

Preface

Four blocks off the F train at York Street, a quarter of a mile from the A/C subway at High Street, and half a mile from the Clark Street station on the 2/3 line in Brooklyn stands Gleason's Gym. The gym is housed in a renovated warehouse at 77 Front Street between Main and Washington Streets, two cobblestoned blocks east of the East River. The building is surrounded by a honeycomb of high-end clothing boutiques, chic coffee shops, specialty furniture stores, art studios, and expensive apartment buildings. Since 1996, the real estate tycoon David Walentas and his Two Trees commercial and residential development firm have turned this section of Brooklyn, now named DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), into a destination for the ultra rich. The former industrial area, which boasts Civil War-era storehouses that once stocked coffee beans and spices, is now one of the most desirable districts in New York City. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when DUMBO was an unnamed district of the Brooklyn waterfront and offered cheap rents, this location was a logical choice for a gritty cantankerous boxing gym. Today, it is the last place one expects to find a serious pugilistic institution.

As I enter 77 Front Street and begin the one-flight climb to the gym, the first sounds I hear are the chirping of the timekeeping bell and the hypnotic thundering of what was once the famed boxer Jake LaMotta's 600-pound speed bag. At the second-floor landing, the voices of trainers, the laughter of fighters, and the springs of the gym's four rings become audible. The odor of sweat and toil hit me, and the air acquires an increasingly humid feel. This assault of sound and smell provokes anticipation about just what activities, happenings, and personalities lie behind the two heavy gray doors. Through these gates, the gym's owner, Bruce Silverglade, blocks admission to the gym with an old wooden desk and a smile. From this post, he greets guests and regulars alike, gently remind-

ing tardy members of unpaid dues, and offering an opportunity for all to work out.

After passing through Silverglade's entry, I gravitate to the middle of the gym, the locus of training activity. Around this center, boxers, trainers, spectators, and other gym regulars cluster habitually in different spaces—at the domino table, beside the exercise machines, next to the treadmill, in front of a ring—socializing, coaching, working out, cooling down, reading, playing games, and dozing off. Around 11:00 a.m., when competitive fighters train, I watch Anthony practice his uppercut in front of a wall of full-length mirrors while Joanne and Maya jump rope. A spar in Ring 1 draws the encouragement, heckles, and jeers of onlookers who line up three people deep to watch Lawrence outclass an outsider. Around 2:00 p.m., when many professional and amateur pugilists have finished their work-outs, Leon studies from a textbook, Adrian flips through the pages of the *New York Daily News*, and Max shushes his toddler to sleep. Fast-forward to 5:00 p.m. and the gym is flooded with firefighters, “white-collar clients”—recreational athletes of considerable means who pay substantial amounts of money for their training—and children. Karl and Ed, two trainers, debate the weekend's championship bout with a Wall Street banker. A pair of six-year-olds mischievously avoids instruction on the heavy bag, opting instead for a game of tag; they weave in and out of the spaces between StairMasters and elliptical trainers to the dismay of their coach and the resigned disapproval of their mother.

This is Gleason's Gym.

Forty years ago, a bird's-eye view of Gleason's Gym would have produced a very different picture. At that time, the urban gym was frequented almost exclusively by competitive male boxers of color, trainers, and other men of the pugilistic industry, such as managers, promoters, matchmakers, and sportswriters.¹ Urban gyms were the domain of working-class masculinity and its historical connections to physical, powerful manhood. Boxers trained for competition; professionals worked to advance their paid careers and amateurs practiced so they could “turn pro” at some point in the foreseeable future. Trainers worked with their fighters early in the morning before work or late in evening after punching out. Unless they had retired from other jobs, trainers could not afford to forfeit employment outside the gym to spend their entire days there. Journalists and those fueling the pugilistic economy watched spars, observed fighters, struck deals, and talked amongst themselves during the gym's open hours.

Over the past four decades, Gleason's Gym has changed dramatically. In the 1980s, the gym welcomed two new groups of boxers: white-collar clients and women. As the memberships of these contingents grew, the urban gym transformed. New social practices, social relations, and relations of power emerged while novel spaces of interracial, interclass, and inter-gender contact and communication were created.² The meanings that the sport held for its practitioners diversified, and today, Gleason's Gym's 1,000-plus members—roughly 80 trainers, 450 amateur and professional fighters, 300 female pugilists, and 300 male white-collar clients—use the gym in a multiplicity of ways.³ For some members, it is a stabilizing force; for others, it is the opportunity for intergenerational friendship. It nurtures dreams of superstardom and the need for a steady paycheck. It is a daily workout and a means to develop an identity. Gleason's is the last remaining gym from New York's golden age of boxing, and a former home to luminaries of the noble art, such as Roberto Duran and Hector Camacho. But as women and people of different class and racial backgrounds move in, the gym faces new, competing visions. It no longer functions merely as a working-class male sanctuary, though it struggles to maintain the ideals of one.

