

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Punching is a sickness”

Temporal work, violence, and unsettled care among men who box in Accra

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Abstract

Men who box professionally in Accra recognize that bouts are physically harmful and that they involve violently subordinating one another. Yet they also share a sense that bouts can be spaces of mutual becoming and affirmation. To navigate the tension between harm and affirmation, boxers and coaches couch their work between the ropes in idioms of care and mutual support. These idioms reflect their understanding that their lives and futures are mutually dependent and intertwined. Yet conflicting accounts of what constitutes appropriate care in the ring arise when boxing's violence is framed in relation to different imagined futures, and when mutual benefit is imagined to occur in the more or less distant future. In the boxing ring and beyond, divergent forms of temporal work animate the unsettled and ambiguous nature of care.

KEYWORDS

Accra, boxing, brain injury, care, Ghana, sport, temporality, violence

KETA FIGHT NIGHT

In 2015 I traveled to Keta, a coastal town 100 miles east of Ghana's capital, Accra. In Keta, boxing events are regularly held at an upmarket beach resort. Two professional boxers from Accra's Attoh Quarshie Boxing Gym would fight there that night, and I had come along to assist Washington, their coach.¹ Keta straddles a long, narrow sandbar between the churning Atlantic and a mirror-flat lagoon. That evening the thud of waves crashing against sand drifted over the ring as the boxers set about their work.

Midway through the program, Washington and I worked the corner during a bout between Ayitey, a middleweight from the Attoh Quarshie, and a boxer named Samuel. Between rounds 1 and 2, Ayitey sat on a stool in the corner drawing deep breaths while I applied Vaseline to his brow. Beside me, Washington instructed Ayitey in staccato bursts—words meant only for the boxer's ears but shouted above the din of the crowd and under the glare of the ring light. Shouts of “ji le!” (beat him!) and “ma le!” (hit him!) rose from the crowd, imploring the boxers to violence.² A disembodied voice announced, “Seconds out, round 2.”

Ayitey stood, Washington whipped away the stool, and I clambered out of the ring. Ayitey bounced, shifting his weight from toe to toe. The referee stepped forward, cut the diagonal of the ring with outstretched arms, and beckoned the two boxers forward. As Ayitey raised his gloves and advanced, Washington shouted a final instruction in Ga:

Kaaa ma le waa. Ebe hewale.

Do not hit him hard. He is not strong.

Boxing is often imagined as defined by its attrition. For example, in his canonical portrait of a Chicago boxing gym, Wacquant (1995, p. 495) describes the sport as “delivering potent blows ... so as to inflict superior physical damage and, if possible, render him [the opponent] incapable or unwilling to sustain the contest.” Boxing is similarly defined by its detractors, even if they, unlike Wacquant, advocate against the sport (in some cases calling for it to be banned). In the eyes of critics, boxing is a morally unacceptable “relic of the barbarity of bygone eras” (Rudd et al., 2016, pp. 1–2), thanks to its intentional violence, which distinguishes boxing from statistically

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more dangerous sports like motor racing and cycling (see also Headway, 2019). But if violently subordinating others is the defining aim of boxing, why would Washington instruct Ayitey not to hit Samuel hard, particularly given Samuel's perceived weakness?

Accra boxers like Ayitey recognize that their sport often involves violently subordinating one another. Yet they also understand bouts as spaces of mutual dependence, affirmation, and relational becoming. To navigate the tension between affirmation and violence, boxers and coaches understand their work between the ropes through idioms of care and mutual support. They share a sense that mutual affirmation and support—what boxers call “looking after”—is possible through violent encounters in the ring. Yet they often find this ideal elusive in practice. This sense of possibility, and the attendant conflicts among boxers and coaches about what might constitute effective care in the ring, emerge as boxers imagine their lives and futures in the sport as mutually dependent and intertwined. Conflicts, however, arise about what constitutes care when boxers frame their actions in the ring in relation to different imagined futures and temporal horizons, or when parties emphasize the importance of divergent relationships of dependence and mutuality.³

UNSETTLING CARE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Anthropologists have shown at length how the provision of care is a political process implicated in producing gendered, racialized, and class-based inequalities, even as it ostensibly preserves life and health, and mitigates harm. Regimes of institutional and interventional care (re)produce dispossession and social isolation (Biehl, 2013; Stevenson, 2014; Ticktin, 2011); legitimize the violent subjection and unequal health outcomes of certain people (Bridges, 2011; Mulla, 2014); and encourage suspicion and bitter competition (Nguyen, 2010). Inspired by Foucauldian accounts of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), such analyses often see institutional and interventional care as part and parcel of a biopolitics of self-care and individual responsabilization (Mulligan, 2014; Zigon, 2010), and as supporting neoliberal modes of governance. In such analyses, practices of care are both productive and coercive—shaping specific understandings of selfhood and informing particular orientations toward others. Accra boxers' practices and notions of care likewise shape particular modes of subjectivity. Following Ortner (2005, p. 31), I use *subjectivity* to describe the affective and emotional senses of self and desire that animate boxers' actions. In doing so, I recognize that these affective senses of self are shaped by specific cultural, social, and historical contexts.

A contrasting body of literature uses care as an analytic to describe moral actions and orientations that seek to build ideal forms of relating. Drawing on feminist care ethics, this work identifies care as a fundamentally affirming practice, one “that contains everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). Practices of care, in this sense, rebuild and sustain lives in times of illness, trauma, social breakdown,

and physical and structural violence (Dilger & Luig, 2010; Han, 2012; Henderson, 2012; Klaitis, 2010; Livingston, 2012). From this perspective, care is an umbrella concept referring to practices and relationships involving recognition, affirmation, and mutual becoming (Black, 2018; Pettersen, 2008; Taylor, 2008; Thelen, 2015). Care is thus seen as a moral practice that makes “caregivers, and at times even the care-receivers, more present and thereby fully human” (Kleinman, 2009, p. 292). In focusing on care's affirming potentials, this literature troubles the traditional dyad of caregiver–care receiver, instead demonstrating that care is often mutual and distributed across relationships. My analysis builds on the assertion that affirming care is a skilled, cultivated, and embodied practice that emerges from “webs of relations rather than interpersonal dyads” (Brown, 2020, p. 251).

