**The Dissertation Committee for Benita Anitta Heiskanen Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:**

# Fighting Identities: The Body in Space and Place

**Committee:**

Neil F. Foley, Supervisor

Janet M. Davis

Steven D. Hoelscher

Jeffrey L. Meikle

Samuel C. Watkins

# Fighting Identities: The Body in Space and Place

**by**

**Benita Anitta Heiskanen, M.A.**

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To my Brother **Tom Heiskanen**,
the fighter who showed me the ropes.

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# Fighting Identities: The Body in Space and Place

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Prizefighting has assumed deep-seated meanings as a racialized practice in the United States, epitomizing both immigrants' rags-to-riches sagas and competing notions of the sport's identity as an "American" enterprise. "Fighting Identities: The Body in Space and Place" combines a historical, a theoretical, and an ethnographic approach in examining the occupational culture of professional boxing as a locus for ethnoracial, class, and gender formations. Contextualized within the history of pugilism, the bulk of the research springs from interviews with a community of Latino fighters who grew up and began boxing in East Austin, Texas from the 1970s onward. The research situates the boxers' life-stories within a theoretical framework of the *body* in *space* and *place*, while a four-year ethnographic sojourn inside Texas prizefighting complements the analysis with a participant observation component. The focus is on how the

athletes negotiate the tension between individual agency and ideological control within various pugilistic and societal settings; how their collective status as Latino fighters is deliberated within global sporting networks; and how boxing simultaneously enables challenging various power dynamics, as it reflects existing ethnoracial, class, and gender politics in society at large.

Emphasizing an ongoing dialogue between everyday practices and academic discourses within the interdisciplinary field of American Studies in particular, the discussion links prizefighting and identity formations as spatially determined processes, delineating the boxing body as a site of knowledge and various locations within the pugilistic occupational culture as sites for being and becoming. The dissertation argues that a continual relationship between space and place—turning space into place *by appropriating space as one's own*—evokes a larger tension between social control and individual mobility and that this dynamic becomes absolutely central to Latino fighters' *raison d'être*. Amidst the existing social hierarchies, "Fighting Identities" come to derive meanings through space, while space becomes racialized through geographically determined boundaries of socio-economic concentrations of power in place, corresponding to such everyday parameters as ethnoracial segregation and exclusionary class and gender politics in the United States. Alongside the increasing *Latinization* of 21st century prizefighting, the sport is diverging from its Northeastern origins into a distinctly Southwestern phenomenon.

# Table of Contents

## Introduction

> This anonymous hero...does not expect representations. He squats now at the center of our scientific stages. The floodlights have moved away from the actors who possess proper names and social blazons, turning first toward the chorus of secondary characters, then settling on the mass of the audience.
>
> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Have you ever been spellbound by the spectacle of a prizefight? Whatever the case may be, allow me to refurbish the image here, for it has always been an extremely powerful experience for me: The bell rings, the seconds step out, and the two boxers face each other eye-to-eye, toe-to-toe in the center of the ring. Beneath the limelight, their bodies, trimmed to the bone, shine with layers of Vaseline, as the referee in the middle summons the fistic ritual to commence: "Protect yourself at all times. Obey my commands at all times. Good luck to the both of you. Touch them up and may the best man win!" As a sign of mutual respect, the fighters thump each others' gloves, and the combat sets in motion within the confined space of the ring, against limited time, under the naked eye of the audience. They contest their spatial range, timing and synchronizing their jabs, hooks, uppercuts, and combinations; they bob and weave, duck and feign across the ring, all the while challenging each other's strength, condition, and willpower. Between the two combatants, the battle reaches a solipsistic culmination, as it is lost or won over physical prowess, agility of the mind, and the control of the

geography of the canvas. Whether it lasts twelve rounds or is over in a split second, the victor's arm is raised in triumph and the vanquished stoops in defeat, simultaneously attesting to their delicate and transitory status in and out of the prize ring.

Immersed in such an intriguing display, one may not stop and think about the miscellaneous aspects that led the boxers to step into the ring in the first place, such as their childhood experiences, social relations, and their surrounding everyday realities. Nor may it come to mind to question the power relations shaping up the event itself, exemplified by a "who-what-where-when" quadrangle that characterizes the sport's multifaceted organizational structure. What difference does it make, for example, whether the bout is staged by internationally renowned promoters, such as Top Rank Inc., Don King Productions, Main Events, or newcomers such as Golden Boy Promotions, Sugar Ray Leonard Boxing, or Julio Cesar Chávez Promotions? What bearing does it have further that the boxers are bound by contractual agreements to certain managers, promoters, and business advocates? What about the role that the different world sanctioning bodies, such as the World Boxing Association, the World Boxing Council, the International Boxing Federation, the World Boxing Organization, the World Boxing Union, or the North American Boxing Federation, have in ranking fighters internationally and in determining specific contenders and challengers for a championship title? How about the state athletic commissions who regionally have the judiciary right

to regulate boxing matches and to arbitrate which rules are implemented in any one fight; who regulate which physical examinations and medical testing the boxers undergo before and after the bout; and who choose the particular ringside officials in charge, such as the judges, referees, inspectors, time-keepers, and physicians? Why bother about which "stables" the boxers belong to; how the particular fight's location was chosen; where the weigh-ins, press conferences, and physical examinations are being held? Or why such seemingly minor details as which TV-stations broadcast the fight, what advertisers are most visible during the event, and what sponsorship endorsements the athletes have should carry any relevance to the combat itself?

All of the above for the reason that these underlying intricacies begin to have enormous significance when one recognizes that boxing is not only a professional sport, but also a form of bodily labor, a mode of being, a lucrative business, and an instrument of politics, both governmental and grassroots. Thus conceived, the ostensibly uncomplicated fistic combat takes on tangible social, historical, economic, and ideological importance for individuals, communities, nations, and international collectives alike. For the athletes themselves, boxing comes to constitute the essence of their sporting prowess, but—equally important—it plays a fundamental role in their identity formations, their day-to-day survival, and, indeed, in their very existence in the world. What is more, prizefighting carries deep-seated historical meanings as an ethnically and racially

delineated, class-based, gendered, and regionally demarcated practice, corresponding to immigrants' integration endeavors in U.S. social hierarchies, even as the majority of boxers and their trainers stubbornly persist at the bottom of the sport's socio-economic ladder. Today, professional boxing is overwhelmingly dominated by Latino and African American athletes, but the sport is not solely a masculine practice anymore; quite the contrary, it has transformed into a remarkably heterogeneous world that comprises tiers of other personae who are central to its occupational culture, such as women fighters, fe/male ring officials, fe/male handlers, and fe/male recreational boxers. As a result, these diverse characters interact with each other in everyday boxing environments, leaving their individual insignia on the pugilistic social organization and engendering various implicit and explicit identity contestations. Thus, while the fighters, their corner men, managers, promoters, matchmakers, administrators, ringside officials, broadcasters, and financiers are all shaped by boxing, they simultaneously have an impact on the identity of the sport *per se*, one which has assumed deep connotations as a quintessentially "American" enterprise.

"Fighting Identities: The Body in Space and Place" probes into the complex issues embedded in the sport by examining the occupational culture of prizefighting as a locus for identity formations. With a focus on a community of Latino fighters who grew up and began boxing in East Austin, Texas from the

early 1970s onward, the dissertation combines a historical, a theoretical, and an ethnographic approach in explicating ethnoracial, class, and gender formations as contested through professional boxing.[1] The bulk of the research springs from a series of life-story interviews with the East Austinite Latino fighters, who negotiate their lives and career opportunities within various everyday locations, such as the barrio, boxing gyms, and fight venues within the span of the last thirty years.[2] Voyaging with the fighters' launching of their careers in Texas, we will learn about their childhood reminiscences and early encounters within amateur boxing; we will then navigate via their athletic adolescence in various local, national, and international boxing tournaments; and we will finally journey all the way through their maturation as prizefighters amidst the shifting politics of the sport today.[3]

In so doing, I lean on Michel de Certeau's premise that "the approach to culture begins when the ordinary [wo]man *becomes* the narrator, when it is [s]he who defines the (common) place of discourse and the (anonymous) space of its

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[1] I am using the term "ethnoracial" throughout the dissertation to emphasize the interdependent nature of race and ethnicity: Latinos/as, for example, identify with a range of different racial markers, just as they represent various ethnic backgrounds. On the social construction and ideological contestation of race and ethnicity, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

[2] Although the community of East Austinite fighters is the focus of the research, there are some exceptions here. I have also interviewed fighters who grew up and began boxing elsewhere, but who are part of the larger boxing community today.

[3] The fighters' accomplishments range from regional, state, and national titles to continental or world championship belts, and their amateur and professional records combined average between a hundred and four hundred bouts total.

development."[4] Hence, by elevating the largely anonymous cohort of fighters (a group of people generally regarded as marginal in U.S. society) to the center stage of scholarly scrutiny, by discussing prizefighting itself (a trade often portrayed in a simplistic manner), and by examining Austin (a place largely unknown for professional boxing), I wish to establish a connection between these so-called "ordinary" people and academia at large, and to narrow at least some of the chasm between everyday practices and scholarly discourses within American Studies in particular, a field which, despite its professed interdisciplinary and multi-methodological disposition, in practice seems to valorize historical research paradigms over inter-personal encounters and theoretical problematization. The dissertation, then, hopes to demonstrate decided interdisciplinarity within American Studies, while it also contributes to such individual disciplines as history, anthropology, and cultural geography, as well as various area studies, including Sport Studies, Cultural Studies, Latino/a Studies, and Gender Studies.

The dissertation and its title—"Fighting Identities"—suggest a range of different identity contestations that take place and intersect within the fistic occupational culture; thus the *fight* comes to signify a struggle over individual, pugilistic, societal, and academic social organization, exemplified by the overlapping disciplines, sources, and analytical tools embedded in the research. The purpose of the deliberately multifaceted approach is that each chapter, in

[4] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall. (Berkeley: University

effect, examines distinct perspectives of identity formations as manifested through the sport; and the various disciplinary and methodological lenses simultaneously explain, interconnect, and complicate the fistic combat's larger individual, social, and political ramifications. By appropriating research methods from oral history, ethnography, and textual analysis, I situate the fighters' everyday accounts within a socio-historical context through scholarly treatises on prizefighting, while the theoretical framework draws largely on the works of various philosophers and cultural geographers. To exemplify the intricate workings of pugilistic power dynamics further, I resort to the state of Texas boxing archives and prizefight laws, U.S. congressional hearings and federal boxing legislation, as well as miscellaneous medical, political, and ethical discourses surrounding the prizefight industry, past and present. In addition, a range of print and electronic media sources, including newspapers, fight magazines, boxing shows on TV, and fight websites, illustrate public depictions of the sport, while the boxers' personal scrapbooks, photographs, and video collections bring an invaluable resource in delineating their individual career developments. Finally, my own four-year ethnographic sojourn inside the world of Texas prizefighting brings a participant observation component into the analysis—including working out at gyms, attending boxing matches, and other interactions with fight insiders in Texas—shedding light on the pugilistic everyday culture in the actual spaces and places in

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of California Press, 1984), p. 5.

which the sport is organized.[5] Combining these diverse aspects, the dissertation attempts both to elucidate the broad historical spectrum as well as to furnish the contemporary sporting scene with individual fighter's personal worldviews and social relations, while situating the study of prizefighting within specific socio-historical, theoretical, and geographic frameworks.

To set the scene, then, Chapter 1 first traces the development of U.S. prizefight history at large as an ethnoracial, class-based, and gendered continuum, as boxers have typically represented immigrants and other persons from lower rungs of social hierarchies, and the sport has served as a stepping-stone for various disenfranchised groups'—including women fighters'—attempts at civic inclusion in society. The historical contextualization exposes the sundry meanings that boxers and the sport have assumed in connection with shifting U.S. socio-political climates and the geopolitical state of affairs of the world during different historical times, epitomizing societal power relations and their contingent ideological contestations, with far-reaching everyday significance outside of the immediate sporting context as well. Reviewing the existing prizefight literature shows further that scholars have by and large—with a few exceptions—focused on the role of white and black heavyweight champions in prizefight history, thus

[5] Understood more loosely, the participant observation can, perhaps, be considered to have begun already in my childhood, as I grew up on fight circles in Finland, following my Brother Tom Heiskanen's amateur and professional boxing career in the welterweight division from 1976 to 1989.

in and of themselves shaping ethnoracial sporting identities as socio-historical constructions, analogously with larger tendencies in U.S. society and academia.

However, the occupational culture of prizefighting has always been more diverse than many of the scripted histories allow, and whenever the heavyweight division has failed to produce charismatic champions, the powers-that be have shifted their focus to other saleable athletes in the lighter weight categories. Indeed, prizefighting today is experiencing an unparalleled crisis in the heavyweight division, one generally explained by a lack of magnetic and marketable African American superstars, who—so goes the argument—nowadays tend to choose such sports as basketball and football over prizefighting, complete with primetime TV-exposure, media glitz, and appealing sponsorship deals.[6] As a result, the sport's spotlight has gradually steered towards various "crossover" Latino fighters, and the growing number of women boxers have begun to attract increasing publicity, while boxing has also become a fashionable workout routine for various recreational practitioners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, simultaneously broadening the sport's fan base. In Texas, in particular, the interest in Latino fighting, the attention to women's boxing, and the motley cohort of conditioning boxers have resulted in a magnificent boxing boom; and amidst

[6] Boxing analysts on television usually cite three reasons for the heavyweight division's crisis: that the recent undisputed champion, Lennox Lewis—who was born in the Caribbean, raised in England, and who now lives in Canada—does not have a magnetic enough personality; that African Americans who used to choose boxing as a profession now turn to football or basketball instead; and that Mike Tyson's negative publicity has damaged the appeal of the heavyweight division on the whole.

the more diverse practitioners and followers, many of the grassroots Latino fighters have also—as if by accident—gained increasing attention on various levels. Yet, even if Latino fighters from across the Americas dominate the worldwide occupational numbers today, and women boxers gain increasing prominence in its everyday culture, both of these groups are glaringly absent from academic examinations of the sport.

The ethnoracial and gender markers aside, the critical point to be made in the study is that only an infinitesimal proportion of boxers ever become contenders or world champions; the large majority never enjoys notable—or any—fame or remarkable riches; and few of them become main events with major commercial sponsorship and pay-per-view TV-endorsements. However, that is not to say that the internationally lesser-known boxers are not celebrated in their immediate communities, for many of them are, and prizefighting becomes a central locus for them to carve a niche of autonomy and respect amidst their everyday surroundings. Indeed, the sport offers them meaningful athletic, social, and personal gratification, and that is why many grassroots fighters remain within boxing despite all of its numerous risks, sacrifices, and negative odds. But to understand how boxers, in point of fact, make sense of their craft, Chapter 2 turns to the interviews with the Austinite fighters themselves, as their life-stories reveal how the athletes explore their personal and professional opportunities through the fistic occupation; how they contest their individual mobility versus social control

within their own everyday environments; and how they connect their identities within the sport's social networks. On a personal level, for example, the boxers negotiate the tension between individual agency and ideological control within various regional pugilistic and social settings; as Latino fighters, their collective status is simultaneously deliberated within the cultural context of the United States, while they are also intrinsically linked with worldwide prizefight networks; and it is this very nexus of the local, regional, national, and global scales that ties boxing to identity formations. Indeed, the pugilistic encounters enable the fighters to challenge various social hierarchies within the sport's everyday locations and to question one's unspoken social and occupational boundaries—in other words, one's ostensibly prescribed station in life.

That said, to complicate the discussion further, the fighters' professional experiences gain broader scope when engaged in conversation with theoretical conceptualization, for—after all—identity formations necessarily have both concrete *and* abstract dimensions and, thus conceived, act as a bridge between everyday practices and academic discourses. Consequently, borrowing the analytical tools of the *body* in *space* and *place* from various philosophers and cultural geographers, I argue that the boxing body becomes a central source of a fighter's everyday knowledge about the world, while various locations within the pugilistic occupational culture serve as sites for being and becoming in that world. Indeed, it is through boxing that fighters understand their everyday existence,

while the body comes to epitomize a foundation for their athletic and personal development. Space, in turn, proves critical in fighters' understanding of their everyday surroundings: the ring, the gym, the corner, competition venues, dressing rooms, and ringside—most everything about boxing is spatially organized. By situating the boxers' accounts within such a conceptual framework, I wish to link prizefighting and identity formations as *spatially determined processes*, always jumbled up within the power relations of bodies interacting in everyday places. It is my contention, then, that a continual, dynamic relationship between space and place—turning space into place *by appropriating space as one's own*—evokes a tension between social control and mobility, and that this dynamic becomes absolutely central to Latino prizefighters' *raison d'être*. By maintaining a ubiquitous conversation between theory and practice, the bodily trade and spatial practice of boxing espouses a continual epistemological and ontological contestation, one which offers a locus for individual identity formations, while also providing a space for negotiating collective allegiances.

To then contextualize the examination within specific regional settings and place-based power dynamics, Chapter 3 turns specifically to the East Austin barrio, the city of Austin, and the state of Texas. To do so, I discuss the interviewees' early understanding of personal and collective identities as impacted by their socio-economic influences and possibilities in the barrio: why they choose amateur boxing as a leisure activity to begin with; and how they

delineate their lives within the ethnoracial and class-based demarcation of the city as a whole. Moreover, through the life-story interviews, newspaper sources, and Texas's prizefight legislation, we learn of a vibrant boxing tradition in the eastside of town, while the capital city unveils itself as the bureaucratic and legislative center of the state's pugilistic practice, with momentous financial, judicial, and ethical significance in shaping up the sport and its entrenched ethnoracial mores. Within the existing social hierarchies, race, we will see, comes to derive meanings through space, while space becomes racialized through geographically determined boundaries of socio-cultural concentrations of power in place, evoking such everyday parameters as ethnoracial segregation and exclusionary class and gender politics in U.S. society at large.

Indeed, when considering Texas's prizefighting within the larger context of the nation, we discover that not only is U.S. boxing marked by increasing *Latinization*, but it is also experiencing a radical shift in its geographic demarcation. Because Latinos have the highest regional concentration in the U.S. Southwest, more and more boxers and fight audiences—evidently—come out of such states as Arizona, California, New Mexico, or Texas, and, in fact, the Lone Star State alone—with its size, location, and demographics—ranks second (after California) in the number of professional boxing matches conducted in all of the nation today, while also frequently dominating the numbers of pay-per-view fights purchased on TV. This phenomenon, then, has quite remarkable

ramifications, as it indicates that prizefighting *per se* is currently diverging from its Northeastern origins into a distinctly Southwestern phenomenon.

Added to the above, yet another striking aspect of Texas's prizefighting is that Austin happens to be home to an exceptionally vibrant women's boxing scene, and Chapter 4 thus offers a case *par excellence* to analyze some of the recent gender developments within professional boxing worldwide. Accordingly, my discussions with both male and female boxers illustrate how the fighters themselves conceptualize their lives and athletic opportunities within the occupational culture of the sport today; how they perceive their work regimen and daily routines amidst the social relations and business practices at the gym; and how these dynamics play out in their own identity formations. Thus, we learn that the Latino fighters' early encounters in the barrio differ significantly from their experiences at the commercial boxing gyms which, as workplaces, have entirely new sets of hierarchies, principles, and social organization from their amateur boxing days. Moreover, we find out how professional boxing matches—also known as "fight cards"—serve as intriguing sites for identity contestations for the combatants and various other people involved, as the center-stage of the ring turns into a spectacular space for deciphering personal and collective allegiances. Women fighters' presence in boxing, in particular, has prompted intense ideological contestation amongst fight insiders and in media texts within the past ten years. A range of discursive strategies, including gendered stereotyping,

ethnoracialized and class-based profiling, and sexualized signifying reveal larger tensions with regard to what types of femininity and masculinity are preferred and promoted in particular sporting contexts; as well as what women and men can legitimately do with their everyday lives and bodies to begin with. The implicitly and explicitly competing narratives, then, come to reflect the state of flux that characterizes contemporary professional boxing, echoing the remarkably dynamic ethnoracial, gender, and class relations in the social space of the gym, the spectacle of the fight card, and on TV.

To then connect the Texas fighters' experiences and the regional pugilistic practices back to the framework of the global prizefight industry, Chapter 5 brings up a range of economic, judicial, and health considerations endemic to the sport as a bodily labor, a profitable business, and a political tool. Drawing on various governmental, judicial, and medical discourses surrounding the policy aspects of boxing within the past fifty years, I specifically focus on two pieces of legislation concerning the basic safety and business practices of prizefighting in the United States, the "Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996" and the "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000," both of which have been enacted into federal law during the past decade. These legal measures have, as a result, brought about some substantial changes to the traditionally unregulated pugilistic practices, and some of the sport's larger labor grievances have been eased by the enforcement of basic standardized safety procedures for the first time in the history of the sport.

In addition, the laws have produced some generally accepted business and ranking principles, as well as provided legal resources to the athletes themselves, long subject to rampant worker-exploitation, corrupt business practices, and lack of employee benefits. However, not only have the sport's various policy considerations exposed some of its backroom maneuverings, but their embedded discourses have contributed to the changing identity of the sport itself, while revealing basic assumptions about prizefighters as worker-athletes in Texas, the United States, and the power dynamics of worldwide socio-economic networks alike. Thus, alongside these everyday consequences and subtle ideological underpinnings, professional boxing *per se* continuously negotiates its shifting identity as an "American" enterprise, while it also raises larger questions about the rights of individuals and collectives within the global context, simultaneously offering a perspective to an American Studies that increasingly seeks to query its own academic identity from multidimensional disciplinary, methodological, and geographic viewpoints.

By way of a final introductory remark, I would like to express a central premise that sums up my entire approach toward and analysis of professional boxing. Since the dissertation hopes to establish a connection between "ordinary" people and academia at large, it is essential to call attention to the following very last point: namely, that I do not wish to depict, study, or represent boxing as a symbol of or allegory for something else. Even though I certainly agree that the

one-on-one combat is a powerful image and may invite various thought-provoking readings, I would prefer leaving any such interpretations up to boxing aficionados' imaginations. Indeed, even though many a fight scribe has speculated as to what boxing emblemizes—that it is, for example, a metaphor for the condition of humankind; that it is a morality play between good and evil; or that it is a symbolic struggle over hubris and nemesis—my examination absolutely and necessarily begins from the basic notion that the battle is extremely *real* for the combatants who daily step into the ring to do the bodily work. What is more, with all the pain, sweat, and effort invested in training and the actual fight, deep down every fighter knows that some of them might never come back from the ring, a fact which may inspire poignant symbolic resonance, but which always has literal consequences for the boxers themselves. For that reason, I am in complete agreement with Joyce Carol Oates when she writes: "No one whose interest in boxing began as mine did in childhood…is likely to think of boxing as a symbol of something beyond itself, as if its uniqueness were merely an abbreviation, or iconographic."[7] Akin to such a disposition, the focus of the following pages, then, will be on the very *substantiality* of professional boxing—in all its myriad facets—for its practitioners in its everyday contexts, always tangible with various identity ramifications. For, ultimately, after all the behind-the-scenes intricacies are said and done, and the bell rings, the fighters in the ring still face each other

[77] Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (New York: Ecco Press, 2002), p. 4.

alone; and the boxing match—as such—is only ever between those two individuals.

# Chapter 1 Ethnoracial Identities: A Historical Perspective

> From Tom Molineaux, the doughty slave undone by the self-righteous Anglo Saxons, to Muhammad Ali, whose arrogance was a red, black, and green flag of hope to the brothers and a slap in the face of the white-dominated boxing commissions and state power structures, the history of fist fighting in England and America is a study of our social and racial convulsions, of synthesis and antithesis fighting it out inside the ropes with brine-hardened maulies and boxing gloves, and outside the ring with the politics of the streets.
>
> Budd Schulberg, *Loser and Still Champion*

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, U.S. prizefighting has developed as an urban phenomenon, an emphatically—although not exclusively—male, working class, and minority practice. With its genesis in 18th century English pugilism, through the heyday of U.S. bare-knuckle fighting within two thirds of the 19th century, gloved boxing established its "modern" conventions in the late 19th century.[1] Ever since its early

[1] According to prizefight historians, pugilism was introduced to the ancient Olympic Games in 688 BC, 92 years after the first Olympics. It disappeared from 500-1700, and reappeared again in 18th century England in the form of bare-knuckle fighting, with James Figg acknowledged as the first Champion in 1719. The first recognized bare-knuckle bout in the United States was between Jacob Hyer and Tom Beasley in 1816, and a much publicized championship was between Tom Hyer and "Yankee" Sullivan in 1849. (Boxing was also practiced recreationally among slaves, but few records remain of the fights.) The origins of gloved prizefighting as we know it today—as opposed to bare-knuckle fighting—is generally linked with the emergence of the Marquis of Queensberry Rules in 1867 which instituted the basis for gloved fighting, with most of its rules applied in contemporary boxing. However, the first heavyweight championship under the Queensberry rules was not fought until 1892 when Jim Corbett defeated the bare-knuckle champion John L. Sullivan. On prizefight historiography, see Egan, Pierce, *Boxiana; or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism* (London: G. Smeeton, 1812); Nat Fleischer and Sam Andre, *A Pictorial History of Boxing* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1959); Gilbert Odd, *Encyclopedia of Boxing* (New York: Crescent Books, 1983); Peter Arnold, *History of Boxing* (Secaucus, N.J.: Chartwell Books, 1985); Eliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prizefighting in America*

U.S. origins, pugilism has epitomized a bastion of immigrants' rags-to-riches sagas, a rare stronghold of pride for those at the bottom of the nation's socio-economic ladder. S. Kirson Wineberg and Henry Arond's 1952 report on the prominence of prizefighters in the *American Journal of Sociology* explicates the shifting ethnoracial tendencies in 20th century United States. Until 1916, fighter numbers were dominated by the Irish; by 1928 Jewish fighters had become the predominant group; by 1936 Italians had taken over the list, only to be surpassed by "Negro" boxers by 1948, a year that also saw the appearance of the category "Mexican" for the first time, in the third place.[2]

Today, professional boxing is overwhelmingly dominated by African American and Latino practitioners, with Latinos controlling the lighter weight categories and African American fighters heading the divisions from middleweight upwards. Boxing has, undoubtedly, offered tangible means to improve individual socio-economic standing, while bolstering a sense of immigrant dignity, collective community, or national allegiance, while it has also, in critical historical moments, been utilized for domestic political strategies in the service of larger ideological agendas. Various countries have, in fact, used boxers as advocates for domestic relations or international schemas, and the United States, in particular, has employed fighters to showcase ostensible battles for

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(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), and Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

ethnoracial egalitarianism. Calling attention to the political and ideological ramifications of prizefighting for individuals and collectives alike, I will delineate this historical examination around the following underlying questions: Which bodies are acceptable in certain everyday sporting spaces? Which bodies can legitimately express physical aggression in particular places? What types of bodies speak to ideal physical notions of "Americanness"? Which bodies are chosen to represent the nation? What constitutes acceptable combative wo/manliness?

As a point of departure, it bears underscoring that prizefighting is always intrinsically linked with any existing social tendencies; that *no sport*, as Susan Birrell and C.L. Cole aptly remind us, ever stands "outside the economic, cultural, political, and theoretical conditions in which it takes form and reform; sport and the bodies that stand at its center are always made and remade within particular histories and places."[3] Following in the footsteps of the nation, then, prizefighting has assumed characteristics of a fundamentally "American" enterprise in various respects. Cherishing a belief in U.S. exceptionalism, the sport is structured around a *laissez-faire* principle that insists on a loose central organization, autonomous regional governing bodies, and minimal central security networks, while it valorizes a Horatio Alger-type self-help ideology, complete with manly heroism,

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[2] S. Kirson Weinberg and Henry Arond, "The Occupational Culture of the Boxer," *American Journal of Sociology*, No. 57 (March 1952), pp. 460-469.

pecuniary gain, and social mobility as its obtainable perks. Budd Schulberg proposes that professional boxing may, in effect, serve well to be perceived,

> not as a mirror but as a magnifying glass of our society. It is hardly accidental that out of the poor Irish immigration of a people being brutalized by their British overlords, we have a wave of great Irish fighters…As the Irish moved up into the mainstream there was less economic need to use the prize ring as their way out and up. The wave of Jewish boxers followed exactly the same pattern, and so did the Italians. The almost total domination of the ring today by African-Americans and Hispanics speaks directly to the continued economic deprivation and discrimination of large sections of our inner-city communities.[4]

Schulberg's metaphor of boxing as a "magnifying glass" is pertinent for our analysis, as the sport synchronizes the nation's ethnoracial hierarchies, always necessarily echoing where and how people, at any one time, can or cannot belong.

Indeed, the nation's self-determination was, as historians and race scholars have in recent years frequently pointed out, founded on a 1790 Naturalization Law which granted U.S. citizenship to "white" persons only; its post-bellum realities were rooted in the "separate but equal" doctrine enforced by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision that established *de jure* segregation; and while the Treaty of the Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 granted "white" legal status to Mexicans in the Southwest, it failed to bring about *de facto* citizenship rights to many U.S. Mexicans.[5] In consequence, Richard Dyer writes, "the idea of

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[3] Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, eds. *Women, Sport, and Culture* (University of Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1994), p. vi.

[4] Quoted in Allen Bodner, *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), p. xi.

[5] The Walter-McCarran Act of 1952 eliminated the racial basis for U.S. naturalization.

being an 'American' has long sat uneasily with ideas of being any other colour than white."[6] Yet Grant Farred makes the crucial observation that socio-political marginalization "never means that disenfranchised communities do not participate in public discourses; it simply means that their articulations are far more likely to emerge from informal, and frequently unacknowledged, public locales—and personages."[7] The pugilistic podium has, throughout its existence, served as one such forum for individual and collective public participation *par excellence*; and this chapter attempts to trace the sport's gendered and class-based ethnoracial tendencies to contextualize contemporary Latino fighting *per se* within the power dynamics of U.S. and worldwide prizefight networks. For it is only "within a reflexive historical framework," to borrow from Michael Messner, that "we can begin to understand how sport (and culture in general) is a dynamic social space where dominant (class, ethnic etc.) ideologies are perpetuated as well as challenged and contested."[8] Indeed, to review the ethnoracial history of U.S. prizefighting is, ultimately, to probe into a persistent American Studies quandary, namely: "Who or What is an 'American'"?

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[6] Richard Dyer, "The White Man's Muscles" in Rachel Adams and David Savran, eds. *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), p. 264. See also his *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[7] Grant Farred, *What's My Name?: Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 23.

[8] Michael A. Messner, "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain," in Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, eds. *Women, Sport, and Culture* (University of Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1994), pp. 66-67.

## WO/MANLY "WHITENESS"

Mid-way through the 19th century—before gloved prizefighting had taken shape and interracial boxing had become a reality—the ethnoracial battle in pugilism (and elsewhere in society) was over which groups of people could claim a stake in "whiteness" and, hence, assume an "American" identity. David Roediger argues in his groundbreaking *The Wages of Whiteness* that the first sixty-five years of the 19th century was a foundational period in constructing U.S. working-class, male-specific "whiteness," a privileged ethnoracial category distinguished from a derogatory notion of "blackness."[9] At the time, pugilism was overwhelmingly dominated by Irish men; and, according to Steven Riess's estimation, over 70 percent of bare-knuckle fighters in New York between 1840 and 1860 were either Irish-born or second-generation Irish; between 1870 and 1920 prizefighting had become "totally dominated by Irish pugilists."[10]

Two seminal boxing historiographies, Elliott J. Gorn's *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prizefighting in America* and Michael Isenberg's *John Sullivan and*

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[9] David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991). See also Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990). On middle-class construction of masculinity, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); and J.A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

*His America*, delve into early pugilism by examining the sport through a particular working-class masculine sensibility, one endemic to 19th century urbanization, class formation, and folk recreation. Defining his work as "social, labor, and gender" history, Gorn conceptualizes pugilism as a valorous form of masculine labor: "Prizefighting engendered a male aesthetic. For the fancy, a good bout was an artistic idealization of reality, displaying manliness, fair play, and finely refined physical skills."[11] Isenberg, in turn, argues that John L. Sullivan—an Irish-born champion from 1882 to 1892—comes to exemplify the era in need of such a hero: "John L. Sullivan emerged as the first significant mass cultural hero in American life. He was not merely a celebrity, a person known for being known… But his deeds were controversial and conversational at the same time. People *talked about* John L. Sullivan in ways that they had not talked about, say, Lincoln."[12] With a habitual challenge to "lick any son-of-a-bitch in the house" Sullivan, without a doubt, reinforced the ideal of masculine whiteness, explicit in his 1892 public battle cry: "[I]n this challenge I include all fighters—first come, first served—who are white. I will not fight a negro. I never have and never shall."[13] With a firm determination to climb up the nation's "whiteness" ladder—inclusive of Irish Catholics on the premise of the exclusion of blacks—

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[10] Steven Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 19 & 110.
[11] Gorn, *The Manly Art*, p. 27.
[12] Isenberg, p. 13.
[13] Ibid., p. 301.

"The Boston Strongboy," to be sure, epitomizes the era's racial dynamics in which "whiteness" alone stands for ideal masculine prowess. While Gorn's and Isenberg's works are important in explicating prizefighting as a locus for class and ethnoracial formations in 19th century United States, their focus on gender falls short in one significant aspect: they both fail to acknowledge that prizefighting was not then, as it is not now, solely a masculine practice.[14] Although unbeknownst to many, women fighters have, throughout the existence of modern pugilism, had a role—albeit a minor one—within U.S. prizefighting.

In actual fact, already during John L. Sullivan's days, a cohort of women frequently stepped into the prize ring to take measure of each other. Susan Cahn records such a boxing bout between one Nell Saunders and Rose Harland in New York City as early as 1876; allegedly, the fight took place for the prize of a silver butter dish.[15] In 1884, the *National Police Gazette*, a popular source of boxing reporting at the time, recognized Nellie Stewart of Norfolk, Virginia, as the "Female Champion of the World."[16] The following year, Ann Lewis of Cleveland,

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[14] See also Gorn's article, "The Meanings of Prizefighting" in S.W. Pope, ed., *The New American Sport History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), pp. 225-250 where he, in fact, touches on 19th century gender issues and even acknowledges the existence of women fighters in a quotation, yet he chooses not to deal with them.

[15] See Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sports* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

[16] In the absence of boxing commissions in the late nineteenth century, newspapers—e.g., the *National Police Gazette*, founded in 1845 by Richard K. Fox—became the main source of advertising, promoting, and reporting of boxing matches. See Thomas M. Croak, "The Professionalization of Prizefighting: Pittsburgh at the Turn of the Century," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, V. 62, No. 4 (October 1979) and Riess's *City Games*, Chapter 2.

Ohio won the title after issuing a challenge—*à la* Sullivan—through the *Gazette* to fight anybody for a thousand dollars. The paper described her bodily demeanor in fascinating detail: "Her form is as straight as an arrow. She has a pleasing face, her lips are thin and firm, and her eyes clear and piercing. The muscles of her arms and chest are as hard as iron."[17] The first advertised women's championship bout took place in Buffalo, New York in 1888 between "24 year old Miss Alice Leary, a brunette, and 20 year old Miss Hattie Leslie, a redhead," with Leslie winning the bout by a seventh round knockout.[18] However, due to the late 19th century climate of social reform movements, prizefighting was largely outlawed and, as a consequence, pushed either underground or to the margins of society; it was organized outside of mainstream sporting venues, in places such as saloons, brothels, variety theaters, and carnival circuits. Within these marginal spaces, the social history of U.S. prizefighting—in print and otherwise—came to demonstrate a struggle over civic inclusion, specifically in terms of gender, class, and ethnoracial hierarchies.[19]

One can certainly understand that fighting women's bodies were out of control within established 19th century gender orders; that their aggressive

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[17] Lew Eskin, "Complete History of Women's Boxing: Part I," *Boxing Illustrated*, Vol. 16, No. 8 (August 1974), pp. 29-34.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Janet M. Davis's *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) offers an excellent insight into turn-of-the-century circus as a locus for gender contestations. "Circus women's performance," Davis writes, "celebrated female power, thereby representing a startling alternative to contemporary social

performances in the prize ring violated conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. Yet the sheer fact that women took part in the pugilistic scene challenges the understanding of prizefighting as an exclusively "masculine" form of labor, simultaneously complicating the essentialist conflation of 19th century physical prowess with "manliness" alone. Whether female fighters' presence in the fistic trade has been regarded as irrelevant, anomalous, or freakish, the insistence on their bodily absence, of necessity, signifies both a social and an epistemological exclusion from the "all-male" domain. Such a position cannot be deemed but ideological, although not only is it biased; it is factually erroneous. Be that as it may, women fighters' conspicuous banishment from prizefight literature today suggests an ongoing sense of disturbance with regard to a desirable gender order in sporting practices, if not in academia and society at large.

### "WHITENESS" VS. "BLACKNESS"

If 19th century gender histories of prizefighting have categorically focused on "manliness" alone and have, thus, rendered fighting women invisible, the ethnoracial history of 20th century pugilism has signified a persistent "white-black" dichotomy, with the heavyweight crown always its ultimate physical apex. "Americanness" has frequently connoted either *manly* "whiteness" or "blackness," what Budd Schulberg describes in the epigraph as "synthesis and

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norms." Moreover, "the world of circus was one of male gender flux, with androgynous acrobats, gender-bending clowns, players in drag, and animals dressed as men." Pp. 83 & 143.

antithesis" doing battle inside the boxing ring. Indeed, nowhere is this binary struggle chronicled more lucidly than in Schulberg's 1972 *Loser and Still Champion*, which depicts heavyweight boxing (in a distinctly DuBoisian manner) as a racial "Fight of the Century," emblemized by a continual search for a "Great White Hope," with the fight always remaining the same as the centuries move on.[20] Indeed, ever since an 1810 boxing match between "Britain's [white] pride" Tom Cribb and [black] American "plantation champion" Tom Molineaux; through [black] Jack Johnson's devastating victory against [white] Jim Jeffries in 1910; to [black] Joe Louis's knockout over Nazi Germany's [white] Max Schmeling in 1938; up until Cassius Clay's upset victory over Sonny Liston—and his consequent revolutionizing of racial categories among all-black contenders in the 1960s and 1970s—Schulberg convincingly traces each decade's heavyweight championships as corresponding to their shifting racial currents. Although a separate "Negro" heavyweight championship division existed in the United States during the first three decades of the 20th century, interracial boxing matches were left up to the discretion of white fighters themselves; and on the infrequent occasion they thus chose to do, they could circumvent the fistic segregation by staging title bouts abroad.

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[20] Budd Schulberg, *Loser and Still Champion: Muhammad Ali* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), p. 156. Thomas Hietala's recent *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002) organizes itself around the same idea, but whether there is a connection between the two works is unclear, since Hietala does not cite Schulberg as a source.

From the first modern interracial heavyweight championship between Jack Johnson and Irish-born Tommy Burns onward, matchmakers were quick to take advantage of racialized promotions. Thus, well before Johnson defeated Burns in the first black and white championship bout in front of a Sydney crowd of 30,000 on December 26, 1908, promoter Tex Rickard had begun, as Al-Tony Gilmore points out, "his publicity campaign by manufacturing stories of interest about the fighters, always using the theme of a black-white confrontation."[21] By the time of Johnson's title defense against Jim Jeffries two years later—on July 4, 1910—in Reno, Nevada, racialization had become the sole promotional strategy for all parties involved, from matchmakers and journalists to the combatants themselves. Accordingly, Gail Bederman writes, the discourse surrounding the fight frequently intersected racial dominance and manhood: "From its inception, then, the Johnson-Jeffries fight was framed as a contest to see which race had produced the most powerful, virile man. Jeffries was known as the 'Hope of the White Race,' while Johnson was dubbed the 'Negroes' Deliverer.'"[22] Explicit about his racial agenda, Jeffries himself publicly proclaimed: "I am going into this fight for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a Negro."[23]

Johnson's 15th round knockout victory over Jeffries had tremendous consequences, for it instigated, as sport historians have abundantly described,

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[21] Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975), p. 33.
[22] Bederman, p. 2.

racial riots, mob-violence, and overall mayhem throughout the United States. To quote Randy Roberts's account:

> In Little Rock two blacks were killed by whites; in Houston a white cut a black to death; in Roanoke six blacks were critically beaten; in Wilmington, Delaware, a group of blacks attacked a white, and whites retaliated with a "lynching bee"; in Atlanta a black ran "amuck" with a knife; in Washington, D.C., two whites were fatally stabbed by blacks; in New York, one black was beaten to death and scores were injured; in Pueblo, Colorado, thirty people were injured in a race riot; and in Shreveport, Louisiana, three blacks were killed by white assailants. Every section of the county experienced the racial violence and the Johnson-Jeffries fight was named as the catalyst.[24]

Prizefighting, as a result, became increasingly unpopular, and Johnson's championship galvanized social and religious groups to attack it with evermore vigor, including campaigns against showing any of the fight's films.[25] Writes Mike Marqusee: "Johnson was the white man's nightmare come alive. Not only did he beat up white heroes in the ring (sporting his trademark grin), he dallied with white women out of the ring and made no secret of it. It seemed that by brute force he had upturned all the conventions of race and gender which governed America."[26]

Even so, as Steven Riess observes, the anti-prizefight sentiment was to remain momentary, for the shifting tide in the global geopolitical ambience in the

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 24.
[25] Gilmore, p. 75.
[26] Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 21.

next few years to come presented fight folks with an unexpected ally. As U.S. participation in World War I became more imminent, boxing began to receive increasingly positive official publicity as an integral part of soldiers' training for combat.[27] Promoter Tex Rickard, too, had an astute premonition about the impact of the new state of affairs:

> "Governor Whitman says boxing is through forever in the United States." Tex said, "You can say for me that Governor Whitman is all wrong. If the United States gets into this war, they'll be teaching every soldier how to box, and when the war is over, you'll see the biggest crowds you ever seed [sic] wantin' to see the new champions fight. Why fellers, you'll see million-dollar gates."[28]

Indeed, the looming war—both on and off the battlefield—soon swung the ever-shifting boxing barometer once again to its favor; though equally important, the sport's popularity was aided and abetted when Jess Willard defeated Jack Johnson, the then exiled taboo-violator, for the heavyweight championship title in Havana on April 5, 1915.[29] Such were the racial ramifications of the particular boxing match that, according to the *New York Times*, Willard's victory "restored pugilistic supremacy to the white race," which it certainly did, for twenty-two

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[27] Steven Riess, "Only the Ring Was Square: Frankie Carbo and the Underworld Control of American Boxing," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (May, 1998), pp. 29-52.

[28] Maxine Elliott Rickard, *Everything Happened to Him: The Story of Tex Richard* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1936), p. 263.

