

## Being “the Best Ever”: Contradictions of Immobility and Aspiration for Boxers in Accra, Ghana

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Floyd Mayweather is an unbeaten and hugely wealthy African American boxer with a carefully curated public image of global mobility and opulent wealth. He is widely known by the self-selected moniker T.B.E. “The Best Ever.” Although now retired, during my fieldwork with boxers in Accra between 2014 and 2016, Mayweather was the most lauded boxing icon among my interlocutors. They watched Mayweather’s fights avidly, but they were equally dedicated to the images and video clips circulating on social media, in which Mayweather appeared in lavish clothing and surrounded by huge material wealth (e.g., cars, houses, and private jets), handling large sums of cash. This proliferation of images represents a new aspect of the “media of compression” that make global connection and vast material wealth so tantalising and seemingly accessible for young people (Weiss 2009, 8), and which shape athletes’ aspiration to participate in global sporting industries (Besnier 2015). Yet, most aspiring athletes never realise these aspirations.

“T.B.E.” is also the nickname (or “guy name,” as Accra boxers say) that Daniel, a boxer who trained at the Attoh Quarshie boxing gym where I conducted much of my fieldwork, chose for himself.<sup>1</sup> Daniel has boxed for eight years, but unlike Mayweather he is viewed by other boxers and coaches as relatively unskilled and unlikely to ever become globally mobile or wealthy through the sport. Although Daniel regularly professes his commitment to becoming “a champ” or “the best.” He is aware of his technical shortcomings. Yet he is well respected in the gym. His guy name is acknowledged in the Accra boxing community, even by many more skilled boxers who are globally mobile and have achieved financial success. Rather than encouraging him to temper his claims, Daniel’s coaches and fellow boxers laud his ambition and commitment to training.

Daniel is not exceptional. Many boxers in Accra nurture aspirations that far exceed their skills and choose similarly ostentatious guy names, yet they are accepted and respected by their peers. As a paradigm of seemingly hopeless aspirations, Daniel's claim to being "The Best Ever" raises two questions: *why* is the claim accepted despite Daniel's limitations, and *what* is being recognised by this acceptance, if it is clearly not Daniel's skill in the ring? Daniel's appropriation of "T.B.E." is a public commitment to the gendered success that Mayweather represents for boxers in Accra and to ambition in the face of limited opportunity. For the many athletes like Daniel who find themselves on the periphery of global sporting industries with little hope of fulfilling their ambitions, performing aspiration rather than embodying sporting prowess is central to their gendered identity.

### **Aspiration and Fantasy in Global Sporting Industries**

As other authors in this volume argue, aspirations to sporting success on a global scale have become since the 1990s a feature of gendered experience in many countries of the Global South. Increasing global connection and economic integration since the 1980s has led to new forms of marginality and exclusion for many in the Global South (Weiss 2009; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Against this backdrop, young men who find forms of social adulthood increasingly difficult to achieve through conventional gendered roles have turned to sport as a route to social mobility (Besnier 2015; Besnier, Calabrò, and Guinness, this volume). The neoliberal economic reforms that Ghana underwent in the late 1980s and early 1990s were typical of this moment and resulted in changes to labour markets which saw forms of employment previously associated with masculinity and social adulthood in Ghana (such as government or state-industry employment) become inaccessible to many young men (Esson 2013). Changes like these precipitated a situation in Ghana and across Africa wherein young men increasingly found employment in "feminine" roles, such as market trading and hawking,

and consequently sought to express their masculinity in ways other than employment (Esson 2015; Weiss 2009). During this period, Ghanaians' hopes of participating in global sporting industries were fuelled by increasingly available images of sporting migrants' success in the wealthy leagues and competitions of Europe and North America. Sport as a route to financial wealth and social mobility has thus become an attractive pursuit for many young Ghanaians in much the same way as it has for young men across the Global South.

Ambitions to participate in global sporting markets come hand in hand with projects of global mobility and transnational migration (Besnier, Guinness, Hann, and Kovač 2018). However, the extreme competitiveness of sporting industries means far fewer aspiring athletes realise dreams of global mobility and engagement than hold them, leaving the question of how athletes deal with the discrepancy between their aspirations and their immobility. In Accra, the presence of a relatively high number of globally mobile athletes contributes to a sense that engagement in a global industry is a real possibility for ambitious boxers. Yet, there are far more aspiring but immobile boxers like Daniel than boxers who have led successful international careers. For many, the juxtaposition of global engagement and exclusion illustrates the conditions of millennial capitalism as a space of simultaneous opportunity and exclusion (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). While some athletes labour under the sincere belief that they can realise grand sporting ambitions, many others realise the limits of their dreams. In Accra, performing aspiration is central to the masculinity of immobile athletes. These performances reveal Accra boxers' critical perspective on the global boxing industry, which promises them much but often does not deliver. Daniel's participation in boxing shows how aspirant athletes simultaneously engage with and are critical of neoliberal sporting markets, rather than blindly participating despite the odds of success being stacked against them.

