

THE SOLITUDE OF THE STANCE THE BODILY AUTOLOGY OF GYM-WORK AND BOXING IN AN ESSEX TOWN

• PETER LOCKWOOD •

ABSTRACT

Contemporary accounts of masculinity in Britain have tended to focus on the politics of body image: how and why young men aspire to appear a certain way through forms of body modification. Drawing on ethnography carried out amongst young British males in Essex, this paper homes in on the technical processes of body modification itself, arguing that what is at stake in practices such as working out at the gym is not only the transformation of appearance. Rather than seeing practices such as weight-lifting as failed acts of resistance, where men attempt to craft themselves as physically powerful individuals while ultimately conforming to gender stereotypes and norms, what follows is an argument that posits the body as a locus of sensory self-enunciation. Drawing upon the praxeological method of Jean-Pierre Warnier, I advance a sensory-logical analysis of weight-lifting practices to show how young men quite literally embody themselves as capable and agentive persons. I further explore these questions of embodied self-enunciation at the Billericay Boxing Hut where I analyse forms and logics of sensory experience that allow men to render themselves persons defined by the capacity to overcome pain from within. I argue that boxing training and weight-lifting in the gym instantiate a local principle of male personhood, autology: the sense young men have of being individual, self-determining and agentive persons. Gym-work and boxing are thus re-interpreted as acts of bodily autology: practical acts that elicit a singular and capable self.

Keywords: resistance, hegemony, body image, praxeology, autology, self

Introduction

Take a trip to any given town centre in Essex today—Billericay, Basildon, Wickford—and you will notice the ubiquity of ‘built’ male bodies.¹ Often apprehended as stereotypical ‘lads’, it is assumed that these young men craft their bodies in the gym in order to fulfil the implicit social demands to look appropriately manly (Gill et al. 2005; cf. Bridges 2009: 84). Over the last decade the popularity of weight-lifting amongst British men seems to have exploded in the wake of an increased visibility of muscular male bodies in the media (Gill et al. 2005: 3, 9).

Q: Why do you think the gym is so popular amongst young men?

Gym-employee: [sigh] Well, personally for me it's because I did a lot of sports when I was younger, but for a lot of the people who come here I'd say it's television, *Geordie Shore*² and stuff like that... You can come here on a Saturday, all the blokes in front of the mirror lifting weights, looking at themselves...

Bodies that are built to some degree have become more available to young men than ever before. As such, much of the sociological and anthropological literature (as well as media commentary) has homed in on the material effects of gym-work:³ the identity politics of appearing a certain way whereby men are usually seen as conforming to hegemonic norms of masculinity (Connel 1987 in Bridges 2009: 84, 103–104; Gill et al. 2005; Buchbinder 2012: 125).⁴

But many of these accounts have failed to offer sufficient exploration of the sensory logics of gym-work itself (cf. Crossley 2006), such as the sensations of pain and achievement that characterise weight-lifting. One of the things that is striking about gym practices at Studio 180, a gym in Billericay, Essex, are the silent iterations of young gym goers pulling, pushing and lifting weights.⁵ The young men who primarily occupy these mechanical micro-spaces of bodily activity are not the gigantic body-builders so often encountered in sociological literature (Wacquant 1995b: 174; see Crossley 2006 for critique). They do not inhabit masculine cults that, for Loic Wacquant (1995b: 164, 173–174), have made a cosmological fetish of the muscular male body. Quietly, they work through the various machines of the gym, walking from station to station without truly leaving the state of intense focus on the set of activities before them. It was these types of relatively silent and focused activity along with my informants' perspectives that have encouraged me to push past the conclusions of the sociological literature that has generally couched what I refer to as 'gym-work' as a body-image project (Gill et al. 2005: 3, 9). On the whole, accounts of contemporary British masculinity and of body-image politics more broadly have focused on this point. Sociologists like Anthony Giddens (1991: 10, 99–100) have described the body in 'high modernity' as a 'reflexive project of the self', an object of continuous regimes of self-cultivation through practices of tattooing, piercing, dieting, body-building and other forms of modification (Featherstone 1999; cf. Weigers 1998). In the process, Giddens and others (see also Gill et al. 2005; Bridges 2009) have continued to focus on the reflexive construction of appearance, of the body as image or material: an externally-oriented presentation of 'self-identity' (Giddens 1991: 99) rather than a force that is exerted.

In an attempt to move beyond symbolic or image-based approaches to the body in anthropology, this article seeks to realise the way in which young men in Essex actualise the body as a 'technical means' (Mauss 1992 [1934]: 461; see also Warnier 2007, 2009) for particular forms of self-invention that are not manifest in image (contra Giddens), but bodied forth in action (Warnier 2007, 2009; Rapport 2003). Whereas much of the literature and even local discourse (see above) about gym-work sees it as an aesthetic pursuit, I suggest that gym-work and boxing put in motion a '*moi*' concept of the masculine self, defined by its 'psycho-physical' immanence in activity (Venkatesan 2014: 132; Ingold 2011: 58, 61) and concomitant disconnection from everyday life where body image would otherwise be an operative marker of personhood (Carrithers 1985:

235 in Venkatesan 2014: 153). What is at stake in the gym, for instance, is not only appearance, but sensing the physicality of the self as a determining force in the world. These acts prove the self's power to affect the world *to the self* (rather than to anyone else, as with body image), by physically bodying forth a version of the person that *can*. My use of the word 'self', therefore, is not to evoke Giddens' account of reflexive self-identity, with its suggestion of socially-purposed image or appearance, but rather to describe an ethnographically precipitated aspect of personhood expressed and enunciated by my informants through bodily praxis.

By including a discussion of boxing praxis alongside that of gym-work, I show how both sets of practices allow young men in Essex to work from the site of the body to generate an experience of individual agency, power and overcoming.⁶ Through a focus on 'sensori-motor conduct', 'bodily motion aiming at something and involving *ipso facto* perceptive activity' (Warnier 2009: 465), I study the sensory logics that define these spaces, such as resisting pain felt in the body during weight-lifting, or unleashing punches against an invisible opponent during shadow-boxing. In doing so, I show how men's praxis in both spaces is unified by a common principle of bodily autology (following Povinelli 2011: 26–27), a concept I use to describe how young men harness these kinetic practices to body forth a physically and existentially capacitated and powerful version of the male self through sheer movement (Rapport 2003: 3). This self-victory-over-the self-to-the-self is what gives gym-work and boxing the peculiar self-trumping quality that I describe as autological: the capacity to overcome the pain and discomfort arising from gym and boxing challenges is thought to emerge from within male persons, a sort of corpo-poiesis where something arises from out of itself through particular forms of bodily doing and associated sensory experiences (Heidegger 1977: 10; Warnier 2007: 24).

The notion of bodily autology, then, is not intended as a totalising analytical framework that displaces my broadly praxeological approach, but a means of ethnographically describing how men quite literally embody this alternative imagining of the self through the sensory logics and bodily forms afforded by both gym-work and boxing.⁷ As I go on to show in the final section of the paper, acts of bodily autology take place within a broader context of socio-political youth disenfranchisement and boredom, where young men find themselves locked in to time-consuming and often mundane office jobs that hinder the exertion and experience of the body (cf. Leder 1990). By connecting their achievements within these spaces to adversity beyond, young men re-invent their position in relation to the world outside the gym and the Hut, and reclaim a strand of personhood (Humphrey 2008: 370) that theorises them into the world as powerful agents through vigorous sensori-motivity. In this way, I attempt to illuminate the social logics of contemporary masculinity in Britain as they 'play out' through these practices, much as other anthropologists have examined types of bodily activity in extreme sports that afford their young male practitioners novel imaginations of, and connections with, the forces they understand as existing in the world (Abramson & Lavolette 2007).

