

Sugar Ray Robinson and the Sweet Science as Masculine Performance

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Prizefighting has long-been a site where conceptions of masculinity have been fostered and affirmed, one where men have exhibited themselves and have performed (for the most part) for other men. Unlike the version of pugilistic masculinity that historian Elliot Gom suggests was prevalent in the nineteenth century, which “bound displays of sanguine passions within an aesthetic of restraint and decorum,” the ring has also constructed cults of masculinity that have articulated deeply ambivalent versions of manhood in which beauty and unrestrained violence goes hand in hand. It is important, of course, to recognize that, just like femininity, conceptions of masculinity vary tremendously, that meaning is never fixed nor universalized. Still, since masculinity is arguable constructed by language and symbols -- and by what Judith Butler refers to as performative “acts, gestures, enactments” -- and because boxing (much like football and professional wrestling) always accentuates them, the versions of masculinity that boxers literally and figuratively embody at any one time are powerful representations of a type of ideal manhood. In this sense, boxing champions often become symbolic expressions or magnifications of ideal masculinity.

Invariably, when scholars have examined boxing as an expression of masculinity (or what Stephen Twitchell calls “preposterous masculinity”), they have focused on legendary heavyweight champions, such as John L. Sullivan, Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Floyd Patterson, and Muhammad Ali. In this paper, however, I intend to focus on middleweight champion Sugar Ray Robinson

and what Richard Majors describes as “cool pose” -- that is, expressive lifestyle behaviors by which some African-American men have expressed their masculinity within an otherwise limited social system. Considered by many to be pound-for-pound the greatest fighter in boxing history, Robinson was the middleweight champion of the world five times between 1951 and 1958. In and out of the ring, he was well-known for his flamboyant style and charm, as well as his independence and candor. Drawing on a variety of sources (primary texts, histories, essays, and Robinson’s autobiography), this paper critically examines boxing as a particularly masculine form of performance -- one that has reflected as well as constructed dominant and resistant paradigms of masculinity in American history -- and the ways in which Robinson, whom A.J. Liebling described as “the epitome of ring grace,” personified a mid-century African-American male aesthetic that countered prevailing (white, middle-class) conceptions of manhood without being overly antagonistic to mainstream America.