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By

Omar Gonzalez

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A History of Violence, Masculinity, and Nationalism:

Pugilistic Death and the Intricacies of Fighting Identity

By

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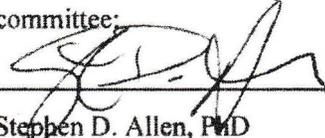
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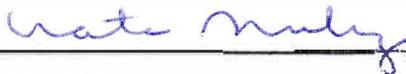
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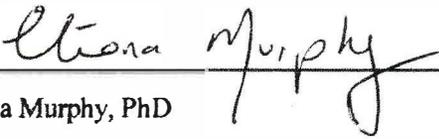


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DEDICATION

To my wife Berenice Luna Gonzalez, for her love and patience. To my family, my mother Belen and father Jose who have given me the love and support I needed during my academic career. Their efforts to raise a good man motivates me every day. To my sister Diana, who has grown to be a smart and incredible young woman. To my brother Mario, whose kindness reaches the highest peaks of the Sierra Nevada and who has been an inspiration in my life. And to my twin brother Miguel, his incredible support, his wisdom, and his kindness have not only guided my life but have inspired my journey as a historian.

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Abstract

of

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Boxing is a fascinating subject inspiring scholarship on the meaning of the sport's violence. Few, however, have examined the fatal results of this violence and its contributions to the development of manhood. This thesis focuses on fights that resulted in the death of boxers and examines pugilistic death to understand its contributions to gendered identities. The fight between Davey Moore and Ultiminio "Sugar" Ramos in 1963 and the bout between Johnny Owen and Lupe Pintor in 1980 reveal how, among other factors, death helped shape fighters' identities. The press coverage of these fights contextualizes death to be an essential part of the sport alongside other issues. Themes such as nationalism, the media interpretation of sporting bodies, ethnic fighting, and working-class origins are also important factors to a boxer's

character. The death of Owen illustrates how the press functioned to disseminate ideas about his imagined fragility due to the perception of his sporting body. The story of his fight with Pintor also reveals the relevance of ethnic nationalism within the context of Mexican boxing and how emotional relationships developed when Owen's death occurred. The death of Moore in 1963 contributed to the shaping of Ramos's fighting identity. Despite multiple deaths on his conscience, Ramos established himself as a world boxing champion in Mexico. The importance of fatherhood, aspects of masculine vulnerability, and Ramos's ascension into Mexican boxing culture with his championship victory over Moore are overlooked in the historical record. This thesis also covers the importance of Southern California, where Mexican boxers dominated the lower weight divisions in the years between the 1960s and 1980s, and where these fights took place. Most research on boxing death and injury focus on regulation and questions of morality. These two case studies reveal that to fully understand the relationship between boxing, violence, and death, one must examine cultural and gendered contexts in which the violence took place because pugilistic death reveals the complexities of manhood and its effect on the formation of fighting identity.

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Preface

As a Mexican American growing up in California's Central Valley, sports were a big part of my culture. Since my youth growing up in McFarland, CA, sports were viewed as a positive way to establish successful roots in the United States. Both Mexican immigrants and Chicanos utilized sports in my community as a tool for living a successful life in the United States. Additionally, the sport of boxing was a significant part of my childhood and my adolescent years. Most importantly, my father's love for boxing increased my interest in the sweet science. Growing up, I watched fighters such as Julio Cesar Chavez, Oscar De La Hoya, Erik Morales, Marco Antonio Barrera, and Juan Manuel Marquez square off with one another, and it shaped my idea of what it means to be Mexican and masculine.

My uncle Federico Gonzalez, who died in 2005 of cancer, once boxed in Mexico as a youth. There is a poster of one of his fights that symbolizes the boxing culture in my family as well as my Mexican heritage (see Figure 1). Federico "Terror de Huanusco" Gonzalez fought in Guadalupe Victoria, Zacatecas (also known as La Villita) on March 3, 1962. My uncle's experience as a young fighter reminds me every day how the sport is rooted in my culture and family history.

The subject of death within boxing triggered my curiosity, and the recollection of the boxing culture in my family helped shape my thesis. The theme of pugilistic death reminded me of the passing of Marco Nazareth at the hands of Omar Chavez (one of Julio Cesar Chavez's sons) in 2009. I also recalled talking about boxing with my father, and how the subject of death frequently came up in our conversations. The most notable name that came from my father's

memory was Mexico's Francisco "Kiko" Bejines who died after his fight with Mexican American fighter Alberto Dávila on September 4, 1983. My father's memories of fights that ended in a tragedy such as the Dávila fight and other fights were always a central part of our discussions on boxing.

I always wanted to be like my father, a good man, and a fan of the sport that had given many ethnic Mexican fighters their masculine identities. Even fighters who did not die in the ring were part of my father's boxing memories. Salvador "Chava" Sanchez, who was famous for his fight with Puerto Rican fighter Wilfredo Gomez in 1981, captured the hearts of Mexican boxing fans. This fight elevated the pugilistic rivalry between Mexico and Puerto Rico and crowned Sanchez as one of the best with his knockout victory over Gomez. Unfortunately, Sanchez died in 1982 from a car accident at the young age of twenty-three shortly after his back and forth battle with Ghanaian fighter Azuma Nelson. My father's respect for Julio Cesar Chavez, as one of the best boxers, did not stop him from suggesting that Sanchez would have been even better if he would have lived out an entire career.

Immediately following the idea of researching death in boxing, the conversations with my father, and my fascination with the sport and familiarity with boxing deaths inspired this study. My father helped shape my idea of manhood, and this included the importance of pugilistic masculinity in our culture. This research delves into the significance of death inside and outside of the ring. Of course, it would be difficult to discuss every important pugilistic death in this project, as that would be a daunting task. This thesis covers only some of the tragic deaths that occurred, and I hope to inspire other works to explore the meaning of these deaths. This thesis also illustrates boxing's rightful place in academic history.

Pepsi-Cola

PRESENTA

BOX

**Sábado 3 de Marzo de 1962
a las 8.30 de la Noche**

GUADALUPE VICTORIA, ZAC.

4 Peleas de BOX 4

Pelea Estrella a 8 Raunds

Fili Guerrero vs. Arturo Durán
Idolo de Aguascalientes. Campeón de
Guadalupe Victoria

Pelea Semifinal a 4 Raunds

FEDERICO GONZALEZ vs. FRONTERIZO GARCIA
Terror de Huanuzco. El Fajador de Moda

Evento Especial a 3 Raunds

Francisco Durán vs. Jose Romo
Campeón Guantes de Oro de Noqueador de
Guadalupe Victoria. Kid Coyote

Preliminar a 3 Raunds

SALVADOR DURAN vs. ROSARIO ROMO
El que derrota las Pulgas. El azote de Barrio

PRECIOS

Todo Ring \$ 2.00

Gradas \$ 1.50

Niños \$ 1.00

Quieres más. ?

Pepsi-Cola

Nada mas!

Figure 1.

Chapter One: Introduction

In 1959, Bantamweight world champion Jose Becerra faced an African-American fighter Walter Ingram in his native Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. The fight ended in tragedy as Ingram took brutal punishment from the hometown fighter. In 1960, *Sports Illustrated* magazine reported on the bout on November 16th and questioned why Ingram's corner allowed him to continue despite being outmatched by the Mexican slugger. Becerra embraced his opponent as he struggled to get back to his corner and after a short time, he was no longer conscious.¹ Ingram was denied medical care more than once until he was finally received at the Mexican American Hospital in Guadalajara, where he passed away. While the article highlighted the dangerousness of the sport, it included an image of Becerra helping lift Ingram's coffin, which was covered by the American flag at his funeral. For Becerra, his masculine character as a fighter also exhibited signs of respect and vulnerability, which tend to be overlooked in academic discussions of boxing violence.

The sportsmanship and respect that Becerra showed to his fallen opponent challenges notions of morality inside the dangerous sport. This fight illustrates how violent men deal with boxing death in a respectful manner. The focus on the vulnerabilities of violent boxers is not to suggest that ignoring the issues of death and violence should be a priority for scholars who study the sport. However, as it remains largely unstudied, examining the significance of death in boxing reveals issues important to masculinity and how fighting identity developed. Although boxing provided ethnic Mexicans in Los Angeles with opportunities to celebrate the Mexican

¹ "Death of a Fighter," *Sports Illustrated*, November 16, 1959, 38.

nation, deaths associated with the sport reveal the complex relationship the sport shares with masculine identity because tragedy allowed fighters to show vulnerabilities that have been overlooked within boxing history. The brutal nature of boxing hides the notion that masculinity consists of ignored themes, such as the importance of fatherhood, and the homosocial relationships that developed. This gendered approach helps to humanize violent boxers by validating the intricacies of manhood and fighting identity. Transnational coverage of boxing death reveals the emotional and vulnerable aspect of pugilistic identity and how media coverage from different countries traced the events. On the surface, violent performance gives male pugilists a platform to fight for individual masculine glory, but they also fight for their families, for national and international recognition, and other important aspects of their fighting identities as sporting men. Stories of boxing death like the Becerra–Ingram fight gives us a glimpse into the world of boxing in order to reconsider how death helped shape aspects of fighting identity.

In recent scholarship, death is a topic that has intrigued scholars to reexamine its implications in the broader social and cultural influences in places like Mexico. Cultural historian Claudio Lomnitz’s analysis of Mexican death as a national symbol illustrates the value of reconsidering death and its meaning. Lomnitz states, “A history of death in Mexico needs to reach beyond the social and cultural history of death and dying into the political and cultural deployment of death and the dead in the very figuration of national times.”² In the sport of boxing, death can also be reexamined to discover its implications in the formation of masculine boxing identity by focusing on the ways in which death complicated ideas of men.

² Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (Brooklyn NY: Zone Books, 2005), 21.

The male social space of boxing is essential to examine the construction of complex manhood where violence dominates a fighters' identity. However, this does not mean that fighters do not have other social traits that are important to their history. Ethnographer Mathew Gutmann's analysis of Mexico City "machismo," helped debunk the notions of masculine ubiquity by examining the ways in which lower-class Mexicans carried contradictory traits.³ Although boxers are violent performers, pugilistic death illustrates how these violent men became vulnerable as they dealt with the tragic consequences of their profession. This study of boxing incorporates discussions in the international media discourse of death as a tool for understanding the intricacies of boxing identity and manhood. This transnational perspective incorporates newspaper coverage from the United States, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and other publications to explore the meaning of boxing death for fighters. This coverage included talks of morality, corruption, regulation, and other aspects of boxing that frequently surfaced due to the deadly consequences of the manly art. Within this coverage, there is an element of boxing that has yet to be methodically discussed through a transnational perspective in academic approaches to the history of pugilism. The sport illustrates key elements of gendered identity such as death, nationalism, ethnic origins, and complicated notions of manhood. Death in boxing serves as a lens to uncover the trajectory of masculinity through sporting bodies beyond violent displays of *machismo*.⁴ This history incorporates the significance of death, nationalism, and ethnic fighting to the already existing works on boxing that have illustrated the need for the

³ Mathew C. Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1996.), 223. Gutmann asserts that in the Mexican media, intellectual literature, and other platforms, the terms *macho* and *machismo* have contradictory meanings. He argues that this not only illustrates the complexities of perceived manhood, but also that the origins of these gendered concepts are debated.

⁴ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, The Other Mexico, and Other Essays*, Trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Philips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 29-46. Paz defines the Mexican *Macho* as a man who publicly expresses his stereotypical masculine traits in the public sphere in attempts to hide his vulnerabilities. Like Gutmann, masculinity here is defined as complex. Violent sporting men carry contradictory traits as part of their fighting identity.

analysis of masculine boxers. Examining transnational sources before and after the boxing matches of Johnny Owen–Lupe Pintor and Davey Moore–Sugar Ramos, reveals how different newspapers reacted to these specific bouts and how boxing identities were shaped by death. This approach to pugilism is critical for understanding manhood and its contradictions.

Revisiting Male Violence and its Implications in Boxing

This study of boxing also addresses a problem in scholarship on gender where, despite the traditional male-dominated history, a gendered approach to a history of men has yet to be thoroughly discussed. Michael S. Kimmel argued in *A History of Men* (2005), “Books about men are not about men as men. These books do not explore how the experience of being a man structured the men’s lives, or the organizations and institutions they created, the events in which they participated.”⁵ Although he is talking about American men in general, as studies on boxing have shown, the sport can be used as a lens or a tool to understand masculinity in the U.S. and elsewhere. This thesis incorporates the history of ethnic fighters that fought in places such as Los Angeles, California, where masculine performances became part of the popular sports culture.⁶ Boxing history gives us a glimpse into the complicated world of violent performance, which reveals its significance for understanding how gendered identities developed. The press coverage of the death of Davey Moore in the early 1960s and the tragedy of Johnny Owen in 1980 reveal how fighters showcased vulnerabilities, sportsmanship, and developed relationships after tragic

⁵ Michael S. Kimmel, *A History of Men: Essays in the History of American and British Masculinities* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press), 3. For an early approach to men’s studies see, Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man!: Males in Modern Society* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc, 1990)

⁶ For a history of Ethnic Mexican boxing in Southern California see Gregory S. Rodríguez, “‘Palaces of Pain,’ Arenas of Mexican-American Dreams: Boxing and the Formation of Ethnic Mexican Identities in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles.” PhD diss., University of California-San Diego, 1999; Gene Aguilera, *Mexican American Boxing in Los Angeles* (Charleston SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014).

consequences. Kimmel stresses that “masculinity is a homosocial enactment,” making the sport of boxing essential for understanding how men dealt with the consequences of their profession.

Fighters train and enhance their violent performances over time while simultaneously changing their masculine identities. Sociologist Michael Messner’s analysis of sporting bodies and their production of violence helps to understand the trajectory of violence and its development. Messner asserts that “first, the term ‘male violence’ tends to suggest that violence is an essential feature of maleness, rather than a socially learned feature of a certain kind of masculinity. Indeed, concrete social-scientific examinations of violence show that there is no convincing evidence that men are genetically or hormonally predisposed to violent behavior.”⁷ For Messner, the learned violence in men is not predetermined and develops over time. On the contrary, boxing violence is essentially pre-determined as the main objective for fighters is physical damage. However, boxers carry other important aspects of their fighting identity, particularly in times of death. The death of fighters like Owen and Moore helps to understand how boxers became vulnerable, developed homosocial relationships, and how fighters and others dealt with these tragedies. Therefore, death in boxing must be examined as part of this masculine development to fully understand boxing’s gendered implications and the relationships established when death occurs.

Scholarly Approaches to Boxing History

⁷ Michael A. Messner, “When Bodies are Used as Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport.” In *Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 94. Messner’s analysis focuses on the social and broader ideological meaning of violence in sports, but also how it contributes to the already existing notions of hegemonic masculinity.

The social significance of boxing, despite its dangers, has been an important topic of discussion in scholarly approaches to the contact sport. Jeffrey T. Sammons traced the early days of the sport in American society and revealed how the sport was no longer just symbolic of barbarism and signified a meaning “Beyond the Ring.” Boxing was introduced into American society when sports were becoming more popular. Especially in athletic clubs in the late nineteenth century where ordinary men could covertly participate in the sport despite questions of morality.⁸ Clubs like the Old Olympic Club in places like New Orleans were used as arenas to promote boxing events in the 1880s.⁹ These clubs allowed boxing to become part of a capitalist economic system that grew in a time where business became an integral part of American society.¹⁰ The increase in the popularity of boxing inside these clubs helped the sport progress in American society despite the visibly associated dangers. Newspapers from New York, Boston, Washington, and San Francisco promoted boxing events and printed descriptions of major fighting events.¹¹ The dangers of the manly art were now seen by a wider audience and caused observers to question the civility of the sport in the emerging modern American society.¹² Sammons acknowledges the death of New Orleans lightweight Andy Bowen at the hands of George “Kid” Lavigne in 1894 as a motive for further oversight. The death of Bowen effectively put an end to prizefighting in Louisiana as potential boxing capital. But as Sammons suggests,

⁸ For a history of the sports moral question see, Dennis Brailsford, “Morals and Maulers: The Ethics of Early Pugilism,” *Journal of Sport History* 12, no. 2 (1985): 126-142.

⁹ Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Illinois Books ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² For a history of boxing films and the attempts for social control of these films by American progressivism see, Dan Streible, “A History of the Boxing Film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era,” *Film History* 3, no.3 (1989): 235-257.

“While brutality and death have often stirred calls for reform or abolition, they have also served as alleged proof of manhood and even national resolve.”¹³

Boxing received attention from scholars that focus on the importance of examining gender in male subcultures. Social Historian Elliot Gorn’s book, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (1985), established how fighting subcultures within male communities contributed to social development in early American History. In the 1980s, this approach of writing a gender history was still a fairly new development. Gorn acknowledged in a later edition of his book that “Virtually no review, however, noted that it was a book about gender... But I was explicit, I thought.”¹⁴ After all, Gorn acknowledges that without the development of Women’s Studies which paved the way for analysis of gender, it would not be possible to write about pugilism and its significance to the development of manhood and its “malleability.”¹⁵ This study also delves into the malleable aspect of boxing manhood. This thesis argues that beyond the surface of violent performance, death illuminates characteristics of masculinity which seem contradictory to the very nature of the sport. Despite Gorn’s study of pugilism, it lacked analysis of the social significance of the sport for African-American boxers.

The significance of pugilism as a tool for men to fulfill their duties is a topic of debate in recent scholarship. In boxing, working-class fighters successfully used boxing as a tool for economic advancement. Historian Louis Moore argues that pugilism was a pathway for African-Americans to assert their masculinity under working-class conditions. He argues that their

¹³ Ibid., 236.