The ethnography in this paper draws on 'observant participation' (Wacquant 2004: 6) at boxing and gym facilities where I trained alongside my informants, and through which I direct the analysis towards a consideration of the sensory logics of bodily doing in these spaces. I also reference a set of interviews with my interlocutors, a group of young men from Essex in their early to mid-twenties. Craig works in public infrastructure,

Mark is a surveyor, Pascal is a Muay Thai enthusiast with a local office job and Will works with a London-based football club.⁸ I bridge this discussion of bodily doing into a consideration of boxing at the Billericay Boxing Hut where my main interlocutors were Nick and Dave, two men in their early twenties who had experience boxing at junior level and had recently returned to the sport with a view to 'moving up' and becoming 'carded'⁹ boxers. Before moving on to a praxeological analysis of gym-work and boxing, I begin by addressing the body-image question and the impact it has had on the study of masculine gym-culture and sports more broadly.

Beyond 'body image': towards a praxeological analysis of gym-work

There is no doubt that young men in Essex are affected by how they think the body should *look*—simply put, 'body image' (Fedorak 2013: 75)—in relation to the body they *have*. Gym-work is what they think they should *do* in order to address the discrepancy between the former and the latter. In Will's view, 'pretty much every man who starts going to gym is doing it 'cause he wants to look good'. As if speaking for an entire generation of men affected by the increasing presence of the athletic male body in advertising (Gill et al. 2005: 4), Craig told me that 'I don't think any man is one hundred per cent happy with how he looks'. According to him:

Everyone wants to fit in in the middle ground don't they, and blend into what is conventionally known as attractive, know what I mean? The safe option rather than like get super-super ripped or super-super skinny or super-super fat. Everyone just wants to be... Like, I don't, I don't want to get ripped at all; I just want to be considered as averagely fit.

The importance of being considered fit cannot be overstated. The young men I spoke to showed an explicit concern to show to others that they 'looked after themselves', that is, that they were responsible and hard-working persons.¹⁰

Anthropological and sociological accounts of masculine 'body projects' (Gill et al. 2005) have generally focused on this point—the modification of the body's appearance (Featherstone 1999)—often emphasising that despite claims to rebellion and self-expression, a 'normative masculinity' is reinforced (Gill et al. 2005: 18). Underlying these accounts is an understanding that young men ultimately fail in their attempts to rebel and to secure their goals of social autonomy through body projects, since 'vehement protestations of individualism, independence and bodily autonomy' are actually 'enactments of hegemonic ideals' (Ibid.: 22). The potentially empowering or self-inventive effects of gym-work are cancelled out by the implicit maintenance of hegemonic norms of body image and bodily capacity: the norm of the built masculine body that allows men to present themselves as capable social actors (Ibid.: 9, 22; see also Wacquant 1995b).

This analytical tendency to play down the claims of young men to 'rebellion' echoes a strain of anthropological writing concerned with political resistance in everyday life that conceptualises how oppressive social organisations and their corresponding ideologies are maintained via everyday practices of resistance (Gluckman 1958 in Gledhill 2000: 70–71; Scott 1985: 292, 304–305). The notion of 'body capital', for instance, that one



Figure 1. Nick throwing a right cross.

accrues through shaping the body according to ideal types in order to ‘fit in’ socially, is part of this general orientation towards ‘conformity’ (cf. Bridges 2008; Staples 2011). This emphasis on the constant production or reiteration of norms could equally be described as a ‘resistance-hegemony’ dialectic, and I henceforth use these terms to describe the types of analyses that have emphasised the power of social norms (see also Bridges 2008; Wacquant 1995b). Anthropologists have generally been reluctant to part with this dialectic, and have often emphasised the inescapability of these hegemonic structures even whilst discussing acts of bodily control and self-creation (Giddens 1991) that are, at an individual level, designed to transcend these structures. Joseph S. Alter’s work on the body of the wrestler in India is a case in point. Whilst he accepts that gym-work—the sheer effort of it—involves an experiential subjectification of the self (Alter 1992: 91–93), he maintains that it offers only an ‘illusion of liberation’ (Alter 1992: 91–92; cf. Wacquant 1995b). For Alter, this rests upon a particularly Western ontological arrangement: Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body. By contrast, Hindu schemes of discipline are let off of the hook, as it were, because they do not recognise the same mind/body distinction that allows *bodies* (in a Western context) to become objectified, separately from *minds* (Alter 1992: 91–93).

The recourse to precisely such understandings of social normativity or hegemony has often meant that the claims made by young men regarding the realisation of autonomy through gym-going practices have been played down (Gill et al. 2005: 22). Consider, then, Mark’s explanation that:

Body image is one thing, but as well when you like speak to people who go to the gym, getting compliments from girls is nice but it's the compliments from other men that they feel more gratuitous [sic] about, because the men actually realise how much hard work you have to put in to look like that—there's more of that acceptance of them putting in loads of hard work to look like that.

The body is not so much taken as a product of a social structure, but of individual 'hard work', and 'that's why you appreciate it', Mark tells me. Hitherto, few ethnographic accounts have explored the content of this 'hard work' itself, focusing instead on the discourse that surrounds body modification, and the uniform appearance of male bodies in contemporary Britain (Gill et al. 2005; see also Marsden 2007 on all-male gatherings and social aesthetics). As Mark suggests, it is not so much the aesthetic appearance of the body itself that men value, but rather the nature of the sign—the concerted exertions of bodily doing that is indexed by a built body.

The tendency to emphasise the maintenance of masculine norms has largely been due to a focus on the substance or appearance of the body, rather than its experiential praxis *during modification*: the 'hard work' that it takes to transform the body, as Mark put it (Giddens 1991: 56; see also Warnier 2007: 5–9 and Crossley 2006 for critique). Jean-Pierre Warnier (2007: 5–6, 10; 2009: 465) has called this analytical tendency towards the symbolic the 'Magritte effect',¹¹ where analysts become fixated on sign values, on the representational value of things, rather than their presence in a moving world. In precisely this body-object, symbolic vein Wacquant (1995b) has argued that the 'sensual dynamics' of gym-work only reinforce 'the cult of muscularity' that prevails amongst body-builders. What these accounts maintain is the notion that *practice*—simply put, bodily doing—cannot ever transcend the form of the object: the *substance* or *appearance* of the body that is subject to social control (cf. Alter 1992). The interior effects of bodily practice are always obstructed and mitigated by their visual and material conformity to a set of norms.

A conversation I had with Craig echoed this line of argument about the impossibility of transcending 'structure' or hegemonic forces (Gledhill 2000: 77–78) through the modification of the body. In Craig's words:

Human nature says we're striving for acceptance of some sort and even the people that deliberately rebel against conventional notions of beauty, by the very fact they're doing that they're the same, because they're accepting that *there is that structure in the first place...* Everyone's looking for something. There isn't anyone there that hasn't got any motive for what they're doing, how they dress, how they present their bodies and stuff. (Emphasis added.)

Craig was fully aware he implicitly maintained and participated in a corporeal regime that upheld the norms of aesthetic appearance discussed above. But then I was struck by how our conversation quickly turned:

Take for example: my ambition right now is to be able to do an unassisted pull-up, because I've never been able to do one in my life. Which is a really negligible minor thing in relation to most people at the gym, but people probably... a lot of people probably don't appreciate that that means a lot to me 'cause if I can get to a day where I can do that, without an assistance, that'll be like *I'll be ready to take on the world*. That's my goal. That's what I told myself that I couldn't do and if I get to the point where I can do it, *you're set in't you, you're made. You walk out and you're walking on air*. (Emphasis added.)

