“Seeing What Frames Our Seeing”: Seeking Histories on Early Black Female Boxers

CATHY VAN INGEN†
Department of Kinesiology
Brock University

Grounded in a deconstructionist approach, this article identifies ideological elements in historical work on women’s boxing, including my own. First, I examine the sources, practices, and evidence that have constituted historical facts on women’s boxing. Then, employing some of the tactics of a deconstructive historian, I examine and critique the erasure of black female combatants from boxing history through an examination of various written sources about pugilism. To rectify this longstanding silence and exclusion, I provide a brief account of some black female boxers from the late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries. This paper draws from mainstream and African-American newspapers, U.S. boxing periodicals, and a sample of scholarly and popular literature on the history of boxing.

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“The past is what actually occurred in some previous era; history is the stories we tell about the past.”

MURRAY G. PHILLIPS

HISTORIAN, AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES SCHOLAR, AND BOXING ENTHUSIAST Jeffery Sammons documented the role of boxing in American society stating that perhaps “no sport has been more confined to the realm of men than boxing.” In Beyond the Ring (1988), Sammons highlights a bout between two unnamed women in the 1880s remarking that the fight was “an anomaly and must have been that period’s answer to contemporary, voyeuristic mud wrestling.” Bob Mee, who traces the history of bare-knuckle prize-fighting, claims that prior to the 1990s, women’s boxing “had laid dormant for the best part of a century.” In both of these examples, the claim that women’s boxing was not historically significant is emphatic and epistemologically self-assured. Accordingly, this article seeks to move past such narrative closures of the past, in favor of a history that acknowledges the ideological nature and discontinuities within historical coverage on women’s boxing and works to place black female boxers on the agenda.

First, let me begin with a confession: I have always believed that women, though fewer in numbers, have been raising their fists in this fascinating, brutal, bloody, and dangerous sport. Yet, there was little evidentiary basis for this hunch. Another confession: I am not a historian. As a practitioner of physical cultural studies, I have been researching women’s boxing as a means of interrogating cultural mythologies surrounding women, violence, and aggression. Part of this work has involved researching the histories and experiences of women boxers from somewhere outside of History, a location from where I could question whose historical “truths” get told while also stressing the impositionalist role of the historian. As such, this article is offered from a particular engagement with deconstructionist history, one that pays critical attention to the understanding that history is always about power and is never innocent but always ideological. In other words, I question historical understandings of women’s boxing, acknowledging the ways in which ideological considerations enter into historians’ attempts to conduct historical inquiry and produce truth claims. In particular the focus remains on the ideological “representations of pastness” of black women boxers.

The article consists of two main parts. The first examines historical sources and evidence in order to reflect explicitly on the practices that have governed the production of knowledge on women’s boxing. In doing so, I give greater consideration to the interpretations imposed on the past by boxing scholars. In the second part, I highlight a series of discontinuous histories of several African-American female pugilists who, dating back to the 1860s, raised gloved and naked fists to one another, yet have not been included in historical narratives on boxing. As such, this paper stresses the historical absence of female, and in particular black female pugilists, by examining the role historians have played in framing and narrating boxing history. As Keith Jenkins argues there is an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of the past. To this end, I argue that there are many different stories to be told about women’s boxing, that each act of telling is an unavoidably ideological act and that there is no such thing as getting the past “right” as it actually happened. Rather, I suggest that we need boxing histories that educate us about the discontinuities instead of the “convincingly objective” ways that conventional boxing
histories tend to be written. To this end, I recognize my own role in representing the past as I attempt to construct boxing histories on ignored and overlooked racialized female boxers while fully acknowledging the centrality of my own worldview to what I produce.

**Boxing’s Past: “Seeing What Frames Our Seeing”**

History, as deconstructionist historian Alan Munslow contends, is a construction and a fuller understanding of the past can emerge only when the role of the historian in representing the past is considered. Similarly, Murray Phillips has challenged accepted practices within sport history by asserting that “[h]istorians can not be wrung out of history, nor can textuality be wrung out of history.”8 Phillips also asserts that historians have the potential to offer new versions of the past as we gain access to new documents, ideas, and concepts. Unfortunately, early sources on women’s boxing remain elusive, a significant limitation when the historical enterprise involves translating evidence into “fact,” which then functions as historical truth. However, deconstructionist history problematizes the basic tenets of historical knowledge arguing that there is no unmediated access to the past as it actually happened. There are only situated and partial versions or stories that historians create based on evidence that is used to sanction one mode of explaining over another.9 In other words, all histories are interpretations framed by meanings imposed by an author. As such, deconstructionist historians urge us to pay careful attention to the way in which history is interpreted and reported as a literary product.

A central tenet of postmodern historical analysis is the view that history is “a truth-effecting rather than a truth-acquiring discipline.”10 Deconstructionist sport historians compulsively foreground this distinction, arguing that history writing does not reveal “the truth” about the past; rather it imposes meaning on the past.11 Even the best primary historical sources do not provide unmediated access to historical truth. Historical evidence is already framed by particular narrative structures and freighted with cultural meanings. Deconstructionist history moves beyond seeking objective facts in favor of asking questions about the origins of facts and their operation. As Patti Lather posits, “It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing—spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge.”12 Under the influence of postmodernism, historians are urged to pay attention to seeing what frames our seeing.

