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Habits of Belonging in and through Boxing

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The final episode of the series *Human: The world within* features ‘the universe of the most powerful machine on Earth: the human brain and the vast nervous system it controls’ (2021). The episode entitled ‘React’ focuses on internal processes of the human body; it explores how individuals respond to stimuli and how they navigate external threats. To illustrate the complex and intricate inner workings of the body’s nervous system, which are responsible for regulating emotion, memory and ideas, the episode features an amateur boxer who trains out of renowned Gleason’s Boxing Gym in New York. Boxing, the narrator explains, is a sport that ‘tests the nervous system’ (‘React’ 2021) like no other. It is a physical practice requiring ‘extreme mental agility’, which serves as a strong metaphor for navigating the multiple complexities of life: a simulation, of sorts, of ‘when life comes at you fast’ (‘React’ 2021). The mindset of a boxer – or what is sometimes referred to as the ‘mental toughness’ (Olusoga 2015) required to fight – is curated through repetitive habits and rituals, which, over time, establish an inner confidence and focus, and ability to draw on strength and skills developed in training. Through training practices, such as bag drills, pad work and sparring, boxers prepare their bodies and minds to respond efficiently and effectively to the pressures and threats of combat. The physical and cognitive reactions of sparring are explained in the ‘React’ episode thus:

[M]aybe the boxer has a memory of being punched before, or maybe this is a brand new experience. Either way, the brain has to react. So a boxer, like most athletes, carries out the same movements repeated, over and over. (‘React’ 2021)

Movements and gestures are ‘encoded into muscle memory’ (‘React’ 2021), conditioning boxing bodies to react. However, this essay goes beyond straightforward thinking about how

individuals prepare their minds and bodies to fight. Instead, through an exploration of the habits and rituals of boxing, this essay seeks to understand how boxing communities forge and maintain experiences of belonging that are transformative for individuals and groups. I draw on my own experiences of boxing training, my ethnographic research on the cultural heritage of boxing in Wales and interviews with project participants to better understand how *habits – characteristic habits, collective habits and cultural habits* – empower individuals and communities through boxing. I refer specifically to an interview with New York based boxing trainer and founder of Trans Boxing, Nolan Hanson, who suggests that boxing-related habits support individuals in being present with and responding skilfully to personal and collective challenges – both inside and outside of the gym. In their 2022 lecture ‘Who’s afraid of gender?’, Professor Judith Butler explains that ‘whatever gender is, it is a field of contestation’ (2022). This article, then, aims to understand how the habits of boxing equip individuals and communities with skills to negotiate such contestation.

CHARACTERISTIC HABITS: ACTS OF CONSISTENCY AND REPETITION

Author of best-selling book *Atomic Habits: An easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones* (2018), James Clear argues, ‘Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become’ (2020a). This quotable reference has been picked up and shared across numerous podcasts, blogs and social media platforms to make the case for why habits are central to the pursuit of self-improvement. Identity formation, for Clear, as for many of the stoic philosophers his work echoes, begins with daily action, repetition and habits, whereby habits repeated daily and over time have the

power to create seismic shifts in one's behaviour and changes to experiences of self. Another widely referenced quote from Clear's book distinguishes between notions of 'goals' and 'systems' in habit formation: 'You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.' (2020b). Clear, then, encourages those seeking to make improvements to their lives through habit change to focus on being 1 per cent better each day. An example offered by Clear is to consider the habits of a runner. If the goal is to run a marathon, focus on putting your running shoes on each day, he says. In repeating simplistic actions, we create systems that are capable of transforming key facets of our identity through performing daily habits.

Clear's ideas have been central to popular discussions on athletic pursuits and success. But his perspectives on habit formation are not new. Rather *Atomic Habits* draws on ideas about habit formation and identity that have been circulating since the earliest instances of ancient Greek philosophy. Responses to Clear's work see value in his ability to put into practice complex ideas regarding how 'tiny changes' have 'remarkable results' (2018b). For Clear, as for cultural theorist Elizabeth Grosz, habits require deliberate and purposeful action: 'Habit is a *degree* of instinct, a modifiable, pliable, learned impulse to act' (2013: 221). In their reading of Felix Ravaisson and the 'mind-body problem', Leandro Gaitán and Javier Castresana suggest that '[w]here there is habit, there is order and connection' (2014: 3). This view is echoed by boxing trainer Nolan Hanson who suggests that through the habits and rituals of boxing training individuals transform.

