

# **SHADOWBOXING WITH THE GHOST OF BOURDIEU**

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper we attempt to move beyond the heated debate between Mitchell Duneier and Loïc Wacquant on urban ethnography, by returning to Bourdieu's methodology. In 2002, Wacquant's attack on Duneier's ethnography *Sidewalk* which documented the lives of black booksellers in Greenwich Village, opened up a fresh round of academic mudslinging, in which both sides attacked each others' self-ascribed "reflexive" methodologies. The publication of Wacquant's *Body and Soul* in 2004 on the world of boxing in the Chicago black ghetto, allows us to close this rhetorical gap between Duneier's and Wacquant's sociology; by demonstrating how they struggle with the same inherent contradictions between ethnographic ethics and politics, and how they both attempt to work through the concepts of 'race' and 'capitalism' within a reflexive framework. We argue that, by returning to Bourdieu's concepts of radical doubt and participant-objectivation, we can move beyond the superficial differences between Duneier and Wacquant's positions and towards a constructive debate over the real differences between these two reflexive currents in sociology. We argue that Bourdieu's sociology, born out of a concern for object-construction, is to some extent incompatible with the American prioritisation of ethical representation, and that more attention needs to be given to this tension in future debate and application of Bourdieu's ideas in Anglo-American sociology.

## Summary of the Wacquant/Duneier Debate:

This paper concerns a debate on the methodology of ethnography that followed the publication of two ethnographies, Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* and Loïc Wacquant's *Body and Soul*. As not everyone will be familiar with these works, and the debate they sparked, we would like to preface our argument with a brief summary of the topic.

In 1999 the American sociologist Mitchell Duneier published the book *Sidewalk*, which was the culmination of 5 years of research on (and with) black street vendors in Greenwich Village, New York. Duneier's main concern in *Sidewalk* is the social construction of decency and respectability and how the street vendors create a moral existence in the face of physical hardship and social exclusion. Duneier won the prestigious C. Wright Mills Award for his ethnography which also enjoyed huge popularity outside of academia. In 2002 the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant wrote a brutally critical review in the *American Journal of Sociology* entitled 'Scrutinizing the Street' which viciously attacked three American ethnographies all published in 1999; namely Duneier's *Sidewalk*, Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* and Katherine Newman's *No Shame in My Game*. However, the critique of Anderson and Newman went mostly unnoticed as more attention was given to Wacquant's attack on the otherwise well-received *Sidewalk*.

Wacquant's main arguments in his review were that *Sidewalk* lacked a theoretical framework and that it was overly empirical. According to Wacquant, Duneier's focus on the categories of respectability and decency, which he appropriated from popular and political terminology, as well as Duneier's uncritical acceptance of his informants' statements, had resulted in an ethnography that was both contradictory and short-sighted. Duneier responded to

Wacquant's critique in the same journal issue by accusing Wacquant of misrepresenting *Sidewalk* and distorting his argument. Essentially, Wacquant's criticism was that *Sidewalk* appeared as an 'unreflexive' ethnography according to the standards set out by Bourdieu and himself in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992). Duneier's response defended his use of reflexive methodology in *Sidewalk* according to a set of standards which form an Anglo-American concern for ethical representation in ethnography.

*Body and Soul*, Wacquant's long-awaited ethnography - the fieldwork had begun 15 years prior to the US publication date in 2004 - centres around a boxing gym and its poor black users in a Chicago ghetto. In his ethnography Wacquant tackles similar topics to Duneier in *Sidewalk* albeit within a different theoretical framework. Wacquant seeks to develop Bourdieu's concept of habitus by supplying a model for what he terms 'carnal sociology' or 'ethnography by conversion'. The US publication of *Body and Soul* was swiftly followed by a collection of critical reviews in the journal *Symbolic Interaction* which rather explicitly used the shortcomings of Wacquant's ethnography as a means to return to Wacquant's original critique of Duneier et al. In Wacquant's response he defends his earlier criticism of American sociology as he draws up lines between the French model of ethnography, as spearheaded by Bourdieu, and the Chicago-style ethnography reproduced in most North American urban field work. The two styles, Wacquant argues, are incomparable.

The intention behind this paper is not to participate in the debate between Wacquant and Duneier. Neither are we going to deconstruct the debate itself. Instead our aim is to salvage from these two ethnographies and the debate surrounding them the insights and observations that point towards something beyond the narrow parameters of the debate. No matter how entertaining this academic mudslinging may be what makes it so frustrating is that at no point are any suggestions offered on how to bridge the theoretical cross-Atlantic gap.

Bourdieu may have made the best attempt yet when he wrote in the preface to *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*: "Friendly confrontation with the most advanced products of American social science forced me to explicate and to clarify presuppositions that the peculiarities of the French context had hitherto allowed me to leave in the state of implicit assumptions. It gave me an opportunity to display more fully the theoretical goals of my work, goals that I had till then kept somewhat in the background due to a mixture of scientific arrogance and modesty (*hauteur et pudeur*)" (Bourdieu, 2007:viii).