[29] Johnson's most scandalous behavior was generally considered to be his amorous affairs with white women, and he was charged with the Mann Act (an inter-state transportation of women for "immoral" purposes) in 1912 which led to his seven-year exile in Europe.

years would have to pass before another African American contender would be given a chance to fight for the heavyweight title.[30]

Meanwhile, the 1920s were characterized by an all-white heavyweight championship scene, culminating in Jack Dempsey's (William Harrison Dempsey) victory over Jess Willard on July 4, 1919. Budd Schulberg describes the new social ambience: "The war was forgotten, prosperity was on every corner, the market was a game you played for fun and profit, and in this carefree swinging atmosphere, Jack Dempsey came into his own, came to be loved, starring in Hollywood, squiring movie stars, marrying Estelle Taylor."[31] According to Randy Roberts, Dempsey was—just like Sullivan before him—a man for his times. A onetime hobo, Dempsey stood for the twenties' ideal of individualism: he became a symbol for yet another notion of "American masculinity"; he espoused an air of a Hollywood *persona*; and above all, he became an unprecedented box-office magnet.[32]

Assisted with the emergence of radio broadcasting of fights and the founding of *The Ring* magazine, manager Jack Kearns and promoter Tex Rickard turned prizefighting—*via* Dempsey—into *big* business spectacle, complete with mass-scale stadiums and stellar ticket sales. Writes Bruce Evensen: "By the

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[30] Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), p. 202.
[31] Schulberg, p. 20.
[32] Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler*. See also Roger Kahn, *A Flame of Pure Fire: Jack Dempsey and the Roaring '20s* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999).

twenties, an estimated twelve million Americans watched boxing matches or fought themselves…Kearns hawked the unassuming youth to newspaper offices throughout the city and used personal publicity to force fights with local challengers. 'Like a strip-teaser,' Kearns observed, I always figured you couldn't get anywhere without exposure."[33] With at times debatable level of opposition—and an occasional whisper of foul play—"The Manassa Mauler"—gained fame as a knockout sensation in and out of the prize ring. Defending his title against "white" non-American opponents—such as French Georges Carpentier and Argentine Luis Firpo—Jack Dempsey managed to sustain the racial status quo within pugilism and society by, throughout his career, refusing to "pay any attention to a 'negro challenger.'"[34]

However, because of the racial ambience that thus glorified exclusive "whiteness," another group of people low down on the socio-economic ladder got a chance to try out their luck in the fistic line of work. Allen Bodner's *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* chronicles the brief boom of Jewish boxing within the first three decades of the 20th century, recording no less than twenty-six Jewish champions between the years 1910-1940.[35] With such poor second-generation Jewish fighters as Joe Bernstein, Leach Cross (Louis Wallach), Al McCoy (Harry Rudolph), Harry Harris, Abe Attel, Benny Leonard (Benjamin Leiner), and Maxie

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[33] Bruce J. Evensen, *When Dempsey Fought Tunney: Heroes, Hokum, and Storytelling in the Jazz Age* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), p. xiv.
[34] Roberts, *Jack Dempsey*, p.143.

Rosenbloom, Jews had become the dominant group of immigrant boxers by 1928.[36] Attempting to gain momentum in the spirit of their predecessors, up-and-coming Jewish boxers, in fact, found a remarkable strategy to spice up their image by adopting *Irish* ring-names. Writes Steven Riess: "Al Mc Coy, like many other Jewish prize fighters, such as 'Ring' O'Leary and 'Mushy' Callahan, fought under a pseudonym to escape parental disapproval and advance his career. The conventional wisdom then was that only Irishmen made good fighters, and thus ambitious young fighters chose Irish names in hope of gaining public recognition."[37] Indeed, many of them did for the duration of a few decades, but their prizefight spell was to remain fleeting. By 1938, Jewish boxers had already sunk back to the third place in the occupational statistics, and after the Second World War, Jews would mainly be seen active in the business side of the sport, in the capacity of promoters (e.g., Mike Jacobs, who signed Joe Louis), writers (e.g., Nat Fleischer, founder of *The Ring* magazine), or entrepreneurs (e.g., Jacob Colomb, founder of *Everlast* boxing gear).

As the years rolled into the 1930s, then, societal atmosphere changed yet again drastically. With the days of prosperity over, and the hard times hitting

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[35] Allen Bodner, *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997).

[36] The most famous Jewish fighter, lightweight Benny Leonard, held his championship title for eight years, from 1917 to 1925. Leonard is also known for the fact that "he ducked no one as a champion, unlike Jack Dempsey and others who drew the color line." See Steven Riess, "A Fighting Chance: The Jewish-American Boxing Experience, 1890-1940," *American Jewish History*, Vol. LXXIV, No. 1-4 (September, 1984 to June 1985), pp.223-254. See also Peter Levine, "Oy Such a Fighter!: Boxing and the American Jewish Experience" in S.W. Pope, ed., *The New American Sport History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), pp. 251-283.

everybody, yet another global conflict was looming around the corner; and the pugilistic power players, too, would have to re-evaluate the new situation. In his *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope*, Richard Bak discusses Joe Louis's (Joseph Louis Barrows) career and significance as a racial symbol in the United States from 1935 to 1948 in the geopolitical context of the Second World War.[38] In the early 1930s, when Louis was still an up-and-coming promise, trainer Jack Blackburn was pessimistic about his prospects within the existing racial dynamics: "'the heavyweight division for a Negro is hardly likely. The white man ain't too keen on it. You have to really be something to get anywhere. If you really ain't gonna be another Jack Johnson, you got some hope. White man hasn't forgotten that fool nigger with his white women, acting like he owned the world."[39]

Taking heed of Johnson's notorious demise, Louis's handlers carefully crafted a public image which was to portray him as a modest, humble, and an overall unassuming man. Bak cites Louis's athletic and social code of conduct, also known as John Roxborough's "written set of commandments":

> Joe was never to have his picture taken with a white woman. He was never to enter a night club alone. He wouldn't participate in any soft fights. He wouldn't participate in any fixed fights. He was never to gloat over a fallen opponent nor speak negatively about him before or after a fight. He

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[37] Riess, "A Fighting Chance," p. 235.
[38] Richard Bak, *Joe Louis: The Great Black Hope* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 1996). See also Chris Mead, *Champion: Joe Louis; Black Hero in White America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985).
[39] Ibid., p. 49.

> was to maintain a deadpan expression in front of the cameras. He was to live and fight clean.[40]

The image-crafting proved worthwhile, for not only was Louis given a chance to compete in an interracial heavyweight boxing bout against Max Baer, he was chosen to represent the United States abroad; and, in due course, he would be given the chance to fight for a heavyweight world championship title. Budd Schulberg ironically comments: "maybe the New Deal and hard times had turned our minds around, but all of a sudden it seemed good to have a black champion of the world."[41] Indeed, as sport historians have amply demonstrated, Louis's was a career intrinsically linked with his symbolic role as a representative for U.S. democracy abroad.

According to Bak, Louis first became a national emblem in the summer of 1935 when he fought Italian Primo Carnera in a volatile Italy that was receiving worldwide criticism for its invasion of Ethiopia; his domestic impact was felt when he became the first black fighter—since Johnson—to win an interracial world heavyweight championship against James J. Braddock on June 22, 1937; and his major global significance assumed meaning in his world championship title defense against Nazi Germany's Max Schmeling on June 22, 1938.[42] The fight's stakes were high, for Schmeling had defeated Louis in their first non-

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[40] Ibid., pp. 74-75.
[41] Schulberg, p. 22.
[42] Tiger Flowers was the first black fighter to gain the middleweight world championship in defeating Harry Greb on February 26, 1926.

championship encounter two years earlier and now, within the context of the global war, he was hailed as a symbol for American democracy and racial egalitarianism, while Schmeling was depicted as representing Nazi nationalism and racism.[43] In the words of Mike Marqusee: "Louis was made aware by the press, the churches, the president and the Communist Party that knocking Schmeling's block off was his duty to America, the cause of anti-fascism and the 'Negro.'"[44]

Carlton Moss's radio commentary before the bout certainly reveals the enormous significance of the prizefight: "This time it's a fight between nation and nation. A fight for the real championship of the world, to determine which way of life shall survive, their way or our way."[45] As a result, Thomas Hietala argues, Louis's victory by a first-round knockout had remarkable ramifications, both actual and symbolic: "By war's end, Joe Louis had become a national icon. Early in his career, writers had labeled him 'a credit to his race.' When he defeated Schmeling and joined the army, writers shifted their emphasis from color to

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[43] See Anthony O. Edmonds, "The Second Louis-Schmeling Fight: Sport, Symbol, and Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 7 (Summer 1973), pp. 42-50; Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, "Multifarious Hero: Joe Luis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945," *Journal of Sport History* Vol. 10, No. 3 (Winter, 1983), pp. 5-25; and Frederic Cople Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali" in Donald Spivey, ed., *Sport in America: New Historical Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 145-192. See also Jill M. Dupont's dissertation, "'The Self in the Ring, the Self in Society': Boxing and American Culture from Jack Johnson to Joe Luis" (University of Chicago, 2000), which explores how ideas about race are constructed through different fights in specific historical moments.

[44] Mike Marqusee, "Sport and Stereotype: From Role Model to Muhammad Ali," *Race and Class*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (April-June 1995), p. 6.

[45] Bak, p. 226.

country, proclaiming Louis as a credit to his nation."[46] "The Brown Bomber" did, to be sure, become a national icon; he had a momentous function in carving space for other African American athletes ("Without Joe, would there have been a Jackie?" Hietala asks); and his role as a world champion enabled signifying "blackness" into meaning an inclusive sense of "Americanness" as a national identity.[47] Even so, Eldridge Cleaver takes issue with such citizenship espousal by black athletes in a discriminatory society, heavily criticizing prizefighters' role as ostensible goodwill ambassadors in what turns out to be detrimental racial politics in society: "There is no doubt that white America will accept a black champion, applaud and reward him, as long as there is no 'white hope' in sight. But what white America demands in her black champions is a brilliant, powerful body and a dull, bestial mind—a tiger in the ring and a pussycat outside the ring."[48] Indeed, from Joe Louis onward, black heavyweight fighters' predicament has culminated, as Grant Farred points out, in a continual contestation over "whiteness":

> [B]lack boxers have consistently had to negotiate between endorsing, as was most often the case, or challenging the white status quo… Even as America's armed forces were divided along racial lines and the country's segregation policies disturbingly echoed Hitler's strict ethnic categories, the nominal Sergeant Joe Louis stood…as a symbol of American patriotism, (precarious) ideological unity, and his society's commitment to successful "racial integration."[49]

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[46] Hietala, p. 293. In addition to his enlistment, Louis appeared in *The Negro Soldier*, a U.S. propaganda film about African Americans in the military. See, War Department Special Service Division Army Service Forces, *The Negro Soldier* (Alpha Video, 1995).
[47] Ibid., p. 318.
[48] Elridge Cleaver, "Lazarus Come Forth" in *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 92.
[49] Grant Farred, "Feasting on Foreman: The Problematics of Postcolonial Identification," *Camera Obscura*, No. 39 (September, 1996), pp. 53-76.

However, as the Second World War neared its end, the U.S. fight against Nazism and fascism in Europe brought its own racial inequities under increasing worldwide scrutiny. Receiving its most articulate expression in Gunnar Myrdal's research team's 1944 publication, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, the study exposed an intrinsic discrepancy between U.S. egalitarian ideals and everyday practices, arguing that the ethos of "liberty, equality, justice, and democracy" was contradicted by the nation's racial realities—its ongoing segregation, poverty, and powerlessness. The root and cause of the dilemma, the study claimed, was a deep-seated "doctrine of anti-amalgamation":

> Considerable efforts are directed toward "Americanizing" all groups of alien origin. But in regard to the colored peoples, the American policy is the reverse. They are excluded from assimilation… They are more helplessly imprisoned as a subordinate caste in America [and] the caste line between whites and Negroes is based upon, and defended by, an anti-amalgamation doctrine. [50]

As a "solution" to the problem, in contrast, Myrdal introduced his own doctrine of "amalgamation," a conviction that began to resonate widely in and out of academia throughout the 1950s. The decade, in effect, became characterized by a zealous belief in racial "universalism," one that valorized "assimilation" as a socio-economic panacea: its emphasis was on "ethnicity" as a focus of social scrutiny, while it deemphasized "race" as an element of "ethnicity" and, in so

doing, it reinforced "whiteness" as a seemingly neutral, unmarked ethnoracial category. This belief in "assimilation" did, nonetheless, bring about some positive social changes, with its best-known manifestation being the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that deemed school segregation unconstitutional, with substantial cultural ramifications throughout the United States.[51] In Texas, for example, H. "Sporty" Harvey, an African American prizefighter, used *Brown* to challenge the state's 1933 prizefight law which prohibited boxing "between any person of the Caucasian, or 'white' race and one of the African or 'negro' race."[52] Although the Texas Court of Civil Appeals had turned down the case a year earlier on the grounds that "mixed prizefights threatened stable race relations," on February 24, 1955, Harvey was successful in arguing that the prizefight law violated his civil rights—thus proving it unconstitutional—and he would go down in Texas history as "the first black man who ever legally fought a white man."[53]

In national prizefighting, Italian-born Rocky Marciano's (Rocco Marchegiano) ascendance to heavyweight championship also exemplified the shifting ethnoracial relations. As Russell Sullivan writes:

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[50] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944), p. 54.
[51] The decision overturned the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling that had legalized segregation.
[52] Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Boxing and Wrestling Law of Texas With Rules and Regulations*, 43rd Legislature, Chapter II, Section E.

> Only a few years before…[f]irst- or second-generation immigrants from Europe were not only defined by their ethnicity but also limited occupationally, educationally, economically, and otherwise. In the years after World War II, however…the Italians, Irish, and other new Americans of European descent were invited to join 'old stock' Americans at the table.[54]

Defeating Jersey Joe Walcott on September 23, 1952, Marciano—like Dempsey before him—personified "the [white] American Dream." Yet, Sullivan argues: "[a]s in society, the racial tension surrounding Marciano and his fights against black men remained very much beneath the surface. But it was there… Marciano was the Great White Hope. But no one trumpeted it—only because race relations were in a 'calm before the storm' phase."[55]

Indeed, with regard to the 1950s racial policies, Mary Dudziak reminds us that the decade's federal agendas were never isolated national issues alone; quite the contrary, they were inherently dictated by larger geopolitical considerations. Since the Cold War had divided world politics into two polar opposites, the U.S. agenda, Dudziak argues, was to unite its democratic forces in its own propaganda battle against a foreign foe; in other words, to prevent the spread of Communism.[56] Geoffrey Davison points out further that the Cold War turned

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[53] According to an anonymous source, the judge had privately admitted: "'I'd rule for the nigger, were it not for the heat I'd feel.'" Quoted in Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 185 86.

[54] Russell Sullivan, *Rocky Marciano: The Rock of His Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 4. For a unique insider's social commentary on prizefighting in the 1940s and 1950s, see also A.J. Liebling, *The Sweet Science* (New York: The Viking Press, 1956).

[55] Ibid., pp. 4-5.

[56] See Mary Dudziak, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative," *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 41 (November 1988), pp. 61-120.

sport into an increasingly powerful medium in the ideological contest to demonstrate national solidarity and world superiority: "The United States and the Soviet Union were unable to dominate the globe through the use of military force, and recruited political and cultural methods to increase their influence."[57] As a result, sport—among many other cultural arenas—became an explicit instrument of governmental policy, as the U.S. State Department launched its 1953 Sports Program whose purpose was to collaborate with foreign athletic teams, to provide assistance for foreign athletes, coaches, and "sports agency advisors" in governments abroad.[58] It would not take long, then, before athletes themselves would embrace the socio-cultural power embedded in their activities; and in the two decades to come, sport not only became a site for expressing individual and collective discontent, but prizefighting provided an overt forum for challenging racial relations, spectacularly manifested in Muhammad Ali's (Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr.) rise to the heavyweight throne. Indeed, Harry Edwards wrote in 1963: "The winds of revolt blow briskly through professional sport… Special mention is due Muhammad Ali. *For in a very real sense he is the saint of this revolution in sports*."[59]

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[57] Geoffrey J. Davison, "The Cold War and the Evolution of a Sports Consciousness in America," *Sporting Heritage* 1 (1995), pp. 91-103.
[58] Ibid., p. 93. See also Reinhold Wagnleitner, trans. Diana Wolf, "The Development of United States Cultural Foreign Policy," *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), pp. 46-83.
[59] Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 89. See also Douglas Hartmann, "The Politics of Race and Sport: Resistance and Domination in the 1968

While the 1960s saw daylight amidst a scorching cauldron of socio-political conflict, the United States found itself in the forefront of civil rights outcries and grassroots social movements. The previous decade's alleged racial harmony had turned into disillusionment; the assimilationist agenda had proven to be fundamentally unrealistic; and the ethnicity paradigm had become under attack as an utter failure in explicating ethnoracial relations. A conservative backlash argued that racism, for all intents and purposes, was over; that class inequities were the source of social grievances; and that, ultimately, minorities themselves were responsible for improving their social "pathologies" and economic disparities.[60] In this anxious ambience, Cassius Clay won the heavyweight crown against Sonny Liston on February 25, 1964; and soon afterwards, he was to shake up the perception of boxers, prizefighting, and the sport establishment around the world.

In stark contrast with earlier heavyweight champions' re-naming pattern to underline one's "Americanness," Clay proudly announced his Islam alias Muhammad Ali to renounce what he referred to as his "slave name." Frequently

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African American Olympic Protest Movement," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July, 1996), pp. 548-566.

[60] Nathan Glazer and Patrick Moynihan were the most vocal representatives of this view. See Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T, Press, 1963). A decade later Robert Blauner would object to the ethnicity paradigm and the reduction of race to class, emphasizing, instead, the dynamics of race and place in societal hierarchies. According to Blauner, race and racism were central to U.S. economics, culture, and politics; and the ghetto, barrio, and reservation serve as specific sites for "internal colonialism." See Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

staging his fights outside of the United States, Ali also claimed a pan-African *racial*—rather than national affiliation—always proclaiming to be heavyweight champion of the *world*, not champion of the United States. April 28, 1967, in effect, bore witness to his most distinct disavowal of national allegiance as "The Greatest" stupefied the media world over by refusing to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, blurting out his legendary *ad hoc* reasoning: "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong." The consequences were extensive: Ali was sentenced to five years in prison and fined 10,000 dollars; the government confiscated his passport and invalidated his boxing license; he was stripped of his world championship title; and all fifty states denied him the right to box in the United States.[61] After three and a half years in professional exile, Ali was allowed to return to boxing in 1970, with his most memorable fights during 1971 and 1978: a ferocious trilogy of bouts with Joe Frazier; his second heavyweight title against George Foreman on October 30, 1974, and his third world championship fight against Leon Spinks on September 15, 1978. He retired from boxing on December 11, 1981.

During his two-decade long career, Ali dramatized a black-white dichotomy as a central focus in his pre-fight campaigning against various opponents—but most notably against all-black challengers such as Floyd

[61] Michael Ezra's dissertation, "Muhammad Ali's Main Bout: Black Nationalism and the Civil Rights Movement, 1964-1967" (University of Kansas, 2001), examines Ali's emergence as a "race leader" after his refusal to serve in the Vietnam War.

Patterson, Ernie Terrell, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman. "Whiteness" in Ali's discourse came to signify the U.S. government at large, patriotic acts in general and Christianity in particular: "I think of who I am and who my opponent is. Who is he? He is White America, Christianity, the Flag, the White Man, Porkchops."[62] Frequently calling into question an understanding of "Americanness" that signified an exclusive "whiteness," Ali invoked his childhood's racial reminiscences: "We heard about Snow White. White Owl cigars. White Swan soap. White Cloud tissue. White Rain hair rinse. White tornado floor wax. White plus tooth paste." "The President lives in White House. Jesus was white...Miss America is white. Even Tarzan, the King of the Jungle in Africa, is white."[63] Just as "whiteness" had arbitrarily come to stand for a seemingly neutral "Americanness," Ali reversed the notion and signified "blackness" into meaning "Africanness": "Africa is my home. Damn America and what America thinks. I live in America but Africa is the home of the black man."[64] Detaching the "blackness-whiteness" binary from the context of physical characteristics, phenotypes, and national boundaries, Ali called into question fixed assumptions about race and racial difference and, in so doing, turned prizefighting into an explicit site for ethnoracial contestation. Eldridge Cleaver, as a result, hailed Ali as the first prizefighter who was independent and removed from the "white" sport

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[62] Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 400.
[63] Cited in Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali in Perspective* (San Francisco: Collins, 1996), p. 76.
[64] Ali in Leon Gast, dir, *When We Were Kings* (Das Films, 1996).

establishment: "Muhammad Ali is the first 'free' black champion ever to confront white America. Essentially, every black champion until [him] has been a puppet, manipulated by whites in his private life to control his public image…Muhammad Ali, by the very fact that he leads an autonomous private life, cannot fulfill the psychological needs of whites."[65]

Much has been made of Ali's boxing career, his role as an activist-athlete, and of his racial, cultural, and religious legacy in the context of U.S. society.[66] A unique analysis is Mike Marqusee's *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* which not only depicts Ali in the context of the United States, but within worldwide loci and phenomena: the "Third World," the African Diaspora, the anti-war movement, and global boxing fandom. Marqusee points out three central facets of Ali's significance that have been largely neglected in earlier writings. Firstly, he argues, Ali's heroism assumed meaning in the global context long before he was ever embraced in the United States in the mid-1970s:

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[65] Cleaver, pp. 92-93. See also Mark Naison, "Sports and the American Empire," *Black Panther* (May 18, 1974 & May 25, 1974).

[66] See Thomas Hauser's biography, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), with extensive quotations from Ali, his handlers, and boxing insiders; Ferdie Pacheco (Ali's ringside physician), *Muhammad Ali: A View From the Corner* (New York: Carol Publishing Company, 1992); Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975); Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali & Company: Inside the World of Professional Boxing*. (Norwalk, Ct.: Hastings House, 1998); David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 1998); Elliott J. Gorn, ed. *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Gerald Early, ed., *The Muhammad Ali Reader* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1998); and Howard Bingham and Max Wallace, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. the United States* (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 2000). See also Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), his much disputed and controversial "autobiography."

> It is too often forgotten that the American sixties were merely a single act of a global phenomenon. Ali was one of those who acted as a transmitter between struggles…The key to Ali's story and to the dynamic of the sixties is this meeting and mingling of global currents…To present him as an American hero acting on an American stage is to miss what made him extraordinary. It was Ali's transgression of American norms—in an American idiom—that enabled him to build his global constituency.[67]

Such "global constituency" is best manifested in Ali's racial rationale to refuse to serve in the Vietnam War: "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs."[68] Although largely condemned as a "draft-dodger" in the United States, Ali began to receive plaudits from abroad. Indeed, so widespread was the boxer's worldwide significance that British philosopher and pacifist Bertrand Russell thus expressed his support:

> In the coming months there is no doubt that the men in Washington will try to damage you in every way open to them, but I am sure you know that you spoke for your people and for the oppressed everywhere in the courageous defiance of American power. They will try to break you because you are a symbol of a force they are unable to destroy, namely, the aroused consciousness of a whole people determined no longer to be butchered and debased with fear and oppression.[69]

However, Marqusee points out further, Ali's business affiliations with transatlantic dictators or boxing despots simultaneously had a flip-side of problematic undertones, complicating his overall egalitarian agenda: "Thanks

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[67] Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, pp. 204-205.
[68] Quoted in Remnick, p. 289.
[69] Quoted in Ali, p. 126.

largely to Ali, [Don King] was now set on…a career as the heavyweight division's premier promoter and possibly the most ruthless exploiter of black talent boxing has ever known…It has to be remembered that King prospered not in defiance of but in collusion with the white establishment."[70] Marqusee's third argument is that Ali's public image in thirty odd years has conspicuously shifted from that of radical politics to one of consensual accommodation: "Was there a better figure to help NBC, Coca-Cola and the Atlanta business elite sell the global games to America, and sell America to the world?...The Ali offered up for veneration in the 1990s is not the Ali of the 1960s."[71]

Akin to Marqusee's disposition, Grant Farred has discussed Ali's role within an international context. As a political athlete, Farred argues, Ali galvanized a global black resistance movement through religion, and he was among a group of "vernacular intellectuals" who assumed an important popular culture role within the postcolonial movement: these "intellectually mobile," "oppositional public figures…use the cultural platforms and spaces available to them, but not ordinarily accessible to their disenfranchised communities."[72] Acknowledging Ali's momentous global importance Farred, too, points out the inherent ambiguity of some of the boxer's choices in the postcolonial context of Africa and South-East Asia:

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[70] Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, pp. 275 & 284.
[71] Ibid., pp. 3-5.
[72] Farred, *What's My Name?*, p 23.

> [U]nlike his critical relationship to the American body politic..."The Greatest's" reticence about postcolonial politics is a consistent feature of his career as an engaged athlete…Mute about Mobutu [Sese Seko], Ali showed himself to be equally retiring about Indonesia and the Philipino, the other Third World sites where he fought…[He] spared Mobutu and Suharto the kind of criticism he routinely aimed at the administrations of L.B.J. and Nixon.[73]

Following Marqusee and Farred's argumentation, it is my contention that Ali's central significance, in effect, was that he made *explicit* the power—for better *and* for worse—thus far implicit within the sport industry. For as Harry Edwards put it in the context of the 1960s:

> [A]thletics still are regarded by most people as primarily recreational as all fun and games. And the sports establishment would love to keep it that way. But the very word 'establishment' belies that claim. Sports in America is big business, and has a significant social, economic, and political impact on both the national and international levels.[74]

As a result, by claiming active agency in challenging the existing power dynamics endemic to sport, Ali exposed the cultural influence that a prizefighter possessed in individual and collective identity formations, as well as in larger ideological contestation. Ultimately, Ali's boxing career, as Mike Marqusee aptly sums up, "is a standing reminder to us all that national affiliation—in sports, in politics, in life—is not natural or God-given; it is constructed and can therefore, as Ali demonstrated, be deconstructed."[75] At the dawn of the 21st century, the two

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[73] Farred, "Feasting on Foreman," p. 62. See also his "The Prettiest Postcolonial: Muhammad Ali," Paul Smith, ed., *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 151-170.
[74] Edwards, p. 32.
[75] Marqusee, *Redemption Song*, p. 297.

decades to come would increasingly illuminate sport as a site for problematizing national affiliation and any singular understanding of prizefighters' "Americanness."

### "BLACKNESS" VS. "BROWNNESS"

The post-Ali era experienced a dramatically altered worldwide political climate: from the 1970s détente that pacified the volatility of East-West relations, via the late 1980s and early 1990s crumbling of the Iron Curtain, the United States had established itself as an unrivaled powerhouse in the world. In a league of its own, the nation's military might hardly needed symbolic strengthening from prizefighters, nor were there up-and-coming heavyweights who exemplified any desirable "Americanness" to begin with. By the late 20th century, the biracial understanding of race as a black-white dichotomy that Ali so fiercely criticized had caught fire in academia as well. Ever since Michael Omi and Howard Winant's groundbreaking *Racial Formations in the United States* gained critical acclaim in the late 1980s, a large scholarly consensus has begun to conceptualize racial signification as a social construction and a political phenomenon; instead of essential entities, racial formations are increasingly viewed as processes of individual and societal negotiations.[76] Furthermore, in the current climate, race and ethnicity are no longer perceived as separate entities, but as dynamically

[76] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

interrelated facets, always jumbled up with various other elements of power: e.g., class, gender, sexuality, age, religion, regionalism, and language. In Omi and Winant's definition:

> A *racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines*. Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning. [77]

As a result of the understanding of race and ethnicity as interrelated categories, scholars have recurrently articulated the obvious but previously ignored truism that black people come from various cultural backgrounds, just as Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans come in all colors: hence, *ethnoracial* identities. Similarly in prizefighting, the tendency has become increasingly to look beyond the black-white racial paradigm and the heavyweight trajectory *per se*.

Indeed, the late 20th century saw yet another lull in the heavyweight division, as the champions to come—such as Larry Holmes, Leon Spinks, Michael Spinks, Riddick Bowe, Evander Holyfield, Buster Douglas, or Lennox Lewis—never quite managed to embrace Muhammad Ali's *tour de force* in the fight game. It would take Mike Tyson's 2:35 knockout victory in the second round of his first title bout on November 22, 1986 that championship boxing

[77] Ibid., pp. 55-56.

witnessed another *phenomenal* prodigy.[78] With his meteoric rise, Tyson broke all conceivable records: at age twenty, he became the youngest heavyweight champion ever, his ferocious split-second victories smashed all existing knockout statistics, his multi-million purses were bigger than ever seen in boxing, and his title defenses grossed the largest ticket-sales and TV-ratings in pugilistic history.

Yet Tyson was no Ali; his life-history and personal experiences resembled more those of his mob-controlled hero Sonny Liston. As Joyce Carol Oates puts it: "his is not the image of the Establishment-approved Olympic Gold Medalist…but the image of the outsider, the psychic outlaw, the hungry young black contender for all that white America can give."[79] With traumatic childhood experiences, crime-infested adolescence, and emotionally troubled adulthood, Tyson had no sophistication to deal with his dazzling superstardom; nor did he have the eruditeness to handle the business intricacies of prizefighting—let alone his psychological problems. Exemplifying the cadaverousness of professional boxing, Tyson's career kept the cash flows running for a legion of handlers and hangers-on; but in times of trouble, the pugilistic occupational culture offered him no professional guidance, personal assistance, or any other safety networks. With recurrent legal run-ins, several prison stints, and perennial publicity stunts, Tyson is frequently portrayed in the media as an ultimate social pariah; his heavyweight

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[78] For biographies on Tyson, see Phil Berger, *Blood Season: Tyson and the World of Boxing* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988) and José Torres, *Fire & Fear: The Inside Story of Mike Tyson* (New York: Warner Books, 1989).

reign represents neither "blackness" nor inclusive "Americanness." Even so, "Iron" Mike's are the fights that the "mainstream" public—as opposed to boxing insiders—are willing to purchase on pay-per-view television today; his is the name that, day after day, attracts the biggest media headlines in boxing; and he is the fighter frequently mentioned as a heavyweight contender—whether in or out of training. One cannot but wonder: Why? Because, for one, as Jacqueline Zita puts it: "power resurrects bodies selectively just as it ignores bodies selectively."[80] And also because the dollar-driven media and TV-viewers are hungry for scandal; because every time the name *Tyson!* crops up as a newsflash, it is a quick payday for someone; and because his public persona today has little to do with athleticism and everything to do with freakish spectacle. Mike Tyson is, without a doubt, the most tragic heavyweight champion in the history of the prize ring.

Nonetheless, just as in earlier periods when the heavyweight division suffered from a lack of attractive African American champions, the new era saw opportunities arise for various other groups of prizefighters. Coinciding with the ethnoracial conceptualization of the early 1980s, when the United States began to count persons of "Hispanic" origin in its Census categorization, the public eye gradually turned its focus to divisions other than the heavyweight. With magnetic personalities emerging throughout the Americas within weight categories ranging

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[79] Joyce Carol Oates, "On Tyson," *On Boxing* (New York: Ecco Press, 2002), pp. 119-181.
[80] Jacquelyn N. Zita, *BodyTalk: Philosophical Reflections on Sex and Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 12.

from flyweight to middleweight—including Alexis Arguello, Wilfredo Benítez, Héctor Camacho, Julio Cesár Chávez, Roberto Durán, Thomas Hearns, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Sugar Ray Leonard, Aaron Pryor, and Salvador Sánchez—world championship boxing was increasingly being billed as a black-and-brown affair.

This duel was epitomized in two spectacular welterweight championship bouts between Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto "*Manos de Piedra*" Durán. On June 20, 1980, Leonard lost a close 15th round decision to the Panamanian "Hands of Stone" warrior, but he came back seven months later to relentlessly force Durán into ninth-round retirement.[81] Epitomizing what would become known as characteristically black and brown fighting *styles*, Gerald Early describes the bout: "Here was the monumental encounter between the hot and the cool, between the classical order of technique and the romantic impulse of improvisation…Duran becomes the stereotypical fiery, macho Latin and Leonard becomes the stereotypical cool, slick boxing black."[82] The championship bouts in the welterweight and middleweight division—especially amongst Leonard, Hagler, and Hearns—significantly increased the popularity of boxing in the late

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[81] Alan Goldstein, *A Fistful of Sugar* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1981).

[82] Gerald Early, "Hot Spics Versus Cool Spades: Three Notes Toward a Cultural Definition of Prizefighting, *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1989), pp. 115-129. See also Early's "Battling Siki: The Boxer as Natural Man," *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Hopewell, N.J.: The Ecco Press, 1994), pp. 66-85).

1980s, resulting in record-breaking TV-audiences. Grant Farred, in turn, offers yet another explanation for the lower weight divisions' popularity:

> Middleweights and welterweights are not as threatening, one can deduce, as their heavyweight brethren. In his well-cut suits and tuxedos, debonair Sugar Ray Leonard was the personification of the cool, eloquent style and intelligence…For that reason he could be accredited qualities—articulateness, wit, mental dexterity—denied to the likes of, say, the recently paroled Mike Tyson.[83]

Be that as it may, the generation of fighters that matured in the 1990s—Marco Antonio Barrera, Michael Carbajal, Vernon Forrest, Bernard Hopkins, Oscar de la Hoya, Roy Jones Jr., Floyd Mayweather Jr., Erik Morales, Shane Mosley, Johnny Tapia, Felix Trinidad, and Fernando Vargas—to mention only a few, have continued to reinforce the existing black-brown paradigm in contemporary fistic limelight. In Texas, such Latino fighters as Paulie Ayala, Roberto Quiroga, Jesse James Leija, Juan Lazcano, Raul Marquez, and Jesus Chávez are among its recent champions, and Austin experienced its first world title bout ever on August 15, 2003 when "El Matador" Chávez defeated Thailand's Sirimongkol Singmanassuk in the super-featherweight division by a unanimous decision in front of a sold-out hometown crowd.

Gregory Rodríguez's dissertation, "'Palaces of Pain'—Arenas of Mexican American Dreams: Boxing and the Formation of Ethnic Mexican Identities in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles" is one of few attempts to examine Latino prizefighting in the United States. Chronicling the history of Mexican presence in

Los Angeles boxing from the early 20th century onward, Rodríguez's study shows that between 1900-1950 such fighters as Aurelio Herrera, Joe Rivers, Bert Colima, Baby Sal Sorio, Baby Arizmendi, and Arturo Aragon claimed fame in California's prizefight scene. In the 1960s and 1970s, Rodríguez writes,

> the Los Angeles boxing industry produced Mexican and Chicano world championships at an unparalleled rate, one that virtually guaranteed these groups' hold on championship belts. In the bantamweight division (118 lb.) ethnic Mexicans produced 12 world champions between 1960 and 1980, ten of these coming in the 1970s. In the same period, ethnic Mexicans accounted for nine featherweight champions (126 lb); six lightweight chapions (135 lb.); and three welterweight champions (147 lb.)… Between 1969 and 1999 over twenty Mexican-descent flyweights became world champions.[84]

Although I am uncertain as to how Rodríguez comes to the conclusion that U.S. Mexican boxing aficionados "used boxing arenas as sites for reinterpreting and reassembling symbols, objects, and artifacts to assume new ethnic and gendered identities," his dissertation is a useful starting point for the historical recognition of Mexican fighters' existence and legacy in the U.S. fight scene.[85]

For in sheer numbers, Latinos from across the Americas overwhelmingly dominate today's world prizefight rankings and championships. According to three international governing bodies in professional boxing—the World Boxing Association (WBA), the World Boxing Council (WBC), and the International

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[83] Grant Farred, "The Prettiest Postcolonial: Muhammad Ali," p. 165.
[84] Gregory Rodríguez, "'Palaces of Pain'—Arenas of Mexican American Dreams: Boxing and the Formation of Ethnic Mexican Identities in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles" (University of Southern California, 1999), pp. 174-75.
[85] Ibid., p. x.

Boxing Federation (IBF)—Latinos hold the majority of all championship titles below the middleweight division. This is in keeping with *The Ring* magazine's rankings (generally considered more impartial than the "alphabet" organizations' listings), with nine out of the twelve lighter weight categories headed by Latinos, whereas African American fighters top the five categories from the middleweight division upwards. Because the African American heavyweight division is experiencing yet another crisis, *certain types* of Latino boxers can be turned into salable "crossover" products, consistent with the *Latinization* or "browning" of U.S. popular culture currently in vogue; and more and more all-Latino prizefighting attracts pay-per-view purchases and "mainstream" audiences. Moreover, a generational shift is currently taking place in boxing promotions, and such mainstay figures as Bob Arum, Lou Duva, and Don King are gradually stepping aside, while such celebrity fighters turned promoters as Oscar De La Hoya, Sugar Ray Leonard, Julio César Chávez, Roy Jones Jr., and Lennox Lewis are stepping in the business, bringing youthful megastar quality to the increasingly budding fight game. Notwithstanding the growing *Latinization* of prizefighting, scholarly research on the phenomenon remains virtually non-existent, almost as if signaling an academic refusal to expand beyond the black-and-white heavyweight paradigm. Even so, the pugilistic occupational culture is becoming evermore heterogeneous, as it expands into new territories and

endorses, among others, a diverse assemblage of fight aficionados and a continually growing number of female fighters.

## FISTIC WOMANHOOD

The female boxers who claimed fame in prizefighting during the bare-knuckle days of John L. Sullivan in the 19th century turned out to be no oddities; quite on the contrary, as the 20th century drew near, fistic women were not in the least finished with the fight game. For example, in 1910, Crystal Bennett of Kansas City claimed to be "Female Lightweight Champion of the World"; in the 1920s, boxing was part of ladies' health education in Boston; in the 1930s, former middleweight champion Mickey Walker traveled around the United States with a troupe of fighting women who appeared mainly in nightclubs and fairs; and in the 1940s, Nicky Novell claimed the women's fight crown by defeating Lally Dean, while Jo-Ann Hegan defeated Bonnie Waters.[86] In 1954, "Battling" Barbara Buttrick, a British carnival boxer and wrestler, was the first female boxer to enter the formal realm of prizefighting, and she was the first woman to obtain an official boxing license in the United States.[87] On October 6, 1957, authorized by the Texas Commission of Labor, Buttrick won the first "Undisputed Women's World Boxing Title" against Phyllis Kugler of South Bend, Indiana. Fighting in

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[86] Eskin, "Complete History of Women's Boxing: Part I," p. 32. See also the historical overview in <http://www.womensboxing.com>.
[87] Lew Eskin, "Complete History of Women's Boxing: Part II," *Boxing Illustrated*, Vol. 16, No. 9 September, 1974), pp. 50-53.

the flyweight and bantamweight divisions, "The Mighty Atom of the Ring" had an active, twelve-year boxing career, with a professional record of 30-1 and some thousand exhibition bouts with mostly male opponents. She was the first female fighter to have her pictures appear in *The Ring* magazine in 1957 and 1959, and hers was the first women's boxing bout ever broadcast over a radio station, WCKR Miami, on October 1, 1959.[88] Since the 1970s, professional boxing began gradually to attract more female followers, with such fighters as Caroline Svendsen, Pat Pineda, Cathy Davis, Jackie Tonawanda, Marian Trimiar, and Shirley Tucker claiming fame in the sport. On July 13, 1979, California was allegedly the first state to stage an all-female professional boxing event in the United States, when an eight-bout all-female fight card took place in the L.A. Sports Arena.[89]

Since the early 1990s, women's boxing has seen a dramatic change on both the professional and amateur levels. The legal turning point was a 1993 court case in which a female recreational boxer, Dallas Malloy [born Jennifer McCleery] of Washington sued the United States Amateur Boxing, Inc., the Pacific Northwest Amateur Boxing Association of Tacoma, and the International Boxing Association in order to be able to participate in the Golden Gloves

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[88] Ann Simmons, "Former Champ Retains Her Interest in Boxing," *The Miami Herald* (August 11, 1988), p. 14. This newspaper article is courtesy of Lori Lord. Buttrick later went on to become the founder and president of the WIBF (Women's International Boxing Federation), and she was elected to the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990.
[89] <Http://www.womensboxing.com>.

tournament. On the basis of the state's anti-discrimination laws, the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington filed the suit on behalf of the sixteen-year-old Malloy in King County Superior Court in March 1993, and the U.S. District Judge Barbara Rothstein granted a preliminary injunction which allowed Malloy to take part in amateur boxing the following October. The U.S. Amateur Boxing, Inc. soon complied with the ruling, and voted in favor of passing a series of regulations which legalized women's participation in the national boxing program, thus resolving the case before it proceeded to higher court.[90] From then on, women's boxing has attracted thousands of practitioners both as amateurs and professionals, with seven organizations sanctioning women's professional world championship boxing. Such fighters as Laila Ali, Sumya Anani, Jolene Blackshear, Yvonne Caples, Delia Gonzales, Jacqui Frazier-Lyde, Christy Martin, Fredia Gibbs, Jill Matthews, Lucia Rijker, Bridget Riley, Ada Velez, Ann Wolfe, and Anissa Zamarron are among some of the female fighters who have firmly established women's fistic athleticism within the past ten years.[91]

The first sanctioned female amateur boxing match in Texas took place in November 1993 between Melinda Robinson and Kelly Parrish, with Robinson

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[90] Because the judge made a preliminary injunction to which the boxing federation compiled before the case went to higher court, the case is not available and cited the way public court cases generally are. On the reporting of the case, see "Female Teenager Sues for Right to Box Women," *Washington Post* (March 9, 1993), p. E 2; "Boxing," *Washington Post* (May 9, 1993), p. D 2; "Women Fight Red Tape to Win Right to Box," *Washington Post* (October 14, 1993), p. D 2; and "Boxing," *Washington Post* (November 1, 1993), p. C 2. I would like to express a heartfelt thanks to Kim Simpson for research support with the legal details of this case.

[91] Women's professional boxing federations are the IBA, IBO, IFBA, IWBF, WIBA, and WIBF.

claiming a split-decision victory. The first known women's professional boxing bout in Texas—since the days of Barbara Buttrick—took place in January, 1993 between Lori Lazarine and Amy Miller, with Lazarine winning the four-round bout by a unanimous decision. Only a year later, on March 31, 1994, as many as eighteen women boxers participated in an all-female amateur fight card in Austin to raise funds for the city's Rape Crisis Center.[92] On November 16, 2001, the Women's International Boxing Association held an all-female professional championship fight card, the "Texas Shootout," in Austin, featuring five world title fights and a four-round preliminary fight. Consequently, the fact that women have been accepted into the sport's everyday culture has, in and of itself, contributed to a gender desegregation of prizefighting as an exclusively male form of labor. Moreover, the female boxing body calls into question traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, as it challenges conventional expectations about women's bodily practices in particular sporting spaces; and the days of a male-only, working-class prizefight culture are clearly over. All the same, despite the abundant evidence of female fighters, it is quite astonishing that scholarly analyses of prizefighting should systematically ignore the women's existence, refusing to grant them historical voice or societal agency, insisting that *gender* in

[92] Ron Stefani, "Women Boxers Step into the Ring for Charity Event," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 24, 1994), p. 4.

combat sports persistently signifies "maleness" alone.[93] In view of that, one cannot help but ask: Could it, indeed, be, as Jane Gallop so thought-provokingly argues, that "the really disturbing violence is not physical violence but the physical as it violates the rational categories that would contain and dominate it"?[94]

## CONCLUSION

Few sports have captivated writers' and historians' imaginations the way prizefighting has, as it portrays fascinating sagas about heavyweight champions climbing from rags to riches (and sometimes back again), inviting one to explore the implicit and explicit meanings behind the bodily battle. This chapter's historical analysis has made the case that sport is always intrinsically connected to societal power relations; that it fundamentally shapes individual and collective identity formations; and that it serves as an important site for ideological contestations. We have seen historians' depictions of how prizefighters' careers and opportunities have exemplified U.S. societal tendencies, especially with regard to ethnoracial, gender, and class relations. Occupational statistics have illustrated further how prizefighters represent either immigrants or other persons

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[93] Within American Studies, Carlo Rotella has studied women's amateur boxing, see his *Good With Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); "Get Busy Girlfriend," *Boston College Magazine*, V. 62, No. 1 (Winter 2002); "Cut Time," *American Scholar*. V. 69, No. 2. (Spring, 2000); "Good With Her Hands: Women, Boxing, and Work," *Critical Inquiry*, V. 25, No. 3. (Spring, 1999).
[94] Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), p. 18.

from the lower rungs of social hierarchies, and the fistic profession has, accordingly, enabled champion fighters' ascendance in the nation's ethnoracial esteem. Charismatic heavyweight champions, in particular, have been either celebrated or shunned as public representatives of national unity, ethnoracial egalitarianism, and Western democracy. "Americanness" has been construed through shifting racialized discourses, with its meanings necessarily corresponding to both the U.S. politico-ideological climate as well as the geopolitical state of affairs in the world. Whether they have climbed up the "whiteness" ladder (as Irish, Jewish, and Italian fighters from John L. Sullivan through Rocky Marciano did); whether they have claimed civic inclusion by signifying "blackness" into meaning an all-encompassing "Americanness" (i.e., Joe Louis); whether they have radically redefined both these terms (*à la* Muhammad Ali); or whether they have been disowned in the public eye (e.g., Jack Johnson and Mike Tyson), various champions have been appropriated for some larger conceptualization of national identity and prizefighting has epitomized either social inclusion or exclusion—that is, where one can or cannot claim to belong.