The first of these two broader approaches takes care as an object of suspicion, worth studying for its ill effects and its implication in the unjust exercise of power. The second uses care as an analytic to describe diverse affirming, restorative, and supportive relationships. There is clearly value in both. Yet taking such a moral position on care—as *either* suspicious *or* life-affirming—belies the ways that care practices are often morally ambiguous, and it draws attention away from how care's morality is contested and negotiated. In this vein, Cook and Trundle (2020, p. 180) suggest that anthropologists should attend ethnographically to care's “unsettled” nature as a “morally ambiguous practice with which actors strive to grapple, achieve and indeed curtail.” Following their lead, I trace how boxers contest and negotiate different understandings of care in the ring, exploring how care is made and unmade as a moral practice. Rather than asking whether care is a force for good or bad, I ask what animates boxers' shifting moral evaluations of care practices.

Ethnographers of care have shown that, under specific conditions, seemingly violent and neglectful practices might be nurturing, supportive, and affirming (Brown, 2010; Garcia, 2010, 2014, 2015; Livingston, 2012; Mol et al., 2010; Pinto, 2014). For instance, Brown (2010) shows how an apparent lack of empathy verging on cruelty is an effective, culturally patterned mode of care in an under resourced Kenyan hospital, while Garcia (2015) argues that the physical violence of informal addiction treatment in Mexico City has healing effects in a context of pervasive violence. This work critically examines normative and scholarly understandings of “good” care. It shows that “‘good care’ is relationally and contextually contingent” (Brown, 2010, p. 137) and that it may involve normatively harmful or violent practices. Building on this literature, I show that affirmation and violence are intertwined as boxers “look after” one another in the ring.

Analyses of such uncommon care practices are often characterized by what McKearney (2020, p. 224) calls an “evaluative reversal”—they explain the logic by which normatively condemned violence might constitute mutual affirmation in a particular context. Presenting coherent logics to such unusual practices of care, however, “steers us away from uncertainties, debates, and contingencies that shape the ethical status of actions within care” (McKearney, 2020, p. 225), that is, the “unsettled” character of care in practice. Hence, I focus on the

shifting and contingent nature of boxers' practices of care in the ring rather than elucidate a single, coherent logic of violence-as-care. To explore this contingency, I juxtapose ethnography of moments when "good care" (in boxers' terms) is realized against moments when the legitimacy of care is contested, when care is lacking, or when care seemingly fails.

World-making care often requires temporal work: establishing temporal boundaries (Kennedy, 2019), moving between temporal frames (Allerton, 2020), coordinating life courses (Coe, 2016, p. 38), and invoking and working toward imagined futures (Brown, 2020, p. 251; Svendsen et al., 2018). Similarly, as they "look after" one another in the ring, boxers invoke specific imagined futures, anticipate how their futures are intertwined, and recognize this intertwinement through their actions in the ring. Yet boxers and coaches do not always share visions of how their futures intersect. Furthermore, they may see the benefits of care as happening in more or less distantly imagined futures, which I call "temporal horizons" of care. These differences precipitate debates and disagreements about what constitutes care in the present. Anthropologists attending to the "unsettled" nature of care might thus consider how conflicting imaginaries of the future, and divergent temporal horizons, "unsettle" care and animate debates about its morality.

NEOLIBERAL SPORTING SUBJECTS?

Since the late 1980s, increasingly commercialized sporting industries have opened new paths to social and global mobility for elite athletes, and they have inspired similar dreams for scores more aspirants (Besnier et al., 2021). Pursuing these dreams, athletes follow strict training programs (Besnier, 2012; Esson, 2013; Guinness, 2018); become fervently religious in the hope of harnessing divine powers (Kovač, 2022; Rial, 2012); and co-opt occult forces (Fanoli, 2022; Hann et al., 2021). These commitments aim to cultivate bodies and dispositions fit to compete on global stages. Some have argued that, through this reflexive self-improvement, athletes embody a distinctly "neoliberal" model of agency and subjectivity (Besnier et al., 2018; cf. Urciuoli, 2008), which others have found excessively individualistic and thus morally wanting (e.g., Gershon, 2011). Ethnographies of boxing echo this logic of reflexive self-fashioning through sporting practice (Heiskanen, 2012; Wacquant, 2004; Woodward, 2007).

As they cultivate athletic bodies and sporting dispositions, aspiring athletes shape relational subjectivities—positioning themselves as virtuous men and women through their relationships with family, friends, mentors, and guardians, whom they do not compete against in their chosen sport (Guinness, 2018; Hopkinson, 2022; Kovač, 2021). Despite this, many scholars continue to imagine relationships between *competitors* as individualistic and as shaped principally by an ethic of self-interest.⁴ While Accra boxers often profess individualistic aspirations, they also explicitly account for relations of dependence and mutuality between competitors, supporting analyses that suggest competition itself involves relational positioning, not hyperindividualism (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2002). Dependencies between competitors inform boxers' preoccupation with "looking after" and "taking care" of one another,

aligning with a recent emphasis on relational moralities under neoliberal governance (Rangel & Adam, 2014; Trnka & Trundle, 2014). Boxers' emphasis on care thus encourages us to rethink recent characterizations of athletes as individualistic "neoliberal workers" (Besnier et al., 2018, p. 849).

METHODS

I conducted participant observation at the Attoh Quarshie gym from 2014 to 2016, when I trained and lived alongside my gym mates. The gym has about 40 members, of whom 12 to 25 might train each day, and it is run by five coaches of ascending authority. It occupies a rectangular, single-story building with a small ring in the center and a heavy bag at each end. Boxers train there from 2 to 4 p.m. each weekday. To maintain their fitness and specified weight, boxers are encouraged to control their diet and lifestyle outside the gym. They are sometimes fanatical and sometimes lackluster about these regimens, as their enthusiasm waxes and wanes or as jobs, family, and social lives take up time (Hopkinson, 2022). Ga, a minority language spoken mainly in the ethnically Ga neighborhoods of Accra, is the principal language among those involved in the sport in Ghana. English is the second language, and conversations between boxing people often involve code switching between the two languages, which is common among Accra's Ga speakers. Having learned Ga in the field, I conducted my research in this language, though in practice I often found myself code switching as my interlocutors did.