This article begins by examining the practices that have governed the production of knowledge on women’s boxing, highlighting the silences, fissures, and gaps within historical representations of female pugilists. To begin, I briefly review the ways in which women boxers have been chronicled as the subjects of history. Three types of boxing writing, highlighted in Dan Streible’s work, aid this inquiry: 1) anecdotal boxiana; 2) critical reflections on boxing by later essayists; and 3) the work of sport historians.13 In addition to highlighting an impressive range of writing on boxing, produced and consumed by boxing aficionados, literary pugilists, and academics alike, these varied types of writing are useful for outlining the widespread absence of women from the storied landscape of boxing. It is also the first step in assessing the ideological effects of this history upon the understanding of women’s boxing in contemporary society.14 To this end, each of the three categories are taken up here to examine the ways in which historical discourses articulate
and organize our understandings and experiences of women's boxing. I do not devote an equal amount of space to each section as I focus most attention on the abundant and rich sources in the first mode of representation, boxiana.

Boxiana

The first type of historical writing is “boxiana,” a term that comes from Pierce Egan’s 1812 book on pugilism.15 The main focus of Egan’s work was blow-by-blow accounts of ring battles, commentary, biographical sketches, and career highlights of particular fighters.16 Boxiana is a term that captures the vast majority of boxing history that exists in the form of “anecdotal histories, fan literature, ephemera, record books, illustrations, popular biographies, and sports periodicals.”17

A significant component of boxiana history is the tabloid press including sports periodicals such as the National Police Gazette and The Ring magazine. Both periodicals became the authoritative boxing journals of their time and their respective editors Richard Kyle Fox and Nathaniel Fleisher, authored numerous books on boxing, earning them each a place in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. While the Police Gazette was an integral part of the development of professional women boxers in the 1880s and 1890s, The Ring did not provide any substantive accounts of female pugilists.18

Founded in 1845 the Police Gazette, as it was more commonly known, was an illustrated weekly featuring “buxom showgirls, scandals, hangings, red-tinted paper, and spicy stories.”19 Fox took over the sensationalistic magazine in 1877 and added a sports section. The first time the Gazette reported on boxing was in 1880, covering an eighty-five-round heavyweight championship fight between Paddy Ryan and Joe Goss. Sales for the issue dramatically increased, and Fox responded by giving increased prominence to the world of sports, noted by the magazine’s new subtitle The Leading Illustrated Sporting Journal in America.20 However, Fox not only reported on sport, he became a promoter of boxing and other sports as a way of providing a regular offering of events and steady print coverage for his readers. Dubbed “the P.T. Barnum of the world of sport” Fox was an entrepreneur who did much to promote interest in boxing, despite the prevailing opinion and legal restrictions of the times.21

The Gazette stands out as a significant and rare form of boxiana, one that regularly covered female professionals who were defying traditional ideals of Victorian womanhood in the late nineteenth century. The Gazette reported on women who gave boxing exhibitions in variety theatres and saloons, as well as gloved contests using Marquis of Queensbury and the Gazette’s own rules in sporting clubs such as Harry Hill’s in New York City. Harry Hill’s, a popular destination for pugilists, advertised and regularly held female boxing matches as early as 1881.22 Women from across the country would place advertisements in the Gazette challenging opponents to a bout. The Gazette’s “Pugilistic News” column reflects Fox’s promotional savvy and became a space to arrange matches, secure fight purses, promote fights, publish the article of agreement between fighters, and offer championship belts to worthy pugilists. At a time when there were limited options for female boxers the National Police Gazette offered some legitimacy and much needed exposure. It is important to note, however, that the magazine only reported on white female boxers and the tone of the articles oscillated between celebration and ridicule.
Female pugilists active during the 1880-1890s, such as Hattie Stewart, Annie Lewis, Hattie Leslie, and Alice Jennings were both commemorated and scorned in the Police Gazette and other media of their day. Hattie Stewart remained in the fight game for almost two decades, earning the nickname “The Female John L. Sullivan” as she performed at variety theatres across the United States with her husband. The Gazette reported that in her exhibitions, she was thought to “show up cleverly” and demonstrated “considerable science and quickness and much strength. She appears to have developed her boxing abilities as much as it is possible for any woman to do.” She also “conquered every female artist who ever dared face her in the orthodox 24-foot ring.”23 As noted in a lengthy interview published in the Omaha Daily Bee on December 28, 1887, she stated her willingness to fight “any woman in America, Europe or Australia, to the finish, for $1,000 a side, with hard or soft gloves, at any place or time.”24

Females participating or even watching fistic competitions in the late nineteenth century were often represented as abandoned, corrupt, and immoral. Yet, boxing was often tolerated when undertaken as a form of exercise among “ladies of refinement.”25 A female body trained for pugilistic competition, however, was routinely framed through a lens of derision as depicted below:

The ... match between these “gentler sex” pugilists is announced to be an eight rounder. ...[T]he rounds of such contests last three minutes and the rests one minute, wrestling forbidden. ... The abilities of the two women to hurt each other in a contest like the above are very limited. A woman’s much-laughed-at inability to throw a stone at a hen is just as natural and unchangeable as her tendencies to gossip. There is a difference between the sexes in the ability to deliver a blow straight from the shoulder which no woman has ever yet been able to overcome. A woman “slaps,” she does not “punch,” and she cannot do otherwise, no matter what teaching she may have or how hard she may try.26

In 1922, Nat Fleisher launched The Ring magazine, the self-proclaimed “Bible of Boxing.” Fleisher is considered by many boxing historians to be the pre-eminent chronicler of boxing history despite controversy surrounding some of his writing on the sports earliest black practitioners.27 Fleisher did not report on women’s bouts nor feature them in his publications. It is worth noting that in The Ring magazine’s eighty-eight-year history only one female boxer has been featured on the cover. In 1978, Cathy “Cat” Davis, Jackie Tonawanda, and “Lady Tiger” Trimiar were each involved in a lawsuit against the State of New York in order to receive a professional boxing license. Davis, the only white female boxer of the three, was featured on the cover of the August issue.28 She is pictured under a large banner that asked in bold yellow letters, “Is women’s boxing here to stay?” The article reassures readers that while Davis trains six days a week, she also “leads a normal female life. She has many hobbies; loves opera, classical music, and animals.”29

Boxing-oriented publications like the Police Gazette and The Ring do much to promote interests of boxing, often at the exclusion of female pugilists. Therefore it is important to examine the way boxiana, like any form of boxing literature, shapes the generation and legitimating of knowledge. It is problematic when historical sources (or lack thereof) are understood to “speak” for themselves as accurately representing reality.30 Rather, as philosopher of history Hayden White contends, “we impose stories on the past for a variety of reasons which are explanatory, ideological and political.”31 Indeed throughout The
Ring’s history women’s boxing has been positioned as outside the parameters of real boxing. Remarkably, in the magazine’s long history, there have only been five owners and six editors-in-chief. Yet, each has continued to overlook and ignore female boxers who, though fewer in numbers, continued to climb through the ropes to box.32

Flamboyant publisher and one of the most lauded boxing historians in North America, Bert Sugar, took over The Ring between 1979 and 1983, bringing with him his disdain for women’s boxing. He maintained this view when, a decade after leaving the magazine, he wrote in a chapter entitled, “I’d Rather Poke My Eye Out With A Sharp Stick Than Watch Women’s Boxing!” stating that “[w]hile the ink-stained wretches of the press corps . . . are wearing their pencil stubs chronicling women’s boxing, I, for one, am having great difficulty accepting it as a sport.”33 Sugar is widely considered one of the sport’s outstanding writers and boxing historians, who penned over eighty books, many on boxing. The International Boxing Hall of Fame (IBHOF) inducted Sugar in 2005 for his excellence as a boxing historian and journalist. Sugar was inducted in the Observer category, a place for print and media journalists, publishers, writers, historians, photographers, and artists. His committed and steadfast exclusion of the legacies, memories, achievements, and accounts of women pugilists provides a useful focal point for considering that individuals that chronicle and celebrate the sport do not neutrally produce documents but rather authorize particular accounts.

Deconstructionist historians emphasize the imposition of narrative forms on the past that reflect particular epistemological and ideological pre-suppositions. For instance, Sugar is not a dispassionate recorder of boxing history, yet there is very little attention to his acts and performances of writing, and in particular, the ways in which his work has produced and deployed particular “truths” and exclusions. His logics of selection, classification, access, and interpretation has contributed to the erasure of women and the notion that boxing is “naturally” about men. Individual boxing scribes, and more broadly the IBHOF, play a strategic role in the public remembering and interpretation of the sport. As Bruce Kidd has outlined, the dearth of women from sports halls of fame is not innocent but works to maintain the gender order that privileges men within the culture of boxing, while “symbolically annihilating women.”34 The IBHOF consists of five categories of members: Modern, Old-Timer, Pioneer, Non-Participant, and Observer. After the 2011 ceremonies, a total of 389 inductees had been selected to the Hall, 388 men and one woman. Aileen Eaton, a boxing promoter for five decades, was inducted in 2002 and remains the only female member.35 The IBHOF represents and commemorates a perspective of boxing history that effectively imposes stories on the past while overlooking the complex historical relationships that have profoundly impacted the erasure of female pugilists in the past and the present.

Deconstructionist history compels us to ask whose facts, experiences, and perspectives are recorded as history and how do these stories maintain and cultivate particular written versions of the past. As Patricia Vertinsky asserts, “the male body is continually represented, examined, worshipped, all too often to the exclusion of the female-body-as-active.”36 Boxiana histories constitute the vast majority of texts on boxing and convey deeply rooted cultural beliefs and values. Following Vertinsky and others who critically reflect on the practices involved in writing histories, increased attention needs to be given to women’s
boxing. In order for such histories to surface we must face the unavoidable difficulty of the concreteness of facts as well as reflect on the ideological staging of knowledge. While acknowledging the provisionality and uncertainty of history, we must ask questions about our modes of knowing the past in order to better reflect the diverse experiences of women who have entered the ring.