Yet, even though the history of prizefighting in print canonizes heavyweight world champions, its everyday practices have clearly been much more diverse and inclusive than is evidenced in most of the scripted monographs. The pugilistic culture has never been singularly about the heavyweight division;

its “masculine” practices have not been performed by men alone; and the world championship crown has hardly stood for national identity exclusively. Firmly ensconced in societal margins and afar from public scrutiny, various other groups have used the pugilistic podium as an important site for claiming a stake in U.S. social hierarchies, as well as offering a locus for individual identity allegiances. As a result, which particular bodies are chosen to represent the nation at any one time speaks volumes of existing societal hierarchies and their ideological underpinnings. Who expresses physical aggression on behalf of individuals or collectives alike can never be neutral; on the contrary, it always carries subtle cultural and socio-political ramifications. Which bodies perform in certain sporting spaces in various historical times will, therefore, always have inevitable significance outside of the actual sporting context as well. Today, the fistic occupational culture—with its established traditions and new currents—is re-evaluating its own changing identity, evidently much more fluid than most of the existing prizefight literature allows for. Consequently, the chapters to come steer the focus from the broad historical spectrum to contemporary professional boxing to shed light on what actually takes place in the world of prizefighting from the perspective of the boxers themselves. Their stories are next.

# Chapter 2 Spatio-Bodily Identities: A Theoretical Practice

> Where we are—the place we occupy, however briefly—has everything to do with what and who we are (and finally, *that* we are).
>
> Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place*

> When space feels thoroughly familiar, it has become place.
>
> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*

## Introduction

This chapter probes into contemporary professional boxing by calling attention to the unsung heroes of the pugilistic profession, the large bulk of non-heavyweight, grassroots fighters, who hardly ever become contenders or world champions, who seldom get recognized as household names, who rarely showcase as internationally exposed main events with major commercial sponsorships, flamboyant entourages, and pay-per-view TV endorsements. Although an infinitesimal proportion of these everyday artisans come to enjoy notable fame or the prospects of remarkable riches, most of them stick to the fight game year after year, because the sport offers them athletic, personal, and social gratification that surpasses all of its numerous risks, sacrifices, and negative odds. Even so, why boxers *do* box is a conundrum that many a fight scribe has attempted to decipher, and the intriguing bodily trade continues to invite interpretations ranging from scholarly and fictional to allegorical analyses. Some sociological explanations, for example, suggest that prizefighting is a means to survive in the ghetto or the

barrio; that it offers a channel to escape structural poverty and, thus, to bring about socio-economic mobility; others maintain that it is an outlet for repressed anger or violent impulses, while yet others argue that it is an articulation of masculine gender-superiority.[1]

Somewhat more poetic readings, in turn, have construed various symbolic meanings behind the sport: that it might serve as a metaphor for the condition of humankind; or else that it emblemizes a morality play of good versus evil; or, yet again, that it could be viewed as an allegorical struggle over hubris and nemesis. Indeed, to Gerald Early, the sport's appeal is patently obvious: "Why boxing—or more broadly considered, bruising—attracts is so self-evident to me that I sometimes wonder why it is not so to others. Modern prizefighting is a remarkable metaphor for the philosophical and social condition of men (and, sometimes, women) in modern society."[2] However, even if many of the

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[1] On boxing ethnography/sociology, see John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Loïc Wacquant, *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); "The Prizefighters Three Bodies," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (63-3, November 1998), pp. 325-352; "A Fleshpeddler at Work: Power, Pain, and Profit in the Prizefighting Economy," *Theory and Society* Vol. 27, No. 1 (February 1998), pp. 1-42; "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade," *Theory and Society* Vol. 24, No. 4, (August 1995), pp. 489-535; "Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers," *Body & Society* Vol. 1, No.1 (1995), pp. 65-93; Jeffery, Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Geoffrey Beattie, *On the Ropes: Boxing as a Way of Life* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1996); and Donald McRae, *Dark Trade: Lost in Boxing* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Press, 1996). F.X. Toole's *Rope Burns: Stories from the Corner* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000) is an excellent collection of semi-fictional short stories from a boxing insider's perspective, written under a pseudonym, but based on the experiences of the late Jerry Boyd, a California-based trainer and cut man.

[2] Gerald Early, *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1994), p. xiv.

explications were applicable to some fighters, many of the analyses rationalizing or emblemizing its significance run the risk of simplifying boxing as too monolithic an endeavor, while also rendering both boxers and fight aficionados as too homogeneous a whole. In trying to find unequivocal meanings behind the bodily trade, writers too often overlook that its practitioners are remarkably heterogeneous professional athletes—male and female—individuals who operate within distinct, yet continually evolving, socio-historical and regional power relations. Besides, whatever the case may be, the most crucial point to be made here is: why even speculate? Why not go and ask the athletes directly?

This chapter, then, hopes to do precisely that: to look into the professional experiences of the fighters themselves, and the various meanings that the pugilistic practice—as a form of bodily labor, as a professional sport, and as a mode of being—carries for their everyday lives in a range of spatial contexts, always intrinsically connected to identity contestations. Giving the podium to the cohort of Latino fighters in Austin, I will explore how, in actual fact, the pugilistic occupational culture serves as a locus for identity formations. The focus will be on the fighters' exploration of their individual opportunities within various pugilistic sites—such as boxing gyms and fight venues—and how the agency of the boxing body enables the challenging of social control and/or individual mobility within one's *own* everyday spaces. Moreover, the occupational culture of prizefighting offers access to and mobility within spaces which would ordinarily

be out of the reach of those seemingly confined to societal margins, jumbling up as it does the power dynamics of ethnoracial, gendered, and class-based bodies interacting in different everyday environments.

To demonstrate the dissertation's ongoing conversation between theory and practice—or as Michel de Certeau puts it, to build a crucial conceptual bridge between "what is happening" and "what is being thought"—my examination springs from the discussions with the Austinite fighters, while I will contextualize the interviews within a theoretical framework of *the body in space and place*.[3] I regard prizefighting on a theoretical level as a bodily epistemology and a spatial ontology; and in the context of the everyday, I delineate the sport as a bodily trade and a spatial practice in particular places. The pugilistic battle, as such, exhibits a spectacular combat over physical prowess as much as it displays a struggle over spatial manipulation, celebrating corporeal force as an ultimate manifestation of territorial dominion. By deploying these analytical tools, my attempt is, ultimately, to link prizefighting and identity formations as *spatially determined processes*, hearkening to such everyday parameters as ethnoracial segregation, exclusionary class and gender politics, or any other modes of socio-spatial control. I will argue that a continual, dynamic relationship between the body in space and place—turning space into place through bodily appropriation of space as its own—evokes a larger tension between social control and individual

[3] Graham Ward, ed., *The Certeau Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 71.

mobility in U.S. society, and that this dynamic, in effect, becomes absolutely central to Latino fighters' *raison d'être*, in and out of the prize ring, on both the levels of theory and practice.

**A Bodily Epistemology, A Spatial Ontology**

For the purposes of discussing Latino prizefighters within the pugilistic occupational culture in Texas, I need to begin by conceptualizing professional boxing not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic process, one in which the boxing body becomes a central source of one's everyday knowledge about the world, while different pugilistic spaces offer critical sites in understanding one's being and identity formations in that world. For such a discussion, Loïc Wacquant's definition that boxing is "the vehicle for a project of *ontological transcendence* whereby those who embrace it seek literally to fashion themselves into a new being" offers a salient point of departure.[4] For it is also my contention that prizefighting is centrally about *seeking* to improve one's ontological status, as it brings about self-respect, structure, and stability into lives frequently circumscribed by a range of negative social forces. Rather than a literal "transcendence," however, I wish to characterize boxing as a *continual epistemological and ontological contestation*, as prizefighting and identity formations take place through different bodily encounters within shifting social

dynamics on a daily basis, never quite reaching an ultimate "transcendence" or a decisive "completion." Rather, fighters continually negotiate the tension between individual agency and ideological control within various pugilistic and social dynamics; moreover, as Latino fighters, their collective status is simultaneously contested throughout the United States and global prizefight networks at large. Although not the focus of my examination, it also bears emphasizing that identity contestations do not end after fighters' active careers are over; if anything, they are likely to intensify, a fact which is dramatically epitomized by numerous destructive endings that some fighters' lives are known to have.

Initially, my delineation of prizefighting as a bodily epistemology and a spatial ontology was informed by Michel Foucault's perception of the body as a product of power relations and space as a fundamental locus for the exercise of power. In accordance with his key argument—that "[d]iscipline proceeds from an organization of individuals in space, and it requires a specific enclosure in space"—I first envisaged prizefighting, together with my interviewees' life-stories, as a basic form of bodily and spatial knowledge, always in conversation with larger societal and pugilistic power dynamics.[5] Regarding the boxing body as

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[4] Loïc Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade," p. 501. I would like to thank John Park for pointing me toward Wacquant's work at the beginning of my research.

[5] Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 17. See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977); *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed., Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); and Ladelle

a site of knowledge, while viewing various pugilistic spaces as sites of being and becoming, I came to consider the fistic occupational culture, in its entirety, to be a locus for identity formations. My interviewees' perceptions of their occupation soon affirmed the role of boxing as source of personal knowledge, as is evident in welterweight Johnny Casas's conceptualization, clearly applicable to contexts other than sport:

> Boxing is not just about throwing blows; it's about learning. You have to learn to adapt, to adjust in the ring. You're successful because you work hard and believe in what you do: heart, skills, and condition. Heart because it's will to learn. When you fall, you have to get up and go again, go again. It's how you recover from that trouble; you save yourself by fundamentals: left hand, right hand. Sparring sessions are to learn from my mistakes; fights are to have fun, to show my talent. In the fight game your opponent is gonna find your weakest point, he's gonna take that away from you, and that's how you'll get beat…But a great fighter knows what survival is about.[6]

The fighters' professional accounts also elucidated that most of them choose boxing as a preferred sport specifically because of their own bodily attributes and the spatial conditions they grew up in—embedded in which are various socio-economic and other relations of power. To quote flyweight "The World Famous" Joel Elizondo: "I started fighting when I was seven years old: I had to defend myself. They wanted to pick on me because I was the little guy: I'm only 5'1 and a lot of people laughed at me. I started going to the gym every day and then our neighbors would say 'Hey, I saw you fight last night!' and more

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McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

people would start going to the gym and support us."[7] The body, then, as Jacquelyn Zita points out, is always necessarily "materialized and assembled in cultures, histories, and languages, and continuously represented by laws, ideologies, and various regimes of knowledge…[I]t is a critical nexus serving the effects of power, as well as an inner sanctum of human agency."[8] Indeed, a particular body *type*, too, becomes a significant factor in determining which specific sport might offer one feasible prospects, while it also speaks to important ideas about cultural values. Unlike, for example, basketball and football—both of which explicitly valorize height and physical bulk—boxing is remarkably egalitarian in its wide spectrum of weight classes that provide opportunities for practitioners in all possible shapes and sizes.

My theoretical delineation of spatio-bodily power dynamics was subsequently broadened by Henri Lefebvre's and Michel de Certeau's elaboration of the Foucauldian premise within *everyday spaces* in general and the *urban context* in particular, and they both have clarified my thinking of the spatial distribution of bodies in society as instruments of ideology at large. That is to say, analogously to Edward Casey's epigraph, where and how bodies are positioned in society—where people can or cannot claim to belong—is never "neutral"; it always corresponds to tangible grassroots politics of location as well as

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[6] Interview with Casas, November 21, 2002.
[7] Interview with Elizondo, April 23, 2003.

theoretical questions of spatially demarcated social organization.[9] Lefebvre argues that this connection becomes critical, for "[w]hat is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?"[10] Space, then, cannot be viewed as a passive locus for social relations, for any social dynamics derive their meaning *through* larger spatial organization—to the extent that they have, to quote Lefebvre again, "no real existence save in and through space."[11] Before long, however, employing the theoretical apparatus of the body and space necessitated linking these notions with *place* in order to understand how spatial structures in society are intrinsically linked with social control and mobility in particular places.

Within prizefight networks, place operates at a range of spatial scales, and any regional boxing cultures are always interrelated with national and international cultural and sporting trends. Although a place such as Austin may, perhaps, seem an altogether unlikely site for pugilism in the United States, on closer look one, in fact, learns of generations of pugilists who have quietly gone about their business in the eastside of town for decades on end—quite consistently with the practices of the sport elsewhere in Texas. But the fact that Latino fighters

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[8] Jacquelyn N. Zita, *BodyTalk: Philosophical Reflections on Sex and Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 146.
[9] Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. xiii.

in Texas should suddenly draw attention and enjoy more publicity in the media than they typically have in the past is tied to larger national and worldwide trends. Indeed, given the growing interest in Latinos in U.S. popular culture and academic discourses, Latinos in the Southwest will, by default, also attract increasing public attention. In addition, as I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 3, my interviewees' early socio-economic possibilities, together with their understanding of individual and collective identity are deeply rooted in the spatial structures of the city of Austin, and their memories of social relations at home, schools, and boxing gyms have everything to do with growing up in the East Austin barrio. While their personal development comes to assume meanings specifically through various pugilistic practices in Texas and the United States, prizefighting enables them to negotiate their own *sense* of place on local, national, and global levels.

By way of a summary, my discussion of boxing as a bodily epistemology and spatial ontology in this chapter can be condensed into the following premises: that the body in space and place is always invested with power and, hence, the body/space/place triad can never be neutral; that the body in space and place exhibits a concurrent tension between ideological control and individual agency; that spatial structures in society are linked with social control and degrees of

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[10] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 404
[11] Ibid., p. 44.

socio-economic movement in particular places; and that the boxing body in pugilistic space, therefore, negotiates societal place. The fistic occupational culture, in effect, offers sites for the contestation of individual identity formations as well as overall social organization, while it also provides specific locations to challenge any established spatio-bodily power hierarchies. Moreover, prizefighting allows for the questioning of one's own implicit and explicit geographic boundaries—that is, any ostensibly "assigned" place vis-à-vis an "aspired" place in society at large. Thus, ideally, in an event that space becomes thoroughly familiar it can, indeed, as Yi-Fu Tuan's epigraph maintains, be turned into place—even if only momentarily, at times only for the fleeting duration of the boxing match.[12]

## The Body in Space and Place

In its most elemental, boxing exhibits a body-on-body combat over physical prowess, but it is always also a struggle over spatial manipulation, both implicit and explicit.[13] It is through boxing that fighters conceptualize their

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[12] Yi-Fu Tuan *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 73.

[13] For literature on sporting bodies, see Rachel Adams and David Savran, eds., *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002); Toby Miller, *Sportsex* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Jessica R. Johnston, ed., *The American Body in Context* (Wilmington, DE.: Scholarly Resources, 2001); Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Geneviève Rail, ed., *Sport and Postmodern Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Gerald Early, ed., *Body Language: Writers on Sport* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1998); John Richardson and Alison Shaw, eds., *The Body in Qualitative Research* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1998); Tim Armstrong, ed., *American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Philip Deloria, "'I am of

everyday existence, such as training, competition, injuries, sacrifices, diet, pain, fear, and control of desire, while the body comes to serve as a foundation for both their athletic achievement and personal development. The instrument as well as the physical target of the combat, the body constitutes an all-embracing significance to a fighter's being: it serves as the only medium to conduct one's occupation, as it comprises the principal source of athletic information, technical know-how, and professional expertise. When victories and defeats turn into physical memories, with cuts and scars tattooed on the athletic skin, the corporeal markers of the opponent's body, too, contain strategic information before, during, and after a fight. Super-featherweight Jesus "El Matador" Chávez explains the significance of the boxer's body in his tactical preparation for a fight:

> When I first meet the person I'm gonna fight, it is with his clothes on. I look at the way he dresses; how he approaches me; how he treats other people. I look at his facial wounds—war wounds—scars in his tissue; whether he has a limp, whether his hands are long. And, finally, at the weigh-in, without his shirt on, I size him out. And I look at his bone

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the Body': Thoughts on My Grandfather, Culture, and Sports," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 95, No. 2 (Spring 1996); Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society* (London: Blackwell, 1996); Moira Gaten, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Michael M. Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). On and the intersection of the body and space, see David Bell et al., eds., *Pleasure Zones: Bodies, Cities, Spaces* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001); Susan Hardy Aiken et al., eds., *Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998); Rosa Ainley, *New Frontiers of Space, Bodies, and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1998); Henning Eichberg, *Body Cultures: Essays on Sport, Space, and Identity*, John Bale and Chris Philo, eds., (London: Routledge, 1998); and Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile, eds., *Places Through the Body* (London: Routledge, 1998); and Nancy Duncan, ed., *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1996).

> structure: does he look solid or weak, where the strengths and weaknesses of his physique are.[14]

Eventually, *being a fighter*, featherweight Conrad Sanchez concludes, becomes absolutely central to one's everyday self-conceptualization: "A fighter is someone who does it with their blood, it's that spark in you. You smell like a fighter; you eat like a fighter; you walk like a fighter; you think like a fighter. You look at people like a fighter: you size people up; you think what people are gonna do before they do it—because that's what a fighter does."[15] The boxing body, then, does not solely engage itself with the physical fight; it necessarily has to do with other simultaneous contestations: one over assuming control of one's own body, another over carving autonomy for oneself within various societal spaces, and a contingent negotiation of one's own identity.

Yet another significant corporeal aspect in fighters' existence has to do with an intricate balancing out of bodily isolation and social interactions during different stages of training regimen. By its very nature, ring work is a solitary endeavor and fighters frequently characterize themselves as "loners." They specifically choose boxing as opposed to team sports, invariably citing the one-on-one challenge as the sport's main appeal. As bantamweight Mike "The Night Train" Trejo reasons: "If I win a fight, I was the better man. *I* did it, nobody else.

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[14] Quoted in Benita Heiskanen, "The Body in Space, Identity in Flux: Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez" in Richard Santillan and Jorge Iber, eds., *Mexican Americans and* Deportes*: The Significance of Athletic Endeavor in Barrio Life, 1920-2002* (forthcoming from Syracuse University Press).
[15] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.

This is not about teams; this is about individuals."[16] Indeed, "[t]he body and its specific behavior," John Fiske writes, "is where the power system stops being abstract and becomes material. The body is where it succeeds or fails, where it is acceded or struggled against. The struggle for control, top-down vs. bottom-up, is waged on the material terrain of the body."[17] Indeed, the will-power of the body is tested in various forms of self-restraint, and fighters' preparation for competition, for example, includes lengthy periods of social seclusion, as they are expected to minimize personal and physical interactions several weeks before an upcoming fight. Trainer Inéz Guerrero sheds light on the deep-seated pugilistic belief which maintains that a fighter should exercise complete control of bodily desire between two and six weeks before a boxing match:

> Sex before a fight weakens your legs. You may have strong arms but your legs are holding you up. When a fighter is in top shape, his mind is clean and his punches are crisp and sharp. It doesn't even look like he is hurt when he gets hit. But if he is tired, he is frustrated; he knows what to do but he can't do it because his body won't let him.[18]

While most of my interviewees subscribe to the necessity of bodily self-control before an upcoming fight, others deny any physical validity in the celibacy conviction; although the skeptics, too, emphasize that to be completely focused, a fighter must eliminate any possible distractions—whether mental or physical—and concentrate exclusively on the task at hand.

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[16] Interview with Trejo, August 20, 2003.

[17] John Fiske, "Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life" in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 162.

In preparation for a fight, bodily abstinence becomes further apparent in the process of dieting to make one's weight class. For boxers distinguish their so-called "walk-around" weight, as opposed to competition weight, the difference of which may typically range between five and fifteen pounds—or two to three weight classes—before and after the day of the match-up. A welterweight fighter who "walks around" with 150 pounds, for example, may lose up to ten pounds during a period of two weeks prior to the fight in order to make the junior welterweight limit of 140 pounds, with some 24 to 36 hours to regain strength for the actual bout. Not irregularly, some fighters may have to lose two or three pounds by running, drying up in the sauna, or taking diuretic substances after the weigh-in, unless a confident opponent settles for a financial compensation to patch up the weight discrepancy. Moreover, Abel Davilla explains, the level of competition is also a consideration in determining one's weight class:

> A welterweight in the amateurs and professionals are totally different. I realized I can't be a welterweight and compete with these guys [as a pro]; I had to go down to lightweight. [San Antonian cut man] Joe Souza told me: "You know you're in the right weight class when you hit someone with all you have and he falls…and does not get up. But if you hit a guy with all you have, and you shake him, but he keeps coming after you, you're in the wrong weight class, because he's gonna hit as hard as you do."[19]

The repeated fluctuation of one's weight, then, forges an intimate self-awareness of the capacity of the body and one's metabolism, impacting "not only the

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[18] Interview with Guerrero, August 25, 2003.
[19] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.

physique of the boxer" but, Loïc Wacquant contends, "also his 'body-sense,' the consciousness he has of his organism and, through this changed body, of the world about him."[20] Accordingly, failing to make the desired weight is always a signal—for both the fighters and the trainers—to re-evaluate one's standing in the pugilistic profession: to either implement changes in training and/or nutrition, to move up to a different weight division, or, ultimately, to retire from competitive boxing.

While fighters ostracize themselves from non-pugilistic encounters during the final finessing for combat, their symbiotic relationships with trainers, sparring partners, and handlers become all the more critical, as the camp's input strives to maximize the individual fighter's potential. The corner is to make sure that minutest particulars are perfected before the boxer steps into the ring, and unnoticeable details carry vast significance both to the bout in question as well as to the fighter's entire future. For example, trainer Jesse Ravelo explains:

> Hand-wraps are really important. Your whole career can end by not wrapping your hands the right way; once you break your hand or a knuckle, it will never be the same. You don't wanna have your hands tied too tight when they get numb; you don't wanna have them too loose when you can break your hands. You have to take your time with it and make sure your boxer is comfortable with the hand wraps; if not, you have to do it again.[21]

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[20] Wacquant, "Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers," p. 73.
[21] Interview with Ravelo, August 14, 2003.

In addition to relying on trainers, fighters have liaisons with various business people whose control over their career choices and financial interests determines their prospects in the pugilistic profession, whose personal clout in the sport may, in fact, prove crucial to the outcome of the fight. The body, therefore, is concurrently in service of these commercial purposes and financial handlers' agendas, as promoters, sponsors, and gambling advocates always carry their vested interests in the fight's outcome, tellingly revealed in the pugilistic belief that "if it's a close fight, the judges will go with the corner." Because of the financial investments, Mike Marqusee opines, boxing "appears highly individualistic but the individuals involved, the boxers, have less power over their bodies and careers than almost any other sports people. Even successful boxers, with few exceptions, are bound like serfs to promoters, managers and satellite [or cable] TV companies."[22]

Then again, the aestheticism of the body also serves as the object of the spectators' and TV-viewers' ubiquitous gaze, for as David Chandler observes: "the ring irradiates the body and exposes fine detail, it casts individual boxers as the sharp focus of attention and brings them under the power of the watchers."[23] Thus, a number of other people involved—from handlers and stablemates to

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[22] Mike Marqusee, "Sport and Stereotype: From Role Model to Muhammad Ali" in *Race and Class*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (April-June 1995), p. 3.
[23] David Chandler, "Introduction: The Pictures of Boxing" in David Chandler, John Gill, Tania Guha, and Gilane Tawadros, eds., *Boxer: An Anthology of Writings on Boxing and Visual Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 17.

boxing aficionados—may identify with the boxing match, collectivizing the experience of the one-on-one pugilistic performance. A victorious battle proves to be a powerful—if not at times cathartic—experience for the boxers and their followers, and the body provides a vehicle for personal and collective empowerment. In the event of a heroic performance, then, it is not only the fighters who embrace the glory; anyone who claims a stake with the fight—or maintains an affiliation with the boxer—can claim a part of the heroism. Unavoidably, defeat and disappointment turn out all the more devastating for each party involved, and boxers often describe losing in the ring as more traumatic than any other painful experiences that may have occurred in their lives. Nevertheless, whether testifying to individual triumph or demise, prizefighting enables a negotiation between bodily agency and the various power dynamics that command the sport, an ongoing contestation that occurs within shifting spatial dynamics.

The inherent spatiality of boxing becomes apparent in its various everyday locations: the gym (comprising the "stables" that fighters belong to), competition venues (with dressing rooms, seating hierarchies), the ring (with specific color-coded and "neutral" corners that fighters occupy during the fight), and most everything else about the pugilistic logistics correspond to spatial arrangements. Indeed, fighters may conceptualize their entire profession in such terms, as is evident in Johnny Casas's depiction of boxing technique:

> The ring is my office. The jab is the key to the house, the key to the fight game: it opens the door, sets the pace… But you gotta stay real tight in the pocket, especially in the distance. The pocket is: "Hands up at all times, establish your left hand, and stay in touch with the defense." Your defense is: "When you see a hand coming, you move out of the way, slide."[24]

The sport's overall power dynamics, in turn, become embedded in the social spaces that boxing gyms and competition venues provide. While the boxing gym may offer liberating social possibilities where the combat signifies the only marker of empowerment on a daily basis, the politics of the sport are always simultaneously in full swing in the background. What takes place in the space of the gym, then, often starkly contrasts with various financiers' aspirations at the spectacle of the fight, and the sport's "backroom" politics and "underground" connections may, indeed, turn out to be equally disempowering to an individual fighter. As John Bale and Chris Philo point out, sport venues thus illustrate "how spatial relations—the spaces in and through which bodies move, display themselves and are disciplined—enter into the articulation of bodily presences with the operations of wider socio-cultural formations."[25]

Professional boxing matches themselves, perhaps, best showcase the assemblage of the pugilistic power players within the spatio-bodily order of the competition venue, epitomizing what Doreen Massey describes as "the spatial reorganization of social relations, where those social relations are full of power and meaning, and where social groups are very differently placed in relation to

[24] Interview with Casas, November 21, 2002.

this reorganization."[26] Various pre-fight events—such as weigh-ins, physicals, and press conferences—expose the hierarchical spatial organization within the competition venue, bringing together promoters, managers, and sponsors in charge; ringside officials and doctors whose services are hired; and, finally, fighters who do the most crucial work. At fight cards, seemingly insignificant details become invested with political meaning: Who, for example promotes and sponsors an event? Who provides the ring and the canvas? Who gets to fight or judge a fight? Who sits at ringside? Who is allowed access to dressing rooms? All these details reflect the sport's power dynamics. Embracing these different players within the spatio-bodily setting of the sporting arena, the boxing match encompasses a politico-financial battle of the warring interests, epitomized in the common phrase one hears after a bout, namely that a fighter "won the fight, but didn't get the decision."

The center stage of the ring itself becomes a spectacular space for the athletic performances, embedded in which are several technical intricacies. A crucial element that judges consider in scoring a decision is known in the pugilistic lexicon as "ring generalship," a combination of a fighter's spatial manipulation of the ring and the coordination of technique, power, and speed in

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[25] In Eichberg, *Body Cultures: Essays on Sport, Space, and Identity*, p. 8.
[26] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), p. 121.

overpowering an opponent.[27] The particularities of any one ring *per se* are significant for tactical strategies, as specific types of rings correspond to fighters' diverse stylistic and technical approaches. Different types of canvas mat ("soft" or "tight"), on the other hand, determine the maneuverability of the ring—or, to use occupational jargon again, the "pace" of the fight—considerations which prove important in determining whether a fighter prepares to go to "distance" or to strive for a knockout victory. Jesus Chávez explains the spatial rationale of different size boxing rings:

> There are different types of rings, big ones and small ones. If you don't have enough force to take control of the ring, then you use it to your advantage. The big rings are for boxers who like to move and use the space; the small ones are for punchers who prefer not to have their opponents run around.... Powerful fighters fight in a smaller ring; while slimmer and faster fighters want to fight in a more spacious ring, where they can maneuver better.[28]

Conrad Sanchez elaborates on the difference between a technically skilled "boxer"—as opposed to an offensively oriented "fighter": "A small ring is for a fighter, a brawler; a big ring is for a boxer. That's what Sugar Ray [Leonard] picked when he fought [Marvelous Marvin] Hagler, so he could dance. [Muhammad] Ali preferred the bigger ring. But most Latino fighters are gonna pick the ring where they can get you and hold you there."[29] However, boxers often have to accept the ring that comes with an opponent's home-turf advantage.

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[27] The four basic criteria that judges consider in scoring are: clean punching, effective aggressiveness, defense, and ring generalship.
[28] Quoted in Heiskanen, "The Body in Space, Identity in Flux: Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez."

Mike Trejo explains: "I'm a banger, I prefer smaller rings: 16 foot. But when I fought for the NABF-title, I fought in a big ring."[30] "The World Famous" Joel Elizondo, in turn, contends that his preferences are conditional: "Whenever I'd have a lazy day, I'd pick up the big ring, because you have a lot more room to maneuver, to pick the spots for your jabs and combos, and to pick your opponent apart; but when I'd be ready to get at it—to *fight*—I'd prefer the smaller ring."[31] Featherweight Carlos Valdez, on the other hand, is explicit about his personal inclination: "I don't like small rings. I think small rings are for people who are taking shortcuts. It makes a sloppy fight; you're gonna see a lot of holding and tying up. You want a big ring; that's why you run, to be conditioned. The big ring is for people to see the talent come out."[32]

The physical space of the ring, then, not only calls attention to the actual combat, but it also offers a dramatic forum for presenting various explicit sporting idiosyncrasies, that is, one's desired self-characterization in the pugilistic tradition and everyday culture. Indeed, while victorious fighters take control of the geography of the canvas, they simultaneously construct what Loïc Wacquant defines as a "*publicly recognized, heroic self*." [33] In elevating themselves to the center stage of communal attention fighters, moreover, enable boxing

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[29] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.
[30] Interview with Trejo, August 20, 2003.
[31] Interview with Elizondo, April 23, 2003.
[32] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.

aficionados' negotiation of any collective identity allegiances. In addition, for the various power players who habitually claim their space in the ring before or after a main event, the limelight of the pugilistic podium offers a forum to visibly establish one's eminence in the social hierarchy of the sport: the closer one's vicinity to the ring, the stronger the personal pull. In this constellation, Gerald Early concludes, the boxing ring characteristically becomes "a place where ideas of order are contested," as it may serve, depending on one's point of view, to either stabilize or to shatter seemingly fixed occupational social organization.[34]

However, in addition to the physical spaces that constitute the sport's everyday practices, spatiality manifests itself in yet some other aspects. Often regarded as a peripheral activity in society at large, boxing is considered marginal within sporting hierarchies in general: it is frequently characterized as the "red-light district" of professional sports, a pariah activity where the rule avows that dog eats dog and the strong devour the weak. True enough, it is hardly accidental which segments of society end up occupying the various pugilistic positions: while male fighters typically hail from the outskirts of any socio-economic power concentrations, the sport's business intricacies are frequently run by characters with less than formidable repute. Thelma McCormac, in effect, proposes that the boxing ring offers a perfect forum for the surveillance of such marginal

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[33] Loïc Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade," *Theory and Society* (24-4, August 1995), p. 501. Emphasis in the original.

characters. "The fighter's space," she writes "is flat and cramped, confined by ropes and exposed on all sides, a topography which is ideal, on the one hand for the supervision of infants and, on the other for the entrapment of adults."[35] Whereas such a reading offers a thought-provoking ideological dimension in conceptualizing the structure of the prize ring, it fails to take into account the athlete's agency in pugilistic power dynamics: that a fighter may, in fact, take advantage of the "cramped" space and use it for one's own personal mobility.

Quite the contrary is Michel de Certeau's view which maintains that marginality *per se* can always provide channels to *break free* from established social structures. By taking advantage of the imposed systems and refusing to succumb to victimization, one may carve out liberating social possibilities and, instead, invent various satisfactory *modi vivendi* within the existing social hierarchies. De Certeau's description of the game of "trickery" has intriguing relevance to a discussion of boxing:

> Innumerable ways of playing and failing the other's game…that is the space constituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants' stratagems, there is a certain art in placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of constraining space.[36]

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[34] Quoted in Jeffrey T. Sammons, "'Race' and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Fall 1994), p. 212.

[35] Thelma McCormac, "Hollywood Prizefight Films: Violence or 'Jock' Appeal?" *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* Vol. 8, I. 2 (1984), pp. 19-29.

[36] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 18.

Analogously within the world of prizefighting, then, it is possible to break away from established structural settings by inventing strategic possibilities amidst the spaces constituted by others. Albeit amidst existing power relations, one can forge a niche of personal autonomy within the pugilistic spaces in the margins, if not momentarily destabilize the very socio-cultural arrangements. All things considered, it is my contention that the intrinsic marginality of the pugilistic profession is precisely the reason why prizefighting offers a nexus for identity formations *par excellence*, as the marginal spaces may, to quote Kevin Hetherington, "act like shrines for those who live outside of the conventions of a society…because they come to symbolize another set of values…Such spaces facilitate opportunities for being different and the constitution of new identities."[37] Indeed, Abel Davilla's account is exemplary in summing up the point: "Once I had my first fight, it was like an addiction. I wanted to be in the gym all the time; that's what I loved, that's what I wanted. Boxing is a rush: I crave to be doing it because [that's when] I'm at my best person. It's a feeling of belonging."[38] The interplay of spatial marginality, bodily solitude, and interpersonal power dynamics in boxing, in effect, become directly linked with identity formations, as the sport frequently brings fighters into a deeper dialogue with themselves.

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[37] Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 107.

Finally, to conclude the examination of the body, space, and place in identity formations, it is necessary to turn our focus to the notion of *place*. In so doing, a host of geographical thinkers—such as Yi-Fu Tuan, Doreen Massey, Tim Creswell, and Edward Casey—have influenced my assessment of the dynamic relationship between the triad in theory and practice, always in conversation with my interviewees' professional experiences. Differentiating the notion of space as necessarily distinct from place, cultural geographers generally define the abstract concept of space as being concretized into a tangible sense of place when human beings ascribe individual meanings to it. In Tuan's definition: "'Space' is more abstract than 'place.' What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value…[I]f we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause." Moreover, Tuan contends, "place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other."[39] That space characterizes mobility, possibility, and freedom; that place becomes a source of belonging, security, and identity, offers a useful springboard for my examination of space-place dynamics within pugilistic environments. As we have already seen, the manipulation of the space of the ring can be personally empowering in a victorious combat, but appropriating social space, moreover, can be transformed into a sense of belonging to place. In this regard, Carlos Valdez's account is revealing: "When I got to the gym to work out…it's a place where I

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[38] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.

can relax, let myself go; I can let my guards down. I no longer have to impress anybody; I know what I have accomplished: I know this is my domain."[40]

However, it is necessary to elaborate on the understanding of space and place further not solely as fixed entities but, rather, as dynamic contestations, continually negotiated through bodily practices in everyday spatial interactions. To quote de Certeau: "in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions."[41] In addition, drawing on de Certeau's conceptualization which deems everyday practices central in defining place, Tim Cresswell's reading is particularly relevant for our purposes:

> Place is constituted through reiterative social practice—place is made and remade on a daily basis. Place provides a template for practice—an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways where place is constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways. Place is the raw material for the creative production and identity rather than an a-priori label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice.[42]

Similarly, Doreen Massey emphasizes the inherent *ambiguity* of place, a conceptualization that does not render the notion static or unchanging, but deems it in relation to social interactions: "What gives place its specificity is…the fact

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[39] Tuan, pp. 3-6.
[40] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.
[41] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117.
[42] Tim Cresswell, "Introduction: Theorizing Place" in Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell, eds., *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 11-32.

that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus."[43] Describing place in this ephemeral sense, Massey likens it to such signifiers as a "meeting place," an "intersection," or a "process." Hers is a definition, moreover, that links place with degrees of bodily movement, socio-economic mobility, and social formations—e.g., class, gender, race/ethnicity, and regionalism—always maintaining that these relations of power fundamentally influence how one experiences an individual sense of place on an everyday level. Conrad Sanchez's depiction of boxing is interesting in this context, as it, too, entails an understanding of place as transitory and mobile: "I would have never left Texas; I would have never got on a plane—never flown—if it weren't for [amateur] boxing. Boxing took me to a lot of places. It *was* my place. It belonged to me."[44] Sanchez's conceptualization of *boxing as place* suggests that as a fighter, one could claim place wherever the ring might be set up, also implicating that *via* boxing—through the bodily appropriation of the space of the ring—one could contravene an ostensibly prescribed station, geographic, economic, or otherwise, in life.

That is not to suggest, however, that space-place relations *only* stand for such positive elements as security, empowerment, and belonging. On the contrary, equally relevant must be its negative aspects, the flip side of constraint, powerlessness, and exclusion. Indeed, Edward Casey acknowledges that while

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[43] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, p.154.

place has a power "to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (as well as where we are not)," he simultaneously calls critical attention to *bodily experience*, both pleasurable and traumatic, as a central focus in understanding place.[45] "I have attempted," Casey writes, "to relocate [human experience] resolutely in the body, especially when place is on the agenda."[46] All human experience—living, thinking, remembering, geographic orientation—for Casey, is mediated in and through the body:

> I am proposing that the body is of centralmost concern in any adequate assessment of the range of remembering's powers…[U]nless *it* feels oriented in place, *we* as its bearers are not going to feel oriented there either…[T]he lived body familiarizes us with regard to place [and] this familiarization, more than any other single factor, brings about the conviction of being at home in the world.[47]

In accordance with Casey's conceptualization, the boxing body—with its triumphant and traumatic experiences—becomes crucial in determining one's space/place in the world, alongside with identity formations.

Negotiating bodily potent and its limits, epitomized by injury, pain, and losing in the ring, thus becomes an ongoing contestation in the gym and competition venues. Outside of the ring, the perennial economic power plays endemic to boxing turn into a source of disillusionment and many a fighter has

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[44] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.
[45] Casey, *Getting Back Into Place*, p. xv.
[46] Ibid., p. 110.

thus expressed his frustration: "I love the sport, but *hate* the business." Loïc Wacquant explains the intrinsic paradox embedded in pugilistic power plays:

> [T]o outsiders [prizefighting] stands as the penultimate form of dispossession and dependency, a vicious and debasing form of submission to external constraints and material necessity. For boxers it represents the potential means of carving out a margin of autonomy from their oppressive circumstances and for expressing their ability to seize their own fate and remake it in accordance with their inner wishes.[48]

With all its possible positive and negative upshots, body/space/place liaisons in prizefighting—on both the level of theory and praxis—are temporary rather than permanent, best understood by way of active negotiation processes in which multi-layered discourses are contested amidst various individual and social dynamics in everyday circumstances, shifting at a variety of spatial scales. The fistic occupational culture, nonetheless, enables fighters to ascribe meaning to their individual senses of place, one which may signify a momentary sense of belonging, liberation, and mobility in one location, while it can just as easily turn into powerlessness, stagnation, and threat in some other spatio-bodily dynamics—if not instantly vice versa.

## Theory and Practice on Scale

As I hope to have established thus far in the discussion, the pugilistic occupational culture comprises interrelated networks of social relations, with

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[47] Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 147 & 195.

various levels of activity taking place within shifting spatio-bodily arrangements, always engendering a range of concurrent conversations in and out of the ring. To problematize the dynamic nature of these interactions further, I need to add yet another defining trope to our examination, one that is particularly pertinent with regards to boxing, namely that of *scale*. For just as a fighter's training regimen is based on continuous weight-watching before and after stepping on the scales on the day of the weigh-in, my examination of prizefighting and identity formations—indeed the entire research—is premised on an analogous conceptualization. Embedded in these pages, then, is a continual contestation over pugilistic, societal, and academic social organization at several scales, as identity negotiations prove the *raison d'être* of not only Latino fighters, but of the inter-disciplinary dissertation itself. Prizefighting, identity formations, and academic discourses are all, in effect, contingent upon various spatial, temporal, and disciplinary scales. While boxing takes place on such spatial scales as the neighborhood, the region, the nation, and worldwide networks, it is also—as I argued in Chapter 1—temporarily determined, and sporting discourses become, of necessity, influenced by any particular societal trends within changing historical ambiences. By the same token, disciplinary practices in academia manifest themselves on various levels, demonstrated, for example, in this dissertation's

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[48] "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade," *Theory and Society* Vol. 24, No. 4, (August 1995), p. 501.

conceptualization of theory and practice within a deliberately interdisciplinary overall framework.

Comprising different levels of activity, ranging from amateur boxing and prizefighting to today's growing cohort of recreational boxers, pugilism and its consequent identity formations can, thus, best be understood with reference to scale. For, as Neil Smith puts it, "[w]e tend to take for granted the division of the world into some combination of urban, regional, national and international scales, but rarely if ever explain how they came about."[49] Indeed, most of my interviewees' childhood introduction to amateur boxing and their early encounters in the barrio speak to a scale quite different from their subsequent professional pursuits in the pugilistic occupational dynamics in Texas and the United States. As fighters move to gyms outside of the barrio, they get more exposure on a statewide scale because that is where most promoters, matchmakers, and bigger purses generally are. The professional world of boxing, then, demarcates a distinct mode of social organization from that of the barrio, while national and global fight networks add a further dimension to the pugilistic complexities. Thus, all local prizefight scenes are always intrinsically tied to national and worldwide prizefight networks, which constitute the numerous athletic commissions regulating the pugilistic occupational culture nationally, as well as the world

[49] Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p.134. On discussion of scale and identity formations, see also Fredrik Barth, ed., *Scale and Social Organization* (Oslo: Universitetsforslaget, 1978).

boxing federations—known colloquially, tongue-in-cheek, as “the alphabet soup organizations”—which determine professional rankings and different world championships. These experiences, then, come to constitute a fundamental crux of fighters’ everyday knowledge and being in the world, while their familiarity with these different forms of social organization, with their encompassing professional discourses, provides opportunities for re-negotiating identities at these various scales.

