercilessness of which any feeling person is aware. However, in the world of amateur boxing the risk of serious injury is strikingly low (it ranks below rollerblading, horse riding and gymnastics in the *Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents*' list of dangerous sports). Significantly, despite boxing's proclivity for authorised violence, it is also well understood that any violence falling outside the remit of the rules will be shunned and severely punished.

It must also be said that the instances of violence inside the amateur boxing ring are rarely without some beneficial side effect, even if that side effect is merely for a beaten boxer to get back to the gym and train harder than ever. Indeed, it is almost a part of boxing lore that one learns, improves and develops fastest in adversity. As Trimbur argues, "[t]he fact of physical suffering *as-is*, is an inevitable feature of gym life" (2011: 342; my italics). In what may at first seem like a kind of perversion, it is perhaps the giving and receiving of physical suffering, in part, that draws some people to the sport.

Perhaps the central point to notice in all of this is that the violence on display in a boxing gym or ring is consciously sanctioned by all those involved in its creation. Throughout my research, nobody was forced to fight, and nobody fought for longer than they were comfortable. Moreover, it is customary both in amateur and professional versions of the sport that regardless of how vicious or tame a bout has been, at the end of any sparring or competitive fight, boxers touch gloves or embrace - providing essential closure to the

battle they have fought and reiterating the deep respect that almost all boxers have for one another. The violence of boxing then, is a violence in which boxers wilfully elect to participate and a struggle they eagerly embrace. Once one has made the decision to train, to spar and to compete, the suffering ahead is a known quantity. The test of a respected boxer is not so much the skills they demonstrate so much as their tenacity for adapting to struggle. This is significant because it places an emphasis on the *response* one has to suffering, rather than the *fact* of suffering itself. As with many of the lessons garnered inside the boxing gym, such a philosophy transposed to life outside of the ring makes for a powerful coping strategy. Yet even with a powerful strategy such as this, it is not unheard of for boxers to fall off the tracks. The three following vignettes aim to illustrate something of the *other side* of township life; what happens to certain boxers when they cease to be boxers.

Shortly after Jongi opened the doors of *Grassroots* in the early 2000s, the gym quickly became home to a stable of regular amateur boxers between the ages of 9-15. At the time, Jongi wanted novice boxers only – boxers who hadn't been trained before, so as to avoid the potential politics of future negotiations with another trainer over to whom a boxer should be loyal. In his first intake of recruits were two promising youngsters named Sipho and Andile,[15] who were both around eleven years old when they joined. For two years these boys trained until they began to show signs of becoming genuine 'prospects.' From their impressive showings at amateur tournaments, they began to earn a reputation from the likes of other prominent South African coaches such as Zola Koti, and their fate as future stars seemed likely, if not inevitable.

In 2006, however, gangsterism in Makhaza was on the rise (kept particularly alive by a fierce rivalry between the *Amapharaphara* and the *28s*), and permeated the lives of almost everyone who lived there. Tragically for Andile and Sipho, their lives were permeated more than most, as they had to cross contested gang territory on their ways to school each morning. Before too long they were refused passage along their route unless they agreed to become members of the gang with the most sway at the time, which happened to be the *Amapharaphara*.

[15] Both pseudonyms

In becoming members of the gang, they automatically resigned their right to train at *Grassroots*. Jongi's stance on gang membership and gym membership was strict and clear; the two affiliations were mutually exclusive. The danger of gangs becoming familiar with his gym; using it as a meeting point, or otherwise putting its existence in jeopardy were just too great. He only discovered the reason for the boys' abstention two weeks after they had stopped training, through their peer network, and never got the chance to speak to them again. Two years went by until one day Jongi found himself in front of a television screen watching the news report. A typical story was breaking about a case of vigilante justice in which two gangsters had been stoned (one of them to death) and set aflame by an angry mob. The incident had occurred in Makhaza. Later that day Jongi received a phone call from a friend and discovered who those two gang members had been: Sipho and Andile. In telling me this story, Jongi was clearly evoking a most unwelcome memory. "My heart was so very sore," he told me. "I knew them from when they are so innocent."

There are other cases too of boxers whom the gym could not keep from danger. One story I heard many times was that of Justin, a white, flyweight boxer whom Jongi had known back in his days as a professional. Justin joined Jongi's gym in Plumstead at a time when he was being trained by Lakis, a Greek trainer who oversaw the majority of Jongi's career as a pro. The gym was populated mostly by black boxers, including many South African champions. Justin entered the gym as a tall, skinny, unpopular and thoroughly unboxerly youth.

Lakis tried to dissuade him from joining up by emphasising the difficulty of the road ahead, but headstrong Justin insisted on joining, and ended up learning very fast. He quickly became competitive and turned pro without even fighting in the amateur ranks. Alienated as Justin was during training, Jongi decided to take him under his wing. They would jog together during roadwork while the other gym members raced ahead. On one of their runs, Justin confided to Jongi that Lakis had organised a fight for him in Khayelitsha…and that he was scared. Jongi offered some very frank advice. He told him that 99.9% of supporters would be black and all of them would want to see him lose. He told Justin to keep this fact close to his heart.
"Justin, don't forget – everybody wants to see you lose. But, if you box nice, don't make any mistake, they're gonna turn!"

As it happened, Justin showed up on the day of his fight well prepped by Jongi and Lakis, and he was blazing. By the end of the last round the whole crowd was screaming "umlungu, umlungu!!" ('whitey!!') and Justin won by unanimous decision.

Not long after Justin's first fight he stopped coming to the gym. The next time Jongi and Justin saw each other was four years later at a bus stop in the centre of town. It took a moment for Jongi to recognise the homeless man striding towards him with his arms outstretched.

"Jongi, I'm a *bergie*!"

As he got close, Jongi suddenly realised that this smelly, grubby, barefoot *bergie* was in fact his former stable-mate, the flyweight boxer, Justin. They hugged for a long time at the bus stop, before a queue of very surprised onlookers and reminisced about the past until the bus came. Then Jongi gave him R20 before they departed and slid back into lives that had unfurled so differently since they had boxed together in Plumstead.

A final torrid tale concerns the fate of Jongi's nephew, Xolani, who Jongi had hoped to rescue from a quickly worsening situation in the Eastern Cape. Xolani had grown up without a father and with a huge respect for Jongi, whose fights he had listened to on the radio and whose figure he had often seen on television. Xolani came down to Cape Town at Jongi's behest. He was sixteen years old when he moved into a shack in 36 section (a district in Makhaza) with his role-model uncle. Jongi gave Xolani one month to continue with his bad habits, which consisted mostly of getting drunk and smoking *dagga* (marijuana), after which he vowed to teach him the 'manly art' of boxing. True to his word, exactly a month later Jongi dragged Xolani out of bed at 5am for a morning run, and Xolani, protesting though he was, obliged. Jongi bought him training footwear and clothes and they soon developed a steady routine of running, boxing, and fitness.

Xolani trained so hard that after just four months he was able to compete as an amateur and not long afterwards, turn professional. However, soon after that things began to go downhill. Xolani fell in with a bad crowd and was soon back into a cycle of drinking and smoking. Naturally, his exercise routine suffered and following a number of weeks of lackadaisical training, he stopped altogether. He became careless in his relationships and negligent about his personal hygiene. He allowed his beard to grow long and refused to wash for weeks on end. When confronted about his behaviour he became belligerent. A

few times he challenged Jongi to fight him and they ended up rolling on the floor of their shack until Jongi was forced to restrain him until he surrendered.

He also began doing strange things like breaking dishes and ripping the zinc panelling off the roof of their house. On one occasion he piled the TV, radio and other electrical equipment outside and set fire to them. Eventually they took him to hospital, then to a *sangoma*, and then to rehab. He is now on permanent medication and suffers from what is most likely some form of schizophrenia. From training three times a day, he abandoned training completely. Xolani now lives in Makhaza with his aunt, who works as a kitchen porter and he is unemployed.

These anecdotes are not intended to suggest that mere membership of a boxing gym can keep young people on the straight and narrow. I am not mistaking coincidence with causation. What I am attempting to do, however, is to give some sense of the proximity of a danger far more prevalent and devastating than anything occurring inside a boxing ring; the violence (structural or otherwise) that occurs outside of it.

Saturday night: I was giving Jongi and four of his boxers, Thulani, Khayelethu, Lwasi and Breakfast a ride back to the Grassroots gym after a tournament at the Khayelitsha military barracks. It was a winter's evening, dark and cold, and it became apparent once again how raw township living can be. Street lights are none existent; spontaneous road closures common (as someone decides to use their street for a wedding or a funeral); dogs and children running everywhere; the smell of meat cooking; a jubilant, unpredictable atmosphere; potholes, darkness, and drunkenness. Jongi accompanied me in the car until it was easy to direct me back to the motorway. He still had his laptop with him from college (he was taking a community college course in physiotherapy at the time), and was, albeit in his light-hearted manner, a little wary about walking back to the gym with it alone. I said I'd call him from town to find out if he was alright. I drove back to my neighbourhood in the centre of town and stopped at a bar, from where I called him. He picked up the phone laughing and told me he was fine.

