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# On the ground and off

## *The theoretical practice of professional boxing*

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**ABSTRACT** In the United States, prizefighting carries deep-seated meanings as an ethnically and racially delineated, class-based and gendered practice. At present, the sport is characterized by its ongoing 'latinization' corresponding to Latinos' integration endeavors in urban USA. This article examines boxing as a locus for identity formations. Based on four years of ethnographic fieldwork with a community of Latino prizefighters in Austin, TX between 2000 and 2004, the research draws on life-story interviews conducted with the boxers, while their experiences are situated within a theoretical framework of the body in space and place. The fieldwork brings the research 'onto the ground' to the actual sites – such as the boxing gym, the weigh-in and the competition venue – where the athletes conduct their occupation on a daily basis. As professional boxing determines these worker-athletes' physical prowess, it also shapes their identities, day-to-day survival and their very mode of being in the world.

**KEYWORDS** *identity formations, place, professional boxing, space, the body, US Latinos*

## **Introduction**

This article examines professional boxing as a locus for identity formations. Based on four years of ethnographic fieldwork with a community of Latino prizefighters<sup>1</sup> in Austin, TX between 2000 and 2004, the bulk of the research draws on life-story interviews conducted with the boxers, while their experiences are situated within a theoretical framework of the body in space and place. The fieldwork brings the research 'onto the ground' to the actual sites – such as the boxing gym, the weigh-in and the competition venue – where the athletes conduct their occupation on a daily basis. With this approach, the article hopes to establish a connection between everyday practices and academic discourses, or to borrow from Michel de Certeau, to build a 'conceptual bridge' between 'what is happening' and 'what is being thought' (Ward, 2000: 71). Combining such 'on the ground'



research with 'off-the-ground' conceptualization is particularly relevant when discussing so-called 'real' or 'ordinary' people, often celebrated in cultural studies today. Through the intersection of theory and practice, prizefighting and identity formations are linked as spatio-bodily processes: the boxing body is a site of knowledge, while various locations within the pugilistic culture serve as sites for being and becoming.<sup>2</sup> I want to suggest that a dynamic relationship between the body in space and place – turning space into place by appropriating space as one's own – proves absolutely central to Latino prizefighters' *raison d'être*. Professional boxing determines these worker-athletes' physical prowess, but equally importantly, it shapes their identities, day-to-day survival and their very mode of being in the world.

Within the context of the United States, prizefighting carries deep-seated historical meanings as an ethnically and racially delineated, class-based and gendered practice. At present, the sport is characterized by its ongoing 'latinization' (see Heiskanen, 2005), corresponding to Latinos' integration endeavors in society. Indeed, when asked about the most gratifying aspect of winning a boxing match, many of the interviewees gave the following explanation: 'They can't take it away from me.' The generic 'they' denotes no particular individuals; rather, it refers to a series of personal memories of deprivation as well as to the lowly status that prizefighters generally have. While male boxers typically hail from the outskirts of socio-economic power concentrations, the prizefight industry is run by characters with less than formidable business reputations. The position of boxers within the fringes of society, in effect, invokes a larger ideological dimension underneath the spatial distribution of bodies in urban USA. That is, where and how bodies are situated is not neutral; it reflects both grass roots politics of location and theoretical questions of spatially-demarcated social organization. As Henri Lefebvre points out: 'What 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?' (1991: 404). At the same time, de Certeau contends that marginality per se provides a potential to break free from established social structures:

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. (1984: 18)

Similarly, a prizefighter may appropriate the spaces constituted by others to create strategic possibilities, to forge a niche of autonomy, if not at times to destabilize the very arrangements. Under the limelight of the ring, the combatants not only take physical control of the geography of the



canvas but also (quite literally) of their lives. Such manipulation of space is personally empowering because it enables a contestation of inclusion or exclusion in societal power plays; that is, challenging one's ostensibly prescribed station in life – even if momentarily. However, that is not to idealize this extremely dangerous sport in any way. On the contrary, its risks are patently obvious to anybody watching the combat and boxers themselves know that some of them never come back from the ring alive. Instead, the attempt here is to call attention to the abstract and concrete dimensions of professional boxing within existing sociocultural power relations and, in so doing, to expose the study of sport as a pertinent site for such a discussion.

