

I lie on the bed smelling of freshly washed linen and wait for a feeling to fully crystallize. I am expecting it to soon pass the threshold from formlessness into readability. It is so hot outside. The feeling has been long overdue, making me nervous and moody for the past few months. In the late afternoon it finally becomes clearer. I am lonely within masses. There is so much freedom—to choose and discard. There are days with too many hours and boredom is something to be ashamed of.

I am certain at last that I am lost in this glorified life of malleable structures. The curve is low and my self-justifications are weak. My therapist told me my generation is undergoing an anxiety epidemic and I unconsciously believe I need something drastic to bend the curve upwards. So, I decide on boxing. It's August (the least proactive month of the year?), I am on the coast, sitting in a room with air-conditioning, furnished in 60s-Tito-Yugoslavia style. The sea is too far to swim in, yet too close not to lament its remoteness. I am with a friend who is, at that moment, defiant. Using my neighbor's stolen internet (password: Kikabub1c@) I google 'boxen wien 1160'. The search finds one hit and a click later I scroll through a poorly designed website of a boxing gym in Vienna's 16<sup>th</sup> district. Amongst flashy letters and overly contrasted photographs I stumble upon a quote: "Boxen fördert meine Kreativität" by Viktoria,

an artist. One more click and I see that Vikoria's practice consists of making colorful glass bullets and small models of Paris.

After a few days I go back to wien 1160, where I currently live, having left the more tourist-attracting wien 1040. In wien 1160, I am among different visitors—my brothers and sisters, seekers of a better life, or, at the very least, non-acceptors of the worst of lives. Some differ from me in their lack of residency permits—I successfully obtain mine every year thanks to my status as a student—while others have the advantage of having both better and more convenient Austrian citizenships. Over the course of time many have submitted excessive amounts of documents and have attempted to prove their fluency of German to maintain residence. Some have had to prove they can sustain themselves by producing an adequate bank balance. Sometimes, when they were under the required minimum they would ask somebody, a family member or a friend, to borrow them the remainder. But if asked to produce evidence as to why this person was so generous they might find themselves back at square one. Those without a permit pay the border police 300 euros not to stamp their passports. They know which border gates offer this clandestine service, but I don't, I've only heard stories from my Serbian waxing lady who, alongside her boyfriend, resides in Vienna illegally.

My mother tongue isn't really enough of a wager to have access to all the factors in this game of who gets to live northwest of the motherland. Serbian is a language mainly spoken by native speakers, yet the way it is used in Vienna, often freely combined with German words into bilingual sentences, or not even well spoken at all (creating broken Serbian from within) defies the notion of the native tongue I used to have. The accuracy of how I use it, among other things, sets me apart from this culture that shares the same tropes as mine, yet simultaneously being unknown to me. I am unable to find a correlation between how well an immigrant speaks Serbian and how long it has been since they relocated to Vienna.

We are the biggest minority in Austria's capital, outnumbering even Germans, who are the most numerous at the state level.<sup>1</sup> We predominantly inhabit the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> district.

Brothers and sisters—yet we have scarcely anything in common—I am undercover, but my cover is permanent. Sometimes on the street we see resemblance in each other's eyes, but only for an instant. In wien 1160 I successfully pretend I live in Viennese Neukölln; I enjoy cheap rent and late night Turkish shops. Not that many friends live here but there are a few.

I inquire about the trial training and the boxing club suggests a session for the same day. I take the tram

and walk for a bit. I venture to the first floor, where the reception is. I don't notice the reek of sweat, iconic to boxing. The person at the desk is cold and disinterested. She shoves me a form to fill out. Once I'm done, she brushes me with her look and provides no additional information, other than where to change and go thereafter.

In a narrow rectangular gym hall, the main trainer, a fit short man, greets the group. He speaks in fluent German, however at some point he utters a short phrase in Serbian. I don't deduce anything more than that he knows some slang, which is not uncommon for those who grew up in Vienna. Later I learn I am wrong: he moved to Vienna at the age of 1. The trainer is not giving me any instructions, so I try to do what the others are doing. I imitate poorly. Towards the end of the training I am told to do an exercise with a young man. First, I should punch his hands that he holds up as targets and then we reverse the roles. As I begin, my partner explains a few technical things to me. I am too hasty to listen to him, the power of my punches feels mildly intoxicating. That surprises me. Soon, it's round two and now he is doing the punching; I watch his face, red from heat and sweat, his eyes light blue, expression: concentrated, centralized, almost absent; droplets of sweat on his forehead shining while the edges of my field of vision blur and fade

out to white. I am being pummeled and I am present, an unprecedented crack in my careful existence. A window is only slightly ajar, the vast world of curated physical violence presents itself before me, I am a 8-year-old girl in a doll factory and every doll is free and I can have them all, to dress them or to pull their heads off, it doesn't matter. I know I am hooked.

