

# Encounters with Jesus ‘El Matador’ Chávez: In and Out of the Ring

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This article considers sport as a locus for US Latino ethnoracial identity formations. To suggest a dialogue between everyday practices and academic discourses, it first examines professional boxing on a theoretical level as a network of spatio-bodily power dynamics; it then discusses the life story and legal case of world champion Jesus ‘El Matador’ Chávez. A Mexican national who grew up in the USA, Chávez was twice deported before winning his legal case against the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in November 2000. Through his story, the article problematizes identity formations within various spatial frameworks – such as the city, the prison, the ring and USA–Mexico national borders. It also considers how the boxing body is both linked to power relations and how, through its own agency, it contests those relations. Ultimately, Chávez’s case exemplifies the fluidity of identity formations, the incongruency of many identity signifiers, and how, simultaneously, identity formations have a necessary strategic and political function.

I could be considered Mexican or Chicano or Tejano, although I usually say I’m ‘Mexican’. But it’s important that some of us start realizing that, in the end, we are all Latinos and we still eat the same beans.

(Boxing champion Jesus ‘El Matador’ Chávez<sup>1</sup>)

## INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

In January 2000, when I was a PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin, I took a graduate seminar entitled ‘Documentary Explorations’, which had a fieldwork component as a requirement. According to the instructions for our first assignment, we were to do a ‘mini-documentary’ on something that people generally perceived in a stereotypical or

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simplistic manner, something that we, on the other hand, were familiar with and could portray in a different light. A photojournalism student and I teamed up to do an in-depth portrayal of a Mexican bantamweight boxer who, we had been told, was claiming fame in town.<sup>3</sup> Although I had not been involved with boxing for some time, I was quite familiar with the fistic world, for I grew up on fight circles in Finland, following my brother Tom Heiskanen's amateur and professional career in the 1970s and 1980s. The very first interview, however, fell through, because the bantamweight left the gym due to professional disagreements with his manager. Instead, we became acquainted with a cohort of other fighters in town; and, with a background in martial arts, I soon started working out at the gym myself. Not long thereafter, my dissertation topic changed from the late *Tejano* singer Selena Quintanilla Perez to a community of Latino prizefighters who grew up and began boxing in the East Austin *barrio* from the 1970s onward (Heiskanen, 2004). For the next four years, then, I was working out at gyms, interviewing or transcribing interviews, going to boxing matches in town or out-of-town road trips; or else I was at the library, reading boxing literature, trade magazines, or scanning newspaper articles; and if at home, I found myself watching several 2–3-hour fight cards weekly on TV.<sup>4</sup>

During my early interactions with fight insiders in Texas, the name Jesus Chávez frequently popped up in conversations. There was talk about his extraordinary boxing talent; about his deportation to Mexico because of some legal trouble; and that if only he were allowed back to the USA, he would be world champion in no time. A Mexican national who grew up in the USA, Chávez was twice deported before winning his legal case against the Immigration and Naturalization Service in November 2000. A year later I would conduct my first interview with him. By the time he was back at the gym, I already knew many other boxers in town, so 'establishing rapport' with Jesus was never an issue. The first time I saw him face-to-face was early one morning: he was done with his workout, and – like many of the pro boxers often did – he offered to help me out with the medicine ball and the punch mitts. Besides, I had gathered from my discussions with other fighters that I had three things going for me as a researcher: first, my brother was a boxer, so I was not a 'newbie' in the fight game; second, I was a foreigner, and people really had no preconceived notions about Finland whatsoever; and third, I spoke Spanish, hardly a minor detail with Latino fighters in Texas. For example, when Johnny Casas, an Austinite welterweight, once put me in touch with an interviewee, he offered the following explanation: 'I don't know what you call a person from Finland, if she is 'white' or 'Finnish'. But she is really smart and she speaks Spanish.' Another time, someone else from the gym asked me: 'I heard you speak Spanish to Gallito the other day, but I thought you were white. What are you?' After I heard similar comments

a few times, I understood how deeply, on an everyday level, US ethnoracial identities were conflated with language: Spanish equaled being non-white – irrespective of one's skin colour – whereas English automatically labeled one a *gringo/a*, regardless of one's actual nationality.

