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Boxing

Loïc Artiaga

Boxing is a major modern sport. Codified in England at the end of the eighteenth century, it became a privileged space of symbolic confrontation of races and nations, dominated by a virile image of manhood. It participated in the regulation of violence, to the detriment of other martial practices in Africa and Europe.

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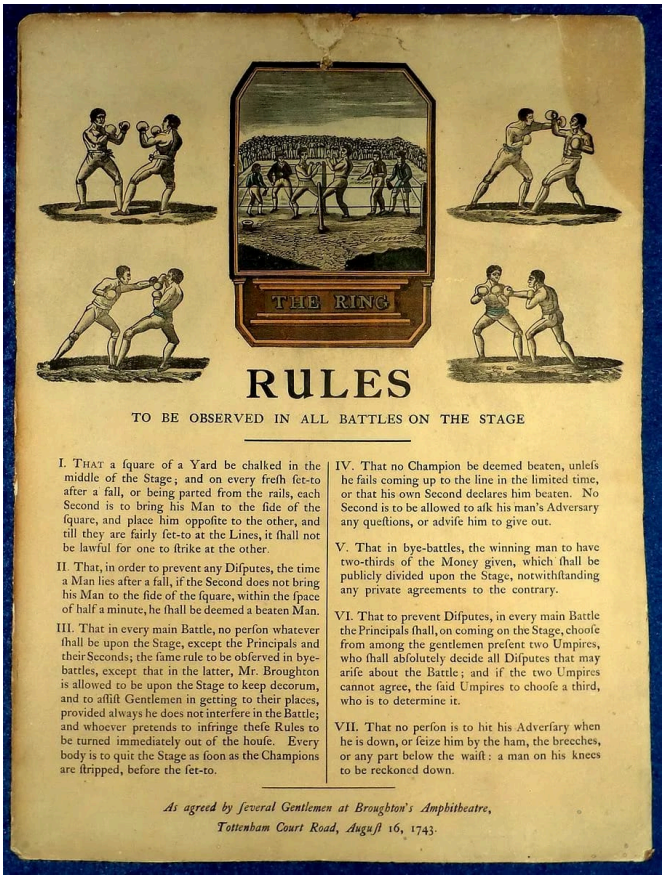
Since the late Middle Ages, Africa and Europe have seen many forms of regulated hand-to-hand combat with no relationship or affiliation with each other. Towards the end of the modern era, the Atlantic world became a privileged space of circulation for codified fighting. Various practices existed, most of which followed the Western sports model, different from real fighting. Based on mastering techniques in a regulated, competitive framework, they were part of a wider move to contain and purge violence. The

demonstration of technical, physical and tactical superiority mattered more than destroying the opponent. According to René Girard, the spectators "vaccinated" themselves against violence by watching it as a show [1] but boxing critics totally disagree with this point of view. Besides, pugilism's main defenders relied on nationalistic and virile arguments to promote it. This is the context in which boxing, codified in 18th-century England, became a major world sport.

The earliest British devotees adroitly traced boxing's lineage back to ancient Greece to legitimize bare-knuckled fighting. The first instructors, James Figg and Jack Broughton, quoted Aeneas while teaching the "manly art" in spaces called "amphitheaters". At the same time, ordered to "pacify their morals", the agonistic traditions practiced in America by the descendants of slaves faded away as they integrated into Creole societies. Slaves brought their self-defense traditions to the New World, such as *engolo* from Angola, which was later integrated into *capoeira* in Brazil. While English boxing dominated the world of codified fighting until the 1960s, when the popularity of Asian martial arts began rising around the world, it was less thoroughly institutionalized than other sports governed by better identified and more centralized bodies. It immediately became a professional sport that people paid money to see, while other practices long remained steeped in the amateur ideal. Moreover, boxing was less internationalized than other sports codified at the same time, such as football. Several forms of pugilism lay claim to the title of boxing; American and French boxing, and forms of *kickboxing,* are national versions forged in reaction to the original model. While the British invented a sporting tradition by tracing its roots back to ancient Greece, the reality of practices before English boxing became the dominant model—quite simply called boxing without reference to its country of origin—is rather that of a rhizome, developing without a common base or subordination.

