



Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer by Loïc Wacquant

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Source: *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (September 2004), pp. 505-507

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/425391>

Accessed: 06/03/2011 10:57

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Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer. By Loïc Wacquant. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. xiv+274. \$26.00.

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Hoping for a passage to observe the American ghetto, Loïc Wacquant, then a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the Hyde Park area, stumbles upon the Woodlawn Boys Club, a boxing gym populated by young African-American men minutes from campus. For Wacquant this South Side world seemed the apotheosis of Otherness, even while as a student of Pierre Bourdieu he questioned attempts at Orientalizing race. Yet, as he proclaims, the gym was “a mere two blocks from my abode but on a different planet” (p. ix): big black men as little green ones. In this, the book owes much to anthropological imaginaries. The Woodlawn gym becomes an exotic Otherworld with “Busy Louie” our Tocqueville-in-trunks.

Body and Soul is certain to surprise disciplinary readers who view Wacquant as a fierce polemicist and subtle theorist of urban inequality and racial domination (views embedded in some of Wacquant’s previous essays on boxing and, perhaps, in his second, planned volume on the ring, *The Passion of the Pugilist*). However, *Body and Soul* is a surprisingly generous and gentle work, apolitical at its core. The black ghetto, while by no means absent, is not here a subject of theorizing. It is the canvas on which these men are knocked down and from which they strive to rise. This volume contributes most dramatically and effectively to the sociology of emotions and of the body—Marx’s suffering being—and both embraces and interrogates the traditional model of a realist ethnography.

Believing that his South Side gym was a separate world and he a “perfect novice,” Wacquant strives diligently through his apprenticeship to become a competent member of this body, as boxer and as gym buddy—if not quite as *native*. His nicknames, “The French Hammer” and “Busy Louie,” testify to his acceptance and to his *différance*. This work, emergent from authenticating notebooks, is an account of that attempt, a project Wacquant describes as a “sociological-pugilistic *Bildungsroman*” (p. vii). Wacquant discovers at the gym a mentor, DeeDee Armour, the gifted coach of generations of fighters, a moral paragon who enters the benighted pantheon of ethnographic key informants, alongside William Foote Whyte’s Doc, Mitchell Duneier’s Hakim, and Elliot Liebow’s Tally. We readers become socialized to DeeDee’s moral worldview, just as Wacquant and his fellow boxers did. As Wacquant is learning to experience his body anew, he never stops questioning how this experience is mentally, culturally, and socially situated. As such, *Body and Soul* qualifies as the first sociological classic of reflexive autoethnography. Wacquant’s power is precisely in the fact that—in the lengthy opening chapter at least—he subjects his observations and his emotions to the same theoretical rigor

to which ethnographers often subject the actions and interpretations of others.

Body and Soul is designed as a triptych: “The Street and the Ring,” “Fight Night at Studio 104,” and “‘Busy Louie’ at the Golden Gloves.” The initial essay, “The Street and the Ring,” occupying the majority of the text, is Wacquant’s attempt to develop an embodied, carnal, emotive sociology of pugilism and, implicitly, other domains of social life (although his scope conditions remain unspecified). Wacquant recognizes that the boxing gym is a lair, a space away from the struggles of the ghetto, a place that demands bodily discipline and control, in sharp contrast to the life outside. Tempting indulgences in sex, food, drugs, and drink place one outside DeeDee’s moral boundaries. The gym is, in this sense, a site of “protected sociability” (p. 26), kindred to the Valois cafeteria, perched on the other edge of Hyde Park. Like the African-American patrons of the Valois (or those of those other notable Chicago establishments, Jelly’s and Trena’s, as described by Elijah Anderson and by Reuben May), the Woodlawn boxers are members of the respectable working class (p. 46). While these men at DeeDee’s ring are more emotive than the talkers who sit at Slim’s Table, they employ similar strategies to distance themselves from the disorganization that surrounds them. Through the supportive resources of their group and their tough mentors, an avenue for stability, if not escape, emerges. The picture that emerges, as we watch Curtis, Ashante, and Butch battle their way to equilibrium, is precariously sanguine, if never precisely rosy.

The other two segments are set pieces. The second chapter, “Fight Night at Studio 104,” a meticulous account of a single day—the preparation, production, and presentation of a fight in South Chicago—reveals a remarkable ethnographic and theatrical eye. Few other field essays so insistently immerse us into social (and economic) worlds as hauntingly and eloquently as this. If Wacquant has his writing tics (he is too fond of describing boxing as “the manly art” and “the sweet science”), he reveals a playful, personal, and profound ear for language (“the tutti-frutti of academe”) to match his disciplined eye. However, while the essay embraces the foundational detail, it abjures theoretical claims. For 80 pages we are drenched in the arcane and arching world of boxing, left with puzzles, much as Wacquant must have been as a novice.

The third section, “‘Busy Louie’ at the Golden Gloves,” is a 20-page recounting of Wacquant’s entry in the Chicago Golden Gloves tournament—read the book to learn the denouement. The essay was originally composed for a French literary journal, and it constitutes what Wacquant terms a sociological novella. Read skeptically (it is always prudent to read sociological texts skeptically) the moral narrative depicts a nerdy intellectual discovering love, community, and his bad-boy self by entering the ghetto and learning the ropes among an unlikely group of buddies, under the tutelage of a sage patriarch. By the end, Busy Louie triumphs through an awe-inspiring display of courage that simultaneously marks both his

acceptance by and transcendence of this dark utopia. By looking inward in order to look out, Wacquant is able to salvage the masculinist fantasy of boxing as a scaffold for the existential self—and by making himself the hero, he can romance his subjects as the triumphant heroes of a compellingly savage world. The accounting is coolly eloquent, crisply instructive, but finally of more use as data than as analysis. It is truly an instance of raw empiricism.

As the book progresses, the sections become increasingly personal, retreating from the rigors of theory to the rigors of the ring, leading Wacquant to speculate that the book could be read backward, from lived experience to experienced theory. Yet, each depiction is writerly, revealing a deluged and torrid participant.

Body and Soul is not a volume that speaks to boxing as an outpost of the postindustrial political economy. That claim deserves attention that it does not receive in this volume. Here is an author—like many academics who have traversed inner-city streets—struggling to resolve the tension of the tragedy of urban lives versus their against-the-odds heroism. Here is tough-minded social realism standing against a popular neoromanticism, each essential and unavoidable in an ethnography that poses as literature of public truth. Through this clash emerges a model account of a personal, embodied sociology, depicting how pain and effort become integral to, and constitutive of, the establishment of tightly held group bonds. These bonds create a moral space in which a tiny public can provide communion for impoverished strivers and French intellectuals alike.

Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration. By R. Keith Sawyer. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003. Pp. ix+214. \$49.95 (cloth); \$22.50 (paper).

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In *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration*, using jazz musicians and improvisational comedians as exemplars, R. Keith Sawyer argues that prior work on music and humor has overemphasized scored and scripted ingenuity, product over process, and personal imagination over social inspiration. He calls for a paradigm shift that stresses improvisation, emergence, and interaction.

His work reminds me of my own research on pickup basketball, where, lacking coaches, referees, and playbooks, players make up each play as they play. This activity epitomizes the creativity that Sawyer wants to analyze. The process (playing well) matters more than the product (a win or a loss). Furthermore, how well the players play is determined by their interactions: each time one set of players score, the defenders take away