I had boxed before beginning fieldwork but was a relative novice in the Attoh Quarshie, which allowed me to explicitly question taken-for-granted practices. As a white, British man with some amateur boxing experience (i.e. as neither a professional boxer nor a Ghanaian), I did not enter the dependent and reciprocal relations, with their attendant ethics of care, that I describe below. Consequently, I foreground my interlocutors' reflections on their practice and use my own experience as supplementary to, not representative of, theirs.

During my research, the Accra boxing scene was composed predominantly of men, and the sport remains associated with particular forms of masculinity in Accra (Hopkinson, 2020, 2022). The coaches I knew, however, encouraged women's involvement in the sport, and the male boxers I knew always supported their female peers. Women trained, coached, and refereed alongside men, but they were always a small minority. Boxing in contemporary Accra is evidently more than merely a route to masculine social inclusion. The subtleties of its gendering, however, are beyond the scope of this article's focus on care and temporality. Hence, my argument focuses on the relations of dependence, mutuality, and care between men who box with and against one another, and who made up the vast majority of my interlocutors in the sport.

BOXING AND SOCIAL IN/EXCLUSION IN ACCRA

Boxing in Ghana is strongly associated with the Ga ethnic group and the neighborhood of Ga Mashie in central

Accra.⁵ My interlocutors explained that Ga people's prowess in professional boxing stemmed from *asafo atwele*—a historic pugilistic contest between competitors from different *asafo* brigades.⁶ Before European colonization, *asafo* brigades from Ga Mashie's seven quarters provided military and civil labor for Ga chiefs, and male social inclusion in Ga society was tightly linked to *asafo* membership (Akyeampong, 2002). This also applied to migrant men, for whom martial participation in an *asafo* brigade meant becoming a citizen of the Ga state (Akyeampong, 2002, p. 41). When British colonial authorities banned *asafoi* (pl.) militaristic practice, weekly *asafo atwele* contests become important spaces to express martial prowess and thus claim social inclusion as a Ga (Akyeampong, 2002, p. 51). Boxing remains deeply associated with social inclusion and belonging in Ga Mashie, as Washington explained when describing the sport's ethnic inflection in Ghana:

All the boys who box are Gas. Kofi comes from Volta region and Yaw from Kumasi [both non-Ga regions]. But all of them are here, boxing in Ga Mashie. They are Gas.

Boxers are folded into Ga ethnic identity and inherit a sense of belonging in Ga Mashie through practice in place. Murals and posters of local boxers are prominently displayed across Ga Mashie; boxers and coaches are hailed in the street by passersby. To train and compete as a boxer in Ga Mashie is to claim a sense of belonging, grounded in a history of social inclusion through martial participation.

Boxing is also intertwined with political agency and activism in Accra. The sport was a motif of Ga ethnic pride in the mid 20th century, when Gas were increasingly marginalized from the city's political and economic spheres (Dunzendorfer, 2011, p. 1016). Ex-boxers and older coaches described their pride in seeing Roy Ankrah, the first Ghanaian to win a British Empire title in 1951, beating their "colonial masters." Others reminisced about training trips to Cuba and ties forged through Ghana's postindependence turn toward the socialist world. In contemporary Accra, boxing facilitates social inclusion, local pride, and a sense of political possibility in a globalized world. Despite this, the global boxing industry is riven with racialized inequalities that position Ghanaians as cheap and expendable labor, with real-world consequences for their health and well-being. Accra boxers are critically aware of this contradiction (Hopkinson, 2022).

Thus, while boxing affords modes of belonging, social inclusion, and political agency in Accra, it is also a space of racialized exploitation and physical violence. Garcia (2010, 2014, 2015) argues that the all-encompassing nature of violence and dispossession in the lives of heroin addicts in Mexico City and New Mexico fosters counterintuitive forms of harmful and violent care. To analyze Accra boxers' practices of care as framed ultimately by exploitation and subjection (as Garcia does for addicts') would be to make an a priori assumption that the sport's structural violence precedes and subsumes the social inclusion, agency, and belonging it affords. I follow Accra boxers' lead in refusing to elect either the sport's structural violence or its affirming potentials as the ultimate frame of their sporting

lives. As they do, I hold these dynamics of harm and affirmation in tension.

“PUNCHING IS A SICKNESS”: TEMPORALITY AND FRAGILE BODIES

Boxers are well aware of the sport's damaging reality. As one experienced professional, Joshua, put it,

When you sign that [fight] contract, you know you are going to get hurt. You are going to get cut. You will get pains in your body. You are going to get knocked out. That is boxing.

Many current and former boxers suffer long-term cognitive and physical impairments inflicted through the sport (known colloquially as “going craze”), and the link between boxing and their condition is widely recognized. Describing this link with regard to sparring—full-contact training that simulates a bout—Washington explained,

If you are taking too many blows all the time, if you are sparring when you don't need to, you craze [*sic*]. You see those boxers who have sparred too much like this [*he mimes swaying side to side*]. Their speech is slow. You need sparring, but you should only spar to prepare for the fight.

Hence, coaches remind boxers who act nonchalantly that “these [gloved hands] can kill,” and the Ga language impresses the sport's violence; the verb for boxing is *no* (to fight), as opposed to the language used for other sports: one might *tswa boolu* (play football). Consequently, boxers and coaches conceptualize their bodies as limited resources that are gradually and inevitably worn down by the sport. As longtime professional Faris put it, “Punching is a sickness. Look at those who keep going. It fucks them.”

“Going craze,” as Faris shows, is a certainty of lives in the sport. Yet it is not something boxers accept passively. Rather, boxers and coaches work to forestall this certainty by carefully managing the physical intensity of training, noting the intensity of violence across bouts (e.g., avoiding successive “hard” fights that are perceived to take a particularly high toll on fighters' corporeal resources), and ideally by leaving the sport before the long-term symptoms of neurological damage become acute. I use “attrition” to describe the cumulative, irreparable damage that boxers and coaches perceive as an unavoidable consequence of lives lived in boxing, and “attritional” to describe the physically harmful encounters that cause this wearing-down.