Under neoliberal economic reforms like those implemented in Ghana since the 1980s, the self becomes conceptualised as a business or bundle of skills and network connections, which

must be reflexively self-governing and constantly seek self-improvement (Gershon 2011, 2018). West Africa athletes implement intense programmes of bodily discipline, spiritual commitment and magico-religious practices in the pursuit of participation in global sporting industries (Kovač 2018; Hann 2018a). The “athlete self” is thus constantly engaged in corporeal and spiritual bettering and in social networking in the service of future sporting success (Hann 2018b). Yet, many of my interlocutors in Accra were well aware of their limited futures in the transnational boxing industry. Athletes like Daniel, who recognise their limitations yet continue to publicly perform aspirations to success, show that the athlete self’s focus on self-improvement is not the only goal of training and competing. Daniel participates in the sport neither in the blind hope of success nor because he sees improving his athletic ability as a route to social mobility. Instead, performing aspiration is central to the gendered self-making of involuntarily immobile athletes like Daniel.

While Daniel often talks publicly of “taking his chance” and “getting lucky,” discourses characteristic of neoliberal capitalist logics, he is also a realist who leverages resources and skills to present himself as an ideal masculine subject despite recognising his athletic shortcomings and immobility. To do so, he reframes market trading from a feminine form of work dominated by women (Esson 2013, 88; Overa 2007; Thiel and Stasic 2016) to one that facilitates and supports his masculinity. Like youth in Kinshasa (De Boeck 2004, 48–9), he constantly reframes his experiences of connection and marginality to articulate a sense of agency while simultaneously recognising his exclusion from an imagined world of capitalist modernity and boundless consumption. Daniel’s life can be read as a criticism of the rags-to-riches myths and millennial capitalist ethos that proliferate in the Global South. His immobility and lack of skill as an aspiring boxer challenge the assumption that sporting aspiration is necessarily an index of reflexive self-improvement in the mould of an idealised neoliberal subjectivity (Gershon 2011). Instead aspiration itself is central to gendered selfhood for athletes in Accra.

## **Boxing in Accra: Migration and Mobility**

In Ghanaian popular consciousness, boxing is associated with the Ga ethnic group and the neighbourhood of Ga Mashie in central Accra. The sport is understood as a contemporary continuation of the historic Ga pugilistic practice of *Asafo Atwele*, itself a marker of masculinity in Ga Society (Akyeampong 2002; Dunzendorfer 2014). During my fieldwork, there were 41 boxing gyms in Accra, of which 25 were in Ga Mashie; no other neighbourhood had more than four gyms. The network of gyms in Ga Mashie are the nodes around which the sport is structured both socially and spatially.

During my fieldwork, I followed an established tradition of foregrounding bodily praxis and embodied experience in ethnographic research (Jackson 1989; Bourdieu 1977; Stoller 1987; Wacquant 2004). I was affiliated principally with the Attoh Quarshie gym, a relatively large gym with a membership of over 40 boxers, of which around 20 train together on any afternoon. I trained there three to five times a week. Depending on the schedule of upcoming fights, I joined other members on morning runs and I controlled my diet and sleep prior to bouts as my interlocutors did. Boxers' strict regimen is reminiscent of the reflexive practices of self-improvement associated with athletes attempting to enter neoliberal global sporting industries across West Africa (Hann 2018b; Kovač 2018). However, athletes like Daniel follow these regimens while also recognising their immobility, and ground their participation in a sense of gendered self in a subtly different way.

The Accra boxing family (the collective term that my interlocutors used) includes women in all the various roles involved in the sport – as boxers, coaches, referees, judges, promoters, and managers (see Figure 10.2). While spaces were often predominantly male dominated and only a few women boxed actively, women were not excluded from training, competing, organising or promoting boxing. None of the coaches or referees I spoke to opposed women

training at their gyms or competing, despite the fact that the sport has historically been a male domain. Indeed, several of the most experienced, globally successful and well-travelled boxers at the Attoh Quarshie were women.

[Please insert Figure 10.1 here]

Accra boxers are strikingly mobile globally and actively engaged in the global boxing industry. During my fieldwork, boxers and coaches travelled across six continents to ply their trade, and over the last 40 years Ghana has produced nine world champions, the most recent in February 2019. Most boxers who travel overseas to fight return to Ghana within a week of competing, often the very next day after a bout. A small number of athletes migrate semi-permanently to work with coaches and promoters based abroad. There were also rumours of irregular migration involving overstaying short-term visas granted for single bouts, often in Western Europe and the United States. However, more prominent than these rumours was a widespread sense that foreign consulates were so paranoid about boxers' absconding while abroad that they were reluctant to issue Ghanaian boxers visas, and thus limited boxers' ability to work abroad despite legitimate offers of employment.<sup>2</sup> Coaches and boxers often spoke of building up a reliable travel record by leaving destination countries prior to visa expiration as a strategy for increasing their likelihood of receiving visas in future.

