

**Styles Make Fights: Fashioning the Male Boxing Body in  
Contemporary British Boxing Ring Dress**

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## Abstract

This study is an anthropological and cultural exploration of professional male boxers and their boxing ring dress. In boxing, once fighters have debuted and become professional boxers, they have complete creative expression in the ring and the economic means to hire a designer who will create their custom boxing ring dress. Objects of boxing dress such as boxing trunks, robes, boots, jackets, and trunks that are worn in the boxing ring often contain embellishments that are distinctive to the boxer's history, race, sexuality, nationality, tastes, personality, and political position (Mondragon, 2021).

As a masculine institution and classed sport, objects of boxing dress can also be considered as gendered and classed material culture. Boxing ring dress can also operate as a subtle form of resistance and cultural activism, and in effect, can give a voice to marginalised men.

The research methods for this study are qualitative and mixed, combining semi-structured interviews with both former boxing champions and a former dress maker of boxing ring dress, with participant observation by attending live boxing matches at York Hall in east London, alongside an analysis of pre-

worn objects of boxing ring dress at a sports memorabilia retail outlet in east London.

The study is underpinned by Raewyn Connell's gender theory, in particular her notion of '*Body Reflexive Practice*'. This is combined with Bruno Latour's *Actor Network Theory*, which considers how objects become social actants working in relation to humans in society (Latour, 2005; Connell, 1995). It is hoped that this study will, through the narratives and stories that are embodied within boxing ring dress, provide insights into the lived experiences of working-class men. Findings aim to make a significant contribution to studies of fashion, gender, sports, and subcultural style.

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## Introduction and background to the research

Boxing is one of the world's oldest sports, dating as far back as ancient Greece, and is mentioned in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (Boddy, 2008). Boxing, as bare-knuckle fighting (boxing without gloves) or 'pugilism', became extremely popular in Britain and Europe from the end of the 1700s. Pugilism was illegal across Britain and in most states of America during this time but at the end of the nineteenth century, the practice was civilised through the formulation of the Marquess of Queensbury rules and the adoption of the boxing glove. The sport was renamed boxing and became a legitimised indoor sport and spectacle. From its beginnings, boxing was traditionally the sport of the lower classes a way for working-class men to settle disputes. Today, boxing is still considered a sport of the working-class man (Arond and Weinburg, 1952).

Since the introduction of new media like broadcast television, satellite TV and dedicated sports channels in the latter half of the twentieth century, which created new spaces for spectatorship, boxing ring entrances have evolved and

become increasingly elaborate. What boxers wear during their ring entrances have become increasingly flamboyant and decorative (Scott, 2008).

Boxers within the amateur ranks of boxing are limited in their ring dress and must adhere to strict codes. Which include wearing a vest and trunks that are either red or blue representing the red and blue corners of the ring, or they will wear the colours representative of their local boxing gym (englandboxing.org, 2019, Scott, 2008). However, from their boxing 'debut' a fight which marks their career shift from amateur to professional, boxers can freely express themselves in the ring. This freedom of expression manifests through their ring-wear fashion, their walk-out music and their entourage's dress on the way to the boxing ring. This study explores the ways that boxers utilise the medium of dress in their ring walk to express their identities and subjectivities and to determine if professional boxers' dress in the ring can be considered an object of material culture.

The term 'styles make fights' is a popular colloquial term within boxing culture. It traditionally denotes boxers' distinct styles and strategies of fighting in the ring. Boxers in training will watch films of their opponents' fights to gauge their fighting style; fighters may also emulate and mimic former fighters whose fighting style they admire. In this study of the dress of

professional boxers, however, I use the term 'style' to refer to dress, as I focus on the different and unique styles of dress of professional fighters in the ring.

Although the primary focus of this study is on the dress of male professional British boxers, I have incorporated examples of global and transatlantic men's boxing ring dress. Particularly for example when discussing the African global diaspora. This strengthens the study by opening up conversations around issues of race, class, and the masculinity of working-class men and their distinctive boxing ring dress. For instance, Rudy Mondragon's recent work on the ring entrances of boxers of colour in the United States alongside Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson's study of Black masculinities in America, helps to contextualise the British examples by framing them within a broader global narrative and wider conversation surrounding men's boxing and dress (Majors and Billson, 1992; Mondragon, 2021).

Most boxers will have their boxing ring dress custom-made for their upcoming fights to reflect their personality and boxing identity. This may incorporate elements such as their personal heritage, masculinity, relationships, class, politics, religious beliefs and tastes. This study aims to find out if boxing ring dress can hold special meaning for the wearer,

embodying their narratives, histories and boxing identities. I believe on closer inspection of boxing ring dress as objects of material culture, this study will ascertain if boxing ring dress embodies the values and beliefs of the boxing world itself, as well as significant world events. I hope this study will also focus on interesting stories embodied within boxing-ring dress, providing insights into the experiences and biographies of working-class men (Mondragon, 2021).

### **Boxing Scholarship**

There has been a lot of contribution by writers about boxing. Such as authors like Norman Mailer and his depiction of the Muhammad Ali versus George Foreman fight (1975). Jonathon Eig's book *Ali: a life* (2017). Boxing writers George Kimball's chronicles, *Four Kings, Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, Duran and the last great era of boxing* (Kimball, 2008). Joyce Carol Oates book '*on boxing*' (Oates, 1987). A.J. Liebling '*The sweet science of boxing and boxiana a ringside view*, George Kimball and John Schulian '*the hurt business*, that both chronicle the sport of boxing during the twentieth century (Liebling, 2018; Kimball and Schulian, 2013). Academic boxing scholars such as Kasia Boddy, whose book *Boxing: a cultural history* provides a wealth of knowledge on boxing history and culture (2008). David Scott in *the Art and Aesthetics of*

*Boxing* (Scott, 2008). Kath Woodward in *'Boxing Identity and the I of the Tiger* (Woodward, 2007). Rudy Mondragon's doctoral thesis in 2021 on boxing ring entrances entitled *'Miles Before the Bell, Race Agency and Sporting Entitlements in Boxing Ring Entrances* (Mondragon, 2021). French sociologist Loic Wacquant's book *Body and Soul Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Wacquant, 2004). Wacquant's ethnographic study is of particular significance to this inquiry, as to learn about the sport, Wacquant immersed himself within his research and became a participant observer at the Woodlawn boxing gym in Chicago in the late 1990s. Wacquant's study informed and inspired my previous work on boxing and working-class masculinity, from my own auto-ethnographic experiences and observations of the culture of the boxing community. From secondary research and reading boxing literature, boxers' biographies, boxing journals, and journalism, I have observed that boxing is a gendered and classed sport for men and by men (Oates, 1987). Therefore, through the platform of boxing and examining boxing ring dress, I am hoping it will provide a window from which we can see and examine the experiences and micro-biographies of working-class men.

This study builds on Rudy Mondragon's recent work on boxing ring entrances. Which looks at how fighters, particularly fighters of colour, perform subtle and covert political dissent during their ring walks through music, fashion, and their entourages. Mondragon calls these acts of dissent 'sporting entitlements' and the use of dissent in dress in the ring 'style politics'. He also details how boxers are highly engaged with their chosen designers in the creative and design process to communicate their ideas and visions for their dress and ring entrances. My study differs to Mondragon's, however, as I specifically focus on boxing fashions that are displayed during the ring entrance. Exploring boxing ring dress from all races and nationalities but with a particular emphasis on British boxers, as I seek to ascertain if boxing dress can be classed as artifacts and objects of material culture. As boxing is also a gendered and classed sport and a patriarchal institution, I will be exploring objects of boxing dress to see if they are encoded with working-class masculine identities. Like Mondragon, my study also examines the role of politics in boxing-ring dress. However, I will additionally investigate how the boxing ring entrance and fighters' ring dress assist them in constructing their social identities and masculinities. While demonstrating how athletes and particularly boxers, perform bragging rights in the ring through their dress,

which can be seen through their practice of conspicuous consumption (Coad, 2008).

One of the most significant and salient insights that has emerged from this study on men's boxing ring dress. Is that dress worn in the boxing ring can, in effect, give marginalised working-class men a voice. These are men that may have felt disenfranchised and alienated from broader society due to adversity, economic deprivation, and social isolation. Within boxing, working-class men can produce and construct new forms of masculinities. These masculinities give them new identities. So that even though their hyper masculine bodies are subject to the demands of the sport and are controlled and commodified within the sport's institutional structures and systems, which seek to control their physical bodies leaving fighters with little freewill or power. Through the vehicle of dress, the ways in which fighters adorn their bodies and the bespoke fight kits that they wear, which may include motifs and embellishments distinctive to the fighter's identity, masculinity, and personality. They can reclaim a sense of agency and power simply by what they choose to wear.

### **Working Class Masculinities and Dress**

Liza Betts (2014) observes that class is complex and often challenging to stratify. Due to its fluid nature, it is often felt, lived and experienced rather than simply being classified. The working classes are frequently depicted to the middle classes and seen through the dominant middle-class gaze. Betts also maintains that appearance is key to how classes are understood. Masculinities and fashion consumption, specifically working-class men's relationship with fashion and dress, are key areas missing in the scholarship on masculinities. Historically, working-class men would have constructed their masculinities through their bodies; their bodies were part of the capitalist economy as they worked primarily in manual labour positions. With the decline in manual labour jobs for working-class men due to post-industrialization and the rise of service-industry employment, working-class masculinity was no longer constructed and defined through the body. Instead, it was constructed and defined through consumption. Betts points out that where working-class masculinity can no longer be defined through the body, it is now represented by the body being adorned instead of utilised for hard graft. Where fashion and dress were previously the preserve of women, now men, and particularly working-class men, are paying particular attention to how their bodies are

dressed and adorned. This shift in fashion and dress has caused representations to emerge within the media of working-class bodies and their dress as being vulgar and lacking in taste, such as the British chav phenomenon which emerged during the early 2000's. When lensed through the middle-class gaze and reported on by the dominant voices of middle-class media representatives, sartorial expression on working-class bodies becomes othered and exoticised as vulgar and crass. Representations of the working-class lifestyle and dress in British popular media has moved from fetish to disgust. For the working-class man, then, the attempt to construct his working-class masculinity through dress (as he no longer can exert his masculinity through the body and manual labour) is fraught with difficulties (Betts, 2014; Owens, 2020).

### **Mind Games in Boxing Ring Dress**

Boxing is an indigenous sport; it has a long history. It is a distinctive culture that includes many rituals, traditions, and ceremonies that are enacted before a controlled battle between two fighters takes place within the elevated, squared-off space of the ring (Woodward, 2006). In my study I seek to unveil the narratives and stories of marginalised working-class men within the boxing world. These micro-biographies are both subtly and sometimes overtly woven

into their ring-wear dress. My primary research shows that boxers often communicate through their boxing-ring dress. Through the use of colour, embellishments, motifs, and text. That boxing-ring dress can be read as a text and an artefact of material culture. In my primary research where I was a participant observer at boxing events at York Hall in 2023, I observed that the audiences that attend boxing matches are highly engaged with the sport; boxing audiences are charged with emotions which are often displayed at the ring, and in this way, they become active participants in the voyeuristic displays of violence that are being staged. In this emotionally charged environment, boxers will utilise their dress to intimidate their opponents in the ring. For fighters, boxing-ring dress can give them agency, but it can also have strategic potential. It can be tactically utilised as a vehicle to exert power and dominance over an opponent and distract them through the enactment of pre-fight mind games (Greenough and Rushton, 2016). Even before the fighters reach the ring at pre-fight and public weighing-in ceremonies, dress can be employed to intimidate an opponent. The public press conferences also provide spaces and opportunities for boxers to display their prestige and wealth gained from their achievements within the sport, such as winning titles and championships; this is shown using conspicuous consumption or designer clothes. Boxers will often

use dress to communicate their dominance; the aim is to wear down their opponent mentally before the fight and knock their confidence. This type of pre-fight mind games can result in a fight being won before the opponents have reached the ring (Powell, 2014). Often, they are remarkably clever and creative the boxing-ring dress of Terence Crawford in his match with Errol Spence Jr. in August 2023 is one example. Spence Jr. refers to himself in the ring as 'the big fish'; Crawford had a conceptual design piece created for his ring walk by British designer Imtayaz Qassim of British boxing brand Bespoke Boxing. Crawford's design featured fabrics and embellishments that represented a fisherman: features of the design included rope fishing net detailing on the jacket and trunks and British beeswax waterproof fabric coating that is used in fishing jackets. In this, Crawford is asserting his dominance through his dress on the way to the boxing ring, effectively saying to Spence Jr. 'if you are the big fish, tonight I am the fisherman' (Pattle, 2023; Webb, 2023).

### **Boxing-Ring Dress Aesthetics**

In his chapter entitled 'Boxing apparel and the legible body', David Scott notes that, during the 1920s, the fabrics of the traditional boxing trunks, which had previously been made from plain cotton or jersey, were swapped for satin. He

argues that one influence came from the introduction of Hollywood film and the glamour of its female movie stars; the satins of the female movie stars' dressing room robes, which had their names embroidered on the back while they were on set, were adopted by the sport for boxers' ring trunks and ring entrance robes. This added, he suggests, a type of feminine glamour to a hypermasculine and patriarchal sport. An aesthetic emphasised by the satin fabrics reflecting the glare of the ring spotlights above. Scott notes that with the introduction of the abdominal guard and jockstrap to protect the groin, first introduced in 1930. The designs of the trunks became wider at the waist and longer to hide the new jockstrap beneath the new longer shorts and their new satin materials also gave more ease of movement during the fight. The satin robe also added a sense of performance as boxers, on entering the ring, would enact the customary 'peeling' ceremony (Colls, 2020), revealing their muscular bodies, naked from the waist up. The robe also had a practical function in covering the boxer's body on the way to the ring. It would keep their muscles warmed up for the fight. Scott notes that, between the 1920s and the 1950s, dark colours such as black or purple were often worn to hide the bloodstains on the shorts (in my primary research speaking to a former British boxing dress designer Sophie Miller, she informed me that boxers

choose satin fabrics also to hide water and sweat marks (Miller, 2018). With the introduction of black-and-white television in the 1940s, fighters had to wear dark and light shorts so that boxing audiences watching on television could identify the fighters. Scott also points out that the implementation in boxing dress of manufacturing labels (that were worn on the outside of the trunks from the 1920s) influenced modern fashion in the twentieth century, as sportswear and streetwear design begun to put labels on the outside of dress as a new aesthetic in fashion, and that the satin boxer short became domesticated and utilised as a blueprint for men's underwear (Scott, 2008, pp.21-23).

Scott's chapter on boxing apparel is helpful, informative, and useful for my study especially when looking at the changes and developments in boxing-dress design through the twentieth century from an aesthetic perspective. What Scott doesn't address however is the material culture aspects of objects of boxing dress as histories and micro-biographies of individual fights and fighters, and at times as signifiers of broader cultural events. Joyce Carol Oates observes that 'each boxing match is a story, a unique and highly condensed drama without words' (Oates, 1987). I would suggest that boxers' stories are embodied and embedded within their ring entrances and dress. Scott does not

address the significance of boxing dress as material culture that is central to and at times being an embodiment of world and cultural events. As embodied material culture signifying what was happening globally around the time of specific fights and the impact this had on boxing ring dress. However, Scott's example is significant of how the American film industry and the roaring twenties had impacted what fighters wore into the ring and the use of satins instead of cotton or jersey. Or the impact of the jockstrap which brought about changes in the length of boxing trunks or the depth of the waistband, as well as the performative and entertainment aspects of the fight, the spectacle which the introduction of film had also influenced so fights could reach wider audiences (Scott, 2008). Scott acknowledges that boxing is about representation. A fighter represents and embodies the politics hopes and dreams of a nation. The boxing ring for centuries has been the site of the representation of class, as the boxing ring is a classed space (Woodward, 2007.) They have the responsibility of a nation on their shoulders. If boxing is representation, then I would suggest what boxers wear into the ring during specific and historical fights can also be considered forms of representation (Scott, 2008 ).

### **Boxing and the Exploitation of the Working-Class Male Body**

Loic Wacquant (2001) argues that Boxers are subjugated within the sport due to its exploitative nature. Wacquant writes that the boxer's body is 'devoured with cannibalistic cruelty at the will and whim of those who hold the economic levers of the game' (p. 183). Certainly, the working-class men within the boxing world are subject to the inter-male gaze from managers, coaches and promoters, viewed as a sporting commodity within the sport's commodifying structures. I would suggest that there is a paradox regarding the working-class male body in boxing whereby, through repeatedly being the object of the inter-male gaze while in training and in the ring, they are rendered feminine and passive. This is only accentuated by the fact that the preferred silks and satin fabrics predominantly used in boxing ring dress would have historically been coded as feminine (their practical functions notwithstanding). Boxers also favour fabrics in the ring such as leathers, velvets and furs which could also be historically coded as fetish fabrics; there is an element of costume and the carnivalesque to the boxers' ring dress, but I would argue that, seen through the lens of exploitation and the exploitative nature of the sport and their being offered up for public entertainment and spectacle. That the boxers' bodies become an object of fetish to both male and female audiences. Boxing-ring

dress therefore, is multifaceted, and I would suggest that the fetishization of the hyper-masculine working-class body by its male and female audiences is subconsciously embodied and reflected within boxing-ring dress. So that on a subconscious level, boxing-ring dress in addition to being representative of micro-biographies, conspicuous consumption, political activism and resistance, mind-games and objects of material culture, the boxer's body I would argue is also decorated for the pleasure of the spectator and boxing audiences.

Wacquant observes in his essay 'Whores, slaves and stallions: languages of exploitation and accommodation among boxers' (Wacquant, 2001), that there are parallels between the male boxer and the female stripper or the prostitute; that both sell their bodies and disrobe on a stage, revealing their bodies as entertainment and pleasure for audiences. A boxer's agency in the industry is small, which creates another paradox within the sport: on the one hand, their masculinity is subdued, even feminised, by the exploitation that exists within the sport and the offering up of their bodies for boxing audiences; on the other hand, the nature of the sport calls for an exemplary hyper-masculinity in their bodies and in their performance in the ring. Wacquant likens the bodies of professional boxers to three idioms: prostitutes, slaves, and horses (a selection of boxers within a company is called a 'stable' of boxers). In the boxer/manager

relationship the boxer offers up his body to be used within the ring in a way that mirrors the exploitation and relationship of the female prostitute and the pimp. Both sets of bodies are used and abused and sometimes left damaged from physical punishment. Wacquant considers boxing managers to be flesh peddlers and hustlers of manly flesh. He notes that the professional boxer's body is dehumanised within the sport and reduced to the status of a beast to be raised, fed, trained, and finally displayed in the ring. Their bodies are discarded when they are no longer of use or damaged by the sport's practices. Promoters suck the life out of professional boxers' bodies for economic gain. This type of exploitation is rife within the boxing industry. It attracts working-class men, often men who originate from extremely impoverished backgrounds, to the sport, who are in turn often underpaid for the use of their bodies' power. But Wacquant observes that, even within the sport's exploitative structure, there is still agency to be had by the boxers, who train rigorously to develop a type of entrepreneurial physical boxing capital in their bodies which can be sold on the pugilistic economy (Wacquant, 2001, p. 187). In the ring, fighters can regain some masculine agency by dominating their opponent, winning their bouts, and rising through the professional ranks of the sport's structures. In this context and background of marginalization, I would

suggest, that dress plays a key part in restoring agency; it represents another decision that the boxer can make, that he can control. Within the sport, he can choose what he wears on his body, his colours and style of ring dress and how he enters the ring; this is also a way to reclaim agency and hegemonic masculinity within the wider professional structure of the sport.

### **Carnavalesque in the Ring**

If, in addition to their success in the ring, the boxing-ring entrance allows fighters to reclaim agency and control over their bodies, this agency is often expressed in the ring through carnival and excess. Kath Woodward (2007) points out that boxing is rooted in the carnivalesque through its very ancestry, being linked to travelling booths in carnivals and fairs, and observes that the carnivalesque in boxing can be distinguished by excess and parody in the ring; I would also suggest that the carnivalesque, and notions of excess and parody is not only limited to the spectacle of the sport, with fighters' elaborate ring entrances, but extends to dress and what fighters wear into the ring. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque (2009) as the overthrow of socially dominant hierarchies through parody and excess can be seen to manifest in the way boxers temporarily overthrow the hierarchies in the sport. Seizing back control of their bodies through the performance of their ring entrances

or in the flamboyance of the designs, motifs and embellishments of his ring dress.

Woodward also argues that, in boxing, there is an exaggerated performance of hyper-masculinity, which is purposely performed through display and spectacle in the ring. My study builds on these ideas of spectacle, carnival and excess in boxing ring entrances. It suggests that display and spectacle are performed through the ring entrance, and that boxers use this moment to perform a transgressive masculinity. To be subversive and reclaim agency over their bodies on their way to the ring. Woodward goes on to suggest that where working class meets with carnival, this becomes grotesque to the dominant middle-class culture, but that there is also a voyeuristic appeal there an 'attraction in repulsion' none more so than when, at a live boxing match. Spectators may love and hate the spectacle of the blood sport simultaneously (I noted personally how, at live boxing events at York Hall, the audience went wild when one fighter had his opponent on the ropes and on the verge of a knock out). Furthermore, as Woodward maintains, the theatricality of boxing performed for its audiences is much like the gladiatorial games that were performed for the crowds in ancient Rome. Lynda Nead (2011), in 'Stilling the punch: boxing, violence and the photographic image', has likened the

voyeuristic appeal of the violent display of battered male bodies in the ring to the voyeurism of sex: both are morally grotesque; both depict the violated body with a grotesque or erotic gaze, (Nead, 2011).

Everything, then, about the ring entrance reflects this theatricality and drama, which supersedes the violent displays to take place within the ring. The moment a fighter enters the ring and disrobes is when this theatrical drama becomes real and raw and is no longer theatrical but corporeal. Woodward also describes the theatre of the primary fight and the preliminary fights as 'a field of entertaining practices' but here I would depart from Woodward slightly, as reducing the violence of the sport, where fighters risk their lives every time they enter the ring, to simply being 'entertaining practices' takes something away from the very real and present danger in the ring. From my observations at York Hall, once the boxers disrobe and meet in the ring, it is a primal and brutal experience, and not just entertaining. Boxing sanctions violence if someone were to die in the ring, as many boxers have in 'death fights', this would not be considered murder (Oates, 1987, p.10) and the violence that takes place in the ring would never be acceptable outside of it.

### **Boxing Masculinities, Folklore and Dress**

Working-class boxing masculinities are also re-produced through their local communication networks, as stories of boxing mythology and folklore, historic and courageous fights are passed around and down through boxing networks and the boxing community at a local, national and international level. Through this reflexive retelling, traditional working-class masculinities are reproduced in this relational construct (Woodward, 2007). I also argue that objects of boxing-ring dress are enmeshed within these narratives and stories, as fighters are not only renowned for their heroism in the ring and their performances of exemplary masculinity, but are remembered and a part of boxing mythology for their ring entrances and dress. Former Olympic boxer Tony Cesay told me in an interview that his favourite ring entrance by former British featherweight fighter Prince Naseem Hamed, which involved him entering the ring on a mechanical flying carpet. We can see how hegemonic boxing masculinities are reproduced through the repetitive retelling of boxing stories and also how boxing mythology and folklore impact the ring entrances and dress of fighters today.

Woodward also maintains that boxing myths contain the components of religion, magic, and legend combined. Boxing produces its legends, but often

they contain boxing protagonists the good boxer and antagonists the bad boxer in what are called 'morality fights' in boxing culture. Take, for example, the world heavyweight fight between Muhammad Ali and the world heavyweight champion Sonny Liston in 1964. This was not just a fight for the world heavyweight championship status, a remarkable achievement in itself, or for just another boxing hero in the canon of boxing mythology. For many boxing fans this was a 'morality fight', a battle between good and evil, and a battle of religions with Ali representing Islam and Liston Christianity. Many Americans, even white supremacists, wanted Liston to win rather than Ali, even though Liston had a criminal past and had affiliations with the mafia, due to their deep suspicion of Ali's Muslim faith (George 2020).

In boxing culture, a monarchical element within boxing myth and legend extends to the notion of kingship; world heavyweight champions are often referred to as kings in boxing folklore (or, more recently, the 'greatest of all time' or 'GOAT'). Usually, these legends of the sport provide incentive and inspiration for young hopefuls training in run-down urban backstreet gyms (Woodward, 2007). Boxers are immortalised within boxing folklore and mythology, through the passing round of stories of legendary fighters and

fights, through narratives of heroes and legends. Boxers are also immortalised in the arts (Scott, 2008).

### **Mysticism and Superstitions in Boxing Ring Dress**

In 1973, musician Elvis Presley commissioned his dressmakers to produce a bespoke robe for Muhammad Ali similar to his bejewelled jumpsuit. The robe was custom-made with the words 'Peoples Champ' on the back and an Aztec design with hundreds of gemstones and rhinestones. Ali wore the robe in his world heavyweight championship fight with Ken Norton in 1973, and after losing the battle vowed never to wear the robe again; it was widely rumoured that Ali felt the robe had brought him bad luck in the ring (Marsh, 2022; Troesen, 2018). Graham Neil (2016) in 'Demystifying sport superstition' observes that, due to the unpredictable and competitive nature of sports, the arena of sports is a ripe field for superstitions and superstitious practices. Which are sometimes obvious to the spectator and at other times so subtle and covert that they are only apparent to the athlete. Neil maintains that, although athletes are disciplined and train hard to have the best outcome in their sport, some things are out of their control. This is particularly true in boxing as fighters can be in the best condition possible for the fight and have the best odds of winning, and one unlucky punch can bring them a sudden loss,

no matter how disciplined and trained for the fight they may be. I would also argue that the strength of boxing folklore as narratives retold and circulated within boxing networks means that these mystical stories are particularly likely to become part of boxing mythology (Neil, 2016).

Furthermore, within boxing, superstitious rituals have a particular link to and emphasis on dress; fetishes are often incorporated into a boxer's dress, such as lucky motifs like a shamrock for an Irish fighter, or a fighter may have a pair of lucky shorts. Neil also observes that it is common for athletes to have lucky clothing. George Foreman stated in a press interview that he had held onto a pair of trunks for twenty years that were designed for him by the American boxing brand Everlast; he then wore them in his comeback fight in 1994 as he believed they would bring him luck in the ring (Christie, 2023). Neil states that in sports, there are three different types of superstitious practices the athlete brings with him or her to the sport: beliefs and superstitions that they may already have from the general society; superstitions and superstitious rituals that are already embedded within the sport's internal structures; and their own idiosyncratic superstitions. These beliefs and practices the athlete brings with him or her to the sport become a part of boxing mythology and simple objects within the sport such as a pair of lucky trunks can take on almost

supernatural or mystic properties for the athlete. Becoming fetishes or talismans of good fortune (Neil, 2016). As I discovered in my secondary research of boxing ring dress online and in social media, over the past four years a trend circulated in the boxing community, a superstition or fetish called *'the curse of the Versace robe'*. This began to circulate among the combat sport of mixed martial arts and fighters such as Connor McGregor, Jorge Masvidal and Israel Adesanya, who all appeared in the press wearing a robe by the Italian designer Versace before bouts they subsequently lost. This superstition crossed into the boxing arena when Conor McGregor, a mixed martial artist, fought Floyd Mayweather Jr. In 2017, McGregor again wore a Versace robe before his fight and lost again. After British middleweight boxer Billy Joe Saunders lost to Mexican Canelo Alvarez in 2021 after also having worn a Versace robe beforehand, fight fans were afraid for heavyweight boxer Tyson Fury, who soon after also wore a Versace robe before his fights (Nayak, 2021; Malata, 2021).

These superstitions and fetishes feed into boxing mythology and folklore, becoming narratives as they are told and retold through boxing networks. They are more than just stories, however, and that they help assist in the constant construction of working-class boxing masculinities and identities. These

superstitions, which are centralised on objects of dress, not only have an affect on what fighters wear before a fight or on the way to the ring, but how these stories are retold demonstrate poignantly the depth of boxers' and how they have a relationship with their objects of dress and how much they care about what they put on their bodies.

### **Working Class Masculinities, Boxing Dress and Conspicuous Consumption**

With elite-level athletes, a boxer's boxing-ring entrance provides opportunities for a fighter to not only display and show off his elite physical strength but also his newfound economic strength; through conspicuous consumption and customization, a fighter can display his success within the sport. Theorist Thorstein Veblen notes that the unproductive consumption of goods is honourable. Primarily as a mark of prowess and a perquisite of human dignity. In other words, the overt display of wealth through acquiring expensive or hard-to-acquire cultural goods can demonstrate a person's social standing, economic power, and social superiority (2005). Through the lens of Veblen, we can see here in the context of the boxing ring and dress worn into the ring that, by using high quality and designer fabrics and expensive embellishments in boxing dress, boxers can demonstrate through their dress their masculine power, their prestige within the sports structure, their new social status as

boxing champions and their newfound wealth. Therefore, excessive consumption of goods, including expensive dress, or fabrics for their dress, in the context of the boxing ring, demonstrates a fighter's pecuniary strength. In December 2014, for his fight with Devon Alexander, former British light welterweight champion Amir Khan commissioned a pair of boxing trunks by British boxing dress brand 'Fight Label' that were inlaid with twenty-four-carat gold and cost approximately £30,000. Former British heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua also commissioned Fight Label to produce bespoke boxing trunks; one pair he wore into the ring was lined with French designer Christian Dior silk (Roper, 2017). Many boxers, particularly those who have achieved world title status within the sport, demonstrate conspicuous consumption in and out of the ring. Fighters demonstrate their economic strength outside of the ring by purposely wearing designer clothes to weighing in ceremonies, press conferences and other public events: former British world heavyweight Tyson Fury, for example, has often been seen in the pre-fight build-ups and in the press sporting a robe by Versace, while British middleweight boxer Chris Eubank Jr. has worn garments by French designer Louis Vuitton during press conferences. This overt display through conspicuous consumption can be indicative of a boxers newly acquired wealth and social standing in the sport;

it also demonstrates why boxing has such a broad appeal to lower-working-class men. Since, if a fighter is successful in the field, boxing can provide a route out of poverty and a way to gain instant value and instant respectability (Arond and Weinberg, 1952; Powell, 2014).

### **Combat Sports and Psychology in Dress**

Recent studies have shown that dress can have a cognitive effect on the wearer. Hajo Adam and Adam D. Galinsky carried out studies on the impact of a white coat on two groups of participants (Adams and Galinsky 2012). The first group was told that the white coat they were to wear was an artist's coat, and the second group was told they were putting on a doctor's coat. Both groups were then given psychometric tests to perform. The results demonstrated better performance in the group who had been told that their white coats were doctors' coats. More research studies need to be undertaken in dress and cognitive performance. Still, Adams and Galinsky have shown that objects of dress are more than symbolic that wearing specific clothes can stimulate cognitive pathways and produce positive mental performance. The Netflix reality television series *At Home with the Furies*, which aired on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2023, documented the daily lives of former world heavyweight boxing champion Tyson Fury and his family. Fury's

younger brother Tommy Fury, who is also a professional boxer, in the eighth of nine episodes states that his chosen colour for the ring is white as white makes him feel faster in the ring: 'You always feel quicker though in white, when I wear black I feel like I'm stuck in the mud, but when I'm wearing all white I feel pretty quick' (Doyle and Leigh, 2023). Other scientific studies on psychology and dress in sports, particularly combat sports, have shown that specific colours, such as red and black perform better in sports competitions, and those wearing black or red showed more dominance in sport. Former world heavyweight champion Mike Tyson often wore black into the ring it was his signature colour. The black colour of his trunks and boots signifying his aggressive, dominant, and menacing style in the ring and instilled fear into his opponents during his ring entrance (Talk Sport, 2022). Another example of the colour black in sports is the New Zealand male rugby team, the All Blacks and their dominant and aggressive Haka dance before a match, which, like Tyson, was meant to instil fear in their opponents. However, studies in the field of science and dress and combat sports is new, and more thorough research needs to be undertaken in this area, particularly with sports psychology and sports dress (Sorokowski et al., F.2014).

Colours in boxing ring dress are important, particularly for identification purposes; in boxing, colours carry and hold meanings and narratives. Fighters will use colours in their dress to show their patriotism and nationality, or for activism and politics, and to indicate a signatory ring style. Colours can also be used to communicate dominance and power, like Tyson's black trunks, to mimic or pay homage to another fighter's ring style, or for psychological advantage and mind games within the sports structure. In 1902, at the height of the United States' Jim Crow segregation laws. Jack Johnson purposely wore bright pink shorts rather than the standard black for his fight with Jack Jeffries in Hazards Pavilion in Los Angeles. Geoffrey C. Ward notes that 'it wasn't an ordinary inoffensive kind of pink, it was one of those screaming, caterwauling belligerent kind of pinks' (Ward, 2004, p. 47). Pink at this time would have been considered a feminine colour, indicating Johnson was self-assured in his masculinity. Johnson demonstrated his confidence and dominance in the ring through flamboyant colour. Which I would suggest may have antagonised the mostly white audiences, and his opponent Johnson's taunting of his opponents in the ring would characterise most of his professional career. I would also suggest that the pink trunks for Johnson were a colour of resistance and signified Johnson's refusal to shy away or be

invisible; he was not going to stay small or be considered inferior to the white man in the face of segregation and at a time when Black people were being regarded as second class citizens, Johnson was a man of colour daring to wear colour and to stand out (Ward, 2004).

### **Boxing Dress and Subcultural Style**

In *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige observes that, within subcultures, specific items of dress are adopted from the dominant culture and then subverted from their original use and given new meanings. This dress acts as a sign to those inside and outside the subculture that the subculture's members belong to that specific group. Combining different and varying clothing items from broader culture and modifying them by subverting them and giving them new meanings is what Hebdige terms 'style bricolage'. Objects of dress, such as a simple T-shirt or a tailored suit, can be modified within the subculture and used to communicate resistance to the dominant culture, while simultaneously serving as signs and codes to those within the subculture that they are part of the group. We see this in the case of the Teddy Boys, who adopted the style of suits from the Edwardian era and, through their unique styling and tailoring, made it a part of their subculture. The sharp metal comb used as part of their unique style for their

coiffured hair also served as a weapon when fights broke out between male subcultures.

Hebdige also maintains that style bricolage contrasts within subcultures, two opposing realities. For example, within the punk subculture, the opposing realities of a British flag and a T-shirt were used to create a new meaning of demonstrating anarchy and resistance to commodity (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 104-106). Style bricolage within the subcultures meant not only objects of dress being subverted, and dress as anarchy and resistance to the dominant culture, but styles were created to mirror the activities and focus of the group and to reflect the group's image. Class was a significant factor in the development of post-World War two youth subcultures; they reflected the values and traditions of the working-class man. Holding onto familial generational ties and aspects of working-class life while simultaneously experiencing the breakdown of working-class traditional community life with the advent of consumerism and prosperity of the post-war years. Hebdige points out that all the post-war youth subcultures reflected the working class or mirrored the group's views, values, resistance, and the styles of working-class men. Class is an essential factor when looking at the youth subcultures of post-war Britain, as each subculture in effect reflects a variant of working-

class men's taste and style (Hebdige, 1979, p. 75; Willmott, 1966). British youth subcultures can be traced back further than post-World War Two; early youth subcultures include the nineteenth-century “hooligan” gangs or ‘scuttler gangs’ of London and cities in the North of England, who were known for their unique dress codes and some of whom were even named after their dress. These “hooligan” gangs also subverted specific items of dress, had unique hair styles and styles of dress that separated them from the lower working-class of the time; they had highly decorated belts with studs and motifs, which served not only as an object of style or decoration to wear about their waist, but were also used as weapons when rival gangs would fight on the streets. In the 1950s, Richard Hoggart (2009) observed a new youth culture emerging amongst the working classes in Britain within a more affluent post-war era. The latest British working-class youth or teenage culture was heavily influenced by America and American culture and styles of dress in their new access to consumption. This new construction of working-class youth gave way to the emergence of youth subcultures in the 1960s and 70s, as Hebdige examines the ways the punk subculture, for example, was produced in defiance and resistance to the alienation and marginalization of the working class and economic decline in post-Fordist Britain and

Thatcherism. In post-modern Britain, I would suggest that the British Chav subculture is a metaphor for and indicative of the role of consumption in identity construction, particularly for the lower class; in a world of globalism and consumerism, social belonging and identity is rooted in the ability to consume and to consume with taste. The British poor cannot consume in the same way as the affluent, and this inability to consume makes them flawed customers. Or they consume ostentatiously, overcompensating for their lack of access to cultural and economic capital through production in society. For working-class men who can no longer construct their masculinity through their bodies in manual labour due to the decline in the British manufacturing industry, consumerism offers them an opportunity to build their masculinity through style or the sign of a designer logo. Keith Haywood and Majid Yar (Haywood and Yar, 2006) observe that through their overcompensation with brands and poor consumer choices, the dominant class considers the working class as lacking in taste and vulgar. Still, the poorer class cannot consume in aesthetically pleasing ways due to the lack of opportunities. Boxing-ring dress is a global subculture made up of working-class men's dress that is worn into the ring; therefore, in this study I aim to discover through ethnographic research more about the subculture of boxing ring dress and

how dress is utilised within this subculture to simultaneously communicate a fighter's narratives, values and beliefs as well as the collective, views, values and tastes of its working-class recruits.

### **Boxing Versus Wrestling**

Boxing is a lonely sport. Although fighters may be surrounded by a team at certain points in the run up to a fight, especially during training in the gym or during his time in the ring, in the build-up to a fight, the majority of the time, the fighter often builds up his physical body in preparation for the fight alone. Tony Jefferson (Jefferson, 1998) in 'Muscle hard men and Iron Mike Tyson reflections on desire anxiety and the embodiment of masculinity' observes that one of the key attributes that fighters possess in their bodies in boxing that separates boxing from other sports such as body building or wrestling, with wrestlers and body builders bodies also being at the peak of athletic fitness, is the notion of 'hardness' and 'toughness'. It is, however, as Jefferson observes not just a physical hardness of tough masculine and hard bodies that are being displayed in sports such as wrestling, but a mental hardness and resolve. In boxing, it is having the ability to get punched in the face or knocked down and get back up with controlled aggression and press into the fight for more punishment. It is the ability to risk the masculine body

in the ring, even one's life, in boxing nothing in the ring is ever certain and anything can happen. This adds a solemnity to boxing that you do not find in other combat sports such as in wrestling or martial arts. It is the willingness to risk one's life in the ring in what is known as a bloodsport. The goal in boxing is to knock out the opponent as quickly as possible and win the match.

Chris Ewers (Ewers, 2023) in 'Rocky v The Wrestler: sport as genre, shifting ideology and the doubleness of the sports film' notes that each sport is unique, having its own genre with rules and bodies that navigate and engineer stories that become genres. Just like other genres such as film or music, each sport is in competition with another, for example, English rugby and football, or American football and baseball. Sports are understood in competition and comparison to one another. Ewers observes that it could be supposed that boxing and wrestling are similar to each other. Both being sports from the genre of combat sports, they share many similarities in the structures of the sports, such as timed rounds, a ring as a platform and a stage. They both create a spectacle and performance for spectators as well as having aesthetically pleasing hard bodies that are beautifully constructed. It is interesting to note that in Regency bare knuckle fighting or pre-boxing rules, fighters would include wrestling moves in the outdoor ring as well as

punching. However, Ewers notes that contemporary wrestling is not a real sport but simulated violence that is controlled and staged for the audience. The primary purpose of opponents in wrestling is for one opponent to dominate the other, demonstrating injustice in the ring which excites the audience. In boxing, fighters will conceal their pain or injuries and will not want the opponent or the boxing audience to know that he is injured and in pain or cannot continue to fight, as this is detrimental to him winning the fight. He will hide his pain. In wrestling, the pain is the central component of the spectacle. It is exaggerated and made a part of the narrative in the wrestlers' ring, causing the injured wrestler to gain the sympathy of the audience, exciting their desire to see justice enacted in the ring and the revenge of the injured wrestler. This speaks to moral and ethics.

Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1972) in his essay entitled simply 'The World of Wrestling' observes, like Ewers, that wrestling is a spectacle and a spectacle of excess; that it is a pompous experience similar to that of ancient theatre. He notes that the differences between boxing and wrestling can be observed in that while in boxing there is a declared winner and you can bet on the outcome of a boxing match, wrestling, however, is made up of immediate moments in the ring and displays of passions and spectacles. He also

observes that in the sport of Judo there are measured and controlled symbolic gestures in the competition. If an opponent gets knocked down, he quietly acknowledges his defeat and comes away. With wrestling, every knock down is an exaggerated gesture and wrestlers perform this exaggeration and excess of gestures for the audience so that they are in no doubt he is in pain and knocked down. The contestants are like, as Barthes suggests, the characters in ancient theatre, playing their parts. They know their roles in the ring and their characters are all a part of the performances. Barthes observes that, essentially, in wrestling, what is shown to the audience is a performance of suffering, and most importantly the means to enact justice. Faces contort as one opponent has the other component in a hold such as an arm lock that has all the appearance of cruelty. Concealed cruelty would not suffice, as fans want the performance and spectacle of obvious suffering which is the primary goal of the fight. In summary, we find that although wrestling and other combat sports would seem to share traits with boxing, boxing as a sport is entirely separate from other combat style sports. Boxing is a blood sport which leads to real injury in the ring and even death in what is known within the community of boxing as 'death fights'. Fighters may incur real injury and physical damage in the sport as well as

suffer physically long after they have retired with long term damage to their health. Retired champions may even potentially develop neurological problems later in life.

### **In the Gym Routines and Practices**

The professional male boxer will sculpt and tone his body in the gym, but his body represents much more than this for professional boxers; boxing is their craft, art, and training is a crucial part of their boxing career. Many young male boxers who start out in the gym at first consider training as a second job; many will have day jobs that they go to alongside training to support them financially until they can turn professional, compete at a championship level, and begin their climb through the hierarchical ranks of competitive championship boxing (Wacquant, 2004). A fighter's preparation in the gym is pivotal and crucial to their performance in the ring. Coaches will make the training in the gym for the fighter so extreme and so wearisome that by the time the fighter reaches the ring, the fight itself will be less challenging. The ascetical nature of the fighter's journey permeates every part of his lifestyle, from training in the gym to his private life outside of it. In the build-up to an important fight the boxer is put on a strict diet, as Wacquant observes in the

Woodlawn boxing gym in Chicago during the late nineties: fighters must avoid certain foods such as sugar or starch and must eat white meat such as chicken or fish with steamed vegetables. They should avoid alcohol, drinking only water or tea. This is to get the fighter's body prepared to meet his optimal weight category for the fight ahead. They must go to bed early to get as much sleep as they can so that their bodies can recover from the intense training during the day and must abstain from all sexual contact before a fight so as not to lose essential bodily fluids that might make him weak since some fighters subscribe to the rumour that sex can weaken a male fighter's legs prior to the ring.

Wacquant observes that the most obvious feature of training for the prize-fighter is the repetitive nature of it: the workout is rigorous with little variation to the training practices, and the subjection of the body to this repetitive and intense routine means that some fighters give up after a few weeks because of this. He notes that the training session will usually last no longer than an hour and a half, with a lot of floorwork and calisthenics. The fighter will adapt these routines to his body. Other practices while training in the gym include shadow boxing in front of the mirror and inside of the ring,

hitting the various shaped bags hanging from the roof of the gym, skipping and abdominal exercises. These basic routines will be gradually tweaked over time by the coach, as other exercises may be added, such as those that condition and prepare the body to receive and absorb punches and blows to the face and body inside the ring. Wacquant points out that boxing is first and foremost about taking hits, not delivering them.

Within boxing history and folklore, it is the fighting champions who have been hurt and knocked down but refuse to stay down and get back up to absorb more punishment in the ring that are the most renowned. Such legends of the ring are reified for the mysterious and esteemed quality within the boxing community known as “having heart”. To prepare for this, fighters need to demonstrate through training, their willingness and ability to take a punch or a flurry of punches to the body or the head not only to condition their body to absorb punishment but to be able to control their immediate and natural defensive bodily instinct to protect itself and to avoid shying away from getting hurt. The only way to ensure this is to submit the body to regularly getting hit. Training practices will also incorporate working on specific bags to sharpen skills, such as the double-end bag or the speed bag,

during a session. Fighters are encouraged to do stretching exercises at the end of training to warm their bodies down; all of this is combined with intense roadwork outside of the gym or running on the pavement (Wacquant, 2004).

Wacquant also notes that the apprentice fighter in the gym learns the craft socially by simply observing and mimicking the bodies of other boxers in the gym, demonstrating that the training experience and boxing pedagogy are collective, as more experienced, seasoned, and elite fighters train alongside amateurs. I would also suggest that through this collective socialization in the gym, boxing masculinities and identities are also fashioned. As Wacquant observes, being a part of the boxing gym is likened to belonging to an exclusive men's club or membership in a fraternity of boxing.

The rhythm of the gym is centred around the clock, as drills and workouts are conducted according to three-minute rounds with 30-60 second periods of rest in between. When the coach shouts 'time', drills and rounds continue. The body soon takes on the rhythm of the gym's time and drills. Other bodies all assist in the education of the boxer's body. Wacquant notes that it is exclusively within boxing that athletes and boxers need the meticulous

management of their bodies, particularly the face and hands. One of the other centralised features of the training in the boxing gym and fashioning of the male boxer's body is a preoccupation with a fighter's ideal weight. Within the boxing community, stories and legends circulate about the lengths to which fighters of the past went to shed extra pounds on their bodies prior to a weigh-in ceremony. From training in layers of clothes, sitting in saunas, or intense last-minute dieting (Wacquant, 2004).

Similar to Wacquant's observations of the training routines and corporeal practices of the Woodlawn boxing gym, John Sugden (Sugden, 1996) observes the Memorial Club boxing gym in Charter Oak, Manhattan, in the United States in the 1990s. The gym sessions started with warm-ups, exercises on the gym floor, stretches, callisthenics and light workouts with skipping ropes. Then practising combinations of moves such as jabs on the varied punching bags, followed by gloved sparring inside of the ring. Sugden points out that once sparring begins, a second session of more intense circuit training on the floor commences. He also observes that in the gym, workouts are subject to the strict timings that govern the rounds in the ring. Three-

minute intervals with a minute's rest in between each round, mimicking the rounds in the ring.

Sugden also observes that professional and champion fighters train alongside junior and amateur fighters in the gym, although the workouts may be less intense for the junior fighters than for the professional elites, who spend every day training for an upcoming fight. The egalitarian nature of the gym means that everyone is considered equal and boxers will do everything together, to getting undressed alongside each other, using the same equipment and training on the gym floor.

I would suggest that young lower working-class boys and men who come to the boxing gym originating from urban ghettos without necessarily having athletic ability, will have bodies that are already primed and hardened for boxing training. These are bodies that contain unresolved frustrations and anger, used to risk taking and absorbing punishment both mentally and physically. These are bodies that have a propensity for aggression. These are tough and aggressive bodies that are used to having street fights and being hit.

Sugden observes that there is a correlation between the working classes and boxing, which warrants further investigation. He argues that the subculture of boxing is filled with aggressive bodies. He points out that aggressiveness within boxing is perfectly acceptable and sanctioned, as well as the boxing gym and boxing training providing a sanctuary from the harsh realities of its recruits' everyday lives. It is through boxing training that I would argue young male recruits can also produce and craft traditional, respectable, yet tough and hardened boxing masculinities and identities. Sugden also observes in his ethnographic research of international boxing gyms, that in the Holy Trinity boxing gym in North Belfast the training patterns are the same as the transatlantic counterparts. The routines and practices again are a combination of three-minute round intervals with a minute's rest, and consist of skipping, calisthenics, bag work, shadow boxing, sparring in the ring and a warm down through stretching. Sugden observes that centralised within boxing is the role of physical and mental aggression. This aggression is not unbridled and must be controlled delineating the difference between aggression and violence and suggesting that qualities such as ascetism, self-restraint and delayed reward are esteemed within the boxing world. They demonstrate a fighter's complete discipline to the art as well as their

consciousness, being aware that they must show the utmost respect to their opponent in the face of defeat (Sugden, 1996).

The fashioning of the boxer's body for the purposes of this study allude less to the fashioning of physical bodies in the boxing gym, more centrally to the politics and aesthetics of fashions, styles, dress, and how British male boxers adorn their bodies for the ring.

## Contextual Review

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores gender theory, in particular Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell's masculinities theory and her notion of body-reflexive practice and of how the body is central to constructing masculinities through the social interaction of male bodies with other men's bodies (Connell, 1995). The boxing gym will be examined as a homosocial space where working class men's bodies interact relationally with other working class men's bodies, constructing traditional working-class masculinities. This chapter also looks at French sociologist Loic Wacquant's experience of masculinities in the Woodlawn boxing gym in America in the 1990s (Wacquant, 2004) and his

ideas around violent masculinities in sport. Including how the violence in sport is inverted on men's bodies, especially while playing while injured or— within boxing through fighters putting their lives on the line (Messner, 1990). French sociologist Bruno Latour's actor network theory how objects are participants in the social world through social associations, mediating between human and object will also be employed and the way Connell's body-reflexive practice and actor-network theory both utilise the notion of relationship in the social world and in gender construction will be examined. Lastly, we will explore art historian Jules Prown's idea of material culture studies and its use as a vehicle and methodology to study boxing ring dress as being representative and objects of material culture that embody the values, customs and attitudes of global boxing and help boxers to create new social identities (Latour, 2005; Prown, 1982).

### **Raewyn Connell's Masculinities Theory**

In her chapter 'Men's Bodies' (1995). Raewyn Connell emphasises the importance of the male body in studies of gender analysis. Connell argues for the physicality of the male body in gender construction; that masculinities are a work in progress and are embodied through physical social interactions, with the body central to these interactions. She argues that the body is not

static, merely a canvas to be inscribed upon with social influences and inscriptions, but it is a physical body in motion, working in relationship and it is through this relationship with other (male) bodies that new masculinities are constantly being produced. That the body is central to how these masculinities are formed is not to say that masculinities are biologically determined because of biological sex and gender, that it is through both the body and socialization, however, that masculinities are produced, and the body is central to how these are constructed and sustained. Connell maintains that the body is not a machine; it is diverse, and there are many outside influences on biological gender. The body has agency: we eat, sleep, exercise, and labour, and the body is therefore central in understanding gender as bodily practices incorporate at an individual and collective level ways that sociality is performed.

Similarly, I would argue that working-class masculinity is not a fixed structure or pathologically inherent in the biological sex of the working-class male body; rather, working-class masculinity is produced and sustained through bodily practices and bodily social interactions with other working-class male bodies and nowhere are these bodily practices of masculinities more evident than in the world of modern men's sports and, in particular, the hyper-

masculine world of boxing. Which produces and sustains its own types of hegemonic working-class masculinities through the body. Connell observes that recent work on sports sociology shows that the rules and ordinances that govern modern sports are in place to produce gendered bodies (Connell, 1995).

As I elaborate in greater detail below, alongside Connell's masculinities theory, my study also draws from Chapter three of Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. In this chapter, Latour looks at objects as having relational associations with, and being participants within, the social world. Arguing that, when examined more closely, everyday things prove significant in the way they work in relationship with humans exploring the social world and social relationships. At this point, it suffices to note that both Connell and Latour explore the social world through relationships. Connell through gender and the relationships with the body, and Latour through things and this is significant for my study, which aims to explore the relationships of gender identity and dress with the body in the sport of boxing.

### **Loic Wacquant's Reflections on the Boxing Gym**

French sociologist Loic Wacquant, in his reflections on the Woodlawn boxing gym in Chicago in the late 1990s, notes that, in the boxing gym, there are many networks of coded nuances, rules and relationships, including the relationship with the body, that can only be properly appreciated and understood by being immersed in the sport through training. Everything about the traditional boxing gym is centred on gender; the boxing gym is a gendered space. Boxing has always been referred to historically as 'the manly art' and seen as a sport of virility. From the walls decorated with posters of past legendary fighters that budding boxers look up to and try to emulate, or advertisement posters for upcoming battles and fighting bouts. Combined with the impact on the senses from the heavy smells of leather and sweat that pervade the atmosphere, the sounds of the skipping ropes hitting the floor and the loud pounding of the punch bags. The gym is a sensuous space in which the boxer's body is produced and primed for future battle in the ring. Through boxing's rigorous corporeal routines and practices, boxers inhabit their bodies, knowing with accuracy their physical limits, weaknesses and strengths. Boxers mimic one another on the gym floor, copying techniques, postures and moves, and this sociality of boxing bodies and

bodily social interactions masculine bodies mimicking other masculine bodies helps in the construction of boxing masculinities. The gym space is also a site in which serious boxers are distinguished from hobbyists, being identifiable by their bringing to the gym their own gloves, boots, hand wraps, custom-made boxing trunks, tops, robes, and by having their own locker in the gym. In Wacquant's Woodlawn gym there were no female members, which was typical of most boxing gyms in the 1990s (although this has changed over the years and now in the twenty-first century women are more present and visible in the sport though, although boxing prides itself on being egalitarian, there is still much work to be done in terms of inclusion and equality within the sport for its female, gay and trans participants). Boxers are, in effect, invited into this space to produce masculinities. Crucially, however, the boxer's masculinity is not an abstract canvas to be inscribed upon with symbolism and meanings but is embodied: the body in question is in motion and constructed not only through its tough physicality but through sociality and the social interactions it has with other bodies in the gym. Wacquant observes that the gym subculture is sacred; no outside influences must contaminate this manly retreat, and it is an unspoken part of the gym code that everyday problems and life stresses are left outside of the gym, where

conversations and social interactions are focused on boxing, upcoming bouts or fights, a fighter's weight, and boxing mythology. To be a member of the gym is to be subject to this exclusive virile brotherhood where conversations evolve around making weight, upcoming bouts or boxing lore.

The boxing gym is also the crucible of the boxer's specifically working-class masculinity, a sanctuary of working-class and traditional paradigms recruits traditionally come predominately from working-class communities (historically this would have included immigrants from Irish, Jewish, Italian, Black British/American, and Latino communities) and Wacquant notes that boxing is an indicator for who is lowest in the class system (Wacquant, 2004).

### **The Body and Gender**

Recent work on gender and semiotics have tended to focus on femininity rather than masculinity and that social constructionist and semiotic approaches to gender, work against the biological determinism of the sociobiological and rather than the male body as a machine the male body is a blank sheet ready to be inscribed upon (Connell, 1995). This approach has its problems: with so much emphasis on what is being inscribed socially on the body, the body itself evaporates or fades into the background; but the

body on which these social inscriptions are written on is not static, it is in constant motion. Connell observes that the physicality of the male body is central to understanding gender, noting the degree to which literature and books on men detail physical problems with the male body (whether from impotence, ageing, occupational health, violent injury and even early death). The social constructivist approach to gender alone minimises bodily difference not only between the biological sexes, but between men but social process and biological sex alone will not suffice for a contextualization of masculinity or the production of gender. Masculinity is corporeal it centralises bodily processes and the physical, body language, and bodily ways of being in the world through touch, movement, muscularity, life experiences and sex. Bodily experience is central to understanding who we are sport however has become central to contemporary definitions of masculinity. With the male body being in continuous motion the rules and ordinances that govern modern sports bring the male body into submission through carefully moderated gender practices and gender competitiveness (Connell, 2005).

### **Violent Masculinities in Modern Sports**

Eric Dunning, in his chapter 'Sport as a male preserve: the social forces of masculine identity and its transformations' (Dunning, 1986), observes that, of the main patriarchal institutions and their structures, very little attention has been paid to sport; the sociology of sport has been underdeveloped, particularly when observing masculinities in sport and sport as a civilizing space and a male institution. Writers have observed sport mainly, he suggests, as a source of inequity between the sexes, rather than observing the variants and types of hegemonic masculinities that are produced and reproduced within sport. Due to its competitive nature, sport promotes and encourages aggression, and certain sports particularly combat sports such as rugby, American football and boxing allow specifically for, or require, the use of hyper-masculine and aggressive attitudes. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (Elias and Dunning, 1986) maintain that a big part of the original formation of modern sport was built around the need for activities that would allow men to express their excitement and bodily aggression in a civilised and socially acceptable way; modern sports allow participants to play-fight and to imitate battle, either between two individuals or within groups as with rugby,

football and hockey. Dunning notes that the origin of modern combat sports can be traced to early British medieval folk games such as Knappen, which were played in the streets across the country these early forms of sport were uncivilised and unrestrained by rules and regulations their central ingredient being the unrestrained violence they involved, in some senses the games were simply a type of unchecked violence.

Men inhabited through these games a set of unrestrained manly standards; during the nineteenth century, however, sports began to be regulated and restrained. Subject to rules to control the levels of violence (often first developed in public schools) as part of the wider societal development of restraint and self-regulation that Elias has called 'the civilising process'. Many men felt that this change had an emasculating effect. Elias observes that, in ancient Greek boxing, for example, opponents were expected to stand in front of their opponent, not moving out of the way from blows but absorbing punches and punishment; early forms of rugby also had a similar ethos, as players would engage in kicking each other's shins; while in boxing's pre-Queensbury era, bare-knuckle fighting would include kicking, punching, eye-gouging and wrestling (Woodward, 2007).

Sport, however, still reflected the manly values and ethics inherent in the games from their beginning as a patriarchal domain for men. Dunning identifies patriarchal dominance in sports as a reflection of the patterns of dominance both social and occupational in society's main institutions. He detects this in the sport of rugby not only in the aggression on the field, but in the clubhouses and pubs after the game, where players engage in songs and chants to fortify their hegemonic masculinity. In these songs, women are objectified, and gay men are ridiculed; through drinking, shouting and social interactions (and the exclusion of women apart from those that were there to serve in a submissive role as barmaids and waitresses), these violent masculinities were preserved. In terms of Connell's body-reflexive practice and social interactions, hegemonic and violent masculinities are not only produced in this context through bodily interactions, body language, gestures and performance for example, through the violent content of the chants and songs but they are constructed, sustained unchallenged and patriarchal. With the passage of time and wider civilising processes, the rugby club are no longer spaces that represent aggressive and misogynistic masculinities, and women are no longer excluded in the clubhouses, demonstrating through sport that masculine dominance in society is, over time, slowly disintegrating.

In rugby, as in football and boxing, more women are emerging within the sport as well as some players and fighters that openly identifying as gay and who are becoming more accepted within sports. The continued patriarchal structure and dominance of hegemonic masculinities, however, show that the archaic structures of modern sport still have a long way to go.

In modern British football and football “hooliganism”, for example, there has been a continuation of open displays of unbridled excitement and violence. Both during the game from football fans and after the game, particularly with opposing fans and teams. Fighting and the displays of aggression, particularly during the late twentieth century, were once considered par for the course in football. As with rugby, violence also came in the forms of songs and chants on the terraces, following a similar pattern of violent, homophobic and racist content, along with the intimation of acts of violence and mocking gestures. Although much has been done in recent years to ban this type of violence in football, and stadiums have long since removed the terraces, this serves as an indication of the type of hegemonic and violent masculinities produced in the sport through its fans and through football as spectacle. Many “hooligans” attended matches just for the violence both during and after the game with rival fans, entering battle either on the terraces or in the streets.

Dunning notes that a main ingredient for football hooliganism was the assertion of a certain type of virility and an aggressive masculine manner. Football “hooligans” emerged from the lowest sphere of the class spectrum, hailing from extremely deprived lower working-class communities, and he notes that it is fair to suppose that the aggressive style of masculinity inherent in football “hooligans” arises from some structural defects in lower working-class communities.

These structural ingredients produce men that are aggressive and violent banded together to survive alone on the streets of extremely rough working-class neighbourhoods; groups of young men that would congregate on the streets, separating themselves from the opposite sex and demonstrating loyalty and unity to their peers while guarding their territories from rival area gangs. Elias and Dunning point out that violence is expected to be found in streets and neighbourhoods where there is little, if any, control exerted by local authorities. Where young men produce methods of self-defence.

Dunning also notes that within these lower working-class communities there is little in the way of civilizing processes to control or subvert violence, as violence is seen as a part of daily life and normal within these communities; violence is rationalised and prized and masculinities are hegemonic, and even

women are conditioned to become violent themselves as they learn to accept violent men. Dunning calls this behaviour part of a positive feedback cycle within social relations, where men who can fight are men of repute; undoubtedly this develops a fondness for violence where men encounter meaning and pleasure through it in their everyday life. He observes that, within the communities of lower working-class men, aggression and a violent masculine style connect with feelings of gratification and theorises that this type of violent masculine style is prevalent among the football “hooligan” and made manifest through fighting. Dunning also notes that it is not only the football terraces where this type of masculinity can be seen, but it provides a good setting as football presents itself as an almost tribal mock battle with the fans protecting their ‘sides’ or goal ends with territorial fervour, while the other team is depicted as the encroacher (Elias and Dunning, 1986).

All this is relevant and useful context for our consideration of the construction of masculine and working-class identity through the legitimised violence of the boxing ring. I will only add, at this point, my belief that the hegemonic and violent masculinities that were produced and sustained through football hooliganism were not simply an assertion of hegemonic masculinity, but actually served subconsciously as a resistance to the civilizing

process that was happening in wider society, where institutions of traditional forms of patriarchal masculinity and violent productions of masculinity were slowly dying out.

### **Working Class Masculinity Embodied in the Male Body in Sports**

Connell considers that, in the world of sport, the whole of the masculine body is involved and centralised and developed; it is the body that engenders, through its interactions. Socially and within the sporting context, the body performs hegemonic masculinity through its development of specific and competitive skill within a sanctioned space; the male body is then reified within the sports field and mass culture. Ironically, Connell uses the example of the bodily performance and skill of former world American heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali. Sport is the perfect field for understanding, and for a closer examination of, gender. Particularly, through the body and bodily practices; sport has its own world and rules of producing gender through social interactions, competitiveness and a male hierarchy. Which, until recently, included the exclusion or marginalization of women, particularly in combat and team sports such as rugby, British and American football and boxing. The sociality of gender is signified and embodied in the male body through male-dominated sports; men's sporting prowess, as

Connell notes, has become a subject of contention in modern feminism. The body is so important to a man's performance of gender, particularly when producing working-class masculinities (in both sports and labour) that, when men cannot perform with the body in sport, work or even sex, their masculinity is jeopardised.

For working-class men, their bodies allow them to produce and reproduce their masculinities through hard labour and physicality. This explains why deindustrialization within British manufacturing towns has resulted in a complete loss of British traditional working-class masculinities and identities. Which prior to its demise was a sphere of endurance against class exploitation and of declining male dominance. Working-class men's bodies, bodily strength and physical force are often considered their only economic capital labour market; the deindustrialization in British villages and towns thus resulted in a loss of traditional respectable working-class masculinities and identities. In *Chavs: the demonization of the working classes* (2020), Owen Jones describes how, when British prime minister Margaret Thatcher was in political power in the late twentieth century, her attacks on the industrial jobs of the working classes such as the mining industry left old industrial towns ravaged and had a negative impact on working-class identity.