As Craig went on, he gave far more emphasis to the effects of his ‘striving’, and allowed the physicality of his work in the gym analytical autonomy from the problem of ‘structure’ and ‘conventional notions of beauty’ that saw him otherwise following the ‘safe option’ to be ‘considered averagely fit’. Within a broader process of reinforcing the hegemony of bodily beauty was a challenge that, when taken up, was able to radically enhance Craig’s sense of capability to *do* (Long & Moore 2013: 13) that went beyond merely physical capability or wanting to attain a ‘toned’ aesthetic. In Craig’s description, the body is more than an image to mediate the presentation of a desired identity. It is moving force that capacitates the self as powerful according to its sensori-motoricity (Warnier 2007), that is, its very performance or exertion through praxis rather than manifestation in appearance. The body’s aesthetic appearance is eclipsed by his self-determination to become a physically competent and powerful being that would be ‘ready to take on the world’. The body is the locus of Craig’s agency and its capacities define the horizons of his existence (Rapport 2003: 215–217). Crucially, this *you* (or self, as I describe it) is formed in relation to an externalised social world *against which* it makes itself a competitive agent, a theme I explore in the latter stages of the article.

In light of Craig’s words, focusing on bodily conformity as though it were a failure of individual autonomy would seem to ignore the sheer re-invigorating and self-repairing potentials of gym-work, much as Nick Crossley (2006: 47) has also noted. In a useful contribution to the ‘hegemony-resistance’ debate, anthropologists Jacqueline Urla and Justin Helepololei (2014: 437) note that, in anthropological writing on resistance, contradictions such as this should not always be framed in terms of co-optation. They argue that anthropologists must strive to understand why our informants choose certain strategies, and how ‘they puzzle through the origins, advantages, and shortcomings of these political strategies’. Through such puzzling, anthropologists can gain insight into precisely why strategies have meaning and use in the achievement of a particular aim (*ibid.*). I do not think conformity is a problem if we look at gym-going and boxing as ‘political strategies’ in the way that Urla and Helepololei describe, that is, as multi-faceted, containing logics, plans, shapes and forms that achieve certain aims, whilst having other—and not necessarily unforeseen—consequences. If what emerges from these engagements is a body that appears to conform, then it is probably an advantage for my informants who require certain appearances or types of body capital to socialise in a masculine social context (*cf.* Staples 2011: 548, 558), but clearly gym-work has effects for the self that require further analysis.

In keeping with an established ethnographic tradition concerning ritual and embodied action, this paper seeks to position gym-work and boxing as liminal zones of experience, spatially and temporally ‘marked-off’ from everyday life (Kapferer 1983: 2; *cf.* Turner 2008 [1969]: 96) where latent ‘ideas’ about male personhood can ‘realize their full force’ (Kapferer 1983: 4). Though never explicitly stated, young men in Essex value qualities of individual ‘personality’, as my informants would often put it, and character expressed through sociability, dress and in sport. Gym-work realises latent qualities that my informants associated with male personhood such as the ability to overcome pain, to continuously put in effort towards particular bodily ends, and to make tangible corporeal achievements through sporting activity. Gym-work and boxing could be said to realise local understandings of masculine capability as an intrinsic quality of the person. In

light of the example provided by Craig, above, what might to an outside observer seem a mundane aspect of everyday life—setting oneself challenges in the gym—becomes a mode of action through which his understanding of self transforms his position in relation to ‘the world’ into one that is distinctly powerful (cf. Turner 2008: 103). Gym-work and boxing are about proving that masculine agency or the capacity to do *really is* located at the level of the individual via bodily challenges that require men to overcome the pain and exhaustion they encounter within their bodies (cf. Rapport 2003: 30).

Ethnographies of ritual undertaken in the phenomenological tradition (see for example Kapferer 1983; Csordas 1994) have often seen the body and bodily performance as forms of social reconfiguration where new existential horizons are arrived at (Csordas 1994: 7–8) since the body’s pre-reflexive orientation to the world is never fully territorialized by cultural values and categories (ibid.: 14). Like many phenomenological approaches attuned to the form and content of ritual, whilst also moving beyond representational approaches to the body in anthropology, Warnier (2009: 465) has put forward an approach that inquires into the sensori-motoricity of the body—bodily motion that aims for something (and which necessarily involves perceptive activity)—via a ‘praxeological’ method, essentially a cartographic study of the body’s forms and sensory responses to different types of activities. The emphasis placed in this framework on the ‘effects’ of sensori-motor conduct on ‘subjects’ (ibid.) are analogous to Csordas’ notion of bodily indeterminacy where, although never entirely pre-cultural, the body operates as locus for the (sensori-motor) re-configuration or ‘objectification’ of novel and alternative cultural categories (Csordas 1994: 8–9, 13–14) through particular forms of sensory experience.

Warnier’s praxeological orientation is particularly useful in this ethnographic context as boxing and gym practices in Essex involve very specific forms of sensori-motor conduct, and the salience of these forms are not always verbalised by interlocutors. He has argued that amongst the Mankon of Cameroon, for instance, a material culture of vessels and the containment of substances forge a type of subjectivity whereby people see their bodies as containers (2009: 467). Warnier (2007: 161) gives us reason to believe that notions of the personhood are not simply verbalised, but also manifest themselves in practice.¹² By adopting Warnier’s praxeological framework as a grounding methodology, the second and third parts of this paper, then, explore what is at stake for the self that is engaged at the gym and during boxing training.

The work of autology: a praxeological analysis of gym-work

When I lift a weight, I think that if I don’t do as many lifts as I want then the weight’s beaten you.
(Will, gym-goer.)

It was a conversation with Pascal on an overcast day in Basildon that brought into focus the internal and introverted aspects of the effects and efforts that take place in the gym. I was already well into my fieldwork based at a local gym in Billericay, but I had continued to wonder about the role of silence and bodily control in the practice of weight-lifting (amongst other gym-based exercises). During weight-lifting at Studio 180 men seemed to recede into themselves. These acts of internally-focused concentration were usually

facilitated with an iPod or mp3 player—not to mention the blaring house music—in what seemed like attempts to create personalised soundscapes where lifting could follow a continuous rhythm. If the gym is a ‘public space’ (de Certeau 1998 [1994]: 9), it is only so through the glances and brief greetings that take place between gym-goers. Extended talk, if it takes place at all, does so within small groups or pairs of young men who congregate around pieces of equipment and take it in turns to use them. Gym-work is generally collaborative, and men work in pairs to take it in turns on a piece of equipment or weight-lifting, whilst the other ‘spots’, that is, monitors and facilitates his friend’s form and technique. Mutual assistance facilitates the forms of experiential interiority we find in the gym, and conversations between individual men are generally kept short out of an implicit respect for the autonomy of others and their very personal aims in the gym. For men like my informants Craig and Mark, who sometimes frequent the gym together as a pair, the collective dynamic of gym-work is geared towards their realization as singular persons since each takes it in turn to facilitate the other’s form and technique during weight-lifting. Whilst the one ‘spotting’ might offer words of encouragement during a lift, he plays a supporting role by calling on the other to push past his limits in order to achieve a new goal. These words of encouragement do not have a machismo style, and in general I found that the spotting partner would often talk as if reassuring his friend that a given lift were possible rather than barking orders in the style of the boxing coaches we meet later in this article. This way, the lift stays calm and focused for the person attempting it, whilst the spotting partner fades into the background, as it were. Meanwhile, the lifting partner remains in a state of concentration, intent on the precise control of his bodily movement and contraction of his muscles.