On their travels, boxers and coaches participated at the highest levels of the sport – several challenged professional world titles or competed in the Olympic Games, pan-African championships, and amateur world championships. However, many more travelled for less prestigious competitions, titles, and bouts. The mobility of African boxers who train in Accra is facilitated by pervasive racialized stereotypes in the global boxing industry of Ghanaians as inherently “tough” and physically durable – able to withstand much physical attrition during a bout. These stereotypes are reminiscent of the racialized profiling of sporting communities around the world, for example the emphasis on African footballers' strength and physicality

(Yeku 2018) and the profiling of Pacific Islanders in the international rugby industry as large, muscular, and athletic (Besnier 2015). Although toughness and durability are stereotypes attached to Ghanaian boxers, they were readily applied to black African boxers from across West Africa who trained in Accra. As a result, boxers who train in Accra are sought-after opponents in the centres of the global boxing industry in North America and Western Europe. European and American managers and matchmakers have established links to the Accra boxing community, often by way of the Ghanaian diaspora, through which they recruit Accra boxers to fight abroad. In recognition of this, several of my interlocutors from neighbouring countries chose to identify as Ghanaian for the purpose of their boxing records in the hope of increasing their global mobility.

While Ga Mashie provides a migratory starting point for some boxers, it is also a destination for boxers from across the world. During my fieldwork, boxers from the United States, Britain, Lebanon, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Benin, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Namibia, Cameroon, South Korea, Argentina, Mexico (and no doubt other countries I was unaware of) came to live, train, and compete in Accra. Most came for short periods of up to two weeks for a single professional bout, but a few came to train for longer periods and a number of boxers from Nigeria and Benin had migrated permanently to Accra in the hope of furthering their careers. In addition to leveraging the racialized stereotype of the Ghanaian boxer to increase their chances of getting lucrative fights abroad, these athletes cited as reasons to migrate the high quality of coaching, sparring and training available in Accra. This constitutes a twist on the image of mobile athletes invariably moving from the Global South to the Global North.

Further complicating the idea of Accra as a peripheral source of sporting labour in the global boxing industry, several of the more successful Ghanaian boxers I worked with chose to base their careers in Accra rather than migrating overseas permanently despite having the resources to do so. Many had trained and fought abroad for long periods, often in the United

States or Britain, where large Ghanaian migrant communities facilitate their arrival and employment. Yet several chose to relocate to Accra as they too felt that training there, specifically in Ga Mashie, was better for their careers. However, these athletes still successfully sought well-paid fights abroad in the boxing hubs of Western Europe, North America, and elsewhere. These complex patterns of migrant labour complicate the paradigm of sub-Saharan countries as sources of sporting labour and migratory starting points, as well as the idea that permanent migration is central to sporting aspirations. For many boxers in Accra, temporary global mobility anchored in a life in Ghana is a central feature of ambitions to success in the sport (see Figure 10.2).

[Please insert Figure 10.2 here]

Accra is better understood as a hub of global mobility linking West Africa to the global boxing industry than as a starting point for migration (compare Crawley, this volume, on a similar pattern among Ethiopian runners). The complex dynamics of mobility through which boxers engage with the industry are not encapsulated by a paradigm that contrasts the Global South as source of labour with the Global North as a consumer of labour. In Ga Mashie, former world champions, world-title challengers, and African champions are regularly found training alongside novices and boxers of much inferior skill. Only a small proportion of Accra boxers are globally mobile and fewer still maintain this mobility during their entire careers, and they are a tangible and celebrated presence in the city. If global mobility and immobility are generally experienced at the same time (Salazar and Smart 2011; Jónsson 2012), athletes like Daniel experience their immobility particularly acutely in contrast to their mobile peers. Yet, globally recognised and mobile athletes' presence in Ga Mashie helps maintain a sense of possibility and potential for immobile athletes. Boxers understand Accra as a globally connected node, which allows immobile athletes like Daniel to position themselves as actively engaged with a global industry rather than being immobile, peripheral, and marginal.



## **Constructing Masculinities**

Understanding boxing as the quintessential “manly art” (Oates 1987; Wacquant 2004, 37) belies the ways that gendered experience is contextually contingent and constantly in the process of being redefined (Butler 1990; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). For Accra boxers, this re-making draws on both globally prevalent discourses of masculinity and gender roles grounded specifically in central Accra. Boxers’ masculinities and the gendering of the sport are therefore not static but constantly remade in response to shifting gender norms and discourses at both the global and local scale. Daniel’s participation in the sport is one such moment of re-making in relation to the contemporary icon of Floyd Mayweather.