Attempts were made to censor and ban English boxing until its legal acceptance became widespread throughout the Atlantic world in the 1920s. Part of its history is marked by a militant, counter-cultural dimension associated with struggle and liberation movements where self-defense was a major component. Whether for the British *gentry* in the Victorian Age or the *Black Panthers in the 1960s*, boxing was primarily a means of self-defense. At first, women were excluded; boxing was driven by a masculine ideal. Much of its success stemmed from its ability to be a symbolic space where the dominant masculine incarnations are made and consecrated. Its cultural success as a global spectacle lies in its simplicity, media-friendliness—two fighters on a stage—and its ability to be a powerful metaphor for political and social dualities wherever it is practiced and seen. Like cockfighting studied by Clifford Geertz [2], the boxing match has an interpretative function. It is a story told by and for the viewers. From the first transatlantic matches, which were also the first international ones, the ring was a semiotic space with its political, racial, social signs. For example, in 1810, when Afro-American Tom Molineaux squared off against Englishman Tom Cribb in Oxfordshire, he was met with overt hostility from the crowd because of the color of his skin. Molineaux represented a black, and therefore *wild*, form of brutality against a *civilized* embodiment of Britishness. The confusing fight was fraught with various incidents, which caused arguing over its interpretation, [3] and ushered in two centuries of rivalry between nations, races and different representations of masculinity, all focused on the small area of a flexible, raised floor that everyone could see. Boxers from different continents have been crossing the Atlantic world, a particularly coherent space to study the phenomenon. However, boxing can also be understood on the scale of the British Empire with champions from Australia or the Pacific world and the West Coast of the United States as a point of contact with Asian practices. These other world histories of boxing will only be marginally considered here.

Fighting, but with rules



Broughton Rules (1753)

Source: Wikipedia

The English press is the main source of information for matches in Europe. In 1681, *The True Protestant Mercury* published an article about a match attended by the Duke of Albermale. The winner, a butcher, was proclaimed the best boxer in England. [4] The British nobility's patronage shored up the sport's fragile growth. As a show on which people could place bets, boxing became a sign of distinction easing out other popular practices, such as *quarterstaff*. Codification by successive touches set the acceptable level of violence and guaranteed wagers. Those gambling on a match's outcome had to be able to anticipate its course. But for bouts at the Royal Theater in London, which began in 1698, there were no weight classes or time limits. It was not uncommon to see the combatants rolling around together and punching each other on the floor. No matter how hard the authorities tried to ban these brawls, they could not. In the late 18th century, the national question gave boxing a *raison d'être*: it symbolized a form of British courage forged in the fight against rival nations. Matches served to teach the importance of bravery and bodily force. The song *A-Boxing We Will Go* sung by British troops during the Spanish War of Independence (1808-1814) was taken up ringside to proclaim their nation's superiority over others:

> *Italians stab their friends behind,*
> *In darkest shades of night;*
> *But Britons they are bold and kind,*
> *And box their friends by light.*
> *The sons of France their pistols use,*
> *Pop, pop, and they have done;*
> *But Britons with their hands will bruise,*
> *And scorn away to run.*
> *[. . .]*
> *Since boxing is a manly game,*
> *And Britain's recreation;*
> *By boxing we will raise our fame,*
> *'Bove any other nation.* [26]

As the foundations of modern Western masculinity were being laid, characterized by willpower, courage and a sense of honor, boxing was an antidote to *macaroni*, young, long-haired English fops considered effeminate and spoiled by the Latin atmosphere. Various matches and shows aimed to compare different traditions—French versus English boxing, wrestling versus jujitsu—in competitions to define manly ideals, measured by their respective effectiveness.

