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# The *Latinization* of Boxing: A Texas Case-Study

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PRIZEFIGHTING IN THE UNITED STATES HAS DEVELOPED as an urban phenomenon, an emphatically—although not exclusively—male, working-class, and minority practice. From early on, it has epitomized a bastion of immigrants' rags-to-riches sagas, a stronghold of pride for those at the bottom of the nation's socio-economic ladders. According to estimates, the number of active U.S. prizefighters today is somewhere between 8,500 and 10,000; of them about 5 percent reaches the world championship level. Nevertheless, this group contributes to a lion's share, roughly 80 percent, of the sport's international financial revenue; thus, the United States can boast hosting some 40-50 percent of all world championship title bouts within its national borders.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1950s,<sup>2</sup> the sport has been primarily a masculine, black-and-brown affair, with Latinos generally controlling the lighter weight categories and African American boxers heading the divisions from middle-weight upwards<sup>3</sup>—although the past two decades have also seen a growing cohort of women boxers getting involved with the sport. Since the mid 1990s, however, the African American jewel of the crown, the heavyweight division, has been experiencing a crisis, one that has resulted in plummeting viewer rates, fewer sponsorship deals, and less primetime television exposure.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the powers-that-be have shifted their focus to other saleable athletes in the lighter weight categories, and the pugilistic spotlight has gradually steered

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towards the gallery of Latino fighters throughout the Americas. Alongside them, the entire sport is undergoing a shift in its geographic demarcation in the United States: it is diverging from its Northeastern origins into a distinctly Southwestern phenomenon.

Yet the geographic shift of boxing is not only explicable by the number of Latino fighters; there are several other currents underway influencing the phenomenon. Firstly, because Latinos have the highest regional concentration in the Southwest, more and more boxing aficionados and television audiences come out of such states as Arizona, California, New Mexico, or Texas. Indeed, Texas alone—with its size, location, and demographics—ranks second (after California) in the number of professional boxing matches conducted in the entire nation today.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, in boxing promotions, celebrity Latino fighters turned promoters—such as Oscar De La Hoya, Julio César Chávez, or Erik “El Terrible” Morales—are increasingly stepping in the business side of the sport, specifically showcasing their grassroots fight cards in the Southwestern states to appeal to the Latino (especially Mexican and Mexican American) masses. Thirdly, because of the overall “browning” of U.S. popular culture currently in vogue, all-Latino prizefighting attracts more of the so-called “mainstream” pay-per-view audiences, while the growing number of female fighters also contributes to broadening the sport’s fan base. Apropos, a remarkable result in the past few years has been that fight ratings on television have gone up to the extent that, according to boxing writer Thomas Hauser, “virtually every survey indicates that the sweet science is a major reason why subscribers buy and retain HBO.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the sport’s recent developments are reflected in other media representation: after a decade’s hiatus, network television chose to give professional boxing another chance in the spring of 2003. The bilingual *Budweiser Boxing Series on NBC/Boxeo Budweiser Telemundo*, a joint endeavor between NBC, *Telemundo*, promoter Main Events, and Budweiser, was launched “to enter into a venture that includes integrated sales and sponsorship opportunities; extensive crossover promotions; combined television production; shared broadcast/fight promotion costs and revenue sharing.”<sup>7</sup> *The Ring Extra* assesses the ramifications as follows:

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.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, during 2004–2005 no less than *two* boxing reality shows appeared on television, Oscar De La Hoya’s *The Next Great Champ* on FOX/FOX SportsNet and Sugar Ray Leonard and Sylvester Stallone’s *The Contender* on NBC.<sup>9</sup> Still, despite all of the above—that Latino fighters from across the Americas dominate the worldwide occupational numbers; that an increasingly heterogeneous group of fight fans are tuning in to watch the sport; and that things Latino/a are currently the rage—academic examinations of the phenomenon are stunningly few.<sup>10</sup>

To fill some of the void, this article probes into the *latinization* of boxing through a case-study based in Austin, Texas. Although the city of Austin is hardly renowned as a hub in the nation’s prizefight history and few people outside of the pugilistic occupational culture likely have even heard of fighters in town, Austin has—unbeknownst to many—

always been the bureaucratic and legislative center of Texas prizefighting, with the state athletic commissions, regulatory agents, and legislative bodies all residing there. Just like any other place where a highway or railroad tracks separate socio-economic and ethnoracial<sup>11</sup> enclaves, it has quietly gone about its grassroots boxing in the eastside of town for decades. Far from much public scrutiny, Latino and African American youth have congregated in East Austin's recreation centers to pursue various sports, and boxing, in particular, has been available as an affordable activity for the neighborhoods' aspiring athletes. But the distinguishing feature of the city's fight scene today has become to frequently stage women's bouts—sometimes all-female fight cards—and it is being billed as the “female fight capital of Texas.”<sup>12</sup> The interesting outcome of this is that many of the previously unknown Latino boxers have also gained more attention in the local community and media. Indeed, the last decade has seen a remarkable boxing boom in town: fight cards have emerged from back-alley clubs to such central sporting venues as the Austin Convention Center or the Frank Erwin Center at the University of Texas, with local shows broadcast on major sports stations, including ESPN2, HBO, HBO Latino, FOX SportsNet, Showtime, *Telemundo*, *Galavision*, and *Telefuturo*.

To probe into the on-going *latinization* phenomenon, my paper contextualizes the sport within the regional dynamics of the Southwest. It first examines the amateur boxing tradition in East Austin at large; it then looks into the careers of a community of Latino boxers who began boxing there from the 1970s onward; and finally, it discusses the professional boxing boom that started in town in the mid 1990s. Drawing from interviews conducted with the Austinite Latino boxers from 2001 to 2004, my attempt is to show how these particular athletes understand their early influences and possibilities, as shaped by their surrounding socio-economic realities, and how they construct and recreate their personal lives, careers, and identities within the sport's everyday culture. In so doing, the paper demonstrates that boxers' agency makes it possible to question various established power relations within one's *own* everyday spaces. It also enables challenging one's geographic boundaries—any ostensibly “assigned” place vis-à-vis an “aspired” place in society—as it offers access to spaces which would ordinarily be out of the reach of those in societal “margins.” Ultimately, calling attention to these unsung heroes of the pugilistic profession—the large bulk of non-heavyweight, grassroots fighters, who hardly ever become contenders or world champions—connects boxing in the actual places where the sport is organized on an everyday level to academic discourses at large.<sup>13</sup>

