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Only one Mayweather: a critique of hope from the hopeful

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Professional boxing offers hope of vast wealth and global mobility for aspiring athletes in Accra, hopes bolstered by the understanding that Ghanaians are particularly suited to boxing's attrition. However, when boxers become active in the global industry, they encounter power relations which locate them as cheap, subordinate labour, and stymie their championship hopes. As boxers build lives through the sport, they reflect critically on the role their hopes of 'making it big' play in perpetuating industry inequalities, recognizing what I call the ideological function of hope. Despite this, they remain committed to hopes of dramatic success. Their simultaneous optimism and cynicism complicates contemporary accounts of hope as a strategy of resilience in contexts of profound uncertainty. Building on ethnographic research with Accra boxers, I theorize hoping as a paradoxical experience of critique and optimism in equal measure, to account for the contradictory ways people act when orienting themselves towards better futures.

Introduction: Aspirations forestalled

Abraham[1] is a talented welterweight boxer who turned professional in 2013 at the age of 23, after representing Ghana at the World Amateur Championships.[2] If asked about his future in the sport, Abraham would explain that he planned to build up a winning record, fight abroad, win world titles, and become wealthy through boxing: a common constellation of aspirations for professional boxers in Accra. Abraham and I became close from 2014 to 2016 when we both trained at the Attoh Quarshie Boxing Gym in Accra's old centre, Ga Mashie; Abraham building his fledgeling career while I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Accra boxers.

At the time, Floyd Mayweather, a vastly wealthy and unbeaten African-American boxer, was Accra boxers' principal icon of a masculinity associated with material wealth, conspicuous generosity, and global mobility (Hopkinson 2020; cf. Esson 2013). Like others, Abraham shared images on social media of Mayweather posing beside cars, private jets, expensive clothing, jewellery, and piles of cash; wore clothing branded with Mayweather's 'TMT' ('The Money Team') logo; and extolled his slick defensive style

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in the ring. In seeking to emulate Mayweather's success, Abraham lived an ascetic life typical of aspiring boxers. He trained twice a day except on Sunday, when he played football; carefully controlled his diet to stay close to his 'fight weight'; was abstinent in the weeks before fights; and forwent the pleasures of socializing into the night and drinking alcohol. He explained that a disciplined lifestyle shaped his body to win, and that 'making it big' was achieved by moulding a body and disposition capable of competing on a global stage. With this in place, competition became an opportunity to excel and move closer to his vision for the future: becoming a champion.

Despite his lofty ambitions, technical skill, and committed lifestyle, Abraham repeatedly refused lucrative, high-profile bouts abroad. Why would such a committed and capable athlete turn down opportunities to realize his aspirations – opportunities he had pursued diligently for years? His decisions were informed by a critical engagement with the structural inequalities of the global boxing industry, and the role hopes of 'making it big' play in perpetuating those inequalities.

As Accra boxers become active in the global industry, they encounter racialized structural inequalities which locate them as a cheap source of expendable labour. These dynamics leverage the tropes which fuel boxers' initial optimism about becoming champions. In other words, boxers' optimistic participation in the industry contributes to the industry's exploitative inequality. As they become increasingly aware of this, boxers reshape their understandings of success to account for these dynamics. Despite their critical perspective, boxers and coaches also maintain hopes of transcending the industry's prejudices and realizing grand ambitions. Anthropologists have recently analysed the production of hope as a strategy of resilience in the face of rupture, doubt, and insecurity (Crapanzano 2003; Mattingly 2010; 2014; Miyazaki 2006; Pelkmans 2013). By contrast, boxers' reflections contribute to a nascent literature on the ambivalence of hopeful orientations towards the future (Langevang 2017; Vigh 2017; 2019), and highlight the role hope can play in perpetuating exploitation and subjection. Read alongside their steadfast commitment to championship hopes, boxers' cynical navigation of the industry suggests that hope involves critique and optimism simultaneously and in equal measure. This critique of hope from the hopeful helps us to account for the inconsistent and paradoxical ways people act when orienting themselves towards imagined better futures.

Aspiration, masculinity, and global ex/inclusion

In the wake of structural adjustment programmes implemented since the 1990s, opportunities for meaningful employment and social adulthood have become increasingly scarce for young people in Ghana and across the Global South. Simultaneously, rapid globalization means young people 'recognize the values of a wider world they find uniquely compelling … yet feel almost completely incapable of realizing the potential of those values in their lives' (Weiss 2009: 14; see also Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000). Consequently, recent accounts of youth and agency across the Global South, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, are framed by a twofold exclusion: from social adulthood 'at home' and from a globalized world of 'tempting promise and boundless consumerism' (de Boeck & Plissart 2004: 48-9) which remains largely inaccessible (Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006; Honwana 2012; Masquellier 2019; Vigh 2006; Weiss 2009).

Set against this exclusion and rapid globalization, aspirations to sporting success in the wealthy competitions of the Global North have become popular among young

people seeking a more prosperous future (Besnier, Brownell & Carter 2018). Aspiring athletes draw on intense programmes of bodily discipline, spiritual commitment, and magico-religious practices as they pursue prosperous sporting futures (Besnier 2015; Kovač 2021; Rial 2012), a mode of reflexive self-improvement which resonates with accounts of agency and selfhood under neoliberal capitalism (Gershon *et al.* 2011). Although few realize dreams of global sporting success, the rigours of an ascetic lifestyle and pursuit of gendered sporting dreams provide a sense of meaningful striving for young people faced with the reality of elongated youth and exclusion from global flows.

While association football (soccer) is the most popular vehicle for sporting aspirations in Ghana (Esson 2013; Ungruhe 2016), in Accra many men and some women take up boxing in pursuit of a more prosperous future. Unlike aspiring footballers, for whom global mobility is often a distant dream, a significant proportion of Accra boxers are globally mobile and actively engaged with the global boxing industry, and a minority are extremely successful. Ghana has produced nine world champions in the last forty years – two since I began fieldwork in 2014 – all but one of whom have trained for much of their career in central Accra. During this time, many others have contested world and regional titles across the globe, and more still travel frequently to fight outside Ghana in less prestigious bouts. Many of these globally mobile athletes continue to live and train in Accra.

Accra boxers complicate the picture of sporting aspirations as a reaction to the double bind of generational stasis 'at home' and exclusion from a globalizing world. Their involved presence in the global industry, and decisions like Abraham's to refuse opportunities for global engagement, call for an analysis which foregrounds strategies of participation and experiences of inclusion, rather than framing sporting hope as a reaction to exclusion, stasis, and curtailed possibility. Hence, I trace the dilemmas and inequalities boxers encounter when they take fights abroad, or choose not to, as active participants in the global industry.