Bare-knuckle fights spread throughout the formal and informal empire as English boxing practically ceased between 1830 and 1880 in the context of class struggles to control and moralize leisure activities. In the United States, boxing found fertile ground on plantations whose owners encouraged fights between slaves and in leisure venues that followed in the wake of Western expansion. Popular theaters and *saloons* hosted boxing matches along with circus acts. In a society where race and ethnicity were paramount, matches were a place where tensions between groups could be played out in public, giving each side fleeting heroes. In *saloons*, customers sometimes stepped into the ring to exchange blows for a few dollars. The immorality of these spectacles sparked lively debates. Congress felt compelled to step in and ban public prizefights after state laws proved ineffective: California passed legislation in 1850, 1872 and 1893; the entire Middle West in the 1860s-1870s. Louisiana banned bare-knuckle fights in 1882 and 1891, Arkansas and Texas in 1895 and New York in 1900. [5] Until the 1920s, progressives mounted public campaigns to prohibit the main fights. They not only condemned the violence, but also the drinking and corruption that went along with it. Matches took place in secret venues or more permissive jurisdictions, such as Nevada and Indian reservations. To attend, people had to take trains or steamboats without knowing where they would end up. In 1896, the Fitzsimmons-Maher match announced in El Paso actually took place on the opposite of the Rio Grande to officially come under Mexican law. United States officials gradually threw up their arms and ended up taxing an activity they could not stamp out. Conservatives in Mexico and Cuba unsuccessfully tried to curtail boxing, calling it a "barbaric", "murderous", "bestial" and "grotesque" spectacle [6] unsuitable for the tropical climate and local physical constitutions. United States sailors contributed to the sport's advancement in South America by staging fights that often took place in secret.

Threatened but never stopped, boxing was caught between two movements. The first, codification, was internal. It laid down the rules of conduct for the fighters and their entourage. The second, supervision, was external, and established boxing's social acceptability. Before the widespread application of the

Queensberry rules (1865) in the 1890s, the "Police Gazette Rules" (1882) and "American Fair-Play Rules" (1888) complemented and competed with each other. They laid the groundwork for a new system by setting time limits for the rounds and establishing the 10-second count for a knockout. Gloves were required and wrestling was prohibited. The new rules resulted in shorter and more spectacular matches that put the focus on speed and striking.

Popular success led to the earliest professional careers and the increasing technical and tactical sophistication of boxing, which did not meet with unanimous approval. In the late 18th century, Daniel Mendoza's style, based on footwork and defense rather than brute force, was a matter of debate. Some commentators considered Mendoza's attitude cowardly. In the 1830s, black boxers like James Wharton and John Perry, "The Black Sailor", became the champions of the day. These men were among the first to travel, from Cairo to London or London to Nova Scotia, to get paid for their talent. They were the earliest "international vagabonds" [7] for whom boxing was a narrow path to emancipation.

The birth of a global spectacle

Boxing circulated geographically and socially within societies and on either side of the Atlantic. At first, most fans were affluent. Strict rules established the acceptable level of violence and the social dividing lines of sports associations. Thus, boxing was encouraged among the ruling classes in closed, controlled spaces and possibly learned in elite schools as part of a manly education, such as the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in Mexico. Then came a wider form of supervision. In the United Kingdom, it began in 1880 with the foundation of the British Amateur Boxing Association, with the motto "*Box, don't fight*". Everywhere, the sport spread as urbanization concentrated populations eager to see the show as well as the number of men willing to risk their health, and sometimes their lives, for money.

Entertainment industry promotors soon came to dominate boxing, which led to its convergence with various types of *entertainment*. In 1887, Buffalo Bill and prizefighter John L. Sullivan appeared together in Birmingham, where their respective European tours converged. They offered two distinct sides of white American manhood. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show provided a romantic view of how the West was won, while Sullivan embodied the new might of the urban working classes. Since prizefighting, unlike other modern sports, depends not on a seasonal timetable but on opportunities for matches, those opportunities had to be created by publicizing the fighters, making fans want to follow their careers, and anticipate the fights between two clearly identified personalities. Some boxers became *respectable* figures of identification.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.loc.gov/item/mbrs00064432

Corbett/Fitzsimmons Fight (1897)

Source: Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division

The elegant, dashing heavyweight James "Gentleman Jim" Corbett was one of boxing's first global media stars before turning to a successful career in theater and film. Veriscope captured his 1897 bout with Fitzsimmons on film, which was shown in New York and London. The French press covered the match,

with one newspaper declaring that Frenchmen would take up boxing "no more than they would the cruelty of bullfighting". [8] Analogies with dogfights and cockfights commonly appear in the history of boxing, putting it beyond the pale of civilization.