## **Introduction**

"I often say sociology is a martial art, a means of self-defense. Basically, you use it to defend yourself, and you do not have the right to use it for unfair attacks" (Bourdieu quoted in Carles, 2001, our translation)

The critical exchanges in recent years between Mitchell Duneier (2002; 2004) and Loïc Wacquant (2002) over the merits and pitfalls of their different approaches to urban ethnography give the appearance of a continental bout between two sociology heavyweights. In the American corner we have Mitchell Duneier, the rigorous fact-checker and self-doubter. In the French corner we have Loïc Wacquant whose ring name was 'busy Louie', a name given to him by his fellow boxers for his offensive style of boxing, but which also characterises his style of academic critique. Despite this caricature, or because of its easy seductiveness, we want to move outside of the ring in order to deal with the more substantial ethical and political differences between the two sociologists. Although neither admits to it, Duneier and Wacquant share similar methodological concerns, engage in similar textual strategies in the construction of their ethnographies, and more crucially make the same mistakes when it comes to the ethics at stake in their work. This is not to deny that there are

serious differences between them, and much of what follows seeks to unpick those differences, but there is a disingenuous outrage in their critiques of each others' work that generates more heat to further personal careers than light to further urban ethnography.

Duneier and Wacquant are situated in different positions in sociology. Duneier identifies his work closely with the Chicago School, and envisages his project as a productive dialogue between the empiricism and realism of this tradition and the current trends in postmodern ethnography. Wacquant, by contrast, writes in the long shadow of his mentor Pierre Bourdieu, with whom he has written a vigorous critique of both traditional empiricism and postmodernism (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It is hardly surprising therefore that at first Duneier and Wacquant talk in different sociological dialects, if not entirely different epistemological languages. Any dialogue between them is likely to descend into misunderstandings and mutual suspicion which is exactly what happened following Wacquant's review of Duneier's *Sidewalk*. However, we believe there is an important dialogue to be had, if not between the authors, then between their academic work. Wacquant and Duneier are engaged in rapprochements between variants of reflexive sociology and empirical approaches. Despite their flaws and contradictions, both confront and make explicit the scientific, ethical and political stakes in doing ethnography.

At one stage in the debate Wacquant complains that the American critics of *Body and Soul* invalidate their argument by judging his work against the yard stick of American sociological theory and method, which are, according to Wacquant, encumbered by "blissful parochialism, [...] unabashed empiricism, [...] suffusive moralism, and [...an] utter lack of epistemic reflexivity" (Wacquant, 2005:442). *Body and Soul*, he contends, belongs in a different tradition and heritage that draws together French sociological structuralism, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, and the reflexivity of Wittgenstein; integrated into a

model of reflexive sociology that Bourdieu spent a life-time laying down, and together with Wacquant culminated in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Central to their seminal work was the critique of participant-observation and the introduction of the notion of participant-*objectivation* and the reflexive construction of sociological objects, and it is on these grounds that Wacquant launches his attack on American sociology.

The partisan nature of this debate obscures the fact that both sides have produced remarkably similar work, mirroring each other in many of their *reflexive strategies*, as well as the way in which they handle their objects, and the ethical and political mistakes that they make. We demonstrate in this paper that the debate hides essential similarities that cross the divide. Moreover, the debate does not help a useful exchange between two *emergent reflexive sociologies*. Given the viciousness of Wacquant's attack, and his misquoting and misrepresenting of his adversaries' work, it is hardly surprising that Duneier appears to think that American sociology has little to learn from the Bourdieu-Wacquant strain of reflexive sociology. We argue that it does.

### **Ethics and reflexivity in ethnography**

Bourdieu begins his collaborative project *The Weight of the World* by asking: "How can we not feel anxious about making *private* worlds *public*, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals?" (Bourdieu, 1999:1). Ethnographic ethics are those that are relevant to this representation of other peoples' worlds. Ethnographic material is produced in the context of knowledge and truth claims that command authority. Furthermore the objects of ethnography enquiry are the personal worlds and private lives of often vulnerable or marginalised groups. As ethnographies are usually published their most

significant effect is the transformation of private lives into public documents. We want to suggest that Duneier's ethnography grapples effectively with these issues, whilst Wacquant, maybe in his effort to apply other Bourdieusque theories, appears to abandon significant aspects of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology.

In *Sidewalk*, Duneier presents humanism as the most significant ethical problem for ethnography. This is most clearly expressed in his relationship with his key informant, the street book vendor Hakim Hasan, who became a co-collaborator in producing *Sidewalk*, writing an afterword for the book in which he poses the problem: "How does a subject take part in an ethnographic study in which he has very little faith and survive as something more than a subject and less than an author?" (Hasan in Duneier, 1999:321). This question lays out a number of issues that Duneier returns to throughout *Sidewalk*. First, we are presented with an informant announcing their interest in the outcome of the ethnography. This is not the passive classical ethnographic subject that is not required to have an opinion about how their world is written. This contrasts with Wacquant's work where the boxers are claimed to have no interest in Wacquant's book (Wacquant in Schoch, 2003). Secondly, Hakim Hasan not only has an opinion, it is initially negative: he is suspicious of Duneier and his motives, stating early on that "African Americans are at a point where we have to be suspicious of people who want to tell stories about us." (Hasan in Duneier, 1999:23). Hasan has "very little faith" in *Sidewalk* because he is aware of the possibility of exploitation and misrepresentation, and Duneier's hopes of gaining trust are vastly reduced because he arrives on the sidewalk principally as a white researcher and not as a black street vendor. Thirdly, by phrasing the problem in terms of 'survival' Hasan draws attention to the symbolic violence of ethnography; its capacity to erase, distort and fragment those it represents.