During 2001–2002, I conducted two taped interviews (3–4 hours each) with Jesus Chávez. In addition, I had a number of informal encounters with him at the gym; and once he came to UT campus to listen to a presentation I gave on his life story and legal case at a graduate student conference.<sup>5</sup> Both of the interviews turned into powerful experiences: I felt privileged by the fact that he was willing to share his personal and professional experiences with me, complete with all the joyful and painful memories that my questions brought with them. I was also struck by his conspicuous mood change during the interview: at the gym he was always joking and fooling around; talking with me, he became extremely articulate and analytical – almost 'academic' – in his approach toward his profession. I had a broad interest in sport and ethnoracial identity formations, but Chávez's life chronology enabled me to begin delineating their connection as *spatially* determined processes. Born in Chihuahua, Mexico, bred in Chicago, Illinois, and living in Austin, Texas, his personal experiences came to assume meanings within such spatial dynamics as the *barrio*, the prison, the boxing gym, and USA–Mexico national borders, also evoking a larger tension between social control and individual mobility in US society. Chávez's legal encounters within the United States, his citizenship battles with the INS, and his rise in North American boxing to world championship level all further illustrated the complexities at work in identity formations within various everyday contexts. To get a sense of the boxer's growing popularity and reputation in town, I also did extensive research on media depictions of his career, with particular attention to the coverage of the city's main newspaper, the *Austin American-Statesman* during 1995–2005.

My theoretical conceptualization of boxing was initially informed 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 (Rabinow, 1984: 17) key argument that '[d]iscipline proceeds from an organization of individuals in space, and it requires a specific enclosure in space', I thought of prizefighting as a basic form of bodily and spatial knowledge, always in conversation with larger societal and pugilistic power dynamics. Various spatial frameworks within the sport, such as gyms, dressing rooms, weigh-ins and competition venues, in turn, offer everyday sites for these processes, while the boxing body enables the contestation of the existing power relations. The Foucauldian premise was subsequently exemplified in practice by Loïc Wacquant's (1995a; 1995b; 1998a; 1998b; 2004) sociological work with journeymen boxers in Chicago. Wacquant depicts

how boxers conceptualize their lives, work, and social relations within the everyday culture of the sport, and he (1995a: 501) argues that boxing, in effect, serves as ‘the vehicle for a project of *ontological transcendence* whereby those who embrace it seek literally to fashion themselves into a new being’. It is also my contention that boxing is centrally about *seeking* to improve one’s ontological status, for it is through the sport that many boxers conceptualize their everyday existence – training, competition, injuries, sacrifices, diet, pain, fear and control of desire – and the body serves as a foundation for both their athletic achievement and personal development. The instrument as well as the physical target of the combat, the body comes to constitute an all-embracing significance to a boxer’s being: it serves as the only medium to conduct one’s occupation, but it also comprises the principal source of athletic information, technical know-how and professional expertise. However, rather than a literal ‘transcendence’, I would characterize boxing as enabling a *continual ontological contestation*, because identity formations fluctuate amidst different bodily encounters within the shifting social dynamics on a daily basis, never quite reaching a completion or a permanent state of ‘transcendence’.

For such theoretical delineation, I also found Joyce Carol Oates’s *On boxing* thought-provoking. Oates (1987: 8) depicts how seemingly ordinary bodily, spatial, and temporal aspects of boxing turn into extraordinary existential experiences: ‘Boxers are there to establish an absolute experience, a public accounting of the outermost limits of their beings; they will know, as few of us can know of ourselves, what physical and psychic power they possess – of how much, of how little, they are capable’. In its most elemental terms, then, boxing is a combat between two bodies within a confined space against limited time, but it hardly ever is solely about physical prowess. Jesus Chávez, for example, describes the function of the boxer’s body for strategic information:

When I first meet the person I’m gonna fight, it is with his clothes on. I look at the way he dresses; how he approaches me; how he treats other people. I look at his facial wounds – war wounds – scars in his tissue; whether he has a limp, whether his hands are long. And, finally, at the weigh-in, without his shirt on, I size him out. And I look at his bone structure: does he look solid or weak, where the strengths and weaknesses of his physique are.

In spatial terms, the boxing match has to do with controlling the geography of the canvas. Chávez (ibid.) describes the spatial logic of the ring:

There are different types of rings, big ones and small ones. If you don’t have enough force to take control of the ring, then you use it to your advantage. The big rings are for boxers who like to move and use the space; the small ones are for punchers who prefer not to have their opponents run around.

Powerful fighters fight in a smaller ring, while slimmer and faster fighters want to fight in a more spacious ring, where they can maneuver better.

Specific types of rings correspond to boxers' different stylistic approaches and become hotly contested tactical choices, especially in a championship fight, even if the contender typically has to succumb to the champion's home turf advantage in such matters. However, in addition to the explicit technical battle, other more implicit battles transpire during the course of the fight: one over gaining control of one's *own* body; another over carving spatial autonomy for oneself and, ultimately, over defining one's own identity. Indeed, the body does not, as Jacquelyn Zita (1998: 146) so aptly writes, exist in a sociocultural vacuum: '[it] is also materialized and assembled in cultures, histories, and languages, and continuously represented by laws, ideologies, and various regimes of knowledge. The body is a critical nexus serving the effects of power, as well as an inner sanctum of human agency'.