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FITZIMONS ET CORBETT

CORBETT FITZIMONS

Nous reproduisons cette semaine la photographie des deux célèbres boxeurs CORBETT et Bob FITZIMONS et donnerons par la même occasion quelques renseignements sur la manière dont se pratiquent les assauts de boxe anglaise. Le match de la semaine dernière a vivement passionné tous les amateurs et certes il y avait de quoi car les deux adversaires étaient dignes l'un de l'autre et tous deux se trouvaient dans leur meilleure forme. Corbet pesant dix livres de plus et mesurant quatre centimètres de plus que son rival, représentait le boxeur savant, méthodique et adroit, tandis que Bob était reconnu résistant et surtout dur frappeur. Le résultat a étonné tout le monde car James Corbett

L'Athlète, March 28, 1897

Source: Gallica

In *La Vie au grand air (Outdoor Life)*, Fitzsimmons and Corbett are called "transatlantic boxers". The writer preferred "French and genuinely French" boxers, who "spread a useful recreational sport". [9] By the late 1800s, matches were taking place at the Élysée Montmartre, the Salle Wagram and other Parisian entertainment venues. From 1908, African-American boxers made these events successful and aroused curiosity about black bodies.

How did boxing become a practice and then a spectator sport on both sides of the Atlantic? For Gorn, the answer lies in the transformation of the working world. Boxing embodies basic values associated with capitalism—rugged individualism, materialism and the drive to succeed—while ignoring others that value restraint and delayed gratification. [10] It bluntly reflects the world's brutality, where suffering and defeat are facts of life. The history of boxing's progression also has to do with shifting sensibilities, the acceptance of violence through the filter of technical, aesthetic and moral codification. For some, the "*manly art*" embodied national qualities and virtues—*Britishness in the United Kingdom—*or local ones—the toughness of *costeños* in Colombia. [11] In France, boxing's pre-war promoters praised its "wholesomeness" and the moral aspect of a sport that was no longer "the exclusive monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon race". [12] They acclimated it to national conditions before French boxers anchored the sport in the collective imagination. The same thing happened at almost the same time in Mexico, where boxing's popularity after the First World War transformed it from a foreign import into a factory of modern national heroes.

This dialectic, which combines the globalization of sport with the nationalization of the public's interests, went hand-in-hand with the development of technology and mass media. When Jack Dempsey defeated Georges Carpentier in 1921, the French press took heart by celebrating the triumphs of Branly and Marconi. Granted, the national champion went down for the count in Jersey City, but it took just 120 seconds for the news to reach France by underwater cable and radio. [13]

The racial contest

The *color line* also divided the citizens in the ring. The rise of spectator sports made it a space where men, especially poor ones, could prove their manliness, earn a living and have a shot at upward mobility. The main white champions of the Gilded Age refused to fight blacks and many campaigns were waged against interracial matches. There were two reasons for this: the risk of defeat at the hands of a black man, which would counteract a modern sports imagination vaunting the white body through the restored Olympic Games (1896) and the first international competitions like the Davis Cup (1900); and the fear of exacerbating racial tensions. Born in the Virgin Islands, Peter Jackson had to settle for becoming the world champion "*colored"* boxer because he could not face off against John L. Sullivan.