¹⁴ Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 258. For an early history of the sport’s evolution during the antebellum era in the United States see, Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *American Historical Review* 90, (1985): 18-43.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

presence in society under increased urbanization and other societal changes had a lot to do with boxing. Moore argues in *I Fight for a Living* (2017) that prizefighting and the development of sporting culture jolted black athletes into a job market in the midst of racism in early America.¹⁶ In other words, late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century pugilistic activities allowed blue-collar African-Americans to assert their masculinity, thereby, debunking myths of inferiority. These athletes displayed manhood in a variety of ways and contributed to notions of “hegemonic middle-class manhood.”¹⁷ And as scholar Anthony E. Rotundo noted, before the Civil War, the physical aspect of masculine culture helped increase resistance to the vices of urban American life.¹⁸ This study recognizes Moore’s analysis of fighting as a tool for economic advancement for athletes as an important part of pugilistic activities. In the case of “Sugar” Ramos, his migration from Cuba to Mexico City to continue his boxing career allowed him to assert his masculinity and develop his fighting identity.

Fighting activities were dominated by men where their subculture became filled with gendered experiences and built relationships. Sergio Lussana’s recent scholarship *My Brother Slaves* (2016) examines the “male homosocial network” on plantations and illustrates how “enslaved men, in such environments, fashioned their own unique masculine work culture.”¹⁹ According to Lussana, these men engaged in manly activities such as wrestling, gambling, and drinking, which enabled them to create male to male relationships establishing a brotherhood.

¹⁶ Louis Moore, *I Fight for a Living: Boxing and the Battle for Black Manhood, 1880-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2017), 11. Moore focuses on the denial of black American economic, social and political manhood. For a history of black sparring masters and their contributions to the masculine culture in early America see, Louis Moore, “Fit for Citizenship: Black Sparring Masters, Gymnasium Owners, and the White Body, 1825-1886,” *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 4 (2011): 448-473.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anthony E. Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic, 1993), 239.

¹⁹ Sergio Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 6-8.

Building from Lussana's research, this approach to boxing acknowledges the significance of the built relationships of fighting men and how boxing death led to these kinships between boxers, family members of fallen fighters, and others.

When a death in boxing occurs, officials and opponents of the sport typically focus on what regulations should be implemented or discussed. Scholar Robert G. Rodriguez focuses on boxing regulation in the United States, where he pinpoints several issues that plague the sport regarding its institutional oversight. Rodriguez notes that the Randie Carver–Kabary Salem bout on September 12, 1999, at Harrah's Casino in North Kansas City, ended with the death of Carver after being knocked out in the tenth round. Carver underwent an emergency medical procedure on his brain and died two days later.²⁰ Rodriguez is adamant that the lack of boxing regulations are usually the culprit, especially in the case of Carver. He argues, “the most damning evidence that the lack of standard professional boxing regulation was at least partially at fault in Carver's death was the lack of an ambulance present at the fight.”²¹ Loopholes such as the proximity of the hospital to the boxing venue in the case of the Carver–Salem bout is one example of the types of issues that plague the sport. Lack of regulation, the efforts of promoters, and others involved in boxing events have taken safety regulations as a secondary issue to the profit motive in the organized sport. In a different approach, this study will focus on how death contributes to fighting identity and how people responded to it.

Examining the press coverage of boxing death helps to understand the public reactions to events in the aftermath of lethal boxing matches. Christina D. Abreu's analysis of the Afro-Cuban boxer Benny “Kid” Paret illustrates how media discourses were influenced by the U.S.

²⁰ Robert G. Rodriguez, *The Regulation of Boxing: A History and Comparative Analysis of Policies Among American States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

and Cuban relations of the Cold War. Paret was only the third Cuban in history behind Kid Gavilán and Kid Chocolate to win a world title, and his trilogy against Emile Griffith (born in Saint Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands) represented a national rivalry within the context of the global politics.²² After 1959, there was a surge in Cuban migration to the United States that led to tensions in Cuban immigrant communities in Florida and other parts of the country over the death of Paret and his funeral arrangements. For Abreu, the controversy over Paret's burial symbolized a complicated journey of Cuban life in the United States that illustrates issues of "migration and social mobility."²³ The death of Paret was significant since the growth in the popularity of the sport in the 1960s was catalyzed by the era of television, which highlighted the dangers of the sport to a broader audience.²⁴ Historian Troy Rondinone notes, "In the earliest days of network television, boxing accounted for close to half of all programming."²⁵ The rise of American households with television during the 1950s and 1960s helped establish boxing as part of American popular culture. This history of boxing death takes a gendered approach to understand how the sport is a valuable source for understanding how fighters' gendered identities were shaped by their experiences with death.

By the 1980s, the knowledge and experience of fighters who dealt with the death of their opponent increased. Mexican-American fighter Alberto Dávila, who won a world title by delivering lethal blows to Mexican fighter Francisco "Kiko" Bejines on September 1, 1983, was interviewed by Robert Rodriguez and asked for his opinion on regulation. Dávila believed that

²² Christina D. Abreu, "The Story of Benny "Kid" Paret: Cuban Boxers, the Cuban Revolution, and the U.S. Media, 1952-1962," *Journal of Sport History* 31, no. 1 (2011): 96.

²³ *Ibid.*, 98. There were family members of Paret arguing whether he should be buried in Florida or sent back to Cuba to be buried.

²⁴ Rodriguez, *The Regulation of Boxing*, 39.

²⁵ Troy Rondinone, *Friday Night Fighter: Gaspar "Indio" Ortega and the Golden Age of Television Boxing* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 3.

athletic commissions bend the rules but do protect fighters in some cases.²⁶ While researching the death of Johnny Owen in his fight with Lupe Pintor, Dávila's name appeared in articles of *El Informador* since he eventually became Pintor's next opponent after his fight with Owen.²⁷ Pintor and Dávila shared the ring not knowing that by 1983, they both would have a death on their record and as a part of their fighting identities. Part of this thesis focuses on Anglo/Latino ideas of pugilistic death. The Owen–Pintor bout led both British and Mexican observers to question the civility and sportsmanship of their rival national sporting cultures.

Another critical element of this history accepts the importance of regulation in times of injury or death and the media's role in the discussions on oversight. This approach to boxing places boxing death at the forefront of the sport's history. Although questions regarding the institutional oversight of the sport are common in cases of boxing death, press coverage also illustrates how death became part of gendered boxing identity. Scholar Fernando Delgado's analysis of media interpretations of boxers noted that "Boxing is one of the several global sports that manifest the connections between masculinity, sport, and culture."²⁸ Delgado asserts in his study of Mexican-American fighter Oscar De La Hoya that the "masculinity performed in and out of the ring" is disseminated through media coverage of fighters.²⁹ Essentially, a fighter's identity is disseminated by the press and helps fans and others to interpret a boxer's masculine identity. Anthropologist Justin D. Garcia compared the differences between the masculine

²⁶ Rodriquez, *The Regulation of Boxing*, 50.

²⁷ "Pintor: Estoy Listo Para Gganar a Dávila," *El Informador*, December 19, 1980.

²⁸ Fernando Delgado, "Golden But Not Brown: Oscar De La Hoya and the Complications of Culture, Manhood, and Boxing." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 22, no.2 (2007). 197.

²⁹ Ibid. For an overview of the making of sporting bodies through the mass media also see, Jim McKay, Toby Miller, and David Rowe, "Panic Sport and the Racialized Masculine Body." In *Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport*, edited by Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner and Don Sabo (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc, 2000.), 245.

identities of both Fernando Vargas and De La Hoya arguing that although both fighters are Mexican-American, Vargas and De La Hoya's identities were interpreted in different ways. Their "social location" determined how they were received by their ethnic fanbase; *Latinidad* and ethnic authenticity play out through identity politics.³⁰ Using Delgado and Garcia's analyses of boxing identity, the importance of the boxing press, boxers' social mobilities, and adding the emphasis on death, this research examines newspapers to uncover their discussions of tragic fights to understand masculine boxing identities. What scholars of sports and gender have yet to discuss is the role of the press (through a transnational approach) in their interpretation of fights or fighters involved in boxing death. This newspaper coverage of boxing helps to understand how death became an important part of a fighter's character.

Additionally, this study explores how ethnic boxers dealt with victory despite boxing death. From a transnational perspective, the media coverage of deaths in the sport helps to understand the implications of ethnic displays of manhood. A boxing rivalry developed in the media between the United Kingdom and in Mexico after Johnny Owen died at the hands of Lupe Pintor. The success of Mexican fighters in the United States was nothing new in the post-World War II years; newspapers from Mexico had been interested in reporting on fights since the early 1900s.³¹ Victories such as Pintor's title defense against Owen were a focal point in Mexican newspapers such as *El Informador*.

³⁰ Justin D. García, "Boxing, Masculinity, and *Latinidad*: Oscar De La Hoya, Fernando Vargas, and Raza Representation," *The Journal of American Culture* 36, no.4 (2013), 324.

³¹ In Mexico, newspapers dedicated to boxing coverage increased in the 1920s when Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey participated in boxing events in Mexico. For a history of the increase in the popularity of boxing and its press coverage, see, Richard V. McGehee, "The Dandy and the Mauler in Mexico: Johnson, Dempsey, Et Al., and the Mexico City Press, 1919-1927." *Journal of Sport History* 23, no. 1 (1996): 20-33.

The success of ethnic boxers from Mexico is documented by historians such as Gregory S. Rodriguez who illustrated the ways in which boxing helped Latino fighters assert themselves in the social and cultural space of Southern California.³² By examining sources such as the Spanish newspaper *La Opinión*, Rodriguez traces the changing gendered identities of ethnic boxers in Southern California through their success in the sport. Although Rodriguez acknowledges the rampant issues with violence and death in the 1960s and 1970s, his study lacks analysis of death and its contributions to the evolution of gendered identity. This study incorporates aspects of Rodriguez's analysis of the development of ethnic and gendered identities in conjunction with the death of fighters that helped shape boxing identity.

The story of Ultiminio "Sugar" Ramos and his trajectory as a fighter delves into the significance of victory for the Mexican nation and how death became part of his fighting identity. Historian Stephen D. Allen argues that the success of Mexican boxers "was essential to constructing Mexican national identity" that helped establish "Mexican modernity."³³ Allen highlights how Afro-Cuban fighter Jose "Mantequilla" Nápoles and his boxing success established him as a representative of Mexican national identity despite his Cuban origins. This study incorporates similar discussions on the role of boxing performances and their symbolic importance for the nation. Much like Nápoles, Ramos' career illustrates important aspects of masculine development through the sport of boxing, which included death on his conscience.

³² Gregory S. Rodríguez, "'Palaces of Pain,' Arenas of Mexican-American Dreams: Boxing and the Formation of Ethnic Mexican Identities in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles." (PhD diss., University of California-San Diego, 1999), 3.

³³ Stephen D. Allen, "Boxing in Mexico: Masculinity, Modernity, and Nationalism 1946-1982," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2013), ii. Allen's work has recently been published; however, this dissertation is valuable for its discussion of boxing regulation in California which is important to this study.

The importance of pugilism for the development of the Mexican and Cuban nations in the late nineteenth century relates to the story of Sugar Ramos and how boxing is an essential feature of his inherited manhood. The growth of pugilism during the late 1800s illustrates an early history of masculine boxing for the construction of these Latin American nations. Historian David C. LaFevor discussed in his dissertation *Forging the Masculine and Modern Nation* (2011), how “the conflicting constructions of masculine identity” were reported by the press and were an essential aspect in the development of the modern nation.³⁴ LaFevor noted that “The mass media mirroring the ambivalence of the political elite, was split between those in the press who sought to protect the Mexican public from imported barbarity, and those who looked to the new ‘physical culture’ as a necessary way to cultivate the modern masculine nation.”³⁵ In regards to modernity, the sport was seen as regressive by the political elite, and by others a necessary development for the masculine and modern nation.³⁶ Similarly, in Cuba, boxing was discouraged by elitist critics while others encouraged the physical culture to help build the nation.³⁷ Afro-Cuban magazine *Minerva* utilized the success of Jack Johnson’s transnational, and racialized boxing victories helping Afro-Cubans identify the value of black sporting identity and its nationalistic implications.³⁸ Examining the history of pugilistic activities is essential for understanding the construction of masculinities and its gendered implications for fighters and their respective origins. This approach to the sport reveals the multidimensional development of boxing identity and the ethnic influences that shaped manhood.

³⁴ David C. LaFevor, “*Forging the Masculine and Modern Nation: Race, Identity, and the Public Sphere in Cuba and Mexico, 1890s-1930s*,” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2011), 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-13. For example, In Mexico, Oaxacan Salvador Esperón who spoke Nahua (the indigenous language of the Mexico) even taught the physical sport of boxing in the military that promoted the sport as part of the national culture.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

An Overview of this History of Boxing Violence

International newspapers and their responses to boxing death and interviews from fighters, provide a comprehensive picture of the sport and its gendered implications. Academic approaches to the sport have included death in their discussions but lack a transnational perspective on how it helped shape identity and what notions of masculinity are disseminated through the press. The focus on the boxing body helped the media disseminate these ideas which can vary depending on specific events and who reported on the event.³⁹ Chapter two of this study brings attention to the fight between Afro-Cuban fighter Sugar Ramos and African-American Davey Moore in 1963 that ended in tragedy. The death of Moore contributed to Ramos's fighting identity. Moore fell into a coma and died four days after suffering a cerebral injury in his brainstem. This fight produced talk of the morality of the sport, the outright banning of the sport, and how the sport should be further regulated to prevent boxing death and make it safer. However, what has been overlooked in the history of this fight is how Ramos's identity as a fighter dealt with death during his journey social mobility in Mexican sports culture. By examining the press coverage of the fight along with an interview of Ramos later on in his life, this history reveals how death was an important aspect of Ramos's masculine identity as a historically great prizefighter. This study reveals aspects of his masculinity such as his acceptance into the Mexican national sports culture despite his Afro-Cuban origins, fatherhood as an important aspect of pugilism, and vulnerability of men as violent performers who inadvertently killed their opponents.

³⁹ For analysis of boxing bodies and their cultural reproductions in the sport see, Kath Woodward, *Globalizing Boxing* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 87-110. Sociologist Kath Woodward's work on masculinity noted that the "self-control" it takes for the body to become agentive in pugilism is critical for understanding the sport. Also see, Kath Woodward, "Rumbles in the Jungle; Boxing, Racialization and the Performance of Masculinity," *Leisure Studies*, 23, no. 1 (2004): 5-18.

Chapter three discusses how the transnational media obsessed over the body of a boxer and how death shaped his legacy as a fighter. In 1980, the fight between bantamweight fighter's Welshman Johnny Owen and Mexican Lupe Pintor ended with the tragic death of Owen. Owen was a fighter with an atypical boxing physique. In the case of Owen, newspaper coverage before, during, and after the prizefight reveals a gendered perspective that incorporates death and discourses on Owen's body as the boxing media interpreted it. This chapter explores Anglo and Latino press discourses of pugilistic death and the media's obsession with Owen's pugilistic body. Additionally, the coverage of this fight reveals the continued glorification of Mexican boxing dominance that was fueled by the death of Owen and the media's recollection of the tragic event. The nationalistic implications for victory also led to rivalries in the British and Mexican media that illustrate the role of the media in helping shape ethnic boxing identities. Despite the loss of Johnny Owen, two sporting cultures developed an emotional relationship with the reunion of Pintor and Johnny's father Dick Owen. Despite boxing's infamous troubles with injury and death, the boxing world witnessed a vulnerable and emotional relationship develop between two distinct and yet familiar boxing cultures.

Conclusion

The international coverage of Ramos, Moore, Owen, and Pintor reveals the significance of death for understanding boxing masculinity and the various ways that fallen fighters caused contradictions in the behavior of violent performers, and how the media disseminated ideas about masculinity and pugilistic death. Stories of boxing events that ended in the death of a fighter are not complete without a thorough examination of how death shapes the masculine identity of pugilists. Davey Moore, who died at the hands of Sugar Ramos in 1963 affected Ramos and created vulnerability and emotional connection to his fallen opponent. Although this fight

prioritized officials to implement more safety measures regarding the ring ropes, Ramos' career has not yet been incorporated into discussions of how death influenced him throughout his career. This analysis contends that Ramos's trajectory into the Mexican boxing culture, the deaths on his conscious, and his Afro-Cuban origins all contributed to his boxing manhood. The bout between Lupe Pintor and Johnny Owen illustrates how the media interpreted the Welshman's abilities as a fighter by disseminating ideas about his lack of brute strength and atypical physique. Owen's death heightened the talk of his sporting body that ultimately shaped his identity as a prizefighter. Furthermore, the career of Pintor symbolizes a history of ethnic boxing and the emotional aspects of his fighting identity with the death of Owen.

The newspaper coverage of these fights and their discussions on the consequences of boxing reveals the complexities of fighting men that go beyond public displays of violence. This study traces the development of pugilistic masculinity and death by seeking to understand a myriad of contributions to a fighter's identity such as vulnerability, national culture, the consequences of death. Incorporating death into conversations about boxing helps determine the meaning of violence that does not center around discussions of abolition or reform.

Chapter Two: Sugar Ramos and Boxing Death: The Intricacies of Fighting Identity

Introduction

On October 31, 1964, Bob Dylan performed “Who Killed Davey Moore” a song he wrote inspired by the tragic ending of the fight that took place on March 21, 1963. The fight between Afro-Cuban Sugar Ramos and African American Davey Moore inspired Dylan to examine the ramifications of the bout. In the lyrics, Bob Dylan voiced his dilemma with boxing and its consequences. Dylan contemplates whom to blame for the death of Moore. He quotes Ramos as saying: “I hit him, yes, it’s true but that’s what I am paid to do.”⁴⁰ At around the same time, Dylan’s song was first performed in 1964, folk singer Phil Ochs took a more direct approach to the subject in his song “Davey Moore.” He echoes an important aspect of boxers gendered identities that deal with the consequences of death. Ochs’s verse on Moore’s family says, “He left his home in Springfield, his wife and children five... His wife, she begged and pleaded, ‘You have to leave this game. Is it worth the bloodshed and is it worth the pain?’”⁴¹

The bout between Sugar Ramos and Davey Moore at Chavez-Ravine Stadium in Los Angeles made the Afro-Cuban famous on March 21, 1963. This bout not only inspired two songs in the 1960s, but it also represents a history of boxing that illustrates the ways in which violence complicates conceptions of masculine identity. On the same night that Ramos fought Davey Moore, another Cuban fighter Luis Rodriguez (who defeated Emile Griffith) would also become a world champion. This chapter focuses on what Ramos’ victory and the death of Moore

⁴⁰ Bob Dylan, “Who Killed Davey Moore,” 1962.

