

## Where Are ‘We’ in Transnational US Latino/a Studies?

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The article considers various disciplinary, methodological, theoretical and ethical questions resulting from conducting transnational US Latino/a studies in practice. Drawing from research with a community of Latino prizefighters in Austin, Texas, it delineates academic discourses as spatially determined processes, demarcated by scholars’ institutional settings and individual agency in multiple geographic environments. The discussion suggests that being an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ is not a rigid condition but necessarily malleable, contingent upon a range of factors that shape up broader knowledge formation processes in and out of academia. In lieu of a nation-based research paradigm, the article calls for contestations of shifting scholarly loci—spatial between-ness—for important strategic purposes. Such mobility may effectively allow adopting viewpoints that are not necessarily available for those who operate within fixed disciplinary, methodological and intra-group boundaries, while providing scholars with innovative new approaches to conduct Latino/a studies research from de facto *transnational* and *interdisciplinary* perspectives.

**Keywords:** Interdisciplinarity, knowledge formation, space, place, transnationalism, US Latino/a studies

### Introduction

It has been popular of late, across disciplinary spectra, to conduct research and designate one’s scholarly locus within transnational research paradigms (Fishkin, 2005; Halttunen, 2007; Gutierrez and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008; Ngai, 2005; and Portes, 2003). While debates about the definition of the term per se—its origins and application—abound, such a stance usually invokes approaches that question rigid national geographic boundaries (Fitzgerald, 2004; Briggs, MacCormic and Way, 2008; and Kerber, 2005). Area studies scholars, in particular, have begun appropriating transnational ‘lenses’ in efforts to demonstrate the complexity of seemingly fixed place-based cultural, historical, socioeconomic and political phenomena (Pease and Wiegman, 2002; Rowe, 2002; Spivak, 2003). Yet, even if

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many of us today take seriously the spatial dimension of knowledge formation processes; others stubbornly insist on reifying essential notions of national identity, mono-disciplinary research agendas and singular methodological frameworks (see the dialogue between Berube, 2003; Kaplan, 2005; and Wolfe, 2004).

Cultural geographers generally differentiate the abstract concept of ‘space’ as distinct from ‘place.’ According to Yi-Fu Tuan, for example, “[s]pace” is more abstract than “place.” What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value...When space feels thoroughly familiar, it has become place’ (1977: 6 & 73). Doreen Massey (1994; 2005) emphasizes the *ambiguity* of place, likening it to such signifiers as a ‘meeting place,’ an ‘intersection,’ or a ‘process’. Hers is a definition that links place with degrees of bodily movement, socioeconomic mobility, social formations and other relations of power. Tim Cresswell (2002), in turn, emphasizes the dynamic nature of place as continually performed and practiced within various everyday contexts:

Place is constituted through reiterative social practice—place is made and remade on a daily basis. Place provides a template for practice—an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways where place is constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways.

But what broader ramifications might such spatial theorization have for transnational research in actual practice? Where do ‘we’—as scholars—position ourselves within various spatial paradigms that extend beyond national borders? What, if any, corollaries do such approaches have for conducting research in various disciplinary environments?

My starting point for this inquiry is both scholarly and personal. The discussion springs from my background in the interdisciplinary field of American studies—with a particular focus on US Latino/as—but it hopes to engender interest beyond the hemispheric context of the Americas. Having worked within the field in the United States, Finland, Ireland and Denmark, I have been in a position to contemplate US Latino/a studies from the vantage point of multiple trans/national contexts and disciplinary home bases during the past decade.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I have observed that transnational research has rarely only to do with geographic borders; more often, it jumbles up a complex web of other issues, such as identity politics, disciplinary politics and research ethics. This article attempts to untangle some of those interrelated issues.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the ideas presented in this article have been explored in earlier formats at various academic gatherings. In particular, it draws from presentations given at the American Studies Association convention in Washington, D.C. in November 2006, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis workshop in Amsterdam in March 2007, the British Association for American Studies conference in Leicester in April 2007, and the seminar ‘Latino/a USA: Transnational Identities/*Identidades Transnacionales*’ at the University of Southern Denmark in November 2008. I would like to express thanks to the participants of those sessions for dialogue concerning these issues. Thanks also to the anonymous comments and suggestions made on the manuscript during the peer review process.