Her attacks on working-class unions stripped them of their communal power and, for working class men who defined their identities through their physical labour, this resulted in a loss of masculinity, as the traditions of generations of working-class men were eradicated.

The loss of employment gave rise to welfare dependency for many and higher rates of working-class people being on state benefits as there were no jobs available or only service-sector jobs or casual part-time labour. New definitions of the working-class poor began to emerge; while amongst sociologists they were labelled 'the underclass', for the rest of middle-class Britain they were simply defined as 'chavs' a derogatory name given to those who were poor and unemployed. Particularly, the younger white working class, who were labelled as feckless, feral, work-shy, violent, sexually debauched, dirty, and less than human. Football fans, mostly male, were deemed "hooligans" because of the actions of a few, the underclass were caricatured and considered fair game by British media and social commentators (Owens, 2020).

This has extreme significance when exploring contemporary working-class masculinities and particularly the centralizing of the male body in working-class masculinities; it also explains why, for many young working-class men,

boxing not only as a sport but for many professional boxers as a career and a trade is one of the very few arenas where some form of traditional and respectable working-class masculinity can still be constructed through the body in a patriarchal and communal setting.

The word 'underclass' began to be used to describe the working classes in long-term unemployment those most devastated by the economic and technological changes at the end of the twentieth century. Which had left many working-class communities without work. As John Welshman observes, the term had connotations of unskilled labour and lack of education; for Marx and Engels they would have been considered the new 'lumpenproletariat'. But it was under Thatcher that this new underclass was born and, as David Cannadine observes, the loss of inclusion in production in a capitalist economy meant that many could contribute nothing to the economy, but were left behind, invisible somewhere on the edge of society. Having no real identity while being told they only had themselves to blame for their poverty and loss (Cannadine, 1998, Welshman, 2006).

Subsequently, with the advent of changes in the economy and deindustrialization, new definitions of masculinity are now being defined through the internet and technology. Men sitting in offices at computers

produce new masculinities through the body instead of with physical labour. What was once the domain of women (office work) is now the domain of men (white-collar workers) but these new masculinities do not include working-class men. With post-industrialization and modernization and the reduction of the importance of male physical strength in job roles, sport as an institution is the only available sphere where brute masculine strength is a requirement. For those players in combat sports or boxing the muscular male body is revered and given heroic status (Messner, 1990). Messner observes that, as society becomes more civilised and rational, the sporting arena is the only remaining institution where male violence is acceptable and allowed. A masculine space free from the civilizing process of the wider society where men can still dominate women and reduce their influence. As such, sport has become a key arena of masculine-affirming practice.

Both Connell and Michael Messner (Messner, 1990) observe that men's bodies, particularly working-class men's bodies are weapons, but in modern society these bodily weapons (the male capacity for violence) are largely inverted and turned in upon themselves. This is most evident in physically demanding sports such as American football, boxing and even basketball. In which players will often play on with injuries, have accidents on the field or,

in boxing, are permanently hurt. Boxers can sustain lifelong and life-threatening injuries or trauma to the brain, which leads to loss of work and destitution; former fighters may take recreational drugs or binge on alcohol so that even the healthiest boxers are worn down. But for many professional athletes sports injuries are considered an acceptable risk for the chance to achieve notoriety and masculine superiority. Messner, discussing male violence in general, notes that there is a triad of male violence, violence towards other men, violence towards themselves and violence toward women and this is particularly prevalent in men's combat sports such as American football, British rugby and boxing. But where, for the player, the use of the body as a weapon through violence towards the opposite team means winning or scoring goals, this violence can also result in serious injury for a player or individual as well as pain occasionally even death. Indeed, in boxing, the violence within the sport is turned inward against the body even before it is turned outward against other bodies in the ring. For example, the sparring techniques of the former world champion Muhammad Ali punished his body in sparring with continuous blows to his body and head, absorbing punishment to condition his body for the ring and be more formidable in the

ring but likely leading to an early onset of brain damage and Parkinson's disease (Connell, 1995; Eig, 2017).

Messner maintains that male violence is not inherent in a man but is a socially learned behaviour which is particular of a certain type of masculinity. As Connell observes, there is no scientific proof that men are naturally prone to violence and, in sport, men are as much the victims of violence as the instigators. Though men come to combat sports with already-gendered identities, their gender identity is still a work in progress and it is in the realm of combat sports that these gendered identities can be fully explored. Within the combat sports field, then, exists a contradiction: men within combat sports such as American football, rugby and even more so in global boxing are at peak physical condition, yet they are also more prone to suffer from injury and long term disabilities, and some may battle with addictions on leaving the sport. The sport that teaches men to utilise their own bodies as weapons in the field or the ring is the same sport which damages these hyper-masculine bodies. Which could do much to explain that it is mostly working-class men from disadvantaged communities that enlist in combat sports and particularly men from ethnic minority and poorer backgrounds. Men from more advantaged backgrounds may take part in combat sports

such as rugby while in higher education, but will quit the sport once their education is complete as they tend to have more educational and career choices, whereas men from more disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the same choices or career access (Messner, 1990).

As we have touched upon, it is impossible to construct definitions of masculinity without a male body, but the body is not fixed and static; it becomes part of social processes and interactions. That is, masculinities are plural and diverse, but they are also extremely personal to the body and they become more complex over time. Nonetheless, with post-industrialization and modernization and the reduction of the importance of male physical strength in job roles, sport as an institution is the only available sphere where brute masculine strength is a requirement. For those players in combat sports or boxing the muscular male body and its capacity for violence is revered and given heroic status.

### **Body-Reflexive Practice**

Connell (1995) notes that bodies are central to social practices. Many theories have viewed bodies as symbolic of power but not partakers in its agency; Connell points out that bodies need to be seen as having agency in

producing masculinity through social processes and interactions. Much sports research has emphasised the disciplining practices used within the sports field to produce gender, but masculinities are produced and created through the body and new social shared bodily interactions; these practices are what Connell defines as 'bodily reflexive practices' whereby bodies interact with other bodies, creating new meanings and new definitions of masculinity not simply bodies that are inscribed with meanings, but bodies that are agents of creating new meanings (in this case, new masculinities) through bodily interactions. I would add to this that objects are also intrinsic to these bodily interactions and experiences, and that they too can assist in the production of new masculinities or sustaining of a particular type of exemplary masculinity through bodily reflexive practice. Sports as a field is the perfect site to observe body-reflexive practice in the production of masculinities, and in particular working-class masculinities. This is especially true of boxing; boxers are hyper-aware of their bodies and what their bodies can do and their bodies are hyper-disciplined not to be fed alcohol, junk foods, or drugs, while sex is forbidden before a fight, as is any form of violence outside the ring. In boxing, the competitive drive that makes champions is turned inward against their bodies and is dictated by the social world of the professional

sport; most boxers in preparation for a fight will drive their bodies to its limits, starving themselves before a weighing-in to make the required weight, remaining celibate and isolating themselves from any distractions from friends and family. It is a contradiction of sorts: hyper-masculine bodies and exemplary hegemonic masculinities are produced and sustained through bodily practices for the ring, yet at the same time the hegemonic boxing body is submissive to strict rules and regulations and controlled outside the ring through the stringent discipline of training, diet and celibacy. The combination of self-discipline and strict rules in the world of boxing that fighters have to comply and submit to can be seen in one sense as actually undermining their autonomy and masculinity (Connell, 1995).

Connell maintains that body-reflexive practice, as well as constructing new individual masculinities, constructs a new social world through bodily relationships. Just so, the body-reflexive practices within boxing masculinities are also produced through the social interactions within the sport and social relationships; the institution of boxing assists in sustaining these types of hegemonic and hyper-masculinity both through boxers' bodies and inhabited individually within the body. However, body-reflexive practices are not the body being signified as a symbol of masculinity or a body to be simply

inscribed with hegemonic masculinity. In the example of boxing, the institutions of boxing, its social world, its structures, even its history as a sport with its pantheon of historical champions, are all called into play. The body absorbs all of this while remaining a body, a masculine body that is material not a sign; its materiality is of utmost importance. The social explanations of gender being constructed socially is crucial to escape the restriction of biological determinism, but bodies matter and the practices that involve the body create new meanings and structures for the body, creating new social worlds and new possibilities.

Body-reflexive practice in boxing, therefore, creates a social world that has a body at its core but not biological determinism of gender, revealing possibilities for creating new meanings around gender in the body. This world may, however, be contentious to the body and the masculinity that is being constructed, and may involve the boxer's body being required to give and to take punishment.

### **Bruno Latour and Actor-Network Theory**

As mentioned earlier, for this study I also draw from Bruno Latour's (Latour, 2005) actor-network theory, in particular the third chapter of *Reassembling*

*the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, entitled 'The Third Source of Uncertainty: Objects Too Have Agency'. Latour describes the social world as a very diverse, rocky, and uneven landscape. He notes that the social world is not an equal structural domain that can be explained through power and domination but is a world of associations and networks. That new networks, associations and asymmetries are being created continuously through social interactions and associations, and that it is in these social associations that we can find a more solid explanation of how society is made. These associations can incorporate objects, and those objects help and assist in explanations of the social world and the networks that make up the social.

Latour doesn't describe his theory as a complete social realm; nor does he incorporate social hierarchies such as class, gender, sexuality, race and other cultural structures into his theory. Rather, he incorporates the many facets of, or associations with, both human and objects that make up the networks and assemblages of the social world, and explores what these networks and assemblages can communicate and tell us about the social world they are in. The social, for Latour, is found in the temporary associations and assemblages which come together in brief interactions or associations, and

he observes that the social world and its simple social skills are not strong or universal enough to define the social world that it is also necessary to trace non-social means (Latour, 2005).

Latour maintains that, as soon as you recognise that social ties alone are not strong enough to stabilise society, then objects can come into play as a stable means of creating lasting social associations; objects fade from sight however when you insist that social forces exist to prop up society and are enough alone to create durable social ties. Latour asks the question: do objects make a difference to society and cause actions that create new social ties? Do they become agents in the actions of humans within society? Although they do not necessarily make humans act, objects are there as utensils and associations in the course of an action; thus, objects act, they also sanction, empower, make available and so on. The sociologist, Latour insists, needs to really examine the networks produced by objects in the social to ascertain if the connections are strong enough and not merely a list of inanimate objects assembled together to make assemblages of social associations; they need to devise a way to make them a substantial whole. Objects still need to be considered amidst the backdrop of the social landscape as being an unequal and rocky terrain with many asymmetries and their employment of social

power objects are always there in the social world, but they are never accorded or recognised; they exist on the periphery of the social world but are never represented in explanations of the social. They remain dormant until called into action in a course of human action. Any social action must navigate that rocky mountainous terrain of the social world, finally brought together by such a medley of unequal social associations. The course of action weaves its way through both human and the non-human interactions. However, Latour notes that it is necessary to take objects into account only for as long as they are proportionate to the social action, and how the sociologist of associations needs new social devices to explore these new associations that are part of the social world; associations that flow only when new associations are being constructed. Objects can quickly change from being mediators between humans and action to having no trace of action at all, which is why Latour notes that certain techniques need to be introduced to make them communicate, to assert themselves and what actions they are encouraging both humans and non-humans to do. Latour notes that objects regardless of how conducive they are to action, quietly retreat once they have served their purpose. Making it difficult to analyse them, and the greater their significance the quicker they disappear.

When objects have dissipated into the background permanently, it is possible to bring them back to life momentarily. For example, if we look at the field of boxing and the subculture of sporting memorabilia and its collections of pre-owned sporting objects, as well as auctions, archives and retailers of objects of boxing memorabilia such as boxing trunks, gloves, boots and robes that have been worn by former champions, they are brought briefly back to life and back into the foreground by collectors who purchase them and exhibit them in pride of place on their wall.

Latour observes that students of actor-network theory know that, if objects are not analysed, this is not due to a lack of objects to study but a reluctance on the part of sociologists to analyse the data from non-human actors. He notes that, historically, in the study of sociology, 'objects' were strictly the domain of the scientific and engineering fields of study; objects were never assembled working with humans in the social world through relationships, but were rendered as weak social ties and consigned to being signifiers of social action. But objects' actions are far more diverse than that and their effects are more ever present than simply being there for symbolism or decoration to the study of humans (Latour, 2005).

### **Jules Prown's Material Culture Studies**

This study also draws inspiration and techniques from the 'material culture studies' of Jules Prown (1982). In his study of material culture, Prown offers a similar argument for objects as being active not passive; not simply things to gaze upon, but objects as artifacts that embody and reflect societies past which have been lost, forgotten or only made visible and accessible through the artifact. He proposes that the data extracted from objects offer insights into the collective communal views, standards and ideologies of societies past and present of both the maker, user and the society for which the object was crafted. However, there are limitless objects available to the researcher of material culture, all varied and diverse, so that the study of material culture, Prown notes, is too broad to be a field as such; it does not constitute a specialization in and of itself, but the study of material culture is more of a discipline and a methodology, a sub-field like archaeology, and art history. Material culture provides insights and evidence of the maker or user and the societal values at the time of its creation. Functional and aesthetic interpretations of objects, therefore, I would argue are representations of culture and, as such, can embody consciously or unconsciously elements of

race, class, religion, gender, culture, and so forth of a particular society or community.

The study of material culture is useful for my study as many objects of boxing ring dress are kept after a fight; the more rare used objects of boxing dress will be collected by sports fans as curiosities of a particular moment in time a particular fight, especially in relation to legendary fighters or world champions such as Muhammad Ali. These artifacts of dress, therefore, I would suggest are representative of historic fights and are simulacra of the diaspora of the global boxing world. Artifacts of boxing dress can have functional value but also spiritual value; for example, some fighters wear the same pair of trunks for every fight for their functional purpose, but may also believe that they must continue to wear them in future fights, particularly if they won their first fight wearing these trunks, as they have now brought them luck in the ring. These superstitions, where the object takes mythological properties as a kind of fetish, are not uncommon in boxing (Arond and Weinburg, 1952).

At other times a fighter's ring dress may have aesthetic value attached, not unlike works of art; so much so that the finery in the materials used for the trunks can be auctioned off after the fight. Some fighters have done this to

raise money for a charity they support such as British welterweight boxer Amir Khan, who auctioned off a pair of trunks that had cost thirty thousand pounds to make after his fight with Devon Alexander to raise money for a school in Pakistan (BBC, 2014). Boxing-ring objects of dress can be analysed for data about the maker who created them and the fighter who commissioned them to be made, the fighter's beliefs and culture, his class, race, ethnicity; even his favourite fighter and fighting styles can be gleaned using the tools of material culture analysis and can unlock the conscious or unconscious hopes and desires of the maker or end user and their community. Prown notes that material culture excludes natural objects and is the study of man-made objects; he considers that the more extravagant the materials used in the object the more significant and precious the object was to the user and the community for which it was created for. In boxing we can see the more expensive materials used in fight dress, often commissioned by the boxer with the help of the designer, as an indication of that fighter's hierarchy within boxing structures and within the boxing world; he is renowned and displays through his use of objects how high-up and important he is within the boxing community and the world of professional boxing.

Both Connell's theory of 'body-reflexive practice' and Latour's actor-network theory and objects working in relationship with humans, are useful to examine how working-class masculinities in boxing are produced and sustained, and how objects assist in the creation and manufacturing of these working-class boxing masculinities particularly in objects of boxing dress worn in the ring. I argue that objects of boxing-ring dress such as robes and gowns, jackets and trunks, boots and gloves have agency, and work in relationship with the boxer as well as embodying the structures and rules of the sport. For example, the object of the white towel, has a practical function, being often worn around the neck of fighters on entering the ring to keep their muscles warm for the ring, but also a potential aesthetic function. As with former American heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, who wore a white bathing robe along with the white towel around his neck on entering the ring. Simultaneously the white towel in boxing is also an object that the boxer's trainer will throw into the ring if he suspects his fighter may be in danger and cannot continue. Meaning this simple object assists not only in a practical function or for display being worn by some fighters into the ring, but is also a significant part of the rules and structures safe-guarding the fighters in the sport. As this object also communicates surrender in the ring, fighters

will go to great lengths to avoid the ceremonial throwing in of the white towel, as this will impact a fighter's masculinity in the ring, making him seem weak and defeated. Fighters are expected to take punishment in the ring, and getting back up from being knocked down in the ring is considered having what boxers call 'heart' or courage. Therefore, we can see how the white towel is symbolic in boxing, but it also embodies masculinities; being either physically and mentally strong or weak can be defined through how this object is deployed. I argue that objects of boxing dress are inscribed with a fighter's personal culture and in some instances can act as micro-biographies; they are embodied objects that help in the construction of a fighter's working-class masculine identity.

The glove, to take another example, is symbolic within modern boxing as it historically demarcates the process of the modernization of boxing. From an unlicensed bareknuckle practice to a legitimised respectable indoor sport and spectacle. Many fighters will have their gloves and boots as well as their dress customised to their colours, and a fighter's gloves can signify his identity in the ring. For example, in the world title fight between British heavyweight Tyson Fury and Ukrainian fighter Oleksandr Usyk in 2024, Usyk had both his gloves designed in the Ukrainian national colours; his gloves are symbolic and

help him to construct his new social identity, while serving a practical function in protecting his hands and his opponent's face. A fighter's boots can also be utilised in the ring to construct their social identities: in April 2024, in a fight between American super lightweight champions Devin Haney and Ryan Garcia, Haney wore a pair of customised boots costing over a thousand dollars, designed by Los Angeles-based designer Dominic 'the shoe surgeon' Chamborne. They were a pair of light grey 'fear of god' mock-knit high boots that resembled the brand of Ugg boots; when Haney was knocked out by Garcia, the media reported that this may have been due to his unorthodox knitted boots affecting Haney's footwork in the ring (Mrinal, 2024). This example demonstrates how objects assist fighters in creating ring identities Haney's boots were symbolic of his success in the sport, a marker of his economic power as objects of conspicuous consumption and his hegemonic masculinity but he ignored the practical function of the boots and may have thereby cost him the fight.

Objects of dress in boxing, then, are multifaceted: they have practical functions, but they also help to create new social identities; they can determine weak or strong masculinities, be markers of economic capital in the ring and demarcate the civilization of boxing from street fighting to

indoor spectacle and sport; they can be used to enforce psychological power before a fight, affect and alter the outcome and performance of a fight, and serve many other purposes in the ring. Working in association with the boxer and within the boxing community and its traditions, nuances and networks. Latour's notion of objects having agency is particularly apt in the world of boxing, and, through Prown's approach of material cultural study, these networks of agency can be uncovered (Latour, 2005, Prown, 1982).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored gender theory and how masculinities are constructed through both the male body and social interactions with other male bodies, and that it is a reflexive process of both the biological and the relational (Connell, 1995). We have also seen how the boxing gym as a space is a sanctuary of traditional masculinities, and that it is within the boxing gym that boxers learn to inhabit their bodies; how the sensuality of the gym as a gendered and classed space its apparatus, the continuous bodily interactions of men with other men in this homosocial venue continues to construct working-class masculinities (Wacquant, 2004).

We have also examined the institution of sport as a gendered and patriarchal realm that was designed for men so they could enact battle through games; that, through the civilizing process, men were unable to publicly show extreme emotions of aggression or excitement. Sport therefore became a vehicle through which men could release intense emotions of conspicuous excitement and shows of violence while constructing traditional forms of masculinities through the body (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Men can get injured in sports however, and the culture of some sports means that they will disregard injuries to play on which can be seen as the violent displays of aggression in sport inverted against themselves (Messner, 1990). This chapter also explored social anthropology and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, in particular his theory of objects working in relationship with humans in the social world as social mediators; and the correlation of Raewyn Connell's body-reflexive practice with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. In that they both incorporate the use of relationship within the social world. We explored material culture studies and how objects are artifacts that can embody the ideologies, values and belief systems of a particular culture and society and that in boxing objects are collected by fans as curiosities of a particular fight or moment in history (Latour, 2005).

# Methodology

## Introduction

In boxing, once fighters have risen through the amateur ranks of the sport and become competitive professional boxers, they have full creative expression in their boxing-ring entrances. Including their dress in the boxing ring. The only requirement and rule for professional level boxing-ring dress is that, for identification purposes, fighters must not wear the exact same colours as their opponent (England Boxing, 2019). At this stage in their careers, fighters may also have acquired the economic means to hire a designer who will create their custom boxing-ring dress, or 'fight kit'. Their fight kit may include boots and gloves, customised boxing trunks and a boxing robe or matching jacket in the fighter's chosen colour scheme. Boxers are self-fashioning and will often utilise their ring entrances and their dress to express in subtle or overt ways their values, beliefs, politics, identities, and nationalities, as well as using the ring walk and their dress to exert psychological dominance over their opponents, or simply for expressing their individual style (Mondragon, 2021).

For this study I employed mixed methods. Combining secondary online research of boxing-ring dress in the news media and on social media websites with direct participant observation at live boxing events in York Hall in East London in 2023. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with former professional boxers, as well as an object analysis of pre-worn objects of boxing-ring dress. The interviews employed a less structured approach as I wanted them to be more relaxed and to allow room for the boxers to elaborate on some of their experiences in the ring, their life histories and how they felt about their boxing dress. For the object analysis of pre-worn boxing-ring dress, I visited a sports memorabilia store in Romford, east London. Analysing six artifacts of boxing-ring dress with an approach borrowing from Jules Prown's object analysis techniques in material culture studies (Prown 1982), Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim's book *The Dress Detective* (2015) as well as drawing inspiration from wardrobe studies (Fahy, 2021; Klepp and Bjerck, 2014; Skjold, 2018; Woodward, 2014).

I used the six-step method approach by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021) to conduct thematic analysis when going through the primary and secondary data to draw out themes and patterns; I discovered that the themes and patterns that had emerged from the secondary online sources

correlated with the themes and patterns that had emerged within the primary data and through the object analysis of boxing dress objects. Braun and Clarke propose a qualitative reflective thematic analysis approach to the data and research findings. Which firstly includes the researcher getting familiar with the data secondly generating some initial codes within the data, thirdly the researcher searches for themes, fourthly reviewing the themes, then naming the themes and finally writing up the themes from the research data (Braun and Clarke. 2021).

### **My Subject Position to the Research**

I first encountered my love for boxing when I attended a traditional men's boxing gym back in the late 1990s. While in my twenties I wanted to learn how to box, so attended the Peacock boxing gym in Canning Town, East London. While undertaking my master's dissertation in 2018, which explored working-class masculinities in boxing, I conducted empirical research at the Peacock boxing gym as a participant observer, inspired by French sociologist Loic Wacquant's sociological study of the Woodlawn boxing gym in Chicago in the late 1990s (2004). While attending the gym, I was able to observe firsthand the culture of boxing and to be a part of the boxing community; this gave me some insights into the sport at a ground roots level. However, in my

subject position to the research as a white, working-class middle-aged woman on the periphery of the sport, my general knowledge of the boxing world is limited.

The three participants for my study had either lived, worked or trained in Hackney, East London, which is where I had spent my childhood, so this gave the research added meaning and gave me a personal resonance with the participants. It was back in 2018 that I first met one of the participants for my interviews, Tony Cesay, a former Olympic boxing champion, boxing trainer and youth mentor at the Peacock Gym. I became acquainted with Tony when, while conducting my participant observation at the gym for my research, I booked one-to-one coaching sessions with him. I met with Tony again at the Peacock Gym in 2024 when I interviewed him for this study.

My lack of boxing knowledge was apparent when I met with Andy Brace, the owner of a sports memorabilia store in Romford, to ask for his help to recruit participants for this study; when he asked me what my boxing knowledge was like, I had to answer honestly and tell him that I didn't know much.

However, through reading a variety of boxing literature such as Kasia Boddy's *Boxing: a Cultural History* (2009), Norman Mailer's *The Fight* (1975), and other academic books on boxing, as well as boxer's autobiographies,

academic journals on boxing and masculinity in sports, sports journalism, and watching many boxing-ring entrances on the platform YouTube, as well as watching live boxing matches on sports streaming networks, I feel I have developed a solid foundation from which to carry out this research.

### **Secondary Research**

For the secondary research for the study, I researched the vast array of boxing-ring entrances and examples of boxing-ring dress online. I followed a variety of boxing news accounts on my social media platforms alongside boxing news sites such as *'Sky Sports Boxing'* and *'Heavyweight Boxing UK'*. These two provided me with regular updates on current events within the boxing world, particularly the British boxing world; for example, who the emerging British fighters were. The boxing news websites would also showcase boxing-ring entrances of various British fighters, providing me with regular insights into what boxers are wearing in the ring and enabling me to see how boxing-ring dress was evolving and developing. I also followed British boxing-ring dress designers and makers on my social media platforms, such as *'Fight Label'* and *'Bespoke Boxing'*, both brands having created unique designs for professional fighters. This also provided me with insights into the development of boxing-ring dress as well as helping me to stay

relevant with what was happening in the boxing world and what professional boxers are wearing into the ring. Many of the different examples of fighters' ring dress that came up on my social media newsfeed, I was then able to research further online to gain more insights; this also helped me during the recruitment process for my primary research interviews, as it presented me with examples of unique and distinctive fighter's dress. Exploring secondary research online allowed me to determine which fighters I wanted to reach out to for potential interviews for the study.

### **Wardrobe Ethnography**

For the research methods for the primary research, I took inspiration for my approach to the semi-structured interviews for the research, from the current scholarship of wardrobe studies and wardrobe ethnography techniques. In her doctoral research on women's wardrobes, *Getting Dressed: a study of women's relationship to their clothing* (2014), Woodward conducted an ethnographic study of twenty-seven women's wardrobes, exploring their collections of garments, how they were stored and the physical space of the wardrobe the garments were contained in, over a period of fifteen months. Woodward observed how the assemblages of women's clothing was pivotal in the construction of their biographies and

identities and were emblematic of the social relationships of the women.

Woodward's ethnographic approach included taking photographs of the contents of the women's wardrobes, conducting semi-structured interviews with the women about their wardrobes and garments, and asking them to keep clothing diaries. My study has adapted methods from this kind of wardrobe ethnography; I took photographs of professional boxer's objects of pre-worn boxing-ring dress, made notes of my findings for example, the weight of the garments, size, the fabrics, the type of fabrics they were made from and any embellishments or design features that were on the garments.

I.G. Klepp and M. Bjerck's 2014 study 'A methodological approach to the materiality of clothing wardrobe studies', which was conducted in Norway and observed manual workwear for male occupations such as construction or in industrial sites, the authors also examined sports and leisure wear in the wardrobes of the participants. Klepp and Bjerck's approach also looks at the relationship between the clothes and the participants and studied what comprises a wardrobe and how the wardrobe is compartmentalised with diverse types of clothes for workwear, fitness, leisure and social events.

The methods Klepp and Bjerck used included qualitative research such as interviews, taking photographs, taking inventories of the wardrobe contents

and laboratory testing. In wardrobe ethnography, however, the interview remains the central part of the research method. Helen Maguire and Frances Fahy's 2021 study 'Practicing fashion and wardrobe studies: a geographical reframing' was undertaken in the north-west of Ireland between July 2018 and May 2019. They collected data from fifteen participants and their everyday use of clothing with a geographical focus, and with a social practice theory lens. The data collected within participants' homes included a partial wardrobe audit, a clothing diary, and photography to record the items from the wardrobe. My methods adapted some of these wardrobe ethnography techniques; however, in my study, the term 'wardrobe' referred neither to the physical space that holds and stores garments, or to a collection of garments. 'Wardrobe studies', for my research, pertains to the act of examining up close an object of dress that has been taken out from a storage space, that had been worn in the boxing ring in a previous fight by a professional boxer. In my approach I utilised wardrobe ethnography techniques to examine six objects of dress that had belonged to six different fighters; my focus for the analysis was primarily framed through the lenses of masculinity and class.

### **Participant Observation at York Hall**

In 2023, between the months of September and December, I attended four live boxing events as a participant observer at York Hall in East London. The events were titled '*A Night of Professional Championship Boxing*' and '*Boxxer Breakthrough*'. York Hall, located in Bethnal Green, is considered within the boxing community to be a British boxing mecca. Designed by the architect A. E. Darby, it first opened its doors in 1929 as a public bath and swimming pool; it was during the 1950s that it began to be used to stage boxing events. Many champion British boxers have made their debut as professional boxers at York Hall; the hall has an upper seating area and balcony that accommodates two hundred and eighty people and overlooks the ring below, with more seating on the ground floor and standing room at the back (Forrest, 2019). I had ringside seats at all four of the boxing events that I attended, and I made hand-written notes of the variety of boxing-ring dress the fighters wore as the fighters entered the boxing ring. I also took photographs of the various ring entrances and of the fighters' boxing dress, the fights included both men and women and some of the fighters were making their professional boxing debuts. The four boxing events that I had attended at York Hall in East London during the months of September to December, were sponsored by

the university. I had received financial assistance from the student support fund. This was because I was unable to pay for the cost of the events myself, as I am unemployed. The student support fund covered the costs of up to four events for me and a companion to attend, with ringside seats which made observing the fighters entering the ring easier. The dates for the boxing events were chosen at random, between September to December 2023.

### **Object Analysis of Boxing Ring Dress**

Material culture studies embraces a broad and diverse range of objects; any object that is man-made can provide insights into cultures and societies, and through the study of objects we may learn that they have innate value to the people that crafted them, or that for the people that used them they embodied and reflected aspects of a community to broader society.

Therefore, through the study of objects as material culture we can learn more about communities and their cultures. Prown (1982) observes that material culture as an approach is unique, in that objects are its primary data; he also observes that material culture studies is not a field but a discipline that is grounded in cultural history and cultural anthropology and borrows from social history and social anthropology. Objects communicate and, for the non-literate, objects can provide insights into and embody the values,

beliefs, intellect, of a community or culture that otherwise would have no representation in society. The study of objects in material culture studies is varied and can range from analysing a work of art to devices in technology or adornments and dress.

For the object analysis research for the study, I was invited by Andy Brace, the owner of Worldwide Signings in Romford shopping mall, to come to his shop in July 2024 and conduct an object analysis of pre-worn objects of boxing ring dress that he had either for sale or on display in his store. Before analysing the objects of dress, I considered my subject position to researching the objects and had taken into account my worldview and perspective, my gender, my age and my background and the little knowledge of the boxing community I had prior to reviewing and handling the objects, to ensure I remained objective.

I analysed six objects of pre-worn boxing ring dress with the shop owners' consent, taking measurements of each object and examining the objects through my senses for example, through sight, touch and smell (Macguire, Fahy, 2021). I held the objects to see if they were heavy or light in weight, and to feel the fabrics they were made from and if the fabric was smooth or rough to touch. I checked the objects for care labels to see who had made

them and what fabrics they were made from. I documented all my findings with handwritten notes and took photographs of the objects on my phone, to ensure that I could reflect on the objects after visiting the store. I wanted to see if any of the objects had notable features in the design that matched the many features of boxing-ring dress that I had observed online in my secondary research, or the themes that I had found while coding the data from the primary interviews.

Three of the objects were anonymous and the owner had no information about the previous owner or wearers of the objects; two of the objects a pair of gloves and a pair of boxing boots were vintage, and the owner informed me that they were over sixty years old. The other three objects were linked to professional boxing champions. After the viewing, I conducted secondary research online to see what else I could find out about the history of the objects; for example, what fights they had been worn in. I wanted to ascertain if these objects of boxing-ring dress could be classed as artefacts and objects of material culture, and was looking to see what they could tell me about the time in which they were worn historically, and what was occurring more broadly in the world at the time these objects were worn in the ring. I examined the objects through the lens of gender and class to see if

they could be classed as gendered and classed objects, embodying working-class masculinities, and to see if the objects assisted the individual wearer in articulating his boxing identity and masculinity as well as collective values and beliefs of the boxing community.

### **Recruitment of the Participants**

For the primary research and the interviews for the study, I was able to recruit two retired professional boxing champions and one former boxing-ring dress designer. Recruiting the participants for the interviews was challenging. I did not know any current professional boxing champions and did not have many connections with members of the boxing community particularly boxers. I had, however, made a few contacts within the boxing community whom I reached out to for the study. The first contact that I had was retired boxing champion and youth mentor Tony Cesay. I knew Tony from having had personal boxing training sessions with him at the Peacock Gym in Canning Town in east London back in 2018. Tony is a friend and a contact on my social media platforms. I decided to get in touch with him on the WhatsApp app.

Tony has a vast number of connections and contacts within the boxing community, so I initially inquired to see if he could make introductions for me with professional male fighters. However, he volunteered to be interviewed for the study instead. For the recruitment of the second participant, James Cook, I had become acquainted with the owner of a shop called 'Worldwide Signings sports memorabilia' which was based in Romford in east London owned by Andy Brace.

Andy Brace also had many connections within the boxing community; I visited Andy in his store one afternoon and asked him if he could help me enlist participants for the study. He wrote down some telephone numbers for professional boxers' agents. However, cold calling agents of the boxers proved challenging. Eventually Andy invited me to a book signing at the store on a Saturday afternoon and retired boxing champion James Cook was in attendance. Andy made the introductions, and I was able to interview James in the store during the event.

My last connection within the boxing community was former boxing dress designer Sophie Miller who I had met back in 2018. Sophie was a friend of my brother-in-law, Roger, and had been introduced to me at the time as someone who had designed and made boxing ring dress for former British

boxers and champions. In May 2024, I got back in touch with Sophie, and she agreed to an interview via videocall.

Prior to this, I had contacted another British boxing dress designer for the label 'Bespoke Boxing'. He had agreed to an interview, however, when I tried to follow this up and send over the consent forms, he went silent.

The difficulties I encountered during the recruitment phase of the research meant that I had limited time to conduct the interviews and gather my research findings in time for the writing up phase of the study. Due to time constraints, I was unable to recruit any more participants for the study and had to rely instead on the small group of participants I had managed to secure for the research. This proved to be fruitful as the participants provided me with their time and a wealth of knowledge for the research. All three of the participants were based in London; the two boxers had previously fought at championship level, and they had both competed abroad. The boxing dress designer had designed and produced boxing-ring dress for former British champions. The participants were all working-class as boxing is traditionally a working-class sport and I felt that it was highly unlikely the participants would have differed in class.

The participants were asked to take part in a face-to-face semi-structured interview; the interview questions were loosely constructed to provide some structure, but left open-ended so that participants could elaborate during their answers. The interviews lasted for less than an hour. The first participant, Tony, was a former Olympic boxing champion. The second participant, James, was a former European and British super-middleweight boxing champion that I had met in Romford during a book signing event for former British boxing champion Maurice Hope. The third and final participant, Sophie, was interviewed via videocall, whereas the interviews with the boxers were conducted in person.

### **Challenges of the Primary Research**

For the primary research, my aim was to explore examples of late twentieth and twenty-first-century British boxing dress. The selection was to be purposeful and non-random, and to be led by boxers whose boxing-ring dress I felt was unique or stood out. I had hoped to enlist professional boxers whose boxing-ring dress was distinctive and memorable, or was political or decorative in style, or dress that contained an interesting creative narrative. I came across many challenges to conducting the research: one was that successful fighters did not want to give up their time for free. Andy Brace had

given me a list of telephone numbers of London-based British boxers for me to contact. When I reached out to the fighters by telephone I was met with agents who were unhelpful and unreliable in helping me to set up an interview with their fighters. The agent of one of the boxers on the list who I contacted, former British heavyweight boxer and public figure Frank Bruno, informed me that the university would need to make a sizeable donation to Frank Bruno's mental health charity to secure an interview. Other less well-known fighters that were on the contact list agreed to an interview, but when I tried to set a date and time for us to meet I was met with excuses as to why they could not attend. I reached out to boxing gyms over the phone by cold-calling and sent messages to boxers on social media with no success.

I had initially planned to interview four or more boxers and boxing dress makers in person with their objects of boxing dress, taking inspiration from wardrobe ethnography methods (Chong Kwan, 2016). I also wanted to take a sensory approach to the interviews: fighters would be asked to hold their dress while being interviewed to see if their objects of dress evoked any nostalgia of their previous fights and specifically any memories of fights that they had worn the objects in. Tony Cesay forgot to bring items of dress to the interview, and the interview with James Cook took place at an event so he

also didn't have any objects of dress. I conducted my interview with Sophie online, she didn't have any physical examples of boxing-ring dress to show me.

### **Interviews**

For the primary research, I took a qualitative approach using ethnography and semi-structured interviews. The interviews all took place between the months of March and July in 2024. The framework for the interview questions and the object analysis methods were inspired by Sara Chong Kwan's research and multi-sensory object analysis study of everyday dress (Chong Kwan, 2016; Whyman, 2019). Kwan's multi-sensory object analysis and wardrobe ethnography was conducted in participants' homes as she examined the objects participants brought out of their wardrobes. I adopted Khan's multi-sensory approach to wardrobe and object analysis by framing my interview questions to ask participants about the sensory experience of wearing their objects of boxing-ring dress. For example: how the fabrics might have felt against their skin; if their objects of dress had embellishments that might have created a distinctive noise whilst in the ring; how they felt when putting on the boxing dress in the dressing room before a fight; whether their dress impacted their performance in the ring in any way in the

fight. The questions were designed to discover if the participants had a sensual relationship to their objects of boxing-ring dress. Boxing has historically always been a working-class sport and institution; therefore, through the interview questions I also aimed to explore if boxing-ring dress encodes working class masculinities and gendered and classed boxing-ring identities. I compared my findings from the interviews and the notes from my participant observation at York Hall, to see if there were shared or communal values and beliefs within the boxing community.

### **Conclusion**

The mixed methods for the study, which included non-random semi-structured interviews, empirical research at live boxing events and an object analysis of pre-worn boxing ring dress. Were designed to unearth the relationships fighters have with their boxing-ring dress. By conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews with boxers and adopting a multi-sensory wardrobe ethnography framework for the interview questions, I had hoped to distinguish how fighters felt about their clothes and detect any sensory engagement they may have had to their dress. Boxing is a sensual sport and practice, and we might consider boxers to be particularly embodied individuals (Wacquant, 2004). Therefore, it is probable that they are more in

tune with their senses, particularly touch, and would have a heightened awareness of dress on their bodies in the ring. These methods were designed to bring that awareness to the forefront of the study. The methods were also designed to identify if fighters' objects of boxing-ring dress assist them in producing and articulating their social identities and masculinities in the ring. The challenges to the research required me to adapt the research methods and primary interviews, as the participants had not brought with them examples of boxing ring dress to the interview, which resulted in limitations to the research. An object analysis was conducted on a separate occasion at another venue, being designed to ascertain if artifacts of boxing ring dress can be considered objects of material culture.

## Research Findings

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the data that I have gathered through my primary research into the dress of working-class boxers. Research that combines both the empirical findings from attending live boxing events at York Hall in East London in 2023 and ethnographic data, namely interviews with two former fighters and one former boxing-dress designer. This chapter also explores the

findings from an object analysis of objects of dress formerly worn by boxers and sold at the Worldwide Signings memorabilia store in Romford. For the secondary research for this study, I analysed and examined many examples of contemporary boxing ring dress available online in the media and on social media platforms. I used the same method of coding for both the notes that I made from attending the boxing events at York Hall and the interview data.

### **Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data**

In analysing the primary research data, I adopted the six-step reflexive thematic analysis approach introduced by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021). Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data is premised on the understanding that there are themes and patterns within the research data that can be made explicit using this six-step method and approach. Reflexive thematic analysis is not a methodology or underpinned by a theoretical position, but is simply a method and a structure that captures the emerging themes and patterns from undertaking qualitative interviews. Helping the researcher in making sense of their data. Braun and Clarke indicate that there are two different types of approaches within this framework to analyse the data: a semantic approach, which looks at simply what has been said and written within the data on a basic level, and the

latent approach, which reads more deeply into the data, analysing concepts and ideas that contribute to framing the research. Braun and Clarke also indicate that there are two approaches to exploring the data in regard to research findings: a thematic approach, which looks to see if the data answers the research question, or an inductive approach, which lets the data do the talking. Using this framework, the researcher can progress with the findings by going backwards and forwards within the data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). As my research question and my research is exploratory and reflexive, I used the inductive approach to explore what the data and the findings were communicating.

### **Race and Representation in Sports**

Twenty-four themes emerged from the interview data, though some of these could be categorised as sub-themes. Eleven themes emerged from the findings of my research as a participant observer at live boxing events at York Hall. The data from the interviews suggests that race is a key theme in boxing the two fighters that I had interviewed for the study had both talked about the subject of race and their experiences being boxers of colour. From the interview findings, two themes emerged: 'race and ethnic identities in sport' and 'race and ethnic role models in sports'. When interviewed for the study,

former Olympic boxer and boxing mentor Tony Cesay stated: 'When I was young it was racism for me, so I had to learn how to fight', going on to say 'I mean, you know, even when I'm West Ham supporters, you know, when I used to go football when I was a youngster, it was the worst place you could ever go. West Ham in them days, you know, but you know, I was a West Ham supporter because you, like, family even though you know they shouted out names and you couldn't believe it, you know, and then they would come round and they'd say to you "we're not talking about you, it was him," but that's how they was, that's how the days was, so you had to learn how to fight and my mum would, um, always have arguments with people and I didn't know what they were for, you know'. This data shows that there is an objectification of Black male bodies within sport, and how the Black male body in sport becomes the object of the white male gaze. Tony's experience highlights this and how it seemed perfectly acceptable for the white football fans to shout out racist insults to the Black football players on the field. When observing the data from a critical race perspective we can see that Tony in this environment may have had to mask his Black masculinity and put on a 'white mask' bearing a double consciousness so that he could be accepted

into the group (Fanon, 1986). Tony also told me that he had to fight a lot in his childhood, which I would suggest precipitated his career as a boxer.

When interviewed, former British and European champion James Cook MBE, said: 'well, at that time when we was growing up there wasn't a lot of influence, it was either Muhammad Ali or the West Indies cricket team. You know what I mean, so there wasn't much, so I decided I don't want I love cricket and I played cricket still doing it now, you know what I mean, you know what I mean, you know. I went to boxing for the discipline of it and even though the time, you know, in the Seventies, you know what I mean, we used to go to gym white, Black boxing didn't see colour, you know, everybody's at the gym and everybody respect each other. So it just gave me something to focus on and plus my mum know where I was, I'd be in the gym'. James highlights the egalitarian ethos of the boxing gym, how boxing does not see colour, and that within the confines of the gym and the boxing community he could find a suitable Black role model. Tony showed me a photograph of him standing next to former American boxing champion 'Sugar Ray Leonard' this, I would suggest, is also indicative of the lack of Black role models for young Black working-class men outside the realm of sports and entertainment, and reinforces the idea that there is a crisis of Black

masculinity, even today. For example, Tony's history demonstrates that there are pressures on young Black men to perform to earn their masculinities and identities and their right to be visible, and how this is often through the avenue of sports or entertainment.

The crisis of Black masculinity is transatlantic. It affects both the Black community in the United States and the United Kingdom. This suggests that after being denied access to normative and dominant modes of patriarchal masculinity through deindustrialisation, social isolation, and ghettoisation within urban cities, Black men face more obstacles than most. For example, not being a part of the capitalist economy, and inclusion and representation within broader society more generally. Pedro A Noguera (Noguera, 1997) in 'Reconsidering the crisis of the Black male in America' observes that the notion of a crisis of Black masculinity is dubious at best, as to be in a state of crisis means that prior to the crisis, there was stability. Noguera also suggests that Black masculinity has never been stable due to structural inequalities, ghettoisation, unemployment, and social deprivation of the Black communities. This would indicate, therefore, that Black masculinity has been in a perpetual state of crisis. The data from this study does suggest, however, that within the realm of boxing, ethnic identities become prized identities.

Working-class Black men can construct traditional and authentic working-class masculinities and identities through their bodies and performance that will ensure they obtain inclusion and respectability in the wider boxing community (Noguera, 1997).

### **Superstitions and Religion in Boxing**

Another theme that emerged within both the empirical research at York Hall and across the interview data was the pattern of superstition, ritual, and religion in boxing. In an interview with former boxing-dress designer Sophie Miller, she stated: 'But I enjoyed the Union Jack shorts because it was well, he was we made them for the world champion fight, world belt fight and, erm, yeah I put a little of my magic in there, if you see what I mean; but I enjoyed the whole process of making them, erm, the fabrics were a bit of a nightmare, but I enjoyed that process' also noting that 'I put the Union Jack up on my sitting room wall and I didn't take it down until he won those belts'. The data here suggests the presence of superstitions in sports, specifically in boxing, and that it is not just the athletes that perform superstitious rituals; by keeping the Union Jack up on her living room wall, believing it would bring Carl Froch luck in the ring, Sophie demonstrates that anyone invested in the fight can perform superstitions rites on the fighters' behalf. Tony Cesay,

when asked whether he performed any superstitions or had any objects of superstition prior to getting in the ring stated that: 'Yeah, things like I always did things the same way, I made sure I was relaxed, played music and I breathed, you know, and I did the right things. The stretches, the warm up and it was like a ritual and I ate the right foods, you know what I mean, and I made sure I was always winning'. Tony also commented: 'But you used to watch other people: fear fear drove 'em mad and some couldn't fight'. This suggests that even routines in boxing can become a form of ritual and superstition; by always performing actions in sequence in the same way before a fight, fighters can produce for themselves a sense of calm. These routines and rituals give the fighter a level of comfort and control in a sport that is full of uncertainty, where anything can happen in the ring. When asked if he had any superstitions James stated: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, listen: fighters, when you reach a certain age, when you go to the gym, you hear the boys them say, well, you can't have sex before a fight, you know, stuff like that, you know, automatically in your head. So I lived with my missus, she used to put me in the next room to sleep by myself, yeah, so that superstition, yeah, come in your head and if you do anything, you're thinking you told your missus last time, so I'd never sleep with my missus six, seven

weeks before a fight, you know what I mean, so, yeah, that is my very soul mate. I know I'd be worried about it for a fight so I tried to go with the rules'.

This data suggests that there is an underlying rule in boxing of sexual abstinence before a fight; it was in the gym that James discovered this rule. James points out that, for him, having sex with his wife before a fight could bring him bad luck in the ring and he didn't want to take any chances with the outcome of his fight, so he stuck to the rule.

Neither the boxers or the dress-maker in the interviews indicated that they had any religious beliefs; however, in my empirical notes from York Hall, I observed that two of the professional fighters at the live boxing events had religious iconography on their dress in the ring: one had black shorts with the words 'God 1<sup>st</sup>' printed on the waistband of his trunks and another had a cross embroidered on her trunks and entered the ring to Christian music. This data suggests that some professional fighters will reach out to a higher power before during a fight and that their religious beliefs, like superstitions, can be embodied in their pre-fight preparations and interwoven into their boxing-ring dress, perhaps bringing them added comfort and reassurance in the ring. Religious iconography in boxing-ring dress is a type of superstition, as fighters

look outside of themselves for luck in the ring in the face of complete uncertainty.

### **Patriotism in Boxing Dress**

From the interview data and the empirical data there emerged a prominent theme of patriotism in boxing-ring dress. When asked about patriotism in boxing, Sophie Miller informed me: 'As I said, my friend was the go-between, she would go and speak to them and find out how they wanted to portray themselves and what was important, to find elements. So this one guy, um, was Irish and he, er, I think he was a Traveller, actually, he was from Dublin and he wanted to reflect the colour of the brickwork of the buildings and also his name was, is his fighting name was 'Ore' which is gold, so we put a little bit of gold in there, as well.' Elsewhere Miller also stated: 'But I always think the Union Jack shorts and this was his idea, er, he wanted three quarters of the shorts Union Jack and then the one side was left blank so you were able to sew promotional stuff on the blank side, so already that was quite a unique design, it was really real fun to do'. The data shows fighters want to display their nationalities in the ring and that, for fighters, exhibiting a sense of patriotism in boxing-ring dress takes different forms; this might be through having the colours of a national flag or a Union Jack design on their boxing-

ring dress or, as Sophie indicates, they may even have the colour of architecture and brickwork to represent their country of origin. In my notes from my participant observation at York Hall I noted that one fighter who was from the army demonstrated his patriotism to his country by having the emblem and colours of the Parachute Regiment on his boxing-ring dress so that he was demonstrating not only his pride in his country but his allegiance to the British Army. During my interview with Tony he showed me some photographs on his phone and stated: 'So yeah, yeah, we were lucky, we had some, you know, and you remember Carl Froch, so they were both in our England team, so when we boxed I was their captain and, you know, Audley Harrison was there. It was fantastic, a fantastic team, yeah, it was a great time at that time and that's me there boxing' as I looked at the photos I said: 'Oh you're wearing red and white' and Tony replied 'Yeah, that's for England, when I was boxing for England at that time'. While looking at Tony's photographs he also stated: 'This, when we went to the England team, it's when we went Commonwealth Games. This is, oh what was his name again, bloody hell, he fought sugar Ray Leonard'. The data suggests that professional fighters can have many opportunities to display their pride in their national heritage as they travel internationally to compete in both the

Commonwealth and the Olympic games. The findings of patriotism in boxing-ring dress however is not entirely new; secondary research reveals that fighters have been exhibiting their patriotism in dress in the ring since boxing's bare-knuckle days using coloured handkerchiefs and scarves (Sugden, 1996).

### **Object Analysis of Objects of Boxing-Ring Dress**

Jules Prown (1982) maintains that artifacts or objects can reveal a lot about the traits of a given community. That objects become indexical for the ideologies, values and beliefs of a society, and that the study of material culture is unique in that objects become the centralised source of data and can become a window into the world of a particular culture and society.

Material culture studies is a discipline that adopts and utilises many different fields such as the social sciences and even technological fields to investigate, analyse and understand an object. For the object analysis component of my primary research I drew inspiration from both Jules Prown's methods of material culture studies and Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim's book *The Dress Detective* (2015). I conducted my analysis and positioned my data within the framework of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and Raewyn Connell's masculinities theory this was to determine if objects of boxing-ring dress can

also embody and encode gender and class. For the object analysis I visited the Worldwide Signings sports memorabilia store in Romford, East London in July 2024.

For the object analysis part of the primary research I analysed six objects of boxing-ring dress that were on display in the memorabilia store. However, due to the amount of content that had to be included in this thesis, and not desiring to exceed the study's word count, I felt that it was best to only include the findings of three of the objects, with additional sections, including a reflection and analysis of the objects, which can be found in this chapter of my findings.



Figure 1. Front of black boxing boots, 1960s.

### **Boots' Construction**

These boots were stored inside a glass cabinet located on the shop floor.

They are charcoal black vintage boxing boots, in the classic shape of a boxing boot, which is high in the ankle to provide support for the fighter's legs while moving around the ring. The boots are made from soft leather, which would allow for ease of movement and flexibility in the ring; the many creases and lines in the soft leather of the boots show that these boots would have been worn often for training and in fights. They are lined in leather which is a faded off-white colour and there is white top stitching detail along the front and the side panels of the boots. There are no laces for the boots but I would suggest that the laces may have been white to match the 24 white eyelets that start at the front of the boots all the way up to the top. Two of the eyelets are missing on the right boot. There is a long leather tongue which goes up to the top of the boots and on the top of the leather tongue of the boots is a stitched faded white cotton label with white top stitching, that states 'sports goods Syd. Cannell London' in navy blue writing. The boots are twenty-nine centimetres in length, sixteen centimetres in depth and sixteen centimetres in width, this indicates that the boots are a man's size ten; it also suggests that the boxer would have been of an average height, possibly

between five foot six and five foot nine, and of a slim build as the boots were narrow. There is no exact date as to when these boots were made or an exact age of the boots. However, I was told by the owner of the memorabilia store that they were approximately sixty years old and would have been worn perhaps in the 1960s. They are only slightly heavy to hold and still had a slight leather smell even though they were old. The sole of the boots is slightly thick with a smooth surface to touch, which would make them slippery to wear; historically fighters would wear these style of boots and, like gymnasts, would step into boxes of resin that were placed in their corner of the ring to provide traction for the boot so they would not slip in the ring (Ampro, 2021). Aside from the many creases and lines in the leather and a small hole in the left boot at the front of the boot, these boots have aged well and are in good condition.

### **Reflection and Analysis**

The introduction of the Queensbury rules in the latter part of the 1800 brought about changes in the styles of boxing-ring dress such as the transition of footwear from a shoe to ankle boots (Scott, 2008). The two most prominent brands in boxing-ring apparel and sporting goods from the twentieth century are the American boxing brand Everlast and British brand

Lonsdale. These black leather boots are representative of a time in British history when London was at the forefront of fashion; Lonsdale was founded in 1960 by former professional boxer Bernard Hart, who started his label in Walker's boxing gym, then later opened a shop in Beak Street near Carnaby Street. The Lonsdale boxing boot became a fashion accessory for the mod subculture during the 1960s, particularly the red and white Lonsdale boxing boots which were worn by Scooter Boys. Ben Sherman, who worked alongside Bernard Hart were clothing mods from 1965. The Lonsdale store became a hub for members of the boxing community and celebrities; those who wanted customised boxing boots would remove their socks and stand on a piece of cardboard while their feet were measured. The cardboard was sent off to Sid Cannell in Hayling Island in England, who was reputed in the boxing community to be the world's greatest boxing boot-maker (Bunce, 2020).

The Syd Cannell on the label of these boots, then, is a nod to the Sid Cannell who supplied custom made boots to Lonsdale customers. The label suggests that these boots were made in London economically, this was unusual during this time as manufacturing in London was in decline and more and more clothing and shoe factories were closing as manufacturing went abroad. The sports goods printed on the label indicate that these are distinctly sports

boots and are not for general wear or fashion boots. The boots possess romanticism and nostalgia and are, I would suggest, reminiscent of traditional working-class masculinity, masculinity that would have been constructed through physical labour and the body. Boxing was historically a rite of passage for young boys and young men from working-class families and communities; for many young working-class boys boxing provided them a route out of poverty and access to working-class male respectability. These boots, therefore, are emblematic and representative of a tough working-class masculinity. The details of the boots' fastenings, with pearl-white top stitching and white eyelets against the black leather of the boots, would have been quite striking in the ring, and the design detailing would have ensured the fighter would be noticed and recognizable as they would immediately draw attention to the wearer. The simple colours of these boots charcoal black leather and pearly white of the top stitching demonstrates that the owner was possibly traditional in his style in the ring; black and white are classic colours and the more traditional fighters would have black leather boxing boots. During the 1960s, many professional champion boxers such as Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier would match the colours of their boxing boots to their trunks; with changes in technology fighters were opting for more

flamboyant colours for the design of their boots, while new technological advancements in textiles also resulted in more breathable fabrics being used in boxing boots such as mesh inserts to allow the foot to breathe. It is important that the leather is soft and that the boots are not heavy to allow the fighter to move with ease in the ring and to prevent fatigue in the legs.



Figure 2. Front of vintage boxing gloves

### **Gloves' Construction**

These gloves were stored in the same glass cabinet as the vintage boots, located on the shop floor. They are charcoal black with stained white laces and a faded stained white bandage-type elasticated cuff at the top. They are in the classic shape of a boxing glove with a wide thumb and the large,

rounded hand section. The gloves are made from leather and are creased and lined with age and use, with white top stitching. The gloves are light in weight, the words 'Frank Bryan, England Worcester' are on the front cuff of one of the gloves in faded green letters; on the front of the glove are the words in small gold letters 'imperial services'. There are tiny holes at the top of the glove which are most probably for ventilation. The glove measures twenty-eight centimetres in length and nineteen centimetres in width. They didn't smell much of the leather anymore and, due to their age, they smelled musty. The gloves have cracks and creases in the leather, which suggest that they have been used for many fights in sparring, training or in the ring. The gloves are lace-up boxing gloves which also indicates that they are from the mid-twentieth century as, towards the latter part of the twentieth century, it was more common in boxing to find gloves that have Velcro to fasten them at the top particularly for sparring in the ring and during boxing training. Which makes them easier to put on and fasten, although lace up gloves are still utilised for professional fights in the ring and require a second person to lace them up for the fighter. The action of lacing up the gloves denotes another boxing ritual and tradition. The gloves are possibly filled with horsehair, as

was common for boxing gloves until the latter part of the twentieth century when gloves were foam padded and filled.

### **Reflection and Analysis**

These gloves are from the twentieth century, perhaps the middle part of the twentieth century. Frank Bryan Ltd. who produced the gloves, stopped trading in 2010 due to the decline in British manufacturing. Frank Bryan Ltd. produced many types of leather gloves for the sporting industry, the military, and high fashion. These gloves were possibly either made in the Worcester factory or outsourced to be made by local women in their homes (White Horse News, 2024). The gloves have a cultural heritage as they were produced by a reputable and well-known British glove factory, which supplied sporting gloves not only for boxing but also other sports such as squash and cricket, and for international high fashion houses such as Ralph Lauren in the United States and in England Vivienne Westwood, Burberry, Austin Reed and others. In *'The Art and Aesthetics of Boxing'*, David Scott observes that boxing gloves were first introduced in the 1800s as 'mufflers', which were made of chamois leather or kid and filled with Indian grass or hair; they were

introduced so that gentlemen could learn to box without the risk of black eyes or broken noses. Gentlemen would often take part in sparring at boxing academies in London, which were opened up by former champions to teach classes on boxing for the middle and upper classes. The glove was not officially sanctioned within the sport until the end of the nineteenth century. With the modern boxing glove made of leather and filled with horsehair introduced in 1883. The glove demarcates a shift in boxing from bare-knuckle fighting or to a legitimised form of sport and entertainment in the late 1800s. The introduction of the glove and the Queensbury rules marked the transition from a pastime of the lower working classes to a respectable sport and practice (Scott, 2008). There are many pairs of Frank Bryan vintage boxing gloves for sale in auction online, some dating back to the 1920s. The gloves for sale online are of a similar shape to this exhibit; many are filled with hair, which suggests these gloves could also be filled with horsehair. Like the vintage boxing boots, these gloves are reminiscent of a bygone era of boxing, each crease and line on the gloves are traces of blows delivered during a fight. Which I suggest are traces of a traditional working-class masculinity. A masculinity that was constructed and produced through the body, in the boxing gym and in the ring. I would suggest that the glove is a

coded object of gender and class, as an object that is representative of and embodies traditional working-class masculinity (Connell, 1995; Latour, 2005).



Figure 3. The back of Billy Joe Saunders ring trunks 2019.

### **Trunks' Construction**

The boxing ring trunks were on a hanger and displayed in the store. They were worn into the ring by world super-middleweight British champion boxer Billy Joe Saunders. The trunks have large red and white striped panels down the front and the back of the shorts, royal blue side panels and a large royal

blue hem along the bottom both at the front and the back of the shorts. The side panels have three pearl white stars on each of them. At the bottom of the side panels there are small slits in the trunks, providing room in the legs for the fighter to move with ease around the ring. The waistband is royal blue in colour and is ruched, the waistband has embroidered patches on the front of the fighter's name, 'Billy Joe' on the front of the waistband and 'Saunders' on the back; the patches are in the same colours as the shorts, red, white and blue. Along the wide hem at the bottom of the trunks are six stars at the back and six at the front. The stars are embroidered patches that are sewn onto the hem; the patches are in the design of the Union Jack in the colours of red, white and blue. The fabric looks shiny like satin but is made from polyester as the small white care label on the inside indicates. On the front and back of the trunks the polyester fabric makes the red and white striped panels look shiny. A small label on the inside of the trunks indicates that they were made in Pakistan; the trunks seem to be manufactured but are at the same time customised and bespoke for the fight. Saunders wore these trunks in the world super-middleweight title fight in which he beat Marcelo Coceres in 2019. On the back of the trunks Saunders promoter MTK Global's logo is sewn in large gold letters along with the words 'mack the knife' also in gold

letters. Either side of the waistband, on the top of the side panel, a white and black embroidered patch sits on either side with the letters F and B placed back to front; there is another gold patch on the front in the centre with the words Marbella.co.uk in silver embroidery, and the shorts are signed by Saunders in black ink across the front. There is also sponsorship branding along the back on the left-hand side, and on the front a WBO patch which stands for World Boxing Organization in red, white and blue with a pair of boxing gloves and 'world champion' in red lettering. Underneath there are advertising and sponsorship details. The trunks feel slightly heavy, and they measure thirty-four centimetres around the waist, the inside leg being thirty-two centimetres and the length fifty-three centimetres. These measurements suggest that the boxer may be quite tall and bulky. The depth of the waistband is ten centimetres – many fighters request from their dress designer a deeper waistband that will cover the protective box they are required to wear under their shorts in the ring.

### **Reflection and Analysis**

The colours of the trunks that depict Saunders' nationality, are indicative of his pride in his British heritage, which can also be seen with the embroidered patches along the hem that have the Union Jack design, and the red, white

and blue lettering of the fighter's name on the ruched waistband. The vertical red and white shiny striped panels down the front and the back of the shorts are reminiscent of a circus tent, which gives the shorts a dramatic and theatrical feel. The combination of the stars and stripes in red, white and blue provides a nod to the United States of America. In the first half of the nineteenth century, prior to the implementation of the Queensbury rules, Victorian fighters went from wearing knee-high breeches in the ring to wearing trunks. Scott observes that the advent of Hollywood glamorization during the 1920s influenced the designs and development of ring trunks; fighters now wanted to look glamorous in the ring like the Hollywood stars. Scott also notes that fighters now wanted to wear satin in the ring instead of cotton or jersey, and waistbands were larger and ruched to accommodate the jockstrap and protective box hidden underneath. The femininity of the soft satin trunks balanced out the hyper-masculinity of the sport and the hyper-masculine fighter's body, while the satin fabric also had a practical purpose in hiding water, sweat and blood stains on the trunks. The satin also, as Scott observes, had a ricochet effect, bouncing off the lights that would beam down into the ring. The romanticization of the fighter's body in the ring is offset by the feminine glamour of his ring attire which feeds into the boxing

spectacle and the fighter's body being centralised in a sport of entertainment that reaches the masses (Scott, 2008). These ring trunks, although made from polyester, provide a satin sheen which would reflect the lights in the ring. The theatrical feel to the trunks is carnivalesque which suggests that Saunders wanted to be noticed in the ring. The trunks mix references between Britain and America, suggesting a type of hybrid cultural allegiance, indicating Saunders' allegiance to Britain and his patriotism for his country, and his respect of America. The polyester fabric that shines like satin on his hypermasculine body subverts gender stereotypes in dress in emanating femininity and adding a romanticization to his ring style.



Billy Joe Saunders vs Marcelo Coceres ( 2019).