Critical Reflections on Boxing by Later Essayists

The second type of writing on boxing are essays, articles, and books by writers such as Gerald Early, Joyce Carol Oates, AJ Liebling, Norman Mailer, and George Plimpton. Overwhelmingly, writers and literary pugilists produce partisan writings about a sport and the participants who fascinate them. These critical reflections bridge the gap between popular and academic discourses through explorations of the racial, gendered, classed, and nationalist dimensions of the sport. At their best these writings capture the carnality and ethos of the sport, its noteworthy cast of characters, and the larger social canvas that shapes the sport. Mailer’s mediation in *The Fight* (1975) on the epic Ali-Foreman contest in what was then Zaire and Plimpton’s participatory journalism in *Shadow Box* (1977) are celebrated examples of this approach.

Copious examples of writers entering into boxing fraternities and giving scant attention to female boxers exist. Here, I provide but one exemplar that highlights whose boxing story gets told and whose remains unwritten. In *Shadow Box*, Plimpton enters the world of professional men’s boxing and prepares for a confrontation with light-heavyweight champion Archie Moore. Along the way he explores the world of professional men’s boxing sharing insights and observations on fighters such as Floyd Patterson, Muhammad Ali, and Rocky Marciano. As an “insider” at Dundee’s legendary Fifth Street gym in Miami he observes an old, faded poster of Barbara Buttrick stating that she “hails from Lancaster, England, and is the female boxing champion in what must be a somewhat limited field.” While Plimpton’s observation is correct, there is no critical engagement or acknowledgment that women’s boxing faced severe legal and gender restrictions that limited its participants and supporters. As Linda Hutcheon outlines, literary narratives can silence, exclude, and absent certain past events and people.

Power-saturated literary narratives such as Plimpton’s normalize our sense of boxing as an exclusively masculine endeavor. What remains overlooked in his writing is any significant mention of Buttrick’s legendary contributions to women’s boxing. As Keith Jenkins argues, “we would do well to recognize and remember that the histories we assign to things and people are composed, created, constituted, constructed and always situated literatures. And, what is more, they carry within them their author’s philosophy or ‘take’ on the world.” This is not bringing in politics where there are none, rather this understanding is about making overt how power permeates the construction and legitimating of knowledge in Plimpton’s (or anyone’s) writing. In the early 1950s, Buttrick gave over a thousand boxing exhibitions, many against male opponents, on fairgrounds in England, France, and the United States. In 1954, Buttrick started fighting competitive bouts, training for a time in Miami at the same Fifth Street gym where Plimpton and other male legends trained. Buttrick became a well-known boxer and, in 1954, was the first female pugilist to have a fight broadcast on national television. Twenty years prior to Plimpton’s brief
entrance into boxing, Buttrick retired with over thirty professional bouts, something Plimpton, a pioneer in modern sports writing, ignores in his insider’s account of the professional sport.

Deconstructionist approaches aspire less to “tell the truth” (as there is no complete knowable historical reality) as much as question whose truth gets told. I do not mean to suggest that deconstructionist historians do not value historical insights, but rather they acknowledge the procedures involved in creating historical knowledge when dealing with evidence, such as a faded boxing poster hanging on a gym wall. Clearly Plimpton was not claiming to be doing historical work with his participatory journalism. However, the impositionalist role of the writer and historian is the same. A deconstructionist historian sees history as primarily a narrative construction, an act of creation on the part of the historian. Even with careful scrutiny, without direct access to the reality of the past, the process of translating evidence into fact can only be understood as narrative interpretation. To reiterate, the objective here is not to try and recover Plimpton’s intentions but to acknowledge the author’s role in representing the past. Moreover, given a narrative’s ability to either mirror or disrupt recognized power arrangements, critical reflections on boxing highlight the need to address more fully the shortcomings, as well as the potential, of this mode of representation as a means of explanation.

Sport History

The sub-discipline of sport history generates the third type of historical boxing literature. In particular American historians such as Elliot Gorn, Steven Riess, and David Wiggins have examined the all-male subculture of prizefighting, the rise of professional boxing, and boxing’s color line respectively.42 Sport historians Allen Guttmann and Susan Cahn each address women’s boxing as part of their larger work on women’s sport history.43 While boxing has been an attractive subject for sportswriters, novelists and filmmakers, professional historians have been far more ambivalent about rigorously studying the sport.44