For boxers in Accra, “being a man” is not a given but requires careful planning and effort. For example, over the Easter weekend of 2015, I spent several days with Idris, an aspiring light-heavyweight from the Attoh Quarshie, who was a mechanic by trade and ran his own business north of Ga Mashie. We had been given the long weekend off from training and many boxers took the time to relax, party, and socialise. Idris and I spent a day at a packed beach in central Accra. He told me about his life; growing up close to the border with Burkina Faso, moving to Accra as an 18-year-old and eventually beginning training aged 29 at the Attoh Quarshie, just over a year before. He was an amateur at the time, but like many who enter the sport he wanted to turn professional, “win titles” and “get big fights abroad.” As we talked, Idris reflected on the place of gender in his experience; beginning with phrases like “if you want to be a man” or “to be a man you have to,” he narrated his life to me as an ongoing project of gendered self-making (Smith 2017).

In the evening, we left the beach and headed back to his shop on a quiet side street, which consisted of a cramped passage where he keeps his tools, some stacked chairs, a table, cooking equipment, clothes, and an awning. He erects the awning on the side of the street and works

under it during the day. We washed at a nearby public bathroom, cleaning the sand off our legs, hands, and faces, before laying out the chairs and the table in the street. Idris sent his apprentice away to buy food, and when he returned we sat down to eat. As we ate, Idris stopped abruptly, looked into the middle distance and said,

“It’s hard to be a man.”

Across the table, the apprentice sighed deeply and nodded. Surprised by the immediacy of his reflection, I asked why. As a man, he explained, you have to plan your future because nobody will do it for you. As a 17-year-old in the northern region of Ghana, he had planned to come to Accra, become a mechanic and establish his business before becoming a boxer. Boxing was what he had wanted to do since he was young, but first he had to “make means” for himself – create financial security to support himself as he trained. He described how he now plans to travel and fight abroad before retiring and returning to Ghana, building a house and adding car import to his already successful business. Being a man – not just being male – requires work and a plan. Idris’ words also reference the common theme of self-improvement which ran through many boxers’ discussions of gendered experience, and reflect understandings of neoliberal selfhood as a process of reflexive self-development (Gershon 2011). Although Idris’ plan was unique, the fact that he had one was not. Of course, his aspirations to become a particular type of man reflect a concern with becoming adult that go beyond gender. In one form or another, boxing figures centrally in my interlocutors’ aspirations to become the men they want to be, but it is never coterminous with gender (see Figure 10.3).

[Please insert Figure 10.3 here]

In a similar vein, the sport played a varying role in women’s gendered sense of self. Some women boxers I knew trained and boxed sporadically, while others were regular amateur competitors and boxed on the national amateur team, and one world-title challenger migrated from Nigeria to Accra to further her career before migrating to the United States through the

sport. Like men who box, women boxers held ambitions of global mobility and financial wealth, but these aspirations were shaped by different gendered expectations outside the gym. In a context where childcare and small retail businesses such as provisions shops and market stalls are considered women's labour, women boxers at times spoke of the conflict between their training regimes and their responsibilities as businesswomen or parents, often sacrificing the former for the latter (compare Borenstein, this volume, on women runners in Ethiopia). By contrast, many male boxers proudly justified leaving workplaces in the afternoon to train because for them the latter was a "job," irrespective of whether they received any payment for boxing. Sarah, the world-title challenger who subsequently moved to the United States, told me she was waiting until her boxing career ended to have children and start a business, as she did not think it possible to attend to both at the same time.

The gendered possibilities of a boxing life are clearly different and although women's experiences in the sport are certainly worth exploring, the relatively small amount of data I have on women boxers limits my capacity to analyse their gendered experience. From here on, I focus on how male boxers construct masculinity in relation to the sport, without taking for granted that there is something inherently masculine about the male boxing body or experience.

### **Masculinity and Generosity**

In the Attoh Quarshie, boxers often reference iconic Ghanaian and foreign boxers by talking about them, appropriating famous boxers' ring-names as "guy-names," imitating others' style of movement in the ring, and carefully choosing attire reminiscent of iconic boxers. First among icons during my time in Accra was Floyd Mayweather. Mayweather personified boxers' ambitions of global mobility, material wealth, and a winning record. His popularity peaked when he fought Manny Pacquiao for the world welterweight titles in May 2015, in what was at the time the richest bout in history. In Accra, the fight was hotly anticipated. Boxers wore caps and

clothes branded with “T.B.E.” and “T.M.T.” (“The Money Team”), Mayweather’s own brand of clothing and also the name of his entourage. Boxers shouted “T.M.T.” and “T.B.E.” around the gym as they trained, and many spoke of their allegiance to T.B.E. and lauded Mayweather’s defensive skills and tactically astute style. The countless men’s clothing boutiques around Ga Mashie and Kantamanto market, the city’s largest clothing market, were awash with garments printed with T.M.T. and T.B.E., and many boxers enjoyed wearing the gear. Many boxers and coaches predicted that Pacquiao would lose and most openly supported Mayweather.