The transformative potential of boxing is well documented. Critical perspectives on boxing range from affirming its ability to encourage physical and emotional self-regulation (Crews and Lennox 2019), to illustrating where boxing supports individuals in overcoming personal trauma and forging new connections through self-making and community practice (Chaudhuri 2012; van Ingen 2019). In her essay 'The future is coming for you', Deb Chachra explores the benefits of boxing, beginning by declaring its suitability as an outlet for 'angry women': '[l]ike a lot of women, I am increasingly angry with the state of the world', says Chachra (2019:

125). Chachra cites boxing as fundamental to harnessing her potential to 'stand up' against the gender-based challenges that she encounters each day, giving her 'a clear path on the sidewalk – in a patriarchal world' (ibid.). Chachra describes how learning technical skills for fighting and developing muscular strength allowed her to embody a different type of confidence for occupying social spaces. In becoming physically and mentally stronger, Chachra felt 'better equipped' to push back against the type of threats that marginalized bodies face via structural oppression, inequality and daily aggression (ibid.). While a willingness to fight was not the end goal – fighting violence with violence is never the answer, says Chachra – she could not ignore the sense of agency and power experienced through *conditioning* her body and mind to be 'better able to function in a patriarchal society' (ibid.). Where previously Chachra may have reacted to fear-inducing threats by freezing or retreating, she found that habitually practising strength training and boxing instilled a preparedness to hold her ground – literally and figuratively:

There is no question that lifting or boxing in the morning makes me feel better equipped to take on the world that day. I walk out of the gym with my shoulders square, my head held high, and my 'don't fuck with me' urban forcefield fully recharged. (Chachra 2019: 125)

Chachra highlights how habits create 'behaviour change' (Grosz 2013: 217) whereby training each morning has a profound effect on her ability to navigate the complexity, danger and discomfort associated with being a marginalized body in the world. Chachra's experience affirms Grosz's perspective that 'habits change the disposition to action ... They bring about a new ability, the capacity to persist, thrive, change and grow in the face of a world that is itself subject to endless and often random change' (ibid.). In turn, Chachra pushes back against social habits and dynamics of power that frequently see male bodies taking up more space than female presenting bodies.

But while this morning routine empowers Chachra to deal with the types of aggression and violence presented through both overt and veiled threats – such as being 'bodychecked by men' (2019: 125) – Chachra is honest about the

difficulty of sustaining positive daily habits: ‘The simplest and hardest of rituals: Get up. Do the thing. Get up and do it again tomorrow’ (126). Irrespective of her awareness of the rich benefits that lifting and boxing each morning bring about, maintaining training habits that lead to such desired outcomes is, for Chachra, the ‘hardest’ part of all. Nevertheless, Chachra returns to the gym each day, ‘reorient[ing]’ her ‘actions to address the new, and to be able to experience the unexpected’ (Grosz 2013: 221) with confidence and clarity. For many boxers, consistent, habitual practices hold far greater value and significance in their lives than simply being a better athlete or having athletic success. In an interview for my project ‘Women’s Boxing Wales: Past, present and future’, Welsh amateur boxer Jade Gitcam discusses the negative effects she experienced when taking a break from boxing regularly. Gitcam explains the impact that training frequently has on her sense of a fixed and stable self: ‘Boxing makes me, me’, she says, underlining how boxing each day actively improves what she describes as her sometimes ‘terrible’ (Women’s Boxing Wales 2023) mental health.

Whether navigating the dread of the morning ritual, what boxing coach Nolan Hanson defines as the ‘tender’ (2023) vulnerability of being a beginner in boxing, or, as Gitcam expresses, returning to boxing having taken a break and lost a core part of herself in the process, personal habits and self-motivation will only take boxers so far. To better understand this means exploring boxing beyond simplistic ideas derived from mainstream representations, paying close attention instead to where *collective*, relational habits play a key part in the deeper, sometimes transformative, experiences that boxing facilitates. When boxers experience the vulnerability described by Hanson and Gitcam, what, or who do they draw from? What or who has the capacity to hold boxers and bolster their courage in the face of these ‘tenderest’ (Hanson 2023) of moments?

