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Authors

Early, Gerald
Solomon, Eric
Wacquant, Loic

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THE CHARISMA OF SPORT AND RACE

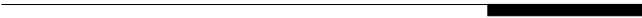
GERALD EARLY

ERIC SOLOMON

LOÏC WACQUANT



The Charisma of
Sport
and Race



THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, discussion groups, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

THE CHARISMA OF SPORT AND RACE contains the text of a panel discussion held in March of 1996 under the sponsorship of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities. In this edition, Professor of English and African-American Studies Gerald Early, English Professor Eric Solomon, and Sociology Professor Loïc Wacquant present arguments for the serious study of sport in the academy. The panel was occasioned by Professor Early's tenure on the Berkeley campus as Avenali Professor in the Humanities for Spring, 1996.

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Editor: Christina M. Gillis

Assistant Editor & Design : Jeffrey S. Akeley

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Contents

Gerald Early
Baseball, Boxing, and the Charisma of Sport and Race
1

Eric Solomon
Jews and Baseball: A Cultural Love Story
13

Loic Wacquant
From Charisma to Persona: On Boxing and Social Being
23

Open Discussion
35

The Charisma of Sport and Race

The importance of both charisma and performance in the analysis of sport figure prominently in Occasional Paper No. 8, the collected presentations from the Townsend Center's program "Baseball, Boxing and the Charisma of Sport and Race."

Professor Loïc Wacquant, from Berkeley's Department of Sociology, argues that the "universe of sport is not the world of charisma but the world of *persona*"; athletes (boxers specifically) are, in Wacquant's view, "performers who wear masks." For Gerald Early, Professor of English and African-American Studies at Washington University, and visiting Avenali Professor in the Humanities at the Townsend Center in March and April 1996, sport offers the scholar grounds on which to examine race, masculinity, and even more broadly, the "symbols and metaphors of our society." Sport, he suggests, "is how human beings perform the art and craft of competition"; it is about merit, justice, desire and will. This is perhaps why sport, in this case baseball, is Eric Solomon's subject in "Jews and Baseball: A Cultural Love Story"; why he argues that the lore and the "deep mythology" of the game has played such an important part in the lives of Jewish immigrants, inspiring not only players, but writers and artists as well.

What emerges perhaps most strongly from these papers is the argument posited by Gerald Early: that the study of sport is important and should be taken seriously. Sport, he says, is an "extraordinary cultural political and social phenomenon of post-industrial, late capitalist, American life." The Townsend Center was pleased to welcome Gerald Early to Berkeley as Avenali Professor and was especially gratified to have had the opportunity to explore with him, and with Professors Wacquant and Solomon, the important contributions that the study of sport offers to the scholarship of cultural analysis.

Christina M. Gillis
Associate Director
Townsend Center

**The Charisma
of
Sport and Race**

Baseball, Boxing, and the Charisma of Sport and Race

GERALD EARLY

I have to preface my remarks by saying I am not an historian, nor am I a sociologist. I need to say that right now for fear that, to paraphrase Mark Twain at the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn*, you may be thinking I'm trying to talk like one of these people and not succeeding.

I do not have a formal paper to present. Instead, I have some observations concerning sport and its importance in cultural studies. These comments are deeply influenced by my having written about baseball and about boxing, as well as by my having participated in three sports documentaries. One was Ken Burns' *Baseball*; another was an HBO documentary on the prize fighter Sonny Liston. HBO also did a documentary on the history of the African-American athlete. I participated in that, as well.

I'd like to begin with a story that foregrounds the difficult position sport occupies in academic circles. We have, at our school, a group of African-American graduate students called "Chancellor's Fellows." Two or three years ago, the group decided that the fellows should put on a conference every year with a selected theme. As their coordinator, part of my responsibility has been to facilitate their coming up with a theme for the conference, so I sent them, as has been my wont, about twelve or thirteen suggestions.

In order for you to fully understand the background of this story, I must describe the situation in some detail. There were seven men and four women at the meeting to vote on the choice of a conference theme. One theme I had suggested was the

African-American and sport. The men said this was what they wanted to do, but the women did not want to do this at all, were totally unsympathetic to it, were not interested in sport.

The women saw three reasons for not pursuing this theme. First, they thought sport was a trivial subject and not worthy of scholarly attention. Many dismissed sport as a passive amusement or entertainment, which precluded its having any intellectual content. In fact, one woman was outraged about the suggestion. Why would a group of dedicated scholars pursue a topic without any content; in effect, a topic without any meaning? Secondly, the women felt that studying sport was playing into racial stereotypes by focusing on African-Americans and our continuing involvement in popular culture—everybody knows that blacks can sing, dance, and play ball. We had long and heated discussions on the appropriateness of this subject. I felt this response reflected an unwarranted racial sensitivity. Athletes and entertainers, regardless of their race, tend to be overvalued figures in our society. Moreover, it is not unusual in the United States for some oppressed ethnic groups to be over-represented in these fields—Irish and Jews for example. There were, in my view, questions to be explored here, not group shame to be concealed. Third, the women felt that the subject had been discussed enough already. There seemed to be no end of talk in the popular press about race and sports. Mike Tyson, Michael Jordan, Marge Schott, *Hoop Dreams*—wasn't this topic being thoroughly aired? One of the men thought this all the more reason to hold the conference in order to ask simple, but potentially far-reaching questions: How is the topic being covered? Why is it so important? Why does a topic that seems so devoid of intellectual content possess such political significance?

In the end, the group was divided on gender lines. The seven men voted to have the conference on sport. The four women did not. The vote was final, and we began organizing a conference on sport. When we talked about having a keynote speaker, the men suggested inviting, partly as an attempt to accommodate the women, I am sure, someone like Anita de France, who won an Olympic medal in rowing and who is also a noted lawyer. They also suggested Robin Roberts, who is a women's basketball star, now a sportscaster, or somebody like Jackie Joyner Kersee. It didn't matter. It had no appeal, even if a woman was to be the keynote speaker. The women just didn't like this subject at all.

With this controversy in mind, I'd like to make a few comments about sport itself, the study of sport, and why I think the study of sport is important. Consider this a primer's preface on why anyone should take sport seriously. As I told the dissenting students, sport is not trivial. Some may think it is trivial because it is written about so much and because a section of the daily newspaper is devoted to analyzing excessively and sometimes pointlessly the performance of sport. Because there's so much useless stuff said about sport, some think that it really is trivial. But it is an error to assume that a subject is trivial for the simple fact that so much that is trivial is said and written about it. A good deal of what is presented for daily consumption about sport is generated by shills and fans, not by people who are standing back and simply thinking about sport as an extraordinary cultural, political and social phenomenon of post-industrial, late capitalist, American life.

Sport may be a passive amusement, but it certainly is something a great deal more than that. It is a very highly developed, commercial business. It is a very highly developed institution in this country. Insofar as racial stereotypes are concerned, sport problematizes and reveals the form of American racial stereotypes in very interesting ways—I will talk about that a little bit as I go along. So I'd like to engage the subject through explaining to you why I write sport essays and why I deal with this subject as much as I do.

There are three basic reasons why I write about sport. First, I am interested in an exploration of race, and I think that sport is an excellent area to conduct such an exploration. In the realm of athletics we are considering a very small group of people who are rigorously trained, highly disciplined—most of them are men, but not exclusively so—who influenced American society and American culture, and who became heroic and highly idealized figures through the dramatic impact of their ability to perform under pressure. Some of the most significant blacks in the history of this society have been people—mostly men—who have done this. There is the complex business of what aspiration and ambition mean for a group of black people, particularly men, to be found here. Aspiration and ambition are not things which normally are associated with black people, which makes the field of sport all the more vital, because it makes this connection between a pariah group and highly-focused determination so explicit. Simply put, I can look at who these people are, what they

did, why they did it, what their accomplishments mean, and why those accomplishments mean what they mean.