Although my gym mates recognized that the sport is attritional, they often took pleasure in hard-fought bouts and sparring, and described how both made them “sharper.” The next day, however, the same boxers might complain of sore and fatigued bodies or voice their fears about “going craze.” As boxers and coaches anticipate the sport's physiological effects, these effects make boxers' futures immanent in the ring and its violent encounters. Boxers and coaches feel that

what is happening now connects deeply to their future lives and selves. Hence, modulating and managing physicality in the ring is at one level profoundly about anticipating, forestalling, or (preferably) avoiding unwanted bodily futures.

Responding to the inevitability of corporeal degradation, coaches understand their work in the gym, before bouts and during them, as practices of care and “looking after.” During training, they towel boxers down, massage shoulders, feed boxers water, help them into and out of gloves, and peel sweat-soaked T-shirts and shorts from their bodies. These intimate acts of corporeal maintenance ameliorate discomfort, forestall future harm, and materialize coaches’ commitment to boxers’ well-being. Before a bout, they do likewise—carefully wrapping boxers’ hands to protect them, dressing/undressing them, and skillfully applying Vaseline to help blows glance off their faces.

Coaches’ care work is tactile and somatic, a constellation of embodied skills and techniques developed over time and with experience. It not only anticipates and counteracts the attrition of competition, but it also enables boxers to better inflict physical damage on opponents. It is perhaps unsurprising that boxers and coaches use idioms of care to describe their work that ameliorates harm before and during a fight. Boxers, however, also use idioms of care to describe their work in the ring. These idioms recognize their relationality and mutual dependence as opponents, intertwinements that I now trace across the fights that night in Keta.

JOURNEYMAN

Samuel, Ayitey’s opponent that night, was a journeyman. “Journeyman” is a loosely defined and ubiquitous category in professional boxing, and one that my interlocutors used readily rather than a Ga translation.⁷ In Washington’s words,

A journeyman is not such a good boxer. He is often losing, but it is his job to fight. It is how he feeds his family.

In Accra, journeymen are often reasonably skilled boxers who are deliberately overmatched, meaning they have a losing record (more losses than wins). Boxing is a zero-sum game—for every winner there must be a loser. Journeymen’s losing labor thus creates champions and prospects with winning records (many more wins than losses), who go on to feature in the high-profile, high-grossing bouts that make the sport profitable. Managers and matchmakers also use journeymen to give “prospects” (boxers touted for future success) experience early in their careers and as “warm-up fights” for boxers with a winning record after periods of inactivity. In Accra and beyond, journeymen’s losing labor is fundamental to professional boxing as a business and as a spectacle. This was well understood among the Accra boxing family—what my interlocutors call the range of actors involved in the sport, including boxers, coaches, referees, judges, managers, and promoters.

For many journeymen, like Samuel, boxing was a significant and dependable source of income. Journeymen typically fight regularly and take fights at short notice. Some spend entire careers as journeymen, while others become journeymen as their relative skill, fitness, and reflexes decline, often with age. The Attoh Quarshie coaches regularly lectured their boxers that being a journeyman is a “good job” and a respectable role in Accra (Hopkinson, 2022).⁸ Journeymen are often proud of being boxers, although many speak about their work in terms of past wins rather than losses, showing some ambivalence toward their losing role. Journeymen are not, however, derided or shamed either by the boxing family or the public. Their respectable (if not aspirational) status echoes the Gas’ history of social inclusion through martial participation (and not only winning).

Washington explained that journeymen could play two roles:

You have the journeymen who know they cannot win, so they just give you rounds. They will not try to win. Your boxer can just box small with him, move around, and do enough and then finish. Then you have the second type, who thinks that every time he should try to win. Even if he knows he cannot fit them [knows his opponent is much better than him]. This journeyman is also useful because he gives you rounds, and your boxer must be more careful.

Here, “journeyman” is a relational category that describes the relative skill and experience of boxers (rather than an attribute that defines an individual), and their relative roles in a bout. Journeymen are seen as agentive subjects who “give rounds” to their opponents rather than victims who are beaten for money. Yet being continually overmatched is also dangerous and damaging, as a coach named Azumah elaborated: “If a journeyman is taking a lot of punishment, I tell him that he should stop.”

Consequently, Accra journeymen often box defensively and might retire from a contest if they feel they are taking too much “punishment.” Journeymen’s skill lies in avoiding harm, managing their bodies as a finite resource over time, and regularly performing the violence of competitive boxing. Knowledge of boxers’ relative skill—and hence whether one boxer is positioned as a journeyman in a given contest—is carefully cultivated and continually evaluated by the boxing family. Where disparities are significant, meaning one boxer has significantly more potential to harm another, the more experienced boxer has a responsibility to care for the journeyman, as was the case for Ayitey and Samuel.

RECOGNIZING RELATIONALITY

Samuel lost to Ayitey by not meeting a count—failing to declare himself ready to continue before the end of referee’s eight-second count after a knockdown. He left the ring not visibly injured because he and Ayitey, the latter under Washington’s instructions, had sustained a performance of violence without

delivering attritional punches. Washington reflected on the fight some days later:

LEO. Why did you tell Ayitey not to hit Samuel hard?

WASHINGTON. He [Samuel] is a journeyman. It's his job, so there is no need to hurt him. [...] If Ayitey is hurting so many journeymen, who is going to fight him? How can he build his record? If he can't get fights, then he can't get a [good] record and he can't box, so he has to look after them [journeymen]. [...] The boxing family is not *sooooo* so big, so if you are always hurting people so badly, then it is difficult for you. You won't get fights.