## Inside, Outside, or In-Between?

To begin, I want to invoke Günter H. Lenz's essay, 'Toward a Dialogics of International American Culture Studies: Transnationality, Border Discourses, and Public Culture(s)' in which he discusses the so-called 'international' (that is, non-US-based) American studies scholars' position within the global academic forum. Rather than lamenting being ignored by their US colleagues or being compartmentalized as specialists in particular 'minority studies' by default of one's cultural background, Lenz urges American studies practitioners to 'investigate and articulate more rigorously than they have done in the past their own positionings in the interchanges between US American cultures and their (and other) cultures and to define clearly the political and cultural role and function of conceptualizing and institutionalizing interdisciplinary American studies programs in their own national or transnational contexts'. (2002: 477-478)

I propose to take up Lenz's challenge by exploring the spatial dimension of transnational US Latino/a studies, engendered by our everyday comings and goings—momentary entrances and exits—that turn into academic discourses in various research environments. Although drawing from my experiences both in the United States and Europe, the article will not be centred on either continent as such; rather, my attempt is to specifically underscore the mobility of our scholarly positionalities *between* various geographic and institutional settings.

Yet this spatialization of the discussion has a deliberate underlying agenda: it is an attempt to distance myself from place-based identity politics on either side of the Atlantic. For, as Sheila Hones and Julia Leyda argue, most of us are already 'familiar with the practice of living and working in relational space, a space in which national location is only one aspect of scholarly positionality' (2005: 1022). I want to suggest, in effect, that instead of insisting on some established spatial research paradigm (inside/outside), it may be a worthwhile exercise to occasionally distance ourselves from such positions. Indeed, embracing such 'relational spaces'—the spatial between-ness of our shifting positions—might offer scholars operating in any number of geographic contexts various strategic possibilities. My approach echoes Michel de Certeau's contention, according to which 'marginality' may provide channels to break free from the seemingly established spatial hierarchies: by taking advantage of the imposed margins, a person may carve out liberating possibilities for oneself; if not momentarily destabilize the very arrangements. In a similar vein, spatial between-ness amidst various scholarly loci not only allows disengaging from restricting nation-based assumptions but also adopting perspectives that might not be available for those operating within fixed disciplinary, intra-group or geographic boundaries. By such strategic appropriation of space, '[m]obility' per se, as Tim Cresswell so aptly writes, 'becomes human agency' (2006: 213).

## From Identity Politics to Disciplinary Politics

In the United States, in particular, as the saying goes, everybody has to ‘choose’ an identity: one is either inside or outside of a group, and such affiliations carry momentous practical, theoretical and political implications. Identity formations become intricate interplays of individual, collective and societal assignments, intersecting with naming, citizenship status and language use, while tied to other relations of power, such as class, gender, age, religion and regionalism. The choice of a group label, too, easily turns into a political cauldron in which intercultural and interracial conflicts take on volatile meanings, with a marked difference in terms of who appropriates any particular labels at what specific instances.<sup>3</sup> Analogously, to engage in dialogue with certain groups of people becomes loaded with subtle underpinnings. Let me exemplify such labelling in the context of my own research.