### The East Austin *Barrio* as Bedrock

The location of particular populations within specific urban spaces shapes an individual's understanding of one's socio-economic prospects, personal identity formations, and collective allegiances in society. According to the U.S. census of 2000, Austin ranks the fourth largest city in Texas; with a population of 656,562, its main ethnoracial divisions are 52.9% “white,” 30.5% “Hispanic,” and 9.8% “African American.”<sup>14</sup> The ethnoracial and class-based semantics between the city's white center and the non-white margins are unambiguous even to an outsider, for the 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. Such spatially

structured social organization speaks to distinct exclusionary policies and practices in society, or to what cultural geographer Edward Soja characterizes as the “politicized spatiality of social life.”<sup>15</sup> In his 1995 Ph.D. dissertation, James William McCarver, Jr. discusses the historical development of Austin’s eastside area during the past hundred years. At the turn of the century, McCarver points out, the areas east of the town’s central business district had been predominantly farmlands owned and managed by Swedish immigrants, but in 1928, the city adopted an urban plan under which non-white groups were relocated to areas “east of East Avenue.”<sup>16</sup> In 1987, a survey on East Austin defined the overall area’s demographic divisions as 43.9% Latino, 42.1% black, and 13.7% Anglo, with 27.2% of incomes below poverty level.<sup>17</sup> According to the latest census demographics, the central eastside areas where my interviewees mainly grew up comprise an over 80 percent “Hispanic” population today, with a poverty rate ranging between 20 and 50 percent, depending on the zip code categorization by the census.<sup>18</sup> Although there are some signs of gentrification underway in East Austin today, in the main little seems to have changed in the eastside’s ethnoracial concentration from the time that my interviewees launched their careers in the 1970s to the present day.<sup>19</sup>

Amidst such unyielding *de facto* segregation, the understanding of individual mobility and social possibilities become deeply inscribed within the city’s spatial boundaries. At stake for people affected by the social hierarchies is a very tangible conceptualization of everyday existence: where one can 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 right one has to claim belonging to different places. The Latino boxers’ early experiences form the basis of their conceptualization of the city as a whole, and many of my interviewees’ maneuverings show an internalization of Austin’s racialized power dynamics at an early age. Having grown up on frequent encounters with racial profiling—e.g., automobile stoppages outside of the *barrio* by Texas law enforcement agents—they seem savvy in urban geography, often avoiding the white-only public spaces with a premonition not to be in “the wrong place at the wrong time.” In a pinch, however, some of them have learned the social gravitas of sport, for a police officer’s recognition of them as boxers might actually resolve an otherwise volatile situation. Were it not for boxing, many of the Latino youngsters would likely never have gained comfortable access to various spaces outside of the *barrio* nor would they have entered into any kind of interaction with the forces that maintain the socio-spatial boundaries within the city.<sup>20</sup>

My 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 make-up, their incentive to begin to box, and parental involvement with the sport. However, the one commonality all of the boxers have, directly or indirectly, is childhood memories marked by deprivation endemic to poverty: whether by way of challenging domestic living arrangements, neighborhood encounters with violence, or institutional discrimination. At the same time, their reminiscences harken back to an extremely strong sense of a communal self-help principle, peer-group support, and sibling-solidarity. Those boxers 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 an early age. “The World Famous” Joel Elizondo 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.<sup>21</sup>

Because the boxers’ childhood encounters were also filled with various forms of violence—street lawlessness, petty crime, and weapon threats—the youth became, of necessity, familiar with everyday strategies of survival: they learned to always stick together, to defend themselves, and to take responsibility for one another. They frequently recall being “picked on” or “tried,” especially at school, while verbal slurs (“midgets,” “burnt *burritos*”) and direct provocations (“Whatcha lookin’ at?”) would instigate school scuffles. As Carlos Valdez’s childhood confrontation reveals, getting to school could pose a minefield of hazards in and of itself:

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 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.<sup>22</sup>

A number of other incidents in the *barrio* expose bleak everyday realities, ranging from thieving schemes (complete with color-coded ski-masks), “pistol-whuppings,” shootout carnage to subsequent incarcerations. Personal tragedy, then, is hardly surprising, and one of my interviewees 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.”<sup>23</sup> 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 P.E. 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.”<sup>24</sup> With little awareness of or positive encounters with external support networks, boxing came to offer an instrumental channel to escape various dysfunctional everyday conditions, and many young fighters learned to rely on themselves in times of trouble, although trainers and coaches may have taken on the role of surrogate parents, adult confidants, and role models for some of them. Yet, while the underlying survival urgency in the streets and the ring may be the same, Johnny Casas insists on a fundamental difference between boxing and 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.<sup>25</sup>

Launching their amateur careers between the ages of five and twelve on average, the youth were typically introduced to boxing through friends, neighbors, or parents, some of whom were former fighters themselves and would become actively involved in the gyms as trainers, coaches, or ringside officials. Yet each kid's reasons to begin boxing vary as much as the fighters do. For example, Conrad Sanchez began to box at age six because his father took him and his brother Joey to the gym, in an effort "to keep them off the streets, away from drugs, alcohol, and just hanging out."<sup>26</sup> Johnny Casas thought of himself as a born fighter from age five onward ever since he saw a pair of boxing gloves in a neighborhood tournament, but his mother would not allow him to begin boxing until age ten.<sup>27</sup> "The World Famous" Joel Elizondo got involved in boxing by sheer accident, and he considered gymnastics to be his main sport for a long time. 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.<sup>28</sup> Javier Alvarez, on the other hand, became involved in the sport relatively late, at age twelve, for he never professed to have any particular "love" for it nor did he think he possessed a 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.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, a number of families had generations of boxers either in Texas or Mexico; thus, throughout the *barrio*, the sport had enjoyed a widespread following for quite some time. During the first two decades ensuing since the launching of the Golden Gloves tournament in Texas in 1937, the following state champions hailed from Austin: lightweight Joe Augustat and light heavyweight Earl Crowe (1937); light heavyweight Tom Attra (1940, 1943); bantamweight Valentino Luna (1947, 1949); and welterweight Pete Gil (1949). The year 1951 saw three regional champions emerge from Austin: flyweight Joe Vela, bantamweight Paul Herrera and Manuel "Rocky" Caballero, while welterweight Melvin Barker won the state championship in 1955.<sup>30</sup> As Conrad Sanchez explains, *mexicano* fighters were big heroes in the community: "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."<sup>31</sup>