I was in a fight once when I was a young teenager. In the middle of the street a girl from school saw me and hit with something between a slap and a right hook, straight over my face. As she approached me I just stood there, frozen, observing her energetic steps and then her swinging half-clenched fist, waiting immobile for my resolute punishment. And when the punch was close I shut my eyes. It hurt and seemed unavoidable. I cried and ran away home.

Half a life later, I am an adult whose lifelong conditioning allows for the queering of my femaleness. I am in the position to move farther on the axis from my native *F* pole, into the zone of lesser pull. I am a bastard of Serbia—a liberal, pro European, upper-middle class woman, a perfectly integrated art student, whose only parents are my biological ones.

The majority of Serbian immigrants in Vienna are not highly educated. Only since the 90s, because of the wars and the difficult economic situation, more highly

educated people started moving to the capital of Austria. When I was young, saying the word *Beč* (Vienna, in my mother tongue) had a strong connotation—it evoked plight, hardship, poverty and the working class. My family and I always giggled about the tacky houses the *gastarbeiter*<sup>2</sup> built in their villages in midland Serbia that I had only ever seen when I was going skiing to a mountain where a ski pass cost as much as the Alps. That was one of the very few places we could go to without a visa, while Serbia was still not on the ‘Schengen White List’, which reigned over our mobility till the end of my teenage youth, at the age of 18. When I was finally able to travel freely, I had to pick my destinations wisely because I didn’t have the time nor the money or enough friends who had the time or the money to go wherever. And when I had an opportunity I always wished to go somewhere more exciting than the place I presently reside. I ended up going only when a friend found a band that I wanted to see, but who wasn’t playing in Belgrade. I remember being very surprised that Vienna is not the narrow set of nouns I tied it to.

The youth landing the punches is oblivious to my new fascination; he strikes me like I’m a punching bag. I enjoy the anonymity of the act. At the very end of the training I am being told to observe the boxers as they do a short body sparring session.<sup>3</sup> Two days later,

I come back and sign the contract. Henceforth I begin noticing posters for various fight nights covering my neighborhood. The pugilists on them stand alert, hands in front of their faces.

In the book *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym* by the sociologist Lucia Trimbur, which describes one of the last surviving gyms from the golden age of boxing in New York City<sup>4</sup>, the author points out how the majority of women who take on the sport are from the middle class, as opposed to the men who are predominantly from the working class.<sup>5</sup> Trimbur argues further that male amateur fighters understand pugilism as a job, although unpaid, which they need in order to gain dignity, build identities and implement discipline. Boxing offers a second chance in actualizing or enhancing the benefits of participation in the workforce. Furthermore, she writes: "Amateur boxers disentangle traditional moral and emotional features of work from economic compensation." I am unsure if I have any conscious thoughts about the effects and the interworkings of boxing when I begin, but being in a practice that is also functioning based on the very same disentanglement, at least for a certain period in an artist's career, seems to fit well with this observation from Trimbur. At the gym, "moral and emotional features of work" are virtually

dripping down the walls. The rings and gloves ooze it, and I kneel in the corners and lick it, and then smack my lips as I cherish the taste, on my way back home.

There are several trainers in the club, with a few of them also being competitors. The main trainer was born in Portugal to an Austrian father and a Serbian mother and moved to Vienna at the age of one. In his gym, only German is to be spoken because of his loyalty to the country he represents and as an educational measure for the many immigrant kids training in the club. A few times I notice people talking to him in Serbian. I can see he understands but he always replies diligently in his fluent 'father' tongue. He is married to a Serbian woman, who is a police officer. They have been together for 9 years and have been married for 4. They just got a baby girl and in an article I read said that since she's a girl she wouldn't be a boxer. The wife sometimes does strength training in the club. She has a strong accent when she speaks German but I've never heard her say a word in Serbian. Once I saw her naked in the shower, and she is the only pregnant woman I've ever seen entirely naked. She was huge, and I felt guilty for my surprise. They have a joint profile on Facebook and she has lip fillers that make her look older. I have checked their social media profiles multiple times. She writes all her captions on Instagram in English and he



writes them in German, with occasional commonplace Serbian phrases. She was miss Vienna when she was 18 and in the hallway of the club, on the way to the toilets is a poster of the two of them—her with a sash, him shirtless, with gloves on.