Ethnoracial identity formations, in particular, shape up as interplays between individual, collective, and societal assignments, necessarily tied as they are to a number of signification practices, such as naming, ethnic/racial labels, citizenship status, national boundaries, and language use. Together with these processes, all social formations fluctuate with any other relations of power, such as class, gender, age, sexuality, regionalism, if not all of them combined. The choice of any individual or collective nomenclature, therefore, easily turns into a political cauldron in which intercultural and interracial conflicts take on volatile meanings, with a marked difference in terms of who appropriates any particular label in what specific instances. For example, Agustín Laó-Montes writes: “it is crucial to conceive latinidad not as a static and unified formation but as a flexible category that relates to a plurality of ideologies of identification, cultural

expressions, and political and social agendas."[50] Hence, whether the U.S. Census Bureau, for example, deploys a particular label to classify a remarkably heterogeneous group under a particular category, evidently, carries conspicuously different undertones from any group's self-chosen pan-ethnic identification labeling for intra-group allegiances or political counter-tactics. By the same token, the appropriation of an ethnoracial label for the purposes of academic research is, without a doubt, also loaded with complicated underpinnings, and whatever designation one chooses can always be questioned as arbitrary.

Acknowledging the problematic nature of any such labeling, the initial idea in this dissertation was to make use of the interviewees' self-identification labels, to refer to them with their own preferred choice of naming. That plan, however, turned out to be convoluted, for it left me with close to a dozen terms, such as "Mexican," "*mexicano*," "Mexican American," *tejano*," "Tex-Mex,"

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[50] Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dàvila, eds., *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 8. For discussions on U.S. Latinos and identity formations within the past decade, see also Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Páez, eds., *Latinos: Remaking America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Arlene Dàvila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing And Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000); Jorge J. E Gracia and Pablo De Greiff, *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race, and Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Linda Martín Alcoff, "Latina/o Identity Politics" in David Batstone and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *The Good Citizen* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 93-112; Rodolfo D. Torres and George Katsiaficas, eds., *Latino Social Movements: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Roberto Suro, *Strangers Among Us: How Latino Immigration is Transforming America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Mary Romero, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Vilma Ortiz, eds., *Challenging Fronteras: Structuring Latina and Latino Lives in the U.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic*

"Meskin," "Latino," "Spanish," "Hispanic," and "Chicano." For not only do different fighters denote their ethnoracial identity differently amongst themselves—determined by such factors as place of birth, place of residence, citizenship status, and language—but meanings of these labels are frequently conflated with such nuances as class, hue, and gender. Whether one is, for example, speaking with a middle-class gringo at the boxing gym, interacting with another Texas-born Mexican in the barrio, or conversing with a U.S. Latino at the fights, one may use a range of different self-identification labels respectively, depending on the person one interacts with, where one is physically located, and what language one uses. Nationality, too, obviously becomes a crucial factor in ethnoracial characterization as is exemplified in the case of Jesus Chávez, who unlike most of the Austinite Latino boxers, was born in Mexico and grew up in Chicago before establishing a career as a professional fighter in Austin. A twice-deported Mexican national, Chávez has lived most of his life in the United States, with only sporadic periods in Mexico, but he now holds permanent residency in the United States, explicitly problematizing his various positional identities: "I could be considered Mexican or Chicano or Tejano, although I usually say I'm 'Mexican.'…Now, I guess, I would even say that I'm 'Mexican American'

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*Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

because I have access to both countries…But it's important that some of us start realizing that, in the end, we are all Latinos and we still eat the same beans."[51]

Chávez's reasoning brings up the relevant point that, within the ethnoracial hierarchies in the United States, identity formations are not solely a matter of individual conceptualization, but they also have a *de facto* communal function, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has characterized as "strategic essentialism."[52] Such an understanding has to do with appropriating certain identities for a political purpose or, as Coco Fusco puts it, "a critical position that validates identity as politically necessary but not as ahistorical or unchangeable."[53] Recognizing the fluidity of identity contestations and the necessarily problematic nature of ethnoracial labels I, nonetheless, have chosen to employ the intra-group label "Latino" for the purposes of this research. Because my attempt is to discuss individual fighters' experiences not only to shed light on the local prizefight scene, but also to call attention to the role that prizefighting has in relation to specific socio-historical tendencies in the United States in general and within the scholarly context of American Studies in particular, it is necessary to underscore the contextualization of identities at all these different scales.

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[51] Quoted in Heiskanen, "The Body in Space, Identity in Flux: Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez."
[52] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 214.
[53] Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), p. 27.

As a result, the notion of scale becomes a central organizing principle of the dissertation itself: while prizefighting is contextualized within the history of U.S. pugilism at large and the research is based on oral-history styled interviews, equally crucial is its participant observation component which includes the four-year ethnographic sojourn inside the world of pugilism in Texas. As seen in this chapter, moreover, my theoretical conceptualization leans largely on the works of various philosophers and cultural geographers, adding yet another level to the interdisciplinary and –methodological discussion. It is my contention, then, that through the scales of the grassroots, theoretical, and historical examination the dissertation best elucidates the complexity of ethnoracial identity formations within prizefighting as continual epistemological and ontological contestations.

Indeed, ethnoracial identity formations—as theory and practice on scale—necessarily become ongoing contestations that include a range of concurrent spatio-bodily dialogues. As individuals, fighters continually negotiate the tension between individual agency and ideological control within local pugilistic and social relations; as Latino fighters, their collective status and exposure is influenced by national power plays and marketing considerations, while global prizefight networks at large determine their overall occupational standing. In addition, fighters and boxing aficionados also forge a dialogue as fans might follow sparring sessions at the gym, when they come to fight cards as spectators, or when they purchase fights as TV-viewers in their homes. Finally, a

concomitant dialogue between the interviewees and the researcher incorporates these divergent everyday practices with academic discourses, synchronizing the broad pugilistic spectrum with theoretical detail, while situating identity formations within specific societal, historical, and geographic loci. For that reason, the chapters to follow will specifically examine how prizefight networks not only provide opportunities for the creation and re-definition of new identities, but also how they allow embracing multiple subject positions—some of which may be overlapping or contradictory—as fighters give meaning to and negotiate their own identity representations amidst the various pugilistic hierarchies.

**Conclusion**

Through an intersecting nexus of theoretical discourses and everyday practices this chapter has delineated prizefighting as a locus for identity formations. As a form of bodily labor, a professional sport, and a mode of being prizefighting espouses, I have argued, a continuous epistemological and ontological contestation at various pugilistic and societal scales. It offers central sites for creating multiple situational identities, strategic intra-group solidarities, enabling the questioning of pugilistic and societal orders within various social spaces, such as boxing gyms and fight cards. Under the gaze of the audience, the boxing match itself becomes a powerful culmination of a combat between two bodies, whose victor and valor are publicly testified amidst communal scrutiny.

The limelight of the ring also provides a spectacular space for re-evaluating identities and deciphering personal and collective allegiances, and a range of people—from handlers and fight fans to various financial players—may forge affiliation with the fighters on personal, communal, national, or international levels, collectivizing the one-on-one pugilistic experience.

While the professional world of boxing demarcates a spatial order quite distinct from any understanding of societal "mainstream," it simultaneously incorporates components of prestige ordinarily beyond the reaches of those in the "margins." When fighters advance from the ostensible obscurity to the center stage of the boxing ring for the duration of the fight, they take control of the geography of the canvas, while they also self-position their bodies in various spaces and places. Most important, perhaps, the fight enables one to forge a niche of autonomy, a space for movement within existing societal power dynamics, lending itself to the exploration of personal opportunities within one's own everyday environments, and facilitating the questioning of one's implicit and explicit geographic boundaries. Such manipulation of space is personally empowering, and it speaks to a bodily epistemology and spatial ontology in which being in space can, indeed, be transformed into belonging to place. Turning space into place—even if momentarily—makes it possible to negotiate levels of one's knowledge, being, and becoming in the world. Were it not for prizefighting, however, most of my interviewees would likely have never entered into any

dialogue with these alternative discourses and the consequent contestations between individual agency and social control. Let us, then, in the next chapter, travel back in time and place to explore how, in actual fact, the aspiring athletes first began their pugilistic careers in the East Austin barrio within the span of the last thirty years.

# Chapter 3 Barrio-Based Identities: An Athletic Adolescence

> Race matters, but it is clear that space does too.
>
> Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First*

> Spatiality is socially produced, and like society itself, exists in both substantial forms (concrete spatialities) and as a set of relations between individuals and groups, an 'embodiment' and medium of social life itself.
>
> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*

## Introduction

As I have hitherto established, prizefighting has assumed, during its two-century long historical evolvement in the United States, deep-seated connotations as a racialized practice and a spatialized mode of being, always in conversation with shifting societal ambiences and sporting tendencies. Therefore, so goes my argument, the pugilistic occupational culture offers a locus for individual identity contestations *par excellence*; perhaps best epitomized by the conceptual tools of the body in space and place, which elucidate identity formations as dynamic negotiation processes at various spatial scales—i.e., the neighborhood, the city, the region, the nation, and global prizefight networks—simultaneously evoking an underlying tension between social control and mobility in society at large. That said, to redirect our focus from the previous chapters' broad pugilistic spectrum to specific geographic loci, regional contexts, and place-based power dynamics, this chapter hopes to situate the historical and theoretical analyses of boxing with the

Austinite Latino fighters' personal experiences within the nexus of the East Austin barrio, the city of Austin, and the state of Texas. In so doing, I am in agreement with David Harvey's contention that "[t]he study of the body has to be grounded in an understanding of real spatio-temporal relations between material practices, representations, imaginaries, institutions, social relations, and the prevailing structures of political power."[1]

In order to understand the Latino fighters' contestation of identities through the fistic occupational culture at various stages during their careers, we first need to scrutinize the intersection of their everyday spatial surroundings and overall social organization in Austin, manifested as they are through individual experiences, institutional discourses, and structural hierarchies of space and place within the city itself. As follows, then, I will first delineate Austin's pugilistic tradition by discussing the development of the state of Texas's prizefight legislation as arbitrated in the capital city during the past century; I will then turn to the fighters' actual life-stories and the launching of their amateur boxing careers in the East Austin barrio from the 1970s onward; and, finally, I will probe into the memories of the fighters' maturation as athletes via boxing tournaments within the past thirty years. Voyaging through the amateur boxers' childhood and adolescence reminiscences, this chapter's examination will pay particular

[1] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 130. See also his *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

attention to their personal encounters and social relations within the neighborhood, the boxing gym, and amateur tournaments at various spatial scales. As a result, I hope to shed light on how these particular boxers understand their early influences and possibilities, as shaped by their surrounding socio-economic realities; why they choose amateur boxing as a leisure activity to begin with; and how they construct and recreate their personal lives, ideals, and worldviews—indeed, identities—amidst a range of pugilistic practices.

With the underlying premise that identity formations derive meanings through spatial organization, this chapter's discussion maintains that the location of particular populations within specific urban spaces forges an active dialogue with the understanding of one's socio-economic prospects, one's individual and collective allegiances, as well as one's sense of space and place in society. Through exclusionary everyday policies and practices, the spatially structured organization of bodies in society—or what Edward Soja characterizes as the "politicized spatiality of social life"—illustrates how the fighters' early experiences form the basis of their ethnoracially and class-based demarcation of the city of Austin as a whole, while their everyday encounters simultaneously speak to larger tendencies with regard to socio-spatial regulation within the United States.[2] Accordingly, deploying Michel Foucault's notion of the

[2] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 2.

disciplinary distribution of bodies in space, Soja ties the discussion of societal power dynamics into the urban context as follows:

> Cities are specialized nodal agglomerations built around the instrumental "presence availability" of social power. They are control centers, citadels to protect and dominate through what Foucault called "the little tactics of the habitat," the rough and subtle geography of enclosure, confinement, surveillance, partitioning, social discipline, and spatial differentiation.[3]

From the everyday ethnoracial and class-based realities in Austin, in connection with my interviewees' personal accounts, this chapter infers a basic chicken-and-egg supposition: that race derives meanings through space, while space, by default, becomes racialized through geographically determined boundaries of socio-cultural power concentrations in place. In view of such reasoning, it is important to emphasize—as Murray Forman's epigraph does—in both popular culture discourses in general and sporting practices in particular that race, indeed, matters; but let us not overlook that space and place, necessarily, do too.[4]

**Pugilistic Practices in Austin**

The city of Austin is hardly renowned as a boxing hub in the likes of, for example, Chicago, Detroit, New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, or San Francisco, in the nation's prizefight history. To be sure, outside of the pugilistic occupational culture, few people have—until recently—even heard of prizefighters in Austin; fewer still would be able to recognize (let alone name)

[3] Ibid., p. 153.

one of them; and the fighters have certainly never been the subject of any in-depth academic scrutiny. However, Austin has always been—albeit unbeknownst to many—the bureaucratic and legislative center of Texas's prizefighting, with the state athletic commissions, regulatory agents, and legislative bodies all residing in the capital city. Nonetheless, ever since the beginning of scripted prizefight legislation by way of a series of statutes in the late 19th century, Texas has shown marked ambivalence toward the pugilistic practice, clearly having to do as much with the state's financial interests as it does with its shifting ethnoracial mores. It bears emphasizing, then, that the state's pugilistic legislation does not concern itself with the medical aspects of the sport: the main controversy over prizefighting has always been about who has the right to make a living or gain pecuniary benefits from such activities; the issue of the safety of the combatants has proven a secondary concern in the debate.

In 1889, the Texas legislature passed a statute which allowed a miscellaneous entity known as "blood sports" in the state, contingent upon the levying of an occupation tax "for every fight between man and man, or between men and bulls, or between dogs and bulls, or between bears and dogs, or between bulls and any other animals, or between dogs and dogs, five hundred dollars for

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[4] Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), p. 2.

each performance."[5] Two years later, however, the legislature reversed its course with the statute of 1891, which declared that any person engaging in a "pugilistic encounter…for money or other thing of value, or upon the result of which any money or anything of value is bet or wagered...shall be guilty of a felony and upon conviction shall be punished by a fine of not less than $ 500 nor more than $ 1000, and by punishment in county jail no less than sixty days nor more than one year."[6] When promoter Dan Stuart four years later considered Texas as a site for the world heavyweight championship bout between "Gentleman" Jim Corbett and Robert Fitzsimmons, he appealed to the state's Attorney General for a reconsideration of the anti-prizefight statute. The outcome was not to permit the competition to take place; and instead, the bill of 1895 was introduced making prizefighting in Texas a felony punishable from two to five years imprisonment. With regard to the ruling, Leo Miletich cites some insider sources questioning the motivation behind the decision: "It was reasoned by certain unnamed Austin promoters that the main objection to the fight was not its legality but simply its location. If it came off in Dallas or Galveston, no one in the state government would be able to attend without spending a lot of time and money."[7] Be that as it may, the final step in the Texas anti-prizefight legislation was introduced after

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[5] Cited in Elmer M. Million, "History of the Texas Prize Fight Statute," *Texas Law Rev*iew, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (February 1939), pp. 152-159. According to Million, the only prosecution reported on the violation of the occupation tax statute appears in the case *Sullivan v. State*, in which John L. Sullivan had failed to provide the license, pp. 152-153.
[6] Ibid.

Jack Johnson's title defense against Jim Jeffries in 1910, after which the state—akin to the rest of the nation—prohibited the inter-state distribution of prizefight motion pictures.[8] However, as sport historians have amply recorded, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's outlawing of boxing had little *de facto* impact, for fights were frequently staged as no-decision "exhibition" contests in venues outside of mainstream sporting scrutiny. The upshot of forcing prizefighting underground was, in effect, that it instigated the infiltration of organized crime and political maneuverings into the pugilistic practice, facilitating the rampant corruption that permeates the sport still today.

Facing up to this reality, and in compliance with larger trends in the United States, the statute of 1933 created *The Boxing and Wrestling Law of Texas* which legalized prizefighting in the state—except on Sundays—under the supervision of the Texas Commission of Labor.[9] A 1935 amendment granted the pugilistic jurisdiction and its authorization to a Governor-appointed Board of Boxing and Wrestling Commissioners to enforce and to regulate the promoting of

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[7] Leo N. Miletich, *Dan Stuart's Fistic Carnival* (College Station: Texas A& M University Press, 1994), p. 31.

[8] Million, "History of the Texas Prize Fight Statute," p. 158.

[9] By way of comparison, New York legalized prizefighting in 1920, Pennsylvania in 1923, Los Angeles in 1924, and Chicago in 1927. See Steven A. Riess, "A Fighting Chance: The Jewish-American Boxing Experience, 1890-1940," *American Jewish History* Vol. LXXIV, No. 1-4 (September, 1984 to June 1985), pp. 223-254. See also Riess's "Only the Ring Was Square: Frankie Carbo and the Underworld Control of American Boxing," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (May, 1988), pp. 29-52. New Orleans permitted boxing under the nomenclature of "glove contests"—not "prizefighting"—already in 1889. See, Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp.12-15.

boxing and wrestling matches, with the power to grant or refuse licenses for boxers, seconds, managers, matchmakers, promoters, and ringside officials (judges, referees, and timekeepers).[10] In addition to license fees, the law imposed a 500-dollar promotional fee for each organized pugilistic event, a three per cent state tax on their gross receipts, while it prohibited gambling, betting, and the fixing of fights. Sanctions for any violations included monetary penalties—including the forfeiture of the purse of a boxer or a manager—as well as disciplinary actions, such as suspension or revoking of a license, all of which stand in their original form in today's prizefight legislation.[11] The law also established the general occupational age limit of prizefighters at eighteen years for all combatants and twenty-one for contenders participating in a championship bout; and it also introduced required physical examinations before and after a competition. Interestingly, it does not mention gender-differentiation in prizefighting, and it follows that women's professional boxing has always been legal in Texas.

However, as we discussed in Chapter 1, the law was originally racially based, and it explicitly banned *all* "interracial" encounters within prizefighting, with reference to both athletic and managerial interactions:

> Persons of the African (negro) race shall not be permitted to act in the capacity of manager of any boxer or wrestler of the Caucasian (White)

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[10] The State of Texas, House Bill No. 161, 44th Legislature.

[11] See, Texas Department of Licensing Regulation, "Combative Sports Occupation Code," Title 13: Sports, Amusements, and Entertainment; Subtitle B: Sports, Chapter 2052 (January 1, 2004).

> race. Promoters and matchmakers are hereby strictly prohibited from negotiating with any person or persons of the African (negro) race for the services of any boxer or wrestler of the Caucasian (White) race, either directly or indirectly.[12]

The Boxing and Wrestling Law's racial premise was based, according to Jeffrey Sammons, on the Boxing Commission's reasoning that mixed prizefight events had a tendency to provoke "disorders, quarrels, and breaches of peace" in society.[13] Even so, when African American H. "Sporty" Harvey challenged the constitutionality of the law in the Texas Court of Civil Appeals in 1954, "witnesses provided convincing evidence that blacks and whites had lawfully engaged in mixed sporting events without racial incidence…Moreover, Deputy Boxing Commissioner Louis Quintanilla testified that interracial boxing matches had occurred and there had been no unfavorable or disruptive fan reaction."[14] Evidently, a discrepancy between the everyday realities and scripted law was conspicuous, as black-and-white prizefighting had, in actual fact, frequently taken place, although San Antonian Harvey would go down in history and legal scripture as the first black fighter to engage in an interracial championship bout in Texas.

The latest episode in the state's prizefight legislation took place in 1989 when the supervision of wrestling was transferred to the Office of the Secretary of

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[12] Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Boxing and Wrestling Law of Texas With Rules and Regulations*, 43rd Legislature, Chapter III, Section 26. Mexican American fighters were considered "white" with regard to the prizefight laws.

[13] Cited in Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, p. 186.

State and the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation became the primary enforcement agency for other "combative sports," including boxing, kick-boxing, and tough-man contests. With Governor-appointed Boxing Commissioners, who nominate the executive directors and ten field inspectors, the agency regulates prizefighting by issuing licenses, investigating complaints, and imposing sanctions on violations within the combat sport industry. The Boxing Commission oversees pre- and post-fight events and their physical venues (weigh-ins, dressing rooms, and physical examinations), equipment used (the ring, hand-wraps, and gloves), as well as the validity of licenses, identification cards, and insurances. While meeting increasing popular demand, prizefighting has, concurrently, become a lucrative income for the state of Texas, as promoters are required to submit a 500-dollar promotional fee, a 50,000-dollar surety bond, and three per cent of the gross receipts obtained from each fight card (including TV revenue) to the TDLR.[15]

In addition, some hidden financial benefits, as Thomas Hauser brings up in his recent article, "The Insurance Issue," can provide an extra source of profit, both implicit and explicit, for certain individuals. Hauser's article exposes the TDLR under national spotlight by disclosing that Texan referee Laurence Cole—who, incidentally, happens to be the son of the Boxing Commissioner Dick

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Exempt from this rule are educational institutions, law enforcement organizations, the Texas National Guard Unit, and an amateur organization recognized by the TDLR commissioner.

Cole—owns the insurance agency which sells the majority of boxer insurances in Texas. Hauser describes the interest convergence dilemma:

> It's unlikely that a referee who agented [sic] an insurance policy would stop a fight too soon out of concern that medical bills might mount…However, the conflict becomes more real in theory when one considers that fact that promoters have a rooting interest in the fights they promote…Picture then a situation where a promoter says to a referee, "I'll give you my insurance business, but I want you to keep in mind who I'm rooting for."[16]

Whereas the TDLR, according to Hauser, has denied any wrongdoing in Cole's dual role, and benevolent as his actions may be, the Boxing Law itself explicitly gives grounds for an interpretation of a conflict of interest: "No person who has a financial interest in and/or is officially connected with any promotion shall be permitted to perform or act in said arena as inspector, referee, contestant or judge."[17] Furthermore, the legal problematic aside, a larger issue at stake here is the basis on which the Boxing Commission is appointed: because its administrators' nominations are politically motivated, selecting any particular ringside officials—as is evident in the father-son liaison above—becomes rife with debatable corollaries and partisan dealings. In the absence of a national umbrella organization in U.S. prizefighting, each state's athletic commissions have absolute *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty over arbitrating the pugilistic

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[16] Thomas Hauser, "The Insurance Issue," <http://www.secondsout.com/usa/column_46308.asp>. The TDLR requires a $ 10,000 death or accident insurance coverage for boxers in Texas, as opposed to a $ 50,000 minimum required by some other U.S. boxing commissions.

[17] *The Boxing and Wrestling Law of Texas With Rules and Regulations*, 43rd Legislature, Chapter III, Section 28.

practice, with no accountability to an overseeing central governing body, thus enabling myriad questionable everyday maneuverings—whether real or hypothetical.[18]

The controversy notwithstanding, prizefighting flourishes in Texas, and such is its volume today that, according to the TDLR's "Sunset Self-Evaluation Report," the state ranked third in the number of professional boxing matches conducted in the United States in year 2000.[19] In 2003, the TDLR sanctioned, on average, between two and ten mostly non-championship, grassroots prizefight events a month, raising Texas's ranking to the second place in the number of contests currently organized in the entire nation.[20] This, perhaps unexpectedly dense occurrence of boxing in Texas is, I would argue, best explainable by the state's size, location, and demographics. As the worldwide prizefight industry is increasingly headed by Latino fighters, who dominate both grassroots and pay-per-view boxing events, and because Latinos have the highest geographic

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[18] Such a problem is, at least in principle, absent from amateur boxing, as all local boxing committees must work in compliance with the national governing body, USA Boxing, the International Amateur Boxing Association (AIBA), and the Olympic Committee. For amateur boxing regulation see, Paul Montville et al., *USA Boxing: Official Rules* (Colorado Springs: United States Amateur Boxing, Inc., 2003). State boxing commissions are loosely organized within the Association of Boxing Commissions (ABC), an organization which does not hold jurisdiction over its members in the United States and Canada. See <http://www.canadianboxing.com/abcboxing.index.htm>.

[19] See the TDLR's "Sunset Self-Evaluation Report" (August 17, 2001). <Http://www.license.state.tx.us/reports.htm>, pp. 62-65.

[20] In 2003, California ranked first with 108 professional fight cards organized annually; Texas was second with 65 cards; and Nevada placed third with 55 cards. See Jack Obermayer, "K.O.-J.O. Says," *Boxing Digest*, Vol. XLVI, No. 4 (April 2004). Last year, the TDLR sanctioned professional boxing matches in the following cities: Amarillo, Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, Humble, Laredo, McAllen, and San Antonio.

concentration in the U.S. Southwest, a large pool of fighters and fight audiences, by default, come out of Southwestern states. Additionally, Latino promoters, such as Oscar De La Hoya and Julio César Chávez, are largely gaining foothold in the promotions business by staging grassroots fight cards in the Southwest, featuring mainly Latino fighters from Mexico and the United States as main events. This growing "Latinization" and regionalization of prizefighting, then, has absolutely remarkable spatial ramifications, as it indicates signs of a radical shift underway in the concentration of contemporary U.S. prizefighting, suggesting that 21st century pugilism *per se* is diverging from its Northeastern origins into a distinctly Southwestern phenomenon.

Thus, taking into consideration the interrelated statewide, national, and global tendencies, the occurrence of prizefighting in Austin may not be in the least as surprising as it initially appears, and it is within the last decade that the capital city's fight scene, too, has increasingly attracted major media headlines. Indeed, professional boxing matches have surfaced from back-alley fight clubs to such central sporting venues as the Austin Convention Center or the Frank Erwin Center at the University of Texas, with boxing now frequently broadcast on national television stations such as ESPN 2, HBO, HBO Latino, FOX Sports Net, Showtime, Telemundo, Galavision, and Telefutura. In addition to the mainstay of Latino and African American fighters, Austin's fight cards have distinguished themselves by frequently staging female bouts. In comparison to San Antonio—

which has the most boxers and boxing gyms in the state—Austin is being billed as the *female* fight capital of Texas, and women's boxing has brought a lot of additional attention to the city's boxing profile. To be sure, ever since an early sanctioned women's boxing bout took place in 1993, the interest in women's fighting has been astounding.[21] Only a year later, in 1994, no less than eighteen women boxers participated in an amateur fight card in Austin;[22] in 2001, the Women's International Boxing Association held an all-female professional championship fight card, the "Texas Shootout," in town; and, to date, five Austinite professional women fighters have held continental or world championship title belts in different weight divisions.

The interest in women's boxing, in particular, has broadened the fan base of the sport, and amidst the new pugilistic boom, then, many of the seasoned Latino fighters have also, as if by accident, gained increasing attention on various levels. As Abel Davilla puts it: "Austin is about the white-collar, the girl-boxer. I really think the older fighters wished this kind of boost in boxing happened when they were coming up. They always had to go to San Antonio or El Paso."[23] Yet, long before the recent prizefight enthusiasm, Austin has—just like any other city where a highway or a railroad tracks demarcates socio-economic and ethnoracial

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[21] The four-round fight was in the flyweight division against Lori Lazarine and Amy Miller, with Lazarine winning the bout by a unanimous decision.
[22] Ron Stefani, "Women Boxers Step into the Ring for Charity Event," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 24, 1994), p 4. The newspaper article is courtesy of Lori Lord.
[23] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.

enclaves—quietly gone about its grassroots boxing in the eastside of town for decades. Afar from much public scrutiny, Latino and African American youth have congregated in East Austin's Recreation Centers to pursue various sports, and amateur boxing, in particular, has been available as an affordable leisure activity for the neighborhoods' aspiring athletes.

**Amateur Boxing in East Austin**

According to the U.S. Census of 2000, the city of Austin ranks as the fourth largest city in Texas. With a population of 656,562, its main ethnoracial divisions are 52.9 per cent "white," 30.5 per cent "Hispanic," and 9.8 per cent "African American."[24] The ethnoracial and class-based semantics between the city's white center and the non-white periphery are unambiguous, as Interstate Highway 35 marks a clear-cut socio-economic boundary between the western core and the eastern periphery, with conspicuous lack of investment of public funds and resources in the eastside of town. According to the Census's demographics, the central eastside areas where my interviewees mainly grew up comprise an over 80 per cent "Hispanic" population today, with a poverty rate ranging between 20 and 50 per cent, depending on the Census's zip code

[24] For Census information, see <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us>.

categorization.[25] Indeed, class relations and spatial organization are, as Nigel Thrift and Peter Williams aptly point out, intrinsically intertwined:

> Classes do not wax and wane in a geometrical abstraction but on the ground as concrete situations of conflict and compromise—in a geographic reality. Classes are organized (or disorganized) over space at a variety of scales and the degree and form of this spatial organization will affect their integrity in myriad ways.[26]

What is more, although there are some signs of gentrification underway in East Austin today, little seems to have changed in the eastside's spatially determined ethnoracial concentration from the time that my interviewees launched their careers to the present day.[27] Consequently, amidst such unyielding implicit and explicit everyday apartheid, the understanding of individual socio-economic mobility and occupational possibilities become deeply inscribed within the city's spatial boundaries. Indeed, to quote Henri Lefebvre, "a spatial code is not simply a means of reading or interpreting space: rather it is a means of living in that space, of understanding it, and of producing it."[28]

At stake for people affected by the ethnoracial and class demarcations in Austin is a very tangible conceptualization of everyday existence: where one can

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[25] Phone conversation with demographer Ryan Robinson, City of Austin, Department of Planning, December 18, 2003.

[26] Nigel Thrift and Peter Williams, eds. *Class and Space: The Making of the Urban Society* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. xiii. On class and urban space, see also Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (London: Edward Arnold Pty Ltd, 1983).

[27] According to city demographer Ryan Robinson, the visible change in the area's demographic patterns is that it increasingly attracts newly arrived, low-income immigrant families. Phone conversation with Robinson, December 18, 2003.

and cannot justifiably be—sit, walk, or drive—at any one time; what specific routes one chooses to a particular destination; what access one has to various recreational spaces; and what rights to claim belonging to different places. Lucy Lippard points out, in effect, that "[p]laces that are merely *accessible* to citizens, rather than controlled by them through use, are truly not public places."[29] Growing up on frequent encounters with racial profiling—e.g., automobile stoppages outside of the barrio by Texas law enforcement agents—much of my interviewees' everyday choices and maneuvering within the city speaks to an internalization of Austin's racialized power dynamics at an early age. Savvy in the urban geography, fighters seem to have learned to avoid the white-only public spaces with a premonition to not be in "the wrong place at the wrong time"—even though a police officer's recognition of them as boxers would characteristically resolve a possibly volatile situation.

Accordingly, as David Harvey argues, "what goes on in a place cannot be understood outside of the space relations that support that place any more than the space relations can be understood independently of what goes on in particular

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[28] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 47-48.

[29] Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 243. See also, Setha M. Low, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000) and Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, *The Antropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

places."[30] Moreover, Tim Cresswell elaborates on place as a marker of degrees of individual mobility and social power:

> Places are fundamental creators of difference. It is possible to be inside a place or outside a place. Outsiders are not to be trusted; insiders know the rules and obey them. The definition of *insider* or *outsider* is more than a locational marker. Just as place has objective and subjective facets, the designation of place means two connected things. An outsider is not someone literally from another location but someone who is existentially removed from the milieu of "our" place.[31]

It is my contention, then, that amateur boxing offers the barrio-based bodies a rare channel for possible contestations of individual agency against the very forces that foster social stagnation within the city of Austin. For, to quote Tim Cresswell once more: "Just as it is the case that space and place are used to structure the normative world, they are also used (intentionally or otherwise) to question that normative world."[32] By the same logic, were it not for boxing, I seriously doubt that many fighters would ever have gained access to many spaces and places outside of the barrio; nor would they likely have entered into any kind of dialogue with alternative societal discourses which enable the problematization of one's insider/outsider status—that is, levels of social inclusion or exclusion, or where one can or cannot claim to belong.

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[30] David Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity" in John Bird et al., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 15.

[31] Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 154. For an excellent discussion of space, place, and mobility, see also his *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

[32] Ibid., p. 9.

My Latino interviewees who began their amateur boxing careers in East Austin within the past thirty years, in the 1970s and 1980s, represent a heterogeneous group of individuals in terms of family structures, their incentive to begin to box, and parental involvement with the sport.[33] However, the one commonality all of the fighters have, directly or indirectly, is childhood memories marked by various forms of deprivation endemic to poverty: whether by way of challenging domestic living arrangements, neighborhood encounters with violence, or institutional discrimination or maltreatment.[34] At the same time, their reminiscences hark back to an extremely strong sense of a communal self-help principle, peer-group support, and sibling-solidarity. Those fighters who grew up in families with five to ten children would typically have parents holding two or more blue-collar jobs at once, with many household responsibilities falling on the children at a young age. "The World Famous" Joel Elizondo, for example, recounts:

> I knew already when I was seven that I had to work and help my family out. I was always helping people out, picking up their trash and stuff like that, and I started making money out of it. We grew up on food stamps: they'd give you a dollar here or a food-stamp there but, hey, to me that was money. That's how life was.[35]

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[33] In this section, my focus will be on the life-stories of those fighters who specifically lived or began their boxing careers in the East Austin barrio. Abel Davilla, for example, grew up in South Austin, Mike Trejo in San Marcos, Jesus Chávez in Chicago, and Jesse Ravelo in Cuba. Conrad Sanchez grew up in Southeast Austin in a somewhat wealthier family than most of my informants, but he began boxing in East Austin.

[34] One of my interviewees gives an everyday example of his childhood poverty: "If I would get an ice cream, everybody in the house would take a lick of it."

[35] Interview with Elizondo, April 23, 2003.

An assemblage of the fighters' childhood encounters in the neighborhood depicts an everyday ambience of street lawlessness, petty crime, and weapon threats, with kids becoming, of necessity, familiarized with an early initiation of various strategies of survival. Thus, they would learn to always stick together, to defend themselves, and to take responsibility of one another, as they frequently recall being "picked on" or "tried," especially at school. Verbal slurs—varying from such physical labeling as "midgets" and ethnic epithets like "burnt *burrito*s" to direct provocations, such as, "Whatcha lookin' at?"—would instigate school scuffles, although getting there in and of itself could pose a minefield of hazards on a daily basis. Carlos Valdez's childhood confrontation is revealing:

> We were living in a rough part of the neighborhood in East Austin, and every day we got picked on. When I was 5-6 years old, my brother and I took a shortcut, because my aunt and uncle weren't with us that day, and we didn't wanna get roughed up on that side. We were walking and I saw a wall formed by four-five black kids coming at me with a broomstick cut at the end—a sharp point. One of the guys swung it at me, and another one got my brother Pete, and I started bleeding. Lucky for us, there was a fire station not two blocks away and my brother carried me there, and they ran me over to the emergency. That's kind of where it [boxing] started right there. We found out they had free boxing lessons at Montopolis Recreation Center, so my brothers Pete, Ernest, and I started boxing. I wasn't going to be picked on. I was a fighter; I've always been a fighter.[36]

As a number of other incidents in the barrio expose bleak everyday realities—ranging from thieving schemes, complete with the guise of color-coded ski-masks and "pistol whuppings" during gang clashes, to shootout carnage and

[36] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.

subsequent incarcerations—personal tragedy is hardly surprising.[37] Quite the reverse, experiences of physical and emotional brutality seem prevalent not only as an outcome of school bullying and street anarchy, but also in domestic and institutional settings. One of my informants describes his childhood exploitation as follows: "I grew up with…physical, verbal, and mental abuse for four years of my life, between four and nine. I still have scars everywhere…But it gave me a new life. I closed that chapter out of my life and replaced it with the sport." In a similar manner, another fighter analyzes boxing as a refuge from abusive circumstances: "For a long time, I used boxing to hide things that happened to me when I was young. To me it was like recess, like PE at school. Boxing kept me busy so that I wouldn't think of what had [been] done to me. I wish I had the [means] to talk to a therapist, but I tried to deal with it on my own." With little awareness of or positive encounters with any external support networks, boxing comes to offer an instrumental channel to escape various dysfunctional everyday conditions, while many fighters learn to resort to themselves as sole reliable pillars of support. To be sure, such self-help ingenuity is perfectly logical, for as Philippe Bourgois points out, "individuals who have been marginalized socially, economically, and culturally have had negative long-term relationships with

[37] Such circumstances are not, of course, restricted to East Austin alone. Growing up in South Austin, Abel Davilla describes similar encounters: "I wasn't in a gang technically, but the guys I hung out knew guys who were, and we got associated with them…It wasn't like *Colors*-like gang, no shooting until I got to high school, but then guys started getting shot…[It was] more like experimenting with drugs, staying out late, friends of mine were stealing stuff. That's one thing I didn't do: I've never been a thief, but I'm crazy though, fearless." Interview, August 22, 2003.

mainstream society" and, hence, would likely not seek outside resources for personal assistance.[38]

Instead, by taking charge of their own lives at an early age and making the explicit choice *not* to succumb to the surrounding social devastation, young fighters try to help themselves any possible way they know how. When the alternative of social disorder becomes substituted by a hands-only, one-on-one battle—complete with rules, referees, and a principle of fair game—some kids experience a sense of regularity, structure, and cohesion for the first time in their lives through boxing. The attention and instruction from trainers and coaches also provides a central source of adult guidance, personal support, and value-formation, with the handlers taking on the role of surrogate parents or role models for some kids. Many fighters, in effect, assert that, in comparison to their various other life-experiences, boxing becomes not only relatively *easy*; the gym is also an extraordinarily *safe* environment.

Consequently, Thomas Hauser points out, "[p]overty wears most people down, but it spurs others with powerful incentive and anger. In a perfect world boxing might not exist. But the world is not perfect, and in the eyes of many, thousands of young men are better off because of boxing."[39] Although the early

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[38] Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 12. For an anthology on Latinos in U.S. barrios, see also, Joan Moore and Raquel Pinderhughes, eds., *In the Barrios: Latinos and the Underclass Debate* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993).

[39] Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), pp.13-14.

intimacy with barrio mayhem prompts an incentive to succeed in the fight game, Johnny Casas insists on a fundamental difference between boxing and the perils of the streets:

> In the ring it's not violence; I don't think so. I look at it like being a gladiator. You have to have that survival soul, to defend yourself, protect yourself. You have to find a way to survive. I've fought with broken hands, broken ribs; and I've found ways to win. I've learned to live with pain at a very young age. That's what the fight game is—*pain*. It's gonna be there and then it's gone. But a lot of people don't see it that way.[40]

While the underlying survival urgency in the barrio and the ring may be the same, their difference is the sport's codified rules and everyday ethics versus the random gun-controlled logic of the streets' chaotic atmosphere. In addition, distinguishing the space of the streets and the boxing gym further, Loïc Wacquant importantly observes that: "[a]nybody can pick up a job in a factory or peddle drugs on a street corner; not everyone has the mettle to step into the ring but even more so the 'spunk' to retire into the gym for years and put up with the unflinching discipline of mind and body this demands."[41]

Launching their amateur careers between the ages of five and twelve on average, the East Austinite kids were typically introduced to boxing through friends, neighbors, or parents, some of whom—e.g., John Alba, the late Oswaldo A.B. Cantú, Rocky Medrano, Moses Saldana, the late Joe Sanchez, and Joe Vela, to mention a few—were former fighters themselves and would become actively

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[40] Interview with Casas, November 21, 2002.

involved in the gyms as trainers, coaches, or ringside officials. Yet the kids' reasons to begin boxing vary as much as the fighters do. Thus, Conrad Sanchez, for example, began to box at age six because his father took him and Brother Joey to the gym, likely "to keep them off the streets, away from drugs, alcohol, and just hanging out."[42] Johnny Casas thought of himself as a born fighter from age five onward ever since he saw a pair of boxing gloves, but his mother would not allow him to begin boxing until age ten.[43] The "World Famous" Joel Elizondo, however, got involved in boxing by sheer accident, while he considered gymnastics to be his main sport for a long time.[44] The Valdez brothers, in turn, all began boxing for self-defense reasons at an early age, and their father Pete Valdez also worked in the gym as one of the trainers. Javier Alvarez, on the other hand, became involved in the sport relatively late, at age twelve,[45] for he never professed to have any particular "love" for it, nor did he think he possessed a

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[41] Loïc Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade," *Theory and Society* Vol. 24, No. 4, (August 1995), p. 504.

[42] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.

[43] Casas recalls how, at age five, he saw some boxing matches organized in the neighborhood's park; how he was mesmerized by the boxing gloves; and how he secretly started going to the gym, until his "aunt took care of the situation for him" and he was able to begin boxing seriously at age ten. Interview, November 21, 2002.

[44] Jesus Chávez, who began his amateur career in Chicago, also got involved in the sport only because he could not afford his first choice, karate. Finding out about free boxing classes in a facility where his father urged him to take swimming lessons, he took on boxing in lieu of the more expensive martial arts.

[45] Jesse Ravelo, who was born in Cuba, also began boxing at age twelve; he won the junior national championship at age fourteen, and defected to the United States at age sixteen while representing the Pan American boxing team in Canada. Ravelo explains: "My mom and dad were already in the United States, but I was military age, and I wasn't able to leave Cuba, so I had to be good at athletics." Interview, August 14, 2003.

great deal of athletic aptitude early on; instead, he viewed boxing as a strategic outlet:

> I knew that my dad liked boxing and I figured if I could involve myself in a boxing program at the local recreation center that he would love it, and I could get out of the house; otherwise I'd have to stay at home. So I started boxing to get out of the house…My dad used to box when he was young, never really to the level that I did, but maybe South Texas title. He was a heavyweight, 6'3 and that's what I wanted to be: I wanted to be like my dad. I didn't do it for the love of the sport.[46]

Indeed, a number of families had generations of boxers either in Texas or Mexico; thus, throughout the barrio, boxing enjoyed a widespread following, and *mexicano* fighters, in particular, were big heroes in the community. As Conrad Sanchez puts it, "we knew it was in our blood, that we are the Latino fighters. It is part of our history: you're Mexican, you fight—like a rooster."[47] On Friday nights, then, a dad might buy a whole bunch of doughnuts and take the entire family to grandma and grandpa's house to watch the *Corona Fight Night* on the Spanish-language Channel 13, and everybody would watch such Latino fighters as Alexis Arguello, Salvador Sanchez, Wilfredo Benítez, Roberto Durán, as well as such African American fighters as Muhammd Ali, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, or Thomas Hearns. In addition, ever since the late A.B. Cantú became boxing director for the city Parks and Recreation Department in the 1960s, he launched

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[46] Interview with Alvarez, July 19, 2003. Mike Trejo, in turn, explains his reason to begin boxing as follows: "I would get into fist fights when I was a freshman, sophomore in high school—that's when Mike Tyson started coming out. I was beating up all these guys, and I thought if he could do it, I can. Right then I stopped drinking and smoking dope, but there was no place in San Marcos. The closest place was Austin." Interview, August 20, 2003.
[47] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.

the amateur boxing program, which by the mid-1970s had firmly established its position in Texas's amateur fight scene, attracting some hundred youth between the ages of six and nineteen who participated in its activities in the city's sporting facilities, such as the Pan American Recreation Center, the Montopolis Recreation Center, and the South Austin Recreation Center.[48]

With a majority of *mexicano* and black kids, and only a few white kids, the communal boxing gyms served just as much of a sporting function as they performed a social role. Boxers' daily training regimen laid out the groundwork for their athletic development and personal determination, as they were instructed the rudiments of the fight game to be technique, conditioning, dedication, and—most important—"heart." According to trainer Inéz Guerrero, "when they're six-seven years old, you can't say too much [as to whether they will make it in the ring], but if they come back you know the boy is not a quitter. I would see if they had the heart, not just to dish it out but take it too."[49] The three to four-hour exercises consisted of ring-work, road-work, and strength exercises (including some 250-300 sit-ups), the synchronization of which demanded discipline, timeliness, and perseverance in and out of the gym. While ring-work emphasized speed, technique, and power, it also showed the importance of rhythm, timing, and coordination. Kids would learn to jump rope, shadow-box, hit the punch-

[48] Ronald Powell, "Amateur Boxing in Austin: Austinite Learns Discipline the Key" and "From a Vegetable Warehouse and a Duffle Bag: Boxing Program Has Come a Long Way," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 25, 1978), p. 10.

mitts, and throw medicine ball before they would practice their shots on the speed-bag, double-ended bag, and the heavy bag; and, at long last, they would get to spar.