As a final introductory point, let me comment briefly on the methodology of the research. Understood loosely, the ethnographic component of this study could be said to have begun in my own childhood as I grew up on fight circles, following my brother's amateur and professional boxing career in Finland in the 1970s and 1980s. For this particular project, the fieldwork included working out at boxing gyms, attending boxing matches, conducting interviews and leisure interactions with fight insiders in Texas. The sport's everyday locations – including the rituals before, during and after boxing matches – provide rich sources of information with regard to the pugilistic power plays and motley gallery of characters involved. As fighters, handlers, matchmakers, promoters, state athletic commissions, sanctioning bodies, fight officials, ringside physicians, the media and aficionados all gather together with their miscellaneous agendas; they simultaneously expose hierarchical social organization within the sport. Although such a method may well pose various practical and ethical challenges for the researcher, it also facilitates making sense of the complexity of the sport's occupational culture first-hand, complete with its positive and negative ramifications. Most important, fieldwork enables one to be actually present in the spaces and places where people's quotidian activities are organized, to engage in conversation with the sport's practitioners and to develop a liaison between the everyday and academia. Without further ado, then, let us enter the fistic world.

### **At the boxing gym**

New to this boxing gym, one cannot help but marvel at the workings of social relations here. Amateurs, professionals and recreational boxers work side-by-side; when the pro boxers are finished with their own workout, they prepare their stablemates for upcoming fights. For the fighters, the gym has several everyday functions. On the one hand, it offers a locus for bodily empowerment. As flyweight<sup>5</sup> 'The World Famous' Joel Elizondo explains:

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 people would start going to the gym and support us. (Interview with Joel Elizondo, 20 July 2003)

On the other hand, it provides a comfortable social space. As welterweight Abel Davilla describes:

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. (Interview with Abel Davilla, 22 August 2003)

Yet again, the gym serves as a spatial retreat from the outside world. According to featherweight Carlos Valdez:

It's a place where I 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. (Interview with Carlos Valdez, 13 April 2003)

Further still, boxing becomes a source of personal knowledge. To quote welterweight Johnny Casas' evaluation of the 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. (Interview with Johnny Casas, 21 November 2002)

Ultimately, professional boxing in its entirety becomes a site for identity formation, as the athletes make sense of their work, lives and the outside world through the sport. Consequently, the notion of 'being a fighter' determines many boxers' self-conceptualization. As featherweight Conrad Sanchez describes:

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. (Interview with Conrad Sanchez, 11 April 2003)

The all-encompassing role of the sport in the athletes' lives is reinforced further by a careful balancing of social interactions and corporeal isolation in preparation for competition. Several weeks before a fight, boxers are expected to minimize all physical encounters, both in and out of the ring. Trainer Inéz Guerrero sheds light on the pugilistic principle of celibacy before an upcoming fight:



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. (Interview with Inéz Guerrero, 25 August 2003)

While most of the interviewees subscribe to this belief, others deny its validity; although the skeptics also emphasize that to be completely focused, a boxer must eliminate any distractions to concentrate on the task at hand. Thus, physical willpower is tested continuously in various forms of self-restraint, for it is in the body, as John Fiske so aptly writes,

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. (1992: 162)

Bantamweight Mike 'The Night Train' Trejo corroborates the sentiment: 'If I win a fight, I was the better man. *I* did it, nobody else. This is not about teams, this is about individuals' (interview with Mike Trejo, 20 August 2003). Yet even though the athletes ostracize themselves from non-pugilistic encounters during the final finessing for combat, their social relations at the gym become all-the-more important during different stages of their training regimen.