This last consideration is not least. Sport, as highly symbolic as dance, the thorough virtuosic display of play as creative endeavor, to me is about meaning, and the meaning of meaning properly understood. I'm interested in how that meaning structures itself and unfolds itself for the individuals involved as well as for the culture where those people live. Why do these accomplishments have the meaning that they have? What preoccupations are common to people who are inspired to achieve this level of excellence? One important thing about writing about sport is that you are thinking about people who, when they've achieved a certain level, become paragons of excellence at what they do. What is the function of ritualized excellence in any culture? Furthermore, by looking at race, I can examine how race affects the meaning of what athletes do and have done in this society. In that regard, I find studying sport—studying race through sport—to be just a wonderfully rich arena in many important ways.

Second, I wish to examine masculinity. Sport is intriguing because it is, on the one hand, very gendered, and in others, a force against the barriers of gender. Sport supports and subverts the taboo of gender. So studying sport gives me an opportunity to look at the shape of the meaning of gender: Why is sport so dominated by men? Why does it seem specifically a province of "male" virtues? How does sport instruct our society in how to see men and maleness? There are, of course, women who compete in sport just as intensely as the men do. Having success in sport means as much to them as it does to men. There doesn't seem to be any difference in how women are instructed in sport or how they see the value and meaning in sport. Top-flight women athletes do not differ from men in a sport when it comes to questions of what they want to achieve. As I said earlier, sport is very gendered in one respect, but in another respect, gender does not effect a different relationship to sport or competition, unless you intend to say that the women who go into sport become, in essence, camouflaged men because they're adopting values that we unthinkingly associate with men. Does this mean that those Hemingway-esque preoccupations with moments of truth, stoic valor, and the like are trans-gender values? Those questions, I think, are worth exploring.

The third reason for my interest in writing sports essays is an exploration of an important set of symbols and metaphors for our society. Sport is not about play. Play is one thing; sport is something else. Sport is about a level of performance, deeply and self-consciously artistic performance, within the context of competition. Play is something else, a release from the concerns of sport, a release from the world of work. Sport is the rarefied, utter condensation and compression of the ultimate pressures and glory of work. So it is useful to distinguish sport from play. No matter how much people say Michael Jordan is “playing” basketball, Michael Jordan is performing a certain art form. That is what Michael Jordan is doing—in the context of sport—which gives his performance “meaning” for its audience. Part of understanding that context is understanding competition.

What is sport? Sport is how human beings perform the art and craft of competition. There are two very important components in sport. One is artistic expression; the other is competition. The aesthetic of sport is built on competition—it is built on winning and losing.

The contrivance of anxiety, ritual, drama and romance as institutionalized expressions of spectacle that surround the acts of winning and losing make sport different from art. Trying to understand what sport is about is trying to understand what winning and losing are all about.

Sport is about meritocracy. People are attracted to sport often because it is pure meritocracy. You have to be excellent at sport, and that excellence supposedly transcends any social construction except the social construction of “athlete” which, ideally, is just reified merit, actualized desire and ambition, or apolitical excellence. Of course, sport has practiced race and gender exclusion, but in the rational liberalism that sport represents, this exclusion has been seen as a form of corruption of sport’s “truth.” Sport is also about justice. It is about desire. It is about the will. The cultural structuring of these four ideas—Merit, Justice, Desire, Will—is, I think, the essence of sport. Sport is not value-neutral. Indeed, the intensely pedagogical nature of sport, the absorbing mythologized stature of the coach and the pupil, or the fact that sport is so very much intertwined institutionally with our nation’s colleges and universities, with education itself, and that we have so mythologized the pedagogical aspect of sport is to me proof, in and of itself, that it is meant to transmit

values, and, therefore, *cannot* be value-neutral. The precise nature of those values surrounding Merit, Justice, Desire, and Will is complex. I think it is clear, however, that the values attached to sport, despite being the creation of the nation-state, transcend the limitations of the nation-state idea. Moreover, the values of sport are not inimical to any existing political system of any so-called nation-state. This is what gives sport and athletes their power as charismatic phenomena.

Despite our mythologizing of the pedagogy of sport, the absolute acquisition of the skill or skills to perform a sport is not seen as the purpose of training in sport. Those skills must be made manifest in a performance, a ritualization of winning and losing that refers not just to the playing field, but to the society and culture, to the day-to-day life of sport's audience, where winning and losing, too, has highly specified, even explosive meanings. Sport has meaning in part through its exploitation of the symbolic and imaginative preoccupations associated with both war and injustice, which is why sport is so much a metaphor about war.

The two sports I study most, baseball and boxing, are clearly metaphors about war in many respects, but very different kinds of metaphors about war. If you read any history of professional baseball, it will talk about baseball, as that sport developed, as having gone through a series of organizational crises often referred to as wars. All these wars took place before professional baseball finally emerged as the highly structured, extremely hierarchical institution we understand it to be today. Also, on the field, the content of the sport, as A.G. Spaulding said, is supposed to be war. Ty Cobb said it is war. What happens out there on the field is a spectacle of war, and that war is also about injustice, a dialogue between justice and injustice.

The issue of justice is engaged because sport is about overcoming barriers, oppositions, enemies, rivals, opponents and the like. It is not surprising, therefore, that sport is so persistently seen as a metaphor for human endeavors against adversity, and I think that this particular meaning for sport resonates with black people in some way. Black people have always had, I think, traditionally, a very ambivalent feeling about sport. In Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* and in other early writings about plantation life, sport is bad because white people contrived these competitions to degrade black people, to have black people, in their shame, entertain whites, and to no particular end other than drawing them away from being industrious people.

On the other hand, because sport is such a metaphor for overcoming adversity, I believe that it also resonates with the black imagination in another way, which is why certain kinds of black sports heroes have a tremendous impact on African-American life. Their achievements give a physical, observable example of overcoming adversity. It is a palpable victory for people who need as many examples of such achievement as they can. But what gives sport its power as a show about justice is that, as a ritual, as a theater, it does not eliminate either chance or caprice from its design. This is why the public sees athletes as heroic.

Sport has a universal, transnational appeal despite the specific economic, cultural, and political contexts in which any given sport was created. To be sure, the two sports I am most concerned with, professional baseball and professional boxing, as we understand those two sports today, were shaped in post-Civil War America. There was a form of boxing that existed before gloved boxing came along: bare-knuckle fighting. The kind of fighting that you see today, however, dates from post-Civil War America. The origins of most professional sports in post-Civil War America suggest the values of a monopolistic, *laissez-faire* capitalism. One boxing manager described boxing as capitalism gone crazy. There's an intense individualism in boxing that probably makes that statement true. On the other hand, the intense monopolistic, league-like structure of baseball reflects another aspect of capitalism, the emphasis on teamwork and the near obsession with organization statistics. So, both sports represent different aspects of capitalism and how it works.

They also represent other aspects of their time—Social Darwinism, the ideology of an industrial, urban America where strength and power, dominance and order are everything. One sport, baseball, developed without being ruled by a clock. The other, boxing, is relentlessly governed by a clock. Each symbolizes two different visions of how work can be compelled and its achievements granted meaning. Both appear to be products of their time by claiming to be both art and science, being rational constructions. Both convey capitalistic cultural values of aggression, industry, endurance, and monomaniacal intensity on the achievement of a specific goal. Some might argue that these goals, that these aims that I've just described here are American, that someone like Ahab in *Moby Dick* exhibited all of these things. As a student in my class once said, when I was teaching *Moby Dick*, "You know, this could be the story of Vince Lombardi." And he was right.