People often ask me why I chose boxing. I noticed a Bipa ad on my way to work, featuring a white German female world champion in the lightweight division and over it the slogan “Weil ich ein Mädchen bin”. On another occasion, I received a newsletter from Erste Bank advertising one of their new services with a video of a white female pugilist shadowboxing.<sup>6</sup> The strength of these women combined with their casual presence resonated with me, making me want to compare myself to them. I don’t immediately notice the apparent gap between this imagery and the main trainer’s attitude towards the thought of his daughter boxing one day. Later though, I connect it to Trimbur’s findings that women in boxing are mainly from the middle class, which I assume are Bipa’s and Erste Bank’s target audiences. Then there is Viktoria, the glass bullet and Paris model artist. Admiral, a sports betting parlor, I pass by whenever I go to the non-profit exhibition space I run, displays an array of posters of a few sportsmen and one sportswoman—a boxer. The poster for MuseumsQuartier summer program is a giant

blue boxing glove with the slogan “Culture punch”. My friends: Charlotte, Leda, Julia, Sigrid, Eugen, Anne, Dan, Robert, Fini, Ivona, Chanty, Sara, Minja, Feli, Mia, Axel, Miljana and Jessyica did it or are doing it. Florentina Holzinger makes fight workshops/performances. Anne Imhof had punching bags in her show when she won the *Preis der Nationalgalerie* in Hamburger Bahnhof in 2015 and she organized boxing training sessions the same year as part of a seminar she held at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. She also talked about boxing in a conversation with Susanne Pfeffer, released for her show at the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017. They discussed Imhoff’s first artwork ever: she rented a table dance bar near the Frankfurt train station and organized a boxing match inside. She had a band playing as well. The band was supposed to play as long as the fighters fought and the fighters were supposed to fight as long as the band played. So, as Imhoff said, “there was no way out.” Furthermore, Imhoff told Pfeffer, the event eventually became bloody, tinting the entire table dance bar red. She then argued that that was one way to create a picture. I don’t really understand what she meant by that. Was she saying that the blood created a picture, acting like a paint of sorts? Or did she think the happening as a whole worked as an image? I think about her practice comprised of very

slow performances, which deal with the contemporary state of the image—that of perpetual circulation and diminished ownership—but also about her roots as a painter. Then I picture a boxing match and think about the mesmerizing unintentional choreography of the fighting bodies and the power they echo. It is easy to find arguments for both hypotheses, leaving me undecided as to what she intended to say.

Boxing is said to be a confidence boosting sport, an emancipating activity. Its female trainees the founding ‘mothers’ of the virgin territory of the ‘*New Woman*’—the feminist in the mainstream, punching hard post the #metoo movement. Boxing is a total body workout, it builds up one’s stamina, balance and burns a lot of calories. In the past 6 years the sport has seen a massive rise in popularity with women.<sup>7</sup> NBC News announced it as the top fitness trend for the year 2018. When all this is additionally paired with the erratic schedules, flexible (money) work obligations and progressive views on current socio-political issues, boxing makes even more sense within the female art (student) crowds.

Yet, in the opening sequence of the Retro Reports episode from the New York Times titled Blood and Sport, the boxing commentator and author Kieran Mulvaney says: “There is something fundamental and primal

about boxing”. I still don’t really know why I chose boxing exactly. The allure of owning and articulating one’s aggression has for sure played a role. And once I began, I did feel as though I had unlocked something primal and instinctive within me. Yet, as listed in the paragraphs above, I can’t be ignorant to the fact that pugilism is apparently all around me. Being in the arts and spending a lot of time on social media definitely honed my alertness to actively seek ways to empower myself. However, I still can’t decidedly tell what made me do it; and when people ask I never have a good answer.

The main trainer’s brother, who is also the founder of the club, trained him and he became both the EU champion and Austria’s top professional boxer. The main trainer’s brother works only with competitors; he has tidily plucked eyebrows and is the only overweight person in the gym. At my second session, the main trainer wears a red tight t-shirt, over it a black sleeveless tank top with the club’s logo on it and huge openings for the arms, red Adidas shorts, red knee high socks and white plastic Givenchy slippers with anatomic soles. He organized a boxing match where all the competitors participated and asked the members of the club to vote on Facebook which city the club should fight against. They chose Belgrade. Half of the boys representing

Belgrade were Roma. The Roma are the biggest minority in Belgrade. There was only one female match. Between each round two girls in high heels and tiny leotards pranced around the ring, holding cards announcing upcoming rounds. They did the same while the women fought. During a ten-minute break in the middle of the program the girls performed a short dance choreography in the ring, which involved a lot of arm movements and smiles, while the legs remained still and erect. When they exited the ring, somebody always held their hand to help them out down the narrow, wooden stairs.

At one session the main trainer tells us to hold small weights with our arms stretched out to the sides, our bodies shaped like the letter T. We are not allowed to drop them and after a bit we are to lift our shoulders up and down. We are training our shoulder muscles. As we do so the trainer yells the word *rosemary* in Serbian. I know immediately what he means by that. *Ruzmarin* is a Serbian turbo folk song from the mid 00s, and the movements of the exercise resemble that of a typical male dance to turbo folk music, which I however haven't noticed until that point. *Ruzmarin* was very popular when I was around 14 years old, at the end of elementary school<sup>8</sup>—a time when social inclusion was of the highest priority, and alt-tastes, art, fashion, rock and roll, techno and west were a fuck no. For me,

knowing this song symbolizes the period shortly before the very first education institution choice I've made; it was a time of dealing with the most realistic sample of the Serbian society I've known to this day. It stands for the farthest I've ever gone in the direction of belonging to my problematic nation. I don't think I was really aware of all this until that day in the boxing gym. I spend almost no time thinking about those times. Yet, in that one instance, while I work out hard, while I challenge my femaleness and reacquire physical aggression men robbed us of, worlds collide, so singular and precise, I never realized there was any space for a possible connection. And as I lift my shoulders I grin to myself.