Journeymen are autonomous actors who may (and do) refuse to fight boxers with a reputation for physically damaging them. Ayitey needs journeymen to box against, to maintain his record, and keep him in practice. His dependence thus shapes the imperative to take care of Samuel. Dependence on journeymen is acutely felt in Accra because the boxing family is relatively small. With only around 200 active male professionals (spread across 17 weight classes), the pool of domestic opponents is limited. Prospects and championship boxers thus often fight the same opponents several times, winning each time. A boxer who excessively damages journeymen will find few willing opponents and therefore struggle to develop the winning record required to secure higher-profile and higher-paid bouts.⁹

Journeymen, too, often depend on their work in the ring as a source of income and respectability. Samuel had recently suffered a violent knockout, as Washington explained:

They beat Samuel very hard the last time. I don't think he has recovered yet, but it is his job, so how can he not box? That is why I said to Ayitey, *Ebe hewale* [He doesn't have strength], because he is still weak. So we had to look after him.

Through their work in and around the ring, Ayitey and Washington acknowledge their dependence on journeymen. They position themselves as ethical actors who affirm Samuel's subjectivity as a boxer and someone who provides for others, by "looking after" Samuel during the bout. Care in the ring requires Ayitey and Washington to account for the mutual dependencies that crosscut boxing in Accra; the inequalities in skill and power between boxers; and athletes' fragility in the face of boxing's violence. By limiting the attrition of their bout, Ayitey and Samuel act on a shared image of the future in which Ayitey still has opponents, and in which Samuel's sense of self is maintained. In this case, the possibility and practice of care emerge as the imagined futures and temporal frames for the bout align. Like coaches' work in the gym and the corner, this care manifests in skilled physical practice—expressed and recognized in a punch that lands with an open hand rather than a clenched fist; or when Ayitey steps back ever so slightly, allowing Samuel to move off the ropes and away from him.

RECIPROCITY BETWEEN THE ROPES

Later that evening, Washington and I worked the corner for Faris, an Attoh Quarshie boxer, during his bout with a boxer called Ray. At the time, Faris boasted only three losses in some 25 fights. He was "moving up," as Washington put it—climbing the world rankings. Soon, he might fight for regional and world titles and higher purses. Ray's record included a recent string of losses; he was becoming a journeyman.

Although the bout was physically intense, Faris won comfortably on points. As the rounds passed, the crowd hurled shouts of "Kill him!" "Ji le!" Referring to Faris's dreadlocks, they implored Ray to "beat the Rastaman." After the fight, however, Faris and Ray sat quietly together, talking through the fight and smiling as they recounted particular exchanges. Later, Ray asked me, "Did you like my fight?" I told him I had. He smiled back and explained, "I had to help him [Faris] today, to give him some rounds. Another guy canceled, so I helped him out."

Ray, like many journeymen, recognizes his agency in "helping" his opponents by "giving them rounds." Referring to the bout's relatively high intensity, Washington explained, "It was good. Ray gave [Faris] some good [hard] rounds. It is good for his [Faris's] condition and his record."

Although the bout was relatively attritional, Ray's aim was not to win by physically subordinating Faris. His emphasis on "helping" foregrounds mutual benefit through a violent encounter, highlighting the reciprocity of care work between journeymen and championship boxers in the ring. During this bout care involves sustain, attritional physicality between Faris and Ray. This attrition recognizes that, as journeyman and prospect, they share intertwined lives and futures.

IGNORING INTERTWINEMENT

The contingent nature of care in the ring becomes most apparent when "good care" remains unrealized. Some months before Ray and Faris's bout, Washington worked the corner for a journeyman called Ekow, during a bout when Ekow was knocked unconscious by a boxer called Jonathan. Jonathan's coach repeatedly told him not to hurt Ekow, but Jonathan ignored his coach. Tensions were high after the knockout, and Washington stormed across the ring to admonish Jonathan, as he explained:

It is not right to beat a journeyman like that. It is his job to box. How can he do it if they beat him like that every time? The boy [Jonathan] did not listen to his coach. *Eye seke* [He is mad]. *Ebuuu ehe* [he has no respect].

As it became clear that Jonathan was deliberately trying to hurt him, Ekow did not want to retire from the bout. Instead, he wanted to prove he could "go the distance" in riposte to his opponent's insistence on hurting him. During this bout, the action between the ropes was shaped by a competitive disposition that valorized violent subordination and physical resilience over logics of dependence and mutuality. Washington lamented Jonathan's selfishness but seemed ambivalent about Ekow's

actions—as if they were understandable but foolish given the lasting damage (or death) that a bad knockout can cause.

Jonathan's failure to provide care would have lasting consequences, Washington explained:

Next time it will be him [Jonathan] that is like that. I told him in the corner. He is not such a good boxer. George Ashie, Tagoe [other Accra boxers] have beaten him, and they can all beat him again. So he will have to turn a journeyman some time. But when he does, I will not tell my boxers to take care of him. I will tell them to knock him [out]!

Reciprocal care transcends the space of the ring and the moment of the bout. Practicing care establishes a reciprocity with the boxing family that extends into the future, but withholding care ruptures that reciprocity. When Washington compares the offender to Ashie and Tagoe, he demonstrates that the offender's future and subjectivity is intertwined with and mutually constituted by the careers and skills of others. The offending boxer *must* become a journeyman because of his ability relative to others'. By deliberately knocking out the journeyman, the offender disregards the ways his future is intertwined with others', and the relational nature of being a boxer. In this case, social inclusion in the boxing family is not predicated on a logic of violent subordination, nor is it achieved through reflexive self-fashioning. Rather, it is based on one's capacity to recognize hierarchies of skill, to nurture webs of dependence that crosscut these hierarchies, and to act in ways that bring about mutually beneficial futures.

The dependencies and asymmetries that crystallize in bouts are temporary, shifting with each new encounter in the ring as careers wax and wane. Journeymen, prospects, and championship boxers are relational concepts through which boxers and coaches weigh up the morality of violence in the ring and explore the possibility that a bout might be affirming for both boxers. While many matches involve disparities between the fighters, others are more evenly matched. But even in these, mutual affirmation and care take new forms and face new challenges. I now explore these shifting practices of care across a series of evenly matched bouts.

