

LEVEL 1: Basic Information

Figure 1: Boxers
Maker: unknown
Subject: persons unknown; two men boxing
Genre: staged studio scene
Process: ambrotype
Dimensions: quarter plate
Date: circa 1860-65
Collection: Greg French

LEVEL 2: Factual Commentary

Little is known about this image. The setting is a photographer's studio, because we can see a backdrop behind the figures. The two young men are both wearing working men's clothes, rather than sporting attire. Judging by the photographic process (ambrotype) and the style of the clothes and the brass mat, this ambrotype probably dates to the Civil War period (1861-65) or possibly the late 1850's. We do not know who the photographer and the two men were.

LEVEL 3: Interpretive Commentary

Interpretive Commentary 1: The Mirror Image, by [Gregory Fried](#)

This photograph is emblematic for the Mirror of Race project as a whole.

It depicts two young men of apparently different races — a black man and a white man — confronting each other in a boxing stance. They pose as opponents in what was a notoriously bloody and dangerous sport of the period: bare-knuckle boxing. This violent sport seems a ready metaphor for race relations not just of that era but for most of American history: we see them poised on the brink of combat, defenses ready, prepared to attack.

And yet the antagonists *mirror* each other, or more correctly, they *pose* themselves *identically*: each facing the other, with right leg forward, right arm out to block, left hand back at the chest, ready to strike. Their outstretched arms overlap, and we now see that the photographer has *composed* them in such a way their entire stance forms a unitary image with striking symmetry.

The story of race in America is often one in which antagonists pose themselves and oppose others as distinct groups with separate identities and separate destinies. Race is one of the most combustible elements in our society, always poised, like these two boxers, on the verge of explosion and violence. Although the specific idea of race, as a set of characteristics that are biologically innate, is one that the white Europeans imposed upon others, whether “native” or “imported” human beings, the *fact* of group identification and opposition is not new to Europeans. Nevertheless, since the rise of biological racism in the late 18th century, the dynamic of belonging, difference and exclusion has largely, if not exclusively, played itself out in terms of race in America. And yet, despite the racialist notion that race separates us, our history has entwined us in our opposition. Even victims of racism sometimes adopt, internalize and apply the racialist mentality to themselves and to others. Our history has bound us together in a symmetry of belief and a unity of experience that we often do not recognize.

What *is* the meaning of race? Is it merely a biological concept, or has it also come include cultural components, so that what we refer to as “race” means much more than a person's genetic composition? What is the extent of race's role in our history and in our future? Is race real, or is it a fiction that, once imposed, takes on a grotesque pseudo-reality of its own? To what extent do those who have been the victims of racial categorization go on to mirror

and thereby perpetuate the racialist way of thinking? Is race the original sin of the American founding, one that can be expiated so that the nation may be redeemed — or is it *the* fundamental betrayal, a testimony to the hypocrisy of an experiment that must necessarily fail because grim reality contradicts its stated ideals?

The goal of the Mirror of Race is to explore questions such as these without a preordained notion of what the answers are. The project seeks to *look* and to look *closely* at images like this one of the boxers so that we can both respond to the raw individuality of what we see and to reflect critically upon ourselves and upon our own presuppositions by looking into this mirror of the past.

Returning to the two boxers, then, and looking closely: let's not forget that this photograph is a *pose*, and not everything may be as it seems. First, it is worth remembering that this is a staged scene in a photographer's studio, so it can't be a photograph of an actual fight. As an ambrotype, it is a unique image, so it could not even have been used for widespread promotion of a fight. Such images were overwhelmingly made as *personal* objects, to be shared with friends and family. So it is more likely that these two young men were friends than that they were genuine opponents in a boxing match.

And so in looking closely, we feel compelled to ask, who were these two young men, and what does this boxing pose mean? Notice the clothes: while not particularly fancy or fashionable, they look sturdy and well made; both young men wear good shoes and jaunty caps. These youths might both be tradesmen, striking a boxing pose as a playful way to demonstrate their pluck or their interest in the sport, which was one the most popular for working-class men at the time.