After the quiet summer months, the gym is getting more crowded as people return to their city routines, and when the fall completely sets in it is so full that it is almost impossible to get the trainer's attention. I mention this to a friend who's boxing in another place and she says that that is horrible and that I should immediately change my gym. I nod, not wanting to get into an argument. Yet I sense a tingling sensation of pride in my decision to stay. In my youth I got quite used to bad conditions and unprofessional attitudes—in training and in general. At 15 I trained swimming 6 times a week and whenever I missed a session the trainer asked if I had an STD because my dick hurt to show up.<sup>9</sup>

That was even funny. But most of it was plain annoying. In Vienna and in the art school however, I begin to like the sudden edge my nationality provides: it yields proximity to an underground in a way I have never been granted before or anticipated I could have been. I think about how a whole nation, when placed within another, can be translated in terms of class: in my example, in Vienna certain aspects of my life still remain grounded in the wealth and privilege I enjoyed as a child—like the expensive ski trips, which allow me to blend in perfectly when skiing on the Alps with my international friends, yet some, like war and extreme macho culture, mark my otherness in the west—back home they played no role, and I was ever only wealthy and privileged. When I box in wien 1160 I get to sharpen this new edge. Furthermore, through that I adorn myself with the filtered version of the stereotype I used to dread, but which I'm now into—one of: power, decisiveness, rudeness, violence, manliness—one of my countryman—the prime testosterone carrier, perpetually dizzy from the burden of his aggressive patriotic ideals. I receive it flattened out though, as a lightweight eau de toilette, benign and kitsch. It's fun. I still find it all so cool.

At the club however, I am shy when I say *servus* to the trainers at the reception, and if I am ten minutes early I awkwardly stand in the corner and roll and unroll

my bandages into little bundles until the training begins. Anybody, who ever addresses me, does so in German. On a training session at the very beginning the main trainer orders us to do push-ups. I go on my knees, to do the so-called female ones, and the trainer yells at me with a smirk: "On your feet! On your knees only when you go home back to your boyfriend!" I obey and feel ashamed and humiliated. But I had gotten used to this before; now it's only role-play. Right?

When I google the main trainer I learn that he is only a year older than me. The next time I go boxing I stare extra carefully at his face trying to see any traces of our peerness. I don't know if it's his demeanor or the authority he has in the group, or what it is really, but his age surprises me. I was sure he was much older. Some months later, I meet Selma and tell her I am 27 and she has to ask me 5 times to repeat my age, amazed that I am not 6 or 7 years younger. I tell her I think she's 26, however she is 20. The receptionist tells me once that I am beautiful. I find it ok because of our perceived age difference, him being older, leading me to assume that he is clumsily trying to make me feel comfortable. Later I read he is a year younger than me and it perplexes me so much that I have to reread it several times, resembling a cartoon character when their eyes pop out in disbelief. I seem to be utterly unable to correctly



guess people's age in the club. They always look older. And interestingly, I always look younger to them. This is however generally not the case, I am accurate in my ability to estimate people's ages, and vice versa. In comparison, around the same time I meet Johanna on an exhibition opening and neither of us have any reaction when we casually tell each other our age.

On the club's website all the competitors have short bios, and judging by the style, they were all written by one person. These are selected excerpts from them that I translated from German:

Ivan Drakulic began boxing in 2012. At first, his only goal was to be able to defend himself. Ivan Drakulic was born in 1997 in Vienna and is an Austrian citizen. After two years of elementary school, he moved for five years with his parents to Bosnia. When he came back to Austria in 2010, he finished high school and a one-year vocational school for business. Ivan Drakulic is on the right path.