When I first started working with Latino prizefighters in Texas, my initial idea was to use whatever self-identification labels my interviewees’ might themselves use. That plan left me with close to a dozen ethnoracial markers: Mexican, Mexican American, Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, Spanish, Tex-Mex, *mexicano*, *tejano*, and *meskin*. The appropriation of any one term turned out to be contingent upon such variables as place of birth, place of residence and nationality—conflated with class, hue, and gender—and further nuanced by who one is interacting with, where one is physically located and what language one uses. Citizenship status, in particular, becomes a key factor in ethnoracial delineations, as evidenced in the statement made by former world champion boxer Jesus Chávez, a twice-deported Mexican national, who has lived most of his life in the United States, with only sporadic stints in Mexico, but without US citizenship: ‘I could be considered Mexican or Chicano or Tejano, although I usually say I’m “Mexican”....Now, I guess, I would even say that I’m “Mexican American” because I have access to both countries...But it’s important that some of us start realizing that, in the end, we are all Latinos and we still eat the same beans’ (interview with Jesus Chávez, 21 November 2002; see also Heiskanen, 2006). Acknowledging the complexity of ethnoracial labelling in various everyday contexts, I ended up using the term ‘Latino’ when referring to the boxers collectively, although with a keen awareness of the problematic nature of grouping a heterogeneous cohort of people together under a singular marker.

Because these debates surrounding identity politics continue to be important, let me state my own position regarding the issue clearly: identity politics—and politics of location—have been *absolutely central* in articulating different groups’ historical power struggles and hierarchical social organization in the United States. Within the parameters of academic research, however, the notion that some scholars would be more ‘entitled’ than others to engage in dialogue with particular groups of people has a number of problematic asides: it may lead into navel-gazing research projects, reluctance toward inter-group collaboration and a glass-ceiling in hiring

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<sup>3</sup> Nowhere was this more evident than in the 2008 presidential elections, where Barack Obama’s mixed-race background became cause célèbre for scepticism about his claim for (African) Americanness on the grounds of race, religion and places of residence.

practices. Furthermore, what has been glaringly absent from the discussion of identity politics is the attention to the multiple *scales* at which identities—and power relations—are contested within individual, communal, regional, national and international contexts. While so-called ‘ordinary’ people may struggle daily to have their basic civil rights respected within various local and global contexts, academics the world over are generally privileged in comparison to most minority groups’ class-based power contestations. For this reason, we would do well to pay increasing attention to the actual ramifications of everyday power dynamics on individuals operating within shifting spatial contexts.

Otherwise, the valorisation of a closed community for its own sake (which in reality, of course, is remarkably heterogeneous) may turn into a trump card in the so-called ‘victim game’ that some critics associate with identity politics. To quote Wendy Brown: ‘[an] identity rooted in injury...leads even those who do not appear overtly victimized to claim victim status...to see and cite victims outside oneself who can stand in for oneself’ (2001: 54). A monolithic group identity may also impose identities on those who do not want to be part of it in the first place. Further still, there is the issue of ‘non-identity’: What if there is no identity to claim on the local/national front? (see Malkki, 1992) Will one insist on some—any—identity (‘I am a Woman!’) in an effort to belong? Or does such affiliation become an empty mantra that reveals little about one’s actual scholarly locus? Finally, what sense, if any, do these considerations have in relation to various disciplinary locations?

I will make the case here that an interrogation into identity politics also has direct relevance to disciplinary politics: about having to ‘choose’ a scholarly position within certain preconceived disciplinary traditions, methodologies and theoretical paradigms. Professed interdisciplinarity, too, often seems to assume meaning as a conversation between two disciplines, instead of any number of disciplinary criss-crossings one might expect. American studies research, for example, often comes across, in both teaching and in research, as privileging certain mono-disciplines (such as History or English) as its disciplinary springboard; similarly, what is alternatively referred to as its inter-, cross-, multi-, or post-disciplinarity often amounts to those two disciplines. Indeed, John Carlos Rowe is well-founded in criticizing the field for its disciplinary insularity: So where are the theories and methods from some of the disciplines continually neglected in American studies, such as political science, economics, psychology, rhetoric, and even the cognitive sciences? Our range of interdisciplinary inquiry turns out to be embarrassingly narrow. (2000:14). My contribution to this discussion is that rather than continuing to impose rigid methodological suppositions for ourselves—whether students or faculty—should we not let the *topic* determine how to go about our work?

Instead, I would call more urgent attention to the ethical ramifications that any particular methodological choices carry with regards to knowledge formations and everyday power dynamics, issues that apply to all of us as researchers, regardless of our departmental home bases. What would be welcome in any Area studies, then, is more research that knowingly jumbles up various disciplinary scales to demonstrate the contingency of everyday and academic power relations.