It is in this context that what Hasan describes as "the radical willingness of the social scientist to listen" (Hasan in Duneier, 1999: 327) becomes important. Hasan's afterword deals with more than accuracy, and by declaring his desire to be "more than a subject" but "less than an author" Hasan is supporting what Duneier describes as a redistribution of ethnographic authority. This is a pragmatic position somewhere between two extremes. It rejects the realist position of an aloof "view from afar" as well as the relativism of some postmodern ethnography (e.g. Tyler, 1986) which argues that the ethnographer exerts a kind of rhetorical totalitarianism in the text through the exclusion of other voices, and that the ethnography needs to be reduced to an evocative poetics of everyday life. This misses the point that ethnography and the power relations of researcher and researched begins in field practice before it is transformed in writing up. Duneier's approach is pragmatic, recognising the extent to which power relations can be adjusted in the research project without believing they can be eradicated all together. The ethnographer cannot (and should not) escape his own authority, or as Duneier notes: "Yet Hakim and I both know that, in the end, I was the author. Our experiment does not alter that fact and the responsibility it implies." (Duneier, 1999:352). Duneier's success lies in his attempt to practice, what we call, a reflexive realism that attempts to leave "open a possibility for humanity. Whereas the traditional realist ethnography presents the ethnographer as the heroic omniscient scientist, whilst the informants are reduced to disembodied voices supporting abstract models and theories; Duneier attempts to both acknowledge the power relations and divisions produced in the study whilst, where realistically possible, seeking to overcome them. This position combines the realism of the Chicago School tradition with some of the insights of the "Writing Culture" theorists (James Clifford, George E. Marcus, Paul Rabinow, Stephen A. Tyler, et al.), and despite its different lineage shares common territory with the reflexive sociology set out by Bourdieu and Wacquant in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

We see an example of this in *Weight of the World* when Bourdieu lays down a methodology for “nonviolent communication” in research (Bourdieu, 1999: 610). By scrutinizing the limitations of communication within the context of research, Bourdieu identifies the social distance between researcher and researched as the most significant obstacle to effective research. In order to overcome this he suggests that, where possible, the researcher should be socially proximate to the researched. This is an approach adopted by Duneier in *Sidewalk* who, in recognising the limits of communication between him and the inhabitants of Sixth Avenue, encourages them to use the tape recorder to interview each other (Duneier, 1999:339), and invites Hakim and Marvin to participate in academic seminars at the University of California, Santa Barbara (Duneier, 1999:333-4). As Bourdieu argues, it is only through a sense of shared ownership of the research process, that the artificiality of research methods – interviews, photography, tape-recording, participation – can be overcome. Moreover, by allowing Hakim’s opinion about the first draft of the book (that its focus was too narrow) to influence his decision to rework the entire research, Duneier recognises Hakim as having a role beyond “subject” or “informant” better described as “actor” or “participant” in the construction of the ethnography itself. As Duneier argues, this is not a one-way relationship: “I think that Hakim did give me that opportunity, to be recognized as someone outside the grid of my race, my class, my gender, and I think that part of my job as an ethnographer, too, is to give my subjects the same opportunity that Hakim gave me, to be recognized as complex human beings, to unfold in that way, to develop as characters, as people” (Duneier in Back, 2006: 553).

The relationship between Hasan and Duneier is in many ways similar to that of William Foote Whyte and Doc in another well-known Chicago-School ethnography, *Street Corner Society* (1943). Whyte was instrumental in getting Doc into paid employment just as Duneier arranged for Hasan to guest-lecture at the University of California which possibly played a part in Hasan later becoming

the director of the Urban Institute of the Metropolitan College of New York. Interestingly, the main critique of Whyte (Boelen, 1992; Denzin, 1992) was that in his effort to change society's inequalities and perception of poorer areas (Whyte, 1993:281-283) he stopped observing and instead became involved in life changing acts in Cornerville which, to critics, rendered the reliability of his study invalid. In contrast Hasan's career change has not been paid much attention by critics of *Sidewalk* which may partly be attributed to Duneier's explicit self-reflexivity illustrated above. Duneier appears acutely aware of his effect on the life of the street vendors as well as the ways in which they have affected his life.