It is possible to argue that these qualities are related to the American frontier because they are qualities that a frontier nation or settler nation might particularly value and might particularly want to have dramatized as part of its cultural memory. I do not think these qualities and values are merely American or even exclusively Western, although professional sports and amateur sports, as we understand them today, are largely the creation of the West. I, once again, wish to emphasize the transnational impact of sport.

Sports are popular in capitalist and communist countries and dictatorships and democracies. In some way, sport is both democracy and its opposite, liberalism and its opposite. In *Moby Dick*, of course, Ahab and the ship represent, as Melville said, pluralistic democracy, but also a hierarchy that Ishmael at times called a kind of slavery. And a lot of the language of slavery—of ownership and property—are associated with both boxing and with baseball specifically, and with sport, generally.

When we consider all these aspects of sport, the performance of sport must say something important and apparently universal about human aspiration, which is why we must need it.

I'd like to sum up my comments by saying that there are three things that I look at in trying to examine sport, and they are, first, the actual content of the performance of a particular sport—its aesthetic, and the general psychology and sociology of its performers, and of its audience.

One question that's interested me for a very long time is how a sport consumes its history. Every sport has a history, and there are different ways that both athletes and audiences use a sport's history. This should not lead us to assume that the practitioners of the sport, the athletes, know its history. In some ways, it is not necessary for the athlete to have such knowledge as his or her presence is meant to embody history and tradition. The athlete does not know history; he or she constructs or extends a history for which the fan provides the knowledge and the sports writer the narrative.

I am also interested in the structure of the sport as a commercial and bureaucratic enterprise, its governance—from major league baseball to the NCAA—its lines of authority, its rules of behavior, its codes of conduct, its financing, so forth. Third,

I am drawn to the life of some particular athlete who stands out as someone who shaped his or her sport and his or her culture, and how a particular sport itself has, throughout its history, shaped and been shaped by its culture. So those are essentially the three issues that have attracted me in specifically looking at sport and how sport functions.

Jews and Baseball: A Cultural Love Story

ERIC SOLOMON

I will be the second speaker instead of Loïc Wacquant; we change the rules as we go along here at this game. It is a game, of course, that we're playing. We now are competing in some odd way. I've always loved the arrival of the person who comes in with a tremendous document and says, "I'm only going to read part of this," you know? [laughter] And then he keeps throwing away all of the good stuff. This is a high moment of competition to me. Also, I want to reassure you, what I will be talking about today is OK because Herb Caen does it every year. He talked about a Jewish baseball player himself three days ago, and that's comfortable.

Now, what I've been up to for more years than I or the publisher who gave me a contract like to believe, is working on a book which is about baseball. The working title is "Jews, Baseball, and the American Novel." I got interested in this subject not just because I like baseball, but because all books are and all criticism is largely autobiographical. I did teach a course with a former Kansas City center who is now getting a Ph.D. at Stanford. We taught a course in sports literature, and he said, "You do baseball. I'll do all the others." Well, he was seven feet tall, so that seemed like a suitable arrangement. As I started looking at baseball fiction, I was astonished that after Ring Lardner and with a few later exceptions, the vast majority of the great or interesting, to me at least, works on baseball are novels by Jews, from Bernard Malamud on through to more contemporary writers. I could give you a list of hundreds—well, sixty-eight—baseball novels that were written by Jewish authors. I got very involved in that and wanted to figure out why. I'm still figuring.

I have written a little something I call “Jews and Baseball: A Cultural Love Story,” from which “I’ll only read a small part.” In many ways, I pursue an argument that is very similar to Gerald Early’s. It is a little different, however, because it is about literature. It is also about how immigrant groups, this particular group being Jewish immigrants in America, took to baseball and what they made out of it in their literature and in their lives. Zelig, if you remember Woody Allen’s meditation on reality, says, “I love baseball. You know, it doesn’t have to mean anything. It is just beautiful to watch.”

I asked the question, “Why Jews and baseball?” Why do I try to connect a wave of immigrant tailors and Talmud scholars and their descendants to a game that was played at that time—from the turn of the century through the 1930s—mostly by American farm boys who were classified by their greatest bard, Ring Lardner, as barely literate. The answer doesn’t necessarily lie in the fact that there have always been a number of Jewish-American major league ball players. Now, the first (I tell people this because they get angry). . .the first major league professional ball player was Jewish. His name was Lipman Pike, believe it or not. The first. And there was an absolutely wonderful pitcher, Erskine Meyer, who was known as a Yiddisheh Curver. But mostly we think of Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax. Greenberg, interestingly, at the end of his life, said he started out wanting to be a great ball player and ended finding himself wanting to be remembered more as a great Jewish ball player.

I do have the numbers here. There has been some argument about the accuracy of the numbers, but there have been about 110 Jewish Major League ball players from 1871, when it started, to 1980, and there were approximately ten thousand players in all. That’s 110 out of ten thousand. It is a bit like Senator Luger’s axiom—the figures are small, but they’re not zero. If you really demand it afterwards, I’ll give you a Jewish All-star team, but not now.

Gathering precise numbers is difficult because some players deliberately hid their Jewish identity for various reasons. One player I’ve had a lot of trouble with was a great catcher for the Chicago Cubs in the ’20s named Johnny Kling. Some baseball historians said he was Jewish. Others said he was not Jewish, and they won. It was agreed that he was not Jewish because some former clubhouse boy for the Giants,

Harry Golden, who wrote a lot of books about Jews, said he had heard Kling say he wasn't Jewish, and that was assumed to be enough. But because I am a scholar, and I have a Ph.D., I went to the Hall of Fame baseball library. There, it turns out, before the days of closed files, they asked everybody who played major-league ball to file a form. I looked up Johnny Kling. Sure enough! They'd asked for his ethnicity, and he said. . .Lithuanian. "Aha!" said I. "Litvak? Hmmm." There was more in the file. I discovered that both his daughters had married Jewish men, and that he had been buried in a Jewish cemetery. So I said to myself, "A hundred and eleven."

The figure seemed low, actually, for the '20s and the '30s. The publisher of *Baseball Magazine* in 1926 asked, "Why not more Jewish ball players. . . in a game as cosmopolitan as baseball?" And he quotes the pitcher, Ed Reulbach (Yes, he was Jewish), arguing that managers should seek—I hate this—"some hook-nosed youngster who could bat and field to supply a proper hero for Jewish fans." Thinking about where the Giants were located, John McGraw was always seeking a Jewish Babe Ruth. The closest he came, however, was Moses Solomon, who was known in the minors as the Rabbi of Swath, where he hit seventy-two home runs. He lasted three games in the major leagues, however, and said, "Oh, hell, I'll play football." But McGraw did get Andy Cohen. In *The American Hebrew* in 1926, an editorial about Andy said,

If Cohen comes through as his manager expects him to, he will rival Babe Ruth as a drawing attraction and stimulate the interest of the Jews of America in our great national pastime. Baseball is the great American sport, and as the Jew is thoroughly Americanized, there is no reason why his name should not be prominently found on the baseball roll of honor.

Well, there was a reason. He couldn't go to his left, Andy Cohen.

I'll give you one more interesting fact, this one dealing with the names of some notable Jewish ball players. There were six other ball players named Cohen in the major leagues, but only one other, Andy's younger brother, played under his own name. They usually changed Cohen to Cooney, which is interesting. Interestingly enough they frequently changed their names not to protect themselves from anti-Semitism, but, and this is really what I am trying to work with, because their parents

couldn't bear it that their sons had become professional athletes. As Eddie Cantor, the comedian's, father said, "I did not raise my boy to become a wild Jewish runner."