Pascal brought these apparently introspective acts into analytical focus when he described going to the gym as ‘almost like a kind of meditation’. As Pascal and I were talking he opened up his arms and straightened his posture slightly, like one might when attempting to attain the inner focus and bodily posture necessary for weight lifting. He continued, ‘It’s a locus of control; you’re in there, concentrating on your movement and breathing, and really it’s about getting that control’. Pascal explained that the ‘healing’ effects of the gym relied on its separation as a space from his chaotic life. Pascal had recently gone through a break-up and in the midst of it the gym had given him a purpose that, whilst he acknowledged was partially aesthetic (‘I can look in the mirror and think, “I look good”’), was also contingent upon sensing his body in a way that afforded him a level of ‘control’ that his life otherwise seemed to deny. Another of my interlocutors, Mark, described this as a state of absent presence,

You’re away from everything else, you haven’t got to think about anything else, your mind is just focused on doing a rep¹³ or whatever, and that’s all you’re thinking about.

Pascal’s reference to ‘a locus of control’ indexed an imagined topology of agency in the social world. It seemed to recognise what Michel Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish* (1991 [1977]) as a set of institutional technologies that discipline and direct the body towards greater efficiency in war and labour. Foucault’s bio-politics presents us with a body that is one’s own but simultaneously subject to external loci of control. Pascal’s principle of a bodily locus of control reverses this formula. Control is something he is capable of *if* he utilises the body in a particular way. The body is therefore the centre of



Figure 2. Dave ducking an imagined punch from the bag.

acts that restore Pascal's capacity for control in a universe of agents that both control him and seek to deny him control in his own social universe (the unpredictability of working life and personal relationships). Control in Pascal's definition is, much as Nigel Rapport has suggested, an 'existential power' afforded by bodily control of weights that physically impede the body and which evoke the 'impersonal, social-structural or institutional power' that limits him in everyday life, from his job to his personal relationships (Rapport 2003: 5). The effects of these are cast off by 'getting that control' over the body in the gym in order to restore a sense of independence and capacity to affect the world. Pascal's definition of bodily 'control' directed me towards considering gym-work as unfolding on a plane of agentive forces, where loci of control are gathered and assembled through the body's practical and perceptual activity: its sensori-motoricity (Warnier 2007).

The primary logic of gym-work involves heavy physical forces that are resisted by the body through the strength of its muscles, often requiring deep concentration. When using a Shoulder-Press at the gym, it is the shoulders (on which the weight of the machine rests while being pushed upwards), hands (that wrap around the handles) and arms (that push up) which are brought into heightened presence through their exhaustive use, whereas the legs recede from focus due to their relative inactivity (Leder 1990: 24–25). In the context of gym-work, the perspectives latent in the body are activated in conceptually significant ways through its engagement with objects. For Pascal, the weights disappear in the sharpening of his capacity for control (see also Alter 1992). For Mark, the process of repetitive weight-lifting requires so much focus that the external world disappears from perceptual apprehension, isolating him as a separate social actor concerned with only one objective: the rep.

During a lift the agency of the equipment is activated *against* the gym-goer, but *by* him as well. For a dumb bell to resist the lifting arm it must be lifted initially; the body must animate it as a resistance in the first place. Through such assemblages of human and non-human agency, bodies become the very forces that reflexively act back upon them. Another of my interlocutors, Will, described how he, 'as a naturally competitive person' saw weight-lifting as 'a competition between me and the weight even though it is me against me'. In other words, gym-work involves opposed perspectives: the lifter, and the weights he must not only resist but overcome, as Will's quote at the head of the section suggests. The lifter is not a passive agent, but an active force that aims to overcome the obstacle posed by the weight.

For Will, weight-lifting is an intra-relational contest: '... it's almost even the athletic driven "better yourself" side against the lazy, relaxed slobbish side of me which is in constant battle...' The alternative 'lazy' self is the potential version of the self that lacks the autological capacity to *do*.¹⁴

I suppose the way I see it is that you will have the side which wants to strive and improve and the other side which I suppose you could call the lazy side which wants to protect and preserve itself and then reproduce. For example I will feel much more lazy... when I have had a long day at work, am tired, hungry etc., so I suppose that's your body's way of saying I need to rest, refuel or I am going to be in trouble. The problem is that it seems to be very over cautious to me. I reckon everyone has that 'lazy side' and then difference in people is how strong the 'other' side is to override it. Like some people have an amazing determination and drive which seems unrelenting whereas others none at all.

For Will, gym-work becomes an auto-relation (Venkatesan 2014) extended out into the sensori-motoricity of the process. Weight-lifting becomes a zone of possibility in which different possible selves duke it out for their own emergence. Gym-equipment becomes an unwanted 'lazy' version of the self, whilst the doing, agentive and determined side must work to overcome it. This takes us further than defining gym-goers in the midst of a repetition of lifts as experientially heightening their notion of themselves as already singular 'selves' or 'subjects' (Alter 1992: 91–93). Weight-lifting becomes a material and sensori-motor instantiation of an auto-relation that must itself be collapsed in order for one side of the relation, one version of the self to 'override' and emerge: the autological. Gym-goers like my interlocutors do not describe themselves as emerging from these practices as 'subjects', but as the opposite: powerful agents emancipated from a socially-induced laziness (contra Warnier 2009). In a similar respect, Mark explained to me how gym-work afforded a greater sense of achievement than his job, because office work lacked the same degree of corporeal intensity:

You never really get a massive sense of achievement... although you may have done so many emails or written so many reports...but by going to the gym you feel like it's more tangible...

What is at stake in these acts of agentive reconstitution can be seen more clearly if we consider the possibility of failure. Mark reflected that,

Normally before the gym I roughly know what I want to do... If I don't do it, yeah, I'm not happy afterwards and I'll feel like 'Ah, I should have done a little bit more'... You're fighting yourself, and you're not doing it for anyone other than yourself... There shouldn't be no real reason [sic] to be annoyed, but you are.

Mark's description shows us how, despite the sociological and anthropological commitment to locating the desire for young men to work out in a specific socio-cultural milieu, the default logic of gym-work for gym-goers is autological. It is an individual project that pitches the self against the self, addressing the need to extinguish the self's 'lazy' version, as Will put it. The determination to succeed is seen to come from within, and this interior locus of capability is bolstered by the achievement (Long & Moore, 2013: 13).

By analytically conceiving of autology as a force of personhood, and gym-work as a bodily strategy that elicits that force, then the body can be seen as the locus through which this version of the self is focused on as *the* defining aspect of a male person. Autology requires what Nigel Rapport has described as the body's capability—as a locus of experience—to be used creatively in the bodying forth of alternative 'world views', as Rapport (2003: 215–6) describes them. If what is unique about the body as a locus of perception is that it remains partially pre-reflexive or pre-cultural (Rapport 2003: 217; Csordas 1994: 8), then it can be seen in this instance as 'man's first and most natural technical object' as well as 'technical means' (Mauss 1992: 461) in the reconstitution of an agentive self. Young men in Essex therefore use a phenomenal understanding of the body's experiential capacities in their own political strategies. The body *is* the potential to body forth alternative ways of being in the world.

