Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership

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This article responds to the special issue of Qualitative Sociology devoted to the author’s book, Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer (vol. 28, no. 2, summer 2005). Four themes are tackled: the positioning of the inquirer and the question of social acceptance and membership; the dynamics of embodiment(s) and the variable role of race as a structural, interactional, and dispositional property; the functioning of the boxing gym as miniature civilizing and masculinizing machine; apprenticeship as a mode of knowledge transmission and technique for social inquiry, the scope of carnal sociology, and the textual work needed to convey the full-color texture and allure of the social world. This leads to clarifying the conceptual, empirical, and rhetorical makeup of Body and Soul in relation to its triple intent: to elucidate the workings of a sociocultural competency residing in prediscursive capacities; to deploy and develop the concept of habitus as operant philosophy of action and methodological guide; and to offer a brief for a sociology not of the body (as social product) but from the body (as social spring and vector of knowledge), exemplifying a way of doing and writing ethnography that takes full epistemic advantage of the visceral nature of social life.

KEY WORDS: boxing; embodiment; habitus; membership; apprenticeship; black American ghetto; viscerality; writing; reflexivity; autoethnography; carnal sociology.

I am grateful to the contributors to the special issue of Qualitative Sociology devoted to Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer (vol. 28, no. 2, summer 2005) for the seriousness and sincerity which they have engaged my book, and for the varied and vigorous reactions, criticisms, and queries contained in their papers. I shall aim to respond in the same spirit, by explicating my purposes, spelling out and defending my claims when needed, and pointing to some

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1Response to the special issue of Qualitative Sociology on Body and Soul, vol. 28, no. 2, Summer 2005.
implications of my incarnate approach to and analysis of pugilism as skilled action. For the sake of clarity, I shall regroup their comments in four thematic clusters and tackle each in seriatim: the positioning of the inquirer and the question of social acceptance and membership, indicating how friendship can be an invaluable resource for fieldwork; the dynamics of embodiment(s) and the variable role of race as a structural, interactional, and dispositional property; the functioning of the boxing gym as miniature civilizing and masculinizing machine and the conundrum of the “missing women”; and, finally, apprenticeship as a mode of knowledge transmission and technique for social inquiry, the scope of carnal sociology, and the textual work needed to convey the full-color texture and allure of the social world.

I hope that these responses and elaborations clarify the conceptual, empirical, and rhetorical makeup of Body and Soul (Wacquant 2000/2004, hereafter B&S) in relation to its triple intent: (i) to vivissect the manufacturing of prizefighters in an effort to elucidate the workings of a bodily craft, that is, a sociocultural competency residing in prediscursive capacities that illumines the embodied foundations of all practice; (ii) to deploy and develop the concept of habitus by tracing its layering and fleshing out the imbrication of its sensual, moral, and aesthetic facets; and (iii) to offer a brief for a sociology not of the body (as intelligible social product) but from the body (as intelligent social spring and vector of knowledge), exemplifying a distinctive manner of doing and writing ethnography that recognizes and takes full epistemic advantage of the visceral nature of social life.

POSITIONING “BUSY” LOUIE

All the contributors remark on the peculiar position and relations I developed as a French novice learning to box in a predominantly black gym located in Chicago’s ghetto. Stoller and Zussman question my claim that my “French nationality provided [me] with a special entry into the social niches of African America” (Stoller 2005, p. 198); both recount personal anecdotes implying that such a notion is deceiving if not deceitful (Zussman [2005, pp. 201, 206] seems to think it is a distinctively French fantasy). This is ultimately an empirical matter; and, in the case at hand, my nationality was clearly a facilitating feature, and on both sides of the investigative equation.

It saved my limbs if not my life one muggy afternoon of August 1988, in my third week of training, when a burly young man stopped me as I was coming out of the back of the gym and inquired aggressively about my reasons for being there. An enigmatic and tense interrogation ensued, centering on what a student from the nearby university like me knew “about us black people,” during which his four friends initially sitting on a bench were ambling closer towards me, causing me to worry whether I should try to dash for my car parked on the street or sprint straight to my apartment building three blocks away before their bellicose intentions erupted into physical onslaught. But the threat of imminent