COLLECTIVE HABIT: ACTS OF BONDING

In terms of a physical practice, boxing is arguably a straightforward system comprised of gestures and movements that build in

complexity when layered and put to use. Boxers often talk about how skipping, shadowboxing and running condition their bodies to sustain the two- or three-minute rounds that they fight; and how pad work and bag work simulate an experience of throwing and dodging punches. But, for boxers, nothing truly replicates the experience of fighting. Sparring is the only practice boxers can do to prepare themselves for active combat. The act of sparring complicates the popular misconception that boxers alone are responsible for shaping their bodies and sharpening their mind/body reflexes to fight. They might sometimes work in isolation in repeating the twelve punch variations and drilling the multiple defence styles through shadowboxing and bag work, but boxers must consistently rely on the support of others to improve. The amateur boxer featured in the *Human: The world within* episode describes how her personal habits and training practices prepare her to fight:

I’ve definitely gotten calmer in the ring. Punches come at me and I’m not overreacting. When I’m fighting time disappears. I don’t even have to think but instinctively I’m moving and evading those punches and it takes no effort when the body and mind are one.

Building this skill and ability to be calm under the pressure of intense two- or three-minute rounds takes time, patience and daily habits relating to physical practice (including recovery work) and nourishing the body through food, hydration, rest and meaningful training relationships. There is much more to boxing training than enhancing the body in a mechanical manner. Glamourized misrepresentations of boxing derived from Hollywood films showcase the habits and rituals of boxing as a means of creating a machine-like body. Such interpretations overlook key aspects of being a boxer, or of being part of a boxing community – oftentimes fetishizing narratives of torment and suffering and demonstrating how becoming ‘hard’ and ‘tough’ erodes physical and emotional vulnerability. This correlation of boxing body as machine speaks to how bodies are frequently viewed ‘through the dominant technology of our time’ (React 2021) – as individual components operating in isolation.

But as the *Human: The world within* programme suggests, the internal workings of bodies are comprised of complex and interrelated systems and networks, which impact one another on every layer and level.

Understanding how to work with the human nervous system and its regulatory processes (such as emotion, memory and creativity) means understanding the body's capacity to sense and respond to multiple, competing stimuli at once. Boxers can physically train their bodies and condition cognitive patterns in preparation to fight, but boxing – like life – cannot be predicted or choreographed. Popular representations of boxing bodies as 'fixed', which position an 'iron' or 'machine-like' physicality as the defining attribute of a successful boxer, ignore how, like the nervous system, a boxer's physical form is just one part of a connected and interrelating network. When imposing damage and/or defending against destruction are read as primary objectives in boxing, we miss opportunities to comprehend boxing bodies outside of their 'external shell' and 'muscle armour' (Nead 2013: 373–4). In short, boxers do not work alone to resist 'external threats' (373).

In our interview, Hanson articulates the more complicated and nuanced aspects of boxing, describing boxing as both 'discipline and an artform', and as a 'formally complicated language in which to articulate a response to a threat' (2023). Hanson began Trans Boxing as 'an on-going co-authored art project' in 2017, providing essential tools for trans and gender variant individuals to explore 'a multiplicity of self-expressions' (Easterling and Hanson 2023: 113), in and through boxing. Trans Boxing is

a place to hold fighters as they negotiate a sometimes-adversarial collaboration with themselves and their environment ... this can be a refuge from social contexts in which the rules of engagement are incomprehensible, implicit, incoherent, and veiled. This negotiation is precarious for most. (Easterling and Hanson 2023: 113)

This description above invites opportunities to see where the habits and practices of individual boxers become enmeshed with other materials in the gym, including, but not limited to, other bodies. The deeply relational experiences of

being and sense-making in Trans Boxing point towards where boxing extends popular readings of the *surfaces of individual boxing bodies*. Trans Boxing accounts for how boxers' personal habits are part of a broader, integrated system that is always already in direct, and indirect, communication with individual *and* collective action throughout the gym. The 'place to hold fighters' (ibid.) does not speak solely to a physical space. Rather it explains the importance of a shared space and connection between boxer, coach and broader gym community. It refers to a physical space of familiarity and support, and a framework that connects individuals and keeps them coming back: a place where individual participants push themselves and one another beyond preconceived comfort zones; where bodies bleed and blend into one another, the materials they embody and physical spaces they occupy. This interconnected site coupled with the shared non-verbal vocabulary of boxing enables participants to move outside of the rigid, mundane and sometimes oppressive nature of the world outside of the gym. It gives rise to the types of experiences – both shared and individual – which allow 'interplay between established narratives and the fleshy materiality of the sport, which in turn, create space for subversive readings of transformation within boxing' (Crews and Lennox 2019: 159).