Bodily autology at the Billericay Boxing Hut

To bring practices of bodily autology into greater focus, I now turn to the Billericay Boxing Hut where I undertook fieldwork in conjunction with my participant observation at Studio 180.¹⁵ Boxing, it must be noted, cannot be described as a practice of body modification in the same way as gym-work. The training that takes place at the Hut is dedicated to bringing the boxer into being; taking inexperienced trainees and making them move, think and feel like a fighter (Wacquant 2004: 16–17, 1995a: 71–72). As well as a range of collective fitness exercises, this effort included drills aimed at teaching trainees how to move, parry and punch like a boxer. This might include the use of hand-held weights in shadow-boxing, or ropes tied between the walls of the hall that we (the trainees) practice rolling (i.e. ducking) under. As Wacquant (2004: 149) noted, through these methods training gradually brings about the 'sea shift' towards the boxer's *habitus*, the embodied skills that allow participation in the pugilistic sport. But whilst Wacquant's study focused on the ways trainees come to adopt the *habitus* of a boxer through 'an implicit, practical, and collective mode of inculcation' (Wacquant 2004: 100; 1995a: 66–67; Bourdieu 1990 [1980]: 68), my inquiry into the praxeology of boxing views its sensory logics and bodily forms as a set of technical practices that draw forth an autological aspect of male personhood. In this respect, this section continues the line of inquiry established in the praxeological study of gym-work presented above. My intention here is not to deny the salience of Wacquant's practice-based approach to boxing pedagogy, but to argue that—through the forms and sensory logics available in the Boxing Hut— young men are able to theorise themselves into the world as agentive persons capable of overcoming adversity through sheer movement. Whilst such acts of bodily autology retain a conceptual similarity to overcoming the challenge posed by weights seen in the example

of gym-work, boxing training, in distinction from gym-work, involves the adoption of postures and performance of gestures that allow the practitioner to place greater analytical emphasis on its bodily *forms* (in addition to its sensory logics) as a means through which boxers render themselves fluid, adaptive and powerful persons. Whilst the gym-goers presented above kinetically express the autological self through pitting themselves against weights, I argue that the conflict at the heart of boxing, which is simulated in training, calls upon trainees to embody an autological version of the self, capable of overcoming the opponent.

It is here that my analysis diverges from Wacquant's (2004: 237) emphasis on the boxing gym as a factory of socialisation, due in part to a praxeological approach that inquires into the immediate effects and logics of sensory experiences (Warnier 2007: 154–158), rather than studying their coding into the body's *habitus* through learning. Although my informants emphasise the importance of training (and, indeed, would comment on my own progress as evidence of its gradual nature), I seek to explore what I consider the 'other side' of boxing, which comprises a discourse and a set of practices that posits the sheer capacity of trainees to overcome adversity (whether that is to keep punching when becoming fatigued, or to overcome an opponent through the wiles of jabbing and rolling), a capacity that is thought to be enabled and elicited through social relations of camaraderie (Strathern 2013: 186) rather than socially constructed by it. As I go on to show in the following section, the kinetic self-enunciation that takes place in the Boxing Hut turns upon an analogy boxers (and, likewise, gym-goers) establish between the forces that constrain self-realisation in the world beyond and the obstacles they face during the course of training. First, however, I show how the boxing stance calls on trainees to embody the autological self by evoking the opposition between boxer and opponent, the fundamental, if eventual, *telos* of training.

Consider first the Competition Boxer, a higher level and more complete boxer than the trainees who attend the Billericay Boxing Hut on Wednesday nights. The competition boxer, who will occasionally drop in on Wednesday sessions, displays the kind of total re-tutoring of movement that Wacquant highlighted as central to the boxer's *habitus* (Wacquant 2004: 16; Bourdieu 1990: 68–69). He moves around the punching bag as if sizing up an opponent, never taking his eyes from it. He walks as a boxer should: on the balls of his feet, and like a tin-man with rusty joints, his gloved fists swinging up high. The bag also swings but chaotically so, as if reeling from his punches. Whilst he walks, the boxer picks another spot and returns to his fighting stance; elbows raised, feet dancing below him as he turns on his core in such a way as to generate maximum power in his blows.

Highly competent boxers with real fighting experience are able to bring the punching bag to life. Such is the experience of one Competition Boxer, who tells me afterwards that he has boxed since he was a teenager and that his interest came from his family (his brother and father also boxed), that he *cannot* act as though he is training when he does his bag work. To be enough, training must become as close to fighting as it possibly can be. This relies upon acts of imagination (Sneath et al. 2009) that go beyond merely bringing the bag into heightened focus to harness the material affordances of the bag to transform it into another boxer. Its obdurate materiality adds to this scenario of endless assault, being filled with rags and sand so as to make it a troublesome opponent, and

difficult to move, if somewhat offensively limited. Whenever the boxer adopts his stance, his pugilistic *habitus* (Wacquant 2004: 16) in relation to the bag, it becomes the body of an untiring opponent.

Technical training in the Boxing Hut always takes place with implicit reference to the potential opponent. The Phantom Opponent, as I call it, underpins exercises such as shadow-boxing and bag-work; its absent presence gives training its guiding logic: boxing trainees must prepare for the time when this Opponent must be fought. The absence of a 'real' opponent at the Hut and the great emphasis placed on the improvement of one's own technique and fitness means that it is sometimes easy to forget that the training process should culminate in the fighting of an opponent. Although many trainees have sparred at some point in their boxing career, and have at least some knowledge of what it is like to face an opponent, very little is said about the experience of fighting or the type of opponent. This is because experienced boxers know that thinking about the opponent is problematic since he is almost always a surprise: an opposing force that cannot be fully anticipated. Instead, trainees wisely focus on the certainty that all they can do is to improve their own abilities in the long preparation that prefigures even basic sparring practice. But nevertheless, the spectre of the opponent continues to lurk in the background. Everything ambitious trainees like my informants Nick and Dave do is directed towards perfecting their capabilities in the anticipation of an eventual match. During shadowboxing boxers are sometimes explicitly told to imagine an opponent. '*Imagine you're backing him up*', shouts Doug the coach, before reversing the terms of the engagement. '*Now imagine he's got you backing up!*' Imagined fights break out in the individual combat spaces that trainees periodically establish in the generally communal space of the Hut, and that dissolve again as soon as solitary exercises come to a close. If one was to look at the more experienced boxers during this exercise, such as Nick or Jason, then one would notice that whilst they appear to be fighting the Phantom Opponent, they are simultaneously drawn into themselves, partially absent from external activity. With eyes glazed over, Jason appears to have an internal focus; he brings his own movements into heightened awareness, since the need for precision and technique is a corollary of fighting and opponent: the need to land efficient blows.

The Phantom Opponent exists as a reminder of the future 'real' opponent who exists outside of the social connections—the gestures, small talk and shared experiences of pain—that characterise life at the Boxing Hut. Boxers prepare to face an opponent who is presented by coaches in the abstract as more capable, more competent and therefore requiring boxers to focus on their own capacities (to step back from a punch quickly enough, to develop combinations of punches that maximise possible force and speed) rather than those of the, at this stage unknown, opponent. When demonstrating punching combinations, coaches often explain that stepping back after throwing a left jab is very important because, to punch initially, you step in range of the opponent. The Phantom Opponent, then, is an imaginative function embedded in training with the purpose of encouraging greater awareness of one's own punching technique and all-round movement in the ring. Whilst for inexperienced boxers the challenge of imagining an opponent is difficult, perhaps due to a lack of real ring experience, for experienced boxers the notion of an opponent is so deeply embedded within their 'pugilistic *habitus*' (Wacquant 2004: 16) that they cannot help but train as if the opponent is there. The Phantom Opponent

is present to the extent that experienced boxers know they must take extra care over their movements, their rolls and punches. The Phantom Opponent is so much a part of the underlying logic of experienced boxers' movements that it makes possible a seemingly paradoxical capability: to be both inside the body, and concentrating on its movements, whilst simultaneously guiding these movements towards an external target.