## **Conclusion**

The data from the research findings demonstrate that a fighter's ring dress is more than functional sports dress; it is multi-faceted. From picking their colours and fabrics for the ring, to the emblems, motifs and embellishments that they want to incorporate into their fight kits. Fighters have a unique style, and many are very involved with the design process for their boxing ring outfits and work closely with independent designers to bring their ideas for dress to life and to communicate a message to the world in the moment they enter the ring. Fighters are patriotic and take pride in their national heritage and this is reflected and embodied in their dress; they are, however, creative with the ways in which they incorporate this into their dress, ranging from motifs and embellishments that depict their nations flag or colours to the insignia of the army or architecture. The interview data, my findings at York Hall and secondary research indicate that the quality of the fabrics in a fighter's ring dress can be emblematic of where a fighter is positioned within the sport's hierarchical structures. With the more renowned fighters and champions wearing more lavish fabrics. Superstitions and religion are deeply embedded within boxing structures, and these are manifested in unique ways for the fighter. From observing rituals, such as sexual abstinence before a

fight, to having good luck charms or religious iconography incorporated into their ring dress, superstitions are commonplace within the boxing community. The data indicates that fighters want their boxing ring dress to be striking in the ring; this is evident in the frequent use of flamboyant colours and embellishments and fabrics such as fur, satins, polyesters, silks and exotic animal skins or theatrical and carnivalesque designs. However, the fit and function of boxing dress is also important to fighters; they care about how the boxing dress fits on their bodies, particularly when they are wearing the protective box underneath their ring trunks. Both the primary research and secondary research findings show that objects of boxing ring dress are objects of representation and material culture; they can embody a fighter's politics, religion, race, nationality, sexuality, values, and their personality. They are, I would suggest, micro-biographies that assist fighters in the creation of their social identities, while aiding them in the construction of traditional working-class boxing masculinities.

# Chapter One

## **'Flyness, it was a psychological advantage'**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the role of dandyism in boxing and how boxers exhibit forms of dandyism outside of the ring in their dress and appearance through the practice of conspicuous consumption. It then looks at the role of the pimp aesthetic, which is popular amongst wealthy Black athletes in American sports, as another form of conspicuous consumption, and applies Connell's masculinities theory and Latour's actor-network theory (1995; 2005). To explore how the masculinities of elite athletes are produced through conspicuous consumption. This leads to a discussion of the role of luxury fashion within boxing and how fighters are increasingly collaborating with couture designers for their ring outfits. This chapter also looks at the role of masking in pre-fight ceremonies, and how pre-fight masking serves as a form of tactical intimidation, highlighting the role of pre-fight ceremonies as spaces for enacting 'mind games' in boxing and how these are often communicated through dress (Rushton and Greenlough, 2016).

## Race and Dandyism in Sports

The figure of the British dandy was popularised during the early 1800s by George Beau Brummell. John Harvey (2008) notes that Brummell favoured dark tones and black suits, which were simple and tight-fitting, giving a clean cut and sharp image which contrasted to the men's dress of the day, which had been a lot looser and more extravagant in style. Brummell pioneered the style of men's dress that men in Victorian England would wear. Christopher Breward (2003) observes that Brummell had introduced sharp Saville Row tailoring to menswear and London society, demonstrating that you did not need to be titled or the son of a landowner or an aristocrat to look good. In addition to this new style and attention to details such as a perfectly tied cravat, coiffed hair and clean toilette, the dandy embodied a type of self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, which set him apart in British society (Harvey, 2008).

The dandy image was avant-garde and opposed the manufactured and commercial fashion styles of the time. Offering a new form of fashionable representation based on experimenting with self-image and appearance instead of following the crowd. Breward notes that Brummell's dandy style

would have inspired those in the creative arts, such as poets, artists, and writers, many of whom adopted his style to show direct defiance to the fashions of the day. Breward suggests that Brummel's aesthetic may have been the precursor to the modern bohemian styles of dress that came shortly after in the nineteenth century. He also observes that future subcultures and avant-gardism in dress can all be traced back to Brummel.

However, Brummel not only impacted men's fashion but, through his body, he was defining and producing a new type of masculinity; the tight-fitting suits would have accentuated the male body and physique, so it was important for the dandy to engage with sports such as boxing, which would have given them a good definition underneath the suit (Breward, 2003).

Modern masculinity emphasises the physique of the body, from careful attention to bodily hygiene to the body's muscular outline; here we can see a transformation not only in men's dress, in opposition to the masses and manufactured men's fashions, but a new type of masculinity which cared about the health and fitness of the male body and, through sports, actively nurtured the body to be presentable underneath the dress. David Coad (2008) observes that the figure of the Victorian dandy is the forerunner to the post-millennial 'metrosexual' a man that pays particular attention to his

appearance, dress, and self-grooming, such as ex-footballer and celebrity icon David Beckham. Coad observes that, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, clothes acutely symbolised public, cultural, and political status; by looking at a person's clothes, someone could tell if they were rich or poor, Black or white, even enslaved or free as in some states in America, 'sumptuary laws' were in place aimed at controlling slave clothing. During this time, however, Black people used styling of their clothes to demonstrate defiance and a form of resistance to these laws; Coad observes that, by the 1900s, elaborately dressed African American dandies could be seen promenading in urban areas in lavish dress and with immaculate toilettes (Coad, 2008).

It is within the context of male dandyism smart tailoring, impeccable appearances, and self-grooming. That we find, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the figure of world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson or 'the Galveston giant' (Newland, 2021). Jack Johnson utilised the vehicle of conspicuous consumption to demonstrate to his fans and to white supremacists of the time not only his newfound wealth and prestige as the world champion, but also his political dissent. Dress for Johnson served as a form of active resistance to the discrimination against his race (Ward, 2006). Rudy Mondragon (2021) observes that Johnson's dandyism was an act of

political and rebellious resistance against white imperialism of the time and asserts that Johnson utilised style and fashion in his appearance to reclaim agency and pride, an act of political defiance at the height of the Jim Crow era and segregation in the U.S. (Newland, 2021). During his reign as world heavyweight champion from 1908 to 1915, Johnson spent most of his money on flashy cars, tailored suits, mink coats, expensive jewellery, diamond-tipped walking sticks and gold teeth. Geoffrey C. Ward (2005) reports that Johnson so loved his sharp suits that he sometimes changed them twice daily. He also points out that Johnson would deliberately stroll down the street so that bystanders could see his wealth and admire him. He also states that 'Johnson became famous for the diamonds that winked from his fingers, his tie and his cuffs, at some point early in his money-making years he added to his overall dazzle by having several of his front teeth capped with gold' (Ward, p.58, 2005).

Through this style, Johnson is also a forerunner of the late-twentieth and twenty-first century Black athletic pimp aesthetic. A new form of dandyism emerged in American sports over the last century as sports superstars began to adorn themselves with expensive jewellery, lavish watches, earrings (as Coad notes 'Ear jewellery is the most common example of basketball bling')

(2008, p. 127), bracelets and necklaces. Coad argues that there is a form of conspicuous jewellery consumption common to both highly paid Black American sports stars and hip-hop artists and notes that the sports media coined the term 'conspicuous jock consumption' to define the ways that national basketball players adorn their bodies with expensive jewellery. He also points out that, among young Black men within Black American culture, there exists a bling mentality which arises from an early age.

For the Black athlete, flashiness and flamboyance in dress become signifiers of their acquired cultural and economic power. Although, as Coad points out (2008), while much has been documented on the pimp aesthetic within American Black gangster rap culture, there is little if any academic research on the pimp aesthetic adopted by celebrity Black athletes like basketball, American football, and baseball players and least of all, boxers. To date, there is a lack of scholarship on the conspicuous consumption practices of Black male athletes and their dress outside of the sports field; most of the scholarship on the styles of working-class Black men in the United States focuses on hip-hop stars, and this study will hopefully bridge that gap and contribute to this field by exploring the style, politics and aesthetics of dress

of professional champion boxers and their (increasingly evident) practice of conspicuous consumption both in and outside of the ring.

Johnson's dress, I would argue, is also indicative of a hyper-hegemonic masculinity that was constructed and produced both through boxing training in the gym and through his conquests in the ring. Every fight Johnson won reaffirmed this new type of powerful Black masculinity, that was then accentuated through Johnson's appearance and dress outside of the ring; through the embodiment and the performance of the dandy aesthetic, Johnson defiantly produced resistant Black masculinity (Connell, 1995).

Johnson, who was from Galveston in Texas, and both of whose parents were formerly enslaved people, would have witnessed the restrictions and sanctions of Black bodies and their style and dress growing up, and with his newfound fame in the ring, he challenged the stereotypes and depictions of Black masculinity and the subjugation of style within Black dress. He would have been aware of the subculture of flâneries and urban Black dandies that appeared after slavery was abolished, taking part in what was termed 'the stroll', and these constructions and productions of Black masculinities were in contrast to white hegemonic and supremacist masculinities. Johnson was not only pioneering in his construction of a Black male dandy aesthetic outside of

the ring, representative of emancipated Black masculinity, but was performing resistance to the national stereotypes inscribed on Black bodies of the Black man as being poor, dumb, savage, bestial and subhuman. Through utilizing both his body and style of dress, Johnson actively constructed a new Black masculinity, one that exuded respectability and extreme style; in defiance of Black men being reduced to their bodies and anatomy, he was the original celebrity Black athlete and he was the first to produce a flashy 'pimp' style as a forerunner of the modern pimp aesthetic (Boddy, 2008; Wacquant, 2001; Ward, 2006).

Coad observes that 'Pimpin' is a style and aesthetic that can be observed in the dress of Black American sports stars, particularly for professional athletes of sports teams such as the National Basketball Association; their ostentation in dress and style has been appropriated from the figure of the 1970s Black street pimp who would hustle for a living and wear flamboyant clothes and expensive jewellery, displaying his wealth and Black male dominance through the use of conspicuous consumption (Coad, 2008). Although, as Coad notes, this pimp style also feeds into the hypermasculine and hypersexual stereotypes of the Black American male, at the same time it offers working-class Black men the opportunity through dress of upward mobility. Which is

why the icon of the Black male pimp is often featured as a type and a trope in popular gangster rap music and videos. In the figure of the Black male athlete, we can see how Black working-class male bodies are pimped themselves through the sports they succeed in; this is particularly evident in boxing (Wacquant, 2001). It is a paradox that, through success, the Black male as Stuart Hall (1993) and Franz Fanon (1986) suggest is reduced to a body; his body is sold on the sporting market. Culturally and economically, the pimp style offers the Black male athlete a cool aesthetic, at the risk of the Black man continuing to be reduced to body-centric stereotypes.

In 'Who's the Mack?: the performativity and politics of the pimp in gangsta rap', Eithne Quinn (2000) observes that the 'flash pimp daddy' is immersed in the conspicuous display of material goods, and that the Black pimp aesthetic emerged in response to economic, cultural and political changes in America. Resulting from the deindustrialization of blue worker employment, which raised the pimp figure to heroic status as emblematic of Black lower working-class or underclass masculinity. Through adopting the Black pimp aesthetic, the working-class Black man can reclaim power and status through Black style amid poverty and political upheaval; as Quinn observes, through style

politics, the pimp acts in resistance to the mainstream order of things and white male hegemony (Quinn, 2000; Ward, 2006).

The Black pimp style became popular within American sports as top male athletes acquired new economic and sporting capital and looked for ways to exhibit their new-found prosperity; demonstrating they can afford the pimp lifestyle. Displaying their wealth through their conspicuous consumption practices but, in return, allowing their bodies to be commodified as their prime physical capital demands. Conspicuous jock consumption has been used as a media term to define celebrity Black athletes who adorn their bodies with expensive designer jewellery. Coad (2008) notes that, within gangster rap music, there is an emphasis on expensive jewellery or 'bling'; a bling mentality which, as he points out, stems from lower working-class Black male culture and the Black struggle from economic deprivation. The pimp then, in modern culture, becomes a metaphor and signifier for Black masculine power as a subculture that is untouched by whites or the dominant western and European cultures (Quinn, 2000). In boxing, the pimp aesthetic is not just limited to Black style on Black bodies; as professional boxers reach the pinnacle of their careers, boxers of all races look for ways to exhibit their newfound wealth and prestige both in and outside of the ring.

Becoming more dandified in their appearances. The extreme end of this spectrum can be seen in the boxing-ring dress of former American YouTube influencer turned professional boxer Jake Paul. In 2021, Jake Paul wore what was considered at the time the world's most expensive boxing-ring trunks for his boxing rematch with Tyron Woodley; the white trunks were inlaid with real silver, while Rolex watches were sewn into the waistband. This \$1.2 million ring outfit was said to be commissioned by Paul to taunt his boxing rival, British boxer and younger brother of world heavyweight champion Tyson Fury, Tommy Fury, as he accompanied the expensive trunks with an oversized red, white and blue Union Jack top with the words printed on the front 'Hey Tommy wish you could've been here but watching from a TV is cool too' (Davies, 2021). More recently, Jake Paul, during an exhibition fight with former world heavyweight champion Mike Tyson, who came out of retirement for the fight, wore silver shorts, gloves, and boots in the ring; his boots, jacket, and shorts were laden with 380 diamonds that were attached in chains and his name on the front waistband of his shorts was also diamond-encrusted; the trunks cost approximately \$1 million to produce. Paul collaborated with Los Angeles-based custom wear designer 'Surgeon'; down the side panels of his trunks were featured artwork by street artist Alec

Monopoly. Paul's trunks were literal works of art and material culture, and it could be argued that they are an embodiment of the excess and consumption in the twenty-first century (Henderson, 2024; Scott, 2024).



Figure 5, Jake Paul's ring trunks in silver and diamonds.

Other examples of the pimp aesthetic and conspicuous consumption practices in the boxing community include British YouTube influencer and boxer KSI, who wore the world's most expensive mouthguard designed by 'safejawz'. The mouthguard consisted of 108 diamonds and gold leaf valued at approximately £40,000 for his fight with Tommy Fury in 2023 (Balogen, 2023). Here we can see how, by using conspicuous consumption, the pimp aesthetic can be enacted in the ring through excess. However, I would also

suggest that the pimp aesthetic and conspicuous consumption practice in the ring is indicative of boxing politics in the sporting arena; these boxers utilise excess in their ring dress to display not only their wealth, but their positioning in the hierarchy of the sport as elite level or title holding champions at the top echelons of the sport, and for those taking part in mega-fights or world championship fights, their overt displays of wealth also display their dominant masculinity in the ring.

In late-twentieth-century boxing, Black British world middleweight champion Chris Eubank Sr., or 'simply the best' as per his ring moniker. Was known for his dandified and aristocratic style outside of the ring and for creating a spectacle with his grand ring entrances. In more recent years, Eubank has collaborated with bespoke tailors 'Cad & the Dandy', founded by James Sleater and Ian Meiers on Saville Row, to design suits and a range of designs suitable for the English country 'gent'; Eubank adopted this look outside of the ring with his tweed suits and country-style jodhpurs, bowler hat, monocle and walking stick. Like Johnson, Eubank demonstrates his economic and social power through dress and style politics. Like Johnson, Eubank saw himself as deserving equality with his peers as a confident Black man and 'the intolerable other' as he described himself (Weeks, 2016). Eubank

demonstrates that dandyism and the pimp aesthetic can also be performed by boxers using smart tailoring, which creates ambiguity around their class as their style adopts the look of an upper-class gentleman. The dandy and the Black pimp aesthetic is also indicative of performance; American atelier and Harlem fashion designer Daniel Day or 'Dapper Dan' as he is more widely known (2019) observes that, for the urban Black man, having the right clothes, jewellery, houses, and cars becomes a form of theatre, a spectacle it is performative and it is, I would suggest, that through these performances of Black working class masculinities and Black style that young working-class Black men can reclaim power and draw agency. As Day says: 'Fashion for me wasn't about expression, fashion was about power. I would navigate the streets with a certain look until I could own the look. Being fly was a vehicle to getting around my situation in life' (2019, p.160). Here Day argues that having style is a tool that enables young Black men to navigate ghettoization and adversity in their everyday life. This, I would suggest, is also a form of masking; using conspicuous consumption and dress, young Black men can mask their emotions and vulnerabilities behind their style. As Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson state: 'the Black mask is similar to what others call a front or persona' (1992, p.61). However, dandyism and the pimp aesthetic

can also assist in the construction of Black working-class masculinities: the material things that they surround themselves with and what they wear on their bodies can provide respectability, and through owning expensive things, the young working-class Black man can retrieve power and produce a type of hegemonic masculinity that is emblematised through the performance of the pimp aesthetic and Black dandyism.

Another element of the American 1970s Black pimp style is the long fur coat. Fur also happens to be a key element in many fighters ring dress: fighters will often incorporate fur into the designs of their jackets, trunks or robes, and in my participant observation research I observed fur in the trunks of some of the boxers in the ring. What this demonstrates is that there is a parallel between the Black pimp aesthetic and fashion and style in the ring. Owning fur is symbolic: it shows that you have prestige, and it is a declaration of power. Boxers who wear fur into the ring are signifying that they have made it, that they have prestige; we find this demonstrated in the ring entrance of former junior lightweight Puerto Rican champion Hector 'Macho' Camacho, who originated from Spanish Harlem. In his bout with Louis Burke at the Trump Plaza in 1985, Camacho entered the ring wearing an Alaskan black wolf fur coat, from a wolf which, he had been rumoured to claim, he shot

himself (Katz, 1985). Fighters such as Jack Johnson, Floyd Mayweather Jr, Deontay Wilder, Hector Camacho, Muhammad Ali, Tyson Fury, and Connor McGregor have also worn long fur coats outside of the ring. Irish mixed martial artist and boxer Connor McGregor had such a collection of authentic fur mink coats bought from Gucci that animal rights organization Peta contacted him and asked him to give up wearing fur and donate his coats to charity (Young, 2019). Day observes that fur is symbolic and is highly significant in Black American working-class culture: 'Harlem had a fashion history rich with fur coats' and, during his early years as a Harlem fashion designer, Day designed and produced fur garments as one of only three Black furriers in America during this period (2019, p.164). For the urban working-class Black man, fur then becomes more than just an expensive coat. It embodies the cultural capital of the neighbourhood of the inner city, of urban fashion; fur is highly symbolic within Black urban culture, particularly for Black masculinities, being emblematic, as Majors and Billson note, of Black masking and the creation of a front. The pimp and his fur coat is the master of this front; fur, then, is representative of social prestige and inner-city affluence. For those who resided in ghettos it represented, in Day's words, 'ghetto fabulous' (2019). Therefore, the fur coat in Black American culture is

indicative of the Black affluent pimp icon, a type of Black working-class hero, a Black male role model to aspire to amid the deprivation of ghettoization and adversity.

I would argue, then, that in sports and entertainment, Black athletes and rappers are reconstructing their masculinities by imitating and centralizing the Black pimp style and exhibiting a type of Black dandyism. This combined with their celebrity athletic status, helps them to forge new Black hegemonic masculinities as well as showing resistance to dominant white normative masculinity and hegemony (Majors and Billson, 1992; Day, 2019; Latour, 2005; Waterlow, 2016).

I would suggest, that although the Black dandy and the Black pimp aesthetic coalesce in discussions of flamboyant Black male styles, they are each representative of different political and culturally embodied dispositions, identities and bodily performances. The dandy is framed in bodily dispositions of refined and sophisticated resistance to sanctions that were inscribed on the Black male body. With the subjugation of Black masculinity and dress to white supremacy and 'postcolonialism'. Through the figure of Jack Johnson and his practice of conspicuous consumption and adoption of European dress codes outside of the ring, we see a form of political activism

and a display of resistance, demanding visibility during a time when Black masculinity and Black male bodies were expected to remain invisible. The Black pimp aesthetic, conversely, is representative of Black dominance and power, but also of exploitation. The pimp acts in defiance of and in resistance to systemic institutional racism and the Black body reduced to being symbolic, through the disposition of the bodily performance and conspicuous consumption practices in the face of extreme economic deprivation, social isolation, and the marginalisation of Black masculinity within broader society. The Black dandy and the pimp aesthetics are emblematic of the histories of race relations in the United States. However, their bodily performances speak to different experiences of racism. The dandy resists subservience to sanctions imposed on the body and dress, while the pimp speaks to a reclamation of the body and the body's power through the body and dress. Both are evident in the dress of professional boxing champions, inside and outside of the ring. They overlap at times, but it is crucial to acknowledge their distinctions with differing racial histories, so that they do not become enmeshed into a single analysis of Black flamboyance (Coad, 2008; Majors and Billson, 1992; Quinn, 2000, Ward, 2006).

## Boxers and Luxury Fashion

'Iron' Mike Tyson was the first boxer to win a world heavyweight title at age twenty in his world title match against Trevor Berbick in 1986; a year later, Tyson unified all three boxing heavyweight belts, the WBA, IGF, and WBC, after defeating Tony Tucker. As a reward for this history-making moment, Tyson's then-promoter, Don King, staged a mock coronation to celebrate Tyson's achievements. Tyson was paraded in front of celebrities and boxing aficionados dressed in a chinchilla fur robe that was purchased from Le Nobel Furriers; former world heavyweight champion and celebrity icon Muhammad Ali placed a jewelled crown on Tyson's head studded with, as Tyson states in his autobiography 'baubles, rubies, and fabulous doodads.' Tyson was also presented with a jewelled sceptre and necklace (Sloman, 2014).

The objects of dress he was presented with were not gimmicky or imitation of fur and jewels; they were real the fur robe was real chinchilla fur, and the sceptre and crown contained real jewels as rewards for unifying the belts and becoming world champion. This use of luxury objects not only demarcated Tyson's new position and his success within the sport, but they represented his masculinity, a new powerful Black masculinity that has been constructed

in the sport and culminated in a regal ceremony. Like Johnson before him, with his diamond-tipped walking cane, jewels and tailor-made suits, which were objects of dress that communicated Johnson's new Black power and hegemony, Tyson's dress communicated not only his world champion status and power to the eight thousand fans present at his coronation within the Hilton hotel, but also a powerful regal like masculinity (Sloman, 2014; Rafael, 2005).

Griffin Adams (2020) observes that, over the last two decades, fighters' ring dress has become increasingly excessive and lavish. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, boxing dress has become more and more fashionable as fighters seek to collaborate with European designers and fashion houses to produce their fight kits: The ring dress of Mexican fighter Saul Canelo Alvarez who has multiple world championship titles is often designed by Dolce and Gabbana; British heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua commissioned boxing brand Fight Label to make his white ring trunks, which were lined in Christian Dior silk (Roper, 2020); Ukrainian three-time world title-holder featherweight through to lightweight champion Vasyl Lomachenko became the first brand ambassador for Phillip Plein-owned brand 'Billionaire' in 2019 Lomanchenko entered the ring for one of his fights wearing crocodile-leather

for his shorts and robe (Maoui, 2019); Mexican-American boxer Ryan Garcia had his ring dress designed and produced by French fashion house Christian Dior for one of his ring entrances, where he publicly said of his opponent 'I'll be knocking his ass out in Dior' (Ring magazine, 2022).

What many fighters are now wearing into the ring could be categorised as now being objects of conspicuous consumption, high fashion and also artifacts of material culture communicating excess within sports. Adams notes that there has been a shift in more recent years with what boxers wear to the ring: 'Gone are the days of the short black shorts Mike Tyson used for most of his bouts, or the terry-cloth robe with scripted names on the back like Muhammad Ali'. This demonstrates that fighters are now more conscious than ever about what they wear into the ring, how they adorn their bodies for a fight and how they are seen by boxing audiences while in the ring. This integration of designer brands into boxing dress and the changes in boxing-ring dress also demonstrates how the sport is evolving. I suggest that these changes are also indicative of changes to masculinities in boxing and how new, more metrosexual, masculinities are being constructed within the sport; that boxers are becoming more fashion-savvy and more conscious of their appearances. Adams also points out that fighters from previous eras have set

the tone and standards for what boxers wear today; if we look at the flamboyant dress of Camacho and his use of sequins, tassels, leopard prints, we can see how he provides inspiration for current fighters to draw from with their ring dress today (Adams, 2005).

Recalling David Scott's observation that glamour was introduced into boxing ring dress from the 1930s onwards when fighters started to wear satins and silks in the ring, it is clear that there has always been an element in boxing where fighters wanted to exhibit and display their toned bodies with lavish or glamorous fabrics (Scott, 2008). In my interview with James Cook, he noted that fight shorts traditionally used to be made of silk, and said 'I think you go with the fashion at them times; you go with fashion and the silk was coming into fashion at these times, so I went with it.' James confirms how, towards the end of the twentieth century, boxing-ring dress was already luxurious and subject to fashions in boxing dress, setting the tone to equate boxers with luxury and fashion. As Adams (2005) also observes, however, the introduction of new technologies and social media puts added pressure on fighters to perform not only in the ring but in how they arrive at the ring, as their ring entrances and dress are viewed by bigger and larger audiences; this

is reflected in the increased use of designer fabrics, and designer collaborations in boxing-ring dress.

Within the structures of boxing there is a system of hierarchies: amateur and professional, challenger, champion, male, female, lower weights, higher weights. A fighter's positioning Within the sports hierarchy can be observed through their dress. While conducting my primary research, I noticed that during the preliminary fights at the beginning of the evening, some of the fighters' dress was shabby, ill-fitting and made of poor quality fabrics; one fighter had on white shorts with a black trim which was creased and crumpled and looked as though they were made of cheap satin polyester fabric. There was a marked and distinct difference in the quality and flamboyance of the fighters from the 'undercard' or first fights of the night to the fighters of the main event. As the evening went on, the more prominent fighters had more flamboyant, customised dress that indicated that they were important fighters. The higher up within the sport for example, titled heavyweight champions performing for mega-fights the larger the spectatorship and the more extravagant the ring entrances and ring-wear fashions become. It is within these mega-fights that we see bespoke designer collaborations and the most ostentatious and expensive fabrics incorporated into ring dress.

What a fighter wears into the ring symbolises his pecuniary strength and his positioning within the sports structure, so when fighters collaborate with luxury brands, they are also communicating their champion status within the sport.

Thorstein Veblen (2005) argues that no class of society does without the custom of conspicuous consumption; that even the working-class consume conspicuously. Historically, as Veblen points out, the consumption of goods by the leisure class in Britain became an outward signifier of economic strength, class, and rank. As far back as medieval times, the aristocracy and members of the palace would demonstrate their pecuniary strength through their consumption practices. Luxury fabrics in large quantities and specific colours in dress were indicators of wealth, as these were determined by economic income, land ownership, and status. Through apparel, the elite class were able to demonstrate their superiority and class by separating themselves, with what Veblen calls an invidious comparison, from the emerging bourgeois and the working classes. This meant that, the more the middle classes, particularly the bourgeois and politicians, consumed luxury apparel conspicuously to emulate the elite and maintain a pecuniary reputability and decency, the more the nobility needed to consume in dress

to retain social supremacy and to set themselves apart. The poor would not have been able to afford luxury items, but would have also tried to exercise some pecuniary decency in their dress, as each class tried to compete with the class above. Vivienne Richmond notes in *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England*, 'in any case the vast majority of people did not identify poverty by enquiring about earnings, they simply looked. People therefore made strenuous efforts to avoid looking poor' (Richmond, 2013, p.294-5).

What this demonstrates is that, among the working class, there is a notion of respectability, and this is indicated through dress; respectability is also a core element in boxing, in that marginalised working-class men can gain instant respectability within the boxing community as they construct what are considered respectable forms of working-class masculinities. I would argue that dress is one of the ways a fighter can demonstrate his respectability, while simultaneously indicating his positioning in the hierarchy of the sport through his conspicuous consumption practices and denoting his economic hegemony to his opponents through his new championship status.

Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century fighters ring dress also became increasingly flamboyant, particularly for high-profile boxers and fights. Hector Camacho's flamboyant ring entrances included him entering

the ring dressed as a fireman or wearing a native American headdress to the ring. In my primary research, I observed that many fighters' ring dress were embellished with furs, polyester satins, and bright or metallic colours so that they stood out. For more renowned professional fighters in mega-fights, respectability and pecuniary strength will be exhibited through excess in the ring by incorporating into their ring dress extravagant textiles such as exotic animal skins, expensive satins or silks, leathers, furs, designer collaborations and glamorous embellishments.

Sophie Miller said in interview with me, of designing and making boxing-ring dress for former British champion boxer Carl 'The Cobra' Froch, 'that we did that, tried to incorporate his logo; one of them was a velvet but had, erm, a glitter in it and she must have sourced four or five different glittery silver fabrics, and he was quite, you know, we to-ed and fro-ed about the glittery silver fabrics quite a bit, it was slightly velvety, it had a pylon, and I was like "ooh, ooh"; that was the one he went for [laughs]". Fighters care about how they will look in the ring; many fighters will work closely with boxing-dress designers to make their ideas of how they want to be perceived by boxing audiences come to life and can be very involved in the design process. They want to look respectable even down to the fine details of how their trunks sit

on their bodies, and that their waistband covers up the protective jockstrap and box that sits underneath their trunks. When I asked James Cook, of his boxing trunks, 'How did you feel when you wore them during your ring walk?', he responded 'Well, you know, what do you know, yeah, I don't think I was worried about, feeling I was worried about, just make sure it fits ok, when you got your protector, when it goes over it, how does it look'.

Adams observes that the fashions that we now see in the boxing ring have all arrived onto the boxing scene over the past twenty years. Heralding a new era of conspicuous jock style in sports. In boxing, however, a fighter's incorporation of conspicuous consumption in his boxing-ring dress can do more than just exhibit his respectability, his wealth and prestige, or to denote where they are positioned in the hierarchy of the sport; I would argue that luxury fashion in boxing can be tactical, a way for the fighter to exert psychological dominance over his opponent in the ring. It signifies his championship and sporting achievements, which can be intimidating for a fighter who is still making his way up through the ranks. Champion fighters will have entourages who will carry their belts while walking behind them into the ring; it can be intimidating for their opponent to see the number of titles and belts they possess. When this action during the ring walk is

combined with a fighter who is dressed by a couture designer or luxury fashion house, it creates an intimidating spectacle for their opponent prior to getting in the ring. I would suggest also that the use of luxury fashion in their ring dress can signify fighters' masculinity, that through conspicuous consumption in their ring dress they are constructing a hegemonic masculinity and dominance before they even get into the ring.

Having agency in what to wear in the ring is also indicative of championship status. While interviewing James Cook about his boxing-ring dress he informed me that 'there was a colour that I like, it was light blue, so when I became a champion I could afford to get blue shorts made' noting that 'it's amazing feeling when you know you can go to a shop and say "I want that made" and, you know, they look at ya and say well "yeah, you're a champion" and they design it to the best best quality'. James hints at the hierarchical structure within boxing; by the time he had reached champion status he had the acquired boxing and economic capital and wanted to have his boxing dress designed more elaborately and to his tastes to choose colours, fabrics, and styles of his boxing dress, even having his dress made bespoke and with better quality fabrics. The more successful a fighter becomes, the more autonomy they will have in their boxing ring dress. In any

weight class, there is a spectrum in boxing which starts with the amateur fighters, who cross over into the professional ranks, then move up to championship status right up to the highest end of the sport with the world champions or elite level fighters and mega-fights, which have the largest spectatorship. Through their dress in the ring, world champion boxers can make a clear statement to their opponents: I am at the top of my game. Luxury fashion in boxing-ring dress can become a visual indicator and marker of where a fighter is positioned within the ranks of the sport on his boxing journey. That a fighter's ring dress can also be a signifier of their world championship success and status adds another level of psychological dominance over their opponent.

We see this exhibited in the ring dress of Mexican-American super lightweight champion fighter Ryan ('KingRY') Garcia who, aged just twenty-four, has boxed and won titles in four different weight categories: super featherweight, lightweight, light welterweight and super lightweight. For a super lightweight bout with Javier Fortuna at the Crypto arena in Los Angeles in 2022, Garcia entered the ring in an elaborately custom-designed robe and trunks by the menswear artistic director Kim Jones for French couturier Christian Dior. The robe and trunks consisted of white duchess silk satin with

an all-over Dior pattern in blue leather design detailing embossed with a python motif, and approximately three thousand Swarovski rhinestones in sapphire and cobalt embellished around the hem of the robe and its sleeves and the words Dior that would shimmer when the lights hit them, with decorative navy blue silk fringes adorning the sides of the trunks. Garcia's ring moniker 'King Ryan' is embellished on the front of his robe, with Dior emblazoned across the back of his robe and trunks and the Words King Ryan on the front of his trunks, while he wore a bespoke hand-beaten copper crown by Dior's milliner Stephen Jones, plated with real silver with a lion's head as a motif (Widjojo, 2022).

A closer look at Garcia's ring dress demonstrates his status and positioning in the sport. Dior wanted to collaborate with him to produce his fight kit, which speaks volumes about his place within boxing as an accomplished champion and fighter. His Dior fight kit are objects of conspicuous consumption, but we can also consider them objects of material culture, consumption and excess, embodying as they do the evolution and development of the role of luxury fashion within the boxing ring. For Dior, this was a historic moment, as it was the first time the French fashion house collaborated with a professional boxer and dressed him for the ring, marrying boxing with luxury fashion, art,

and high culture. Through collaborating with and wearing Dior into the ring, Garcia is asserting his dominance in the ring and his hierarchy within the sport as a champion. He is also utilizing Dior to construct his boxing masculinity and identity in the ring as a powerful Mexican American fighter. The Dior robe and trunks become objects of art, excess and consumption but they also become objects of psychological intimidation to his opponent. (Connell, 1995, Latour, 2005, Veblen, 2005).



Figure 6. Ryan Garcia Dior robe, (2022).

Similarly, Italian fashion house Dolce and Gabbana dresses light heavyweight champion Saul Canelo Alvarez for the ring, with Alvarez donning a hot pink sequined and satin poncho emblazoned with 'D&G' in large letters on the front above his ring moniker 'Canelo' for his bout with Dmitry Bivol at T Mobile arena in Las Vegas in 2022 (Esquire, 2022). Boxing's influence on luxury fashion is nothing new, as designers have long been known for drawing inspiration from the boxing ring. For example: French fashion

designer Jean Paul Gaultier's 2010 Autumn Winter menswear collection (LA Times, 2010); Gaultier's 2021 boxing-inspired men's fragrance scandal campaign (Men's health.com 2021); creative director Olivier Rousteing designing the Puma and Balmain collaboration collection (Johnson, 2019); Italian fashion house Versace designing \$3,000 boxing gloves in 2019 (Chin, 2019); while in 2014, German fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld designed a luxury boxing bag for Louis Vuitton priced at \$175,000 (hypebeast.com, 2014). Former world heavyweight champions and Ukrainian brothers Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko were both sponsored by the Italian menswear tailoring brand Hugo Boss, wearing trunks into the ring made by Hugo Boss with 'Hugo Boss' on the waistband of their trunks (Plaschke, 2004), while Versace has created robes for boxers such as British boxer Billy Joe Saunders, Irish MMA fighter Connor McGregor, who crossed into boxing for a mega-fight with Floyd Mayweather, and British heavyweight champion Tyson Fury. As mentioned previously, the iconic black and gold robe gifted to each fighter was given the epithet 'the cursed Versace robe' by fight fans as both Saunders and McGregor lost both of their fights after donning theirs; fans feared Fury would be struck by the Versace curse ahead of his trilogy fight into 2021 with Deontay Wilder (Blow, 2021). This feeds into the already-

prevalent superstitions and rituals within boxing, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Three.

Former middleweight and welterweight title champion boxer Amir Khan from Bolton in Greater Manchester was the youngest British national to win an Olympic medal at just age seventeen and one of the youngest British World Boxing Association professional champions. For his boxing bout with Devon Alexander at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas on 12th December 2014, Khan wore trunks that were designed by Sophie Whittam of independent Sheffield-based boxing fashion label 'Fight Label' at the cost of £30,000; the trunks were made with white Nappa leather and the finest silks, and embellished with twenty-four-carat gold thread, and were considered at that time to be the world's most expensive boxing trunks. Khan later donated the trunks to charity in India. Once again, Khan's trunks are a visual marker of his success in his boxing career and in the ring, communicating his positioning within the sport and his masculine dominance through opulence (Powell, 2014).

Professional boxing is unique; whereas, in most sports, athletes have set colours or a uniform to wear when they perform, professional boxers can wear whatever they want into the ring if they do not wear the same colours as their opponents. Amateur or Olympic boxers have to adhere to a uniform,

a vest and trunks that will represent their gym colours or their country in international competitions, but once a fighter has crossed over to professional boxing he has complete autonomy in dress. Welterweight interviewee Tony Cesay had boxed for the Repton boxing gym in Hackney, East London, prior to boxing for the England team. When an amateur boxer, he had to wear team colours for his fights: 'What my, em, yeah it was just for us, we wore the green and white and, er, green and gold, that was, that was, erm our colours, you know, our colours – I'll have to send you some of the colours so you can see the famous colour, erm Repton, so, erm, yeah it was, er.' He also showed me some photographs of him wearing red and white: 'Yeah, and thats England, when I was boxing for England at that time.' British boxer Lawrence Okolie, who was on the undercard for the Anthony Joshua fight and also had his trunks made by Fight Label, stated that he likes that he now has the chance to wear what he wants in the ring now he's turned professional, He also stated that 'when you're in the Great Britain team it's all standard, everyone wears the same thing, and that it's not just about walking out to the fight it's about trying it on the day before; I remember putting it on and feeling like an African superhero when I looked at myself in the mirror' (Roper, 2020). Here, Okolie indicates that he has risen from the amateur

boxing ranks and boxing for the England team to professional boxing, and his new positioning is demarcated through his dress.

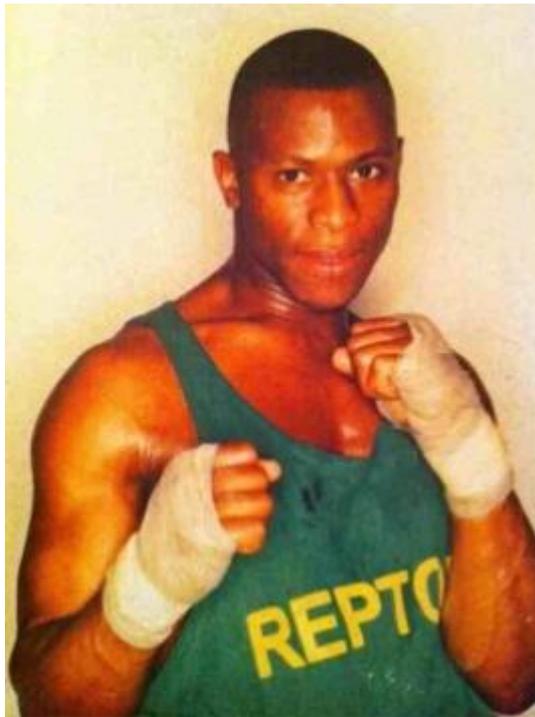


Figure 7. Former boxer Tony Cesay in the green and gold colours of Repton Gym.

Luxury fashion within boxing, I would argue, is also indicative of a fighter's masculinity. Boxers' bodies, as professional athletes, are at the very pinnacle of physical health through the brutal conditioning, rigorous routines, and intense training regimes. French sociologist Loic Wacquant observes that boxers inhabit their bodies, that in effect, they are their bodies (Wacquant,

2004); this indicates that what boxers wear into the ring assists them in performing their boxing masculinities. Boxers construct and produce their masculinities in the gym through their physical bodies and social interactions with other male bodies, as Connell observes (1995), both through the physical and the social. I would argue that what they put on their body emblematises their hegemonic masculinity and, through conspicuous consumption and opulent dress, helps them to construct and communicate their dominant masculinities to their boxing audiences.

Other example of fighters utilizing the practice of conspicuous consumption inside the ring can be seen with super lightweight American boxer Gervonta 'The Tank' Davies, who commissioned Californian atelier Sheron Barber to make him some custom-made Louis Vuitton headgear, bags, and gloves, which Davies had considered utilizing in his upcoming bout against Yuriorkis Gamboa for the lightweight title in 2019. In an interview, Barber describes how he constructed the custom-made pieces for Davies, stating that:

I started off by cutting up a Louis Vuitton midnight eclipse garment bag and I used some gator, then we had to construct patterns for the gloves, for the bags and headgear. The inside of the glove needs to be soft, so I used perforated leather. One of the real challenges here is making sure the gloves are made in an artisan quality but are still durable enough so that they're functional. (Unitthan, 2023)

American lightweight boxer Devin Haney frequently collaborates with designers for his custom fight wear. For his fight with Vasily Lomanchenko in 2023, Haney collaborated with shoe designer Dominic 'The Shoe Surgeon' Ciambone for Haney's boxing boots and took inspiration from Louis Vuitton x Nike Air Force Ones designed by the late Virgil Abloh, Ciambone's boxing boots included £5000 worth of Louis Vuitton bags (Verry, 2023).

Sometimes this commitment to ostentatious display can be counterproductive to the practicalities of boxing, however. In American Heavyweight boxer Deontay ('The Bronze Bomber') Wilder's second heavyweight fight, defending his title against British Heavyweight Tyson ('The Gypsy King') Fury, Wilder entered the boxing ring in a black face mask covering his entire face, embossed and outlined with the shape of a skull, with black rhinestones along his jawline and brow. The cutout shape for the eyes had red LED lights around them and on the top of his head was attached a rhinestone crown, also in black. Accompanying the mask and crown he wore a long black cape and a gladiator-style chest plate which had skulls placed on the shoulders like shoulder pads, more Red LED lights running down his arms. They lit up his shoulders and chest with black mesh and

rhinestone detail along the collar of his cape. Wilder's entire costume was black, aside from the red LED lights.



Figure 8. Deontay Wilder versus Tyson Fury, 2020

Wilder's all-black costume embodies his politics; it becomes a form of Black activism, honouring Black History Month. It is, however, also indicative of his rank and positioning within the sport; he was the first professional American world champion boxer to hold the heavyweight world title in nine years, and by being world heavyweight champion he had brought the title back to the United States. Again we can see evidence of the connection to luxury and

conspicuous consumption in fighters' ring dress and how fighters demarcate their position and rank through ostentatious dress; this bespoke outfit had cost him an estimated £30,000, and was created by design team Cosmo Lombino and Donato Crowley of Los Angeles-based fashion label Cosmo and Donato. Wilder lost the fight to Fury, however. Fury became the new heavyweight champion, returning the title to England, and Wilder blamed his dress for the loss of this fight, claiming that wearing his elaborate homage to Black history, which weighed 30 pounds, for the walk out to the ring had weakened his legs during the fight.

Competition for up-and-coming fighters within boxing is fierce. Many try, and very few succeed at getting a world title, even though more belts and titles are available now, due to the expansion over the last half of the twentieth century of weight categories and boxing associations that award titles and belts. For fighters, the hard work of making their way through the amateur ranks to professional ranks and getting a shot at a title is difficult enough physically, but only a few out of thousands reach this stage. What makes the boxing-ring dress of professional champions such as Garcia, Joshua, Wilder, Tyson, and Khan so significant is that they are representative of this enormous achievement. Objects of dress in the ring, I would argue, also work

in relationship with fighters; they serve as intermediaries with their boxing audiences, to communicate their wealth, prestige, status and their boxing masculinities and identities. (Connell, 1995; Latour, 2005; Sugden, 1996). Through luxury fashion and conspicuous consumption, fighters' dress also communicates visually to lower-ranking professional boxers their status in the ring and their pecuniary prowess.

Lastly, the correlation of luxury objects of dress in boxing for fighters is not limited to the ring; many fighters will wear objects of conspicuous consumption to pre-fight press conferences, ceremonial weigh-ins, and face-offs with their opponents. These pre-fight ceremonies are opportunities for fighters to communicate their dominance and psychologically intimidate their opponents through excess in dress even before they get in the ring. British middleweight boxer Chris Eubank Jr. attended his press conference with opponent Connor Benn in 2022 wearing a Louis Vuitton Jacket worth £8000; Eubank's jacket was inspired by former American welterweight champion Floyd Mayweather Jr. and his Louis Vuitton utility-style jackets, which he wore at press conferences during his career (Terry, 2022). Mayweather's sleeveless jacket, with large orange LV embossed on the back and orange striped panels across the front also embossed with LV, cost approximately

\$5000 and had Louis Vuitton small wallets and bags sewn onto it. The monogram admiral jacket was a new concept by Louis Vuitton, and the brand states that this style embodies 'accessomorphosis', where accessories and garments blend into one (Gamble, 2022; Morgan, 2020).

### **Pre-Fight Boxing Ceremonies and Mind Games in Boxing**

In the week leading up to a high-profile boxing match, boxers will attend press conferences, public weigh-ins, and sometimes open workouts. Wilson Rushton and Kenny Greenlough (2016), in a recent paper entitled 'Mind Games in Amateur Boxing: a qualitative study of four senior male amateur boxers in Greater Manchester', observe that three main ceremonies occur before a boxing match takes place, and that boxers may utilise these ceremonies to assert their aggression and dominance psychologically before a fight. However, somewhat surprisingly, Rushton and Greenlough note that anger is frowned upon in the sport of boxing. This is due to the central aggression within the sport which must be emotionally and physically kept in check and controlled. They also observe that the emotional control that boxers are required to exhibit prior to and in the ring is something that produces a vulnerability that can also be exploited by the boxer's opponent. This is particularly during the public weigh-in, when fighters often use

intimidating behaviours such as glances and stares, and their body language to unnerve their opponent. Eye to eye contact, between fighters, however, is encouraged in boxing, and during the traditional pre-fight 'face off' (a boxing ritual that encourages fighters to face each other while making prolonged eye contact for a few minutes). Fighters can utilise this space to wear down their opponent. It becomes another psychological tactic in the fighters armoury, and can be a show of dominance before the fight. Moreover, this tradition adds to the spectacle and performances that sell fights (2016).

Jefferson also observes that fighters will utilise the ritual tactics of eyeballing during the face off, to the trash talking and insults, while simultaneously displaying a bodily calm, and a quiet but focused confidence and detachment. The victor at the weigh-in, however, is not necessarily the opponent who has the most well-honed body and athletic prowess, but he who emanates the most danger, and is the most menacing, displaying his mental robustness (Jefferson, 1998). I would also add that these pre-fight ceremonies offer opportunities for fighters to utilise their dress to 'psyche out' and intimidate their opponents before a fight.

The three main pre-fight events are the press conference and public weigh-in, workouts, and the ring entrance. The public weighing-in of fighters before

a match is a historic tradition that goes back over a century in boxing; fighters will strip off their items of clothing during a weigh-in ceremony, providing an opportunity for fighters to display their muscularity and physicality, and allowing gamblers to place bets on the stronger-looking fighter. The weighing within boxing there are many different weight classes, seventeen at present, ranging from the smallest, the minimum weight, which is set at 105 pounds, to the heavyweight division which is unlimited. That there is no maximum weight in the heavyweight division, but boxers will still be publicly weighed, demonstrates that these ceremonies are as much ritual, tradition and ceremony as they are functional (Arond and Weinberg, 1952).

Weight is so significant in boxing, as S. Kirson Weinburg and Henry Arond (1952) note, that boxers are classified, ranked, and rated through the internal structures and hierarchy of boxing according to their weight and within their weight class annually. Conversations in boxing gyms among professional boxers, coaches, promoters, and managers will always be around weight; boxers will utilise many strange and unorthodox methods to make their weight on the day of a weigh-in, from exotic diets to sitting in saunas and running in sweatsuits, which are made from PVC or coated nylon to help the body retain heat and sweat off calories. Rushton and Greenlough (2016)

observe that, due to the intensity of the weight loss of fighters before a weigh-in to make weight, a fighter's body will not only be at its most formidable, but also, due to dehydration, at its most physically defined. Wacquant (2004) observes that, within boxing, fighters obsess over weight and keeping themselves at their best weight; he notes that boxing folklore is full of stories of fighters that will go to great lengths, sometimes medically unsafe lengths, to maintain or meet their weight class, to shed pounds before the ceremony of the weigh-in. However, as he notes, boxers cannot afford to lose too much weight through intense dieting or exposure to heat while they train, but must find the balance between losing just the right amount to make their official weight during the run-up to a fight. All this means that the public weigh-in ceremony is highly significant in boxing culture. The ceremony for a high-profile fight usually takes place on an elevated stage in front of the press and boxing officials.

Once fighters have weighed in, they will then enact another of the boxers' ceremonies and traditions, called the 'face-off', in which they turn and face one another, staring into each other's eyes in silence for a few minutes. This ritual provides an opportunity for fighters to intimidate their opponent with a show of mental strength. Through these pre-fight ceremonies and traditions,

promoters for a high-profile fight will also drum up publicity for an upcoming fight (Arond and Weinburg, 1952).

Fighters must display high confidence levels before and during a boxing match. This may include wearing down their opponent's confidence through verbal assaults ('trash talking'), bodily gestures, and, during the three stages before the bout takes place, as well as utilizing objects of fashion and dress. As Rushton and Greenlough (2016) observe that, when, during the weigh-in, a boxer parades his physicality in front of his opponent, it is an exchange of power. Arond and Weinburg(1952) also observe that self-confidence is key both before and during a match. Many fighters will use the space of pre-fight ceremonies to enact psychological warfare or 'mind games' on their opponent, and this is often enacted through both verbal and nonverbal means' by verbal assaults or intimidating body languages such as strutting and through objects of fashion and dress. Animosity between opponents is also utilised by coaches, managers, and promoters of a fight to market the fight during the pre-fight build-up as this performative, sometimes staged aggression is a central element of the boxing spectacle.

Rushton and Greenough (2016) state that 'although there has been a deficit of sports psychologists working in boxing, it was established by Herring

(2012) that boxers and their coaches have used mind games to gain an edge over an opponent.' They also note, 'Hennessy, Mercer, and Warwick (2011) referred to mind games as mixed messages intended to mislead a recipient, affecting emotions and judgments such as confidence and aggression.' Schoening (2012) identifies two strategies in which mind games can be utilised: verbal and body language. The psychology that is distinctive to the culture of boxing, the tactical wearing-down of the opponent outside of the ring through mind games indicates the sport's more insidious side; there is a level of psychological violence within the sport that boxers are exposed to, and the dangers inherent in the sport are as much psychological as they are physical, due to the brutality experienced in the ring. Although all emphasis is on the body and the controlled violence in the ring, the continual wearing down of an opponent's confidence and mental resolve also has consequences for a fighter's performance in the ring and could ultimately result in a loss, demonstrating that the outcome of a fighter's success in the ring is as much psychological as it is physical (Rushton and Greenough, 2016).

The residual effects of the ritual of trash talking between fighters are illustrated when former sports illustrated editor Mark Kram recalls the iconic

'Thrilla in Manilla' fight between Muhammed Ali and Joe Frazier in 1975.

Kram writes:

Across the ring Joe Frazier was wearing trunks that seemed to have been cut from a farmer's overalls. He was darkly tense, bobbing up and down as if trying to start a cold motor inside himself. Hatred had never been a part of him, but words like 'gorilla, ugly, ignorant,' all the cruelty of Ali's endless vilifications, had finally bitten deeply into his soul. (Kram in Kimball and Schulian, 2013)

It is within this environment of pre-fight tensions and boxing ceremonies that objects of dress can be utilised by fighters as another way to enact mind games. We see this, for example, with the pre-fight weigh-in for an exhibition fight between Jake Paul and Mike Tyson in November 2024. During the weigh-in, Paul wore a diamond-spiked ear clip; the purpose of this ear clip was multifaceted. Firstly, the diamond-encrusted ear clip was an object of luxury and conspicuous consumption, as it was made from genuine diamonds, denoting Jake Paul's accumulated wealth. Secondly, the ear clip was an extravagant object of jewellery representative of the Black pimp aesthetic in American sports. Lastly, the ear clip was worn to enact pre-fight mind games with Tyson; during Mike Tyson's reign as world heavyweight champion, in a rematch fight with Evander Holyfield in 1997, Tyson bit off a chunk of Holyfield's ear. By wearing the ear clip Paul not only antagonises Tyson with an object that covered his ear, indicating that he is protecting his

ear from Tyson, it also asserts Paul's hegemonic masculinity in that moment, suggesting to Tyson 'you will not be biting my ear in the ring'; it represents Paul's dominance (Davie, 2024).

Masking is common in boxing; many fighters will wear masks into the ring. Some fighters, however, will wear masks during the pre-fight ceremonies and open workouts as part of the mind games (Rushton and Greenlough, 2016). In a chapter entitled, 'When they are veiled on purpose to be seen' exploring eighteenth-century masks worn by women in England, Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (2001) observe that masks in a non-masquerade setting are an understudied phenomenon. Masking was popular in eighteenth-century England, when a vizard, a black half-shaped mask worn by gentlewomen in London, was used for cosmetic purposes, to protect a lady's skin from the cold. These masks only covered the top of the face, so they did not provide complete anonymity; which was also part of the function of the masquerade to provide some privacy for urban dwellers within the city. The bottom half of the face, however, could be hidden with the use of the fan. Here, the mask served other purposes, when there were widely held beliefs that a person's thoughts and feelings could be read by their facial expressions. The mask eliminates the risk of facial expressions exposing feelings, motivations, and

intentions, rendering the wearer invisible. However, the mask's most prominent attraction is that it advertises concealment, drawing attention to the subject beneath and inviting attraction and further speculation. Half-faced masks could be more of an idea of disguise than actual disguise; during the latter part of the eighteenth century, face masks became more popular in public but were only worn in designated areas such as London parks. For example, in these full-faced masks, there existed an understanding of the incognito ritual that meant that, even if you knew the person beneath the mask, you were to act like they were anonymous. Eye-to-eye contact was frowned upon in social situations as it was thought that to look at one's face, you could read their thoughts, and reading their faces invaded their privacy; many books were written on the subject during this time teaching people how to read faces and how not to have your face read. This led to the practice of training your body and face to remain expressionless whereby emotions were controlled entirely.

The expressionless face that is trained to show no emotion is something that is employed in boxing ceremonies with what is called the 'face-off'; here we can see another type of masking, the masking of expressions and emotions; during press conferences and weigh-ins fighters will have the opportunity to

face each other for the first time before getting into the ring. They will stand and stare into each other's eyes for a few minutes before resuming their positions in front of the press. Fighters will mask their expressions and emotions during this ceremony so as not to appear weak in front of their opponent, to show no fear and to appear resolved, so that their opponent has no idea what they are feeling in that moment. British heavyweight Tyson Fury, prior to his heavyweight defending world championship fight with Oleksandr Usyk in 2024, refused to face his opponent during the face off and looked straight ahead instead, while Usyk faced him. In this way, Fury gives nothing away for his opponent to latch onto, no clues at all to his emotional state before the fight. Here we can see that, just like the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century masks, their opponents cannot read their faces.

Many fighters have employed the use of a physical mask before a fight to intimidate their opponent and to enact mind games before getting in the ring, such as a bout between Tyson Fury and Swedish heavyweight Otto Walin in 2019, when Fury wore a Mexican-style lucha libre mask during the weigh-in and while facing Walin. The Mexican lucha libre masks are thought to be symbolic within Mexican culture and can take the form of animals, gods or heroes it is thought that the luchador takes on the identity of these

symbolic themes while wearing the mask. Fury may have been invoking these themes, and also wore the mask in homage to Mexican independence day which was later that week. However, I would suggest that the lucha libre mask could also be another vehicle to masking his facial expressions as with the expressionless masks of the face-off, the lucha libre mask would have disguised any inability to control his facial expressions and moments of weakness or self-doubt before the fight; for Fury, the mask here could easily have been masking pre-fight tensions.

In eighteenth-century England, the new theories emerging that promoted face-reading resulted in the practice of wearing a complete face mask covering the entire face, but in this mask, wearing was also a type of gameplay where women wanted the luxury of being both incognito and attracting attention at the same time. However, the mask also provides an element of privacy in public spaces; Entwistle and Wilson suggest that the mask communicates simultaneously both 'I wish to be seen' and 'I am invisible' in this way the mask's purpose is to both attract and repel scrutiny. The mask allows the wearer to do things or act in specific ways that they would typically not feel at liberty to act or be, all the while protecting the identity of the wearer.

However, this only allows for anonymity when the wearer meets strangers. In the case of fighters masking during pre-fight ceremonies such as the weigh-in, face-offs, and open workouts, the public is already aware of the identity of the wearer, so the mask does not conceal or disguise fighters' identities; in this case, I would argue, it only reveals that the wearer has something to hide. As Entwistle and Wilson point out, 'the cultural practice of wearing a mask is like displaying a sign: I am incognito while being recognisable.' It could be that boxers who are masked during these ceremonies wish to be both recognizable while hiding behind the object of the mask. Fury's lucha libre Mexican mask in this context, although full of Mexican culture and symbolism and in homage to Mexico, could also be an object for him to hide behind prior to the fight to disguise his pre-fight anxieties or insecurities (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001; Powell, 2019).

Other British fighters to utilise the use of masks during pre-fight ceremonies include British heavyweight Derek Chisora, who wore a mask themed on the character Bane from the film *Batman: the Dark Knight Rises* to his open workout for his European heavyweight title fight with German Edmund Greber in 2013. Chisora is known for entering the ring with the bottom half of his face masked with a bandana tied around his face. Could this disguise also

be rendering some sense of anonymity and privacy for Chisora, disguising his insecurities and any emotional weaknesses that might be read from his face before entering the ring ?In this scenario, the mask for Chisora also places him in the role of the villain, as it becomes symbolic and representative of Chisora's bad boy image in the media for some of his antics outside of the ring. Such as incidents in 2012 when Chisora slapped Ukrainian fighter Wladimir Klitschko during a public weigh in. Again, as with his bandanas that would mask half of his face on entering the ring, the Bane mask only covers the bottom half of his face, leaving the top half exposed. However, just as in eighteenth-century masking, where Entwistle and Willson observe that public masking for both men and women provided performance opportunities and to take on a new identity which could be expressed to both sexes, the mask in public performance aids the wearer in maintaining control in social situations. It assists with communication and gives the wearer privacy when amongst strangers (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001; Powell, 2019). Chisora's Bane mask is therefore also performative, enacting mind games by portraying himself as an anti-hero and portraying a villain, playing into his image and identity outside of the ring; by wearing it, he perhaps hoped it would unnerve

his opponent Greber before they got in the ring (Strange, 2013; Pattle, 2022; Downes, 2022).

Similarly, American heavyweight Deontay Wilder wore a half-faced leather-look Bane mask for his public weigh-in with Tyson Fury in 2018; Wilder states that the mask is part of his alter ego, The Bronze Bomber, and that when he puts on a mask, he transforms into his alter ego. Again we can see the mask providing an opportunity for a fighter to express and perform a new identity while remaining concealed. I would argue that the use of masking in pre-fight ceremonies has multiple purposes: as a tool to enact pre-fight mind games; as an object of performance and an object that attracts the audience's attention; and as a shroud for fighters to hide behind and mask their expressions and emotions during pre-fight tensions (Steward, 2018; Entwistle and Wilson, 2001).

Pre-fight mind games in boxing, however, are often enacted through a fighter's dress. Sometimes these mind games are enacted through a fighter's dress at the pre-fight weigh-in in the form of conspicuous consumption and designer brands to demonstrate a fighter's success and achievement in the ring to their opponent, but at other times fighters will use direct imagery and text that are printed on their clothes to play mind games with their

opponent. We see this for example with the dress of Mike Tyson during the pre-fight press conference for the exhibition fight with Jake Paul. Tyson, Fifty-eight years old and long retired, arrived at the press conference wearing a throwback-style black and red bomber jacket. The bomber jacket had the words 'Iron Mike Tyson' printed across the back in large font, 'Mike Tyson' printed in large font across the front of the jacket, as well as large graphic images of Tyson from when he was world champion on the front and back, serving as a stark and very visual reminder to Jake Paul of Tyson's former dominance and power within the sport and in the ring (Ryan, 2024). Tyson's bomber jacket is nostalgic and emblematic of the nostalgia in boxing, which is often enacted through the retelling of historic fights between fighters and fans of boxing communities. The nostalgic old-school design of the bomber jacket is also indicative of Tyson's boxing era, heritage, and lineage as a retired world champion; the images on the jacket of him from the time he was a champion along with his ring moniker 'Iron Mike Tyson' emblazoned across the back of the jacket reminding his audience and his opponent of his pedigree in the ring. It was most probably designed to wear to the public weigh-in for this mega-fight with opponent Jake Paul, and Tyson will likely not wear this bomber jacket in public again. It becomes what Latour calls an

actant in social action, working in a relationship with Tyson to declare his message and communicate to his audiences his boxing history as a former world champion. It becomes an object that embodies and symbolises his vintage boxing prowess and power. Within the design, the images and text on the jacket work together to create this message. Without the images and text on the garment, it would not communicate anything spectacular, but with it, it becomes an object of power (Latour, 2005). However, the jacket also embodies and communicates Tyson's working-class masculinity within boxing, as being not only an actant of his boxing legacy and lineage but of the construction of his masculinity, that is here being reproduced and valorised through coming out of retirement and training for this fight. This is a prime example of what Connell observes as body reflexive practice; his masculinity is being constructed through his body and socially in relationship with other bodies in the gym and the ring; here his jacket then becomes a signifier and an embodiment of his particular brand of menacing and dangerous masculinity, bringing to the forefront his powerful hegemonic masculinity (Latour, 2005; Connell, 1995).

Tyson Fury and Connor McGregor have both used men's tailoring to enact mind games and their dominance as fighters; both commissioned British

tailors to make custom-made suits for them to wear to public pre-fight ceremonies. The suits that both Fury and McGregor had made contained covert messages hidden in the print of the cloth itself. For the Floyd Mayweather vs. Connor McGregor fight in 2017, during the pre-fight buildup Connor McGregor wore a limited edition pinstripe suit in navy twill, which was designed by Owen Scott in Huddersfield, UK, that had the words 'F\*\*K you' woven into the pinstripes of the suit. The tailored pinstripe suit is symbolic of masculine hegemony; with these words embedded into the pinstripe the suit becomes a powerful social actant, allowing McGregor to call out Mayweather, while at the same time helping him to construct his working-class masculinity and boxing identity (Sebra, 2017).

Tyson Fury regularly uses the medium of custom-made suits during press conferences before a fight to mentally wear down his opponent before they get to the ring; during the trilogy fights with Deontay Wilder, at the press conference for their second fight, Fury wore a grey pin-striped suit with the words 'you big dosser' (the phrase he repeatedly used in the buildup to the fight to taunt Wilder) printed vertically into the pinstripe covering the jacket and trousers. The suit was light grey with the pinstripe in dark grey and the words in dark grey and gold lettering. Fury's suits are commissioned by

British menswear brand Claudio Lugli, a family-run bespoke tailoring and menswear company. Fury's suits contain a narrative and are a vehicle for storytelling; he is known for embedding messages for his opponents and the press in his tailor-made suits. For his fight with British heavyweight Dillian Whyte in 2022, Fury had a bespoke suit made in black with printed images of crowns. The suit appears to be a black pinstripe but embedded in the pinstripe from top to bottom are the words 'lineal champion' (Hughes, 2022). Fury also uses the menswear tailors to have suits made with more positive messages for his fans, and Fury's activism as an ambassador for mental health. For example, one of Fury's tailored suits incorporated images of his face and mental health quotes printed over his face. Claudio Lugli claims that each of Fury's suits is a limited edition and one of a kind (Lawrence, 2022). Fury's custom suits are social actants and multifaceted; they hold narratives, make statements, assert his dominance, and enact mind games, but through wearing the suits they work in relationship with him socially to construct his working-class masculinity and boxing identity, symbolizing his hegemony within the sport. More recently, Fury has had tailor-made suits with printed images and symbolic messages for both his high-profile bouts with African fighter Francis Ngannou and the 'Ring of Fire' match and the Ukrainian

Oleksandr Usyk in Saudi Arabia in May 2024 for the heavyweight championship of the world. Fury wore two different custom-made suits for the pre-fight press conferences for his match with Usyk: the bespoke suit, designed by Claudio Lugli, for the match with Usyk was emblazoned with images of fire. Fury also wore a custom-made fedora hat by British hat makers Gamble and Gunn (Gamble and Gunn); the hat was bespoke, with the word 'undisputed' embroidered along the ribbon of the hat. By wearing the hat, Fury constructs his hegemonic masculinity through his object of dress, denoting that he is the undisputed world champion before the match has taken place. For his press conference with Usyk for their upcoming rematch title fight in December 2024, Fury wore another custom-made suit that, from a distance had a black-and-white dogtooth effect or pattern, but on closer inspection was an image of a hand with the middle finger pointing up. Usyk, however, came to the press conference dressed as a fictional character 'Agent 47', a hitman or contract killer in a video game; a black suit with a red tie and black leather gloves, carrying a briefcase. In this way, both Fury and Usyk's dress communicated to each other: Fury's suit giving Usyk the finger, while Usyk's Agent 47 dress replies: 'I am a killer, an assassin, I will take you

out'; this nonverbal exchange between both world champion heavyweight boxers all takes place through the medium of dress (Glinski, 2024).