Nikola Stefanovic was born in 1995 in Täby, in the outskirts of Stockholm (Sweden) and in 2006 he moved to Austria with his family. With 13 Nikola was beaten up by three kids double his size, which made him decide to take on a sport that would enable him to defend himself. Parallel to boxing, he finished an engineering secondary school. Currently Nikola is

**fully concentrated on boxing.**

**Malik Sahar, 1998, was born in Kabul (Afghanistan). Right after his birth his parents fled Afghanistan from the war. In the beginning this was a very hard time for them, because here in Austria the culture is different and people don't live the way they were used to. However, after 15 years, the family is very well integrated. Malik's father approved of boxing because he thought it would be good for Malik to know how to defend himself.**

**Florian Heilig, 1995, was a real problem child. He was always interrupting teachers in school and provoking fights. He needed something to combat this attitude. At 16 he started as an electrician at a vocational school in Korneuburg, and when he switched to Stockerau he came in contact with boxing. Once he began training it, there was no more talk of the 'problem kid' he used to be.**

**The bio of the only woman goes like this: Marika Kučerová comes from Czech Republic. In Olomouc she studied German and Czech studies and then came to Vienna for Erasmus, but she liked it a lot and decided to stay. She says that she finds it sad that boxing is often associated with beating up and violence, she wants to show that that is a ridiculous notion and that boxing can definitely be a girl sport.**

**Boxing trainings consist of constantly changing modes and tempos of workout so that the trainees**

learn to react quickly. Because when in a fight, a pugilist is not only pushing his or her limit, but they must also be prepared to react to their opponent's maximum simultaneously. My typical session would consist of, among other things, endless rope skipping of varying intensities (normal, knees high, double jumps), followed by a short break, then 10 (male) push-ups, 45-second planks, in different variations: forearm plank, push-up position, forearm plank with knees to the shoulders, side plank—in three reps, then push-ups again. After that we'd do some shadowboxing, a few rounds of partner exercises and at the end around 250 sit-ups in many variations. Upcoming exercises and reps would never be announced. It was always a surprise. When sparring, it is very challenging to even stand on one's feet, as one has to be able to do that but also think, analyze, evade punches and concurrently use them to retaliate. If one boxes, one will inevitably get hit, and one has to endure it, there's no way around it.

The dynamics, jargon and jokes in the club are reminiscent of my elementary school in Belgrade, which was in a right-wing-hooligan district. This was a time with too low innocence rate. It was also a time of no agency, when those more fortunate among us were still too immature to comprehend the scope of potential solutions and future realities, while others simply began

their lives. All we were able to do then was absorb and deal with our surroundings, unconscious little hyenas and bunnies that we were, becoming women and men in the first decade after the wars and the bombings. I often felt inadequate in the social games of my schoolmates, their harshness and rudeness confused me. Every day I would talk about it with my mom, and she would console me, full of patience and understanding. She was protective. She wanted to preserve me by not encouraging me to familiarize with the figures of the playground. She wished for a more secure outcome of my identity in the making.

The humor around me was sharp and piercing and mine was mild, like a dull, rubber knife. An abundance of choices is intrinsic to the dominant classes, (think of artists schedules that got us here in the first place), whereas the working class is often forced to make the most of the given circumstances. In the film *Punch Line – Eine Frau steigt in den Ring*, by Kati Zambito, in which the 36-year-old Viennese based actress documents her journey from a beginner boxer to her first match, that coincidentally took place in the same gym as mine, her trainer Dalibor Nikolic says (in perfect German, Viennese dialect): “When the fighter falls to the canvas, he stands up and fights on. It’s about what you make of a situation once it occurs.” There is something inherently working

**class about boxing: the strenuous and long workouts, enduring the pain and fighting it through, with nothing else but one's bare body as a tool. My high school was in the city center. With each new education institution I was coming one step closer to the promise (and chains) of total belonging. Nobody ever talked about his or her memories from the wartime. I have one: seeing an orange sky, like an exaggerated sunset, the colors of fire. It was a bomb detonating somewhere close by. When I was 12, a guy from school flashed his penis before me and that was the first erect penis I'd ever seen. When I was 12 a guy masturbated in class and sent me his pubic hair in a self-made paper envelope. When the class was over, he chased other girls and me with his fingers covered in cum and that was the first time I'd ever seen cum. When I was 13 I had to hit boys, and they never hit back. Their mission was to grope all protruding part of girls' bodies they could get their dirty little hands on and we hit them hard in order to prove we didn't enjoy it. I was happy with my punches, even though I enjoyed the touches. I also enjoyed the punches.**

**Boxxing became an Olympic sport for women in 2012. It has been an Olympic sport for men since 1904. The first world championship for women was in 2001. Women were banned from partaking in the sport for a long time for the fear of injuries and men thought that**

women would destroy the sport. Women are always required to wear headguards in competitions. However since the 2016 Olympics men are not, since analysis actually shows headguards increase chances of injury. There is insufficient data whether this is applicable to women. Within a small, marked, caged square—*the ring*, people of the same gender and weight meet and fight in equal intervals. The array of possible punches is extremely limited—there are only three different ones that can be performed with both hands anywhere on the frontal upper side of the body. I thought boxing was pure violence, if we are to understand this term as violence that is not the result of a socio-economic conflict between two parties (like a protest or a gang fight), nor instigated by a personal falling-out. The fighters just hit each other and that's it. They make a conscious decision to do it, right? However, the fact that boxing is based on aggression and inflicting pain might mean, in some cases at least, that there is something one is fighting against. "Or, if nothing, it can help", as a friend of mine who's boxing once told me. This something might be the injustice of being trapped in one's social order and/or gender identity. In the film *Million Dollar Baby* by Clint Eastwood, Maggie, a 30 something working class waitress, becomes a boxer, and yes, she fights strangers, but in the end she is boxing herself and "the trash that