This is not to say that boxers are not embedded in a set of social relations with their peers. By contrast, collective exercises forge egalitarianism amongst boxers through creating shared experiences of bodily pain. At the end of another training session Amy the coach makes the entire class hold the plank¹⁶ for as long as possible. '*No pain no gain*,' she shouts. One of the younger trainees mumbles 'Why do they say that? Why not, "no pain a lot of gain"?' After a while Nick is buckling, 'I feel like I'm giving birth!' he says. These comments are an important part of the camaraderie of training in which pain is often expressed in a self-deprecating, semi-humorous way. These grumblings are extremely socially orientated; as Nick made his comment he turned to the trainees in the plank position next to him, looking to express his pain to the others. In the plank position trainees resist a common obstacle: the floor, against which they prop themselves by their elbows and toes. Although boxers encounter the same resistance, they of course have different capabilities. Some trainees, particularly those looking to 'move up' to competition boxing are able to hold a position like the plank for much longer. But rather than differentiating bodies from each other, these exercises instead give encouragement for boxers to share their bodily experiences in such a way that they establish the similarity of their corporeal substance. In a similar respect, time-outs between bag-punching drills involve glances and shared gestures—grimaces of exhaustion and the exaggerated puffing out of air—that locate trainees on the same plane of physicality. Trainees might exclaim things such as, 'These are the worst burpees¹⁷ ever!'

But when the boxer adopts his stance, he severs himself from the relations between trainees, from the camaraderie that defines sociality at the Hut (Strathern 1996). The boxer—in this mode—is doing more than merely gesturing. He takes up a position. He is focused on the idea of his opponent and through that heightens concentration upon his own movement and its improvement. Consider, for instance, a brief scene from my ethnography on stance-training:

Tip is leading this week's class, and after beginning with toe-running outside the Hut, we go back inside. 'Everybody get a wooden pole,' says Tip as we trudge back into the Hut. In this exercise, we lodge the metre-long pole horizontally behind our heads and wrap our hands over it on each side, a bit like scarecrows. Tip explains that this is to show us how boxers 'turn on their core'. Spaced apart, the trainees follow Tip in adopting the stance, with left foot forward, right foot providing stability behind and lowering our torsos so that, in Tip's words, we 'sit' in our stance. Turning the pole either side, we twist our upper bodies and arms like a boxer does when he hits a series of shots. The boxer's core remains stable, and in an arc of movement around this stable stance, he composes a series of outward shots. (Fieldnotes, July 2nd 2014)

'It might not seem like it, but if you're like this you're actually quite hard to get at,' says Tip, as he demonstrates the proper stance to the class. From here the boxer looks out at his opponent. When he punches he *turns* on his core, which provides a locus of stability from which punches emerge in a surrounding arc of movement. This stance is fundamental; it underpins everything a boxer does in the ring and in technical training. It enables boxers

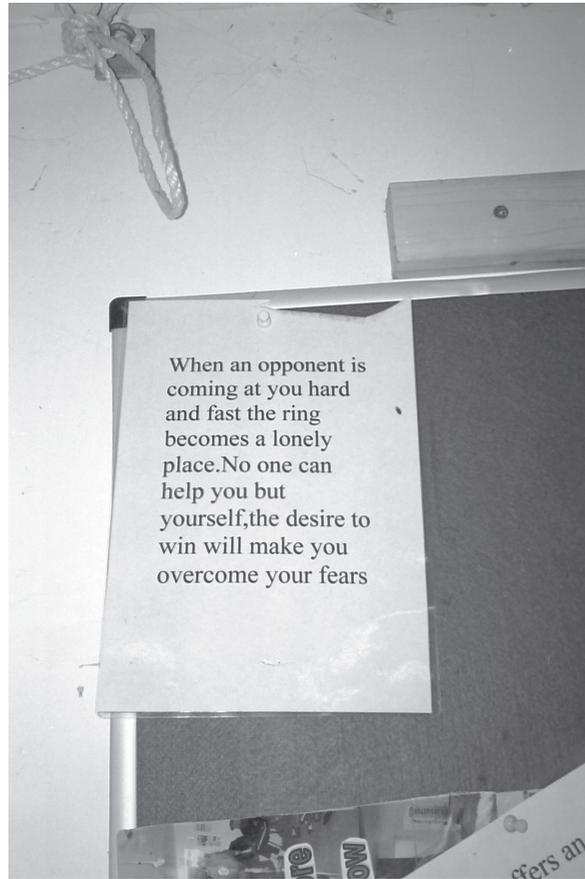


Figure 3. Cutting the network away from the boxer.

to twist their hips as they punch with a left jab or right cross and to generate extra power into a blow. It exists in utter contrast to the social postures enacted before training, and the relational orientation of trainees during collective exercises. It inherently isolates the trainee from his peers. A sign on the wall in the Hut addresses precisely this cutting of the network (Strathern 1996: 523–524) that a boxer must undergo: ‘When an opponent is coming at you hard and fast the ring becomes a lonely place. No one can help you but yourself, the desire to win will make you overcome your fears.’ It suggests that boxing hinges upon the socialised training (Wacquant 2004: 59–60) of a being who is eventually made singular when he enters the ring to face an opponent and his network of peers and coaches is cut away (Strathern 1996: 523–524). Entering the fighting stance during training is a bodily form conceptually analogous to entering the ring, since it encourages boxers to adopt the compact and manoeuvrable physical shape (gloves raised, chin tucked in, and feet apart—ready to roll punch in an instant) that facing an opponent requires.

During these stance-based exercises interactions amongst trainees—the expressions of pain and the humour—stop entirely as boxers recede into themselves, much like gym-

goers do. Isolated by his stance, the boxer's capacity to work through the punishing physical exercise of constant bag-punching is thought, ultimately, to be a product of abstract stores of individual agency: autology. The very principles of individualised exercises, such as bag-work, are based upon the notion that persons have a default source of agency that is the fundamental factor in their decision-making and overall ability to carry out tasks. '*Dig deep!*' shouts Barry, one of the coaches, as the Boxing Hut erupts in a cacophony of 'bam-bam-bams' as an army of gloved fists hit the array of punching bags. Each punch is an iteration of the self against the pain and discomfort the very activity generates in the body.