The 1908 Jack Johnson-Tommy Burns bout was a watershed moment. Johnson's victory prompted lynchings and the search for a "Great White Hope" to beat him. Defying social hierarchies and moral codes, Johnson embodied a new black male ideal, freed from the racial determinism that relegated most African-Americans to subservient roles and menial jobs. The emerging African-American press reported on his career abroad, giving concrete expression to "the utopia of black freedom". [14] Johnson's victories thrilled diasporas in Europe, but they also fueled tensions. In London, fans of the British champion Jeffries assaulted a black music hall artist outside a theater after Johnson defeated him. Matches were drawing crowds everywhere. In April 1915, 25,000 Cubans and 5,000 Americans packed Havana's Oriental Park to see the Johnson-Willard bout. [15]

In a world of symbols, the image of defeat and its reproduction mattered more than the defeat itself. In 1909, the South African police banned advertising for a film of the Johnson-Burns match. The following year, a campaign by the United Society of Christian Endeavor succeeded in blocking screenings of the Johnson-Jeffries fight in the United States, while the Cuban government prohibited cinemas from showing interracial matches. Officials were worried it would heighten racial tensions and incentivize Afro-Cubans to fight for political and social equality. In 1911, the announcement of the Johnson-Bull match aroused similar concerns in the United Kingdom, where some people feared that the New World's racial issues would combine with tensions in the colonies. Following in Johnson's footsteps, many Latin American boxers from humble backgrounds embodied new hopes, like Kid Chocolate and Young Jack Johnson (Cuba) and Kid Azteca and Chango Casanova (Mexico), whose chosen names express their desire to stress their ethnicity.

In Africa boxing as an organized spectator sport did not start making inroads until the 1930s, so fighters left to pursue careers in Europe and the United States. The best Ghanaian boxers, such as Floyd Robertson and Kimpo Amarfio, preferred the United Kingdom to the United States. Born in Saint-Louis, Senegal, Amadou M'Barick Fall beat Georges Carpentier in Montrouge, France to become the 1922 world champion. The French press called him the "championzee" and "jungle boy "; his manager said there was "something of the monkey about him". Three years later, Fall was murdered in New York, where he was trying to make a career.

The racial issue did not just boil down to a contest between men of different colors. It was also based on the establishment of intra-racial norms acceptable to the dominant classes. For example, in the 1930s, a sharecropper's son, Joe Louis, the "Black Bomber", was a more consensual public figure than Jack Johnson. Early in his career, his manager set down a list of conditions that was sent to the press: [16]

1. He must never be photographed with a white woman
2. He must never enter a nightclub alone
3. No easy fights
4. No fixed fights
5. He must never rejoice at the fall of an opponent
6. He must look impassive in front of the cameras
7. He must lead a wholesome life and fight fairly

Louis toed the line, securing a good public image, which was unprecedented for a black boxer. He could then claim to defend the entire country.

The clash of nations

In the 1930s, Germany's Max Schmeling and Italy's Primo Carnera toured the United States. this was a pivotal step in the internationalization of boxing, but it also had a political side. For Mussolini, fisticuffs were "a wonderful means of Fascist communication." [17] Schmeling represented Europe in the "Battle of the Continents" pitting him against Jack Sharkey in 1930. But three years later, he was the "Black Uhlan of the Rhine" in the eyes of the world. When Max Baer fought Schmeling in New York, he thought of each blow as a punch in the Führer's face. [18] Schmeling's body became an object of transfer. So did Carnera's, which Mussolini's Italy fetishized to be contemplated, touched and worshipped.