The fight itself was a masterclass in defensive boxing from Mayweather, who beat Pacquiao convincingly on points over 12 rounds. Few in Accra were surprised. I asked a boxer called Abraham a few days after the fight why he liked Mayweather so much: “T.B.E.! Floyd. The. Money. Mayweather.” He went on: “I like the way he fights, and I like his business. He works hard in training and he gets money. Floyd respects himself.”

Although Mayweather’s opulent wealth and global success make him a distant figure for the majority of boxers in Accra, he remains tangible in some respects because several Ghanaian boxers have worked for him as sparring partners, most recently Bastie Samir. Following the 2008 Beijing Olympics Games, Bastie was signed on as a professional by a major U.S.-based promoter. He moved to the United States for three years, during which he worked as a sparring partner for Mayweather and others. Since then, Bastie has returned to Ghana to pursue his professional career. He is widely known, regularly spars at gyms around Accra, and is often seen around Ga Mashie. Other high-profile Ghanaian boxers such as Ike Quartey and Joshua Clottey have shared a ring with former Mayweather opponents, Oscar De La Hoya and Manny Pacquiao respectively – perhaps Mayweather’s two highest profile opponents before 2015. Even the youngest and least experienced boxers in Accra are likely to have watched YouTube videos of Ghanaians sharing a ring with these international icons in Las Vegas or New York. Simultaneously, they see these Ghanaians around Ga Mashie, in gyms or at fights, and likely will

have spoken to them, trained alongside them, and perhaps even sparred with them. Joshua, Ike, and Bastie among others are a tangible link between the Accra boxing family and the world that Mayweather occupies and symbolises. The presence of these athletes lends to Ga Mashie a sense of being connected to a global industry.

Mayweather's lavish consumer lifestyle and seemingly vast amounts of cash reflect boxers' desire for a disposable income as a marker of masculinity, as possessing material wealth and being in a position to be generous is widely understood as a masculine trope in Ghana, particularly among young men (Esson 2013; cf. Besnier 2015, 853; Newell 2012). As a man, one should be able to give freely to others in a public way. Discussing their aspirations in the sport one afternoon, two professional boxers made this clear:

David: I will get a house there and here, and I will get a nice car, top car [David and Nana playfully imitate cruising with one arm out of the window, and turning the steering wheel with the other] and I will get nice clothes, plenty. Then I will be able to give small things to people.

Nana: Yeah, I will have money and be like [mimes shuffling paper bills out of his palm into the air].

Leo: But if you give away all your money you will have none left.

David: No, if you give things to people it is good, because they will respect you. You will never want.

As David's and Nana's conversation illustrates, a self-respecting man has the capacity to give material goods and cash generously. Respect (*bu* in Ga) is a reflexive concept; one can only respect other persons who are perceived to respect themselves. *Bu* is a relationship constituted between subjects rather than given from one subject to another. Performing self-respect demands respect from others and in this sense attention to the self is also attention to one's relationships with others. As a reflexive and relational concept, *bu* helps illuminate Abraham's earlier

statement about Mayweather – Abraham respects Mayweather because Mayweather demonstrates self-respect through his skill in the ring *and* his accumulation of wealth as a successful businessman. Generosity and the capacity to give freely generates respect between subjects that is clearly gendered, as Nana went on to explain:

If you start boxing and stop your job, your girlfriend has to be happy with you because you can make plenty of money and then you can give her things. You can buy things for her, so it is good to become a boxer as a man.

Aside from gift giving, self-respect is demonstrated materially through stylish and clean clothing, conspicuous displays of material wealth including cars and jewellery, and careful and graceful bodily comportment (Newell 2012; Shipley 2009). This was clearly apparent when coaches reprimanded boxers dressing in dirty or dishevelled training gear and described them as disrespectful. Boxers invest significant time and effort in dressing to a particular aesthetic reminiscent of contemporary U.S. hip-hop stars and Floyd Mayweather’s public image. Opulent wealth in this form is reminiscent of the “X-way,” the “hegemonic ideal of masculinity associated with a footballer’s lifestyle” in Ghana (Esson 2013, 89). For my interlocutors, Mayweather’s displays of wealth demand respect from others and demonstrate his self-respect. Like aspiring footballers (Esson 2013), boxers in Accra see accruing money and material wealth as a way to articulate masculinity through the capacity to give to others and dress well. By doing so, one demands respect as a visibly self-respecting man; becoming a respected man requires cultivating relationships of generosity.

Although boxing is locally associated with wealth and opulence, many professional boxers supported families on around 300 cedi (US\$70) a month, a lower-end income. Many found seeking respect through gift giving difficult. Yet they continued to desire to be seen as publicly generous and were socially expected to do so. The irony of the situation is not lost on boxers like Nana, who bemoan the disjuncture between expectations and realities.