COMPETITIVE BOUTS: DIVERGENT IDEALS OF CARE IN PRACTICE

Ghanaian funerals often involve a "wake keeping" the night before the body is buried. Mourners gather to witness the body—often embalmed in a tableau showcasing the deceased's passions in life—and to eat, play cards, listen to music, and socialize. If the deceased was involved with boxing, exhibition bouts are often held during the wake keeping. An exhibition has no winner or loser, is not listed on boxers' official record, and is performed principally for an audience's entertainment. Like mortuary tableaux, funerary exhibitions attest to and enact the deceased's inclusion in the boxing family. Boxers and coaches feel a sense of responsibility to perform funerary exhibitions—to the deceased and to the boxing family—and they take pride in

doing so. In this sense, wake-keeping exhibitions demonstrate how a duty of care, and sense of mutuality, extend beyond death for members of the boxing family.

Despite their commitment to funerary exhibitions, the boxing family are also wary of harm incurred during exhibitions, given that fighters gain neither money nor a new win to add to their record. Hence, exhibitions are ideally boxed with minimal attrition—"just light punches, no heavy punches," in Washington's words—to minimize cumulative and acute harm. From this perspective, exhibition bouts require a longer-term temporal horizon of appropriate care; by minimizing physical intensity, one tries to ameliorate cumulative damage in the *longue durée*.

One such exhibition was between Edom and Jacob, a lightweight former Olympian and the contemporary Ghanaian welterweight champion, respectively. A small crowd had gathered around a ring erected outside the house of the deceased, a former member of the Ghana Boxing Authority. I had been given a stopwatch and told to shout "box!" (at the beginning) and "time!" (at the end) of each three-minute round. Edom and Jacob began with lighthearted flamboyance. Performing Ali-style foot shuffles and throwing light, exaggerated punches, each boxer gave the other time and space to move and respond. The two had sparred often, and this familiarity was discernible in their eye contact and fleeting smiles. As the rounds went by, however, they began punching harder. Noting this, Washington shook his head. Between the fourth and fifth rounds, Quaye, acting as referee, told the boxers sternly but quietly not to box *gidigidi*—an onomatopoeic Ga word meaning "fast" or "intense."

For the first minute of the fifth round, Edom and Jacob floated easily around the ring; Quaye's message seemed to have gotten through. With two minutes gone, Jacob raised his hands to block a jab. Seeing Jacob's torso exposed, Edom threw two quick hooks, the second landing with a distinct thud. Jacob smiled and shook his head—acknowledging the harder blow but contesting its effect. Seconds before I called time, Jacob landed a heavy shot to Edom's temple. The pair smiled broadly and locked eyes before walking away to their respective corners.

The sixth round began as the fifth had finished, with both men landing forceful single punches. As the round wore on, their movement slowed—legs wearying from the blows—and they stood close together, trading shots for five, seven, 10 seconds before moving apart. The bout's rising intensity was dialogic and cooperative—each boxer responding in kind to the other's shots, recognizing that they *could* compete and *were* similarly skilled. They clearly found this quickening pace enjoyable, at least initially.

Quaye's frustration grew visibly throughout the sixth round, while the crowd's engagement swelled with the rising violence. At the end of the round, Edom and Jacob trudged to their corners, bruises rising on their faces. In the seventh they stood toe-to-toe, throwing vicious shots without pause. Quaye, now sweating profusely, wrenched them apart each time he called "break." A minute into the round, I glanced down at the stopwatch, perhaps feeling Washington's concern beside me. Looking up, I saw a halo of sweat spring from Edom's crown as Jacob snapped Edom's head back with an uppercut. Quaye

leaped between them shouting, “Time! Time!” The stopwatch showed 1:24. Quaye had stopped the round, and the bout, early.

Jacob and Edom slipped between the ropes and walked away in different directions, speaking to no one. Minutes later, I saw Quaye speaking to Edom in harsh tones. The three left separately soon after, and later I asked Washington what had happened. He said,

Ame ye seke [They (Ben and Edom) are mad]. Why are they trying to hurt each other like that? It’s an exhibition. It’s supposed to be a show. They are idiots. Why hurt yourself like that?

The next time we met, I asked Edom about what happened that night. He told me,

We were enjoying too much. We have known each other so long, so when we’re in the ring, we have to enjoy, show our skills together. But then one always wants to win. It’s like that.

Initially, Edom and Jacob took pleasure in recognizing and affirming each other’s skill and sense of self as elite, competitive athletes. Only by responding in kind could the two be affirmed as equals and “show [their] skills together.” In this sense the rising violence was a process of mutual becoming and recognition, both central elements of care as an affirming process (Taylor, 2008). Similarly, other boxers described “making” something “nice,” “good,” or even “beautiful” together in hard-fought bouts. From Jacob and Edom’s perspective, the temporal horizon of care in the ring is relatively close—oriented toward the more immediate consequence of recognizing and affirming each other in the moment through an enjoyable, but attritional, bout. Yet, because “one always wants to win,” mutual becoming slips into harm, disdain, and an effort to physically subordinate the other. What begins as an act of care and recognition transforms into a process of violent subordination. “It’s like that” reveals Edom’s sense that this slippage between affirmation and subjection is not unusual, and perhaps inevitable.

Jacob and Edom’s rising violence also contravened the “low and slow” ethic of care that Quaye and Washington felt was appropriate for an exhibition bout. In prizing the fighters apart (Quaye) and calling them crazy (Washington), the coaches contested Edom and Jacob’s vision of mutual care through escalating violence, perhaps anticipating a slide into harm. Quaye and Washington’s vision of appropriate care prioritizes boxers’ corporeal longevity and value to the boxing family as a collective—a temporal horizon considerably more distant than the immediate gratification of recognizing each other as competitors in the ring. Divergent visions of appropriate and effective care emerge as different actors frame the benefits and harms of their actions in the ring in relation to more or less distant temporal horizons, and different imaginaries of what future benefit might look like. A singular “logic” of good care (however counterintuitive it might be) remains elusive.