⁴¹ Phil Ochs, “Davey Moore,” 1962.

symbolized for his fighting identity, apart from representing his Cuban origins. Although his Cuban background never faded with his migration to Mexico, his victory was symbolic of the Mexican nationalism that pugilistic victory entailed. The Mexican press inaugurated Ramos as a true champion fighting out of Mexico, a country that was notorious for producing world championship boxers. Moore's death raised issues important to boxing manhood apart from violent performance and the implementation of more safety measures. Sources from the media coverage before, during, and after the fight serve as a lens to explore how the press coverage of Moore's death unfolded. Additionally, an interview of Ramos later in his life shows the malleability of a boxer's identity because Ramos's memories of his fallen opponents recollect times of vulnerability. Despite dealing with the death of fighters in Cuba and in the United States, Ramos was able to adapt to emotional and vulnerable traits within the confines of his violent profession. Facing challenges in the development of his masculinity, the contradictions that boxing death introduced to his fighting identity shaped his malleable manhood. Additionally, the nationalistic implications of his victory over Moore gained him notoriety and status in Mexican sports culture despite his Afro-Cuban identity.

The intimate relationships developed between pugilists help reexamine masculinity in the violent sport. Sociologist Laurence De Garis's analysis of masculine sparring sessions in a New York boxing gym gives insights into how boxer's masculine traits go beyond productions of violence. Although his study focuses on the lesser public space of a boxing club, his analysis gives credence to the idea of an existing multidimensional boxing masculinity. De Garis noted, "Male boxers were able to express vulnerability and emotion at times, but they often (though not

always) balanced such moments with assertions of masculine dominance.”⁴² Sociologist Michael Messner’s understanding of violence reminds us that “The instrumental rationality that teaches athletes to view their bodies as machines and weapons with which to annihilate an objectified opponent ultimately comes back upon the athlete as an alien force: the body-as-weapon ultimately results in violence against one’s own body.”⁴³ This analysis of the body as a weapon emphasizes American Football, which has had similar head injuries to athletes in the sport of boxing.⁴⁴ However, Messner’s analysis is also consistent inside the world of prizefighting. Both De Garis and Messner give insights into the complexities of violence that debunk traditional notions of masculine violence that men can be defined as only vicious aggressors. These contradictory notions are an important aspect of the Ramos–Moore bout.

With death looming over Ramos’s boxing career, his story illustrates a balance between violent performance and dealing with the death of his opponents. In the Ramos–Moore bout, the bodies of both fighters were weapons that inflicted and received damage, which resulted in a fatal injury for Moore. What has been overlooked is how the fight with Moore affected Ramos outside the boundaries of violence. Ramos continued his career after his championship victory ended the life of Moore, but he did not leave Moore’s memory behind; the memory of his fallen opponent became part of his pugilistic identity. At times, Ramos seemed ill, affected by the tragedies during his illustrious career as he managed to gain notoriety from a Mexican national perspective. However, in Ramos’s reflections, his fallen opponents revealed vulnerabilities in

⁴² Laurence De Garis, “‘Be a Buddy to Your Buddy,’” in *Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport*, ed. by Jim McKay, Michael A. Messner and Don Sabo (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc, 2000), 104.

⁴³ Michael A. Messner, “When Bodies are Used as Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport.” In *Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 102. For an analysis of how boxers think about their profession and analysis of fighters from journeymen, contenders, prospects, and others who make up the majority of the sport see, Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade,” *Theory and Society*, 24 no. 4 (1995): 489-583.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-106.

Ramos as a prize-fighter; The death of his opponents and his recollections of them illustrates his malleability as a violent performer. The death of Moore in the career of Sugar Ramos has yet to be explored to investigate the complexities of boxing manhood.

The story of Ramos also illustrates the ways in which Cuban boxers gained social mobility through boxing as they migrated to Mexico to continue their professional boxing careers. Although many Cuban fighters migrated to Miami after the elimination of prizefighting in Cuba, others like Ramos fought out of Mexico where his championship victory over Moore became a cause for celebration in Mexico and elevated his status as a top featherweight boxer. He became a top-level Mexican champion despite his Afro-Cuban origins.

By the time this fight took place in 1963, boxing was already considered a dangerous sport with its history of casualties. Nevertheless, the Ramos–Moore bout and the ramifications of violence showcases a history of boxing death outside the scope of statistics on injuries (in some cases fatal) and the overarching views and questions of morality against the sport. Boxing produced a masculine spectacle of blood and violence, and the death of Moore allowed Ramos's masculinity to incorporate an emotional bond with his opponents and a motivation to represent them through violence. Death is an important part of this development. The physical culture and the public display of violence are the most significant aspects of pugilism. Characteristics such as fighting for world titles and fighters asserting themselves as top athletes in their sport are usually at the forefront of boxing coverage; however, these fighters also defended other aspects of their identity as men.

The bout between Sugar Ramos and Davey Moore serves as a lens to examine how Ramos became a world boxing champion and what effect death had on his masculine character. Ramos was a uniquely gifted fighter who is one of the few fighters in the history of boxing with

two deaths on his record. These deaths had taken place by the time Ramos was twenty-one years old; an age where his masculine character was in development. As for Davey Moore, newspaper coverage of his death was framed and understood in the public sphere as a consequence of masculine violence. Most of this coverage included conversations about the regulation of the sport which eventually led to safety regulations. The damage he sustained according to medical examiners, suggested that his cerebral injury was not typical to others in the history of the sport. Without ignoring the importance of Moore's death as a basis for further regulation, death in boxing also illustrates the complexities of masculine identity. The African-American's unfortunate death also created vulnerability in his opponent. For Ramos, the connection that he held for Moore was built on violence, yet it created a spiritual kinship between Ramos and his fallen opponent. Despite these contradictions, he was able to continue as a championship level boxer and have a successful career.

The coverage of Moore's death in the *Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers also included questions of the civility of the sport. These perceptions of the sport centered on the tragic ending of the fight and filled the newspaper headlines. However, this press coverage also touched on other themes such as tragedy, family, and how fighters intimate relationship with fallen foes existed. Although a focus on the uncivil display of the fighter's physical abilities and the consequences of violent performance was a focal point, newspapers also incorporated talk of Moore as a working-class father figure and a husband, which were important aspects of Moore's boxing identity. The history surrounding his title defense against Ramos and his eventual death brings attention to the intricacies of masculinity in boxing.

Working Class Fatherhood and Making a Living in Prizefighting

Before examining the tragic events and the public response to Moore's death, it is important to understand the limited story of Moore's fighting identity. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Davey Moore's professional boxing career lasted eleven years with sixty-six fights. He only lost two fights in the last six years of his career.⁴⁵ His identity as a fighter incorporated his status as a father with a priority to his economic responsibilities. Moore's death as a fighter showcased that boxing performances were not just an indication of training for a brutal fight, but these performances reflected economic achievements that contributed to his fighting identity. As a boxer, hard work and championship status earned him masculine recognition. However, his violent yet skillful performances also defined what it meant to be a father. Moore's character as a family man and his duties as a responsible father to his household were part of his fighting character. Moore fought for his family of five children ranging from ages two to eight.⁴⁶ As a father and fighter, Moore's prizefighting career took shape. For Moore, being a father called on him to be a world championship boxer and defend his title by violent means. Despite his death, the violence that occurred in his fight with Ramos was symbolic of masculine respectability.

Newspaper coverage gives a glimpse into what type of fighter Davey Moore was before his encounter with Ramos. As a native of Springfield, Ohio, Moore's working-class attitude towards the fight game also came with a reputation of violence. This combination thrived inside boxing where men are allowed to express their working-class manhood in a perceived uncivil environment. De Garis noted: "Furthermore, unlike many other professional and collegiate

⁴⁵ John Hall, "Moore's Death Saddens Ring World: Olympic Calls of Mitt Card," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1963. Pg. B1

⁴⁶ Ibid.

athletes, professional boxers are not coddled and sheltered and must keep full-time jobs to support themselves, that is, male Gym members are, by and large, adult men, sharing the same concerns many men face: making a living, finding life's partner, and raising a family."⁴⁷ Moore was very successful before the last fight of his career against Ramos. According to Spanish newspaper *ABC (Sevilla)*, he represented the United States in the 1952 Olympic games and later became champion of the world with his victory over Hogan "Kid" Bessy of Nigeria in 1959.⁴⁸ As a champion, Moore reached the highest status of masculine identity in boxing. Nicknamed the "Springfield Rifle," Moore was a successful boxer who fought his way up the division before generating half a million dollars in his fight with Ramos.⁴⁹

From the vantage point of a fighter like Moore, boxing allowed him to make a living like other African American fighters in the sport's early days. Traditionally, boxing had helped black men tap into a masculine space for economic mobility and autonomy from the grips of discriminatory early American capitalism.⁵⁰ For Moore, his modest aspirations as family man and provider were of utmost importance. According to his manager Willie Ketcham, who spoke with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1962, Moore was conservative about spending his hard-earned prize money. Ketcham said, 'He don't spend nothing. He has money now, and he'll have it when he's finished. He doesn't spend a dime except maybe on another house or piece of real estate in Springfield.'⁵¹ His frugal approach had a lot to do with his demeanor as a humble fighter who had no aspirations of fame. He told the newspaper 'I got my own style' referring to his small

⁴⁷ De Garis, "Buddy to Your Buddy," 103.

⁴⁸ "Ha Muerto Davey Moore." *ABC (Sevilla)*, March 26, 1963, 61.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Louis Moore. *I Fight for a Living: Boxing and the Battle for Black Manhood, 1880-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2017), 10-11.

⁵¹ John Hall, "Moore an Exception---He Saves His Loot." *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1962, A3.

entourage.⁵² His worries as a boxer were humble and not about fame, but about his family. He even worried that his time traveling abroad to fight left him less time with his wife, five kids, his father (a minister), and a handful of brothers and brothers-in-law.⁵³ The sacrifices that Moore made as a boxer are important to his boxing identity. Before his death, his blue-collar approach served him well as he was successful in capturing a world title and defending it several times against a plethora of Mexican fighters.

In the 1960s, Moore earned notoriety and status as top-level champion with multiple victories. According to John Hall of the *Los Angeles Times*, his campaign in 1962 started with his fight against Cisco Andrade at the Olympic Auditorium, and he fought nine fights internationally in places like Mexicali, Juarez, Rome, Tokyo, and Paris.⁵⁴ Hall noted that Moore was ready to move up in weight since he had successfully dominated the featherweight division, yet a potential fight with rising prospect “Sugar” Ramos put into question his dominion over the featherweight division. The presence of Ramos as a potential challenger to Moore’s championship was a potential roadblock in his quest to move up in weight to face the lightweight champion of the world Puerto Rican fighter Carlos Ortiz.⁵⁵ A young Ramos was getting closer to a title challenge and, much like Moore, his boxing identity was motivated by factors beyond his violent attributes.

Ramos and the Role of Pugilism in Masculine Identity

Ramos’s origins and his victory over Moore illustrates the importance of boxing for national representations of masculinity. As a Cuban immigrant fighting out of Mexico, Ramos’s

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Feather Ring King Davey Moore Tops ‘Fighting Champions’ List,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1962, 15.

⁵⁵ John Hall, “Moore an Exception---He Saves His Loot,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1962., A3.

success in boxing helped him gain notoriety from a national perspective. Historically Latin American fighters' pugilistic activities allowed for the advancement of their nations through this culture of muscularity. Historian David C. LaFevor suggests that in Mexico the popularity of violence and "ethnic nationalism" was the thriving force behind the popularity of pugilism.⁵⁶ The rise of the modern nation during the 1800s coincided with the development of modern sport in both Cuba and Mexico, and the international sport of boxing was at the forefront of this development.⁵⁷ These displays of manhood helped Latin American fighters tap into the world of respectable modernity through their pugilistic activities. Moreover, in Cuba, the increase of "voluntary social organizations" helped men connect to the national collective, which shifted ideas about the body and its importance for the modern citizenry.⁵⁸ For Ramos, his origins as a prizefighter were molded by the national culture behind pugilism, which was similar in Mexico where he continued his career to pursue a championship.

Cuban fighter 'Sugar' Ramos's trajectory to becoming featherweight champion by twenty-one years of age began with his origins in Cuba where his sporting manhood developed. Inspired by his father, Ramos knew the importance of prizefighting for his cultural heritage. For Ramos, the brutal victory over Moore in 1963, elevated his status as the new featherweight champion of the world which would become an important part of his masculine character. Inspired by his socio-economic status and his father, he was drawn to the sport. In his interview with Jose Ramon Garamabella, Ramos remembered how important it was for his father to know

⁵⁶ David C. LaFevor, "Prizefighting and Civilization in the Mexican Public Sphere in the Nineteenth Century," *Radical History Review* no. 125 (May 2016): 140.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22. For Mexican and Cuban men, he argued that in the early twentieth century boxing was viewed as a way show masculine virility despite the sports Anglo origins.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

of his goal to become a boxer. One day in Cuba, he saw his father crying as he was accompanied by another man. Ramos remembered:

The first thought that crossed my mind was that my father had had some difficulty with his companion and my initial reaction... [was to] throw myself at that man without any regard. The individual, after eluding my blows... although some reached the target-and after several attempts to calm me down, he could finally explain to me that my father wept for joy because the same day, before going to work, I had said that I would be that great boxer he always wanted to be in our family.⁵⁹

Boxing was not just a way for Ramos to utilize his body as a weapon for fame and recognition of his manliness, it was also a way for him to make his father proud by becoming a respectable pugilist. Upon finding out his son wanted to be a boxer, the emotional response from Ramos's father illustrates male physical identity inside pugilism to be associated with good fatherhood.

While navigating his way up the sport in Cuba, Ramos experienced his first encounter with pugilistic death and it affected him emotionally. The tragic consequences of his profession came at an early age which began to shape his reputation as a hard-hitting slugger. As a young boxer, Ramos inflicted fatal punishment to a fighter named Jose "Tigre" Blanco on November 8, 1958, in Havana, Cuba. Ramos recounted the events that took place, he remembered:

In the eighth, however, he was connected by a right cross that hit him squarely in the jaw. I was surprised at the null resistance that he put in when he fell because it seemed that, instead of a man, I had hit a doll. It was not necessary to be a doctor or know much about medicine to realize the magnitude of the tragedy, because when he dropped against the canvas, Jose had his eyes blank. He died two days later at the hospital.⁶⁰

Ramos's memories of the tragic death of Blanco, much like Moore's death, were now part of his identity as a fighter. Although Ramos did not necessarily earn praise for the damage he caused to the two fallen fighters; these events became part of his emotional and vulnerable boxing identity. These contradictory attributes of masculinity reveal how death in boxing symbolized more than

⁵⁹ José Ramón Garamabella, *Grades Leyendas Del Boxeo* (México City: Debolsillo, 2009), 181-182.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

calls for reform and questions of morality. In a sport where performance and violence are at center stage, incorporating death helps us to understand a more thorough history of gender in pugilism.

The end of the 1950s threatened Ramos's career as a boxer and his potential as a future world champion. The Cuban boxing culture was strong on the island, but it was dramatically affected by the Communist Revolution of 1959. This political change resulted in the banning of professional boxing in 1961 by the revolutionary government. Fighters like Ramos eventually made their way to Mexico and were able to continue their boxing careers. For Mexico, sports enabled the country to improve in the political, cultural, and diplomatic spheres through international recognition.⁶¹ In the 1930s and 1940s, the Mexican Athletic Association of Southern California (MAASC) had transnational ties to Mexico and helped promote sports in poor neighborhoods throughout Southern California.⁶² Eventually, the success and popularity of Mexican boxing allowed the country to assert itself as a modern nation, especially with the violent victories of Mexican fighters in Los Angeles where most championship fights took place. The sport became an important aspect of the developing national culture with the success of fighters like Enrique Bolanos in the 1950s and Ruben Olivares in the 1970s in Southern California.⁶³ By the time the Ramos began fighting out of Mexico, boxing victories for athletes from Mexico in places like Los Angeles were celebrated as a Mexican national achievement. Although the popularity of pugilism was rampant in Mexico, the nation also had other cultural

⁶¹ Joseph L. Arbena, "Sport, Development, and Mexican Nationalism, 1920-1970," *Journal of Sport History* 18, no. 3 (1991): 350.

⁶² For a history of the transnational ties between the MAASC and Mexico's Confederación Deportiva Mexicana (CDM) see, José M. Alamillo, "Playing Across Borders: Transnational Sports and Identities in Southern California and Mexico, 1930s-1945," *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (2010): 360-392.

⁶³ For analysis of Ruben Olivares's boxing career see Allen, "Boxing in Mexico," 183-194; For a history of boxing in Los Angeles and the rivalries between Mexican and Mexican American fighters see, Gene Aguilera, *Mexican American Boxing in Los Angeles* (Charleston SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014).

similarities with the Cuban daily life. The similarities between Mexican and Cuban and their interconnected histories helped a fighter like Ramos continue developing his boxing career. The transition by Ramos into a new country was critical for his boxing success and his acceptance into the sporting culture.