Hope as ideology

The past two decades have seen a sustained anthropological attention to hope (see Kleist & Jansen 2016), often framed by a pervasive sense of instability and uncertainty – whether about the crumbling edifice of global capitalism (e.g. Graeber 2008), political turmoil, or precarity under neoliberal governance. For some, hope is produced by generating 'prospective momentum', deferring agency to processes and logics which actors trust to fulfil their ideal futures (Crapanzano 2003; Miyazaki 2004; 2006). This framework helps to explain the fervent commitment of athletes like Abraham to training regimens which theoretically create bodies fit for success (Besnier, Guinness, Hann & Kovač 2018; Guinness 2018: 323), and the way some athletes enlist spiritual (Kovač 2021) and magico-religious (Hann 2018) powers in pursuit of sporting dreams. However, it leaves little room for athletes' critical reflection on the objects of their hopes and the inequalities of sporting industries. Seeing sporting hopes only as a way of living through uncertainty and exclusion in the present leaves us ill equipped to explore why Abraham refuses opportunities to realize his aspirations, or to understand those who become disillusioned with sporting industries which fail to deliver on big dreams.

Like work on sporting aspirations, ethnographies of hope show how orientations towards an imagined better future make life meaningful and liveable despite hardship and constraint (Cooper & Pratten 2015; Mattingly 2010; Pelkmans 2013; 2017; Zigon 2009). Here, hope is envisioned as a strategy of resilience through which people

navigate rupture, uncertainty, and inequality. Recent ethnographic analyses have also explored the ambivalence of aspirational projects. This work highlights how aspirants knowingly take risks to realize social progression, maintain hope despite recognizing obstacles to desired futures (Langevang 2017; Pedersen 2012), and are morally ambivalent towards the practices through which they pursue better futures (Vigh 2017; 2019). Like Accra boxers, Vigh's cocaine trafficking interlocutors and the textile entrepreneurs of Langevang's work participate actively in global circulations (albeit from marginal positions) rather than being totally excluded (Langevang 2017; Vigh 2019). Their ambivalence stems from their knowledge and experience as participants, and I contribute to this focus on informed ambivalence towards global industries. Much of this work considers how hopes for a better future respond to a radically unstable and uncertain present, often caused by rapid economic depletion and social disenfranchisement. By contrast, I foreground boxers' accurate critical reflections on, and astute understanding of, the boxing industry's inequalities. I thus theorize hope in light of their critical certainty (not uncertainty) about how the industry's inequality shapes their experiences in the present, and their possible futures.

Attending to hope's darker side, I consider how striving for better futures can be implicated in practices of governance which perpetuate inequality and violence (Berlant 2011; Hage 2003; Vigh 2019). Like their soccer-playing counterparts, Accra boxers' participation in the global boxing industry is mediated by racialized accounts of African athletes as hyper-physical, which both fuel their hopes of success and exclude the majority from the sport's elite spaces (cf. Ungruhe & Esson 2017). Drawing on a Marxist understanding of ideology as a dominant set of ideas which support extant social structures by obscuring relations of subjection, boxers recognize what I call the ideological function of hope: the role hope plays in encouraging their necessary participation in an exploitative industry. I trace how they act in light of this critical engagement with hope, demonstrating the way hope is tangled up with exploitation, rather than only being a mode of survival in a precarious present.

My analysis builds on twenty-one months of ethnographic fieldwork with Accra boxers between 2014 and 2016. During this time, I trained, as noted, as a boxer at the Attoh Quarshie (a long-established gym with a stable of active professionals and amateurs), lived alongside gym-mates, and shadowed coaches and boxers as they moved around the city to plan bouts and develop careers. I regularly observed training at other gyms, attended coaches' meetings, and spent countless hours discussing dreams, aspirations, and the challenges of everyday life with my interlocutors.

I begin by outlining how the presence of globally mobile boxers and the sport's ethnic inflection in Accra make boxers confident about their world-beating potential. Locating hope as an embodied experience particular to the Accra boxing scene follows Ghassan Hage's argument that hope is always a contextually specific experience, not a generic sentiment (Hage 2003). I then trace why boxers become critical of this embodied hope, and how they navigate the industry's structural inequalities as they build lives through boxing. Finally, I consider the paradoxical form that hope takes in their lives, and the implications this has for anthropology's turn from 'suffering subjects' towards the 'good' (Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013).

Global mobility and tangible aspirations

Washington, head coach at the Attoh Quarshie, estimated that the Accra boxing 'family' – as my interlocutors call the city's network of gyms, boxers, coaches, promoters,

and referee/judges – included around 200 active professional fighters and slightly fewer registered amateurs. The boxing family is centred on the neighbourhood of Ga Mashie, a square kilometre in Accra's old colonial centre containing twenty-five of the city's forty-five active gyms. Consequently, Accra boxers often literally rub shoulders with former world, Commonwealth, and African Champions as they train. Icons like Mayweather remain tangible as several Ghanaians have worked for him as sparring partners, at least one Ghanaian coaches in Mayweather's Las Vegas gym, and others have faced high-profile Mayweather opponents.

From 2014 to 2016, Accra boxers travelled across six continents to ply their trade, competing in everything from small-scale events in regional Ghanaian and West African cities to world title fights in Las Vegas. Although the majority travel for short periods for single fights, a small number emigrate to box and train elsewhere, often to the United Kingdom and the United States. Accra's global reputation for producing good, globally engaged boxers also makes it a migrant destination for aspiring pugilists from across West Africa hoping to hone their skills and leverage the city's reputation to build careers. While I trained there, the Attoh Quarshie hosted several boxers from Nigeria and Benin who had moved to Accra for these reasons, two of whom subsequently emigrated to the United States to box. During my fieldwork, boxers from the United States, the United Kingdom, Lebanon, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Benin, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Namibia, Cameroon, South Korea, Argentina, and Mexico contested matches in Accra, often leaving shortly after their bouts.

If aspiration describes boxers' future-oriented desire for sporting success, hope describes the sense that those aspirations can be fulfilled. The constant flow of international boxers through Accra and the presence of globally successful Ghanaian athletes lends a palpable sense of global connection to Accra's boxing scene and keeps athletes optimistic about 'making it big'.[3] Although only a handful of Ghanaian boxers compete at world level and earn the large paycheques associated with such fights,[4] a significant minority earn a living fighting regularly in Ghana and abroad. This differentiates the boxing 'family' from Ghana's vast corpus of aspiring footballers, whose pursuit of financial gain and global mobility through football is almost always an 'unrealistic venture' (Ungruhe & Esson 2017: 27). Boxers who travel to fight within and outside Ghana, and compete below the sport's highest levels, are the majority of Accra's globally active athletes, and their experiences inform my analysis.

Although many boxers share hopes of 'making it big', they also lead heterogeneous lives. Many leave education before 16 and work alongside boxing. The most successful amateurs are employed by the state as soldiers and prison or police officers: all respectable masculine jobs with long-term stability. Others run businesses, work in markets, warehouses, and slaughterhouses, and/or own part shares in rental property or taxis. Many are married and have children. Some live with extended families whom they depend on, and some with families who depend on them. Others choose to live alone or are actively seeking marriage partners. This heterogeneity is partly because active boxers vary in age from their late teens to their forties. Although boxing is not always a lucrative pursuit and some struggle to achieve financial independence and social adulthood, boxers are not necessarily excluded from social adulthood as other cohorts of youthful men in sub-Saharan Africa are (Masquelier 2019; Weiss 2009).