In the mid 1950s, Austin's Parks and Recreation Department began to appropriate special funds to develop recreational activities in East Austin, and the Pan American Recreation Center was opened as a result on September 7, 1956. The late Oswaldo A.B. Cantú, an ex-fighter in the Army and an employee of the Parks and Recreation Department, founded the Pan American Boxing Club, which helped invigorate the burgeoning local fight scene further.<sup>32</sup> In 1971, the city took over the Montopolis Recreation Center, previously owned by the Dolores Catholic Church, which also began to offer boxing lessons in East Austin under the tutelage of the late Joe Sanchez and Inéz Guerrero.<sup>33</sup> By the

1970s, the local boxing program already attracted some hundred young boxers between the ages of six and nineteen—most of them *mexicano* or black—who trained in East Austin's recreational facilities, serving just as much a sporting function as they had a social role.<sup>34</sup> Carlos Valdez recalls his early lessons to be that “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.”<sup>35</sup> In addition, the aspiring athletes were informed about nutrition (no *tortillas*, sodas, or ice cream), healthy living habits, and sportsmanly codes of conduct. Gym etiquette stressed self-discipline and character-building, and young people were incessantly being cautioned to “stay out of trouble”—for “trouble-makers *don't* box.” “A fighter,” gym-lore had it, 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.”<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, Conrad Sanchez points out, the respect for the ring also had a bonding element: “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.”<sup>38</sup> Many fighters, in effect, assert that in comparison to their life-experiences the gym was an extraordinarily *safe* environment. As “The World Famous” Joel Elizondo puts it:

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 the street, you never know: people may jump on you. Inside the ring, you feel secure.<sup>39</sup>

Early sparring sessions also taught them 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 more challenging than one would think, having as much to do with hand-eye coordination as with foot movement and breathing technique. According to trainer Inéz Guerrero, “[W]hen 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.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the youth learned a sense of structure when they had to synchronize training with other daily activities. Javier Alvarez explains:

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.<sup>41</sup>

All of my interviewees proclaim that their involvement in amateur boxing has fundamentally changed their lives; that the sport has offered them possibilities that would not be feasible otherwise; and that it has brought them a spectrum of “focus,” “stability,” “confidence,” “discipline,” “liberation,” “manners,” “respect,” and “better treatment.” The *barrio-gym*, as such, offered the young athletes a secure social space that enabled distancing oneself from various forms of everyday negativity. It was a receptacle of positive values,

honorary principles, and peer solidarity, while it also functioned as a locus for identity formations and making sense of the outside world. Because of their otherwise scarce options available, boxing came to offer the Latino youth 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 socially segregated city otherwise. Most important, perhaps, by taking charge of their own lives at an early age—that is, by making the explicit choice *not* to succumb to the surrounding social devastation—young fighters learned to help themselves. When the alternative of social disorder became substituted by a hands-only, one-on-one battle complete with rules, referees, and a principle of fair game, some youth experienced a sense of regularity, structure, and cohesion for the first time in their lives through the sport. 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 less heroic activities. As the 1950s Golden Gloves champion Pete Gil sums up, “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.”<sup>42</sup>

### Amateur Tournaments on the Road

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 “rec” centers, the Metz Park, or the City Coliseum. As part of the local boxing program, youth from Austin competed in the Amateur Boxing Federation (AFB) championships, the Silver Gloves, the Golden Gloves, and the American Athletic Union Junior Olympics. 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. These tournaments typically consisted of four different categories: the division from age six to ten had a minimum weight-limit of fifty pounds; from ages ten to fifteen, youth fought in the “junior” division; at age fifteen, they moved onto the “novice” category for their first five fights, after which they would, at long last, compete in the “open” division.<sup>43</sup> Carlos Valdez’s situation as a boxer was atypical, for he had trouble not in “making weight” but putting *enough* weight on for the required minimum:

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.<sup>44</sup>

Valdez did, however, manage to get away with his small physical size. Such was the volume of his competition experience that, by age eleven, he had already accumulated a record of fifty-three mostly victorious fights, with two regional American Athletic Union Junior Olympics medals.<sup>45</sup>

Conrad Sanchez was the first of my interviewees to emerge as Texas state champion in 1981, an event of which the *Austin American-Statesman* wrote: “One of the brightest fight-



ers 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."<sup>46</sup> With two Golden Gloves state championships and a growing victorious record, Conrad soon became a celebrity in the local boxing community. 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."<sup>47</sup> 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 like I was. I looked up to him a lot, and I wanted 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.<sup>48</sup>

With a growing cohort of local fighters getting involved in the sport, Austin had become 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. On February 1, 1982, for example, the capital city hosted the 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Austin Golden Gloves Tournament, with over a hundred youth participating from the Central Texas area (San Marcos, Fort Hood, San Antonio, Waco, and Elgin), as Austin's Pan American Gym was chosen to be the top division team.<sup>49</sup> Local sports writer Bill Valdez predicted Pan Am's Johnny Casas's fight against Stevie Martínez to be the highlight of the tournament. "A finesse boxer who is driven by the desire to make it as a professional fighter," Valdez wrote, "[Casas] hits hard with both hands and is an excellent counter-puncher. A natural right-hander, he can switch to a southpaw style."<sup>50</sup> By 1982, Johnny Casas, Conrad Sanchez, and Carlos Valdez had all become Texas state champions, bringing plaudits to the local 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."<sup>51</sup> A conspicuous 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*—as opposed to East Austin—an allegiance they hardly had claim for before becoming involved with boxing. At the same time, the tournaments offered an important social forum for East Austin's community. With only nominal ticket fees and seating based on a first come, first served-principle, kids, parents, and grandparents alike would show up for the fights.<sup>52</sup> Gloria Elizondo describes:

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.<sup>53</sup>

Rapidly accumulating records of hundreds of fights, East Austin's boxers advanced to participate in the open division in the Texas Golden Gloves and Amateur Boxing Federation's regional tournaments, with frequent road trips around the state. Getting one's first team jacket was a special source of *esprit de corps*, and support from one's stable-mates proved particularly important when a young person experienced being "robbed" of a victory. With experiences that some opponents would win fights because of home turf advantage, the boxers learned the principle that one had to *first* win the fight in the ring and *then* win the decision on the score cards. Carlos Valdez's most bizarre experience in San Antonio is particularly intriguing, for it took place on August 12, 1982, the day that the twenty-three-year-old legendary World Boxing Council (WBC) featherweight champion Salvador Sanchez died in an auto accident. Everybody agreed, young Carlos had overwhelmingly outscored and "outboxed" an up-and-coming San Antonian favorite, but the local judges called it 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 miscellaneous objects being hurled into the ring—the organizers were forced to cancel all the remaining fights of the tournament. 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.<sup>54</sup>