During the past decade, boxing has experienced some significant social changes. In addition to the well-established fact that some poverty-ridden immigrant groups can claim dignity through the sport, various other people representing the so-called 'mainstream' segments of society have become involved with it. Middle-class women, white-collar employees and educated professionals can be seen at the gym as much as working-class Latino or African American youth. At the gym in Texas, I met such people as a state senator, a high-tech tycoon, a writer, a lawyer and a medical doctor, but I also came across an ex-convict, a former drug addict and a strip dancer – all of whom frequent the fistic bastion recreationally. Furthermore, University of Texas fraternities have their members train at the gym for 'Fight Night', a hugely popular, annual fundraising event in the city of Austin, TX. For such a heterogeneous gallery of characters, the gym creates a remarkable social space to interact together. Folks develop sym-biotic relationships just to get through everyday workout routines: they rely on each other to tie the gloves, give water between rounds, hold the heavy bag, throw medicine ball, or simply wipe off sweat during sparring sessions. As flyweight Anissa Zamarron explains:

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 11 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. (Interview with Anissa Zamarron, 12 December 2001)

Texan writer Jan Reid, who has followed the career of local world champion Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez, is open about his veneration for 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. (2002: 92)<sup>4</sup>

To the casual observer, the boxing gym seems to offer egalitarian social possibilities where the bodily combat signifies the only marker of empowerment, the mutual respect for the ring sustains the intra-boxer camaraderie, and preconceived notions about social hierarchies cease to have an immediate impact within the sporting context.

Nevertheless, some years of working out at the gym complicates the egalitarian notion, for the sport's backroom politics often prove disempowering to individual fighters. As soon as the financial component enters the athletic equation, the gym's liberating facade turns into a battleground for financiers' interests. Flyweight Jay Vega describes the tension:

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 moneyhandling. It's too much trouble whenever there's a conflict. That's why a lot of people have left the gym. (Interview with Jay Vega, 9 July 2005)

Boxing is notorious for its seedy business practices: it has been characterized as the 'red light district' of professional sports, a pariah activity where dog eats dog and the strong devour the weak (see, for example, Culbertson, 2002; Hauser, 1986; McRae, 1996; Newfield, 1995, 2001). The most difficult situation for a boxer arises when a handler acts in the dual capacity of a manager and promoter, an irreconcilable conflict of interest, because the former is supposed to look out for the athlete's career well-being, while the goal of the latter is to make the most profitable monetary investment. Other grievances include being pressured – sometimes even being blackmailed – into taking last-minute fights, being manipulated into fighting overweight opponents or not receiving adequate training or promotion. Financial disagreements result in frequent clashes between the parties involved; sometimes they take place behind closed doors, at others as non-conspicuous exits, or they culminate as outbursts in the middle of a training session: 'See you in court!' During the fieldwork, after one such incident, a manager walked up to me to explain his side of the conflict:



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 judgement, he went to California and set out to fight on his own.

Whatever the reason behind the disagreements, boxing has a vigorous grapevine and whenever there is a falling-out, myriad accounts immediately begin to circulate amongst fight insiders. In that regard, feather-weight Linda Tenberg explains, the boxing gym is 'like *any* workplace, just like working in an office: the same dynamics, annoyances, irritations and there is all the gossip. Just the physical environment is different' (interview with Linda Tenberg, 7 January 2003). Somewhat paradoxically, then, in an ambience where physical prowess is decisive inside the ring, the might of the word – by way of gossip, rumor and storytelling – turns into a powerful weapon in the social space of the gym. Undoubtedly, as Jack Newfield observes, boxing must be 'the only jungle where the lions are afraid of the rats' (1995: 39).

### **At the weigh-in**

Boxers distinguish their so-called 'walk-around' weight from fight weight, the difference of which may range between five and 20 pounds (roughly between 2 and 9 kilograms) before and after competition day. For example, a welterweight who 'walks around' with 155 pounds may lose 10 to 15 pounds during a period of two weeks before the fight to make the junior welterweight limit of 140 pounds. Not irregularly, some boxers have to lose two or three pounds by running, drying up in the sauna, or taking diuretic substances before the weigh-in, with some 10 to 36 hours to regain strength for the actual bout. The repeated fluctuation of body weight forges an intimate awareness of one's metabolism, for it has an impact 'not only [on] the physique of the boxer [but] also his "body-sense," the consciousness he has of his organism and, through this changed body, of the world about him' (Wacquant, 1995a: 73). Analogously, failing to make the desired weight is a signal (for both the boxers and their handlers) to re-evaluate the athlete's standing in the profession: to implement changes in training and/or nutrition, move up to a different weight division, or retire from competitive boxing. While the weigh-in provides a public platform to establish each combatant's physical fitness and strategize one's game plan, it also serves as a forum for a range of other players involved.