With the popularity of Mexican fighters and a plethora of featherweights to compete and train with—Ramos’s professional career took shape; This geographical advantage allowed him to be closer to a world title. In his interview with Jose Ramon Garamabella, Ramos recalls meeting a Cuban fighter who confirmed the benefits of training in Mexico. Ramos said, “It was in those days when I met a Cuban fighter who lived in Mexico. His name was Manuel Armenteros. The man did not hesitate to speak marvels of that country, especially the grand following that existed for pugilism...”⁶⁴ Ramos felt Mexico was an ideal place to continue his career even though most Cubans went to Miami, Florida. He said,

There were two reasons for choosing the Aztec country. First, Mexico had the best featherweight fighters in the world, while also, its geographical location near the United States made it easier to fight for a world title, that in those days the American Davey Moore reigned as champion; which of course would be an opportunity if my career continued to ascend.⁶⁵

Ramos expresses his desire to become a world champion fighting out of Mexico, which entailed targeting Moore’s featherweight crown. Now that Ramos fought out of Mexico, he was also in a position to compete at the highest level with the potential to become a part of Mexican boxing.

The Build Up and the Fight between Moore and Ramos

⁶⁴ Garamabella, *Leyendas Del Box*, 182-183.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 188-189.

In the build-up to the Ramos–Moore bout, Greek promoter George Parnassus insinuated that Moore might be wary of Ramos since he could not get Ketcham and the rest of Moore’s team to “the negotiating table the three times they had agreed to meet.”⁶⁶ Parnassus wanted Moore to be stripped of his title if he would not defend it against Ramos since he had not faced any meaningful challengers in recent memory. His only meaningful fight was in November of that same year against Kazuo Takayama in Tokyo.⁶⁷ Talk of Moore ducking potential challengers challenged his manhood, which created extra motivation so that he could defend his title and fulfill his manly duties as champion.

Leading up to the fight with Ramos, there were also questions regarding his durability since he had taken severe punishment over the years. According to Paul Zimmerman of the *Los Angeles Times*, Ramos witnessed the punishment Moore took in Caracas, Venezuela in 1960 against journeyman Carlos Hernandez. There was a debate in Moore’s team that Ramos was not present at the fight; however, Ramos had a vivid memory of Moore’s lackluster performance. Ramos told reporters: “Maybe Moore’s jaw was broken in the third round.”⁶⁸ He continued, “Well, there were several things that I noticed. But I can’t mention them until after this fight. I know one thing. I’m faster than he is. And my knockout record is better, too. I’ve never been beaten and I saw him get tore apart by a young fighter. So I’m confident I will be the new champion.”⁶⁹ The newspaper reported the day after the fight and confirmed that Moore suffered a broken jaw proving Ramos was correct in his assessment of Moore’s lackluster performance.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ John Hall, “Davey Moore Ducking Ramos, NBA Should Take Title, Says Parnassus,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 18, 1962, B5.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Paul Zimmerman, “Moore Saw Stars: It Happened in Caracas,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1963, B2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Davey Moore Drowned Eight Times, Jaw Broken in Loss to Venezuelan,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1960, C1.

Although this did not prove that he was present at the fight since Moore's injuries were well documented by the press before he was asked the question, Ramos was targeting Moore as a potential challenger since he fought that brutal fight in Venezuela in 1960.

Inside Moore's training camp in San Jacinto, California, his gym sessions told a different story to the one that Moore was possibly a 'shot' fighter who had taken too much punishment. Don Johnson (Moore's sparring partner) told the *Los Angeles Times* that "Davey is a strong and sharp as I've ever seen him."⁷¹ Moore had just showcased thirteen rounds of hard training that included sparring, jump roping, speed bag work, and shadowboxing.⁷² Moore told reporters that the "Only difference between me and now and four years ago is I'm smarter."⁷³ Death in boxing occurs more frequently than it should, even when fighters at the championship level are evenly matched. According to *El Informador*, both fighters weighed in under the featherweight limit.⁷⁴ The champion Davey Moore, at twenty-nine years old, had a long reign as champion since defeating David Bessey in the same city four years before. Ramos came into the fight with only one disputed lose due to a foul, but the ten to six odds still favored the champion.

Moore was a fighter who not only was a world champion; he was also known for his dominating victories over fighters from Mexico. In his interview with Garamabella, Ramos said, "Moore had converted himself into a Mexican executioner with victories over El Yucateco Victor Manuel Quijano, Roberto Garcia, Fili Nava, Lauro Salas, Kid Anahuac, and Pajarito Moreno whom he knocked out with barely one minute in half into the first round of their

⁷¹ John Hall, "Who's Washed Up?: Angry Moore Puts on a Dazzling Show," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1963, B2.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "El Martes se Realizarán Las Peleas por los Campeonatos: La Lluvia Evitó Los Encuentros," *El Informador*, March 17, 1963, 2B.

fight.”⁷⁵ Ramos remembered that Moore would do whatever it took to retain his title when he said that Ramos was traveling all the way from Mexico to take my belt, but he would have to kill me to take it.⁷⁶ The build-up to the fight was over, yet no one could anticipate how the night would unfold.

Although much of the fight’s coverage focused on the tragic aftermath, the press reported on the action they witnessed from Ramos and Moore that night. According to John Hall of the *Los Angeles Times*, the fight was an even battle for the first eight rounds with “one final burst in the seventh round” from the champion.⁷⁷ According to Al Wolf’s description of the fight in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Indeed, it was Ramos who seemed to be in greater distress at times, particularly in the seventh round.”⁷⁸ Then, the champion Moore began to show signs of deterioration from Ramos’s punches. Hall noted:

With his legs wobbling and gasping for breath, he had difficulty in the eighth and ninth, and finally went down from a left to the chin early in the 10th. Up at five, he took referee George Latka’s mandatory eight-count on his feet. But he was groggy and reeling. His face splattered with blood, and another left hook draped Davey helplessly over the middle strand of the ropes just before the sounded.⁷⁹

He sat on his stool, seemingly unstable but suggested that he was ready to keep fighting.⁸⁰ His manager Willie Ketcham rushed to the ring and signaled to the referee to stop the fight. Moore was not allowed to continue past the tenth round. The fight was over, and the new champion “Sugar” Ramos was only twenty-one years of age. *El Informador* noted that at the time, in

⁷⁵ Garamabella, *Leyendas Del Boxeo*, 204.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁷⁷ John Hall, “Davey Moore in Coma, Fights for Life: Ex-Champ’s Condition Worsens,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1963, A1.

⁷⁸ Al, Wolf, “Latka’s Problem: ‘Blind Spot’ in Ring Rules,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1963, B2.

⁷⁹ Hall, “Davey Moore in Coma,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1963, A1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

California there were no technical knockouts. Moore lost his championship status with a knockout defeat in the tenth round.⁸¹ Jim Murry of the *Los Angeles Times* covered the bout and acknowledged, “Davey is a puncher... He worries about the other fellow’s head and lets his own take care of itself. He fought Sugar Ramos as if the fellow owed him money. A ringsider pointed out it was not a fight it was Russian roulette with 6-oz. gloves.”⁸²

In the aftermath of the fight, Davey Moore held a press conference in his dressing room. Reporters gathered around Moore’s camp in what seemed like an ordinary post-conference after a big prizefighting event. Then, according to Morton Sharnik of *Sports Illustrated*, Davey Moore began to feel pain and spoke out, ‘My head, Willie! My head! It hurts something awful!’⁸³ Moore collapsed and was not responsive and he was taken to White Memorial Hospital. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Moore died at around 2:00 A.M. the Monday after the fight. His brain injury took his life after being in a coma for seventy-two hours.⁸⁴

Davey Moore’s death hit his family the hardest. The boxer left behind his wife Geraldine (who was twenty-seven years old) and their five children. Although devastated by the loss of her husband, she did not blame Ramos for the tragedy. According to Dan Smith, who reported for the *Los Angeles Times*, she told Ramos, “I want you to understand I’m not blaming you for anything.”⁸⁵ She added, “I realize it is hard for you to know you aren’t the one to blame. But I’m closest to Davey and I’m asking you not to take it that way. It was God’s act.”⁸⁶ Geraldine’s

⁸¹ “Moore Cayo en el Decimo El Cuba Subió al Ring Con las Apuestas en Contra,” *El Informador*, March 22, 1963, 8B.

⁸² Jim Murray, “Stop the Fight!: Murray Column,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1963, 11.

⁸³ “Death of a Champion,” *Sports Illustrated*, April 4, 1963, 20.

⁸⁴ John Hall, “Moore’s Death Saddens Ring World: Olympic Calls off Mitt Card,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1963, B1.

⁸⁵ Dan Smith, “Ramos Comforted by Davey’s Wife: Tearful Young Champ Visits Mrs. Moore in Highly-Emotional Scene at the Hospital,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1963, B1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

spiritual approach connected with Ramos as he wept and felt sorry for the loss of his opponent. They both agreed to pray for Davey and hope for the best.⁸⁷ *El Informador* reported on Geraldine's concerns for her children. She said, "I don't like boxing," she hoped that her kids would not follow in their father's footsteps and become professional boxers.⁸⁸ The sport that gave the Moore family a way to survive also caused emotional pain.

Moore's Death and the Vulnerability of Pugilistic Manhood

Ramos is one of the few fighters in recorded history to have two deaths in his professional boxing record, so he was no stranger to the emotional toll that the death of Moore would have on him. The death of Jose "Tigre" Blanco affected him emotionally and it became a struggle to continue his career. Ramos remembered how difficult it became to overcome the death of his opponent:

I was inconsolable because I felt guilty about what happened. Not even the signs of affection and the words of my parents and my brothers could alleviate my misfortune...But when I finally managed to close my eyes, it was worse because I had a nightmare that could not erase from my memory the moment... It was then when I woke up abruptly and, while I was sweating cold, I was crying uncontrollably.⁸⁹

Ramos was a prizefighter who earned money to survive, but the tragic death of his opponent showcases the contradictions of Ramos's masculine character. For Ramos, to continue his career meant having to deal with the death of Blanco on his conscious. Ramos recalled a significant moment that would lead to the continuation of his boxing career despite the tragedy:

I received a visit that changed my life: it was the mother of el "Tigre" Blanco. My first reaction when I was received in that house...was to hug her and ask her forgiveness for what happened. I also inform her of my decision to retire from boxing...Then, softening

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ "Declara la Viuda de Davey Moore," *El Informador*, March 26, 1963, 6-B.

⁸⁹ Garamabella, *Leyendas Del Box*, 185.

the tone and taking my hands, she told me that I was now the bearer of Jose's dreams of becoming a champion, and each triumph of mine would be a victory for him.⁹⁰

After the positive reaction and support from his opponent's beloved mother, Ramos used emotional and spiritual means and continued to peruse his dream to become featherweight champion. The continuation of his career incorporated the vulnerabilities of his fighting identity.

Boxing death allowed Ramos to express his malleability and build a connection with his fallen opponents. This aspect of his identity has been overlooked since the history of this fight focuses primarily on the safety reforms that occurred due to Moore's death. While not ignoring the significance of Moore's death for the regulation of the sport, Ramos was affected spiritually by the death of his opponent. Elio Ruíz, a Cuban Film Maker who interviewed Ramos, captured this very sentiment. He noted:

The reason, according to Ramos's confession to me, was that while he was running as part of his training, he suddenly heard steps behind him. He stopped. Somebody was following him, but nobody was visible. He restarted running and once again heard the steps following him. He stopped for a second time, as did the footsteps. At that moment, Ramos felt that it was Davey Moore's spirit.⁹¹

The death of Jose "Tigre" Blanco in 1958 and Davey Moore at Chavez-Ravine in 1963, illustrates how vulnerable violent men become when death becomes part of a fighter's identity. Moore's memory lived with Ramos and continued to be part of his identity both spiritually and emotionally. The tragedies did not stop Ramos from ultimately becoming a great fighter who represented both Cuban and Mexican boxing.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 185-186.

⁹¹ Elio Ruíz, "Who Killed Davey Moore? (Boxing and literature, face to face)," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 33, no. 2 (2014): 115. Ruíz is a Cuban Filmmaker living in the United States. He has worked in theater, television, films, print media, screenwriting and other projects. He has also taught acting at Cuba's International School of Cinema and Television, the Universidad Autónoma de México, Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica, the Cuauhtémoc University of Puebla, Mexico, and Lumière Institute.

To opponents of the sport, fighters are seen as violent men whose public displays of manhood are not modern or moral. However, Ramos's character showed signs of emotion and vulnerability that allowed him to continue performing violently as a contradictory character. Similar to the death of Blanco that occurred early in his career and where he showed signs of emotion and vulnerability, the death of Moore also led to similar aspects of boxing manhood.

The Realities of Pugilistic Violence and the Attempts at Reform

Unfortunately for Moore, his death did not allow us to see the trajectory of his career and how it would eventually unfold. Moore's contribution to the sport after his death helped the sport implement safety measures regarding the ropes of the prize-ring. How Ramos dealt with the tragedy illustrates an important aspect of boxing history. In boxing, men are exalted as world champions; therefore, the relationship between the champion and the contender create ideas about hierarchical masculinity. In some cases, the champion gets more respect from the referee and is allowed to continue fighting even if he is losing the fight. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* by Al Wolf captures how vital a referee is to the fight itself and an unwritten code of allowing a champion to continue despite the dangers to his health and the crowd's chants for more action. Wolf suggests, "And to stop a close title fight in favor of the challenger is to incur the wrath of fans, possibly even a quizzing by ring commissioners."⁹² Although it may be difficult to assess the thought process of the referee when determining the stoppage of the fight. Fans of the sport expect a champion to be laid on a stretcher before giving up his championship. Moore was given plenty of time to answer back at Ramos's punches. The fight might have avoided tragedy if the referee intervened sooner than he did.

⁹² Wolf, "'Blind Spot' in Ring Rules," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1963, B2.

In a sport where the main goal is to punish the opponent with aggression and precision punching, it would be difficult to measure when a fight should be called off. Wolf said, “Those mishaps almost without exception are accidental. In boxing, they are intentional-intentional in the sense that the object is to inflict punishment and damage.”⁹³ He continues, “Moreover, there’s something radically wrong when skilled boxers such as Benny Paret, Alejandro Lavorante and Moore become victims.”⁹⁴ Perhaps these fallen champions were allowed to continue fighting since their masculinity and championship status granted them more time to fight back and defend their title.

Just one year before the Moore–Ramos bout, there was another ring death in a championship fight. On the night of March 24, 1962, a fight between African American Emile Griffith and Afro-Cuban Bernardo “Benny the Kid” Paret took place at Madison Square Garden in New York City. This encounter was the third fight of their epic trilogy which resulted in the death of the Cuban fighter Paret. Griffith lost his title to Paret several months earlier in a fight mired in controversy. At the weigh-ins before the fight, Paret called Griffith a “maricon”⁹⁵ which referred to Griffiths rumored sexuality.⁹⁶ Griffith responded with his pugilistic manhood winning the fight by technical knockout in the twelfth round, which resulted in the death of Paret due to injuries sustained that night. In the case of the Paret–Griffith rivalry, death became a focus that in turn highlighted other important aspects of the bout regarding gender, historical significance, and

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ A Spanish derogatory word for homosexual.

⁹⁶ Donald McRae, “The Night Boxer Emile Griffith Answered Gay Taunts with a Deadly Cortege of Punches,” *Guardian (UK edition)*, September 10, 2015.

why examining death enables us to look closely at fights, fighters, and the sport. The history that surrounds death in boxing encompasses critical themes regarding studies on masculinity.

The Governor of California, Pat Brown, called for the abolition of the sport in 1963. He stated, ‘The Moore–Ramos tragedy is another illustration that boxing, even under ideal conditions, is a brutal sport if it can be called a sport.’⁹⁷ Efforts to ban the sport were taken seriously by the California government. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “Gov. Brown, a long-time foe of boxing, told a press conference he would ask for the immediate introduction of a bill asking the people to vote for the abolition of the sport in the state of California.”⁹⁸ Others did not see the complete abolition of the sport as a legitimate option. Dr. Philip J. Vogel, Professor of neurosurgery at Loma Linda University did not agree with the complete abolition of pugilism. He said, “I’m not sure abolition is the answer... I think some safeguards are needed.”⁹⁹ Brown’s declarations defined the sport as something uncivilized where the social space of fighting was unfit for a modern society. Moore’s death is an important part of interpreting the significance of the history of boxing, which has included discussions about the civility of the sport. This death allowed for spectators, officials, and others to acknowledge the dangers and consequences of a sport that had several cases that resulted in serious bodily harm. According to Bill Becker of the *New York Times*, there were also two state legislators who supported the governors call on the sport with their independent amendments they were Carl A. Britschgi, Redwood City, and Alan G. Patee, Salinas, both Republicans.¹⁰⁰ The head of the California State

⁹⁷ John Hall, “Davey Moore in Coma, Fights for Life: Ex-Champ’s Condition Worsens,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1963, A1.

⁹⁸ “Ban on Boxing Urged: Fighter Lingers Near Death in Coma Brown, Legislators Demand Action as Davey Moore Sinks,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1963, 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Bill Becker, “Davey Moore Remains in Coma; Brown Bids State Outlaw Fights,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1963.

Athletic Commission, Clayton Frye, described his thoughts on pugilism with a focus on the sport's monetary value. "A hard, tough business. I have always felt it justified itself in what it has done for the many as opposed to the few fatalities."¹⁰¹ The money that the sport generated might have influenced Frye's take on the matter. However, it is important to note how the monetary value of boxing naturally exists inside the sport. As for gendered performance, the death of Moore overshadows the more technical aspects of the actual events and helps to illuminate ideas about regulating the sport.

The death of Davey Moore generated discussions about the civility of the sport because of the dangers involved. Do promoters and managers legitimately care about these fighters? Does race matter? Jack Newfield's article for the *Nation* magazine critiques boxing and attempts to answer these questions, although he does accept the positive influences that boxing has on popular culture. Newfield acknowledges boxing's influence on music and film by the tragic deaths of Jimmy Doyle (1948), Benny 'the kid Parret (1962), and Bethoven Scotland in a fight in New York City.¹⁰² Boxing promoter Lou DiBella stated, "Respectable society doesn't care." He continued, "They say it's just boxing, and boxing has always been dirty. Respectable society doesn't care because almost all the fighters are black or Latino. Boxing is the sport of the underclass. Even the Russians are poor."¹⁰³ The results of the Ramos-Moore bout challenged the sport as a respectable part of modern society.