While much recent literature on future orientation in sub-Saharan Africa addresses the difficulties of transitioning from youth to adulthood, my interlocutors are not

exclusively identified (by themselves or others) as 'youth', nor do they necessarily frame their aspirations through ideas of generational progression. Rather, boxing is one aspect of the ongoing project of gendered (and sometimes generational) self-making which affords particular opportunities: for global mobility, gendered prestige, and material wealth. Their aspirations remind us, as Samuli Schielke (2015) explores in his ethnography of Egyptian men's future orientations, that hopes of gendered self-making are not only marked by the transition from youth to adult, but are also an ongoing process of shaping gendered subjectivity *within* generational categories as well as between them.

While religion plays a prominent role in youth agency (Janson 2014) and sporting aspirations (Kovač 2021) across West Africa, it was a less significant feature of most boxers' future orientations. The Attoh Quarshie hosted many practising Christians and a smaller number of Muslims, but was also a space where religion was openly critiqued, and several boxers and coaches claimed not to be religious. Religion was rarely brought up by my interlocutors when planning futures in the sport, in marked contrast to other sporting contexts (Guinness 2018; Rial 2012). Instead, they emphasized commitment to training and a strategically astute navigation of the industry. Hence, I focus on boxers' imaginaries of training, their athletic bodies, and their modes of strategic planning.

Embodying hope in Ga Mashie

Fighting spirit

In Ghana, boxing is strongly associated with the Ga people of Accra and the neighbourhood of Ga Mashie. My interlocutors often described Gas' aptitude for boxing as continuous with *Asafo Atwele*: an historic pugilistic practice through which men claimed inclusion in socio-military *Asafo* brigades. Prior to colonization, *Asafo* brigades functioned as civil and military manpower for Ga chiefs, and integration into *Asafoi* (pl.) was central to male social inclusion in Ga society (Akyeampong 2002). When British colonial authorities banned *Asafoi* militaristic practice in the early twentieth century, *Asafo Atwele* became an important way to express martial prowess and claim inclusion in *Asafo* companies, with contests held most weekends on Ga Mashie's beaches (Akyeampong 2002: 51). *Asafo Atwele* celebrates speed and showmanship over size and strength, elements which I was told translate directly into the style of contemporary Ghanaian boxers as fast, entertaining, and better in the lower-weight divisions (cf. Makinde 2019: 105).

Hence, coaches and boxers explained that Gas have been boxing since long before the codified sport was introduced by the colonial authorities in the early twentieth century, so contemporary boxing was easy for them to pick up and excel in. Many went on to locate boxing and *Asafo Atwele* in a history of Ga warrior masculinity, as a coach named Quaye explained:

> Gas are not the biggest or strongest people. Northerners are big and strong [gestures to swollen biceps]. But if there is a fight, Gas are the toughest. They have the fighting spirit. You know about the coups in this country [referring to the coups of the postcolonial period]? In one coup, two Gas found themselves fighting for the [soon to be deposed] government. All their comrades surrendered, but they refused and fought with the coup forces. Though there were many soldiers against them, they would not surrender. Eventually, they were captured and brought before [Jerry] Rawlings [leader of two successful coups]. Rawlings did not execute them. He saw how hard they had fought, how tough they were, so he put them back in the army as captains. Gas have that fighting spirit, that is why they are the good boxers.

Others located Gas' aptitude in a precolonial history of warriorhood. This point was elaborated on by Michael, an official of the Ghana Boxing Authority[5] who enjoyed explaining Ghanaian history to me:

> Through the whole British colonial time and before, the Gas were never conquered. They were not under [subjects of] the Asante Empire [which extended over much of present-day Ghana]. The Asantes made peace with the Gas, because the Gas fought them too hard. That is why, of all the people in Ghana, the Gas are good at boxing.

While Michael's account is not an accurate history of Ga-Asante relations, histories of the Ga state do note a tradition of armed resistance to West African and European colonizers (Henderson-Quartey 2002; Parker 2000). Michael locates Gas' boxing aptitude as continuous with this historic military prowess. Likewise, the boxing family see themselves as heirs to an historic pugilistic tradition, rooted in a warrior masculinity which fits them well for the contemporary sport.

Boxing is also associated with a history of political agency. In the mid-twentieth century, the sport became a motif of Ga ethnic pride in a city dominated by other ethnic groups (Dunzendorfer 2014: 1016), and older ex-boxers explained to me their delight in seeing Roy Ankrah, the first Ghanaian to win a British Empire title in 1951, beating their 'colonial masters'.[6] This sentiment was mirrored by younger boxers who explained that although Ghana is relatively poor, Ghanaians are the equal of anyone in the world in the ring. These intersecting histories of continuity with colonial resistance, ethnic sovereignty, and success in a global industry buoy contemporary boxers' hopes for a prosperous future.

Fighting body

Despite boxing's ethnic inflection, fewer than half of the Attoh Quarshie boxers I worked with were Ga by descent. On pointing this out to Washington, he explained that: 'The boys who do boxing, almost all of them are Ga. Maybe Kofi was born in Volta region or Yaw in Kumasi [both outside Accra]. But they are all in this area, Ga Mashie, they are boxing, they are Gas'. For Washington, living and training in Ga Mashie is what makes Kofi, Yaw, and others heirs to the Ga-ness of boxing and a 'fighting spirit', a pervasive logic which fuels the hopes of boxers who are not Ga by descent. Training in Ga Mashie is also understood to generate corporeal qualities which make Accra boxers particularly suited to the attrition of professional boxing. Joshua, a former world champion who trained at the Attoh Quarshie, explained why he had decided to return to Accra after living and training in the United States:

> Over there [the United States], you are training inside on a machine, in a gym with lots of things, in air conditioning. It's easy, everything is there for you. Here, look at the gyms [gesturing around the Attoh Quarshie]. Only some small resources: maybe one punchbag, this old ring! But people here want *so much* to be boxers. This – training with nothing, training with people who really want success, who are *hungry* – this makes the body tough, hard. It makes you understand *really* how to fight. So I came back to train here, for my performance.

The Attoh Quarshie boxers from Nigeria and Benin also explained that training in Accra made their bodies more resilient and that this shaped their decision to relocate to the city. These qualities are not only discursive idioms which boost boxers' confidence but are also physically borne out by Accra's globally successful pugilists. Of the Ghanaians who fight abroad, many are incredibly physically resilient as well as skilled fighters. The Ga-ness of boxing functions as what Rachel Spronk calls a 'discursive reality' (2014:

509): a constellation of naturalized attributes which, although discursively constructed, are nonetheless embodied and materially meaningful.