In the rest of this paper, I want to consider sport as a locus for US Latino ethnoracial identity formations through the life story of Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez. US prizefighting, in particular, carries meanings as a racialized practice, corresponding to minority groups' integration endeavours in social hierarchies on an everyday level. For the past half-century, the sport has been overwhelmingly dominated by African American and Latino athletes<sup>6</sup> but, as I have argued elsewhere (Heiskanen, 2005), it is currently undergoing increasing *latinization* and regionalization from its northeastern origins into a southwestern phenomenon. This racialized sport takes place in the spatial margins of society and, as a result, is regarded as a peripheral activity; it is viewed marginal within the hierarchy of sports in general; and boxers themselves are considered to represent the outskirts of socio-economic power dynamics.<sup>7</sup> Another spatial aspect of boxing is its solitary nature: many fighters identify themselves as 'loners'; they often choose the one-on-one combat consciously as opposed to team sports; and they are generally instructed to minimize personal/physical interactions several weeks before a fight. Even so, as Kevin Hetherington (1998: 107) argues, 'those who adopt values and beliefs that are perceived as marginal within society, are likely to have some sort of symbolic affinity with the identity in question. Such spaces facilitate opportunities for being different and the constitution of new identities'. Furthermore, I would suggest that marginality provides spaces for the formulation of situational identities and intra-group solidarities, what several cultural critics (see, for example, Spivak, 1996: 214) have called 'strategic essentialism'. Such a process has to do with appropriating certain identities for a political purpose or, as Coco Fusco (1995: 27) puts it, 'a critical position that validates identity as politically

necessary but not as ahistorical or unchangeable'. In other words, it acknowledges the fluidity of identities, but does not deny their *de facto* communal function. When Jesus Chávez (interview, 2001) reasons in the epigraph that 'it's important that some of us start realizing that, in the end, we are all Latinos and we still eat the same beans', he is emphasizing the political urgency of ethnoracial identity formations as well as the strategic function that any identity labels have. But to understand the background for such reasoning, let us now turn to his life story.

## CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

An examination into Jesus Chávez's personal history begins with naming. Born in a Mexican mining town of Parral, Chihuahua in 1972, he was christened Jesus Gabriel Sandoval Chávez. Throughout his childhood and adolescence (that is, school and amateur boxing career) he was known by his paternal surname as Gabriel Sandoval. In 1979, the Sandoval family moved illegally to the United States; they settled in Chicago; and applied for permanent residency as part of an amnesty in 1987. Although the parents soon gained their green cards, Gabriel and his sister's applications were declined, because a technicality classified them ineligible for permanent residency. Due to a 1982 sojourn in Mexico, while their mother underwent heart surgery, the children's school records showed a one-year gap and, as a result, they did not fulfil the INS's requirement of seven consecutive years in the United States before qualifying for legal status. The INS's ruling was remarkable – not only because of its impact on these individual lives, but as a legal and social principle: that under-aged, immigrant children could be, in effect, separated from their parents in legal status. (The obvious paradox here is that while children lack legal and political autonomy in society, the INS in this case considers them to be independent agents in determining citizenship status or lack thereof.)

During his childhood, such legal details seemed relevant to neither Gabriel's identity nor his everyday life: he went to school, had hobbies and played with his friends – just like any other immigrant kid in the neighbourhood. It was not until later, with recognition in amateur boxing, that the citizenship question first became an issue: whether he would be able to represent the USA in international boxing tournaments. When Gabriel began boxing in 1982, within months his handlers started signing him up for local events and district tournaments, and he was soon winning most bouts in the flyweight division. By 1987, he became the Chicago Youth Organization Champion, the Amateur Boxing Federation Champion, and he was named Chicago's Amateur Boxer of the Year. In three consecutive years – 1988, 1989 and 1990 – he won the Chicago Golden Gloves Championships. At this time, he had three simultaneous

social frames of reference: school, boxing and gang membership. He was generally considered to be a rising star in boxing; high school newspapers printed stories about the up-and-coming local prospect; and he himself strongly identified with the boxing team. On his boxing merits, he was awarded a scholarship to pursue studies at a university, but – secretly – he also became a member of the Harrison Gents, one of Chicago's tough gangs. When on 25 September 1990, Gabriel decided to join two fellow gang members – albeit as a passive accomplice – in a grocery-store robbery in Chicago, he prioritized the gang membership over the other two frames of reference: being a scholarship grantee or a sports star. In the following, he (interview, 2001) explains the circumstances in hindsight:

I was a good kid. I was going to school, I had two jobs, I was boxing; and I had a scholarship coming to Northern Michigan University. But [the gang] was different, something I had never experienced before – the attention they had – they seemed like pretty cool guys. I was a teenager, I didn't know jack about life; I didn't have a true direction. I had no idea that I could be one of the best boxers in the world. I was friends with everybody [in the gang], but whenever they needed to take care of some business, as they would say, they would sneak out and I felt left out. I guess [the robbery] was to get some respect, to know that I was down with whatever they were doing. So, when the guys asked me if I wanted to go along, it seemed very simple – just like you asked me if I would do this interview – and I said 'Sure'.