To give an example, during the fieldwork a weigh-in, physical examinations and press conference for one televised event all took place in a local Irish pub because its main sponsor, Miller Lite, insisted that alcoholic beverages be served. Unsurprisingly, the venue was ill-equipped to handle the sport's officiating logistics and the whole event turned into something of a circus. Some California fighters had left their blood-test results behind, but there was no fax machine to receive them in the bar.





As the handlers, officials, aficionados and media mingled in the smoke-filled room, I could spot one pugilistic ego bigger than the next, each pushing their own agendas, whether sporting, financial or personal. The restaurant patrons peered over the goings-on with their cooling drinks, while the boxers – conspicuously undernourished and dehydrated – could only fantasize about a sip of water in the Texas heat. Evidently, as Lori Lord complained: ‘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’ (interview with Lori Lord, 17 December 2002). The proceedings became drawn out on this particular day as well, for the organizers had to stage separate official and unofficial weigh-ins: the fighters first posed for the media, accompanied by the bikini-clad Miller Lite ring card-girls, and only later did they step on the scales for the purposes of the Boxing Commission.<sup>5</sup>

During the course of the event, a Mexican fighter that I knew from the gym turned to me for assistance because his manager had abandoned him, to all intents and purposes. The Spanish-speaking boxer needed help with interpreting to get through the officials’ paperwork routine. They inspected the validity of his boxing license and medical documents and asked for information for the ring announcement: his win–loss record, which city he represented, the color of his trunks and suchlike. As the physician proceeded 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 grew more charged. We learned that the Mexican’s fight would be canceled because his opponent never shows up. According to the word on the street, the real reason for the cancellation was an out-of-town matchmaker’s personal grudge with the local manager. Indeed, it is often the athletes who become ‘patsies’ for their handlers’ business intrigues and payback schemes. As emotions flared, the beer sponsor’s representative turned to the boxer to express his personal notion of a consolation: ‘Be Happy: It’s Miller Lite Time!’ There was nothing either of us could do except stare at him in disbelief.

The beer sponsors’ position in the prizefight industry is certainly firm: typically, they provide the canvas and ring card-girls for the boxing show, but they also enjoy remarkable visibility during commercial breaks on TV. During the 2002 *Friday Night Fights* season on the US network ESPN 2, a series of ‘Miller High Life’ commercials was the main sponsor of the boxing shows. The campaign’s slogan – ‘*Friday Night Fights* presented by Miller High Life. To look simply, proudly, boldly, manly. This is the High Life’ – illustrates its overall theme in which various ordinary, bold, manly (i.e. beer-bellied) working men’s manhood is uplifted with the assistance of Miller High Life, ‘the Champagne of Beers’. Such a process generally involves a carefully-crafted strategy (emblemized by card games or war references) to nullify a vindictive woman’s attempt to obstruct a



masculine ‘High Life’ for the duration of the evening. As the following two excerpts reveal, the solution 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. [The man puts a red rose in the bottle.] Well, well, well, two to one you’ll be living the *High Life* – tonight.

Example 2: 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 *Lite* way to live the *High Life*. (emphasis in original)

Given that boxers’ strict diet bans drinking during training, it might seem ironic that beer should play such a central role in its advertising. However, Lawrence Wenner argues that drinking, sport and gender are 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’ (1998: 304). In all of the ‘Miller High Life’ commercials, too, women are either invisible or depicted in a humorous manner (‘little ladies’, ‘gals’); they function as gender foils for the men’s ‘masculine’ sporting activities – interestingly enough, at a time when boxing is no longer solely a male endeavor.