The new configuration of Gleason's Gym is the result of political, economic, and social policy changes that began in the 1960s. New market theories and practices encouraged the replacement of an economy rooted in industrial production with FIRE industries (finance, insurance, and real estate), and New York City lost a significant number of manufacturing jobs. Blue-collar workers could not find positions that paid a living wage in the "new economy," and the city experienced a rapid rise in unemployment. Black and Latino residents were disproportionately affected; poverty rates soared and produced new forms of racial inequality. Attendant policy changes included the dismantling of welfare programs, the deterioration of public education, and an unprecedented focus on law and order. The emerging crime complex mandated longer sentences than ever before, prison populations exploded, and black and Latino men with modest education were disproportionately confined. By the early 1990s, poor and working-class men of color were increasingly out of school, out of work, and in and out of prison.⁴

Longtime patrons of boxing gyms, poor and working-class men of color continued to join Gleason's Gym as amateur boxers, professional fighters, and trainers, but their participation took on a new meaning in a postindustrial era. With little access to wage labor, the gym became an

important site of masculine identity formation, complete with its own set of practices and values divorced from market forces. Men used the gym not merely as athletes training in their spare time but rather as workers use their places of employment; they labored to convert joblessness into self-respect, proving to themselves and their peers that they, too, wanted to and could work. In a time of mass incarceration, the ever-present specter of imprisonment haunts the gym, and men with experiences with forced confinement joined Gleason's to reenter society and receive guidance and support from men with similar histories. With limited other opportunities, the gym remains one of the last social institutions available to them for masculine socialization and for building individual and collective forms of identity.

While poor and working-class New Yorkers experienced a decline in living standards, new subjects, objects, and spaces of commodification produced new social experiences for the upper-middle and upper classes. Wealthy men and women, primarily white, who have benefited from postindustrialism's social and economic arrangements, turned their attention to consumption and their gaze to their bodies.⁵ A burgeoning fitness industry, which included health clubs and media, programs for fit lifestyles, and personal training regimes, offered products and services to an increasingly body-obsessed consumer culture. Cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and diversity bolstered unprecedented amounts of advertising. Black male authenticity, a new site of cultural capital, sold fitness products to men anxious about their masculinity.⁶ With the enactment of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, advertising firms capitalized on the increasing participation among women in competitive sporting activities. Their campaigns promoted female empowerment, bodily strength, and self-defense.⁷

Bruce Silverglade quickly recognized that to survive the pressures of gentrification and other economic restructurings, he needed new sources of revenue. He took advantage of trends in the postindustrial fitness industry by inviting doctors, lawyers, and investment bankers to Front Street to be instructed by gym trainers and fighters. Preoccupied with their masculinity and attracted to the bodily strength of black men, white-collar clients sought a powerful manhood by proximity to blackness. Women, with determination to become strong and confident in their bodies, signed up in large numbers.

And yet, if postindustrial social and economic conditions create the constellation of people at Gleason's Gym, such circumstances do not determine the gym's internal social practices, social relations, and power

relations. *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym* analyzes how different groups of gym members use the gym in different ways. It is an ethnography of how gym enthusiasts practice boxing training, how they collectively make and mold the gym's social space, and, in doing so, how they negotiate life in postindustrial New York.⁸ *Come Out Swinging* documents how Gleason's membership improvises arrangements for members' well-being and how principles such as reciprocity and redistribution are admired and flourish. It shows how value is produced in ways different from the market economy, with not all interactions motivated by the desire to make money and not all forms of value defined by the demand for profit.⁹ The social practices, social relations, and relations of power in Gleason's Gym demonstrate that actions can occur both *within* and *in response to* the market and illuminate the inventive ways that some people use boxing training to answer back to forms of inequality, such as gender subordination, anti-black racism, and class stratification, as well as the ways the wealthy simultaneously use capital from new markets to forge identities and entertain themselves.

Come Out Swinging is interested in the social experience of postindustrialism as it is lived. The postindustrial is not only an economic and social restructuring but also a way of life. Accordingly, this book is concerned with how and why people construct certain identities in postindustrial circumstances. I examine one space in New York City—the urban boxing gym—where people go to create work, develop a sense of self-worth, consume, and process their social worlds. It is one site among many, but it is important in a society that is increasingly turning its attention to the body.¹⁰ *Come Out Swinging* argues that through postindustrial changes, the ethos of the urban boxing gym has been protected, but in the process, it has been commodified. In Gleason's Gym, members relate to this boxing ethos and attendant commodification differently. Each group invests its own meanings in the gym's culture, undertakes boxing training in various ways, and produces new lived experiences. These new uses of space and reinvented ways of life illuminate how, with the right resources, postindustrial spaces can be transformed and avoid obliteration.