Looking again, we'd also probably say that the man on the left looks obviously *looks* black, the one on the right, white. The fact that the photographer's studio has added a light tinting of pink to the cheek of the man on the right, but not to the man on the left, lends further support to the raced identification of the men.

But can we be so sure of what we see? Certainly, many if not most Americans looking at this image would "see" the man on the left "as" black, the one on the right "as" white. But in the history of race in America, seeing isn't everything. The notorious one-drop rule, which came fully into force only by the mid-19th century, decreed that even a single African ancestor would make a person "negro," no matter how white he or she *looked*. By the one-drop rule, then, the man on the right *could* be of mixed-race descent and therefore *look* white but *be* black — at least according to the racialist logic.

Is he white or black, then? We just don't know. But one goal of the Mirror of Race project is to get us — we as viewers — to look into these images as mirrors that reflect on ourselves and on the assumptions that we bring to our seeing. The fact that we do not know more about these two people than what we see forces us to confront our own *need* to locate people on a racial map. I am asserting that our *lack* of knowledge about an image such as this can be a *positive* thing. Imagine being told the racial identity of these two men, as a matter of historical fact: this would allow us to place them and the image into the convenient categories we already are familiar with. But *not* knowing *displaces* us in a way that makes possible an examination of what it is we *want* to know. Just as we do not know about these two men of the past, we also do not know about the strangers we meet in our daily lives today. The difference is that, while our everyday presumptions and assumptions generally remain unexamined, the photograph has the power to arrest us and give us pause to reflect on what we desire to know, what that desire means, and whether that desire it is even valid.

So, why do we tend to see the man on the right as white and the man on the left as black? Largely, because our *seeing* of race in America has been defined by the influence of the one-drop rule. We tend to see dark skin as black, light as white.

But can we also learn to *see* that the one-drop rule is entirely arbitrary? If the one-drop rule were reversed, perhaps the man on the left could be "white." Why do we not see anyone with a hint of "white" features as white, rather than the reverse? The obvious answer is that the one-drop rule developed historically as a defense of white supremacy and white racial purity, so that any deviation from that purity, whether seen or unseen in a specific individual,

had to be proscribed. Still, the question is, why does our society still largely follow this rule in our seeing? Even those most committed to ending racism still tend to see race according to this rule. Moreover, *can* and *should* we learn to see otherwise? Is it even *possible* to see in a manner that is not racialized? If it were possible, then the two young men in this photograph truly would mirror each other as sharing in the qualities essential to being human, without the distorting mediation of race. But it would also be a distortion to forget the history and the historical power of race, to pretend that it no longer has its effect on us. Somehow, we must find this balance: to see the influence of race on our historical ways of seeing each other while at the same time seeing beyond race to what unites us as human beings.

Annotated Bibliography

For a helpful introduction to the history of the one-drop rule in America, see F. James Davis, [*Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*](#) (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1991).

Interpretive Commentary 2: The History and Cultural Context of Bare-Knuckle Boxing, by [Gregory Fried](#)

Boxing: From Greco-Roman Sport to Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting

Fist fighting as a sport has ancient roots in the West. The ancient Greeks included boxing as one of the events in the Olympic games. The Romans, who admired many elements of Greek culture, also adopted boxing.

Like wrestling, a sport which the Greeks and the Romans both practiced, boxing was not strictly speaking a martial art: it had no direct relevance to the modes of actual military combat — the armor, weapons, and tactics — used in these societies. Instead, it served as a ritualized display of combat and violence, one in which the antagonists stood against each other with no weapons and no armor. Because of this, the appeal of this form of combat was that the opponents had to face each other purely on the basis of their own physical strength, endurance and skill. The purity of this form of ritual combat appealed to the Greeks and Romans because it served as an elemental display of the physical and moral virtues essential to their conception of manliness: the courage to confront the opponent with one's own unequipped body, the stamina to endure intense pain and a long struggle, the willingness to strike and to draw blood at close quarters, and the mercilessness needed to defeat the opponent by rendering him simply unable to continue fighting, by either knocking him out or disabling him entirely.