A general sense of confusion, a desire to belong, and peer pressure seem the main motives behind Gabriel's unfortunate choice. However, it was not until he was sentenced to seven years in prison (out of which he served 3.5 years) in the Illinois state penitentiary system, that the ramifications of the crime began to dawn on him.

Within the power dynamics of the prison system, Gabriel had, again, various social frames of reference, but in the new situation, *spatiality* took on a central role in identity formations. At stake was, as John Bale and Chris Philo (1998: 8) write, 'how spatial relations – the spaces in and through which bodies move, display themselves and are disciplined – enter into the articulation of bodily presences with the operations of wider socio-cultural formations'. Because of the confined everyday circumstances, Gabriel obviously identified himself as a prisoner first. Within the frame of reference of the other inmates, he also identified with the Harrison Gents, because the gang affiliation brought him a sense of security. Third, as an athlete, he (interview, 2001) viewed himself as a power-lifter, because bodily strength and physical weight were necessary for his self-defence: 'In there, I had to identify myself as a gang member; I had rivals there. And I was a power-lifter. I was buffed; I needed my body weight to fight the people in there. When I came out of there, I was weighing 175 pounds; now I'm back to 129.5'.

Inside the social space of the prison system, Gabriel deemed an over 40-pound *bodily* transformation as crucial to his everyday survival, but the *spatial* role of the Harrison Gents is also thought-provoking, for they exemplify the double-edged workings of power on an everyday level. They had a strategically necessary function for Gabriel's survival in jail, yet they were also his nemesis, as they were the cause of his initial incarceration. In addition to these identity formations, Gabriel's (interview, 2001) seemingly lost possibilities and identity as a boxer began to gain increasing foothold in his thoughts and daydreams:

[In prison] I had time to watch boxing. I thought that someday I'm gonna fight this dude or that someday I wanna be like this dude. I had my experience with boxing and people cheering my name — it's a thrill you never forget. It's the adrenaline that goes through your body ... and I just wanted to get back into it, to be a professional fighter, but I thought I never could be because of who I was at the time, a prisoner. I thought I had left the best of me on the streets — which was boxing.

When the 21-year-old Gabriel was paroled for good behaviour on 1 April 1994, he did not end up in Chicago's boxing gyms realizing those dreams; instead, he found himself on a plane to Mexico City. All of a sudden, his citizenship status (the 1982 situation that had caused the denial of his permanent residency earlier) took on new significance, because now the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was in effect, and it stated that all non-US citizens with a criminal conviction were to be deported from the country. The law did not take into account the circumstances that had denied Gabriel's legal status as a child; nor did it consider that his father and brother had become US citizens, that his mother and sister were permanent residents, or that he had lived practically his entire life in the USA — he was to be sent back to his place of birth. As followed, during the deportation flight's stop-over in Texas's capital city, Gabriel became mesmerized by Austin's skyline, quickly contemplating an opportunity to start his life afresh in a new place, to realize the daydreams envisioned during the long hours spent in the prison cell. After a brief stay in Mexico, then, he illegally crossed the Texas–Mexico border once more — again, undetected. But to give himself another chance as a boxer, he had to adopt a new identity — to be renamed — and to be spatially removed from Chicago. Enter Jesus Chávez of Austin, Texas.

## AUSTIN, TEXAS

After Jesus Chávez relocated to Austin in 1994, his mind was set on a singular agenda and his identity assumed little other meaning than that of a boxer. The transition from prisoner to boxer developed as he worked his

way up from an unheralded unknown to championship in Austin. Not only did he start training and competing immediately, but he soon moved into the boxing gym. The boxing body became inscribed in the social space of the gym: sparring, weightlifting, dieting and personal interactions all took place therein. Living in the gym, the trimmed, 130-pound Jesus was either working out or training other people. The much-quoted maxim that boxers 'eat, sleep, and breathe boxing' was literally true in Chávez's case. He initially began to use his maternal surname Chávez to go undetected by the INS, but his life soon became more representative of the newly adopted ring name, 'El Matador'. The matador was a tribute to Chávez's (interview, 2001) former boxing gym in Chicago, but it also represented his cultural legacy: 'I identified it with Spanish if not Mexican-Spanish culture'. 'A matador', Chávez (interview, 2002) explains, 'is basically a person who loves to fight *life* because if he wins, he gets to keep his life; if he doesn't, then the bull wins'. In Chávez's case, life meant boxing; the bull came to signify the INS.