Literature on boxing includes a breadth of perspectives on individuals and communities accessing the sport's creative potential via connections between self and other, narrative and materiality. These perspectives range from autobiographies, autoethnographic research and first-person accounts in interviews, such as the conversations I had with Hanson and Gitcam. However, as many of these examples indicate, the transformative potential witnessed in the non-verbal exchanges of boxing are not easily articulated through words – particularly because the 'place' Hanson describes is not demarcated or signposted in a straightforward manner. It is sensed, felt and experienced. For Hanson (2023), the boxing gym is a space of physical exploration and experimentation, enabling individuals to practise 'internalising a response' to challenges and threats. When I ask Hanson whether there is a risk of romanticizing the idea of boxing as

a means of learning to ‘fight’ complexity and difficulty in life, he replies:

[J]ust being alive – existentially is a fight – it’s overwhelming ... particularly amongst people who have more existential threats, like women, trans people ... boxing is offering ... a formally complicated language in which to articulate a response to a threat – or multiple threats you have to defend against when you get in the ring. (Hanson 2023)

Formally a community art practitioner, Hanson is now a full-time boxing trainer at Gleason’s Gym. Hanson explains how, as an artist, it became increasingly difficult to ‘intervene’ in the multiple socio-political challenges facing the communities he worked within (2023). Instead, Hanson says, ‘boxing feels really good’ as a means of creating the necessary space to process and engage skilfully with the plethora of injustices facing individuals and communities – injustices that can sometimes feel like a host of ‘impenetrable’ and ‘threatening forces’ (ibid.). Core to this work is the act of being present with difficulty, says Hanson: ‘What boxing provides is a way to directly respond to something in the moment’, which ‘I think is really empowering’ (ibid.). This immediacy and directness experienced through boxing training speaks to the power of habit and habit’s ability to establish ‘order and connection’ (Gaitán and Castresana 2014: 2) through individual and social means. ‘When we contract habits from others by sharing spaces, practices, routines, rhythms, and a language’, says Clare Carlisle, ‘communication and interaction become easier, less effortful, and communal life more harmonious’ (cited in Gaitán and Castresana 2014: 2).

The ‘empowering’ qualities of boxing that Hanson remarks on are evident in the urgent need to bring order to chaotic and sometimes dangerous instances, for example when boxers are forced to adjust their performance between rounds in sparring or change their tactics during a fight. There is agency derived from having *someone in your corner* to guide you through these shifts and in understanding that you are not alone in the decision-making process. The role of a trainer is to be responsive to their fighter’s needs – to support them through the complexities of combat and to offer concise

and specific advice on how fighters can improve and protect themselves against threats that they may not be able to see. The exchanges between trainer and boxer that occur during the one-minute rest period between rounds are significant because they rely on a short-hand in communication whereby tactics and success are reviewed in live-real time. This shorthand is developed through both an individual commitment to action and change and *collective* commitment to agreeing on and addressing impeding challenges. The connection between coach and boxer demonstrates the potency of personal (characteristic) and relational (collective) habits that are repeated and performed over time. ‘In a world of constant change’, says Grosz,

habits are not so much forms of fixity and repetition as they are modes of encounter materiality and life. Habit is the point of transition between living beings and matter, enabling each to be transformed through its engagement with the other. (Grosz 2013: 217)

The rapport between boxer and trainer highlights where individuals are transformed through habitual encounters ‘with the other’, where relationships built on trust rely on habitual and direct communication that is concise and immediate. Trainers must also practise personal and relational habits that lead to a capacity to hold a boxer when they are at their most vulnerable and to lead them through potentially life-threatening situations. Successful communication between boxer and trainer demands *connection* – an intimate relationship between bodies that can thrive with clarity through minimal verbal exchange. A fighter’s progress, then, is not solely determined through personal habits relating physical discipline and rigorous training patterns; their progress relies on a trainer’s ability to prepare them for high-risk (and hopefully high-reward) encounters. If high-risk situations are ill-managed, a fighter could face physical and emotional trauma that shatters their confidence and creates potentially irreversible damage to their body and mind. Incremental improvements in boxing are established through collective habits and relational practices, underpinned by a tangible connection of trust and support

between boxer and other.