As alluded to in the introduction, Khayelitsha is one of the most dangerous places in South Africa, and Imizamo Yethu too is no peace garden. In seeking to understand the nature of the danger, and more pertinently, the violence of both places, it is worth being explicit about what 'violence' truly means and what forms it actually takes. The work of Galtung (1969; 1990) and Farmer (2002; 2004) is instructive on this point. Certain forms

of violence, they argue, assume the form of real blood-letting, similar to the gloved fist striking flesh in a boxing match. In this category would also fall crimes such as assault, murder, manslaughter, rape, child abuse, arson and so forth. One need only take a cursory glance at the transcript of the *Commission into Policing in Khayelitsha* to see that these forms of violent crime are a clear and constant danger in Cape Town's biggest township. There is another form of violence which undergirds the first form, however, and this is the so-called 'structural violence' of which it is now common to speak. Examples of structural violence are things like high levels of unemployment, a corrupt state, global capitalism, lack of sanitation and services, poor or corrupt policing, and a pitiable schooling system (see Galtung 1969, 1990; Farmer 2004; Harvey 2005). To a significant degree, structural violence lays the table for the other kind of violence; it creates the poverty, the disillusionment, and the discontent. Ultimately, as Farmer reminds us, "[t]he adverse outcomes associated with structural violence – death, injury, illness, subjugation, stigmatization, and even psychological terror – come to have their 'final common pathway' in the material" (2004; 308). The invisible processes of structured inequality will eventually and always make themselves apparent in the form of dilapidated human flesh. A lack of effective networks and services also creates the conditions for people to slip through the net when life takes a turn for the worse. Both forms of violence are alive and well in the townships of Cape Town and in South Africa as a whole.

In the boxing ring, pain and suffering are objectified and real. They can be confronted, battled and defeated. This does not apply quite so neatly to the structural violence of life outside, where the daily grind is both oppressive and multifaceted. Whether the struggle is with a poor education system, low wages, or unemployment, the root causes appear hidden from view and so deeply entangled in history and politics as to seem almost 'natural.' Indeed, in speaking to various members of the two boxing gyms, I was often surprised at how little resentment there was towards 'the system' for their dire circumstances. The debate around whether this acceptance of 'normalised' inequality is genuine or merely apparent is a debate for another thesis. It is, however, worth pointing the interested reader in the direction of Johann Galtung (ibid), who theorises very

persuasively about a third type of violence whose role it is to make direct and structural violence "look, [and] even feel right" (1990; 291).[16]

The inner boxing ring and the outer ring of socio-economic circumstance are clearly linked. The outer ring dictates the contours of the inner one; which boxers attend; what equipment they use; and the focus of their aspirations. Boxers who occupy the inner ring necessarily occupy the outer one too. As Trimbur argues, the gym is effectively a "mediating space between the structural and the individual" – in other words, a kind of conduit between inner and outer rings (Trimbur 2011; 351). All fighters come from the outer to the inner, where some manage to remain. Others fall back from the inner and make their way in the outer, as was the case with Justin, Xolani, and the two boxers who became gangsters, who eventually met such a sticky end.

The Coach (without whom, nothing!)

The role of the coach is of utmost importance. Inside the gym he conducts, shapes, frames and energises proceedings. It is a cliché but also a truth that a good trainer is also a mentor, a role model, a father and a brother. As one of the trainers in Trimbur's study of a Brooklyn boxing club succinctly puts it "you counsel them on more than this boxing shit" (2011: 348). If the literature (Wacquant 2004; Trimbur 2011) and anecdotal records are to be trusted, Bongile and Jongi are typically involved in their young boxers' lives. Their influence stretches well beyond the confines of the boxing gym. They are involved personally with all of their regular fighters' domestic affairs, advising them not just on how and when to train, but also on what to eat, how to keep focused and the importance of keeping humble. They have to be aware of the other obstructions (academic and otherwise) that might interfere with their boxers' training so they can work around them; and moreover, they are not above reminding their boxers directly of their domestic and social responsibilities. Both Bongile and Jongi made frequent house calls to all of their

[16] Galtung names this final form rather ambiguously as "Cultural Violence," though a semantic debate concerning nomenclature certainly does not necessarily interest me here. Other well known scholars who write on similar phenomena are Noam Chomsky (see *Manufacturing Consent* 1988) and Pierre Bourdieu (see *On Television* 1996)

regular fighters; knew their parents well, and could tell me a good deal about their home lives.

Trimbur argues that the role of the coach is also to provide linkage between two contradictory paradigms. The first of these paradigms concerns the domain of the boxing gym and imagines the boxer as a personally responsible and agentive individual in the story of their life. The second exists for the world outside the gym and utilises a discourse associated with systemic inequality and structural violence (Trimbur 2011). Somehow, the economically limited members of urban boxing gyms have to tread a line between these two spaces, and it is the coach who helps them to do that. The neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility is almost totally redundant as a tool for helping people to understand why opportunities for those living in townships are so limited; crime so high; and employment so low. Appropriating this philosophy for work in the gym, however, makes a great deal of sense – for this *is* a space in which you reap what you sow, and where there is an opportunity to transcend your station. As Trimbur writes of the Brooklyn gym, "discourses of individualism counter the tendency to define amateur boxers solely by their tragedies, by their lacks, or by that to which they have not had access." It helps young boxers to see that "no identity is final" – in other words, it doesn't matter what structures society has imposed to limit you, or what awful fate has befallen you; in the ring you are your own person creating your own identity out of the mill of your own industry, or to quote Trimbur again: "the individual is burdened with the remaking of society by his own success into what neoliberal discourse claims society already is" (2011: 351). It would thus be wrong to think that certain boxers' acceptance of their own desperate circumstances as 'natural' was due to a simple lack of critical awareness. Much more apposite is the fact that their trainers view bitterness as a fundamental impediment to progress.

If that is an overview of the trainers' role generally, it is now worth looking in much greater detail at the specific life histories of the principal coaches at *Sisonke* and *Grassroots* gym respectively, Bongile, MacDonald, and Jongi.

Bongile and MacDonald

The two coaches at *Sisonke* are Bongile and MacDonald. Bongile was born on the 1st January 1967 in Umtata, where he started boxing at 14. He moved to East London at 18

and started boxing seriously there. In 1998 his brother called him from Cape Town and invited him to move down to the city. After a brief period working in construction, he then started working at the BP garage in Hout Bay in 2001, and has been there ever since. His wife of twenty years is a domestic worker in Hout Bay and together they have two children: a son, a daughter and a grandson. He lives with his family in a four-room shack in Imizamo Yethu.

Bongile heard about the gym whilst working at the BP garage. It was called *Hout Bay Boxing Club* at the time and run by a man named Sydney. Shortly after joining the gym Bongile met his future coaching partner, MacDonald.

Significantly younger than Bongile, MacDonald was born in 1973 in the so-called Mecca of South African boxing, Mdantsane, in the Eastern Cape. He moved to Cape Town along with three other promising young boxers at the behest of Sydney, who promised him training and guidance and a possible boxing career. Soon after moving to the city, however, MacDonald and the other boxers developed serious misgivings about Sydney's coaching abilities and conflicting interests (Sydney was acting as coach, manager and promoter) and began training with Bongile instead. That was Bongile's first experience of coaching. Bongile worked together with Sydney but the relationship was never to be and eventually it broke down completely. Following a fiasco of a tournament in the Eastern Cape, there were crisis meetings at *Hout Bay Boxing Club*. Soon afterwards Bongile and MacDonald broke away and the name *Sisonke* was chosen for the new club, meaning 'we are together.'

MacDonald no longer boxes professionally himself, but as a coach he is a source of boundless energy and precise effort. His classes consist of a lot of jumping, squatting, and stretching, all punctuated by some of the strangest sounds I've ever heard emitted from any gym. He introduces each exercise in the same way ("Exercise. Ready. Exercise. Ready. Hop. By numbers…") and then segues into a series of rumbling sounds and high pitched calls. Unique as this technique is, his inscrutable language somehow seems to take some flack off the rest of the class (or at least distracts them from their own thoughts).