After a couple of tune-up fights, Chávez ended his amateur career with a record of 95 victories to 5 defeats, and his professional debut took place on 5 August 1994. On 31 March 1996, he won the WBC Continental Americas featherweight title; on 9 August 1996, he gained the NABF featherweight championship; and on 5 March 1997, he was crowned with the NABF super-featherweight title.<sup>8</sup> He was soon offered a contract with Main Events Promotions, and his fights were subsequently broadcast on national television. A local celebrity, he had also become a prime motor for a thriving boxing business in Austin at a time when boxing was experiencing some major changes. First, women were now visibly present in the sport and second, boxing had also become a popular form of conditioning training for aficionados from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. These bodily presences affected boxing gyms in new ways, as they all began to interact within the existing social dynamics. With amateur and professional fighters working together with female and recreational boxers, many assumptions about social organization within the sport were seen in a new light. Chávez (interview, 2001) explains the social function of the diverse groups: 'There are all sorts of people walking into the gym, *all* sorts. That creates a different type of environment and a different kind of encouragement. There are a lot of women that train there which is a good thing for boxing: seeing them hit that bag makes me train harder.' Indeed, many of my Latino interviewees have used boxing to decipher their own understanding of gender relations, but Chávez, in particular, was a role model for the motley crowd – male and female alike – hence, his self-awareness of his bodily performance.

It is interesting to observe Jesus Chávez's career not only to see his development as an athlete, but also to see how his representations of himself as a

boxer gradually change. The boxing trunks, robes and other clothing are telling in this regard. What name, for example, does Chávez/his entourage use on the trunks; what else gets printed on them; which colours are chosen, and so on? In one of his early professional bouts, his trunks had all of the following items: 'Austin, Texas', 'Richard Lord's Boxing Gym', and 'Chávez'. In another bout, his trunks had the colours of the lone star flag with 'Austin, Texas' on them; yet in another fight, he had trunks which only stated 'Lord's Gym' (certain Christian groups, in fact, interpreted the message to be a religious one). For most of his professional career, his trunks have included 'Jesus Chávez – El Matador' in various colours and combinations. The fighter (interview, 2002) explains:

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

With his overall experiences as a prizefighter, Chávez began to take charge of the workings of his *own* body; to recognize his *own* agency within the pugilistic power relations; and to determine his *own* identity representations.

But just as the Matador rose up in the world rankings to be a contender for the WBC super featherweight title, the bull had also awakened. Because of some official paperwork that he had to file at the Texas Department of Public Safety, the INS pieced together that Jesus Chávez was Gabriel Sandoval. Taking into consideration his boxing accomplishments, they allowed Chávez to stay in the United States to fight some important fights, on the condition that he would then leave the country voluntarily. The news on Chávez's deportation created a movement in Austin: local boxing personas, fight aficionados, lawyers, politicians, writers and other public figures began an appeal process for a clemency hearing. Feature stories (see Acosta, 2000; Reid, 1998; 2002) on Chávez's life and career appeared in print; a documentary film (Garriott, 2000) was made about his life; and Austinites were signing petitions for his pardon. His supporters brought up the following incongruencies in his legal case: that he had served the sentence for which he was convicted; that he had been deported from the USA without an appeal process; and that he could not be deported as an aggravated felon when he was never a legal resident in the first place. So intense was the reaction in Texas that Austin Mayor Kirk Watson declared 7 August 1997, Jesus 'El Matador' Chávez Day. Two months later he was deported to Mexico.

## CHIHUAHUA, MEXICO

Whether he was referred to as Gabriel Sandoval, Jesus Chávez, or 'El Matador' had little significance in the dusty town of Delicias, the home of his grandparents in Chihuahua, Mexico. The fundamental question became to understand what 'Mexicanness' meant in this new context. Identity formations were now problematic within the spatial framework of *national* borders, and with the deportation, the body became a physical representation of law. The role of citizenship status, national boundaries, and language also intersected in an altogether new light, as Chávez was now exiled in a place legally deemed his home. While he had denoted his ethnoracial identity as 'Mexican' in the United States – referring to his cultural heritage rather than place of residence and/or citizenship status – the situation was more complex in Mexico: there he was considered Mexican American, a *pocho* or, to cite the historian Neil Foley (1997: 8), a 'gringoized Mexican'. Particularly problematic for Chávez (interview, 2001) was the conflation of identity with language, and not only because he encountered different vernacular versions of Spanish but – more important – because he could not understand *doble sentido*, a Mexican culture-specific capacity to signify:

Well, I basically felt like I was up in the air, because I grew up in the US, and my Spanish was not the same as the Spanish in Mexico; we don't have the same tongue. There in Mexico, they have a thing called *doble sentido* – when you say one thing and actually mean another. I went back to Mexico and a lot of people there realized that my accent was not the same; I didn't understand the *doble sentido*, so I wasn't considered a 'real' Mexican. But, then again, I didn't feel like an American because, although I grew up in the US and knew the language well, I had been deported from there.