A survey of sport history journals including Sport History Review, the Journal of Sport History, the International Journal of the History of Sport, and Sporting Traditions illustrate minimal scholarly engagement with the fistic sport. As the Table (opposite) indicates boxing is a neglected field of academic study despite the frequency of journalistic and popular print coverage the sport receives. Additionally, only one of the thirty articles on boxing featured in these sport history journals between the years 1974 and 2010 focuses on women’s boxing. Specifically, the article examines the experiences of eleven female Muslim boxers in India in the late 1990s.45 There remains a significant role for deconstructionist historians who can address gaps and silences and who can challenge the established notion that, as Joyce Carol Oates claims, “boxing is for men, and is about men, and is men.”46 Historians can address this assertion in practical terms and are uniquely positioned to examine the ways in which historical writings on boxing are constituted within a framework for the exercise of power, legitimacy, and illegitimacy. In particular, deconstructionist historians have access to evidence that offers “signposts, possible realities and possible interpretations” from which to situate versions of the past that take gender and race seriously and which argue beyond one history in favor of multiple histories of exclusion and transgression.47
In 2011, the journal *Sport in History* featured a special issue on boxing. The issue was an attempt “to highlight and reflect upon a notable increase in recent years in scholarly research on the culture and history of boxing.” However, only one of the eight feature articles in the *Boxing, History, Culture* issue, namely Kath Woodward’s “The Culture of Boxing: Sensation and Affect,” commented on the invisibility of women “from the histories and legends that are the delivery systems of boxing culture.” Deconstructionist historical approaches also recognize the limitations of histories that do not seek to include multiple voices, contextual reflections or move towards new modes of understanding that disrupt histories that have a privileged status.

### Table

**Boxing Articles, Commentaries, and Essays in Sport History Journals**

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<th>Journal</th>
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<th>Total Number of Published Articles</th>
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<td><em>Sporting Traditions</em> (1984-2007)</td>
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*One journal article focused explicitly on women’s boxing

### A Plurality of Meanings: Partial Histories of Black Female Pugilists

For decades the struggles and achievements of black prizefighters were forgotten, trivialized, or ignored. Despite the growing body of scholarship on the earliest black male boxers, scholars continue to pay insufficient attention to black female pugilists as well as the gendered nature of racism in specific historical periods and social contexts. There is virtually no record of black ringwomen until 1978 when Jackie Tonawanda and Marian “Lady Tiger” Trimiar received their boxing licenses in New York. As Patti Lather contends, “facts are not given but constructed by the questions we ask of events.” Therefore, in this section I seek to construct new facts by asking new questions that are informed by an understanding of racialization and gender and that disrupt whiteness as the dominant lens within historical boxing discourses.
There is no single, complete historical record no matter the nostalgia for such an entity. Instead of getting closer to the truth of what actually happened, I offer a partial historical understanding focused on some of the earliest black female boxers. I acknowledge that this is an uncertain history; one that does not grasp at the impossible notion of historical truth but rather one that recognizes that there is, as Douglas Brown argues, “a place for many smaller narratives, a plurality of meaning, a plurality of realities.” I hope this work produces an awareness of the complexity, contingency, and fragility of historical narratives on boxing and exposes the systems of power, which have authorized some representations of pastness while blocking others.

As Deila Douglas outlined, scholarly sport studies have not adequately taken into account intersections of race and gender. Black women, Douglas explains, find themselves in a position that “resists telling” as sport scholars often focus on race and gender discourses that framed identity as an “either/or proposition;” black (male) or female (white). The failure to consider the ways in which women’s boxing is both a gendered and racialized practice has contributed to the erasure of black women from the storied landscape of boxing.

Returning to boxiana history, I searched mainstream and African-American newspapers and sport periodicals looking for any instances of black women competing as boxers. Written sources on black female pugilists were scant, but a few traces did surface. I also conducted an oral history interview with the daughter of a black female boxer from the 1920s in order to expand the boundaries and the hitherto-ignored areas of historical experience. The boxiana literature contained only a few singular statements on black female boxers—disparate facts that I gave some unity of significance to by drawing on the dates, events, and individuals represented in the brief chronicles. I draw attention to the ideological conditions under which this (like all historical work) is done in order to be, as Jenkins explains, situationally transcendent or critical of the status quo. The result is a brief and fragmented historical interpretation that will highlight the discontinuities (the unacknowledged or ignored power arrangements) that frame our understanding of boxing. This is the key difference between a deconstructionist approach and those dominant historical renditions so “objectively” in place.

The earliest example of black female pugilists I located is a brief mention in 1882, where a match is recorded between two black female heavyweights who are noted for their regular training. The two women, Bessie Williams and Josephine Green, were trained by their husbands and were noted as experts in the “manly” art. Williams reportedly “when down to her fighting weight tipped the beam at 290 pounds” faced Green who weighed 280 pounds. The women were interested in settling the question of who between them was the superior boxer. The winner was to take the prize of $20 a side and the title of the colored lady championship. The fight, which took place in front of a large crowd, was reported as “a bloody, brutal, vicious fight” with Williams victorious after landing a right hand that knocked Green out.

Despite the reference to the regular training of these two fighters, no other mention of their ring exploits could be found. From this scant report we cannot establish the location of the bout, how often Williams and Green trained and fought, who their other opponents were, who witnessed such boxing events, or if there were any consequences
for engaging in this reportedly bloody battle. This account does, however, offer a disavowal of traditional histories that ignore black female pugilists and suggests the need for more speculative representations of women's boxing pastness. By engaging in a tentative and partial history, one that is still barely flushed out, we can begin to see a way out of the power/knowledge problematic of male only or limited to white female boxing histories.