Hanson (2023) tells me that the trainers he has worked with ‘want to see if you’re going to stick around’ through the physical and emotional difficulties of the early stages of boxing – through the frenetic realities of being a beginner. These difficulties manifest as the shock of, or reaction to, being hit for the first time, the panic of what is sometimes described as moral guilt related to hitting someone else, or the pain of experiencing the intense physical demands of boxing, which very little can prepare you for. However, this vulnerability might just as likely be derived from where the habit of ‘fighting’ takes on a whole new meaning in someone’s life: where the daily habits of boxing enable individuals to wrestle with, and process, the complexity and pain they experience in everyday life. Hanson (2023) observes that being able to hold fighters through the ‘tender’ moments and encounters he has witnessed in boxing – and that seeing boxers return to the gym despite this recurring discomfort – is ‘testament to the depth of the relationships that boxing gyms can support because ... you don’t just get it right away ... you have to earn that’.

Hanson refers to the boxing gym as an environment that enables diverse and dynamic experiences of understanding and belonging. The way that these rich exchanges are ‘earned’ involves ‘putting in the work’ (Hanson 2023): performing habits and rituals related to an embodied commitment to training and demonstration of care towards the range of materials that exist within the gym environment. In my interviews with boxers at all levels of the sport, boxing trainers and volunteers who support the daily running of the Welsh gyms I visit, several participants use the words ‘family’ or ‘home’ to describe their gym environment. This observation does not intend to romanticize boxing gyms as a utopian space, nor does it suggest that boxing experiences are universal and all-encompassing. However, my work with Wales-based boxing gyms highlights a strong connection with what Nolan describes as the creative potential available within the social and tactile relationships in boxing: complicated relationships whereby gym inhabitants engage in a ‘unifying, emotional, spiritual ... realm’ –

a space to connect ‘in a way that [for several reasons] isn’t available for them anywhere else’ (Hanson 2023). Whether explicitly named or accepted unconsciously, these deeply held, sometimes rapidly formed, relationships rely on both a habitual commitment to ‘showing up’ and willingness to be present with any discomforts that the gym and its practices present. Mutually agentic connections of this kind are instigated by the blurring of shared narratives, the materiality of boxing bodies, gyms and objects, and the visceral and tactile relationality of bodies. Some of these relationships, Hanson suggests, are almost entirely intangible but they are *felt and experienced* profoundly. They resonate with Grosz’s definition of habit as ‘the opening of materiality to the forms of engagement required by life, and the modification of life imposed by the requirements of a material universe’ (2013: 217). Moreover, boxing bodies united through the habits of boxing demonstrate ‘entangled knowledges’ that are capable of disrupting ‘binaries’ (Thorpe *et al.* 2023: 2) of athletic practices and spaces. Embodied, relational connections (read as ‘communal skin’ by Baxter 2020: 165) are where boxers ‘leak, weep and seep onto one another and the apparatus and surfaces that house, facilitate, and sustain the sport’ (Crews and Lennox forthcoming).

Trans Boxing deals explicitly with bodies and lives who find themselves bound up in cultural ideals unsupportive to ‘mystery or abstraction’ – qualities of dominant culture that are inherent to some spheres of boxing, which demand everything ‘be explicitly named and categorised ... particularly amongst the lines of identity’ (Hanson 2023). The embodied practice of boxing allows participants to challenge, directly, some of these ideals and ‘expectations of what ... we expect of certain people’ (Hanson 2023). In the early stages of Trans Boxing, Hanson (2023) found it important to designate a separate, ‘infinity’ space for its participants and practices, ‘where people understand us in a really literal way’ – away from potentially myopic attitudes about identity and gender. However, since bringing the project to Gleason’s Gym – a historical boxing venue in New York enmeshed in boxing traditions despite its socially progressive stance – Trans Boxing participants

have been part of a reciprocal process – an ‘openness to being understood, or seen, in a way that might not be totally literal or explicit’ (Hanson 2023). Hanson is clear that taking Trans Boxing to Gleason’s did not involve stepping into a ‘space where identity doesn’t matter’ (Hanson 2023). However, Hanson did witness where the ‘deeper – physical, temporal exchange[s]’ boxing facilitates allowed individuals to ‘transcend identity in the way our identity is labelled these days’ (Hanson 2023). The reason for this, Hanson explains, is because Trans Boxing participants are understood as ‘benefitting the space just as the space is benefitting them’ (Hanson 2023). They are involved in shared habits, labours and practices of the gym and therefore support the broader community.