After the fall of Rome in 411, the practice of boxing disappeared, because the specifically Greco-Roman culture of organized sport ended and because the emerging culture of Christianity was antithetical to boxing. This is not to say that people stopped fighting and using their fists to do so; rather, it was boxing as an organized sport, with recognized rules and audience participation, which disappeared. It reappeared more than 1000 years later, in 18th century England.

There is an important distinction to be made between bare-knuckle boxing and the kind of boxing we are more familiar with today, which requires the use of equipment such as padded gloves, mouth guards and the institution of timed rounds, and the like. Such equipment and regulation is intended to protect the opponents from serious bodily injury. There was no such protection in ancient boxing and in 19th century bare-knuckle boxing. The Greeks used to wrap the boxers' hands with leather straps, but this was to protect the boxer's hands, not to protect the opponent from dangerous blows, and the Romans, when they used gloves, often reinforced them with lead and iron, or even with spikes. (For an image of Greek boxers using leather straps see this image <link "this image to: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?lookup=1991.10.0394>> on Tuft's Perseus Project website) Bare-knuckle boxing does not even provide this kind of protection to the hands of the boxers. And the fight continued until one man was unable to go on. The point of this was simple, and it goes back

to the ideal of the primal, agonistic contest prevalent among the Greeks and Romans: the boxer is supposed to display himself as a man, and this means being willing to endure the possibility of flowing blood, great pain, and even crippling injury and death.

Bare-knuckle boxing emerged from the culture of the duel, which in Europe had its roots in the medieval practice of jousting and chivalry's code of honor. We tend to think of duels as involving two men facing each other with pistols or swords, with clear rules of engagement including the presence of seconds for each of the two opponents. Dueling served as a defense and assertion of a man's honor, and as such it was necessarily a public display, even if the audience included only the seconds of the dueling parties. Offering to risk his own life preserved a man's honor in the face of an insult, particularly when that offer was accepted by the offending man; the duel itself did not have to result in death or even in the spilling of blood to uphold each participant's honor.

Dueling was originally the prerogative only of the ruling orders: the knights and aristocracy of the Medieval and early modern eras, as only these classes could be men of honor. But the culture of honor, and of fighting to defend one's honor, spread throughout society. Fist fighting was the duel for everyman: it required no expensive weapons or equipment. An affronted man could call out his opponent, and they might fight, without set rules, until one gave up. It is also clear that bare-handed fighting before a paying audience had become common in the village and city fairs of England in the mid-1600's, after the end of the ascendancy of the Puritans, who took a dim view of spectacles and violence other than in the service of God.

Fist fighting as an organized sport got its start in the 1720's, when permanent theaters for this form of combat began to open. The boxers themselves came from the working class, and often from occupations whose form of labor demanded the greatest physical strength and exertion: watermen, blacksmiths and the like. Boxing received backing from both middle-class investors, such as promoters and theater-owners, as well as from gentlemen and aristocrats who were eager to patronize the sport, to engage in betting and the excitement of the spectacle, and to reward the victors with cups and prizes. There were "champions" and "challengers," and contenders fought for glory and a cash prize, but what this shows is that this form of fighting was no longer a defense of one's personal honor against a specific insult: it had become a defense of one's honor against all comers as the best fighter. Jack Broughton, a powerful waterman, became England's first celebrated national champion; he opened his own theater for the sport, and in the 1740's developed a set of rules for matches. As Dennis Brailsford has argued in *Bareknuckles: A Social History of Prize-Fighting*, these rules were designed not so much to protect the health of the contestants but rather to ensure the reliability of the matches so that spectators could bet with confidence. The rules included: a clearly marked stage for the fighting; a fixed time limit for a man to go down; an absolute ban on men other than the contenders entering the fray; the selection of umpires to decide disputes; and a prohibition against hitting a downed adversary or seizing him by the hair or below the waist (Brailsford, 8-9).