Wacquant is also aware of his own development while doing his field work for *Body and Soul*. In an interview with Berkeley Alumni Magazine he describes how during the three and half years of boxing he developed a *libido pugilistica* which until he migrated to Harvard was superior to his *libido scientifica*: "When I left Chicago and the gym and migrated to Harvard, I went through a long period of withdrawal and a deep depression. My *libido pugilistica* was no longer nurtured, but my *libido scientifica* was totally moribund. I was stuck midway between the two universes. It took a long time for me to extricate myself emotionally from the extraordinary relationships of friendship and trust and love--for that is the right word--with my buddies in the gym and to be able to rejoin fully the planet of researchers" (Wacquant in Schoch, 2003) . It is obvious, from this quote, that Wacquant felt a close bond to the other boxers at the Woodlawn Boys Club, and in particular to the trainer DeeDee Armor whom Wacquant refers to as a 'second father' (Wacquant, 2004:4) and whom Wacquant also credits with teaching him about "prizefighting, sociology, and, most important, life" (Wacquant, 2004:264). On the final page of the ethnography Wacquant proudly claims that he is now fully one of the boxers: "Yep, Louie's a soul brother" (Wacquant, 2004:255).

Unfortunately, *Body and Soul* does not include any of the alternative interpretations of Wacquant as a boxer which circulated in the Chicago press prior to the publication of the ethnography. Observations such as the following

may have provided a more nuanced perspective and resulted in a more reflexive ethnography: "I saw this French dude in the gym. A pencil neck, kind of geeky, asking questions and making the fighters nervous. Every once in a while, you see guys like that sneaking around playing games. He's goofy." (Kass, 1998:3)

### **Participant-Observation**

The inevitable conclusion of comparison between the theory of Wacquant and Bourdieu in their conception of "reflexive sociology" and Wacquant's practice is that *Body and Soul* demonstrates an uneven commitment to Bourdieu's logic of practice. Whilst it has been Wacquant who has consistently criticised and commented on the selective and confused appropriation of Bourdieu's theory in the Anglo-American world (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) it is Wacquant himself who is found unable and unwilling to take Bourdieu into the field. Wacquant faithfully employs the familiar concepts of habitus, field and capital in his ethnography; and his methodology, "carnal sociology", is based on Bourdieu's understanding of embodied practical knowledge as explained in Bourdieu's *Pascalian Meditations* (2000). However, he abandons Bourdieu's critique of participant-observation and ignores the concept of participant-*objectivation* which Bourdieu explored with Wacquant in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

Whilst Bourdieu is often credited for his critique of the structuralist 'view from afar' and over-dependence on theoretical models of society, he also developed a critique of participant-observation. In *Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu argues that objectivist interpretations of culture fail to understand practice, but that this "in no way implies the rehabilitation of immersion in practice" (Bourdieu, 1990:34). For Bourdieu, participant-observation, "a contradiction in terms" (Bourdieu, 1990:34)), is predicated on an illusion that it is possible to simultaneously enter a different moral universe and stand back from it (Bourdieu, 1990:68). Immersion seeks to

bridge the gap between researcher and researched, not by turning the researched into researchers and redistributing ethnographic authority, but by transforming the researcher into one of the researched. This, Bourdieu claims, avoids “the question of the real relationship of the observer and its critical consequences for scientific practice” (Bourdieu, 1990:34). Wacquant’s method is exactly this; he immerses himself in the life of the gym, surrenders (Wacquant, 2004:11) himself to the field, attempts to suspend his “received notions” (Wolf in Wacquant 2004:11n16); and through this “intoxicating” experience is so entirely converted he considered turning pro (Wacquant, 2004:4). It is immersion, he claims, that earns him the respect of the boxers, and he glosses over the relationship between researcher and researched with the incredible statement that boxing culture has “an egalitarian ethos and pronounced color-blindness” (Wacquant, 2004:10); a statement that sits uncomfortably with one of his nicknames, “The Black Frenchman” (Wacquant, 2004:11), and the following quote from the assistant trainer: “I got respect for you, Louie, for you comin’ in d’gym and just bein’ one of d’guys and bein’ just like everybody else in d’gym... *Ain’t too many Caucasians who do that with us blacks...*” (Wacquant, 2004:10, our emphasis). So much for colour-blindness.

Duneier on the other hand remains skeptical of the ethnographer's capacity to transcend the barriers of race and class. He employs the theory of the ‘chain linked fence’ as developed by Liebow in his ethnographic classic *Tally’s Corner* (1967): “[D]espite the barriers we were able to look at each other, walk alongside each other, talk and occasionally touch fingers. When two people stand up close to the fence on either side, without touching it, they can look through the interstices and forget that they are looking through a fence” (Liebow, 1967:250-251). Duneier explains: “I thought the sort of metaphor that he used in the book is something that really should stand the test of time for ethnographers that don’t want to lose sight of their white privilege” (Duneier quoted in Back, 2006:6).

*Body and Soul* is remarkable because it is such an undisguised break with Bourdieu's and Wacquant's position on methodology as presented in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, a break that Wacquant appears to enjoy: "PB [Pierre Bourdieu] was saying the other day that he's afraid that I'm 'letting myself be seduced by my object' but, boy, if he only knew: I'm already way beyond seduction" (Wacquant, 2004:4n3). This frank admission, hidden away at the bottom of a note in the opening pages of *Body and Soul* is quite startling, and it touches on Bourdieu's central reflexive concept of "participant-objectivation"; a concept Wacquant completely ignores. It appears that Wacquant by being seduced by his object may have lost sight of his white privilege in connection to the site and subjects of his ethnography.