As the boxers built up their experiences in the open division and got a chance to compete on national level, their competition trips took them all over the nation. They recall the novelty of quotidian encounters in new places: 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. The national tournaments brought the fight game to an altogether different level. Conrad Sanchez explains:

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."<sup>55</sup>

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 Jesse Benavides, Steve Cruz, and Jesse James Leija—all of whom would later claim fame as world champions in professional boxing.<sup>56</sup>

Carlos Valdez and Javier Alvarez also climbed all the way to the U.S. national championships, both winning their weight divisions—and a chance to represent the United States in international boxing tournaments, with many trips overseas. 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 sport, Alvarez would eventually become the first Latino boxer to 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.”<sup>57</sup> In due course, Alvarez would win five medals in the national championships, an accomplishment that earned him a spot in the U.S. Olympic Program, one which also gave him a chance to get a college degree. Alvarez took advantage of the opportunity, but it was 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.<sup>58</sup>

As East Austin’s 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*. While their early experiences at school, the neighborhood, and the city of Austin typically revealed a deep-seated sense of ethnoracially demarcated and class-based sense of social hierarchies, their involvement with the sport at several spatial scales brought about new mobility: it enabled various identity negotiations as well as giving meaning to one’s multiple subject positions. 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 training and 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.”<sup>59</sup> In addition to having more than half of its population of Mexican descent, San Antonio has the most vigorous boxing tradition in Texas with a number of world ranked Latino fighters—hence Alvarez’s sense of personal amazement in comparison to his sporting and life experiences within the social divisions of the capital city. Yet, despite their early experiences of discrimination in Austin, when the boxers launched their amateur careers, they generally refused the condition of anonymous *victimage* and, instead, became autonomous designers of their 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 can elevate the boxers as celebrated individuals and communal heroes on a local scale. By proving themselves in the ring, fighters might—even if momentarily—transgress the threshold from an outsider to insider status, as their athleticism can give them entitlement to a number of different identities in and out of the ring: “East Austinness,” “Austinness,” “Texanness,” “*Latinidad*”—if not “Americanness” at large.<sup>60</sup>

Be that as it may, many boxers come to articulate that place matters in and out of the ring differently: that the respect for the sport provides a non-discriminatory basis that does

not privilege race, ethnicity, or class affiliation. The competition venue can turn into a non-hierarchical meeting ground, a crossroads that connects people from different socio-cultural and regional backgrounds. While a fighter may proudly carry his ethnoracial or regional heritage to the competition venue to cherish the team's *esprit de corps*, all of the East Austinite fighters point out 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."<sup>61</sup> Johnny Casas elaborates, "You never forget 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."<sup>62</sup> The fighters' ethnoracial identification, in effect, assumes different meanings in various place-based dynamics and sporting contexts. Inside the ring, the racially demarcated basis of the outside world momentarily ceases to carry relevance; instead, what counts exclusively for the boxers themselves, as Conrad Sanchez puts it, is the athletic challenge: "[I]t's me and the guy right there; me-him, one on one."<sup>63</sup>

Today, amateur boxing in Austin is a pale shadow of its yesteryear heyday. With most of the trainers gone, and the boxers turning professional early on, the city no longer has enough amateur boxers to host the Golden Gloves or any other major regional tournaments. What is left are the boxing classes trying to eke out an existence in the *barrio*, with some sporadically organized one-day competitions.<sup>64</sup> Inéz Guerrero explains 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."<sup>65</sup> In 1996, the Pan American Recreation Center honored the posthumous legacy of its pugilistic founder by renaming the facility 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.<sup>66</sup> In 1998, trainer Joe Vela established a new non-profit boxing program in East Austin, "Austin Boxing Against Drugs," with a specific social aim for drug-preventive and pro-school campaigning in the neighborhood.<sup>67</sup> Even so, little remains of the golden days of A.B. Cantú's amateur boxing program of the 1970s and 1980s, and all the major regional tournaments are now held in San Antonio. In its place, professional boxing has taken over in the capital city, although together with it, the amateur program's idealism has been turned on its head, as many of the principles from the boxers' athletic adolescence come crumbling down after they enter the world of prizefighting.

## The Professional Boxing Boom

Most boxers from East Austin turned professional in their early twenties and, in so doing, they also relocated to gyms outside of the *barrio*, for that is where most promoters, matchmakers, and bigger purses generally were. Several factors, however, differentiate the

amateur gyms from the commercial gyms that had appeared in town with the “mainstream” popularity of the sport at the turn of the twenty-first century. Unlike the recreation centers’ gyms which carried out the social function of keeping kids “out of trouble”—alongside with building their athletic foundation—the commercial gyms were above all businesses and, as such, dictated by the owners’ and handlers’ monetary interests. Whereas the *barrio* gyms used to have a number of trainers working with the youth for free, the commercial ones rarely provide any services without a cost, except perhaps for some fighters with promotional deals with the gym.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, in evaluating different gyms, the boxers are quick to differentiate between the athletic, business, and social aspects of the sport. Johnny Casas, for example, developed a habit to commute 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.”<sup>69</sup> After working out at several gyms mainly in Texas and Arizona, to this day, Carlos Valdez only feels comfortable at the communal 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.”<sup>70</sup>

Notwithstanding their successful amateur careers, none of the Latino fighters from East Austin managed to reach the five-odd percent that makes it to the world championship level as prizefighters. By the time the boxing boom hit the town, they were generally considered too old to seriously consider making it to the top. Although their professional careers steered them through numerous places in Texas and the United States, most of them have been unable to find entirely satisfactory work environments. Either the sport’s business side has posed problems with the handlers, they have had family concerns interrupting focusing on the sport, or else, they have grappled with injuries and other health issues.<sup>71</sup> That is not to say, however, that they would not have been celebrated in their immediate communities, for many of them have been. In addition, they have used the pugilistic podium as an important site for claiming a stake in social hierarchies, while the sport has offered them meaningful athletic, social, and personal gratification. As Conrad Sanchez puts it, “I would have never left Texas; I would have never got on a plane—never flown—if it weren’t for boxing. Boxing took me to a lot of places. It *was* my place. It belonged to me.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, as they have watched Austin’s fight scene change, their experiences within both amateur and professional boxing have become central to their identity formations and everyday knowledge about the outside world. For example, when women boxers and a mixed gallery of recreational boxers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds began to interact together in the social space of commercial gyms, they also had an impact on the boxers’ outlook on the dynamics there. Johnny Casas came to reconsider his thoughts about gender and sport after working with women fighters:

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.<sup>73</sup>

According to Abel Davilla, one of the next generation of Latino boxers, the older fighters were simply ahead of their times: "Austin boxing 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."<sup>74</sup>

The actual fight boom, then, took off with what would become Punch for Pay Promotions' series of eighteen boxing shows entitled the "Brawl in the Music Hall" during the course of the decade. These fight cards were initially created around the career prospects of the city's new pugilistic prodigy, Jesus "El Matador" Chávez, whose fights for continental championships and their consequent title defenses were featured as the main events. Later on, the series continued by featuring mainly women boxers as local attractions.<sup>75</sup> 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 on the under-card. The second show in the series followed no less than two months later on November 2, 1995.<sup>76</sup> After Chávez won the WBC Continental Americas super-featherweight title against Cedric Mingo in Brownsville, Texas, on March 31, 1996, "Brawl in the Music Hall III" followed up by staging his first title defense in Austin on May 17, 1996.<sup>77</sup> On August 9, 1996, "Brawl in the Music Hall IV" moved on to showcase Chávez's (and Austin's) first victorious featherweight championship of the North American Boxing Federation (NABF) against Javier Jauregui of Mexico.<sup>78</sup> Because of Chávez's injury, the "Brawl in the Music Hall VI" put Mike Trejo, another frequently acclaimed prospect, as the main event against Eduardo Manzano of Mexico on January 24, 1997.<sup>79</sup> However, on March 3, 1997, Chávez was back to bring increasing attention to the newly emerging professional fight scene in town, as "Brawl in the Music Hall VII" featured his North American Boxing Federation's championship bout in the super-featherweight division against San Antonio's Louie Leija.<sup>80</sup>

Not long afterward, out-of-town promoters, such as Gamez Productions of Brownsville followed suit in staging fight cards in the area. Mike Trejo, for one, would begin to feature in their pro-cards, eventually winning the North American Boxing Federation's flyweight title against Mexican Olympian Marciano Gonzalez in San Antonio on November 17, 1998.<sup>81</sup> Established national matchmakers were increasingly seen around, as Chávez was offered a contract with Lou Duvá's Main Events Promotions. His fights, as a result, began to feature regularly on national television.<sup>82</sup> A local celebrity and a *primus motor* for a thriving boxing business in town, "El Matador's" winning streak soon lifted him up in the world rankings to be a contender for the WBC super-featherweight title. Just as he was on the threshold of international pugilistic fame, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) found out about his past felony conviction and deported the prospective world champion to his place of birth, Chihuahua, Mexico.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, local promoters continued to present boxing shows, headlining 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 Hur 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 the Texas State Championship against Nelson Alexander of Forth Worth in the junior welterweight division on May 17, 2002.<sup>84</sup>

After Jesus Chávez’s three-year exile in Mexico, the INS revoked their earlier deportation order and allowed him to re-enter the United States in November of 2000. On his return, Chávez signed a contract with Bob Arum’s 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 as main event, while bringing to town such up-and-coming fistic television 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.”<sup>85</sup> To the joy of the local aficionados, Chávez won his comeback NABF title defense in Austin on February 23, 2001, against former world champion Tom “Boom Boom” Johnson.<sup>86</sup> He was also victorious in his next fight against Juan Arias in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on May 23, 2001.<sup>87</sup> “El Matador’s” career culmination was the first world championship bout ever organized in Austin, when he won the WBC super-featherweight title by a unanimous decision against Thailand’s Sirimongkol Singmanassuk on August 15, 2003. The fervor of the sold-out crowd spoke of the boxer’s reputation in town: he had raised the visibility of Austin prize-fighting to unprecedented dimensions. Interestingly, however, it was not until Chávez *lost* the title against Mexican three-division world champion Erik “El Terrible” Morales on February 28, 2004, that he gained *national* recognition and newfound esteem in the United States. Injuring his arm in the second round of the bout, Chávez fought some ten rounds with only one arm exhibiting, according to the *New York Times*, “one of the most courageous performances . . . ever seen [in boxing]; the kind . . . that gives credence to this game, that makes it worthwhile.”<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the growing popularity of boxing in Austin, the sport has also brought about some interesting commercial ramifications. The first to take advantage of the boom have been beer companies. As fight aficionados know, beer sponsors enjoy the largest advertising visibility in prizefighting, since both the canvas and the ring card-girls typically advertise such companies as Miller Lite, Budweiser, or *Corona*. But in Texas, Miller Lite actually launched its own championship boxing shows, the “Miller Lite Texas Title Belt Professional Boxing Series” in 1998. Since no sanctioning bodies recognize such a title in their rankings, the belt obviously has more to do with commercialism than boxing merits; but even so, whenever a title—malt or otherwise—is on the line, it increases public interest and ticket sales. Should a star fighter endorse the beverage, the outcome can reach rather remarkable dimensions, which was the case with Jesus Chávez’s sponsorship agreement with Miller Lite in 2002.<sup>89</sup> Such was the regional gravitas of the beer mogul and the celebrity boxer that the University of Texas actually abandoned its strict no-alcohol policy on its premises for the duration of professional boxing matches, a decision which did not

escape the *Austin American-Statesman*: “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.”<sup>90</sup> During the year 2003, Miller Lite sponsored sixteen boxing shows in Texas, promoted mainly by Top Rank and Main Events and televised by *Telefuturá’s Sólo Boxeo* and ESPN2’s *Friday Night Fights*. On the whole, the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation sanctioned sixty-five professional fight cards during the year in such cities as Amarillo, Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, Humble, Laredo, McAllen, and San Antonio, raising the state to the second position it holds in the number of boxing matches organized in the United States.<sup>91</sup> While Austin, then, may have seemed like an altogether unlikely site for U.S. boxing at first sight; on closer look, one learns that its pugilistic practices have developed quite consistently with the sport elsewhere in Texas. The fact that local Latino fighters should suddenly get more publicity than they typically have in the past is tied to larger cultural trends worldwide. Given the growing interest in Latinos in U.S. popular culture and academic discourses, Latinos in the Southwest will, by default, keep drawing more attention.