Despite these rules, this form of boxing remained a bloody, brutal and dangerous sport. Matches frequently ended in serious injury, maiming and death. The violent cruelty of bare-knuckle boxing, its popularity with raucous elements of the lower classes, and its association with gambling were all factors that provoked more respectable segments of society, particularly those upholding Christian ideals of behavior, to condemn the sport as barbaric and to advocate banning it by law. But its popularity with gentlemen and aristocrats, and its patronage by several royal princes, ensured that this form of boxing would continue. Successful boxers offered themselves, alongside fencing and staff-fighting masters, as instructors to the gentry in the art of pugilism as a form of manly self-defense. Jack Broughton realized that however much gentlemen might enjoy boxing as a spectator sport, they had no intention of competing in the prize-fighting ring themselves, and they would be reluctant to risk their own teeth and faces in barehanded training. So he instituted the use of padded gloves for the instruction of gentlemen (Brailsford, 9-10).

Race and Boxing

It is essential for the understanding of boxing in this period to remember that it has its roots in a culture of honor. One might fight with fists to uphold one's personal honor against an insult, or one might enter the ring to uphold one's public honor as a champion, but the necessary condition in either case was that the opponent be a person whom one might honorably fight. A child or a woman, in this context, could not ordinarily be a legitimate opponent, because the code of honor held that such persons must be defended from violence, not subjected to it. The code of honor also held that a man must be willing to risk himself, and thereby prove himself as a man, against another man who — as much as you might hate him personally — was also a man of honor. Fighting a criminal conveyed no honor: one might beat him into submission, but to stand up, man against man in a boxing match with a dishonorable person, would dishonor the better man as well.

And so fist-fighting as a public sport or as a private extension of the culture of the duel presumed an essential equality between the contestants: each must be a person capable of bearing a man's honor in society. (There was, of course, a separate code of honor for women, but it did not include physical combat!)

The question for our purposes then is: could a black man fight a white man in a bare-knuckle match? Because doing so would indicate that the black man was being recognized as an equal. And this recognition would not come only from the opponent in the ring, but from all those willing to participate as seconds, referees, financial backers and spectators. Would this be possible in 19th century America?

The remarkable thing is that black Americans did become renowned boxers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries — but in England, not in America. Bill Richmond was a 13-year-old servant on Staten Island in 1777 during the American Revolution. A commander of the British forces, General Lord Percy, admired the spirit and the look of the boy and brought him back as his servant to England. There, Lord Percy gave Richmond an education and supported him in learning a trade as cabinet-maker. Richmond grew up strong and tall, better educated than most English workingmen, and sure of his own dignity. His sense of self-worth made it impossible for him to back down from insults, and he began to gain a reputation as an indomitable fighter. He went on to become a winning prize-fighter (although never national champion), and he parlayed his success into a business as a prosperous and fashionable tavern-owner in London, as a boxing promoter, and as a boxing trainer sought after by aspiring working-class prize-fighters as well as aristocrats and gentlemen. Although in his youth he might be called a "black devil" (and those who did so paid for it with a fight), his color was no bar to his career in the sporting world; he was treated with respect by the working class sporting public, as well as by noblemen and gentry.

Tom Molineux was a man of obscure origin, either from Virginia or Maryland, who made his way to New York as a dockworker and from there to London in 1809. He had already learned a rough-and-ready fist-fighting from his working days, and he sought out Bill Richmond as a promoter. In the young and powerful Molineux, Richmond believed he had found a black man who could win the title of champion of all England. Molineux trained with Richmond, and they challenged Tom Cribb, the reigning English champion, in 1810. Molineux fought well, but lost after a long fight. They challenged Cribb again in 1811, but Richmond could not get Molineux to discipline himself in training or in life: the young athlete wasted his health on food, drink and womanizing; Cribb beat him quickly and soundly, breaking his jaw. That was the last of it.

There were other black boxers in England as well, but the particular significance of Richmond and Molineux was that neither society nor the sporting world made race an obstacle to their highest ambitions, even though those ambitions weren't realized. Furthermore, they were Americans, but their nationality did not count against them either. Not that color wasn't an obstacle; the fact that Richmond and Molineux were in England without family or established connections, and that the black community was poor and dispersed, made it more difficult than it would have been for white Englishmen to raise funds

and maintain patrons. But certainly Richmond's success, if not as a champion, then at least as a sportsman, businessman and gentleman, demonstrates that color was not an absolute barrier.