### **Virile Masculinity: Giving and Getting**

Boxers also associated gift-giving and global mobility with virile heterosexual masculinity.<sup>3</sup> A neighbour of mine who boxed at the Attoh Quarshie often described the capacity to give material goods or cash away to sexual partners, implicitly women, as an important part of “being a man.” As an amateur, he made little money through the sport, often only earning when he trained with the national team or competed in international competitions. Consequently he found it difficult to realise the heterosexual masculinity to which he aspired, as he explained when reflecting on coaches’ criticisms of him:

People say I like girls too much, that I am always with girls, coach is always saying this. But I don’t have money, so I can’t get them things, so instead I talk to them a bit and give them some words instead, and then see if they want to come [have sex] with me... Like this one girl I was talking to [earlier that day]. But then she didn’t want to, I can’t give her anything.

Many of my interlocutors saw transactional sex as a benefit of the vast wealth which sporting icons like Mayweather possessed, although transactional sex is by no means the only form of sexual activity that they engaged in. Gift giving is therefore a route to both gendered respect (*bu*) and heterosexual virility. Similarly, travel and global mobility contributed to aspirations of heterosexual virility. A favourite call-and-response chant of one Attoh Quarshie boxer beginning to travel as a professional articulated this succinctly: “*Ke ote abroji* [if you go abroad], fuck the *yoyo* [women]! *Ke ote abroji*, fuck the pussy!” Boxers found sexual encounters with women while abroad particularly desirable and often publicly recounted such encounters, whether true or fictional, in the gym. In this sense, travel was an opportunity to realise and recount a globally engaged, heterosexual masculinity.<sup>4</sup>

The boxer as a virile, heterosexual man is a commonly held stereotype within the sport and among members of the Ghanaian public. At a meeting of the Ghanaian Coaches' Association, when the issue of the possibility of disease transmission through exposure to bodily fluids in the sport was broached, an experienced coach noted with a wry smile, "As we know, the boxers like to fuck all those women in Bukom [a neighbourhood in Ga Mashie particularly strongly associated with boxing]." The statement was a double entendre. Meant to comment on blood-borne STD transmission, it was delivered with an air of self-satisfaction and met with quiet chuckles around the room, highlighting the expectation that boxers are virile sexual actors. The coach both affirmed and problematized boxers' heterosexual virility, recalling the ambivalence of the concept of "African men" when used as a naturalized category of sexual actor. Although clearly socially constructed, the idea of "African men" as a specific group of actors shapes men's understanding of masculinity and experience of sexual encounters (Spronk 2014). Similarly, although boxers reflect critically on stereotypes about them, these stereotypes still shape their gendered experience, aspirations and sense of self.

Being virile and highly sexually active is particularly problematic for boxers when juxtaposed to the regimented lifestyle that they are expected to maintain, particularly when travelling abroad and preparing for bouts. Prior to a fight, boxers are supposed to remain celibate to improve their "focus," strength, and "condition," as sex is understood to diminish these attributes significantly.<sup>5</sup> The paradox that boxers should be sexually active and abstinent at the same time resonates with analyses of the contradictory forms of selfhood engendered by neoliberal market conditions (Gershon 2011; Besnier 2015). Given the value that boxers place on sexual encounters abroad and the limited time that boxers spend aboard when travelling to fight (no more than two weeks prior to a fight), the strain of this paradox is heightened when boxers travel. Male boxers found sexual encounters aboard are highly desirable, yet having sex abroad reduces a boxer's "condition" and his likelihood of performing well in a bout, and undermines



his relationship of trust with his coach.<sup>6</sup> Different aspects of gendered aspiration are pitted against one another when boxers become globally mobile.

As a globally mobile, unbeaten, skilled, and extremely wealthy boxer, Mayweather is an icon of a masculinity grounded in gender roles, idioms, and ideals specific to Accra. However, boxers like Daniel who are neither globally mobile nor wealthy remain widely respected members of the boxing family. The details of Daniel's participation in the sport, which I explore in the following section, reveal how he performs an iconic masculinity despite his immobility, and answers the question of why Daniel is recognised as "T.B.E." despite his paucity of skill in the ring.

### **Daniel, "T.B.E."**

Daniel is a 31-year old welterweight (69kg) amateur boxer at the Attoh Quarshie, where he has been training for eight years. He wears a polished bald scalp and sometimes sports a carefully styled Marvin Hagler-like handlebar moustache.<sup>7</sup> Daniel is also a trader at Kantamanto, the large clothing market close to Accra railway station, which spills onto the tracks once the one-train-a-day leaves the station each morning. He trades primarily in clothing inspired by the style of U.S. and West African hip-hop artists, which is popular among young men, particularly boxers. Brands such as October's Very Own (or OVO - Drake's record label), YMCMB (Young Money Cash Money Billionaires, the brand of the Young Money hip-hop crew), TMT (Mayweather's brand) and Jordan AIR (after the basketball player Michael Jordan) cover his shop in the market. At the market, he is known as a boxer and takes pride in conspicuously leaving work every afternoon to train.

At the gym, Daniel sports carefully assembled attires branded with major sportswear labels and basketball and football-team logos. Branded sportswear is popular in the gym, and boxers and coaches carefully choose, wash, and prepare their gear prior to training each day.