## Conclusion

My attempt has been to shed light on the *latinization* of boxing by elevating a largely anonymous cohort of Texas boxers to the center stage of scholarly scrutiny; and by showcasing Austin as an example of the sport’s everyday culture, I hope to have demonstrated the regionalization underway in contemporary boxing. To conclude, however, it bears underscoring that any and all local boxing communities are always interrelated with ongoing national and international sporting currents, and all of my Texan interviewees are an inherent part of the existing pugilistic networks. Thus, boxing enables them to formulate their identities on several spatial scales, as their personal development comes to assume meanings specifically through the sport’s everyday practices. Elucidating identity formations as dynamic negotiation processes at such scales as the neighborhood, the city, and the nation also suggests an underlying tension between social control and individual mobility in society at large. Whereas the boxers’ early experiences form the basis of their ethnoracially and class-based demarcation of the city, their encounters speak to larger socio-spatial boundaries in the United States as well. In addition, while the boxers may negotiate individual mobility and social control within various regional settings on a personal level; as Latino fighters, their collective status is further contested within the cultural context of the Americas. Yet again, they are simultaneously part and parcel of an international cohort of worker-athletes who perform within the shifting socio-economic conditions and pugilistic principles worldwide. For these bodily laborers, then, professional boxing becomes a self-made means to connect to, claim a stake within, and make a mark on a sporting, socio-economic, and cultural chain of command. Ultimately, when one acknowledges that contemporary prizefighting *per se* is currently re-evaluating its own changing identity, it might serve the sport well to occasionally steer the focus from the broad historical spectrum to what actually takes place in its everyday culture, specifically from the perspective of the athletes themselves.





<sup>1</sup>See “Boxing and Federal Laws: Hearing on Reform of Professional Boxing Industry before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation,” 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, 23 May 2001, <<http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/hearings01.htm>> [24 March 2004].

<sup>2</sup>In 1952, an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* ranked the prominence of twentieth-century professional boxers in the following order: the Irish dominated the fighter numbers until 1916; by 1928, Jews had taken over the list, although only to be replaced by the Italians in 1936. In 1948, a new category, the “Negro,” dominated the rankings, and that year also saw the appearance of Mexicans for the first time, in the third place. See S. Kirson Weinberg and Henry Arond, “The Occupational Culture of the Boxer,” *American Journal of Sociology* 57 (1952): 460–469.

<sup>3</sup>In sheer numbers, Latinos from across the Americas overwhelmingly dominate today’s world prize-fight rankings and championships. According to three international governing bodies—the World Boxing Association (WBA), the World Boxing Council (WBC), and the International Boxing Federation (IBF)—Latinos hold the majority of all championship titles below the middleweight division. This is also 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 typically headed by Latinos, whereas African American fighters top the five categories from the middleweight division upwards.

<sup>4</sup>Boxing analysts on television usually cite three reasons for the heavyweight division’s crisis: that many of the past decade’s champions—such as Lennox Lewis—do not have magnetic enough personalities; 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.

<sup>5</sup>In 2003, California ranked first with 108 professional fight cards organized annually, Texas was second with sixty-five cards, and Nevada placed third with fifty-five cards. See Jack Obermayer, “K.O.-J.O. Says,” *Boxing Digest* 46 (2004): 46. See also the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, “Sunset Self-Evaluation Report,” 17 August 2001, pp. 62–65, <<http://www.license.state.tx.us/reports.htm>> [28 April 2004].

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Hauser, *A Year at the Fights* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 196. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>7</sup><<http://www.mainevents.com/pressreleases.php?id=6>> [3 February 2004].

<sup>8</sup>“Boxing on TV,” *The Ring Extra* 83 (2004): 36.

<sup>9</sup>*The Contender* represented the on-going geographic shift in professional boxing quite well: the show’s teams were divided into the East Coast and the West Coast, and the one representing the West was invariably better than the East Coast team.

<sup>10</sup>On Latino boxing in the 1980s, see Gerald Early’s “Hot Spics Versus Cool Spades: Three Notes toward a Cultural Definition of Prizefighting,” in his *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1989), 115–129; and his *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Hopewell, N.J.: The Ecco Press, 1994). On Mexican American boxing in California, see 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” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1999). On Latino boxing in Texas, see Benita Heiskanen, “Fighting Identities: The Body in Space and Place” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2004).

<sup>11</sup>I am using the term “ethnoracial” here to emphasize the interdependent nature of race and ethnicity in identity formations: Latino/as come from a range of different ethnic backgrounds, while they identify with multiple racial markers. For discussion on U.S. Latino/a identity formations, see Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Páez, eds., *Latinos: Remaking America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Arlene Dávila, *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 *The Good Citizen*, eds. David Batstone and Eduardo Méndieta (New York: Routledge, 1999),

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

<sup>12</sup>Ever since an early sanctioned women's boxing bout took place in 1993, the interest in women's fighting has been astounding. Only a year later, no less than eighteen women boxers participated in an amateur fight card in Austin; 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.

<sup>13</sup>On scholarly analyses on the cultural/societal ramifications of boxing, see Geoffrey Beattie, *On the Ropes: Boxing as a Way of Life* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1996); Donald McRae, *Dark Trade: Lost in Boxing* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Mainstream Press, 1996); Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Jeffrey Sammons, "'Race' and Sport: A Critical Historical Examination," *Journal of Sport History* 21 (1994): 203-278; John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1996); Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); idem, "The Prizefighters' Three Bodies," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 63 (1998): 325-352; idem, "A Fleshpeddler at Work: Power, Pain, and Profit in the Prizefighting Economy," *Theory and Society* 27 (1998): 1-42; idem, "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade," *Theory and Society* 24 (1995): 489-535; and idem, "Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers," *Body and Society* 1 (1995): 65-93. 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.

<sup>14</sup>For local census information, see <<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us>> [28 April 2004].

<sup>15</sup>Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 2.

<sup>16</sup>James William McCarver, Jr., "The Blackland Miracle: An Analysis of the Development of Power in an East Austin Neighborhood from 1982 to 1994" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1995), 19.

<sup>17</sup>See John A. Gronowski and Suzanne K. Weiler, "East Austin Survey: Educational Attainment, Job Skills, Employment Status, and Job Opportunities" (Austin: University of Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, 1987).

<sup>18</sup>Phone conversation with demographer Ryan Robinson, 18 December 2003, Department of Planning, City of Austin, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>19</sup>According to Robinson, the visible change in the area's demographic patterns is that it increasingly attracts newly arrived, low-income immigrant families. *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>The existing ethnoracial status quo is also reflected in the fact that precious little scholarly literature, whether articles or monographs, exists on East Austin's Latino community, or Latino-Anglo relations in town. However, Benjamin Chappell's "Lowrider Space: A Critical Encounter of Knowledge" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2003) is an excellent exception to the rule, as it attempts to begin to fill some of the void of Latinos as an untold story in Austin's history from an ethnographic perspective. On historical and anthropological literature on ethnoracial relations in the Texas-Mexican borderlands region, see Richard Bauman and Roger D. Abrahams, eds., *"And Other Neighborly Names": Social Process and Cultural Image in Texas Folklore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981);

Richard Flores, "The *Corrido* and the Emergence of Texas-Mexican Social Identity," *Journal of American Folklore* 101 (1992): 166-182; Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); idem, "Becoming Hispanic: Mexican Americans and the Faustian Pact with Whiteness," in *Reflexiones 1997: New Directions in Mexican American Studies*, ed. Neil Foley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 53-70; José Limón, *Dancing With the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); idem, *Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); and Americo Paredes, "With His Pistol in His Hand": *A Border Ballad And Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958).