### **At the prizefight**

At the actual boxing match – also known as the ‘fight card’ – the sport’s multifaceted organizational structure becomes apparent when one considers some of its most conspicuous details. Who, for example, promotes an event? Who provides the ring and the canvas? Who gets to fight or judge a fight? Who sits at the ringside? Who claims space in the ring before and after a bout? Who is allowed access to dressing rooms? Which TV stations broadcast the fight? What sponsorship endorsements do the boxers have? All these details reflect the embedded power dynamics. But there are also numerous intricacies that might escape an untrained spectator’s eye, issues that can influence the athletes’ entire future. Trainer Jesse Ravelo gives one such example:

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. (Interview with Jesse Ravelo, 14 August 2003)



Another thought-provoking detail is the significance of the boxing ring per se. A small ring generally suits the style of an offensively-oriented 'fighter' (to use occupational jargon), while a technically-oriented 'boxer' prefers a bigger ring. Different types of canvas mat ('soft' or 'tight'), in turn, determine the 'pace' of the fight – that is, whether the boxer plans to go to 'distance' (to defeat the opponent by points) or to strive for a knockout victory.<sup>6</sup> As Conrad Sanchez explains:

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. (Interview with Conrad Sanchez, 11 April 2003)

Carlos Valdez, however, disagrees:

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. (Interview with Carlos Valdez, 13 April 2003)

According to Joel Elizondo:

Whenever I'd have a lazy day, I'd pick 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. (Interview with Joel Elizondo, 20 July 2003)

Yet, as Mike Trejo points out, the contender typically has to go along with the champion's home turf privileges: 'I'm a banger, I prefer smaller rings: 16 foot. But when I fought for the NABF [North American Boxing Federation] title, I fought in a big ring' (interview with Mike Trejo, 20 August 2003). The physical space of the ring, then, not only speaks to the technical aspects of the pugilistic combat; it also reflects the athletes' self-characterization in the overall professional legacy.

At the same time, the boxing ring serves as a podium for a range of identity affiliations: in the event of a heroic performance, after all, it is not only the boxers who embrace the glory; anyone who claims a stake with the fight can assume a part of the heroism. As David Chandler puts it, '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' (1996: 17). The various power players, who climb into the ring before or after the bout, visibly showcase their own eminence in the sport by juxtaposing themselves with the boxers. For the fight crowd (including aficionados and TV viewers) the battle offers a site for deciphering individual and group identities. Fight cognoscenti often have strong preconceived notions about the performance of athletes that represent different ethnoracial groups.<sup>7</sup> According to Jesse Ravelo, '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' (interview with Jesse Ravelo, 14 August 2003). Abel Davilla elaborates: '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' (interview with Abel Davilla, 22 August 2003). At any random fight card, one can interpret several meanings behind the athletes' identity performances, for boxers are particularly mindful of their physical appearance, complete with the choice of boxing trunks, robes and fight paraphernalia. The humble warrior-hero, for example, would show up with simple gear, a small entourage and little other extravaganza, while his boxing style exhibits hard work, skill and technique. The patriotic *mexicano* might enter the ring wearing trunks, robes and bandannas in national colors, with *mariachi* music playing in the background, and his boxing style underscores the boxer's 'heart' – the principle never to quit. A third, hyper-masculine type would have extravagant entourages, embellished by glittering outfits, spectacular music and flashy spotlights, while his performance may point to a style that is showy but 'suggish'.

Be that as it may, as soon as the ringside official's announcement 'Boxers to the Ring!' summons the commencement of combat, the behind-the-scenes intricacies become irrelevant and the fight as such is only ever between the two individuals. The ring announcer introduces the combatants in their respective corners to the audience with the provocation: '*Damas y caballeros, vamos a ver: ¿quién es el más MACHO?*' ('Ladies and gentlemen, let's see who is the most *MACHO?*'). Once 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 of Vaseline, as the referee in the middle instructs: 'Protect yourselves 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 boxers thump each others' gloves and the battle sets in motion within the confined space of the ring against limited time, under the naked eye of the audience. The fighters 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. Whether it lasts 12 rounds or is over in a split second, the battle is lost or won over physical prowess, agility of mind and control of the geography of the canvas. Between the boxers, the battle reaches a solipsistic culmination, as the victor's arm is raised in triumph, while the vanquished stoops in defeat. A victorious battle is a powerful experience, as it enables the winner to construct what Loïc Wacquant calls a '*publicly recognized, heroic self*' (1995b: 501; emphasis in the original). Defeat and disappointment are all the more devastating and boxers often describe losing in the ring as more traumatic than any other painful experience in their lives.