she is”, (with endearing vigor, too). Therefore, a place of certain negativity could result in a need for the staged, isolated space—an artificial portal into fighting, that could make one feel emptier and safer. The pattern is there. However, I’d like to note that I don’t want to make boxing seem like an impulsive catfight. ‘A place of certain negativity’ is more of an initial push to enter the practice of pugilism, and then a ‘source’ of energy, but once in it the fighters learn that boxing involves a lot of planning, tactics, control and analysis. Some even say it is like chess; one has to think ahead, be wise and calm and surely not let one’s anger be the sole master of the punches.

In *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason’s Gym* Lucia Trimbur argues women who take on the sport look for empowerment or ways to deal with abusive experiences. A female trainee in my club progressed to the advanced group in only two months (it usually takes approx. 6-12 months) because she was having relationship problems and, as she told me in the changing room, “needed to express them bodily”. She continued to say however, that as soon as she made it into the group things improved with her partner and she didn’t know if she had the motivation to continue. “I get a blue eye every time I go there, and I don’t know if I care anymore.”

In the female group I go sparring for the first time. I walk into the ring and immediately enter a state of mind I have never experienced before. The adrenalin makes everything seem like a dream, but a very rapid one. I split most of the fighting between two teenagers, one of them being quite aggressive. After a while of back and forth, I manage to land a right uppercut straight to her chin, with a force previously unknown to me. We immediately stop and I start apologizing, but I am not sure if I should—I am not familiar with the etiquette. The guy from the reception comes over and looks at her, my head vacant and feeling like I've never experienced a single emotion in my life. The trainer tells me insensitively there is no need to apologize, that this is boxing. Next round, I spar with a woman a bit older than me and she lands two blows straight to my face. I am stunned, because I am actually inexperienced as to how to evade punches and unable to fully comprehend getting hit in the face yet.

While on YouTube at home that night, I accidentally find a video explaining how boxing is considered to be the most dangerous sport of all, even more than MMA and rugby, because the majority of the punches aim for the head. It is said that headguards can successfully protect against cuts, but not against head jerks that can lead to concussions and brain damage. My nose hurts



when I put on my La Roche-Posey face cream.

Eventually I ask my trainer if I am ready to move to the advanced group. In order to do so, both she and the trainer from the group need to approve my request. She confidently says yes. After training I go out and meet a friend, he is celebrating his birthday and we are all drinking wine and beer in the first district.

The following week I go to the advanced group. There are approximately 35 men, two women and I. The men stare. As soon as I show up, the trainer, the 23-year-old amateur boxer Nikola Stefanovic, asks me why I am here. I say the trainer sent me. He asks which one. I say who, and he's not impressed. He lets me know I can stay that day but we'll see if I am ready to be part of the group at the end of the training. "We have many strong opponents", he says in German. I spar and give my best to showcase my preparedness. It is extremely hot, and the ventilation doesn't work. My hair is wet and sticky under my plastic headguard. Once I am finished sparring I approach him again, but this time we speak in our mother tongue. His accent is unexpectedly flawless, it is just like mine. And suddenly before him my well-kept secret is for all to see. He says: "Nisi spremna." I am not ready. I need to improve my technique and I am not strong enough to fight the men. He points out one of the two girls, the sturdier one, who is also a competitor, ignoring the other

one, (who is 15, weights around 40 kg, and when her and I sparred in the female group I made her nose bleed), and tells me: “Look at her, she fights like crazy—she fights dudes. You’re too weak to fight them. If I take you in the group the guys will complain that they have to take it easy on you. They’re crazy here, you know, these boys are wild, they knock each other out sometimes and I have to jump in to stop them. Come back when you’re strong enough. And don’t get mad at me.”

I go to the changing room confused about the unspoken politics there. As I pack my smelly equipment, a fellow trainee tells me that she’s heard about the recent mandate of the advanced group. She claims they have too many people there and only recently three 15 year-old girls (among them the one that was there that evening) have been accepted. These girls are young enough to eventually become actual, amateurs fighters of value, however they are still very small and skinny. The men complained, so the club management decided not to take any female boxers that can’t fight men or who aren’t guaranteed to become competitors. I thank her for telling me and feel ushered to head back home.