<sup>21</sup>Interview with Joel Elizondo with author, 23 April 2003, San Antonio, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Carlos Valdez with author, 13 April 2003, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>23</sup>Because of the sensitivity of the boxer's experience, I would like to secure his anonymity in this particular case.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Interview with Johnny Casas with author, 21 November 2002, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Conrad Sanchez with author, 11 April 2003, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>27</sup>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. Casas interview.

<sup>28</sup>Joel Elizondo interview; Valdez interview.

<sup>29</sup>Interview with Javier Alvarez with author, 19 July 2003, San Antonio, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>30</sup>Austin's regional Golden Gloves tournaments were sponsored by the *Austin American-Statesman* Golden Gloves Association. The information is gathered from the annual Golden Gloves programs from the personal scrapbook and courtesy of Joe Vela. Private papers of Joe Vela, Austin, Texas.

<sup>31</sup>Sanchez interview, 11 April 2003.

<sup>32</sup>The predecessor of the Pan American Recreation Center was the Latin-American Center, which was established in East Austin in 1942. It provided such activities as the Boy Scouts, the Girls' Reserves, Century Club, the Mothers' Club, folk-dancing, and storytelling, but boxing was not a part of its activities.

<sup>33</sup>I would like to thank Gloria Mata Pennington of the City of Austin and Margaret Schlankey of the Austin History Center in tracking down clippings with regard to the "rec" centers' development.

<sup>34</sup>On the 1970s amateur boxing scene in Austin, with listings of all the existing boxing programs and a featured profile of A.B. Cantú, see 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*, 25 March 1978, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup>Valdez interview.

<sup>36</sup>This is not a verbatim quotation from any one person. I have tried to sum up the idea as expressed by various boxers.

<sup>37</sup>Sport historians have written abundantly about the intersections of race/ethnicity, class, and gender in the context of U.S. immigration history and urbanization. See, for example, Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell

University Press, 1986); Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and His America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); 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); Steven A. Reiss, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); and David K. Wiggins, ed., *Sport in America: From Wicked Amusement to National Obsession* (Urbana: Human Kinetics, 1995).

<sup>38</sup>Sanchez interview, 11 April 2003.

<sup>39</sup>Joel Elizondo interview.

<sup>40</sup>Interview with Inéz Guerrero with author, 25 August 2003, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>41</sup>Alvarez interview.

<sup>42</sup>Interview with Pete Gil with author, 3 September 2003, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>43</sup>This information is gathered from all of the boxer interviews, as well as personal clippings of Johnny Casas, Conrad and Patricia Sanchez, and Carlos Valdez, notes in possession of author.

<sup>44</sup>Valdez interview.

<sup>45</sup>On Carlos Valdez's early ring experience, see Bill Douthat, "Youthful Boxers Put Spirit in Ring," *Austin American-Statesman*, 28 May 1979, sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup>Manuel Navarro was a national bantamweight champion from Austin in 1964. See "In the Spotlight: Conrad Sanchez Wins State Championship" *Austin American-Statesman*, 17 March 1981, sec. C, p. 1. See also Randy Riggs, "Gold Glover Finds Father Knows Best: Youth's Affair with Boxing is a Glove Story," *Austin American-Statesman*, 25 June 1981, sec. C, p. 1. Both newspaper articles are courtesy of Conrad and Patricia Sanchez.

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Conrad and Patricia Sanchez with author, 9 January 2004, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>48</sup>Valdez interview.

<sup>49</sup>Bill Valdez, "Austin Sends 11 Boxers to State Golden Gloves," *Austin American-Statesman*, [undated, 1982]. The newspaper article is courtesy of Conrad and Patricia Sanchez.

<sup>50</sup>Bill Valdez, "Battles in the Ring: Golden Gloves a Stepping Stone for Some, a Hobby for Others," *Austin American-Statesman*, 1 February 1982, sec. D, p. 6. The newspaper article is courtesy of Johnny Casas.

<sup>51</sup>"Austin Boxers in Nationals," *Austin American-Statesman*, [undated, 1984]. The newspaper article is courtesy of Johnny Casas.

<sup>52</sup>Admission fees for amateur boxing events were as low as \$2 for adults, \$1 for students, and \$ 4 for a weekend's tournament pass.

<sup>53</sup>Interview with Gloria Elizondo with author, 29 July 2003, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>54</sup>Valdez interview.

<sup>55</sup>Sanchez interview, 11 April 2003.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Alvarez interview.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid. Alvarez participated four times in the Olympic trials.

<sup>59</sup>Alvarez interview.

<sup>60</sup>Gregory Rodríguez's article, "Saving Face, Place, and Race: Oscar De La Hoya and the 'All-American' Dreams of U.S. Boxing," in *Sport Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, eds. John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 279-298, discusses identity politics surrounding the career of Oscar De La Hoya, probably the best known superstar Latino boxer for "mainstream" or "white" U.S. audiences, from a slightly different perspective—that of representations.

De La Hoya's career, Rodríguez argues, has become loaded with meanings attached to it from various interested parties, all of whom claim a stake in his identity representations: many "whites" consider him to be a "cross-over" American whose "Mexicanness" is suppressed because of his middle-class financial status; whereas many working-class Mexicans, for precisely the same reasons, have come to regard him as a "sell-out." While I agree with Rodríguez's particular reading on De La Hoya's case, my own approach toward boxing is somewhat different, for I am not primarily concerned with representations; nor is De La Hoya comparable to my interviewees, most of whom can be regarded as neither "commercial spectacles" nor "transcending race" in the eyes of the large sporting public in the United States, let alone the international fight scene. Even if they are all Latino boxers, their substantial difference here boils down to the cash value of the athletes: *because* my interviewees are not widely known celebrities worldwide, they do not have the burden of having to choose a single or binary essentialized identity.

<sup>61</sup>Valdez interview.

<sup>62</sup>Casas interview.

<sup>63</sup>Sanchez interview, 11 April 2003.