If we look across the Atlantic at this same time period, it is remarkable, as Elliott J. Gorn has observed in *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*, that Americans — who were otherwise so eager to find ways of “twisting the British lion's tail” — took no particular interest in the Molineux-Cribb championship fights (Gorn, 34). While it is true that formalized, bare-knuckle prize fighting did not really catch on in the United States until the 1820's, this does not fully explain the lack of interest in the Molineux-Cribb saga. After all, here was an American challenger to the champion of the Mother Country, and this in a sport that put the very claim to manliness of the nation at stake! But still this drama had no resonance in Molineux's native land.

The reason for this was of course the cultural meaning of race and the variation of that meaning from context to context. In 1810 and 1811, a young America was still committed to slavery, and slavery demanded a corresponding commitment to the color line.

As we have seen, boxing in this era was an extension of the culture of the duel and the code of honor. In his book, *Honor and Slavery*, Ken Greenberg has shown how Americans of African descent, most prominently in the antebellum South, but also to a large extent in the North, had to be excluded by the logic of race-based slavery from activities and practices that demonstrated and certified a man's honor. Greenberg explains the meaning of the duel with pistols, especially as practiced in the South (it was rare for Northerners to duel):

It is easy for a modern observer to misunderstand the central point of the duel. Although some men dueled in order to kill a hated adversary, the vast majority dueled in order to demonstrate that they possessed the central virtue of men of honor: they did not fear death. The central purpose of the duel was not to kill, but to but to be threatened with death. Hence, the exchange of shots on a dueling ground should be thought of as a double gift exchange. Each man shot a bullet and gave his adversary a chance to demonstrate that he did not fear death; honor was more important than life. And each man allowed his adversary to shoot at him, and therefore paid him the compliment of acknowledging his social equality. Men, after all, only dueled with their social equals. (Greenberg, 74)

Of course, we are talking about fist-fighting, not dueling with pistols. But the larger point is that, while it had a very specific form for the aristocratic upper classes of the South, the ethos of the dueling resonated throughout the country in this period. Fist-fighting was the poor man's duel: no equipment was required, and one could call out an offender on the spot. And let's not forget: bare-knuckle boxing could be lethal, too.

Combat in any form of duel that adhered in some recognizable way to the code of honor required that each party in the encounter regard the opponent as an equal at least in this: that the adversary be a person against whom either victory or defeat could be honorable. As Greenberg shows, it was for this reason that slaves were excluded by definition from dueling. This necessarily included any form of competition, like boxing, that was related to the ethos of dueling — namely, a way to demonstrate one's manhood and therefore one's worthiness for freedom. One could whip a slave like an animal, but one could not fight him like a man. To do so would contradict the very basis of the justification for slavery: that the slave prefers the certainty of life and slavery to the uncertainty of deadly combat for the sake of freedom, that consequently the slave has no honor, that he does not share in the rights and privileges of manhood, and that he may therefore be treated as a possession and violently coerced into labor if need be. The rise of ideological racism in the 19th century as the primary justification for the specific enslavement of Africans and their descendants (rather than, say, of any man deemed dishonorable and therefore not truly a man) meant that even freed slaves could not be treated as fully equal in the sense that they could expect to meet a white man on the field of honor. As Elliott Gorn has argued, even fights between slaves

themselves were generally discouraged, because of the threat to the owner's property and because the practice might undermine the discipline of the slaveholding regime (Gorn, 34-35). Even in the rare cases that slave-owners trained slaves to fight for sport and gambling, the practice was more like another popular sport of the period, cockfighting, which pitted animal against animal. Slaves were not allowed claim the rights of honor even with respect to each other. To allow this would set a precedent of mutually acknowledged self-worth that the slave-master could not tolerate, because having one's honor acknowledged even by one's fellow slaves could lead to more dangerous ambitions for securing one's dignity.