I did some oral histories with this. In every interview the Jewish ball players said, "The problem was our families. They thought that we are supposedly people of the mind, people of the book," which is an important part of my argument. Instead of playing ball, Jewish boys wrote novels about it. I'll just give you the names: Gerald Green, Chaim Potok, Delmore Schwartz, J.D. Salinger, Paul Goodman, E.L. Doctrow, Max Apple, early realist Charles Einstein, Elliot Asinof, Irwin Shaw (probably the best of them, whose *Voices of a Summer Day* is perhaps the best ethnic baseball novel I know), Mark Harris, many novels from Bernard Malamud and Phillip Roth. There were also women who wrote about baseball: Eve Babbitt, and Sylvia Tannenbaum, whose *Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife* is among the best ethnic novels I know about baseball.

And now we have a generation of post-modern writers, Jerome Charyn, Jay Neugoboren, Eric Greenberg, Harry Stein. I just found one yesterday, somebody named Mark Weingartner. Well, I have to write him. I wonder. Is he Jewish? Well, yes, he will be to me. . .and so on. And so the question is Why? What? I know why they wrote about baseball, because Shaw and others told us. Their families did not want them to play it. But what was the Jewish interest in baseball? And, boy, was it an interest!

American popular culture resonates with Jewish angles on the game—radio, television, shows, plays, so on and so forth. Everything from Irving Berlin's "Jake, Jake, the Yiddisheh Ball Player," to Paul Simon's "Where Have You Gone, Joe DiMaggio," are all centered around the national love of baseball. In art, Kitaj, Saul Steinberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenberg, Ben Shahn and Harvey Dinnerstein have all made works that deal primarily with baseball. Why?

In baseball, the magic numbers you use are 3 and 6. I've got five reasons for the Jewish love affair with baseball.

One. The national game provided a superb avenue for acculturation where a minority group emulates the dominant culture's values and customs, and assimilation, where a minority group is absorbed into the dominant culture. Baseball's

original role for the immigrant, then, was not unlike that of the Yiddish theater, paradoxical as that might seem, which took as one of its missions the aim of teaching success and the transformation from *yidn* to Yankee.

Two. The dialectical aspect of baseball was particularly attractive in its remarkable historical and statistical documentation to the argumentative Jewish intellect, trained in Hebrew school in the methodology of a close reading of religious texts, which actually calls for simultaneous concentration on historical fundamentals and on logical interpretation and sense of time. Thus, arguments as to who is the better outfielder (Ruth or Cobb) better pitcher (Johnson or Matthewson) and so on fit in remarkably well with the disciplines involved in Talmudic disputation. Because this same Jewish sensibility was obsessed with the past and remains haunted to our time by the Holocaust memory, the claims of history and folklore, the Old Testament and the family chronicle, baseball provided for these immigrants instant American nostalgia because after three years somebody's an old-timer and he's history.

Three. Since Jewish sons should not, according to their families' oldest beliefs, as I described earlier, actually play baseball professionally, many wrote plays, novels, stories, songs, and poems about the national game. They painted and sculpted and produced a good number of works about baseball.

Four. Baseball did become, despite its start, a city game. A preponderance of Jewish youth identified their urban roles by their ball clubs. If one grew up in Flatbush, one followed the Dodgers; in the shadow of Coogan's Bluff, the Giants; in the Bronx, perhaps the Yankees. But they were too capitalistic for most left wing Jews. Other multiple team cities, like Boston or Chicago, brought forth similar urban alliances. And Murray Baumgarten explains the urban alliance that he's talking about in reference to *Ragtime*, when he says,

Baseball and city life are experiences in surprise, rewarding alertness to new situations where split-second judgments depend on knowing how to take advantage of the breaks. Like walking in the city, which is a matter of feeling your way through space, so baseball is a game of the individual's constant negotiation with his changing environment.

And, finally, five. It is baseball itself. This national game—it is called that—rich

in folklore, deep in mythology, full of anecdote in the Scholem Aleichem mode, cabalistic in numerology, quasi-religious in its gods—Babe Ruth, of course—creative in language, reminiscent for some of an inventive, rural past, denying time's rules while emphasizing the conflict between youth and age, mythic, historical, spiritual, simple and complex, harsh and beautiful, real and fictional. Baseball, in simple, is America, and for the Jew seeking hyphenation—the 1930s Jewish-American, the 1950s American-Jewish, and I don't know what after 1996—baseball provides a pass into a cultural highway through the traditions, the rituals, the ceremonies, the society of the past and the secular religion of the United States.

I don't want to get into an ethnic argument, but I did see somewhere that most of the Jewish immigrants came here to stay, prepared to accept a full cultural transformation, which was different than those who were brought here, you know, as chattel, and was different from, say, Italians, who came to make money and go back to Italy, or others, who were going to return home. And so baseball, I do try to believe, was a substitute for the *shtetl*, a center of perception and community with strong cultural traditions, psychological sanctions, and emotional commitments, and the *shul*, a center of belief and ritual. Thus, to know and love baseball was to know and love America. And there's a wonderful book by Peter Goldbeck called *Bums*, where he interviews the Brooklyn residents after the Dodgers left for Los Angeles. So much of the documentation that I have on this I drew from this kind of argument. With no world to return to, with all the towns either destroyed or taken over by others or by pogroms, the Jewish youth, my argument goes, and adult alike could find America in baseball yet hold onto the past, just as the game itself lives on memories of early, nearly instant history, an invented past that in the Faulknerian sense is always looming over the present, a Jewish identity through baseball, rituals, and one found community. Moses Rischen discovers this, and I think baseball's schedule, the sports page you talked about, helped to fulfill it. There was something.

Unhinged from the old associations, Rischen is arguing, the calendar guidepost of feasts and fasts appeared less reliable. "Religious festivals, with their spontaneous, even pastoral, charm went limp, drained of communal relish out of touch with the seasons." That Jewish immigrants seemed to adjust more rapidly and successfully to American ways than did other immigrant groups, perhaps accounts for the interest

in baseball and its changing seasons, and the rituals from April through October. And as Jacques Barzun told us, to understand America, one first must understand baseball.

Steven Reiss quotes a settlement house worker from a Jewish neighborhood in Chicago.

We consider baseball one of the best means for teaching our boys American ideas and ideals. Not only the traditional values, but to join the mainstream through embracing the customs of the sport.

And it is in this sense, I think, that baseball is, at its most sophisticated, in its memory, so amenable to the Jewish experience. And that is part of the appeal it continues to have for Jewish writers and artists. But it was never easy.

The immigrant's fathers' view of life did not provide for sports, and he was distressed by his American son's concentration on sandlot ball and baseball. And when this youth became an adult, still he often bolstered his ego by identifying with brawn. Jewish sports heroes have an irresistible attraction for the American Jew. Against his better judgment, he is prouder of a Sandy Koufax than of a Marc Chagall.

And I cannot stop without mentioning the case of Moe Berg, whose recent biography will make him familiar to you. Most of you know who Moe Berg was, don't you? . . . Don't you? OK, you're gonna know.

Very, very quickly. He was the most brilliant and best educated man ever to play the game of professional baseball. Moe preferred baseball's male bonding to linguistic or legal professions, even hanging on to baseball as a bullpen coach. During WW II, however, he went into espionage work and was the agent with the gun in his pocket who went to a meeting to see if Werner Heisenberg knew enough about atomic fission to warrant his assassination. Those were his orders.

But Moe Berg was also a journeyman ball player: fifteen years in the majors as a backup catcher, .243 lifetime batting average. In his love for the game, even though he had his law degree, his linguistics training and so on, he stayed. He stayed. He played. I think what his father said is very nice. "Moe could have been a brilliant barrister, but he gave it all up for baseball." OK. Point made.