Despite the adjustment transition, Chávez began his boxing regimen in Chihuahua. Training in elementary conditions and taking random fights, his (interview, 2002) impetus was to keep his WBC rankings, for he had risen to be the world champion's first challenger: 'I was training for a fight to survive, to keep my number one position – with the hopes that I could come back to the US.' Meanwhile, his immigration lawyers had begun working on a possible clemency hearing in the USA.

After two years in Mexico, Chávez got a chance to defend his (continental) NABF super featherweight title against the less prestigious Mexican (national) championship title in Mexico City. Curious incidents transpired during the preparations for the fight, and the boxer experienced the sport's notoriously corrupt everyday manoeuvrings first-hand. Because of an inexplicable fatigue during training sessions, Chávez sought a physician's advice, and laboratory tests showed a 350-milligram

barbiturate poisoning in him. Most likely, the drugs had been put in his food or drinking water, although to this date, it is unclear who was behind the poisoning. The championship bout, however, was postponed as a consequence, and the media in Mexico City invested the fight's meaning with ideas of national identity: 'El Matador' was ridiculed as the *pocho* who was afraid to face the *Mexican* champion. A newspaper cartoon (see Reid, 2002: 186–87) portrayed Jesus with shaking legs, with a caption saying 'Poor Jesus. He doesn't *feel* good'. Nonetheless, after his recovery, Chávez decided to go on with the original plan, and the 12-round bout did finally take place in Mexico City. On 23 May 1999, dressed in his *mata-dor* outfit, Jesus Chávez won the Mexican championship against the hometown favourite Julio Alvarez by a unanimous decision.

The boxing match had remarkable consequences. After the declaration of his victory, the Mexican TV announcer (see Garriott, 2000) proclaimed: 'Congratulations, El Matador! You have demonstrated that you are number one in the world, you have demonstrated that you are *Mexican*!' Boxing merits now became the basis on which Chávez's identity was conceptualized within Mexican national boundaries, and the championship entitled his claim to 'Mexicanness'. After the victory, Chávez (interview, 2001) explains, '[people in Mexico] considered me Mexican then, because I had beaten the Mexican national champion'. Six months later, his immigration lawyers were able to resolve his legal case in the United States. They found a provision under the immigration law (see Pitluk, 2001) which stated that if a person committed a crime under the age of 18, and five years had passed since the crime, a waiver for readmission to the United States was not necessary, and the person would only need the INS's permission for re-entry. Chávez was finally allowed to re-enter the United States legally in November 2000, and he was granted permanent residency on 8 February 2001. Although the sudden turn of events, complete with all its media attention in Mexico and the United States, proved quite overwhelming for Chávez, the return to the USA meant – above all – that he would finally get a chance to fight for world championship.

## THE US COMEBACK

On his return, Chávez signed a contract with Top Rank Promotions, which began to stage boxing shows in Austin's mainstream sporting venues, such as the Frank Erwin Center at the University of Texas, featuring Chávez, but also bringing to town many international TV celebrities. The *Austin American-Statesman* (Golden, 2001a) 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.' For his comeback NABF title defence (see Golden, 2001b; Maher, 2001) in Austin on 23 February 2001, Chávez underlined his multiple identities: he was introduced as 'representing Chihuahua, Mexico by way of Austin, Texas'; his entourage brought three flags – the US, Mexican and Texan – with them; while his immigration lawyer carried his title belt into the ring. For his next fight (see Golden, 2001c) in Grand Rapids, Michigan on 23 May 2001, Chávez entered the ring in a robe and trunks with the colours of the Mexican flag, again paying homage to the Mexican sporting community, while claiming residence in Austin, Texas.