Daniel's attire is among the most varied, flamboyant, and carefully selected in the gym. His aesthetics resemble those of wealthy sporting icons and he revels in his outfits being obviously matched and prepared, all of which other boxers and coaches described as commanding their respect (*bu*). It was no surprise, when one day Daniel emerged from the changing room in bright white shorts and a top with gold trim, the letters "T.B.E." emblazoned in gold across the shoulders, white trainers with gold trim, and a pair of gold boxing gloves by Title, a popular U.S. brand. As he walked out of the changing room, he was greeted with shouts of "T.B.E." and "FLOYD!", to which he responded "T.B.E.! THE. MONEY. TEAM." He was clearly pleased with the recognition which the outfit garnered from his gym-mates.

Despite his ostentatious dress sense and frequent references to Mayweather, Daniel understands that he is not a skilled boxer relative to others in the gym. This became most apparent during the many informal meetings that took place after training, when boxers were told to rank themselves "by level." "Level" is a relative measure of skill and experience commonly used in the Attoh Quarshie and beyond. As boxers formed a single line in front of the coaches, Daniel would self-identify among the boxers of a low level. Yet, he would also candidly speak about his desire to be a "champion" and "The Best Ever." Following a fight night on the outskirts of Accra, I asked Daniel how his bout went. He told me that he lost on points and explained with a deliberately American accent, "I gotta' keep trainin'. You gotta' train to be the best, to be a champion, man!"

His commitment to becoming "the best" was also embodied in the way that he mimicked, much to the chagrin of the coaches, a movement known as a shoulder roll; this involves dropping the lead hand low and sandwiching the chin between the rear hand and forward shoulder, and is characteristic of Mayweather's defensive style in the ring. However, successful execution of a shoulder-roll defence requires a high level of skill which Daniel does not have, and the technique is specifically not taught by the Attoh Quarshie coaches for this reason. Hence the coaches'

annoyance when Daniel deliberately performed this ineffective defensive technique rather than striving to develop effective boxing skills.

Although Daniel regularly spoke about travelling to the United States to fight, he had never boxed outside Accra. His coaches made it clear to me that he would likely never box overseas and that he knew it. Despite the gulf between his aspirations and the possibility of realising them, Daniel remained a valued member of the gym. He was often chosen to represent the gym at public events to which it sent representatives, such as funerals or weddings. The coaches liked Daniel and described him as a “good boy” who “respected” because he trained hard and regularly and contributed generously to the gym by helping with maintenance, representing the gym at events, and giving generously for repairs, collections, and new equipment. Other boxers described how Daniel was a “good person” who “respected himself,” citing how he regularly gave clothing and small amounts of cash to other boxers, paid for drinks and taxi rides, and helped boxers and coaches to source rare and sought-after clothing and equipment from the market. Daniel’s generosity and commitment to the gym, combined with his recognized lack of skill, was understood as a sign of humility, which coaches and other boxers respected. Outside the gym, Daniel also had a reputation for having lots of sex and many girlfriends, and some described how his sense of style, generosity, and self-respect made him attractive to women.

Daniel’s veneration of Floyd Mayweather operates on several levels: materially in his clothing, verbally in his references to Mayweather’s nicknames and brands, physically as he appropriates Mayweather’s boxing style at the expense of developing effective boxing skills, ideologically in his commitment to becoming “the best,” and socially in his generosity and reputation for heterosexual virility.

Despite lacking technical prowess, Daniel achieves a sense of gendered respect as a “good man” by skilfully performing aspiration. His work and skill as a market-trader,

traditionally feminine work in Ghana, support his masculine performance of aspiration and generosity. He trades exclusively in clothes that reference the iconic masculinity to which he and others aspire, and uses his access to these materials to perform a material commitment to aspiration impeccably and dress in a highly respectable manner. Few others at the gym would have had the resources, knowledge, and opportunity to put together the “T.B.E.” outfit that he wore with such pride. In particular, the skills and connections to have the vest printed with “T.B.E.,” alongside the cash to buy the full matching outfit, would have been beyond the means of many. His relatively successful business at the market also enables him to give generously and position himself as a respectable, respected, and virile man. Whether the rumours of his popularity with women are true or not, his virility and self-respect are confirmed by his generosity. Daniel’s skill in fashioning a masculine aesthetic is not lost on his gym-mates, many of who ask him for advice and help in acquiring particular items and putting together outfits of their own.

Despite his grand ambitions, Daniel is not naïve enough to ignore the fact that he does not participate in the global boxing industry and remains involuntarily immobile.<sup>8</sup> He uses his skill and success in the market, and his refined sense of the aesthetics of aspiration, to invoke the figure of the aspirant athlete and become an ideal moral subject – a good man - in locally specific terms. Daniel demonstrates that technical boxing skills are not the only way of articulating oneself in the mould of an iconic masculinity. Rather, Daniel’s skill in commodifying aspirations to global success in locally legible terms makes him “T.B.E.”