Even so, whether testifying to individual triumph or demise, the contestation of bodily potent and its limits – epitomized by injury, pain and losing in the ring – enables the exploration of individual opportunities within one's own everyday spaces. Albeit in societal 'margins', professional boxing incorporates components of personal mobility, social prestige and socio-economic advancement for the athletes. Geographic theorists generally differentiate the abstract concept of 'space' as distinct from 'place'. Yi-Fu Tuan, for example, writes: "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 . . . When space feels thoroughly familiar, it has become place' (1977: 6, 77). Edward Casey, in turn, emphasizes the centrality of bodily experience in making sense of one's entire existence:

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. (2000: 147, 195)

In line with Casey's conceptualization, the boxing body determines one's space and/or place in the world; thus, the boxing body in pugilistic space negotiates societal place. Through bodily agency and by appropriating space as one's own, the athletes may ascribe meaning to their individual *senses* of place, corresponding to their insider or outsider positions in society. Attachment to place may signify a momentary sense of belonging, liberation and mobility in one location, but can turn just as easily into powerlessness, stagnation and threat somewhere else – if not rapidly vice versa. For such an analysis Tim Cresswell's definition is also useful:

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. (2002: 11–32)

The interplay of spatial marginality, bodily prowess and interpersonal power dynamics in boxing, in effect, become directly linked with identity formations. Prizefighting brings together its sundry practitioners with their miscellaneous agendas; therefore, identity formations become active negotiation processes that take place on a daily basis in the everyday locations of the sport. Boxers, corner men, managers, promoters, matchmakers, administrators, ringside officials, broadcasters and aficionados all shape



boxing as much as they are shaped by it, and together they all mold the sport's image in the main. Finally, although not the focus of the examination here, it is worth emphasizing that identity contestations do not end after professional boxers' active careers are over. If anything, they are most likely to intensify: a concern which is epitomized dramatically by the numerous destructive endings that many former boxers' lives are known to have.

## Reflections

Cultural studies scholarship calls attention to the role of popular culture, previously often rendered insignificant as 'light' entertainment, in reflecting larger societal concerns, with powerful ramifications outside of the immediate leisure context as well. In a similar vein, this discussion of Latino boxers' identity formations demonstrates that prizefighting is not only a professional sport, it is also a bodily trade, a lucrative business and an instrument of everyday politics. Because the pugilistic occupational culture comprises layers of sociocultural power relations, always jumbled up with the dynamics of bodies interacting in the everyday locations of the sport, the fistic combat takes on tangible importance for individuals, communities, nations and international collectives alike. Even so, elevating a cohort of largely unknown Texas boxers to scholarly scrutiny calls attention to boxers' agency in the existing power relations and illustrates the relevance of sport as a subject worthy of note within cultural studies. The deliberately multidisciplinary approach here, in turn, hopes to problematize identity formations from a range of different perspectives that explain, interconnect and point to the sport's larger individual, sociocultural, economic and political ramifications. Ultimately, such a 'grounded' research agenda in active conversation with theoretical conceptualization proposes a useful methodological lens to engage in dialogue with everyday practices and academia at large.