Another interesting moment in the legacy of Jews and Baseball is Abraham Gahan, who edited *The Jewish Daily Foreword*, where he wrote about American capitalists, was one of the real intellectual leaders of American Jewry. He also wrote fiction. He believed mostly in the work ethic, in education, in social responsibilities, in the wonders of Yiddish culture, and in the honor of Jews being people of the book. That's why he, however reluctantly, was forced to accept the importance of baseball, even though he thought that it was terrible, and that people were wasting their time going to baseball games. He published in *The Jewish Daily Foreword* August 27, 1909 in Yiddish, of course, a diagram of the Polo Grounds and the rules of the game. *Der iker fun de baseball game, erklert for mit keyn sports layt*. I hope nobody speaks Yiddish here. [laughter] In these American cities that were beginning to get a substantial non-Anglo Saxon immigrant population, baseball, according to Richard Crepeau, was supposed to teach the Anglo Saxon idea of play. And it taught a lot of other things, too. It was supposed to teach people, when they were immigrants, to get someplace on time. It was *supposed* to; the game started whether they were there or not. And they learned that. [laughter] Baseball was supposed to teach that there were rules, and that you had to obey the rules. That's what democracy and law are about. On the other hand, you could boo the umpire, which was hard for some to understand. I mean how can you do that at authority? And so-on. [laughter]

Another figure, Isaac Asimov, asks why frustrated players, like Philip Roth, who just wanted to be a center fielder, wrote one of the great pieces on the game, and Shaw and so on turned to baseball fiction.

To write great novels, yes. That was permitted Jewish boys, along with playing violins, not saxophones or guitars; playing chess, not poker or pool; and becoming a doctor or lawyer or, in an emergency, a dentist or an optometrist, but not a ball player.

Asimov goes on to say, "The result is that a great many novels written in America deal with Jewish themes. After all, what else are these great Jewish novelists going to write about? Methodists?" To which he says, "I would reply no. Ball players." And that's what they do.

Baseball was an assimilating tool both to the city and to the culture and, I think, it provided a new storehouse of myths for these young American boys mainly,

although there were some girls and women, too. It wasn't the Bible anymore. It was *Who's Who in Baseball*. [I can't believe I actually wrote that, but I did.] And I'll end—really—with the most distinguished Jewish American philosopher, Morris Raphael Cohen. After the White Sox scandals, Chicago Black Sox in 1919, which was the same really for many lovers of baseball as the recent strike has been, Cohen said, ironically, “Baseball is a secular religion” and, mocking William James, “the moral equivalent of war.” His personal love affair with the game commenced in boyhood. Naturally, he wrote in his diary, “I begged Mama to let me go out and play baseball, but life was earnest on the Lower East Side,” and so he went on to write about and teach ethics and metaphysics to generations of City College students. But very few people know that he also contributed complicated baseball questions to the radio quiz program, “Information Please,” in the '40s, or that he wrote probably the best essay on baseball I've found. He compares the game to “the fine arts of song, story, painting, sculpture, and music.” Wondering what some later scholar might define as America's soul, Cohen asks, “And when he comes to speak of America's contribution to religion, will he not mention baseball?” Cohen compares the game to Greek drama: “Is there any other experience in modern life in which multitudes of men so completely and immensely lose their individual lives in the larger life that they call the City?”

Soma Morgenstern, a Jewish novelist, didn't want to understand baseball or even read about it. He said, “The uniforms reminded me of all the chimney sweepers in Vienna,” and so the critic, Harvey Breit, and Allen Hirshfield, the cartoonist, take him to a baseball game. “I will never forget this man, for what he did, because it was such a big part of my being Americanized. I don't think you can be Americanized if you don't understand baseball. All the other sports are not American.” This is a strong sentiment even though there are others who didn't feel that way.

Before closing, I'll just give you that roster of Jewish All-Stars. It is not mine. It is from a wonderful book by a man named Joel Oppenheimer, *Memoir and Meditation on the Importance of Baseball*. First Base: Phil Weintraub, who was with the Giants during the war, but he was a very good hitter. Andy Cohen, Second. Buddy Myer at Short. Buddy Myer actually won a batting championship. Rosen at Third. Greenberg, Sid Gordon and Pike in the outfield. Kling, yes, as catcher, and Myer and Koufax as pitchers. And there, I'll stop.

FROM CHARISMA TO PERSONA

LOÏC J.D. WACQUANT

I've prepared my remarks without knowing the exact format of this event, basically taking my cues from the title of our session. So I have to make the same disclaimer as Gerald Early and say that I cannot speak fully as a sociologist here—even though I am one—because of my scant knowledge of this area of inquiry and limited preparation.

By way of prelude, I would like to note first that it's a privilege to participate in this panel: I have great admiration for Gerald Early's writings, for both the substance and the style of his work, and particularly for his insightful and deft essays on prizefighting. I particularly recommend his "Battling Siki: The Boxer as Natural Man" and his "Three Notes Towards A Cultural Definition of Boxing," which stimulated my own early attempts to puzzle out the place of boxing in American society and culture as I was trying to learn the craft on the South Side of Chicago, coming from a background where I knew nothing about either the black ghetto or prizefighting. So, for me, it is a special pleasure and honor to have a chance to react to his work—if only on the fly.

Second, I should add the disclaimer that, its title notwithstanding, the book that I'm working on and which presumably brings me here, *The Passion of the Pugilist*, begins with the line: "This is not a book about boxing." In truth, it is intended as a study of the constitution of social agents and how we are made into competent practitioners, deft, adept, involved and recognized members of and in a particular

social world. The general analytical question that I try to tackle with (or through) this particular ethnographic and experiential material is how is it that we produce social competence and social excellence.

When I started writing up this study of boxing as a subproletarian bodily craft, it was more in the mold of a sociology of poverty, (im) mobility, and Afro-American culture, and it was essentially a straightforwardly materialist analysis of how social structures of marginality determine certain types of aspirations and conduct. My early papers on the topic reflect that. But then, as I was drawn more and more into the game itself, as I became ever more deeply immersed in the special sensual and moral universe anchored by this Chicago boxing gym where I trained for over three years (so much so that I seriously contemplated giving up academic life entirely to stay within it), I came upon the realization that there was much more going on. I came to understand that the relation that binds boxers to their trade is not one of material constraint, of external imposition, but a strange and powerful relation of *passion*, a complex mix of “sinful desire” and public suffering—a skewed love, no doubt, a passion born of class inequality, racial exclusion, and masculine hubris, and of the limitations they imply, but a passion nonetheless.

It became clear, then, that if I wanted to provide an adequate anthropological understanding of that world as boxers fabricate and experience it day-to-day, I would have to pry open that relation, get inside this skewed nexus of love and suffering, constraint and desire, and try to explicate it. That’s what I’ve been engaged in. Paradoxically, it’s taken me from almost one extreme, the sociology of structural constraint and material inequality, to another, a phenomenological sociology of desire and carnal self-making. Much to my own surprise, the book that has helped me the most in effecting that passage and puzzle out that relation is Emile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Certainly, when I signed up at the Stoneland Boys’ Club and paid my twelve dollars to get my license and my ten-dollar annual gym dues and “gloved up” for the first time (really thinking that I was daydreaming and that it wouldn’t go anywhere since I had never so much as seen a live fight in my life), I would have never thought I’d be talking about this—and certainly not in those terms—a few years later before an audience such as this one! If you had told me then that one day I would maintain that Durkheim has a close

connection to boxing, I would have thought that to say this is proof that I was punch-drunk before I'd even gotten into the ring! [laughter].