### **Participant-Objectivation**

Bourdieu defines "participant-objectivation" as the "full sociological objectivation of the object and of the subject's relation to the object" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:68). This breaks down into three levels of analysis: first locating the researcher in social space; second locating the researcher within the academic field, and finally an analysis of the researcher's investment in the scholastic interest to objectivise (Bourdieu, 2004:94, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:260). To Duneier and Wacquant's credit they both address the first strand of Bourdieu's reflexivity - their location in social space - in some detail, through wrestling with the problems associated with white middle-class intellectuals studying poor black men. However, as we have seen, Wacquant appears to use his notion of "carnal sociology", his "moral and sensual conversion" to the social space he enters, as an escape route out of this problem and only Duneier, pragmatically and cautiously, fully engages with this issue. And for Bourdieu this is only the beginning of the reflexive analysis required of the ethnographer. "Participant-objectivation" involves a reflection on the position of the researcher, and his

research, in an academic field. Bourdieu argues that although we take the researcher's motives to be self-evident, in reality they need to be explained as much as the motives of those researched. It is in this context that Wacquant's footnote about being seduced by his object becomes so revealing, and leaves us with several unanswered questions. Why, after publishing a major work on methodology with Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), does Wacquant write an ethnography based on an entirely different methodology? Why does Wacquant continue to portray himself as a representative of a holistic approach to Bourdieu in the field of Anglo-American sociology (Wacquant, 1993), whilst drawing on Bourdieu selectively? It would be appropriate for Wacquant to outline in greater depth his position towards Bourdieu's 'reflexive sociology' and his reasoning for departing from it in *Body and Soul*.

These are not trivial questions, and are not to be confused with an individualistic reflexivity that is overly concerned with the psychological world of the ethnographer. Bourdieu invites us to engage in an epistemic reflexivity, a collective enterprise, to understand the process by which the object of research is constructed. Critique of ethnography is therefore a necessary extension of the reflexivity that begins in the field. This kind of constructive critique could begin by asking what the purpose of *Body and Soul* is supposed to be? From Wacquant's own statements on *Body and Soul* we can deduce that he has a large investment in this ethnography. Wacquant is convinced that his way of doing ethnography, "carnal sociology" or "ethnography by conversion" (Y., 2004:1), is the one best way to do ethnography. Wacquant even claims that *Body and Soul* is "a model for what ethnography, or field research, should look like" (Eakin in Duneier, 2004:1) as well as arguing that participant observation is the *only* method of presenting the inhabitants of the 'ghetto' (Wacquant, 2004: 59). This is Wacquant's first major piece of ethnography and his view of it is uncompromising. Wacquant is joint editor of a major journal entitled *Ethnography*, and is one of the principle English-speaking custodians of

Bourdieu's sociology; in this context *Body and Soul* is as much about the establishment of a reputation and the production of distinction as it is about amateur boxers in Chicago.

A reflexive analysis of the way Wacquant has constructed his object of research cannot avoid comment on the choice of title for his ethnography, *Body and Soul*. In sociology we usually talk about Cartesian dualism; the mind and body distinction, so why has Wacquant chosen to change it to a body and soul distinction? Wacquant briefly comments on this when he explains that he feels that Cartesian dualism would restrain his ethnographic methods (Wacquant, 2005:442). We are puzzled as to why using the word 'soul' would be less debilitating. Wacquant obviously uses the word 'body' in the title because it is central to the book's theme (boxing) and theory ('carnal sociology'). The word 'soul' may not have any profound meaning to Wacquant but used in the title of an ethnography about black men, the word 'soul' invokes a heavy history which culminates in the question: Do black men have souls, not minds? To not make any comments on the title seems the most negligent aspect of Wacquant's ethnography. The word 'soul's' relation and connotation to black history is incredibly important. Instinctively it makes us think of such things as soul music (one of the most famous jazz standards is called 'Body and Soul') and soul food; selection of Southern food linked to black communities in the US. Thus, Wacquant's title implies stereotypical ideas and continues imperialist discourse. It would have been less controversial had Wacquant stuck to the working title of the ethnography which is mentioned in *La Sociologie est un Sport de Combat* (Carles, 2001), namely *La Boxe* (boxing).