The Photograph

With this cultural history in mind, let's look again at the image of the two boxers. I have argued in my other interpretive commentary on this photograph, "The Mirror Image," that despite appearances, we cannot be completely sure of the racial identity of the men. But obviously the *force* of this image is that a black man *appears* to be confronting a white man, and their at-ready stance indicates that they are prepared for a fight according to the formal rules of bare-knuckle boxing. Furthermore, the image strongly suggests the *equality* of the two men: they are of about the same height, their clothes indicate a similar class background, they strike the same pose, and they occupy symmetrical positions in the composition. This is striking because it seems to contradict everything we have learned so far about the racial politics of combat sports during this period of American history.

We can draw several possible conclusions from this. One is that this photograph is an anomaly, a deviation from the standard cultural practices, and that we simply cannot know the circumstances that gave rise to it. Another is that despite the overall accuracy of the history we have sketched, actual historical reality was much more complicated and might have permitted such an image in contexts that our general overview could not account for.

Consider the experience of Frederick Douglass <link "Frederick Douglass" to fig012>, a man born into slavery who escaped to freedom and became one of the nation's greatest abolitionist orators and activists. A turning point in Douglass's life came when his master rented him out to work with a notorious slave-breaker, Edward Covey, in order to tame Douglass's rebellious spirit. Covey beat Douglass several times for insubordination, but finally Douglass fought back, a daring step that could have cost him his life. Douglass and Covey battled for hours, and the struggle ended in a draw. But a draw was tantamount to victory for Douglass because Covey had failed to make him submit, and Douglass had successfully asserted his independence as a man — in principle if not in fact, since he was still a slave. The beating had been transformed into a metaphorical duel. This was the decisive turning point in his self-conception, and although he did not gain his freedom for several years, that freedom became his single-minded goal. Later, when Douglass had become a leading abolitionist and went on the road to advocate for the rights of blacks and for women, he would often be challenged and assaulted at speaking engagements by rowdy opponents from the crowd. Although Douglass did not welcome such attacks, he recognized that he must not to give ground to them, that he had to defend himself, by himself, before the public. And so fought back hand-to-hand with his assailants.

Now, these kind of fights may seem more like brawls than boxing, even by the rough standards of bare-knuckle fighting, but they have this in common: both were based on an essential assumption that a man must secure his honor and his self-respect in society by refusing to bow to insult or aggression, and that he place his own body and life at risk in doing so to demonstrate that he would prefer pain, maiming or even death to indignity or submission. By fighting, Douglass believed that he would demonstrate his *right to claim* the "inalienable rights" guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence. That is in part why he later argued so strongly during the Civil War that black men should be allowed to bear arms and fight for the Union cause, ultimately prevailing with President Lincoln. (See figure 16 for an illustration of an African American serving in the Civil War <link "figure 16" to fig016>.)

The point of this illustration from the life of Douglass is to remember that there were many free blacks, especially in the North, who, despite the overwhelming racial prejudice of the age, did earn the respect of their peers in the local context of their workplace. The vast majority of such people will have passed out of recorded history, because they were ordinary people, working at ordinary jobs, who left behind no record of the day-to-day struggles and achievements of their lives. But free blacks worked with whites (again, mostly in the North) in a variety of trades, from building and carpentry to wharf-work and whaling. The kind of hard labor that free blacks engaged in alongside whites was often of a kind (whaling is a prime example) that forged strong bonds of respect, interdependence and camaraderie among the co-workers.

So look again at the two young men in the photograph: their clothes are not those of professionals or gentlemen of leisure; they are the sound and sturdy clothes of the working class. If we recall that bare-knuckle boxing was tremendously popular as a sport with the working men of the period, and that fist-fighting was acknowledged as an appropriate way to respond to an insult and to assert one's self-respect and defend one's honor, then it is plausible that these two young men were co-workers who enjoyed sparring as sport and who chose this pose to proclaim their mutual respect. Furthermore, the photographer quite obviously made the decision to compose the portrait with a mirror-like symmetry that confers equality of position to the two young men. Compare this composition to Figure 9 or Figure 11 <Link to fig009 and fig011> in the Mirror of Race exhibition, where it is very clear who is supposed to be the center of attention and who is supposed to be subordinate. The fact of the equality of position of the two boxers, despite their apparent racial difference, might even suggest that the photographer's intent was to challenge the racial hierarchy of the time with a portrait of equality, albeit an equality in the tension of confrontation.