Fighters exploiting pre-fight traditions with their dress to enact mind games in boxing is nothing new; for the world heavyweight championship in 1964 between Muhammad Ali and the reigning champion Sonny Liston, during the pre-fight trash talking ritual Ali had repeatedly called Liston a big, ugly bear. Ali's vilification of Liston was particularly cruel considering the mid-twentieth-century stereotypes and prejudices of the time of the Black man and Black masculinity in America. Stereotypes had long depicted Black men as being hypersexual, predatory, savage, subhuman, and bestial. Black men were also often likened to dumb animals. Kasia Boddy (2008) writes of political activist Franz Fanon's work in the 1960s, that he had conducted a word association test with 500 white participants of what they associated with the word negro. Words like biology, penis, athletic, savage and animal were some of the stereotypes that the survey produced. Therefore, Ali is indicating to Liston that he is not only less than a human being, a subhuman, but is the incarnate Black man according to white supremacist notions of Blackness; Liston becomes a savage beast, and not just any beast, but a big, predatory, wild bear. Comparing Liston to a dumb animal here is not only an attack on his

personality, but also his Blackness and masculinity and becomes a form of Black-on-Black racism.

Ali also knew that as a former criminal, Liston was extremely sensitive about his public image and gaining the public's respect. This occurred at a time in American Black history, a political backdrop when there were still segregated areas for whites and Blacks in America's south, during the height of the Black civil rights movement. So much so that, as Boddy observes (2008), Ali, who had won a gold medal participating as Cassius Clay in the Rome Olympics in 1960 in the light heavyweight division against Zbigniew Pietrzykowski, reportedly threw his gold medal into the Ohio river for being refused entry into a Louisville restaurant. Boddy also notes that, for a time, Ali, after winning a gold medal in the Olympics, became in the public eye of America a type of Black, white hope in boxing. This would have also positioned Ali's Black opponents as the subhuman Black boxer, the villain that America needed to beat. Ali would serve as a Black-white hope in boxing until a white American world heavyweight champion could be found; this all changed, however, when in 1964, Ali denounced his birth name of Cassius Clay as what he deemed his slave name and changed his name to Muhammad Ali after joining the Nation of Islam. Ali began to be viewed with suspicion and known

by boxing fans as the new Jack Johnson (Boddy, 2008). Ali's deriding of Liston in this sense was both sinister and poignant, labelling Sonny as the bad guy and something primitive. In *Ali: a Life*, Jonathan Eig writes 'Clay had been disrespecting Liston for months, waking him from bed, waiting for him in casinos, surprising him at airports, and always with the same refrain, 'you're a chump, a big, ugly bear, I'll wop you right now'. Ali knew how to push Liston's buttons; he also knew that Liston would be a formidable opponent in the ring, being a larger and more complex-hitting fighter than Ali. By constantly deriding and demeaning him, Ali hoped to wear Liston down mentally through playing mind games before they reached the ring. The months of trash-talking Liston finally culminated at the pre-fight press conference for the fight through Ali's dress; he arrived at the press conference wearing a long-sleeved 1960's style dark blue denim, lee jacket, with red and blue embroidery lettering across the back that simply read 'bear huntin' (Sports Illustrated, 1964; Eig, 2017, pp.142-143).

Here, Ali communicates to Liston through the denim jacket that he is Ali's prey. However, Ali's denim jacket embodied more than just the cumulation of insults hurled at Liston during their months of training before the fight. I would argue that it was an object of material culture; with Ali wearing it

publicly at the weigh-in after ridiculing Liston for months, it would have embodied the cultural and social history of the time of the 1960s Black civil rights movement and Black history. It was an attack on Black civil rights and Black masculinity. Ali had condemned Liston and had reduced him to a Black stereotype and his jacket embodied and affirmed these prejudices against Black men of the time, almost condoning racial prejudice and the profiling of Black men. What makes it even more troubling is that the insult was no longer just verbal or verbal assault, which is temporal, but by having it embroidered onto the jacket was rendered permanent. What we find with Ali's denim jacket is that it is an object of dress that works in relationship with him as a social actant, embodying months of verbal torment and racist accusations directed at Liston. The result for Ali is that, in that jacket he is constructing and producing a dominant narrative of Black masculinity. Again, we see an object of dress working relationally and socially with a fighter to produce and communicate a hegemonic Black masculinity. In his latter years, Ali became a political activist working against racial prejudice in America; he joined the Black militant organization the Nation of Islam and briefly had a friendship with Black political activist Malcolm X during the 1960s. He also

refused the draft for the Vietnam war, not desiring to fight in a country where he was considered a second-class citizen (Boddy, 2008).

Some fighters will draw inspiration for their dress from their cultural and historical heritage. Ukrainian Oleksandr Usyk, during the press conference for his rematch with British heavyweight Anthony Joshua on 20th August 2022 at Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, arrived wearing a traditional full Ukrainian Cossack dress. The uniform of warrior Cossacks, with a traditional Oseledets haircut, wherein the whole head is shaved apart from one lock. Usyk wore a navy sleeveless cloak with a white open-necked Vyshyvanka embroidered around the collar and sleeves in a traditional red pattern, with red serial or harem-style trousers, a large leather belt around his waist, and a navy necklace with a navy tassel on the end. Usyk stated that his dress was a tribute to his history and culture, but as warrior dress is obviously also intended to be intimidating, asserting his dominance and hegemonic masculinity before the fight and enacting pre-fight mind games. I would suggest it is also an object of material culture, which embodies the mood of the time and is poignant as, during this period, Ukraine and Russia are at war, with Ukraine resisting Russian invasion. This second fight between Usyk and Joshua took place after Usyk beat Joshua in the first match and then volunteered briefly in the

Ukrainian army before the rematch. Usyk's dress then is a visual demonstration of his pride in his heritage, but also shows and embodies the solemnity of the moment. The warrior dress contains embodied narratives and is a social actant, working with Usyk in that moment during the pre-fight press conference to make a powerful statement (Gulf News, 2022).

Some fighters will exploit pre-fight mind games by employing the use of colours in objects of their dress to enact mind games with their opponents. Floyd Mayweather Jr. liked to sometimes appropriate his opponent's national colours; in an interview in Vice magazine in 2014, in an article entitled 'Dapper Dan helps Floyd Mayweather stay pretty in the ring, who cares about sweaty balls when you're a boxing champ' Dapper Dan discussed the outfit he had created for Floyd Mayweather's ring entrance at his upcoming fight with Marcos Maidana, stating that:

Floyd likes to incorporate the colours of his opponent. He wanted the Mexican colours this time because I think he was under the impression that since Maidana was fighting in Mexico, he was Mexican. But Maidana is actually Argentine. Floyd brags a lot and attacks his opponents, but that's just show business.

Mayweather here uses his opponent's own culture, nationality and heritage against him, as he parades (what he thought was) his Mexican identity into

the ring; through adopting his opponent's dress Mayweather demonstrates his superiority as a fighter, his dominant boxing masculinity and his positioning as a world champion fighter in the ring. I would also suggest that Mayweather embodies and attacks not only his opponent's identity but also his masculinity as a Latino fighter. It is also a huge display of confidence in his ability as a fighter that he can fight in his opponent's national colours (Euse, 2014).

An earlier example of fighters appropriating an opponent's colours in the ring to enact mind games happened in 1986, with the world heavyweight champion Trevor Berbick's world title defence match against Mike Tyson. The reigning champion Berbick got to choose his colours for the ring first and he chose black trunks, knowing at the time that Tyson's signature ring colour was all black; his trunks were black his boots and even his socks were black. This meant that Tyson, as a challenger, would have to wear a different colour in the ring. Tyson, however, chose to still wear his signature black trunks into the ring and was fined \$5000, which sent a clear message to his opponent that he was not there to be dominated by Berbick and that he would be the one to dominate the fight. As Jordan Ellis writes: 'being the champ gave Berbick the decision on what colour trunks he would wear to defend the

crown, opting for mind games he chose black which Tyson had made his trademark' (Ellis, 2024).

Joyce Carol Oates (1987) observes that, in the ring, a boxer's opponent becomes a metaphor or symbolic of the self; the boxer sees himself in his opponent all that he is, his insecurities, fighting skills, anxieties, and weaknesses all are embodied within his opponent in the ring. It could be argued that Mayweather and Berbick, by choosing to appropriate their opponents' colours to enact mind games in the ring, on a subconscious level perhaps saw something of themselves in their opponents and their own insecurities, anxieties, pre-fight tensions and weaknesses are embodied and transferred onto their dress (Hamlyn, 2003; Oates, 1987).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have explored how boxers historically have employed the dandy look outside of the ring to construct hegemonic Black masculinities and demonstrate resistance to white supremacist notions of Black masculinity; how, within sports, there exists a conspicuous jock consumption of designer brands and lavish jewellery, which is influenced by the iconic

aesthetic of the Black working-class pimp in American culture and notions of Black working-class masculinity; and how the Black pimp aesthetic can also be observed within the sport of boxing. With the conspicuous consumption of luxury dress and designer labels both inside and outside of the ring. The Black pimp aesthetic is emblematised in boxing through the object of the long fur coat and many fighters wear fur coats outside of the ring, or to enter the ring, and many incorporate furs into their objects of boxing-ring dress.

Thorstein Veblen's (2005) theory of conspicuous consumption addresses how fighters can denote their positioning in the hierarchical ranks of boxing through luxury fashion and dress in the ring; fighters in the lower echelons of the sport will look up to title-holding champions who demarcate their position through dress. This chapter has been underpinned by Bruno Latour's actor network theory (2005) and Raewyn Connell's gender theory (1995) to demonstrate how fighters' masculinities are both embodied and communicated through their fashions and dress in the ring. We have looked at how boxing masculinities and ring identities are also relational and like social actants that work with the fighter relationally to narrate through their dress their message to their opponents and boxing audiences. Pre-fight ceremonies provide spaces for psychological intimidation and mind games

with an opponent before getting in the ring and we have seen how this is enacted through rituals and traditions and through a fighter's dress prior to a fight, exploring the ways metaphorical and physical masks can be a centralised object to enact mind games at pre-fight ceremonies such as the press conferences and weigh-in ceremony, and how the mask can also be a shroud for fighters masking pre-fight tensions. Pre-fight mind games can also be enacted through a fighter's everyday dress or costume before a fight and can even be enacted through stealing an opponent's colours in the ring and embodying their national and cultural heritage.

## Chapter Two

**'You knew him by his dress.'**

### **Introduction**

This chapter begins by exploring some of the scholarship on working-class masculinities and dress. Specifically, two British dress subcultures of the working-class man, the casual movement in the twentieth century and the chav phenomenon of the twenty-first century. To examine some of the dress

patterns of working-class men and how these dress patterns might transfer into the dress of fighters within the world of boxing.

Bare-knuckle fighting was a popular sport and pastime during the British Regency and Victorian eras. It was also boxing's predecessor sport. Bare-knuckle fighting also provided a way for working-class men to settle their disputes and soon, due to its potential for gambling, it drew the attention of the elites, who patronised the sport (Sugden, 1996). It was in the bare-knuckle prize ring that the traditions and ceremonies of modern boxing were first developed and introduced. Such as the peeling ceremony, whereby bare-knuckle fighters would strip to their waist before a fight (as it was customary for pugilists to fight naked from the waist up), and the introduction of dress as objects for self-expression in the ring, such as a scarf or sash tied around a fighters waist with his national colours, or an embroidered handkerchief tied to his corner of the ring post (Colls, 2020; Hallas, 2014). This chapter will explore patriotism in the ring and how, as well as having a flag representing their country of origin, fighters express both their cultural and national patriotism in their ring outfits and dress. Boxing-ring dress is multifaceted: it can be a vehicle that communicates whatever mood or message that a fighter wishes to convey to the world; it can also embody the social mood of

the time as objects of material culture; in the ephemeral moment during ring entrances, boxers can also utilise dress to express their political beliefs and convictions (Mondragon, 2021).

During Victorian times, there were many among the lower classes who could not read or write, so dress for the working classes historically became a means of self-expression and communication. Dress played an important factor in working-class life and at times became a source of resistance and politics for working-class men (Richmond, 2013). Working-class men in boxing utilise dress as a form of representation and communication, as dress embodies their chosen message in the ring; this chapter also looks at politics and boxing-ring dress, and how boxing dress can be utilised for political activism and resistance in the ring (Mondragon, 2021). The ring also provides a space and a platform for boxers to celebrate, commemorate, and pay homage through their dress; some fighters pay homage to an inspirational family member, a celebrity sportsperson who may have died, their trainers or former legendary fighters and champions. Which is often embodied in their dress (Sloman, 2013).

## Scholarship on Working-Class Dress, Football Casuals and the Twenty-First Century Chav

Working-class masculinities and dress is a complex subject to research, as it is an area that sadly has been neglected within scholarship of gender, cultural, and dress studies. There is, however, an abundance of scholarship on working-class men within the field of social and cultural studies, including studies that explore the traditional boxing gym. Many writers have conducted research on boxing from a sociological and cultural standpoint, some even becoming amateur boxers themselves in the process, such as French sociologist Loic Wacquant (2005) and author and academic David Scott. There have also been significant contributions to the field by writers such as Kath Woodward, Kasia Boddy, Joyce Carol Oates, David Scott, and Elliot J Gorn, (Woodward, 2007; Boddy, 2008; Oates, 1987; Sugden, 1996, Gorn, 1986). David Scott's book *The Art and Aesthetics of Boxing* (2009) contains a chapter on dress, and academic Rudy Mondragon observes the style, politics, and ring entrances in modern boxing of Black American and Latino boxers (2021). We see the significance of dress to working-class men in the modern boxing subculture, with boxers using conspicuous

consumption practices both inside and outside of the ring; the use of lavish fabrics such as satins, silks, and fur indicate a form of boxing dandyism and style politics in ring entrances (Veblen, 2005). To investigate the ways that boxers fashion themselves for the boxing ring, firstly it is helpful to locate dress patterns of working-class men outside of the boxing ring, within working-class male subculture; to examine patterns and commonalities of dress that are then transferred into the ring as objects of boxing-ring dress. This could provide insights into the subjectivities, class, identities, politics, and masculinities of working-class men (Mondragon, 2021).

My study of working-class men's dress within boxing will hopefully bridge the gap that is lacking within academia on the dress practices of marginalised men and how they adorn their bodies. I would argue that exploring the bodies and masculinities of working-class men within boxing can provide some insights into the tastes and subjectivities of working-class men and their dress habits. Boxing recruits its subjects from the most marginalised communities; men from the most deprived areas within global cities turn to boxing as a route out of poverty (Arond and Weinburg, 1952; Gorn, 1986; Sugden, 1996). Boxing provides a good location for analysing working-class masculinities and working-class men's dress practices; boxing is a form of

representation, and so too is boxing-ring dress. Fighters in the ring often embody the political and cultural temperature of their time (Mondragon, 2021).

In dress history, we know that working-class dress and the dress of people experiencing poverty were often not preserved; they were often worn so many times that, by the time they had finished wearing an item of dress, it was practically ragged, which makes it challenging to gain a thorough reading into the history of working-class menswear. Christiana Payne and Steven King (2002) note that dress histories of the poor in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are challenging to research; archives have only preserved elite dress which makes it easy to assume that historically the poor only wore rags or drab clothes. Vivienne Richmond (2013) observes that 'object-based research on the working classes and poor dress is hampered by the paucity of extant garments.' She also notes that 'the poor's clothing was worn until it fell apart or passed onto other people salvaged to patch other garments and sold as rags for recycling' (p. 13). This makes object-based research of the dress of the histories of working-class men and their dress practices challenging to obtain and analyse, making it extremely difficult for a reading of the dress of the working classes. There is, however, ample

research on British working-class men's dress from the twentieth century, particularly within the studies of British subcultures, such as the teddy boys and skinheads in Dick Hebdige's book *Subculture: the meaning of style* (1979).

We know that the working classes sought to gain respectability through dress, sometimes even forfeiting necessities to look respectable (Richmond, 2013). By looking at historical subcultures such as the casual football culture and the chav phenomenon, we can see that dress is important to working-class men and how it serves as a form of representation; however the amorphous nature of the terrace culture of working-class football "hooligans" of the late twentieth century presents problems for documenting it, which suggests why there is little if any academic scholarship of the casual football fashion in the field of cultural studies and fashion (Redhead, 2012). Dick Hebdige (1979) made an invaluable contribution to studies of working-class men's dress in post-war Britain and working-class subcultures, but the emerging terrace fashions of the football "hooligans" in the late 1970s go unmentioned. Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily observe in 'Chavs, Chavettes and Pramface Girls: teenage mothers, marginalised young men, and the management of stigma'(2014) that often the poorer class do not have a voice of their own, but rather are spoken for and represented by

those in a position of authority in the media such as newspaper journalists. Nayak and Kehily describe this as a form of 'techno-orientalism'. More research needs to be undertaken to document the terrace football fashions and the chav subculture and dress, as these subcultures have been overlooked. What is apparent is that the white British poor, as well as being underrepresented in academia, are also criticised and vilified within the media for their tastes and aesthetics. Similar attitudes operated towards the white poor in Britain during the Victorian times, as the white poor were considered to be a dangerous class, today the white poor are considered to be subhuman and caricatured as vulgar and tasteless (Tyler, 2008, pp.21-22).

### **Twentieth-Century Football Fashion and Working-Class Masculinity**

Kevin Sampson (2023) observes that casual culture, which originated in Liverpool during the 1970s, was an emerging phenomenon where football became the gateway for access to high culture in terms of luxury designer and sportswear brands, acquired and worn by working-class men who travelled around Europe to support Liverpool football club. Steve Redhead (2012) suggests that the casual subculture began in 1977-1978 but, as a subculture, is hardly mentioned in post subcultural or fashion studies; he also notes that, as a British youth subculture, it has not been taken seriously

within academic studies of youth culture. He notes that casuals originated in Merseyside, where they were called scallies, then began to spread to Manchester as Perry boys, and London, where they were called dressers or chaps. Because of the nature of the subculture coinciding with football culture, casuals were often linked with violence and vandalism; however, their styles and dress created competition between clubs as much over fashion as the turf wars involved in football hooliganism, with different clubs wearing different labels and brands (Redhead, 2012).

The early casual look in the 1970s adopted the duffel coat, worn by pop icon David Bowie for the cover of his album *Low*. The duffel coat here becomes a blueprint, and symbolic of the emerging casual movement. Although, as Redhead points out the duffel coat became symbolic of football-related violence and rugged masculinity (2012; 2023), I would also suggest that the alienness and otherness of Bowie's music style look may also have resonated with the feeling of alienness of the working-classes within the casual movement. The emergence of Thatcherism and the resulting lack of employment for young working-class men, meant that many young working-class men would have felt disillusioned and disenfranchised, set apart from mainstream culture economically, socially and culturally. Following the casual

movement would have given them a sense of belonging and an identity; the duffel coat, in this context, would have embodied these fears and frustrations and been emblematic of their feeling of alienness and otherness from mainstream society. Observing the duffel coat adopted by the early casuals through the lens of Latour, we can consider it as a social actant, working with the casuals to communicate the resistance of perhaps thousands of young unemployed working class men, embodying a narrative of cultural resistance and class resistance in a cult fashion object, an object of material culture that emblematised the political and cultural mood of Britain in the 1970s. I also read the simple duffel coat during this time as an object that assisted in the construction of working-class masculinities for the casuals; as unemployed working-class men they were unable to construct their masculinities physically through their bodies, so would construct them through dress. The object then becomes symbolic of and imbued with rough and ready working-class masculinity (Museums of Liverpool, 2022; Redhead, 2012).

The casual movement and terrace fashions quickly evolved into patterns of conspicuous consumption, as casual fans began experimenting with and consuming the latest designer and sportswear fashions. Some football fans who could not afford the latest designer fashions due to unemployment

would resort to crime and steal the latest sports and designer brands from shops; football fans would display the brands by wearing the latest fashions on the terraces and on the grounds of football matches and clubs. Phil Thornton (Thornton, 2003) observes that these designer trends were constantly evolving and changing. Supporters were constantly metamorphizing the casual look through these brands and constantly competing; he writes, 'like almost everywhere else it went mental, labels were everywhere' (p. 89). For the casual youth culture, casual fashions were not random but were territorial and regionally specific; certain brands were adopted and worn by certain clubs and had regional diversity and codes. Sports and designer brands began to be presented as turf codes for rival football clubs and their supporters. However, the style for the working-class casual was an overall look and aesthetic which also incorporated having the right haircuts, such as the wedge cut, which was also inspired by David Bowie, who had an orange coloured wedge haircut on the cover of *Low*. Thornton observes that Liverpool reached a European final from 1976-1978, when casual culture first emerged. Part of its success was the inclusion of fashions imported from the continent, as fans who followed their club to football matches outside of the UK could collect rare sports shoes and

designer brands from abroad. This changed the face of football fandom and working-class English men's dress. He also observes that this phenomenon quickly swept across the rest of the nation (Thornton, 2003).

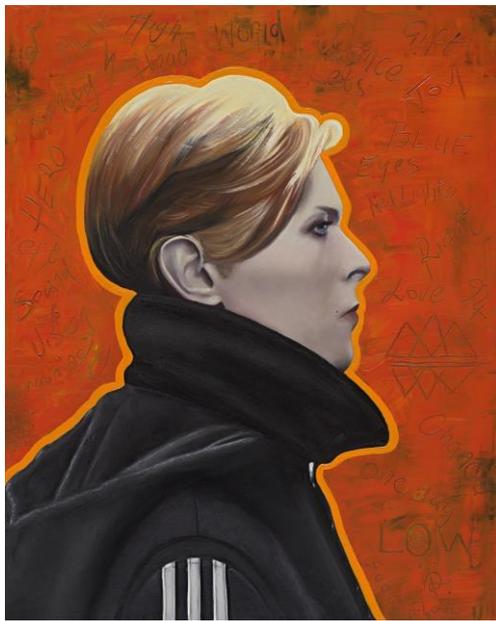


Figure 9. Bowie, painted in 2020 by Ross Muir (born 1981), in oil on canvas (Sampson, 2023).

An art exhibition was held at the national museums in Liverpool between November 5th, 2022, and March 12th 2023, and was co-curated by the head of decorative arts, Pauline Rushton. The 'Art of the Terraces' exhibition is the first to bring awareness within art and cultural studies of the impact of the

terrace football culture and terrace fashions, which introduced sportswear and designer brands into mainstream men's fashion during the '70s, '80s, and '90s. The exhibition commemorated the casual youth subculture and how the mainstream art world has overlooked it. Not disavowing the violent connotations behind the subculture, this exhibition acknowledged the emergence and consideration of football fashions (Liverpool Museums, 2023). What we can see within the casual culture as we examine it more closely is how working-class masculinities were being redefined through the conspicuous consumption of luxury designer and sports fashions. With working-class men no longer able to construct their masculinities through their bodies and in manual labour jobs, masculinity was reduced to the symbol or the sign, allowing designer labels and sports brands to act as markers of working-class masculinity. Latour observes that social action is produced through human and object interactions. The fashions of the terraces were social actants working in relationship with the casuals, communicating their regional diversity and letting others know which club a "hooligan" supported and belonged to. When a group of casuals are wearing the same brands and fashions this then becomes collective action; the dress informs rival gangs from rival clubs who they support and what region of the

country they are from (Baron, 2006; Connell, 1995; Latour, 2005). Brands are amorphous and ever-changing, as new brands and logos emerge and come into fashion, and these were quickly latched onto by the casuals. The transient nature of the designer and sports brands among the casuals meant that objects of dress and designer brands would be 'in' one week and 'out' the next. Latour observes that, with objects as social actants, the more significant their importance to social interactions, the more they disappear and retreat into the background; like the amorphous football fashions, which were constantly changing. I would argue that the logos and brands were also a form of bragging rights for the casuals and demarcated their masculinities within the group; therefore, the more exclusive, unique and hard-to-acquire their designer brands were, especially if they had been imported from abroad, the more masculine they were perceived to be. Thornton observes: 'everything had a label on it, you either got a job which was no mean feat in the North of England at the time and paid through the nose, bought off someone who had lifted the clobber or robbed it yourself' (p.89). Working-class masculinities, therefore, were being reinvented through fashion and dress. As Connell observes, the body is central to cultivating masculinities through bodily social interactions, and the more casuals interacted within the

group or with other football casuals with their fashions worn on their bodies, the more they were reflexively constructing their masculinities (Connell, 1995).

In *Adorned in Dreams*, Elizabeth Wilson observes that the casual movement was 'Football Chic... an incongruous mixture of Nike trainers, frayed Lois jeans and Lacoste shirts worn with cashmere scarves and jumpers topped with long Burberry raincoats' (1985, p.197). Wilson points out that retail stores such as Lacoste were in despair as they couldn't stop the smash and grab raids that were happening during this time by many unemployed working-class men who would do anything to acquire the latest fashion and designer brands; as a working-class subculture that centralised the practice of conspicuous consumption, there is a tendency to glamorise football casuals as football chic, as Wilson points out, but it is best not to forget that behind the history of the casuals lay a murky past of violence and theft. I would suggest there is also another motivation for football fans, however; that the designer brands and logos are indicative of a type of class and gender resistance, that through wearing the brands working-class men who are disenfranchised demonstrate their resistance to dominant ideologies and normative modes of masculinity and the stigmatization of unemployed

working-class men. In the figure of the casual there is resistance to being marginalised from mainstream culture; by exhibiting designer brands on their working-class bodies men could reclaim some agency and redefine their masculinities through style and create what Sampson describes as an aesthetic of 'smart individualism,' a hybrid style made up of a conglomeration of brands and designer dress from other cultures and countries. Sampson points out that the early casual look was also influenced by the punk aesthetic; styling a mohair jumper with drainpipe Lois jeans, the duffel coat, and the androgynous wedge haircut sported by Bowie, along with utilitarian footwear of Adidas or Samba trainers (Sampson, 2023). Sampson maintains that the term 'casuals' was given to the subculture by the media observing that the original casuals never gave themselves a name, but that it subsequently became a fashion cult that had emerged from the grassroots level to take over high-street fashion.

Dougie Brimson's (1998) *The Geezer's Guide to Football*, in the chapter 'What to Wear', observes that 'terrace fashion is all about labels, not bloody great triangles or silly tricks, but tiny little signatures or initials'. Football chic was not about having brand names splashed across clothes in big letters or large logos, it was subtle; the smaller the logo design, the more stylish. Brands that

were popular in the early formation of the casual movement in the late seventies and early eighties were sports labels such as Ellesse, Lacoste and Diadora but, by the end of the twentieth century, in the nineties labels such as Dr Marten's, Burberry and Stone Island signified the new casuals on the terraces. Brimson also notes that designer brands that are easy to counterfeit and are sold at outdoor markets, such as Ralph Lauren and Hugo Boss, should be avoided. He also states that 'if you fancy being very pro-English you could always try Dr Marten's range of clothes, they're the bollocks' (1998). Kevin Sampson, in his work of fictional *Awaydays* (1999), which charts a hooligan's journey supporting his football club in 1979, writes of the 1970s football casuals: 'Most of us have wedges or side partings and wear Samba or Stan Smith trainers, Lois jeans and cardigans.' Sampson indicates here that being casual, whether in the seventies, eighties, or nineties, was about curating a specific look, specific styles that were brand-specific and evolving. Just as the brands were in and out of football fashion so too were their masculinities adapting and changing; working-class masculinities were now growing in confidence and individualism. Brimson maintains that, in the latter half of the movement, football fashions became more refined, more exclusive, more designer, and classier. Indicating that working-class masculinities that were

being constructed through social interaction with other football fans and bodily through the fashions they wore, were becoming classier too, as working-class men made continuous conscious efforts through the brands to look more exclusive and stylish (Brimson, 1998; Sampson, 1999).

In summary, what the casual football culture demonstrates is that there is a correlation between working-class men and designer fashions; that working class men construct their masculinities through the symbol or the sign; and that, among their peers, owning and wearing designer fashions can give them a sense of belonging as well as producing masculine hegemony. The designer fashions on working-class men's bodies are aspirational and indicate their sense of individualistic style as they utilise symbols and logos to create new masculine identities; and the more exclusive and harder to acquire the brands are, the more masculine they become. When we translate football chic to the working-class men within the boxing community, we can see that there is a parallel and a pattern of working-class men employing designer fashions to construct and produce their masculinities and create new identities. That conspicuous consumption in boxing produces and communicates masculine hegemony. There seems to be among working-class men, then, a celebration of designer fashions and an aspirational masculinity

that is produced by exclusivity, by wearing hard-to-acquire brands.

Mondragon maintains that what we are now witnessing in boxing is a proliferation of designer fashions with boxers, so much so that the obligatory ring walk could easily be mistaken for the fashion runway (2021). There is a sense of resistance in these fashions; owning and wearing designer clothes helps the working-class man to navigate his situation in life, helping to cope with everyday circumstances in that, even if he is unable to economically or culturally access normative mainstream hegemonic masculinity, by wearing designer brands he can have a sense of belonging (Connell, 1995).

Like the football casuals, boxing-ring dress is a working-class subculture, a community of working-class men that for the majority employ the services of independent designers for their ring outfits. These independent designers for boxers are another subculture, an exclusive community of bespoke designers that is generally only known to those who are fighters or within the boxing community. The only difference between boxing ring fashions and the casual subculture is that boxing ring fashions for the boxer contain their personal narratives and a form of storytelling, which the bespoke designer can bring to the forefront of their designs for the ring. What this demonstrates is that working-class men then are extremely creative in articulating their identities

through dress; that, by using a hybrid curation of fashion labels, they can curate objects of dress that form a nuanced and original style. However, the fashions of the football casuals are still under-researched and the dress of boxers both inside and outside of the ring is also an unexplored field; perhaps this is due in part to the connection with football casuals and professional boxers and violence. Mairi MacKenzie (2020) in 'Football Fashion and Unpopular Culture', points out that football fashion as a subculture has been hugely under-researched. Although much has been documented on football "hooliganism", particularly from a sociological or criminological perspective, there has been no ethnographic or empirical research on terrace culture fashions (MacKenzie, 2020; Thornton, 2013).

### **The British Chav Subculture and Working-Class Masculinity**

Redhead observes that there is some crossover between the football casual movement and the chav phenomenon, as both subcultures share an aspiration of branded clothing and the practice of conspicuous consumption through dress. He also maintains that the white working class are demonised through the figure of the chav, particularly within the media, which has led to the white working class being depicted as white trash. He also observes that there are little mention of the casual youth subculture and the chav

subculture in the canon of post-subcultural and youth culture studies (Redhead, 2012).

As I examine the chav subculture, it is very difficult for me to be objective in what I have researched; as a white working-class, disabled, middle-aged woman, I currently fall into the category of the white poor myself. I am on universal credit, I live in social housing in a disadvantaged London borough in Newham, in East London, and I have been long-term unemployed and dependent on welfare. However, I feel that this puts me in a good position to undertake my research, as many fighters also originate from marginalised and vulnerable backgrounds. The term 'chav' is a derogatory word thought to be derived from the Romany word 'chavo', meaning children. It has been attributed many alternative etymologies, however. One suggestion is that it is an acronym for 'council housed and violent'. The chav phenomenon is a subculture that, like football casual culture, also incorporates the use of designer brand labels for both individual and collective identity and representation; however, there is to date very little academic research available on the chav subculture. Particularly in studies of fashion, culture, and dress, most of the information available on the British chav stems from what has already been documented by the British media, who have

caricatured the white poor in the figure of the chav. The term 'chav' is not often used by the white poor to describe themselves; I would argue that this derogatory term is a form of social and white racism (Mason and Wigley, 2013).

Owen Jones (2020) in his book *Chavs: the demonization of the working class* writes that 'here I was witnessing a phenomenon that goes back hundreds of years the wealthy mocking the less well-off and it got me thinking: how has hatred of working-class people become so socially acceptable?'. He also observes that 'it seems as though working-class people are the one group in society that you can say practically anything about'. Jones maintains that this new class hatred directed toward the white poor stems from the diminishing of the more traditional working-class culture that was seen in post-war Britain; the advent of Thatcherism and decline of industry-based jobs gave rise to a new burgeoning underclass in the urban cities of Britain and put urban city areas into a state of ghettoization (Jones, 2020, p.2). As we have seen with casual culture, working-class masculinity and identity has been reduced to being a symbol or a sign and is now constructed through excess consumerism and no longer through the physicality of the body in industrial labour (Baron, 2006; Jones, 2020).

However, the working-class man's construction of masculinity through his dress rather than through the physicality of the body is fraught with difficulties. As Roger B. Mason and Gemma Wigley (2013) point out, the sign or symbol for the young white working-class man within the chav subculture was being attached to an object of dress namely the Burberry designer baseball cap, which gave him a new working-class masculine identity, one that had prestige attached symbolically, as Burberry is a luxury fashion brand that was often worn by the gentry. British websites such as [chavscum.co.uk](http://chavscum.co.uk) demonised the white poor even more in their definitions of the British chav, labelling them as being obsessed with branded sportswear, large gold jewellery, and designer baseball caps. I would argue that here we can see parallels with the football casual subculture; the white working-class man in the chav subculture is reduced to constructing his masculinity through the sign, where logos and brands become markers of hegemonic masculinities. As we have seen with the football casuals, working-class men are disenfranchised economically, socially and culturally and adopt an aspirational symbol in response. The Burberry cap, I would suggest, is emblematic of this shift in how working-class masculinities are now being constructed and produced. The Burberry cap worn collectively in a group also

signifies a sense of belonging and assists working-class men in creating new masculine identities and hegemony; to own one becomes a form of social capital among their peers (Bourdieu, 1984). I would also suggest that there are parallels to and a correlation with the working-class men within the chav subculture and the boxing community; both groups are aiming for respectability, and constructing- their masculinities using designer logos and luxury brands helps them to forge a sense of respectability even if it is through excess.

Keith Haywood and Majid Yar (2006) observe that brand consumption and material goods displace work and a sense of purpose through labour and economic production for the new white poor, and that production for the economy and being a part of the social mainstream are vital forms of identity construction for the working-class man; being denied access to the economic and social mainstream therefore leaves the working classes having to rely on their consumption patterns for identity. However, even this presents problems, as many of the new white poor are unable to access full-time employment as the labour market and economic landscape have changed, resulting in more casual labour and zero-hour contract positions in the retail and hospitality market being created, leaving the working class, who

historically with little education have relied on their bodies, not their minds for labour and work, and are out of the labour market and dependent on welfare. The media during the 1990s frequently depicted young working-class men as work-shy and preferring to exploit the benefits system than engage in labour, unlike the generations before them. Haywood and Yar observe other pathologies given to working-class young men within the chav subculture as that of despair, violence, crime, and drug abuse.

Haywood and Yar observe that the white poor or the underclass is not a new construct of the working class; during the Victorian times there were many derogatory names for the white poor, including the unrespectable, depraved, the great unwashed and the feckless poor. These names all formed a part of the umbrella term 'the dangerous classes' who, because of their sometimes criminal activities, were seen as a threat to moral and social order. They also note that, even during the 18th century, the English labouring classes imitated the classes above through dress to maintain a sense of respectability conspicuous consumption practices by the poor is, then, not a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, they write, 'we now live in a society of consumers where social membership is grounded in the aesthetics of consumption' (2006, p.14). However, the problem with the chav, and the

reason they have been demonised so much is that their consumption practices are deemed flawed and vulgar and lacking in the merit of the higher classes; and designer fashions are seen as vulgar on the working-class body (Bourdieu, 1984)

For the mainstream and the middle classes, working class bodies overtly adorned are seen as vulgar and garish and were seen as outward signs of social deviance. This has led to a system of surveillance of working-class bodies as some public spaces were refusing access to the white poor if they wore certain brands, such as wearing designer baseball caps or to those wearing specific designer brands such as Burberry or Timberland. The website [chavscum.co.uk](http://chavscum.co.uk), Haywood and Yar point out, indicates seven traits in the dress of the figure of the chav: the baseball cap, branded shirts and jackets, trainers, gold pendants, gold sovereign rings, gold chains, and big hooped gold earrings. They also argue that, within the chav subculture, just like in the Black ghettos in America, the poor are exposed to what I would call a saturation of consumerism through the advertising and marketing of designer and branded goods. Hence, they are both enticed and oppressed by consumerism simultaneously. What this demonstrates is that there is a pattern and a continuation of working-class men trying to maintain a

pecuniary decency in dress, but also, by owning and wearing designer brands, reclaiming some agency over how they construct their masculinities and over their bodies in a society where their bodies are being scrutinised and are under surveillance. If we examine the Burberry cap more closely, it could be argued that it is the physical embodiment of the chav subculture, that it is an object of material culture that is inscribed with excess, class, gender, resistance to the mainstream, and the anxieties and frustrations of the white poor. It could also be emblematic of the working-class male struggle, a struggle to define his masculinity and identity through a loss of purpose and identity.

I would suggest that there are similarities and a parallel between the white British and Black American poor. Both groups experience poverty and ghettoization and are saturated by consumerism. Both groups try to reclaim agency over their bodies by acquiring designer and sportswear brands.

Haywood and Yar (2006) observe that there is a simulation of Black ghetto culture by the white poor. They are inextricably linked by social deviance, and the presence of violence and crime. Majors and Billson observe of the Black American poor, that 'clothes can also contribute to violence and fighting and even death among young Black males'; they also note that 'they have also

fought occasionally to death over brand names clothes such as Giorgio and Gucci items, basketball sneakers, or gold chains' (1992, p. 80). The British casual subculture also resorted to crime to obtain designer and luxury brands and sportswear. This indicates that there is a correlation between the style practices of the Black American poor and the white British poor, especially when it comes to desiring and wearing designer and sportswear goods. However, I would argue that how each of these groups are represented and labelled within the media and the academic literature differs. For example, Majors and Billson label the dress practices and bodily performances of the Black American underclass as a 'cool' pose or simply 'cool'. As they write, 'To style is the ultimate way hustlers attempt to act cool. Clothes are a portable and creative expression of styling' (1992, p.80). In comparison to how the white British poor are represented and stigmatised within the British media, Owen Jones observes 'In the current climate of chav hate the class warriors of fleet street can finally get away with it openly and flagrantly'. He goes on to write that 'Caricaturing working-class people as stupid, idle, racist, sexually promiscuous, dirty, and fond of vulgar clothes nothing of worth is seen to emanate from working-class Britain' (2020, p.119).

Roger B. Mason and Gemma Wigley observe a link between consumer goods and identity construction, in that objects mediate socially for the self and our possessions become markers of tastes (Bourdieu, 1984; Mason, Wigley 2013 ). In which case, objects here for the chav become a way to mediate and navigate their social world and help in the creation and communication of working-class masculine identities. The designer labels, I suggest, become like Latour's social actants in the social world; objects of dress then become more than just signifiers of a tribe or working-class tastes. They are encoded with masculinities and, by wearing them on their bodies, working-class men are actively constructing their identities and masculinities physically and relationally through wearing them. Through the social interaction with their peers, they are communicating these identities and working-class masculinities but, more than that, through relational and social interactions with their peers, these masculinities and identities are being continuously constructed and reaffirmed (Connell, 1995; Latour, 2005).

Undisputed American lightweight champion Devin Haney demonstrates his love of fashion and designer labels by incorporating the use of designer fabrics in his ring dress. Of working with Harlem atelier and streetwear designer Dapper Dan, he said 'at first they sent all the fabrics that they had

and then I chose the fabric; it was crazy how much different fabric he had from Gucci, it was unbelievable' and that 'I am the type of person where I want to be able to really design, I don't just tell somebody my colours and have them design for me, I like to be hands-on when designing my outfits.'



Figure 10. Devin Haney wearing an in-ring outfit designed by Dapper Dan. (2020).

As I have explored in Chapter One, there are conspicuous consumption practices among boxers inside and outside the ring. Many prominent boxers collaborate with designers and luxury fashion houses for their boxing-ring dress or wear designer brands outside the ring to attend press conferences and public weigh-ins. I would also argue that the designers labels that boxers wear into the ring not only demonstrate their newfound pecuniary decency

and respectability, but also provide a form of social capital among their peers and boxing audiences, and that through designer dress they are continually constructing and cultivating their masculinities and identities in the ring.

For working-class men, whether in Britain or the United States, dress was not just about style and aesthetics, it denoted power; when being denied access to economic or social power in their everyday life being on the fringes of mainstream society, the working-class man, through dress, could obtain the power to assist him in dealing with his position in life and on the streets and in owning or taking back some credibility. Daniel Day (Day, 2019) or 'Dapper Dan' the Harlem atelier who has designed bespoke fashions for celebrity hip hop artists, and celebrity athletes such as Mike Tyson observes in his autobiography: 'fashion for me was not about expression, fashion was about power.' He also goes on to state that ' I would navigate with a certain look until I could own the look being fly was a vehicle to getting around my situation in life'(Day, 2019, p.160). Day also observes of his community: 'Poverty was getting worse, beefs were getting deadlier, my designs grew out of an understanding of my customers lives' writing that 'I was reflecting their feelings, their risks, their ambitions and their dreams in the clothes' (p.189). On creating his prints of heritage brand logos such as Gucci, Burberry and

Louis Vuitton combining them with African inspired designs, he states that 'I knocked them up, I didn't knock them off, I Blackenized them' (Day, 2019, p.193). In creating his streetwear designs – an amalgamation of homegrown printed logo designs with African heritage and street style he states that 'my creative vision bloomed from helping my customers express their own identity' (p.204). This creativity in dress practices of the Black poor in the United States can also be found in the white poor in the United Kingdom in styles such such as the football casual and the chav subculture that designer brands and designer logos assist the working class man in creating and fashioning his identity and masculinity, and this pattern crosses over to the working-class man creating and fashioning his identity in the ring.

## **The Birth of British Boxing and Patriotism in Boxing Dress**

From the early days of British bareknuckle prize fighting, boxing's predecessor sport. Objects of dress have always been a key feature, especially as a means of identification in the ring (Colls, 2020). During British regency and the Victorian times, coloured sashes called colours were tied around a fighter's waist or on the corner post of the makeshift outdoor boxing ring for identification purposes; the winner would take his opponents

'colours' as a trophy, which represented a victory for the winner. Often, these sashes or embroidered handkerchiefs would have the fighter's chosen colours and fighters from different countries would have their handkerchiefs embroidered with their national colours, for example a fighter from Ireland might have green incorporated into his colours in the ring. Herbert C Hallas (2014) recounts the British London prize ring rules first introduced by the father of bare-knuckle boxing, Jack Broughton, during the eighteenth century, which stated that:

boxers should wear knee length breeches that fastened below the knee with a long hose and lightly spiked heavy laced walking boots, and that each boxer was expected to bring his colours Usually a large silk handkerchief ornamented with a special design and his nation's flag into the ring, and tie it to the upper end of one of the centre posts, the winner was entitled to the possession of his opponent's colours as a trophy of victory. (Hallas, 2014)

Other regency customs related to dress objects included fighters demonstrating their willingness to fight by throwing their hats into the ring. As Elliot J. Gorn (1986) observes, 'new customs appeared such as the taking of battle colours painted handkerchiefs tied around the fighters waists, and on the posts in each man's corner the winner seizing the losers colour as a trophy.' Gorn also states that 'flipping a coin for choice of side quickly became the rule as did the fighters' habit of throwing their hats into the ring

as they approached' (1986, p.42). Alan Lloyd (1977) also notes that pugilists attached their battle colours to their corner posts; Lloyd also observes that 'bare fisted, stripped from the waist up, the combatants wore close-fitting drawers, high stockings and spiked boots' (p.15). The painted or embroidered handkerchiefs of fighters also presented opportunities for making a statement in the ring: 'McCoy tied his colours to the ropes, a black handkerchief signifying victory or death' (Gorn, 1986, p.75). On throwing the hat into the ring, Dick Johnson also observes 'prompt on time at 1pm Johnson slung his castor into the ring to be followed a minute later by the colours of Hill' (1987, p.82).

The peeling ceremony was also a customary practice during this time, whereby each fighter would strip to the waist, bearing his upper body for inspection by patrons and boxing audiences, so that audiences could place bets on the stronger-looking fighter to win. Robert Colls (2020), asserts that 'stripping or peeling was a vital part of ring ceremonial, sometimes inviting applause, always inviting scrutiny.' For Gorn, Pugilism was more than just brutality in the ring, for it created a male aesthetic: 'for the fancy a good bout was an artistic idealization of the reality, displaying manliness, fair play, and finely developed physical skills,' the undressed pugilist in the ring

demonstrated displays of manly courage and valour while at the same time eliminating British fears of masculine effeminacy. Which was one of the reasons why bare-knuckle fighting during the latter half of the eighteenth century became the most popular English sporting and national pastime.

According to Gorn, 'the fancy', which was the name of a group of gentry that supported, patronised, and followed bare-knuckle fighting, 'found beauty in man's sheer physicality'. The bare-knuckle prize fighter also epitomised the British notions of virility and manhood (Downing, 2010; Gorn, 1986, pp.26-27). Karen Downing (2010) observes that, in eighteenth-century prize fighting, there was a political need to find men who could demonstrate their fighting ability in the ring during a time of fears of French effeminacy pervading England. With the rise of consumerism and more men doing sedentary work, prize-fighters were admired for their physical power and strength in the ring, which led to prize-fighters being held up as the ideal display of manhood (Downing, 2010).

Inter-male gazing upon the working-class male body can still be seen in modern boxing today: at the ceremonial weighing-in of fighters, where fighters often strip down to their underwear prior to being weighed; and in the ring, where fighters will peel off their robes revealing their naked upper

form. During the live boxing matches I attended at York Hall I observed that not only do boxing audiences gaze upon the bodies of the fighters, but they also objectify them and shout out instructions to the fighters in the ring; for example, 'uppercut to the body,' 'keep him busy Fred, get involved,' 'box him, box him.' This custom of audience participation I suppose would have been likely practiced in Regency and Victorian times when fighters were in the ring, audiences would have been shouting commands to their favourite fighter to win. This suggests that historically there has been a fetishization of the working-class male body in boxing, by both men and women, for its muscular physical form. Joyce Carol Oates observes of modern boxing that 'no sport is more physical than boxing or more powerfully homoerotic,' noting 'the confrontation in the ring, the disrobing, the sweaty heated combat' (1987, p.30). The customs within boxing such as the peeling ceremony add to the exoticization of the boxers' male form but also indicate that objects of dress play a central role in boxing, and that boxing dress can provide valuable insights into the lives of ordinary working-class men.

A pugilist's colours could also be symbolic and political. Kenneth Cohen and Alex Feargus, in an article for the National Museum of American History, 'A sport star being political, 19th century style' (2019) observe that there has

been widespread belief that with the rise of the Black Lives Matter campaigns and sporting celebrities taking the knee and footballers wearing the LGBTQ+ armbands, it would seem that the sporting arena has become more cultural and political as a space. However, sports have always been political, and none more so than boxing. Cohen and Feergus discuss one of the artifacts of the museum's collection, a silk banner from 1882 that celebrated one of the last Irish American bare-knuckle champions, John L. Sullivan. Cohen and Feergus recount that when John L. Sullivan became world heavyweight boxing champion after defeating Irish American Paddy Ryan in 1882, his fans made a replica of Sullivan's colours as a silk banner to commemorate his victory. Cohen and Feergus describe Sullivan's handkerchief, as depicted by the National Police Gazette, America's leading sports paper at the time, as a white background with a green border, with small American and confederate flags of stars and stripes in each corner, coupled with small green Irish flags in each of the corners and an eagle in the centre, with the motto 'may the best man win'. However, by replicating the handkerchief, as well as being made of silk and by denoting that Sullivan won the fight, the museum's banner has an additional layer of meaning. This replica banner of Sullivan's object of political dress in the ring is an object of material culture that is also imbued

with politics and culture, reflecting the times, and is indicative of Sullivan's beliefs and politics of that time.



Figure 11. John L. Sullivan boxing banner 1882 (2019).

The green flags on each corner of the banner, which would be on each corner of the handkerchief, are representative of Irish independence; Ireland was still under British rule in 1882, and Sullivan would have been demonstrating his views on Ireland in defiance of British control. Similarly, the green flags depicted with the harpists would be to commemorate the attempted Irish uprising for independence in British Canada in 1866. Here, we can see Sullivan's devotion to his native Ireland and defiance of British colonial rule. The green flags sit alongside the United States flags on each

corner, with the American eagle in the centre. The handkerchief also depicts a Confederate flag intertwined with the United States flag; here, Sullivan is announcing that he is both a true Irishman and American patriot but, controversially, aligning himself with the confederate South, communicating views that would depict him as a white supremacist. This is evident in the fact that Sullivan would never agree to fight Black contenders in the ring, as he felt superior as a white American. By featuring a Southern Cross on the United States flags in each corner, he is stating his alignment with the confederate South and his sympathies for the South, stating that he is both an Irish American and white, and in the wake of the Civil War in America, that he is a white supremacist. This object of dress becomes a statement of Sullivan's politics and views and what was happening in America, Britain, and Ireland at the time and becomes an object of material culture. However, the banner and handkerchief also speak of Sullivan's whiteness not only as a bigot and a racist, in a time when Irishness was seen as less than human or less than white, in the same way as most white Americans viewed Black Americans during the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Sullivan's prowess and power in the ring, proven by becoming world heavyweight champion, gave him the economic, social and

cultural power to equate himself as equal to white Americans. I would suggest that the handkerchief is also representative of Sullivan's masculinity outside of the ring; his masculinity would have been considered inferior as an Irish immigrant, but as a champion he could now take pride in his Irish American ancestry, as he was considered at the time of being the epitome of American manliness through his physicality and prowess in the ring. Sullivan's embroidered handkerchief suggests that, historically, fighters have always expressed themselves through objects of dress in the ring and also demonstrates the beginning of the pattern within modern boxing of the self-fashioning of boxers with their ring dress through their input into their customised creations. It is probable that Sullivan would have had some input in the design of his handkerchief. It would most probably have been embroidered by a family member or a friend, someone that knew him well and with whom he could express the exact colour, motifs, and design of it. Sashes played a unique role for the individual fighter; in a similar fashion to today's fans wearing the colours of their favourite teams at football matches. Fans could, during bare-knuckle fighting, indicate their loyalty to a particular fighter by wearing a ribbon or waving a sash in the colour of their favourite pugilist (Downing, 2010). The handkerchiefs and colours were not just for

identification purposes but were also to demonstrate a fighter's patriotism and politics, particularly during a fight with an international opponent such as an English and American prize-fighter. We can see that patriotism and politics are key features in boxing expressed through objects of dress even from its beginnings and are still very much a key feature of boxing dress in modern boxing. Hallas observes that bare-knuckle fighter James 'Yankee' Sullivan was born in London and fought many bouts in England under the London prize ring rules but once came into the ring with an American flag draped around his waist, which earned him the moniker 'Yankee'. Through the flag draped around his waist during his ring entrance, he demonstrated his support and allegiance to America, and his patriotism and politics; after spending eight years in an Australian prison he later emigrated to America (Hallas, 2014).

Former boxing-dress maker Sophie Miller describes her experiences creating a pair of patriotic boxing ring trunks for former British super middleweight champion Carl Froch:

yeah I liked the Union Jack shorts that I made and I also liked the gown, but the gown was one of the first things I made and he didn't really wear it that much... but I enjoyed the Union Jack shorts because it was, well, we made them for the world champion fight world belt fight and, erm, yeah I put a little of my magic in there, if you see what I mean, and I just enjoyed that whole process to get the reference right for the Union Jack cos it's not symmetrical there are things to it. (Miller, 2023)

Sophie also created boxing-ring trunks for an Irish fighter who wanted his colours to match the stonework of Dublin; 'One did didn't he? The Irish guy. He wanted to have the, he wanted to match the colour to the Ceylon, if you like, of the stone of Dublin to get that kind of like, erm, Gerry, obviously her name is Irish as well and she was quite passionate to, she got that side of it and she knew that colour', going on to note that 'she knew what he wanted so, as I said, she really thrived on that side of the process, she was quite happy to go off and make sure its perfect and then we had the gold in it so, as I said, his fight name was gold ore, so we had to incorporate it a bit into the design'.

In my participant observation at York Hall, I observed that one of the fighters in the ring had insignia on the front of his shorts that indicated he was in the parachute regiment for the British army (I could immediately tell that it was a parachute regiment emblem as members in civilian dress were in the audience in the upper seating area with a Pegasus flag, which is the parachute regiment symbol draped over the balustrade in support of the soldier in the ring. My son, who was with me at the boxing event, remarked that 'he won't get tired' due to the parachute regiment training being one of the most challenging forms of physical training you can do). This form of

patriotism indicates patriotic and political loyalty to the British army, which I would suggest is a very distinctive form of patriotism in the ring. This fighter's trunks stood out for their specific type of patriotism, a patriotism for Britain and an elite regiment of the British army. I would suggest that the motifs and emblems on his trunks were an embodiment of his working-class masculinity, a masculinity that has been constructed and produced reflexively through two distinct types of training, in boxing training and parachute regiment army training. This was reflected in the soldier/boxer's ring trunks through his insignia; I also observed that on the back of his trunks were three miniature flags which were pinned onto the waistband, also demonstrating his patriotism for Britain. Therefore, the boxer's masculinity is exemplary and distinctive, communicating a unique and nuanced form of working-class masculinity which is embodied in his dress, a dual boxing and a military masculinity.

World champion British super middle weight champion Billy Joe Saunders' trunks also contain symbolism like the embroidered handkerchief of Sullivan and, like Sullivan, he has also faced discrimination. In Saunders' trunks he also references America, and with the repetitive use of references to the British flag and national colours he is reiterating and proclaiming his

legitimate whiteness and Britishness. Saunders, who originates from the traveller community, would have experienced white-on-white social racism; British travellers have often been denied equality with the white British, being viewed with suspicion and fear and at times being excluded from public spaces, such as pubs, restaurants and holiday parks. The discrimination and racism British travellers have had to face have never been challenged (Mohdin and Murray, 2021). Saunders, here, like Sullivan, is stating 'I am a world champion and British', declaring his national identity and patriotism embodied within his trunks in multiple ways and reiterated multiple times; In my primary research conducting object analysis of some items of worn boxing dress at the Worldwide Signings memorabilia store in Romford, the shop owner brought out a pair of Saunders' trunks; these trunks have motifs and patches of stars along the hem that include miniature Union Jack flags; the trunks are in red, white and blue, the colours of the Union Jack, and the patches for the lettering of his name, 'Saunders' on the back of the waistband, and 'Billy Joe' embroidered on the front, also have the red, white and blue colours and design of the British flag. Saunders declares that, as a world champion, he is legitimately white and British. Saunders, the first man from the traveller community to win world titles in two weight classes, also

carried the Romany gypsy flag into the ring for his world middleweight title fight with fellow Irish Traveller Andy Lee in 2015, declaring that he was doing this for all the British Travellers (Mitchell, 2015). The trunks have a theatrical and carnivalesque playful feel, the red and white vertical stripes down the middle of the shorts are reminiscent of a circus tent and the white stars down the side seams combined with the red and white vertical stripes provides a nod to America. Here I would suggest we can also see not only Saunders's claims to whiteness and Britishness but his claim as a working-class man to respectable working-class masculinity; his trunks are social actants working in relationship with him as he declares in that moment he enters the ring that, like Sullivan, he has earned the right to be white British. As a two-time world title champion in two different weight classes and as a successful British boxer he now has claims to hegemonic and respectable masculinity, Saunders demonstrates when he enters the ring with the Romany flag, his cultural and political views and his resistance to white on white racism of the Traveller community.



Figure 11. The boxing ring trunks of British super middleweight champion Billy Joe Saunders (2024).

## Politics and Resistance in Boxing Dress

Embodied politics is a key trope within boxing-ring dress; more often than not, boxers will use the platform of boxing to not only show their patriotism, subjectivities or identities but their political or social leaning or dissent. To make a statement in support of their race, class, gender, sexuality, and

identity and often this is enacted during ring entrances and through dress (Mondragon, 2021). Historically, dress has always been utilised by the working classes in Britain to communicate different things; Katrina Navickas, in 'That Sash Will Hang You: political clothing and adornment in England 1780- 1840' (2010), observes that, for the working class, many of whom were illiterate, dress could be employed to communicate their politics and demonstrate their resistance against the government. The working class attached symbolism to a collective patriotic, national, or political identity expressed through ribbons, sashes, motifs, and emblems as adornments. I would suggest that this symbolic form of activism through dress gave the working class a voice and was coded with politics of gender and class.

Dress played an influential role in working-class suffrage; clothing and objects of dress being potent, loaded and more powerful visual communicators for public audiences and specifically the working classes, more so than public speaking and oratory. Navickas points out that folklore historians have noticed common characteristics to both popular custom and protests, including the disguise, using masks and dress, and the wearing of ribbons, sashes, handkerchiefs, and other visual adornments (2010). Simple motifs,

patterns, colours, or fabrics could have political significance, providing a form of dissent and agency for the working class (Navickas, 2010, p.549).

Adornments and disguises were just some of the ways the working class exhibited political loyalty or political dissent; cloth was another. The Victorian working class frequently wore the fabric fustian, a rough mixture of cotton and wool, which became the fabric of the working-class man and emblematic of industrialization, the labouring class, and the wool mills. Fustian is a tough-wearing work fabric that resembles what we would now call denim (Harvey, 2008).

Because of its hard-wearing properties, it was also a fabric associated with prisoners and criminals (Skyas, 2009). Vivienne Richmond (2013) points out that, during the nineteenth century, fabrics were representative of class conflicts, as well as highlighting the political connotations of dress; fustian jackets were symbolic of the working-class Chartist reformation movement, and wearing fustian fabric would have also highlighted the differences between the working class and middle class. Richmond also notes that fustian played a significant role in working-class communities, becoming emblematic of the working-class man; she cites Friedrich Engels, who suggests that working men were labelled fustian jackets. (2013, p.38-39). One of the key

leaders of the Chartist movement, Irishman Fergus Edward O'Connell, on being released from prison for his political involvement in the movement, intentionally wore a fustian jacket in support of the masses and the working class (Richmond, 2013).

The quality and finish of the weave of fustian would determine its use, as those of high and low status could wear it; by the eighteenth century, Sykas points out (2009), class differences could be observed in the differences in cloth. The difference between the working class and the bourgeoisie was seen in fustian and broadcloth, the bourgeoisie preferring the softer, refined broadcloth. Vivienne Richmond (2013) also observes that, in the eighteenth century, class difference was shown through the type of fabrics worn, how expensive the fabrics were, and the amount of yardage used; she also observes that class was recognizable by the quality of cloth that garments were made from, not by type, and by the 19th-century class was distinguished by both the fabric quality and styles of dress.

What Chartism shows us is that the working classes often use dress for social, political and class dissent and activism. Chartists made an emblem of the fabric fustian as fustian jackets became metaphorical of a class movement. Fustian also became symbolic of an ideology and a class reformation in

Britain, which demonstrates how fabrics and dress can not only denote class but can also become, in a sense, orators of class dissent.

What this demonstrates is that even cloth for the working-class man can contain political symbolism and can be used to narrate their experiences; this pattern in working-class dress translates to the boxing ring, as not only can boxers' dress contain subtle or overt political messages present in emblems, motifs, colours, images and text, but the fabrics that boxers use in their dress can also be symbolic. The type and quality of fabrics and textiles incorporated into a fighter's dress can be signifiers of their success and achievements within the sport; the more expensive, lavish and high-quality the cloth that is used, such as designer silks and designer prints, the more prominent their position within the sport. The textiles that are used in boxing are representative of the 'politics' that exist within the sport, involving weight categories and classes of boxers from amateur, professional, to the title-holding champions or the more renowned fighters within the sport. Cloth, for working-class men, not only has the power to symbolise class insurgency as with the Chartist leaders showing dissent against the government through wearing fustian, but it has the power to denote and symbolise the stature of

working-class men and, in boxing, the stature of how far down they exist within the sports structures and hierarchies.

Richmond observes that sub-proletariats that emerged from the eighteenth century onwards formed what she terms a 'sartorial underclass', distinctive in their lack of decent dress. She also states that 'poverty was identifiable visually, so they made sartorial efforts not to look poor' (Richmond, 2013, p.294). For working-class men, we see this pattern of displaying pecuniary decency through dress as a sign of respectability; in boxing, fighters will utilise fabrics in their dress to not only demonstrate their positioning within the sports structure, to show that they have achieved success within the sport, but to illustrate their pecuniary power. This is why often the primary fabrics utilised in boxing ring dress are extravagant such as high-quality silks, satins, leathers and velvets and even exotic animal skins.

Rudy Mondragon (2021), in '*Miles Before the Bell: race, agency and sporting entitlements in boxing ring entrances*' observes that the boxing-ring entrance is a space rich with contrasting, conflicting binaries; in other words, in order to market and sell fights each fight needs a narrative to make the fight appeal to its audiences. It is in these ephemeral spaces that boxing narratives can have the potential to demonstrate the political resistance or leanings of a

particular fighter. For example, during the world heavyweight championship fight between Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston, the fight had a political and religious narrative attached to it; many white American Christians wanted Sonny Liston to win even though he was a known former criminal associated with the mafia, simply because Christians felt he represented America better. Muhammad Ali had at the time joined the Black Islamist group the Nation of Islam and was professing to be a Black Muslim. For both fighters, this was about so much more than winning the world heavyweight championship it was a battle between politics and religion (Eig, 2017).