Jongi

Jongi grew up in Alice in the former Ciskei during the 1970s, where unemployment was high and opportunities were slim. Most men of his generation left to work in the mines near Johannesburg and Pretoria. Jongi's own father (a gardener for a family in the Eastern Cape, and a pastor for his local congregation) was fanatical about boxing and Jongi recalls listening to boxing matches around a wireless radio with his dad, visualising the fights in vivid detail as the commentator described the scenes ("he lands a beautiful left hook, then a right, and an uppercut landing straight to the jaw"). As a young boy Jongi used to practice stick fighting with his friends, getting cut and bloodied in a pitch black room, then drinking *unxombhoti* (wheat beer) and immediately making up with his opponents.

After the death of his father when he was still a young boy, Jongi helped his mother to make a living by chopping wood to sell for fuel. Shorty afterwards, the Ciskei got its independence and the white farmers all began to leave. For a year or two Jongi and his mother continued to scrape a living by selling wood, until the informal chopping of trees was made illegal. Demonstrating her industriousness in the face of adversity, Jongi's mother did not despair, but started a chicken selling business instead.

Jongi was initially a keen footballer before he discovered boxing. Once he had found his calling, however, there was no going back. As a footballer, he had smoked cigarettes and *dagga* and often got drunk with his teammates. Tiring of this lifestyle, boxing was what helped him to terminate his unhealthy habits. "Boxing changed me, gave me a reason to be different," he told me. As a youth, Jongi explained, to suddenly stop drinking and smoking without an excuse can potentially cost one the respect of one's peers. However, he found that stopping drinking and smoking *because of boxing* resulted in his street credibility becoming enhanced rather than diminished.

As he passed out of his teens, Jongi was unwilling to join migrant labourers heading for hopeless salaries and family-less lives in Gauteng province, and he felt that boxing might at least be a way of doing something different with his life. He turned professional after approximately 400 amateur fights, in 1994. It was a job, though the pay he used to take home was absurdly little. He would, for instance, earn R150 for a fight before paying expenses to his trainer, promoter, and any of the people from whom he borrowed money in the weeks leading up to the bout. In the early days he would total about R20 a

fight, net. Similar to the boxers in Wacquant's study (1998; 2001), managers and promoters bled him dry, and if he had complaints about his income for a fight, there was always a queue of other boxers waiting to take his place; a flooded labour pool is as cruel for boxers in the fight game as it is for workers in the job market. The *Congress for South African Trade Unions* (COSATU) may have been created in 1985, but in 1994 there was certainly no union for professional boxers. Jongi thought about leaving to go north at some point, but after discovering his girlfriend was pregnant, he decided he couldn't abandon her - so he stayed. At that time he was already living in Khayelitsha (site B).

Coupled with his passion for boxing, Jongi, like many a pugilist before him, has a deep faith in God - in fact his long-term goal is to become a preacher. Far from contradictory, this faith in God is totally complimentary to his love of boxing. As Jongi and many other boxers besides explained to me, as a fighter you want all the help you can get. To all intents and purposes, Jongi's gym is his church and his boxers are his congregation. In church, Jongi has told me, "you have to be honest with God, there is no hiding place - but I don't feel free in church. *In the gym I feel free*" (my italics).

Boxing as Religion

It is not just by Jongi's reckoning that the gym is a kind of church. Wacquant also recognises the sacred connection between the gym and something 'higher.' He writes: "boxers are bound to their trade by a profound, multifaceted, sensuous relationship of affection and obsessive devotion, an organic connection (*sympatheia*) akin to a religious allegiance inscribed on their whole being" (1995: 507). A reverent atmosphere is perhaps unsurprising, for the gym is also a place of "fixed, repeated, fused messages" (Bloch 1989: 38) - rituals, in other words - that serve to offset the disorder of life outside.

Within the sequestered ambiance of a training session, rituals of various kinds abound. Whether it be the rhythmic tapping out of footwork drills; the methodical preparations for sparring; the singing of *amagwija* songs; or the actual religious practice of reciting a prayer at the end of a class, it is very much as Wacquant has described: the gym is "organised so as to unmoor their members from their mundane attachments and to foster collective cloistering" (Wacquant 2005: 459). However, strains of the sacred do not only occur during training; they are present during tournaments and as well. The

following excerpt from my field diary is taken from the afternoon before one of Xayo's bouts. Xayo and his supporters had gathered in Jongi's gym in anticipation of travelling to the tournament in Strand, a half hour's drive away. The supporters were united in their encouragement for "*boxer yethu*" (our boxer).

As the stragglers finally arrive, we gather in the cozy gloom of the gym and Jongi says a few words in Xhosa. This is followed by a prayer recited by Jongi's wife, Rachel, also in Xhosa, to which all assembled reply 'Amen.' Last of all, out of the quiet Xayo begins singing softly – a struggle song – and gradually everyone else joins in. Soon the room is loud with voices singing in harmony with Xayo moving around the inside of this circle of support, before everybody eventually files out behind him, leaving the gym totally empty and quiet, although the singing can be heard continuing outside.

Other Players

As the above episode recognises, other community members are invested in the fortunes of the gym and its boxers. The interested members range from parents of boxers to members of the street committee. This was especially evident during a period in which a tutoring programme was being established to run alongside the boxing activities at *Grassroots*. At this time it was normal for 20-30 people to be present to hear Jongi and the other actors talk about developments.[17] Without digressing into a discussion about the relatively new aspect of tutoring at *Grassroots*, the point is that people *know* Jongi's gym; it is a modest stronghold on the corner of Ncedo and Hlala Street where community members know that good things are happening and will continue to happen.

Jongi, Bongile and MacDonald's relationship to their boxers is undeniably parental. As Jongi says, "they are like my kids, like my children; there's no difference between them and Thulani [Jongi's son] – I treat them the same way." This is no lip service either. The coaches are intimately involved in their boxers' lives; doing their best to guide them towards what is good and away from what is bad. It is often just as well that the coaches do this because parental guidance (particularly the paternal variety) can be hard to come by or even non-existent for many of their young charges. This said, no coach I spoke to

[17] This initiative came to fruition in 2013 and continues today under the banner of Grassroots Youth Academy (see http://grassrootsacademy.co.za/)

would ever consider themselves replacement for the father their boxers lacked at home. Indeed, for Jongi the support from parents is absolutely, utterly, irrefutably key to a child's success. It is often the support and encouragement from parents that allows boxers to attend the gym in the first place, and the ones who stop coming are often the ones whose home life cannot afford them the chance to be there.

In Imizamo Yethu, the place of the gym in the wider community was less immediately obvious. It is true that some parents seemed to send their children there as a form of free afterschool care, with very little interest in what the gym actually offered. However, Bongile was familiar with the home lives of most, if not all gym members. In the past, more than nowadays, *Sisonke Boxing Club* was reasonably well known for its preponderance of quality boxers. It is a mark of the times that this no longer holds true.

Boxing for what?

"Boxers feel that, by stepping into the squared circle, they can achieve something inaccessible or forbidden to them outside, whether it is wealth, fame, excitement, a sense of personal control and moral proficiency, or yet simply the unspeakable prosaic joys of being caught up in a thickly knit web of tensionful activities that valorize them and imbue their life with élan, drive and significance. Most importantly, all these rewards can seemingly be attained under their own powers, as an outcome of their individual choices and strivings…Through the ministry of boxing, fighters' ambition is to remake themselves and the world around them" (Wacquant 1995: 510)

Up until this point I have considered boxing principally as a *modus vivendi* for the youth in Makhaza and Imizamo Yethu (and by extension, for the youth of other socio-economically precarious precincts in South Africa). I have looked at the notion of developing a boxing *habitus*; of identity creation; and at the wider sphere of influence in which community boxing clubs exist. One topic I have thus far avoided, however, is the most obvious one of all: why is anyone boxing in the first place? In circumstances where life is already hard, what explanations are there for practising a sport that makes it so much harder?

To be sure, the connection between inner city poverty and boxing is not a purely South African phenomenon. The rags to riches stories that contribute to the sport's aesthetic are contingent on historical precedent. Part of Mike Tyson's sensational grip on the public imagination was that his life had been rescued from the inevitable jaws of violent crime by his discovery of boxing in a junior penitentiary at the age of fifteen. Tyson's story is not anomalous either; the narrative that boxing can save a person from the rugged edges of life in the street or in the 'hood' seems to be common wherever boxing is a popular sport. Out of competing theories that might explain this connection there is one I wish to put forward in particular, and it explicitly concerns the construction of masculine identity.

In 2015 there is such an abundance of literature (Connell 1995; Morrell 1998; Carton & Morrell 2012; Pype 2007; Hollander 2014; Groes-Green 2009; Trimbur 2011; Gutmann 1997; Mager 1998; Broqua & Doquet 2013) concerning the "multiple, historical, relational and contradictory" construction of male identities, that the notion of what it means to be a man is anything but singular. If ever there was a general consensus about 'manhood,' this conceptual vestige has been long superseded by the concept of hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, protest and marginalised *masculinities*, and inevitably even these categories are subject to on-going augmentation, fragmentation and critique (see Hollander 2014; Groes-Green 2009).