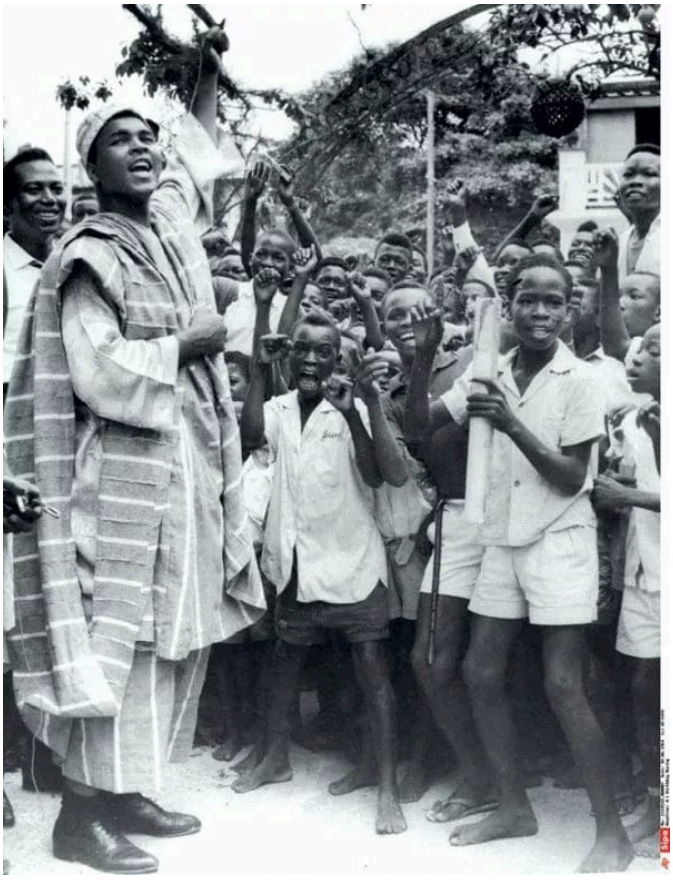
Joe Louis became world champion in 1937, but his two fights with Schmeling (1936 and 1938) are what thrust him into boxing's pantheon. He lost the first match, but pulverized Schmeling in the first round of the second, dispelling the myth of Aryan superiority. However, Louis did not expunge the period's structural racism: the press wrote about his supposed intellectual limitations. The Black Bomber did not become a national hero until his 1942 Navy Relief Society fundraising bout, which contributed to the war effort and served military propaganda aims.

In 1952, the USSR's first participation in the Olympic Games precipitated the Cold War in the sports world. Olympic and amateur world championship matches played out in a new arena that was different from professional, Americano-centrist bouts, making room for other nations, like Cuba, to appear on the international athletic stage. Fidel Castro banned professional sports and promoted amateur heroes who shined at the Olympiads. Three-time Olympic heavyweight champion Teofilo Stevenson (1972, 1976, 1980) spurned the promoters' repeated invitations, turning down large sums of money to leave Cuba for a professional career in the United States. *Sports Illustrated* journalist Tex Maule lamented that he would rather be "red than rich" [19] . Reacting to corruption, considered endemic in the United States dominated by the World Boxing Association (1921), in 1963 Latin American countries founded the World Boxing Council on the proposal of the Mexican president. The International Boxing Federation (1983) and World Boxing Organization (1988) followed.

As African countries gained independence, boxers from the Gold Coast, Nigeria and Senegal rose to international prominence. However, anthropological research on the West African coast shows the rich variety of local martial traditions, which were still distinct from boxing. In Angola, Carlos Estermann documented *kandeka*, a kind of open-palm boxing that was also practiced in Namibia. [20] The penetration of boxing negotiated with other practices, which, as elsewhere, occurred at the cost of symbolic and political appropriation. In South Africa, it was facilitated by missionaries who, in their schools, extolled its moral virtues to the black urban population and its ability to channel the energy of young men. Boxing had a better reputation than football, which sometimes sparked riots and brawls. Many boxers made the sign of the cross before matches and displayed model behavior in and outside the ring, like Jake Ntuli. In 1952, he became the Commonwealth flyweight champion, followed by his countryman Denis Adam in 1957. Boxing in their country's "Non-White" and "White" categories, respectively, they never officially fought one another. While secret interracial *sparring sessions* existed, the boxers' skin color meant that they led different lives outside the ring. Nelson Mandela, an amateur boxer, described the gyms without equipment that he went to and the double careers black champions were forced to have because they could not earn a living from boxing alone. [21]

A global image of manliness

Starting with the 1960 Rome Olympics, Cassius Clay, who changed his name to Mohammed Ali in 1964, left a deep mark on the Atlantic history of boxing. A Pan-African icon and civil rights activist, he encapsulated the political issues of his day. As Mike Marqusee wrote, Ali helped shape the black Atlantic as much as it shaped him. [22] His career coincided with the rise of boxing as a globally televised spectator sport that Mondovision and satellite links brought to millions. Growing media attention kindled new debates about the spectacle's violence, which was broadcast live without censorship. As television viewers were eager to see new bodies and faces, the medium sped up the pace of careers. Boxing, bullfighting, *jai alai* and *lucha libre* became popular televised spectator sports in Latin America.