Mondragon also maintains that, as many boxers originate from ethnic minority backgrounds and marginalised communities, this makes them increasingly vulnerable within the business of the sport, as Black and brown bodies provide the physical capital for the capitalist machine that is the business of boxing, which benefits mostly the promoters and managers of the industry (Mondragon, 2021). These marginalised backgrounds and vulnerability of the fighters provide dramatical storytelling in the buildup to a fight; promoters will exploit stereotypes and embellish them to sell fights, for example, a poor Irish American fighter versus a poor Black American fighter or a Mexican fighter. Their nationalities, politics or religions will also be

included in the narratives that sell fights. Fighters will also utilise politics to market themselves in the ring to their fans. For example, American junior lightweight fighter Rod Salka, when he fought Mexican fighter Francisco Vargas in 2018, wore a pair of boxing-ring trunks that were printed with images of a brick wall and the words America 1<sup>st</sup> on the front waistband of the trunks. By doing this, Salka demonstrated his support for President Donald Trump's proposition to build a wall on America's border with Mexico, aligning himself with Trump's vision to keep out Mexican immigrants. Salka was knocked down in the fifth round and his trainer threw the towel in on the sixth round, so that Vargas won the fight; symbolically, Vargas was standing up for much more than just a professional competitive fight in the ring he stood for justice, for immigration and the plight of immigrants in America. The rich narratives of this fight embodied American politics and the fight between white America and immigration. Vargas promoter, former Mexican fighter Oscar De La Hoya, also used the politics of immigration and the plight of Mexicans to sell and advertise the public battle between two Mexican fighters, Saul Canelo Alvarez and Julio Cesar Chavez Jr, by broadcasting both fighters running through Trump's depicted brick wall and destroying it, throwing a metaphorical punch at Trump (Raskin, 2018).

Mondragon observes that Salka's dress in the ring made visual his white supremacy and emblematised much of white America at the time, and that fashion and style is used by boxers not only to express their subjectivities in the ring, but that dress embodies political power struggles between opponents and is in response to the cultural and political climate they find themselves in. He also points out, however, that often these political acts of dissent through dress need to be gentle or minimal; fighters need to walk a fine line so as not to be offensive and jeopardise the potential of future fights or earnings in the ring. I would also argue that, as much as objects of dress in the ring give fighters a vehicle for self-expression of their patriotism, their subjectivities and political dissent, they are also vehicles for their masculinities how these masculinities are reproduced through these boxing narratives and the drama that surrounds a particular fight. In this case, Mexican immigrant masculinities are being constructed and produced in the ring, and these are embodied and depicted in dress. Furthermore, the political dissent present in objects of dress not only act as actants or objects of material culture, they become embedded in boxing theatre and become part of the theatrics that sell fights (Connell, 1995 Mondragon, 2021).

Mondragon also maintains that fashion within boxing is utilised as a form of style politics, for fighters to express their political dissent and as a form of activism and that, through what they wear in the ring, fighters can demonstrate their individual resistance to societal, political and cultural injustices such as immigration and the concerns of Black Lives Matter. Fashion within boxing has a multiplicity of meanings and purposes, but boxers are on the forefront of the political and cultural zeitgeist as they utilise boxing ring entrances to fashion their identities; identities that encompass their race, class, sexuality, politics and gender. Most fighters are fully aware of the rules of the game in boxing, and the risks incurred in the sport; they are aware that their bodies are being exploited in the ring for monetary gain, but the promise of fame and success for many fighters means that they will take the risk. Boxers know that they are offering up their bodies for the business of the sport. Through how they fashion their bodies, though, especially how they choose to express themselves during their ring walks, fighters can reclaim agency. Through dress they can create identities, express their individuality and micro-biographies, as well as their politics; the ring walk provides boxers with a platform. The boxing ring is the perfect site to analyse boxing identities for narratives, politics and hidden messages of

resistance; it is also the perfect site to analyse working-class masculinities, as well as the dress and tastes of working-class men. Fighters' personal narratives and biographies, Mondragon observes are what sell fights and make the fighter palatable to his fan base and boxing audiences. The political activism that can be observed in boxing ring fashions, I would also suggest, make them potential garments of material culture as the fighter's resistance and dissent through dress is always set within the wider historical, social and cultural context (Mondragon, 2021).

We see an example of politics and resistance in boxers' dress depicted in the world heavyweight boxing match in 1933 between Jewish American Max Baer and German Max Schmeling at the Yankee Stadium in New York. This fight took place during the rise of Adolf Hitler's campaign in Germany; Schmeling was rumoured to be a favourite of Hitlers. The fight was given special significance and was viewed by America's boxing audience as a fight between the good Jew and the bad German. Baer won the fight, knocking Max Schmeling out in the tenth round to become the new heavyweight champion. Baer's trunks had a Star of David motif, demonstrating Baer's resistance to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany and to Hitler's campaign. As social actants, Baer's trunks worked in relationship with him to

communicate his identity as an American Jewish man, embodying his pride in his race and heritage, and his Jewish masculinity is inscribed in them; a working-class masculinity that has been produced in training in the gym through his body and social interactions with other men's bodies, assisting in the creation of his boxing identity and narrating his identity on a global stage at a very critical time in Jewish history. They were social actants of working-class male Jewish suffrage and resistance and embodied the resistance to Nazi rule and occupation in Germany (Green, 2013).

Former world champion heavyweight Muhammad Ali's historic world heavyweight championship fight with American heavyweight champion George Foreman in 1974 took place in Zaire. Ali had won the hearts of the African people by relinquishing his birth name of Cassius Clay, which he had called his 'slave name', and changing his name to Muhammad Ali after joining the Nation of Islam. For his ring entrance, Ali wore a long white silk robe that had bespoke handmade African style weaving detail in black along the cuffs and the hem, with a large section of black weaving detail on the bottom half of the back of the robe, with his name, 'Muhammad Ali' in black lettering along the top of the back of the robe. This robe made a statement that this was his heritage, his culture, and his people. As Norman Mailer (1975) wrote

in *'The Fight'*: 'Now Ali stopped dancing and took out the robe he would wear into the ring and put it on. It was a long white silk robe with an intricate black pattern, and his first comment was "it's a real African robe". Louise Jury wrote in the Independent newspaper in 1997 that though the robe looked as though it had been designed and produced in Africa, it was designed by Michael Fish and Christopher Lynch in Hammersmith in West London and the Black African weaving and patterns that adorned the robe were made by Dr Anna Gruetzner, who at the time was an art history student. At the time of the news article's publication, the robe was being sold off for auction as sports memorabilia in the United States with estimated bids of \$75,000 (Jury, 1997).

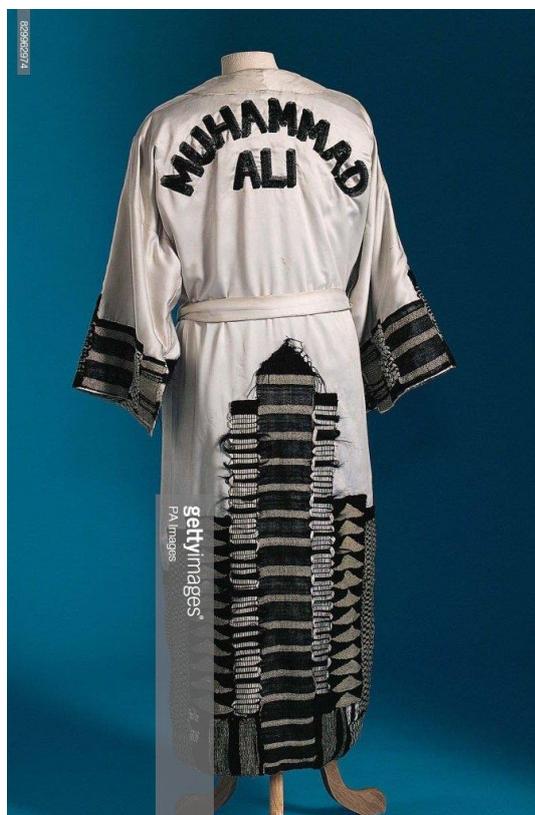


Figure 13. Muhammad Ali's robe worn in Zaire in 1974. Getty images, 1997.

Mondragon observes that boxing ring entrances are like catwalk shows in which fighters have the opportunity in that moment to showcase who they are to a now-global audience; their aspirations, their values and beliefs, their politics, subjectivities, biographies and idiosyncrasies, everything about themselves that they want the world to see. The ring entrance is a rich site for exploration and excavation of working-class masculine identities.

Mondragon also observes that the performance of the ring entrance itself is a

fusion of many components that a fighter performs before he enters the ring, but the most obvious is in his dress. The ring entrance gives the fighter the opportunity to demonstrate his success in the field, and this can be exhibited through his dress. Fighters utilise the practice of conspicuous consumption through their dress to demonstrate their hegemony in the ring, but fighters can also use their status in the ring to exhibit their political leanings and dissent and enact what Mondragon terms 'sporting entitlements'. Which is where fighters who have achieved success within boxing, for example becoming champions, will sometimes have a political message embedded in their dress and ring entrance. This, I would suggest, is another way that boxers can demonstrate their agency. It is through their ring entrances that fighters have the power to exhibit their political leanings and cultural values, but they still must be careful to curate ring entrances that will not threaten their standing with their fans and boxing audiences and the potential for future fights; their curated ring entrances and dress also have the potential to leave them a legacy in the ring and may be imitated by a future generation of fighters (Mondragon, 2021).

Ali's robe was an object of material culture; it embodied the political temperature of his time, the political strivings in Zaire, it also embodied Ali's activism and political views as a proud Black man and spokesperson for civil rights for Black Americans. The African detailing in the weave celebrated his African heritage; this was an historic fight the whole world was watching so Ali's robe was seen by a global audience. The robe also embodied Ali's religious beliefs as a member of the Nation of Islam and friend of Black activist Malcolm X. Through it he created a new masculine identity; he started his career as Cassius and would finish it as Muhammad. The robe became a social actant narrating his pride for his African culture and the Zairean people who had embraced and adopted Ali. Mondragon argues that it is within the ring entrance that fighters can perform their new constructed identities, their success within the sport and enact political resistance within boxing structures to dominant societal hierarchies. I would also add that the ring entrance is a space and a site for boxers to perform not only their boxing identities but also their boxing masculinities and through their boxing masculinities demonstrate resistance to and challenge the dominant hegemonic hierarchy of masculinities and the structure of masculinities within the wider society. Mondragon also makes reference to the Black

dandyism performed by Jack Johnson at the start of the twentieth century, that it was through dress and fashion that Johnson made claims to normative modes of white hegemonic masculinity and that this occurred through his successes in the ring and the masculinity that he constructed through boxing and body reflexive practice (Connell, 1995; Mondragon, 2021).

Another interesting facet of Muhammad Ali's African robe for the fight in Zaire is that it was a physical embodiment of sporting superstitions and boxing superstitions, a topic which I will explore further in Chapter Three. According to a post on Brixtonblog.com, the robe contained a hidden astrological chart that had been hand drawn by British astrologer Frederic Davies onto a white handkerchief, which was then sewn by the designer Michael Fish into a panel inside the hem of the robe. Frederic Davies and Michael Fish were the only two people who knew of the astrological chart hidden inside the robe predicting Ali's victory in Zaire; it was only discovered in 1997 when the robe went to auction in Los Angeles (Brixtonblog.com, 2016). The robe literally employs sporting superstitions, although these superstitions were perhaps secretly enacted by the designer of the robe without Ali's knowledge.

American heavyweight fighter Deontay Wilder similarly employs African influences in his boxing ring dress to exhibit Black pride and Black activism through dress. In his third ring entrance for the trilogy fights with British heavyweight Tyson Fury at the T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas in October 2021, Wilder entered the ring wearing a bespoke outfit from his dressers and designers Cosmo and Donato comprising a mask, robe, trunks and accessories. He wore a red hooded robe with black fur trim with a sequined red and silver hood. On his face he wore a bejewelled half-face mask in red sequins with Swarovski crystals embellishing the cheeks. His chest was naked from the waist up while he wore large, beaded red, white and black necklaces (red coral or ivory beads being the staple accessory of the Edo tribe), the largest of the three with a red stone pendant. The large, beaded necklaces and his fur-trimmed robe gave him the look of an African warrior. Wilder's dress exhibits the ethnic influences of Wilder's Nigerian heritage from the Edo tribe in West Africa. In an interview with the *Sun* newspaper, Cosmo and Donato claimed that this final piece in Wilder's trilogy fight was an ode to Africa, and that Wilder requested the use of the colours red and black for his outfit; the colours have a specific symbolism in the Edo tribe, with red representing war and black representing a funeral. Wilder demonstrated

through his ring dress his pride in his African heritage, wearing it in honour of the Edo tribe. Cosmo and Donato also stated that the designs are more than just an outfit but contain narratives allowing the boxer to communicate to the world his chosen message in that moment. I would also suggest that Wilder's dress is indicative of his masculinity, and how he has constructed a new masculine identity through his dress in the ring, one that communicates to Fury 'it will be war and it will be your funeral', as he produces a look of chiefly African power and masculinity (Boon, 2021; EDO affairs, 2024).

Tyson Fury has also been known to express political views through his dress. In 2014 he wore a pair of trunks in training camp that featured a Palestinian flag and the words 'Free Palestine'; he also posted a message on the social media website Twitter (as it then was) with the hashtag 'Free Palestine', showing his support for Palestine and beseeching Israel to stop bombing the Gaza strip. In 2021, Tyson Fury's Instagram account was hacked and the message 'pray for Israel' was posted on his account; Fury stated that he is a man of the people and represents people from all over the world and that he had nothing to do with the post while Israel and Palestine were on the brink of war (Gamp, 2021). Mondragon observes that fighters will style their ring outfits to communicate whatever their message is to their fans and

audiences at any given fight and time; it is a creative process as often fighters will collaborate with dress-makers, giving them their personal specifications on the look they want to achieve. Consider Fury's ring trunks which were originally designed by British boxing-dress makers Suzi Wong for his fight with Derek Chisora, to be held in Manchester in 2014, though the fight was cancelled: the white trunks had a skirt attached to the front and back with the image of the Romany gypsy flag on the back of the trunks, along with the Bible verse John 3:16 and an image of the Palestinian flag on the front with the words 'Free Palestine' above the flag. The trunks also contained the names of two of Fury's children on the front and back of the waistband. The incorporation of the bible verse and his children's names could possibly be for good luck in the ring (Breen, 2014). Fury's trunks give hints not only to his ethnic loyalty as a British Traveller, with the inclusion of the Romany flag, but to his subjectivity and his masculine identity, that would have been constructed both in the traveller community and in the boxing gym through constant social and physical interactions. His shorts also speak of his values, ethics and beliefs; a family man, a Christian and a supporter of peace in the Middle East. The messages and images that a fighter communicates through his style during the ring entrance and his dress in the ring often resonate with

fans and the people, particularly political messages that fans may agree with. As often in these moments fighters can become powerful communicators for the people and their audiences, highlighting social, cultural and political themes through dress as well as issues of race, class, gender and sexuality (Mondragon, 2021).

## Paying Homage in the Ring

Dress can sometimes be utilised in boxing to pay homage to a family member, another fighter, a celebrity athlete, a fighter's mentors, coaches and trainers, or someone they look up to, and they will incorporate this into their designs through embroidery, graphic print, text, emblems and motifs or simply in the colour of the trunks. Many within the boxing community, for example, believe that Mike Tyson, whose signature ring colour was black, wore black in the ring to honour his former mentor and coach Cus D'Amato who had passed away and that Tyson wore black to express his grief and to commemorate D'Amato. More recently, Mike Tyson, in his exhibition fight with Jake Paul in November 2024, wore his trademark black trunks with the name of his daughter, Exodus Sierra Tyson, who had died aged four in a freak accident, on the left-hand side at the bottom (Peter, 2024).

After winning his bout and the unification of the middleweight belts against his Japanese opponent Ryota Murata in Japan on the April 9th 2022, Kazakh fighter Gennady Gennadyevich Golovkin or 'Triple G', gifted his robe to Murata. The robe was royal blue velvet, lined with royal blue satin and embroidered with a traditional gold Kazakhstan design. In that moment, Golovkin honoured his opponent; I would also suggest that the robe encapsulates Golovkin's nationality, his race, his culture and his status and prestige within the sport, and his boxing identity and Kazakhstani masculinity. In this way, not only does Golovkin celebrate Murata by giving him his custom robe, he gifts him with some of his boxing cultural capital that he has earned as a champion within the sport; the robe is a social actant, personifying Golovkin's achievements and success in the ring (Moore, 2022).



Figure 14. The blue and gold Triple G boxing robe (Moore, 2022).

Heritage auctions serve as an archive of pre-worn sports and athletic memorabilia. At the time of researching for this study, collections included pre-worn boxing-ring dress of former boxing champions such as former American middle weight champion James 'Lights Out' Toney; along with the embroidered names and initials of his daughters, Toney's boxing trunks have the star of David embroidered on them to pay homage to his former manager Jackie Kallen, who was Jewish (Heritage Auctions, 2018).

In 1973 Elvis Presley, who was friends with Muhammad Ali gifted Ali a long white robe. To commemorate their friendship, Elvis had the robe custom-made by the same designers that produced his jumpsuits, customised in a similar style with embellished 1970s Aztec sun designs in different coloured

and shaped jewels and rhinestones; on the back of the robe in jewelled letters were the words 'people's choice'. The robe was designed by B&K Enterprises and Gene Doucette. Ali wore the robe into the ring in 1973 when defending his title against British heavyweight Joe Bugner. Ali won the fight and then wore the robe again in the ring in 1974 when he fought Ken Norton. This time, he lost the fight, and it is rumoured that he never wore the robe into the ring again after that, believing it to have given him bad luck (Elvis Presley music.com, 1996).

World interim lightweight title holder American Ryan Garcia, for his bout with Francisco Fonseca in 2020, wore into the ring customised boxing boots now archived on the Goldin online auction website. Garcia's Hyper KO boots, made by sportswear company Nike, were red with painted images of both Kobe and Gianna Bryant painted on the heel of each shoe and the words 'RIP Kobe' painted beneath. The decorated boots paid homage to the late basketball champion and Los Angeles Lakers superstar Kobe Bryant (Goldin, 2020). When American welterweight fighter Paulie Malignaggi fought Adrien Broner in 2013, Malignaggi wore a pair of white satin trunks with a gladiator-style skirt including a flap at the front and back with the words 'justice for' in green lettering and 'Arturo Gatti' in red lettering on the flap at the back of his

trunks, in homage to the late Canadian super featherweight champion Arturo Gatti, who was found dead in a hotel room in 2009 (Snowden, 2013). Israeli welterweight boxer Dustin Fleischer, 'The White Tiger,' wears boxing trunks that are patterned with the white stripe of the tiger while also embodying his family history and heritage with a large Star of David printed on them.

Fleischer stated that the Star of David on his trunks was in honour of his grandfather Bernard, who had survived two concentration camps during the holocaust and, after a near-death experience, joined the Jewish resistance.

Fleischer also has the Hebrew letters for the word 'Chai', which means 'living' or 'alive' printed on his shorts to feel close to his late grandfather in the ring (Cathryn, 2015).

Sometimes fighters will pay homage in the ring to the countries that they are fighting in through their dress, such as the 'Thrilla in Manilla' fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in the Philippines in 1975. To show his respect, Frazier wore blue and white trunks with Adidas boots with a red stripe in honour of the Philippine's national colours and their flag; his cornermen wore short-sleeved dark blue barongs, embroidered formal shirts and the national dress of the men in of the Philippines. When fighting George

Foreman in Jamaica in 1973, Frazier chose to wear gold gloves with green thumbs to honour the people of Jamaica (Khalid, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter began by exploring two subcultures that have been underrepresented in studies of gender, class, culture and dress. The British football casual and the British chav. Examining the dress of working-class men in these subcultures provides a deeper understanding of the patterns and habits of working-class men's dress, which transfers into boxing and the ring (Jones, 2020; Redhead, 2012). Traditional working-class masculinity is no longer being constructed through the use of bodily strength in industrial labour, but has been reduced to being constructed through the sign or the symbol so that working-class men will utilise conspicuous consumption and the logos of designer brands to construct their masculinities; the designer clothes become social actants working with working class men to communicate their masculine identities (Baron, 2006; Latour, 2005). This chapter also explored patriotism in boxing-ring dress and how fighters during boxing's emergence in Regency times exhibited their nationalities and patriotism through the coloured scarves and handkerchiefs they wore into the ring. Politics has always been a key feature in boxing-ring dress and

sometimes the embroidered handkerchiefs pugilist fighters wore into the ring exhibited their political leanings and dissent and became objects of resistance and material culture. Today many fighters will also employ dress to express their political beliefs or dissent (Hallas, 2014). This chapter investigated the practice of fighters paying homage in the ring through their dress and how their objects of dress such as robes, trunks, gloves or boots, could be utilised to celebrate or honour other fighters, family members, or even countries that they were fighting in through print, embroidery, motifs, colours and even the design of their dress.

## Chapter Three

**'When the mask is on, it's time for me to fight.'**

### **Introduction**

This chapter looks at masking within boxing-ring entrances and explores a variety of examples of professional champion boxers who incorporate a mask for their ring walk. The mask in boxing can have many different functions for the boxer: it can symbolise his cultural and economic capital, such as the

luxurious, expensive masks worn by American heavyweight boxer Deontay Wilder into the ring. It can also embody a fighter's heritage and culture, or be a tactical item of intimidation during ring walks. Many boxers utilise a mask for their boxing-ring entrances, this chapter explores some of these examples. This chapter will also look at the role of superstitions in sports and religious rituals, and how, in boxing, fighters will often utilise superstitions when they are preparing for a fight and how, historically, fighters have often performed magical rites and superstitious or religious rituals before a fight, or taken objects into the ring for luck; sometimes these sports superstitions or good luck charms are incorporated in a fighter's dress and become a form of the fetish.

## Masking in Boxing

There are numerous examples of professional boxers who incorporate a mask as part of their ring entrances. New Orleans native and super lightweight champion Regis (Rougarou) Prograis incorporates a mask in his ring walk, a mask that embodies the folklore and mythology of his ring moniker, 'Rougarou.' The mask is a hybrid man, bat, and wolf, with a headdress of red and white feathers, almost like a native American Indian headdress. In Cajun

folklore, the Rougarou is a mythical werewolf-like creature that lives, according to Creole legend, in the local swamps of New Orleans. Tales of the Rougarou would be told to Cajun children from Southern Louisiana. The custom-made mask has the face of a werewolf with a light brown beard and wide-open brown eyes with brown eyebrows. The mouth is open with white protruding fangs and ears at the sides of the mask that are shaped like a bat's. There is a red and black band around the forehead going all the way round to the back of his head; the band contains white circles that have the letters 'R and P' in red letters in the centre with red images of boxing gloves in the centre of the other white circles. On the top of this band is attached a fan shape of what appear to be red arrow-shaped feathers set on a white background while red feathers hang from the side and the back to just below his shoulders (Downes, 2021). Prograis describes his Rougarou mask as a theatrical nod to his Creole heritage, but it also has a functional purpose, as he states in interviews about the mask, in that it allows him to remain hidden from the glaring eyes and voices of thousands of boxing fans as he makes his way to the ring. Prograis, however, claims that, unlike Deontay Wilder, who is well known for his masking practices during his ring walks and claims to

absorb power from his masks, the mask does not give him any special powers.



Figure 15. Image of Regis Prograis' Rougarou mask (Downes, 2021).

Boxing commentator Steve Bunce observes that the Rougarou is a shape-shifting swamp monster nicknamed 'the bigfoot of the bayou' and indicative of New Orleans black magic and Creole folklore; Prograis claims that 'the Rougarou is me, it's my way of warning opponents that I will change and adapt and take everything they have when we fight' (Bunce, 2019). Ben Elliot and Chantal Conneller (2021) in *Masks in context representation emergence*

motility and self' observe that the object of the mask is relational, an event that encompasses the mask maker, the wearer, the mask, and the audience the mask is intended for; for the mask wearer, it is important that the audience believes in the performance of the mask and the effect it creates in spectators. Mask audiences need to be invested in the performance for the mask to work. This is reminiscent of Latour's social actants, objects working in relationship with humans to create social associations; the mask maker, the audience and the mask itself work with the wearer to assist in forming his new social identity all are involved and help to create this new temporal identity and narrative. If we examine Regis Prograis' Rougarou mask from this viewpoint, the mask-maker has custom-made and produced the mask exclusively for Prograis for the purpose of wearing to the ring, imbuing it with elements of his idea of what the swamp monster would look like as an identity in object form. Prograis performs this identity for his audience, becoming and inhabiting the identity and image of a frightening swamp creature. It is in the moment that Prograis performs the mask that his audience sees this enactment of the Creole mythological creature; either they allow this performance to become real at that moment, complying with the performance of the Rougarou even though they are aware this is a

fictional character, or rejecting it, in which case the performance would not work and the mask would have no effect (Elliot and Conneller, 2021).

Prograis survived two hurricanes, including Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when he was just a child. In an interview in the *Sun* newspaper, Prograis claimed that, although Katrina destroyed his childhood, it made him the man he is today; that the hurricane took away any materialistic instincts from an early age: 'I learned in a split second that you can accumulate all this physical wealth, homes, houses, jewellery and clothes and God can just wipe it away from you'. The mask is multifaceted, as it is representative of Prograis' masculinity; through the mask, Prograis is able to construct a new masculine identity, a masculinity that has been shaped by surviving two hurricanes in his lifetime he is a survivor and, like the Rougarou, he is able to evolve, shift and adapt to adversity. Prograis' mask can also be seen as an object of material culture that embodies the struggle of New Orleans to rebuild itself after catastrophic events and the resilience that has shaped New Orleans and its people. Not only does it lean into Prograis' personal Creole heritage, but the mask brings to the forefront the rich mythology and folklore of New Orleans, which are all embodied in the mask; the fearsome shapeshifting creature as an event for masking audiences (Downes, 2021).

The mask has another function and purpose, however. The purpose of Prograis' mask is not just to perform his Creole identity and embody his masculinity, nor even to represent the New Orleans audience; the mask also has strategic potential. It is a tool of mind games within boxing to deter and put his opponent on edge before they reach the ring. This is a psychological tactic that many fighters who wear masks use. Just like his shape-shifting mask, Prograis professes to his opponent that he will transform through the mask and become like the Rougarou; will shift, change and adapt in the ring (Elliot and Conneller, 2021).

Former cruiserweight Michael 'The Bounty Hunter' Hunter, in his debut fight against Alexander Povetkin in Saudi Arabia in 2019, entered the ring wearing a Predator mask, in homage to the late-1980s horror science-fiction film *Predator*. Accompanying the mask, Hunter also wore printed trunks with images of the Predator and a goat's-head sculpture attached to the front of the shorts. In the film, the lead character is played by former bodybuilder and Hollywood actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is hired by the U.S. government to secretly rescue a group of politicians in Guatemala; Schwarzenegger and his team are hunted and pursued by the Predator, a fictional alien (Figg, 2019). Elliot and Conneller point out that masks, are

more than just representation; that they have more than just aesthetic value. They are relational because of their connection to the body and they can become a site of indexicality for the wearer; here, Hunter, like Prograis, is summoning the essence and presence of something monstrous, signalling a sense of danger to his opponent. By indexing the Predator Hunter is expressing through the mask not only his confidence in his ability as a fighter but, more than that, his own predatory instincts in the ring (Elliot and Conneller, 2021).

Former American light heavyweight Bernard 'The Executioner' Hopkins traditionally wore a black satin hooded executioners mask with an X in the center. Hopkins needed an outfit that matched and reflected his ring moniker, but the X referencing his ring moniker, 'The Executioner, is also, I would suggest, a nod to the 1960s political activist Malcolm X. Hopkins, a former street fighter with a criminal past, was no stranger to violence; at the age of seventeen he was put in Pennsylvania state penitentiary for multiple crimes. While in prison, Hopkins learned how to box; his mask is a reminder of his dark past, but is also indicative of his redemption as a boxer. He said in a press interview that 'I was ignorant when I was a kid, I was a thug. You have two kinds of people, lambs and wolves I was a wolf'. He also goes on to state

that 'I'd just look at a guy and he'd take his chain off without asking, I thought respect was having chains and nice clothes and money to spend'. As a professional fighter, he would often antagonise his opponents at press conferences by not speaking at all, reasoning in interviews that executioners don't talk (Schultz, 2017). For Hopkins middleweight title fight versus Puerto Rican native Felix Trinidad at Madison Square Garden, New York, in 2001, Hopkins nearly caused a riot during the pre-fight press conference by throwing Trinidad's Puerto Rican flag on the floor. For this fight, Hopkins wore a mask that reflected and embodied the mood of America; the fight was staged just weeks after the 9/11 terror attack on the Twin Towers in New York. To honour this historic moment, Hopkins entered the ring wearing a red leatherette executioner-style mask with holes cut out for the eyes, the tip of the nose and the mouth, and a large silver 'X' across the front, with a matching red and silver robe; around his neck he wore a bandana in the pattern of the American flag. Hopkins' mask is representative of his transformation from being a criminal on the receiving end of justice to being dressed as an executioner and a dispenser of justice in the ring (The Mirror, 2015).

Hopkin's executioner mask is also representative of his masculinity. No longer a street thug who was unable to construct his masculinity through his body and relying on material things to construct his masculine identity (Majors and Billson, 1992), he has transformed his masculinity through his body in boxing training and during social interactions with other men in the boxing gym into a traditional respectable working-class masculinity (Wacquant, 2004). The mask demonstrates how Hopkins has reinvented himself, his masculinity and his social identity, which has culminated in the ring. Later on in his career, at the age of 49, Hopkins reinvented himself again in the ring by declaring his new ring moniker to be 'The Alien' and wearing an alien mask into the ring, stating that someone as old as him and still in the ring must have been spawned by an alien (McCormick, 2014). Hopkin's 'bright green mask with a huge cranium tapering to a narrow chin small mouth with big black eyes' (Rosal, 2014), although appearing carnivalesque, is, I would suggest, indexical of Hopkins' otherness within the sport. His criminal past eighteen years in prison for armed robbery at just seventeen years old would have also made him feel othered within the boxing world and this sense of otherness is indexed in the performance of an alien. The alien mask is also political and cultural, as it is representative of and indexes Afrofuturism and Black power.

It presents, as Patrick Rosal (Rosal, 2014) observes, 'the alien as a manifestation of Black power in the tradition of funkadelic icon Sun Ra'; the mask is demonstrative of Black resistance and Black renaissance. Like the other masks, Hopkins' mask is strategic, helping him to enact mind games and to unnerve his opponent in the ring, while producing a sense of shock and awe in the mask's audience. Rosal points out that Hopkins confidence in wearing this mask into the ring indicates his dominance within the sport as a multi weight champion and his success as a multi-weight champion boxer (Rosal, 2014).

However, for his last fight, at the age of 51 and the oldest fighter ever to be in the ring, Hopkins reverted to a black hooded executioner mask. With holes cut out just for the eyes, and a black satin robe with blue satin on the sleeves, hem, and trim and a large blue satin 'X' on the back of the robe. He was flanked on either side by two large and muscley men also wearing black executioner hoods with holes cut out for the eyes and naked from the waist up, holding large executioner swords. This scene of Hopkins entering the ring flanked by two half-naked men is slightly homoerotic as it elicits a masochistic aura (Woods, 2006). Traditionally, medieval executioner masks would have been used to conceal the executioner's identity from the public;

Hopkins, however, does not wish to hide his identity but to perform his identity through the mask. The mask is also indicative of the psychological intimidation present in boxing structures, where fighters perform mind games with their opponents. Hopkins mask is tactical; it becomes a social actant, communicating his dominance in the ring to his opponent. What we find from the masks of Prograis, Hunter and Hopkins is that the masks are frightening to look at and are tropes of horror. Which also suggests that the masks are not just for theatrical display or for spectacle; fighters will utilise the object of a mask as psychological weapons to perform and enact mind games with their opponents before entering the ring while simultaneously constructing their masculine identities through the masks (Connell, 2005; Latour, 1995).

Donald Pollock (1995) observes that masks act by bringing together iconicity and indexicality of a particular cultural sphere, pointing out that masks become the semiotics of cultural identity and what is happening within that culture; masks can either be representative of identity or negate cultural identity. The large 'X' which is centralised on the front of Hopkins' executioner mask symbolises more than just a medieval executioner mask. It signifies Black activism and Black rights in America; by centralizing the 'X' he

is referencing Black activist figure Malcolm X. By performing the mask, Hopkins takes on the identity of Malcolm X in that moment and brings it to the forefront of his audience's consciousness. Pollock theorises that masks do not simply offer a visual aid of mystical beings, but the wearer of the mask is imbued with the identity of the indexicality it displays. In this instance, Hopkins is imbued with the identity of Malcolm X in the moment he puts on the executioner mask and presents that identity to his audience. Pollock observes that, although much has been documented on the symbolism and art of masking and masks, little research has been undertaken on the effects of the mask on the wearer and audiences; that the mask is indexicality for the culture of the wearer and a form of social impression management, particularly in Western society (Pollock, 1995).

Claude Levi Strauss (1988) observes that, although ritual Kwakiutl masks vary according to geographic region, they all correlate via underlying narrative threads. They all contain stories of how the masks came to be in their possession; some mythologies state they had been passed down from their ancestors, some that they had come from supernatural beings from the sky or water, but all the masks had similar rites and ceremonies. Here, if we examine the masks of Prograis, Hunter and Hopkins, although the masks are

different in appearance and have different indexicality and referencing, they all have the same function; to disarm and tactically intimidate their opponent. Just as the Kwakiutl masks induce an element of fear in audiences and tribes of particular regions of North America in various forms, so too do these masks worn by different boxers in different contests have the potential to elicit fear in their audiences and opponents. Strauss points out that 'each type of mask is linked to myths whose objective is to explain its legendary or supernatural origin and to lay the foundation for its role in ritual in the economy and within its society' (Strauss, 1988, p.14).

American light heavyweight Steve 'So Cold' Nelson was wheeled into the boxing ring for his debut with Cesar Ruiz in 2017 on a gurney wearing a 'Hannibal Lector' mask. The Lector mask was a prominent feature from the 1991 psychological horror film *Silence of the Lambs*. In the film, Hannibal Lector is a serial-killing psychopath and cannibal, once a former psychiatrist. Now in a high-security prison, who works with a young FBI agent, Clarice, while she tries to locate another serial killer who preys on young women. The mask in the film was worn by Lector to prevent him from biting anyone and to add to his aura of terror; here we see a pattern of the mask in boxing being representative of horror. When interviewed about his ring entrance for

Boxing News Online, Nelson stated that he sometimes makes his ring costumes and dress while in training for a fight; in this way, he not only showcases his boxing talents and ring prowess but simultaneously his creative and design abilities. The horror mask is an event; Nelson signals to his opponent through the mask that he is his prey. Again, we can see how masking in boxing is used to enact mind games. Nelson's Lector mask has a mouth that is open, while the original mask made for the film has metal bar restraints across the mouth opening to prevent Lector from biting anyone; this mask has an open mouth without restraints and two holes for the eyes. In North American Kwakiutl masks, often the mouth is open as they believe the soul enters and comes out through the mouth, while within western tradition the eyes are the windows to the soul and masking centralises the eyes. Pollock notes that masks are not merely representational or signals for other things that are being displayed, although masks do have an aesthetic use in most cultures or masking practices and can be considered works of art. However, for the audience at the moment that the mask is being worn, the supernatural being, ancestor, or character inhabits the mask wearer. That new identity then, during the masking event, becomes the wearer. Therefore, by wearing the Hannibal Lector mask performing this event, Nelson becomes,

through the indexicality of the mask, Hannibal Lector. The mask signals and performs the role of a flesh-eating cannibalistic serial killer at the moment prior to meeting his opponent in the ring. Creating a sense of unease in his audience and his opponent. If we look at these masks, the rougarou, the executioner, the predator and the Hannibal Lector mask all are representative of horror; whether mythical, historical, or psychological, they are all designed to achieve the same effect, to shock and unnerve their opponents through alterity (Pollock, 1995; Strauss, 1988).

The mask in boxing can also be considered as an object of material culture referencing wider economic, political and cultural issues that are occurring around the time the mask was worn. The mask can be used to highlight awareness of wider cultural events, or even as subtle resistance to mainstream ideologies. Hopkins' use of the 'X' on his mask suggests that the fight for equal rights for Black Americans is not over but is still very much a pressing social, cultural, and political issue; so Hopkins' mask worn publicly highlights this need to both the wearer and the mask's audience (Strange, 2013). During the pre-fight press conference and weigh-in ceremony for his fight with Kubrat Pulev in 2022, British heavyweight champion Derek Chisora wore a mask of former British prime minister Boris Johnson, demonstrating

his support of the prime minister who had resigned two weeks previously to the fight. What on the surface may seem gimmicky or theatrical also becomes for Chisora a masking event and a way for him to illustrate the current political climate of the United Kingdom; he brings to the audience's attention the mood of the time through the identity of the mask and, through this performance, indexes British politics for the mask's audience (Corby, 2022).

Annie Zimmerman (2020), discussing Pollock's view of the semiotics of masking, points out that cultures and communities assign cultural traits to the mask, and that the mask will function according to the cultural needs of its audience. For the mask to perform its function, the community need to accept the mask's function and the traits that it possesses; therefore, as an object of material culture, the mask will embody the community's identity as a whole, its economic beliefs and values, spiritual, mythical and social systems and the traits that have been assigned to the mask by the community, which are identity signifiers of the tribe, group, or community to which the mask belongs. The mask wearer simply performs back to the audience its ascribed identity.

Pollock maintains that masks narrate and communicate messages to an audience that is already aware of its message; the mask-wearer, however, performs this message through the mask. The mask can both conceal identities and transform identities for the wearer; the mask-wearer can conceal his own identity and transform his identity simultaneously in the moment he puts on the mask. Pollock also stresses that the semiotics in masking as indexing work because the mask references something already familiar to the mask audiences, such as animals that have special significance to the group. These animals may make up a considerable part of the audience's cultural and social identity, such as the bear providing meat and fur for provisions or the animals being revered or feared as part of the audience's cultural mythology (Pollock, 1995). The mask has transformative qualities; the mask-wearer can conceal his identity and take on the identity of the mask and the traits it holds in whatever form that is. In boxing, the audience in the boxing community are already aware that the mask is being performed to enact mind games, as this is a common trait within the boxing community; therefore, the mask is not an individual event as part of a pre-fight ceremony or ring walk it has shared values indexing the cultural trait of boxing mind-games that are embedded in the sport; the mask demonstrates

that it is a part of something bigger, a community, and the mask is imbued with the attitudes of the community (Pollock, 1995).

Furthermore, each individual mask for each fighter, although having a shared identity assigned to them by the community as being objects and bearers of tactical mind games, are simultaneously individual objects and icons that contain unique narratives and messages for the boxing audience and opponent. For example, the Rougarou mask worn by Regis Prograis during his ring walks communicates to his audience his Creole heritage and his pride in his indigenous culture, while containing a mythological element indexing the swamp monster. During Prograis' ring walk, he wears no robe and no covering for his torso; being naked from the waist up with only a mask signifies his eagerness to get in the ring and fight, which indicates his dominance to his opponent. The audience at the fight are caught up with Prograis's mask-wearing performance, and as Prograis states, they go crazy (Velin, 2020).

This demonstrates that there are themes within the mask that are multifaceted for the wearer; the mask adopts horror tropes and is strategically used to intimidate the opponent and shock the audience. The mask, I would suggest, is also representative of a fighter's confidence and

dominance within the sport as a champion. The mask however serves another function for the fighter, however. Boxers are at their most vulnerable on the way to the ring and already in a heightened state of anxiety before the fight occurs (Rushton and Greenough, 2016; Oates, 1985). The mask can provide momentary sanctuary, something they can hide behind. Prograis states that wearing the mask gives him restricted visibility and tunnel vision, helping him to block out the crowds of spectators on the way to the ring (Velin, 2020).

Pollock observes that masking comes in various forms and is not restricted to just being on the face; there are many ways in which you can cover and conceal identity while simultaneously creating a new one. Masks function to conceal or adapt parts of the body that make an identity recognizable and, by masking these features of identity or personality, offers in the process potential for new identities to be created by being transformed by the mask during social interaction and engagement (Goffman, 1956; Pollock, 1995). We see this masking by body covering depicted, for example, in the ring entrance of Ugandan-born lightweight boxer Shariff Bogere. Bogere enters the ring inside a cage with a lion skin draped around his arms, shoulders and back, while the head of the Lion is draped over his head constricting the view of his

face from fans and the audience. The cage is carried by four men wearing nothing but loincloths. Bogere moved to the United States of America at just eighteen to make his debut as a pro-ranking boxer. Bogere's manager discovered the animal, which was also from Bogere's native Uganda, was due to be euthanised for killing humans. After being put down, the animal skin was offered to Bogere's manager, and then incorporated into Bogere's ring walk, being demonstrative of Bogere's ring moniker, 'The Lion'. Bogere's ring trunks for his title fight with Raymundo Beltran in 2011 are just as elaborate as the dead lion skin that he wears into the ring; his trunks, which are black with the words 'the Lion' printed in gold lettering across the waistband at the front, are covered both front and back with a large printed image of a lion wearing a gold and green crown (Ferlisi, 2014). Pollock points out that the Kwakiutl community mythology uses the notion of animals metamorphosing into humans as they discard their outer animal shells to reveal humans underneath. These skins become the masks; then wearing the masks changes the human back into the animal ancestor. Pollock observes the mask is triggered by cultural identity, that they are not just images of supernatural beings or revered animals or deities, but that they are indexes of identity, which is what makes the mask so powerful (Pollock, 1995; Strauss, 1982).

Here, we see a sense of Bogere summoning his cultural identity and the spirit of the lion in his performance. Indexing his identity as an African first and foremost, the lion being an indexicality of his Ugandan culture, but not only his African culture is being indexed here; the lion is a powerful symbol in boxing mythology and folklore, which is why many boxers will use the lion motif in their boxing-ring dress and even in their marketing and advertising of a boxing event. There are also boxing gyms named after the lion, and one of the earliest references to the lion within boxing culture dates back to boxing's origins in nineteenth-century Britain when Tom Cribb, a bare-knuckle champion fighter who fought Jim Belcher for thirty-one rounds, was awarded a lion-skin belt with a silver clasp in 1809 (Gurashkin, 2015). Bogere here, then, references his cultural identity from both a Ugandan and a cultural boxing standpoint, by indexing the lion. The lion in boxing holds powerful symbolism as it denotes courage and bravery; Like Prograis, Bogere is transforming his identity through the lion-skin mask, constructing a primal masculinity while referencing the strength of the lion and simultaneously indexing his native cultural identity and the identity of his ancestors (Pollock, 1995). Bogere and his lion mask becomes an exotic and almost erotic spectacle for the audience and his opponent in the ring. Pollock notes that

research on masking is scant; many theories examine just the iconicity of the mask rather than how wearing the mask can affect the wearer. Masks are not just visual images of mythical or mythological beings but, he admonishes, the characteristics of the mask and identities and how they rest upon the wearer need to be considered (Pollock, 1995).

Elizabeth Tonkin (1979) points out that masks are best observed in action, not standing still, and that there is a trifold narrative between the mask, the costume, and the wearer. I would suggest that there are multiple narratives and a relationship between the mask-maker, the mask, the mask-wearer and the mask audience; that they are all intrinsic to making the mask talk and communicate to its audiences. She notes that masks, rather than concealing identities by covering the face, reveal new identities that are being performed through the mask, and mask audiences see this as the mask-wearer taking on a new personality and identity because of the mask. The mask-wearer, in effect, dies to their old personality in the mask while simultaneously creating a new one. This is where the power of the mask lies. It can erase old identities and form new ones, transforming the wearer and signalling to the mask audience this new identity. Combining this with Pollock's view of masks being indexical, we can say that the beings, animals,

deities, and mythologies which the mask is referencing have the power to momentarily transform the mask-wearer with new characteristics and a new identity signalled by the characteristics of the mask. Tonkin observes that these events of the mask contribute to its use in important rituals such as initiation ceremonies; masking is about events and relationships between the mask-wearer and non-maskers. The mask wearer's new identity being created through the mask, as she suggests, is where the mask derives its power and the power needed explicitly for the mask production.

Mask-bearers are powerful and have the means to possess and wear masks to enact power in their communities; masking has the means to pronounce power by nonverbal means. The mask visually expresses a culmination of the hopes and fears of its community. This is where its power lays, not only for the wearer but also those present, who can be transformed and changed through audience participation. The mask at the event is the primary focus of the entire community, being imbued with all the attributes and multiple meanings of their culture through its symbolism and, as Tonkin has observed, is even more potent as the face is obscured from the audience, which adds to the sense of fear. The mask then is not just an object that obscures

identification but rather, through the mask, new identification is being revealed (Tonkin, 1979).

British and Commonwealth featherweight champion boxer Nathaniel Collins frequently wears a mask as part of his ring entrances under the moniker 'The Nightmare'; his mask is in the shape of a face and looks like a prosthetic covering of the cheeks and nose, leaving just the eyes and his forehead in view. The mouth is a large, menacing, and eerie smile with gold-coloured protruding teeth like two fangs; the mask is attached with velcro across the back of his head and across the top. Collins stated when interviewed by Scottish newspaper the National that 'even if you don't remember my fights then you'll hopefully remember the guy in the mask, and it gets me hyped too; when the mask is on, it's time for me to fight' (Macpherson, 2020). This illustrates another purpose of the mask, that of leaving a legacy and being remembered as a fighter; Collins remarks that he will be remembered as the man in a mask even if he himself as a fighter or his ability or achievements in the ring as a fighter, are not remembered. This can be said for most maskers: Prograis, Hunter, Hopkins and Bogere will all be remembered within boxing culture and mythology for their ring entrances and their masks, and I would add the masculine identities that are constructed through their masks.



Figure 16. Nathaniel Collins and the Mask (Gillen, 2019).

Elliot and Conneller (2021) point out that the power of the mask is that it has the potential to bring other things into existence during the mask event; that the mask is a merging of many different things, animals, deities, symbols, nature. There exists a relationship and process of relations between the forging of the mask by the mask-maker and its materials and its performance by the mask-wearer himself. It is an object of material culture with a system of meanings narrated in the mask and a system of meanings related to the community to which the mask belongs.

Pollock points out that masks work not only by being representational, symbolic, and indexical, but by altering parts of the body through which we express forms of identity, such as hiding the eyes or mouth or focusing the eyes or mouth. The North American Kwakiutl are believed to symbolise the mouth as an opening for identity as souls enter and leave through the mouth, which is why many Kwakiutl masks have an open mouth, some with teeth or a lolling tongue. The eyes are either bulging or half-shut, according to which myth or legend the mask is replicating or presenting; the Kwakiutl Dzonokwa mask has half-closed eyes and an open mouth, while the Xwexwe mask has protruding eyes and an open mouth with lolling tongue. The Kwakiutl frog mask with copper teeth demonstrates and symbolises wealth; we can compare this to Collin's mask, which appears to have gold or bronze-coloured teeth suggesting wealth, although Collin's mask's gold teeth are most probably not real gold, which actually indicates a lack of wealth and therefore a lack of prestige within the sports hierarchy. Collin's mask, then, can only be considered in relation to the context of the sport as a theatrical mask designed to scare and incite fear in his opponent; the grimacing open mouth with gold-fanged teeth illustrates Collins's identity in the ring as 'The Nightmare' and a form of macabre toughness. Elliot and Conneller note that a

mask's aesthetic often designates its purpose or what it does; the aesthetics of boxing masks like Collin's black face-shaped mask with an eerie grin and fanged teeth which, like the other masks, is sinister, indicates their purpose in tactical mental warfare (Elliot and Conneller, 2021; Pollock, 1995; Macpherson, 2020; Strauss, 1982).

As Strauss notes of the Kwakiutl masks, each mask is inter-relational and can be understood not only through indexing a specific group or community but can be contrasted with other masks from neighbouring tribes and communities. When we think about the inter-relational aspect, then, of masking between tribes and the relational aspect of masking between mask-maker, mask-wearer and mask audiences, we can see that the object of the mask illuminates networks and systems, becoming an actant of sociality between the Kwakiutl tribes and the mask audiences. It acts as an intermediary object socially communicating not only the mythologies that are inscribed onto it and performed by the wearer for the group, but acts as an intermediary between neighbouring communities, socially indicating to which community a particular mask belongs. I would also suggest that masks are indicative of masculinities, that masculine identities are created and performed through the mask as the wearer takes on the identity of the mask

and transforms by wearing the mask into a new identity, constructing not only a new identity but a new masculinity which embodies the characteristics and mythologies of the mask. This may include new masculine identities that have been imbued with supernatural and natural elements, such as a deity from the ocean or sky or the earth that is considered godly by the group; therefore, through the mask as material culture, new identities and masculinities are being constructed and performed (Strauss, 1982).

To clarify my point, let us look at another male-gendered sport and examine the mask in American ice hockey, which is a prime example. Kathleen Bachynski (Bachynski, 2020) observes that the goalie in ice hockey was formerly expected to catch the pucks that would come flying at him in the goal without any protection for his head or face; any injuries that were sustained, for example, black eyes, the loss of teeth and scars added to his masculine prestige, the scars serving as markers of tough masculinity. The introduction of mandatory face masks into the sport was resisted by the goalies. Many refused to wear them or were afraid to wear them, as wearing a protective mask signalled a lack of toughness or masculine honour. The implementation of protection in a gendered sport that prized itself on masculine toughness meant new meanings of masculinity within ice hockey

were being constructed and produced; their hegemonic masculinities had to be negotiated as new masculinity was being made. Many goalies felt that the use of a protective mask during the game would feminise them and bring a reduction in what many sportswriters hailed as exemplary masculinities. This was because social meanings were attached to the ice hockey game, which was considered more about male toughness than just one team scoring points over the other (fights would regularly break out between teams during the game). Masking manufacturers had to find a way to persuade the players that wearing a mask would not mean they would lose their masculinity or dampen their toughness. They had to find ways to promote safety in the game without the loss of masculine identity, thereby creating a new masculine identity for the game through the mask. Here, we can see how the mask, as well as concealing identity, can be crucial in creating identities and, in this case, new masculine identities for the players, but in order to do that, companies had to find a way to make their protective masks socially safe for players as well as protecting their head and faces. After the 1960s, when players finally adopted the use of the mask they went to lengths to protect and keep their masculinity intact. Bachynski notes that one of the most memorable players for the Boston Bruins, goal keeper Gerry Cheevers, drew

the outline of stitches on his protective mask to show where the puck had hit him; each outline would indicate where the scar would be on his face if his face had been hit by the puck. The fake stitches allowed Cheevers to protect his masculinity during the game without having to incur real physical scars. Goalies were still reluctant to wear the mask, as the refusal to wear it was seen as indicative of tough masculinity. Other goalies mimicked Cheevers by embellishing their masks with all sorts of menacing imagery, from fanged animals to aliens and monsters. Bachynski observes that, today, in the National Hockey League, the most intimidating and frightening goalie masks are customary practice for players; creating a new narrative for the protective masks entailed convincing them that the masks were masculine and would not detract from their socially produced toughness and masculinity within the structures of the sport.

We see similar tropes with masks in boxing, as most of the mask's imagery is also menacing such as aliens, monsters, antiheroes and villains, creating expressions and idioms of what would be socially viewed as an intimidating masculinity. As with the National Hockey League, the mask indexes not only a specific culture, but through the mask tough scary masculinities are indexed,

constructed, performed and transformed by the mask (Bachynski, 2020; Pollock, 1995). Within the broader terrain of the sports field as a whole we can see that the mask can be offset and contrasted to its neighbouring communities. For example, the relationship between boxing and ice hockey, two masculine sports. As with the National Hockey League, the mask has the agency to transform masculinities that are produced socially through the sport. The mask, then, is more than theatrical or carnival; it is a part of sport structures. As Strauss observed of the Kwakiutl, masks are inter-relational and cannot be considered in isolation, as they each lend components, myths and legends and the performance of masculinity from neighbouring peoples and tribes. Strauss points out: 'We have seen that, on the contrary, a mask does not exist in isolation it supposes other real or potential masks always by its side, masks that might have been chosen in its stead and substituted for it'. He also goes on to say 'I hope to have shown that a mask is not primarily what it represents but what it transforms, that is to say, what it chooses not to represent. Like a myth, a mask denies as much as it affirms. It is not solely of what it says or thinks it is saying but of what it excludes' (Strauss, 1982, p.144). This suggests that, within the context of sports and masking practices within sports, the boxing mask must be juxtapositioned with masking in other

masculine sports, such as ice hockey, wrestling and American football. It is not to be viewed solely within the culture and structure of its own sport as it may borrow from other sports masks and be influenced by them in some way, or may say things, particularly regarding masculinities, that other sports masks cannot (Strauss, 1982).



Figure 17. Boston Bruins goalie Gerry Cheevers and his protective hockey mask

American heavyweight champion Deontay Wilder regularly wears masks into the ring; like Collins they form part of his ring identity. What differentiates Wilder's masks from his contemporaries and some of the other boxers whose masks we have explored is that Wilder's ring masks are ornate and elaborate

works of art. They are statement pieces; they communicate excess and are objects of conspicuous consumption, becoming more elaborate and exorbitant in price with each new fight. Wilder's mask, however, is not gimmicky or theatrical; as an object of conspicuous consumption, it becomes a visual demonstration of not only his wealth but also his prestige and positioning within the sport, as the world heavyweight championship being at the very pinnacle of the boxing hierarchy (Arond and Weinberg, 1952). The mask references his cultural position and success within the sports structure. For example, the gold and jewel-encrusted skull-shaped mask Wilder had commissioned by Los Angeles-based designers Cosmo Lombino and Donato Crowley for his ring walk to his first fight with British heavyweight Tyson Fury in 2018 is particularly grand. As Wilder stood in the wings waiting to make his ring entrance, his golden mask, which covered the bottom half of his face and is skull-like in shape, was accompanied by a matching tall golden-spiked crown with five gold column-like spikes and a bird-feathered cape draped around his shoulders. Lombino and Crowley, who custom-make Wilder's ring outfits, are both costume designers for films. The bird's feathers for Wilder's cape are excess feathers from a Stephen King horror television series that they had been working on (Boon, 2020). Wilder's mask, when walking to the

ring, produces a glistening effect. It illuminates his face due to its golden surface and is embellished with Swarovski crystals. Wilder's 'Bling in the Ring' had cost thousands of dollars to produce (Lombino and Crowley, 2020). The golden mask and spiked crown feeds into his mythical aura.

Tonkins observes that the concept of the mask is more than a symbolic representation or a disguise to conceal the face; it is transformative as well as being representative of a mythical spiritual being or ancestor. The mask-wearer during a masking ceremony or event is transformed by the mask and takes on a whole new personality. She points out that there is almost a process of death enacted by the mask as the face takes on a new image the image of the mask, which momentarily replaces the wearer's personality and personhood. They are intermediaries that can transform not only the wearer but also events, which is why she suggests they are often used in ceremonial practices or events. They have the ability during these ceremonies and events to cause the wearer to die to an old self and create a new one. Tonkins points out that, in African masking, there is a deep connection between death and portrait-masks and that these portrait-masks are indicative of death and rebirth, where two identities collide in the mask and create one

new identity. The mask, she notes, can claim a conquest over death as the wearer dies to themselves through the effacement of their face, and through the mask, there is a replacement of a new identity performed through and imbued by the mask (Tonkin, 1979). That power lies in the mask due to the interactions with non-maskers and the effects the mask has upon its wearer to transform not only the wearer but the mask audience, who are caught up in the masking event, especially during mask ceremonies and initiations or other masking rituals that are performed for masking audiences. The mask is reflective of the transformation that is experienced by the culture and community, to which the mask is iconic and indexing; during such ceremonies, the mask-wearer may also be imbued with power from the masking audience, attributing power and characteristics to the mask. The mask, therefore, can also be utilised to enact social control by expressing control and having an effect and creating impressions among its audiences (Goffman, 1956).

The audience is carried away with the performance and is not passive during the masking event, as the mask wearer elicits power that is imbued onto it by the audience. The mask has the power to exert control over its audience; as

Tonkins notes, the mask embodies power and is an object and conduit of power. In Wilder's mask, we see this power in action; Wilder's iconicity is one of power, as a powerful right-hand puncher who can knock his opponents out early in a fight Wilder's audience knows this about him. They are aware of his boxing style as he makes his way to the ring, and the mask, therefore, for Wilder, is indexical and a reference of power within the sports culture; his physical power as a hard-hitting puncher in the ring and his cultural and social power within the boxing community as a heavyweight champion (Pollock, 1995; Tonkin, 1979). Wilder's body embodies hard-hitting power and brute strength, and this is celebrated through his mask. This power is symbolised, and his identity is transformed by the mask as he states that, when he wears the mask he changes into his alter ego, The Bronze Bomber. The mask is indicative to his audience of his invincibility and masculine power in the ring. Wilder's mask is likened to a portrait mask, with the power to create a new identity for Wilder as he momentarily dies to his old self, becoming both the old combined with the new Wilder, a paradox of great boxing power symbolised through the golden mask and crown. The mask also, for Wilder, gives reference to and indexes his African ancestral heritage. Elliot and Conneller argue that the mask is a unique object for its power to

illuminate and show other signs of representation and bring to the forefront of the audience issues of importance (Elliot and Conneller, 2021).

Elliot and Conneller point out that masks are telling because of their connection to the body; their ability to embody the body or transcend it. For Wilder, the centralizing of the object of the mask is also highly subversive, as it interrupts and rewrites the narrative of an historical object in American history, the hooded white mask worn by the Ku Klux Klan, an object symbolic of white supremacy and Black terror, now re-inscribed as a celebration of African-American and pan-African heritage and masculinity. The lavishness and material expense of the crown and the mask are symbolic of an emerging genre of exhibited Black athletic masculine pride (Coad, 2008). When asked about his masks, Wilder publicly states that when he puts on the mask, he takes on a new identity as The Bronze Bomber, that he absorbs energy and power from the mask, that masking is a part of his African heritage and he is following African traditions. Wilder does not just exhibit the mask for his boxing fans; he inhabits it (Akopyan, 2020).

Like the other masks such as Prograis', Hunter's and Hopkins', Wilder's mask appears in the arena as surreal and otherworldly; it operates in a similar way

to the aura surrounding ancestral West African masking customs that entrance and captivate their audience. The object of the mask could also be considered assimilation of an object that is symbolic of African masculinity, such as the masks utilised by the Duru in Northern Cameroon. The Duru's gag mask is a pivotal object within the village initiation ceremonies and the celebrations of rites of passage that lead to manhood. The Duru chief receives the highest honour as the mask-keeper and a custodian of higher masculinity, as Jean Claude Muller observes in 'Inside, Outside and Inside-Out: masks, rulers and gender among the Dii and their neighbours': 'the Dii chief is considered to be the only true man of his chiefdom, a being superior to all other men' (Muller, 2001, p.59). In Wilder's case, the mask and crown, therefore, could be representative of chiefly regal Black masculinity. Levi Strauss points out that the aesthetics and styles of tribal masks are often influenced by or combine neighbouring tribes and that the styles and functions are not just produced in solitary, isolated groups; tribes are in inter-relation and, through relational networks, through marriage, war, rituals, and economic exchange, will borrow from each other's societies. Each tribe will have its mask, but will adopt ideas, styles or stories for the mask from other mask aesthetics from other tribes; in other words, tribes do not live in an

isolated world, where they come up with unique ideas that have no outside or surrounding influences by neighbouring communities. New styles of the mask communicate what other masks communicate in its own way or present something new that the other mask did not say (Strauss, 1982). Wilder's ostentatious mask embodies meanings and representations from other sports, like the American football player helmets and masks and the ice hockey masks; although they primarily function as protective objects, they are sports objects that automatically signify a heroic form of sporting masculinity, symbolic of male toughness, a tough masculinity and physical dominance. For Wilder, the mask signifies a revealing of his identity. It is a process of revelation. The luxuriousness of the mask's materials and its craftsmanship, which are a nod to the work of artist Damien Hirst and his iconic and controversial 'diamante skulls' (Kennedy, 2007), are indicative of Wilder's acquired economic and social power. The mask exhibits Wilder's success in the field; it is a trophy and is emblematic of how he rose from the amateur-level ranks of boxing to becoming the world heavyweight champion. American sports and gender sociologist Michael Messner notes from his findings on a study conducted in the 1980s of former male athletes:

'Respect' was what I heard over and over when talking with the men from lower-status backgrounds, especially black men. I interpret this type of respect as a crystallization of the masculine quest for recognition through public achievement, unfolding within a system of structured constraints due to class and race inequities (1989).

Wilder's mask signifies 'respectability' through his sporting and boxing achievements and acquired economic power; he has successfully gained access to American middle-class notions of respectable Black masculinity. As Louis Moore notes in *Fine Specimens of Manhood: the Black boxer's body and the avenue to racial equality, racial advancement, and manhood in the nineteenth century*: 'The newfound admiration for competitive sport and the brawny body allowed the working class athlete to transcend the limits of class, ethnicity, and race, and use his body as a proof of manhood, equality, and belonging.' He also states: 'middle-class men idolised the pugilist's body because of his noticeable muscles and the discipline it took to become a prize fighter' (2010, p.67).

In S. Kirson Weinberg and Henry Arond's 1950s sociological study *The Occupational Culture of the Boxer* they observe that 'fighters who remain in the sport are always hopeful of occupational climbing. This attitude may

initially be due to a definite self-centeredness, but it is intensified by the character of boxing.' 'Weinberg and Arond also suggest that:

'it can be inferred tentatively that the social processes among juveniles and adolescents in the lower socio-economic levels, such as individuals and gang fights, the fantasies of *'easy money,'* the lack of accessible vocational opportunities and the general isolation from the middle-class culture, are similar for those who become professional boxers as for those who are delinquents. (Arond and Weinberg, p.463).

The mask, therefore, is imbued with not only Wilder's newfound economic status but his accumulated sporting and bodily power; being the world boxing champion in the prized heavyweight division, it is also representative of his newly acquired hegemony. R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt in *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept* state: 'Rather, hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g., professional sports stars), symbols that have authority even though most men and boys do not fully live up to them' (2005). In this way, the mask serves as a motif demarcating the transitioning of Wilder's masculinity, symbolizing his shift from a marginalised masculinity to a hegemonic one. It becomes emblematic of Wilder's transition, metamorphosis, and the unveiling of his new identity and masculinity, a symbol of his Black masculine power. The mask is instrumental in fashioning and constructing Wilder's new identity. Wilder's identity is constructed, revealed, and unveiled through it.

As with Prograis, Hunter, Hopkins and Collins, Wilder's elaborate mask is proof of his boxing legacy; through it Wilder can be remembered and produce a legacy in the ring. He will always be remembered as a powerful puncher and as the boxer who wore the jewelled mask. Pollock observed that, for the mask to work, all those present must agree that the mask symbolises a prescribed set of characteristics of identity and that the mask is also a conduit of communication for the audience who have a shared knowledge and culture within the boxing community.

Wilder's mask also has a dissimulating effect; it operates as a distractive mechanism. The shift of the audience gaze is centred on the mask, thus allowing Wilder temporary sanctuary before reaching the confines of the ring. Like the mask worn into the ring by Regis Prograis the mask provides a shield which the boxer can momentarily hide behind on the way to the ring to almost block out the audience during the ring walk. As Joyce Carol Oates in 'On Boxing' points out, 'the boxers will bring to the fight everything that is themselves, and everything will be exposed, including secrets about themselves they cannot fully realise' (1987). Ratzan, R and Ratzan, peeler, K (2024) in 'On wearing masks' notes that most masks centralise identity from the heroic American sports star, wrestler, bank robber, and military mask.