Early sparring sessions typically taught kids humility, as they experienced that finding one's spatial range in the ring, while timing defense and offence against a moving opponent, was a lot of more challenging than one might at first envision, having as much to do with hand-eye coordination as with foot-movement and breathing technique.[50] Moreover, they learned first-hand that conditioning was the key to one's success in the ring; that running determined a pugilist's ultimate physical shape and endurance during the fight. Thus, boxers would do various types of road-work—short and long distance runs, sprints, and interval running—as a central part of their basic training. Balancing out these various components with one's everyday schedule, then, called for remarkable punctuality and dedication, as is evident in Javier Alvarez's recollection:

> I learned perseverance and endurance. After we moved away from where the gym was, (I'd say about ten miles away), I had to take the bus. The child rate was seven cents; and every day I'd have to come up with seven cents to ride the bus. Whether I had to sell a coke bottle, I'd get it. And I'd get a two-hour transfer and do my workout within that time-frame, and that developed a lot of discipline. If I missed that bus, it would be a long walk…[51]

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[49] Interview with Guerrero, August 25, 2003.

[50] Mike Trejo's candid account is revealing: "First time I sparred, I didn't know what I was doing. I thought I was just a bad dude and I was gonna kick some butt, but I got whupped. I learned that I wasn't bad like I thought I was; it didn't happen that way. So I started training, training, training." Interview, August 20, 2003.

[51] Interview with Alvarez, July 19, 2003.

However, the rigid régime of the ring did not solely benefit the kids; its function could be equally rewarding to a trainer. Inéz Guerrero explains:

> Boxing has [also] helped me get in condition and it gives me responsibility, just like for the kids. I have to get in the gym because I have a commitment, so I won't go to the bar, for example. So it's helped me out that way. It has helped me get along with kids and their parents. And I can give them advice. It has helped me get along with people in my business; I used to be shy and not look at people in the eye.[52]

Young boxers' training regimen, accordingly, was based equally on the development of the physique as well as one's mental aptitude. Gym etiquette stressed self-discipline and character-building, and kids were incessantly being cautioned to "stay out of trouble," with a specific elucidation that "trouble-makers *don't* box." A fighter, gym-lore maintained, is one who "eats, sleeps, and breathes" boxing, one who beats his opponent "physically, mentally, and spiritually," one who is "a fighter in the ring, and a gentleman out of the ring." A *great fighter* would always enter the ring in the best physical shape, would always put up the best performance, and—most important—would never quit. "The World Famous" Joel Elizondo describes his early memories of the social atmosphere at the Pan American Gym:

> In the gym, we all got along, working out, sparring, and everybody helping each other out: "Keep your hands up; keep the jab going!" And they would teach you not to get involved in gangs and to stay out of trouble. To this day, I feel safer in the ring than out on the street. Out on

[52] Interview with Guerrero, August 25, 2003.

> the street, you never know: people may jump on you! Inside the ring, you feel secure.[53]

In addition, the aspiring athletes were informed about nutritious diet (no *tortillas*, sodas, or ice cream), healthy living habits, and sportsmanly codes of conduct. Carlos Valdez describes his childhood lessons about pugilistic behavior: "Boxers don't stay up late, they don't smoke, don't drink, and they're respectful. It starts from 'Yes Sir, No Sir' and if you're wrong, you say: 'I'm sorry.' You maintain your workout schedule and you're honest. Honesty plays a big part."[54] Unlike their daily experiences at school and on the streets, the respect for the ring called for open-mindedness and considerate behavior toward everybody at the gym. Conrad Sanchez explains that getting along was, indeed, an everyday necessity: "We were like a family, you had to like everybody. We were there five days out of a week, sometimes Saturdays. We took care of each other."[55]

Interestingly enough, "everybody" did not solely refer to other East Austinite boys, for notwithstanding the male majority, some six or seven girls, too, would frequently show up for the boxing classes. Knowing as we do today that women boxers have existed throughout the history of pugilism it is, perhaps, unsurprising to find out that such girls as Gloria Elizondo, Cindy Escalante, Sovia Marcharro, and Rose Hansen would be among a handful of girls who frequented the Pan American Gym for not just boxing classes, but they actually took part in

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[53] Interview with Elizondo, April 23, 2003.
[54] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.

local one-day amateur competitions—also known as "smokers"—during the mid-1970s.[56] Gloria Elizondo reminisces on her involvement with boxing:

> We were so small; we had to build our self-esteem. They took us in with the guys; we started practicing and sparring and we'd be there three, four hours a day. We watched the guys, asked them questions, and they answered. To box you always have to think ahead of yourself; if you don't, they'll bring you down. My jab was there to protect me, and I would always get up if I got knocked down. We learned never to give up, not walk away. We would rotate to fight each other, and I had maybe 10-11 fights. They put us the headgear, mouthpiece, and a cup, and said "Block yourself at all times." I learned that I liked to compete against somebody.[57]

Although A.B. Cantú was an avid advocate for girls' and women's boxing, the American Athletic Union chose not to sponsor female participation in the program, and the girls' boxing careers remained short-lived. Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter 1, it was not until 1993, that the judicial system would recognize the legality of women's amateur boxing, and without such official acknowledgement, the East Austinite girls' competitive boxing was, undoubtedly, too radical for its time. Moreover, during the era in which male boxers were not required to wear the protective headgear that is compulsory in today's amateur boxing, the girl boxers felt that such rules were imposed on them on discriminatory grounds. A.B. Cantú, in fact, called public attention to the withering away of girls' competitive boxing, and the ensuing gender debate, in a

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[55] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.
[56] The term "smokers" originates from boxing matches organized in clubs where the tobacco-filled atmosphere would characterize the sporting events.
[57] Interview with Elizondo, July 29, 2003.

1978 article in the *Austin American-Statesman*: "'The girls did not like the regulations forcing them to wear protective vests and we began to have problems…They wanted to be like the guys. They wanted equal opportunity.'"[58]

All of my interviewees proclaim that their involvement in amateur boxing fundamentally changed—and often *saved*—their lives; that the sport offered them social possibilities that they would not perceive as feasible otherwise. To quote Johnny Casas: "It has changed me so much: it's calmed me down a lot, and [I've learned] a lot of discipline. I think boxing has always been my savior. And I've met a lot of good people. In the fight game everybody has a 'story'—but you gotta deal with it and move on."[59] According to other fighters, boxing has brought them a spectrum of "stability," "focus," "confidence," "discipline," "liberation," "manners," "respect," and "better treatment."[60] As a result, the boxing gym in the barrio came to serve, for the young athletes, a secure social space which enabled the distancing of oneself from various forms of everyday negativity; it was a receptacle of positive values, honorary principles, and peer solidarity, while it also

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[58] Ronald Powell, "From a Vegetable Warehouse and a Duffle Bag: Boxing Program Has Come a Long Way," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 25, 1978), p. 10.
[59] Interview with Casas, November 21, 2002.
[60] In comparison, when I asked my Brother Tom Heiskanen whether he regards boxing as a source of social opportunities in Finnish society, his response is in stark opposition to all of my U.S. interviewees: "*Absolutely not*! In Finland, where the standard of living is so high for everybody boxing is, by no means, considered to be a merit for social or professional advancement. Boxers are, as a rule, considered 'feeble-minded,' asocial, aggressive, and—above all—unintelligent." My translation from "*Ei, ei missään tapauksessa*! Suomessa, missä elintaso on niin korkea jokaiselle, nyrkkeily ei ole välttämättä mikään positiivinen asia, ei se mikään meriitti ole, etenkään like-elämässä. Nyrkkeilijöihin suhtaudutaan tylsämielisinä, epäsosiaalisina, aggressiivisina ja varsinkin tyhminä." Interview, June 26, 2003.

functioned as a locus for conceptualizing one's being, surroundings, and understanding of the outside world.[61] Most important, perhaps, amateur boxing enabled a young fighter to consciously take responsibility and claim agency of one's own life, offering as it does, in Loïc Wacquant's words, "a chance to seize one's own fate, to become a worthy social being."[62] Pete Gil, a former East Austinite welterweight turned constable in the Department of Public Safety, who fought as a professional boxer in the 1940s and 1950s, sums up the social function of boxing in children's character building: "Amateur boxing is good for everyone, if they teach what they are supposed to teach: ethics, how to behave, respect; everybody needs those skills. Not necessarily to be a professional, but to learn how to carry yourself, how to compete, how to protect yourself."[63]

**Tournaments and Trophies**

Amateur boxing matches—both one day "smokers" and weekend-long tournaments—were organized in the 1970s and 1980s no less than once or twice a month at one of the Recreation Centers, the Metz Park, or the City Coliseum. Occasionally, the ring would be set up on the dance floors of the Broken Spoke or the Chaparral Club, and boxing was also a featured outdoor event at the Austin Aqua Fest city festival on Auditorium Shores. As part of A.B. Cantú's boxing

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[61] The most difficult emotional experiences fighters recall from their early days are losing their trainers or coaches whom they have become attached to.
[62] "The Prizefighters Three Bodies," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (November 1998), p. 327.

program, Austinite kids competed in the Amateur Boxing Federation championships, the Silver Gloves- and the Golden Gloves championships (*Guantes de Oro*), as well as in the American Athletic Union Junior Olympics.

These tournaments typically consisted of four different combative categories: the division from age six to ten had a minimum wage-limit requirement of fifty pounds; from ages ten to fifteen, kids fought in the "junior" division; as they reached age fifteen, they moved onto the "novice" category for their first five fights, after which they would, at last, compete in the "open" division. Indeed, Carlos Valdez's situation as a beginner was atypical, for he had trouble not in "making weight" but putting *enough* weight on to reach the minimum limit and to be able to fight in what was colloquially referred to as "the Little League of Boxing":

> The first three years I fought at 50 pounds, but the first two years I weighed 46-47 pounds. So my dad always had to keep 15-20 dollars worth of quarters with him, so I could stick them in my clothes to make weight. The hardest thing about fighting the first few years was because every time I wasn't sure if we were gonna pull it off, because there was talk of my dad putting quarters in my jocks.[64]

Carlos did, however, manage to get away with his small physical size; indeed, such was the volume of his boxing experience that, by age eleven, he already had

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[63] Interview with Gil, September 3, 2003.
[64] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.

accumulated a record of 53 mostly victorious fights, with two regional American Athletic Union Junior Olympics titles.[65]

Conrad Sanchez, in his turn, was the first of the local boxers to emerge as Texas state champion in 1981, an event of which the *Austin American-Statesman* wrote: "One of the brightest fighters to come out of the Austin area for a long while won the [bantamweight] State Championship in Fort Worth. Not since the days of national champion Manuel Navarro has the Golden Gloves produced such a promising fighter."[66] With two Golden Gloves state championships and an impressively growing victorious record, Conrad soon became a celebrity in the local boxing community as well as at his school, Travis High. Wife Patricia Sanchez reminisces: "He had an entourage at school and everybody knew who he was. They would make announcements on the intercom: 'Conrad did it again: he won state championship.' And they would write about him in the newspapers. But he was never flashy or a show-off at school; he never wanted to wear the jackets: I still have all of them upstairs."[67] Carlos Valdez explains his personal adulation for Sanchez as an up-and-coming fighter:

> I think the one who influenced me the most was Conrad because he was a southpaw [left-handed] like I was. I looked up to him a lot, and I wanted

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[65] Bill Douthat, "Youthful Boxers Put Spirit in Ring," *Austin American-Statesman* (May 28, 1979), p. A 1.

[66] "In the Spotlight: Conrad Sanchez Wins State Championship" *Austin American-Statesman* (March 17, 1981). See also Randy Riggs, "Gold Glover Finds Father Knows Best: Youth's Affair with Boxing is a Glove Story," *Austin American-Statesman* (June 25, 1981), p. C 1. Manuel Navarro was an Austinite national bantamweight champion in 1964. Both newspaper articles are courtesy of Conrad and Patricia Sanchez.

[67] Interview with Sanchez, January 9, 2004.

> to emulate everything he did. If he would hit the bag one-two three, I was right there next to him to hit the bag one-two three. I actually copied his style. His style was pretty, and I wanted to be pretty: like two Mexican roosters fighting—you see the roosters '*pat-tat-tat-tat-tat!*' real quick. One of the reasons I won nationals was Conrad Sanchez.[68]

At the time, Austin was remarkably active in hosting various amateur tournaments, with East Austin's Pan American and Montopolis teams recurrently triumphant in capturing the most outstanding team award, bringing sporting inspiration to the East Austinite fight aficionados. Indeed, with no money involved, the amateur boxing ideal embraced not only individual achievement, but also the team's accomplishment, and the ultimate pride was to bring the team trophy back to the community. On February 1, 1982, for example, the capital city hosted the 46th Annual Austin Golden Gloves Tournament, with over a hundred kids from the Central Texas area—San Marcos, Fort Hood, San Antonio, Waco, and Elgin—competing in the event, as the Pan American Gym was chosen to be the top division team."[69] Bill Valdez, a local sports writer, predicted Johnny Casas's fight against Stevie Martínez to be the highlight of the tournament, describing the former as "a finesse boxer who is driven by desire to make it as a professional fighter…a 'classic boxer' who can hit hard with both hands and is an excellent counter-puncher. A natural right-hander, he can switch to a southpaw

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[68] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.

[69] Bill Valdez, "Austin Sends 11 Boxers to State Golden Gloves," an undated newspaper clipping from a 1982 *Austin American-Statesman*. The newspaper article is courtesy of Conrad and Patricia Sanchez.

style."[70] By 1982, Johnny Casas, Conrad Sanchez, and Carlos Valdez had all become Texas state champions, bringing plaudits to East Austin's boxing profile: "Years of dedicated training have sharpened the skills of three Austin amateur boxers—welterweight Johnny Casas, flyweight Carlos Valdez, and featherweight Conrad Sanchez—and their efforts paid off with Amateur Boxing Federation state championships and a berth in the AFB nationals."[71] A significant detail here is that, quite unlike their other experiences within the city's racial dynamics, the young athletes are being billed as representatives of the city of Austin, an allegiance that they never had claim for before becoming involved with boxing.

Equally important, however, these boxing tournaments always offered a social forum, in particular, for the East Austin barrio, and the community would get eagerly involved in the events, with more and more of them starting to follow the local kids' careers. With only nominal ticket fees and seating based on a first come, first served-principle, kids, parents, and grandparents alike would all show up for the tournaments, and folks would come up to congratulate the fighters, ask for autographs, and everybody seemed to want to be friends with them.[72] Gloria Elizondo describes the social function of local boxing:

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[70] Bill Valdez, "Battles in the Ring: Golden Gloves a Stepping Stone for Some, a Hobby for Others," *Austin American-Statesman* (February 1, 1982), p. D 6. The newspaper article is courtesy of Johnny Casas.

[71] "Austin Boxers in Nationals," an undated clipping from a 1984 *Austin American-Statesman*. Courtesy of Johnny Casas.

[72] Admission fees for amateur boxing events were as low as $ 2 for adults, $ 1 for students, and $ 4 for a weekend's tournament pass.

> It was beautiful just to see people find a goal, something they can accomplish. They were just happy to get together to do things. It was a mix of African Americans and Hispanics, not too many Anglos. We got to know them and we'd make them *tortillas* and teach them Spanish. After the boxing we'd all go to Hill Side, where they had bands like Rubén Ramos, and we'd sit on the grass, enjoy the music, and have some refreshments.[73]

Rapidly accumulating records of hundreds of fights, the East Austinite boxers advanced to participate in the open division in Texas Golden Gloves and Amateur Boxing Federation's regional tournaments, with frequent road-trips to such places Amarillo, Beaumont, Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, Lubbock, Odessa, San Antonio, Tyler, and Wichita Falls. "The World Famous" Joel Elizondo explains: "Everywhere we would go, we would pack a van and A.B [Cantú] would take us there. He was like a father to us, and after the fights he would say 'Hey Kids: Wanna go out to eat?' That was the best. He took care of us, taught us right from wrong."[74] In addition to the athletic experience, in effect, an important part of these excursions was a sense of exploration they provided for the boys who, thus, got a rare chance to leave town and their everyday surroundings. As Javier Alvarez recalls: "I enjoyed the camaraderie, I enjoyed the road trips we would take—that was exciting to me: to leave the house, to eat at restaurants, to stay at hotels. It was adventure. That's why I stuck with boxing at the time."[75] The culmination of the tournaments,

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[73] Interview with Elizondo, July 29, 2003.
[74] Interview with Elizondo, July 19, 2003.
[75] Interview with Alvarez, July 19, 2003.

nonetheless, was winning, and kids would get medals, trophies, t-shirts, rings, and miscellaneous fight paraphernalia and, for some boxers, getting one's first team jacket was a special source of pride, as it cherished the *esprit de corps* amongst the stablemates.

Team support proved particularly important when fighters experienced being "robbed" of a victory because of an opponent's home-turf benefit, as favoritism turned out to be an unfortunate commonplace in the fight game. With experiences that opponents would win fights because their corners had contact with the judges, kids had to succumb to the principle that one had to *first* win the fight in the ring and *then* win the decision on the score cards.[76] Inéz Guerrero elaborates: "Hometown advantage is true especially in boxing. If we don't knock them out, I guarantee that we have a hard time getting a decision from a hometown favorite. When they take too long to come up with a decision, you know something is wrong."[77] Indeed, many fighters recall being disillusioned with such incidents, but Carlos Valdez's most bizarre experience in San Antonio is particularly memorable, for it took place on August 12, 1982, the day that the twenty-three-year-old legendary WBC featherweight champion Salvador Sanchez died in an auto accident. Everybody agreed, young Carlos had overwhelmingly

[76] Johnny Casas recalls one of his memorable amateur fights: "I never forget this one fight with a guy named Steve Martínez. It was really political. I fought him in the finals and he beat me because of who his father was—a former champion. And everybody came up to me after the fight, 'he won because of who his father was, they knew the judges.' I met him again later on in the years, and that's when the doors opened up for me, and I refused to let him beat me." Interview, November 21, 2002.

outscored and "outboxed" an up-and-coming San Antonian favorite, but the local judges inexplicably called the fight a draw, a ruling against any possible logic, for amateur boxing does *not* recognize a draw! As the judges' arbitrary pronouncement resulted in a flood of protests—embellished with a range of miscellaneous objects being hurled into the ring—the organizers were forced to cancel all the remaining fights of the tournament. Nevertheless, the overall mayhem continued outside the fight arena, possibly also serving as an expression of grief for Salvador Sanchez, a champion with nine successful title defenses, whom many among boxing cognoscenti still today consider the best "pound-for-pound" fighter to ever emerge from Mexico.

As fighters built up their experience in the open division and got a chance to compete on national level, their competition trips would take them all over the nation. Mentioning a spectrum of memories in such places as Oklahoma, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, California, New York, Minnesota, and Ohio, fighters recall the novelty of their quotidian encounters: for example, seeing snow for the first time, stepping on an airplane, trying new foods and, most memorably, meeting other fighters, some of whom were former or future superstar champions. Alongside the geographic expansion one's team allegiance, too, shifted from the local boxing gym in the barrio to representing the state of Texas, and the national

[77] Interview with Guerrero, August 25, 2003.

tournaments, obviously, brought the fight game to an altogether different level, as is evident in Conrad Sanchez's description:

> When I fought in the nationals in Toledo, Ohio, there were five hundred guys there, and you fought from sunup to sundown and there were cuts every day. There's this huge convention center the size of a football field with state flags everywhere. You had three rings for a couple of nights, then the next night two rings, and the last night one ring; and you knew you were getting closer and closer, and the adrenaline makes you go a thousand miles an hour. I lost the last fight, but this was back to the "didn't get the decision."[78]

After defeating four opponents on consecutive nights, Sanchez entered the national championships' finals, but a standing eight-count in the first round likely cost him the victorious decision. However, he would return home to Austin celebrated as a rare silver medalist with other victorious Texan teammates, such as flyweight Jesse Benavides, lightweight Steve Cruz, and welterweight Jesse James Leija—all of whom would later claim fame as world champions in professional boxing.

Carlos Valdez and Javier Alvarez also proceeded to climb all the way to the U.S. national championships, both winning their weight divisions—alongside a chance to represent the United States widely in international boxing tournaments, with trips to countries as different as Canada, Cuba, Holland, Korea, Mexico, Romania, Turkey, and the USSR. Javier Alvarez, unlike most of the other fighters who turned professional in their early twenties, stuck longest with the amateur boxing program. Nicknamed "Hard-Luck Harvey" because of his

rocky beginning in the fight game, Alvarez would eventually become the first Latino boxer to ever win the U.S. national amateur championship in the heavyweight division. However, his first world championship gold medal victory became a lackluster celebration amidst the national team's somber spirits: "The team went to Seoul, Korea to fight in 1989. Everybody lost and I was the only one who won, and I remember the headlines in *USA Today* saying 'Alvarez the Soul Winner in Seoul.' But everybody else lost, so I didn't get to enjoy the victory."[79] In due course, Alvarez would win five medals in national championships, an accomplishment that earned him a spot in the U.S. Olympic Program. With job opportunity and education opportunity programs, drug prevention programs, and speaking programs, the Olympic Committee provides funding for the top three contenders in one's weight class, offering to pay the athletes' college education, an opportunity which Javier took advantage of but which he, simultaneously, describes as a double-edged sword:

> I was a Communication Arts major, and they paid all my expenses. The first year was very humbling: I had dropped out of high school, didn't have a GED, didn't know how to write an essay, but I endured. I think I was the only one who went to school but the others in the national team—like Oscar De La Hoya and Sugar Shane Mosley—were completely dedicated to the sport: they went to the Olympics, and I lost the Olympic trials because I was thinking ahead of myself for a back-up plan; I didn't gamble everything.[80]

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[78] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.
[79] Interview with Alvarez, July 19, 2003.
[80] Ibid. Alvarez participated four times in the Olympic trials.

As the East Austinite boxers seasoned within the amateur line of the fight game, traveling and training at various regional settings, they became familiarized with diverse forms of social organization beyond the spatial framework of the barrio. Together with the gradual progression from the local, regional, national, and global levels, one would encounter new customs, languages, and climactic variation, all of which, by default, came to influence one's self-conceptualization and surroundings. The fighters' involvement within the pugilistic practice at a range of spatial scales, hence, brought about personal mobility, simultaneously engendering various personal identity negotiations, while enabling giving meaning to one's multiple subject positions and one's sense of space and place. When Javier Alvarez, for example, began to work with trainer/cut man Joe Souza at San Fernando's Gym in San Antonio, he experienced an absolute sense of personal liberation with regard to both his training regimen and ethnoracial identity conceptualization: "In Austin, I felt like I was held down. When you're "Hispanic" there, you're an *ethnic* group, but when you're "Hispanic" in San Antonio, you're just San Antonian."[81]

In hindsight of their various pugilistic encounters, the East Austinite fighters today invariably come to articulate that place, necessarily, matters in and out of the ring differently. While their early experiences at school, the barrio, and the city of Austin typically reveal a deep-seated sense of ethnoracially demarcated

[81] Ibid.

and class-based sense of spatial organization, the respect for the ring provides a non-discriminatory basis which does not privilege race, ethnicity, or class affiliation. Thus, the competition venue turns into a non-hierarchical meeting ground, a crossroads that connects people from different socio-cultural and regional backgrounds to the—ideally—level playing field of the sport. Even so, Mike Marqusee writes:

> The logic of the level playing field gives sport an egalitarian premise, undoubtedly the reason for their popular appeal…Of course the level playing field is enclosed within a society that is anything but level. As a result, a host of social forces converge to ensure that, despite its apparent autonomy and indifference to social status, the level playing field mirrors prevalent ideas about social hierarchy, including ideas about race.[82]

Indeed, my interviewees, too, are acutely aware of such a distinction, and while a fighter may proudly carry his ethnoracial or regional heritage to the fight arena to cherish the team's *esprit de corps*, all of the Austinite fighters point out in unison that such identification only makes a difference outside of the ring; for the duration of the actual combat, the group allegiances have no bearing whatsoever. For that reason, Carlos Valdez explains: "I'm proud to be Mexican, and I'm still [upset] they took my land, but I don't take that into the ring because being Mexican is not gonna win me the fight. The promoters are doing it because Latinos are hip right now: movies, music, sports."[83] Johnny Casas elaborates further on his personal delineation of race, space, and place: "You never forget

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[82] Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 17-18.

where you come from. If you do, you're a fool. But we're talking about the fight game, it don't matter what color you are: he's out to do the same thing you are. In every race you're gonna have your good, bad, and the ugly, but it's the media that builds up all that nationality crap."[84] The fighters' ethnoracial identification, then, assumes different meanings in various place-based societal dynamics and sporting contexts. Race, accordingly, becomes spatialized just as space becomes racialized, contingent as they always are upon fighters' everyday experiences in and out of the ring. Mike Trejo, in effect, conclusive sums up: "In boxing, there is no "race." It doesn't matter if you're green, white, orange, or purple; the *race* is the fighter."[85] Consequently, inside the ring, the racially demarcated basis of the outside world momentarily ceases to carry any relevance; instead, what counts exclusively for the boxers themselves, as Conrad Sanchez puts it, is the athletic challenge: "it's me and the guy right there; me-him, one on one."[86]

**Conclusion**

When asked about the most gratifying aspect about winning a boxing match or a championship title on any level—in either the amateurs or the professionals—fighters repeatedly come up with the following explanation: "They can't take it away from me." The generic *they* denotes no specific individuals or

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[83] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.
[84] Interview with Casas, November 21, 2002.
[85] Interview with Trejo, August 20, 2003.
[86] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.

groups of people; rather, it refers to a range of painful memories of deprivation or personal loss in one's past experiences; it signifies the outsider status one has in societal power dynamics; and it exemplifies the agency that a fighter claims in bringing about change with regard to an ostensibly prescribed station in life. Indeed, Victor Burgin writes: "History has familiarized us with the insidious movement in which 'nation' is confused with 'race.' Institutionalized racism may ensure that racial minorities live in a condition of internal exile within the nation of which they are citizens—an exile that, if it is not legal, cannot be named."[87] Growing up in the East Austin barrio epitomizes such exclusionary everyday realities, embedded as they are in the racialized and class-based structures of the city of Austin.

Yet, when fighters launch their amateur boxing careers—for whichever miscellaneous reasons—they refuse the condition of anonymous *victimage* and, instead, become autonomous designers of their own lives and personal aspirations. With no money involved in amateur boxing, its athletic ideal embraces a notion of fighting for the glory of oneself and the team; for that reason, it elevates the boxers as celebrated individuals and communal heroes. By proving themselves in the ring, fighters simultaneously transgress the threshold from outsider standing to insider belonging by espousing a role in a range of collective entities and group allegiances, from the East Austin barrio-identity to

[87] Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University

"Austinness," "Texanness," if not "Americanness" at large. However, were it not for boxing, most of the fighters would likely have remained anonymous, unassuming, and invisible barrio boys—whether picking up someone else's trash, burgling a neighbor's car, or being involved in other activities characteristic of thugs rather than heroes. Amateur boxing, in effect, comes to offer various liberating possibilities, egalitarian social organization, and a space for contesting identities, all of which would not be probable within the confining structures of the segregated city otherwise.

Today, amateur boxing in Austin is a pale shadow of the nostalgia of its yesteryear heyday. In 1996, the Pan American Gym honored the posthumous legacy of its pugilistic pioneer by renaming the facility as the Oswaldo A.B. Cantú Pan American Recreation Center, and the Montopolis Gym recently recognized the late Joe Sanchez by placing a plaque in his honor next to the boxing ring, celebrating his contribution as an invaluable trainer.[88] However, little more than the names remain of the golden days of the boxing program of the 1970s and 1980s. With most of the other coaches gone, and the fighters increasingly turning professional early on, the city is no longer a host of the Golden Gloves or any other major regional tournaments; what is left are the amateur boxing classes trying to eke out an existence in the barrio, with some

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of California Press, 1996), p. 130.

sporadically organized one-day events.[89] Inéz Guerrero sheds light on the current state of affairs: "When A.B. died, boxing went down, and now we're just trying to survive. We'll have one-day shows, smokers. I don't know if it's the city or the politicians. Of course in Westlake you don't have boxing; so they never give boxers the recognition. Amateur boxing produces no money, but it produces good people."[90] In its place, then, professional boxing has taken over in the capital city, although alongside with it, the pugilistic practice has dramatically turned the amateur program's idealism on its head. Hence, while this chapter has depicted the influence of amateur boxing as the foundation of young fighters' identity formations early on in their sporting careers; for many fighters, the guidelines from their athletic adolescence often come crumbling down in one fell swoop after one enters the world of prizefighting. The chapters to come, then, will portray an altogether different set of social organization and pugilistic principles within the fistic occupational culture, far removed from the youthful lessons picked up in the East Austin barrio.

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[88] See, Rebecca Thatcher, "Boxing Trainer Cantu, 65, Dies," *Austin American-Statesman* (February 14, 1996), p. B 5 and Starita Smith, "Center Renamed in Honor of A.B. Cantu," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 18, 1996), p. B 1.

[89] See, Miguel M. Salinas and Kevin Virobik-Adams, "Bringing Back Boxing: Effort to Revive Sport Aimed," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 31, 1994), section "Neighbor East."

[90] Interview with Guerrero, August 25, 2003.

# Chapter 4 Combative Identities: The Pugilistic Profession

> [I]n itself the language of the body is egalitarian.
> Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural*

> And yet, in boxing, because this is a tough and dirty enterprise, there are always sides to be taken.
> Donald McRae, *Dark Trade*

## Introduction

Despite the sundry evidence of female fighting in the United States, boxing gyms and fight venues *per se* have been, throughout the history of modern pugilism, almost entirely masculine everyday spaces: women athletes' bodily absence has signified both a social and an epistemological exclusion from the male-dominated realm. Home to an exceptionally prominent women's fight scene, Austin, however, offers a particularly pertinent site for an examination of the occupational culture of prizefighting in light of the sport's recent integrative developments. Indeed, today's boxing gyms and fight cards, as work environments, have come to offer social spaces with vastly different sets of hierarchies and inter-personal liaisons from those of the Latino fighters' early experiences growing up within amateur boxing in the East Austin barrio. Consequently, my focus in this chapter will be on illustrating how boxers—male and female—themselves conceptualize their lives and athletic opportunities within the business practices of the sport today; how they perceive their work

regimen and daily routines amidst the social relations at the gym (those with stablemates, promoters, managers, and aficionados); and how these dynamics play out in their own identity formations.[1]

As a backdrop for the discussion serves the past decade's large sociological consensus which has emphasized the role of sport as a central site in the social construction of maleness, one which maintains—rather than destabilizes—the marginalization of athletic women, thus reinforcing prescribed notions of a masculine sporting status quo. To quote some of the gender theorists' central arguments, Michael Messner, for example, writes: "Sports are an important organizing institution for the embodiment of dominant masculinity. Sports suppress natural (sex) similarities, construct differences, and then, largely through media, weave a structure of symbol and interpretation around these differences which naturalizes them."[2] Lois Bryson, in turn, contends that "[t]here are two fundamental dimensions to the support sport provides for masculine hegemony. First, it links maleness with highly valued and visible skills and

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[1] The inclusion of female fighters in contemporary boxing throughout the United States is reflected in the growing literature on women's experiences within the sport. See, for example, Rene Denfeld, *Kill the Body, the Head Will Fall: A Closer Look at Women, Violence, and Aggression* (New York: Warner Books, 1997); Lynn Snowden Picket, *Looking for a Fight: A Memoir* (New York: The Dial Press, 2000); and Kate Sekules, *The Boxer's Heart: How I Fell in Love With the Ring* (New York: Villard, 2000). See also such recent movies as Katya Bankowski, dir., *Shadow Boxers* (Swerve Films, 2000); Charles Dutton, dir., *Against the Ropes* (Paramount Pictures, 2004); Karyn Kusama, dir., *Girl Fight* (Sony, 2000); and Allan Moyle, *New Waterford Girl* (Odeon Films, 2000).

[2] Michael A. Messner, "When Bodies Are Weapons" in Maxine Baca Zinn et al. eds., *Gender Through the Prism of Difference* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), p. 151. See also Michael A. Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992);

second it links maleness with positive sanctioned use of aggression/force/violence."[3] According to Paul Willis, "[t]he fundamental anxiety seems to be that men and women have to be continuously differentiated; male preserves continuously guaranteed."[4] In the following, I wish to participate in the ongoing discourse on gender and sporting practices through the lens of the pugilistic profession in Austin, because women fighters have not only "degendered" many boxing gyms as male-only spaces, but they have increasingly complicated the sport's established social and athletic norms. As an intrinsic part of the fistic occupational culture, female fighters' presence simultaneously triggers the questioning of fixed notions of femininity and masculinity.

The various locations within prizefighting present rather paradoxical everyday social spaces, as their contingent power relations offer sites for multiple, at times contradictory, identity contestations. Defined by a strict physical regimen and a principle of equal opportunity, the boxing gym as a work place, for example, on the surface appears to offer liberating possibilities where the body-on-body combat signifies the only marker of empowerment on a quotidian basis amongst one's stablemates. However, underneath the egalitarian premise, commercial boxing gyms are necessarily dictated by the owners' and handlers'

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and Michael Messner and Donald Sabo, eds., *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order* (Urbana-Champaign: Human Kinetics Books, 1990).

[3] Lois Bryson, "Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony" in Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, *Women, Sport, and Culture* (Urbana-Champaign: Human Kinetics Books, 1994), p. 48.

[4] Paul Willis, "Women in Sport Ideology" in Birrell and Cole, p. 35.

monetary interests, as their profit-motivated maneuvering always impacts the general ambience and social hierarchies of the gym when people, willingly or unwillingly, get drawn into the financial scheming, some more than others. Furthermore, although the presence of the diverse practitioners at commercial gyms broadens the social scope of the fighters' personal interactions, the non-combative boxers may also get in the way of prizefighters' focus on their professional goals.

In addition, as I established in Chapter 2, fight cards come to complicate the fistic pecking orders, as they display the power players within professional boxing, always echoing the underlying battles of the warring interests. In this constellation, how the fighters themselves conceptualize, display, or perform their own gender, ethnoracial, or class identities always simultaneously competes for visibility with various commercial players' agendas—whether it means representing particular styles of Latino fighting, embellished by miscellaneous fight paraphernalia; whether it entails being juxtaposed with beer commercials' identity representations on television, or being driven into implicit dialogue with the messages inherent in the ring card-girls' performances on site. Ultimately, as opportunities of the ring and personal beliefs collide with the tangle of commercial interests, fighters end up combating social organization in and out of the prize ring.

**The Social Space of the Gym**

The Latino interviewees' professional boxing careers have steered them through numerous different boxing gyms in Texas and the United States, as most of them have been unable to find entirely satisfactory work environments—whether because of the quality of training, problems with management, or lack of one-on-one athletic attention. Mike Trejo, for example, describes the difference from his amateur gym to the one in which he began as a professional: "I didn't get the same discipline; they didn't correct me. I was doing a lot of stuff wrong, and I wanted them to tell me what I was doing wrong. They just said: 'you did good.'"[5] Several factors differentiate the amateur gyms from the commercial gyms that welcome a diverse cohort of practitioners: unlike the recreation centers' gyms which carried out the social function of keeping kids "out of trouble" alongside with building their athletic foundation, commercial gyms are above all *businesses*.

Whereas the community gyms used to have a number of trainers working with kids at no cost, the commercial ones do not provide any free services, except perhaps for some fighters with promotional deals with the gym. Instead, they charge monthly fees ranging between 50 to 80 dollars and, in addition, some gyms ask more for any one-on-one training sessions, such as hitting the punch mitts, working the medicine ball, or even sparring; thus, their primary concern, rather curiously, becomes paying attention to their principal source of income, the

non-combative boxers.[6] Moreover, because of the heterogeneity of the practitioners, with amateurs, professionals, and recreational boxers working together, everybody's aspirations in the fight game are completely different, and the group synergy is, for that reason, different from the amateur days' common set of goals.[7]

As a result, in evaluating different gyms, fighters are always quick to differentiate between the athletic, business, and social aspects of boxing. Johnny Casas, for example, has grown accustomed to commuting between various sporting facilities, depending on the stage of his training cycle: "I go to several different gyms and to me there is a difference. The atmosphere at the gym means a lot to me—especially closer to fight time. When I fight I like to go away [from commercial gyms], because I'm really edgy when I'm focused and I'm in my own zone. When I have time off, it's good to hang out."[8] Abel Davilla, in turn, compares the novelty of his experience at an "old school" gym in San Antonio, as opposed to what he was used to in a commercial gym in Austin: "The intensity was so different. It was like opening up a book when you've just learned to read: it was exciting; I soaked it all up. I sparred with Jesse James Leija who was world champion and he showed me a lot. But the most exciting time was when I got to

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[5] Interview with Trejo, August 20, 2003.
[6] There is great variation in this regard from one gym to another.
[7] One "old school" trainer allegedly refused to work with his fighter at a commercial boxing gym because of what he referred to as its "country club" atmosphere.
[8] Interview with Casas, November 21, 2002.

go in there with [former welterweight champion] Pernell Whitaker."[9] After working out at various gyms mainly in Texas and Arizona, to this day, Carlos Valdez only feels comfortable at the community gyms: "Montopolis is my gym. They're remodeling it right now, so I've worked at Pan Am and ABAD [Austin Boxing Against Drugs]. We try to involve the younger crowd in the barrio who come from abusive families. I went there because I wanted the hood-type of atmosphere—a warehouse—not everything given to me."[10] Jesse Ravelo, however, opines that for him the gym "is not about the location, it's not about what you have in it; it's about who is running it and how he's running it. It can be a garage called a gym if he knows how to run it. It doesn't matter if it's inside or outside."[11]

My own introduction to Austin's boxing gyms took place my second semester at the University of Texas, in January 2000, when I took a graduate seminar "Documentary Explorations," for which I chose to do a project on local boxing. A photojournalism student and I teamed up to work on a "mini-documentary," an in-depth portrayal of a Mexican bantamweight who, we had been told, was claiming fame as one of the promising up-and-coming fighters in

[9] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.
[10] Interview with Valdez, April 13, 2003.
[11] Interview with Ravelo, August 14, 2003.

town.[12] Our first planned interview and photo-shoot at the boxing gym, however, never materialized, as we found out that the fighter had walked out of the stable due to professional disagreements with his manager. By way of explanation, we were given the following, in its candidness somewhat startling account: "He wanted to be the *prima donna*. He started his career three years ago; he was undefeated, and then he decided he was too good for us. Against my better judgment, he went to California, and set out to fight on his own."[13] Instead, then, we became acquainted with a cohort of other local fighters, as we followed them at boxing gyms, at weigh-ins and physicals, as well as at competition venues. We observed how the nexus of social relations becomes absolutely central to the everyday workings of the gym; how people, of necessity, invent various forms of self-help ingenuity to get through everyday workout routines. It is essential to develop symbiotic relationships with everybody else, as people rely on each other to tie the gloves, to give water between rounds, to hold the heavy bag, to throw medicine ball, or just to wipe off sweat during sparring sessions. Indeed, the solidarity between the practitioners seems extraordinary: when professional boxers are not working out themselves, they prepare their stablemates for upcoming fights, teach aficionados, or just spend time there. On an everyday level, during workout and sparring sessions, the gym seems to offer a profound

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[12] I would like to express thanks to my project sidekick Jorge Sanhueza-Lyon, who was instrumental in establishing contacts with local fight folks for our project, ones without which the class assignment and its ultimate upshot—this dissertation—might never have come to fruition.

sense of equality of opportunity and egalitarian social organization, while preconceived notions of social hierarchies cease to have an immediate impact within the sporting context. Indeed, Thomas Hauser writes, boxers' "creed is simple. In the ring, the best [wo]man wins. What a [wo]man does outside the ring doesn't matter."[14] Boxing, therefore, creates a space for these social interactions amongst a heterogeneous cohort of people, which likely would not be possible under circumstances outside of the sport.

Not long after the documentary project for class was finished, I started working out at one of the boxing gyms myself, still unaware that it would lead me to write my dissertation on local prizefighting. Today, some four years—and many training sessions, twenty-odd fight cards, and mounting piles of interview tapes—later, my original, perhaps somewhat simplistic and one-dimensional, conceptualization of the egalitarian principle in prizefighting has been complicated many times over, as I have become familiar with the multiple conflicting, aspects of the profession.[15] However, it so happens that my very first encounter with the fighter breaking away from the gym has turned out to

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[13] Field notes, February 23, 2000.

[14] Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 14.

[15] In this context, I cannot stress enough the importance of a multi-methodological approach in my research: the combination of interviews and participant observation has proven absolutely critical in deciphering the multifaceted power dynamics within the sport. By contrast, journalists, for example, who interview fighters at the gym—under the scrutiny of their handlers—seldom seem to be able to do more than scratch the surface of the pugilistic practice, as they neither develop the long-term rapport with their sources, nor do they have access to the everyday maneuverings of the sport.

characterize the rule, rather than the exception, in professional boxing. Whereas the respect of the ring sustains the intra-boxer team spirit, managerial disagreements, contractual fall-outs, and legal disputes are commonplace in the fight game to the extent that the large majority of my sources—male and female alike—have had such experiences, at times only temporary but more often permanent. To quote flyweight Jay Vega: "People are willing to help you out. You can be hitting the bag and somebody will walk up to you and say: 'you're swinging your shoulders too much,' or 'straighten up the punch.' But the negative side is the business side of boxing: the wheeling and dealing and money handling. It's too much trouble whenever there's a conflict. That's why a lot of people have left the gym."[16]

Whether the break-ups take place behind closed door, as non-conspicuous exits, or open outbursts in the middle of a training session—*à la* "See you in court!"—such is their frequency that one can never be quite sure if particular fighters who appear to be the mainstay of a gym will be there the next day. Nevertheless, the pugilistic world has a vigorous grapevine, and after any one incident, myriad accounts begin to circulate among fight insiders, who are always sure to compare different versions of the story, ultimately prepared to draw their own conclusions of the turn of events. As featherweight Linda Tenberg explains, the boxing gym is, in effect, "like *any* workplace, just like working in an office:

[16] Interview with Vega, July 9, 2003.

the same dynamics, annoyances, irritations, and there is all the gossip. Just the physical environment is different. But we don't get any perks or benefits. Our only perk is to be in shape to get a fight, and get money that way."[17] Quite paradoxically, in a physical ambience where bodily prowess is celebrated inside the ring, gossip, rumors, and story-telling as forms of manipulation become the most powerful weapons outside of the ring. With regard to such everyday maneuverings, Jack Newfield thought-provokingly comments that boxing "is the only jungle where the lions are afraid of the rats," for the figurative rodents can, indeed, have devastating consequences in sabotaging individual sporting careers as well.[18]

Within the overall power relations, the entire issue of women's boxing—amidst the larger question of gender contestations—needs to be scrutinized not only within the generic category of "sport" but, rather, in relation to the interplay of specific actors within a particular sport. Hence, it is my contention that gender in professional boxing has fundamentally to do about the dynamics of the sport's power players as they function at various scales, comprising the athletes and the trainers, the promoters and the administrators, and the marketing agents combined. For example, while the initial entrance of female fighters into Texas pugilism did not, evidently, happen without controversy, the reaction to women's

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[17] Interview with Tenberg, January 7, 2003.
[18] Jack Newfield, *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1995), p. 39.

participation in the sport varies between different individuals, as the feminine presence proves to have multiple social, ideological, and financial ramifications, depending on one's stake in the fight game. One of my female interviewees, for example, recalls the following about her first professional bout: "The boxing commissioner said at my first weigh-in: 'You're a boxer! You're too *pretty* to be a boxer. If I were your dad, I would put you on my knee and spank you.' I didn't know how to receive that comment too well."