Joshua and others' logic locates Ga Mashie as an auspicious location to become a boxer relative to the whole world, and fuels boxers' confidence about grand sporting ambitions. Training in Ga Mashie produces a body and disposition inherently suited to the sport: one which is physically tough, hard, quick, and possesses an inherent Ga 'fighting spirit' honed by the competitiveness of Ga Mashie gyms. Readers will note that the qualities which buoy boxers' confidence are strikingly similar to colonial discourses of African bodies as inherently tough and resistant to pain, and African men as hyper-physical. Such discourses have been deployed to justify colonial violence and contemporary inequality (Boddy 2011; Livingston 2012), and animated the recruitment of African men into the military and police in Ghana and across sub-Saharan Africa in both the colonial and postcolonial periods (Leopold 2005; Miescher 2005). Although boxers experience these corporeal qualities as empowering, they take on a more sinister valence when Accra boxers fight abroad.

Industry values and hope as ideology

Sai vs Cox

On 9 September 2011, a Ghanaian boxer named Obodai Sai fought abroad for the first time, at the Hilton Hotel in Mayfair, London. He was defending his Commonwealth light-middleweight title against Jamie Cox, a highly rated British prospect. When they met, both were undefeated. An ex-professional and a long-time pundit commentated on Sky Sports' coverage. As the broadcast began, the camera showed men in dinner suits applauding as the two boxers were introduced.

Many (including Sky's pundits) expected Cox to win convincingly, but by the midpoint it was clear that Sai had the better of his opponent. Commenting on Sai's intimidating willingness to 'trade' blows with Cox – disregarding Cox's reputedly ferocious power – the pundits explained:

> *Commentator one*: You don't meet many soft Ghanaians do you, they're all tough fellas.
> [*Commentator two laughs*]
> …
> *Commentator one*: He'll be tough you see. It's one of the great strengths of Ghanaian fighters, they're very hard, physical fighters, they can take a lot of stick. And they're always there. They're very, very durable.
> *Commentator two*: Boxers like these tough Ghanaians, they look tired, but then they bring a shot out of nowhere.

Despite Sai's clear dominance, he lost the fight, with all three judges scoring the fight narrowly in favour of Cox. This was even more remarkable given Cox was docked two points for repeatedly hitting Sai 'below the belt': punching him in the genitals. A chorus of boos rang around the venue as Cox's hand was held aloft while the MC announced: 'And the new Commonwealth light-middleweight champion …'. Sky's pundits were similarly disappointed (although seemingly not surprised) and closed their broadcast after briefly reflecting on a 'poor decision'. As they did so, the camera panned across the ring to show Allowey, Sai's coach, stamping across the ring shouting 'No! No! No!' into the glare of the ring lights. Sai leant back against the ropes, mouth slightly ajar in apparent disbelief. Despite Sai and Allowey's outrage, however, losing 'on the road' is a common experience for Ghanaians.

What is a 'tough Ghanaian'?

Echoing the stereotypes which animated colonial military and police recruitment strategies, racial stereotypes continue to shape athletes' opportunities in transnational sporting industries. For example, African footballers are profiled as strong and physical (Yékú 2018) and Pacific Islander rugby players as muscular and athletic, imaginaries which directly shape sports industry recruitment strategies (Guinness 2018; Ungruhe & Esson 2017). Likewise, the attributes which fuel Ghanaian boxers' hopes of 'making it big' – being physically tough, resilient, and enthusiastic fighters – also circulate as stereotypes outside Ghana. However, in the transnational industry, these attributes position Ghanaians as valuable opponents to be beaten, rather than future champions. Understanding this alternative regime of value requires a brief detour into the logic of match-making and profit-making in professional boxing.[7]

Boxing is a zero-sum game: for every winner there must be a loser. Professional boxers who contest world and regional titles, and whose audience draw makes the sport profitable, boast records of many more wins than losses. Producing one saleable 'prospect' or 'contender' like Jamie Cox requires the labour of many more losers, hence the boxing industry is underpinned by the labour of boxers who lose. The most ubiquitous idiom for boxers who fight and lose regularly, and the one used most often by my interlocutors, is 'journeyman'. As the name suggests, journeymen often travel to fight, compete regularly, are experienced and relatively skilled, but are often knowingly overmatched against more skilful opponents and set up to lose. Journeymen provide valuable learning time in the ring for prospects – a process known as 'giving rounds' – and entertain paying crowds without damaging prospects' future value by beating them. Journeymen are often skilled defensive boxers for whom reliability is a key quality, as promoters rely on them both to put up a show and to lose.[8]

The largest markets for boxing are North America and Western Europe, followed by Central America, and recently China and the Gulf states. Boxing promoters working here (themselves often based in North America and Western Europe) have larger financial resources and organize higher-grossing bouts than many in Ghana. It is in an organizing promoter's interest to maintain the winning records of the boxers they promote; to maintain their earning potential as future 'contenders', whilst having them box (and generate income) regularly. Consequently, financially powerful promoters with vested interests in their own boxers (largely from Europe and North and Central America) find themselves in need of 'credible' and entertaining opposition, who do not pose an undue risk of winning. Ghanaians' assumed 'toughness' and 'durability', alongside their global reputation for being 'game' fighters (cf. Makinde 2019: 105), fit them well for the role of journeymen capable of 'giving rounds' and entertaining crowds. Reflecting on his decision to refuse a title fight in London, Abraham explained that:

> My opponent was [well-known North American promoter's] boy. So how can I win? If it is your boxer fighting, you [the promoter] have to make sure he wins so you keep the belts, you don't let them go. If I go, the scorecards cannot let me win.[9]

Being 'always there', in addition to referencing corporeal toughness, refers to the assumption that Ghanaians will knowingly contest unevenly matched fights. Accra boxers are often offered fights abroad at short notice with what they consider insufficient preparation time, and are regularly overmatched. Despite recognizing these disadvantages, financial incentives make bouts abroad difficult to refuse, as Washington explained:

> So many of these boys have grown up here where they have so little. So if you say to them: 'Come to the UK for a fight, come to the US for a fight, I will pay you $50,000, or $20,000, or even $10,000', this is not big money for a fight abroad, but they have to go. How much is $50,000 in Ghana [cedis]? So much. They must go, how can they say no to that money?

The political economy of boxing is such that it promises great success and gives a sense of equality of opportunity by performing equivalence between boxers: their necessarily similar weight; equal equipment and support in the ring; statistically comparable 'records' (like Sai's and Cox's); and the atmosphere of uncertainty – that 'anyone could win' – which pre-bout publicity produces. This sense of opportunity is embodied by figures like Mayweather, whose rags-to-riches rise from an impoverished family in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is well known to Accra boxers. Yet the industry is structured to extract value from the participation of such hopefuls, using their labour in losing to produce value elsewhere: to generate 'prospects' and 'contenders' in Western European and North American centres of metropolitan capital. Here, boxers' subjection is a consequence not of exclusion from global flows and imaginaries, but of inclusion *on certain terms*, as is typical of neoliberal modes of social control (Han 2011: 18).