REFUSAL AND POSSIBILITY

It is not always the case that boxers appreciate attrition in the ring while coaches condemn it. This became apparent during the funeral of a prominent coach in early 2016. A week before the funeral, coaches, boxers, and members of the Ghana Boxing Authority met to discuss exhibition bouts in the coach’s honor. Several GBA members argued that, out of respect for the deceased coach’s seniority, competitive bouts should be held using 10 oz gloves rather than low-intensity exhibitions using bigger 16 oz gloves, which help protect both opponents. For the GBA members, heightened violence is envisioned as an appropriate tribute to, and act of care for, the deceased and his family. These bouts would not be paid nor their results recorded; they were to be fought out of duty. Hushed words rippled across the meeting before Joshua, an experienced professional, stood.

Speaking with a passion verging on anger, he argued that unpaid bouts were an unfair burden on boxers—who faced cumulative and acute harm. Furthermore, they were unnecessary to respectfully mark the coach’s passing and enact his personhood as a member of the boxing family. Regular exhibitions with a carefully controlled intensity would suffice, he said. The meeting erupted with cries of approval, and it was decided that the exhibitions would be low intensity, using 16 oz gloves. In this decision, no one contested the responsibility to appropriately mark the coach’s passing. But in the face of that responsibility, different visions of appropriate funerary care emerged. The GBA members advocating attritional bouts framed these as a form of respectful care for the deceased, suggesting a relatively immediate temporal horizon of care. By contrast, Joshua framed the bouts in relation to a more distant temporal horizon: the corporeal harm that boxers would endure in the long term. Hence, for Joshua, care for the deceased *and* the boxers involved is best expressed through low-intensity bouts.

Arriving at the wake keeping a few days later, I was struck by the look of concern that Ebenezer, an Attoh Quarshie middleweight, wore. He had been slated for an exhibition with Kojo, he told me. Like Edom and Jacob, the two were in their mid-20s, similarly skilled and experienced. Friends since they were children, they had been rivals for a single spot on the national team as amateurs. Thus, it was widely understood that they would one day be matched in a lucrative competitive fight. Ebenezer explained his concern:

EBENEZER. It isn’t good for me to fight Kojo. He is my opponent, so we can’t do an exhibition.

LEO. Why not?

EBENEZER. If it is an exhibition, then you have to go slowly. [...] But because Kojo is at my level, we have to box properly. If we box like an exhibition, people might say we are not the same level after they watch.

Kojo concurred, later telling me:

If we boxed there [at the funeral], then we had to box properly because we are the same level, which is not good for an exhibition. But then if we do box properly, what will they pay us? Nothing. Then next time [in a future bout], people will not want to watch us box because they have seen it already, so how can we get paid then?

To enact the slow-and-low ethic of exhibitions—agreed on at the meeting just days before—might harm the public perception that Kojo and Ebenezer were suitable for a competitive bout, reducing the chances of this lucrative possibility coming to pass. Not only might this compromise their shared vision of a prosperous future, but it would be difficult in practice. "Because he is my opponent and I am his opponent *for real*," Ebenezer said, "we can't do an exhibition. If we go in there we will throw effective punches. So, we can't do the [funeral] exhibition."

Ebenezer found Kojo in the crowd, and together they told the GBA organizers that they refused to fight an exhibition. Given their similarity in skill and experience, both would want to prove unequivocally that they were the better boxer. Consequently, both were unwilling to risk being publicly labeled the worse by boxing "slowly," despite knowing they should do so.

To box with the ethical low intensity of an exhibition would undermine Kojo and Ebenezer's relational subjectivities as opponents, and the possibility of a competitive bout in future. Yet to compete effectively would also likely foreclose this possibility, and it would transgress normative modes of care in funerary exhibitions. The fighters' intertwinement as "opponents" problematized their capacity to perform care as tempered violence, while the ethical context of funerary exhibitions problematized their capacity to recognize and mutually constitute each other as opponents "for real" through violent competition. By refusing to fight, Kojo and Ebenezer acted together to maintain the possibility of a mutually beneficial future in which a lucrative bout would be possible, and in which a violent encounter might be affirming for both.

Different visions of care in the ring—as more or less violent and attritional—collide in the proposed match between Kojo and Ebenezer. Disparate temporal horizons for care's benefits, different imagined futures, and particular relational subjectivities led the GBA, Joshua, Kojo, and Ebenezer to articulate divergent accounts of what constitutes appropriate and effective care in the ring that night. Yet, for all parties involved, ideas of care and mutuality shaped how boxing's violence was, and should have been, enacted.

VIOLENCE, CARE, AND RELATIONAL FUTURES

As they compete in the ring, boxers bring shared futures and relational subjectivities into being, rather than merely trying to violently subordinate or outdo each other. Reflecting on friendship, Agamben (2009, p. 6) suggests that "the friend is not another I, but an otherness immanent in self-ness, a becoming other of the self." Boxers are bound by ties of mutual dependence, and their futures are relationally constituted. They are

immanent in each other's sense of self—not as friends but as opponents. Kojo and Ebenezer's refusal recognized this immanence of self and other, as did the way Ray and Faris attended carefully to the physical intensity of their bout. "Journey-men," "opponents," and "prospects" can thus be understood as relational concepts that account for boxers' mutual immanence.

A sense of immanence and dependence between boxers, both in the ring and in the *longue durée*, shapes the imperative they feel to "look after," "help," and "take care of" one another. However, their modes of care are often attritional, potentially harmful and violent, something they are acutely aware of. Anthropologists have shown how violent practices might constitute care, in its affirming sense, insofar as they maintain or support others' lives and relationships (Brown, 2010; Garcia, 2010, 2015). We might similarly read boxers' practices of care, emphasizing how Accra's sporting, ethnic, and postcolonial context shapes unusual practices of mutual support, recognition, and social inclusion through boxing. This is certainly true. Such a relativizing analysis, however, stops short of accounting for the fraught and contested nature of care among Accra boxers.

I have argued that Accra boxers' ambiguous and unsettled forms of care are animated by the temporal work they perform in and around the ring. This temporal work includes linking physical violence in the ring to (divergent) imagined futures; recognizing the long-term dependencies and intertwinements between more and less proficient boxers; recognizing that hierarchies of skill and dependence between boxers shift over time; and locating the beneficial and affirming outcomes of a bout in the more or less distant future.