There is some historical precedent for this in art. Consider this lithograph by the celebrated French artist, Jean-Louis-André-Théodore Gericault (1791-1824), titled "Boxers." <Link title to http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/lith/hod_22.63.28.htm> Gericault produced this lithograph in 1818, seven years after the last Molineux-Crib fight. Even though Gericault was not present at the Molineux-Crib fight and labeled the print simply "Boxers," that fight clearly had a wide-ranging effect on the European imagination. 1818 was also just fourteen years after the conclusion of the successful and exceptionally bloody slave rebellion in Haiti against the French colonial government. The idea of blacks asserting themselves as equals had left a powerful impression in France. Just as in our photograph, Gericault portrays the antagonists in a mirror-like symmetry: both have a powerful build and a similar stature, both are defending but maneuvering for the attack, both have the look of resolute determination; in short, they are equals. Lithography was a new technique in printmaking at the time, and some of the prints may have reached the United States. Could our anonymous photographer have been influenced by Gericault's work? Perhaps. But even if not, the very nature of boxing, with the familiar at-ready posture at the start of the match, would suggest a similar composition. Furthermore, an astute photographer with some understanding of the use of symbolism in art must have recognized the symbolic power of facing off a light-skinned with a dark-skinned man. And here the symbolism is one of equal power and equal dignity: opponents who are potentially enemies but also potentially able to respect each other for the determination to stand and fight.

Admittedly, this is only conjecture. We simply do not know. But the point is that the very fact *that we do not know* is what compels us, if we allow ourselves to be open, to explore such imaginative possibilities — and to uncover the resources of the past that make such possibilities plausible. As human beings, we are driven to conceive a story when a visually powerful scene or a challenging situation commands our attention. We are compelled to do so because we sense that there is a meaning there that we need to take seriously, but we are not yet sure what it is. The stories we tell about such things and events allow us to weave together the disparate elements in such a way that the details take on significance proportional to the meaning of the whole. Then we are able to cope with what we see before us. Our compulsion to imagine a story, to construct an interpretation, happens

especially when we do not know everything we want to know about what we are seeing. Our imagination insists on intervening in to supply the missing information to complete the story of what we see. Our imagination does this instinctively, and we can often rightly call the conjecture that this instinct supplies *prejudice*, but we must also acknowledge that we engage in this kind of filling-in all the time — whenever a situation strikes us as meaningful, but we don't, as it were, have the whole picture. But we *never* have the *whole* picture. The question is, then, can we step back and reflect upon these instincts of ours that generate our interpretations of what we don't fully understand? Can we hold the instinct in check long enough to allow ourselves space to imagine new and rejuvenating stories? Are the elements of the stories we tell ones that we have blindly adopted from the prejudices of our age, or can we reconstruct other possible interpretations of what we see that have historical merit and that also challenge our ingrained preconceptions about ourselves and each other? By interpreting critically, by seeking the unexpected stories without distorting what we see before us, we can reflect on the meaning of our history and meditate on both history's enduring obstacles and its neglected promise. Only then do we allow what we see to become a living mirror for reflecting on our past, our present, and our future.

Annotated Bibliography

For a history of the rise of bare-knuckle boxing in England, see Dennis Brailsford, [*Bareknuckles: A Social History of Prize-Fighting*](#) (Cambridge, England: Lutterworth Press, 1988). See also Bob Mee, [*Bare Fists: The History of Bare Knuckle Prize Fighting*](#) (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2001) which covers both the history of British and American bare-knuckle boxing.

The American history of fist-fighting receives insightful treatment in Elliott J. Gorn's [*The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prizefighting in America*](#) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

For a discussion of the culture of honor in America, particularly in the Old South, see Kenneth Greenberg, [*Honor and Slavery*](#) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997)

The lithograph of Gericault's "Boxers" is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.