## Transnationalism in Theory and Practice

I have interrogated some of these ideas in practice with my work with a community of Latino prizefighters in Austin, Texas during 2000-2004. The research explores transnational identity formations as spatial processes within the United States: how the location of ethnoracial minorities within urban fringes shapes the understanding of socioeconomic prospects, individual and collective allegiances as well as the sense of belonging in society. The boxers' life stories are discussed within various everyday locations—such as the Latino *barrio* [neighbourhood], the boxing gym, and competition venue—where they lead their lives, where the sport is organized, and where its triumphs and tribulations are represented. The discussion is conceptualized within a theoretical framework that considers the boxing body as a site of knowledge and various locations within the sport's everyday culture as sites of being and becoming. In addition to the cultural geographers cited earlier, I draw on the work of philosopher Edward Casey, who calls critical attention to bodily *experience*, both pleasurable and traumatic, as a focus in understanding place-based identities. All human experience—living, thinking, remembering, geographic orientation—Casey (2000) contends, is mediated in and through the body. For boxers, too, bodily labour comes to constitute the essence of their physical prowess, identity formations and day-to-day survival—indeed, their knowledge about the outside world.

Although the majority of boxers never become world champions or household names, many of them are celebrated on a local level, and such recognition offers them avenues for upward mobility, social prestige and personal reinvention. What is more, the worker-athletes can—through sport—forge a niche of autonomy within their own everyday spaces and challenge one's geographic boundaries, that is, any ostensibly 'assigned' place vis-à-vis an 'aspired' place in society, for their shifting degrees of mobility are continuously negotiated at a variety of spatial scales in and out of the ring, each with their concurrent but distinct power struggles and socioeconomic stakes involved. In my work, then, I argue that the boxing body in space and place exhibits a tension between social control and individual agency, as various spatial structures in society shape the understanding of the sense of belonging in society. Thus, where and how bodies are situated reflect both grassroots politics of location and theoretical questions of spatially demarcated social organization. At stake is a very tangible conceptualization of everyday existence: where one can or cannot justifiably be—sit, walk, or drive—at any one time; what routes one chooses to travel to a destination; and what access one has to various recreational spaces. Consequently, a dynamic relationship between the body in space and place—turning space into place by appropriating space as one's own—becomes absolutely central to the interviewees' *raison d'être*.

Alongside the boxers, the researcher must continuously try to turn various abstract 'spaces' into tangible senses of 'place' by making sense of the sport's labyrinth of social organization and everyday power relations. For prizefighting carries deep-seated historical meanings as an ethnically and racially delineated, class-based and gendered practice; it is a close-knit community, and nobody just waltzes

into a boxing gym to start interviewing fight folks, no matter where they come from. Although I had stumbled upon my research topic by accident (as so many of us seem to do), I was quite familiar with the sport, as I grew up on fight circles in Finland, following my brother Tom Heiskanen's amateur and professional career in the 1970s and 1980s. Even though I had not been involved with boxing for some time, I soon gathered that the fact that my brother was a former fighter legitimated my project in the eyes of the interviewees. His career gave me (a parasitic?) insider status in the fistic world and no-one cared that it had all taken place on the other side of the Atlantic years ago. But I also had a personal background in martial arts, so I started working out at the gym and, in due course, many of the boxers would help me out with boxing technique and conditioning training; indeed, working with them turned into a central part of the intellectual inquiry. For the next four years, my life revolved entirely around boxing. I was either at the gym, at boxing shows or on road-trips, interviewing or transcribing interviews; or else I was the library scanning newspaper articles or doing online searches; and during weekends, fight insiders would often get together to watch Pay-Per-View boxing shows on TV.