A common misconception about masculinity is that it concerns only men (see especially Broqua & Doquet 2013: XIV). However, it is by no means only men or boys who box at *Grassroots* or *Sisonke* – indeed there is even a gym in Khayelitsha, *Boxgirls*, whose doors open exclusively to girls and women. What can be said in light of this? One argument is that boxing is simply not the typically male sport that it is often assumed it to be. Men certainly do not hold the monopoly on physical aggression, violence or competitive spirit, and the presence of female boxers and boxing gyms only goes to confirm this.

Another argument is that while boxing is not a quintessentially masculine practice, the common *perception* of boxing is that it is. By this token, female boxers are often interpreted to be practising a male sport, and by so doing are appropriating part of the masculine identity associated with it. In the same way that being a boxer furnishes men with a social perception that they can take care of themselves; that they are disciplined;

serious; capable individuals, it secures the same social credit for women. Moreover, and more pointedly, there are real physical benefits for women who box, especially for women who live under the constant threat of gender based violence. As the founder of *Boxgirls*, Heather Cameron, has stated: "we don't teach [women] to hit people. We teach them not to put up with accepting male physical domination" (see Kamaldien 2012).

Thus, for men and women alike, boxing has an appeal. The question, however, remains: by what mechanism does boxing enable its practitioners to earn social capital in precarious settings, that other sports do not? Crudely, what *function* does boxing serve?

Considering an altogether different example might help to shed some light on the matter. According to Hollander (2014), in times of extreme distress and emasculation – his example is a factory closure in the Democratic Republic of Congo that rendered thousands of capable working men unemployed overnight – there are two common responses. These are for men either to adopt the role of victim, or to become effacing in the headwind of their trauma. To become a victim means to become bitter; to not accept one's fate; to turn idle or to alcohol, or to violence to fill the void. To become effacing means to humble oneself, to recalibrate and to adapt to one's new station. As far as the subject of boxing gyms is concerned, the members are, in Hollander's schema, effacing in the extreme. It is not that bitterness is not permitted in their spaces, it is that it is simply absent. Boxing gyms are the means by which socio-economically emasculated men (and women) can continue to develop masculine identities (also see Trimbur 2011: 334).

If this is one function of the boxing gym, the question remains: what is it specifically about the sport that makes it attractive to those living at the economic edges? Evidently there are other ways to be demonstrably masculine other than becoming a boxer, so what is the specific draw to boxing? Apart from being free to practise and requiring little more than one's own fleshy body in terms of equipment, two things stand out about boxing as a sport. First of all, it is violent and secondly, it is difficult. These two features happen to be common to another form of masculine identity creation in South Africa and beyond: violent crime and gang initiation.

As Pinnock and Sefali (2014) have noted, gang initiations such as those common in Khayelitsha and other parts of the city are, to some degree, an urban embodiment of

more traditional forms of liminal *rites de passage*. However, as Pinnock notes, gang initiation in Khayelitsha is circumscribed by certain features that do make it radically different from the traditional Xhosa initiation ceremony of *umwaluko*. For example, as opposed to being overseen by elder members of a community, gang initiates are judged by their peers. Instead of involving a period of solitary reflection in the bush, gang initiates must frequently commit some incontrovertible act to take them over the threshold of uninitiated to initiated (see Pinnock 1998). However, two particular hallmarks of gang initiation that are very similar to more traditional initiation practices (and therefore worth emphasising), and these are that the process must be both difficult and violent. Similar to the *bakumbusu* on the streets of Kinshasa (see Pype 2007), it is not enough for gang initiates to complete an activity that is merely difficult (else the Cape Flats might just as easily be full of brilliant cross-stich aficionados), it must also involve getting ones hands physically dirty (or bloody, as the case may be). This is one reason why knives and *pangas* are preferred to guns in street battles.

Is it conceivable that boxing offers a more morally palatable yet equally emancipatory alternative to violent crime or gang initiation; that it fills the abstract rubric for violence and difficulty without compromising one's ethical code and reputation? Becoming a boxer allows one to live drug and alcohol free; to not smoke tobacco or marijuana; and to abstain from the deeply antisocial activities of gangsterism whilst still retaining the masculine status and edge that accrue with gang membership and violent crime. It offers a safe way out of the bind without becoming an aggressor or a victim. Though this theory would go some way to explain boxing's appeal in contexts of precarity, it is certainly not watertight and is definitely open to critique. However (and most importantly), if the theory does carry weight, it might offer an important insight into initiatives combating violent crime and gangster recruitment across the country at large, and perhaps even across the globe.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to analyse boxing gyms in light of the fact of structural violence. Comparing the notion of a boxing ring to a socio-economic one, I have attempted to interrogate the dialectic of sanctioned violence within a boxing gym and

systemic violence occurring outside of it. In essence I have argued that the boxing gym offers more than just four walls within which to practice a sport. It offers the kind of social architecture that can support individuals living in a precarious environment, and a route away from the pitfalls of substance abuse and gang-related crime, which proliferate in township settings. I have also tried to grapple with the reasons why people decide to box, especially in situations of socio-economic struggle, looking at questions of masculinity, social capital and personal meaning. In the following chapter I continue this line of thinking, with the ultimate aim of showing that despite its violent façade, boxing can actually function as a good antidote to the kinds of violence that thrive in both of my fieldsites.

CHAPTER 4: On the 'Efficacy' of Boxing - Boxing for the Social Good

"If there is a single set of recurrent images and narrative strategies…that dominates the public representation of boxing, it is no doubt that of violence…The unmediated, unbridled fistic onslaught of man upon man…Savage blows hurled to the head of a defenceless combatant, blood squirting from mouth and nose, cut eyebrows and shattered bones, battered bodies crumpled in pain on a stained ring mat as the crowd clamours for more…" (Wacquant: 'The Pugilistic Point of View' 2004: 495)

Introduction: 'Boxing for the greater good'…or a "skewed and malicious passion?" (Wacquant 1995: 523)

Why would anybody think to advocate, as I do, for boxing as any kind of solution or benefit to vulnerable young people living in a South African informal settlement? Is life in such places not already hard and violent enough? The following chapter aims to confront these questions, ultimately with a view to demonstrating that there are considerable unique benefits that accrue from being a member of a community boxing gym in areas of high crime and material want.

Having considered the ingredients that go in to making a boxer and the reasons why boxing (amongst other sports) appeals in a township setting, I wish to consider the societal effect of having free, dependable and friendly boxing clubs in the centre of dangerous and 'peripheral' parts of the city. I advance the idea that for children who are "incubated in violence" (Kaminer quoted in the *Commission of Enquiry into Allegations of Police Inefficiency in Khayelitsha* 2014), a violent sport such as boxing has very special appeal and may even provide an ideal means for young people to non-verbally process trauma and resist becoming victims of drugs and gangsterism. Again, I draw on ethnographic material as well as the literature of sport and development.

Mens sana in corpore sano

The idea that sport can be a medium for positive social change is hardly new (see Burnett 2010, and the *UN Report on the International Year of Sport and Recreation 2005*), nor unique to South Africa. In 1975, for example, the British Labour government was feeling the pinch of impending economic crisis and seeking a loan from the International Monetary Foundation. Rather than plough money into traditional welfare programmes, which the government could no longer afford, they produced a white paper which made recommendations that investing in sport would, "by reducing boredom and urban frustration…contribute to the reduction of hooliganism and delinquency among young people" (Coalter 2007). Whilst due scepticism is healthy in the face of policies that conflate welfare and recreation – kicking a football around in a government sponsored "recreation centre" is not, by itself, going to mitigate unemployment, poverty, lack of educational opportunities and the like - there is a strong case to be made that sport can be a genuine means "to promote education, health, development and peace" (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2003). It is on this level that I now wish to consider the place of a boxing club within sites of social instability.

Unfortunately there are much more data available for Khayelitsha than Imizamo Yethu, and it is worth remembering that while similar in some ways, the two locales differ significantly in others. Nonetheless, to set the stage for this chapter, it is worth re-iterating some facts about Khayelitsha and Cape Town in general. The following information is taken directly from the *Commission of Enquiry into Allegations of Police Inefficiency in Khayelitsha* (published in 2014):

- In 2008, 46% of Khayelitsha children aged between 10 and 19 had witnessed a stabbing in their community.

- Studies suggest that more than 20% of Khayelitsha children may suffer some form of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). To put this into context, equivalent rates for American children are between 1 and 4%.

- Cape Town has the highest rate of youth homicide in South Africa with homicide being the leading cause of death for 15 to 19 year olds in the Western Cape.

- Cape Town and the Western Province has one of the highest rates of multiple youth victimisations in the country, which means that this is one of the provinces where children are most likely to have been victimised several times, rather than just once.