Mohammed Ali in Ghana

Source: Jeune Afrique

Ali was an outsized media showman in and outside the ring. He went to Africa and the Caribbean, where, despite his erratic political positions, many of his fans considered him a "black Castro" [23]. In America hatred towards him grew when he converted to Islam, while his antiracist positions and opposition to the Vietnam War caused outrage. Ali transgressed the role of the subservient Negro and the obsequious athlete deferential to his opponent. He embodied brazen masculinity, a far cry from the *ethos* of the model sportsman. This virile conception of boxing was not only aimed at spectators who saw it as a space where discourses and symbols proposing an ordering of genders are projected. It also shaped the boxers' self-image and what they expected from their matches. After losing to Roberto Durán, Sugar Ray Leonard said: "I don't think it was calculated. [...] He did challenge my manhood, and I wasn't mature enough to know how to respond." [24] He considered his defeat a gender-related failuremore than anything else. When Durán was defeated by Leonard in their second match, the Panamanian press called him a *maricon*, the Spanish word for "faggot". His home was ransacked by crazed fans who could not bear his betrayal of *machismo* anti-yankee Panamanian nationalism. The tragic death of Cuban boxer Paret in 1962 appeared as the consequence of an insult impugning his opponent's virility. Griffith, his adversary, beat him to death after Paret called him a "sissy".



Leonard/Durán "War of the 80's"

Source: Ebay

the sport's relative decline in the late 20th century—the number of French Boxing Federation members plummeted from 8,200 in 1963 to 2,700 in 1970—is hard to gauge because it is practiced in so many different forms and places (private gyms, federated clubs, *fitness courses*, etc.). The ring remained the locus of an endlessly regenerated performance of virility where women were invisible, if not excluded, as in Mexico from 1947 to 1998. There and in Panama, virility is a matter of national honor: the boxer's body symbolizes the country's vigor. The evolution of the major figures of the pugilistic spectacle makes it possible to track virile incarnations, between success of the virility of control, ostentatiousness or ambiguity. In the mid-1980s, Mike Tyson burst upon the scene at the same time as the new image of the "*bad nigga"* popularized by *gangsta rap*. Later, Oscar de la Hoya exposed how deeply the racial identities and gender behavior expected of athletes are intertwined. Accused of pulling his punches, he was reviled by some Mexican-American *fans* a traitor to Latinness.

The Atlantic approach to boxing does not quite resolve the paradox of a sport where the fighter's body, a "locus of tensions and desire" [25] amplified by training, becomes a target of destruction. This tragic dimension accounts for artists' fascination with boxing, who made it a subject and a motif, and sometimes practiced the sport themselves (Byron, Cravant and Hemingway). Braque, Derain, Dufy, Matisse, Picasso and Rodin often attended bouts in Paris. Later, Basquiat painted Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson, who had become heroic figures in contemporary black mythology. Boxing's great names joined the pantheon of a new urban culture. They are mentioned in rap songs by Wu-Tang Clan and Puff Daddy.

The history of Atlantic ties, even when constructed within the dialectic between global culture and local appropriation, tends to eclipse the depth of boxing's local roots. It offers a rough draft of a history of cultural, political and racial tensions, which it stylizes and simplifies. It partially resolves those tensions,

since the outcome of a fight symbolically settles the conflict that is staged in the ring. More than other sports, and despite a history that, paradoxically, was based on the disappearance of other martial practices, boxing belongs to a collective memory that emphasizes struggles and participates in a shared imagining of the overthrow of the mighty. The power of the spectacle, whose codes are universally understood, lies in harboring an aspiration to put the world to rights, if a world born of chaos/KOs.

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