I am humiliated and angry. I imagine how the others in the group know I wasn’t accepted when I fail to show up at the next session. Some maybe even knew about the new management prerogative and could see

immediately that I didn't stand a chance. I talked to my sparring partner during training; he seemed nice and friendly. For a split second I picture him too realizing that I was rejected. It is a strangely clear image. I sit restlessly on my bed and feel like calling a friend and going on a rant about my evening. But I stop myself. I don't really know what to say. I am unable to discern my emotions and form them into intelligible expressions quite yet. So all I do is I tell myself mantras I doubt are helpful ("*I began this to kill time*", "*I wanted to combat the unstructured schedules*") until I fall asleep.

The next day I think I've got it. I articulate controlled complaints to my friends. "It's not fair", I say, "women have 40-50% less muscle mass in the upper body, I don't stand a chance against men's strength. I am close to 30 and I weigh 60 kg. I won't become as strong as the girl who "fights dudes"; she's a real killer."

My friends don't react in any particular way. They shrug their shoulders like they want to say: "I guess it is what it is". After all, these are just the simple mathematics of testosterone, estrogen and progesterone—the ancient hindrance to women. In the matter of jabs, hooks and uppercuts we have a pre-decided winner. This should however be less frustrating than when a winner is pre-proclaimed in spheres where such calculi are unclear, or not even possible.

I go on sulking over the fact that the whole advanced group is structured to cater to the men's needs, inevitably resulting in limited spots and unreachable standards for the few women willing to step into the ring. This is an easy subject for me to get angry with, isn't it? Not only that the anger seems to come naturally, but I've also had years of schooling that taught me how to express it in a vocal, comprehensive way and place it within a relevant political and socio-economical frame. (And I am very grateful for this knowledge.) Discrimination of women is something I've been seeing my entire life. It is an external condition of life and I give 100% to fight it daily the best way that I can. Yet, it rarely activates my stomach anymore. It mainly stays in the head, and in the mouth when I speak about it. It is a negative feature concerning all women, but we are still able to own our womanhood and stand tall, proud and strong.

But, the pulsating spot of wrath is unstable. It changes its location on my body—it vacates the mind and goes lower, following the force of the gravitation. It stops in the belly. And the belly is the subconscious; the bodily; the intuitive; (the 'female?'). Unclear childhood memories come over me, covering me like a silky cape, weightlessly fitting onto every crease on my skin. I can tell there is more to my sulking than the way I was treated

as a woman in the group. My thought-horizon is murky. The memories are from a scarcely reflected place: what it meant to be a naïve and privileged girl in the dystopian early-aughts in Serbia. Since Serbia is not part of the dominant western discourse, I've never obtained the rich vocabulary and the pool of references to help me understand that time of my life better, which in effect caused the thick mist. Without a dialogue on the matter it is difficult for my thoughts and emotions to transition into the realm of the rational, rendering me terribly lonely and slow in the making of that attempt. They have therefore remained relatively childish, dormant until now in the middle of my torso.

The advanced group trainer seems like a ghost. He vaguely reminds me of a boy I used to know when I was 13—perhaps. Or perhaps he is the super-amalgamation of all the boys I used to know when I was 13. I stand still and picture him telling me to do hundreds of sit-ups. I picture him making jokes with the guys in the group, while I wait to hear what the next exercise is. With each new picture my mind becomes blurrier. I can't seem to persist imagining, as if I was given a small number of scenarios I was capable of and I've just used them all up. With the visualization ceasing, a very grounding, cold feeling crawls up my skin. It is maturity—which generally comes as a result of painful experiences,

educating one how to take self-care. All of a sudden, like a blow of unexpected cold wind on a warm day, I know I won't be able to stand the trainer's commands and jokes and the origins we share, which we however left behind in very different ways. The commitment is real and the stakes are now high. I cannot have him, the embodiment of the very stereotype I only freshly and perversely re-incorporated into my life—this time around willingly and as something cool—telling me what to do. I don't have the stamina for it, nor did I ever really have it. I was only playing a game with myself and my art friends. The excursion into boxing was an appealing egzotika<sup>10</sup> and an informative pilgrimage. Nevertheless, at some point playtime has to come to an end. I am nowhere close to seriously flirting with or even embodying a new (old) identity. I am too comfortable in the liberal, leftist art circles. I was Serbian, but then I became an international art student. And that was a goal I really wanted to achieve. I chose the erratic schedules and although they can be difficult, being told (what feels like *once again*, even though that might not be true) what to do—in an aggressive, sexist manner, by someone whose entrapment in a sexist and aggressive value system is all too painful for me to oppose—is worse. My knees are weak if I picture myself truly becoming part of the

advanced boxing group. And I appear hypocritical to myself if I only go there in order to boost my edgy social persona.