But before I get to my remarks, I want to react to some of the observations that Gerald Early made earlier and reflect on the special difficulties that writing and thinking seriously about sport presents—the expression “thinking about sport” has an almost palpable oxymoronic quality.

All of those who try to address this area of social life seriously from a scholarly standpoint (whether it's from a sociological, literary, or historical angle) come up upon the same obdurate obstacles first because *sport is a lowly object in social life*. As Gerald Early pointed out, sport belongs to the realm of entertainment, which means that it stands opposed to the world of work. The world of work is serious and therefore worthy of scholarly inquiry; the world of entertainment, by definition, is not (even though it is a leading sector of the contemporary service economy).

Secondly, writing about sports can be devaluing because it deals with the body and, as Nietzsche put it, “we are all despisers of the body,” particularly in academia. This is true even of the recent wave—and when I say wave I mean tsunami—of social studies of the body that claim to have brought the latter back in. If you scrutinize this extraordinary outpouring of writings, in the humanities but also in anthropology, sociology, and history, you will find that you rarely encounter in them actually existing bodies of flesh and blood: the body has been made into another text, a set of “discursive effects” to be read, and in that process it has lost all of its specificity.

The third reason why it is hard to do a good sociology of sport (especially of professional sports) is that sport is a world populated primarily by the *outcasts of society*—the lower classes, subordinate and stigmatized ethnic groups, those who are not part of “the mainstream,” those who have to go into sports because they couldn't go into something else and something better.

These three reasons, combined, go quite a long way towards explaining why to study sport is to engage in an enterprise of intellectual self-marginalization. You have to be ready to suffer professional tarnishment and obscurity if you persevere in doing this kind of work. I could mention here the story of this sociologist who was invited by his department chair to think of a more respectable topic while conducting a field

study of the social making of the “gloried self” among his own university’s basketball team (it led to a beautiful book, entitled *Blackboards and Backboards*). He was told in no uncertain terms that his tenure would be jeopardized if he did not do so. I could also mention the disheartening experience of one of the leading historians of sport and author of an excellent study of boxing in American society which is also a superb history of race relations in this country, *Beyond the Ring*; his appointment to a program of Afro-American Studies at a prominent university was opposed by some African-American students who argued that to hire a historian who studies sport is to hire a second-rate historian, and that the subject demeans African-Americans.

I’ll confess that I’ve sometimes wondered late at night, “Why are you doing this to yourself?” Part of the impulse, that I have had to fight, to over-theorize the materials I gathered in and around my boxing gym, comes from the need one feels to “ennoble” such a topic. And perhaps I would not have set myself the task of writing this book—and taken so long to do it—if I had not also published a book of social theory with Pierre Bourdieu, which protects me from disappearing into the oblivion of the sociology of sport. (It’s also the case that I don’t believe that anyone should be a sociologist “of” anything). I am not stating this as a personal value judgement; I’m only reporting a Durkheimian social fact.

There is yet another reason why sport is so difficult to capture, which is particularly visible in the case of prizefighting. It is the fact that sporting worlds are worlds that are mythologized and that endlessly mythologize themselves so as to make themselves tolerable. The result is that the analyst gets *caught between two myths*. On the one side are the native myths that we need to deconstruct if we are to explicate the objective and lived reality of that world. On the other side stand the scholarly myths and particularly the artistic myths that developed as a result of the special attraction that writers of all stripes have for boxing.

From George Herbert Mead to Jean-Paul Sartre, from Jack London to Norman Mailer and Carol Joyce Carrol Oates, from the surrealists to B-grade movie makers, scholars and artists have been fascinated by the world of prizefighting (perhaps this is an illustration the law of the attraction of social opposites: white and black, feminine and masculine, the high and the low). Artistic and scholarly portraits of boxing are just that: artistic and scholarly. They do not begin to capture what is going

on because they typically situate themselves *outside* and *above* the action going on. They reveal more about the spectatorial point of view taken upon the craft than they do about the craft itself.

Unfortunately, when you turn from the native and the artistic myths to the social sciences, you don't get much help either because, historically, the social sciences constructed themselves out of the rationalist revolution of the 17th and 18th century premised on the sharp division between passion and reason. And so they have expelled from their domain of scrutiny everything that is on the side of emotions, desire, the body, the "irrational." (Think of the residual status of *affektuel Aktion* in Max Weber for instance).

Perhaps the biggest difference between the approach that Gerald Early proposes and the one I've tried to follow in my work is the following: rather than construing the universe of sport, whether it's boxing or baseball or wrestling, as an expression of something else, or as a reflection, a metaphor, I try to look at it, in a first moment, as a world unto itself, a world that contains within itself its own constitutive elements and regulative principles. Instead of grasping sport *allegorically*, I propose to look at it, following Schelling, *tautegorically*, as referring to nothing but itself. (Of course, this is a moment of analysis and it does not exclude embedding boxing in its local social setting, quite the contrary). In that light boxing is not a metaphor for life or for society; it is not a "reflection of American society"—or capitalism, slavery, or patriarchy. It is a *bodily trade* that we have to understand as such, not through "thick description" à la Geertz, but rather by way of a *carnal sociology* done by foregrounding the understanding that boxers themselves have of their own world through their own bodily experiences and skills.

Now let me address the topic of our panel, starting with the notion of "charisma". The term charisma is one of the most frequently used and abused in the sports pages and in commentaries on athletes (as when people exclaim, "He's such a charismatic player"). In sociological parlance, the notion comes from Max Weber, who borrowed it from the Strasbourg church historian and jurist Rudolf Somm, by which is meant the "gift of grace." For Weber, Western history is, for a good part, the product of the contrapuntal dialectic of rationalization and charisma, entrapment in the iron cage and breaking out of it through extraordinary acts of individual

or collective rebellion against the cold logic of impersonal structures. Weber saw charismatic actors as founders of world religions and sects, prophets, military heroes and political entrepreneurs —interestingly, not as sports or entertainment figures, even though there were quite a few around in his age already. Jesus, Napoleon, Hitler, Ghandi would come to his mind if he were among us today, not Mickey Mantle, Mike Tyson, and Michael Jordan. Charismatic leaders for Weber are the truly revolutionary forces of history. Their words and deeds move individuals; they cause people to escape and challenge status relations, class barriers, political submission, and thereby to open up new worlds. Charisma stands opposed to all institutional routines, of both the traditional and of rational kind.

A charismatic situation is one of direct interpersonal contact, real or perceived, where “personality” breaks through the mass, creativity flouts institutional rule, where imaginative and emotional flight takes us out of the drudgery of ordinary existence. Weber also discusses at length, as one of the key processes of modernity, the routinization of charisma. One could say, to follow along this lines, that the bureaucratization and rationalization of sports (the NBA, NFL, NCAA, etc.), well documented for instance in the work of Allen Gutman, have routinized charisma, have ensnared it in regular, predictable, organizational encasings. Charisma has transmuted itself in either tradition or bureaucracy, but it is still lies there, if dormant.

I want to disagree with this view. I think that the universe of sport is not the world of charisma but the world of *persona*, in the sense discussed by Marcel Mauss in his classic essay on “The Category of the Person” through history. In this piece, Mauss recovers the definition of the notion that emerged at the beginnings of the Latin civilization, for which the *persona* is “a mask, a tragic mask, a ritual mask.” I propose to think of athletes as *performers who wear masks*, as bodily craftspersons who fashion an individual style but who stand in a tradition and whose actions are heavily ritualized—even though through ritualization they seek to create individuality.

Athletes are not charismatic figures but performers, entertainers, which is quite different. They are folk heroes, not transcendent figures. They are *of* the people, not *above* them. They do not have power; rather what they possess is *style*. It is not what they do that matters so much as the manner in which they do it and the fact that they do so in a way that affirms, establishes, testifies to their uniqueness and their capacity to make themselves.