Duneier never claims that his way of doing ethnography is superior to others, which gives the appearance of a very democratic and open-minded approach to methodology (Duneier, 2002:1574; Back, 2006a: 554). However, following the caution of James Clifford, and with an epistemic reflexivity in mind, we should be

aware that all “detailed, committed, critical studies” (Clifford, 1986:24) imply an investment in knowledge production and a belief in the validity of the methodology through which it was generated. Duneier’s methodological modesty aside, his committed and detailed defense of his own methods and his critique of Wacquant’s demonstrates that he is, like Wacquant, caught up in a struggle in the field of sociological methodology. Duneier, a student of Howard S. Becker, has a suspicion of theory, what Becker calls the “necessary evil” of ethnography (Becker, 2000:257), and is defending a style of methodological pluralism from what he regards as Wacquant’s style of “ethnography as a frame for doing theory for theory’s sake”. We agree with Duneier’s concern that this theory-centred method creates an ethnography in which “the people in the studies can’t recognize themselves in the work” and “they don’t have any sense of how they mattered.” Duneier asks “So [the ethnographer] could enter into a dialogue with a theory that is utterly trivial, even by academic standards? What is the ethics of that?” (Duneier in Back, 2006:564). This begs another reflexive question: who is ethnography for? We will turn to that question now.

### **How, why and who?**

At issue in the debate between Wacquant and Duneier are the *ethics of representation* and the *politics of interpretation*. We have argued that on both points Wacquant and Duneier share more common ground than they choose to admit, but that despite this, important differences remain. Unfortunately, the debate has cordoned off the two areas of critique, placing the issue of ethics in a subcategory of practice and methodology, whilst leaving politics to the domain of theory. What is missing from this debate is an understanding of how ethics and politics intersect in ethnography and how they engage with a third concern, the production of knowledge. We want to argue that serious ethnography, with a commitment to telling truths, demands this thorough engagement between ethics

and politics and recognises its own shortcomings and practical dilemmas. Alternative claims to 'radical', 'critical' or 'activist' ethnography suggest too easily gained resolution of the tensions in ethnography.

Duneier and Wacquant came to blows over the methodology of ethnography and the question *How should you do ethnography?* In the spirit of Bourdieu's reflexivity and the importance he gives to 'radical doubt' we want to take the argument back a step and ask *What kind of document is an ethnography and who it is for?* As Bourdieu argues, one of the most significant features of ethnography is its *seriousness*, which is a consequence of it being a very *public* document on subjects of very *private* suffering (Bourdieu 1999:1). Sufferings such as poverty, stigmatisation, sexism, racism, structural, symbolic, and physical violence; all of which dominate these two ethnographies. Rooting ethnography in this way, as Bourdieu does, leads us down a very different path than the one taken by postmodern "textual radicals" (Rabinow 1986:255), who start with the rhetorical textuality of ethnography, and not its objectivity, and end up renouncing any responsibility to truths.

If ethnography is about knowledge-production, it follows that it must be both an ethical and political document, regardless of any wish on the part of the ethnographer to retreat into pure theory. We can demonstrate this by showing the incoherence of removing one or more of these three responsibilities - knowledge, ethics and politics. For example, Stephen Tyler's argument in his contribution to *Writing Culture*, that ethnography needs to be liberated from the "impossible worlds" of the scientific and political, implies a fundamentally trivial ethnography : "...the rhetorical modes of ethics (*ethos*), science (*eidos*), and politics (*pathos*) are sensorial allegories whose root metaphors "saying/hearing," "seeing/showing," "doing/acting" respectively create the discourses of value, representation, and work. All of [my] essays speak of the ethnographic contextualization of the rhetorics of science and politics and tell how the rhetoric

of ethnography is neither scientific nor political, but is, as the prefix *ethno-* implies, ethical" (Tyler, 1986: 122). Contrary to Tyler's argument, it is precisely because ethnography is written in the "rhetorical mode" of knowledge and authority that it is required to be *also* an ethical and political text. The claims of "seeing/showing" are what makes the ethnography a serious document. First, ethnography renders a mixture of intimate social activity and the subjective presentations of its subjects in a text that has the status of knowledge. That subjects recognise and consent to this process is the central ethical stake of a form of text that purports to relate social realities. If ethnography "*describes* no knowledge and *produces* no action" (Tyler, 1986:123) it is impossible to imagine why subjects would want to participate and why institutions would want to support ethnographers. Secondly, its status as knowledge, gives it standing in the politics, of "doing/acting", where it can be used to justify, criticise or formulate policy. Ethnography may be read by either of these audiences – participants or those with political power – and this is beyond the control of the ethnographer. Ethical and political dilemmas are confronted by the ethnographer not as problems distinct from the ethnographer's epistemological commitment or peripheral to it, but as problems central to the task of authoritative inquiry.

### **Problematising 'radical ethnography'**

A concern for ethical presentation and ethnographic experimentation has become mainstream since *Writing Culture* was published. Textual radicals have formed a new orthodoxy in Anglo-American ethnography. However, Bourdieu has warned that the most radical of theoretical conceptual tools can become worthless when applied uncritically. This is what he regards as the state of *impensé*, unthinking, in which critical and reflexive thought is applied uncritically and dogmatically as a new "scholarly doxa" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:248). Politically charged ethnography is just as susceptible to this. Thus what Duneier

describes as Wacquant's "evil capitalist pigs exploit subalterns" (Duneier in Back 2006:8) approach to ethnography, intended to guard against becoming complicit in power structures, has the opposite danger of imposing a "rigid commitment to theory" (Anderson, 2002:1533) that reduces the cultural complexity of the ethnographic scene.