They all converge on identity. Although they may have different functions, the mask is best represented in action; the mask can be anything that transforms a person's identity for good or evil purposes, but they need an audience and an audience to engage with the mask for it to function as a representation or representing something outside of itself. We all wear masks to some degree, whether physical or invisible masks; according to Erving Goffman all of our social interactions often include some form of masking, and we are all actors in our own lives and represent our identities from behind a mask. Wilder transforms and represents his identity through an elaborate costly mask (Goffman, 1956; Ratzan and Ratzan, peeler, 2024). It becomes his alter ego. His continued fascination and centralizing of the mask for his ring-walk suggest the mask for Wilder holds fetishist properties. It is an object of fetish (Hamlyn, 2003).

Willaim Peltz (1985) in 'The Problem of the Fetish' observes that the fetish as a concept has its roots in the cross-cultural lifestyles on the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Derived from the Portuguese word 'feitico', in Britain in the middle ages the term became associated with sorcery practiced mainly by the lower classes. The word's association with the sexual phallus as a concept did not arrive until the

nineteenth century. The fetish describes objects that emerged between different societies with different systems as they would place value while interpreting these cultural objects. The concept became divided between medieval Britain, Africa, and the newly emerging merchant traders. It is from within this backdrop that the object began to personify all at once a sequential material embodiment of religious, artful and commercial elements. The fetish would therefore be a physical embodiment of the cultures and religions of different non-capitalist societies that would meet and trade in culturally diverse regions. The fetish was basically of significance as an object of materiality that personifies different cultural societies, differentiated from the worship of spiritual or heavenly beings but a physical material object; the embodiment of the natural instead. The notions of commodity, modernism, and psychoanalytic fetish always concern the material object; the notions of distinctiveness and reoccurrence derived from its power as an object that brings together past varying elements to create a new identity inscribed with properties from a special event.

This is where the fetish power lies: in its ability, through its materiality, to produce an identity that embodies a narrative of desires, beliefs, and stories which imbue the fetish object with a power through repetition to repeat the

identity of the originating event by collating the relations of heterogeneous things. The fetish object was prominent as an object separate from the worship of a material idol which is unattached to the physical body, whereas the fetish object was often worn on the body. The concepts of idol worship predominantly involved a worship of a deity or demon; the fetish object, however, promoted positive effects such as healing. The fetish was also symbolic of areas of the body and, when not worn on the body, still represented certain body parts and what the fetish was able to do for the body, such as healing. This is why in the idea of the sexual fetish we find the projection and fixation of desire of the human body can be embodied in an object that is not necessarily attached to or on the body. The fetish power of the object, then, lies in its ability for repetition and redistribution and reconfiguring of gathered embodied elements from an original event. Peltz also observes that the concept of the fetish has no historical or culturally specific grounding or origins, that it belongs to no specific society of people but emerged in cross-cultural spaces as a way to add value to objects from a variety of different cultures and social systems; it has no theory of its own and can only be researched as a term that describes the communications of different social factions and systems from the sixteenth century onwards.

If we examine the example of Wilder's golden mask considering the fetish concept, then we can see how, for Wilder, the mask becomes a fetish object. An object imbued with his identity, his working-class masculinity; the object denotes his hierarchical power as an elite-level champion boxer who has won many fights and at one point was the world heavyweight champion. Each time he entered the ring, not only was he transformed by the mask, but the mask takes over, and he becomes an alter ego, The Bronze Bomber. The mask enacted in his boxing-ring entrances, then, is a continual reordering and repeating of an initial event where he had won a fight; all of the elements of the mask, therefore, in its construction and embodiment of Wilder's body, his personhood, his hopes, dreams, desires, beliefs and values, even his gender demonstrate the mask for Wilder is a fetish object. Each time Wilder wears a mask in the ring, he recalls this event through the mask, where he had won a fight and wore the mask as part of his ring entrances.

## Superstitions in Sport Religious Rituals and the Fetish

Boxers train extensively to be fully prepared for an upcoming bout in the ring, but even when the odds are in their favour by being matched with an inferior opponent, the outcome of a fight is never certain. The ring can be an

unpredictable and dangerous space; anything can happen. Professional boxers often enact superstitious rituals with personal and special meanings to aid them in this process, such as carefully chosen walk-out music, religious prayers, or charms. Sometimes these superstitions or charms for luck are interwoven into fighters' objects of dress, through motifs, embroidery, embellishments and colours, or the object itself can be considered good luck such as a lucky pair of ring trunks (Allen, Thornton and Riby, 2020; Rushton and Greenlough, 2016).

Georgia Allen, Claire Thornton, and Holly Riby (2020) observe of superstitions in boxing and sports, that there is a marked distinction within sports between superstitions practiced by boxers and religious rituals. However, both are significant as ritualised acts of repetition unrelated to functional aspects of the sport that are believed to bring luck and control in a sport full of uncertainty and risks. Repeating certain behaviours in a ritualised way before a competition or fight is believed by the boxer to assist them in the fight. If they forget to perform this ritualised behaviour and there is a loss or a poor performance in the ring, then superstitious rituals become the scapegoat for a poor outcome, and the loss can be blamed on not performing a superstitious repetitive act. Unlike superstitions, religious rituals, however,

are shown to have a more positive effect on the fighter, such as his overall well-being in the ring. If they forget to perform a religious ritual, this does not equate with poor luck, as there is a distinction between performing repetitive superstitious ritualised behaviour and simply praying before a fight for safety and success in the ring.

Anthony Maranise (2013) In 'Superstition and Religious Ritual: an examination of their effects and utilization in sport' observes that superstitions and ritualistic behaviours are so prevalent in sports that the media regularly reports on the issue. It is widely known that athletes engage in superstitious rituals almost religiously; sometimes, the superstitions are practiced by athletes individually and sometimes they are practiced collectively by the team; even coaches and managers engage in them. These rituals are not grounded, however, on rationality, but on the belief that performing them can have a positive outcome, and for boxers who are risking their lives going into the ring with each competitive fight they have, having some sense of control over uncontrollable events brings some comfort and agency. There are numerous reasons for superstitious behaviour. Some fighters enter the sport with their own superstitions prior to entering the boxing community. They bring these superstitions to a sport that is already

the perfect breeding ground for superstition and superstitious beliefs, and they may adopt more superstitions from being a part of the sport and from fellow fighters. This shows a personality more susceptible to superstition and superstitious behaviours. However, in a sport full of uncertainty, danger and high levels of risks, even a sceptic may, after a time, become converted and adopt superstitious rites to help with the anxiety and discomfort experienced directly before a fight.

Athletes and fighters may also engage in retrospective superstitions by reflecting on a win or competitive success in the ring. They may analyse a specific behaviour that led up to the fight, such as a ritual they performed or an object they had worn on their body and see this as helping them to achieve a successful outcome, and they may adopt this ritual or object as part of their pre-fight routine going forward, such as wearing a particular pair of socks or colours in the ring if they feel that it was this object or ritual they brought them luck and success and that they must include this ritual in all future events to have continued success. The superstition may incorporate a range of events before a fight and may even start in a fighter's training camp. Some have gone to extremes, such as not showering or bathing in the weeks leading up to a fight or directly before a fight, or performing things in a

ritualised, controlled way before a fight, such as playing certain music in their dressing rooms backstage and always eating a specific type of food hours before a fight (Arond and Weinberg, 1952).

While conducting my primary research and interviews with former champion boxers, former British Olympic champion middleweight boxer Tony Cesay, when asked about superstitions he may have in the lead-up to a fight or directly before, told me that 'yeah, things like I always did, things the same way, I made sure I was relaxed, played music and I breathed, you know, and I did the right things, the stretches, warm up, and it was like ritual, and I ate the right foods, you know what I mean, and, yeah, so I made sure I was always winning, you know, 'cos if you lost you knew why you lost, because you didn't work as hard as they did.' Here, Tony describes how he always did things repetitively before a fight. I would suggest it was a form of ritualised behaviour in that he always performed a particular routine repetitively and sequentially; this type of ordering and sequenced behavior also denotes a form of the fetish as Peltz points out that the fetish is in connection with an object or event that incorporates an ordering of an original event that brings together heterogeneous components into a new identity. For example, Tony discovered that by making sure he played music, focused on his breathing,

stretched his body and ate specific foods, this ordering of these elements in a repetitive way to create a unique event gave him a sense of control by preparing him for his fight. I would argue this could be classed as a type of fetish as well as a superstition or ritualised performance before a competition. Each time Tony performed his routine, it became a magical rite that would promote a sense of control over uncertain events, bringing him comfort, safety, and good luck in the ring. The power that lies in the idea of the fetish embodies, as Peltz suggests, tangible ingredients and an original account of structures, hopes, and belief systems; the fetish, then, is the power to collect these heterogenous elements and create a new identity of actions and things that communicate in unison and become a repetitive act of the original event (Peltz, 1985).

When I interviewed former British and European world champion super middleweight boxer James Cook about his own experience of superstitions in the ring and if he had any that he performed before a fight or in training, he answered that 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, listen, fighters when you reach a certain age, when you go to the gym, you hear the boys, them say, well, you can't have sex before a fight, you know stuff like that, you know automatically in your head, so I lived with my missus she used to put me in the next room to

sleep by myself'. He also stated that 'yeah, so that superstition, yeah, come in your head and if you do anything, you're thinking time, when I'm thinking you told your missus last time, so I'd never sleep with my missus six, seven weeks before a fight, you know what I mean, so yeah, that is my very soul mate, I know if I did, I know I'd be worried about it for a fight, so I tried to go with the rules'. Here James describes that part of his pre-fight routines and superstitions, which is quite common in boxing, is the idea of abstinence from sexual contact before a fight that sexual contact with a woman, or in James' case with his wife, could bring him bad luck in the ring. Fighters have to remain very disciplined and focused during their training for a fight, having to stick to strict diets to make their ideal weight for the weight class and strenuous physical regimes of exercising such as hitting the bag, sparring and running. James states that this abstinence was six to seven weeks before the fight while he was still in training, and that his partner was complicit in this rule, even enforcing it by making him sleep in a separate bedroom prior to the fight itself, so as not to do anything that would detract his focus on the fight and that might jeopardise him gaining success and a win. What is also interesting to note is that this superstition was common knowledge in the culture of the gym, with the other men in the gym all adhering to this

superstition. However, James enacted it in a way that is tailored to him, stating six to seven weeks before his fight and, while in training, and to avoid sexual contact and bad luck, he and his partner would sleep in separate rooms. Again this form of abstinence becomes a magical rite in itself, bringing James a sense of control over his body prior to the fight and possibly good luck in the ring (Peltz, 1985).

Allen, Thornton, and Riby note that superstitious rituals for fighters serve as coping strategies within the competitive field, and a remedy combining seemingly arbitrary elements from a previous event and repeating these elements in a sequence and a set order to bring order to the uncertainty that is experienced inside the ring. They also note that, to date, there is little research into the use of superstitious rituals or 'SRs' within boxing.

Superstitious rituals in sports are not usually discussed by athletes with one another, whether they are exhibited collectively or individually, but they are prevalent, which is why more research into this phenomenon is needed to understand the social and cultural structure of SRs in boxing, how these superstitions are formed, and how the superstitions are repetitively utilised and performed at specific times. Allen, Thornton, and Riby acknowledge that there are debates over the roles of superstition and religion in sports and

whether they both constitute the same thing, whereby the boxer will look to a force outside of himself, an external power, to help him in the ring, which is embodied in the ritual act or an object. However, they observe that the difference between the superstitious ritual and the religious ritual can be seen in that one provides a sense of control and the prospect of winning and success through luck in the ring. The latter provides comfort and protection in the ring and is not about winning or losing but safety and guidance.

Tyson Fury is known to pray with his entourage prior to entering the ring; he prays that both he and his opponent may emerge safely from the fight.

Fighters may perform a superstitious ritual before a fight and win in the ring, yet there is no tangible evidence that their superstitious belief has anything to do with their success. Former world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, who had worn red trunks into the ring three times in his boxing career, after losing to Joe Frazier in 1971 never wore red trunks again, as it was rumoured that he believed that the colour red had brought him bad luck in the ring and that is why he had lost the fight. This demonstrates that sometimes athletes will both perform superstitions prior to a fight for good luck and this can take the form of a ritual and special routine or fetish object or they may avoid certain things or objects that they class as bad luck,

sometimes even using the superstition or fetish object as a scapegoat for a loss in the competition.

Some athletes will use superstitious rituals to win, while other athletes will use superstitious rituals in the form of avoidance to avoid losing or as a reason for a poor showing (Allen, Thornton and Riby, 2020). Anthony Maranise (2013) observes that superstitious rituals proliferate in sports almost as acts of worship before a game or a competition. The sport superstitions, therefore, are important within sports structures just as much as the competition or game itself. This would mean that superstition would be a part of boxing structures; that not only are they performing a specific tailored routine prior to the fight but that these routines are in themselves at times a ritual and superstition and that the fighter believes these repetitive routines will give them back a sense of control in the moments before they enter the ring. He notes that both the superstitious ritual and religious ritual are ways that the athlete transcends the outcome of his circumstances and the fight to an external other, knowing and acknowledging to themselves that there is no certainty in the ring and that they are engaged in high-risk combat which could even cost them their life. Appealing to an outside force for help, protection or luck offers comfort in an uncomfortable setting for both the

athlete and his coach. Maranise also points out that the anxiety and superstitions prevalent in sports are not limited to just the athlete or player or even their coaches and managers but are experienced by fans and spectators. They may even engage in superstitious rituals on behalf of their favourite or team player (Maranise, 2013).

In my primary research, I interviewed former dressmaker for British boxing champions Sophie Miller, who told me that she had designed and produced boxing trunks for former British super middleweight champion Carl Froch and that he had wanted a Union Jack design for his trunks. Sophie stated that 'I put the Union Jack up on my sitting room wall and I didn't take it down until he won those belts, it was only a few months, but yeah'. She goes on to say, 'It's like "dont break the magic, don't break the magic", its silly, really, but you know, it's got those memories attached.' Sophie Miller demonstrates that she performed a superstition on Froch's behalf by keeping the Union Jack on the wall during his world title fight to bring him good luck in the competition.

Ukrainian world heavyweight champion Oleksandr Usyk regularly takes a cuddly toy with him to press interviews and his dressing room before a fight. In an interview for Dazn.com (2024) Uysk stated of the cuddly toy that 'it's

my daughter's, she gave it to me to be my talisman'. Usyk also kisses a crucifix held by his trainer at the ring post in between rounds during a fight. In his second match with Tyson Fury for the undisputed world heavyweight championship title, however, Usyk was barred from using the cross held by his trainers in between rounds as it was deemed an object that he was bringing to his mouth and caused controversy over whether there were any illegal substances on the cross. Critics were concerned that when Usyk kissed the cross, he could be inhaling illegal substances that would give him an advantage over his opponent. Usyk states in an interview with the Manchester Evening News that 'this cross was a present from the chief monk in one of the Greek monasteries where I go, this cross gives me strength and leads me to victory' (Astbury, 2024; Johnson, Evans, 2024).

Maranise observes that there is a distinction between superstition and religious ritual and that with superstition it is very much about controlling the pre-fight anxiety and lack of certainty and control within boxing, whereas practicing a religious ritual has a much more rounded effect on an individual and can be grounding for a fighter as they look to a source of power beyond themselves to take control of the outcome in the fight, providing a sense of safety and comfort prior to the ring; it can also have a positive mental effect

for fighters as, according to Maranise, studies have shown that religious ritual within sport benefits the athlete more psychologically. He also suggests that sports superstitions are distinctive to sport and are unlike general superstitions outside of the sporting field; in boxing, superstitions are even more specific as they are tailored to the fighters experience, his idiosyncrasies and his biography and are part of his pre-fight preparations before entering the ring.

Fighters may also adopt superstitions from other fighters or from within the boxing structure, which they may add to their pre-fight rituals and preparations. Although Maranise believes that religious rituals are more effective than superstitions in sports, as they may provide the athlete with more control and benefit them in a holistic way, promoting positivity in the face of uncertainty and potential life-threatening risks in the ring. He adds that religious ritual may help fighters become more focused in the fight. However, I would suggest that even a superstitious rite or superstition embodied in an object as a fetish becomes a focal point for the fighter's anxieties, beliefs and insecurities, helping to centralise any negativity in a ritual performance or a fetish object. Tyson Fury, in his trilogy fight with Deontay Wilder in 2021, after winning the fight via technical knockout, wore

an 'I Love Jesus' trucker-style hat with the Spanish words 'El Rey Viene' on the hat, which translates as 'the king is coming'. He also attributed the win of his fight to God and offered to pray for his opponent Deontay Wilder (Nag, 2021). This demonstrates how religious rituals, convictions and beliefs are incorporated into fighter's dress in the ring and how this theme is prevalent in boxing, with many boxers having a cross on their boxing trunks or robes; this was evident in the primary research I conducted as a participant observer at live boxing events and boxing matches at York Hall. I observed that one fighter had worn black shorts with the words 'God 1st' on the back of his waistband; another fighter had a cross on her pink and white shorts and came out to a gospel song called 'Praise You' by the contemporary gospel singers Mary Mary.

According to Maranise, religious rituals such as praying before a fight, having religious objects such as a cross, pendant or a rosary necklace, or embodying aspects of religion woven into their dress, are the boxer's attempts to keep God close at hand during the fight, thereby alleviating anxieties during the fight and possibly having a higher force on their side to secure a win, as many athletes will give praise to God after a competition when they have won. In a recent fight, on easter sunday in April 2025, for his fight with Liam Cameron,

British light heavyweight champion Ben Whittaker entered the ring to a Sheffield gospel choir, wearing a gold robe that had the words 'Jesus is king' printed on the back; his corner men all wore jackets with the same message (Maher, 2025).

For boxers, being part of something that is so much bigger than themselves, which no amount of training can fully prepare you for, brings pressures and tensions that most people cannot grasp unless they are exposed to them first-hand. The added pressures during the build-up to a fight and during the fight in the ring are so intense that having the idea of something existential that transcends their ability and skills can be comforting and reassuring for a fighter or an athlete; existential questions, as Maranise notes, may be inquired into by the fighter during this time of pre-fight tensions, pressures and struggles which, as he notes, can affect the athletes on a physiological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual level. This is why many athletes and, more specifically here, boxers give thanks to God post-fight (Maranise, 2013). Kasia Boddy notes of Jewish-American world lightweight fighter Barney Ross that 'according to legend Ross's mother came to accept his boxing, sewed the Star of David onto his trunks and Friday nights prayed for him at the

synagogue before walking five miles to the stadium to watch him fight' (2008, p. 261).

Marcus Jones (2021) for the online magazine *Premier Christianity*, points out that a study conducted by sports psychologist Jeong Keun Park in 2000 on Korean athletes showed that athletes who have a spiritual belief and who pray demonstrate better performance, and that having spirituality helped to minimise anxiety before a competition, allowing the athlete to be more present in the game or the competition, and therefore achieving a better overall performance. Jones discusses how this provides the athletes with a sense of safety, and athletes who rely on their spiritual beliefs are not limited by the competition results. If they win or lose, if they have given the competition over to God, they are not weighed down by the outcome but can focus explicitly on delivering their best performance. This knowledge gives them a competitive edge over their opponents, as these religious beliefs may also contribute to the athlete feeling specially selected by God to perform in the sporting arena which they are in; athletes that have these convictions are likely to perform better than athletes who have no religion or spirituality. According to Jones, such athletes will also be able to handle disappointments more easily, as having faith has taught them to keep going. For athletes in

combat sports, spirituality and religion have even more meaning (Jones, 2021).

David Daniels of The Bleacher Report.com (2018) also cites Park's study of Korean athletes, but notes that faith can not only improve performance by believing in a higher power, but also enables athletes to believe in themselves, which helps them to be more present and affects their performance in the competition. He observes that many athletes pray before, during and after competitions. Park, however, although he acknowledges that having a faith is grounding for those athletes who practice their faith, states that this does not mean that they have a competitive edge over their opponents who do not have a faith or spirituality (Daniels, 2024). This demonstrates that spirituality within combat sports such as boxing has even more significance for fighters than for athletes in general sports; boxing is fraught with danger being a high-risk sport, athletes can even die in the ring. Spirituality is often embodied within a fighter's dress, and spirituality within their objects of dress can become a loci for their faith and can mean that they have actively taken their spirituality into the ring with them like a lucky charm, giving them a sense of divine power. This can help fighters to be more present in the ring, as having their faith embedded in their dress can bring

additional comfort and confidence. At the same time, their dress that incorporates their faith can be the focus of all their insecurities, anxieties and doubts they may have before or during a fight (Daniels, 2024).

Former American heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield, for his WBA title fight with Mike Tyson in 1996, came into the ring with a purple and black satin robe with the Bible verse reference 'Philippians 4:13', which states 'I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength'. This reference was incorporated into the lapel of his robe in silver lettering, and on the bottom left of his purple satin boxing trunks; the waistband of his trunks was in black with the word 'Holyfield' stitched onto a purple background, giving it a patch-like quality, which was then sewn onto the waistband. Holyfield was up against one of the most challenging and youngest world champion heavyweights in this fight with Tyson, but he managed to secure the win (Gayle, 2022).

Tyson Fury also likes to adorn his dress with scripture verses from the bible, with one of the most iconic bible references, 'John 3:16', having been on the back of his olive-green and gold boxing-ring sleeveless jacket for his first world heavyweight title fight with Ukrainian heavyweight champion Oleksandr Usyk in 2024. Oleksandr Usyk in this fight performed another

religious ritual by kneeling in the corner of the ring and making the sign of the cross before the fight. What was notable about this fight is that both fighters were Christians and professed to have faith, which would have affected both of their performances and made for a better fight as they would have channelled this positivity from their spirituality into the ring. Fury embodies his faith in his dress, and Uysk performs his faith through religious rituals inside of the ring prior to the fight (Jones, 2021).

Arond and Weinberg (1952) observe that fighters and coaches will employ superstitions in boxing in a variety of ways. A fighter's coach may employ superstitions when managing their boxer; some fighters have a ritualistic diet that becomes a form of superstition if they believe that eating certain foods will bring them bad luck, for others, boxing-ring dress, such as robes and trunks become talismans and objects of good luck in the ring, especially if they have been worn in previous fights where they secured a win over their opponent. In which case they will try to repeat this success by wearing the same object or repeating the same routine which then becomes a superstition or magical rite. Arond and Weinburg observe that 'one wore an Indian blanket when he entered the ring; many have charm pieces or attribute added importance to entering the ring after an opponent.' They

also observe that 'Joe Louis insisted on using a certain dressing room at Madison Square Garden.' There are also, they point out, superstitions regarding women, including beliefs that, if women attend training sessions, this will bring them bad luck in the ring; they give the example of one fighter who purposely walked under a ladder before a fight to demonstrate that he was not superstitious before a fight and that he did this so often that it became a magical rite in itself'. Arond and Weinberg also discuss the religious rituals that are traditional in boxing; that, within boxing culture, the fighter's religion or beliefs in a higher power take on more intensity and strength of meaning. They go on to suggest that many fighters will express their religion and incorporate it into their pre-fight routine and even attach it to their superstitions, so that lines can become blurred between what is a traditional superstition and what is religious superstition. Fighters will demonstrate their religious convictions by taking rosary beads or crosses into the ring, by having crosses or Bible verses stitched onto their ring trunks, jackets or robes, they may, as Arond and Weinberg note, have a Bible in their dressing room or spend the morning before a fight in a church; religious beliefs in this setting within the boxing culture are therefore ramped up, taking on a new intensity and concentration. They note that fighters may even adopt superstitions

from other cultures within the boxing milieu locally or internationally. They also observe that fighters will often wear objects or clothes that belong to a particular fighter that they admire, such as their trunks, or they may feel that if they touch the champion somehow their fighting style may rub off on them. Or some go to the lengths in training camps of sleeping in a champion's bed or might adopt names of fighters they admire; some fighters purposely mimic styles of training or try to reproduce modes of training and training routines of champion fighters this still, to some degree, can be interpreted as superstitious behaviour, as these fighters may feel that by mimicking a champions posture, fighting styles and movements this will also bring him success in the ring (Arond and Weinberg, 1952).

We see this mimicking in the boxing style of Mike Tyson, who publicly states that he took inspiration from former Panamanian middleweight champion Roberto Duran for his fighting style. More recently, American heavyweight champion Deontay Wilder takes inspiration for his ring moniker as the Bronze Bomber from former world heavyweight champion Joe Louis the Brown Bomber. We also have the example of British light heavyweight boxer Ben Whittaker, who took inspiration for his boxing-ring dress from former British featherweight champion Prince Naseem Hamed, who was known for his

signature ring-wear look of leopard print on his trunks; Whittaker has also worn leopard-print trunks and a poncho into the ring, suggesting that fighters are not only channelling a former champion's fighting styles or dress to achieve success in the ring, but that this also feeds into boxing superstitions, as fighters find ways to channel the auras and luck of champions (Arond and Weinberg, 1952). British heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua, who regularly wears the colour white in the ring, mimicked Muhammad Ali's boxing-ring style in 2024 by having a bespoke white robe and trunks made in the same style as the one that was made for and gifted to Ali by Elvis Presley. I would suggest that wearing a white robe decorated and embellished in rhinestones for his fight with British heavyweight champion Daniel Dubois was a way for Joshua to channel the aura and luck of Ali. This demonstrates that, by embodying a visual style of successful champion fighters in the ring, emerging fighters can hope to carry that success with them into the ring this object of dress, such as Ben Whittaker's leopard-print trunks emulating former champion Hamed through dress and mimicking his fighting style, becomes a type of superstition, in that instance giving Whittaker an extra boost of confidence in the ring enabling him to perform better (Brookes, 2023). Therefore, through enacting superstition and religious ritual, fighters

can, in the face of unknowing, maintain a sense of agency and power in the ring (Arond and Weinberg, 1952).

Mexican fighter Julio Cesar Chavez, who regularly wore a red headband into the ring, first wore this object initialled with his name in a fight in 1987 with Edwin Rosario. Chavez was told by someone close to him that his opponent's mother, a witch doctor, had cursed Chavez by placing a photograph of him into a bucket filled with ice water. The curse would mean that he would become cold in the ring and unable to fight. Chavez was told to wear the red headband into the boxing ring to thwart these attempts to curse him and to protect him in the ring. Chavez was not only protected in the ring but won the fight, and from then on, the red headband became part of Chavez's signature boxing-ring dress when entering the ring (Title Boxing, 2023).

Leading up to a fight Chavez would have with Greg Haugen in 1993, many Chavez fans gathered in the car park outside of the stadium where the fight took place to watch Chavez do an open workout before the fight; the fans were wearing Chavez's iconic red headband. The red headband was also worn by Chavez's son, Chavez Jr, who wore it into the ring as his father did and had a successful boxing career (Barrios, 1993). The red initialled headband worn by Chavez into the ring becomes a fetish object and a

talisman. It provides him with safety and protection in the ring, as he believes that by wearing it, it wards off evil spirits and this will give him success in the fight; the audience wearing the red headband during Chavez open workout is indicative of fans performing superstitious rituals on the athlete's behalf and, with Chavez' son wearing the same headband into the ring, the legacy of the fetish object is passed down from father to son. The headband would also be a superstitious object that embodies sports superstitions by wearing it; it allows him to minimise his anxieties and worries and focus on the fight at hand, providing him with comfort and confidence during the fight.

Undisputed Ukrainian world heavyweight champion Oleksandr Uysk regularly takes a soft toy of Eeyore the donkey from the Disney story *Winnie the Pooh* backstage into his dressing room before a fight; he first had the soft toy when he was defending his world title against British boxing champion Anthony Joshua in 2022, and the toy played a key role in Uysk's pre-fight preparations and superstitions. Uysk had bought the teddy for his daughter while on a trip to Disneyland Paris after fleeing Ukraine with his family; Uysk's daughter gave him the toy, Uysk states, for good luck and to be his talisman before they were separated when he went off to Saudi Arabia for his training camp. The toy has remained by his side. He would sleep with it, and his daughter told

him to take it to press events. Uysk also keeps Eeyore in his dressing room before a fight (Astbury, 2024). This indicates that, for Uysk, the Eeyore teddy is both an object of sports superstition and an object of fetish; the toy was given to Usyk for good luck in the ring but also has a protective element. Usyk's daughter had given him this object as a way to protect him in the ring; it is not only an embodiment of his daughter's love and a protective object, but embodies Uysk's family, his home in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian war with Russia; I would suggest that it is an object that is embodied with and representative of multiple narratives. On winning the fight with Anthony Joshua, Usyk continued to keep the toy next to him for subsequent fights for the undisputed world heavyweight championship title fight with Tyson Fury in 2024. In keeping the toy close to him at media events and backstage in his dressing room before the fight, the toy recalls the original event when he first used it in 2022. It takes all these heterogeneous elements his daughter, his family, the Ukrainian war, family holidays at Disneyland Paris, and the toy as a good luck charm, its protection in the ring and brings them together to become a fetish object made from the heterogeneous elements of an original event. This event was his fight with Joshua. He won; in this way, every time Usyk has the teddy bear close to him in other fights, this is a sign that he will

win the fight. In an object of superstition, as Peltz suggests, everything is concentrated on and fixated on the object and its ability and power to repeat and order an original event; this would mean the toy could be classed as a fetish object within the sport (1985).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has investigated the practice of masking in boxing and how masking can assist fighters in creating new ring identities and subjectivities and help them to construct working class boxing masculinities. The mask in boxing can have multiple functions and meanings for fighters, from providing them with a moment of sanctuary, something to conceal them on the way to the ring, to indexing their cultural heritage or enacting mind games with their opponents prior to a fight. The mask within boxing, like the protective masks for the American ice hockey player (Bachynski, 2020) helps the fighter in constructing new social masculine identities, it becomes a gendered object and an object of material culture embodying wider social and political issues, representational of the boxing community, particularly the practice of mind games within boxing which is employed by the mask. Masks are more than objects of art or aesthetics; masking is an event that encompasses the mask-maker, the mask, the wearer and mask audiences, and traits are ascribed to

the mask during the mask performances by the audience (Strauss, 1998). Therefore, masking in boxing, although it may appear theatrical, is symbolic, as with the alien mask worn by Bernard Hopkins, which has deeper meaning and is indexical of Afrofuturism and Black power. The masks work in relationship with the fighter and his audience as social actants and intermediaries, embodying a fighter's cultural heritage, nationality, personal narratives and stories. During the ring entrance and mask performance the wearer creates a new social identity, taking on the ascribed traits of the mask that are known by the wearer and the audience. Such as Deontay Wilder's golden skull shaped mask, which denotes excess and power indicative of Wilder's success within the sport and his powerful punching ability, as well as being an object of conspicuous consumption. By wearing a mask into the ring, fighters can create legacies which means that they will be remembered within boxing folklore. As well as helping fighters to create a ring identity, when worn repeatedly the mask has fetishist properties for fighters and can also become a talisman or good luck in the ring as a part of boxing's superstitions and religious practices.

This chapter examined superstitions in sports and specifically in boxing and how athletes will enact superstitious and magical rites before getting in the

ring, through rituals, religious iconography or spiritual practices and through objects of dress as lucky charms or talismans. Fighters may bring to the sport superstitions of their own and will adopt superstitions that are already embedded within the sport's structures; some will emulate former champions for luck in the ring such as a boxer's fighting style, dress or ring monikers and aura (Arond and Weinberg, 1952). Superstitions help fighters to stay calm and maintain a sense of control before and during a fight; however, fighters will also rely on their spirituality for mental strength during a fight and this manifests in different ways such as carrying or wearing rosary beads or a cross into the ring, or having motifs or embellishments on their dress such as verses from the Bible or biblical statements. Superstitions in boxing can take many forms, from holding a cuddly toy to wearing a headband or from abstaining from sex, food or alcohol before a fight (Wacquant, 2004).

# Chapter Four

## **'Boxing is for men and is about men and is men'**

### **Introduction**

For a better understanding of the contextualisation of dress, identities, and performances of professional boxers, it is necessary to dedicate a chapter that explores how masculinities are constructed within sport. Masculinities are particularly inseparable from men's dress, identities, and performances in the ring. This chapter examines the different racialised masculine identities within boxing, such as how traditional constructs for example, of white working-class masculinities, are prized within the boxing community, even romanticised, eliciting nostalgia for a time when respectable white working-class masculinities were constructed through hard graft and labour during the industrial age and the first half of the twentieth century.

Both fighters from within the United Kingdom and the United States converge on issues of class and gender, however, in the UK the working-class boxer is emblematic of a time where working-class men could produce a tough, traditional masculinity through the body both in labour and in collective identity within the working-class community. In British boxing a

fighter becomes symbolic of the ordinary man, or the people's champ. In the United States, however, class and gender are intertwined with issues of both class and race, with boxing often reflecting the identities of marginalised Black or Latino men within the working-class community. Professional boxers' masculine identities are constructed and performed through a racialised lens and as Majors and Billson note, a 'cool' pose as an embodied identity and performance. Through the vehicle of style, Black American male boxers can reclaim some agency and control, demonstrating both their collective and individual expression. British boxers may borrow the style patterns of their transatlantic counterparts, resulting in the working-class boxer being positioned both geographically and symbolically: locally grounded and yet globally interwoven (Majors and Billson, 1992; Wacquant, 2004). Therefore this chapter will explore sport as a male institution and gendered space and as a civilizing process of masculinity in Britain, while exploring how working-class masculinities are constructed in sports such as boxing as lensed through Raewyn Connell's masculinities theory in particular her notion of 'body reflexive practice' (Connell, 1995) and Eric Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009). Sport is the perfect platform to analyse working-class masculinities and how they have evolved and developed over

the years, which leads to a discussion of Michael Messner's work on masculinities within sport and the media, and how the media within sports is a gendered space and a predominantly masculine world (Messner, 2000). We then look at working-class Black masculinity and race within sports in both the United Kingdom and America with a critical race lens, where there are themes of veiling and masking of race, and how there is an inter-male gaze, particularly in American sports, of men gazing on men through the ritual of scrutiny (Du Bois, 1994). This chapter delves into working-class masculinities in boxing, reviewing the icon of the white-working class hero in boxing while also looking at how working-class masculinities in boxing are constructed, produced and sustained and how boxing masculinities and boxing-ring identities are then embodied in a fighter's ring dress. Lastly this chapter explores the concept of masculinities and boxing auras; how boxers have a presence in the ring and how this manifests through their ring entrance and ring dress.

## Working-Class Masculinities in Sport

The institution of modern British sport was formulated to operate as a male preserve, a patriarchal realm instituted for men (Elias and Dunning, 1986). In 'Sport as a Male Preserve: notes on the social sources of masculine identity and its transformations' (1986), Eric Dunning observes that the patriarchal nature of modern sport has only been questioned by a few feminist writers. However, writers such as Kasia Boddy (2008), Joyce Carol Oates (1987), Kath Woodward (2007) and Loic Wacquant (2004) have made valuable contributions to the canon of boxing studies. Dunning points out that the sociology of sport is an understudied field, particularly with regard to boxing. According to Sarah Crews and P. Solomon Lennox (2020) in 'Boxing, Bourdieu and Butler: repetitions of change', the available scholarship on boxing is mostly written by men about men and their boxing experiences. To get a more balanced view, more ethnographic studies by women need to be undertaken to lend female voices and female perspectives on boxing, although I would argue that, because boxing is a messy and complicated sport, it cannot simply be observed; it is a corporeal and sensual bodily practice that needs to be felt and experienced through the body to be

completely understood, and to undertake more sociological work in boxing there needs to be more ethnographic work via participation (Wacquant,2004). I would also argue that there are not enough researchers that have undertaken research within the field of boxing that are from the same socio-economic backgrounds as the fighters, and that, as much as there is a lack of female perspectives and voices in boxing scholarship, there is also a lack of working-class voices on boxing within academia resulting in most researchers not having the cultural understanding of the sport and the working-class men that are its recruits (Crews and Lennox, 2019; Dunning, 1986, pp.1-2). More research needs to be undertaken to understand the working-class masculinities in boxing and how traditional working-class masculinities are constructed within sport, as much of what has been documented about working-class or traditional working-class masculinity is stereotypical and denigrating; what is lacking in the sociology of sport and gender studies is the voices of working-class men themselves. There is also a paucity of relevant scholarship on the white working-class man and how white working-class masculinities are being constructed and produced more generally (Baron, 2006). I would suggest that boxing provides the perfect portal through which traditional working-class masculinities can be examined

and understood and how masculinities in sports are changing and fluctuating more broadly. Although there is a lack of substantial research on white working-class masculinities and how they are constructed, I have found that traditional working-class masculinities can be analysed through a critical race lens, as I would argue that there is a correlation between Black working-class masculinities and white working-class masculinities more generally as they converge and meet on class and that they have undergone similar experiences of being marginalised. Particularly when exploring the Black American underclass and white British underclass, I would suggest that boxing provides a good stable site for these masculinities to be unpacked explored and understood. W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon both observe that Black masculinity is often veiled or masked, with Black men having a double consciousness, holding two identities in their bodies: both their real authentic masculinities and the Black masculinities that they are expected to perform in public. Majors and Billson observe that Black masculinity is hidden behind a false front, public performances, and a persona of cool. This is further compacted in the field of boxing, by the types of masculinities that are being constructed: working class masculinities that are also veiled, behind

a performance, and a front of hyper masculinity and toughness (Du Bois, 1994; Fanon, 1986; Majors and Billson, 1992).

American sports sociologist Michael Messner (2013) and British sport sociologists Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning all observe that sport originally and historically emerged within industrial cities as a form of mock battle between men, out of a need for men to exert physical strength and bodily power in a society shifting with technological and industrial advancements, which no longer required the brute physical strength of men for war. Sport created spaces for men to continue to produce a tough and aggressive traditional masculinity and masculine style; through games men could continue to construct their masculinities through the body, and boxing soon became a pastime and a sport that exemplified traditional masculinity (Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1990).

Dunning observes that sport as a mostly male institution constructs and reaffirms a type of hegemonic masculinity, a hegemonic masculinity which is produced through the body, and as sports are naturally physical and competitive, they are instrumental in activating masculine bodily aggression, particularly in combat and or contact sports such as rugby, football and boxing, where fighting through play is a key ingredient and is symbolic of

sanctioned expressions of violence. Within these sanctioned arenas of sports, the addition of rules to govern the display of aggression and violence led to a civilizing process, which helped to maintain internal and external control in sports in nineteenth century England, and was representative of the civilizing process happening more broadly in society during the industrial age.

Nonetheless, the sports arena has remained a patriarchal realm where traditional masculinities are constructed and produced through the body (Dunning, 1986, pp.3-5; Elias and Dunning, 1986).

Messner points out that, historically, the introduction and popularity of variant sport practices have always contained an underlying political, economic, technological or cultural driver and were usually driven in response to external threats to masculinity. From nationalist fears during the transition from the Regency to the Victorian period and the anxieties associated with French effeminacy, to changes such as industrialization, capitalism and the women's liberation movement, masculinity was often fluctuating, reacting and adapting to cultural shifts and having to renegotiate new ways to construct fixed hegemonic manly values. This was often achieved by reasserting the loss of power through the body. However, with change came decreasing opportunities for men to exert bodily or physical

forms of dominance and power, except for those who were in the military or the police services. With the new cultural, political and economic changes that were taking place nationally, men's access to producing and displaying masculinity traditionally through exerting physical bodily strength was gradually being immobilised; now such displays were controlled, minimised and restricted to the confines and spaces of the industrial factory floor, the military or the feminised domesticity of the home. This would have produced an emasculating effect, which is why I would argue that sport is a perfect platform through which we can also analyse the fluctuations of and changes in masculinities and, in particular, working-class masculinities (Messner, 1990).

Boxing has traditionally always been the sport of the lower classes, a way for working-class men to settle disputes. Today boxing is still considered to be a sport of the working classes (Arond and Weinburg, 1952). During the British Regency period, when bare-knuckle fighting first became a popular pastime and cultural practice, it was illegal across Britain and in most states of America . At the end of the nineteenth century, with the addition of the Marquess of Queensbury rules to civilise the practice, and the addition of the

boxing glove, the sport was renamed boxing and became a legitimised sport and spectacle.

The political systems that structure elite-level boxing and police its champion fighters are not dissimilar to the political systems that are often compared to the orthodox church. The institution of professional boxing is a priesthood of masculinity (Wacquant, 2004). Its priests/fighters adhere to rules of abstinence while preparing for an important title fight, which includes strict diets and no alcohol or sexual contact. Fighters will maintain this monasterial abstinence while simultaneously maintaining a hypermasculine mask and performing their duties for the press and within the ring. This is why Madison Square Garden in New York City has often, within boxing circles, been called the mecca or temple of boxing, a sacrosanct sacred space that has been historically famed for hosting legendary prize-fights (Leibling, 2018).

In 'Sport Identity: politics, gender and globalization' Joseph Maguire (2011) observes that 'sport practices became occasions for competitive national self-assertion'. Sports can represent or be representative of individuals, communities and nations; from its very beginning sports have performed this role for many. Because the sporting field is a male arena and institution, sports therefore play a key role in the constructing of masculinities and male

identities. Sport has also become a site for self-asserting men's national pride, competitiveness, and national identities in a time of globalization. National identity is embodied within male competitors; it becomes a crucial part of his habitus, which is expressed through competitive sports (Maguire, 2011). In *Boxing: from male vocation to neurotic masculinity* (2017), academic and amateur boxer David Scott observes that there exists an ambiguity of masculinities in the sport of boxing; men were encouraged to show aggression in sports but were also expected to remain disciplined and gentlemanly outside of sports. Historically, sports in Britain were considered the preserve of men. During the twentieth century, as boxing developed, amateur boxing was introduced into private schools along with rugby and cricket to teach young boys how to be men; while the manly attributes of boxing were seen as a virtue in schoolboys, however, for the professional fighter boxing was still a sport associated with the working-class man. Most prize-fighters hailed from working-class trades, and during the British Regency era fighting men were often patronised by the upper classes as a source of gambling and entertainment. More ambiguity could be seen in the way that, on the one hand, professional prize-fighters were looked down on socially for their rough and hard-working class masculinities and aggressive

natures but, on the other, their manly attributes of courage and resilience which was demonstrated in the ring, were prized and even romanticised. From its beginnings, then, boxing provided a way for the successful prize-fighter to earn instant respectability (Scott, 2017).

Scholarship that has been emerging within masculinities in sports, particularly over the last decade and a half, includes work by sociologist Eric Anderson (2009) and his ethnographic research on 'inclusive masculinities' and subsequent 'inclusive masculinity theory'. Anderson's study indicates that there is a softening of masculinities within sports, as new, softer, more open and authentic expressions of masculinities are being produced. This softening of masculinities, however, Anderson observes, is reactionary to the social and political changes taking place in sports more generally regarding gender and sexual politics. This is demonstrated in that the key driver for the softening and emergence of more authentic masculinities within sports has been primarily due to the fostering of inclusivity in homosocial sports spaces for its gay male athletes. This reduction in homo-hysteria within sports has both disrupted and inverted the production of traditional hegemonic masculinities in sports, particularly contact sports such as rugby; this has had effects on the structuring of masculinities within sports, which has had, I

would suggest, an emancipatory effect for all in the institution of sport and its predominantly male heterosexual gender order. Heterosexual athletes now no longer feel constrained to perform outdated archaic and archetypal versions of stoic masculinity, which would have included the production of homophobic and sexist masculinities and traditional masculinities that only demonstrated emotions through bodily action on the sports field. This new inclusivity, I would suggest, has helped to construct and produce new presentations of traditional masculinities within sports, masculinities that have become much more fluid and inclusive authentic masculinities that are more emotionally literate and expressive.

In 'Physical Capital and Situated Action: a new direction for corporeal sociology', Chris Shilling (2004) observes that, within the body, there are different forms of physical capital, and that these differing forms aid bodies in entering different types of social and career-advancing environments. He notes that physical capital, like currency can be converted into cultural capital, and that differing bodily dispositions construct differing masculinities which are suited to certain careers or environments; such as the armed forces or the special air services, where strong bodies and physical capital is required to succeed. Historically, during the era of bare-knuckle fighting,

most pugilists originated from a working-class trade where brute strength and bodily skill was needed, so much so that, often, fighters were named after their trades and their ring monikers would tell you what trade they had (Johnson, 1987). Boxing is one of the few remaining spheres where the physical strength and skill of men is required or traditional working-class masculinity is needed, so within boxing fighters can utilise their physical capital as a route out of poverty. This is why boxing automatically appeals to the working classes, as it requires the production of a traditional masculinity, a masculinity that is constructed through the body and with physical action, and a body that is used to taking punishment or taking risks. This demonstrates that, within the constructions of masculinities, there are differing bodily dispositions that, I would suggest, make certain careers or fields more suited to one type of bodily disposition than others. This may explain why, for example, the middle-class masculine body would be better suited to office work or office careers, and may not be able to exchange their bodies in boxing for the boxing economy or marketplace, which requires a different bodily disposition for fighters to succeed (Bourdieu, 1984; Shilling, 2004). Wacquant notes that the body, regardless of what new social world or activity it enters, is pre-dispositioned for its original world, which makes it

difficult when entering a new social milieu. When researching the Woodlawn gym in Chicago in the late 1990s, Wacquant entered the boxing gym with very little bodily or social capital for boxing, as a middle class academic French man with little experience of sports and a differing bodily disposition to the bodies of fighters; this, I believe made his journey in the boxing gym as a participant observer and amateur boxer more difficult than, for example, a young Black working-class man from the local area who may have been used to street fighting or had constructed harder and rougher forms of working-class masculinity through the body. To clarify my point, in my interview with him as part of my primary research, Tony Cesay stated that 'you just had to learn how to look after yourself, so I boxed anyways, you know, so it was just fighting in schools, I fought for everything I had to fight for, so it was a natural thing'. He also stated 'it's just the area I lived in, you know the area I lived in, I lived in an area in, um, in Poplar, East London, in Stepney, so them areas, you had to fight people came and take took stuff off you'. Tony here indicates that he hadn't intended to be a boxer or go into the sport of boxing, but that it was a natural result of growing up in a tough environment and constructing a tough working-class masculinity through the body. Bodily dispositions, then, I would argue, are crucial if a fighter wants to succeed in the boxing

world, and a working-class male body, because of its inscribed habitus, will have more success as a professional fighter because it has already been conditioned to be in that environment and the fighter is used to performing his working class masculinity through his body (Shilling, 2004, pp.7-9). Scott (2008) observes that boxing is emblematic or a metaphor for wider social political, economic and cultural difficulties, and these impact the production of masculinities, as working-class masculinities in boxing are being constructed in response to the outside world and wider social and political concerns and changes. But it is difficult to analyse and pinpoint working-class masculinities in boxing as, from the late eighteenth century to masculinities in today's modern times, masculinities are always being produced within a state of flux in boxing due to the sport's ambiguous nature. I would argue that boxing is a paradoxical sport; boxers are expected to be violent and aggressive in the gym and in the ring where violence is sanctioned and acceptable. On the other hand, they are expected to be controlled and nonviolent outside of the ring and to keep their emotions in check. Boxing is also paradoxical, in that fighters are both the perpetrators of violence and, on the other hand, victims of violence in sport. I would suggest that fighters are therefore both aggressive and passive simultaneously (Scott, 2017, p.10).

In his article 'When Bodies are Weapons: masculinity and violence in sport' (1990), Messner points out that male violence terminology suggests that men are automatically prone biologically to violence, but that not all males are violent and not all masculinities the same (Connell, 2005). Yet within organised sports, particularly boxing and rugby, men instituted such combat sports as a response to shifting balances of power with women and fewer opportunities socially for men to assert an aggressive style of masculinity or to use violence. Messner also notes that not all men are prone to violence biologically, but that violence is learned behaviour (Connell, 2005). Messner also suggests that, in combat sports such as rugby and boxing, masculinity comes at a cost, as often men are wounded and hurt; particularly within sports such as boxing, punishment to the body is to be expected, even welcomed by its participants. In this way, men are not only the perpetrators of violence but are also the recipients of violence; therefore in sports such as boxing hyper-hegemonic masculinity comes at a price, as fighters risk their bodies and lives in the ring and their bodies absorb punishment by default, as this is what they signed up for when they chose to fight.

Raewyn Connell (1995) observes in chapter three of her book *Masculinities*, titled 'Men's Bodies', that sport is designed to produce gendered bodies, but

that the body isn't just sociobiology and gendered from birth, nor a passive body just to be socially inscribed upon, but that bodies are actively involved in constructing gender. Masculinities, according to Connell are constructed therefore, both actively through the body and through socialization and relationships within other gendered bodies. So within the homosocial spaces in sports, sports being a patriarchal gendered institution and realm for men, we can see how specific forms of traditional masculinities are constructed; none more so than in boxing, which is a hyper-masculine sport. Here we can see how, within boxing, which involves an active body, a body that is produced and gendered as it interacts socially with other male bodies both in the gym and in the ring. Connell points out that bodies or men's bodies are pivotal in understanding masculinities, as men's bodies are continuously on the move, active, doing something; they get tired, age, engender, get sick, get injured they are in a constant state of flux, and this cannot be ignored in understanding notions of gender, gender construction or when looking at the sporting male body. Therefore, to understand how boxing masculinities are constructed it is crucial to centralise the male body and how it is socialised relationally through interactions in the gym (Connell, 1995; Wacquant, 2004).

Connell also points out that neither can the biological or the sociological of their own process explain the construction of masculinities, in this case masculinities in sports, but that it is through a process that she terms as body-reflexive practice; that through both the physical body and socialization or relationships in homosocial spaces combined, a particular type of masculinity is constantly being constructed reflexively through both the bodily interactions and the social and relational interactions inscribed in the body. If we take the example of boxing a sport that is designed to construct specific traditional tough working-class masculinities through the body, through the corporeal repetitive routines and practices through the body and the constant social interactions physically with other traditional tough working-class masculinities in the gym. This type of masculinity is constantly being produced and affirmed reflexively and, being surrounded with other men, this specific masculinity is being constantly produced. New masculinities that are introduced into the boxing milieu would learn to construct a hyper-hegemonic traditional form of masculinity reflexively through this body-reflexive practice. As we saw earlier, it wasn't long before Wacquant had learned to construct a boxing masculinity in the Woodlawn gym in Chicago and in the ring, even going as far within the sport as to

compete in America's Golden Gloves tournament for amateur boxers (Connell, 1995; Wacquant, 2004).

Messner, in 'Reflections on Communication and Sport: on men and masculinities' (2013), observes that sport is a site where traditional masculinities are produced and that, in sport, we see perfect homosocial institutions for men to continue to construct and preserve their traditional masculine identities. He also points out that traditional masculine identities are drummed into men from a young age through sports media and the sports media complex. Sports within this complex becomes a commodity to be sold, and through sports traditional manly values are constructed and reified and this is then communicated to young men who are trying to hold onto an already-fragile and threatened traditional hegemonic masculinity. We can see how this is exemplified in sports such as football, where young men construct traditional masculine identities through belonging to a football club or being a part of the homosocial atmosphere on the terraces of their favourite football teams. Messner also points out that it is specifically through advertising, branding and the media that these traditional sporting masculinities are continuously being constructed and held up as examples for young boys to mimic and follow; we see this with the constant influx of

celebrity football players, football merchandise, matches and games, all of which contribute to the production of traditional hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Therefore sports becomes a site and a solution to an already-outdated type of traditional masculinity; I would also add that the sports media complex is also, like sports, a patriarchal and gendered masculine space where traditional masculinities are constantly constructed and validated.

What we find, then, is that the sports realm is a space where men can still exert physical power through the body and re-enact their physical aggression of battle through games. Sport or games enabled men, through being in these homo-social spaces, to continue to construct and perform traditional masculinities socially and, through their bodies reflexively, sport provides a sanctuary for traditional masculinities as it provides homo-social spaces, relational male bonding, and male bodily contact. Not only are traditional masculinities being preserved through the body, but, I would suggest, new nuanced versions of traditional sporting masculinities are simultaneously also being constructed through the body, as is the case with inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009; Connell, 1995). As we have seen, both Connell and Messner maintain that the body is central to gender cultivation through its

physicality, but also through the relational, the social and the institutional; that it is through a combination of these factors that traditional masculinities are sanctioned and produced. The male body in sports, specifically combat sports, takes a lot of punishment, and this punishment in boxing is considered to create specific conditioned hard bodies and an exemplary form of traditional masculinity. Boxers, especially heavyweight world champions, being at the very top end of the sport, therefore are emperors of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1990). However, as we have seen through the work of Anderson and IMT, the heterosexual performances of masculinities within sports are being redefined, as more and more masculinities in sports are becoming more inclusive, which demonstrates that, even within hyper-masculine sports such as boxing, a regeneration of gender through sports is possible, as new and inclusive masculinities are being fostered. This interrupts and disrupts the traditional cultural and political order of sex and gender within sports, and these new masculinities within sport create a ripple effect that impacts society more broadly, as the field of sports welcomes these changes (Anderson, 2009).

Although I would argue that, even with these new changes being implemented with the fostering and production of new types of more

inclusive traditional masculinities within sports, the arena of sport, and boxing in particular, however, still have a long way to go. For example, British middleweight fighters Chris Eubank Jr. and Liam Smith, during the build-up to their bout in Cardiff on February the 5<sup>th</sup> 2022, threw homophobic slurs at each other, which resulted in an official apology from both fighters to the LGBTQ community and Chris Eubank Junior aiming to show support by wearing a rainbow armband for the pre-fight press conference and weigh-in ( Davies, 2023). What this also demonstrates, however, is that at some level, however small hegemonic heterosexual masculinities that are being repetitively constructed in sports, are being disrupted to become more inclusive and accepting, allowing more space within the patriarchal institution of sport and particularly boxing for its gay athletes (Anderson, 2009). The aggressiveness that is fostered within boxing structures and the hyper-masculinity that is constructed by fighters can at times be dangerous if it is not kept under control; even in the ring many fighters have died (Joyce Carol Oates calls these 'death fights'). We see this in the example of a a welterweight bout in 1962 between Caribbean champion Emile Griffith and Benny Paret. Benjamin Lee of the *Guardian* points out that Griffith, who was a bisexual man, had led a double life as a closeted gay male boxer in New

York in the 1960s; during the weigh-in ceremony Paret had ridiculed him about his sexuality, standing behind him and gesticulating intercourse then calling him a 'maricon', the Spanish word for gay. That night Griffith beat him to death in the ring; Griffith once famously said of the boxing community and boxing fans that 'they could forgive me for killing a man, but they could not forgive me for loving a man' (Lee, 2015). During his time as boxing champion, Griffith felt unable to disclose his sexuality and would have masked it beneath a hyper-masculine identity; it is only in recent years that this has begun to change. The prejudice that Griffith faced in boxing would have reflected society's views more broadly, which tells us that Paret's homophobic views would have been common of most men at that time. What this also is indicative of is that Griffith would have had a triple consciousness; as a Black gay man in boxing he would have had to mask not only his Black masculinity but also mask his his sexuality behind a veil of traditional hegemonic heterosexual masculinity in order to succeed within the sport and in the ring (Fanon, 1986; Lee, 2015).

There is some evidence that masculinities in sports and, in particular, boxing are changing and boxing masculinities are becoming more fluid, softer and more inclusive; we see this happening in sports more generally but in boxing,

as such a hyper-masculine sport it is more pronounced. For example, women's boxing is flourishing, with more and more female champions emerging that are now being given as much acquiescence as male champions within the sport. The emergence of inclusive masculinities in boxing can be emblematised and embodied through dress both inside and outside of the ring. Dress, then, in this context, becomes dynamic; not only is it representative of a fighter's style, politics, culture and a host of other things that dress can represent for fighters, but it is representative of the changes in masculinities. Dress in boxing becomes an object of material culture as it signifies what is happening in society more broadly as a signifier of the social, cultural and political shifts that are taking place, and it starts within the field of sports. Dress in sports, then, can be indicative of how there is a slow restructuring of more inclusive masculinities that is occurring within sports, and how contemporary sporting and boxing masculinities are adapting to these changes and are being redefined (Anderson, 2009; Connell, 1995; Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1989). Dress, then, becomes representative of the changing face of working-class boxing masculinities (Anderson, 2009). A good example of this can be seen in the bespoke suits worn by Tyson Fury outside of the ring and in the public eye, as he uses his suits to campaign for mental health

and in particular men's mental health. One suit that Fury wore to a press conference had his face printed in a variety of muted pastel tones all over the fabric of the black suit, along with the words 'mental health' (Downes Jr, 2020).



Figure 18. Tyson Fury's mental health suit (Downes Jr, 2020).

Fury, who struggled silently with his own mental health for years, is now openly declaring his struggles in front of the media; his suit's creation of conversations around men's mental health is encouraging and indicative of how society is changing in its attitudes and acceptance of mental health, particularly regarding men's mental health. In this way, Fury makes it possible

for other men to come forward and be open about their struggles. We see this in other sports such as men's football, for example; more and more male athletes are admitting they struggle with mental health and have come forward and opened it up for discussion. So, then, Fury's mental health suit acts as a marker of societal and cultural change more broadly and how masculinities in sport are changing. Fury's suit becomes an object of material culture as it embodies and communicates these changes (Downes Jr., 2020).

Puerto Rican lightweight champion boxer Orlando Cruz also demonstrated his openness about his personal struggles through dress and, in particular, his boxing-ring dress for the world featherweight title bout in 2013 with Mexican fighter Orlando Salido. Cruz wore rainbow-coloured trunks in the colours of the LGBTQ flag; he had waited twelve years to come out as gay within the boxing community due to fears of being rejected or of negative consequences. Cruz, now retired, also wore the trunks in homage to the late Emile Griffith, who had waited years after his retirement to admit that he was a bisexual athlete. Cruz stated 'I came out so I can also be a better boxer now I have respect in the streets and the ring' (Jerreat, 2013). But, to date, no other boxer has come out as openly gay since Cruz. Cruz in an interview with Lewis Watson (2023) for boxing website Bad Left Hook stated that 'as

boxers we are expected to all be the same, tough, strong and intimidating, but this should have no bearing on sexuality', going on to note that 'thankfully we are beginning to see athletes from other sports come out as gay and act as inspiration for others to follow, but I fear that boxing will be left behind and many young men specifically will suffer.' In terms of Cruz's own boxing and working-class Puerto Rican masculinity, this would have been constructed and produced in the boxing gym and would have been constructed through his body and social bodily interactions with other male fighters as a traditional hegemonic masculinity exhibiting male toughness and a hyper-masculine body. Having an ethnic identity, Cruz would have already been marginalised within American society, and may have feared being ostracised within his own community for coming out as gay, which makes Cruz coming out as gay to the boxing world publicly during a world title bout more poignant. I would argue that by being transparent about his sexuality and interestingly communicating this through his dress, Cruz manages to both retain the hyper-hegemonic masculinity that is constructed in boxing culture while being open about his sexuality as a gay boxer; Cruz also stated 'I wanted to become world champion and felt that doing so would take all my focus and my energy. Coming out relaxed me.' Here Cruz indicates the relief

from the burden of hiding his sexuality in a tough male-dominated sport and the fears that he would have carried for years of being discovered within the boxing community as gay. I would argue that his objects of boxing dress are objects of material culture and that the rainbow boxing trunks represent more than just a statement of his sexuality but they embody and are emblematic of his struggles, fears, his masculinity and his politics, as they embody the changing face of masculinities and how society and culture is changing around men's sexuality in sports. Like Griffith, Cruz's rainbow-coloured fight kit is a visual marker and embodiment of Cruz's triple consciousness within the boxing community and his masculine identity. But, through dress, Cruz was able to come out and construct his masculinity in boxing as an openly gay man, transforming a marginalised masculinity to a respectable masculinity as a proud gay Puerto Rican man. I would suggest that Cruz trunks and jacket embody his masculinity and, more than that, they assist him in the construction of masculinity. Cruz's rainbow-coloured jacket and trunks speak volumes; they become a device allowing Cruz to openly declare and communicate his sexuality and his boxing masculinity and identity. I would also argue that, Raewyn Connell's theory of body-reflexive practice and masculinities being created through the body relationally

through social interactions with other men's bodies parallels Latour's notion of objects working in relationship with humans in social interactions and that through these interactions new social identities are made and can be traced (Latour, 2005; Watson, 2023).



Figure 19. Orlando Cruz's rainbow-coloured trunks (Jerreat, 2013).

In 'Rethinking traditional masculinity as constructed multiple and hegemonic masculinity' Brittany Everett Penhale and Kopano Ratele (2015) observe that many studies use the term 'traditional masculinity' loosely, as a term that covers a fixed static hegemonic masculinity. I would argue that 'traditional masculinity' is not a one-size-fits-all, as this doesn't account for the many nuanced masculinities of traditional masculinity in everyday life. Many men such as working-class men that perform traditional masculinity have no access to hegemonic masculinity in terms of economic, political and social

power. Traditional masculinity does not automatically equate to aggressive or violent masculinity and not all men who produce traditional masculinity are violent, homophobic, or misogynistic. More ethnographic and empirical research is needed on traditional masculinities, in particular working-class traditional masculinities, as these seem to be underrepresented within sociological and gender studies. Penhale and Ratele point out that 'traditional masculinities' can be a combination of old patterns of masculinities and the new, and are not necessarily a fixed archaic binary. They also suggest that traditional masculinities can be positive identities, as past traditions of how masculinities are constructed and performed can adapt to cultural change (Penhale and Ratele, 2015).

I would argue that much of what has been documented about masculinity can be stereotypical; what is lacking in the literature or gender studies is the voices of men themselves and, more importantly, working-class men. I would argue that men and boys are subjected to a lot of scrutiny within gender studies, and there seems to be a mythology around the subject of masculinity and men's bodies, when in fact traditional masculinity is subjective and diverse and is subject to different environments; for example the construction of traditional masculinities among a group of bikers in the

United States would differ from the masculinities produced amongst nightclub bouncers in Britain (Connell, 1995). This indicates that more empirical research is needed in the study of masculinities in a variety of geographic settings to understand what it means to be male, as masculinities are geographically specific and subject to their environment; if we are to learn more about working-class masculinities or traditional masculinities (and those within sports), we need to accept that masculinities are diverse and are lived experiences, subjective experiences, that are inscribed and constructed in the male body, and that these masculinities are constantly adapting and changing through as Connell observes body-reflexive practice and men's bodies interacting physically and socially with other men's bodies in a specific environment. Which I would suggest create new nuances of traditional masculinities. We can see this through the examples of Fury and Cruz and how these new traditional masculinities are being communicated through their dress (Connell, 1995; Latour, 2005).