- The available evidence suggests that children in Khayelitsha are having to go through their developmental process within a violence saturated environment, and that has very particular psychological impacts.

- A study conducted by Lucy Cluver and colleagues in 2008 included a sample of over 1000 ten to nineteen year olds with two thirds of the sample from Khayelitsha and Makhaza. They found that 32% had witnessed a shooting in their neighbourhood; 39% had themselves been robbed; and 13% had been assaulted in some or other way in their own neighbourhood.

- Another study was conducted by Shields and colleagues with somewhat younger children (eight to thirteen year olds), about 20% of whom were from Khayelitsha primary schools. In this study it was found that 75% of these children had witnessed somebody giving somebody else a serious beating in the community; 58% had witnessed an assault with a weapon in their community; 40% reported that they had witnessed a murder in their community; 40% reported that they had been robbed; and 24% had been assaulted with a weapon.

In her final remarks to the commission, Dr Debbie Kaminer, a psychologist specialising in trauma and violence concluded:

"…that there are very few safe spaces that children can access and that they are having to find ways to try and manage threat and danger in an ongoing way and that has particular psychological impacts. This suggests that children in Khayelitsha experience violence as a condition, a condition of living, rather than as a single event that they experience and then have to recover from and this is back to that concept of being incubated in violence. We have also seen that children are witnesses, they are victims and they are perpetrators of violence in this community" (2014: 807).

Two questions arise from this. First of all, why *is* life in Khayelitsha so violent? And secondly, if the violence is an inevitable response to prevailing conditions, what are the current ways of managing this violence and might there be a way of at least directing it toward something less antisocial than violent crime and gangsterism?

Addressing Question 1

The explanations for such high levels of violence in Khayelitsha are multifaceted and complex - and although I am not as concerned with providing a comprehensive theory for the causes of violence as I am with suggesting why boxing may be a good antidote to them, it is worth taking a brief glance at where the high levels of violence in Cape Town might come from.

As Beinart (1992) and others (e.g. Morrell 1998; Carton & Morrell 2012) have argued, using only a political or economic lens to explain South African violence is insufficient. Even though there are clearly some predictable determinants of violence in society, such as widespread poverty; unemployment; income inequality; exposure to abuse in childhood; weak parenting as a result of disintegration of family life (closely linked to migrant labour); access to firearms; widespread alcohol misuse; and weaknesses in the mechanisms of law enforcement (Seedat et al. 2009), it is not enough to simply argue that violence in South Africa is a "reaction to conquest" or an "effect of poverty" (Morrell 1998).

Of course, this is not to say that here, as elsewhere, violence is not also a reaction to prevailing political or economic conditions (see Kaarsholm 2006: 159). Just like the wayward Captain Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's classic *Heart of Darkness*, who speckles his murky jungle abode with severed heads and is only able to make peace with his terror of the Congo by being even *more* terrible himself, any explanation of the South African situation should take cognisance of the 'violence is a logical response to violence' school of thought (structural or otherwise).[18] The only problem with this is that violence in

[18] In the ethnographic/historical record, Michael Taussig has documented the atrocities committed by paranoid Putamayo rubber contractors in Colombia – crucifying many of their human subjects and burning others alive due, in part, to their misplaced beliefs in local cannibalism and their baseline dread of the 'other'; and in the Congo, Adam Hochschild has described the well-known and profoundly inhumane

South Africa is also inextricably linked to the subject of masculinity, and this cannot be ignored.

Carton and Morrell give some insight into this topic during their analysis of traditional Zulu stick fighting, and more pertinently, its function as a form of "peer-based male socialisation" (Carton & Morrell 2012: 31). Elsewhere, Pinnock has considered the attraction of gang life for young boys using a similar theoretical framework (1998). In both cases the authors' argument suggests that the prevalence of violence in contemporary South Africa is a response to wilting masculine traditions. With this said, it follows that any useful engagement with the subject of violence will also usefully engage with the subject of masculinity.

Addressing Question 2

In 2000, the Deputy Minister of Education launched the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM). It was established to counteract the 'moral crisis' baying at the door of post apartheid South Africa. The manifestations of the crisis were understood to be "murder, robbery, violence, abuse, rape, fraud, and drug trafficking" (see Swartz 2009: 22), and based upon its findings, the department of education embarked on a consultative process entitled 'Race and Values in Education' (RVE), which itself led to two reports. One of these was a manifesto listing desirable values, which both included and exceeded constitutional values and was designed to "regenerate the moral fibre of our society" (ibid: 23). These values included nonracism, nonsexism, social justice and equity, equality, *ubuntu*, honesty, integrity, compassion, altruism, justice, kindness and love.

On the one hand, a report such as RVE is a deeply patronizing and paternalistic document. It is full of truisms about what constitutes social virtue and all but ignores the deep ongoing causes the problems that it seeks to cure. Nonetheless, it is true that a society built upon the values that it identifies would be less likely to produce the kind of violence and social ills present in modern day South Africa. The question as far as this

practices of white colonial rulers on the local population, who in order to increase the rubber production of the subalterns, would chop off the hands of local children and murder untold thousands for sport. More up to date examples are to be found in Phillipe Bourgois' sociological investigation of Harlem ghettos (1995); Veena Das' work in India (2000); and closer to home, Pamela Reynolds' study of violent practices used for and against the apartheid state (2013).

thesis is concerned, is whether the presence of community boxing gyms such as *Grassroots* and *Sisonke* does help to inculcate those values and if so, how?

Fighting Fire with Fire, almost

"There are better ways to change adolescent behaviour than demanding compliance and we need to move beyond labelling deviants negatively to an understanding of what it is that captures and holds adolescent attention. This understanding involves an awareness of unmet needs, discouragement, the misery of unimportance and loss of self-esteem and self-control. But it also involves finding ways to mobilise adventurous spirit, satisfy the deep need young people have for ritual, increase their personal social resilience and create meaningful bonds with significant adults. We also have to realise that within the tough delinquent exterior is a need to play - with fire perhaps - but also with the world to see what it will answer" (Don Pinnock 1998)

At the end of the previous chapter I briefly considered the argument that violent crime or gang initiation, and boxing, satisfy, to a certain small degree, similar requirements for young people. Amongst other things, both forms of practice offer the potential of peer respect; a role in society; a sense of social importance; and a sense of actively confronting adversity. At this stage it would be natural to object that not just boxing, but many other types of activity also offer a more socially acceptable (and less illegal) alternative to gangsterism and violent crime on the streets of South African informal settlements. I dedicate the remainder of this chapter to arguing that in fact, community boxing gyms are fairly unique in the assemblage of benefits they offer to young people, as well as in their capacity to divert potentially errant individuals away from a life of drugs, gangsterism and crime.

There was a police van parked outside of a house that Jongi said was known for running drugs (mainly dagga) in the community. Meanwhile a drunkard stumbled up to our car and said a few friendly words to me before accosting a girl with a scarf tied around her head. Jongi told me about a little spaza shop around the corner selling cheap wine to the alcoholics. Then a troop of youngsters appeared, ambling down

the middle of the road. We both watched them for a while. 10-12 years old I guessed, and maybe 10 of them. "Future world champions?" I opined.
"That's when the problems begin," Jongi offered back. "They are just playing now, but when they get older…eish!"
Part of the problem is that these are the school holidays and there is literally nothing for kids this age to do.

In the eyes of Jongi, Bongile and many other coaches with whom I spoke, boxing is a way for young people to keep busy. In fact, it was this reason more than any other that most convinced Jongi about the benefits of boxing gyms for steering youngsters away from crime; boxing simply leaves one too exhausted to think about starting trouble in the neighbourhood. However, it would be wholly inaccurate to think that this is the only benefit. For instance, Jongi (a huge Kaiser Chiefs[19] fan and keen former footballer) compares the benefits of playing soccer (another way of 'keeping busy') very unfavourably to the benefits of boxing. His argument is based upon the fact that boxing is all about clean living and absolute discipline, things which do not apply to soccer in nearly the same way. As Jongi says, eleven boys together is almost a self-made gang - and with the celebratory *braais* (barbeques) and ritual drinking thrown in, it is exceptionally easy to live 'irresponsibly' and still compete in a soccer team each week. Training to be a boxer, by contrast, makes it much harder to compartmentalise one's boxing practice from the rest of one's life.

More than mere sport, boxing is "a 'system of education' (*disciplina*) that endows the boxer's life with moral tenor by the simple fact that it regiments it and submits it to a soldierly discipline exceptional for its extensiveness and austerity" (Wacquant 1995: 514). It is a practice that compels its practitioners to live virtually drink and drug free; to look after their bodies; to eat healthily; to not chase girls; to be upstanding individuals, and to justify the respect from the community that practising their sport earns them (see also Wacquant 1995). I was told by Jongi on more than one occasion, "boxing is not about hitting each other…it is a way of life; if you don't follow the rules, you are in trouble." Possibly the only other sports which require similar levels of overwhelming dedication

[19] A South African soccer team

are the martial arts, but in Khayelitsha the only karate dojo that I ever learnt of had existed in Site C long ago, and was not there anymore.