Richard Fox (2000) has argued that the postmodern concern for rhetoric and poetics in representation forgets this intersection of the scientific, ethical and political, which he argues has its roots in the tradition of participant-observation, ethnography and cultural translation. From Malinowski onwards ethnography has been the product of the dual labour of translating the "native point of view" into knowledge and public discourse with the potential to "displace" commonly held cultural understandings (Fox, 2000:5). *Sidewalk* is a modern example of this radical project, as Duneier sets out to understand the "codes and norms" of the street vendors (Duneier, 1999:44) and then translate this into a political discourse of crime and respect (see *Sidewalk's* conclusion, pp. 312-317). In a different way Wacquant is concerned with understanding the "pugilist habitus" and arguing that amateur boxers develop a moral space that is constructed in opposition to the ghetto and the "street". However, although we recognise the radical potential of cultural translation, we are wary of the mythologizing of "radical ethnography" that views these two parts of translation – its ethics and its politics – as straightforward and unproblematic. 'Radical ethnography' assumes that the study of culture consists of an analysis, amplifying the voices of the marginalised and the oppressed while translating their struggles into a mixture of theoretical jargon and political slogans. The ethnographer immerses him/herself in the world of marginalised and exploited minorities and returns to tell the academy, the public, and policy makers that the marginalized are misunderstood and social adjustments are necessary to include them. The scientific, political and ethical strands of ethnography work in tandem.

Wacquant and Duneier's ethnographies appear to support this straightforward relationship between ethics and politics when they deal with the morality of their subjects. "[A] fundamental theme of my sociology has been about the struggle to live in accordance with standards of moral worth" (Duneier in Back, 2006a:560). Duneier's quote opens an interesting debate because this, in a sense, is also what Wacquant is attempting to do: "The world of boxing is a religion of the masculine body that offers uplift and separation from the rest and allows you to follow an ethic of sacrifice to become a moral being" (Wacquant in Kass, 1998) . They both seem to want to find something about their black 'subjects' which the white middle class (their books' main audience) will find moral and good. Although we believe that Duneier and Wacquant's intentions are well-meant, we find their engagement with imperialist discourse tricky at best if not potentially dangerous. By making it their objective to 'convince' the white dominant population that 'the uncivilized others' really are 'noble savages' they are assuming that we, the readers, do not believe that the 'subjects' of their ethnographies live moral lives to begin with. Thus, by arguing against the conception of poor African-Americans as somehow less moral than their white peers, they are evoking notions of a belief in innate differences and suddenly it is not just a chain-linked fence they are trying to bring down but massive and solid brick walls. In *Sidewalk* the 'subjects' become moral by starting their own book vending enterprises and in *Body and Soul* entering the "island of order and virtue" (Wacquant, 2004:17) transforms former criminals into professional athletes with strong family values. Duneier's following statement definitely rings true: "There are so many ways in which you're blocked from living a conventional life and these are men who live under that burden and how then do you construct a so-called moral life for yourself? How do you make that happen?" (Duneier in Back, 2006a:561). However, we believe that it would be better to critically question the use of morality as one of society's conservative measures of success. Because this is the power that ethnographies have they rattle dominant discourses which may lead to changes in perception and political structures. As

Duneier writes: “[Sociologists] have been part of the dialogue that has raised the kind of consciousness in America that has made it possible for [...] transformations to occur. Every single study that gets done is part of that dialogue [...] and together we build upon one another to enter into a framework, to create a framework that makes it possible for the society to be better than it was before, more humane” (Duneier in Back, 2006a:563).

### **‘Walking many lines’**

Fundamental contradictions are inherent in the project of serious ethnography (implying a three-sided commitment to *ethos*, *eidos* and *pathos*). As Duneier puts it, “as ethnographers, we walk a line, many lines” (Duneier, 2002:1574). The ethics of listening and understanding sit uneasily alongside the symbolic violence of interpretation. A pervasive feature of ethnography is that the betrayal in writing-up is easier to do than winning trust in the field (Duneier, 1999:14). This is not coincidental. Listening and understanding are part of the “unspoken contract” of friendship (Keith, 1992:555; Bourdieu, 1999) and the intimacy and trust of friendship is hard to square with making “private worlds public” (Bourdieu, 1999:1) and the application of a forensic and distanced “sociological eye” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:251). It was Duneier’s “emotionally charged” approach rather than a “cool, clinical detachment” that gained Hasan’s trust (Hasan, 1999:321). As Duneier (2002:1574) admits the result, will inevitably be a compromise: “These are real dilemmas that become embodied as practical trade-offs and enduring tensions in the descriptions and arguments of ethnographies.” The problems resulting from this unequal trade off are several, and were forewarned by Rabinow in *Writing Culture* (1986:255): “Textual radicals seek to work toward establishing relationships, to demonstrate the importance of connection and openness, to advance the possibilities of sharing and mutual

understanding, while being fuzzy about power and the realities of socioeconomic constraints."