Accra boxers' inclusion in the industry, and boxing's political economy more broadly, is animated by racialized logics of value. The corporeal qualities which fuel Accra boxers' hopes of 'making it big', and the poverty-driven desire for success which makes Ga Mashie an auspicious place to build a boxing career, become the qualities which ensure Ghanaians' subordination in the industry. The racialized labour of West African athletes, alongside other journeymen's labour, underpins the profit-making exercise of professional boxing.[10] Being a 'tough Ghanaian' in the global industry is an ambivalent experience for Ghanaian boxers. It undermines the notion that disciplined training creates successful athletes by revealing the sport's systemic inequality and racism. However, it also facilitates opportunities for earning and global mobility which are central to boxers' gendered aspirations, and which many find difficult to refuse.

The ideological function of hope becomes clear here. The attributes which fuel boxers' hopes in Accra ensure a ready supply of athletes who embody the qualities of the 'tough Ghanaian': they are relatively skilled, physically tough, resilient, ambitious, and willing to take fights abroad that systematically disadvantage them. However, the industry dynamics and regimes of value outlined above are so often spoken of in the gym that only the most naïve novices do not recognize them. The choices boxers make as they navigate these dynamics are diverse. Yet all involve a conscious, critical engagement with the racialized commodification of their bodies and labour, and the ideological function of their hopes.

Navigating inequality

One afternoon, a meeting took place between Washington, Abraham, and Abraham's friend John. I was visiting Washington and was invited to stay when they arrived at his house. John has never boxed and has little industry knowledge, but had recently begun giving Abraham a stipend, providing him with equipment and being involved (somewhat peripherally) in planning his career. Abraham and Washington also worked with managers across the city whose industry contacts generated opportunities to fight abroad.

The three talked about increasing Abraham's public profile and potential future bouts. John (I suspect on Abraham's advice) proposed carefully selecting domestic (Ghanaian) opponents of increasing skill in order to build his friend's confidence and

an unbeaten record of around seventeen fights, without undue risk of blemishing his record with a loss. This done, Abraham would start taking fights abroad, pursuing bigger purses, and fighting for titles. Building a winning record before seeking lucrative fights abroad is a common strategy for a 'prospect' like Abraham: a skilled but relatively inexperienced professional touted for future success.

It transpired that Abraham had been offered a fight in China several months later against a Chinese boxer unknown to him and to Washington. Although not for a title, the fight would be lucrative, increase Abraham's public profile, and (if he won) raise his global ranking – improving his chances of securing title fights in future. The three discussed whether the judges would favour the home fighter and whether Abraham was being deliberately overmatched. Abraham suspected the judging would be unfavourable, so he did not want to go. John did not want Abraham to risk the bout 'because of poverty', as he put it, arguing that too many Accra boxers take uneven fights abroad because of the financial incentives. As a result, they 'spoil their record' (rack up defeats), he explained, reducing their future earning potential and chances of fighting for titles. Washington, on the other hand, suggested that Abraham might be the better boxer and could win. Unswayed, Abraham flatly refused to go, and conversation switched to building his social media presence in Accra.

Despite his commitment to an ascetic lifestyle, Abraham's reflections recognize that constant self-improvement through strict training is not necessarily rewarded. By rejecting the role of the 'tough Ghanaian', he refuses to embody the industry's racialized inequality, and to knowingly reproduce the structure of his own subordination. In refusing, he is critical of the promise that boxing's political economy of hope offers. Previous theoretical accounts of hope's role in subjection focus on the unconscious production of desire as a mode of governance (Berlant 2011; Hage 2003). Ghassan Hage, for instance, draws on Bourdieu's concept of doxa in proposing 'societal hope' as a collective ideal of 'meaningful and dignified social life' which disciplines action in the present (2003: 15). Consequently, these accounts leave little room for subjects' critical reflection on the objects of their hope and desire. Indeed, this lack of critical reflection makes optimism so 'cruel' for Berlant (2011), and 'societal hope' such a powerful mode of control for Hage (2003). By contrast, boxers like Abraham recognize and reflect critically on the role that hope plays in perpetuating a profoundly unequal industry.

Despite his critical perspective, by not 'spoiling his record' Abraham also maintains a potentiality towards winning abroad and 'making it big'. John's presence offers some insight into this contradiction. John is an engineer who works between Minnesota and Ghana. He is relatively wealthy and takes pleasure in driving an imported American sedan around Korle Gonno, the working-class neighbourhood where he and Abraham grew up. He embodies a masculinity of conspicuous wealth, generosity, and global mobility towards which Abraham aspires. Although Abraham is well versed in the industry's inequalities, John is relatively naïve about them. As a successful and respectable man, John, with his insistence on pursuing Abraham's championship aspirations, legitimizes Abraham's continued hope that this can happen, despite the latter's critical reflection on the sport's structural inequality. Discussing the paradoxical experience of hope, Cheryl Mattingly argues that hope 'neither forecloses the possibility of personal and social transformation nor invokes an optimism that relies on an ideal' (2010: 218). Abraham's experience reverses this formulation. He feels compelled by the promise of a utopian sporting future and retains a potentiality towards it, but *also* recognizes and rejects the structural realities which make that future highly unlikely. He

both forecloses the possibility of utopian transformation *and* remains optimistic about an ideal future.

Boxers who refuse such 'opportunities' struggle to display the wealth and mobility expected of them, as Abraham explained:

> People think, 'This man is a professional boxer; he should have plenty things'. And then they are asking you for small things, chop money … Because they have seen Floyd [Mayweather] and Pacman [Manny Pacquiao], they think that because you are a boxer you should have so much [wealth] too.

Yet Abraham had often described to me the shame he felt in borrowing money to support his family, avoiding creditors in his neighbourhood, depending on family networks to support his wife and child, and being unable to pay for his son's school supplies. His perceived failings led him to question his gendered sense of self-worth: 'If you are a man, you should be able to give something small to your wife, say, "Here, go spend this", but I cannot. It pains me'. Taking the fight and the money might help Abraham feel a sense of gendered self-worth, but involves enacting his own subordination in an industry which extracts value from his labour through racialized regimes of value and optimism. Alternatively, refusing the fight affirms his sense of agency in rejecting the industry's inequality and keeps alive his championship hopes, but denies him more immediate opportunities to enact a masculinity grounded in central Accra. Multiple and contradictory visions of a good future are contingent on his decision to take or refuse the fight abroad.

Refiguring success

Washington told me later that he thought Abraham could have won the bout, because he was a talented boxer and would have had ample preparation time. Besides, he explained, the pay day would be much greater than any in Abraham's career so far. For Washington, risking an unbeaten record is worth the money, the opportunity to travel, and the chance of winning abroad. Although Washington's and Abraham's approaches reflect different understandings of the best good in this situation, both respond critically to the ideological function of hope in the industry.