Gary Whannel in *'Media Sports Stars: masculinities and moralities'*, writes that 'the growing professionalism of sport and the greatly increased financial rewards have together produced greater pressure for dedication and commitment'. He also observes that 'tabloidization and the pressure for

success have encouraged a culture of surveillance in which miscreants are punished by publicity, and subjected to the disciplined control of their occupation' (2001). This tells us that, although on the one hand champion boxers are publicly appraised and admired in the ring for their hyper-masculine performances and sporting achievements and are almost mythologised by the sporting press for their triumphs in the ring, both the public and the press are quick to vilify sporting champions that deviate from the expected adherence to the moral silent code of honour that operates outside of it. For example, if we look at Tyson Fury and his struggle with mental health and drug addiction, Fury was admired for his performance in the ring when he became world heavyweight champion in 2015, but was condemned in the press shortly afterwards when he struggled with bipolar disorder, drugs, binge eating and depression. Outside of the ring Fury was expected to be controlled and his conduct to be gentlemanly. However, by being open and honest in public about his personal struggles with addiction and mental health, I would suggest, he now defies outdated narratives and performances of traditional 'hyper-masculinity' within boxing and in the media, offering a new narrative and re-framing of boxing masculinities. The disparities and contradictions in gender performance within sport, and the

high personal dividend for male celebrity athletes, in particular professional boxers who are expected to conform to and perform both a hypermasculine role in front of the press and within the ring, to attract global audiences. This is more so for professional boxers, as the sport media coverage is intense, particularly in the run up to a title fight (Whannel, 2001).

Within the sporting realm as a patriarchal institution, however, what also becomes apparent is that there has been limited visibility given to women athletes, especially within sports media coverage, and instead there is a covert sexualization of women within sports, sports media and advertising within the sports/media/commercial complex. Messner, Dunbar and Hunt, in their studies of mainstream American sports media and advertising entitled 'The Televised Sports Manhood Formula', observe that 'images or discussions of women athletes is almost entirely absent in the sports programs that boys watch most'; they also go on to note that 'when they did appear, it was most often in stereotypical roles as sexy masculinity-validity props, often cheering the men on'(2000). Here Messner et al. provides a clear illustration of how sports media is also a gendered space and of the underlying hegemonic structuring of the sports/media/commercial/consumption complex, and how these arms operate in conjunction within the institution of sport and its core

ideology as a male preserve. They illustrate the hegemonic monopoly sports media holds in the global sporting economy, in socializing young boys and men through its sports media and advertising channels to be active participants, perpetuating an ideology of sporting heroic masculinities. Through these processes, these sporting masculinity narratives are continuously perpetuated, normalised, valorised, and reproduced. Gender, therefore, I would argue, is also being constructed and reproduced within the physical and digital media spaces through boxing podcasts, live audio and visual coverage of mega fights, fighting commentary, sports scholarship and sports media pages. Boxing is institutional and its culture and the boxing world has a broad nexus; these spaces are an extension and another branch to the hegemonic boxing masculinities that are repetitively being produced in the gym and the social and relational routines of training. In other words, the media is also a gendered space and another space where traditional boxing masculinities are being continuously constructed, produced and valorised. The intense media build-up to a prize fight and media coverage of fighters demonstrates this. Therefore, masculinities are not only constructed through the body in the gym behind closed doors, both physically and socially through the bodily interactions, but these masculinities are also constructed within

the media platforms; this is especially so in boxing media, as it is during the run-up to a fight and during boxing ceremonies where fighters' bodies are put on display during press conferences, public weigh-ins, and face-off ceremonies, within these spaces that are also extremely gendered, that these traditional boxing masculinities are produced and reaffirmed. With the figure of Fury we can see how the media can also be a space where new, more inclusive, traditional masculinities can also be constructed (Messner, Dunbar and Hunt, 2000; Wacquant, 2004).

As they also provide opportunities for boxers to demonstrate what is important to them, as we have seen with Fury who, although previously vilified by the sports media, has now become open and transparent within the media and uses his fame to advocate for the mental health community in a sport that requires male toughness and hardness, these traditional masculine spaces are becoming more inclusive and allowing men to show their vulnerability; which is emblematised through Fury's dress (Downes, Jr, 2020).

## Race Representation and Working-Class Masculinities Within Sports

One of the themes that has emerged through the secondary research and the literature of this study is the pattern of masking in boxing; physical masking in boxing is the subject of Chapter Three, where the object of the mask is incorporated into boxing-ring entrances, but there are other forms of masking in boxing the masking of sexuality, for example, as we have seen with fighters Emile Griffith and Orlando Cruz. There is also a masking of gender and race, which we see particularly when examining Black masculinities in sports and, more specifically, in boxing. In critical race theory, Franz Fanon observes that, historically, Black men have not only had to mask their race but, for Black men, this meant masking their masculinities. Therefore, within boxing there is not just a literal mask utilised by fighters for boxing-ring entrances but a symbolic one. Franz Fanon's (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks* observes that, for Black men, there is a masking of internal masculinity and race; Black men felt compelled to mask not only their masculinity, which was considered hypersexual, predatory, inferior, dangerous and primal, but their race which was also considered to be inferior and subhuman. This led to a 'double consciousness', as Black men were

forced to hold within their bodies two conflicting identities a Black male consciousness and identity and the performance of a white masculine identity in order to conform with a white supremacist society. Kasia Boddy (2008) observes that, within Frantz Fanon's work, we can see how Fanon tries to dissuade the Black man from being reduced to his body. He observes that true emancipation for the Black man is for him to separate himself from being just a body. In boxing, there are many Black fighters, and fighters inhabit their bodies which perpetuates this narrative (Boddy, 2008; Fanon, 1986; Wacquant, 2004).

Jamaican British sociologist Stuart Hall (1993) observes that Blackness in dominant society has been reduced to being a cultural signifier or merely representation, which doesn't allow or account for the multiplicities of Blackness and Black identities or the multiplicity of masculinities within race. Hall asserts that being Black and the experiences of Blackness are subjective; that Blackness has been relegated to something that is inscribed in the body, not a person with a history, genealogy, dual nationalities, sensibilities, politics or as part of a wider diaspora. There are parallels here with Franz Fanon's idea that, through representation, the Black experience has been relegated to the body; we can also see parallels with Wacquant's work (2004), as

Wacquant points out that boxers inhabit and live in their bodies that, in effect, they are their bodies. What can be noticed from both Fanon and Hall's ideas that the Black man is his body, and Wacquant's observation of boxers as being their bodies within boxing, is that then the Black man is being reduced to being just a body. What we find, then, for the marginalised Black male boxer who uses his bodily capital in boxing as a potential route out of poverty, is that through body-reflexive practice in the gym, through routines and training, the Black man is continuously constructing and producing a Black working-class masculinity through the body, physically and socially in the gym and during physical social interactions with other men; a Black masculinity that is all about the body and that will be performed in the ring in front of mostly white male audiences, perpetuating the narrative, going forward, that Black men are nothing more than their bodies (Connell, 1995; Wacquant, 2004).

Within this narrative, however, I would suggest that the Black male boxer can still retain some agency over his body, not only from his successes in the ring and his physical power, but from how he dresses his body during his ring walk. If we look at the fighter's ring entrance through the lens of Latour and objects assisting in the social world (i.e. objects of boxing-ring dress helping

to forge new social identities in the ring), Latour doesn't suggest that the objects of themselves have an agency or free will they are inanimate things but I would suggest that, for the Black male body in boxing, they assist him to denote his power and agency in the ring. As we have seen with the example of gay boxer Orlando Cruz, the rainbow jacket and trunks he wore into the ring gave him the agency he needed to come out as gay in front of the world. If, as Latour suggests, objects work in relationship with humans as part of the social world, objects of boxing dress here can help Black fighters construct new boxing-ring identities; they become actants communicating a variety of different things for the fighter and, more importantly, they work relationally during his ring entrance to communicate their chosen message to the world and their masculinities (Fanon, 1986; Hall, 1993; Latour, 2005; Wacquant, 2004).

David Coad (2008) in his chapter on 'Black Bodies', explores the figure of the pimp in Black culture, and how Black American athletes have adopted facets of the pimp in their dress and appearance outside of the sporting field, which indicates that there is a form of Black style in sports culture with Black male athletes. This was explored in Chapter Two, where we saw how Black athletes enact bragging rights through dress outside of the ring, which is displayed

through habits of conspicuous consumption. Coad observes that the bodies of Black athletes will include lavish and expensive clothes such as furs, animal skins and especially expensive jewellery. Former Black American boxer Jack Johnson, who was world champion at the beginning of the twentieth century, I would argue, becomes the forerunner for the pimp aesthetic, as we discussed in chapter one through dandyism and style Johnson is able to perform a type of resistance to white supremacy in American culture of the time. Kasia Boddy notes, that the popularity of twentieth-century fighters such as 'The Brown Bomber', Joe Louis had not eroded the popularity of Jack Johnson as a folk hero for Blacks and Black resistance, but it is, as she suggests, through boxing and Black bodies that we can see the changing face of Black masculinities and the political and cultural changes that were happening for Black Americans generally (2008). We can compare Johnson to former world heavyweight champion Joe Louis, who was world heavyweight champion through the interwar period. Unlike Johnson before him, who demonstrated resistance to white hegemony through his Black masculinity, Louis was non-threatening to whites; he dated only Black women and showed no resistance to white hegemony outside of the ring. I would suggest that Louis bore a double consciousness, performing a form of sterile Black

masculinity, hiding his true Black masculinity behind a mask. Boddy observes that the lineage of Black American fighters can be observed through the development of both media and technology during the twentieth century, as Johnson would have been depicted in film, Joe Louis in the emergence of the radio, and later Muhammad Ali was the star of television. The development of technology is also indicative, I would suggest, of how Black masculinities developed and were produced. We can also see through the lineage of Black American fighters how Black masculinities evolved and developed within the sport, as even in the 1960s, with the era of Muhammad Ali, the boxing ring was one of the few places a Black man could excel and gain a sense of pride and purpose and one of the few places a Black man could beat up a white man and get away with it. The boxing ring has always been a platform for political and cultural resistance, and through it we can see how Black masculinities were being created and developed to become more resistant (Boddy, 2008; Halsted; Fanon, 1986; Runstedler, 2010; Ward, 2006).

In the *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois observes of the Black man in America: 'One ever feels his two-ness, an American a negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body' (1994, p.2). Du Bois points out that the Black life is experienced behind a veil

and behind a colour line, that Black masculinity is veiled. Du Bois and Fanon maintain that, for the Black man in America, there exists a double consciousness, and Black masculinities therefore are constructed with dual identities both as Black men and as Americans; as Americans they must conform to a white male hegemony, while at the same time being denied access as Black men to normative modes of hegemonic masculinities through marginalization, ghettoization and economic deprivation. In Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson's (1992) book *Cool Pose: the dilemmas of black manhood in America*, we see a similar theme of masking; the masking of masculinities and the masking of emotions. Majors and Billson point out that, by enacting a cool pose in their everyday life, Black men are able to cope with their circumstances and adversity. They will mask their emotions behind a veil of cool; their masculinities are constructed to be detached, and they are calm, presenting to their world through the performance of cool. I would suggest that this performance of cool becomes like a mask that they wear that hides their true masculinities and, again, we see that this is done in resistance to being denied access through economic deprivation and social adversity to normative modes of hegemony and hegemonic masculinities. Cool is a way that marginalised Black men can maintain a sense of agency and

cool is performed through body language, appearance and dress; it allows working-class Black men to also maintain an agency over their emotions and their bodies. Majors and Billson also observe that the 'cool pose' is also enacted through Black style and the practice of conspicuous consumption and wearing designer labels on the streets, which gives the Black male a sense of power, while the designer brands and jewellery or the latest pair of expensive trainers can give him respectability on the streets. There are parallels here, I would suggest, to the white British poor and the chav subculture; both subcultures utilise brands and conspicuous consumption practices to construct their masculinities and as a coping mechanism while navigating their neighbourhoods each day, giving them a sense of control in their world while they have no control over their circumstances and lifestyles.

Sports is a patriarchal institution that is managed and dominated by white heterosexual men, coaches, managers, promoters and trainers; there is a hierarchy in sports where the men at the top of its structure are usually white. It is within this space that often-Black male bodies in the fields of sport are exploited. Thomas P. Oates (2007) in 'The Erotic Gaze and the NFL Draft', informs us that young amateur sports players, who are mostly Black college men, become the object of the inter-male gaze. This is evident in American

football as, within the National Football League there are sanctioned and legitimised forms of looking; these ritualised forms of looking put white heterosexual men in a position of power over young Black athletes and creates an imbalance of power between Black men and white men. National Football League scouts, coaches, promoters and the press will survey Black male bodies that are paraded in a public ballroom and stripped down to their shorts while being measured, weighed and inspected during what he calls 'the ritual of scrutiny' this is repeated over the months leading up to the draft. This is a repetitive process, and I would argue reduces Black male athletic bodies to being objects or commodities. As well as being reduced to being their bodies, perpetuating the stereotypes that Black men are just bodies, they become bodies that are paraded for and perform for white men. Furthermore, this positions them through the inter-male gaze to become passive and feminised, as the male gaze is often reserved for women, rendering women as the passive object of the gaze (Mulvey, 2001).

What this demonstrates is that the presence of Black masculinity within sport creates a paradox as, through being the object of the gaze, young Black athletes are rendered passive and feminine, yet within the sport and particularly the NFL, athletes are required to perform and demonstrate a

type of aggressive hegemonic masculinity through exerting their dominance on the field. Oates also points out that 'the NFL draft is an orgy of consumption and capitalism; Black bodies are commodified and keep the capitalist cogs of the sports world churning'. From this ritual of scrutiny, I would also argue that, the gaze of white men looking at and scrutinizing Black male bodies in sports perpetuates the stereotypes of Black men being only their bodies and reduces the Black body to something primitive, their identities being cast on their bodies. Oates notes that this is a sanctioned, institutionalised practice of viewing NFL prospects. Promising Black athletes, therefore, are expected on the one hand to submit to the hegemonic structuring within sports that objectifies their bodies and renders them passive, yet on the other hand they are expected to perform a tough and aggressive style of masculinity in the game and in their performance as athletes. I would argue that for the Black male athlete their Black masculinity is masked, their authentic masculinity therefore is only allowed its full expression through their success in the game or by being tough on the pitch (Oates, 2007, pp.74-86). We can apply Oates 'ritual of looking' and the inter-male gaze to the sport of boxing, as bodies in boxing are also objectified and reduced to just being a body; their bodies become commodities in the

business of boxing and within boxing's capitalist economy. Here we see the working-class male body rendered passive through being objectified both in the gym and in the ring in front of mostly white managers and promoters who dominate the management of the sport.

This objectification of the boxer's body was a theme that was present in my primary research where I attended live boxing matches at York Hall in Bethnal Green in East London in 2023, as I observed as a participant observer that 'the audience cheers on or offers advice, bodies are scrutinised and objectified, "he's got a wide stance", a constant stream of comments at the fighter who the audience support the most'. This demonstrates how boxers' bodies are the subject of the gaze of both men and women while they are in the ring, in the same way as the Black male bodies being rendered passive through the inter-male gaze during the ritual of scrutiny. I suggest that boxers' bodies are also a paradox, being rendered feminine and passive through the inter-male gaze of white managers, trainers and promoters and the gaze of the boxing fans and audiences yet expected to demonstrate and perform hyper-masculinity in the ring during a fight. In the early days of prize fighting and pugilism, the working-class men's bodies of bare-knuckle fighters were often fetishised by the upper classes and patrons of the sport; the

peeling ceremonies before a fight would give patrons and fans opportunities to scrutinise their bodies for audiences to gamble on the stronger-looking fighter to win, as they were stripped to the waist before a fight (Colls, 2020). Today, this peeling ceremony continues both in the pre-fight weighing-in ceremony, where working-class male boxers will often strip to their underwear before boxing officials to be weighed to ensure they meet the right weight before a fight, and again they strip down to their waist in the ring before boxing audiences and officials.

Abby Ferber (2007) In 'The Construction of Black Masculinity: white supremacy now and then' also observes that Black masculinity in American culture is reduced to the body. She points out that the Black male body is commodified and reified in sports and entertainment in roles that are controlled by white male hegemony, and that the Black male athlete is revered so long as they appear non-threatening, and remain under the control of white managers, owners and coaches within the sports nexus. She points out that Black masculinity is rooted in white supremacy and stereotypes of the Black man as violent, dangerous, lazy, and unintelligent, historically defined as animals or property to be controlled by white men. Their bodies are fetishised and objectified, their sexuality and masculinity

produced through the body; their muscles and penises become their most important sites (Ferber, 2007, pp.12-15). She notes that Black masculinity is defined and portrayed as something savage that needs to be tamed, controlled, and made submissive to white masculinity. The Black male body is deemed violent and animalistic. This is evident in boxing and can be seen in the way Mike Tyson was portrayed in the media; Tyson's masculinity was deemed savage and beastly, and he was reduced to the power of his body. Former racist stereotypes of the Black man in American history depict Black men being reduced to biology, pathological beasts who needed to be tamed. Ferber also observes that, in the new racism in White American hegemony, Black masculinity is deemed violent and dangerous, seen as unemployable; Black culture is denigrated, the Black man is seen as someone who prefers to live on welfare, and his culture is to blame for the number of Black men that are unemployed or in prison. Ferber notes, however, that 'gender is constructed through race and race is constructed through gender' (Ferber, 2007, p.15). If Black masculinity is constructed through race and therefore reduced to being just the body, then Black constructions of masculinity in America are inscribed with white supremacist ideology, and white hegemonic control. Ferber notes four themes in the contemporary depictions of Black

masculinity in America and the controlling of the Black male body: Black male bodies are depicted as being aggressive, hypersexual, threatening and violent. Societal inequalities in America deemed as Black male culture and white male hegemony is normalised (Ferber, 2007, p.16). Ferber also argues sport is a powerful site and cultural text to American culture; sport provides a site where race relations are constructed, fluctuate and change. Therefore, in the same way that sport is representative of the changes and fluctuations of masculinities, to understand what is happening more broadly in race relations one only need observe what is happening in the field of sports and sport culture. The Black American athletes, assumed to be better athletes due to these historical stereotypes and an emphasis on Black men reduced to being their bodies, are depicted as physically aggressive and their bodies as animalistic. Although Black male athletes may be successful on the sports field, they are rarely in positions of power and control, and their success does nothing to decrease the racial stereotypes of reducing Black men to their bodies. Black athletes that submit to the control of white coaches, owners and managers are viewed as the good Blacks, while those that resist are demonised within sports media and the press, are then viewed as dangerous and threatening and needing to be tamed; this need to control the Black

male athlete in white hegemonic American culture is seen in the ongoing constructions of Black masculinities in sports that reinforce and normalise racial inequality and limit the Black man to being successful in only two fields: athletics and entertainment (Ferber, 2007).

Neil A Wyn (2003) in 'Deconstructing Tyson: the black boxer as American icon' observes that the boxing ring offers a way out of poverty for Black men and brings Black boxers into direct opposition with white boxers; it offers Black boxers an opportunity to produce hegemonic masculinity framed within a white hegemonic institution. As confrontations between race and class converge, I would suggest that the boxing ring offers a reading of race relations. As we have seen, the Black male body throughout American history is framed within the context of a white male hegemonic society and considered by many to be dangerous, hyper-sexualised and degenerate. Mike Tyson epitomised these racial stereotypes both inside and outside of the ring and his brutality in the ring earned him the world heavyweight title, being the youngest world heavyweight champion at twenty years old in 1986. In 1997, when he fought American heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield for the second time, during the third round of the fight Tyson bit off a chunk of

Holyfield's ear and spat it on the canvas. These actions helped to frame Tyson within the media as something subhuman, a beast.

Tyson emerged from the ghetto, like many Black American rap stars, and brought this version of Black hard resistant masculinity into the ring with full force, making him formidable to his opponents. Tyson embodied the image of the bad Black boxer. We see this same image in world heavyweight Sonny Liston before him, in boxing history and within its structures, the narratives promoters use to market the fights often include one boxer being pitted against another as the good versus the bad boxer, or 'morality fights'. Tyson's predecessor Liston, who lost his title in 1964 to Muhammad Ali, was heavily involved with the American underworld and the mafia, and had also served two prison sentences, but even with his bad reputation, Liston was depicted as the good boxer when he fought Ali, preferred by white America to Ali who had joined the Nation of Islam and was a practicing Muslim. For much of white America, Ali and his new religion appeared threatening. Ali was also considered by the boxing community and the media as a loudmouth; Ali, however, demonstrated resistance through not conforming to white ideals of Black masculinity or of how a Black boxer should behave. I would suggest that the boxing ring, for many Black male boxers, offered them a chance to display

their Black masculinity and agency as Black men, and by defeating white opponents they were directly performing resistance to white male hegemony and challenging the social norms of race and gender.

Former world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, who defeated Tommy Burns in 1908, epitomised Black resistant masculinity and hegemony outside of the ring through the practice of conspicuous consumption and Black dandyism. However, inside the ring Johnson would often taunt his white opponents and toy with them like a cat with a mouse. Johnson demonstrated his Black hegemonic masculinity not only by winning his fights but by winning fights sanctioned and legitimised within a white institution. Johnson also demonstrated his resistance by refusing to submit to white ideals of how the Black man should behave. Although they were giants within the boxing community, Johnson, Liston and Tyson were not accepted by white America during their time in the ring; their masculinities were seen as deviant. But within Black communities, they were a source of pride and were aspirational figures. Johnson was deemed the bad Black guy that prompted white America to seek a white champion to defeat him in the ring. Tyson perpetuated the racist stereotypes of Black men being violent, hypersexual and aggressive through his behaviour both in and outside of the ring. Wyn

also points out that in the figure of Tyson we find a Black masculinity representative of many of the Black rappers and music celebrities of his time, one that glorified violence, gang culture and misogyny. I would also suggest that Tyson's boxing era highlights even more the ongoing crisis of black masculinity in America (Wyn, 2003. pp.100-111).

## White Working-Class Masculinities in Boxing

James Rhodes (2011) observes that, in contemporary ideas of gender and race, the white working-class man has been subject to much negative scrutiny, particularly in the United Kingdom where ideas of working-class whiteness have negative associations, which could explain why white working-class masculinity has been under researched. There has been to date very little research within boxing scholarship on the whiteness of the working-class male boxer, where there is a tendency for researchers to research non-white fighters (Mondragon, 2021). I would argue that how white working-class masculinities are produced within the field of boxing have been overlooked, which is important as boxing provides a portal through which we can not only see how white working-class boxing masculinities are constructed, but we can analyse how white working-class

masculinities are changing more broadly. Historically, during the British Regency period, the working-class prize-fighter was prized for his resilience and displays of physical strength. Especially during the period of the French revolution and Britain's war with France, where strong masculine bodies were held in high regard, birthing the concept of the British bulldog, which was epitomised in the figure of the white English working-class boxing champion. The white boxing heavyweight champion was held up as the ideal display of British manhood, so much so that at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, a colour line was introduced in boxing to prevent Black boxers from defeating white boxing champions in the ring. When Jack Johnson was finally able to compete for the world title in boxing, he defeated Tommy Burns in Australia in 1908 to become the first Black world heavyweight boxing champion. This prompted America to find a white boxer who could defeat Johnson, and the 'great white hope' was introduced as an archetype figure that could replace the Black champion and restore order to the ring. Rhodes points out two examples of white working-class masculinity in boxing in the figures of former British light welterweight Ricky Hatton and former American middleweight Kelly Pavlik; he cites these as examples of respectable white working-class champions who both exhibited

attributes of toughness, determination and physical grit in the ring. However he also points out that non-white boxers or Black athletes are attributed an innate, inbuilt skill in boxing due to their natural athleticism; I would disagree with Rhodes on this point, as I suggest that this, as we explored in race and representation in sports, is stereotypical and reduces the Black man to being just his body. Boxing appeals to all classes, but its recruits continue to remain drawn from within the lower classes. The figure of the white boxing champion becomes romanticised, with the idea of him overcoming all odds and economic adversity to become a champion in the ring. While simultaneously the white working-class male outside of the ring, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, is continually marginalised, denigrated and subject to media stigmatization. The figure of the white working-class boxer is in stark contrast to contemporary discourse on white working-class masculinities generally within the media. More traditional white working-class masculinities are viewed as a dying breed, a product of post-industrialization, relegated to just being an emerging underclass unable to adapt and contribute to the modernization of society and the capitalist economy. The white working-class man, then, is depicted as dysfunctional in postmodern society and his cultural practices and tastes are deemed

anathema to a civilised society. What we find, then, is that with fewer traditional trades being available to white working-class men and the introduction of service industry jobs or zero-hour contracts and the rise of unemployment, there are less opportunities for the white working-class man to construct his masculinity through the body, yet boxing remains the one site where this is still possible as a potential route out of poverty and an avenue to create white working-class respectability. In boxing, the white working-class man can, through the body, construct and produce a traditional and acceptable form of working-class masculinity. In boxing as a sport, generally there is no class or race prejudice; the boxing gym is an egalitarian space where anyone can learn to box, which means that masculinities that might be deemed inherently flawed outside of boxing, such as the white underclass, become accepted in the ring and even prized by boxing fans simply through being able to absorb punishment. Rhodes observes that how boxing fans imbue the figure of Ricky Hatton with notions of what are deemed acceptable working-class traits; these traits, such as mental and physical toughness and a determination to succeed within the sport and in the ring, are exaggerated, I would suggest, in the ring. By looking at the figure of Hatton and making comparisons between him and Tyson Fury, both white

working-class men, there is some disparity; on the one hand Hatton's masculinity is acceptable, where Fury's masculinity has at times within the boxing community been deemed unacceptable. I am not sure if Fury's heritage as a traveller bears any significance here or could have contributed to the lack of acceptance of Fury by the boxing world and the public (it is a heritage that Fury admittedly tried to mask). Or if it could be his battles with addiction and mental health in his personal life that shaped the way the public viewed him, but what we can see from this example is that, just as there are dichotomies within boxing with race that create narratives which help to market and sell fights as 'morality fights', such as the good Black boxer and the bad Black boxer, here we can see acceptable forms of white masculinities and unacceptable white working class masculinities in boxing. Fury was, for a time, a spectacle within the media, shortly after winning the world title by beating world heavyweight champion Vladimir Klitschko in 2015. After winning the world title, Fury's personal life caused controversy as he plummeted into drink, drugs and partying; it wasn't until Fury publicly declared his battle with mental health and worked hard to reclaim his status within the sport by losing weight, giving up the party lifestyle and embracing his mental health that the narrative began to change and, through his

transformation, Fury was not only considered respectable but became for many people a source of inspiration, especially for those who also battled with their mental health. Tyson's personal journey with mental health was embodied, as we saw earlier in this chapter within one of his bespoke suits; Fury has now become an ambassador for mental health.

Rhodes points out that, within boxing, the white boxer exhibits all the good qualities of working-class masculinities and his gendered and classed identity; but, although boxing discourse often revolves around making comparisons between white boxers and Black boxers, rarely is there any discourse on the white male boxer and his race, class and gender identity alone. The white working-class male boxing body is often revered, symbolizing traditional masculinity and class and embodying working-class attributes of discipline and hard work hard work that is produced through the body. This becomes a nostalgic masculinity reminiscent of the labouring working-class bodies of the industrial society in the first half of the twentieth century, when working-class men were able to construct their masculinities physically through their bodies and through hard work and physical labour (Baron, 2006).

Karen Downing (2008), in *The Gentleman Boxer: Boxing Manners and Masculinity In Eighteenth Century England*, observes that, within the

working-class culture of the eighteenth century, fisticuffs was a way for men to settle personal disputes and was not uncommon. However, during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries masculinity was becoming increasingly feminised due to new modes of consumerism, which created an aura among men of sensibility, which I suggest gave rise to a crisis of masculinity in Britain during this time. The figure of the prize-fighter, then, who exhibited admirable masculine traits of physical toughness, endurance and bravery, was an attractive alternative for new modes of masculinity in a country that was at war with France. Downing points out that champion British fighters such as Tom Cribb and 'Gentlemen' John Jackson were reified and given a celebrity status. Prize-fighters when in training lived a monastic lifestyle, trained hard and demonstrated discipline; these ethics, which were a combination of physical labour and gentlemanly manners, became prized attributes of the Regency ideal of a new modern man. The aristocracy and nobility often patronised prize-fighters, sponsoring their fights, but it was not uncommon for gentlemen to train with champion prize-fighters outside of the ring to learn the art of self defence; muffers, which were soft padded gloves, were used in these training sessions, however, to protect gentlemen's faces and hands as they trained with champions. I would suggest that, during the Regency era,

the figure of the pugilist or prize-fighter was emblematic of the changes and transformations that were happening in masculinities in Britain more broadly. Downing points out that the idealization of the British pugilist was in stark contrast and resistance to the rise of overly sensitive consumerist men with too much time on their hands, or sedentary men who were inactive, desk-bound and more concerned with appearances than brute strength. Boxing, in this context, had a civilizing effect on new modern masculinities and, because of this, through boxing ordinary working-class men could gain notoriety. The controlled aggression and disciplined bodies of the prize-fighter, combined with the display of mild manners and gentlemanly behaviour outside of the ring, produced a prized white ethnic masculinity and imbued the white working-class boxer with respectability.

Boxing is a trade and a career for many boxers as well as a sport; it can provide a route out of poverty for fighters especially if they are successful. The hard work and intense training fighters adhere to while training for a fight helps them to construct traditional white working-class masculinities that are revered and admired, which I would argue separates white working-class masculinity in boxing from white working-class masculinities outside of the sport. White working-class men that are unable to access employment or

that work in the service industries are no longer able to construct valued traditional working-class masculinities through their bodies. Former British fighter and council-estate-dweller Ricky Hatton epitomises the white working-class man made good, but what also makes Hatton so liked by his boxing fans and the general public, is not only that he was successful within his career in boxing but that he remained connected to his working-class roots. Hatton was not a glory or fame hunter; in the figure of Hatton we find a humble, white, working-class masculinity, rather than a white working-class masculinity that is stigmatised or looked down on by the wider public or considered flawed or dangerous like, for example, the white working-class masculinities that are constructed within the British chav subculture. Rhodes points out that old working-class masculinities in boxing become romanticised and mythologised in a time that places value on new corporate masculinities that use their minds rather than their bodies to produce their masculine identities. Hatton here is depicted as a throwback to the days when white working-class men produced their masculinities through their bodies and manual labour; he is romanticised because he represents a nostalgic form of traditional masculinity (Rhodes, 2011).

## Masculinities and Boxing Auras

Central to the discussion in a fifteen-minute broadcast entitled 'Macklin, Nelson, and Smith talk crazy costumes and amazing rounds 'outrageous boxing outfits' on 'The Ringside toe2toe boxing podcast' was the concept of boxing auras (2020) This phenomenon is identified within the boxing world as a fighter's unique presence as he enters the ring. Two types of boxing-ring entrances are also identified: the traditionalist and the progressive. The traditionalist boxing-ring entrance will consist of the fighter wearing functional and traditional objects of boxing-ring dress such as a boxing-ring robe and trunks. The progressive will want to provide a spectacle and will incorporate costume, theatrics, and the carnivalesque in his performances. However, whether a boxer's ring entrance takes the more formal traditionalist approach or the progressive, a boxer, on entering the ring, will according to Macklin, Nelson and Smith emit a presence or unique aura. I would argue that this unique aura that fighters have that can become another vehicle through which a fighter can communicate and enact mind games at the site of the ring. The concept of the boxing aura is a phenomenon in boxing culture and quite elusive; Macklin, Nelson, and Smith do not elaborate further on the boxing aura, describe or define what it is.

There is no description of what it is or what it represents, except that some fighters have it. For this study, I would identify a boxer's aura as the combination of a variety of things: for example, his ring moniker, his presence, fighting style, music, body language, appearance, dress, and overt displays of confidence during his ring entrance, which I believe collectively form and make up the concept of boxing auras (Macklin, Nelson and Smith, 2020).

Mike Tyson's ring entrance has become iconic in boxing history and folklore. During his heavyweight bout with Michael Spinks in June 1988, Tyson's ring entrance was described as 'bone-chilling'. The media reported Tyson's ring entrance as giving him an 'aura of menace.' On analysing Tyson's ring entrance, I would suggest that Tyson produced his iconic ring aura through the strategic use of minimalism in the ring. The absence of traditional objects of boxing dress, such as the customary robe, and the absence of accompanying music only the sounds of industrial banging chains as white noise or any ring pageantry indicates his solemnity and immediacy in doing business in the ring. In an article on sportbible.com reflecting on Tyson's ring entrance, Adrian Riaz writes, 'the baddest man on the planet came out with no robe, socks or entrance theme and showed very little emotion' (2020).

Interestingly, Macklin, Nelson and Smith centralise Tyson's ring entrance during their podcast and remark on Tyson entering the ring without wearing any socks; this small detail is significant as it is his minimalistic entrance that becomes emblematic of Tyson's desire and eagerness to get in the ring and fight; it is through the absence of dress that he communicates a statement of intimidation, dominance, and fear in both his audiences and opponent when entering the ring. I would also argue that the muted, unvarnished tone of Tyson's ring entrance also symbolises his dominance and his brute strength and power in the ring (Macklin, Nelson and Smith, 2020).

Sports editor Sanjrit Misra (2021) observes that Mike Tyson's ring walk was engineered to create a sense of impending doom in the minds of his opponents; Tyson felt that his ring walk was evidence that he was a spartan warrior or gladiator entering the ring. The sweat on his bare torso, the lack of socks, and only black boots all fed into his aura of menace and became symbolic of his power in the ring. Tyson, when interviewed, stated: 'I'm sadistic, I'm afraid I might get hurt, I'm an animal now' (Misra, 2021). Tyson's stripped-back ring-wear signified he was there in the ring to do business no fanfare or flamboyance, he was all business while communicating to his audience and opponents his confidence in his ability to dominate them in the

ring. American boxing sportswriter Larry Merchant noted of Tyson's walkouts that the only covering he had was a layering of sweat on his skin and warmed-up body; this made Tyson feel like a warrior, a spartan demonstrating to his opponent and audiences the focus was on his physical power and his desire to get the job done (Misra, 2021; Sloman, 2013). The deafening sounds of heavy metal were also tactical, and part of the psychological intimidation of Spinks on the way to the ring (Sloman, 2013, p.169).

In boxing, the white terry towel is both a functional and symbolic object; boxing trainers will use it to wipe their fighters down in the corner of the ring. Fighters may drape it around their neck to keep their bodies warm on the way to the ring. It is also, however, a symbolic object for fighters; it can signify the end of a fight, as the ritual of throwing in the white towel will be performed by the fighter's trainer if they deem their fighter to be in trouble, in danger or unable to continue the fight. It is a last resort for any fighter, as it signifies defeat and surrender. In a sport that prides itself on manly courage and physical toughness, the judgment call on whether to throw in the towel for the trainer is a difficult one. For Mike Tyson, who would often enter the ring naked from the waist up, the white towel was utilised on one occasion as

part of his ring entrance, in a fight in 1986 with world heavyweight champion Trevor Berbick. Tyson notes in his autobiography that, before the walk-out to the ring, the arena was cold, so his coach cut a hole in a white towel and draped it over him like a poncho (Sloman, 2013, p.121). Tyson's coach fashioned it into an object of dress for Tyson to walk out with to the ring; however, by centralizing the white towel as an object of dress Tyson had embodied its symbolism. By fashioning a simple white towel into a poncho Tyson subverted it, took an object that symbolises defeat and loss in the ring and paraded it on his body as part of his ring entrance. I would suggest that, unknowingly, this object that was to keep his body warmed up for the ring now on Tyson's body signified dominance as it communicated to his audiences and, more importantly, his opponent that he will not be surrendering in the ring. It makes a statement, it indicates that during this fight he will not be throwing in the towel; the white poncho on Tyson's body is an object of material culture, as it indicated his reign as a world heavyweight champion and his era within boxing, while for boxing fans it becomes iconic in boxing history and folklore, and signifies Tyson's dominance within the sport and adds to his aura of menace. During this ring walk, the white poncho works in synthesis with Tyson, assisting him in the

creation of his boxing masculinity and identity; it becomes an actant, as Latour suggests, a social object that works in association with Tyson to communicate not only his raw boxing masculinity but a message and a statement to his opponent of no surrender (Eskenazi, 1995; Misra 2021).



Figure 19. Image of Mike Tyson wearing the white towel (Talksport, 2012).

Kasia Boddy (2008) observes how Tyson became a symbolic figure in the 1980s and 1990s; the era of Tyson symbolised a resurgence in racism in America during his reign, from the gains made during the 1960s, with the emergence of the Black American underclass and ghettoization. However, observing Tyson's boxing career provides insights into his brand of Black American masculinity, and how his masculinity became representative of other marginalised and disenfranchised young Black American working-class

men, embodying a crisis of Black masculinity in America. We see this reflected in how his masculinity developed throughout the ups and downs of being a world heavyweight champion, and how his masculinity was portrayed in the media. For example, Tyson began his boxing career being mentored and in the guardianship of famous white boxing promoter Cus D'Amato who primed his aggressive power for the ring and the heavyweight world championship. A young protégé and boxing genius, Tyson soon unified the belts and became the youngest world heavyweight champion at the age of just twenty; his fake coronation by Don King led him to be called by Time magazine 'a jewel-encrusted King Kong' (Boddy, 2008, p.368).

According to Neil Wynn (2003), Tyson's version of Black masculinity was representative of many Black men from the ghetto. Young Black working-class men in New York felt that, through his success in the ring, Tyson had defeated the racialised established norms that were required of them; Tyson had taken on the establishment and won many times. Tyson's brand of Black masculinity was a product of growing up in Brownsville, New York, in a dysfunctional home in poverty. After being bullied on the streets at a young age, which led him to getting involved with gangs, he eventually ended up in a detention centre at a young age. It was in the detention centre that Tyson

took up boxing and was scouted by boxing promoter Cus D'Amato and got his break in boxing. Tyson's success in the ring demonstrated for many young Black men from the ghetto that they could break out of the mould of gangs, drugs, and violence. Therefore, his masculinity, although dangerous and violent, was representative of the crisis of Black masculinity in America particularly during the 1980s and 90s (Wynn, 2003).

We can see in the figure of Tyson how the prejudices in America of Black masculinity during that time were projected and inscribed onto his body, his masculinity being depicted like a dumb animal; again, as we have seen in this chapter with race and representation, how the narrative of Black masculinity being reduced to being just a body is perpetuated and inscribed in Tyson. Although Tyson's hegemonic masculinity in the ring meant that he would have constructed his masculinity during training through his body, through body-reflexive practice both with physical and social interactions with other men's bodies, his body was portrayed within the media as animalistic and subhuman (Boddy, 2008). Tyson lost the title of undisputed world heavyweight champion in 1990 to Buster Douglas, and in 1992 he was imprisoned for rape and served three years in prison for his crime. Boddy points out that, on being released from prison and fighting Black Christian

American Evander Holyfield in a rematch fight, Tyson's boxing license was revoked, and he was fined for biting off a piece of Holyfield's ear in the ring. Tyson's masculinity was then reconstructed in the media and considered unhinged, likened to a cannibal or something from a Victorian freak show: 'no longer heroic or tragic, Tyson was now seen as a character in a horror movie' (Boddy, 2008, p.368). Later in his boxing career, Tyson began to embrace the emerging Black American hip-hop culture and began using hip-hop music to enter the ring. He would also have his everyday clothes made and customised by legendary Harlem atelier Dapper Dan as he expressed his street style, as Dapper Dan points out: 'Mike was in his early twenties and he liked Public Enemy, he embraced the hip-hop culture and hip-hop artists embrace him' (Day, 2019, p.208). Day also goes on to say that 'he had a gold tooth and a fade like the gangsta rappers of that time. He embodied the frustration of an entire generation who'd been villainised by society' (Day, 2019, p.209).

For most of his career, Tyson wore black silk trunks in the ring; the use of black in the ring gave him an air of mystery, danger and dominance. It has been rumoured that there were two reasons why Tyson wore mostly black in the ring other than to create a look of simplicity and dominance; the first is

that, by wearing black he could honour his former mentor and promoter Cus D'Amato as an act of mourning after his death, the second is that he wore black trunks to emulate former Italian American world heavyweight Jack Dempsey in the 1920's, who wore black trunks into the ring. Black trunks were symbolic of Tyson's ring aura and persona; they were his signature look, to the extent that he was prepared to pay a fine of one thousand dollars to the World Boxing Federation for wearing black satin trunks in the title fight with Trevor Berbick in 1986. Under the WBC rules, the champion picks the colour of their trunks first, and the challenger chooses a different colour from the champion. Berbick, who was champion at that time, knowing that Tyson's signature ring style was all black, purposely chose to wear black in his ring entrance. By doing this Berbick was enacting mind games and attempting to unnerve Tyson through dress; though in this fight Tyson knocked Berbick through the ropes (Ellis, 2024). It is also rumoured that Tyson's aura of menace was inspired by 1950s world heavyweight champion Sonny Liston. Liston, like Tyson, had a criminal past and had served time in prison. Like Tyson, Liston had raw strength and power and a menacing presence in the ring. What is interesting to note is that, by examining Tyson's ring entrance dress, we can see the development of his boxing masculinity and how it

evolved and developed during his boxing career. His early ring attire was minimalistic, giving him an aura of menace, wearing mostly black trunks into the ring to add to the solemnity but, during the latter part of his career, Tyson's masculinity evolved again from an aura of menace to an aura of authenticity from wearing no socks, no robe, no frills, and just plain black silk shorts to the ring, to wearing a black cut-out tank vest top and black satin trunks, both with the words in white 'be real' (Fraser, 2020).

#### **Prince Naseem Hamed's Aura of Confidence**

Former British Yemini featherweight champion Prince Naseem Hamed exuded an aura of confidence both in and out of the ring. While in the gym training during the week before his scheduled fight with Steve Robinson, Hamed wore a T-shirt with words printed on the back that stated, 'All I have to do is turn up'; here Hamed is so confident in his ability as a fighter that he declares that the fight for him will be an easy win. In Gavin Evans' (1996) biography, *Prince Of The Ring: the Naseem Hamed story*, Evans writes that 'Naseem positioned his leopard-spotted wrap around oval-shaped shades and, as soon as he saw the cameras, he gave them the walk and the look that makes everyone aware that, even though he may be the smallest fellow in the house, he owns the place'. Evans goes on to say that 'then he unzipped

his tracksuit jacket and revealed the logo on his black Joe Bloggs T-shirt: Prince Naseem Hamed WORLD CHAMPION' (Evans, 1996, pp.7-8). What is interesting here is that Hamed wore this printed T-shirt before the fight with Robinson took place; Hamed had been enacting mind games in the build up to the fight for weeks through the ritual of trash talking, but he utilised dress to finally get his point across. In both these examples, Hamed communicates his complete confidence and self belief that, even before the fight has taken place, he has won. Hamed utilised the pre-fight mind games to wear down his opponent mentally, as he knew that fights can be won psychologically outside of the ring; however, dress was an extra tool in his arsenal (Beattie, 1995). Hamed would also enact mind games with his opponents by purposely delaying his ring entrance, leaving the opponent in the ring waiting for him to arrive and, when he arrived, he would somersault into the ring with precision. Once in the ring, Hamed's boxing style meant that he would often taunt his opponents by dancing around them with his hands down as he lowered his guard.

For his ring entrances Hamed would often play on his Arabic and Middle Eastern heritage, incorporating theatrics into his ring entrances; playing on the narrative of his Arabic heritage was also encouraged by his manager, as

narratives in boxing add to the drama that surrounds fights and sells tickets (Evans, 1996). In one particular fight, he arrived wearing an orange turban and headdress, leaning into his Arabic roots. Coad observes (2008) that, for Hamed's ring entrance in 1996, he was carried into the ring on a golden throne by six minders and two scantily clad women scattering flower petals; this theatrical spectacle and image of resplendence demonstrates how confident Hamed was, but more than that I would argue it serves three purposes: it reflects his aura of confidence, provides an interesting and spectacular narrative around his fights for marketing purposes, and ensures that Hamed is mythologised in the boxing canon of boxing greats. However, I would also suggest that, as a Middle Eastern brown boxer, his body is the subject of the gaze and he is simultaneously both exoticised and fetishised by mostly white western audiences (Coad, 2008).

One of Hamed's most spectacular and memorable ring entrances that illustrates further Hamed's aura of confidence was performed at the start of the millennium for his title defence against South Africa's Vuyuni Bungu. Hamed arrived at the ring on a mechanical flying carpet which he was attached to high above the boxing ring and audience below; again, we can see how he utilises the ring entrance as a space not only to create a spectacle

but to demonstrate his confidence. In my primary research, Tony Cesay, when asked about his favourite ring entrance notes that 'ah, the most famous one that I like was Prince Naseem Hamed, when he came in on one of those, a carpet, that's it, that was so good, it was so funny, it was unbelievable, yeah, and that was, in that was, I think that was done in, er, the stadium, all the other entrances were just entrances.' Here, Tony indicates that there was something unique and special about Prince Naseem and his ring entrances: 'all other entrances were just entrances'. Hamed ensured that his ring entrances were memorable and, even if he was not remembered for his fighting skill or his conquests in the ring, he will always be remembered for that ring entrance where he entered the ring on a mechanical flying carpet. Furthermore, this ring entrance provides another example of how Hamed plays with his Arabic heritage as he imbibes Middle Eastern fantasies of Arabian nights and fairytale Eastern exoticism.



Figure 20. Prince Naseem Hamed entering the ring on a mechanical flying carpet (Benson, 2021).

For most of his fights, Hamed wore leopard-print trunks, which became his signature look in the ring. Coad (2008) observes that the animal print is associated with the idea of male and female sexuality; Hamed being of a dual nationality, both British and of Yemeni Arabic origin, his embodied masculinity would be inscribed with a sense of otherness; Coad notes that the body of Hamed is already an eroticised and fetishised body in the ring. In

terms of his ring dress, Hamed's distinctive leopard-print trunks, however, were his signature and trademark style. Coad observes that Hamed wore the brown leopard-print and light background of his trunks up until 1995, when, after appearing on the cover of magazines such as *Loaded* in 1995, he then began to play with the trademark leopard-print and design of his shorts. In 1995 Hamed changed his look and, for a fight in Edinburgh, wore a new design of leopard-print, which incorporated sixty strips of leopard-print fabric that were stitched to the waistband to look like animal tails. Coad also points out that Hamed's ring style and play with leopard-print design was constantly evolving and developing. I would argue that, through Hamed's changes in fashion and style in the ring, we can see how his boxing identity and masculinity also evolved and developed as he matured and grew as a boxer. The animal tails gave way to a tasselled skort garment (half shorts, half skirt) in leopard-print design; this gave way to matching dark leopard-print tops and matching trunks with eight rows of tassels. However, after his sponsorship in 1996 by German sportswear brand Adidas, he opted for more straightforward knee-length trunks in leopard print with the three stripes of Adidas. Hamed's boxing masculinity, I suggest can be mapped and traced through his dress in the ring, demonstrating how his confidence increased

with each fight as his style in the ring transitioned from a flamboyant leopard print with tassels and skorts to a seasoned professional fighter wearing a simpler, more muted and solemn leopard-print design with sponsorship from German sports brand Adidas (Coad, 2008).

Rachel Evans (2020) observes that leopard print has historical associations with royalty and aristocracy and could be used to demarcate a ruler's wealth. Leopard skins however, have also been associated with bravery, as hunters would wear their animal skins as trophies in Africa to exude power and status. In Egypt, the leopard skin was considered priestly, aligning Egyptian priests with an Egyptian god. For women, wearing leopard print is associated with the Greek god Bacchus, whose female entourage were draped in leopard print, attaching a sense of wildness and feminine sexuality to the print; the animal print is associated with male and female sexuality. Leopard print historically has also had associations with witches, which made it a fabric associated with dangerous women, or a fabric worn by promiscuous women so that it became seen as a promiscuous fabric; by the middle of the twentieth-century, however, leopard print became associated with the theatre and performing arts, as actresses wore leopard print, though even by this time the wearing of leopard skin by women still signalled sexual

availability, as leopard print became a fetishised fabric even at times being seen as a fabric that is vulgar on the body, being an embodiment of overt promiscuity (Evans, 2020). So what this signifies or suggests is that the leopard print as a fabric has erotic and sexual undertones. Hamed constructs his masculinity physically and socially in the gym with interactions with mens bodies through body-reflexive practice, but I would suggest that, when he dresses his body with leopard print, it has a feminizing effect, rendering his body and masculinity passive and erotic as an object of the male gaze. However, the leopard print design is also indicative of glamour, which could explain its appeal to boxers wanting to add a bit of glamour to their ring entrances (Evans, 2020).

Hamed was not the first boxer to utilise leopard print in his boxing ring dress. Italian-American former middleweight champion Jake La Motta, or 'the Bronx Bull' as he was known in the ring, fought during the 1940s and '50s and usually wore a leopard print hooded robe made of velour with his name across the back which was designed by boxing brand Everlast into the ring (2017). Hector Camacho, known in the ring as 'Macho', the former Puerto Rican super featherweight, lightweight and junior welterweight champion during the 1970s and early '80s, who grew up in Spanish Harlem in New York.

Was renowned for his flamboyant ring style. Camacho often wore leopard-print trunks into the ring with his moniker, 'macho', on the front of his trunks and sometimes a leopard print robe into the ring. Camacho sometimes sketched and designed his ring outfits, which he would then have custom made by a Puerto Rican tailor. 'Macho time' was what Camacho called his flamboyant ring entrances (Evans, 2020; Guidice, 2020). Camacho's ring dress was a paradox: on the one hand he was hyper-masculine, as his ring moniker 'macho' suggests as a fighter he would have been constructing hegemonic masculinity in the gym on the other hand, the overly flamboyant ring designs he wore into the ring could be coded as feminine. I would suggest that Camacho, perhaps unknowingly, during his time in the ring, pushed the boundaries of gender and sexuality in his ring entrances, which creates a paradox a hyper-masculine body that is dressed in flamboyant designs. As a former street fighter in Spanish Harlem, Camacho felt that he had earned as a rite of passage his ring moniker 'Macho'. But what we find when we explore Camacho's ring dress, that is also reflected in Hamed's use of flamboyance and leopard print in the ring, is resistance through dress. As a Puerto Rican immigrant growing up in poverty, Camacho was, like many boxers, marginalised. I would suggest that the leopard print worn on his body is a

statement that he has arrived in boxing; it symbolises his success in the sport and in the ring. Here, like Hamed, he signifies his success through displays of confidence in his dress in the ring (Evans, 2020; Guidice, 2020). Since this point, I would suggest, fighters' dress has become more and more glamorous in the ring. In my primary research at York Hall in 2023, I observed firsthand that glamour was a pattern in fighters' ring dress and entrances. In my notes I observed 'the colours were bright, flamboyant, some decorated with tassels and embellishments' and also 'one fighter wearing royal blue velvet and sequinned gold, another fighter wearing white satin with a red and blue trim for the super flyweight division'. The incorporation of sequined or glittery fabrics as well as fur into their garments were quite popular with fighters, and it is quite common for fighters to work with tailors and seamstresses to customise their fight kits and get the look they wanted in the ring. In my primary research, I interviewed Sophie Miller, a former British dress-maker for professional boxers and, when asked about the process she informed me that:

Um, so we only designed for a couple of boxers, it was really design, it was just making for them, um, there was, um, other one, so yeah, it was collaborative, we worked on this, as I said, my friend was the go-between, she would go and speak to them and find out how they

wanted to portray themselves and what was important, to find elements’.

In the process for designing trunks for Carl Froch there were also the added elements of sequins and glitter. As she states:

One of them was a velvet but had, erm, a glitter in it, and she must have sourced four or five different glittery silver fabrics and he was quite, you know, we to-ed and fro-ed about the glittery silver fabrics quite a bit, it was slightly velvety, it had a pylon and I was like, ooh, ooh, that was the one he went for [laughs] and then actually my favourite, my favourite ones other than the Union Jack ones were his away shorts, because they were silver with the Froch logo on the side and they were the literal flip of the glittery velvet, because the back of the glittery velvet was quite nice as well’



Figure 22. A night of professional championship boxing, York Hall 2023

In 2023, current British boxing lightweight champion Ben Whittaker, 'The Surgeon' emulated Hamed's aura of confidence in both his ring-wear style, ring entrances and his boxing style in the ring. Whittaker, like Hamed, drops his hands in the ring and lowers his guard, taunting and antagonizing his opponents and dancing around the ring. Whittaker for his fight with Jordan Grant in Birmingham in May 2023 wore a leopard-print poncho with gold fringing detail and tassels along the hems, with matching three-quarter-length leopard-print boxing trunks. Whittaker is also sponsored by the same sportswear brand as Hamed, Adidas. Here, Whittaker emulates Hamed's aura in the ring through mimicking his boxing style, and his signature look of leopard-print trunks (Brookes, 2023). The use of leopard print in the ring by fighters, I would suggest, demonstrates their confidence not only in their boxing ability but in their boxing masculinities; the leopard print could be coded as a feminine fabric due to its historic associations with female promiscuity and sexuality. I would suggest that Hamed's masculinity in the ring can be tracked through how he utilises the leopard print for each of his fights. His leopard print trunks become an actant and a social object helping him to construct his boxing masculinity and boxing identity and communicate his confidence in the ring, but the changes in his use of the leopard print

design from a flamboyant design towards the end of his career with a more muted and toned-down leopard-print design indicate and reflect how he has grown as a fighter and how his masculinity has changed from being cocky and overly confident to solemn and mature, indicating his desire to be taken seriously as a fighter including gaining sportswear sponsorship demonstrating his success in the ring (Coad, 2005; Evans, 2020; Guidice, 2020).

### **Celtic Auras**

Working-class masculinities that have been marginalised within society and that have been historically denigrated, such as Jewish, Black, and Irish ethnic identities, within the field of boxing become prized identities. Scottish and Irish identities have a rich cultural heritage in boxing as they can market themselves as Celtic warriors. Their Celtic heritage often transfers into their ring dress and ring walks; Eoin Cannon (2006), in 'The Heavyweight Champion of Irishness: ethnic fighting identities today', observes that Irishness is a key feature of boxing folklore and can provide cultural capital in the field of boxing; promoters will brand white ethnicities and identities, creating narratives for social tribalism in the ring, as it is narratives that sell boxing matches, while also contributing to a fighter's aura in and out of the ring. This branding of Celtic identities creates a mystique around a particular fighter or

a fight; the marketing of Celtic identities will also be incorporated into a fighter's ring entrance and dress (Cannon, 2006; Lowe, 2021). Boxing is a nostalgic sport and boxing discourse often evokes past champions, past legendary fights, and nostalgic performances of masculinity (Lowe, 2021). Boxing promotions play with the political, national and historical meanings attached to fights as tribal and territorial battles. For example, you may have two fighters from in England, one from the North and one from the South of England, or two fighters from different regions in the North; the welterweight title fight in 2012 between Matthew Hatton and Kell Brook Hatton being from Sheffield and Brook being from Manchester was billed as 'The War of the Roses (ESPN, 2012). In this way, the marketing and promotion of the fight has mythology and a tribal, territorial narrative attached to both the fights and the fighters. These narratives are exaggerated by fighters and promoters at the pre-fight performances at press conferences and weigh-in ceremonies, such as the pre-fight weighing-in between Scottish heavyweights Jay McFarlane and Mick Campbell in 2022. For the first Scottish heavyweight's championships in seventy-one years, McFarlane arrived for the public weighing-in ceremony with green hair, black face paint with tribal stripes down his face, and a Scottish kilt (Dielhenn, 2022). Scottish fighter Josh Taylor

also leans into his cultural Scottish heritage for his fights. His ring moniker, 'The Tartan Tornado,' is reflected in both his tartan trunks and robes and in the ring as he is depicted as a tornado for his boxing style, landing flurries of punches on his opponents in the ring; Taylor also enters the ring flanked by Scottish men in kilts playing the bagpipes or a marching band of bagpipes and kilts (Carvaho, 2021).

Sometimes the implementation of Celtic identities into ring walks can go awry, which is demonstrated in the ring entrance of Belfast boxer Michael Conlon, who entered the ring on St Patrick's Day at Madison Square Garden in New York to fight Reuben Garcia Henandez wearing a dark green velvet robe and trunks covered in traditional gold Celtic patterns, trimmed in black and gold with Austrian crystals, according to boxing dress designers and suppliers Suzi Wong in the UK (Suzi Wong). Conlon was denigrated for his ring walk and forced to apologise to his fans for having as his walk-out music a song by the Wolf Tones called 'Celtic Symphony', which contained the lyrics 'Ooh ah up the ra', a political reference supporting the IRA (Belfast Telegraph, 2019). In contrast to Conlon's political ring entrance, the ring walks of former world Irish featherweight champion and boxing promoter Barry McGuigan promoted an aura of peace in the ring. McGuigan's ring moniker was 'The

Clones Cyclone'; when entering the ring McGuigan bore the slogan 'leave the fighting to McGuigan.' This statement was also about the conflicts in Ireland; McGuigan, also from Northern Ireland, promoted the idea of a ceasefire between the Catholics and the Protestants through his ring walks.

McGuigan's father would sing the Irish song 'Danny Boy' inside the ring while McGuigan made his ring entrance wearing navy blue shorts with the white dove of peace emblem on them and holding a blue banner flag with a United Nations design. McGuigan purposely chose not to wear Republican green Protestant orange, choosing to wear a neutral colour instead to promote peace and harmony (Gammon, 1985; McRae, 2015).

John Sugden (Sugden, 1996) observes that the ghettoization of the poor working class and marginalised within inner cities that exist in other countries also exist in Northern Ireland's impoverished communities; in Northern Ireland, unemployed working-class boys and young men are often recruited in amateur boxing clubs to keep them out of crime or violence on the streets. However, here it is more complex. Not only do the gang violence, poverty, poor housing, crime and drugs exist in modern ghettos in Belfast, but there is also the added political strain of the ghettos being sectarian and the political violence on the streets between the Protestant and Catholic Irish. Due to the

lack of immigration in Northern Ireland, most of the working-class boys and men who attend the local boxing gyms are poor whites. However, the egalitarian nature of the boxing gym means that both Protestants and Catholics can train together in peace, leaving their politics at the gym's front door. Sugden observes, however, concerning champion fighter McGuigan that, although he managed to promote an aura of peace during his ring entrances, the fact that he fought for mostly British titles and accolades meant that many Irish Republicans felt that he was a traitor to Ireland and a sell-out (Sugden, 1996).

Eion Cannon (2006) describes the ring entrance of Irish heavyweight Kevin McBride on his way to fight Mike Tyson at the MCI Center in Washington, United States. McBride wore a blue tartan robe and trunks, with the hood of the robe almost covering McBride's face as he walked to the ring accompanied by men playing the bagpipes and his Irish flag. However, the primarily Black audience for this fight supported Tyson, so McBride was booed while he made his entrance. Cannon also writes that boxing identities, like boxing auras, encapsulate several elements: the fighter's ring moniker which they fight under, the designs of his trunks, robes, and boots and his colours, the song he enters the ring to, and the branding of the cornermen

jackets for his entourage, even the rituals that he may perform for luck before the fight. The body, however, is still central to the spectacle in boxing. Cannon notes that a sense of Irishness and Irish boxing identities within boxing goes back to its Renaissance origins and became prominent in America at the turn of the twentieth century. It was during the latter half of the twentieth century that the white ethnic Irish identities in boxing became less prominent as new boxing identities began to emerge within the sport, for example, the first Black world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson at the turn of the twentieth century. Cannon also notes that Irish boxing identities, although not as popular in today's boxing rankings, are a key feature of boxing history and its canon, and that boxing history shows how a succession of poor immigrant groups that emerged from America's most challenging and deprived neighbourhoods, such as Irish, Jewish, Italian, Black and Latino boxers, dominated the sport and its history (Cannon, 2006; Arond and Weinburg, 1952).

The 2005 film *Cinderella Man* starring Russell Crowe pays tribute to and immortalises the famous Irish American boxer James J Braddock, who was nicknamed the 'Cinderella Man,' and who rose from extreme poverty and hardship to become world heavyweight champion for a short time. Braddock

embodied his Irishness and Irish identity through wearing trunks that were embroidered with shamrocks. Kath Woodward writes: 'the audience is bound up with fortunes of the white working-class hero who is taking his chance in the ring' (2007, p.1).

Even boxing legend Muhammad Ali can claim Irish heritage; his great grandfather in his mother's lineage was an Irishman from Ennis in West Ireland (McDonald, 2009). Irishness has still had some purchase, especially in British boxing in more recent years, as former middleweight champion Irishman Steve Collins, known in the ring as 'The Celtic Warrior,' fought between 1986 and 1997; Collins wore green tartan shorts with a yellow shamrock motif and the words 'Celtic Warrior' in gold on the waistband (a1sporting memorabilia, 2023). In other fight entrances, Collins' trunks also had a matching tartan green long-sleeved jacket with the words 'Celtic Warrior' in large letters on the back and his name, Steve Collins, underneath in gold lettering. Former British welterweight fighter Tony Conroy, or 'The Tartan Terror, in mimicry or homage to Collins, also wore green tartan shorts. His shorts, which he wore in his first six bouts, were described as his trusty lucky shorts or his lucky charm; as Conroy stated: 'They're the same kind of shorts Steve Collins used to wear, and I'm hoping some of the green rubs off

on me, Steve's always been a hero of mine, and my parents are Irish so I decided to stick with them' (Coventry Telegraph, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we can see how, historically, the institution and realm of sports was the preserve of men. A way for men to enact battle through games and a way for men to express emotions such as excitement and anger that were contained within the boundaries of modern sports, as the rules and structures of sports had a civilizing effect on men and their masculinities. Sport continues to provide a safe space for men to construct their masculinities through their bodies, so it provides the perfect portal to observe what is happening with the construction of masculinities more broadly. Such as the fluctuations of masculinities in response to technological, cultural, economic and political shifts, in broader society (Elias and Dunning, 1986). At the same time sports is a realm that acts as a sanctuary and a harbour for traditional working-class masculinities and provides opportunities for men to continue to produce working-class masculinity in a post-industrial society, where there is a lack of trades where working class men can construct their masculinities through their body and utilise their bodily strength. The sports media complex is also a gendered

masculine space where young boys and men are socialised through advertisements and the media to perpetuate the narrative of sports being a male preserve, primarily a space for men (Messner, 2000). We have seen how the role of race and representation in sports means that the Black male body is commodified in sport and subject to an inter-male white gaze, and how Black masculinities embody a double consciousness and historically have been expected to mask their masculinities and identities behind an acceptable form of white masculinity; how the Black man is often reduced to being his body and how, in boxing, boxers inhabit and are their bodies, which is why marginalised masculinities in boxing are often exploited and their bodies commodified for the white male gaze (Du Bois, 1994; Fanon, 1986). In boxing, white working-class men can construct respectable traditional forms of working-class masculinities through their bodies and body-reflexive practice, and we have seen how white working-class masculinities are underrepresented in studies of boxing and gender (Connell, 1995). Finally we looked at the concept of boxing auras, a phenomenon in boxing that denotes a fighter's ring presence, from his ring moniker through to his walk-out music; fighters during their ring entrances will perform an aura, we have seen this in the examples of the aura of menace displayed by Mike Tyson in the

ring and the aura of confidence exhibited by Naseem Hamed in his ring entrances and dress. Lastly, we explored Celtic auras and the rich cultural heritage of Scottish and more prominently Irish fighters in the ring and how Celtic auras can be exhibited during the ring entrance through dress such as the aura of peace of Irish fighter Barry McGuigan.