By a similar logic, the following two San Antonian old school handlers' obstinate opinions illustrate their physiologically based sporting logics:

> I don't believe women should be boxing. In my own belief, women should be feminine. Women should be in the soft sports: tennis, ice skating, and whatever—definitely not boxing. Yes they are taught the same way, but I just don't think they are equipped to box as good as a man. I like women to smell nice and to be pretty and to wear make-up. I just don't see them in the gym.
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> To be straight and honest with you, I don't believe women should be in boxing. To me, it's unattractive. Any trainer, manager from the old school—at least I—don't appreciate it. I don't think they have the capacity and ability to headline a major, major show.... I like my women in the kitchen; I like my women at home and that's the way it is.[19]

From such trainers' perspectives, women's boxing will obviously have a disruptive function in the social space of the gym, as their presence might divert the male fighters' athletic focus to the women themselves, given that their station in life is to look pretty, to smell nice, and to provide nutrition—in other words, to please men. Nevertheless, women's persistence in the fight game for over a

decade has drastically changed the adamant first reactions; and after the initial shock of the feminine intrusion, the fierce opposition has slowly begun to wear off.[20] Austinite promoter Richard Lord offers his insight into the female fight development within the past ten years:

> Promoters back in the early 1990s—a lot of the redneck promoters, the old school—did not accept it in an "over my dead body kind of way are you gonna have girls on my card." [It was] ignorance, lack of knowledge and awareness, upbringing that it's just a man's sport. But money talks and the popularity showed a lot of these old dogs that they were missing out on a big opportunity. Two years later they were calling me out and pleading for girl fights.[21]

As to the boxers themselves, all of my male interviewees express their support of women's boxing. To quote "The World Famous" Joel Elizondo: "There are a lot of women fighters out there and more power to them. One day they can defend themselves. A lot of people don't approve of women's fighting, but it's really up to the women. I'm *proud* of women who do it."[22] According to Mike Trejo, women's sporting choices are, in fact, a rather simple matter: "You do what you love, that's why you do it. If there's a good fight between girls, I'll watch it. I hope they win."[23] Abel Davilla, in turn, describes his athletic interactions with female fighters: "We became very attached to the girls we were training, and we really wanted to teach them. I think that changed how people

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[19] "Action Figure," an unaired pilot for *Idea City*, PBS, 1999. Courtesy of Lori Lord.
[20] Both of the "old school" trainers above, for example, now train women fighters.
[21] Interview with Lord, July 10, 2002.
[22] Interview with Elizondo, April 23, 2003.
[23] Interview with Trejo, August 20, 2003.

looked at boxing, not just in our gym, but throughout the state. Everybody in Austin really took it to heart."[24] Women boxers' significance may, in effect, become influential on some male fighters' conceptualization of gender formations in and out of the ring. In the following, Johnny Casas describes his change of heart:

> I thought it sucked when it first came out. But, you know, I've met a lot of good girls there. I thought that women only wanted to get into it because it's what men do, but I'm coming to learn a lot about them. And a lot of these girls have good jobs and are secure with themselves; they just do it because they really, really love the sport the way I do. They wanna learn, they wanna craft it, be good at what they do—that's what really impressed me. I respect that.[25]

Women's presence in boxing, then, has enabled discussions on gender formations in specific sports locations, calling into question essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity as many—although not all—boxing gyms have experienced radical gender desegregation in the past ten years. Physical strength, aggression, and toughness can no longer assume a masculine meaning alone, and—like it or not—the female boxing body has become a powerful sporting presence. Thus, a number of male fighters now work side-by-side with women, and the common goal of athletic excellence is what matters in the gym, while it also offers a space for contesting social formations on a daily basis. Linda Tenberg explains:

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[24] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.
[25] Interview with Casas, November 21, 2002.

> I'll talk to anybody that will give me information, because I'm such a student of the game: it's like playing chess. I get a lot of information from Johnny Casas, and I feel really comfortable going up to him for help. I get information from Jesus Chávez, and they are two dynamically different people, so the information I get is also different. And there are the brawlers: I ask their opinion, and that's different.[26]

Amateur lightweight Anca Neagu, in turn, describes her encounters with male boxers at several gyms: "The ones with experience are a lot more accepting; they're willing to help me, and they have a lot more respect for women boxers. The less experienced guys think it's not 'right' to hit a girl; some of them wanna show me they're stronger—to teach me a lesson. But at work I also encounter a lot of male engineers, so I'm used to that."[27] However, another one of my female interviewees complicates the egalitarian notion by emphasizing that women never pose a fundamental threat to male fighters, as they still lag behind in boxing experience and skill. As a result, she argues, it is easy to grant an ostensible equality when male fighters can ultimately enjoy their technical superiority in the ring.

All things considered, judging from my discussions with a number of different fighters, there appears to be a broad sense of fair game during everyday training sessions: physical strength, technical know-how, and commitment by and large seem to determine one's success, as far as boxing in Austin is concerned. On a larger scale, however, the attitudes might be harder to break. Abel Davilla

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[26] Interview with Tenberg, January 7, 2003.
[27] Interview with Neagu, July 13, 2003.

explains: "As the years went on, I remember getting some backlash about [women's boxing] from some other trainers [outside of Austin]. I remember going to the Golden Gloves state tournament and a couple of coaches telling me: 'Hey Abel, you're gonna have to pick up the intensity, you're training like you're training with the girls.'"[28] Jay Vega, who captured the WIBF Continental Americas flyweight title by an upset victory against a local favorite Wendy Sprawl in Massachusetts on January 27, 2001, describes the difference between her experiences as a female fighter in New England as opposed to boxing in Texas:

> We got a call to fight for the WIBF title and I was all excited, but I went up there and it was a totally different feeling from Austin. It was like "yeah, you'll be the main event, but not because people want it to be main event." The promoter had a good relationship with the girl, but people didn't really come to see female boxing. There were a lot of boos; I was out of state…But after I won, the audience cheered for me and I got a lot of people walking up to me and say "you're a good fighter, you've got a good technique; I love your style." I changed people's attitudes and that's exactly what I want to do when I go in there.[29]

On an everyday level, as the bodily presences of recreational, amateur, and professional boxers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds all interact in the same physical environment, the gym, by default, becomes a mixed class, gender, and ethnoracial space. In addition to active boxers, I have met, among others, a senator, a high-tech tycoon, several writers, lawyers, and doctors at the gym; and alongside them such personae as ex-convicts, ex-addicts, and strip dancers, who

[28] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.

all frequent the fistic bastion for conditioning training. Moreover, University of Texas fraternities have their members train at boxing gyms for the "Fight Night," a hugely popular, annual fundraising event for fraternities, adding to the heterogeneous cohort. My own presence at the gym initially stirred a few queries, as some people were confused as to how to label my identity as a foreigner. One of the boxers asked me: "Benita, where you come from, are you considered white?" Another time, a Latino aficionado was curious to know: "I heard you speak Spanish to Gallito the other day, but I thought you were white. What are you?"[30] After I had heard similar comments a few times, I understood how deeply, on an everyday level, ethnoracial identity becomes conflated with language: Spanish equals non-white, English equals *gringa*; I was neither a native Spanish or English speaker, although I speak both, nor American—hence the confusion.[31] Another wonderful example of identity labeling at the gym took place when a Russian boxer, who was about to turn professional, was unable to fight because of a problem with his immigration documents. One of the Texas-born Latino fighters remarked tongue-in-cheek: "Well, he's a Wetback then, a

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[29] Interview with Vega, July 9, 2003.
[30] Field notes, January 17, 2001.
[31] When Johnny Casas once put me in touch with an interviewee, he recounts having given the following explanation: "I don't know what you call a person from Finland, if she is "white" or "Finnish." But she is really smart and she speaks Spanish." Field notes, July 15, 2003.

Russian Wetback. That's what they call my people when their paperwork is not in order!"[32]

Within such a motley crowd, various identities get frequently contested, as people make sense of social hierarchies in and out of the ring, as is evident in flyweight Anissa Zamarron's reflection:

> You meet people you'd think would not even set foot in a boxing gym, who would never have talked to us outside the gym. Maybe we would have scared them in a street corner eleven o'clock at night, and they would tell their kid to stay away from us. I've made a lot of friends with people I never thought I'd be hanging out with. That has made me feel better about myself and, I'm sure, it has made them feel better about themselves, too.[33]

Jesus Chávez elaborates: "There are all sorts of people walking into the gym, *all* sorts. That creates a different type of environment and a different kind of encouragement. There are a lot of women that train there which is a good thing for boxing: seeing them hit that bag makes me train harder."[34] Writer Jan Reid, a boxing aficionado who has followed and written about Chávez's career, candidly describes his own identity projections with the boxer: "Jesus represented everything I wished I had been as an athlete. He had youth, good looks, ebullience, and more important, he seemed to go through life with an absolute lack of fear. To me the balance and striving he maintained were heroic."[35] To be

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[32] Field notes, October 27, 2000.
[33] Field notes, December 12, 2001.
[34] Quoted in Benita Heiskanen, "The Body in Space, Identity in Flux: Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez" in Richard Santillan and Jorge Iber, eds., *Mexican Americans and* Deportes*: The Significance of Athletic Endeavor in Barrio Life, 1920-2002* (forthcoming from Syracuse University Press).
[35] Jan Reid, *The Bullet Meant for Me: A Memoir* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), p. 92.

sure, for the boxers and non-combative participants alike, the sport offers a means, while the social space of the gym provides the forum, for fascinating interactions that few other places in the segregated Austin would cater for, at least without palpable social tensions.

Unfortunately, however, as soon as the business component of boxing enters into the athletic equation, the bodily liberation of the gym can quickly turn into a battle ground for the handlers' pecuniary interests. To quote Abel Davilla's opinion: "The biggest thing to me about a trainer is: *be a trainer*. Don't try to be a manger, a promoter—teach the guy. In San Antonio, my trainer didn't even wanna get paid. He said: 'don't worry about that stuff before you start fighting main events. Let's get you there first.'"[36] Yet the most problematic situation for fighters seems to arise when a handler acts in the dual capacity of manager *and* promoter, resulting in an irreconcilable conflict of interest, as the former is supposed to look out for the boxer's financial and career wellbeing, while the goal of the latter is to make the most profitable business investment. Among fighters' other miscellaneous grievances include being pressured—sometimes even blackmailed—into taking last-minute fights; being manipulated into fighting overweight opponents; not getting adequate training, managing, and promoting for an upcoming fight; or having to accept corrupt and unjust judging and refereeing.

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[36] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.

Even so, to express opposition to one's handlers presents inevitable emotional challenges, as one female fighter explains: "I just couldn't stand up [to the manager] and say that mentally and physically I wasn't ready to fight. I don't know why I couldn't say 'no.' Maybe I was just afraid of letting him down." Another boxer describes her experience:

> I had just come back from [out of town]. When I got back here there were ten messages from [the manager], and I called him: "I don't wanna do this, I'm tired, and I haven't been training." He said: "Oh, it'll be easy, you beat her twice; it'll be easy money, training for your next fight." I didn't wanna do it, but he built me up again—because he is good at that. But I wasn't there mentally, and I was tired; I didn't have my timing and rhythm. Plus, I was in her backyard and they were gonna go with their hometown athlete. So I learned not to take a fight when I don't feel I'm able to fight.

Still other prevalent modes of coercion that boxers experience is handlers' manipulation of them into various forms of dependency by, for example, money-lending, inviting fighters to live with them, or helping them with any other everyday arrangements. In return, boxers are expected to co-operate thoroughly with the handlers, who increasingly gain control over the fighters' lives; and the refusal to succumb to the pressure often leads to falling-outs, as one may find out—in both subtle and obvious ways—having suddenly become a *persona non-grata* at the gym.

Male and female fighters' attitudes toward the financial practices of the sport, however, turn out to be conspicuously different: while the men generally seem rather apathetically resigned to the basic conditions of the prizefight

industry—or what Loïc Wacquant labels as the "economy predicated on distrust"—the women interviewees, who are new to these business transactions, are remarkably more vocal in articulating the everyday tribulations of the sport.[37] Male fighters frequently accept fight deals based on shady oral agreements, and the legality of written contracts is often equally questionable—to say the least—but the women rebel against the occupational perils that many male fighters consider to be an unavoidable part of the sport. The following accounts illustrate two women's experiences with the business of prizefighting:

> Women's boxing is different. They throw you in with anybody; you don't know anything about them. It's not like men's [boxing]: they watch videos, reports; they know if [the opponent] is left-handed, right-handed, or what their power-hand is. The lady here said she was my manager, but I was never told anything. She said I was fighting a girl who had her pro-debut too, but she was a national champion in the amateurs and you could see her experience right away….Promoters should be fined for lying, but they get a cut; even when you get a fight for yourself, they still get a cut.[38]

> I've met a lot of ugly personalities in boxing, and have found out that it's really crooked. A lot of people are in it just for themselves and not the boxer, and it's the boxer who does all the work. Thank goodness I have something to fall back on. If I knew what I know now, I wouldn't sign a [long] contract. I wouldn't be taken advantage of like that. I used to tell my friends that [my manager] is a pimp, pimping me out for all these fights. At the time [of the contract] I really trusted this man. I was his new fighter and I was treated like a princess. I just didn't know better; I was naïve.

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[37] Loïc Wacquant, "A Fleshpeddler at Work: Power, Pain, and Profit in the Prizefighting Economy" in *Theory and Society*, Vol 27, No. 1 (February 1998), p. 1.

[38] What is significant here is not only my informant's disillusionment with women's boxing, but also her lack of awareness as to fighter-manager relations: boxers are not allowed to negotiate any fight deals on their own after signing with a manager.

The paradox here is that the same forces that welcome women into boxing often become their nemesis, as they may not invest the time and effort to train, publicize, and handle women's careers the way they do those of promising male fighters'. Instead of being managed the old school way—in which fighters' records are carefully built and the level of opposition increases gradually—many female fighters end up taking random fights against superior opposition, and building a solid record becomes next to impossible. As the following fighter recounts: "Women's boxing is in demand right now. Like you see here, as it starts out, I'm having fights every month, because it's quick money for the managers and promoters. I said I need a break now, and I was told, 'no, you don't need a break, you just need to train harder.'"

As women fighters become disillusioned with the business practices of boxing, they weigh the feasibility of options available, the pros and cons of the game. They may, for example, buy themselves out of a contract and negotiate new deals with different handlers; they can accept corruption as part of boxing and take solace in the fact that, unlike for many male boxers, the ring rarely provides women's only income; or, ultimately, they can refuse to succumb to the system and quit professional boxing. In order to survive, Linda Tenberg always appropriates the maxims of the sport to the business side of it: "Keep moving forward, no matter what. Try not to back up. Think smart. Protect yourself at all

times—all they tell you. They're all applicable in everyday life."[39] Many female prizefighters eventually come to share lightweight Snodene Blakeney's opinion: "If I could change anything—just the way female boxing is—I would have stayed amateur. Because in the amateurs, nobody is trying to own you or control you; it would have been just a hobby."[40]

Notwithstanding the myriad ethical and moral dilemmas, many women stay with boxing because the sport offers them, as it does for the male fighters, athletic and personal gratification that surpasses all its disadvantages. As Jay Vega puts it "It's a challenge—just to keep in shape: 'Can I train myself to withstand four, six, eight rounds in a boxing ring?' So, boxing brought me to a different level; it raised my standards of what being in shape meant."[41] Bantamweight Isabel Mijares Manyseng elaborates: "I like challenging sports. I don't like to be a quitter. I like the discipline. It takes a lot of guts to go up there. I can say I did it."[42] Anca Neagu, in turn, eloquently describes: "Boxing gives you a sense of power and amazement. It shows that being afraid is not something you need to run away from; if you look at fear in the face, nothing can hurt you."[43] In Snodene Blakeney's assessment, "I guess I've always been a fighter, ever since I was little. I have an aggressive personality and boxing has helped me with that a

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[39] Interview with Tenberg, January 7, 2003.
[40] Interview with Blakeney, December 29, 2002.
[41] Interview with Vega, July 9, 2003.
[42] Interview with Mijares Manyseng, July 20, 2003.
[43] Interview with Neagu, July 13, 2003.

lot. It has made me have a lot of self-control; it has made me a stronger person."[44] Indeed, most of my interviewees emphasize that, above all, boxing has been a vehicle for personal development, a medium for a deeper understanding of oneself. As Anissa Zamarron puts it: "I've had to get a lot of stuff straightened out—my priorities—and to get a sense of who I am as a person. Boxing has made me a better person. It has helped me find out who I am a little bit."[45] Or, to conclude with amateur bantamweight Anju Reejhsinghani's assessment: "Boxing is important spiritually, emotionally, mentally. Psychologically there are a lot of benefits. I think I like to release anger because of all the times I got beat up as a little kid. It's getting back at those bullies; it's that 'don't mess with me.'"[46]

**The Spectacle of the Fight Card**

The new coming of prizefighting in Austin began in the early 1990s, when Ten Count Promotions organized its first pro fight card in town since the mid-1980s. Michael Ibañez of the *Austin American-Statesman* described the novelty of the local fistic showdown, one which featured Johnny Casas in the co-main event: "It's not exactly Caesar's Palace, but the Austin Opera House will play host to professional boxing tonight."[47] The actual fight boom, however, took off with

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[44] Interview with Blakeney, December 29, 2003.
[45] Field notes, December 12, 2001.
[46] Interview with Reejhsinghani, January 15, 2003.
[47] Michael Ibanez, "Four Austin Fighters on Card as Professional Boxing Returns," *Austin American-Statesman* (October 10, 1990), p. C 2. Tickets for this early event cost $ 12.50 for general admission and $ 20 for ringside seats. This fight, and its concurrent managerial

what would, during the course of the decade, become Punch for Pay Promotions' series of eighteen boxing shows entitled the "Brawl in the Music Hall."

These fight cards were initially created around the career prospects of the city's new pugilistic prodigy, Jesus Chávez, as they featured his fights for continental championships and their consequent title defenses, while later on, the series continued to flourish by featuring mainly local female fighters as main events.[48] The inaugural "Brawl in the Music Hall" card took place on August 25, 1995, with Chávez in the main event and other local fighters, such as Abel Davilla, Joel Elizondo, Mike Trejo, Melinda Robinson and Anissa Zamarron performing on the undercard; while the second card of the series followed no less than two months later on November 2, 1995.[49] After winning the WBC Continental Americas super-featherweight title against Cedric Mingo in Brownsville On March 31, 1996, Chávez's first title defense took place in Austin at the "Brawl in the Music Hall III" on May 17, 1996.[50] On August 9, 1996,

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disagreements, would lead Johnny Casas into retirement from professional boxing, before making a comeback in the late 1990s, already in his 30s. The article is courtesy of Casas.

[48] Chávez had moved into town in 1994 to establish his professional career after a solid amateur background in Chicago as Gabriel Sandoval, before getting into legal trouble and serving a three-and-a half-year prison sentence for armed robbery.

[49] See Sarah Hornaday, "An Underdog that Barked Too Loud; Spotlight is Shining on Chávez After Convincing Performances," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 22, 1995), p. C 1; "Chávez-Vicencio Bout Will Top 'Brawl in the Music Hall,'" *Austin American-Statesman* (August 25, 1995), p. C 9; Sarah Hornaday, "Austin Boxer Chávez Wins by Knockout at Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 26, 1995), C 1; Sarah Hornaday, "Buda's Mike Trejo Marches on Fight Night at Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 26, 1995), p. C 1; and "Boxing is Back at the Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman* (November 2, 1995), p. D 2.

[50] See Mark Wangrin, "In This Corner: Austin Boxer Chávez Will Battle Tonight for Vacant Featherweight Title," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 31, 1996), p. C 1 and Andy Dubois, "Austin's Chávez Claims Featherweight Crown," *Austin American-Statesman* (April 1, 1996), p.

"Brawl in the Music Hall IV" staged Chávez's (and Austin's) first victorious North American Boxing Federation featherweight championship against Javier Jauregui of Mexico.[51] Due to Chávez's injury, the "Brawl in the Music Hall VI" on January 24, 1997 showcased Mike Trejo, another frequently acclaimed prospect, as main event against Eduardo Manzano of Mexico.[52] Three months later, "Brawl in the Music Hall VII" was back to featuring Chávez's North American Boxing Federation's championship bout in the super featherweight division against San Antonio's Louie Leija on March 3, 1997, attracting increasing attention to the burgeoning fight scene in the capital city.[53]

Not long afterward, out-of-town promoters, such as Gamez Productions of Brownsville, began to follow suit in staging fight cards in town, and Trejo, for one, would begin to feature in their pro-cards in Austin and elsewhere, eventually winning the North American Boxing Federation's flyweight title against Mexican

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C 3 and Steve Habel, "'El Matador' Bullish in Decisive Win; Chávez Wins Unanimous Decision Over Jauregui in Featherweight Title Bout," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 10, 1996), p. D 1.

[51] See Suzanne Halliburton, "Chávez's Title Fight Believed City's Biggest," *Austin American-Statesman* (July 11, 1996), p. D 1 and Angela Clare, "Chávez Saves Energy for Title Fight; Austin Boxer Low-Key at Weigh-In, But Looks for KO Tonight," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 9, 1996), p. C 2.

[52] See Mark Wangrin, "Flu Knocks Chávez Out of the Brawl," *Austin American-Statesman* (January 23, 1997), p. C 1; Mike Wangrin, "Trejo Headlines Card," *Austin American-Statesman* (January 24, 1997), p. C 1 and Mark Wangrin, "Trejo KOs His Past and Manzano" *Austin American-Statesman* (January 25, 1997), p. E 1.

[53] See Mark Rosner, "Chávez-Leija Bout Lands Here; Fox Will Televise NABF Title Fight," *Austin American-Statesman* (February 13, 1997), p. C 1; Mark Wangrin, "Brawls Are Big Draws, Outgrowing Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 3, 1997), p. C 8; and Mark Wangrin, "Austin's Chávez Wins Technical KO Over Leija in Brawl in Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman* (March 4, 1997), p. C 1.

Olympian Marciano Gonzalez in San Antonio on November 17, 1998.[54] With regard to his professional choices and contractual agreements, Trejo reasons that when it comes to fighting at particular pro-cards, "place doesn't matter but promoters do."[55] Established national matchmakers, too, would increasingly be seen in town, as Chávez was first offered a contract with Lou Duva's New Jersey-based Main Events Promotions, and his fights began to feature regularly on national television.[56] A local celebrity and a *primus motor* for a thriving boxing business in town, "El Matador's" exposure soon lifted him up in the world rankings to be a contender for the WBC super featherweight title. On the threshold of international glory, the Immigration and Naturalization Service found out about Chávez's past felony conviction and undocumented status, resulting in the prospective champion's three-year exile in his place of birth, Chihuahua, Mexico—until the INS revoked the deportation and allowed him to re-enter the United States in November 2000.[57]

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[54] See Rick Cantu, "San Marcos' Trejo Takes Shot at NABF Flyweight Title," *Austin American-Statesman* (November 17, 1998), p. D 1 and Rick Cantu, "Trejo Pounds His Way to Flyweight Title; San Marcos Boxer Triumphs," *Austin American-Statesman* (November 18, 1998), p. D 1.

[55] Interview with Trejo, August 20, 2003.

[56] See Rick Cantu, "Austin's Chávez Ready for Bigger Boxing Ring," *Austin American-Statesman* (May 30, 1997), p. C 1. After a split with Main events, Lou Duva, Dino Duva, and Donna Duva founded the promotional company Duva Boxing in 2000.

[57] On Chávez's legal case, see Marcy Garriot, dir. *Split Decision* (New York: First Run/Icarus Films, 2000); Belinda Acosta, "Fight of His Life: Boxer Jesus 'El Matador" Chávez and the Documentary He Inspired," *Austin Chronicle*, Vol. 20, No 24, (February 9, 2001), pp. 54-59; Jan Reid, "The Contender," *Texas Monthly*, Vol. 26, No 4, (April 1998), pp. 114-158; and Adam Pitluk, "Top-Ranked Fighter Beat a Real Heavyweight—the INS," *Court TV* (http://www.courttv.com/news/feature/boxer3.com_ctv.htm).

On his return, Chávez signed a contract with Bob Arum's Nevada-based Top Rank Promotions, which began to organize fight cards in Austin's mainstream sporting venues, such as the Frank Erwin Center at the University of Texas, featuring Chávez but also bringing to town such up-and-coming fistic TV celebrities as Miguel Cotto, Cory Spinks, and Carlos Hernandez. The *Austin American-Statesman* recognized the significance of the pugilistic expansion: "The Erwin Center has been the site of many marquee performances over the years. The famous names who have appeared on the marquee form the who's who in entertainment and sport. Bruce Springsteen. Andre Agassi. Tina Turner. The Harlem Globetrotters. Now add boxer Jesus Chávez to the list."[58] While Austin's fight scene had suddenly reached altogether unprecedented dimensions with growing national exposure, local promoters continued to stage boxing shows headlining Latino and African American fighters, but increasingly featuring women's fights and championship bouts as main events. On January 29, 1999, for example, "Brawl in the Music Hall XIII" witnessed Anissa Zamarron's Women's International Boxing Federation's world championship victory against Italian Francesca Lupo in the junior flyweight division; on August 4, 2000, the "Ben Hurl Brawl XVIII" staged Lori Lord's victorious International Boxing Association Continental Americas flyweight title bout against Yvonne Caples of Las Vegas, while Johnny Casas, who had recently come out of retirement, won

[58] Cedric Golden, "Chávez Finally Returning to Fight in Austin," *Austin American-Statesman*

the Texas State Championship against Nelson Alexander of Forth Worth in the junior welterweight division on May 17, 2002.[59]

In conducting field research, professional fight cards provide fertile sources of information, as one gets to observe the various facets of pugilistic power dynamics at work, together with the intriguing rituals before, during, and after boxing matches. To shed light on these everyday maneuverings, may my own experience at a weigh-in for a fight card featuring Jesus Chávez and Gerardo Zayas on March 21, 2002 serve as an example. The weigh-in, physical examinations, and press conference all took place at a local Irish pub, because the televised sporting event's main sponsor Miller Lite deemed it best suited for serving and promoting their alcoholic beverage. For the same reason, however, the venue proved ill-equipped to handle the pre-fight officiating logistics, as it turned out not to have, for example, a fax machine needed for sending blood-test results that some California fighters had left behind. At a smoke-filled atmosphere where fight folks, media representatives, local restaurant patrons, and boxing aficionados all intermingled, the proceedings proved utterly disorganized, bringing together one pugilistic ego bigger than the next all pushing their own

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(January 26, 2001), p. C 1.

[59] See Ted Kian, "Zamarron Enjoys a Crowning Moment; Austin Fighter Pounds Out," *Austin American-Statesman* (January 30, 1997), p. C 1 and Curtis Johnson, "Lord Lowers Boom on Vegas Opponent," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 5, 2000), p. C 3. With the growing interest in local boxing, ticket sales would also go up, with seats ranging from $ 20 for general admission to $ 150 for ringside seats. In this context, I would like to thank Punch for Pay Promotions, Top Rank Promotions, and Golden Boy Promotions for providing me complementary passes for fight cards in Texas during the past four years.

agendas, whereas the fighters, under-nourished and apathetic, resembled some innocent bystanders caught in the middle of a chaotic panic zone. To be sure, as Lori Lord points out, the weigh-in is "not set up for the fighters at all. They take care of all the business, instead of taking care of the fighters, who haven't been eating and drinking for days."[60] Mike Trejo elaborates: "One thing I don't like about the weigh-in is that I'm *hungry*. I'll talk after I get some water, but I've been to weigh-ins when it actually happens three hours later."[61] At this particular weigh-in, too, the proceedings became drawn out, for the organizers had to stage separate unofficial and official weigh-ins, determined by the TV-stations' broadcasting deadlines. As a consequence, the fighters first had to pose for the media, accompanied by the bikini-clad Miller Lite ring card-girls, and only later would they step on the scales officially for the purposes of the boxing commission—all of which transpired as the pub-patrons were enjoying their cooling drinks, while the athletes could only longingly fantasize about the prospect of a sip of water.[62]

During the course of the event, a Mexican fighter, whom I had earlier met at the gym, turned to me for assistance, because his manager had, for all intents and purposes, abandoned him. The boxer needed interpretation help in order to

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[60] Interview with Lord, December 17, 2002.
[61] Interview with Trejo, August 20, 2003.
[62] At another weigh-in, I once saw a fighter by mistake drink water because the event was going on for over three hours. In so doing, she gained an extra pound, but fortunately for her, the opponent was also a pound overweight, and the fight was allowed to proceed as scheduled.

get through the officials' paperwork routine: inspecting the validity of his boxing license and medical documents, double-checking his win-loss record, and asking information for the ring announcing, such as which city he represented, the color of his trunks for the fight, and the like. As the physician followed up to check the boxer's blood pressure, reflexes, balance, vision, and hearing, I found myself translating the doctor's orders: "Put your hand on your nose. Follow my finger. Over here: Watch my finger!" Meanwhile, the atmosphere kept growing more charged as we found out that the Mexican's fight got canceled, because his opponent never showed up, although the word on the street insinuated that the real reason was an out-of-town matchmaker's personal grudge with the local manager.[63] With emotions flaring and different characters pointing fingers at each other, the boxer (and I) stared in utter disbelief when the beer sponsor's representative turned to express his personal notion of a consolation: "Be Happy, It's Miller Lite Time!" The possibility to be present at the physical location, indeed, magnificently exposes the backroom players within the sport's hierarchy, illustrating that nothing in the pugilistic profession is neutral; that the minutest choices are invested with political significance; and that not irregularly, it is the fighters who become patsies for the business people's internal conflicts.[64] Notwithstanding all the financial transactions and officiating, the weigh-in does,

[63] I never got a chance to officially interview the fighter, due to his fall-out with the manager.
[64] At another fight card, I witnessed how somebody had sabotaged the boxing ring by unscrewing the wires holding it steady, allegedly to cause a delay to change the order of the televised fights.

however, always provide a strategic forum for the fighters to interact in person, as they scrutinize each others' body language for any kind of information that can be useful for the game plan.

At the actual competition venue, the atmosphere of the dressing room, in particular, becomes extremely significant for fighters' focusing and finessing for their athletic performance. Snodene Blakeney explains: "I don't mind people talking and being there. But sometimes you have people playing music that you don't like, some people being *macho*. When we used to fight at the Music Hall I really liked it because it was all my female boxing friends."[65] In addition, a stablemate's loss may add to the ambience's electricity, as Jay Vega describes: "One thing I don't like is sharing a dressing room when they lose: they come in there and they're throwing stuff and crying, and you're trying to get ready for your fight."[66] While boxing commissions increasingly try to limit dressing room access to the athletes, their licensed handlers, and fight officials only (who verify the legitimacy of handwraps, tape, and equipment used, as well as go over particular state regulations), the location also serves as a social space for stablemates, spouses, and other well-wishers, who frequently show up to express their support and personal stake in the boxing match. Furthermore, Abel Davilla's recollection attests that the perennial business dealings will not escape the dressing room either:

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[65] Interview with Blakeney, December 29, 2002.

> My worst experience was in a dressing room when my trainer kept going back and forth setting up fights for some other fighters, and I lost my focus: I felt neglected. The best experience was in a crammed, dirty (it was more like a bathroom) dressing room, but my coach was right there with me, and all we were talking about was my fight; so it made a huge difference how I felt when I went into that ring. What makes the place is who you're with.[67]

Jesse Ravelo, in turn, characterizes the dressing room's ideal function from a trainer's perspective as follows: "The dressing room is *the boxer's* time. I leave him alone; let him relax; let him concentrate. If the boxer wants something, he'll tell you. If he wants me to just sit there, I'll sit there; if he wants me to listen to him, I'll listen to him. If he wants me to sing a song, I'll sing a song."[68]

Be that as it may, once the ringside official's announcement "Boxers to the Ring!" summons the commencement of combat, the entourages advance to the blue and red corners, escorted by the music of their choice, displaying their miscellaneous agendas, whether having to do with athleticism, business investment, or advertising agendas. Indeed, under the gaze of the audience and TV viewers, the fistic spectacle always offers a platform for representing multiple motives and identity performances. While a fighter may or may not consciously carry his ethnoracial, class, or gender identity with him to the bout, matchmakers, handlers, and fight aficionados often have very specific ideas about what representing any one group entails. Jesse Ravelo sheds light on the preconceived

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[66] Interview with Vega, July 9, 2003.
[67] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.
[68] Interview with Ravelo, August 14, 2003.

notions: "Latino fighters have a reputation of being very aggressive fighters; black and white fighters may be a bit more stylistic. Mexicans have a reputation of being tough."[69]

To be sure, the fighters themselves are aware of the prevailing ethnoracial images, evident in Conrad Sanchez's acknowledgement that "Latino fighters are almost, I hate to say this, *expected* to fight a certain way."[70] Abel Davilla elaborates on his conceptualization of pugilistic *latinidad*: "If you're Latino, you'll fight like you never fought before, as hard as you can. If you do that—win, lose, or draw—you feel great."[71] At any random fight card, then, one can come up with various readings as to fighters' possible identity representations, for especially male fighters' attention to clothing and fight paraphernalia is quite conspicuous. A class-based reading, for example, would include the humble warrior-hero with simple gear, small entourage, and little other extravaganza, whose boxing style exhibits hard work, skill, and technique. The patriotic *mexicano* type who wears robes and trunks in national colors, with mariachis and bandannas, perhaps, represents a boxing style which emphasizes the fighter's heart. Alternatively, a third, hyper-masculine type with glittering trunks, music, spotlights, and a big entourage may point to a style that is showy but "sluggish." "Styles make fights" is a hackneyed phrase in boxing, but it rings true in that

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Interview with Sanchez, April 11, 2003.
[71] Interview with Davilla, August 22, 2003.

fighters' external styles often correspond to their fighting styles in the ring as well.

With regard to explicit identity performances, Jesus Chávez offers a case in point, for not only has he gained the most international exposure by reaching the ultimate pugilistic pedestal—world championship—but also because during his career, the fighter's representations of himself gradually change alongside his immigration battles and professional maturation. The boxing trunks, robes, and other clothing are telling: what name, for example, does the fighter and his entourage display on the outfits; what else gets printed on them; which colors are chosen etc. In one of his early professional bouts, Chávez's trunks had all of the following items: "Austin, Texas," "Richard Lord's Boxing Gym," and "Chávez." In another bout, his trunks had the colors of the lone star flag with "Austin, Texas" on them; yet in another fight, he had trunks which only stated "Lord's Gym." For most of his professional career, his trunks have included "Jesus Chávez—El Matador" in various colors and combinations. Chávez explains:

> When I first came here, I was just glad to be part of a team: I was in Richard Lord's Boxing Gym. I was still in that amateur mode—when you fight out of Chicago, you represent Chicago; when you fight out of Austin, you represent Austin. But then my train of thought changed, and I only had Chávez. I decide what I'm gonna bring into that ring, who I'm gonna bring, and who I wanna work for me. Now I know all these things. I run my own career.[72]

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[72] Quoted in Benita Heiskanen, "The Body in Space, Identity in Flux: Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez" in Richard Santillan and Jorge Iber, eds., *Mexican Americans and* Deportes*: The Significance of Athletic Endeavor in Barrio Life, 1920-2002* (forthcoming from Syracuse University Press).

Together with his overall experiences as a prizefighter, Chávez began to take charge of the workings of his *own* athleticism; to recognize his own agency within pugilistic power relations; and to determine his own identity representations. For his comeback NABF title defense in Austin on February 23, 2001, Chávez underlined his multiple identities: his entourage brought three flags—the U.S., Mexican, and Texan—into the ring while his immigration lawyer carried the title belt, as "El Matador" made his entrance with a bullfighter outfit as "representing Chihuahua, Mexico by way of Austin, Texas."[73] For his next fight in Grand Rapids, Michigan on May 23, 2001, Chávez entered the ring with a robe and trunks with the colors of the Mexican flag, giving credit to his cultural legacy, while claiming home to be in the Lone Star state.[74] Chávez's career culmination was the first world title bout ever organized in Austin on August 15, 2003, as he gained the WBC world championship in the super featherweight division by a unanimous decision against Thailand's Sirimongkol Singmanassuk.[75] With the fighter, his corner, and the audience wearing various matador paraphernalia, the fervor of the live Austin crowd spoke to the magnificent impact that Chávez has

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[73] Chávez won the fight against Tom Johnson by technical knock-out in the seventh round. See Cedric Golden, "Long Wait for Chávez Will Finally End Friday." *Austin American-Statesman* (February 21, 2001), p. C 2 and John Maher, "TKO Chávez; Ex-Austinite Lowers the Boom on Johnson," *Austin American-Statesman* (February 24, 2001), p. C 1.

[74] See Cedric Golden, "Title Looms If Chávez Wins Saturday's Bout," *Austin American-Statesman* (May 23, 2001), p. D 1. Chávez won the fight against Juan Arias by decision.

[75] See Cedric Golden, "Chávez Challenging for Title in Hometown," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 10, 2003), p. C 3; Cedric Golden, "A Final Shot for Chávez; Friday's Title Bout Likely Last Chance for Austin Fighter," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 13, 2003), p. D 1; Cedric

had in raising the visibility of Austin boxing from back-alley club fighting to mainstream international spotlights.

While the male fighters seem particularly mindful about their physical appearance during a fight card, my female interviewees' external choices are striking in that the women express a conscious effort to *de-emphasize* the importance of clothing in the athletic context. Indeed, the women fighters all insist that their priority in the ring is to demonstrate athletic ability alone: "To be," as Lori Lord puts it, "in as good a shape as you can be; [to] do the best you can do; [and not to] get in there and be a disgrace to the sport."[76] Or as Linda Tenberg explains:

> I want people to see a good fight, I like people to see that women have skill, that there are good women boxers who don't just swing their arms wildly in the air, and wear fancy costumes to attract attention. That it is legitimate. I wanna show my skill; show that I worked hard to be here, that I know what I'm doing. And that some of us actually do have a strategy. Win or lose, I want a good fight.[77]

Similarly, Jay Vega points out: "I wanna have a good style; I don't wanna be sloppy. There are still people who don't wanna see a female fight, so when I go in there I want it to be a nice, clean fight. I only have one outfit, so that's what I wear."[78] Snodene Blakeney, in turn, separates her gender representations in and out of the ring: "I'm very girly, pink is my favorite color, but I've never been a

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Golden, "El Campeon; Austin's Jesus Chávez Takes World Title in Decisive Fashion," *Austin American-Statesman* (August 16, 2003), p. C 1.

[76] Interview with Lord, December 17, 2002.

[77] Interview with Tenberg, January 7, 2003.

flashy boxer. I've always had the same outfit, what people think of what I'm wearing doesn't matter at all. I want people to see me as a boxer. But I have to paint my toenails and my fingernails the day before my fight."[79] The men and women's explicit choices, preferences, and values, in effect, reveal underlying messages about their respective status in the pugilistic occupational culture. Having already established their athletic legitimacy in the sport, male boxers' consciousness of their appearance is more acceptable: thus, they *can* toy around with their various ring facades and, in so doing, portray miscellaneous fistic fashion statements. Female fighters, on the other hand, are still struggling to eke out an existence as *bona fide* athletes, and to focus on one's looks, the women fear, might undermine their boxing credibility.

Regardless of their own specific sporting preferences, however, female fighters' performances are always juxtaposed with various commercial sponsors' agendas, for they carry—by default—the burden that Michael Messner describes as "the very unfeminine requisites for athletic excellence."[80] Although female fighters represent a remarkably heterogeneous group, they find it hard to escape being pigeonholed into one of two opposite stereotypes: that of the "foxy boxer"

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[78] Interview with Vega, July 9, 2003.
[79] Interview with Blakeney, December 29, 2002.
[80] Michael A. Messner, "Sport and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain" in Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, eds. *Women, Sport, and Culture* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), p. 7. See also Messner's "When Bodies Are Weapons" in Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael A. Messner, eds. *Gender Through the Prism of Difference*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), pp. 148-152.

or the "butchy boxer," both of which serve to trivialize their very athleticism.[81] Linda Tenberg comments on the binary notions:

> [People's remarks make me] wonder what it is exactly that a female boxer is supposed to look like. There are two extremes. It's either a total butch thing or a total joke—it's sad. And with the foxy boxers, there is a thin line between being a sport and being a show for men to get a kick off of. There are the two big-breasted women who fight in flashy outfits with make-up on. But there are a lot of women out there who are also against it, like "why would you wanna do that—oh my god!"[82]

The "foxy boxer" has the obvious function, as Shura Gat has written, to be "sexually titillating for male observers…both to de-stigmatize athletes who compete in a sport stereotypically lesbian and also to assure the general population…they are not challenging the established gender order."[83] Paul Willis, too, asserts that "the vein of sexual innuendo running through much sports commentary" serves the purpose to render the female athlete as a sex object: "a body which may excel in sport, but which is primarily an object of pleasure for men."[84] The image of the "butchy boxer" also has an inherent ideological purpose: it deems female fighters inherently "deviant," epitomizing a counter-mechanism triggered by what Judith Halberstam describes as women's "assaults

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[81] The only common characteristic I have encountered in women boxers is that many (but not all) of them have a background in some martial arts, for example karate, taekwondo, or jujitsu.
[82] Interview with Tenberg, January 7, 2003.
[83] Shura Gat, "Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am!: Perceptions and Representations of Female Professional Boxers" (Unpublished paper presented at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Conference-Indianapolis (November 8, 2002).
[84] Paul Willis, "Women in Sport Ideology" in Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, *Women, Sport, and Culture* (University of Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1994), p. 35.

on the coherence of male masculinity."[85] Anju Reejhsinghani explains her take on the existing stereotypes:

> I'm really glad I'm not either of those things. Especially the foxy boxer: the idea of being a sex symbol when you're in there is so far from why, I think, most women do this. Some women act in a provocative way and live up to the boxing stereotype. I think when women's boxing has reached the level that men's boxing has, then women can be foxy or butchy or neither and it will all be okay. Only now because women boxers feel that we've been forced into one of two positions, the ones who represent either of those get a lot of criticism.[86]

With regard to the ideological undertones at the root of the stereotyping, the ongoing gender battle in pugilism has to do with the players that determine what constitutes acceptable femininity and masculinity; what particular groups of people can justifiably perform certain athletic activities; and which specific bodies can express physical aggression. As a rule, female fighters are, as Carlo Rotella writes, still perceived as either "too womanly or not womanly enough, too manly or not manly enough, desirable or undesirable, appropriate or inappropriate—everything except boxers."[87] For that reason, the discursive strategies of labeling the women as either the "foxy" or the "butchy" caricatures are ideological attempts to render their combative physicality anomalous and, hence, to reinforce

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[85] Judith Halberstam, "An Introduction to Female Masculinity: Masculinity Without Men" in Rachel Adams and David Savran, eds., *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), p. 362.
[86] Interview with Reejhsinghani, January 15, 2003.
[87] Carlo Rotella, *Good With Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rustbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 41.

the existing gender status quo—quite consistently with sport sociologists' recent arguments.