Washington regularly lectured the gathered gym corpus on the meaning of success in boxing. Central to these lectures was the idea that 'performance' is a more useful evaluative measure than winning or becoming a champion. After competitions, amateur and professional boxers were often told to assess one another's 'performance' irrespective of the result of a bout. During these sessions, coaches explained that too many boxers wanted to remain unbeaten, a problem attributed to Mayweather's widely lauded unbeaten record. Osman, another Attoh Quarshie coach, elaborated on this logic:

> If you go to the UK and you fight well, even if you lose, then they will like you, and give you another fight. Samuel [from another gym] took a fight in the UK and he fought *hard*, the fans enjoyed him. He lost and they paid him £10,000. But because of his *performance*, because they loved watching him even though he lost, they gave him two more fights … for like £30,000 each time. So now he is walking around wearing all these nice clothes and things because of his *performance*.

Osman lauds Samuel's aspirational shift, his uncompromising performance in defeat, and his understanding of the 'losing' role as a route to material wealth, global mobility, and gendered respect. By appropriating the role of the 'tough Ghanaian', Osman sees

Samuel as taking responsibility for the benefits of a lucrative bout abroad, rather than being used by the industry.

Refiguring success in this way was particularly prevalent among boxers whose careers were waning and whose aspirations had shifted from 'championship' dreams. In late 2015, Isaac, an experienced featherweight and former Commonwealth title challenger, was offered a bout in Italy. Isaac no longer trained regularly but began spending more time in the gym before the fight. He was also in the process of founding a church in Chorkor, a suburb west of Ga Mashie. One afternoon, I asked about his opponent and chances of winning. He replied immediately: 'They just want me to come and lose. But it's OK because I can lose, take the money and build my church'. At the time, Isaac was an itinerant preacher who spread the word in the streets around Chorkor and Korle Gonno. He explained that: 'If you want to be a preacher, you should have a church. Now, I am moving and moving. But if I build the church, people will come and I will have a congregation, which is better than always moving'. Isaac's hopes had shifted from 'making it big' in boxing to the 'grand scheme' (Schielke 2015: 13) of becoming a preacher, a different route to gendered respect and a prosperous future. By knowingly appropriating the 'tough Ghanaian', Isaac bends the industry's inequality and racism to his own ends, albeit ends defined by alternative hopes for the future. As they refigure success, boxers like Isaac show a critical awareness of the ideological nature of discourses which tie agency and success to constant, reflexive self-improvement through training. Isaac's context, like Abraham's, also reminds us that boxing always interfaces with responsibilities, relationships, and hopes not defined by the sport.

Ghanaian footballers see racial stereotypes about their sporting prowess as 'palatable racism' (Ungruhe & Esson 2017: 35) which supports their optimism about success in the football industry and encourages them to keep 'trying their luck' despite the low chance of succeeding (Esson 2015). By contrast, Abraham's refusal is a critique of Accra boxers' racialized exploitation, yet also keeps alive his championship hopes. Likewise, far from the industry's racialized regimes of value encouraging Isaac to keep 'trying his luck', he leverages these dynamics to serve his own ends, demonstrating a keen critical awareness of the industry's extractive political economy of hope. Yet in doing so he also reproduces the 'tough Ghanaian' imaginary in the industry.

By refiguring success, boxers 'suture together' (Bear 2014: 74) the gendered expectations associated with professional boxing, and the limited opportunities the industry offers to realize these expectations. Such incommensurable ideals and realities, Laura Bear reminds us, are a characteristic dynamic of labour under neoliberal capitalism. Refiguring success is a quotidian 'fix' which accommodates such incommensurability and generates a sense of agency for boxers, yet which also legitimizes their precarity and allows this contradictory form of capitalism to persist (Bear 2014: 85). This dynamic is clear when Isaac co-opts the losing role to make a materially better future, yet also reproduces the discursive reality of the 'tough Ghanaian'. Aspiration, 'making out', and exploitation are tightly intertwined as boxers seek to navigate the industry's profound inequality.

Hope on the road

Despite this inequality, winning abroad is possible for Ghanaian journeymen, rather than being pure fantasy.[11] Joshua and Charles, both Attoh Quarshie boxers, each took Commonwealth title fights in the United Kingdom knowing they would likely lose but won. However, they are exceptional. Most boxers taking short-notice fights abroad lose,

as Charles and Joshua have done since. Charles became paradigmatic of a boxer who had 'refigured success' effectively: he made a comfortable living by fighting and losing abroad regularly during my fieldwork. He was amongst the most respected boxers in the Attoh Quarshie for his experience, knowledge, and relative wealth.

Although Washington and others encourage boxers to reflect critically on industry inequalities and instrumentalize stereotypes to pursue alternative visions of success, they also remain committed to championship dreams. When I talked with Washington about why he began coaching and if he ever planned to stop, he explained: 'I want to train a world champion. I know I can. This place, Accra, can make world champions. That's why I started coaching and that's why I keep going'. Like Abraham and Isaac, Washington is critical of the role that false hopes play in perpetuating industry inequalities. Yet he maintains a sense that he (and others) can transcend the industry's extractive political economy and realize championship dreams.

Living through rupture

Not all boxers who lose abroad are as nonchalant as Isaac. In 2015, Peter, a Ghanaian welterweight champion, took a fight in the United States. Like Abraham, Peter trained metronomically and led an ascetic life, and we spoke often about his path towards becoming a world champion. Before the fight, I asked Washington about Peter's chances and he sidestepped my question: 'The fight is fine, it's OK'. Boxing in the USA should have been an exciting moment of fulfilment for Peter and the coaches, but there was a distinct lack of buzz in the gym as they prepared for the bout. Peter was violently knocked out in the second round, having been well beaten by a much bigger opponent. Afterwards I never heard the fight discussed again publicly.

I cannot be certain whether Peter knew he was being overmatched, but the gym's silence around the bout makes me think that he did, as did Washington and others. I read this silence as an empathetic response to Peter's sense of rupture in performing his subordination, and in coming to critique the hopes which profoundly shaped his life and sense of self. By not building an atmosphere of hope around the bout, Peter's gym-mates avoided forcing him either to knowingly lie about potentially winning, or to admit his willing subordination as a 'tough Ghanaian'. For Peter, whose ascetic life remains animated by hopes of becoming a boxing champion, either would have been humiliating. Whatever agency we might recognize in the work of journeymen like Isaac and Charles, refiguring success is also demeaning, subordinating, and often physically violent.