Moore's death stirred debate among the boxing community that challenged the authenticity of boxing as a national sport. Jim Murray, who reported for the *Los Angeles Times*, questions the legitimacy of boxing in the aftermath of the fight. Murry poses many questions that

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Jack Newfield, "The Shame of Boxing," *Nation* 273, no. 15 (2001): 15.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

challenge the legitimacy of the masculine space of the sport. Murray covered the fight and was present in the locker room with Davey Moore's team. As he sat in his dressing room, Moore began to contemplate the fight saying, "It just wasn't my night. I just can't take nothing away from that boy but...I know I can fight much better than I did tonight."¹⁰⁴ The case of Moore is fascinating in that Moore could communicate his feelings in the aftermath of the fight. A defeated man felt that his masculinity could go even further and perform at an even higher level. "Does a 'sport' which has been on parole deserve a full pardon when it proves again and again it hasn't changed?"¹⁰⁵ The validities of these questions help us to understand how ideas about the sport's legitimacy and its dangers have to do with the performances inside the social space of fighting where the idea is that men fight for money, notoriety, and pride. These all relate to the athlete's ideas about what it is to be a male fighter.

Interestingly, columnists like Murray did not fault the fighters who participated in the fight and instead blamed the spectators of the sport who crave action-packed fights. Murray acknowledges that sports such as football and youth baseball have had their number of casualties from sports-related injuries. However, he distinguishes why boxing is different from other sports since in the sport of boxing top world champions are hurt with intention. Murray notes, "Kids die in sandlot football, Little League baseball. But these are [boxing] champions, the highest practitioners of their art..."¹⁰⁶ He continues. "As I said before, in boxing, it's the name of the game. 'Kill him!' the crowd cries. They boo at anything sub-lethal...Suicide is tragic but sanctioned murder is unconscionable."¹⁰⁷ Moore's death and the history of this fight illustrate the

¹⁰⁴ Jim Murray, "Stop the Fight!: Murray Column," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24 1963, 11.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

significance of violent yet vulnerable men, the significance of boxing for national recognition, and how the sport is much more than organized senseless violence.

Ramos and His Ascension within the Mexican Sports World

Despite the tragedy of Moore's death, Ramos was able to earn the featherweight title and become a representative of the national sports culture in Mexico. His decision to continue his career in Mexico allowed him to maneuver his way into the Los Angeles fight scene where he finally showcased his abilities. The story of Ramos is unique because it illustrates the ways in which Ramos overcame death despite having to deal with an emotional and vulnerable side of the sport. Furthermore, Ramos is an early example of how Afro Cuban fighters' overcame the banning of the sport in Cuba and how they integrated themselves in Mexican society through boxing.

In a similar circumstance, Ramos's fellow countryman Jose "Mantequilla" Nápoles's career which also incorporated aspects of Mexican national culture with his pugilistic success. For instance, in the 1970s, Afro-Cuban fighter Jose "Mantequilla" Nápoles, who was originally from Santiago de Cuba, Oriente, Cuba, was the welterweight champion from 1969-1970, and 1971-1975, and was also managed by Cuco Conde.¹⁰⁸ Much like Sugar Ramos, "Mantequilla" became part of the Mexican national culture through success in the prize-ring. According to historian Stephen D. Allen, correspondence from Mexico and sports magazines such as *Nocaut* tied boxing to the nation since Mexican boxing fans correlated boxing victory with victory for the Mexican nation.¹⁰⁹ Much like Sugar Ramos, the decision for Nápoles to go to Mexico was an

¹⁰⁸ James B. Roberts and Alexander G. Skutt, *The Boxing Register: International Boxing Hall of Fame Official Record Book* (Ithaca, NY: McBooks Press, Inc., 2011), 618.

¹⁰⁹ Allen, "Boxing in Mexico," 278.

easy decision since the country had many similarities in culture to Cuba. He had the potential to succeed in Mexico, where the boxing culture was familiar. Mexico was a good place for Ramos and other Cubans to continue their boxing careers. Even politically, Mexico and Cuba had good relations despite the opposition from the United States during the Cold War. They allowed Ramos to position himself as an immigrant seeking work as a professional boxer a few years before the success of Nápoles.¹¹⁰

While the decision for Ramos to live in Mexico was crucial to his boxing career, this did not mean leaving every aspect of his Afro-Cuban heritage behind on the island. Lee Griggs in an article in a March 1964 issue of *Sports Illustrated* described Ramos's prefight routine. Griggs noted: "In the weeks before the fight, Ramos had long hours to himself. He spent them, as he always does, devouring Mexican comic books, banging expertly on his bongo drums and listening with a numbing consistency to recordings of his Afro-Cuban musical heroes, Benny More, Miguelito Valdez and the Joe Cuba Sextet."¹¹¹ Despite the death of his opponents and the ramifications that came along with it, Ramos was eventually inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 2001 as a top Champion as a representative of Cuba and Mexico.¹¹²

Conclusion

Cuban Film Maker Elio Ruíz interviewed Ultiminio "Sugar" Ramos over fifty years after his infamous fight with Davey Moore. Ruíz asked Ramos about Bob Dylan's song and whether

¹¹⁰ Allen, "Boxing in Mexico," 258-259. Quotes Garamabella, *Leyendas del Box*, 282; For a history of Mexican and Cuban Relations during the Cold war, see, Ana Covarrubias, "Cuba and Mexico: A Case for Mutual Nonintervention," *Cuban Studies* 26 (1996): 121-142; Renata Keller, "A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption: Mexico's Lukewarm Defense of Castro, 1959-1969," *Latin American Research Review* 47, no. 2 (2012): 100-119.

¹¹¹ Lee Griggs, "Sugar Daddy With a Bongo Beat," *Sports Illustrated*, March 16, 1964, 66. This description was of Ramos two weeks before impressively knocking out Mitsunori Seki in Kuramae Sumo Stadium in Tokyo.

¹¹² Roberts, *The Boxing Registrar*, 696.

he knew what it meant. Ramos replied to the verse that spoke about the banning of boxing in Cuba, “Where boxing ain’t allowed no more,”¹¹³ by saying it was allowed but fighters fought under amateur rules and were underpaid.¹¹⁴ Ruiz noted that “Two weeks later, after being exonerated as a murderer by California’s justice department, “Sugar” Ramos returned to Mexico City where the people gave him a reception reserved by Mexicans only for true national heroes.”¹¹⁵ For “Sugar” Ramos, the victory over Davey Moore became his inauguration into the Mexican popular sports culture. Accompanied by mariachis, multitudes were waiting for him at the airport. The crowd carried him to the *Palacio Nacional*, where a grateful Presidente López Mateo, known as a follower of boxing, greeted and showered him with special honors.”¹¹⁶

Ramos’s championship victory over Davey Moore signified his acceptance not just as a boxing champion but also as Mexico’s world champion. Moore’s death was an unfortunate consequence of Ramos’s historic victory, as he became the youngest featherweight champion in boxing history. Ramos’s success after the victory over Moore and his origins as a young Cuban chasing his dreams signified an important aspect of his masculine identity as a fighter. Of course, the injuries to Davey Moore were not a celebration or a moment or rejoiced for Ramos or Mexican fans. However, his brutal victory and the unfortunate consequences of that victory only resulted in elevating his status as a Mexican fighter to the nation. Mexican boxing became a successful part of the public spectacle in the United States and transitioned into Los Angeles popular culture. In Southern California, Mexican fighters defended their masculinity and turf by defeating fighters from other parts of the United States and the world. Ramos with his boxing

¹¹³ Dylan, *Who Killed Davey Moore*, 1963.

¹¹⁴ Ruiz, “Who Killed Davey Moore?”, 117.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

abilities tapped into the world of Mexican boxing dominance, which led to notoriety in the popular sporting culture in Mexico.

Though in a sport where violence reigns supreme, Ramos developed an emotional attachment to his fallen opponents. The vulnerabilities of Ramos after carrying death on his conscience provide insight into what it means to be a world boxing champion aside from the call for violence. Examining the career of Ramos as he dealt with the death of his opponents, provides insights into the intricate world of boxing. His character illustrates the hardships of the brutal sport and how he overcame such tragic consequences of his violent achievements. His success granted him a rightful place in Mexican sports culture for the rest of his career where he spent his days living in Mexico. In 1969, *ABC (Sevilla)* reported that former champion Cuban “Sugar” Ramos was thinking of boxing again and reports from Mexico City were that this decision could potentially wreak tragic results.¹¹⁷ According to the Spanish newspaper, there was a concern from his manager, Carlos “Cuco” Conde, that Ramos was not fit to continue fighting and he should not return.¹¹⁸ Like many other fighters, Ramos struggled to retire in a sport that granted him masculine recognition despite having to deal with the consequences of his fierce abilities. Ramos eventually returned and had a grueling fight against Chicano fighter Mando Ramos in 1970 where he lost a split decision.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ “Sugar Ramos, Arruinado, Quiere Volver Al Ring,” *ABC (Sevilla)*, January 7, 1969, 53.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Aguilera, *Mexican American Boxing*, 60.

Chapter 3:

The Death of Johnny Owen: The Intricacies of Mexican and British Manhood

Introduction

In 1980, Johnny “The Merthyr Matchstick” Owen captured the boxing world’s attention when he was brutally knocked out in the twelfth round of his match against Mexican champion Lupe Pintor. Owen’s story signifies more than just the issues that have plagued prizefighting. Scholar Martin Johnes discussed Owen’s working-class identity through a national perspective that illustrated his origins as an important part of his memory. For Johnes, Owen was a unique public figure that represented a modest Welsh postindustrial working-class culture.¹ This chapter takes a different approach adding to Mexican and Welsh historiographies on the death of Owen. Through a transnational perspective, the Owen–Pintor fight is useful for understanding the complexities of sporting bodies and their displays of violence. Owen’s death brought further attention to his atypical sporting body and increased notions of his imagined fragility. Issues over the death of Owen sparked controversy which led to a rivalry in the media between the Mexican and British press. The sport of boxing is international, and periodicals from Mexico, the United States, Spain, and the United Kingdom contributed to the public perception of the fight. The press focused on Owen’s body which helped shape his contradictory fighting character. Additionally, by incorporating Mexican sources on the fight as well as an interview of Lupe Pintor, the history of this fight reveals the origins of Mexican boxing masculinity, the

¹ Martin Johnes, “Stories of a Post-industrial Hero: The Death of Johnny Owen,” *Sport in History*, 31, no. 4 (2011): 444-446. Johnes also correlates the death of Owen by a capitalist sport the way capitalism affected the industrial aspect of Wales.

interactions between Mexican and Welsh boxing cultures, and the vulnerable relationship that developed between Pintor and Johnny's father Dick Owen.

Owen's atypical boxing shape fueled the obsession with his pugilistic body by the media. He did not inspire full confidence by some sportswriters, which increased after he died. Like many other boxing prospects, early on in his career, he fought novice competition before winning any titles. Health concerns during his development as a fighter were common. According to Johnes, "More seriously, in 1975 a doctor expressed doubts about Owen's health to box because he looked so frail. But, after seeing him fight, the doctors admitted that looks could deceive."² The contradictions that his sporting body represented led to the kinds of questions that he answered through his performances.

Fighting against Lupe Pintor was a litmus test to resolve the contradictions of Owen's fighting identity. After his fights, the newspaper coverage of Owen focused on how he did not look like the typical boxer, Srikumar wrote in the *Times (London)*:

You could say Johnny Owen was 10 feet tall last night, even though that would be stretching it a bit and pulling the spindley 5ft 8in Welshmen, the Merthyr Matchstick, out of shape like a piece of chewing gum. But, one might be forgiven for grabbing at a hyperbole when you have 1,800 Welshmen roaring their approval.³

Despite the negative perceptions of his masculine figure before and after his fight with Pintor, Owen's boxing career was a success. He captured the British and Commonwealth titles, and later the European title in 1980. With these notable victories that awarded him regional and national titles, Owen became a top-five contender for the WBC Bantamweight world title. Sadly, his

² Johnes, "Stories of a Post-industrial Hero," 446.

³ Sen Srikumar, "The Matchstick Man Wins but Path to World Title Still Dark," *Times (London)*, February 29, 1980, 10.

quest for a world title led to his unfortunate death due to the damage sustained against his Mexican opponent.

The historic fight between Lupe Pintor and Johnny Owen took place at the Olympic Auditorium on September 19, 1980. This fight represents a comparative history that illustrates the ways in which boxing masculinity takes shape that is essential in understanding a gendered history within boxing. Before these fighters encountered each other in the ring, their ethnic origins, their boxing victories, and their symbolic performances as representative of their respective nations, contributed to their gender identities as sporting men. The Pintor–Owen fight and the traumatic death of the Welsh fighter cannot be overlooked as it contributed to the development of these boxers' masculine identity. The significance of Mexican masculine performance and its representation of national success permeated in the history of this fight.

This fight took place in Los Angeles where Mexican boxing dominated, and Owen was outside of his element as a challenger to the Mexican champion Pintor. Fighters such as Ruben Olivares had already historic careers that had cemented the bantamweight division as one of the best for Mexican boxing. Historian Gregory S. Rodriguez asserts that “boxing’s popularity in the 1920s set in motion a series of debates about the impact of the sport on gender identity. Males and females who participated in boxing initiated a process of redefining the meaning of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ by virtue of their performance, questioning, and challenging of these gender subjectivities.”⁴ Boxing’s social sphere enabled violent displays to become a part of ethnic Mexican development in Los Angeles that grew in the 1950s. By the 1960s-1980s,

⁴ Gregory S. Rodriguez, “Palaces of Pain,’ Arenas of Mexican-American Dreams: Boxing and the Formation of Ethnic Mexican Identities in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles,” PhD diss., (University of California-San Diego, 1999), 17.

Mexican and Mexican American boxers had produced a dozen world champions in the bantamweight division.⁵ A world title fight in Los Angeles would test Owen's pugilistic body and his Welsh manhood in front of a hostile crowd of ethnic Mexicans. Understanding Owen's abilities as a fighter is burdened with contradictions because of his sporting body. Also, his Mexican opponent's pugilistic attributes had the backing of a successful boxing culture that ultimately derailed Owen's chances of becoming a world champion.

Most importantly, Owen's death came to define the Welshman's career as a fighter who lacked the visual appeal of a traditional boxing body. Writers who covered the fight perceived Owen's body as an obstacle to overcome throughout his career as a fighter. His death contributed to the contradiction of his story. He was a fighter with an imagined fragility who fought valiantly against his well-respected opponent. His performances and also his atypical boxing physic shaped his legacy as a male prizefighter.

The focus on the body was an essential aspect of the media's interpretation of Owen and his boxing legitimacy. Historically in boxing, the image of a fighter's physical attributes was documented by the press. As social historian Elliot Gorn noted, "The ring was not merely about immigrants and workers, it was about male ones, and that fact could not have been clearer in the adoring descriptions contemporary journalists lavished on boxers' bodies."⁶ Since its adolescent form, modern boxing was documented from a journalistic lens that produced discourses on the physical body, giving an insight into the development of masculine culture inside the sport. After all, boxing obligated these bodies to perform violently for recognition and prize money.

⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁶ Elliott J. Gorn, *Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 258.

Newspapers became a platform for the development of the sport and its popularity; especially in the urban landscape of nineteenth-century America.

The press interpreted Owen's sporting body as a defining factor of his identity as a prizefighter, which centered its focus on his imagined fragility. The death of Johnny Owen overshadowed his performance allowing the post-fight coverage to heighten the discussion about his body and its limitations. These discussions questioned his image as a fighter and his status as a contender for the world championship. Additionally, newspapers covered how Owen's death also revealed notions of ethnic nationalism within the context of masculine performance and its relationship to spectatorship. With a gendered approach, this study exhibits a history of boxing, the origins of ethnic fighters and their symbolic performances, and how the boxing world responded to the fight. The consequences of violent performance led to death and influenced further notions of manhood.

The Perceptions of Johnny Owen in the Press

During his years as a prospect, the *Times (London)* coverage gives insight into Owen's struggles on the path towards becoming a contender. While climbing the rankings of the Bantamweight division, Owen's body became a site of contradictions in the eyes of the media. In 1978, Srikumar reported in the *Times (London)*:

Owen, who boxed rings round a faded Paddy Maguire to win the title last year, is a competent all-rounder. He contradicts the idea that a boxer needs a good physique. He is 5ft 8in tall, yet weighs less than 8st 6lb and is as skinny as a rake.⁷

⁷ Sen Srikumar, "Hidden Pot-Holes on the Lawless Roads to Gold," *Times (London)*, April 6, 1978, 14.

The boxing media coverage of Owen could not ignore his physique as being an important part of Owen's pugilistic journey to becoming a world champion. The first step towards a world title was his victory over Maguire earning him the British Bantamweight title.

The focus on Owen's imagined fragility continued throughout his career. In November of 1979, Pete Walker reported in the *Times (London)*: "The skeletal frame of the Welshman may not contain a knockout punch but no other British title holder has a higher work rate or greater durability."⁸ Owen was not a knockout artist, but he had a reputation as a high-volume puncher who was proving he could contend with other ranked fighters. The press coverage of Owen's career focused on his sporting body and his performances that created an image of a contradictory fighting character. Writers such as Pete Walker held that Owen's stylistic attributes made him a top contender despite his lack of brute force.