## Conclusion

This study has investigated how professional boxers express themselves through style and dress both inside and outside of the ring. We know that historically boxers have exhibited forms of dandyism in style and dress outside of the ring from the beginning of the twentieth century to present day, we see this dandyism epitomised in the figure of world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson who loved to display his wealth and success, by wearing tailored suits, fur coats and jewellery. Furthermore, by being a Black dandy, Johnson simultaneously challenges and demonstrates his resistance to white supremacy of his time when he was reigning champion in 1908, and the subjugation of Black masculinity in America (Ward, 2004). I argue that Jack Johnson was the forerunner and epitomised the Black American pimp, and the pimp aesthetic which would become popular in America in music and

entertainment from the latter part of the twentieth century onwards. The pimp aesthetic was later appropriated by Black American celebrity athletes who exhibited their wealth and sporting prestige by wearing lavish jewellery and expensive clothes (Coad, 2008). However, within the Black pimp aesthetic we also find I would suggest a form of resistance to white American hegemony and the lack of access by young Black men to normative modes of hegemonic masculinity in America, and that the pimp aesthetic is as much political as it is about demonstrating style through the practice of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2005).

A boxer's love of fashion demonstrates that there is a connection between boxing and luxury fashion as many fighters collaborate with designers to dress them for the ring as well as wearing luxury fashions such as fur coats and designer clothes outside of the ring. Fashion and dress are weaponised by fighters, as fighters will tactically utilise the medium of dress to enact mind games with their opponents both at pre-fight ceremonies and during the illustrious ring walk. Historically boxers have always been extremely patriotic, and often their fashion and dress will incorporate their nationalities. Patriotism in boxing heralds from boxing's predecessor sport bareknuckle fighting, whereby bareknuckle fighters would have coloured sashes or handkerchiefs in

their national colours tied around their waists or on their corner of the outdoor ring and the winner of a match would take his opponents colours as a trophy. Patriotism can also be a form of political resistance in the ring as some fighters would display their political allegiance and political values and patriotism in their boxing ring dress simultaneously such as Puerto Rican fighter Orlando Cruz who wore robes and trunks into the ring that were a hybrid bricolage of colours reflecting both the LGBTQ rainbow coloured flag and his Puerto Rican national colours. Fighters will also politicise fashions employing fashion and dress in the ring as a form of resistance to dominant mainstream ideologies and as a form of activism and political allegiance in the ring (Mondragon, 2021). This study has also explored working class British subcultures such as the casual movement of the late 1970s, 80s and 90s, and the chav phenomenon. These particular subcultures have both been under researched and underrepresented in studies of gender, dress and youth cultures but they also are subcultures that can give insights into the dress patterns of working class British men and how they construct their masculinities through dress and how this transcends to the dress patterns of working class British men in the ring. These postmodern subcultures also highlight that there is a lack of opportunities for working class men to produce their masculinities through the

body and how working-class masculinities have been reduced to being constructed through the sign or a symbol such as designer and sportswear logos. Fighters use fashion to pay tribute to other sportsmen, an inspirational family member, manager or trainer or to former fighters. Dress becomes in the ring a way to pay homage a celebration. Many fighters utilise masks to create their boxing ring identities, masks in boxing are multifaceted and can perform many different functions, such as to enhance their boxing ring style and aesthetic during their ring entrance, to exhibit their culture or heritage or to enact mind games and intimidate their opponents.

The mask is an event as much as it is a performance for the ring entrance, when viewed through the lens of Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory and how objects work in relationship socially with humans as part of the social world we can see how the mask is an actant part of the network between the mask maker, the mask as object, the mask wearer and masks audience who are all entwined working in relationship with each other socially for the mask to be effective in its performance (Latour, 2005). Many fighters enact superstitious and religious rituals prior to getting in the ring which can take many forms but often they are incorporated into a fighter's fashion and dress, religious iconography such as crosses or bible verses are often interwoven into

the trunks, robes and jackets worn in the ring. Some fighters will wear the same pair of boxing trunks in every fight believing that it will bring them luck in the ring, even the practice of masking has a mystical purpose and could be considered a talisman or a fetish such as the elaborate and expensive masks worn by former world heavyweight champion Deontay Wilder.

When exploring working class masculinities in sports this study explored how sport emerged out of a need for men to be able to exert aggression and excitement and enact battle through games. Sport is a patriarchal institution that was created for men by men: sport also assists in the production and maintenance of a traditional stable hegemonic masculinity - a masculinity that over the centuries has been in periods of fluctuating and is often feminised outside of the sport domain (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Boxing therefore is a sanctuary and a harbour of traditional hegemonic working-class masculinities; the sports media nexus proliferates hyper hegemonic masculinities through sports media coverage and advertising to young boys and men. However, Eric Anderson's recent research and inclusive masculinity theory has shown that within masculine gendered sports such as boxing, football and rugby new more softer and inclusive masculinities are gradually emerging as athletes no longer want to perform outdated stoic versions of masculinities, but masculinities

that are open and transparent about their own personal struggles. We see this with boxers such as with former world heavyweight champion Tyson Fury who has been honest publicly about his own struggles with mental health (Anderson,2009). Race relations is a significant theme in boxing. The history of boxing is also a history of Black masculinity and Black civil rights in Britain and America. Through examining the history of Black boxers in America from the beginning of the twentieth century to present day we can trace the developments of Black working-class masculinities. White masculinities are also of importance in boxing; boxing is one of the few spaces white working-class men can produce a respectable form of traditional working-class masculinity through the body. Boxing is nostalgic and fighters and fans reify former champions who represent these old types of boxing masculinities. Many fighters have what boxing culture terms boxing auras or a ring presence and for this study I have defined boxing auras to encompass everything from a fighter's ring moniker to his fashion and dress and how different fighters can possess different boxing ring aura. I use the examples of American former world heavyweight champion Mike Tyson and his aura of menace and former British featherweight champion Naseem Hamed. Irishness is a key trope in boxing, this is demonstrated in that within the boxing community some

fighters will even adopt Irish names for their ring monikers to appear Irish in the ring, so this study also explored the Celtic auras of Irish champions. To summarise fashion and dress has an instrumental place within the culture of boxing. Boxing ring dress is its own subculture with its own subculture of boxing dress makers that create bespoke designs for champion fighters. Fighters want to look stylish in the ring, but dress is more than superficial for boxers. It is a form of representation and material culture that can display and exhibit their politics, class, gender, sexuality, race, nationalities and micro biographies and tastes. Dress for the fighter as we have seen can serve multiple purposes and functions, and many fighter's dress contains rich stories and narratives which is why I would suggest that further research is needed within the field of global boxing, particularly in women's boxing in the realms of art, culture and dress.

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## Images

Figure 1. King, A (2024). *Front of black boxing boots*.

Figure 2. King, A (2024). *Front of vintage boxing gloves*.

Figure 3. King, A (2024). *The back of Billy Joe Saunders ring trunks*.

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Figure 22. King, A. (2023) A night of professional championship boxing at York Hall.

### **Interviews**

Cesay, T. (2024). Interviewed by Angela King. 13 March, London

Cook, J. (2024). Interviewed by Angela King. 15 June, London

Miller, S. (2024). Interviewed by Angela King. 29 March, London

## **Appendices**

Interview one: with retired boxing champion Tony Cesay,  
This interview took place on Wednesday the 13th of March at  
approximately 6:30pm and was held at the Peacock boxing gym in  
Canning Town in east London. The gym at this time was not open to the  
general public, as a boxing coach and youth worker Tony had give me

special permission to be there and to interview him at the gym. There were some other people in the gym training that Tony was overseeing. While I was conducting the interview and recording it I could hear the ambient sounds of skipping ropes hitting the floor and the different size boxing bags being hit, which I felt added character to the interview. As this was the first interview I was conducting for the project, I was extremely nervous fortunately my daughter Jasmine had accompanied me to the interview to offer emotional support, and Tony was helpful in his manner putting me at ease.

Me: what made you wanna become a boxer?

Tony: well what made me become a boxer, it's just the area I lived in, you know the area I lived in I lived in an area in um, in Poplar east London in Stepney so them areas you had to fight. People came and take took stuff off you footballs you know when you were young and you know in them days it was you know heavily racial for Black people and Asian people to be around in that place. I mean you know, even when I'm West Ham supporters you know when I used to go football when I was a youngster it was the worst place you could ever go West Ham in them days you know

but, you know I was a west ham supporter because you like family even though you know they shouted out names and you couldn't believe it you know and then they would come round and they 'd say to you we not talking about you it was him but that's how they was that's how that's how the days was. So you had to learn how to fight, and my mum would um always have arguments with people, and I didn't know what they were for you know. When I was young was racism again so for me I had to learn how to fight you know to protect my younger family my you know the younger kids that my mum and dad had, you know I had younger brothers sisters at that time when I was younger I must have been seven, eight when I started to you know see that you had to know how to look after yourself and look after your family. You know and that at that age you know which is mad but it's not like now but that's how it was, in them back in them days you just had to learn how to look after yourself so I boxed anyways you know so it was just fighting in schools I fought for everything I had to fight for so it was a natural thing.

So, I played football first football was my love, so you know but I weren't disciplined you know I wish I was disciplined and um I would have made a

good footballer just wasn't disciplined. You know I played for a little bit in Bournemouth and it came to the stage where I weren't disciplined and I was thrown out you know and that was when I went to Bournemouth and um Harry Rednap was the first team coach at the time and er I had a lot of problems at the club at that time and then Harry had to let me go and Harry said to me 'why don't you box?' cos you're right good at boxing so you know I thought about it and er I went back to east London Roman road when I was let go and er I thought about it it was er it was 1986 it was 1986 world cup, never forget you know 'Maradona' scored that brilliant goal against England so it was about a month that month in the world cup. I came back from Bournemouth and um I was at Roman road I was living at my aunt's house and er I thought to myself you know I was just hanging around doing nothing, you know Roman road in them days but there was a chip shop where I lived in Roman road I had some chips leaned back and the door fell open and when it fell open I thought what's this here, then I went upstairs you know cos them days when you were fifteen sixteen you think woah what's the door opening up for like this so I went upstairs and it was a gym. It was a boxing gym and the fellow erm ah I forgot his name but it was the coach of Poplar boys you know and he

called me in I couldn't believe it waved me in and er he told me all the club history you know and by the time it was about twenty minutes he taught me all about the medals and the taught me pictures, pictures of the club and the people who boxed for the club and the next thing he said to me at the end of the, he says you gonna come back? and he gave me such a good you know talk about the club I said yeah I'll come back you know and that's when and I never looked back. You know so I boxed for a club called Poplar boys Roman road and from there I stayed there for a few years and then from there I went to Repton. It was a boxing club you know in Bethnal Green you know a club of champions I went and boxed with a manager called Tony Bones you know and he was a delightful coach, as well I got lots of stories about him so I thought let me go and test him out let me go and see if he's what they say about how good he is a coach, you know so I went there and he was he was a good coach and from there you know I never looked back. Boxing from there I went and won all novice titles and PLA titles and then but I still played football cos I played non-league football I didn't play for big teams pro teams anymore cos I didn't have the discipline but I went and played a little in the non-league to get a bit of money. So I kept that going and kept training for the

er for the boxing at the same time you know so I thought okay the boxing training that will get me good fitness for the football you know what I mean cos that would really get me ready for it and it did it made me more fitter made me more stronger. So yeah, I love it and from there I just I went for titles for the Repton I went abroad boxed for you know all over Europe so it was fantastic it was the best club you could really box for you know back in them days, but yeah lots of good fun boxing at Repton and from boxing for Repton I got to box for England and then travel the world. You know so from travelling the world I went to all the games you know the Commonwealth games the World games the Olympic games and other multi nations tournaments and for boxing for England you know so yeah that helped me and then cos of Tony Burns being world known through the world cos there was champions at Repton before me there were world champions that came to the club. You know who boxed for the club so I was lucky really to be around in that same era with those guys who boxed er achieved a lot cos from that we got sent to other countries to go and spar with professionals and got paid it was you know the best time. So we were sparring in America we were sparring in Sweden, Denmark, you know Norway , Russia , because of the name and the personality of

Tony Burns being a good coach and George Hodwell hes another good coach I had well he was the main coach. You know what I mean he would teach you everything burns he would be in your head, a good coach would be in your head and talk to you about you know how you should do this and do that and er George Hodwell would teach you everything about your feet how you throwed the shots and what not to do and what to eat what not to eat and how to train. So they were a good team you know yeah brilliant team so we went through the ages where we you know we dominated so there was every weight at my time in from two thousand no it was 1994 we had weights we had all champions in every weight. Years and years we had them champions you know in Repton so you it was it's never been done again not yet it won't be done for a long time where every weight was a champion you know and boxing for England you know.

Me: what weight did you box at?

Tony: I was at 67 kilos so I was a welterweight, yeah so it was a good weight it was lots of people in that weight at that time see, so its not like like heavyweights so many people in heavyweight but you had good

heavyweights you know at the time urm yeah so it was a good period of boxing.

Me: yeah urm who's your favourite boxer?

Tony: er 'Sugar Ray Robinson', 'Sugar Ray Robinson', 'Muhammad Ali', you know erm they were the people who I really saw when I was growing up and watched. You know er he was flair you know yeah flair and er you know and I liked that so where I was you know liked boxing I'd always watch all the good you know exciting boxers at that time cos during the 70's and the 80's there were good, good boxers you know there was Sugar Ray Leonard do you know what I mean, aah there was there was loads loads you just but the favourite ones who I watched was the ones who I met cos I followed them when I went to America to box in different tournaments and sometimes they came there and then we met em. You know we got to meet em we got to if we boxed cos of Tony Burns then they came they and you know professionals came from all over to come and meet us and we got to meet alot of em you know good pro boxers at the time yeah.

Me: um what's your most memorable moment in the ring?

Tony: in the ring probably, you know winning championships boxing box for England winning ABA titles, and keeping it being number one for so many years you know in this country you know cos there's youngsters always coming up to take your place. So you have to always be on your top shape to always keep yourself there and in the England team cos if you're not winning the nationals that means you're not gonna be number one really you know what I mean. They're always gonna send out the number ones to tournaments you know before anybody else, the best tournaments so the best being number one. Being number one cos when you're number one everybody never forget that you're you know you're number one they can't forget that so, so you always know that you are that one they have to beat, your that person they need to beat to get to my position. So I have to prepare better than them cos they're preparing even better than me so I have to prepare better than them to keep being number one you can't just think your putting on an England shirt and spar with the pros and some of the pros that we spar with we've beat, so that why they come call me so often they call you cos they knew you were good you beat them already and you're southpaw. I was a southpaw and you know put me in for sparring and they'll pay ya that was a good thing

cos now you've turned professional they have a money source to pay ya and it was good and really beating them and you did cos if you didn't beat them no one would know who you are so by knowing who you are and being number one, and its something in their minds that'll always stay with them. I'm pro now so let's have a go I'll pay you to come and spar ten rounds cos now they're pro I only do three rounds I had to do longer rounds so I get paid so everything was to their advantage so but you still did it and you still did well enough and yeah you got called back again for more money so that was they were good periods.

Me: talking about ring entrances what is your most memorable moment?

Tony: the most memorable ring entrance I had was boxing in South Africa you know ah what was the place called Sun City. It was extraordinary you know it had a wild life place and they played cricket there and played golf there. Snakes all round the place crocodiles couldn't believe it yeah it was the best place I ever boxed and were invited in like you a pro fighter, ring entrance normal thing like they do today but they didn't do as much in them days like they do now, you know what I mean you know like 'Fury'

going into the ring being carried in it was like that yeah but it was really good but that's the best I had in Sun City in South Africa.

Me: what about your clothes?

Tony: what my em yeah it was just for us we wore the green and white and er green and gold, that was that was erm our colours you know our colours. I'll have to send you some of the colours so you can see the famous colour erm Repton so erm yeah it was er.

At this point in the interview one of the young boxers in the gym had approached Tony to ask him some questions, the interview was paused temporarily while Tony was giving him instruction and answering his questions. After he had finished giving instruction to the boxer, at this point in the interview Tony shows me some photographs of himself and other boxers on his mobile phone.

Tony: this is when we went to the England team it's when we went Commonwealth games, this is oh what was his name again bloody hell he fought 'Sugar Ray Leonard.'

Me: oh wow.

Tony: yeah.

Me: so what colours were your colours?

Tony: green and gold, this is when I won a bafta when we made a boxing film we many years back but we don't talk about it much but yeah it was a good moment and this is Andy Lee he coaches 'Tyson Fury' now.

Me: oh really.

Tony continued to show me photographs.

Tony: but he was one of our boxers met him at Repton, Repton had a famous club famous club because everybody went and done something he was in TV and you know em.

Tony shows me a photo of him standing next to legendary American fighter 'Sugar Ray Leonard'.

Me: oh wow you met him.

Tony: So yeah yeah we were lucky we had some you know and you remember 'Carl Froch' so they were both in our England team so when we boxed I was their captain and you know 'Audley Harrison' was there it was

fantastic a fantastic team yeah it was a great great time, at that time and that's me there boxing.

Me: oh you're wearing red and white.

Tony: yeah and that's England when I was boxing for England at that time these are these are fighters who I developed so yeah so er he became that's 'Anthony Yarde' yeah you know him, yeah.

Me: yeah I've heard of him.

Tony: yeah he's very good so he came from you know erm Ilford he became a good he became a good fighter you know erm there's me winning that was me winning that tournament so yeah and there's coming back from an England journey 'Carl Froch.'

Me: oh wow.

Tony: you know what I mean yeah so that's that's Jenni that's West Ham that's my son but yeah you know erm we had some.

Me: erm in regards to your erm ring walk did you have any like rituals or superstitions like lucky charms?

Tony: yeah things like I always did things the same way I made sure I was relaxed played music and I breathed you know and I did the right things, the stretches warm up and it was like ritual and I ate the right foods you know what I mean and yeah so I made sure I was always winning you know cos if you lost you knew why you lost because you didn't work as hard as they did. That's how I always you know you're both international fighters you know you're both fighters and if you get picked to fight for your country you're the best in the country, you're going out there fighting the best of the best you know so you know that you've got to be better you've got to do a lot stronger mentally you know you've gotta be prepared. Cos sometimes 'Carl Froch' he was he was such a good boxer but sometimes he panicked he was so terrified you know fearful of you know in that ring and he could've won a lot of good things but til he started calming down, that's when he started winning you know so you know through help through other people yeah and that's how it is so when you have good coaches. At Repton they always told you how to do things so you was always good and calm but you used to watch other people fear, fear drove em mad and some couldn't fight so there were good you know in around London around England but when they went away to go

and box in different nations and different countries who were good they just you know fell they just didn't show up. So I didn't wanna be like that so I had a strong mental you know erm er er er my mindset was different you had to be different to wanna win to be winning to keep winning you had to have a different mindset see.

Me: when you erm when you went in the ring did you have any lucky charms that you took in with ya like for luck, some boxers they might have things on their shorts for luck?

Tony: yeah I mean as I got older as I got older your nan or your aunt or your sister used to give you stuff do you know what I mean, then I might put them in my jacket when I was going do you know what I mean, no I different carry nothing in the ring with me I just wore my same shorts and I wore my boots when they got older throw them ones and keep the ones that I you know yeah. So it wasn't it was only make sure I do the right things I'd always make sure I train right I eat right do all the right things that I've always done you know what I mean, so you know so I boxed over 300 times and 50 odd times you know what I mean over that, but for me and only losing thirty times for me it was a a good time. For me boxing you

know didn't get didn't get injured I didn't like getting touched didn't like getting hit cos I knew I was always on my feet you know so yeah it was it was good for me I was alot older than most the boys who boxed in England you know so I had to look after myself a little bit more you know.

Me: erm thinking about other fighters what's your favourite ring walk out of all the fighters ring entrances you've seen?

Tony: ah the most famous one that I liked was 'Prince Naseem Hamed' when he came in on one of those.

Me: flying carpets.

Tony: a carpet that's it that was so good it was so funny it was unbelievable yeah, and that was in that was I think that was done in er the stadium there (Tony points to the directions of the stadium) do you remember it was at that Newham stadium. I forgotten the name of it bloody hell when they were building Canary Wharf they had a great big you know Frank Warren owned the building at the time yeah I forgot the name of it yeah it was one of those it was nice it was a nice entrance, and then er all the other entrances were just entrances that you liked, but it weren't as flash and good as you know like 'Fury' coming out you know

now it's was really glamorous you know yeah some just gone back to the old way but when they get more and more famous and more titles and they're winning they do special stuff.

Me: yeah they do.

Me: how did you feel in the dressing room when you put on your robes and shorts before you went out to fight? You know when you're in the dressing room before a fight? When you put your garments on and your robes on how does it feel?

Tony: I felt good I felt you know like that have to beat me they've come to beat me, you know cos I was I was the guy they had to beat at times so I felt good there was pressure on you to win you know cos there's people out there who came to see you win you know. So yeah it for me I liked the pressure I was all cool and calm you know and I love it see ,when you fight the hardest thing you can do is this is this is the hardest thing training you know leaving your kids and you're going on camps for you know months at times you're going abroad just to fight for that tournament. So the best thing is the fights so after all that training the exciting thing for me, for me as a fighter was to fight I did all the hard work so once I did all the hard

work now I knew I could have fun cos I knew I was gonna win cos I did, I did everything right when I didn't win I knew I didn't do good enough. Cos that fella trained a lot harder than me so I knew for next time I have to train even harder to make sure you know for he doesn't you know beat me again, that's how I how I always used to think make sure you know I did did a lot better than that guy. So the exciting point for me was when I fought I enjoyed it see I loved it do you know what I mean. I woke up I knew now with all that training I had to make him pay, all that training all that missing my family you know going here and doing that and cos I had to live in a gym I couldn't go out every night you know I couldn't be with mates I couldn't I had to I had to always train. In training I had to eat right slept and then come back again the same thing happened again you know and then you would go away to squad training you know or you'll go away and fight in other tournaments to fight for that big tournament yeah but yeah the exciting bit was fighting for me I couldn't wait.

Me: how did it feel when you was in the corner of the ring just before the fight started so as you're standing there in your corner getting ready to fight what goes through your head in them moments how does it feel?

Tony: just wanting to fight I knew now that I knew what I had to do to win so yeah I wanted to get over there and wanted to get on with it. I was excited I was always you know I wasn't I never used to go in hating people or hating that I always used to laugh smile but I always knew in my head I was gonna win. I always knew I was gonna get excited about the fight I had to win to stay number one or to win that gold medal I knew I had to win see.

At this point in the interview I took a short pause, I looked through my printed list of questions trying to see which questions were the most appropriate for the interview with Tony, which would make the most sense in the context of our time in the gym together and which questions would make the most of his boxing knowledge.

Me: um Did you have any sort of erm as well as having green and white colours for your shorts was it a matching vest that went with it?

Tony: yeah yeah matching vest and.

Me: did you have any other motifs or insignia or embroidery on it ?

Tony : yeah I had a I had a you know really good stuff 'Charlie Magris' erm mother in law used to make em ,cos 'Charlie Magri' used to have a shop

in Bethnal Green and they um the mother in law was such a good sewer she was fantastic and she made all my stuff. My stuff was like flash I was like 'Hector Camacho' the macho man you remember Hector yeah so I love him I used to like him as a fighter and cos he was always flare flamboyant and he wore he had the shorts. So my shorts were like his you know so you know so like his boots I had tassels sometimes on my boots I had different boots so yeah I had a gown which was you know nice they all did everyone did at Repton you know did they had nice when they went, when they had you know shows and bouts aah it was it was really good. And you can see that they had spent time on their outfits, and they were good they wanna look good feel good.

Me: um so what sort of um things did you have, did you your name printed on the back of your robes?

Tony: yeah I had my name printed on them I forgot to bring you em as it goes you know shorts and everything you know but I'll take a picture and I'll send em send it to you yeah.

Me: that'd be brilliant, if you could get some pictures of the robe and shorts and the boots if you still got em.

Tony: yeah I'll have a look I'll have a look I'll take picture and I'll send them to you.

Me: yeah they would be really helpful thanks a lot um well I think we can wrap it up you've been really really helpful yeah no that's really good that's pretty much most of it.

Tony: yeah anything else just tell me.

After the interview Tony offered to speak to other boxers that he knew on my behalf to assist me with possibly getting more interviews.

Approximately a week later Tony contacted me on WhatsApp to invite me and my daughter who had been assisting me with the interviews to a boxing event in Chigwell Essex which was called 'A night with the legends' two of the country's finest boxers 'Duke McKensie MBE' and 'John Conteh MBE' this event was a dinner and reception on Friday the 22nd of March we were not officially invited to the dinner but Tony suggested that we meet him outside at 9pm and he would sneak us in with him and it would be a chance for me to meet other former champion boxers for my interviews. Prior to attending I had thought that this event was purely for networking purposes and introductions only so did not take any of my

consent or participant information forms with me to the event.

Immediately when Tony ushered us into the venue and we sat at Tony's table, Tony pointed to several former champion boxers. One of the boxers was a former heavyweight champion, a large Black guy who was sat around the table, he offered to do an on the spot interview with me there and then as we sat at the dinner table, he asked me what I wanted to know, so I whipped out my phone to record but the background noise was too loud and I was too overwhelmed so only managed a five minute conversation with him. I later discovered he had fought in the ring with the boxing legend former American world heavyweight champion 'Mike Tyson'. My daughter and I stayed for an hour had a free dessert as the staff thought that we were a part of the group and offered us dessert and coffee and then we left. But it was so good of Tony to put himself out there for me and I will be sure to acknowledge him in the Viva examination.

Interview Two:

My second interview was with former British and European super middleweight boxing champion James Cook. This Interview was conducted on Saturday the 15th of June at the Worldwide Signings memorabilia store in Romford East London. The shop was hosting a book signing for former world champion boxer 'Maurice Hope' on the release of his new book 'Land of hope and glory the Windrush kid who conquered the world'. James Cook was in attendance and agreed to participate in the study and to be interviewed by my brother Kenny who was with me at the book signing and conducted the interview on my behalf.

Kenny: so yeah we'll get straight into the questions so could you just give us your name?

James: James Cook

Kenny: James Cook

James: the British and European super middleweight champion MBE

Kenny: ok er so James first question is how old are you? If you don't mind me asking

James: 65

Kenny: ok so 65 years young er what made you want to become a boxer?

James: well you know what when I first come to London erm I loved 'Muhammad Ali', and erm people don't realise I played rugby for my school so everything it was sport that I loved I loved again I just loved Ali so even in the playground I used to get my friends and say to them your 'Joe Frazier' I'm 'Muhammad Ali 'so yeah

Kenny: 'Smoking Joe Frazier'

James: that's right you know

Kenny: so er what weight class was you in?

James: I was in the middleweight and then later on in about a couple of years I went to super middleweight as a super middleweight just come out I had the guys them from middleweight was just going on so I joined them.

Kenny: erm so you've already gave us your idol or someone of influence erm could you explain why in a bit more detail? You was influenced by Ali apart from the way he used to Fight?

James: well at that time when we was growing up there wasn't a lot of influence it was either 'Muhammad Ali' or the West Indies cricket team. You know what I mean so there wasn't much, so I decided I don't want I love cricket and I played cricket still doing it now you know what I mean, you know what I mean. You know, I went er I went to boxing for the discipline of it and even though the time you know in the seventies you know what I mean we used to go to gym white black boxing didn't see colour you know everybody's at the gym and everybody respect each other so it just give me something to focus on and plus my mum know where I was I'd be in the gym.

Kenny: so what was your most memorable moment in the ring?

James: in boxing, one of the most memorable moments for me is erm going to France winning the European title, cos erm nobody expected me to win it, and so forth you see all the press they have over here they sent one press over and they didn't expect me to win and then so I when over there cos I'm upset in myself when I read the director I thought they was gonna make it a film like 42 fights 40 knock outs one loss one draw. So it was nothing easy in the sense you know what I mean

Kenny: they might have seen you as the underdog and you surprised them

James: yes hundred per cent most time I'm the underdog so there was nothing flashy about me I just wanted to go in there and just work hard

Kenny: yes, what was your most memorable ring entrance?

James: erm I think it was probably ring entrance when erm Mark Kelac York Hall Bethnal Green I came in to a song MC Hammer 'you can't touch this'

Kenny: yeah yeah I remember that yeah

They both laugh

James: at the end of my promo I'm coming into MC Hammer

Kenny: of all the songs

James: I wasn't a dancer you know what I mean, but it was a lively song and I was defending the European title so I thought yeah it's good

Kenny: and the title of the songs speaks volumes

James: absolutely absolutely

Kenny: who mainly designed your your robes, or your trunks or your fight wear?

James: funny enough there is a shop called Title a shop in Bermondsey and the guys them up there they used to give me everything free and anything I wanted they were perfect. I can't remember who designed it but I remember a brand new one designed for the European title and when I went France after winning the fight they said to me Cook can I have your suit I said no you I just had this made you can't have it ,and somebody whispered in my ear and said mate you better give it to him he's a gypsy so I signed it and gave it to him and said here ya you can have it you know what I mean

Kenny: thats cool er what type of fabric are your trunks or robes made from?

James: silk yeah

Kenny: was that mainly silk?

James: mainly silk yeah

Kenny: erm did you notice how the silk felt against your skin when you wore it?

James: do you know what erm not really cos I think at the time I was sort of two type of silk you know what I mean, I think I got the silk cos it felt better on your skin but you never notice it but I think you go with fashion at them times you go with fashion and the silk was coming into fashion at these times so I just went with it.

Kenny: yeah I remember the silk shirts.

James: that's right.

Kenny: so would you say that the silk reminded you that you was in a fight or not necessarily?

James; not necessarily I think it was more like saying you could afford a silk suit in the sense of you know like when you was going school you have two pair of trousers you know, you have the expensive pair which was really smooth on your skin and you have sort of rough nylon one you understand me yeah the silk was just coming into fashion so you know I just went with that cos I wasn't paying for them either (James laughs) .

Kenny: which was a bonus.

James: yeah.

Kenny: so it's a bit like a fashion statement erm did you this is a bit of a strange question but trying to gather how you felt, erm did you notice any sound of the fabrics as you walked into the ring? Erm such as your tassels swishing or leather crinkling?

James: no normal pair of shorts you don't notice nothing like that definitely the last thing you take notice of so yeah you know.

Kenny: so the same question would be similar in terms of smell so?

James: hundred per cent hundred per cent.

Kenny: so things like some of your senses your not tuned in to cos your hyper focus more on the fight?

James: That's right you more focused on your opponent running the fight through your head you know you spend more time thinking how the fight gonna go you know what's gonna happen you know what I mean so you like more focused on the fight.

Kenny: your fight plan or something similar.

James; yeah similar yes hundred per cent.

Kenny: erm did you have any signature colours for your ring wear?

James: yeah funnily enough I liked black yeah black and white black shorts with erm white stripe in the middle you know what I mean if I did boxing for something else there was a colour that I liked, it was light blue so when I become champion I could afford to get blue shorts made so I had that one.

Kenny: nice one so that obviously came true for you then when er so that must of been an amazing feeling.

James: it's amazing feeling when you know you can go to a shop and say I want that made and you know they look at ya and say well yeah your're a champion and they design it to the best best quality.

Kenny: It's kinda like your already setting yourself up positively to win .

James: hundred per cent.

Kenny: and using that as er an example to represent your success

James: hundred per cent absolutely the colour what you wanna wear you know.

(Kenny informs James that we are half way through the interview)

Kenny: can you remember roughly how much you spent on your robe on your trunks for a fight?

James: do you know what I can't remember how much I spent I can remember how much I got for my bloody first pro fight which was £150 pounds you know what I mean in 1982 you know it was erm £150 now its alot of money you think hang on that's over forty five years ago compared to now you know what I mean compared to what their fighting for, for the first fight I got the belt and I remember cos I said to my missus borrow some money off her to buy an engagement ring and I said to her when I have my first fight I'll pay ya back for it when I had my first fight I have to pay mostly for my engagement ring after that.

Kenny: so such a stark contrast between then and now.

James: absolutely because when your parents in certain times gave you certain things you know alot of people and kids think they you know compared to when my dad was growing up in the seventies and he said to me save fifty pence, don't forget bus fair was a penny two pence you know all these things you know what I mean and now you know like I said

it's nearly forty years back when I said to my kids I was working for fifty pence an hour my wages was £17.50 after tax and I can pay my rent buy clothes and live it's unbelievable. I'm still alive thinking hang on I can still remember at sixteen I remember school you what I mean so money now twenty pound now it's nothing really but I could live off twenty pound in early seventies so it's crazy you know.

Kenny: I'm kinda from the same era I was born in the sixties so I can definitely identify with the difference between then and now in terms of er the price of things erm did you have a favourite pair of trunks robes or boots for the ring?

James: yeah I had a pair of trunks the blue one or black you know what I mean any one of those two would do me.

Kenny: erm How do you feel how did you feel when you wore them during your ring walk?

James: well you know what do you know yeah I don't think I was worried about feeling I was worried about just make sure it fits ok when you got your protector, when it goes over it how does it look.

Kenny: So it was more like a comfort thing ?

James: yes hundred per cent.

Kenny: did you have any superstitions or lucky rituals that you performed before you go in?

James: yeah yeah yeah listen fighters when you reach a certain age when you go to the gym you hear the boys them say well you cant have sex before a fight you know stuff like that you know automatically in your head .So I lived with my missus she used to put me in the next room to sleep by myself yeah so that superstition yeah come in your head and if you do anything your thinking time when I'm thinking you told your missus last time so I'd never sleep with my missus six seven weeks before a fight you know what I mean, so yeah that is my very soul mate I know if I did I know I'd be worried about it for a fight so I tried to go with the rules.

Kenny: In other words to preserve your er energy.

James: that's right energy strength whatever.

Kenny: that's good that's good discipline.

James: yeah hundred per cent you know .

Kenny: again the same sort of thing does any of your costume have any lucky charms at all?

James: no erm never had no lucky charms or anything like that you know what I mean, listen as a fighter you say certain things as you get older you get a bit wiser I used to say to people if your gonna beat James Cook you got one fight to beat me anything other than that I'm taking over. As you get older I'm thinking why I am telling people how to beat me and they bloody did early on when they carry on they used to beat me four or five rounds you know what I mean yeah.

Kenny: you learn from them mistakes.

James: hundred per cent cos like I said you know as a fighter you know I used to run around Hackney you know living in Hackney with my family I used to run around Hackney you know. Tottenham my running routine was I get up four o clock run on the road six o clock I'm having breakfast shower and I'm finished. I like running alot of fighters don't like running do you what I mean as a fighter I loved running I think running was my strength distance was my strength.

Kenny: yeah I remember Hackney well is there any parts of anywhere you used to go?

James: you know I used to do my sprinting in Hackney Downs yeah Hackney Downs it's a flat park you know I don't know early eighties. Through snow snow and fog, people when I had to fight snow maybe to run and I was running and I remember running right into a tree and my bloody trainers coming round he's taking his time and he looked down and he asked me what you doing down there a bloody big tree I run right into you know what I mean so.

Kenny: I remember the fog the fog used to be really thick .

James: obviously in a park in an open space it's even worse but I never know that I just you know what I mean thought the park was gonna be alright I just went running but it was the worse thing to do especially where it's not going nowhere you know.

Kenny: you was alright after that?

James: yeah yeah yeah I was fine.

Kenny: again some more questions about how you feel about if it's not necessary it doesn't matter so how did you feel erm in the dressing room before you go you kinda of already said?

James: once again your running, your running the fight through your head you know I didn't like to do alot of punch pads or something like that because so I just warm up and you know once again you run the fight through your head your mind it go up and down you know what I mean . It's knowing how to relax yourself you spend two three weeks running the fight through your head so with the experience you know what I mean so with experience you have to learn how to relax and balance that thinking about the fight who you gonna fight you burn off so much energy you have to learn with experience you have to learn how to relax .

Kenny: so it's kind of like more of erm body language and expression?

James: absolutely people will know certain times you know as a fighter before a fight you always shake hands people will grab your hand people shake your hand too often, this is what you gotta work with their your tools so you learn not too touch hands you know.

Kenny: you kind of protect your hands as well and then you don't wanna give too much away.

James: absolutely absolutely.

Kenny: er how do you feel in the moment when your dressed up in all of your boxing attire again we've kinda already asked that do you feel any different?

James: you feel no different dressing up all you want to do is make sure the bout there finish the fight, have this fight and you know the point is you want to come out safe and you want your opponent to come out safe. That was more like you don't need no two person out there I'm trying win beat him he trying to beat me listen we're punching each other and we're punching each other directly so you just wanna make sure you come out and your both safe you know what I mean simple as that.

Kenny: so again it's more focus is more on your performance than how you look?

James: absolutely definitely.

Kenny: yeah we're nearly there just a few more, so was there anything happening in your personal life like an event that had an impact?

James: probably only once erm sorta impact I was training for a fight and I was away what I call it training camp was to me my training camp cos I left North London for South London back in South London and then I went away, and my missus I was training for a fight and my missus had to rush to the hospital erm for one of my girls was born you know what I mean so as I was in the training camp I was very sort of worried about that you know what I mean. So I went straight to the hospital it's my second daughter you know what I mean so evidently so everything was alright in the end it worked out well you know.

Kenny: did that impact your fight in any way? Or was it in the back of your mind.

James: you know what erm I think it was in the back of my mind I think sometimes right being a champion I remember defending the European title in France I got a phone call that say my mum was ill my mum was in hospital. You know and I think let me go out there and lick this boy on the chin as a seasoned professional I shouldn't think like that I'm thinking let

me go and hit this boy on the chin but he bloody hit me and I was more worried about my mum getting back over to see my mum in hospital so I lost the fight in about probably 55 seconds or something like that you know what I mean. I jumped on the plane I think erm people were saying you know what my brother shouldn't have phoned me but at the end of the day it was my mum we love mum so I wanna know anything happened anything did happen I was there at the hospital but you know what it's boxing part of life as a fighter. I should know how to like I said sometime when you a champion you overthink things you know what I mean I was champion and I was overthinking things let me go out there and do that you know what I mean and then it backfire .

Kenny: but fair play to you for not putting the fight off.

James: course not you know what I mean at the end of the day people spend their money if I did put it off because of that it would have been a problem do you know what I mean people lose out and then I have to go train and do it again.

Kenny: no fair play to you, I think for the last question erm does your boxing ring dress if applicable make a statement to your fans or your people or the boxing audience in general when you go into the ring?

James: no because I wasn't that type of fighter who wear fancy stuff or pretty stuff or whatever to make any statement to anyone. I think you know the only statement I wanna make is just to go out there and perform the dress thing didn't make no difference. Actually I sit down and I say to people why he's wear that flashy shorts why's he wearing that flashy gown or whatever you know what I mean only for a fight boxing is a hard sport sometimes you can get an easier opponent where you can look good that prettiness or that flash gown, or whatever aint gonna do nothing for me I just wanna buy normal stuff and go and do my job.

Kenny: strictly business.

James: strictly business.

Kenny: I just have one more question can you remember who was responsible for any of the designs for your boxing dress?

James: yeah erm there was a guy named Nicky Campwell from Title sports, Nicky was a fighter himself and working in the shop you know what I mean I used to live in South London so it was the nearest boxing shop and Lonsdale sports.

Kenny: What part of South London?

James: Peckham.

Kenny: Peckham.

James: Peckham and so he was in Bermondsey so them guys look after me you know well so yeah.

Kenny: and just finally can you remember roughly the price of your boxing dress back then?

James: yeah I think my boxing outfit full outfit cost me about 200 pounds that's with gown short boots and everything you know what I mean you try and buy that for two hundred pounds now the shoes would cost you bloody two hundred pounds, the gown what cost you three the shorts you one hundred and fifty understand me and the sock nearly hundred pound

things have gone to me crazy but then were both born in different times  
different things you know.

Kenny: okay I think that wraps things up thank you so much for answering  
the interview.

James: your welcome.

Interview three:

The third interview for my study was conducted with former British boxing  
ring dress designer Sophie Miller. The Interview was conducted on video  
call via the WhatsApp social media app, on Friday the 29th of March at 12  
pm .

Me: what made you become a boxing dress designer?

Sophie: um I didn't become it was one of those things it found me, um I  
was I have I don't any more actually, teach evening classes and one of my  
ex-students knew someone who was looking for someone they  
approached her and she was out of her depth, so she approached me and  
we just went with it.

Me: wow ok.

Sophie: it wasn't planned it wasn't something we sought after it was something that just happened if that makes sense.

Me: yeah no that's really cool um so it just went from there?

Sophie: yeah.

Me: oh brilliant um how involved with the design process or were the boxers you design for how involved did they get?

Sophie: so um with 'Karl Froch' in particular one of the reasons we got involved was because that he wanted something a bit different at that time which was nearly twenty years ago. Um he didn't want the typical stand up rocky stuff which was you know bunny rabbit ears which was all that was available at the time he wanted something a bit bespoke he also had some specific needs as well um and I didn't actually meet him the friend who was the contact did all the meetings and the fittings and the blah blah blah blah blah. She was the go between and I did all of the making, so in terms of the design he would tell her what he wanted I'd make it up in a mock she'd take it back to him and then we'd make either alterations or plan the next steps from there. Yeah, and we did three or

four maybe four pairs of shorts for him so we went through that process four times I'd say. And it ended because sportswear brands or boxing wear brands were wanting to sponsor him and on this one particular fight a brand approached him and wanted to put their logo on my shorts and he couldn't do that so he then had to go and use their shorts from then on so that's how it came to its natural conclusion.

Me: ok interesting.

Sophie: yeah I couldn't even tell you what brand it is sorry.

Me: no that's alright um was it a collaboration of ideas between you and 'Karl Froch' or the other boxers that you designed for?

Sophie: Um so we only designed for a couple of boxers, it wasn't really design it was just making for them um there was um other one so yeah it was collaborative we worked on this as I said my friend was the go between she would go and speak to them and find out how they wanted to portray themselves and what was important to find elements. So this one guy um was Irish and and he ur I think he was a traveller actually he was from Dublin and he wanted to reflect the colour of the brick work of the buildings and also his name was is his fighting name was ore which is

gold so we put a little bit of gold in there as well we only did one thing for him, to be honest we both picked it up at a time when things were a bit I was looking for extra money because I had a little kid and I was a single mum she was she'd just become self employed and she was just finding lots of different projects to and she actually um got a full time job and then I got more hours with the teaching so that's how the whole relationship with Hennessey sports naturally came to an end. It was disappointing actually because we were approached by 'Tyson Fury' when he was about eighteen and twenty years ago literally and we had to say no and it's one of my biggest regrets, had I said yes I might still be doing it now right.

Me: Oh no that would have been so good.

Sophie: do you know what I mean (sophie laughs).

Me: that's massive wow.

Sophie: He's got he's very I love 'Tyson Fury' I love how he presents himself I love his swag and I love his style ,so I would've loved to been part of that journey but heh everything happens for a reason whatever that reason is.

Me: Oh man that's so good, erm who's your favourite boxer, I was gonna ask who's your favourite boxer but would that be 'Tyson Fury'?

At this point in the interview Sophie was approached by one of her children asking her something.

Sophie: Sorry Angela I got disturbed by child, say it again.

Me: erm I was just gonna ask who your favourite boxer is do you have a favourite boxer?

Sophie: of all time or from that period of working?

Me: um of all time?

Sophie: do you know what I just said it I'm gonna state put my neck out there 'Tyson Fury' or either of the Klitschko brothers, I love watching them fight and in actual fact him being Vladimir or is it the other one.

Me yeah it is.

Sophie: is it Vladimir or the other one.

Me: no it's Vladimir.

Sophie: yeah I can remember watching that fight and looking at the statistics and seeing that Fury's reach was half an inch longer and I'd followed Klitschko a bit before that to notice that he's got a really really long reach, he couldn't be beaten because his reach was long and just looked at that statistic and I said to the other half Fury's gonna win cos his reach is longer and he did so I was like yeah.

Me: He has got he's an absolute giant anyway aint he Fury, he's an absolute giant yeah I love him I think he's brilliant.

At this point I was interrupted by my niece briefly calling me from outside of the bedroom where I was conducting the video call.

Me: um so do you have a favourite boxing ring entrance out of the ones that maybe you designed for? or just generally?

Sophie: Your going back were going back if were really going back I don't think I do.

Sophie was approached again by one of her children.

Sophie: sorry about that.

Me: that's alright no worries.

Sophie: I forgot to forewarn people that I was doing this, right my favourite entrance I don't know I really don't know of the ones I it's going back so long this is gonna sound really really stupid, but I did used to I loved red hot chilli peppers and I love the Klitschkos entrances cos it was always red hot chilli peppers so you knew from that first guitar riff of 'can't stop' hes coming.

Me: yeah yeah yeah, I'm writing that down cos that's really interesting yeah well I'll put that down then cos that sounds like I mean yeah Klitscko red hot chilli peppers thats quite good that's really good erm.

Sophie: I just remembered that cos that sticks in my mind cos as I said I love that song and he used he always see how other boxers change their music from time to time to fit their mood so to speak.

Me: yeah yeah no that's true.

Sophie: he never did he always kept that one tune and I you know it's like Pavlov's dogs whenever I hear that I think oh Klitschko's coming (Sophie laughs).

Me: yeah no I mean it's true alot of them they do they change their song every time they come out don't they, but it's like Chris Eubank he had er

'Simply the best' didn't he he always came out to 'Simply the best' Tina Turner's songs so you kind of associate that song with the boxer then don't ya.

Sophie: if your interested in boxing yeah, and I have continued and It's funny because erm I didn't really pay much attention to boxing before I did the shorts and I think I was just at the beginning of that new wave cos it kinda went underground didn't it, after the Michael Watson.

Me: oh yeah that's right.

Sophie: Michael Watson Michael Watson yeah um, and it kind of became unfashionable so to speak and I think he was Froch's he never bloody he was a welsh guy he never um actually fought him oh it's gone from my head you know who I mean you know who I mean he did strictly come dancing.

Me: Tony Bellow.

Sophie: no the boxer that did um strictly come dancing in Wales.

Me: oh can't remember.

Sophie: yeah no it was his name but he would never he would never take Froch but that's around that times that boxing started getting really popular again to the point thats where it's at now and at that time I started to follow it so I'm taking you um actually watch it cos I like it it's weird.

Me: yeah I do yeah I love watching it.

Sophie: I couldn't make the last Fury fight though it was too late, we literally put the undercard on about half past ten and I fell asleep.

Me: ah no yeah I it was they do put it on a bit too late don't they I watched the Fury Ngannou fight.

Sophie: sorry I meant the Joshua it was the Joshua fight I fell asleep wasn't it yeah sorry not the Fury fight sorry I interrupted you.

Me: no your okay erm yeah when if when you was designing the outfits did you have a favourite outfit of ring dress that you designed?

Sophie: yeah I liked the union jack shorts that I made and I also liked the gown, I but the gown was one of the first things that I made and he only he didn't really wear it that much. But I enjoyed the union jack shorts

because it was well he was we made them for the world champion fight world belt fight and erm yeah I put a little of my magic in there if you see what I mean. But I enjoyed the whole process of making them erm the fabrics were a bit of a nightmare but I enjoyed that process with Gerry Geraldine her name was you should maybe have her whole name Geraldine Turvey T.U.R.V.E.Y, and I just enjoyed that whole process to get the reference right for the union jack cos it's not symmetrical there are things too it erm I put the union jack up on my sitting room wall and I didn't take it down until he won those belts it was only a few months but yeah.

Me: oh, wow that's really cool I like that.

Sophie: it's like don't break the magic don't break the magic, it's silly really but you know he got those belts I can talk about it now cos it's got those memories attached to it.

Me: not it's not silly this is the sort of stuff that makes this interesting for me, do you know what I mean that's the sort of stuff I wanna hear erm what sorts of fabrics do they commonly use for shorts and robes?

Sophie: I wouldn't know about commonly I wouldn't know about if you were to go to the shop and or you know go to the suppliers and see what they're using now they probably use polyester now but it was traditionally it was early twentieth century would've been silk, but we used it was mostly polyester because Froch always wanted a little bit of bling in the fabric he was actually quite specific which to me and Gerry made that all the more fun. Other people might have gone ooh wooh but we just enjoyed it she enjoyed it she's one of those people she's kind of like the runner like you know those people in the fashion industry that literally goes out scouring the suppliers the manufacturers to get that right sample to use she thrives on that side of the design process and I hate it. I love my making I love my ok you know cutting the patterns putting it together making the samples blah blah blah blah so between us we were quite a good team and she enjoyed sourcing the fabrics for everybody. So on the reverse ones that we did that tried to incorporate his logo one of them was a velvet but had erm a glitter in it and she must have sourced four or five different glittery silver fabrics and he was quite you know we to'ed and fro'ed about the glittery silver fabrics quite a bit it was slightly velvety it had a pylon and I was like ooh ooh that was the one he

went for (Sophie laughs), and then actually my favourite my favourite ones other than the union jack ones were his away shorts because they were silver with the Froch logo on the side and they were the literal flip of the glittery velvet because the back of the glittery velvet was quite nice as well.

Me: brilliant cor that's really interesting I'm writing it down.

Sophie: is it?

Me: I'm making a few notes cos I've got it recording but I wanna make few notes as well it's really interesting erm do they tell you specifically what colours they want?

Sophie: yeah they officially have their own colours so Froch was usually in silver and black ,I can't think of what anyone else might be what the home corner might be in the away so they usually have their set colours.

Me: ok do their colours have any special meaning sometimes er you know erm like culturally or?

Sophie: one did didn't he the Irish guy, he wanted to have the he wanted to match the colour to the ceylon if you like of the stone of Dublin. To get

that kind of like erm Gerry obviously her name is Irish as well and she was quite passionate to she got that side of it and she knew that colour she knew what he wanted so as I said she really thrived on that side of the process. She was quite happy to go off and make sure it's perfect and then we had the gold in it so as I said his fight name was gold ore so we had to incorporate it a bit into the design. But Froch was quite specific about what he wanted which is why we ended up with the job in the first place if you see what I mean.

Me: erm this is going back but what's the price range on average for designs for the shorts?

Sophie: ok what did we charge him or (Sophie laughs) how much profit did we make?

Me: ah nah nah its erm I suppose it depends on what fabrics they had how expensive they were.

Sophie: yeah yeah so erm we would do the fabrics separately erm Froch was quite erm thrifty he didn't wanna just get er fifty quid silk for the sake of getting a fifty quid silk. I think he wanted to keep within a budget and I think he can be erm the union jack shorts the material was about sixty

quid but for our time he would give us five hundred quid she would take three and I would take two and the actual if you totted up that's the whole process that's about three or four days work. But for me obviously she's doing the toing and froing duh duh duh duh duh I thought it was fair that she got she was putting more time in cos obviously doing that the fabric sampling and stuff its a really lengthy process.

Me: yeah I bet yeah I mean thats quite time consuming en it going round checking all the fabrics and yeah I mean years ago when I was younger I had a urm for a little while I had my own label and erm I had to go round manufacturers and stuff and fabric shops and button places and it was just yeah to get the right bits for the garments and that it was time consuming.

Sophie: exactly its very time consuming and what she did was no like I felt like whatever we negotiated she definitely did put more time in doing that than I did doing what I did, because at the end of the day a pair of shorts is a pair of shorts. But the first time I dunno if this is gonna be a question that you ask he was very specific he wanted quite long shorts he wanted to erm he wanted a deep waistband that was gonna cover the box and he

wanted a draw string so that he could pull the shorts tight to the box so that it didn't ride up, cos he was really erm preoccupied and if you watch his fights back erm you can actually see and it was an anxiety thing as well. When he's not doing very well he pushes his shorts down with his hands yeah he's really conscious of it riding up whereas if you watch someone like 'Tyson Fury' he doesn't give a f.ck he just carries on riding fighting sorry I swore he doesn't give a whatever couldn't tell if he's box was out or on or whatever me watching Fury having worked with Froch on something so specific I always notice it so that oop shorts are slipping shorts are slipping but he just carries on, whereas Froch would be fiddling around with it.

Me: so they were quite specific in what sort of requirements?

Sophie: Froch was yeah so he gave us his pair of shorts which were absolutley disgusting he did the classical classic man thing of he never washed them and then when cos they were his favourite shorts so to speak he liked the cut of them and he wanted something similar so he passed them on to us, and he did the classic man thing of spraying it with deodorant and when I was copying that pattern I ended up with a migraine

because they just STANK so much and everything it wasn't just the deodorant it was the sweat and the(Sophie makes retching noises). But from those shorts he was like oh no I'd like the crotch a bit longer I'd like the waistband a bit deeper I'd like this I'd like that so we did two or three fittings before we came to the final pattern for him then, from that we did the actual shorts. So we didn't really apart from cos I did cos of the way I did the union jack ones it did change slightly I had to make them slightly bigger to be able to accommodate the pattern.

Me: ok erm that's really interesting erm I was gonna say how did the boxers feel when you give them their finished design but was that something that you did or your friend would do or?

Sophie: yeah she did that yeah.

Me: she would take them their finished shorts?

Sophie: yeah.

Me: oh nice erm.

Sophie: and she gift wrapped them and I think erm Froch was always really he was always really erm friendly and a bit kind to her but the others

were a bit erm functional a bit formal. I remember one guy she just met on the platform in the train station and when she came back when she came back she was like it's a bit weird actually it felt like she was she given them something illegal.

Me: (laughing with sophie) Yeah yeah yeah yeah big drug deal or something.

Sophie: yeah yeah sorry can't answer that one

Me: that's alright erm I've only got a few questions left I'll just run through them for ya, erm have you had any feedback did you get any feedback from the boxers of the designs that you produced for them?

Sophie: no.

Me: so that didn't like feed back to you or your friend or sort of say something?

Sophie: Gerry yeah yeah yeah there would just be the usual feedback straight after the fight or fairly soon after the fight yeah.

Me: erm did any of the did any of the designs that you made did any of them have any motifs or symbolism on them that would have special meaning to the fighters?

Sophie: yeah yeah this is what I have lost all that stuff if you can find it I don't know if so it has been quite a long time hasn't it and I'm trying think back its not on my google drive. I don't have anything on the one drive which is weird cos I've been using that google photos for a really really long time, erm so where is it I'm gonna have to I've just plugged in an old old phone, old old old phone to see if I've got the pictures on there think it might be on the computer which died. So I'm gonna do some more foraging erm cos Froch was cobra (Karl the cobra Froch) his logo which he did designed himself erm the F of the Froch was kind of like shaped to reflect a cobra with it's hood up and he did want that in his designs that was integral to each of the first designs the shorts and the gown.

Me: ok.

Sophie: and obviously the Irish guy wanted his gold ore reflected.

Me: brilliant leading on from that just erm wondering if any of them probably contained any sort of lucky colours or lucky charms? Or any unusual superstitions that might be attached?

Sophie: not really not that I can remember other than what I've just said to the previous question.

Me: yeah so I think the previous one pretty much answers it really don't it, is there anything else you can tell me about your experiences designing er.

Sophie: other than I loved it it was one of the most best stages of my career, and I think one of the reasons why I loved it was cos it was a side hustle and I wasn't to I wasn't dependent on it so I always knew it was gonna be a short term thing I didn't know how long it was gonna be. I think that's what it is I thrive on being quite spontaneous and I'm quite if you see what I mean and erm I liked the unpredictability of it so I was I was thriving creatively erm just in a in a whole area of yeah. No I look back on it and I also when the students ask me now and bearing in mind it was twenty years ago now erm oh what's the best thing you've ever done I can

go to google and go look clickety clickety click turn the board on them and go I made them shorts.

Me: no I bet (me and sophie laughing).

Sophie: and kids who like boxing sixteen seventeen years olds when you talk to them they know who Karl Froch is and I can say oh I made his shorts.

Me: that is brilliant it's so cool it's nice that you can actually say that you know tell people, that that you know obviously great for me cos this is exactly what I need for my project so erm.

Sophie: would you like me I mean Gerry's one of these people even then that when you message you need to leave a beat before you hear back from her yeah do you get what I mean like she's just one of those people. But it doesn't bother me erm would you like me to reach out to her to see if she'd might be interested in asking answering a few questions?

Me: yeah yeah yeah, you can do that that would be really helpful thanks

Sophie: yeah she's busy at the moment she's erm she's caring for an elderly parent or helping to care for an elderly parent so her time is quite

precious if you know what I mean but I can I can send a message if you want it's not gonna hurt is it.

Me: and also I mean it would be nice for me to make introductions cos maybe later on down the line I could interview her one day as well. When she's got a bit more time you know.

Sophie: I mean in this day and age of social media have you thought about reaching out to 'Karl Froch' himself?

Me: Erm no but I have reached out to other boxers on Instagram.

Sophie: have you and how's that gone?

Me: not not had a reply really I've got one boxer that's actually agreed to do it for me the coach I spoke to he mentioned to other boxers about what I'm doing so I managed to get another one I could have a potential interview with a boxer. So I need to try and just arrange a day and time with him but I mean thats all I need at the moment erm and then obviously you your erm sort of knowledge of that industry is really helpful honestly I can't thank you enough.

Sophie: it was such a short little time in my life literally over a period of about two or three years, and each project lasted one or two weeks.

Maybe it was never a big thing but like I said I think that's why I got a lot of enjoyment out of it I was doing teaching as well but er that's my little side hustle it's mine my little thing do you know what I mean and nobody else except me well it was for Froch and Gerry but do you know what I mean but yeah.

Me: oh so that fight the Irish one what was his name again Gerry

Sophie: no John John O'Donnell I think a very long time ago I think I need to have a rummage around in the phone and try to find that stuff, I've plugged in the old old old old old phone to see if I've got anything on there.

Me: yeah that would be great if you could, also I have to ask as well if you wouldn't mind signing the consent form erm that I emailed and sent over to you if that's alright if you open it up in your laptop on google docs you should be able to put your name on there and the signature it's just.

Sophie: just sign it Yeah yeah yeah.

Me: that's all really it's just my university they're really strict about otherwise I can't use it.

Sophie: I know I understand it's fine you don't have to explain I understand I work in I work in the industry right I work in that business.

Me: yeah no of course It's just erm you know I'm just really really grateful for what you've done today and letting me interview ya.

Sophie: oh your welcome your welcome I'm glad things are getting better for you finally your'e in a good place yeah .

Me: yeah they are I picked it up last year I picked it back up again and erm so far it's going really well so, but thanks Sophie I really appreciate you giving up your time.

Sophie: you are most welcome your most welcome right then well keep in touch I'll erm I'll send you what I've got when I find it and I'll ask also I'll ask Gerry. I mean maybe she's got some things as well she clung onto definitely to have the drawings of his erm logo as was I don't know I don't know if he continued with it when he got famous do you see what I mean I don't know if whether it changed or what he did because he's quite a conscientious person 'Karl Froch'. I know I keep talking about him

because that's who we did that was the link if you see what I mean that's who we did the most for but he was really aware he was really mindful and he didn't want any old shit if you know what I mean which is why we ended up in the the place or in the position of making for him in the first place. But he was also he didn't want to on the one hand obviously he did on the other hand he didn't want to go down that big business being sponsored dud dud duh do you see what I mean he wanted to keep being bespoke and I really and I really respected that and he was pushed and pulled and in the end I think he had to go down that line you know in order to promote himself you know yeah.

Me: no thats erm thats the way it happens now with a lot of em its they get sponsored by different sports brands and they sort of have have to include their logos on their shorts shorts and stuff don't they.

Sophie: they do they do but I always think the union jack shorts and this was his idea er he wanted three quarters of the shorts union jack and then the one side was left blank so you were able to sew promotional stuff on the blank side so already that was quite a unique design. It was really real fun to do somewhere I have got the pics it's really annoying me not only

have I lost the physical things but I've lost the digital pictures as well. I'm hoping I'm hoping that this phone has got I think I know they're there you know I know I've got stuff erm so yeah he was really specific about that but that was intentionally to put the sponsorships down one side he was quite clever quite a creative thing that wasn't me or Gerry that was him going I've had this idea and I'd quite like to do this didn't think he could do that yeah he made it happen.

Me: yeah yeah cos I remember seeing them shorts erm and in actual fact when I went to my interview to do my PhD I had to I had to give them a presentation of what my work was gonna be about I had that image I used that image in one of my slides so they could see how what how you know it's got legs this idea has got legs you know.

Sophie: yeah and and even in the time it's been since we last did this erm boxings become even more popular.

Me: it has yeah it has especially boxing fashion and stuff boxing fashion has really started to take off now it's really starting to take off.

Sophie: I feel like Fury's helped with that cos like I've said he's really swagalicious if you see what I mean but also' Anthony Joshua's' got that very slick and sleek way of of presenting himself hasn't he.

Me: yeah no he has very sort of sophisticated and sleek.

Sophie: refined.

Me: refined.

Sophie: yeah alright then all done are we good?

Me: yeah no we must stay in touch, we'll keep in touch I won't leave it so long next time so long before I reach out but I so appreciate what you've done today Sophie honestly I can't thank you enough.

Sophie: oh your welcome your welcome.

Me: I really can't thank you enough I'll keep you updated as to how the course is going as well, erm but yeah if you can just send the consent form that's all I need and if you do find the photos obviously that would be amazing.

Sophie: I'm gonna actually do you know what I'm gonna be honest with you hang on that's there that's there and I had a look this morning and I

was like it's not there aah it's not there and also the digital stuff even before I got up this morning I'd go on my google and I was like what where is everything you know, wheres my physical stuff then if I've got the physical stuff in the folder I can just show it to her I'm really sorry about that.

Me: no no.

Sophie: if you could also have a look through your stuff.

Me: yeah I will do yeah.

Sophie: if it's not too difficult for you but I'm definitely on it I wanna know where everythings gone (Sophie laughs).

Me: I'll look as well I'll check on my emails and see I'll go back through my stuff today and see what I can find as well if there's anything on there erm cos I've got a new phone and everytime you change phones you lose alot of your old photos.

Sophie: this is why I've got I don't know what you use but I've got one drive cos I had it on a very old phone and and I use it in that that phone but I couldn't find anything, also when you Bluetooth things to yourself

when you save back to the cloud that doesn't save it do you see what I mean. The phone I was using the camera was broken cos I was using an old phone for the camera and I think that's where it's got in fact just saying that out loud has reminded me I've got another phone (Sophie laughs).

Me: Let's hope with a bit of luck then that you find them.

Sophie: I'll reach out to Gerry as well see what she's got.

Me: yeah and stay in touch we'll stay in touch we'll keep in touch thanks for today Sophie I really appreciate it.

Sophie: alright take care bye.

Me: bye.