Athletes do not move people and provide a new vision of the world so much as carve out their own individuality on the wall of public culture, transform their life and provide models of self-mastery, for others to try to transform themselves. They are not *other-worldly* but *this-worldly*. They are not violators of tradition but expressions of it; not innovators but ritualists. This is particularly true of African-American culture and history in which, as Lawrence Levine showed, athletes occupy a central position as carriers of individual and collective pride, dignity, and ability. (Gerald Early's remark about the different relationships that the different sports have to their own history is very apposite: that relation of consumption is quite different from the relation of rupture and negation incarnated by the charismatic figure).

If you go back to the great 1966 monograph by Charles Keil on *Urban Blues*, you will see that it provides a clear demonstration that entertainment, and here I quote him, "is that special domain of Negro culture wherein black men have proved and preserved their humanity." He calls entertainers "ritualists" and writes: "The ritualists I have in mind are singers, musicians, preachers, comedians, disk jockeys, some athletes"—and, interestingly, he cites here Sonny Liston and Muhammad Ali, the two dominant boxers of that era—"and also perhaps a few Negro novelists." Keil argues convincingly that entertainment is the very core of African-American culture as a whole, first, because it was not obliterated by slavery and, second, because it thrived on adversity and, third, because it spawned a full-fledged tradition in its own right. He suggests that "the masters of sound, movement, timing, of the spoken word" formed the epicenter of African-American popular culture.

The question that comes to mind, then, is what is it that comedians, disk jockeys, blues singers, dancers, preachers, and athletes have in common? My answer is that they are all *bodily crafts*. They are crafts based on kinetic knowledge, skills, and powers that are inscribed deep into and then re-emerge out of the body. And the great virtue of *bodily capital*, if you want to call it that, is that its distribution is *relatively* independent from the other forms of capital or power that circulate in society, from which African-Americans have largely been excluded (I should emphasize "relatively" here because the body never escapes the province of social laws). It's independent from cultural capital: you don't need to succeed in school in order to succeed on the basketball court; you might even be able to go to school if

you have enough bodily capital of a kind valued by a college. It's independent from economic capital: you don't have to be rich in order to step onto the gridiron; you might even get a fellowship and money from "boosters" to do so (in the case of the happy few who reach the promised land of professional stardom, your body can earn you millions of dollars). Lastly, bodily capital is relatively independent from social capital: it's not who you know, it's what you do on the field that determines your fate; in fact, you will accumulate a great deal of social capital if you accomplish great deeds on the field.

Entertainers are core cultural heroes in African-American life because of the reasons that I just suggested but also because they are quintessentially *masculine figures*. For readily understandable reasons, the dominant strand of African-American culture is working-class culture; it is also fundamentally masculine, at least on its public side. And athletes are paragons of masculinity—none more so than boxers (Eldridge Cleaver writes in *Soul on Ice* that "the boxing ring is the ultimate focus of masculinity in America, the two-fisted testing ground of manhood"). The body, as retooled, refurbished, refashioned, in and for the world of sport, is an archetypal masculine resource, a tool for individual competition and economic success.

In his book, Keil says a great many interesting things about bluesmen on this topic. Many of the observations he makes would apply, with appropriate adaptations, to my friends, boxers from the South Side of Chicago. Both bluesman and prizefighter yearn and strive to develop a distinctive masculine style. The concept of manhood they propose and embody differs from white, middle-class manhood, even from white working-class manhood. Blues artists, for instance, do not boast about their sexual potency because this quality is taken for granted by both artist and audience, so that there's no need to vocalize it extensively. The same thing is true of prizefighters. Much to my surprise, I found that the world of "pro" boxing is not misogynistic because it simply doesn't have to be. Contrary to glib media images, it is not a world of violence against and denigration of women: it doesn't have to be because women are not *in and of this world*. One of the key rules that boxers learn in their long apprenticeship is that one does not fight on the streets or in the home; one does not hit women because they are fragile beings who are statutorily unfit to

engage you on this terrain. A boxer is debasing his craft and tarnishing his own dignity when he engages in a scuffle on the street or if he hits his girlfriend at home. This is not to say that such things do not happen; they do. But they do so in violation of their occupational ethic.

Blues music and prizefighting are also enmeshed in practices of *ritualization*. Much like preachers, bluesmen have to create their own style, to acquire a distinctive pitch, delivery, and timing, whereby they can be recognized. But they do so by innovating within the confines of a tradition. In order to establish their place among what Alfred Schutz called “consociates and contemporaries,” they have to refer to a “predecessor.” They have to inscribe themselves in this peculiar history of the craft (Gerald Early would say to “consume” it). The same applies to boxers who are avid consumers of the history of their trade. It is not by happenstance that Mike Tyson is an obsessive watcher of old fight films, and that his (former) manager owns the largest private collection of boxing movies. One of the ways in which a champion takes up the mantle and assumes his place in boxing history is by imbibing that history, by assimilating its twists and turns, and by re-citing that history in these rituals that are interviews before the great fights. And by displaying in the ring the accumulated bodily wisdom of his predecessors. B.B. King was no different: the respect he earned on music-hall stages comes from his “successful manipulation of a time-tested formula in a style full of nuances and shadings that were then distinctively his own” (these are Keil’s words). Which is what every great boxer has done in his own line of work.

Reappropriating the history of the craft in order to “make” history, placing yourself in a lineage in order to extend it, situating yourself in relation to opposition and kinship with predecessors and consociates: these moves are antithetical to those of the charismatic leader, who breaks with history, ends a lineage, situates himself in a space beyond that traced by others. You can see this in the transmission of names among boxers: when Ray Leonard borrows the nickname of “Sugar” Ray Robinson (arguably the greatest practitioner in the history of the craft), it is to gain prestige but also to mark his respect for his personal hero and to take up and extend his legacy.

The masculinity dimension is crucially important there because the choice of a profession in the ghetto is largely dictated by the perceived manliness of the activity

according to the canons of the street. The extraordinary attraction that athletics and entertainment exert on lower-class black youth can be explained by the fact that they offer public stages for masculine contests of personal prowess and performance. This spirit of contest and conquest (of self and others) suffuses everyday life in the ghetto, which is a world of intense, dog-eat-dog, competition for survival and success. To quote Keil again: “This vital spirit that invests their life [is]: wanting to try and improvising in a continuing effort to contend effectively.” Boxing, like the blues, offers young men from the ghetto a means for crafting a persona, a vehicle for carving out a protected and glowing place of pride in a world that threatens to consign them to obscurity.

What the craft of boxing gives to those who enter it is a universe in which the tiniest bit of behavior is problematic, and consequential—“fateful” in Goffman’s sense of the term. By entering into an occupation that turns on what the latter calls “the willful undertaking of serious chances,” prizefighters restructure the totality of their existence, its temporal and cognitive organization, its emotional and sensual complexion, its psychological and social profile, in ways that put them into a unique position to affirm their capacity to fashion their fate, in however limited a manner. With risk comes the possibility of control; with pain and sacrifice, the eventuality of moral elevation and public recognition; with discipline and commitment, the existential profit of personal renewal and even *ontological transcendence*: the opportunity to create a new (and gloried) being out of the old. Only by understanding the world of sports tautegorically can we grasp how its members collectively craft a new sensual and moral universe for themselves, and a universe that is all the more valuable to them since it puts them right “at the point of production.”

Open Discussion

Open Discussion

QUESTION #1: Do you think that boxing is losing its popularity and will, as some sports writers suggest, eventually lose its popularity altogether?