By February of 1980, Owen earned an opportunity to fight Juan Francisco Rodríguez of Spain. This boxing match was a rematch of their 1979 bout for the European championship, where Owen lost a controversial decision. Owen won the rematch in a tightly contested battle, and although he became a legitimate contender for the champion Pintor, his performance against the Spaniard lacked luster. The *Times(London)* coverage indicated that Owen's long-time manager Dai Gardner should make sure his fighter could defend his titles a few times before taking on Pintor for the WBC title. His fight against his Spanish opponent was not a display of dominance for someone who was ready for a world title challenge.⁹ Although Owen won the

⁸ Peter Walker, "Owen Thrives on Work rate and Greater Durability," *Times (London)*, November 30, 1979, 19. Walker also recalled that it had been a couple of years since Owen defeated Paddy Maguire for the British Title, and twelve months since he became the Commonwealth champion with his defeat of Australian fighter Paul Ferreri at Ebbw Vale ring.

⁹ Sen Srikumar, "The Matchstick Man Wins but Path to World Title Still Dark," *Times (London)*, February 29, 1980, 10.

world title against Rodríguez, his lack of physical dominance in the fight left spectators wondering if he had more to prove before taking on a world title challenge.

On the surface, Lupe Pintor was a dangerous Mexican champion whose physicality could be too much for the Welsh fighter to handle. However, there was also talk of Pintor fighting a few ten round fights since his title-winning performance was controversial. Ironically, Pintor's camp felt the slugfest with his fellow countryman Carlos Zárate warranted a tune-up fight before defending the championship. Pintor acknowledged that the fight was a difficult victory, he said, "Because of how intense the fight with Carlos Zárate had been, and because he wanted me to mature more in order to be a durable champion, el "Cuyo" Hernández decided to hold a series of 10-round fights before defending the championship."¹⁰ Much like Owen, Pintor's preparation for a title defense warranted some tune-up fights. Although Owen earned the right to a world title shot with his fights in the 1970s, his chance at becoming a world champion would be a monumental task.

Merthyr Tydfil the Origins of Welsh Boxing Masculinity

Most prizefighters come from the lower classes, and Owen's origins story gave impressions of a hard-working kid from a blue-collar industrial town that not only had produced other prizefighters but also produced Owen the skinny, yet active fighter who fought like a true champion against Pintor. Owen was no exception to the rule that boxers came from humble beginnings. A story which is not usual in a sport that has produced champions from lower-class society, Owen was a young talented fighter, and his working-class goals catalyzed his boxing success. According to an article in *El Informador*, Owen's career began in Wales at age 8 in a

¹⁰ Garamabella, *Leyendas Del Boxeo*, 145.

small town called Merthyr-Tydfil, and he was planning on only fighting a few more years. Owen stated, “once I win the championship title I will defend it three times before hanging up my gloves.”¹¹ He continued, “I do not want to be in this sport when I am thirty years old.”¹² Owen wanted to retire if he won the world title, and his performance showcased a sense of desperation to prove his identity as a championship fighter.

Mexican boxing by the 1980s established itself with historic victories in the lower weight classes. For Wales, the sporting culture also had a boxing history of its own. According to scholar Martin Johnes, Owen was born in 1956 in Merthyr Tydfil in the South of Wales which had an industrial culture of iron and coal mining. This town produced Welsh boxers such as Howard Winestone, Jimmy Wilde, Tommy Farr and Eddie Thomas who much like Owen were representatives of the working class.¹³ When Johnny Owen turned professional in 1976, he continued to have an identity as a working-class citizen in the factory. Owen’s boxing career incorporated his hometown identity as an aspect of his pugilistic manhood.

The sport of boxing linked the countries of Mexico and Wales before Owen’s encounter with the Mexican slugger. Howard Winestone was famous for his three fights with Mexican legend Vicente Saldivar.¹⁴ According to scholar John Harris, professional boxing incorporates the sporting body as a tool for stories of a fighter’s national origins.¹⁵ In his title shot against the hard-hitting Mexican opponent, Owen’s represented more than a public display of violence. He was also representing his humble blue-collar background. Although Owen and his hometown did

¹¹ “Luego de 46 Días en Coma, Falleció Ayer Johnny Owen,” *El Informador*, November 5, 1980.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Johnes, “Stories of a Post-industrial Hero,” 445. For a history of Welsh sporting culture and national identity see, Martin Johnes, “Eighty Minute Patriots? National Identity and Sport in Modern Wales,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 17, no. 4 (2000): 93-110.

¹⁴ John Harris, “Boxing, National Identities and the Symbolic Importance of Place: The ‘othering’ of Joe Calzaghe,” *National Identities*, 13 no. 2 (2011), 177.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

not have the illustrious history of boxing as Mexico City (where Pintor was from), his Welsh origins were not a detriment but a representation of his origins as a fighter and potential challenger to a Mexican boxing champion.

Owen's hometown of Merthyr Tydfil helped shape his identity into a fighter with abilities. Although his body lacked certain pugilistic attributes, Owen's rise in the sport symbolized the success of a place that was to some extent a producer of quality boxers. According to Jeff Murphy, who co-produced the BBC documentary on Johnny Owen and wrote a book about Owen: "In the end, no one can deny Merthyr its right to be the boxing capital of Wales...Merthyr Tydfil as a place for boxers to learn and grow, and become champions is up there fight it out with probably the East End of London, Belfast or Glasgow as the boxing capital of the whole of the United Kingdom."¹⁶ Like other boxers from Wales, Owen represented his Welshness, yet his imagined fragility was a major emphasis that overshadowed his national imagery.

Johnny Owen's unfortunate death created controversy after his title fight with Pintor, which generated different reactions regarding his boxing physique. Owen was a tall fighter with a slender frame who did not fit the mold as a top prizefighter. Although fighters such African American Thomas "The Hitman/Motor City Cobra" Hearns and Nicaraguan fighter Alexis "El Flaco Explosivo" Arguello made a name for themselves despite their elongated boxing bodies, their power punching abilities demystified any doubt about their pugilistic legitimacy, ultimately becoming Hall of Fame fighters. The late great boxing trainer Emmanuel Stewart said, "But beginning at the end of 1976, he went up to 139, but he didn't grow taller in height. For the first

¹⁶ Jeff Murphy, *Johnny Owen* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2004), 43.

time you could actually see muscles develop. He was physically much stronger than he'd ever been."¹⁷ Differently, the Welshman's physique left more questions than it answered in an era where hard-hitting Mexican boxers dominated the bantamweight division.

Much like his Mexican rival Pintor, Owen's upbringing was working-class with hopes of becoming a boxer despite his lack of visual appeal for a fighter. His career choice was always in question because of his lack of physical features. Owen's appearance was not the most typical for a boxer Murphy noted,

So, from the outset (and from the outside), John Owen seemed destined for anything but professional Championship boxing. The comment, "He doesn't look like a boxer, does he?" would follow him throughout his life. But the young Owen was a great deal tougher than he looked.¹⁸

Unlike Mexican fighter Pintor, who overcame poverty and the path towards becoming a legitimized Mexican champion, Owen had to overcome his slender frame in addition to his social, economic status and create a genuine reputation of durability and work rate. Both fighters' careers illustrate how boxing became a platform to shape their identities as fighting men, which included overlooked attributes of their masculinity aside from their performances.

Owen began boxing at Merthyr Amateur Boxing Club where he excelled as a young athlete. Dick Owen, his father, became an important part of Johnny's boxing career as his head trainer. Owen's beginnings in the blue-collar town Merthyr Tydfil influenced his work ethic and helped him become a promising young fighter. Owen's masculine identity as a fighter dealt with the negative perceptions of his physique. However, his humble origins illustrate that boxing was in his blood despite his non-pugilistic body. Although Owen enjoyed running and he

¹⁷ Emmanuel Stewart Quoted in George Kimball, *Four Kings: Leonard, Hagler, Hearns, and the Last Great Era of Boxing* (Ithaca, NY: McBooks Press, Inc., 2008), 22.

¹⁸ Murphy, *Johnny Owen*, 43.

undoubtedly looked the part as a long-distance runner. A career as a runner was a possibility for the Welshman but not his first choice since boxing was a sport that was present in his family. His great-grandfather was associated with the sport and inspired him to choose boxing at eight years old.¹⁹

The Formation of Mexican Manhood for Lupe Pintor

Historically, Mexicans have used boxing as a tool for monetary success and expressions of manhood. Helping their economic status in boxing also allowed fighters to contribute to the promotion of the national sports culture, which had become very successful after WWII. According to Stephen D. Allen: “Following World War II, boxers became powerful symbols of Mexican national culture because their performances inside and outside the ring allowed Mexican elites to portray the nation as cosmopolitan, nationalist, and masculine.”²⁰ As Allen suggests, for Mexican boxers, their noteworthy success was a “gendered process.” Pintor, like other Mexican fighters, came from a poor upbringing and helped shape his developing masculine character. Sociologist Michael Messner asserts, “In order to properly conceptualize the masculinity/sports relationship, it is crucial to recognize that young males do not come to the institution of sport as ‘blank slates,’ ready to be ‘socialized into the world of masculinity. Rather, young males come to their first experience as athletes with already gendering identities.”²¹ Aspiring young men such as Pintor had the backing of a boxing culture in Mexico to potentially succeed in the sport.

¹⁹ Ibid., 46.

²⁰ Allen, “Boxing in Mexico,” 1-2.

²¹ Michael A. Messner, “When Bodies are Used as Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport,” In *Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 98.

Pintor remembered his youth and recounted his days as an aspiring young Mexican fighter. Well respected Mexican Journalist José Ramón Garamabella, interviewed Pintor who remembered his youth and his trajectory towards boxing. Managed by Arturo ‘Cuyo’ Hernandez (who managed other top fighters at the time such as fellow countryman Carlos Zárate) Pintor’s boxing career took shape. As a youth, Pintor began his boxing journey in Los Baños Jordan, a boxing gym in Mexico.²² Pintor began training as a malnourished kid before he was taken in by boxing trainer Jorge Ugalde. Ugalde not only helped pay his gym fees but also offered him vitamins to combat his malnutrition as a poor young fighter.²³ Under the tutelage of Ugalde, Pintor entered the world of amateur boxing with aspirations of becoming a better boxer. Pintor said, “Cuyo convinced me of the benefits and the possibilities of accepting an invitation to compete for Mexico abroad, which granted me permanent medical attention and help with my nutrition.”²⁴ Even early in his boxing career, the sport provided Pintor an opportunity to use his skills as a fighter to make a living in a nationally revered sport in Mexico. As an amateur, boxing gave him a platform to showcase his abilities internationally, Yet the amateurs lacked the financial upside that professional prizefighting could provide.

Prizefighting created a path for Mexican success in the sport that allowed violent performance to become a way for Pintor to develop his masculine character. Although Mexico had a respectable international amateur presence, the country had a hard time sending their best fighters abroad to compete. Since turning professional offered fighters a better opportunity to escape poverty and earn more money. Pintor remembered his decision to pursue boxing as a

²² Garamabella, *Leyendas Del Boxeo*, 133.

²³ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

professional, “As things happened I decided to abandon the Mexican Olympic route and chose to become a professional boxer which would allow me to succeed in life more effectively.”²⁵ Prize-fighting allowed fighters such as Pintor not only to make a living through violent performance, but it also allowed him to contribute to the already existing and successful Mexican boxing culture, especially in Los Angeles.²⁶ For Pintor, his path towards becoming a world champion meant winning fights against other top Mexican fighters whose manhood was molded by the same ethnic sporting culture.

Pintor solidified his status as a world-class prizefighter after his defeat of fellow countrymen Carlos Zárate for the WBC bantamweight title on June 3, 1979, in Las Vegas, Nevada.²⁷ Although the outcome of the fight was debated as Pintor was awarded a close and controversial decision, Pintor’s masculine identity had evolved with his status as the new WBC bantamweight champion.²⁸ He vowed to continue the legacy of Mexican boxing as Zárate had during his reign as champion. Pintor said, in *El Informador*:

I feel very nice, I know that with this I will earn a lot of money to ensure that my children can grow ... Zárate was a first-class champion. I want to improve what he did. Not only do I refer to triumphs ... I am going to go to the gym and take care of myself. I already achieved what I dreamed of, and now I must have my feet set to the ground so I can improve myself.²⁹

Pintor’s trainer contributed to his success in winning the title. Hernandez continued to be a significant part of his professional career with excellent experience in the sport as a top strategist

²⁵ Ibid., 136.

²⁶ For a history of Latino Boxing in the U.S. see, José M. Alamillo, et al., *Latinos in U.S. Sport: A History of Isolation, Cultural Identity, and Acceptance* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2011.), Also see Gene Aguilera, *Mexican American Boxing in Los Angeles* (Charleston SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014).

²⁷ Las Vegas Nevada was slowly transitioning to become a boxing capital but most of the fights still took place in Los Angeles.

²⁸ Although Pintor became the world champion, This fight is still shrouded in controversy making it a memorable controversial decision. See, Teddy Atlas and Bert Sugar, *The Ultimate Book of Boxing Lists* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2010), 196.

²⁹ “Pintor: Quiero Ser un Digno Campeón,” *El Informador*, June 5, 1979.

for his fights and an excellent cut man. Becoming a World Champion boxer symbolized success for Pintor and Mexican boxing.

As a top fighter in the sport, Pintor's preparation as a champion needed more motivation than ever. Pintor made it clear that he would not lose his championship status without the sacrifice of violence. He said to *El Informador*, "The case, in short, was that in the dressing room, alone, I pressed the belt against my chest and said to myself: Let's see who is the *cabrón* that takes it from me, because to do so, he will have to nearly kill me!"³⁰ Continuing the legacy of Mexican boxing was one of Pintor's top priorities, and in his title defense against Owen, he proved that defending the title could mean death in the ring. Unfortunately for Pintor, his preparation and the defense of his title led to the death of his opponent.

The fight with Johnny Owen had ethnic and nationalistic implications of manhood. Before the fight with Owen, Pintor said, "This time I will demonstrate that I am a complete champion. Owen will not make it past the sixth round because I am stronger now than ever before."³¹ He continued, "I have prepared myself like never before for this fight. The people have exceeded in criticizing me and this time everything will change, I will show how I am a true champion even better than Carlos Zárate."³² Even after he beat Zárate for the title, Pintor wanted to prove he was Mexico's next top fighter. Despite the controversy surrounding his win, Pintor established himself as the next successful bantamweight champion with new competition brewing in the division.

³⁰ Garamabella, *Grandes Leyendas Del Boxeo*, 145. Carbón is a Spanish derogatory word that translates to asshole or closely related profanity. The word can also imply toughness.

³¹ "Quiero Demostrar que soy un Gran Campeón: Pintor," *El Informador*, September 9, 1980, 11(B).

³² *Ibid.*

A Night of Performance and Tragedy

Observers of this spectacle gathered in Los Angeles at the Grand Olympic Auditorium, which according to the boxing media was a cesspool of Mexican-American fanaticism.³³ With a record of 25-1-1, The Merthyr Matchstick entered the ring as a worthy contender ranked number four at bantamweight for the WBC.³⁴ Johnny Owen challenged the Mexican with work rate and endurance that attempted to counter Pintor's boxing style. At the ring of the bell, Owen charged at his Mexican rival and began to assert an aggressive style with continuous punching. According to *El Informador*, Owen was the aggressor for the first half of the fight applying constant pressure to the Mexican fighter thru the first six rounds.³⁵ Owen's performance up to the sixth round showed his abilities as a fighter and displayed his contradictory character as a "Bionic Skeleton."³⁶ Pintor changed the momentum of the fight in round seven with some clean hard left hooks to the body and the head. In round nine, Pintor landed a vicious right hand that dropped Owen to the canvas for a standing eight count.³⁷ Mark Heisler of the *Los Angeles Times* felt it was a close and competitive fight and that Owen was effective before being hurt in the ninth round with a "roundhouse right."³⁸ The *Los Angeles Times* reported that after the fight, the British Boxing Executive challenged the legitimacy of the standing eight-count which had allowed Owen to try and recover.³⁹ Round ten was a continuation of the previous round with signs of wobbly legs from the Welsh fighter. Finally, in the twelfth round of the scheduled

³³ Rick Broadbent, "Owen and Pintor united by memories of ring tragedy," *Times (London)*, September 18, 2003, 44.

³⁴ "World Boxing Council Rankings," *Times (London)*, July 2, 1980, 11.

³⁵ "Luego de 46 días en coma, falleció ayer Johnny Owen," *El Informador*, November 5, 1980.

³⁶ Sen Srikumar, "Well Oiled Voices Behind Wales's Bionic Skeleton," *Times (London)*, March 1, 1980, 6.

³⁷ The fight was sanctioned under the World Boxing Council which implemented a standing eight count rule.

³⁸ Mark Heisler, "Owen is Critical After KO by Pintor," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1980, SD_B8.

³⁹ "Eight-Count Rule Questioned by British Boxing Executive," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1980.

fifteen rounds, Owen was dropped never to get up from his own will again.⁴⁰ Owen fought a brave fight attacking with an accumulation of punches that had Pintor backed to the ropes for the first half of the fight. Unfortunately, this was the last time that Owen's performed with his fighting style, masculine identity, and his sporting body. Owen did not get up from the shot that dropped him in the twelfth round of the fight.

Contrary to his modest aspirations as a fighter, Owen fought with an aggressive style with physicality and endurance juxtaposed with his physical body. However, Owen's body was a site of contradictions when it crumbled at the hands of Pintor's vicious punches. His body eventually turned frail with an accumulation of punches from his opponent. Death overshadowed the success that Owen had in the first six rounds. He was motivated to win the WBC title and fought a historic performance for Welsh boxing history. Welsh masculinity against Mexican manhood took center stage and produced a competitive fight. Overshadowing his brave performance, the history of this fight centers on the death of the Merthyr Matchstick.

Owen's Death and the Response from Boxing

Much of the press coverage after the fight focused on the body of the fallen fighter in a negative light. Mark Heisler of the *Los Angeles Times* reacted to Owen's body at the end of the fight when his body slumped on the canvas. Heisler said, "For an instant, Owen's body swayed into a shape resembling a question mark. He fell on his back and lay still, except for the twitching of his arms and legs, while Pintor was carried around the ring on the shoulders of a

⁴⁰ "Luego de 46 días en coma, falleció ayer Johnny Owen," *El Informador*, November 5, 1980.

second...”⁴¹ The fight was over Pintor successfully defending his status as division champion over the Welshman.