During the course of this research, academics repeatedly confronted me with issues of identity politics. The following question, in particular, was often presented to me: 'How on earth does a *White Finnish Woman* end up studying Latino prizefighters in Texas?' Despite the frequency of the approaches, I never seemed quite ready to come up with a witty response, only a diffident: 'Why not?' But as much as the question sounds a cliché on first consideration, I became increasingly troubled by some of its underlying suppositions: that my *place of birth/nationality*—as opposed to my education, experience, or research ethics—would be considered to be the bedrock for my work. Also disconcerting was the notion of 'Finnish womanhood' that I was not only supposed to identify with but that I apparently was wedded to for the rest of my life. Embarking on such a train of thought, a series of other questions soon followed: should one, in effect, be a man to study male boxers? Should one be Latina to study Latino/as? Should one be a prizefighter to study prizefighters? And, finally, to stretch the logics further still, should one be a US national to do US Latino/a studies?

The provocation is not to say that one's national background has no bearing in conducting research overseas nor is it to argue that place-based power dynamics have no impact on the process. How could they not? One can hardly engage in any endeavour in life without bringing one's multiple subjectivities to it. Rather, it is to say that assuming 'insider' or 'outsider' positions cannot possibly be such rigid conditions; they are necessarily malleable, fleeting states of being at best, continuously contested within different everyday and scholarly power dynamics. This is especially the case with projects involving ethnographic fieldwork or some such inter-personal encounters. Within the idiosyncratic research milieu of professional boxing, I constantly had to be aware of my precarious roles between an insider and an outsider, an acquaintance and an observer, a participant and an observer, positions that were at times difficult to reconcile.

Early on, my presence in Texas boxing gyms stirred some queries amongst boxing insiders, because people were unsure how to label my identity as a foreigner.

One of the boxers asked me: ‘Benita, where you come from, are you considered white?’ (Heiskanen 2006) Another time, someone else asked me: ‘I heard you speak Spanish to Gallito the other day, but I thought you were white. What are you?’ (ibid). Yet another time, when one of the boxers put me in touch with an interviewee, he offered the following explanation: ‘I don’t know what you call a person from Finland, if she is “white” or “Finnish.” But she is really smart and she speaks Spanish’ (ibid). After I heard similar comments on various occasions, I understood how deeply, on an everyday level, ethnoracial identities along the Texas-Mexico borderlands were conflated with language: Spanish signified being non-white—irrespective of one’s skin-colour—whereas English automatically labelled one a *gringo/a*, regardless of one’s actual nationality. I was neither a native English nor Spanish speaker nor was I a US national, hence the puzzlement. Apropos, it was the very foreignness—spiced up with accented English and Spanish—that momentarily relieved me of an *a priori* ‘white’ identity, rendering my position ambiguously as ‘not quite this’ but ‘not quite that’ either within the ethnoracial dynamics of Texas. The fact that people had no preconceived notions about Finland ended up working to my advantage as a researcher, rather than the other way around, as some might expect. All the same, my alleged cultural, ethnic or racial ‘identity’ was just one factor in the larger scholarly process; of its own accord, it certainly was not enough to establish rapport with my sources.

In addition to grappling with identity politics, I was also confronted with questions concerning disciplinary politics: that is, whether my project would or would not constitute legitimate American studies research. At the early stages of my project, a colleague quite casually asked me in the midst of a conversation: ‘By the way, how do you justify being in the American Studies Department; shouldn’t you be in Anthropology?’ Soon thereafter, I had an incident with an out-of-the-department faculty member, whom I had asked to serve on my qualifying oral exams committee. Adamant in refusing to work with me, the professor read into my project an agenda of disciplinary imperialism: ‘So, essentially what you’re doing is a Sociological study on professional boxing and now *that*, too, gets to be called American Studies!’ The personal bemusement aside, such experiences have brought about a lingering intellectual uneasiness about the epistemological and methodological assumptions associated with Area studies, American studies, or Latino/a studies research. To move beyond the essentialism embedded in identity and disciplinary politics, then, I want to call attention to the *contingency of the research process* as a whole. This, in turn, takes us back to our point of departure: the spatiality of research.