While writing this text I watch *Million Dollar Baby*, and despite having seen it before, I burst into tears in a way that I haven't over a film or a book since I was a child. The film's plot is undeniably tragic—in the end Maggie is paralyzed after a foul boxing match and her trainer and only close friend has to disconnect her from life-support—but I know there is more to it that makes me weep. I was so carefully spared from the world of violence and physical pain. My parents tried so hard, and the only time they failed was when I saw the orange, burning sky. I cry because for Maggie boxing is so much more than it is for me, it is Maggie's best chance; it is more honest. She seems so happy to knock out all those women. When I read the bios of the male fighters I get sad. When I think about female boxers I feel pride and I admire them. Yet, I won't stay a day longer in the club. Perhaps if I had become more conscious of my early puberty claustrophobia while it was still happening and used it then as boxing fuel I could have been like Maggie, a million dinar baby. But of course, that was never going to happen. Today, after having long escaped the 'time-of-no-agency', left not only 615 km down southeast, but also behind a few education institutions and multiple

**circles of friends, each more liberal and progressive than the one before, I am not making any real choices here: I stop boxing. I leave the X somewhere forever defeated in wien 1160, as the sun sets down on an early June night.**



1. In: *Facts and figures on Migration 2017 - Viennese population*. (June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018) URL: <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/social/integration/basic-work/facts-figures.html>. Same data shows that there are over 100,000 Serbians residing in Vienna, but that is not counting illegal immigrants and those living on relation Vienna-Serbia with tourist visas, which allow being in EU for three months within a period of six months. Sub-note: I don't know whether the Serbians who've obtained Austrian citizenship are accounted for and if so, for how many generations.
2. The term literally means 'guest worker' in German. Dragana Antonijević in *Stranac ovde, stranac tamo, antropološko istraživanje kulturnog identiteta gastarbajtera*, Etnološka biblioteka, Belgrade, 2013, (translation of the title J. Z.: *Foreigner Here, Foreigner There, Anthropological Research into the Cultural Identity of the Gastarbeiter*) writes how in Germany and Austria the term has been falling out of use and has acquired pejorative connotations. Since the 90s the connotations are similar in Serbo-Croatian and the term has been mainly used colloquially, to refer to particularly those who migrated to German speaking countries between 1960-80s.
3. The Wikipedia article describes *sparring* as a form of training, common to many combat sports. Although the precise form varies, it is essentially relatively 'free-form'

fighting, with enough rules, customs, or agreements to make injuries unlikely, in: Wikipedia, *Sparring*, (June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018), URL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sparring>.

4. Lucia Trimbur, *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013. The book is about a specific gym in New York City. However, lacking proficient German language skills, I had to look up theoretical material in English. I compared Trimbur's analysis to the bios of all the trainers and fighters from my boxing club, bios of other amateur and professional boxers I read online, and to an interview with Florian Höllwarth, the president of Austrian boxing association, (published in the monthly magazine for the ex-Yugoslavian diaspora in Austria Kosmo) and found the models Trimbur provides to be highly translatable to the Viennese boxing landscape. I have used only those statements from Trimbur's book that I have concluded or experienced myself in Vienna. It is interesting to note that in *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym*, as is typical for North America, there is a lot of discussion about race, whereas in Vienna, a city populated by a bigger white population than USA that is not the case as much. This is a good place to think of country/region specific discriminated groups and traits, and how they translate to different locations.

5. I mainly talk about amateur/Olympic boxing in this text, and not about fitness boxing, which attracts different social classes.
6. *Shadowboxing* is an exercise used in the training for combat sports. It is used mainly to prepare the muscles before the person training engages in stronger physical activity. In shadowboxing, only one person is required to participate; the participant throws punches at no one in particular, in: Wikipedia, *Shadowboxing*, (June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018), URL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadowboxing>.
7. The Olympic games include female boxing in 2012, UFC (the largest MMA promotion in the world) includes women in 2013. It is speculated that those events have greatly contributed to the rise in popularity of female boxing. As found in articles: Irish-boxing.com: *Women Boxing Increasing Popularity* by Joe O'Neill, November 2017; The Guardian: *The rise of women boxers* by Rachel Dixon, November 2010; BBC: *Nicola Adams: London 2012 changed views on women's boxing* by Jessica Creighton, July 2013.
8. Serbian education system is comprised of obligatory elementary school—8 grades, age 6/7-14/15; and secondary (high) school—4 grades, age 14/15-18/19.
9. *My dick hurts* (*boli me kurac*, in Serbian) is the literal translation for the phrase meaning *I don't give a fuck* in Serbian. It is used very frequently regardless of gender.

10. *Egzotika* is a term my friend Katarina Šoškić came up with. When I asked her to tell me what exactly she used it for, she wrote via Telegram:

Kata, [08.06.18 18:37] exotic is usually a complicated word

Kata, [08.06.18 18:37] and heavy

Kata, [08.06.18 18:37] because of postcolonial context etc.

Kata, [08.06.18 18:38] and it suited me to resolve that by simply saying that word the way we say in serbian

Kata, [08.06.18 18:38] which is already considered exotic

Kata, [08.06.18 18:38] and through that point out to everything

Kata, [08.06.18 18:38] i dont know



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Julija Zaharijević

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