When successful, aspirational boxers like Peter (rather than those in the twilight of their career like Isaac) reflected on losing abroad, they often underlined their physical resilience and toughness in defeat with phrases like 'My opponent didn't hurt me, he was just too big'. Foregrounding their resilience and bravery in defeat recalls the continuity between Gas' boxing prowess and a warrior masculinity. Hence, Peter and others position themselves as masculine subjects despite their aspirations being curtailed when they knowingly enact subordinate roles in the industry. As Peter and others fall back on the stereotypes which initially fuelled their hopes, they reproduce the idea that Ga bodies are inherently suited to professional boxing and fuel other aspirants' embodied hope. Racialized accounts of Ghanaian bodies are reproduced even as boxers become critically aware of the industry's racism and the ideological function of their hopes for dramatic success.

A critique of hope from the hopeful

Bending chance, fate, and fortune has become a major concern for young people in Africa hoping to secure a more prosperous future in the face of marginality caused by neoliberal economic reforms (Cooper & Pratten 2015; Gaibazzi & Gardini 2015). In this vein, aspirant athletes employ strict training regimens which they hope will increase their chances of global mobility and sporting success (Besnier, Guinness, Hann & Kovač 2018; Guinness 2018; Kovač 2021). Accra boxers complicate this picture. As they encounter entrenched inequality in the global boxing industry, they become critical of discourses which locate success in strict training and corporal discipline, and (rightly) point out that hopes fostered by these discourses function ideologically to provide a source of subordinate labour which serves metropolitan capital. This perspective shapes career strategies concerned with astutely navigating the industry to maximize the benefits of large paydays and global mobility, and enact a respectful masculinity. Although they do sometimes win abroad, the primary concern of many Accra boxers is utilizing industry bias to their benefit, not bending chance and fate to achieve dramatic success against the odds.

Despite their critical perspective, boxers and coaches remain committed to hopes of dramatic success. Abraham's rejection of the industry's racialized inequalities also maintains his potentiality towards becoming a world champion. Likewise, Washington advises boxers to account for industry inequality, but holds out hope he will coach a world champion. Journeymen like Isaac and Peter fall back on the inherent suitability of Ghanaian bodies for boxing when reflecting on losing abroad, despite recognizing the role these stereotypes play in their subordination. Envisioning a future through the sport, or co-opting boxing into other 'grand schemes', as Isaac does, is riven with contradiction: simultaneously cynical and optimistic.

Recent anthropological attention has shown how producing hope is a way of navigating rupture, insecurity, and inequality (Han 2011; Mattingly 2014; Miyazaki 2004; 2006; Pelkmans 2013; Zigon 2009). Such hopes may also be implicated in regimes of control and coercion. Analysing the rise of xenophobia in postcolonial Australia, Ghassan Hage describes how disciplinary 'societal hope' under neoliberal capitalism becomes 'equated with dreams of better-paid jobs, better lifestyles [and] more commodities' (2003: 13). Neoliberal societal hope sustains an illusion of upward social mobility whilst reproducing a class-stratified society, such that 'most people will live their lives believing in the possibility of upward social mobility without actually experiencing it' (2003: 14). In this vein, Hage might label championship dreams boxing's 'societal hope'. Hage contrasts societal hope with the capacity of subaltern and marginalized groups to 'dig for new forms of hope' (2003: 21): to imagine better futures not dictated by a neoliberal ethic of accumulation, on account of their exclusion from mainstream society and the promises of 'societal hope'. For Hage, 'paranoid nationalists' who find social mobility increasingly inaccessible cling to societal hope's promise because they do not recognize its ideological function in reproducing class stratification, and because they lack critical awareness, they cannot imagine ('dig') hope beyond neoliberal ideals (2003: 21).

In contrast to Hage's unreflexive 'paranoid nationalists', Accra boxers are highly critical of the ideological work their championship hopes do in reproducing industry inequality. By seeking to navigate and leverage industry inequality to serve alternative visions of the future – by refiguring success – the boxing family actively 'dig hope' and strive for futures not dictated by boxing's 'societal hope'. Yet as they do so, they

also reproduce the embodied hope which locates Ga Mashie as an auspicious place to box, and which perpetuates Accra boxers' subordination. To frame this in Hage's terms: the boxing family are critically aware of hope's ideological function and 'dig hope' by cynically navigating the industry, yet remain committed to boxing's 'societal hope' of championship dreams. Hage's juxtaposition of uncritical 'societal hope' against the critical and anti-hegemonic act of 'digging hope' cannot account for boxers' simultaneous experience of both.

Addressing the similar persistence of unrealizable hopes among young Mongolians, Morten Pedersen proposes that the 'work of hope' – acting in the present as if ideal futures are certain – makes life in an uncertain and unstable present liveable, regardless of the fact that ideal futures remain unrealized (2012: 146).[12] Abraham's commitment to an ascetic lifestyle, Washington's unwavering belief that he will train a champion, and Peter's stubborn confidence in the corporeal qualities of Ga boxers all resonate with the 'work of hope'. Here, a sense of future potential (irrespective of whether it is realized or not) animates boxers' lives: their daily pilgrimages to the gym, endless miles of 'road work', and the grinding indignity of struggling to achieve gendered ideals.

For Pedersen, the work of hope involves 'deliberately abstain[ing]' from predicting or planning for the future (2012: 148) precisely because his interlocutors' lives are so riven with uncertainty that strategizing is impossible and unhelpful. Here, as much recent literature suggests, hope is animated by uncertainty (see Kleist & Jansen 2016: 379). By contrast, Accra boxers' experience of imagining better futures is characterized by a critical certainty about the industry's inequalities: a nuanced knowledge of how the industry extracts value from their labour and bodies to serve metropolitan capital, and of how their championship dreams are implicated in this subordination. Armed with this critical appreciation, their trajectories in the sport are strategic, cynical, and deeply 'navigational' (Vigh 2006), unlike Pedersen's 'work of hope'. Yet their championship hopes persist. Hence, boxers' experience demands an account of hope which reflects *both* a critical understanding of hope's disciplinary function *and* a commitment to ideological hopes, something neither Hage's nor Pedersen's framework accommodates simultaneously.

Addressing the dynamic relationship between hope and critique, Mathijs Pelkmans develops the concept of 'pulsation' to describe the shifting intensity of ideological conviction. Conviction swells in 'momentary highs' (Pelkmans 2017: 181), then wanes as external critique and unfulfilled promise show the shortcomings in ideological claims to offer a brighter future, producing 'cycles of affective doubt and belief' (2017: 183). Pelkmans' theory turns on oscillation between doubt and conviction as opposite (and relational) experiences, hence conviction's fragility as affective experience swings towards its opposite, doubt. Oscillation is attractive in part because it reflects the way we narrate our experience in binary terms: possessing conviction or possessing doubt, experiencing hope or hopelessness, always moving between opposite poles of affective experience.

Boxers' simultaneous conviction in the promise of boxing *and* certainty that the industry is rigged against them complicates this picture. It suggests theorizing conviction and doubt as contemporaneous and equally present aspects of imagining better futures, rather than opposite poles subjects move between. Where anthropologists have previously understood hope as the affective experience of an uncertain optimism about the future, I propose instead that hope can

entail a simultaneous optimism about the future and a certainty that optimism is misplaced.