### **Aspiration, Masculinity, and (Im)mobility**

Pursuing success in global sporting industries is an increasingly attractive option for young men in the Global South seeking work and social adulthood (Besnier, Guinness, Hann, and Kovač 2018). In response to the demands of neoliberal sporting industries, the “athlete self” emerges as

a reflexive and self-governing individual, constantly in pursuit of self-improvement through networking, training, and enlisting spiritual powers to enhance their athletic prowess and potential for global mobility (Kovač 2018; Hann 2018b). Athletes like Daniel complicate this model since they recognise their athletic limitations and instead are invested in performing aspirations to success. This is perhaps most evident in how Daniel stylistically embodies Mayweather's boxing techniques, despite the fact that they do not improve his technical ability, and claims to be "T.B.E." despite his lack of skill in the ring. Performing aspiration is as important to masculinity as projects of athletic self-improvement and networking, and for some athletes who recognise their own immobility, it may even become more important. For those like Daniel, aspiration is not the state that precedes gendered selfhood, but a gendered form of being itself.

Daniel can articulate himself as a man of global connection because Accra is a global hub of boxing rather than a migratory starting point. In Accra, he rubs shoulders with globally mobile and recognized athletes, lending to his experience a sense of global connection and allowing him to claim participation in a global industry despite his immobility.

Young people in Africa and across the Global South are increasingly concerned with bending chance, fate, and fortune to secure a prosperous future in response to the social and economic marginality of neoliberal economic reforms (Cooper and Pratten 2015; Gaibazzi and Gardini 2015; van Wyk 2012). For athletes, this work often involves strict training, spiritual regimens, and magico-religious practices designed to increase athletes' chances of becoming globally mobile and successful (Besnier, Guinness, Hann, and Kovač 2018; Guinness 2018). Daniel's efforts stand apart from these regimens and technologies of manipulating chance because they are not calculated to improve his likelihood of sporting success and fortune. He consciously performs a rhetorical committed to sporting aspiration as a state of being, but

becomes the man he wants to be by carefully manipulating his skills and resources outside boxing.

Were Daniel to commit his efforts to taking a chance on success as a professional boxer, as many of his peers do, he knows he would likely never become the man he wants to be. Daniel's participation in boxing can be read as a criticism of the neoliberal logics which encourage investment in chance and fate, logics which animate young men's participation in sporting industries in Accra and across the Global South. Daniel's commitment to the gym and the boxing family is sincere; he is not a cynic. Yet, he is also critical of an industry which promises much but often fails to deliver.

Although boxers like Daniel problematize the concept of the "athlete self" and do not engage with the logic of chance which pervades neoliberal sporting industries, they are not totally disengaged from neoliberal selfhood. Performing aspiration, or in Daniel's terms, "hustling to be the best," means constantly working to articulate himself as the man he wants to be despite his exclusion. Daniel is "The Best Ever" because he embodies a form of aspirant masculinity more effectively than those who, ironically, are often closer to realising ambitions of global sporting success and mobility than he is.

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## Notes

1. I use pseudonyms throughout unless my interlocutors specifically asked me not to. I refer to globally active boxers by their real names when their identity is relevant to my argument and is public knowledge.
2. This contrasts with accounts of Senegalese boxers' migration patterns (Hann 2018; this volume).
3. While my interlocutors were critical of non-heterosexual sexualities and none claimed to have had any such sexual encounters, everyone I asked claimed to know people who have had same-sex experiences. There is an LGBT+ community in Accra, yet non-heterosexual people, and gay men in particular, are systematically marginalised in Ghana, where homosexuality remains a crime. In the gym, the physical intimacy of boxing was never openly sexualised and none of my interlocutors reflected in private on this intimacy as sexual.
4. Being a heterosexual man will have shaped my data here. Although I challenged homophobic and transphobic opinions whenever possible, my interlocutors often refused to engage in dialogue on non-heterosexual sexualities and diverse gender experiences. The exception were several middle-aged women I lived with who explained that intimate and sexual relationships between women were more permissible than between men.
5. "Condition" is the readiness to fight and results from boxers' proper adherence to training ideologies, hierarchies, and concepts of bodily constitution. Runners in Ethiopia have the same concept (Crawley, this volume; Borenstein, this volume).

6. For women boxers, sex before a bout is also seen as reducing condition and breaching the trust between coach and boxer. However, the women boxers I knew showed little interest in sexual encounters abroad so travel did not represent the same clash of ideals for them as it did for men.
7. Hagler is a former middleweight American champion who wore a polished bald scalp and handlebar moustache throughout his career in the 1970s and 1980s. The iconic combination of stylistic details is often an overt reference to Hagler, particularly when boxers sport it.
8. My argument here support's De Haas' (2014) assertion that the lives and strategies of those who wish to travel but cannot, the involuntarily immobile, should be a central concern of migration studies.

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