**Wo/Manliness on TV**

Because television provides a lucrative source of income in boxing promotions, matchmakers' and marketing analysts' priorities in decision-making, obviously, have to do with what makes the most pay-per-view sales and viewer ratings on TV. Together with the overall interest in Latino fighting, the growing attention to women's boxing, and the motley cohort of non-combative boxers, TV fights' viewer ratings have gone up to the extent that, according to Thomas Hauser, boxing is a major reason why viewers subscribe to HBO. Writes Hauser: "to put the growth of boxing on HBO in context, in the first ten years of its [thirty-year] existence, the network televised an average of four fights per year. By contrast, in the year 2000, HBO televised fifty fights on twenty-eight dates."[88] Alongside the heterogeneity of boxing audiences, various fight cards are being aired almost daily on cable-TV, while NBC is the first network channel—after more than a decade's hiatus—which began its boxing telecasts anew in 2003, showcasing *the Budweiser Professional Boxing Series on NBC*, with twelve pro-cards scheduled during 2004.[89] *The Ring Extra* comments on the recent development as follows: "If you had to pick just one thing as the single most

[88] Thomas Hauser, *A Year at the Fights* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2003), p. 190.

important happening of ’04, it would have to be NBC’s decision to give boxing another shot on free TV…This is the best news the industry has seen in more than a decade.”[90] ESPN2’s mainstay boxing shows are *Tuesday Night Fights*, *Friday Night Fights*, and *Classic Boxing*; HBO presents its *Boxing After Dark* and *Championship Boxing* series, alongside Showtime’s *Championship Boxing* and *ShoBox* cards on Saturday evenings, while Fox Sports Net airs *Sunday Night Fights*. In addition, HBO Latino’s *Boxeo de Oro* [Golden Boxing], Showtime’s *Latin Fury*, Telefutura’s *Sólo Boxeo* [Only Boxing], Telemundo’s *Boxeo Telemundo*, and Galavisión’s *Lo Mejor de Boxeo* [the Best of Boxing] are broadcast for primarily Latino fight aficionados.

Consequently, the Spanish-language stations showcase mostly grassroots fight cards with occasional continental championship main events and journeymen undercards, whereas ESPN 2 (“Your Boxing Authority”) features mainly up-and-coming fighters in North America, while HBO and Showtime hold control over world championship title bouts and pay-per-view boxing shows. As a result, certain fights become targeted for particular groups of viewers, as opposed to others, which are meant to entice the sport to larger crossover audiences. While HBO ring announcer Michael Buffer, then, begins the ring ritual by his famous howl, “Ladies and Gentlemen: Let’s Get Ready to Rrrrumble!,” Lupe Contreras,

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[89] Eric Raskin, “Looking Ahead,” the *Ring*, Vol. 82, No 13 (December), p. 74.
[90] “*The Ring* Predicts: 10 Burning Questions for 2004,” *The Ring Extra*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (March 2004), p. 45.

his colleague on *Telemundo* kicks off the bout by proclaiming "*Damas y Caballeros, Veremos: Quién Es El Más Macho!* [Ladies and Gentlemen, We Shall See Who is the Most *Macho*!].

Hence, different *types* of fighters become hyped on separate channels, as their portrayed sporting images are directed to distinct audiences. While such superstar U.S. Latino fighters as Fernando Vargas or Johnny Tapia, for example, appeal to working-class Latino viewers, Oscar De La Hoya's fights always guarantee the largest TV sales for more diverse audiences. In Gregory Rodríguez's analysis, "De La Hoya [represents] a usable past, a befitting example of 'assimilation' by white middle-class standards, thus permitting him as a symbol of multiculturalism."[91] Indeed, according to *Boxing Digest*, De La Hoya's junior middleweight title defense against Sugar Shane Mosley on September 13, 2003 amounted to "the 2nd biggest non-heavyweight fight in history with 975,000 pay-per-view buys."[92] Raymond [Mike's brother] Trejo comments on "the Golden Boy's" significance from a fight fan's perspective: "Why Oscar De La Hoya makes such a good Latino fighter is because he plays golf and he plays golf in an exclusive country club. Whereas a lower-class, ordinary Mexican wouldn't do it.

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[91] Gregory Rodríguez, "'Palaces of Pain'—Arenas of Mexican American Dreams: Boxing and the Formation of Ethnic Mexican Identities in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1999), p. 240.
[92] *Boxing Digest*, Vol. XLV, No. 10 (November/December, 2003), pp. 6-7.

The promoters and managers will see what will make the most money."[93] Arlene Dávila explains the ideological underpinnings of such image-making:

> Ethnic marketing hence becomes the interlocutor for these populations vis-à-vis mainstream America, the site that regulates and mediates its ethnics—the immigrant, the alien, the raced, and the underclass—into their respective places within U.S. racial and ethnic hierarchies, creating in the process myths of peoplehood for these populations.[94]

Alongside the specific ethnoracial images portrayed on televised fight cards, gender becomes intriguingly represented in commercials that sponsor live fight cards and their broadcast variations. As a rule, beer sponsors have the largest advertising visibility in prizefighting, for both the canvas and the ring card-girls are generally provided by such companies as Miller Lite, Budweiser, or *Corona*. In 1998, Miller Lite, in fact, launched its own championship boxing shows billed as the "Miller Lite Texas Title Belt Professional Boxing Series," one which, evidently, has more to do with the beverage's visibility and less with boxing achievement, since no sanctioning bodies recognize such a title in their rankings. Even so, whenever a title—malt or otherwise—is on the line at a fight card, the event automatically gains in momentum, rising both public interest and ticket sales. In addition, the shows enjoy all the more visibility when star fighters

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[93] Interview with Raymond Trejo, August 20, 2003.
[94] Arlene Dávila, *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing And Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 22.

endorse their product, exemplified by Jesus Chávez's sponsorship agreement with Miller Lite in 2002.[95]

Indeed, such is the beer mogul's regional *gravitas* that the University of Texas actually abandoned its strict no-alcohol policy for the duration of professional boxing events, a decision on which the *Austin American-Statesman* commented as follows: "Today's Jesus Chávez-Tom Johnson boxing match is a historic one—not only because it's the first live professional boxing main event at the Erwin Center, but also, for the first time at a public event, beer will be served."[96] In 2003, Miller Lite sponsored no less than sixteen boxing shows in Texas, promoted mainly by Top Rank and Main Events, televised by Telefutura's *Sólo Boxeo* and ESPN 2's *Friday Night Fights*. Given that fighters' strict diet excludes drinking altogether, it might seem ironic that beer should play such a fundamental role in boxing promotions. However, as Lawrence Wenner points out, drinking, sport, and gender formations are, in fact, intrinsically intertwined: "Beyond alcohol as a rite of male passage, alcohol serves as a larger symbol of masculinity. Public transactions—ordering, being offered, consuming, and sharing alcohol—are seen to enhance one's manliness."[97] Wenner's argument is remarkably illustrated by two consecutive years' series of "Miller High Life" and

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[95] See "Miller Light Names Professional Boxer, Jesus Chávez, as Spokesperson," (http://www.hispanicwire.com/release_Miller_Chávez_ENG.htm).
[96] Cedric Golden, "Beer Will Flow at Erwin Center for the First Time Tonight," *Austin American-Statesman* (February 23, 2001), p. C 1.

"Miller Lite" beer commercials that sponsored the 2002 and 2003 *Friday Night Fights* on ESPN 2 respectively.

The 2002 campaign's slogan—**"*Friday Night Fights* Presented by Miller High Life. To Look Simply, Proudly, Boldly, Manly. This is the High Life"—** epitomizes the series' extensive gender theme in which various ordinary, bold, manly [beer-bellied] working men's manhood is uplifted to new, gallant levels with the assistance of Miller High Life, "the Champagne of Beers." Such a process generally involves a carefully crafted strategy (often emblemized by card games or war references) with which to placate a malicious, treacherous, or vindictive woman's attempt to obstruct a more enjoyable, chivalrous, and masculine "High Life" for the duration of the evening's boxing. As the three excerpts below demonstrate, the solution and solace invariably comes with the man's clever appropriation of the Miller High Life beer bottle.

**Example 1** [A man fills a Miller High Life bottle with water.] Here's a lesson for the would-be Casanova: Every so often it is advantageous to remind the Little Lady she hasn't dropped off the radar…. [Puts a red rose in the bottle.] Well, well, well, two-to-one you'll be living the *High Life*—tonight.

**Example 2** Tread lightly, son-in-law. There are more traps lying ahead than in the deep woods of Montana. One false step and she'll have your head mounted on her part of the wall. [The son-in-law takes a sip of beer]. That's the right idea! Keep *Light* on your feet, and you just might emerge from this

[97] Lawrence A. Wenner, "In Search of the Sports Bar: Masculinity, Alcohol, Sports, and the Mediation of Public Space" in Geneviève Rail, ed. *Sport and Postmodern Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 304.

encounter in one piece. Good thing there is also the *Light* way to live the *High Life.*

**Example 3** Civilized society is based on some degree of restraint. You might disagree with much of what the gals have to say. But there are times when even the most *misguided* opinion is better left uncorrected. Don't you open your mouth! Unless it is to fill it up again with another sip of beer. Lucky for you, there is also the *Light* way to live the *High Life*.

In all of the commercials in the 2002 series, women are either invisible or depicted in a humorous ("little ladies," "gals")—if not downright misogynistic—manner, because they function as gender foils for the men's manly sporting activities.

However, in January 2003, the *Friday Night Fights*' "Miller High Life" series was interestingly replaced by a "Miller Lite" series, one which places women, their bodies, and human relationships at the center stage of the narration. In comparison to the previous campaign, these commercials portray significantly younger, more fashion/calorie-conscious, city-people, with a general theme revolving around changing fe/male gender roles and infidelity. One of the most frequent commercials exhibits two women's catfight over which attribute best describes the beer: "Great *Taste*!" versus "Less *Filling*!" Two scantily clad, sexy, bosomy women—a blonde and a brunette—get into a fight, tear each others' clothes off, and wrestle in mud, while two couples witness the battle inside a bar over a Miller Lite. Both men are conspicuously excited by the action whereas their lanky, small-breasted female companions follow the scene in utter dismay.

During the course of the year, the commercial changes into various "interactive" formats, as the two couples in the bar themselves get to fabricate different, alternative endings for the scene. One of the male companions, for example, envisions a case scenario in which he deliberately initiates a brawl in order to end up in a *tête-à-tête* with the sexy brunette, concluding the action with his face virtually buried in the woman's voluptuous bosom. With an impish smile on her face, his girlfriend immediately counters this conclusion by depicting a version where the brunette metamorphoses into a huge, unattractive man who practically squashes the boyfriend under his enormous body mass. Other commercials in the series center on narratives that envision daring, daunting, or dangerous situations, always recounted in the haven of an all-male or all-female party, complete with the slogan, **"Life is Best Told in a Place Called Miller Time."**

At the heart of these commercials' gender representations is the issue of what women and men can legitimately do with their lives and their bodies; what particular types of femininity and masculinity are being promoted and valorized. The one-dimensional portrayal of simplistic beer-drinking masculinity and sexually objectifying femininity come to serve, during the commercial breaks, as powerful counter-mechanisms in possible gender contestations. When simultaneously at live fight cards the sport's financial players insist on juxtaposing the female boxing body with the image of the ring card-girls, they necessarily perform an alternative version of womanhood to fight audiences.

Indeed, not only do the girls walk around the canvas to exhibit the number of the proceeding fight's rounds, while advertising the beer sponsor's beverage, but they necessarily also display a sexualized femininity, targeted for the fancy of the male spectators. Ultimately, all of the interrelated ideological identification mechanisms discussed in this chapter—from the discursive strategies of stereotyping and the carefully crafted ethnoracial and "crossover" boxer profiles to the beer commercials' visual and narrated images—come to reflect the state of flux that characterizes contemporary professional boxing, both in the United States and worldwide.

**Conclusion**

Gender in sport, this chapter has attempted to show, is hardly a simple matter, but professional boxing in Austin offers a particularly relevant case to shed light on the multifaceted issue, as it encompasses a nexus of athletic, social financial, and ideological dimensions. Together with its remarkably vibrant female fight scene, the city—and with it the state—has, within the past decade, seen dramatic changes in fight folks' reactions to women's participation in the sport. First, various business people saw a profitable market niche in staging female boxing and offering conditioning classes for non-combative aficionados, gradually opening their doors to an increasingly heterogeneous cohort of practitioners. Acknowledging women boxers' athletic seriousness, male boxers

soon accepted the female fistic presence at the gym; eventually challenging the attitudes of a number of old school handlers and administrators as well. Nonetheless, outside of the gym women fighters continue to pose threats with regard to both athletic and societal gender expectations, resulting in a range of discursive counter-tactics that try to reinstate their unsettling impact. What is more, the sport's financial players often exploit fighters for their own pecuniary gain, contributing to boxers' disillusionment with the business practices of the trade. New to the prizefight industry, female fighters, in particular, come to articulate its grievances, aspects that many male fighters have learned to accept as basic premises of the sport.

All things considered, as an intrinsic part of today's prizefight culture, women's sheer presence in the physical locations complicates the social and occupational norms of the sport. Having entered the social spaces of the gym, the ring, and fight cards, male and female fighters interact on a daily basis, enabling *all* of them to give meaning to and negotiate their own identity representations amidst the overall dynamics. The female boxing presence also calls into question one-dimensional understandings of masculinity and femininity, as a fighter may embrace multiple subject positions and various gender representations in and out of the ring. Identity formations, then, become contestations between individual choices, occupational players, and societal assumptions, enabling either the shattering or stabilizing of the existing status quo. Furthermore, because the

fighting women do not seem to be going anywhere, we will continue to bear witness to the remarkably dynamic gender, class, and ethnoracial combats that take place between different personalities, in multiple locations, at various scales—whether at boxing gyms, fight cards, or on national TV.

# Chapter 5 Backroom Identities: Pugilistic Power Plays

> And all this—organized crime, big business, and television—came together through a mutual acquaintance: boxing.
>
> Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*

> Boxing [today] is not like it was portrayed in the movies of the 1950s. A gangster doesn't strut into the dressing room, a cigar in his teeth, and whisper to the fighter, "Tonight isn't your night, kid. You're going down in the sixth." The corruption now is more subtle, sophisticated and systemic.
>
> Jack Newfield, "The Shame of Boxing"

## Introduction

Let us now, in this final chapter, turn our attention to a range of economic, judicial, and medical considerations endemic to the global prizefight industry, for it is within the distinct, even if constantly shifting, power dynamics at multiple scales in which all U.S. professional boxers, of necessity, conduct their occupation—be it in Austin, Texas, or anywhere else in the nation. While the previous three chapters have focused on the sport's everyday significance to some of its lesser known practitioners, it bears underscoring here that my Texan interviewees, too, are always an inherent part of the international pugilistic machinery, one which is—most conspicuously—a multi-billion-dollar business. Indeed, to put the magnitude of the sport's financial profitability into perspective, a heavyweight mega-event such as a Mike Tyson fight typically generates over a

hundred million in revenue in the United States, mainly consisting of the live gate, television broadcasts, and advertising endorsements. For example, on June 8, 2002, the heavyweight championship bout between Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis prompted a one-day, $23-million sellout at the 20,000-seat Memphis Pyramid (with ringside seats going for $2,400), and almost two million homes purchased the HBO/Showtime broadcast on pay-per-view at the cost of $54.95, amounting to a record $103 million in television revenue alone, while the victor (Lewis) and the vanquished each pocketed a $17.5-million purse.[1]

Even so, notwithstanding the hefty monetary rewards for those on top of their game, professional boxing is beleaguered by various unscrupulous business practices and blatant exploitation of its workers, frequently resulting in glaring conflicts of interest, illegitimate contracts, corrupt rankings, dangerous mismatches, and fixed fights, maneuverings which also result in the deception of fight fans and TV-viewers (that is, consumers)—all of whom are, ultimately, impacted in the process. As an inevitable consequence, even the most knowledgeable aficionados are confused with the jumble of the current arrangements, and such is the widespread distrust of the fight game that

[1] See Dave Anderson, "Tyson 'Shock' Is Just What Boxing Likes," *New York Times* (May 9, 2001), p. C 15, Ira Berkow, "Tyson Remains an Object of Fascination," *New York Times* (May 21, 2001), p. C 17, and Richard Sandomir, "Lewis-Tyson Bout Provides a Knockout Revenue Figure," *New York Times* (June 12, 2001), p. D 4.

sportswriter Jim Brady thus expresses his conclusion: "If there was a canon of ethics in this sport it was written by Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."[2]

The sport's myriad labor grievances are largely a result of its organizational deficiencies, for prizefighting differs significantly from most other U.S. professional sports in the structural absence of a centralized national governing body comparable to, for example, the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, or the National Hockey League. Nor do prizefighters have the equivalent of a players' union or any other collective forum protecting their interests as *athletes*; and when it comes to issues of *workers*' rights, the industry can barely stand the light: fighters do not enjoy minimum health benefits, quotidian health and life insurance security (as opposed to competition insurance), or even nominal basic pension plans. As Jack Newfield puts it: "The fighters are powerless workers of color....They need representation, rights, and collective voice....[But] the fact that almost all boxers are black and Latino makes it easier for respectable people to shrug and look away."[3]

To add to the predicament, the sport struggles with the state athletic commissions which have been unable to create universally recognized officiating rules and safety regulations, while their internal communication is further fraught with devastating communication breakdowns. Moreover, yet another problematic

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[2] "Oversight of the Professional Boxing Industry: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 105th Congress (May 22, 1997), p. 12.
[3] Jack Newfield, "The Shame of Boxing," *The Nation* (November 12, 2001) p. 22.

element in boxing is the proliferation of the world sanctioning bodies with their various "alphabet soup" title belts which today grant championships in seventeen different weight divisions (as opposed to the original eight), all with their different champions, disparate ratings, and incongruent regulations. This chapter, then, attempts to shed light on the multiple facets of prizefighting as a form of bodily labor, a lucrative business, and an instrument of politics, with its embedded nexus of practical, policy, and ethical ramifications. Drawing on various political, legal, and medical discourses surrounding the industry within the past fifty years, I will expose some of the behind-the-scenes pugilistic power plays, with their tangible everyday consequences as well as subtle ideological underpinnings, while simultaneously attesting to competing notions of the sport's identity as an "American" enterprise.

**From Mobsters to McCain**

The various dilemmas of contemporary prizefighting can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century efforts to ban the sport, the outcome of which was its increasing administrative regionalization, underworld influence, and political scheming at the local levels. Indeed, Budd Schulberg opines that "every time boxing has been outlawed it has persevered in some bootleg form. And like bath tub gin, in a more vicious, disorganized, and dehumanizing form."[4]

[4] Budd Schulberg, *Loser and Still Champion: Muhammad Ali* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), p. 4.

Organized crime infiltration into prizefighting intensified especially during Prohibition when such figures as Frank Carbo, Gabriel Genovese, Truman Gibson, Frank (Blinky) Palermo, and Anthony (Tony Fats) Salerno began to exercise control over the industry—and its offshoot, gambling—by assuming positions as its undercover handlers and covert financiers.[5] Nat Fleisher, the original editor of *The Ring* magazine, described the general state of the sport during the 1930s: "The fight game was a racket then and truly could be referred to as the sport of rogues. Although there were some honest promoters in New York when I covered the sport those days, boxing as a whole was ruled by ruffians, gangsters, and politicians."[6]

The first federal intervention into the mobster involvement was launched during the golden age of boxing cinema in the 1950s, when FBI investigations led to various criminals' prosecutions on anti-trust violations, racketeering, and conspiracy charges.[7] In the early 1960s, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee launched the first in-depth governmental investigations to determine the pervasiveness of the sport's corruptive elements on national scale; and after a

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[5] See "Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Judiciary," 86th Congress, Second Session Pursuant to S. Res. 238 (June 14-15, 1960). See also Steven Riess's "Only the Ring Was Square: Frankie Carbo and the Underworld Control of American Boxing," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (May 1998).

[6] Nat Fleischer, *50 Years at Ringside* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), pp. 45-46.

[7] On the chronology of the early boxing investigations, see Peter E. Millspaugh, "The Federal Regulation of Professional Boxing: Will Congress Answer the Bell?" *Seton Hall Legislative Journal*, Vol. 19 (1994), pp. 33-72. For film depictions on the underworld influence in prizefighting, see, for example, Mark Robson, dir., *The Harder They Fall* (Columbia Pictures,

series of public hearings, in which some 90 witnesses (including such former champions as Jack Dempsey, Jake LaMotta, Joe Louis, and Rocky Marciano) testified or submitted written statements, the overwhelming consensus deemed federal legislation imperative to "rescue" the industry.[8] Joe Louis claimed in his testimony that "I not only think that it [the proposed legislation] will protect the fighters from the gangsters and hoodlums and so forth in the boxing game, but I also think it would protect the fighters from managers and also from boxing commissions over the country."[9] Nat Fleischer's statement, in turn, read as follows: "I have been disillusioned in my belief that there are sufficient teeth in the boxing laws of the various states to keep the sport clean of hoodlums, racketeers, cheap crooks, fixers, and chiselers who, according to the sworn testimony given before your committee, have taken over from the legalized commissions the control of boxing."[10] As a result, two federal boxing bills were introduced in 1961 and 1962 respectively, with the aim to abolish unfair competition, anti-trust scheming, and monopolistic practices; to establish an office of the national boxing commissioner; and, finally, to restore the general

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1956); Robert Rossen, dir., *Body and Soul* (Republic Pictures, 1947); and Robert Wise, dir., *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (MGM, 1956).

8 See "Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly of the Committee of the Judiciary," 87th Congress, First Session Pursuant to S. Res. 52 on S. 1474 (May 31, 1961 and June 1-2, 1961); "Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly of the Committee of the Judiciary," 86th Congress, Second Session Pursuant to S. Res. 238 (December 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, and 14, 1960); and "Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly of the Committee of the Judiciary," 86th Congress, Second Session Pursuant to S. Res. 238 (June 14-15, 1960).

9 Ibid. (May 31, June 1-2, 1961), p. 1332.

public's confidence in the sport, but neither of these proposals materialized into law. According to Peter Millspaugh, Estes Kefauver's "untimely death" ceased the impetus to push the boxing legislation forward, and it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that another set of attempts was made on national level to bring about judicial interventions—albeit all of them ineffective.[11]

The primary reason for the failure to enforce nationwide changes had to do with the political unwillingness, as a matter of principle, to impose federal regulation on any U.S. business ventures by and large. As Congressman James Florio of New Jersey explains:

> [The early bills] didn't pass because we had very uninformed Members of Congress standing up and saying that well, we don't want Federal regulations anywhere in our economy, and that what we really ought to have was State regulation. Of course, some of us tried to make the point that that was the problem…[But] just as an ideological bias, they're against that concept.[12]

However, the proponents of the federal legislation counter-argued that the promotion of major boxing matches should not, in fact, be regarded as an intra-state enterprise at all but, given the sport's national character in scope, would better be conceptualized as *interstate* commerce. From a legal standpoint, such a position turned out to have valid grounds, for the Supreme Court had ruled in the 1955 case of *the United States v. International Boxing Club of New York* that the

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[10] Ibid., p. 1488.
[11] See Millspaugh, pp. 33-34.

"promotion of championship boxing contests on a multi-State basis and the sale of rights to televise, broadcast, and film such matches for interstate transmission constituted trade and commerce among the several states within the meaning of the Sherman Act."[13] Even so, the various hearings in the 1980s were to no avail, mainly because of the fundamental reluctance to invest public funds in the administration of any professional sport in general, and the refusal to prioritize prizefighting *per se* as an overall congressional concern. However, increasing outcries among boxing insiders begged for basic national oversight, and Daniel Duva of Main Events Promotions, in effect, thus expressed his dissatisfaction with the proceedings: "the vast majority of the people who work in the industry—the managers, the boxers, the promoters, et cetera—want Federal intervention. In fact, we are pleading for it. I find it extremely frustrating when people who work in the industry come to Congress and ask for mandatory regulations and we are told it's not good for us."[14]

Notwithstanding this rather dismal judicial history, the turn of the 21st century has—somewhat incredulously—brought with it reason for cautious optimism, as the past decade has witnessed the most forceful incentive yet to

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[12] "Creation of a U.S. Boxing Corporation: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection and Competitiveness of the Committee on Energy and Commerce," 100th Congress (June 23, 1989), p. 22.

[13] "Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Judiciary," 86th Congress, Second Session Pursuant to S. Res. 238 (June 14-15, 1960), p. 2.

[14] See Duva's testimony in "Creation of a U.S. Boxing Corporation: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection and Competitiveness of the Committee on

tackle the various problems plaguing the sport. Despite the half-a-century-long federal investigation resulting in a string of unsuccessful legislative proposals, the U.S. Senate launched yet another in-depth series of hearings into the prizefight industry in the late 1980s, including testimonies from fight professionals, undercover FBI agents, boxing writers, and TV broadcasters.[15] Led by Senators John McCain of Arizona and Richard Bryan of Nevada, a legislation crusade continuing to the present day has called attention to the unethical practices of boxing in congressional lobbies; moreover, such writers as Thomas Hauser and Jack Newfield have advocated the issues in print media, while ringside analysts Teddy Atlas and Joe Tesssitore of ESPN2's *Friday Night Fights* have spread the cause on national television. According to McCain, "we simply cannot tolerate the dangerous status quo of bootleg boxing shows and fraudulent matches because things have always been done that way, or because Congress has never found a

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Energy and Commerce," 100th Congress (June 23, 1988), p. 70. Duva later separated from Main Events to create the promotional company Duva Boxing in 2000.

[15] See "Creation of a U.S. Boxing Corporation: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness of the Committee on Energy and Commerce," 100th Congress, Second Session on H.R 2305 (June 23, 1988); "Creation of a U.S. Boxing Corporation: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness of the Committee on Energy and Commerce," 101st Congress, First Session on H.R. 2129 (April 27, 1989); "Hearing on the Boxing Fair Labor Standards Act: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Labor Standards of the Committee on Education and Labor," 101st Congress, Second Session (August 14, 1990); "Corruption in Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Governmental Affairs," 102nd Congress, Second Session (August 11-12, 1992); "Health and Safety of Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 103rd Congress, Second Session (January 20 and September 22, 1994); "Oversight of the Professional Boxing Industry: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 105th Congress, First Session (May 22, 1997); and "Business Practices in the Professional Boxing Industry: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 105th Congress, Second Session (March 24, 1998).

practical and acceptable method to assist the State commissions that regulate the sport."[16] Consequently, the campaign has exposed the sport's fundamental structural deficiencies to the large public, while also calling attention to the underlying question of who, in point of fact, are the profit-makers to gain most from the established pugilistic arrangements. In the main, the reformers have insisted on governmental intervention with regard to precisely the same issues that the Kefauver bills did some forty years earlier: namely, establishing nationwide health and safety standards, uniform business policies, and creating a centrally governed national umbrella organization for the sport.

As an outcome of the vigorous movement, for the first time in pugilistic history the governmental investigations have proven worthwhile, as both the Senate and the House of Representatives have taken a renewed interest in the plight of professional boxing. Consequently, Congress has passed two statutes concerning the basic safety and business practices of the sport—the "Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996" and the "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000"—both of which have been successfully enacted into federal law.[17] Additionally, on March 31, 2004, the Senate passed the "Professional Boxing Amendments Act of 2004" which, if enacted into law, would add to the earlier

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[16] Quoted in April R. Anderson, "The Punch that Landed: The Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996," *Marquette Sports Law Journal*, Vol. 9 (1998), pp. 191-215.

[17] "Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996," 104th Congress, Second Session (January 3, 1996) and "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000," 106th Congress, Second Session (January 24, 2000).

legislation by creating the long sought-after "United States Boxing Commission" to oversee the state athletic commissions and to regulate the industry in the entire nation.[18] Granted that the passage of legislation and enforcing it in practice are two entirely separate matters, these judicial measures have proven to be absolutely remarkable first steps in laying out some basic principles from which to further remedy the persistent maladies that the fistic profession has suffered from for decades on end.

**Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996**

Up until the mid-1990s, the most blatant everyday hazard in prizefighting was the lack of uniformity with regard to minimum safety standards between different state commissions, a stumbling block which was particularly problematic with the large pool of journeyman fighters who, unlike champions and contenders, would fight at non-televised grassroots fight cards with possibly substandard supervision and insufficient pre- and post-fight medical oversight. Due to the lack of centralized resources, information about fighters' medical data, win-loss records, and suspensions/revocations of licenses frequently failed to reach from one administrator to the next, while boxers and their handlers would circumvent mandatory suspensions by simply fighting under the jurisdiction of a reputedly more lax commission. To escape regulations, fighters might use several

[18] See "Professional Boxing Amendments Act of 2004," 108th Congress, Second Session (March 31, 2004). <Http://www.theorator.com/bills108/s275.htm>.

ring aliases, falsify their medical and/or win-loss records, maneuverings which would result not only in devastating mismatches but, at times, even ring deaths.

Indeed, November 14, 1996 turned out to be a tragic day in Texas prizefight history when Mike Trejo's eight-round flyweight bout with Rey Hernandez of Mexico City resulted in the fatal brain trauma of the Mexican fighter who, it was later exposed, should never have been in the ring to begin with. Mike Trejo recalls:

> It was in San Marcos, my eighth or ninth [pro] fight, home crowd and everything. Seventh round I hurt him, and I stopped him. We were throwing a lot of punches, and he didn't recover. I was thinking of his wife, family, and kids. Afterwards I just stayed home. Some people [from local TV] came to visit. My brother got in contact with the widow; she said it was a freak accident, that it wasn't your fault.[19]

Brother Raymond Trejo elaborates: "But people wouldn't let it go. They'd say, 'How does it feel to *kill* somebody?'"[20] The local boxing commission, who had approved Hernandez's physical examination and licensing application with a bogus win-loss record of 20-12, offered neither solace for the victims, nor claimed any responsibility for the mismatch: "Everything down the line was handled right," claimed a representative of the Texas Department of Licensing and

[19] Interview with Mike Trejo, August 20, 2003.
[20] Interview with Raymond Trejo, August 20, 2003.

Regulation. "It was just an unfortunate situation."[21] However, an *Austin American-Statesman* investigation soon proved otherwise:

> [O]fficials didn't challenge the claims, though it would have been easy to do so. If they had, they would have found that Hernandez' true record practically cried out: This man should never fight again…[His] career record was actually 33 wins, 18 losses, and a draw. More important, he had lost 16 of his last 24 fights, including three in a row by knockout, sufficient in themselves to have disqualified him. He had been either knocked out or TKOd [lost by technical knockout] seven times. This record was available to [TDLFR's executive director Tommy] Smith, Dick Cole, the boxing coordinator who works for Smith, and Tony Hernandez, who promoted the San Marcos bout. They didn't check.[22]

Against such a gloomy background, the Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996, which came into effect on January 1, 1997, was drafted specifically to improve the basic conditions of grassroots journeymen fighters, to prevent conspicuous mismatches like the one witnessed in Texas, and to assist state boxing commissions to provide oversight for prizefighting in the United States. Unlike the previous legislative efforts, the PBSA did not attempt an all-encompassing reform of the boxing industry; instead, its modest aim was to establish minimum levels of health and safety requirements to protect the athletes.[23] Delineated in collaboration with the local athletic commissions, the PBSA was premised on the stipulation that professional boxing matches only be

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[21] Quoted in "Mexican Boxer Passed Physical Before Fatal Bout; Brain Trauma Believed Cause of Death After Fight with Trejo in San Marcos." *Austin American-Statesman* (November 20, 1996), p. D 5.

[22] "Make Texas Boxing Safer," *Austin American-Statesman* (January 15, 1997), p. A 14.

[23] See "Proposed Professional Boxing Safety Act," 104th Congress (October 31, 1995) and "Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996," 104th Congress (January 3, 1996).

organized in a state that has a boxing commission supervising the fight cards, together with their pre- and post-fight logistics and medical services at ringside.[24] Accordingly, by law boxers today must register with the state commission where they reside to get a renewable photo identification card, with their social security number and a boxer identification number printed on it, to be presented at the weigh-in. To stage a boxing event, promoters are required to set up basic safety measurements by arranging pre-fight physical examinations ensuring that each boxer is physically fit to compete; they must also provide health insurance coverage for any injuries sustained in the match; and they need to secure the continuous presence of a licensed practicing physician at ringside, alongside an ambulance with resuscitation equipment on site.

Before a fight card, the state commission evaluates the professional records and physician's certification of each boxer, either to authorize or deny his/her participation in the match-up. For example, boxers are not permitted to compete due to a recent knockout (in other words, when they are unable to continue after a count of ten by the referee) or a technical knockout (that is, the referee's stoppage of the bout), a series of consecutive losses, a training injury, or the failure of a drug test. Nor can the athletes compete if they are under suspension from any other boxing commission, if they have used and/or attempted

[24] States without a boxing commission would have to make arrangements for any of their fight cards to be supervised under the jurisdiction of another state's athletic commission, a premise that has caused much uproar in some states with less boxing activity.

to use false aliases, forged records, or fake ID cards. Two days after the conclusion of each show, the supervising commission must report the results to *Fight Fax*, a central boxing registry established to keep track of all U.S. boxers' win-loss records, as well as send any mandatory suspensions to the *National Suspension List* available online.[25] For any suspected wrongdoings, the PSBA has an enforcement provision, according to which the Attorney General of the United States may bring a civil action suit in the appropriate district court against any persons involved a professional boxing match in violation of the Act, with penalties ranging between a maximum of one year's imprisonment and $20,000 in fines for managers, promoters, matchmakers, and boxing administrators, while boxers' maximum penalties are $1,000 in fines. Finally, the PBSA articulates its relationship with state laws as follows: "Nothing in this Act shall prohibit a State from adopting or enforcing supplemental or more stringent laws or regulations not inconsistent with this Act, or criminal, civil, or administrative fines for violations of such laws or regulations."[26]

Accordingly, some boxing commissions have chosen to implement stricter health regulations, albeit with the problematic outcome that existing standards between states might vary from the minimum pre-fight physicals to sophisticated ophthalmologic examinations and neurological scanning (such as EKGs, EEGs, MRIs, and CAT-scans) to detect brain trauma. In addition, Kirk Hendrick of the

[25] The suspension list is available at <http://www.sportsnetwork.com>.

Nevada State Athletic Commission points out that the existing rules can be circumvented in several ways: "While common sense would seem to dictate that the on-site ambulance would be prepared to transport (i.e. ambulate) a boxer, it's surprising how many promoters would prefer to simply call '911' if a transporting ambulance is required."[27] Yet further inconsistencies are caused by varying standards on such mandatory laboratory requirements as hepatitis, HIV, and pregnancy testing, while differences also occur in terms of what substances are allowed to be used inside the ring, in particular the application of coagulants to stop the bleeding of cuts. To bring about long-term consistency, Kirk Hendrick has outlined the following recommendations to improve the PBSA:

> There needs to be a central repository where fighters can send their medical examinations and tests. In addition to the standard tests, it would be very helpful if all boxers had 'baseline' tests conducted before they are able to receive their first professional license. Such testing could track whether a fighter's physical wellbeing has diminished over the course of his career, a valuable tool for knowing when a fighter should retire.[28]

However, the tug-of-war over the standardization of physical examinations, the creation and maintenance of any medical data pools is—quite predictably—over financial considerations. At issue is the costliness of such processes in general, as well as the question of who should be responsible for their payment: the athletes, the promoters, or the industry at large, possibly

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[26] "Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996," SEC. 14.

[27] See Hendrick's testimony in "Boxing and Federal Laws: Hearing on Reform of Professional Boxing Industry Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 107th Congress (May 23, 2001). <Http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/hearings01.htm>.

funded by an occupation tax or the like. Equally important, at stake is the principal over states' rights to determine their local ringside rules and regulations: hence, writer Bert Randolph Sugar points out, states disagree over a basic thing such as scoring, "with Montana giving a 10-9, not 10-8, round to a boxer who knocked down another, with the other boxer getting up right away, thus showing he's not hurt, while Florida will make it a 10-9 round if the fallen fighter takes a 9-count, which shows his 'ring generalship,' as opposed to the one who gets up immediately in a groggy condition."[29] Further disputes are wrangled over whether the physician (or only the referee) can stop the bout and what the length of suspensions should be after knockouts and technical knockouts (ranging from 30 to 60 days), discrepancies which cause unnecessary confusion between the boxers, handlers, and fight officials.

Alongside boxing insiders, the medical profession, too, has frequently participated in the debate over the health and safety of professional boxers. The undeniable fact according to all medical research is, of course, that boxing is a dangerous sport, as the repeated blows to the head and body can cause various physiological traumas, ranging from cuts, nose bleeds, and damaged hands to ocular injuries, cerebral concussions, and brain damage. According to various estimates, between some 10 and 30 per cent of prizefighters suffer from

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[28] Ibid.

permanent brain damage, also known as the "punch drunk" syndrome—or *dementia pugilistica*—which includes, in its various stages, such physical symptoms as hand tremor, memory loss, hearing loss, blurry vision, shuffling gait, slurry speech, and leg dragging, together with such psychological symptoms as paranoid ideas, social instability, and personality changes.[30] According to Yvonne Haglund and Ejnar Eriksson, the prevalence of punch-drunkenness ranges between 9 and 25 per cent of all pro-fighters, because it "correlates with the number of fights and length of the boxing career and is most common in sluggish type heavyweight[s]."[31] The boxers themselves know full well the risks of the trade, and they are aware of the symptoms signaling that a fighter is becoming "punchy"; for example, one of my interviewees describes his sense of apprehension when, at times, he would wake up a morning after a tough fight feeling as if having "an ocean inside my head."

In relation to this hazardous reality, two schools of thought within the medical field have expressed their opposite opinions concerning the status of the fistic profession. The old school has recurrently called for the abolition of boxing

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[29] See Sugar's testimony in "Federal Regulation of Boxing: Hearing Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 107th Congress (May 22, 2002). <Http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/hearings0202.htm>.

[30] According to Kevin Walsh, the American Medical Association estimates the occurrence of the "punch drunk" syndrome to be fifteen per cent. See his "Boxing: Regulating A Health Hazard," *The Journal of Contemporary Health Law and Policy*, Vol. 11, I. 1 (Fall 1994), pp. 63-83. On the syndrome, see also J.A. Millspaugh, "Dementia Pugilistica," *United States Naval Medical Bulletin*, Vol. XXXV, No. 3 (July 1937), pp. 297-303.

[31] Yvonne Haglund and Ejnar Eriksson, "Does Amateur Boxing Lead to Chronic Brain Damage?" *American Journal of Sports Medicine*, Vol. 21, I. 1 (January/February 1993), p 99.

on medical grounds (the repeated blows to the head), moral reasoning (civilized people should not be hitting each other), as well as from an ethical standpoint (the industry exploits its workers).[32] To quote Friedrich Unterharnscheidt's statement from 1970:

> The cumulative effect of blows received and the delayed appearance of symptoms make boxing a treacherous activity, especially for young men. Beyond the physical brutality of this so-called sport, which trains youngsters at school age in mutual assault its repulsiveness lies in its contempt of every educational concept in our civilization.[33]

By contrast, a more lenient recent perspective has brought to light that the overall occurrence of pugilistic injuries is relatively low in comparison to many other popular sports; indeed, boxing typically ranks twenty-eighthor twenty -ninth on the list of most dangerous sports for injuries.[34] Accordingly, Haglund and Eriksson write in their 1989 neurological study:

> The rate of injury is lower in boxing than that of many other sports. There is much higher incidence of injury in skiing, soccer, American football, rugby, ice hockey, and motor racing…The mortality rate has been calculated as 0.13 per 1000 participants…which is less than the rate for horse racing, sports parachuting, hand gliding, mountaineering, scuba diving, motorcycle racing, or American football.[35]

Instead of recommending the banning of the entire sport, the premise of the new school of thought, then, has been to contemplate ways to prevent injuries and,

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[32] On similar grounds, Sweden, in fact, banned professional boxing in 1969.

[33] Friedrich Unterharnscheidt, "About Boxing: Review of Historical and Medical Aspects," *Texas Reports on Biology and Medicine*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter 1970), pp. 421-495.

[34] "Health and Safety of Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 103rd Congress, Second Session (January 20 and September 22, 1994), p. 48.

thus, to minimize its various existing risks. A study examining eye complications in boxing, for example, makes the following recommendations to promote further safety in the sport: instituting mandatory eye examinations, with a registry containing the data for all ocular injuries; training and recertifying ringside physicians to identify eye injuries as they are occurring; creating uniform standards specifying which particular symptoms would stop a bout; and enforcing a mandatory use of a thumbless glove in all boxing matches.[36] By a similar logic, Clive Noble's study on hand injuries calls for additional research on the improvement of the boxing glove *per se*, for, he argues, "the modern boxing glove has not evolved sufficiently regarding the prevention of hand injuries" sustained in a boxing match.[37] Moreover, while many fight insiders and aficionados claim that the adoption of the protective headgear currently used in amateur boxing would absolutely deflate the whole purpose of professional boxing, Haglund and Eriksson's results on their neurological research on amateur boxers gives reason for pause. The study which examined 50 former amateur boxers, compared with two control groups of soccer players and track and field athletes, in fact failed to demonstrate *any* significant differences in the boxers' and the other athletes' brain

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[35] Haglund and Eriksson, p. 98. See also Jan Corsellis, "Boxing and the Brain," *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 298 (January 14, 1989), pp. 105-109.