Chávez's career culmination (see Golden, 2003a; 2003b; 2003c) was the first world title bout ever organized in Austin on 15 August 2003, when he gained the WBC world championship in the super-featherweight division against Thailand's Sirimongkol Singmanassuk by a unanimous decision. While the boxer, his corner and the audience were all dressed up in various matador paraphernalia, the fervour of the live Austin crowd spoke to the tangible impact that Chávez has had in raising the visibility of Austin boxing to mainstream international spotlights. Curiously, however, it was not until he *lost* the title against Mexican three-division world champion Erik 'El Terrible' Morales on 28 February 2004 that Chávez suddenly gained *national* recognition and newfound esteem in the United States. Injuring his arm in the second round of the bout, Chávez fought some 10 rounds with only one arm exhibiting, according to the *New York Times* (Katz, 2004), 'one of the most courageous performances ... ever seen [in boxing]; the kind ... that gives credence to this game, that makes it worthwhile'. Yet courage in professional boxing can become a double-edged sword, and 17 September 2005 turned into a sad day in Chávez's career. The Matador entered the ring to face New Jersey's Leavander Johnson as a contender for the IBF light-weight world championship title. From the early rounds on, Chávez was overpowering his opponent, but Johnson kept fighting back, and the referee did not stop the bout until the eleventh of the 12 rounds. Immediately afterwards Johnson was showing signs of brain trauma, and he was taken to the hospital for supervision. His condition soon deteriorated; he went into a coma; and five days later he died of injuries sustained in the match. Chávez visited the opponent and his family at the hospital, the promoters involved expressed their condolences to all parties involved, for both boxers were considered to be victims in the tragedy. Chávez's new promoter, Golden Boy Promotions, arranged for a press conference (see De La Hoya, Chávez speak on the death of Leavander Johnson, 2005), in which he issued the following statement: 'The best way I can do justice to the title Leavander and I both proudly held is to defend it well and to be a true champion in and out of the ring, like he was.'

Since his return to the United States, Chávez has led a life in a geographic triangle of Austin–Chihuahua–Chicago. ‘Mexicanness’ has become invested in spatial meanings as it intersects with bodily practices, ethnoracial labels and language. In Austin, Chávez identifies himself primarily as a boxer, as his life revolves around the sport, and the gym is still his main spatial frame of reference. His ‘Mexicanness’ in Austin is not as predominant, because he interacts with a heterogeneous and, to a large extent, English-speaking group of people. ‘Mexicanness’ in Chihuahua has come to mean a sense of security: there Chávez has a chance for introspection, as he takes spatial distance from his public self as a boxer, there he signifies freely in Mexican *doble sentido* and other local idiosyncrasies, and there he has no citizenship concerns to preoccupy his mind. Yet Chicago is where ‘Mexicanness’ has always signified cultural heritage rather than national boundaries for Chávez; where his parents, siblings and childhood home are. Indeed, in light of his life experiences, Chávez (interview, 2001) conceptualizes identity labels anew: ‘Now, I guess, I would even say that I’m Mexican American, because I have access to both countries and they both recognize me as whatever it is that I wanna call myself – which is an advantage to me.’ Claiming a single, place-based identity, then, is not possible for Jesus Chávez; his identities are in flux, a negotiation process between societal and individual assessments, sporting dynamics and personal choices. To quote ‘El Matador’ (interview, 2002) once more:

My life has changed. Very dramatic changes: from getting out of prison back to amateur boxing to pro-boxing; to getting deported and running most of my career down there; getting back into the US which was a huge change. Boxing has changed my lifestyle and it’s changed me a little bit. I’ve been liberated from myself a little bit.

## REFLECTIONS

Today’s professional boxing in the USA is undergoing increasing *latinization*: a growing number of boxers hail from the southwestern states; and these athletes, in turn, attract more Latino TV audiences. In the spring of 2003, boxing was allowed back on US national television after a decade’s hiatus when the bilingual Budweiser Boxing Series on NBC/*Boxeo Budweiser Telemundo* was launched as a joint endeavor between promoter Main Events, NBC, Telemundo and Budweiser. Their (Press releases – NBC, Telemundo and Main Events, 2004) goal was ‘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’. These shows featured mainly

up-and-coming Latino talent in their early twenties; for example, Francisco 'Panchito' Bojado, Eleazar Contreras, Juan Díaz, Juakin Gallardo, Rocky Juarez, San Leandro, Joe Morales, Elio Ortiz and Luis Rogado. According to Jorge Hidalgo (*ibid.*), Executive Vice President of Telemundo Sports, the series focuses particularly on Latino fighters, because 'Hispanics are not simply the most passionate consumers of boxing; they also represent the fastest growing ethnic group in this country.'

Be that as it may, yet another purpose behind the boxing shows was to broadcast them to US military personnel on duty abroad. Bob Matheson (Budweiser boxing series will be broadcast globally to over 800,000 USA military personnel, 2004), Director of Broadcasting for the Defense Media Center, explains:

The Main Events fight cards are a tremendous booster for our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines serving in harm's way ... The most deserving audience in the world are our troops in remote and hostile locations defending our way of life against terrorism, and providing humanitarian support for those in need. We thank Main Events and NBC for helping us bring them home during these weekly broadcasts.