International newspaper coverage reported on Owen’s death. In Mexico, *El Informador* reported that Owen was in the hospital for forty-six days, not responding from his coma.⁴² The spokesperson representing the California hospital said that “the cause of death was due to complications with Owen’s respiratory system caused by the comatose state.”⁴³ After two attempted operations by doctors, Owen did not show signs of improvement. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Johnny Owen was just twenty-four years of age at the date of his passing at California Hospital Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead at 7:30 P.M. on November 4, 1980.⁴⁴

In the post-fight reactions, observers questioned if there were any failed actions by the officials involved. In boxing, several of these officials are present ringside in a prize-fight. Boxing consists of a referee, three judges, cornermen for both fighters (usually a cut man, a trainer and an assistant), and medical examiners. Initially, the post-fight focus was to investigate the unfortunate outcome of the bout and questioned whether the medical examiner did their job correctly. This death was not the first time a boxer had died from the injuries sustained inside the ring, or the first time people questioned the referee about his decision not to have stopped the fight sooner. What this fight represents is how, in some cases, boxing regulation is not entirely at fault. Perhaps this also contributed to the obsession with Owen’s imagined fragility, since there was no other evidence to suggest that he was the victim of nepotism. Specifically, the focus on

⁴¹ Mark Heisler, “This Time the Sport of Boxing may Have Only It Itself to Blame,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1980, C1.

⁴² “Luego de 46 días en coma, falleció ayer Johnny Owen,” *El Informador*, November 5, 1980.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Lee Harris, “Boxer in Coma 6 Weeks from Knockout Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1980, 1.

Owen's atypical pugilistic body became a focal point for media coverage. The first six rounds of the fight were a success for the Welsh fighter. His early success possibly motivated the referee not to interfere and give Owen the chance to continue despite his figure and his troubles in the later rounds.

Owen's death forced boxing writers to discuss other deaths in the history of the sport. Jerry Belcher reported in the *Los Angeles Times* about the fight's traumatic result and its connection to other fights that had ended in fatal injuries. Davey Moore's death in his fight with Sugar Ramos in 1963 was incorporated into the conversations after the death of Owen. Moore's death had been the last to occur in Los Angeles in a championship-level fight. Belcher questioned why people called for an investigation into the death of Owen but not others. Thomas Noguchi, the Los Angeles County Coroner, was adamant about launching an investigation into Johnny Owen's death. However, he admitted that there was no such investigation into the death of Davey Moore in 1963.⁴⁵ Many factors took part in the concern for Owen. First, the focus on Owen's frail body could have motivated officials to question his status as a contender for the WBC title. Second, Moore's was most likely understood as just another boxing casualty whose death led to further regulation. Third, the impact of Owen's body turning frail on the canvas during the fight, was more explicitly violent than Moore slipping into a coma a day later. The visual of Owen influenced the lack of further investigation in 1963, and also reveals key differences of death when it occurs in boxing. The focus on the gendered body in the death of Owen illustrates how the image of Owen's malleable pugilistic body influenced ideas of investigation.

⁴⁵ Jerry Belcher, "Coroner to Conduct Inquest in Death of British Boxer Owen," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1980, D1.

Unfortunately for fighters like Owen who succumbed to the violence of pugilism, investigations into the death of fighters was not always a priority for promoters. The medical condition of fighters is often of secondary concern to those who are involved in the monetary aspects of the sport. Aileen Easton, the promoter for the Olympic Auditorium, insisted it was ridiculous to do a federal investigation.⁴⁶ According to *The Los Angeles Times*, Eaton said, “The whole world knows what happened; it was just something that couldn’t be helped. The Athletic commission already has looked into everything and said it was not the fault of anyone involved.”⁴⁷ The inquest into Owen’s death was merely a formality since the results did not indicate a guilty verdict, or force the boxing laws to change. After reports suggested that the officials involved took the proper protocols, the Welshman’s health did not have boxing promoters such as Eaton worried about the possibility of death. For Eaton, her main priority was to resolve any speculation into the death of Owen and allow the sport to move on from the tragedy. In boxing, it is often common to see cases such as Owen as just another unfortunate accident. The reliance on existing regulation and reports that suggested no foul play were used to address the controversy over his death.

On November 5, 1980, *El Informador* published a thorough report that details a comparative of death in the sport and the attempts to reexamine the sport’s dangers. Boxing skeptics found an opportunity to criticize the rules of the WBC because of the death of the Welshman. According to *El Informador*, “The secretary of the Great Britain Boxing Board, Ryan Clarke, argued that the WBC regulations need to be reformed, especially to eliminate the mandatory eight-second count used in this fight. This gives the referee a false sense that if he

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

applies it, he will do his duty,”⁴⁸ Clarke responded, “We do not have that problem in Britain. If a referee feels that a boxer cannot continue, then he has the right to stop the fight.”⁴⁹ Clark’s comments suggest that he trusts the referee to make a judgment call on whether to stop the fight. Since the investigation into Owen’s death found no wrongdoings, the argument against Owen’s abilities as a contender to Pintor’s title focused his imagined fragility. Owen’s performance was overshadowed by his body that did not outlast the damaging blows from the Mexican puncher.

Other fighters who died increased further studies and opposition to the sport. A fighter named Cleveland Denny died when he fought Gaetan Hart in a sanctioned boxing match. Denny’s death garnered some attention concerning regulation. He fought on the undercard of the Sugar Ray Leonard versus Robert Duran on June 20, 1980. Denny died in Montreal which influenced the Canadian government to call for a special commission to investigate the matter. Medical doctors felt that officials should consider outlawing the sport. Dr. Alan Hudson, a neurosurgeon at the University of Toronto, described professional boxing as an “organized form of brain damage.”⁵⁰ Dr. Hudson continued, “from a medical perspective; the sport is indefensible as one where a man wins prize money by inflicting organized damage to the brain.”⁵¹ The debates about the rules were part of the reactions of boxing death, but more importantly, these concerns were influenced by perceptions of the Welsh fighter in the media. Other fighters who have died have generated debates about the rules and the legitimacy of the sport in modern

⁴⁸ “Piden un Estricto Control Dentro del Box Profesional,” *El Informador*, November 5, 1980, 20(B).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. Dr. Hudson cited a recent study by the Royal College of Surgeons of London that demonstrated that 17 % of fighters that registered had extensive damage to their brains.

society. However, the reactions in this fight were heightened by their obsession with Owen's imagined fragility as a pugilist.

Johnny's fight with Pintor was cited in newspaper coverage of other fights that have ended in death. According to *El Informador*, the lack of medical oversight in the pre-fight medical examination was an element that needed more criticism.⁵² The death of Puerto Rican fighter Willie Classen was shrouded in controversy after suffering fatal damage against Wilford Scypion in November of 1979 (the previous year at Madison Square Garden in New York). After medical records revealed that Classen was suspended from fighting until he completed certain medical examinations, he was allowed to fight British fighter Tony Sibson in London in October of 1979. The fight with Sibson took place one month before his deadly clash with Scypion. Classen was a last-minute substitute, and the physician who did his exam had minimal experience, having done only two medical exams before Classen's fight.⁵³ Classen's situation illustrates how historically deaths in boxing can be traced back to mistakes by officials, cornerman, promoters, or lack of safety procedures. In the case of Johnny Owen, perceptions of his malleable body influenced the concern for his well-being. Other cases of deaths that have occurred in the history of the sport have played out differently than Owen.

In the case of Classen, the British officials who sanctioned the fight denied that there was any wrongdoing. Ryan Clarke defended the British Junta at that moment saying, "We were lied to from the boxer and his contacts, but we had medical proof that the fighter was in good condition."⁵⁴ Clarke suggested, "It is asked that all ringside physicians have some experience in

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

surgery and neurology. Other people have suggested that the fighters use protective headgear and that the ring should be softer to prevent injuries from the knockdowns.”⁵⁵ He continued, “You can never stop people from fighting, but you can control them. It can be made acceptable to the public.”⁵⁶ With the death of Classen, officials were able to find the maneuvering by promoters and managers so that the fight could take place. Owen’s death was unique because of the lack of foul play and the focus on his imagined fragility shaped the idea that he was not fit to fight a top Mexican world champion. The attention to his sporting identity was motivated by the concern that he was not ready for the title shot.

Regulation of the sport was a factor in the post-fight discussions; however, what is overlooked in scholarly works is the analysis of boxing writers’ obsession with the idea that Owen was severely outmatched. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Jim Murray discussed the death of other boxers such as Alejandro Lavorante from Argentina in 1963. However, his recollection of Owen from their encounter focused on his concerns based on the fighter’s lack of visual appeal. Murray wrote:

I had lunch with Johnny two days before his main event. I was frankly startled. He looked too frail to be anything but a chimney sweep. He was tall, but if you folded him up you could put him in your pocket. You know how prizefighters are supposed to look. Barbed wire beards, torsos that look chiseled, hard, cunning eyes, fists that look like sacks of broken glass. Johnny looked as if he had arrived on his first two-wheeler, and the truant officer would be along any moment.⁵⁷

Although Murray’s depiction of Owen was a recollection of a meeting with him before the fight, the article was published after the fight on October 9, 1980. The date of this article indicates that Owen’s death heightened the notion that he was a frail boxer. The Welshman was in a comatose

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Jim Murray, "The Harder They Die," *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1980, OC_B1.

state at the time the article was published which allowed Murry to focus on Owen in a concerted manner.

Simultaneously, his depiction of Pintor as a top Mexican fighter only increased with boxing death. Murray recalled: “I thought of Lupe Pintor, the champion he was fighting, a fierce, flat-nosed, mustachioed warrior who looked as if he should have on a big sombrero and a crisscross of bandoliers across his chest and be raiding border towns for Pancho Villa.”⁵⁸ Murry’s depiction, although stereotypical, acknowledged the idea that Mexican boxers at the championship level represented manhood and dominance. The success and an ethnic spectacle of Mexican boxing in L.A. continued to shine with Pintor’s victory. Owen’s death and his supposed brittleness, which could have eventually led to his death, only increased the idea of dominant Mexican boxing.

Ethnic Spectacle and Boxing Rivalries in the Media

Lupe Pintor defended his title in his home turf that Mexican pugilistic success had built in Los Angeles. Fans at the Olympic were hostile to the visiting challenger and his team, and Pintor’s victory led to unfavorable reactions. According to Rick Broadbent of the *Times (London)*:

The Olympic Auditorium was a snarling cesspit of bias. It throbbed with the sweat and saber-rattling of hopes and dreams. The Matchstick Man ignored the cans of urine hurled by spiteful hands and the savage mien of the baying crowd. This was his moment. This was his destiny. Then, blackness.⁵⁹

Death in boxing exemplifies the dangers of pugilism, but the Owen–Pintor fight also generated hostile spectatorship and a British and Mexican rivalry among the press. This prize-fight was

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Rick Broadbent, “Owen and Pintor United by Memories of Ring Tragedy,” *Times (London)*, September 18, 2003, 44.

between a Mexican world champion and the Welshman Johnny Owen, who was the British and European champion. The connection that spectators had with these fighters incorporated aspects of ethnic pride based on nationalistic egotism for their sports heroes. Their pugilistic bodies performed violently to defend their manhood, that created a hostile environment. The death of the Welshman sparked controversy, and those in the media questioned the civility of the Mexican crowd.

The nationalistic ideas in boxing was not a new development; however, the death of Owen heightened those emotions. According to *El Informador*, some British journalists suggested that the Mexican fan base and residents of Los Angeles did not behave in a manner associated with good sportsmanship.⁶⁰ The newspaper reported that “The English spectators did not like the euphoria that arose in the Olympic Auditorium at the moment that Lupe Pintor knocked out Johnny Owen.”⁶¹ The people that witnessed those moments did not realize the magnitude of the injury that the Welsh fighter had sustained. The “gritos” (chants) of the public stemming from the triumph of Lupe Pintor bothered these journalists. Journalists covering the fight from the United Kingdom interpreted the mostly Mexican and American fanbase to be celebrating Owen’s condition. These celebrations and protests from spectators of the fight give us a glimpse into people’s emotional reactions and how action-packed fights had nationalistic implications. For Owen, a victory over the Mexican fighter would have elevated his status among the best in the world. Pintor’s victory symbolized a continuation of Mexican dominance in the sport and fans at the Olympic celebrated. Although the media coverage from the U.K. portrayed their fighter’s death as a celebration for the Mexican crowd, the fans who erupted in

⁶⁰ “Incivilizada, Dicen de la Afición Inglesa,” *El Informador*, October 10, 1980, 13(B).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

celebration at Pintor's victory did not know the extent of Owen's injury. The celebration from boxing fans was less than civil, and the media reacted.

The Mexican fanbase at the Olympic were not the only spectators who had reacted unfavorably to the results of a boxing match. The evidence in the Minter–Hagler fight showcases how boxing fans have similar reactions depending on the outcome of the fight and the loss of a fighter they support. In such a violent and masculine sport where the stakes of entertainment are high, the spectators became uncivil with their protests. Pugilistic fanaticism erupted in a championship fight with notions of national pride. Fans in London erupted in chaos after the defeat of their hometown fighter Alan Minter against Marvin Hagler on September 27, 1980, at Wembley Stadium. Panamanian referee Carlos Berrocal stopped the match when the ringside physician examined Minter's cuts sustained from Hagler's powerful punches. The crowd was not pleased with the early stoppage. According to *El Informador*, there were bottles and other disorderly conduct during this match. The fight was a losing battle for Minter who stayed in front of the southpaw Hagler as he took vicious shots that brutally damaged his face.⁶² Ethnic displays of masculinity in boxing often created emotional reactions. Similarly, at the Olympic, the crowd went wild when ethnic Mexicans overreacted to Pintor's successful title defense; causing hooliganism. In victory and defeat, boxing spectacle had a history of unfavorable reactions and was not limited to Mexican crowds.

The build-up to the fight between Mexican fighter Rafael "Bazooka" Limón and British fighter Cornelius Boza-Edwards that took place on March 8, 1981, reveals how the death of Owen influenced national pride for Mexican boxers. *El Informador* reported on the fights intense

⁶² Ibid.

build-up that showcases the effect of Owen's death on Limón's self-confidence. Limón was notorious for pre-fight antics before his fights, and his verbal attacks contained notions of manhood, national pride, and the death of Owen. In the first press conference of this fight. The fighters met face to face, and Limón's verbal assault began: "I do not know why you want to fight with me. The last time a British fighter fought a Mexican, it resulted in his death. The same thing that happened to Johnny Owen will happen to you."⁶³ Ironically, Limón lost to Edwards by a unanimous decision which delegitimized his verbal assault on his British opponent. Although Pintor's victory over Owen symbolized Mexican boxing supremacy for other Mexican fighters such as Limón, ideas about ethnic nationalism in the sport were sometimes false notions. Limón was well known for promoting his fights with trash talk, and he used the death of Owen to define what it meant when going up against a Mexican boxer. Pintor's identity as a Mexican champion established a narrative of an outmatched opponent who died at the hand of a true champion. Pintor's victory represented a long history of Mexico City fighters that turned street fighting into a career. Although Mexicans did not necessarily use Owen's death as a symbol of Mexican accomplishment, the idea that fighting a Mexican could potentially result in death was incorporated into the pre-fight to Limón's fight with British boxer Boza Edwards.

Memories of Owen and the Focus on his Imagined Fragility

The boxing death of Owen offers a glimpse at the heightened respect for Mexican boxing by the media when writers reflected on the fight's tragic result. The fight between Pintor and Johnny Owen generated memories from Hugh McIlvanney, a writer for the *Times(London)*. His memory from the fight recalled the "dauntingly powerful" champion Pintor whose abilities

⁶³ "Limón Amenazó a su Rival, Boza Edwards," *El Informador*, March 5, 1981, 17(B).

eventually “blasted [Owen] into a terminal coma.”⁶⁴ Death contributed to Pintor’s identity as a historically great fighter. The boxing world was familiar with the hard-hitting Mexican fighting style from Mexico City, yet it was also Owen’s body generating discussions about his contender status that created a narrative of a lopsided matchup. In the eyes of the press, the fight created a memory of death that included further respect for Mexican boxing as having some of the world’s fiercest fighters.

The discussions on gender that went beyond pre-fight predictions dealt with concern for the Welshman. The violent nature of the sport does not deter most spectators that love the sport, even knowing its dangers. This fight was no exception to that rule. Hugh McIlvanney’s observations directly after the fight illustrated concern for the young fighter. He wrote, “There is something about his pale face, with its large nose, jutting ears, and uneven teeth, all set above that long, skeletal frame, that takes hold of the heart and makes unbearable the thought of him being badly hurt.”⁶⁵ Owen did not look like the typical fighter, and at a time when Mexican boxing dominated the L.A. fight scene, his death elevated conversations about Mexican boxing. McIlvanney wrote:

Pintor, a Mexican who had already stopped 33 opponents and would be going to work in front of a screaming mob of his countrymen, whose lust for blood gives the grubby Olympic Auditorium the atmosphere of a Guadalajara cockfight, multiplied a hundred times. No fighters in the world are more dedicated to the raw violence of the business than Mexicans.⁶⁶

The crowd at the Olympic Auditorium was an obstacle for Owen to overcome so that he could become world champion. The night of the fight was the biggest stage imaginable for the twenty-

⁶⁴ Hugh McIlvanney, “Dark Memories of a Violent Night,” *Times (London)*, September 21, 2003.