Incidentally, much of this hypothesizing is corroborated by the work of academics like Wacquant and Trimbur, as well as others working in the field such as Luke Lamprecht,[20] Andiswa Madikane,[21] and Luke Dowdney,[22] all of whom are involved in running non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that emphasise boxing as a way of empowering young people. For instance, Dowdney's international NGO, *Luta Pela Paz*, uses a combination of boxing, martial arts and educational support to counter the omnipresent threat of violence and gangsterism in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and Lamprecht's organization uses a combination of boxing and psychotherapy to rehabilitate young offenders in Johannesburg. Both of these organisations, along with *Boxgirls* and numerous others, operate with a clear mandate to harness the transformative power of the sport and use it to shepherd young people away from the familiar dangers of the street.

Despite the excellent arguments to the contrary, boxing is still often considered a sport for brutes, or even a sport that engenders brutality (see Smillie 2003). It is necessary then, at this point, to irrefutably disabuse the reader of this fallacy, especially where the amateur ranks are concerned. As Wacquant maintains, "to equate pugilism with physical aggression *tout court*... is a distortion bordering on disfigurement in that it arbitrarily reduces a multifaceted bodily occupation to only *one* of its aspects" (Wacquant 1995: 496). Amongst other things, boxing equips its practitioners with an awareness of boundaries, discipline, and ethics and as Draper et al. have shown in the context of troubled youths in Johannesburg, boxing can provide a controlled situation for venting various angers and frustrations in a directed and constructive way (2013). Moreover, by exploiting this energy and directing it into a skilled activity, boxing simultaneously educates its practitioners in a formal pugilistic discipline and improves their physical strength and fitness. As opposed to encouraging aggression, it would seem more accurate to say that boxing actually manages it.

[20] Founder of *Fight with Insight* in Johannesburg.
[21] Former boxing champion and coach at *Boxgirls* in Cape Town.
[22] Founder of *Luta Pela Paz* (Fight for Peace) in Brazil.

Indeed, boxing may even be one of the better ways of discouraging public violence because individuals who box recreationally tend not to go looking for fights in the streets. As Wacquant argues, "there are grounds for arguing that boxing does not fuel but rather depresses the level of interpersonal and public violence by channelling aggressive impulses within an organized, collective framework that rigidly regulates its display and endows it with structure, purpose, and meaning" (Wacquant 1995: 498). Paradoxically, a bigger issue facing boxers is that because of their very trade they are targets for chancers who wish to challenge their physical prowess. Again, Jongi was a rich source of information regarding incidents in which he had been physically assaulted by somebody trying to prove their physical credentials.

There are other elements too, which make membership of a community boxing gym an attractive prospect to those living in Khayelitsha and Imizamo Yethu, and explain why it could help to combat the problem of violence and gangsterism in dangerous parts of the city. In a context in which fatherlessness affects a great many children, boxing is a means by which young people can learn from a stable male role model in a productive environment. Functionally, boxing serves not solely as a means for someone to better him or herself physically and psychologically, but also as a way to ensure that young people have access to mentorship that is often absent in the other arenas of their lives. Last of all, there is this: due to its prevailing public image, boxing, and boxing in particular is a sport that tends to self-select its practitioners for traits that seek comfort in violence. Those that might otherwise feel compelled to express themselves in violence outside of the ring, are lured instead to a sport that seems to put violence front and centre. Until more extensive research is done in this field, this remains as conjecture. However, institutions such as *Luta Pela Paz* and *Fight with Insight* (mentioned above) may well provide qualitative and quantitative proof of this hypothesis in the near future.[23]

[23] It might well be coincidence, but is nonetheless remarkable that Mdantsane, South Africa's boxing mecca is also not plagued by the forms of violence present in other South African informal settlements. In a 2014 Eastern Cape crime survey, Mdantsane featured in the top 10 worst crime hit precincts only 6 times out of 29, and only once did it feature in the top five (for common robbery). (see http://crimestatssa.com/toptenbyprovince.php?ShowProvince=Eastern%20Cape)

A Cautionary Tale

Despite the clear benefits that boxing seems to offer its practitioners, it would be wrong to end this chapter with the naïve sense that any and every endeavour to implement boxing clubs in Khayelitsha and Imizamo Yethu will lead to a reduction in violent crime and increase in youth satisfaction. Development projects in developing countries are seldom straightforward affairs, and development projects involving boxing gyms are no less complex.

Over the past few years the promotion of boxing clubs as social remedying devices has gained a certain amount of traction both locally and around the globe. A few years ago, one of the largest local organisations (which I shall refer to here only as *FC*), approached Jongi to enquire whether he would be interested in putting *Grassroots* under their banner, and offered him a brand new boxing gym in return. Jongi graciously refused the offer, and his reasoning was as follows: that although *FC* ostensibly works to encourage disadvantaged youth to learn and practice boxing, they are also heavily invested in turning their young charges into marketable prospects for the future. The management of the organisation consisted of a boxing promoter, a boxing enthusiast and a boxing coach respectively, all of whom it should be said were essentially good hearted people.

The problem Jongi foresaw, however, was that they were operating as a veritable talent scouting agency - selecting diamonds in the rough for development and future promotion. As for the ones not good enough to make the cut as professionals, it appeared as though they would be forgotten. Indeed, even for the ones good enough to have careers, *FC* offered no training in other areas to ensure that once their millions were spent, they would have some form of future beyond the fighting. This point resonated especially with Jongi because of a story he told me regarding a close friend who had risen high in the ranks of the sport. This friend had made a good salary in the ring, including world title fights. However, after he retired, there was nothing left for him to do. He drank away most of his money and now lives in a shack again, with no more career, no job and no education.

Infinitely more appealing to Jongi was the idea of branching out his own gym to include an educational component. Thus, in 2012, with the help of some generous backing from

his professional clients, he set up the *Grassroots Youth Academy*, which was established to help the children attending the gym with their school studies. Today, the organisation is thriving and continues to offer school tuition not just to the boxers, but to all local schoolchildren who wish to attend. Alas, however, the subject of *Grassroots Youth Academy* is almost large enough to warrant its own entire thesis.

Conclusion

One day Jongi and I were driving to a gym in the CDB where he was working at the time. As we approached the Civic Centre, we were confronted by a huge representation of Mandela by the Cape Town artist Linsey Levendall.[24] Jongi struck up a conversation:

Jongi: "Mandela"
Simon: "Yeah, Mandela"
Jongi: "There's only one Mandela"
Simon: "There sure is. It's a rare a man comes along who can make the whole world feel proud"
Jongi: "Yuss, man!"
Simon: Do you feel especially proud of him being Xhosa?"
Jongi: "Yes I think I do, y'know?"

Once on this theme we talked for a long while in the car after we'd reached the gym. After Mandela, we moved on to talking about South Africa's youth. Jongi explained the importance of initiation and of listening to one's elders; to the lessons one learns as a boy, which keep one on track for the rest of one's life. He explained how a Xhosa person can never be "alone" in the world because they are always invested in each other's welfare. He spoke about how one needs to look after those in one's sphere as if they are oneself: first taking care of one's family, then one's friends, then one's neighbours – and so on, so that to drive a Porsche would represent an absolute failure if those close to you had nothing. "Those words they tell you [during initiation], they stay in you forever," he told me.

I asked Jongi whether, honestly, he thought that this was 'culture' or if this was just him.

[24] At the time of writing this piece is still featured on the side of the civic centre building across approximately 30 giant panes of office glass, peering down onto the westbound cars on Hertzog Boulevard.

Simon: "Do you think you would go around any differently – helping people; giving your time to the community, etcetera, if you were born with a white skin in London?"
Jongi: "You know, I do man. I think I would be different."

By way of illustration, Jongi told me an anecdote about being antagonised by a young aggressor on the bus going home one day. He said, with his skills and strength, his instinct was to explode. But his learning – those "words" – playing over in his mind were what kept him in check. When the young antagonist got off, a man who had been watching on the other side of the bus got up, came over and sat down beside Jongi with his newspaper. Without looking up he simply said, "thank you. Thank you for being calm, and helping us to all be calm." Then he shook Jongi's hand and got off at the next stop. For Jongi it was clear that they were singing from exactly the same cultural script. It was the learning from the bush, which every man must attend, that Jongi felt would keep him and his kinspeople in check.

So I asked the obvious question, if this keeps a Xhosa man in check, and every man must go through it, then what explains his antagonist on the bus? I've never seen Jongi look so rueful, ever, as he looked at me and said, "eish, but that is what we are trying to find out."