Again, may the boxing research illuminate my point: When I left the academic ivory tower to interact with the so-called ‘real’ people in the ‘real’ world, I had little control over the external circumstances. Because the research was not conducted within a university setting, to even explain what the process *means* to the sources, posed various hurdles—conceptual, terminological and otherwise. Yet working out at gyms, attending boxing matches, conducting interviews and going on road-trips with fight insiders in Texas turned out to be strategically important to the research. For example, although I knew that boxing was notorious for its dubious business practices, it was only at the actual competition venues that I got to observe the motley



cohort of people—fighters, handlers, matchmakers, promoters, state athletic commissions, sanctioning bodies, fight officials, ringside physicians, the media and aficionados—who operate within its everyday culture, each with their miscellaneous agendas. As a result, *where* I interacted with my sources at any one time remarkably shaped up the encounters, the specific topics discussed—and, indeed, the overall ambience.

The entire intellectual inquiry turned into a negotiation between personal input versus academic objectives: how involved to get in the interviewees' careers and lives; how to represent one's sources—the sheep, the wolves, and the wolves dressed as sheep alike—accurately and fairly; and how to deal with the sport's overall occupational intrigues? Those ethical questions assumed a great deal more significance to the work than any ascribed or self-imposed identity labels I may or may not have embraced at its outset.

But what relevance does an unknown cohort of Texas prizefighters ultimately have for transnational US Latino/a studies? To answer that question, I had to engage in extensive interdisciplinary research on the history and sociology of prizefighting, complete with a range of economic, judicial, medical and ethical considerations endemic to the sport. This investigation led me to state boxing archives, congressional hearings, prizefight laws, medical records, newspapers, trade magazines, websites, boxing shows, cinematic representations, scrapbooks, photographs and video collections. These competing—and often contradictory—discourses helped me to understand the complexity of the sport, with its tangible social, economic, and ideological importance for individuals, communities, nations, and international collectives alike. Situating the work within its broader societal context also brought up a regionalization pattern underway: alongside the *Latinization* of 21st century US prizefighting, the entire sport was diverging from its Northeastern origins into a distinctly Southwestern phenomenon. Moreover, while the US Latino boxers continuously negotiated their lives and career opportunities within their various everyday locations, their collective status was simultaneously contested within the ethnoracial dynamics of the Americas; and they also belonged to an international collective of worker-athletes who conduct their occupation within global socioeconomic conditions, entrepreneurial principles and sporting networks. Prizefighting, then, the research demonstrated, is not only a professional sport; it is also a form of racialized bodily labour, a lucrative business, and an instrument of politics. Such were the insights gained from the interdisciplinary research, conducted not inside, not outside, but in between a range of disciplinary, scholarly and geographic locations.

## **Conclusion**

As evidenced by my examples of identity politics and disciplinary politics, the binary dichotomy of insider-outsider positionality is problematic when attempting to conduct interdisciplinary US Latino/a studies research within a transnational context. If so, the reader might ask, then what in its place? My attempt in this article has been to conceptualize transnationalism as a paradigm that has to do with disciplinary

locations, methodological choices, subject positions, geographic scales and research ethics. Such an inclusive approach presents an alternative to the existing insider-outsider paradigm, a position which can, at best, only ever be one factor in the larger research process; at worst, it adds nothing to the actual intellectual agenda.

While each research project is ultimately a unique process, I would envision de facto transnationalism along the following lines: it would take into account a range of geographic scales to demonstrate the contingency of everyday power relations. It would entail research projects in which it is not scandalous to study *each other*—on any side, all sides—against the grain of intra-group monopolies and solipsistic identity fixations. How else can we possibly foster dialogue amongst each other? What's more, it would call for scholars to distance ourselves from self-imposed spatial preconditions. And, finally, I would underscore the ethical ramifications that any particular methodological choices carry with regards to everyday knowledge formations in and out of academia. Transnationalism, then, for me, is above all, an attitude. Latino/a studies the world over already provides us with spaces to engage in dialogue with each other from any number of disciplinary and geographic perspectives. But perhaps an important question for the global intellectual community to pose is our own agency within this academic forum: Where Are 'We' in Transnational Latino/a Studies?

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