During the Keta bouts, care was achieved because boxers aligned their imagined futures and enacted their mutual dependence in the ring. Ayitey's and Samuel's tempered violence recognized that their futures in the sport—as prospect and journeyman, respectively—are interdependent, and that the burden of care that night fell on Ayitey as the better boxer. By contrast Jonathan, who violently beat a journeyman, failed to box in a way that recognized how his future is linked to others'. Washington thus deemed Jonathan's violence morally wrong, and threatened to withdraw care in future. Across these cases, physicality in the ring is understood to be affirming only if it reflects dynamics of power and dependence between boxers, and is informed by shared visions of the future. As Jonathan's case shows, these dynamics of power and dependence shift over time as bodies age and skills wax and wane, investing both with distinctly temporal dimensions.

During the funeral exhibitions, different temporal horizons of benefit and harm fueled disagreements about what constitutes care and violence. Some parties, like Kojo and Ebenezer, imagined mutual affirmation and benefit in the *longue durée*; their refusal kept alive a lucrative future bout. For others, like the GBA, ideas of appropriate care were framed by the more immediate end of appropriate funerary care. Like Kojo and Ebenezer, Washington and Quayee saw the violence of Jacob and Edom's bout as problematic because of its long-term consequences for the boxers: in this case, acute injury and potentially cognitive decline. For Edom and Jacob, however, the building violence of their encounter was appropriate and enjoyable (at

least initially) because it recognized and affirmed their senses of self as skilled, competitive boxers in the present. In each case, acts of temporal framing emphasized the importance of different relationships and responsibilities in shaping ideals of care.

As Allerton (2020) argues, short-term care is doable for undocumented migrants in Indonesia, while long-term care is frustratingly unachievable. This creates a feeling of being “stuck in the short term” (Allerton, 2020, p. 221), unable to practice care in the ways they want to, forge the futures they desire. The diverse temporal horizons of care articulated during the funerary bouts did not create a sense that care was unachievable among the boxing family (as for Allerton’s interlocutors). Rather, they informed conflicting accounts of what appropriate care is and can be. The boxing family’s disagreements about what constitutes care and violence, and how they relate to one another, highlight the way that temporal work—whether temporal framing, producing shared imaginaries of the future, or recognizing interdependence through time—animates diverging evaluations of what care is and can be.

TEMPORAL WORK AND UNSETTLING CARE

Anthropologists have destabilized normative understandings of the “good” in care by elucidating counterintuitive logics of recognition, mutual support, and affirmation that take violent and harmful forms. But a moral certainty often underpins this purportedly relativizing work. This becomes clear when we consider how this work addresses the scalar nature of violence—how specific acts of care or harm relate to structural violence and inequality. Actions normatively understood as violent or harmful are analyzed as affirming and caregiving because they occur in contexts of poverty and dispossession (Garcia, 2010, 2014) or of chronic material deprivation (Brown, 2010; Livingston, 2012), or contexts that have been “utterly captured by violence in its worst forms” (Garcia, 2015, p. 469). They are explained as epiphenomena of structural violence, which the anthropologist stands against.¹⁰

Suffering and subjection are, however, far from Accra boxers’ only (or paramount) experiences in the sport. Encounters in the ring are often enjoyable, affirming, and attritional. To explain the intersections of violence and care in Accra’s boxing rings as a product of structural violence would misrepresent boxing’s complex history of social inclusion, political agency, and racialized exploitation in Ghana. It would also downplay the capacity of boxers and coaches to shape the meanings of their sport.

I have described how boxers and coaches go about interpreting and assessing the morality of their sport’s violence, and the extent to which this violence might constitute care in its affirming sense. No single logic of violence-as-care permeates Ghana’s boxing rings. Rather, boxers and coaches often contest the morality of, and relationship between, violence and care. Such “unsettled” notions of care help boxers conceptual-

ize and navigate the tension between corporeal harm and mutual affirmation that competitive boxing involves.

Recent scholarship has highlighted how temporal work helps people achieve effective care in trying circumstances. By contrast, I have shown that temporal work animates the “unsettled” and ambiguous nature of care as a moral practice. Approaching care as “unsettled” draws our attention to the moral complexity of life and relationships—in this case lives characterized by simultaneous mutuality, inequality, affirmation, and physical violence—while avoiding the moral certainty of either condemning or lauding nonnormative practices of care. Attending to such temporal dynamics, in Accra’s boxing rings and beyond, might help anthropologists understand how efforts to achieve ideal forms of care persist, in the face of the ambiguity and contradiction involved in practicing care.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹Pseudonyms are used throughout for my interlocutors. Ga Mashie and the Attoh Quarshie are not pseudonyms.
- ²Translations of Ga are my own, made with the help of the boxing family.
- ³Few women box professionally in Ghana. Coupled with the smaller scale of women’s professional boxing globally, this means that the dynamics of dependence and care I describe among male boxers are different among women boxers. Acknowledging this difference, this article explores how temporal work shapes unsettled notions of care among men who box in Accra.
- ⁴A notable exception is Crawley’s (2019) ethnography of Ethiopian runners’ interdependence.
- ⁵During my research, 25 of Accra’s 40 active boxing gyms were in Ga Mashie. No other area of comparative size had more than four gyms.
- ⁶Asafo brigades are sociomilitary companies that are common across many Ghanaian coastal settlements (Parker, 2000). Historically, they were open only to men. They served as a source of civil labor in peacetime and often as military units during conflicts.
- ⁷Boxers and coaches sometimes differentiated between “journeymen” and “journeywomen,” although many noted that there are few of the latter in Ghana, given the small number of women professionals.
- ⁸It can be distressing for winning boxers to become journeymen. But being a journeyman remains a respectable profession, involving complex dynamics of respect and shame (Hopkinson, 2022).
- ⁹The dynamics of dependence and care between journeymen and male prospects I describe are different in women’s boxing (in Accra and elsewhere), in part because there are far fewer journeywomen than men, and being a journeywoman is a less viable economic prospect. Such dynamics among women boxers are particularly interesting given the rapid global

growth of women’s boxing in the 2010s–20s, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁰In this vein, boxing’s popularity elsewhere has been linked to contexts of hyperviolence caused by structural inequality (Wacquant, 1995, 2004).

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