The ‘reciprocal’ exchanges between bodies witnessed through this *boxing space in transition*, rely on an individual ability and collective capacity to repeatedly ‘bump up against some stuff’ – difficult and tricky ‘stuff’ – while simultaneously having the ‘faith or belief’ (Hanson 2023) that positive change will occur. Through shared practices and habits of personal and collective care, boxing facilitates encounters that demonstrate ‘a new kind of consciousness’ – one that is ‘not aware of itself but prone to act, that is activated by the possibility of its acting, that knows but cannot know that it knows’ (Grosz 2013: 223). This new consciousness transcends the individual, just as the performance of personal habits in boxing transcend individuated bodies.

CULTURAL HABITS: TOWARDS AN EXPERIENCE OF *CYNEFIN*

The multisensory connections of ‘knowing-feeling-moving’ (Thorpe *et al.* 2023: 4) in boxing – the collective ‘entanglements’ (ibid.) between individuated bodies and other ‘live’ materials (Crews and Lennox 2020) – complicate and contradict dominant ideas of boxing and its participants. I ask Hanson about the knotty, difficult-to-express encounters between bodies and materials that boxing gyms invite. I suggest that the Welsh word *cynefin* beautifully captures the agentic, intuitive and sometimes elusive physical and emotional experiences of boxing

training – those that have otherwise been described as ‘leaky’, ‘fluid’ (Crews and Lennox 2019; 2020) and ‘abstract’ (Hanson 2023) in the sense that they feel too complicated to articulate in words. Translated from Welsh to English, the word ‘*cynefin*’ is often taken to mean ‘home’ or ‘habitat’. However, in Welsh, ‘*cynefin*’ captures a far greater and fuller sense of belonging. It gives rise to a multiplicity of possibilities for where I/you/we belong.

In a video about the ‘sense-making’ leadership programme entitled ‘The *Cynefin* Framework’, creator Dave Snowdon translates ‘*cynefin*’ as ‘the place of your multiple belongings’ (Cognitive Edge 2010). ‘It’s this sense that you’re rooted in many different paths that profoundly influence what you are, but of which you can only ever be partially aware’ (Cognitive Edge 2010), says Snowdon, gesturing towards a rationale for the type of experiences of belonging generated through the individual and collective performing of boxing habits and rituals. These experiences of belonging are vast, spanning varying materials and spaces; they are situated betwixt self–other–object, intersecting with personal and collective histories. They illustrate Grosz’s rationale:

Habit produces not only a tendency to act and the diminution of the tendency to feel ... it produces an ‘obscure intelligence’ that operates below the level of will, consciousness, intentionality or reflection, an intelligence in which all forms of life participate ... an intimate intuition, an attunement of the subject and the object. (Grosz 2013: 223)

Cynefin speaks to the nuanced connections in boxing that Hanson describes. It articulates the type of material engagement with other that bonds boxing participants through habit, ritual and action. ‘Entanglements’ (Thorpe *et al.* 2023: 4) forged ‘between living beings and materiality’ (Grosz 2013: 217) in boxing are commonly overlooked in popular readings of sport, in favour of perspectives that bind boxing participants to dominant (and sometimes myopic) narratives. Through secondary translation, *cynefin* is taken to mean ‘haunt’, which resonates with connections in boxing that occur among the live, living and becoming *and* the dead and undead (Crews and Lennox 2020). The notion of *cynefin* captures experiences of belonging in boxing twofold: first, in how *cynefin* draws links with what I have

described as embodied habits of boxing that go beyond the 'personal' and pour into collective *community action*; second, in how *cynefin* articulates what Gaitán and Castresana define as the 'unifying element' of habit, 'which reveals the existence of continuities in the human being individually or collectively understood' (2014: 3). I would extend this definition to include 'continuities' between bodies and materiality in boxing experienced within live and ghostly encounters.