This chapter has been a small attempt to understand the antagonist on the bus, but more than that it has attempted to argue that boxing might be one way of mitigating the aggression that he felt. Boxing is not a sport that was born in slums, townships, favelas or ghettos, but it is in those places above others that it has always found a home. At some point, one is compelled to ask why this is, and to investigate the proposition that perhaps boxing gyms in these places are doing more than offering mere recreation. In the face of deep-rooted social violence, boxing speaks directly to the 'crisis of masculinity' in South African informal settlements. Whether it does this by tapping into a sense of male aggression that has traditionally found other forms of release; or by channelling a sense of frustration at systemic inequality and economic emasculation; or by offering a tangible way to realise the dubious neoliberal claim that individual reward follows individual labour, is almost unknowable. What is knowable is that there is great potential for boxing gyms like *Grassroots* and *Sisonke Boxing Club* to steer their members toward more rewarding futures. Therefore, while it may be inaccurate (and even

insulting) to think about marginal boxing gyms as "weapons of the weak" (Scott quoted in Farmer 2004; 307), to think of them as tiny pockets of resistance is not an over exaggeration.

CHAPTER 5: By Way of Conclusion

As I stated in the introduction, this thesis started as an exercise of vulgar Geertzian decoding in a white-collar boxing club. Having gone deeper into the world of community boxing clubs, one might say that the code has merely expanded. For instance, what ought one to make of professional boxing contests held in township schools and military barracks on cheap laminate canvasses? Or of school classrooms used as changing rooms? Or of the seamless juxtaposition of sporting and religious tropes? As elusive as the answers to some of these questions remain, I hope that my thesis has shed light upon others.

I began by describing in detail the typical training regimes of two community boxing gyms. I suggested that contained within these regimes were not just the means for improvement as a boxer, but also the means to cope with the hard realities of life beyond the walls of the gym. I described the acquisition of boxing skills in terms of embodiment and 'boxing habitus,' which I suggested were learnt through the communal training practices at the heart of both gyms.

From there, I considered the place of the boxing gyms in the wider context of the structural violence that surrounds them. In doing this, I contrasted the visible violence inside a boxing ring with the invisible violence outside of it, and suggested that boxing gyms offer a tangible way to confront life's troubles. I also considered the indispensable job of the coach and argued that they have a crucial role in helping their boxers to mediate between the two types of violence.

In the final ethnographic chapter, I argued that boxing may be uniquely placed to control the aggression of frustrated youths living in marginalized communities. Drawing on

psychological studies and the practices of current international boxing organisations, as well as my own research, I claimed that boxing has great potential to channel aggression (particularly male aggression) into a productive pursuit that could benefit individuals as well as their communities.

Broadly, it has been my intention to link the lives of young Capetonian boxers to the bigger picture of South Africa. Using a perspective born from the Global South, I have tried to investigate local boxing gyms, not merely as boxing gyms, but as small sites of resistance on the edges of late capitalist society. "Endurance," to use Povinelli's word (2006), comes in a spectrum of colours, and membership of a community boxing gym, I have attempted to argue, is one of them.

It is doubtful I have said much that is terribly new in the pages of this dissertation, but as an anthropologist I believe that ideas must adapt to contexts (not vice versa!), and as far as I know, boxing has never been studied in such a way in South Africa before. Ultimately, regardless of how much this ethnographic investigation is able to contribute to current critical discourse, I have felt honoured to do the research, to meet the people I have met and to have applied my mind to such a rewarding field of study.

Epilogue

"Jongi, you are one of the least bitter people I know. Please explain."
"Well, my father was a priest and he died when I was a ten year old boy. My mother told me 'things will change now' but you must never find yourself bitter or angry; you must be in peace with your God."

It would almost have been an accomplishment if I had got to the end of this thesis without drawing attention to the fact that South Africa's most famous son was also an avid boxing enthusiast. In fact, I would have no reason to mention it at all, if Jongi, with his almost impossible capacity for generosity and incomprehensible lack of bitterness, did not remind me so much of former South African president, Nelson Rolihlala Mandela.

Mandela, as many people know, was himself a keen boxer and (even long after he stopped boxing), a vocal enthusiast of the sport. It has been said that especially during his incarceration on Robben Island, boxing offered him "a kind of transcendence that enabled [him] to maintain a personality not deranged by oppression" (Campbell 2014: 122). It may simply be coincidence that both Jongi and Mandela are, to my mind, beacons of fortitude and compassion. Nonetheless, the fact that they both boxed was convincing enough for me to ask whether boxing was not, itself, some mysterious virtue-building practice, or at least…it filled me with a tiny hope that it could be.

The author at *Grassroots* – sporting Xayo's armoured vest

Bibliography

Agee, James & Walker Evans (1939) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. First Mariner Books Edition 2001. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Allison, Anne (2012) 'Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21st Century Japan,' in *Anthropological Quarterly* 85(2): 345-370.

Anthropology Southern Africa guidelines for Anthropological Research (2005) *Anthropology Southern Africa* 28(3&4).

Appadurai, Arjun (2004) "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition," in *Culture and Public Action*, edited by V. Roa & M. Walton, 59-84. Delhi: Permanent Black.

Becker, Per & Ann-Sofie Roth (2011) 'Challenges to Disaster Risk Reduction: a Study of Stake-holders' Perspectives in Imizamo Yethu, South Africa,' in *JAMBA: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies* 3(2): 443-452.

Beinart, William (1992) 'Political and Collective Violence in Southern African Histiography,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18(3): 455-486.

Bestall, Clifford (2012) "Witness (Episode 53) – Hillbrow: Between Heaven and Hell." Produced for *Al Jazeera English* [Online Video]. Available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHk7h71hGxw. (Last accessed: 25.03.2013).

Bloch, Maurice (1989) Ritual, History and Power. UK: Athlone Press.

Bond, Patrick (2001) *Against Global Apartheid: South Africa meets the World Bank, IMF and International Finance*. South Africa: UCT Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1996) *On Television*. Translated by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1998). New York: The New Press.

Bourgois, Phillipe (1995) *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. USA: Cambridge University Press.

Broqua, Christophe & Anne Doquet (2013) 'Examining Masculinities in Africa and beyond,' in *Cahiers D'études Africaines* 2013(209-210): 9-41.

Burnett, Cora (2006) 'Building *Ubuntu* through Community Clubs,' in *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance* 12(2): 123-137.

Burnett, Cora (2010) 'Sport-for-Development Approaches in the South African Context: a Case Study Analysis,' in *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation* 32(1): 29-42.

Butler, Judith (2010) *Frames of War* (paperback edition). London: Verso.

Campbell, Kurt (2014) 'To Think as a Boxer: Thoughts on Reading Shadow Boxing,' in *Transition* 116: 120-127.

Carton, Benedict & Robert Morrell (2012) 'Zulu Masculinities, Warrior Culture and Stick Fighting: Reassessing Male Violence and Virtue in South Africa,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38(1): 31-53.

Chomsky, Noam & Edward S. Herman (1988) *Manufacturing Consent*. United States: Pantheon Books.

Coalter, Fred (2007) *A Wider Social Role for Sport*. London: Routledge.

Comaroff, Jean & John (1997) *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. Volume 2. United States: Chicago University Press.

Comaroff, Jean & John (2009) *Ethnicity Inc*. South Africa: UKZN Press.

Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Police Inefficiency and a Breakdown in Relations between SAPS and the Community in Khayelitsha (2014) 'Towards