With this logic in mind, I turn to examine Harry Hill's, one of New York's most popular taverns. During the late nineteenth century Harry Hill's was a popular destination for men from all classes, particularly sportsmen and gamblers. The concert saloon and dance hall frequently hosted bare knuckled and gloved boxing featuring white and black male boxers. The *New York Times* reported that in 1876 two women, both white, Nelly Saunders and Rose Harland, battled in the ring.60 By 1881, the *Police Gazette* regularly advertised female boxing matches at Harry Hill's. Yet, there are no published accounts of black women in the same ring. Ashbury's *Gangs of New York* states that the saloon “was largely frequented by Negroes, but the women were all white.”61 Yet, in 1885 the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* recounts a court case between a brother and sister. The brother explains to the court that his sister, Mary Carl, is a “colored female pugilist” who he claims became violent in their household. The judge asks Mary Carl to confirm her occupation, and she affirms that she is indeed a pugilist. The case is dismissed from the courts, and the newspaper calls Mary Carl “one of Mr. Harry Hill's dark stars” (emphasis added).62 There is no other mention of Mary Carl or other black women involved in any form of ring work at Harry Hill's. Yet from this single entry it would appear that African-American women did in fact play a role in the early New York boxing scene.

In 1890, New York's Lizzie Somers was challenged by Nellie Malloy to meet at the *Police Gazette* office to make the arrangements for the two to engage in a prizefight. Both women were white and claimed to be champion female pugilists at 114 pounds. Lizzie Somers, twenty years old, is described as a “very graceful blond” who is “clever with her hands” and who can take some punishment as well as administer it.63 Somers is offered a fight to the finish for between $200-$500 a side by Malloy.64 While preparing for the match, Somers' trainer claims to have her walk twelve miles in the morning and again in the afternoon. He also states that every night Somers engages “in a four-round fight with a negress, twenty pounds heavier, and beats the negro girl every time.”65 This brief mention of an unnamed young black woman who serves as a sparring partner for Somers and who presumably takes more than she gives is an ignored and troubling aspect of boxing history. The earliest history of the black male prizefighter typically chronicles the heroic story of men like Thomas Molineaux, the American slave who “earns” his freedom in the ring or battle royals where young men, like Jack Johnson, fought often bare knuckled and blind folded, for the pleasure and ridicule of whites. This single journalistic entry of “the negro girl,” who is beat every time by the white Somers, reveals a largely unknown racialized history of women's boxing that is equally violent and punishing.

In 1893, there is another fleeting reference to a locally known black female boxer from Richmond, Virginia. The skimpy coverage is as follows: “Alice Priddy (colored), a female pugilist of considerable notoriety, knocked out Annie Watson on the third round. The gate receipts didn't cover the fine of $2.50, so she, too, will have to be cared for at the calaboose.”66 Presumably Alice Priddy spends some time in jail, like other male boxers.
from the era, for her illegal fistic career. The church also seems to have played a role acting as guardian of public morality towards black women who engaged in the fistic art. In 1897, the black newspaper, the *Richmond Planet* reported in a section devoted to church news and morality, that female pugilists were issuing challenges to one another and entering into combat.67 Another article from the same paper claims that as one black female pugilist was fighting in the ring she had kept her “little baby suspended in a basket from the ceiling.”68

More press reportage exists on two African-American women, Emma Maitland and Aurelia Wheeldin, than any other early black female pugilists yet these two have been entirely ignored within contemporary boxing histories. In order to move towards further openings and acknowledge the untenable histories that have excluded women of color the remaining section is devoted to Maitland and Wheeldin. What follows is but one narrative framing that seeks to make overt how power permeates the construction and legitimating of historical knowledges and which simultaneously demonstrates the inescapable ways in which my invested positionality shapes this constructed narrative as I searched for ways to move historical “others” to the foreground in order to challenge and reshape what we know of boxing history.

While white women increasingly enjoyed sitting ringside during the flapper era, Maitland and Wheeldin had begun to learn the fistic trade in Europe. In 1924, Maitland and Wheeldin joined Billy Pierce’s New York-based dance company. The two were part of the first African-American group of dancing girls to appear at the Moulin Rouge in Paris where they had a six-month contract to perform the revue “Tea for Two.”69 The show was a hit and was said by one newspaper to be “knocking the Parisians cold.”70

While in Paris Maitland (130 pounds) and Wheeldin (116 pounds) began training with professional boxer, Jack Taylor.71 Taylor, nicknamed the Nebraska Tornado, was a heavyweight, who over the course of a sixteen-year professional career faced Sam Langford, Battling Siki, Max Schmeling, Primo Carnera, among others. Taylor was one of many African-American boxers who journeyed to the French capital, drawn by the popular myth of French racial tolerance and the country’s celebration of black prizefighters.72 Once the pair learned to box, they brought their ringwork to the stage.