⁶⁵ Hugh McIlvanney, “This is How Johnny Owen's Final Fight was Reported, Just Hours After It Ended So Brutally in a Los Angeles Stadium,” *Times (London)*, October 27, 2002.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

four-year-old Welshman. McIlvanney interpreted what could happen to Johnny on the night before the fight. He recalled taking notes on Friday morning before the fight where he wrote: “Feel physical sickness at the thought of what might happen, the fear that this story might take us to a hospital room.”⁶⁷ The memory of his feelings about Owen’s imagined fragility was amplified with his death. Owen was a worthy challenger in the eyes of McIlvanney who was convinced that his only defeat had been a “blatant case of larceny in Spain.”⁶⁸ His durability as a boxer contradicted the image of his sporting body since he had never been knocked down before. The doubts about Johnny Owen as a fighter were based on perceptions of his boxing physique rather than his attributes as a tough fighter.

The fight itself was nothing short of a spectacle, yet the memories of Owen do not focus on his abilities as a fighter. On the twentieth anniversary of the fight, Frank Keaton of the *Guardian* recalled how he witnessed a man who looked nothing like a boxer.⁶⁹ Keaton’s remembrance of Owen was that:

He was a skinny 5ft 8in and weighed 8st 6lb. His arms were spindles, his chest concave. On top of this skeletal, completely unmuscled frame was a pallid face and razored head framed by out-of-proportion Prince of Wales ears and Scaramouche nose, lit up occasionally by a darting, shy Pinocchio smile.⁷⁰

Death in the ring ultimately became a part of the memory of Owen and his identity as a fighter. By interpreting at his death to be more significant than a call to regulate the sport, other important aspects of Owen important to his story are revealed. His Welshness, his worthy

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Frank Keating, “Innocent Son of Merthyr Who Met Death at the End of the Line: Way Back when,” *Guardian (UK edition)*, October 9, 2000.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

performance, and his masculinity are overlooked with the focus on his unfortunate death in boxing memory.

The loyalty of spectators to the dangerous sport is sometimes ineffable. The sport's brutal outcomes on prestigious fighters such as Muhammad Ali and others only reaffirms the loyalty to the sport despite its destructive tendencies. Most observers realize the dangers of boxing, yet the thirst for action inside the ring is everlasting. McIlvanney admits:

In spite of that, in spite of Ali's condition and of a hundred further arguments against boxing, I find that I am still enthralled by watching exceptional fighters in action. It's true that neither The Greatest nor Johnny Owen would have wanted to live his life any other way, but does that really make a case for those of us in the safe seats? All I can say is that if I recanted it would be a phony gesture.⁷¹

Owen was not considered a great boxer, but his masculine performance challenges the narrative that he was not fit to challenge a Mexican boxer for a world title. Ideas about his imagined fragility by the media overshadow his filmic performance. His aggressiveness and work rate made its mark for Welsh boxing history, although his death casts a dark shadow on his fascinating career. Observers of the Welshman focused on his physical traits in order to cope with his death at the hands of one of Mexico's best bantamweights of all time Guadalupe Pintor.

Conclusion

Despite Owen's death, the unfavorable reactions from spectators, and the backlash from the British media towards Mexican spectators, they accepted the excellence of Mexican boxing by the British press, their recollection of the Owen–Pintor bout. Essential figures in boxing history also acknowledged Pintor's capabilities and his ascendancy as a Mexican fighter. In an interview, former WBC President José Sulaimán Chagnón acknowledged Pintor as one of the

⁷¹ Hugh McIlvanney, "Dark Memories of a Violent Night," *Times (London)*, September 21, 2003.

best Mexicans to step into the ring. Sulaimán asserted, “Alternatively, a Lupe Pintor, ‘El Indio of Cuajimalpa,’ as Cuyo Hernandez would call him, had an iron character that made him one of the bravest champions that ever existed.”⁷² Much like other Mexican boxers throughout history, Pintor cemented himself as a great Mexican fighter according to Sulaimán.⁷³ His matchup against Johnny Owen in 1980 was one of his first attempts at creating a legacy as a champion. The fight against Owen had nationalistic and masculine implications which became an important aspect of Pintor’s legacy as a historically great Mexican pugilist. Owen’s death heightened the notion of his abilities as a hard-punching world champion.

The death of Owen is a moment in boxing history where two cultures collided and came together. A BBC documentary titled *Johnny Owen: The Long Journey*, traces the steps of Dick Owen as he traveled to Mexico City where he meets with Pintor for the first time since the night of the fight. In 2003, Dick Owen reunited with Pintor despite the fatal damage he inflicted on his son. Rick Broadbent recounts this reunion in the *Times (London)*, he noted, “What happened in the ring that night forged a respect and kinship that transcended race, language and background.”⁷⁴ Dick Owen was a spiritual man and did not blame Pintor for his son’s death.

Owen’s father said:

It was the best thing I ever did going out there. I didn't think anything bad about Pintor personally. It had been the Mexicans as a whole that I was angry with for the way they treated us that night. They were violent and abusive and threw things at us. It took me a lot of years to understand that they were just different and venting their excitement. They wanted their man to win and didn't think John was in the condition he was. It was relief on their part as much as anything. When I went to Mexico to meet Pintor they treated us wonderfully.⁷⁵

⁷² José Sulaimán Chagnón, Preface, in Garamabella, *Leyendas Del Boxeo*, 12-13.

⁷³ Ibid., 13. He also mentions other great Mexican fighters from the twentieth century in Baby Arizmendi, Sal Sanchez, Jose Medel, Vicente Saldivar, Kid Azteca, El Toluco López, and Rodolfo Casanova.

⁷⁴ Rick Broadbent, “Owen and Pintor United,” *Times (London)*, September 18, 2003, 44.

⁷⁵ Ibid.; Also see, *Johnny Owen: The Long Journey* documentary, 38:56, July 1 29, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjdSt5RJdKs>.

Pugilistic death is an ugly truth of the sport where men battle for physical and psychological supremacy. The history of this tragic event illustrates what kind of civility is present at a sport and perhaps why the sport still functions in society. Dick Owen was in his son's corner the night of the fight and watched his son stand for the last time in his life.

Dick Owen invited Pintor to help pay tribute to Johnny and commemorate his death. Pintor and his wife traveled to Merthyr for the unveiling of a statue for Johnny Owen. This emotional event had Pintor weeping in Dick Owen's arms. Martin Kelner of the *Guardian* described the difficult position Johnny's father was in:

Dick Owen, who has had to carry the burden all these years of knowing he might have stopped the fight when his son received a badly cut lip, and whose decision it was to turn off Johnny's life support machine after 46 days during which 'we broke our bloody hearts', enveloped Pintor in his arms. 'please don't cry,' he said. 'It was an accident.'⁷⁶

Dick Owen traveled to Mexico to reconnect with Pintor and he witnessed the Mexican capital as a joyful place despite economic inequalities.⁷⁷ The emotional reunion that resulted from Johnny Owen's death shows the civility that boxing can inspire despite its brutal nature. The discussions on these tragic events generated talks on masculinity, and this emotional reunion gives us a glimpse into how men can become so vulnerable in the world of boxing.

The story of Johnny Owen illuminates how the boxing press generated discussions about gender that were influenced by the perceptions of his physical body. His masculinity was in question, and his death only elevated those discussions leading to ideas about rule changes, boxing culture, and nationalism. In a sport with so many deaths, this history offers details on a specific fight that tell a history of death in boxing beyond the statistics and regulation of the

⁷⁶ Martin Kelner, "Backpages: Screen Break: Grey is the Colour as the Skies Weep in Merthyr," *Guardian (UK edition)*, June 16, 2003.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

sport. With this focus, the fight established an understanding of the already existing social and cultural implications of ethnic boxing that developed further with Owen's death.

A story of a poor young Welsh fighter who died at the hands of the physically dominant Mexican boxer is only part of the story. The fight between Guadalupe Pintor and Johnny Owen is an integral part of the historical record of prizefighting because the tragic ending of the fight produced media coverage that is essential to understanding how death contributed to changing notions of manhood, the reaffirming of Mexican boxing success, and showcased the fluidity and similarities and differences of pugilistic masculinity.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Boxing has had a long history of injury and death that has continued to fuel questions regarding the sport's rightful place in modern society. Ideas to further regulate the sport are common throughout the history of the sport plagued with injuries. This research acknowledges that the media helps to disseminate ideas about gender and identity through their coverage of fighters and boxing, which is what the bulk of this research relies on.

Davey Moore's death at the hands of "Sugar" Ramos resulted in officials implementing safety measures regarding the ring ropes.¹ In this case, medical examiners pinpointed Moore's injury as caused by his head hitting the bottom rope after being knocked down by Ramos. Differently, than the Owen–Pintor bout Moore was able to do a post-fight interview before collapsing in the dressing room. The death of Moore led to further calls for abolition or reform of the sport that eventually implemented more safety measures. Moore's African-American origins could have symbolized a continuation of black economic advancement and the creation of sporting identities like Jack Johnson, Peter Jackson, Muhammad Ali and others.² Moore's death ended his career and to the chance for him to represent a similar historical significance like other black athletes before him. However, examining Ramos's career after their tragic fight does help contextualize the meaning of death beyond the questions of civility; not limiting the history of this fight to Moore's death and the regulatory response.

¹ "La Soga del Ring le Causó la Muerte al Púgil Davey Moore," *El Informador*, March 26, 1963, 7-B.

² For a history of Jack Johnson, see, Mark Scott, "Jack Johnson: World Heavyweight Champion," In *The First Black Boxing Champions: Essays on Fighters of the 1800s to the 1920s*, ed. by Colleen Aycock and Mark Scott (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2011), 200-217.

The story of Ultiminio “Sugar” Ramos’s career, especially with the death of Moore, illustrates the complexities of masculine identity and the importance of national representations through prizefighting. With his move to Mexico in 1959 after the Cuban Revolution, Ramos took on the challenge of training with world’s best featherweight fighters which allowed him to be closer to Southern California where most championship fights took place. Despite dealing with death on his conscience, he was able to establish himself as a world boxing champion and a representative of the national sports culture in Mexico. Still, Ramos held his Afro-Cuban origins as a central part of his identity as a fighter. The similarities in boxing culture and national recognition of sporting activities in Mexico and Cuba allowed Ramos to continue his boxing career in a new yet familiar place.

Additionally, masculine recognition symbolized aspects of working-class boxing culture. For Johnny Owen, his humble Welshness was representative of the blue-collar town of Merthyr Tydfil that already had a well-established boxing history. His working-class origins were disseminated through his performances despite being physically outmatched in all of his fights. He battled his way towards a world championship fight with a high work rate and durability. Owen undoubtedly left his mark on the sport despite the negative perceptions of his sporting body. Pintor’s victory over Owen reveals that even amongst the plethora of Mexican champions (who were infamous for their hard-hitting style and aggressiveness), he exemplified contradictory traits such as vulnerability and emotion with the death of his opponent. The reunion between Pintor and Johnny’s father, Dick Owen, illustrates the relationships built in boxing when tragedy strikes. The unification of two cultures with pugilistic death shows why boxing is important to understanding men in their most violent and vulnerable states. Of course,

it is not uncommon for men to show emotion in times of death, but in a sport known for its brutality, these aspects of boxers' gendered identities are overlooked.

Additionally, the press remembered that the superior, dominant Mexican boxer physically outmatched the Welshman. The death of Owen heightened the idea of Mexican domination of the bantamweight division. Unfortunately for Owen, his performance which matched Pintor for the first half of the fight is overshadowed by his tragic death.

Research Aims Accomplished and Contributions of the Research Project

The goal of this research is to uncover the gendered meaning of boxing death that goes beyond issues of institutional reform. The attention given to death in scholarly work exists with room for more studies on how it contributes to the development of masculine identity. Those that have challenged the sport's morals might question the authenticity of placing its ethos and government oversight of the violent sport as a secondary concern. However, this work contends that to understand why boxing functions in society, one must delve into the ways in which violent pugilists establish social relationships with the victims of their trade. There must be a thorough analysis of death and its contributions to gendered identities. Much like the importance of nationalism in an increasingly global world, death in boxing is an essential aspect of studies on gender in sports as it affects fighters in a multitude of ways. This approach to the sport contends that the violent men (in this case sporting men) represent more than brutishness and displays of machismo.

This work contributes to the already existing literature on boxing in history and sociology that has helped cement boxing's rightful place as a topic for study in academia. Scholars have shown the importance of boxing history in academia, and this work seeks to build on the notion

that violent men have other important traits as part of their fighting characters; especially when death occurs. The results of violence have not been methodically examined to uncover a clearer gendered history of the sport. These sporting bodies take and receive punishment for monetary gain and masculine recognition and even national resolve. When a boxing death occurs, issues such as vulnerabilities, built relationships increase in the boxing press. These contributions to identity are critical in understanding the social significance of pugilism.

Areas for Future Research

Much of the research for this project focused on ideas about nationalism and issues of gender concerning fighters and fights where death materialized. Within this research, other themes exist that relate to this approach to pugilistic death, such as spirituality. Particularly for Mexican boxing, since sports magazines such as *ARENA* printed articles on boxers' religious celebrations and rituals. Although the Mexican government had a secular bias, Catholicism was a constant feature in the lives of ordinary Mexicans, and this included boxers.³ Religion and spirituality is an important aspect of boxing that needs more attention in future research.

In the newspaper coverage of the fight between Moore and Ramos, the Vatican response to the tragedy also raised issues of morality against boxing. An article in *El Informador* discussed how the Vatican newspaper '*L' OSSERVATORE ROMANO*' condemned the violent sport, comparing it to assassinations for monetary gain.⁴ Richard C. McCormick's article, "Is Professional Boxing Immoral?" in *Sports Illustrated* in November of 1962, discussing the post-fight to the Griffith-Paret fight, questions the morality of the sport using both religious principles

³ Allen, "Boxing in Mexico," 150.

⁴ "El Vaticano en Vs. del Box," *El Informador*, March 24, 1963.

and scientific evidence against the sport.⁵ For this study, these articles on the religious response to pugilistic death could be incorporated to discuss the public response to boxing death from other institutions. “Sugar” Ramos and others who dealt with death in boxing often turned to their spirituality to deal with the death of their opponents. It would be interesting to do further research on the role of religion and spirituality in cases of pugilistic death.

Although this research focus on the Moore-Ramos, and Owen–Pintor bouts, there are a plethora of fights that should also be incorporated in a history of pugilistic death. One bout that would be useful in addressing the key argument of this work is the fight between Gabriel Ruelas and Columbian boxer Jimmy Garcia in 1995. Although Garcia was born in Mexico, he emigrated to the United States with his family to North Hollywood when he was a youth. His experience as a boxer and as a representative of migrant working-class culture fits this gendered approach to the sport. Ruelas’s bout with Garcia ended with the death of Garcia due to the injuries he sustained in their fight. Dealing with the death of his opponent was difficult for Ruelas. Differently, than Ramos or Pintor who had success after their encounters with death in the sport, Ruelas’s career slipped into a decline after losing his WBC Super Featherweight title to Azuma Nelson just one fight after his encounter with Garcia. The story of Ruelas would illustrate the importance of analysis of specific cases of pugilistic death rather than examining overarching statistics of injuries that serves as a lens for further oversight. These issues that make the sport safer and help prevent further injuries are critical for the survival of the sport. However, death means much more for understanding the complexities of boxing masculinity.

⁵ Richard A. McCormick, “Is Professional Boxing Immortal?” *Sports Illustrated*, November 5, 1962.

Lastly, ethnic rivalries such as Puerto Rico and Mexico in the sport of boxing could also be used to discuss masculine character and how death leads to vulnerability. The “battle of the little giants” between Puerto Rican Wilfredo “Bazooka” Gomez and Salvador “Chava” Sanchez in 1981 held nationalistic and masculine ramifications. Gomez was known as a hard puncher having knocked out thirty-two consecutive opponents.⁶ In 1982, Sanchez died in a car accident, and a rematch with Gomez never came to fruition. A documentary series called ESPN PERFILES chronicles how Gomez got emotional at the news that his rival had died. This story is another where issues such as nationalism, vulnerability, and ethnic fighting are important aspects of death in boxing. The Puerto Rican traveled to Mexico City to pay respects to his fallen opponent. There is much research to be done on the idea that death in boxing contributes to masculine identity and studies on gender. This approach to boxing reveals how boxers are more than violent actors who show vulnerability when death in boxing occurs.

Conclusion

Despite its brutal nature, the sport of boxing serves as a lens to understand why men fight and what it means when violence results in death. On the one hand, boxing serves as a way for men to provide for their families and make a living by using their physical abilities. Competing for world championships and masculine glory is what is at the surface and in the public space. On the other hand, boxing also symbolizes the complexities of masculinity, especially when considering post-fight interactions and boxers’ memories of their performances. This world, though violent, also consists of intimacy and gendered relationships that go beyond competition for physical dominance, especially when tragedy strikes.

⁶ Roberts, *The Boxing Register*, 480.

The deaths of Moore and Owen were covered by the press differently. For Moore, his death was caused by an injury to the back of his head. Medical experts agreed the ring ropes and their lack of protection caused his injury. Moore was able to walk himself out of the ring that night before feeling sick in the locker room. His death led to safety measures regarding the ring ropes which allowed the press to move on quickly from the loss of Davey Moore. With regards to Owen, the brutal nature in which he was taken out by Pintor and his atypical boxing figure allowed the media to disseminate ideas about his status as a title contender. Whereas the cause of Moore's death was answered by medical examiners, to most observers, the visual of Owen's frail body lingered in the media as he spent over forty days in a comatose state before passing. His imagined fragility caused observers to question his abilities as a championship contender.

Pintor and Ramos established themselves as tough Mexican champions throughout their careers. For Pintor his victory over Owen proved his status as a great Mexican champion and ideas about Mexican dominance in the sport increased due to his opponent's frail body. Pintor's reunion with the Owen family in the early 2000s illustrates the emotional relationship that developed between two boxing cultures over the death of the Welshman. In the case of Ramos, he was able to continue fighting after pugilistic death since his days fighting in Cuba to the death of Moore in 1963. Despite becoming a vulnerable champion, he was able to find a place within Mexican society with his success. His career included the spirit of his fallen opponents, which became part of his fighting identity.

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