During the course of this four-year research, some boxing handlers told me: 'You have to love your fighter to have his best interest at heart,' while others claimed that 'You can't fall in love with your fighter, or else he will break your heart.' Writing about professional boxing seems to involve a similar dilemma: one has to 'love' the sport to be able to immerse fully in its myriad aspects, but it is also a world that does not leave anybody entirely intact. The ethnographic method itself presents a number of pitfalls: leaving the academic ivory tower to interact with so-called 'ordinary' people in the 'real' world, the researcher has little control over external circumstances. One may have to collaborate with characters that one would not even like to be acquainted with, let alone associate with; or one may end up in situations that are dangerous or unlawful – facets which pose practical, emotional and ethical challenges in carrying out the academic agenda.<sup>8</sup> The one-on-one interviews turn into double-edged experiences:



one feels grateful for the fact that the boxers are willing open up their lives, but one also has to tackle the ambivalence that comes with having to break down – as if to sanitize – the encounters to scholarly scrutiny. Simultaneously, spending time with one's sources creates emotional bonds and, with them, several other hazards might occur such as interpersonal conflicts or male–female entanglements – evidently part and parcel of any social setting where human beings interact. Moreover, when I embarked on the research, I did not consider that when one becomes immersed in people's lives, one not only deals with the interviewees but sometimes with people close to their lives as well. Spouses, for example, might feel possessive about their partners: 'Why are they spending so much time with her?' Stablemates may wonder: 'Why is she interviewing him and not me?' Or handlers may become suspicious: 'What are they telling her?' As a result, one has to walk a tightrope between personal input versus academic objectives; how involved to become in the interviewees' careers and lives; how to represent one's sources accurately and fairly; and how to deal with the sport's overall occupational intrigues. With the minefield of complications, the researcher must assume the dual roles of insider and outsider, acquaintance and observer, participant and aficionado – positions which may be difficult (if not impossible) to reconcile. In other words, not unlike the boxers, the researcher continuously tries to turn various abstract 'spaces' into tangible senses of 'place' by making sense of the sport's labyrinth of social organization. Notwithstanding the challenges, were it not for the real-life interactions, I would never have come to understand the complexity of professional boxing first-hand nor would I have encountered the extraordinary cohort of people – the sheep and the wolves alike – who operate within its occupational culture, making and shaping the sport into an idiosyncratic world of its own.

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### **Notes**

1. Although the focus of my work is on Latino boxers, I have also interviewed some non-Latinos to discuss the sport's overall social organization.
2. My conceptualization of professional boxing in theoretical terms was informed initially by Michel Foucault's perception of the body as a product of power relations and space as a 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' (Rabinow, 1984: 17) – I first envisaged prizefighting as a basic form of bodily and spatial knowledge, in conversation with larger societal and pugilistic power dynamics.



3. Weight classes in professional boxing are: Strawweight, up to 105lb (47.6kg); Junior Flyweight, 105–8lb (49kg); Flyweight, 108–12lb (51kg); Super Flyweight/Junior Bantamweight, 112–15lb (52.1kg); Bantamweight, 115–18lb (53.5kg); Super Bantamweight/Junior Featherweight, 118–22lb (55.3kg); Featherweight, 122–26lb (57.1kg); Super Featherweight/Junior Lightweight, 126–30lb (59kg); Lightweight, 130–5lb (61.2kg); Super Lightweight/Junior Welterweight, 135–40lb (63.5kg); Welterweight, 140–7lb (66.7kg); Super Welterweight/Junior Middleweight, 147–54lb (70kg); Middleweight, 154–60lb (72.5kg); Super Middleweight, 160–8lb (76.2kg); Light Heavyweight, 168–75lb (79kg); Cruiserweight, 175–200lb (91kg); Heavyweight, more than 200lb (91kg).
4. On Chávez's career and life-story, see Heiskanen (2006).
5. At another weigh-in, I once saw a fighter drink water by mistake because the event was going on for more than three hours. 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.
6. The four basic criteria that judges use in scoring professional boxing matches are clean punching, effective aggressiveness, defense and 'ring generalship'. The latter refers to the spatial manipulation of the ring combined with coordination of technique, power and speed in overpowering an opponent.
7. I am using the term 'ethnoracial' here to emphasize that Latinos, for example, represent a number of 'racial' markers (skin color), but also that they come from a range of 'ethnic' (cultural) backgrounds.
8. John Sugden's *Boxing and Society* (1996) is a useful source in depicting the dilemmas that the ethnographer faces in the fistic world.

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### **Biographical note**

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