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A History of Boxing in Mexico: Masculinity, Modernity, and Nationalism by Stephen D. Allen (review)

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Stephen D. Allen. *A History of Boxing in Mexico: Masculinity, Modernity, and Nationalism*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017. 282 pp.

Mexico produced some of the best boxers in the world, but we know little about the early prizefighters that paved the way for Julio César Chávez, the country's most famous boxer. Thankfully, we now have a book that fills this gap. *A History of Boxing in Mexico* is more than a narrative history of Mexican boxing, it is an excellent analysis of how boxing shaped notions of masculinity, nationalism, and modernity. With the exception of the first chapter that situates boxing within the rise of Mexican sports culture, each chapter follows the life and career of one professional boxer, beginning with Rodolfo Casanova, continuing with Raúl Macías, Vicente Saldívar, Rubén Olivares and concluding with José Nápoles.

Mexican sporting history has been stuck on the 1986 Olympic Games in Mexico City, but many forget that Mexico won its first Olympic medal in boxing at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Still, boxing has received little attention from Mexican historians. The late Joseph Arbena observed long ago the important role of sports in the development of Mexican nationalism (Arbena, 1991). By mining archival collections in California and Mexico City (including the World Boxing Council archives), daily sports newspapers, and interviews of former boxers, Allen reveals how Mexican boxers became a symbol of national pride on both sides of the border. It is Allen's gender and transnational analysis of Mexican boxing, however, that makes this book stand out. Mexican prizefighters performed a rough masculine identity in their public display of aggression and strength. Outside the ring, this masculine behavior continued when prizefighters engaged in excessive alcohol drinking, heterosexual relations with multiple women, and other vices.

In Chapter 2, Allen discusses the career of Rodolfo Casanova, who exemplified such a life as he rose from poverty to become a boxing hero during "Mexico's First Golden Age of Mexican Boxing" in the 1930s (43). Casanova was nicknamed "El Chango" because of his "mongoloid face of an Indian" (69) and suffered from alcohol abuse that ultimately cost him his life. Later, Casanova's life inspired the 1945 movie *Campeón sin Corona* that, according to Allen, "served as a warning about the importance of living a disciplined lifestyle in this rapidly changing society" (72).

In Chapter 3, Allen compares Casanova's aggressive masculinity with the "respectable masculinity" of Raúl "El Ratón" Macías who learned to fight in the streets and gyms of the working-class

neighborhood of Tepito, known for producing world-class boxers (75). According to Allen, Macías displayed scientific intelligence and self-discipline during matches, while outside the ring he attended mass with his family and practiced a “clean lifestyle” that made him popular with television audiences, businesses and government officials during the 1950s (103). He leveraged his celebrity status to obtain more government resources for his Tepito neighborhood and operate successful businesses. In Chapter 4, Allen turns to Vicente Saldívar, who, unlike Macías, was unpopular with fans during the 1960s because of his “soft masculinity” and close association with Mexican political elites (105). Although Saldívar was a “Good Mexican” for his “clean living,” strong Catholic faith, and defense of four world featherweight titles, he still was not “idol material” (125). His technical and calculating style of boxing combined with his cold personality and domesticated life made him more effeminate and a stark contrast to the fight-to-the-end style of Mexican boxing (126). Fans even questioned Saldívar’s loyalty to Mexico for the refusal to defend his world championship title and not mentoring younger boxers (130).

As Allen discusses in Chapter 5, the sexual revolution and changing gender norms during the 1970s gave rise to the “hippie” lifestyle of Rubén Olivares, who became a four-time world champion (135). Olivares embraced an alternative masculine identity that allowed him to express a wider range of emotions and alternate views on sexuality and advocated for gender equality by hiring a female promoter. Mexican women were barred from boxing from 1947 to 1998, so hiring a female promoter was a breakthrough for Mexican boxing (148). Olivares’ popularity also inaugurated the “second golden age of Mexican boxing” and helped the Mexico City-based World Boxing Council strengthen its transnational ties with the Los Angeles boxing industry (145).

In the last and, I suggest, most intriguing chapter, Allen profiles José “Mantequilla” Nápoles, an Afro-Cuban boxer who Mexican fans accepted as one of their own. After Nápoles left Cuba in 1962 to pursue a professional boxing career in Mexico he gained a loyal fan base, especially after winning the world championship twice in 1969 and 1970. Allen describes how, despite his blackness, Nápoles performed Mexicanidad inside the ring by wearing a Mexican hat, entering the ring with Mariachi music and asking for the Mexican national anthem to be played after winning the world title (181–182). Outside the ring, he married a Mexican woman, dedicated his fights to the Mexican president and once proclaimed that he was “More Mexican than the nopales (cactus)” (178). However, after Nápoles lost to Argentine

Carlos Monzón in 1974, racist critics were quick to highlight his foreignness and blackness and seriously questioned his national loyalty to Mexican boxing. Curiously, a gender analysis was missing from this chapter. Allen could have further explored how his Afro-Cuban identity intersected with his masculinity. Did Nápoles' Cuban boxing style (compared to the Mexican warrior boxing style) and his libertine lifestyle lead to more criticism about his "soft masculinity" and fragile Mexicanidad? (187). Despite this omission, *A History of Boxing in Mexico* makes a significant contribution to Mexican sporting history and deserves recognition for its rigorous archival research, nuanced gender analysis of Mexican prizefighters and exploration of an often-neglected topic in Mexican history. This book should certainly reinvigorate interest in Mexican sports, particularly in relation to teaching courses in Latin American history, Chicana/o Studies and sports history.

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Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera. *Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. 379 pp.

Los Zetas Inc. is the catchy, eponymous title of Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera's ambitious recent book about a notorious Mexican criminal organization. The central argument is that Los Zetas are a categorically new criminal phenomenon in Mexico, and perhaps also in the world. For Correa-Cabrera, the Zetas are not just a drug "cartel," but a transnational corporation with a structure, business logic, and day-to-day functioning not unlike Walmart, Nike or Coca-Cola. Los Zetas, she argues, are exceptional and have transformed Mexican criminal activity due to various actions, namely: their innovative use of a highly-trained military wing of killers and enforcers; the large-scale employment of shocking forms of violence as a means of political intimidation and dominance not just as simple retribution; their