Consequently, before the commencement of combat, ring announcer Jimmy Lennon, Jr. addresses the various targeted audiences: 'And now, Ladies and Gentlemen in attendance, boxing fans joining us across the United States, and to the US military personnel joining us from Iraq and around the world on the Armed Forces Network ... It's the Main Event!' To be sure, for the large number of US minority soldiers, Latino boxers come to stand for participation in patriotic agendas, national unity and solidarity, and personal belonging in the nation. Jesus Chávez, too, has worn camouflage-coloured boxing trunks for a couple of his recent fights – despite the fact that he does not hold US citizenship – in homage to the troops doing battle abroad.

Even so, as we have evidenced from his life story, US Latino ethnoracial identity formations are contested terrain in various everyday and sporting contexts. Many identity signifiers – such as naming, citizenship status, national boundaries, language and even clothing – become contingent on various shifting power dynamics. Whether a government agent, for example, deploys a particular label to classify a group, carries conspicuously different undertones from a group's self-chosen pan-ethnic identification label. By the same token, whether a boxer refers to himself as 'Mexican', 'Chicano', 'Tejano', 'Latino', or 'Mexican American' is influenced not only by his origins/place of residence, but by whom he is interacting with, where he is located, and what language he happens to be using. For this reason, Agustín Laó-Montes (2001: 8) writes, 'it is crucial to conceive *latinidad* not as a static and unified formation but as a flexible category that

relates to a plurality of ideologies of identification, cultural expressions, and political and social agendas'. All US prizefighters, then, continually negotiate their individual identities within a range of pugilistic and societal relations, but Latino fighters' collective status is further contested within the power dynamics of the Americas, with distinct everyday, strategic and political functions.

## NOTES

1 Jesus Chávez's professional record is currently (February 2006) 43 victories and three defeats. He won the IBF (International Boxing Federation) world championship in the lightweight division against Leavander Johnson on 17 September 2005. He is the former WBC (World Boxing Council) champion in the super featherweight division (2003) and the former NABF (North American Boxing Federation) super featherweight champion (1997), with 11 successful title defences. He is also the former NABF featherweight champion (1996) and the former WBC Continental Americas featherweight champion (1996).

2 I would like to express several thanks with regard to this article. First, thanks to Jesus Chávez for conducting interviews with me; second, thanks to Cary Cordova, Janet Davis, Neil Foley, Gerald Gems, Jeffrey Meikle and Kim Simpson for reading earlier drafts of the paper; and finally, thanks to the anonymous reviewers at *Auto/Biography* for their comments and suggestions.

3 Special thanks go to my project sidekick Jorge Sanhueza-Lyon.

4 For my dissertation research, I found John Sugden's *Boxing and Society* a particularly helpful source in dealing with various methodological aspects – and pitfalls – of doing ethnographic fieldwork within boxing. Akin to Sugden, I also experienced several challenges out in the field: for example, having to collaborate with characters that I certainly would not like to even be acquainted with, let alone associate with; sometimes I would hear stories that made me sick to the stomach; and, at other times, I would end up in situations that were not only ethically questionable, but downright dangerous. These experiences brought about a range of emotional, ethical and disciplinary questions that had to be tackled during the research.

5 Presentations based on the paper were given at the American Studies Graduate Student Conference at the University of Texas at Austin on 27 September 2002 and at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Conference in Indianapolis on 9 November 2002.

6 In 1952, S. Kirson Weinberg and Henry Arond ranked the occupational numbers of twentieth-century professional boxers in the following order: the Irish dominated the fighter numbers until 1916; by 1928, the Jewish had taken over the list, although only to be replaced by the Italians in 1936. In 1948, a new category, the 'Negro', topped the rankings, and that year also saw the appearance of Mexicans for the first time, in the third place.

7 However, I am not suggesting that all boxers retain their 'marginal' status in society. In fact, in 'The *latinization* of boxing: a Texas case-study' (2005), I discuss how my interviewees 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 boxing. I argue that boxers' agency makes it possible to contest various established power relations within one's own everyday spaces. It also enables challenging one's geographic boundaries, as it offers access to spaces which would ordinarily be out of the reach of those in societal 'margins'. Indeed, many 'grassroots' boxers become celebrated figures in their immediate communities, and boxing also offers them meaningful athletic, social and personal gratification. On the other hand, boxing is also known for its blatant exploitation of the athletes. See, for example, Culbertson, 2002; Hauser, 1986; McRae, 1996; Newfield, 1995; 2001.

8 For newspaper coverage on these fights, see Cantu, 1997; Clare, 1996; Dubois, 1996; Habel, 1997; Halliburton, 1996; Hornaday, 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1995d; and Wangrin, 1996; 1997a.

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#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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