The major difference between Wacquant and Duneier lies in their treatment of this ethical-political dilemma at the heart of ethnography. Wacquant's definition of sociology as a dissection of "the social mechanisms and meanings that govern their practices, ground their morality ... and explain their strategies and trajectories" (Wacquant, 2002:1470) is met with Duneier's response that the sociologist disentangles "what is common and what is distinctive so that he can then "account for those distinctions in light of history, situation, and structure" (Duneier, 2002:1574). In the trade-off between the ethical concern for "leaving open a possibility for humanity" (Back, 2006:8) and the political obligation to reveal the structural forces and power relations, Wacquant appears to fall unequivocally down on the political side of the tension. Ironically Duneier's approach has more in common with Bourdieu's, who argues: "Contrary to what might be believed from a naively personalist view of the uniqueness of social persons, it is the uncovering of immanent structures contained in the contingent statements of a discrete interaction that alone allows one to grasp the essential of each [subject's] *idiosyncrasy* and all the singular complexity of her actions and reactions" (Bourdieu, 1999:618).

To understand and take into account structure, situation and history are, for Bourdieu and Duneier, to take the distinctiveness and humanity of subjects seriously. They share a vision of "ethical-political humanism". This is demonstrated in Duneier's pursuit of the complex biographies that brought some of the characters of *Sidewalk* to Greenwich Village from sleeping rough in Pennsylvania Station (Duneier, 1999: 120), a part of the narrative of the sidewalk that was previously hidden from seasoned booksellers like Hasan (Hasan in Duneier, 1999:327). Whilst Duneier's work struggles to adequately situate the sidewalk within the context of neo-liberalism, he does reveal the micro-politics of

gendered and racial interactions on the street (Back, 2006: 8). We see this in the section 'Talking to Women' (Duneier, 1999: 188-216) which, besides dealing with the police, presents 'difficult interactions' for the predominately male black book vendors and the white middle-class women passing by on the sidewalk. Duneier deals with racism throughout *Sidewalk*, but one of many examples of racial interactions on the street can be found towards the end of the ethnography in 'A Scene from Jane Street' (Duneier, 1999: 294-311) where Duneier (1999:304) argues that discrimination of black homeless street vendors is closely linked with the construction of decency in which a "fear of blacks in public spaces" and a lack of trust forces the homeless street vendors to commit 'indecent' acts, such as public urination, which further increases their marginal status.

Trade-offs to be made between humanely representing subjects and analytically interpreting structures are likely to be site-specific. Writing about boxing in the ghetto and bookselling on the sidewalk require different kinds of compromises. However saying that such dilemmas are provisional and context-specific may have the unwanted effect of driving another wedge between theory and method when we need to be able to think about the problems of the 'political-ethical' *in general*, so as to develop the theoretical language to describe the strategies available to us.

### **Conclusion: hypothetical readerships?**

Is it possible, as Bourdieu also tried to do, to make the combat sport of sociology humane and non-violent? One possibility is to consider the relationship between the ethnographer and their audience or readership. Whereas traditionally sociology has tended to assume the existence of only one audience - academia - the preceding argument demonstrates that ethnography is written for at least three audiences, including the participants in the research and a political

audience of policy makers. Some times these audiences are explicitly addressed, in the case of Duneier's discussion about the "Broken Windows" theory, which concerns both an academic and a political audience (Duneier, 1999: 315). At other times the ethnographer produces evidence that an audience is not interested. In his appendix Duneier (Duneier, 1999: 348) records that "most people were much more interested in how they looked in the photographs than in how they sounded or were depicted." Similarly Wacquant notes that rather than being "mesmerized" by seeing their world in print, the boxers used a published article of his, "to take down telephone messages!" (Wacquant in Schoch, 2003). Moreover it is often made out that sociological ethnographies have very little weight when it comes to forming political policy, compared to quantitative survey data or the opinions of economists and political scientists. This creates a false dilemma for the sociologist. It would be very easy to make the cool and calculating decision that we write entirely for our academic audience and our concern for ethics need only go as far as academically fashionable and our politics need only make the right gestures. This is the reality of sociological codes of ethics; we focus on jumping through the right hoops, ticking the right boxes for method and theory. We feel safe in the knowledge that what we write will never leave the academy, and if it does it will not matter because it will not be understood.

Alternatively it might be possible to be guided by the idea of hypothetical readerships. Maybe to write ethically is to have in mind the person or people you would least like to read your work. Duneier tries to make this approach less hypothetical by reading his ethnography back to his informants. Of this he says "I believe I should never publish something about an identifiable person which I cannot look him or her in the eye and read." One criticism of Duneier has been that this approach produced a rosy view of life on the streets and that he is unable or unwilling to deal with the violence on the street. There is some truth in this and in the tension between understanding and interpretation, ethics and politics, Duneier seems to finally side with the first whereas Wacquant lands

somewhere closer to the second. To write politically (as well as ethically) requires an even thicker skin – to write as though we are reading to, or even talking with, the people we end up writing about. Maybe this might manage to be what Bourdieu called 'non-violent communication'. We think it would also be a radical way of writing ethnography.

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