After the production at the Moulin Rouge ended, Wheeldin and Maitland stayed in Paris and staged their own production called the “Tea for Two Girls” which included three rounds of boxing.73 The performances were well received, and the two booked tours in France, Belgium, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, and Austria.74 The two played dates overseas for almost two years without an agent, manager, or promoter.75 Little is recorded of their experiences while working and traveling in Europe other than reports stating that the two were “perfectly content and happy.”76 In Milan, the two appeared in an all-white revue, where one paper notes they were the only black women in the city.77

Upon their return to the United States in 1926, Wheeldin and Maitland continued as boxers and theatrical performers. A journalist reviewing their act stated that “[t]he girls are putting on a real fight with their act, and shake each other up rather badly, at times drawing blood. . . . They fight only six minutes, twice each night, but according to Miss Maitland, those six minutes at times seem like two hours.”78 Similarly, after one boxing performance in 1927, a reporter noted that Maitland was “nursing a black eye and a
cauliflower ear given her by Miss Wheeldin. ‘The art of our act is not to get hit,’ said Miss Maitland, ‘but we were doing our act on a bad floor.’”

It also appears that Maitland boxed competitively outside of the theatre. In 1928, the black newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* reported in an article entitled “Wields Wicked Left” that Maitland was heading to Cuba to box and that she had just returned from a “successful ring siege in Mexico. The powerful left hand of Miss Maitland has helped her win bouts.” This entry suggests that Cuban and Mexican women were also competing in boxing, which opens up further possibilities for readings of the past. It is also notable that in the late 1920s the pair began to utilize the title of world champions—Maitland in the junior lightweight division and Wheeldin, as the world bantamweight champion.

In 1929, Maitland and Wheeldin returned to New York and musical theatre. The pair performed with an all-black cast in the revue, “Messin’ Around.” During this production, they were billed as the only two licensed female boxers in America. In what was considered the most unique feature of the revue, Maitland and Wheeldin staged a boxing match. White critics claimed the boxing was original in what they otherwise described as a lackluster production.

Aurelia Wheedlin retired from boxing and the theatre in 1940 when she married. Emma Maitland continued in the theatre where in 1940 she played the role of a black maid in a white theatre production. One newspaper reported that on her nights off from the play she performed as a “lady wrestler.” In 1943, the *Atlanta Daily World* stated that female pugilist Emma Maitland had given her collection of photographs, newspaper clippings, and testimonials to the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library, noting that female boxers are rare enough but that “a Negro female pugilist is almost unique.” Unfortunately, the New York Public Library, and the Schomburg Collection in particular, have no record of receiving Maitland’s collection of boxing materials.

“Tea for Two Girls”: Aurelia Wheeldin and Emma Maitland. COURTESY OF CATHY VAN INGEN.
Conclusion

Deconstructionist historians contend that there is an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of the past. The goal then is to expose the processes and methods involved in writing about the past—thus allowing all accounts of the past, including dominant or preferred meanings, to be critiqued as imposed or invented meanings. As Munslow outlines, the challenge in engaging in deconstructionist historical work is to be coherent and sensible but not epistemologically self-assured, while being self-reflexive enough to acknowledge one’s role in creating historical meaning. This paper, then, effected two simultaneous moves. It engaged in the meaning-making function of history to think critically and contextually about gendered and racialized representations of female pugilists and it drew on some deconstructionist approaches to problematize the entire notion of historical knowledge. The implication is that all boxing histories remain constructed by historians/writers who represent rather than reflect the sporting past. Deconstructionist history undermines the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations as historians engage in their own interpretive accounts that inevitably tell particular versions of a past.

As Jennifer Hargreaves outlines, women’s prizefighting can be traced back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet, the writing of boxing history has ignored or overlooked black women who participated in the culture of bruising. The lack of critical and nuanced historical inquiry on women’s boxing history is not solely the fault of poor historical sources. Rather, scholars have paid insufficient attention to how gender, racism, and white privilege have obscured various accounts of history within women’s boxing. Reflecting on the ways in which history has been represented is at the heart of deconstructionist history. As such, there is no way to detach relations of power from the generation and legitimating of knowledge. This is not to argue against historical inquiry but to argue for viewing history as a value-laden inquiry linked to discourse, authority, and power. In other words, deconstructionist approaches contend that history is constructed and shaped into particular representations of the past rather than simply discovered.

Boxing history, like any written history, “is always more than merely innocent storytelling, precisely because it is the primary vehicle for the distribution and use of power.” With that in mind, the past is to be examined for its possibilities of meaning rather than a direct representation of a past reality. Deconstructionist history is one approach that can open up women’s boxing history to the present, and undermine the assumptions and narrative unity that has framed the sport—that is, if boxing histories can become more open about its closures.

KEYWORDS: AFRICAN AMERICAN, WOMEN, BOXING, DECONSTRUCTIONIST HISTORY


4David Andrews, “Kinesiology’s Inconvenient Truth and the Physical Cultural Studies Imperative,” *Quest* 60 (2008): 42-63. Andrews, explains that physical cultural studies is “dedicated to the contextually based understanding of the corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power” (p. 54).

5Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (Florence, Kent.: Routledge, 2006), 165.

6Ibid., 179, explains that historian Elizabeth Tonkin, in pursuit of the multiple voices of the past, used the term “representations of pastness” instead of “history.” I take up this term here for the same reasons.


9Hayden White explains in Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 99, that “the question facing historian today is not ‘What are the facts?’ but ‘How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another.’”

10Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 12.


14Women’s boxing has long struggled for legitimacy and acceptance. For example, women’s amateur boxing has only been legal in Canada since 1991 and in the U.S. since 1993. The 2012 Olympic games marks the debut of women’s boxing (despite a brief appearance as a demonstration sport at the 1904 games). However, women were only represented in three weight classes with a total of thirty-six female boxers compared to ten weight classes for men and 250 male boxers.

15Subtitled “Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism,” Egan passionately defended boxing at a time when it was banned in England.


20Ibid.

21Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 7. See Sammons for more specific details of the ways in which prize-fighting came under heavy fire from its critics in the 1890s and early 1900s.

Female Boxers: Professional ‘Sluggers’ among the Fair Sex of America,” National Police Gazette, 14 March 1885.

“She Loves To Fight: A Chat with Mrs. Hartie Stewart,” Omaha Daily Bee, 28 December 1887, p. 2.


Female Boxers.”

Fleisher’s work, particularly in the five-volume series, The Black Dynamite: The Story of the Negro in the Prize Ring, is often laced with fabrications and distortions. See boxing historian Kevin Smith, Black Genesis: The History of the Black Prizefighter, 1760-1870 (New York: iUniverse, 2003), 3. Smith details the brazen plagiarism in Fleisher’s writing, noting text lifted directly from Richard Fox’s The Lives and Battles of Famous Black Pugilists (1897). Yet Fleisher’s series is widely considered the landmark work in the history of the African-American experience in the ring.

Sal Algieri, “‘Cat’ Davis, Woman Boxer, Could Be a Start of a New Breed,” The Ring, August 1978, pp. 6-7, 42.

Ibid., p. 7.

Munslow, Deconstructing History, 14

Hayden White quoted in Munslow, Deconstructing History, 149.

The first regular single column on women’s boxing was added to The Ring in May of 2011.

Burt Sugar, Burt Sugar On Boxing: The Best of the Sport’s Most Notable Writer (Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2003), 11.


Streible, Fight Pictures, 10.

George Plimpton, Shadow Box: An Amateur in the Ring (Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 1977), 72.


Keith Jenkins, Rethinking History, 2nd ed. (Florence, Kent.: Routledge, 2003), 12.


Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 28 [QUOTATION], 131.


Kath Woodward, “The Culture of Boxing: Sensation and Affect,” *Sport in History* 31 (2011): 500. It should also be recognized that Woodward focused on contemporary female boxers like Ann Wolfe and Laila Ali and their participation in the corporeal, hegemonic masculinity of boxing.


Lather, *Getting Smart*, 105.

Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 16.


The lack of desire to engage the multiple, marginalized spaces that black women embody reaches beyond women’s boxing histories. Scholars, including sport historians, have failed to engage the ways in which racialized and gendered practices have rendered knowledge on black women’s experiences silent.

Extensive newspaper searches were conducted using the following databases: ProQuest Historical Newspapers and Historical Black Newspapers including three of the leading African-American papers: *Chicago Defender* (1910-1975), *New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1993), and *Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-2002); the *New York Times* archives (1855-2005), the *Police Gazette* archives, *The Ring* magazine, the Library of Congress, Canadian Newsstand, Times Digital Archives, and Newspaper Archive, the world’s largest online (commercial) newspaper database. The time period of 1855-2005 guided the archival search.

Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 148.


“Nellie Alloy Failed to Come to Time,” *New York Sun*, 23 April 1890, p. 4.

“Female Fighters,” *San Francisco Morning Call*, 1 May 1890, p. 2.

“New York’s Female Pugilist,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 25 April 1890, p. 3.

“Justice John’s Court,” *Richmond Times*, 5 February 1893, p. 5.


“Hit of Paree,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 February 1925, p. 6. It is also notable that while at the Moulin Rouge four white American actresses who were scheduled to appear on the same bill “caused a row by refusing to perform or use the same dressing room” as the Tea for Two dancers. The four white performers were fired and reportedly deported back to America within a few days of this incident.


“Hit of Paree.”

“Calvin’s Weekly Diary of the New York Show World,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 August 1926, p. 9; “Maitland and Wheeldin Send Greetings to Courier; Call it ‘Great Newspaper,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 January 1927, sec. A, p. 3.

Telephone interview, Joan Watson-Jones, with author, 7 November 2010, transcript, p. 3, in possession of the author.

“Sister Team Is in Milan.”

Ibid.


“Calvin’s Weekly Diary of the New York Show World,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 January 1927, sec A, p. 3.


Watson-Jones interview.


Watson-Jones interview.


Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 15.