[36] Vincent J. Giovinazzo, Lawrence A. Yanuzzi, John A. Sorenson, Daniel J. Delrowe, and Enwin A Cambell, "The Ocular Complications of Boxing," *Opthalmology*, Vol. 94, No. 6 (June 1987), pp. 587-596. One of my interviewees, Conrad Sanchez, had a detached retina quite a while before it was ever detected by physicians. After several surgeries, he was forced to retire from professional boxing.

examinations. However, "[s]omewhat contradictory to our expectations," the researchers write, "the boxers had lower scores than the conscripts with regard to impulsiveness, psychic anxiety, and psychanestia."[38]

Undoubtedly, the fighters themselves consider the benefits of boxing to transcend its various medical risks and physical perils, as it gives them integrity, perseverance, and structure that they would likely never have leading less fulfilling lives outside of the ring. As former heavyweight champion Joe Frazier puts it: "People don't understand what an honor it is to be a fighter. It gave me the best opportunity to prove myself, to stand up and say, 'I'm the best. I matter. I am.'"[39] Taking the various pros and cons into consideration, my perhaps self-evident conclusion is that, due to its inherent physical nature, no sport—high-risk or otherwise—can ever completely steer clear from bodily pain, harm, and injury. However, by further developing uniform health and safety standards—as begun by the Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996—in collaboration with medical experts and ringside physicians, it is possible to reduce unnecessary risks, to diminish exposure to permanent damage, and to minimize fatality occurrences. Ultimately, when all is said and done, and it comes to taking a stand on the continuing existence of boxing, I cannot but fully agree with Thomas Hauser's following contention: "The reality of life is that we live in a violent world. Boxers

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[37] See Clive Nobel, "Hand Injuries in Boxing," *The American Journal of Sports Medicine*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (July/August 1987), pp. 343-346.
[38] Haglund and Eriksson, p. 1.

and boxing fans let their violence out in a far more acceptable manner than nations that build nuclear weapons capable of destroying the planet."[40] Furthermore, to counter the frequent gender-based arguments, according to which women, in particular, should not be allowed to fight due to the physiological dangers, I find boxer-writer Rene Denfeld's commonsense claim compelling enough: that "women should also have the opportunity to throw their personal safety to the winds to pursue a sport."[41]

**Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000**

While the Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996 provided the first step in implementing basic health and safety requirements inside the ring, boxers—journeyman fighters and champions alike—have continued to be exposed to the sport's various hazards outside of the ring. In consequence, Richard Bryan argues: "all too often these days, it is the 'business' of professional boxing that is stealing the headlines from the sport of professional boxing. The relationship that exists between boxers, promoters, managers, and sanctioning bodies is often so muddled that some boxers spend more time in court than they do in the ring."[42] A notorious case in point is Mike Tyson whose financial battles have been abundantly

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[39] Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing*, p. 17.
[40] Ibid., p. 8.
[41] See Rene Denfeld, *Kill the Body, the Head will Fall: A Closer Look at Women, Violence, and Aggression* (New York: Warner Books, 1997), p. 141.
[42] "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 105th Congress (July 23, 1998), p. 16.

publicized the media over, epitomizing the conflicts of interest that run rampant in the sport. Tyson explains: "The opportunity for abuse is gigantic. I know this personally, as the absence of meaningful regulations in the industry has allowed others to run in an open field with my finances. By way of example only, I am currently coming to fully understand how over $65 million was taken from me in less than 24 months."[43]

Hence, due to the lack of uniform business principles, professional boxing has thrived with infinite opportunities to capitalize on the athletes, who frequently lack adequate economic and legal sophistication or counseling in negotiating the financial aspects of their careers. As a rule, the hodgepodge of players in the industry have gone about their backroom dealings on a case-by-case basis—often devoid of slightest legality—dictated by the various individuals' status in the fight game, and obviously serving the interests of the self-appointed profiteers. Because of the dismal state of affairs in boxing Jack Newfield, in effect, has characterized the economic structure of the sport as "half monopoly and half piracy," with its sanctioning bodies "more like bandits than regulators."[44] Fighters themselves are utterly disillusioned with the business practices, cynically referring to the sport's ensemble of financial players as "barracudas," "leeches," and "hyenas"—nuisances that make a lucrative living on the back of the boxers. Undoubtedly,

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[43] Ibid., p. 10.
[44] Jack Newfield, "The Shame of Boxing," p. 14.

dealing with the industry's motley gallery of characters on an everyday basis, in and of itself, poses a minefield of challenges for an unwary fighter.

For example, before embarking on a professional career, a boxer first has to sign a contract with a manager, who then negotiates (typically for a share of 33 1/3 per cent of the fighter's purse) with matchmakers and promoters for bout agreements in the interest of the athlete's gradual advancement, ideally all the way to be a contender for one of the world organization's championship title belts.[45] As we already saw in the previous chapter, the managers' and promoters' interests are, in principle, diametrically opposite, but like many of my interviewees have experienced personally, the first conflicting business reality in prizefighting is that the two parties' interests frequently turn out to be one and the same. If not directly acting in the dual capacity of manager and promoter, some promoters are known to have fighters sign managerial contracts with their business associates or relatives, the most infamous case being Don King whose stepson Carl King has often assumed the role of a fighter's manager, doubling the implicit and explicit profits for the King fistic dynasty.[46] Once boxers progress to feature as main events, in order to get meaningful exposure, they generally need to sign an additional contract with an established promoter, for a well-known

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[45] Quite incredulously, trainers only get 10-15 per cent of the fighter's purse.

[46] For in-depth discussions on Don King's role as a promoter, see Jack Newfield, *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1995) and Donald McRae, *Dark Trade: Lost in Boxing* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1996).

occupational principle maintains that "[a] fighter could be the best in his weight class, but if he is not associated with the 'right' promoter, or if he does not 'play ball,' he may not be ranked."[47] Accordingly, signing a promotional contract can, indeed, quickly advance an up-and-coming fighter in the rankings to compete for a continental or world championship title belt, complete with international media hype and lucrative sponsorship deals—in the ideal case scenario.

However, the recent federal investigations have brought to light that the reality of contractual liaisons often turns out to be more lackluster, and fighters are regularly coerced into signing lengthy, one-sided agreements with little room to maneuver, while the promoters claim an effective control over their entire careers. In the following, former IBC middleweight champion Dave Tiberi portrays his embittered experiences with boxer-promoter relations in the fight game's food chain: "I sadly saw how the majority of fighters, depending upon their respective levels of talent, are viewed by the promoters. Some are considered prime ribs, others pork chops and the least talented scrapple, but rarely are they considered as human beings."[48] Indeed, promoters are known to take advantage of fighters by having them sign dual contracts, a bogus contract for the eyes of the administrators and another one with different set of terms for possible lawsuits.

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[47] "National Association of Attorneys General Boxing Task force," <http: //www.oag.state.ny.us/press/reports/boxing_task_force/report.htm> (May 2000).

[48] See Tiberi's testimony in "Corruption in Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Governmental Affairs," 102nd Congress (August 11-12, 1992), p. 10.

Some boxers have even signed multiple blank agreements without knowing any of the actual terms, thus enabling promoters to manufacture false expenses and to deduct large percentages of the purse for their own use. In so doing, "[c]ertain promoters have," John McCain explains, "become quite skilled in duping boxers into signing long-term contracts that represent nothing more than a sophisticated version of indentured servitude."[49] The metaphor of "indentured servitude" is particularly pertinent in the case of so-called "options contracts," according to which the promoter has control of the fighter the entire time s/he is a champion, with two additional years after losing the title. Options contracts are also imposed on contenders who are required, in order to get a shot at a title bout, to approve a clause which grants the reigning champion's promoter exclusive rights for the challenger's career in the event s/he defeats the champion, a practice which guarantees the promoter actual monopoly over the particular championship belts.

In the battle to exercise control over the sport, the financial players themselves are frequently engaged in long and onerous lawsuits, at times resulting in the fighters' devastating career standstills, as they become tangled up in the handlers' intra-personal disputes. Trainer-manager-promoter Lou Duva describes the bleak reality from his perspective: "Would you bet on [Don] King on a deal? Would you bet on [Bob] Arum on a deal? Contract or no contract, first thing you know they're throwing twelve lawyers at you. And you can't afford to fight

[49] "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science,

that."[50] To complicate things further, championship-level fighters have broadcasting contracts with major TV-networks, such as HBO or Showtime, who may, as a result, take on a role of a *de facto* matchmaker and promoter.[51] Because the broadcasters have their exclusive rights to the boxer for a fixed period of time, reigning champions are often, to the detriment of the sport at large, prevented from fighting each other due to the binding contractual obligations.

Nonetheless, the ultimate power over who fights for world titles always rests with the alphabet soup of ratings organizations which maintain the worldwide rankings and sanction championship fights. Having proliferated to some dozen such entities within the past forty years, the most prominent organizations are the World Boxing Association (WBA), based in Venezuela; the World Boxing Council (WBC), based in Mexico City; the International Boxing Federation (IBF), based in New Jersey; and the World Boxing Union (WBU), based in England.[52] Because of their sheer number, none of these organizations today enjoy much credibility either amongst boxing insiders or aficionados, many

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and Transportation," 105th Congress (July 23, 1998), p. 7.

[50] Quoted in Dave Anderson, *In the Corner: Great Boxing Trainers Talk About Their Art* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), p. 175.

[51] See James Nave's testimony in "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," p. 25.

[52] The other sanctioning organizations are the International Boxing Association (IBA), the International Boxing Council (IBC), the International Boxing Organization (IBO), the North American Boxing Federation (NABF), the National Boxing Association (NBA), the World Boxing Federation (WBF), and the World Boxing Organization (WBO). On the role of the sanctioning bodies, see Nevada State Commission's "Report to the Governor on the Role of Sanctioning Organizations in Nevada's Boxing Industry," <http://ag.state.nv.us/gaming/sanctioning.pdf> (April 2001).

of whom are questioning—if not outright ridiculing—their overall function and legitimacy in the sport. To such an effect, Dave Anderson of the *New York Times* sardonically describes the current state of affairs: "If you've wanted to be a boxing governing body when you grow up, you don't need a Ph.D. Just get a cell phone…and a fax, boot up your computer, rate the contenders in each division any which way, call yourself, say, the World Boxing Federation, or W.B.F., sanction some title fights, and you're in business. References are not needed."[53] John McCain, in turn, describes his disenchantment with the groupings as follows:

> Let us be candid about the ratings bodies. The sanction[ing] organizations comprise a Byzantine and largely arbitrary system of rating the fighters that is not primarily on their skills and successes in the ring. Instead, a boxer's rating often has more to do with who their promoter is and whether they will agree to the dictates of the organization with respect to sanctioning fees and mandatory opponents.[54]

Each of the sanctioning organizations operates independently, with their separate ratings systems and criteria, but a fighter in the United States is considered to be an "Undisputed Champion of the World" if he (and this only applies to male fighters, since women's boxing has its own sanctioning bodies) simultaneously holds the WBA, the WBC, and the IBF title belts. In order for such a unification bout to take place, the champion, the challenger, and the

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[53] Dave Anderson, "Boxing's Search for Tomorrow's Somebody," *New York Times* (April 17, 2004), p. B 15.
[54] "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," p. 7.

promoter all have to pay the organizations' mandatory sanctioning fees, ranging from three to five percent of the boxer's purse. According to former heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield, his sanctioning fees for a unification title bout in 1991 amounted to a total of $590,000, with the WBA and IBF each levying $150,000, while the WBC pocketed no less than $290,000—in addition to requesting that the fighter pay for the *belts* himself.[55] Between 1996 and 2000, five of the alphabet organizations sanctioned a total of 124 title bouts in Nevada, collecting approximately $8.85 million in fees from the state's licensees.[56] In addition, the sanctioning bodies require judges and referees to pay license fees to the organization itself (as opposed to the state commission); and in order to get chosen to perform at a championship bout, the ringside officials' must pay to attend their annual conventions and seminars.

Simultaneously, promoter (and former executive of HBO Sports) Lou DiBella points out, the world organizations exercise power over the state commissions, for they determine which particular states get to host the coveted (and lucrative) championship bouts, as well as who will judge any one title fight, "often doling out plum assignments and sought after trips to desirable

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[55] See Holyfield's testimony in "Corruption in Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Governmental Affairs," 102nd Congress (August 11-12, 1992), p. 39.

[56] See "Boxing and Federal Laws: Hearing on Reform of Professional Boxing Industry Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 107th Congress (May 23, 2001). <Http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/hearings01.htm>.

locations."[57] As the alphabet groupings—who, incidentally, are generally defined as "non-profit organizations" for fiscal purposes—collect handsome fees from all parties involved for *virtually nothing in return*, it is hardly surprising that they should be among the most ardent critics of the growing demands for federal interventions to oversee the business practices of the sport. For example, Walter Stone of the IBF argues:

> In the final analysis, the quality of the organization's championships and mandatory challengers will and should be determined by the marketplace, the boxing fan. You either have or develop a good reputation based on your champions and challengers or fans tune you out. The Darwinian principle of economic survival of the fittest should determine the best in this business not Congress, the states, or the ABC [Association of Boxing Commissioners].[58]

Alongside managers and promoters, the sanctioning organizations, then, are the most obvious benefactors from the "Darwinian" pugilistic arrangements, as the deregulated and decentralized industry has guaranteed them an oligarchic dominion over the sport on a global scale.

In spite of this, as the series of senate investigations led to increasing testimonies of bribery, manipulated ratings, and fixed fights, the impetus to intervene in the sport's business practices outgrew the financial players' opposing arguments. To such an end, the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 was

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[57] See DiBella's testimony in "Federal Regulation of Boxing: hearing Befor the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 107th Congress (May 22, 2002). Http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings0202.htm>.

[58] See Stone's statement in "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," p. 36.

drafted to reform the unfair and anticompetitive practices in the professional boxing industry; to further assist state boxing commissions in providing oversight of the sport; and to reinstate "honorary competition" and "integrity of the industry."[59] First proposed by John McCain in June 1998, the Ali Act was approved by the House and Senate some two years later, and it was signed into law on May 26, 2000.[60] With the attempt to protect boxers, on an interstate basis, from exploitive, oppressive, and unethical business practices of managers, promoters, sanctioning organizations, and commercial broadcasters, it establishes basic uniform guidelines to be implemented in all bout agreements and promotional contracts. To begin with, a boxer-promoter contract must state the precise obligations of each party involved, including the exact amounts to be paid, with disclosures of all fees, charges, and expenses deducted from the boxer's purse. While it does not determine the maximum length of any one contract, the Ali Act limits the length of existing contracts' options to twelve months, in addition to prohibiting contenders' options clauses altogether: "No boxing service

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[59] "Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act," 106th Congress (January 24, 2000). See also Scott Baglio, "The Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act: The First Jab at Establishing Credibility in Professional Boxing," *Fordham Law Review*, Vol 68 (2000), pp. 2257-2298.

[60] Although Muhammad Ali has lent his name to and supports the legislation, he has no other role in its drafting. The usage of his name has, however, raised some criticism. Writes Walter Stone of the IBF: "I find it somewhat disingenuous and cynical that the name of this bill would be the 'Muhammed [sic] Ali Boxing Reform Act.' I think that the use of his name would have been appropriate for the health and safety act which was its original intent…[W]ith reference to the business practice, maybe this act should be named the 'Joe Louis Boxing Reform Act,' given the history of what occurred to him during his career as an outstanding boxer, but I assume that the name Muhammed Ali is being offered to engender support since few members of Congress would vote against any act that carried such an icon's name." See Stone's statement in "Muhammad Ali

provider may require a boxer to grant any future promotional rights as a requirement of competing in professional boxing match that is a mandatory bout under the rules of a sanctioning organization."[61] Furthermore, the Ali Act has a so-called "firewall" clause, which prevents promoters from serving as managers—and vice versa—of any boxer participating in a match of ten rounds or more, and it prohibits the hiring of a promoter's relative or associate as manager.

Promoters must also provide the state athletic commission copies of all contracts and bout agreements, with a statement made "under penalty of perjury" that there are no other agreements—written or oral—pertaining to the match, as well as disclosures all payments, gifts, or benefits the promoter is providing to sanctioning organizations. Similarly, to prevent the sanctioning organizations from dictating the choice of ringside officials, all judges and referees must be licensed by the state commissions, with a requirement to disclose all their sources of income and reimbursement for expenses. Sanctioning bodies, in turn, must maintain an internet website accessible to the public (that is, without required passwords or payments) where they provide a complete description of the organization's bylaws, policies, and sanctioning fees; post written criteria for their ratings, the rationale of new/changed ratings for a period of 30 days; and explain a boxer's appeals procedure to challenge a rating. To sanction a championship bout

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Boxing Reform Act: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 105th Congress (July 23, 1998), p. 33.
[61] Ibid.

in the United States, they must also disclose all charges, fees, and costs charged from a boxer; as well as reveal all payments, benefits, and fees the organization receives for its affiliation with the event, the promoter, host of the event, or any other sources. For any violations of the anti-exploitation, sanctioning organization, or disclosure provisions, the Ali Act's enforcement clause entitles any state as *parens patriae* to bring a civil action suit on behalf of its residents in the appropriate district court of the United States; and any boxer "who suffers economic injury as a result of a violation" may bring action in a state or federal court. The penalties for any violations are $100,000 in fines for a match that does not exceed $2,000,000 in revenue, and a maximum of one year's imprisonment.

The immediate consequences of the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 have been that, for the first time in the sport's existence, the industry has been forced to implement some generally accepted business and ranking principles, thus giving the boxers a general understanding of the revenue being created and the deductions made from their purses. Promoters can no longer lawfully enforce one-sided contracts and defend them in courts without any legal resource to the athletes themselves, and the mandatory disclosures from all parties involved have brought to daylight some of the sport's shrouded backroom dealings. Regardless of these remarkably positive improvements, further governmental hearings have revealed that the financial players have managed to fabricate ways to evade some of the regulations. For example, promoter Dan

Goossen claims that the provision that prohibits contenders' options contracts is circumvented "by simply not offering a deserving opportunity to a boxer that the promoter does not have under promotional agreement. [Some have also] attempted to include in its own agreements language whereby a boxer is, in essence, waiving any such coercive tactics!"[62] In addition, promoters can bypass the regulations by staging events in states that do not have the experience, willingness, and/or resources to enforce the legislation and investigate the wrongdoings. As a result, while both of the existing pieces of legislation have been delineated in collaboration with the state athletic commissions, with the premise that grants them the *de jure* and *de facto* power to implement practical and legal measures to oversee the sport on state level, ongoing evaluation has proven the regional discrepancies too great for them to adequately regulate the sport without federal intervention. Indeed, John McCain, initially an avid supporter of the states' regulatory sovereignty, has come to the following woeful conclusion: "'[g]enerally speaking [state] boxing commissions are used by governors as a place to give political awards. A large number of boxing commissioners wouldn't know a boxing glove from a catcher's mitt.'"[63]

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[62] See Goossen's testimony in "Boxing and Federal Laws: Hearing on Reform of Professional Boxing Industry Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 107th Congress (May 23, 2001). <Http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/hearings01.htm>.

[63] Cited by Patrick B. Fife in "The National Boxing Commission Act of 2001: It's Time for Congress to Step into the Ring and Save the Sport of Boxing," p. 1306.

In view of the recent governmental hearings, the Professional Boxing Amendments Act of 2004 was drafted to amend the Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996, as amended by the Muhammad Ali Boxing reform Act of 2002, and to establish the "United States Boxing Commission" within the Department of Commerce to regulate, oversee, and administer the industry nationwide.[64] If enacted into law, the U.S. commission would consist of three members, who must be U.S. citizens with extensive experience in professional boxing, who are of "outstanding character and recognized integrity," and who are not be engaged in any other capacity in the business of professional boxing. Appointed by the President for a (renewable) term of three years, one of the members would be a former member of a local boxing commission; another would ("if practicable") be a physician, while no more than two members could be members of the same political party or geographic region. The Commission's function would be to supervise all professional boxing matches in the United States, to improve the status and standards of the sport, and to enhance the physical, medical and financial safeguards for the protection of the athletes. To do so, it would establish and maintain several national computerized registries: a medical registry for storing comprehensive medical records, medical denials, and suspensions of licenses, a contract registry to store each boxer-manager contract and promotional/broadcast agreement, and a third registry of boxing personnel,

[64] "The Professional Boxing Amendments Act of 2004," 108th Congress, Second Session (March

including boxers, promoters, matchmakers, managers, trainers, cut men, referees, judges, and physicians. The 2004 Act would also extend previous legislation by applying it to Native American tribal organizations who should—akin to states—establish a boxing commission in order to regulate professional boxing matches on tribal lands. The U.S. Commission's boxer licenses would be for four years and any other persons' licenses two years in length, and it could suspend or revoke any licenses for a minimum of one year on medical reasons (ten consecutive defeats or five consecutive knockouts), as well as on the grounds of the Act's violations, or because of bribery, collusion, racketeering, intentional losing, extortion, coercion, and intimidation, while the enforcement clause would entitle the Commission to take legal measures by filing an action in any district court within the jurisdiction of the investigation.

The past decade's legislative measures have been absolutely remarkable springboards in acknowledging the deep-seated problems within the professional boxing industry. The three-tier strategy to proceed with the various aspects of federal regulation—health and safety, business practices, and national commission—gradually has not only enabled the legislators to delve into the various issues separately, but it has allowed to keep the discussion actively alive—as opposed to ostensibly resolving the issue with a panacea legislation. The next step, then, would be a nationwide grassroots outreach campaign that

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31, 2004). <Http://www.theorator.com/bills108/s275.html>.

would spread the information and educate the athletes about their legal rights and responsibilities. Because as things stand right now, none of my interviewees have more than a vague idea about the enforced legislation, with virtually no knowledge about any of their specific provisions; and it has certainly not been in the interest of their handlers to inform them about the ongoing reforms.

Yet, judging from my interviews and field work, unashamed violations of the two pieces of legislation occur quite commonly on an everyday level—ranging from safety evasions and contract abuses to coercion, mismatches, and bribery. Even so, the federal investigations have shown a general trend that fighters only come out to express their grievances after retirement, for to do so during their active careers would amount to an effective professional suicide. For that reason, if a national information campaign were to engender collective awareness, then perhaps the boxers themselves would be encouraged to push further for a professional athletes' union, employer benefits, and a pension plan—all of which are still missing from the basic premises of the fistic line of work. Apropos, April 15, 2004 saw signs of such a development when an entire professional fight card in New York was negotiated under a collective agreement of the "Joint Association of Boxers," a fledgling union seeking to represent prizefighters nationwide.[65] The success of such a union would be ground-breaking not only for all the journeyman fighters, contenders, and champions as they step

into the ring on a daily basis, but it would also be critical in addressing the numerous difficulties that fighters face after their ring careers have ended—an issue that is urgent, but which remains largely unaddressed and –accounted for.

**Conclusion**

From its modern beginnings, prizefighting has—akin to the boxers themselves—been endowed with a range of intriguing *nom de guerre* aliases: thus, at times, the fistic craft has been depicted as "the manly art of self-defense," at others as "the sweet science," or yet again as "the red light district of professional sports." Its meanings have shifted from valorous combat to rogue sport, from plebeian labor to bootleg business. During the past two decades, as the sport has continued to expand, it has assumed new identities, whether nuanced as "the wo/manly art of self-defense," "the sweet science gone sour," or "the red light district exposed to daylight." Be that as it may, boxing is continuously shaped by its myriad different on-location and backroom players: the fighters, trainers, managers, matchmakers, promoters, athletic commissions, physicians, media moguls, researchers, and gangsters alike—all of whom contribute to its manifold identities. The various conflicting positions embedded in the political, ideological, medical, and ethical discourses implicitly and explicitly justify or question the rationale and premises for the sport's continuing existence,

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[65] See Geoffrey Gray, "Dundee Champions Levin, a Swedish Heavyweight," *New York Times* (April 15, 2004), p. C 18.

simultaneously epitomizing its ongoing state of flux. The various underlying assumptions about the racialized, class-based, and gendered group of prizefighters, in effect, reveal larger tensions about the rights and responsibilities of individuals versus collectives, regional versus federal politics and, in the very end, national versus international relations.

Today, the number of active prizefighters in the United States is estimated to be between 8,500 and 10,000, a figure infinitesimally small in the larger scheme of things, in particular, when considering that only about five per cent of them ever reach the world championship level. Even so, the fringe group of people who bring so much to so many—and ask so little in return—contribute to an estimated 80 per cent of the sport's international financial revenue. As the lion share of the world championships are dominated by African Americans and Latinos from across the Americas, the United States can boast hosting some 40-50 per cent of all world championship title bouts within its national borders.[66] Indeed, as the United States controls the economic aspects of the industry by and large, the sport has been cherished as a *bona fide* "American" institution in its *modus operandi*, with a deep-seated belief in a decentralized administrative model and unregulated business practices. However, by the mid-1990s, as network television chose to bid adieu to the scandalous sport and the large public gave up

[66] Boxing and Federal Laws: Hearing on Reform of Professional Boxing Industry Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation," 107th Congress (May 23, 2001). <Http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/hearings01.htm>.

on its incomprehensible everyday maneuverings, the powers-that be awoke to a radical realization that the Darwinian economic principle of the survival of the richest had led boxing to an inescapable *cul-de-sac*, draining the sport of its audience, media attention, and aspiring athletes—and alongside them all the money, might, and glory conceivable.

As a result, within the past decade, absolutely dramatic measures have been implemented to rescue the pugilistic practice from its demise, with the outcome that network TV has given the sport another chance, a new base of fans are gradually tuning in to watch the sport, and the cognoscenti are anxiously predicting the next larger-than-life champion to emerge. While prizefighting, then, necessarily reveals fundamental assumptions about the United States as a nation, its societal state of affairs at any one time, and "Americanness" as a national allegiance, it might serve the sport and its athletes well to begin conceptualizing its larger significance as a *global* enterprise. After all, professional boxing constitutes an international collective of worker-athletes who do the actual work at various scales within worldwide socio-economic conditions and pugilistic power dynamics. For these people, the fistic line of work is, ultimately, about their self-made means to connect to, claim a stake within, and make a mark on a sporting, labor, economic, social, political, and ideological chain of command.

## Conclusion

> When out in the field things will happen which we cannot prevent (and neither should we seek to) and which will face us with ethical dilemmas and/or place us in physical jeopardy…But unlike scribes in the library, if we choose to work at the cutting edge of social construction, we should not be too surprised if, from time to time, we get a little dirty and a little bloody.
>
> John Sugden, *Boxing and Society*

Boxing in the United States has always been tied to the ebbs and flows of society's currents; its ups and downs have swerved hand-in-hand with the geopolitical state of affairs of the world. Today, once again, history repeats itself. Months after the United States and its allies took it upon themselves to "rescue" the Iraqi people from its dictator in the name of freedom, the boxing ring—in a flash—began to assume meaning as a locus for sporting diplomacy, intercultural collaboration, and mutual understanding. In October 2003, the U.S. military administration hired Maurice "the Termite" Watkins from Houston, Texas as sports adviser for Iraq's newly-founded Olympic boxing team, one funded by assets seized from Saddam Hussein's fallen regime. Thus, where an empty warehouse used to decay in Hilla, Iraq now stands a boxing gym complete with jump ropes, heavy bags, double-ended bags, speed-bags, and a computer lab, while the fighters, who used to train without shoes, socks, or mouthpieces, are the proud owners of brand-new boxing gloves, green-and-red sweat suits, and other fight paraphernalia. Jeffrey Gettleman of the *New York Times* comments: "For a

team that just received shoes, it's a long way to Athens. But where others see challenges, Termite, who used to be a prizefighter, sees talent. Every day, he bursts into the Hilla Sports Club, where the boxing team trains, and belts out, 'Iraq is back! Iraq is back!'"[1] Within four months of its existence, the Iraqi national team of eleven fighters—with Watkins acting in the capacity of the "chief second," i.e., the head trainer—participated in its first boxing tournament in the Philippines, continuing to make preparations for another series of bouts in China, before heading for the 2004 summer Olympics in Greece.[2]

Meanwhile in the United States, the visibility of boxing is evermore on the rise, attracting headlines in and out of the ring. As *The Ring Extra* puts it:

> Go ahead and keep ringing the death knell for boxing if you want, but the numbers tell a different story. Once again, the number of televised boxing cards has increased, from 197 in 2002, to 212 in 2003. Thanks in part to the addition of HBO Latino's *Boxeo de Oro* [Golden Boxing] and NBC's return to the fight game, we enjoyed an average of more than four boxing broadcasts a week.[3]

Indeed, the *Budweiser Boxing Series on NBC/Boxeo Budweiser Telemundo* first launched in the spring of 2003, survived its inaugural year's trial round and has continued in 2004 as a bilingual joint endeavor between promoter Main Events, NBC, Telemundo, and Budweiser "to enter into a venture that includes integrated sales and sponsorship opportunities; extensive crossover promotions; combined

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[1] Jeffrey Gettleman, "From Bugs to Boxing, a Termite's Impact on Iraq," *New York Times* (March 16, 2004), pp. A 1 & C 22.
[2] Ibid.
[3] "Boxing on TV," *The Ring Extra*, Vol. 83, No. 8 (July 2004), p. 36.

television production; shared broadcast/fight promotion costs and revenue sharing."[4]

Accordingly, on Saturday afternoons, boxing aficionados can tune in to watch up-and-coming, mainly Latino pugilistic talent in their early twenties—such as Francisco "Panchito" Bojado, Eleazar Contreras, Juan Díaz, Juaquin Gallardo, Rocky Juarez, San Leandro, Joe Morales, Elio Ortiz, and Luis Rogado—showcased for free on national television. According to Jorge Hidalgo, Executive Vice President of Telemundo Sports, the series focuses particularly on Latino fighters, because "Hispanics are not simply the most passionate consumers of boxing; they also represent the fastest growing ethnic group in this country."[5] Equally important, the Latino fighters in the lower weight divisions also become, by default, ambassadors for the nation's military muscle in the combative context of the on-going war, for the boxing shows are simultaneously broadcast to some 800,000 U.S. military personnel on duty abroad. Bob Matheson, Director of Broadcasting for the Defense Media Center, explains:

> The Main Events fight cards are a tremendous booster for our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines serving in harm's way…The most deserving audience in the world are our troops in remote and hostile locations defending our way of life against terrorism, and providing humanitarian support for those in need. We thank Main Events and NBC for helping us bring them home during these weekly broadcasts.[6]

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[4] See "Press Releases—NBC, Telemundo, and Main Events," <http://www.mainevents.com/pressreleases.php?id=6> (February 23, 2004).
[5] Ibid.
[6] See "Budweiser Boxing Series Will Be Broadcast Globally to Over 800,000 USA Military Personnel," <http://braggingrightscorner.com/budmilitary.html>.

As follows, in calling the fistic spectacle to begin, ring announcer Jimmy Lennon, Jr. specifically pays homage to the various targeted audiences: "And now: Ladies and Gentlemen in attendance, boxing fans joining us across the United States, and to the U.S. military personnel joining us from Iraq and around the world on the Armed Forces Network…It's the Main Event of the afternoon!" For the first time in history, then, Latino fighters are chosen to boost up combative "Americanness," as the pugilistic podium comes to stand for national unity and solidarity, individual participation in patriotic agendas, and—hence—personal belonging in the nation.[7] It is, I would argue, quite remarkable that the previously unknown Latino fighters, who only a year ago likely competed in some back alley fight clubs, who—if lucky—may have been able to perform on the undercard of an established Latino star in a Spanish-language cable broadcast, are now regularly featured on national television and around the world as the best and brightest of the nation's athletes.

In such image making, evidently, the commercial sponsors, too, always have their vested interest. Thus, while NBC has chosen Budweiser, the all-American beer mogul, as its main sponsorship collaborator on network television, its arch rival Miller— the established sponsor of ESPN2's *Friday Night Fights*—has wasted no time in producing counter arsenal in the battle over beverage

dominion in sport. With a new "Miller Genuine Draft" advertising campaign launched on ESPN2 immediately after the Budweiser boxing shows began, the Miller commercials feature a series of "President of Beers Debates," staged in an election campaign setting, either on trail or in a White House locale. With a bottle of Budweiser and a bottle of Miller Genuine Draft at the opposite ends of the speaker's podium, a "presidential candidate," for example, addresses the nation as follows: "Beer Drinkers of America…This is America, circa 2004. We're a democracy. You have a vote. Use it. Oh, and Florida…Press hard," with a voiceover concluding: "**Choose a *Genuine* flavor that is cold-filtered smooth—*Miller*. Good Call**!" Thus, time and again, the political and entrepreneurial players keep utilizing the power inscribed in boxing for their own purposes—whether military, financial, or ideological—manifested in various public discourses, TV broadcasts, and commercial representations—with tangible ramifications for the sport's popularity amongst fight insiders and aficionados at any one time.

At the same time, however, contemporary prizefighting is grappling with somewhat more troublesome publicity outside of the ring. On January 6, 2004, as a result of a twenty-month governmental investigation labeled "Operation Match Book"—during which an undercover agent Frankie Manzione, a.k.a. "Big

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[7] Jesus "El Matador" Chávez, in fact, has worn camouflage-colored boxing trunks for his past two bouts, specifically to express support for the men and women doing combat in Iraq and Afghanistan—despite the fact that he does not hold U.S. citizenship.

Frankie," infiltrated Top Rank Inc.'s organization to work as a corner man to probe into alleged mismatches and fight fixing—FBI agents from the Organized Crime Squad raided the company's headquarters, confiscating office computers, boxing contracts, medical records, video tapes, and financial records.[8] On May 10, 2004, related to the issue, the *New York Times* exposed a distressing story about "Boxers Who Make a Living Losing, And the Promoters Who Love Them," describing journeyman mock opponents used in the industry to fight around the country under various aliases with the sole aim to build up prospective contenders' ring records. "Tomato cans, palookas, bums, stiffs," Geoffrey Gray writes, "boxing has myriad terms to describe these boxers' singular purpose: to provide more promising fighters a chance to pad their records and enhance their careers."[9] Sean Gibbons, a Top Rank matchmaker, who was fired as a result of the FBI probe, explains his take on the controversy: "Outside of boxing, people will call it fight fixing, but inside boxing this is the art of matchmaking."[10] Be that as it may, when yet another piece of news recently hit the stands exposing the

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[8] On the investigation, see Kevin Iole, "Top Rank is Not Sole Target in Boxing Investigation," <http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2004/Jan-11-Sun-2004/sports/22973250.html> (January 11, 2004); Kevin Iole, "Boxing Controversy: Top Rank Dismisses Matchmaker," <http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2004/Jan-14-Wed-2004/sports/22993392.html> (January 14, 2004); Jack Welsh, "Fixed Fights? FBI Raids Top Rank in Probe," <http://www.boxinginsider.net.columns/stories/76162895.php> (January 15, 2004); Elisa Harrison, "The Top Rank Scandal is Old News," <http://www.blackathlete.com/Boxing/boxing011604.html> (January 16, 2004); and Jason Probst, "Feds Investigation of Top Rank a Comedy Hack Journalism," http://www.maxboxing.com/Probst/Probst011704.asp> (January 17, 2004).

[9] Geoffrey Gray, "Boxers Who Make a Living Losing, And the Promoters Who Love Them," *New York Times* (May 10, 2004), pp. D 1 & D 5.

[10] Ibid.

conviction of former long-time IBF President Robert Lee to a 22-month prison sentence for racketeering and money laundering, one thing becomes amply clear: namely, that the government agents investigating the professional boxing industry are extremely serious about their mission to clean up some of the corrupt elements of the sport.[11]

Whether seen as a strategic device in international diplomacy, an ideological instrument in domestic relations, or a financial tool in the worldwide pugilistic economy, the occupational culture of prizefighting, as is evidenced throughout this dissertation, constitutes an intricate nexus for all the numerous competing agendas, while its various spaces serve as meeting places which bring together the power players interacting in the everyday settings of the sport. Embedded in the seemingly insignificant fistic combat, then, is a critical connection between individual/political power and the spatial organization of ethnoracial, gendered, and class-based bodies in place, always contesting and re-defining multiple individual, collective, and sporting identities. Indeed, the dissertation has made the case that the occupational culture of prizefighting can best be understood as a locus for identity formations when delineated in its multifaceted aspects as a professional sport, a form of bodily labor, a mode of being, a lucrative business, and a political instrument, complete with athletic, personal, social, financial, and ideological ramifications. Identity formations, I

[11] See "Outside the Ropes," *The Ring Extra*, Vol. 83, No. 8 (July 2004), p. 12.

have argued, serve best to be conceptualized as continuous epistemological and ontological contestations between individual choices, collective allegiances, societal assumptions, and occupational power dynamics. Hence, while the sport becomes fundamental for fighters' self-conceptualization, being in the world, and everyday existence, it always necessarily speaks to the tension between individual mobility and social control within larger societal power dynamics, offering as it does access to various competing discourses in and out of the ring.

By way of scholarly analysis, identity formations, in turn, assume meaning at various disciplinary scales as socio-historical constructions, theoretical delineations, politico-judicial contestations, and media representations. Furthermore, when depicted within a range of geographic scales, such as the neighborhood, region, nation, and the global context, the politics of space and place become all the more significant in revealing the contingency of identity formations as individual, communal, national, and international negotiation processes. Moreover, the study has indicated, professional boxing does not only provide a magnifying glass in exemplifying historical and socio-political tendencies in the United States—tangible with identity ramifications for individuals and collectives alike—but the sport also offer a lens *par excellence* in problematizing the interdisciplinary American Studies, a field which necessarily concerns itself with questions of personal belonging, civic inclusion, and public

participation in society—in other words, the organization of ethnoracialized, gendered, and class-based bodies in space and place.

For, above all, the labyrinth of powers inscribed in the world of professional boxing has to do with the spatial aspects of the sport: with its identity as a peripheral activity in society at large, with its marginality within the hierarchy of sports in general, and with boxers' status as a fringe group within societal power hierarchies. In particular, the symbiotic relationship between the margin and the center becomes absolutely critical when one considers how the center *per se* deems it necessary to deploy the marginal spaces in re-defining, re-evaluating, and re-presenting itself. The core-periphery dynamics in prizefighting, in effect, not only carry remarkable significance in the well-established phenomenon that the traditionally poverty-ridden, working-class, immigrant groupings can claim a stake in social hierarchies through the marginal sporting spaces, but that various other people characteristically classified as representing the more "mainstream" segments of society—such as middle-class women, white-collar workers, and educated professionals—have begun to appropriate the peripheral locations of boxing for their personal, social, financial, and political advancement. Power relations in boxing, we thus have witnessed, always necessarily reside in space, while the body takes on equally radical importance as a central locus and a crucial means for individual and collective empowerment. Consequently, through one's own bodily agency and by appropriating space as

one's own, the various abstract spaces of boxing can be turned into place—a *sense* of place—always also corresponding to ethnoracial, class, and gender hierarchies, one's claim for inclusion or exclusion, one's status as an insider or outsider in societal power relations, and—as follows—to one's identity formations.

During the course of my research, some boxing handlers have told me that "you have to love your fighter to have his best interest at heart," while I have heard others claim that "you can't fall in love with your fighter, or else he will break your heart." Writing a dissertation about professional boxing seems to involve an analogous dilemma: one has to love the sport to be able to fully immerse in its myriad aspects, but it is also a world that can easily break one's heart; I certainly cannot think it could leave *anyone* entirely intact. First of all, becoming engrossed in such a multifaceted investigation turns out to be extremely consuming, both time-wise and emotionally. Because of the complex workings of the pugilistic everyday machinery, conducting the research, in and of itself, becomes an all-encompassing and seemingly never-ending process, at times overwhelming to the extent that the line between work and leisure becomes blurry. Hence, one is either reading the superfluous literature, delving into archival research, searching media sources, working out at gyms, interviewing or transcribing interviews, talking to boxing insiders, going out for dinner with fight folks, attending fight cards, going on out-of-town road-trips, keeping up with fight

magazines, or watching several two-three-hour fight cards weekly on TV. Thus, like the fighters, the researcher, too, simply begins to eat, sleep, and breathe boxing.

The one-on-one interviews always turn into remarkably powerful experiences: one feels privileged for the sheer fact that the fighters are willing to open up their lives, to share their stories, and, in so doing, to relive their joyful memories of sporting achievement, reminiscences of camaraderie and solidarity, while—unavoidably—also bringing back many memories of pain, loss, and personal tragedy. Whatever the case may be, whether the encounters last two or six hours; whether they are cheerful and uplifting, whether they are moving and bewildering; whether they are upsetting and angering, I have always left an interview with utmost esteem for the fighters' work ethics, willpower, and courage, indeed in awe of their extraordinary self-help ingenuity and refusal of *victimage*. At the same time, however, many a times I have felt ambivalent about my role as a researcher: the prospect of having to break down—and, thus, to *sanitize*—the encounters to academic scrutiny can be troublesome on a personal level; almost as if I were, by default of the intellectual rationalization, betraying my sources' genuineness, sincerity, and honesty. The researcher, then, must assume multiple identities—those of an acquaintance and an observer, an aficionado and a participant, an insider and an outsider—roles which may sometimes seem impossible to converge and reconcile. As a result, one constantly

has to walk the tightrope of negotiating personal input versus academic objectives: how involved to get in the interviewees' careers and lives; how to represent one's sources accurately and fairly; and how to deal with the overall pugilistic occupational intrigues.

However, most demanding for a participant observer is that in leaving the academic ivory tower to interact with "real" people in the "real" world, one has little control over the external circumstances. When the research is not conducted within a university setting, to even explain what such a process *means* to the sources, most of whom have never been in contact with the scholarly world, can pose various hurdles—conceptual, terminological, and otherwise. By being entrenched in the everyday culture of the sport one may, moreover, end up in various compromising situations: for example, having to collaborate with characters that one certainly would not like to even be acquainted with, let alone associate with; one may hear shocking stories that makes one sick to the stomach; and, at times, one may end up in situations that are downright dangerous—facets which all pose practical, emotional, and ethical challenges in carrying out the academic agenda to completion.[12] Even so, it is precisely in these different spatial locations that one gets to observe the power inscribed in space at best: thus, whether one interacts with the sources at the gym, in the barrio, at fight venues, or

[12] For example, I was once offered a ride home, and on the way the person revealed that not only did he not have a U.S. driver's license, but he had only driven a car a handful of times in his life, and the particular vehicle he was driving was "on loan."

some more “mainstream” locations in town, remarkably shapes up the encounters, the specific topics discussed, and the overall level of discourse.

Yet another possible complication for a participant observer—one that never occurred to me before beginning the research—is that when immersing oneself in people’s lives, one would not only becomes involved with the sources, but also with their surrounding realities, with sometimes unsettling ramifications for both the researcher and the people close to their everyday lives. Handlers, for example, may become suspicious of an outsider’s involvement with the fighters: “What are they telling her?” Girlfriends may become possessive of their partners: “Why are they spending so much time with her?” Or stablemates may wonder: “Why is she interviewing him and not me?” Moreover, when spending so much time with one’s sources, strong emotional bonds are—inevitably—being forged and, alongside with them, several other pitfalls occur: inter-personal conflicts, male-female dynamics, and social power plays—all of which are part and parcel of the fistic world and, evidently, of any setting where human beings interact. To be sure, together with all the practical and logistical everyday considerations, the entire research process can become extremely daunting with the minefield of complications; and it is no wonder to me anymore that so many academics choose to steer clear from interacting with “ordinary” people and, instead, ensconce themselves in the haven of the archives.

Ultimately, however, without the challenges there would be no rewards. Indeed, were it not for the time spent in the world of pugilism in Texas, I—most obviously—would never have come to understand the complexity of the occupational culture of prizefighting first-hand, complete with all its myriad positive and negative elements. Likewise, I would never have encountered the remarkably heterogeneous cohort of people, who operate within the pugilistic world for miscellaneous reasons; who, consequently, shape up the everyday power dynamics of the sport. In addition, were it not for the real-life interactions, I simply would not have been able to engage in a conversation between everyday practices and academic discourses and, thus, to contribute to what I hope to be a slightly different perspective into the existing canon of prizefight literature, one that—for much too long—has deprived Latinos and women fighters from pugilistic voice and agency. Equally important, albeit on a more personal note, I would never have had the opportunity to meet the male and female fighters, all of whom I have tremendous respect for, and many of whom I now consider my good friends.

By way of a final point, moreover, it bears underscoring—as John Sugden so accurately does in the epigraph—that one can hardly expect to launch into a world such as prizefighting without picking up a few bruises here and there along the way. Even so, if the opportunity arose to go through another similar research project, I would likely embark on it in an instant—although equipped with

somewhat sharper defensive skills, and always keeping in mind rule number one: "Protect yourself *at all times*." Nonetheless, at the end of the day, I cannot but thoroughly go along with manager Mike Jones's following contention: "You can knock promoters; you can knock trainers, managers, even fighters. But don't knock boxing. It's the purest sport there is, and anyone who's ever been involved will tell you it's an honor to be associated with boxing."[13]

[13] Quoted in Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 1.

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# Vita

Benita Anitta Heiskanen was born in Kaarina, Finland on October 17, 1966, the daughter of Anneli Anmar Martikainen and Jouko Ensio Heiskanen. She graduated from High School *Turun Iltalukio* in Turku, Finland in the spring of 1986. In the fall of 1989, she entered the Department of English Philology at the University of Tampere, Finland, and graduated with the degree of Master of Arts (*filosofian maisteri*) in January 1994. In August 1999, she began her doctoral studies in the Department of American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Permanent Address: Västäräkinpolku 4 B 53, 20610 Turku, Finland, Europe

This dissertation was typed by the author.