As Barry's outburst demonstrates, coaches spend much of their time inspiring and cajoling this desire to overcome out of trainees; emphasising that they *must want* to defeat the opponent. Sparring and paired exercises embed boxers in relations of camaraderie that facilitate learning but also allow trainees to elicit autological capacities from each other in a similar way to coaches (Strathern 2013: 186–187). During pad-work, for instance, sparring partners 'call forth', as it were, an autological embodiment of the ideal boxer from their opponents through words of encouragement, much in the way gym-going partners encourage each other during weight-lifting, as we saw earlier.¹⁸ At an early stage in my fieldwork, I spent an evening practicing pads with Nick and discovered first-hand how the voice of the pad-holder is not only pedagogic (in that it offers practical, technical advice), but also oriented towards bringing forth increased power and effort from the trainee; capacities which are thought to be inherent to him as a person, already there and ready to be drawn out (Strathern 2013: 186). '*Hit right through the pad!*'; '*Keep going, mate!*'; '*Yeah, that's good! That's more natural!*' At the same time, the understanding remains that the embodiment of a mobile, compact fighting form, along with the production of effective punches, is a capacity possessed by individual persons and which must be drawn forth. The pad-holding partner will move around, shifting the target and forcing the punching partner to change his angle of approach, whilst occasionally making feints to ensure the latter's guard remains up (since during pad-work, inexperienced boxers can tend to let their guard fall). In paired exercises like this there is greater pressure on the partner with the pads, who must work to challenge the puncher in order to give them a proper 'work out'.¹⁹ Through such techniques, pad-holding partners enable the puncher's inward orientation towards the perfection of his technique and precision of his body's movements that are performed outwardly as evidence of his indefatigability and existential capacity to take on an opponent. Whilst there can be no doubt that these training exercises are also practices of mimetic inculcation that 'recalibrate' the boxer's physical and perceptual orientations to the possibility of a boxing match (Wacquant 2004: 7), boxers implicitly draw upon and refer to an understanding of agency and capacity to do what I describe as autological. This strand of self is located within trainees as an inherent aspect or potential of their personhood, activated through the adoption of the forms of boxing, and their instantiation of its guiding logic of individual capability, given that in the ring boxers must rely on themselves.

At the close of training boxers may compliment each other on their work that evening: 'You trained well tonight, mate.' 'Well done tonight, mate.' These are significant utterances. By concealing the relationships that enable and elicit autological praxis in the Hut (Strathern 2013: 190), they end training on a note of individual achievement that

is carried out the door, into the evening and through the week ahead (Long & Moore 2013: 13). The praise that boxers confer on each other as they leave the Hut underscores its significance as a space where particular bodily practices enable the reconfiguration and enunciation of an alternative imagining of masculine self through sensori-motor conduct (Warnier 2009: 465). In a similar case from the ethnography of masculinity in island Greece, Evthymios Papataxiarchis (1991: 178) described how coffee-shop drinkers expressed *kefi*, an inner and emotional 'nature' that emerges only in these liminal spaces, away from the formality and obligations of kin-relations. Like *kefi* the singular and agentive 'autological' self is an aspect of male personhood that is both the 'motive and reward' for the exhausting evenings of boxing training. As with gym-work, the boxer spends training using 'the natural forces of his body' (Marx in Wacquant 1995a: 67) to reclaim a default setting of self that is defined by its sheer autonomy (Herzfeld 1985: 11, 16; Rapport 2003) and sheer capacity to *do*.

Autology beyond the gym

Papataxiarchis (1991: 178) has shown in his ethnography of masculinity in Aegean Greece that coffee-shops are all-male spaces where heart-friendship—relations of camaraderie—form a 'stand-point' of 'straight emotionality' from which men 'view society and its various structural arrangements'. In these all-male gatherings, men forge relations based on pure feelings, rather than the structured moral reciprocity that defines kinship (ibid.). By bringing society 'inside' the coffee-shop, Aegean men fractally reproduce it and *transform* it. Instead of a society based upon formal relations of exchange, the coffee shop allows an alternative society built upon heart friendship and pure emotionality to be constructed (ibid.). It is my contention that gym-work and boxing both rely on a similar principle of fractal reproduction and reconfiguration. The boxer's stance, for instance—which involves a central point of stability around which his punches are constructed—cannot be grasped as autologically emancipatory without seeing it in relation to the lives of trainees beyond the Hut. Whilst the Billerica Boxing Hut is not quite the Island of Sociality that Wacquant's Woodlawn Gym was in Chicago, it provides a similar focal point for trainees whose outside lives are subject to the obtrusive alterity of their jobs, relationships, and ethical worries (Wacquant 2004: 17, 26, 37).

Just like the collective exercises that forge a sense of camaraderie, much of the sociality that occurs between trainees is based upon identifying and creating a shared experience of the outside agencies that impinge on one's ability to dedicate time to training. Upon arriving late for training one week, I walked into the Hut to find Nick also wrapping up his fists.²⁰ 'You late as well?' he asked. After briefly discussing how we were missing the obligatory jog around the park where the Hut is situated Nick asked, 'You been at work?' and when I said that I had, he immediately chimed back: 'Yeah, me too.' Although this might sound like a relatively minor reflection on life external to boxing, it is important to note that Nick straight away assumes we are in the same position regarding our inability to control our whereabouts due to our position in the world. On another occasion, I was with Nick whilst he spoke to Jason and John ('the brothers', as they were known, experienced former boxers who still trained) about the problems they shared when it came to finding

time to dedicate to proper training because of their jobs and college studies. Nick, Jason and John are all trainees with previous experience of boxing at youth level, but as adults they have found it difficult to ‘get back into it’ because of their outside commitments.

Speech at the Boxing Hut also seemed to index an implicit need to ‘sweat out’ society. ‘That’s why I keep coming,’ one trainee told me, ‘Sweat out all the booze and shit from the weekend, know what I mean? Keep the heart going during the week’. Trainees’ outside lives are also subject to the vagaries and moral dilemmas of everyday masculinity in urban Essex (cf. Wacquant 2004: 17, 26, 37). Dave explained to me after training one evening that since he had become serious about boxing he had given up the substance abuse and conflict that would seem to define masculine sociality in Essex: ‘It’s a good discipline,’ he told me. ‘Since I started boxing again I don’t drink anymore, I don’t smoke. It keeps me off the streets.’ Dave initially described boxing to me as ‘rucking [fighting] in a controlled way’ but he quickly corrected himself, explaining that ‘once you get into it, it’s a real art’.

Following Dave, I want to suggest that the real art of boxing plays out through the boxer’s stance. Whilst collective exercises form a notion of shared bodily substance (through which trainees recognise their equal vulnerability to the problems of the endurance), the stance brackets-off the boxer’s relations with his fellow trainees *and* his relations with an external social world. The technology of imagining the Phantom Boxer underpins this broken-off singularity. It is founded upon an anticipated dual relation: the boxing match. The very techniques of movement that boxing produces are akin to an arc of agentive protection and production of assaults that, I argue, not simply *symbolise* but *are* the trainees’ efforts to cast off the governing influences of the extraneous social forces experienced and implicitly referenced by Dave, Nick and Jason: the social pressure to drink, or the sheer consumption of time by the working day. Foucault (1991: 136–139) pointed out that the body is so often the *target* of governing forces that manage its time, its whereabouts, and its habits. Like Pascal (see above), trainees seem to have realised and inverted the premises of these extraneous forces by choosing *the body* as the target of a transformation that will extract the body from its social context and strip away the ‘culture’ of a trainee—his relations, worries, obligations, even his identity—until only a moving, parrying, blocking and punching body is left.

The boxing stance follows a similar logic of solitude to the individual acts of overcoming that take place at Studio 180, as we saw with Mark’s description of being ‘away from everything else’ whilst weight-lifting. The ultimate aim, as Mark put it, is to reclaim a sense of holistic being that is normal and given:

There is something like that at the gym where it is really hard to put your finger on... but you just feel like *you’re back to normal*, and like *you just feel one*, rather than maybe when you spend the day in the office or walking round, you kinda feel a bit disconnected from yourself... you can kind of get *back to just basics* and think ‘I’m alright now’. (Emphasis added.)

It will be recalled that Craig described how—if he could manage a pull-up—he would be ‘set’, ‘ready’, ‘made’, ‘walking on air’. When my interlocutors overcome the weight that stands in for the ‘lazy’ self, they overcome the self that is affected by daily working life with an autological self that cannot and must not be held in check by these social forces apprehended at the site of the body. The emergence of the autological self changes my interlocutors’ relation to the external social ‘world’, making it possible to ‘take it on’.