WACQUANT: This is the perennial question and a cyclical phenomenon. It is important to note that throughout the 20th century, the game of boxing has been transformed quite significantly. It is much less violent today than it was even thirty years ago. And it will continue to undergo this “civilizing” process in the Eliasian sense of the term that leads to greater and greater euphemization of its violence. But there is also a cyclical aspect: people get periodically interested in or worried about the fate of boxers. Suddenly AIDS has become a great concern, but, at the same time, boxers can’t get basic medical care and no one is getting concerned about that. Sometimes they don’t get paid for the performances they do, and no one is concerned about that. They can go from one state to another, get knocked out one night and fight in another state the next night because there is no national registry where boxers are licensed and so on, but no one is worried about that. Or a boxer dies in the ring and cries of indignation fill the media. . .for a while. But no one cares enough to enact basic legislation to give boxers minimal protection in their trade. Boxers are to sports what miners were to the working class half a century ago. Every few years, people think the sport is going to die, but then another ring hero comes along, and the business rebounds. It is big enough a business that I think it will survive for quite some time.

QUESTION #2: WHEN you discussed the political economy of sport, you did not place much emphasis on the possibility that many sports, boxing in particular, have been criticized for being fundamentally exploitative and degrading. Would any of you care to comment on that?

EARLY: I agree. Boxing is our sport of degradation. It has a long history of being illegal, so it is a more stigmatized sport than any other. It stands as the “exceptional” sport, and that’s because of the object of the sport. The object of the sport is to hurt the person you’re competing against, to hurt him so that the breaking of his will is an explicit, self-evident drama. As a result, we have had this ambivalent feeling about boxing. Its stigma of degradation is convenient. We always go on these crusades and these reformation movements when we want to rid the world of boxing. It is a great deal like the temperance movement. So we go through these guilty moments with this sport, and all this. And it is all a reflection of us and not a reflection of concern about the fighters, except how they shame us.

Moreover, if the sport were made illegal, you would still not be safeguarding these men because the sport would just go underground and be done illegally. It was done illegally for a very long time. It would continue to be that way. As long as you have an audience and people willing to bet on it, fighters can be found who are willing to do it.

WACQUANT: It is an exercise in hypocrisy. Institutionalized hypocrisy.

QUESTION #3: *I notice that this discussion has not treated the place of women in sport, even though in the frieze on the wall behind you the women are engaged in a ball game. Why was there such an oversight? Can any of the panelists contribute something to this issue?*

SOLOMON: Yes. There’s a woman named Leslie Hazleton. She writes sometimes for the *Times*. She grew up in Israel. And when she came to this country, she felt immediately that draw towards baseball and trying to find out about it. And, of course, I mentioned Joyce Carol Oates, who has written as openly about her love for boxing as anyone has, I think.

QUESTION #4: *Isn’t there any scholarship being done on the role of women in athletics?*

Solomon: Well, it is changing. It is changing.

QUESTION #5: *It seems to me that if you studied track and field you would have ample material for examining both race and gender. Many of the African-American women who have become world-class athletes have done so in sports like running.*

SOLOMON: Joe Louis, or somebody like that, once remarked that blacks participated in large numbers at the collegiate and international levels in track and field. And, indeed, African-Americans in significant numbers represented the US at the '32 Olympics and the '36 Olympics. I'd have to think—seven or eight of the gold medals were won by African-Americans. It is also interesting to study track and field itself because the US track and field teams in those years looked like they were segregated. African-Americans ran the sprints. They ran up to a half a mile, but you never, with few exceptions, saw them in any race longer than that. Field events, usually broad jump and high jump, were also exceptions where blacks participated and excelled. In the early days, at any rate, you only rarely saw them running in long distance events. These were called the “natural” events—running, jumping, and all that. Some people even claimed that these events didn't require intensive training, though they did. It stayed that way until the mid-sixties, when African countries began sending athletes to the Olympics. Then long distance running became synonymous with East Africa—Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania—but not necessarily African-Americans. And it would be interesting to study how all these fascinating prejudices were toppled in sport.

Early: I would agree. I think it would be very interesting to study the entire history of track and field. I think, if nothing else, what you said about the history of black runners is true. Once the East Africans came in and started doing distances, it put the lie to the belief that blacks could only do sprints and nothing else. So at least *that* was clearly demonstrated, that black people could do something other than sprints. Track and field is also an area where you could look at women, because there are several important black women who emerged from track and field, so it is a field where you can actually look at some black women in considerable depth.

QUESTION #6: *I was fascinated by your use of Durkheim to analyze sport as ritual. I am using a similar approach in analyzing South Indian women's rituals and how they establish community values. One ritual in particular is becoming more of a sporting event. I was wondering if you could expand on your thinking in that area.*

WACQUANT: We're going to meet midway. My friends from the South Side will encounter yours from India. The book of Durkheim's that I use the most is *The*

Elementary Forms of Religious Life, but his work on moral education, professional ethics, and civic morals, in which he shows that there cannot be a moral world without a particular morality, is also critical here. For Durkheim, the stronger that morality, the stronger that social world, the more taking, the more absorbing. I rely on an untranslated 1907 lecture, absolutely gorgeous—the forty best pages I’ve ever read in any discipline. It is a lecture that Durkheim gave on the origins of religion, in which he lays out arguments that are in *The Elementary Forms* in an incredibly terse manner. What is ritual for Durkheim? It is a means whereby we draw boundaries, reaffirm collective beliefs, and create a “church,” that is, a group of people who share those activities that stand outside of profane time and that make us into a sacred, collective body. This is exactly what the world of boxing does. In fact, I think it is what *every social world* does. You can take this formula literally by saying that the sacred is always a religion, or you can say that the sacred is a particularly *meaningful* social world. What we’re all engaging in is drawing circles, circles of meaning that we then step into in order to exist as social beings. The drawing of the circle, with whom we draw it, how we draw it, is really what is going on. And the world of boxing is exactly that. Boxers enter into a special universe they themselves fabricate. They enter it “willingly,” but with a will molded by all these extraneous factors, of which they are confusedly aware and which explains their ambivalent relation to the trade. They love it begrudgingly. To give you just one example, eighty-five percent of the boxers in the state of Illinois say that boxing has been a positive force in their lives, had brought them great things, has made them better persons, has opened up their universe, and so on. But eighty-five percent would not want their sons to box. How many social worlds are there that you’re so satisfied about that you wouldn’t want to share? Boxing has a sacrificial dimension: first, it is worth doing only for others, and second, it has this capacity to transport you outside the mundane. When boxers enter into this world, they willfully adhere to the dictates of a very rigid ethic, the ethic of “sacrifice,” (this is the term they use) and thereby tear themselves from everyday life. They can’t have a regular meal. They can’t have regular hours and go out at night. They can’t have sex with their girlfriends as they normally would. These rituals of separation enclose them more and more into this moral and sensual universe *sui generis*. And then what do they do with that? And here I’m going to quote this essay of Durkheim’s that I mentioned. This is the definition that he gives of religion: “religion elevates the individual above himself, affords him a life very

different, more exalted and more intense,” end of quote, than the life to which they are otherwise consigned. Rituals are means for drawing that boundary and creating a special world into which you enter and within which you have the possibility of becoming, quite literally, another being. And when in your everyday life you are a non-being consigned to social obscurity and invisibility, entering that one world may be the only way to exist.

THE CHARISMA OF SPORT AND RACE
PARTICIPANTS

GERALD EARLY is Professor of English and of African-American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. He visited Berkeley as the Avenali Professor in the Humanities for Spring 1996.

ERIC SOLOMON is Professor of English at California State University at San Francisco.

LOÏC J.D. WACQUANT is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. He is also a Fellow of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities for 1996-97.