Conceiving of hope as simultaneously optimistic and critical *in equal measure* (rather than one affect outweighing the other) helps to account for the inconsistency of lives oriented towards a better future. For instance, this helps to explain why boxers who know better than most how prejudice and inequality are engrained into their industry and embodied hope are still committed to 'making it big'. Closer to home for some readers, it might also help us understand why precariously employed academics who recognize that neoliberal institutions and academic labour relations are riven with inequality (often at their expense) might remain committed to hopes of bright futures in the academy. Such paradoxes are not accounted for by subconscious disciplinary effects like 'societal hope' (Hage 2003) or 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), precisely because subjects are critically aware of the dynamics which subordinate them and generate inequality. Rather, such contexts demand an account of future orientation in which critique and optimism are concomitant.

Envisioning hope this way also helps account for the proliferation of diverse ideologies in the world. Convincing critique and evidential experience are often levelled against ideologies which offer bright but flawed visions of the future: for instance, critiques of neoliberal capitalism's promise of widespread upward social mobility. Despite these arguments, such ideologies remain powerful affective forces. This is not because people lack critical engagement – like Ghanaian boxers, people are often highly critical – but because imagining and striving towards a better future is not defined only by rational critique.

Conclusion

The ideological function and the paradoxical experience of hope I have outlined show how striving for a better life not only is a reaction against subjection and precarity, but also reproduces it. Here, I build on a burgeoning attention to how doing good, building moral worlds, and pursuing better futures can reproduce violence, inequality, and insecurity (Bear 2014; Han 2011; Vigh 2019). My contribution is that hope offered by exploitative industries – whether for aspiring Accra boxers, precariously employed academics, or others – not only is contingent on uncertainty (Pedersen 2012) and indeterminacy (Han 2011) but also persists even as boxers (or adjuncts) accurately critique the exploitation around them.

The last decade has seen a turn in anthropological attention to how people make viable lives and moral worlds and experience pleasure, optimism, and fulfilment. Attending to the 'goods' (Robbins 2013) of our interlocutors' lives in the face of evident inequality and subjection remains an important counterpoint to the essentialism of emphasizing only the 'suffering slot' (Ortner 2016). However, building theory from a position which attends principally to *either* the 'good' *or* suffering and subjection – as the anthropological turn from subjection towards world-making did (see Ortner 2016) – belies the complexity with which the two are mutually implicated: for instance, how hope and striving are implicated in subjection and discrimination. With this in mind, a key task for anthropologists is to understand not how a 'good' life is built *in spite of* persistent subjection in an unequal world, but how the 'good' is imagined and experienced in direct relation to, and as a product of, subjection and inequality – and vice versa. Understanding hope as simultaneously optimistic and critical is one window onto this process.

The cynical and optimistic vision of hope I have proposed was summed up by Faris, a long-time professional who migrated in 2017 to the United States, where he now fights – and loses – regularly. Another boxer had just proclaimed confidently that one day he would 'become like Floyd [Mayweather]', when Faris cut in: 'There is only one Mayweather. Professional boxers in the world there are plenty, thousands. Only one is Mayweather'. Recognition that there is only *one* Mayweather decries the futility of utopian hopes in an industry loaded against Accra boxers. Yet that there *is* one Mayweather is testament to the fact that embodying those aspirations is possible: that hope persists even as its ideological function is critiqued.

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NOTES

[1] Pseudonyms are used across the article.

[2] Professional boxers are paid a 'purse' for each fight they contest. Amateur boxers are not paid per bout. Amateur and professional boxers compete under slightly different rules, with the professional sport putting more emphasis on attrition.

[3] Guinness (2018) finds a similar sense of possibility among aspiring Fijian rugby players.

[4] Paycheques are significant. For example Richard Commey (a Ghanaian who became a world champion in 2019) earned $750,000 for a recent title fight (Katzowitz 2019). However, they pale in comparison to the (well-publicized) purses of global boxing's elite, which are often in the tens of millions.

[5] The governing and licensing body of professional boxing in Ghana.

[6] Boxing was adopted into the symbolic repertoire of anti-colonialism and pan-Africanism across West Africa in the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Gennaro 2013; Makinde 2019: 113).

[7] See Wacquant (1998) for a detailed account of the economic and competitive structure of professional boxing.

[8] I was never aware of matches being fixed in the sense of a boxers 'taking a dive' in a pre-arranged round. Rather, Accra boxers' understanding is that matches are made to favour one boxer over another, making outcomes predictable (if not certain).

[9] Boxers recognize that winning by knockout might subvert biased judging. However, 'chasing a knockout' against a more skilled opponent is technically difficult and considered a dangerous strategy which reduces athletes' capacity to 'box intelligently', increasing their likelihood of being knocked out and seriously injured.

[10] Not all journeymen's labour is racialized in this way, and Ghana is not the only source of 'losing labour' in the industry. For instance, there are white British boxers whose possession of the 'right' attributes to be a good journeyman is not founded in the racist logics described here. However, naturalized corporeal characteristics (whether racialized, class-based, or otherwise) are often applied to boxers of particular regional and ethnic backgrounds, whether they are journeymen or not.

[11] The few talented Ghanaian boxers selected to train and fight abroad under the employ of promoters from the Global North do not face the same structural inequality given their powerful backers. However, they are often still understood as inherently 'tough Ghanaians' with similar corporeal qualities.

[12] Langevang (2017) makes a similar argument that a radically unstable present means Accra fashion entrepreneurs' orientations towards the future are informed by idealized imaginaries.

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Mayweather est unique : une critique de l'espoir par ceux qui espèrent

Résumé

La boxe professionnelle offre aux jeunes athlètes d'Accra l'espoir d'accéder à la fortune et de voyager partout dans le monde, espoir fondé sur l'idée que les Ghanéens supportent particulièrement bien l'usure causée par cette pratique sportive. Pourtant, à leur entrée dans le circuit mondial, les boxeurs ghanéens se trouvent confrontés à des relations de pouvoir qui font d'eux une main d'œuvre subordonnée bon marché, bien loin de leurs espoirs de championnat. Tout en construisant leur vie à travers le sport, ils réfléchissent à la façon dont leurs espoirs de réussite contribuent à perpétuer les inégalités dans le circuit, prenant conscience de ce que l'auteur appelle la fonction idéologique de l'espoir. En dépit de tout, ils continuent à espérer une réussite spectaculaire. Ce mélange d'optimisme et de cynisme complique les récits contemporains de l'espoir comme stratégie de résilience dans les contextes de grande incertitude. À partir d'une recherche ethnographique menée auprès de boxeurs d'Accra, l'auteur théorise l'espoir comme une expérience paradoxale, mêlant à égale mesure critique et optimisme, pour relater les manières contradictoires dont les gens se tournent vers un avenir meilleur.

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