<sup>64</sup>See Miguel M. Salinas and Kevin Virobik-Adams, "Bringing Back Boxing: Effort to Revive Sport Aimed," *Austin American-Statesman*, 31 March 1994: section "Neighbor East."

<sup>65</sup>Guerrero interview.

<sup>66</sup>See Rebecca Thatcher, "Boxing Trainer Cantu, 65, Dies," *Austin American-Statesman*, 14 February 1996, sec. B, p. 5; and Starita Smith, "Center Renamed in Honor of A.B. Cantu," *Austin American-Statesman*, 18 August 1996, sec. B, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup>Interview with Joe Vela with author, 25 May 2004, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>68</sup>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.

<sup>69</sup>Casas interview.

<sup>70</sup>Valdez interview.

<sup>71</sup>Prizefighting is notorious for its seedy business practices, worker-exploitation, and corrupt fight officiating, while illegitimate contracts, manipulated rankings, and rigged results are commonplace in its everyday maneuverings. See, for example, Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986); Jack Newfield, *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1995); Jack Newfield, "The Shame of Boxing," *The Nation*, 12 November 2001, pp. 13-22; and Steven Riess, "Only the Ring Was Square: Frankie Carbo and the Underworld Control of American Boxing," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 5 (1988): 29-52.

<sup>72</sup>Sanchez interview, 11 April 2003.

<sup>73</sup>Casas interview.

<sup>74</sup>Interview with Abel Davilla with author, 22 August 2003, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

<sup>75</sup>Chávez had moved into town in 1994 to establish his professional career after a solid amateur background in Chicago under the name of Gabriel Sandoval, before getting into legal trouble and serving a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence for armed robbery. On Chávez's life-story, see Jan Reid, *The Bullet Meant for Me: A Memoir* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002).

<sup>76</sup>See Sarah Hornaday, "An Underdog that Barked Too Loud; Spotlight is Shining on Chávez after Convincing Performances," *Austin American-Statesman*, 22 August 1995, sec. C, p. 1; "Chávez-Vicencio Bout Will Top 'Brawl in the Music Hall,'" *Austin American-Statesman*, 25 August 1995, sec. C, p. 9; Sarah Hornaday, "Austin Boxer Chávez Wins by Knockout at Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman*, 26 August 1995, sec. C, p. 1; idem, "Buda's Mike Trejo Marches on Fight Night at Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman*, 26 August 1995, sec. C, p. 1; and "Boxing is Back at the Music Hall," *Austin American-Statesman*, 2 November 1995, sec. D, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup>See Mark Wangrin, "In This Corner: Austin Boxer Chávez Will Battle Tonight for Vacant Featherweight Title," *Austin American-Statesman*, 31 March 1996, sec. C, p. 1; Andy Dubois, "Austin's Chávez

Claims Featherweight Crown,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 1 April 1996, sec. C, p. 3; and Steve Habel, “‘El Matador’ Bullish in Decisive Win: Chávez Wins Unanimous Decision Over Jauregui in Featherweight Title Bout,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 10 August 1996, sec. D, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup>See Suzanne Halliburton, “Chávez’s Title Fight Believed City’s Biggest,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 11 July 1996, sec. D, p. 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*, 9 August 1996, sec. C, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup>See Mark Wangrin, “Flu Knocks Chávez out of the Brawl,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 23 January 1997, sec. C, p. 1; idem, “Trejo Headlines Card,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 24 January 1997, sec. C, p. 1; and idem, “Trejo KOs His Past and Manzano” *Austin American-Statesman*, 25 January 1997, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup>See Mark Rosner, “Chávez-Leija Bout Lands Here: Fox Will Televisé NABF Title Fight,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 13 February 1997, sec. C, p. 1; Mark Wangrin, “Brawls Are Big Draws, Outgrowing Music Hall,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 3 March 1997, sec. C, p. 8; and idem, “Austin’s Chávez Wins Technical KO Over Leija in Brawl in Music Hall,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 4 March 1997, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup>See Rick Cantu, “San Marcos’ Trejo Takes Shot at NABF Flyweight Title,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 17 November 1998, sec. D, p. 1; and idem, “Trejo Pounds His Way to Flyweight Title, San Marcos Boxer Triumphs,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 18 November 1998, sec. D, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup>See Rick Cantu, “Austin’s Chávez Ready for Bigger Boxing Ring,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 30 May 1997, sec. C, p. 1. After a split with Main events, Lou Duva, Dino Duva, and Donna Duva founded the promotional company Duva Boxing in 2000.

<sup>83</sup>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*, 9 February 2001, pp. 54-59; Jan Reid, “The Contender,” *Texas Monthly*, 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](http://www.courttv.com/news/feature/boxer3.com_ctv.htm)> [5 February 2002].

<sup>84</sup>See Ted Kian, “Zamarron Enjoys a Crowning Moment; Austin Fighter Pounds Out,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 30 January 1997, sec. C, p. 1; and Curtis Johnson, “Lord Lowers Boom on Vegas Opponent,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 5 August 2000, sec. C, p. 3. With the growing interest in local boxing, ticket sales went up in comparison to the early days, 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 complimentary passes for fight cards in Texas.

<sup>85</sup>Cedric Golden, “Chávez Finally Returning to Fight in Austin,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 26 January 2001, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup>See Cedric Golden, “Long Wait for Chávez Will Finally End Friday,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 21 February 2001, sec. C, p. 2; and John Maher, “TKO Chávez; Ex-Austinite Lowers the Boom on Johnson,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 24 February 2001, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup>See Cedric Golden, “Title Looms If Chávez Wins Saturday’s Bout,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 23 May 2001, sec. D, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup>Michael Katz, “Beaten Chávez Leaves Ring with Head Up,” *New York Times*, 1 March 2004, sec. D, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup>See “Miller Light Names Professional Boxer, Jesus Chávez, as Spokesperson,” <[http://www.hispanicwire.com/release\\_Miller\\_Chávez\\_ENG.htm](http://www.hispanicwire.com/release_Miller_Chávez_ENG.htm)> [23 February 2004].

<sup>90</sup>Cedric Golden, “Beer Will Flow at Erwin Center for the First Time Tonight,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 23 February 2001, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup>See “Miller Light Names Professional Boxer, Jesus Chávez, as Spokesperson,” [http://www.hispanicwire.com/release\\_Miller\\_Chávez\\_ENG.htm](http://www.hispanicwire.com/release_Miller_Chávez_ENG.htm) [23 February 2004]. See also <<http://www.license.state.tx.us/sports/sportsevents.htm>> [21 January 2006].