a Safer Khayelistsha,' accessible at http://www.saflii.org/khayelitshacommissionreport.pdf, last accessed 30th July 2015.
Connell, Raewyn (1995) *Masculinities*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.
Das, Veena (2000) *Violence and Subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Davis, Mike (1990) *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*. London: Verso.
Davis, Rebecca (13th February 2015) 'SONA: Shame of the Nation 2015,' article published on *The Daily Maverick* available at http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-02-13-sona-shame-of-the-nation-2015/#.VbqAHmSqqko (last accessed 30th July 2015).
Draper, Catherine E., Sheri Errington, Shaheda Omar, and Stanley Makhita (2013) 'The therapeutic benefits of Sport in the Rehabilitation of young sexual Offenders: a qualitative evaluation of the Fight with Insight programme,' in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 14: 519-530.
Evans, Gavin (2002) *Dancing Shoes is Dead*. London: Doubleday.
Farmer, Paul (2002) "On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below," in *The Anthropology of Politics* (Joan Vincent ed.): 424-438. USA: Blackwell.
Farmer, Paul (2004) 'An Anthropology of Structural Violence,' in *Current Anthropology* 45(3): 305-325.
Femia, Joseph (1981) *Gramsci's Political Thought: hegemony, consciousness, and the revolutionary process*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Foucault, Michel. (1978) 'Right of Death and Power over Life,' in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
Galtung, Johan (1969) 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research,' in *Journal of Peace Research* 6(3): 167-191.
Galtung, Johan (1990) 'Cultural Violence,' in *Journal of Peace Research* 27(3): 291-305.
Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books Inc.
Greyvenstein, Chris (1981) *The Fighters*. Cape Town: Don Nelson.
Groes-Green, C. (2009) 'Hegemonic and Subordinated Masculinities: Class, Violence and Sexual Performance among Young Mozambican Men,' in *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 18: 286-304.
Gutmann, Mathew C. (1997) 'Trafficking in Men: the Anthropology of Masculinity,' in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26: 386-409.
Harvey, David (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. USA: Oxford University Press.
Helman, Cecil (2014) *An Amazing Murmur of the Heart*. London: Hammersmith Health Books.
Hollander, Theo (2014) 'Men, Masculinities, and the Demise of a State: Examining Masculinities in the Context of Economic, Political, and Social Crisis in a Small Town in the Democratic Republic of Congo,' in *Men and Masculinities* 17(4): 417-439.
Kamaldien, Yazeed (2012) 'Fighting Spirit: Khayelitsha's Million Dollar Baby throws Punches, changes Lives,' in *The Big Issu*e (SA Edition, #203).
Levine, Susan (2014) *Children of a Bitter Harvest*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
MacDonald, David and Smith, L. (2004) 'Privatising Cape Town: From Apartheid to Neo-Liberalism in the Mother City,' in *Urban Studies* 41(8): 1461-1484.
Mafeje, Archie (1976) 'The Problem of Anthropology in Historical Perspective: An Inquiry into the Growth of the Social Sciences,' in *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 10(2): 307-333.

Mager, Anne (1998) 'Youth Organisations and the Construction of Masculine Identities in the Ciskei and Transkei, 1945-1960,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24(4): 653-667.
Magubane, Bernard (1973) 'The 'Xhosa' in Town revisited, Urban Social Anthropology: A Failure of Method and Theory,' in *American Anthropologist* 75(5): 1701-1715.
Mauss, Marcel (1934) 'Techniques of the Body,' in *Economy and Society* 2(1).
Mbembe, Achille. (1992) Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,' in *Journal of the International African Institute* 62(1): 3-37.
Mbembe, Achille. (2003) 'Necropolitics,' in *Public Culture* 15(1): 11-40.
Morrell, Robert (1998) 'Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24(4): 605-630.
Neilson, Brett and Rossiter, N. (2008) 'Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception,' in *Theory Culture Society* 25(7-8): 51-72.
Oates, Joyce Carol (1987) *On Boxing*. 1994 edition. New Jersey: The Ecco Press.
Perlman, Janice (1976) *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro*. USA: University of California Press.
Pieterse, Edgar (2008) *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development*. South Africa: UCT Press.
Pinnock, Don. (1998) Gangs, Rituals and Rites of Passage. South Africa: UCT Press.
Pinnock, Don & Sefali, Pharrie (2014) 'Young, High and Dangerous: Youth Gangs and Violence in Khayelitsha,' on *Groundup.org.za* (last accessed 25th July 2015)
Povinelli, Elizabeth (2011) 'Road Kill,' in *Economies of Abandonment*: 101-131. Durham: Duke University Press.
Pype, Katrien. (2007) 'Fighting Boys, Strong Men and Gorillas: Notes on the Imagination of Masculinities in Kinshasa,' in *Africa* 77(2): 250-271.
Reynolds, Pamela (2013) *War in Worcester: Youth and the Apartheid State*. USA: Fordham University Press.
Robins, Steven (2002) 'At the Limits of Spatial Governmentality: a Message from the Tip of Africa,' in *Third World Quarterly* 23(4): 665-689.
Ross, Fiona (2010) *Raw Life, New Hope: Decency, Housing and Everyday Life in a Post-apartheid Community*. Cape Town: UCT Press.
Samara, Tony Roshan (2011): *Cape Town After Apartheid: Crime and Governance in the Divided City*. London/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Samuel, Raphael (1992) 'Reading the Signs,' in *History Workshop Journal* 32(1): 88-109.
Seedat, Mohamed, Van Niekerk, A., Jewkes, R., Suffla, S., Ratele, K. (2009) 'Violence and Injuries in South Africa: Prioritising and Agenda for Prevention,' in *The Lancet*: Health in South Africa Series (paper 5 of 6).
Sender, Simon (2015) 'Church of Boxing,' in *Anthropology Southern Africa* 38(1-2): 134-144.
Smillie, Malcolm (2003) 'There is no Sport like Boxing,' in the *BCMJ* 45(9): 473-474.
Smith, Karl (2012) 'From Dividual and Individual Selves to Porous Subjects,' in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 23: 50-64.
Standing, Guy (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
Stokke, Kristian and Oldfield, S. (2004) 'Social Movements, Socio-economic Rights and Substantial Democratisation in South Africa,' in *Politicising Democracy: the New Local Politics of Democratisation* (Harriss, Stokke and Tornquist eds.) England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Strathern, Marylin (1988) *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.
Swartz, Sharlene (2009) *iKasi: The Moral Ecology of South Africa's Township Youth*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
Trimbur, Lucia (2011) "Tough Love': Meditation and Articulation in the Urban Boxing Gym,' in *Ethnography* 12(3): 334-355.
Trimbur, Lucia (2013) *Come out Swinging: the Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym*. USA: Princeton University Press.
Turok, Ivan (2001) Persistent Polarisation Post-Apartheid? Progress towards Urban Integration in Cape Town,' in *Urban Studies* 38(13): 2349-2377.
Turner, Victor (1967) *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. USA: Cornell University Press.
United Nations (2003). *Sport for Development and Peace: towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Report from the United Nations inter-agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace*. New York: United Nations.
Van der Schijff, Johann (2012/2013). *Community Punching Bags*. See http://www.johannvds.com/ (last accessed 24th July 2015).
Wacquant, Loïc (1995) 'The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade, in *Theory and Society* 24(4): 489-535.
Wacquant, Loïc (1998) 'A Flesh Peddler at work: Power, Pain, and Profit in the Prizefighting Economy,' in *Theory & Society* 27(1): 1-42.
Wacquant, Loïc (2001) 'Whores, Slaves and Stallions: Languages of Exploitation and Accommodation among Boxers,' in *Body & Society* 7(2-3): 181-194.
Wacquant, Loïc (2002) 'Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography,' in *American Journal of Sociology* (107)(6): 1468-1532.
Wacquant, Loïc (2004) *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Wacquant, Loïc (2005) 'Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership,' in *Qualitative Sociology* 28(4): 445-474.
Wacquant, Loïc (2008) *Urban Outcasts: a Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Wacquant, Loïc (2009) 'The Body, the Ghetto and the Penal State,' in *Qualitative Sociology* 32: 101-129.
Wallerstein, Immanuel (1983) *Historical Capitalism*. London: Verso.
Ward, C.L., Martin, E., Theron, C., and Distiller, G.B. (2007) 'Factors affecting Resilience in Children exposed to Violence,' in *South African Journal of Psychology* 37(1): 165 –187.
Weekend Argus (July 11th 2015) 'Crime Wave Hits Hout Bay,' by Caryn Dolley. Pages 1-2.
Weierstall, R., Hinsberger, M., Kaminer, D., Holtzhausen, L., Madikane, S., & Elbert, T. (2013) 'Appetitive Aggression and Adaptation to a Violent Environment Among Youth Offenders,' in *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*. Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1037/a0032489.
Žižek, Slavoj (2008) *Violence: six sideways reflections*. New York: Picador.

Online Resources

2011 National Census available at:
http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03014/P030142011.pdf (last accessed 6th

February 2015) and
https://www.capetown.gov.za/en/stats/2011CensusSuburbs/2011_Census_CT_Suburb_Khayelitsha_Profile.pdf

Information concerning youth education on Khayelitsha available at
http://ikamvayouth.org/about/why-we-exist (last accessed 26th July 2015)

University of Cape Town's Codes of Conduct available at
http://www.uct.ac.za/downloads/uct.ac.za/about/policies/humanresearch_ethics_policy.pdf (last accessed May 2015).

Transformation Research Project by the University of Stellenbosch & Transformation Africa available at
http://stbweb02.stb.sun.ac.za/urdr/downloads/Mitchellsplain.pdf (last accessed 26th July 2015)

Data detailing the expenditure of the city in 2015 available at:
http://capetownbudgetproject.org.za/

Fight For Peace: http://fightforpeace.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AR_2014_JUNE1_RED1.pdf (last accessed 26th July 2015)

Fight with Insight: http://ttbc.flickerconsulting.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Fight-with-Insight-executive-summary.pdf (last accessed 26th July 2015)