Spectral presences that haunt how practices, places and performances of boxing are understood are 'a potential threat and hope for both the present situation and the future' (Crews and Lennox 2020: 1) of boxing. *Cynefin*, then, creates a rationale for articulating the shared hope and threat derived from the diverse, varied and relational exchanges in boxing that 'transcend a lot of more common notions of what it means to belong' (Hanson 2023). Intrinsic and intricate exchanges such as these are complex because they rely on sensitivity to, and awareness of, the complicated interplay between freedom and constraints for individuals and communities in boxing spaces. Understood through mainstream interpretations, boxing gyms are hostile and unfriendly towards bodies who unsettle rigid assumptions about what an appropriate boxing body *is* and *can do*. However, as Trans Boxing and several other independent case studies testify, boxing offers participants from all walks of life a powerful and transformative 'non-verbal ... physical' language for comprehending and responding competently to threats to our self and others. In boxing, 'we are performing ... gestures and rituals that are ... bonding us', says Hanson (2023). Habits and rituals bond participants through boxing, offering them refuge through order, connection and continuity. The transformative power of boxing resonates with what Grosz describes as the transformative power of habit:

Habits are the movements that address an open relation to the world, a relation that is not the constraint of behaviour that instincts are, but that, by degrees, is the promise of freedom. It is only because there is some orderly repetition in both the regularities of the world and in the performative possibilities of bodies that habits can ease the burden of creative freedom. (Grosz 2013: 225)

To learn to box does not release individuals from pain. Neither does it make individuals impenetrable. However, boxing does create a type of freedom through habit and embodied practices that is capable of transforming individuals and communities – if only momentarily. Boxing demands a formally complex understanding because it is as much an empowering practice for *bodies under threat* as it is a cultural practice that *polices* inclusion. Snowdon's definition of *cynefin* as a place of multiple belongings of which we are only 'partially aware', and Grosz's description of the interplay between freedom/constraint and self/other that habit affords us, gives voice to the complexity of experiences in boxing, which are capable of creating agentic bonds but are inherently difficult to pin down. As Hanson observes:

[I]t's not just all about training for a fight ... it transcends maybe those more explicit goals and for me ... I find there is a spiritual and emotional depth towards just existing in those spaces ... I think that there is a reason why when people find that, they don't leave. (Hanson 2023)

Cynefin captures where boxing experiences exceed physical and conceptual boundaries, and bleed into the type of nebulous 'entanglements' in the sport that are evident in *both* formal readings of boxing as a cultural practice *and* anecdotal accounts that are rarely given equal value.

Boxing might not explicitly change cultural habits of exclusion, harm and hostility towards marginalized bodies and communities, but Hanson's experience of a boxing community's willingness to 'bump up' against difference and complexity, and to instigate change, reinforces Supriya Chaudhuri's view that boxing is not solely concerned with 'the supposed male propensity to violence' (2012: 1,770). Indeed, in her work with female boxers in India, Chaudhuri discovered:

The boxer in the ring, absorbed in her discipline, needs to shut out the world, and concentrate on the ends of sport. For women as much as for men, that space, seemingly abstracted from the everyday compulsions of society and politics, offers a rare freedom. If there is something to be learnt from the examples of women boxers in India, it is that this

freedom, this pleasure, is accessible to women as much as to men, and that it is, moreover, accessible in the most unpromising of environments. (Chaudhuri 2012: 1,770)

Chaudhuri warns that this agency has its limitations, ‘for boxers inhabit the real world, a world of injustice, oppression and deprivation’ (2012: 1,770). However, Chaudhuri’s analysis, Chachra’s account and the Trans Boxing Project share common ideas about boxing’s capacity to hold space for where personal habits manifest individual transformation, and where the sport itself intervenes in cultural habits of *exclusion*. Disruptions to, or interventions in, the naturalized rules of engagement in boxing spaces – regardless of how temporary – is possible because *any body* engaged in boxing training has the potential to ‘draw sustenance from the body’s capacity to suffer, endure and feel pleasure in athletic practice’ (Chaudhuri 2012: 1,770). Through the habit of returning to the body and ‘stick[ing] around’ through difficulty, individuals cultivate courage and confidence to ‘embed’ themselves and ‘be embedded’ in the ‘social context’ of the gym (Hanson 2023). At its best, then, the boxing gym provides a space where individuals and communities engage in shared habits, labours and practices, where it is possible to move beyond individual experience towards complex, interconnected experiences of care and belonging – towards *cynefin*.

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