For gym-work to elicit the autological aspect of male personhood it must also—like the Aegean coffee drinking—recast the structural arrangement between self and society. Michael Herzfeld (1985) has also shown how amongst the Glendiots of Crete young men use poetic performances to distinguish themselves in relation to their peers and, crucially, in relation to a host of social forces (the government, the looming danger of hunger, senior men in the village). These performances rely upon the ability to connect historical events and ideological positions in a coherent performance through which the male self is able to encompass the ordinary, and yet always remain ‘in front of it’ (ibid.: 10–11). Social forms are subjugated and arrayed by the self, encompassed through poetic scenes in which men are able to assert a sheer right to difference and individuality that is essentially ontological (ibid.: 11). For my interlocutors, rather than including external, social agencies in ever-widening sets of references, they tend to *reduce* them to the sheer duality of resistance: a man resisting a weight in the gym. Overcoming the challenges of the gym, or practicing boxing techniques, thus allows men to externalise society from the locus of the body.

Conclusion

Rather than an overt focus on the politics of body image, this paper has argued that masculine personhood in contemporary Britain might be better understood through a praxeological analysis of practices that alter the body’s appearance, but which also allow particular logics of self to be physically enunciated. My interlocutors engage with the equipment in the gym in a technical process that transforms them in ways beyond the material, beyond body image (Naji & Douny 2009: 415). The male person that emerges from gym-work is one whose autological capacity to do has been recharged by resisting and overcoming the challenges he set for himself. This sense of being a moving and active agent is contingent upon bodily praxis (Rapport 2003: 215–7; Ingold 2011) and marks it as a different form of ‘self’ to the socially-oriented ‘self-identity’ discussed in accounts of body modification (Giddens 1991: 99; Schilling 1993: 5 in Weigers 1998: 147). In the gym, control is assembled at the locus of the body, rendering the person ‘one’ or ‘back to basics’. With their agentic capacities enabled, male persons carry this renewed sense of determination forward into life beyond the gym. In the Boxing Hut the forms of movement instantiate the same principle of autology that responds to a collective apprehension of pain during exercises and social disorder in the world beyond the Hut. ‘We share pain: I fight back,’ is the logic that underlies training. In this respect bodily autology can be considered a sensori-motor instantiation of a given strand of being and of self-originating agency that, through bodily activity, is embodied, foregrounded and bolstered (Humphrey 2008: 267–8).

This much suggests that the ‘hard work’ of gym-going cannot be explained by recourse to an understanding of a hegemonic masculinity that traps forms of body-building and other body-projects in an ever-repeating cycle of self-defeat (since what is mistaken for autonomy actually maintains broader masculine norms). By removing the undue emphasis placed upon the body as an object (Gill et al. 2005; Wacquant 1995b), a praxeological exploration of gym-work as sensori-motor engagement with objects reveals

logics of overcoming and achievement that allow my informants to render themselves as powerful, self-determining agents through the experiences of autology that gym-work and boxing afford. My informants do not simply 'resist' hegemonic forces but, physically and conceptually, they utterly overcome the forces that affect them (cf. Herzfeld 1985: 16–19), whether by pushing past the pain barrier in the gym or by sending the punching bag 'right back' in the Boxing Hut.

Ultimately, I would suggest that an analytical orientation towards the sensory logics of sport such as the one that I have attempted here would be well placed to explore corporeal logics in other ethnographies of movement (dance, acrobatics, sport). Rather than cast the technical practices adopted by persons in these contexts as explicitly Foucauldian technologies of subjectivation (Warnier 2009: 464–5), here I have argued for an approach that retains an ethnographic openness to the imaginative possibilities particular technical repertoires hold (Sneath et al. 2009), and the types of persons and sociality they make possible (Long & Moore 2013: 13). Whether discussing types of auto-relationality or conceptual resistance and overcoming, the anthropology of techniques must remain attuned to the types of experiential logics that underlie the apparatus of particular technical repertoires such as those we see in boxing and at the gym.

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NOTES

¹ This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in gym and boxing facilities in Essex between June and August, 2014, and supplemented with subsequent field visits and interviews from September to November. It draws upon recorded and unrecorded semi-structured interviews conducted with informants aged between 18 and 26. The article also draws on my long-term experiences and observations as a gym-goer.

² A popular reality television show portraying the lives of young people on the north east coast of England.

³ I use 'gym-work' as a broad term for the kinds of practice we find in places such as Studio 180, a gym in Billericay, Essex where I conducted my fieldwork. My use of the word 'work' follows the way my informants describe their activities. ('... If you are working hard in the gym and you aren't making progress that is really demoralising,' Will once told me).

⁴ As noted by Bridges (2009: 84), Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity was developed to consider the ways in which men cultivate themselves as 'manly' according to local social norms regarding what it is to be a man.

⁵ The name of the gym has been fictionalised.

⁶ For Povinelli, the autological subject' is a set of 'discourses and practices that invoke the autonomous and self-determining subject', essentially a lived political ontology (2011: 26–27).

⁷ Like Herzfeld (1985: 10–11, 16–18), I locate my use of 'self' through my ethnography, exploring how it works in my informants' understandings and in 'situations of innovation' (Humphrey 2008: 357).

⁸ Names are fictionalised and biographies partially fictionalised to protect the identities of my informants.

⁹ Registering as a competitive boxer, which involves a medical review and official association with the club as one of its 'competition boxers'.

¹⁰ We could also say that this is about ensuring that the body's visible musculature conforms to local theories of biological sexual difference according to which men should appear physically strong and capable (Day 2001: 120; Rana 2014).

¹¹ Warnier recalls Magritte's series of paintings representing a pipe in which each picture contains the words 'this is not a pipe' (Warnier 2007: 5).

¹² The praxeological method does not rely upon a shift from body-object to 'mindbody' subject (Alter 1992: 92–93), so much as it opens up questions about the particular and contingent ways in which movement and concomitant perceptual, sensory experience have effects on doing persons (Warnier 2009). Instead of adopting a purely phenomenological notion of experience or 'subjectification' (Alter 1992: 92–93), I am proposing a study of the cartography of the body when it engages with the technologies that we find in the gym, and an analytical move that attempts to parse out the sensory logics of these cartographies, such as pain, discomfort, achievement and self-expression.

¹³ A repetition of a particular weight-lifting exercise.

¹⁴ 'When an achievement takes place, new knowledge is created about the achiever in relation to him- or herself: at a minimum the realisation that he or she has accomplished a certain feat within the world, and that he or she has *the capacity to do so*' (Long & Moore 2013: 13, emphasis added).

¹⁵ In addition, trainee boxers from 'the Hut' (as I also refer to it) often frequented Studio 180.

¹⁶ A type of press-up held in place.

¹⁷ A burpee is a squat-like motion that turns into a jump.

¹⁸ Pad-work involves the use of flat-faced pads by one trainee instead of gloves. One holds the pads in a guard-position, and allows the gloved partner to strike them, becoming a moving, opponent-like target.

¹⁹ I discovered the social pressure of having the pads when practicing with Nick. I was holding the pads, during his turn punching, but apparently I was holding them too low, as I found out when Nick stopped. 'Can you hold the pads a bit higher, mate? I feel like I'm punching a midget!'

²⁰ Boxers wear protective wraps inside their gloves to support their wrists and fingers.

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PETER LOCKWOOD, PhD Cand.
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
DARWIN COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
peterallockwood@gmail.com