Scrapping Into A Knot: Pinoy Boxers, Transpacific Fans, and the Troubling of Interwar California's Racial Regimes

Bernard James Remollino

ABSTRACT. This article explores how Filipino boxers and fans in California in the 1920s and 1930s mobilized radical imaginations to creatively express a politics of liberation from oppressive racial regimes. U.S. imperialism in the Philippines reoriented the shape and direction of Filipino (anti)conquest and resistance following Spanish colonization. As the sport of boxing developed into an influential transpacific cultural industry, Filipino migrant fans informed pugilists' performative politics. As they worked and performed in interconnected urban and rural spaces across California, Filipino boxers and their fans destabilized racial scripts while negotiating claims to power, space, and dignity during this period.

> These little Filipinos are fearless warriors. They fight to the very end of the string ... Only a few generations away from savage ancestors, they fight with the fanatical courage of their forbears and keep going at a pace that no white man can travel.
>
> - Manning Vaughan, *The Milwaukee Journal*, 1926

> Years of degradation came into the Filipino's face. All the fears of his life were here—in the white hand against his face. Was there no place where he could escape? Crouching like a leopard, he hurled his whole weight upon the white man, knocking him down instantly ... Then the white men in the restaurant seized the small Filipino, beating him unconscious with pieces of wood and with their fists.
>
> - Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart*, 1943

"Splendid Little Boxers of the Philippines:"[1] Pugilists, Fans, and a Life of Fighting

On the evening of September 7, 1925, Pinoy pugilistic prospect Inocencio "Clever Sencio" Moldez stepped into the ring to headline his North

---

[1] Kay Owe, "Fernandez to Battle Taylor: Filipino Meets Bud Tuesday in Olympic Feature," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Mar* 4, 1928; *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg.* A5.

© BULOSAN CENTER FOR FILIPINO STUDIES

American flyweight debut against Irishman Mickey Gill in front of twenty thousand fans in San Francisco's Recreation Park.[2] The main event showcased the spectacular skills of what white manager Frank Churchill advertised as the "splendid fighting men" of the Pacific in the golden age of Pinoy boxing.[3] The expectations placed onto Sencio's boxing body throughout the fight were connected to interwar commodifications of Filipino colonial bodies as desirable products for consumer entertainment within U.S. regimes of transpacific racial capitalism.[4] When Sencio and American Fidel La Barba "boxed themselves into a knot" at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles on January 20, 1926, advance sales of tickets for their immediate rematch shattered all records for California indoor venues while betting markets billed the Pinoy star to be an "even-money shot."[5] Pinoy pugilists' movement across borders and through commodified boxing spaces entangled their bodies in interwar expectations of race, masculinity, and respectability. Pinoy boxers' impressive in-ring gameness from 1920 to 1941 created the conditions of possibility for Pinoy fans in California to articulate their radical desires for freedom. Pinoy fighters and fans mutually inspired the cultivation of semi-autonomous lives through work, leisure, and pleasure within the sporting culture of interwar boxing.[6]

This article explores the contingent possibilities and cultural effects generated in the social spaces of boxing by Filipino fighters and fans in California in the 1920s and 1930s. The boxing industry channeled the racial, classed, and gendered pressures of U.S. imperialism onto Filipino migrant bodies. Working-class Filipinos expressed their support for their favorite boxers, energizing their daily fights for survival against oppressive structures of labor and law enforcement. Middle-class Pinoys took boxers' victories over white opponents as proof of the Philippine people's respectability and readiness for political independence. White lawmakers and police viewed gatherings of rowdy Filipino fans as dangers to the social order. Boxers mobilized their experiences as laborers in their pugilistic performances. In the context of a global depression, restrictive Asian immigration policies, memories of Spanish and U.S. colonization, and heightened racial violence toward Filipinos in California, boxing became a fulcrum for Pinoy cultural meaning-making and transpacific social negotiation.

---

[2] The terms "Pinoy" and "Pinay" were used in the 1920s by Filipino migrants living or born in the United States to differentiate themselves from Filipinos living in the Philippines or elsewhere. I will be using these terms in the interest of historical consistency. See "Reflections of a Traveler," in the *Philippine Republic* (1924) by Dr. J. Juliano and Carson Taylor's *History of the Philippines* (1927). See also Dawn Mabalon's discussion of the term in *Little Manila Is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* (2013); for Clever Sencio's professional record, see *BoxRec*, accessed July 5, 2020, https://boxrec.com/en/proboxer/41664.

[3] Frank Churchill quoted in Frank G. Menke, "The Man Who Put the Philippines on the Map," *The Ring*, Jan 1923.

[4] Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 51-54. In "'Splendid Dancing': Of Filipinos and Taxi Dance Halls," Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns discusses the affects around the "spectacle of the Filipino dancing body" as its visibility heightened racial, gendered, and sexual anxieties in white men. Public spectacles of supposedly hypersexual Filipino men undermining white heterosexual expectations illustrate how Filipino corporeality's labeling as exceptional "equally circulates and corrupts the very languages of U.S. imperialism."*

[5] Kay, Owe, "Ready to Be Scrambled: Flyweight King Fights Filipino in Great Scrap," Los *Angeles Times (1923-1995); Mar 31, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. B1.*

[6] For this term, I pull from Louis Althusser's discussions of "relative autonomy" under structures of capitalism as discussed in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," trans. Ben Brewster, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (Monthly Review Press, 1971). Originally published in La Pensée, 1970, accessed Dec 26, 2020,* https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm. I use "semi-autonomy" as a framework because Filipino migrants engaged this culture in sites where the hegemony of racial regimes persisted. Therefore, I do not want to overemphasize autonomy as being an ultimately liberalized state that Filipinos of any class were able to attain during this period or any period.

Color commentary radio broadcasts of Sencio's victories reached eager listeners across California, bolstering the contender's reputation as the spiritual successor to the late flyweight champion Francisco "Pancho Villa" Guilledo and raising concerns among whites eager to police the Filipino migrant population. Reporter Manning Vaughan interpreted Sencio's performance through the civilizationist logics of benevolent assimilation[7] when he stated that "these little Filipinos… keep going at a pace that no white man can travel."[8] Yet Sencio and his fans understood that Pinoys' fistic dominance in the ring was often checked by white violence beyond it. Pinoy novelist Carlos Bulosan cited the toll that "years of degradation… all of the fears of his life" put onto a migrant's body and spirit, creating a longing for a "place where he could escape."[9] The boxing arena became a space for fighters and fans intent on imagining alternative lifeways to feed their radical imaginations. Clever Sencio's labor in the U.S. professional boxing circuit illustrates the intimate connections between interwar fighters, fans, and the boxing industry; connections that highlight the precarities and possibilities of Filipino pugilistic labor and lifeways during Pinoy boxing's heyday. The relationship between interwar Pinoy boxing and Filipino migration uncovers the long-historical processes of (anti)conquest that continued well after Spanish colonization, when U.S. imperialism reconfigured collective memories of global navigation and resistances.[10]

---

[7] U.S. President William McKinley's policy of "Benevolent Assimilation," issued on 21 December 1898, outlined the process for establishing military governance over the Philippines that painted the U.S. acquisition of the Philippines as nonviolent and nonthreatening. For histories of this policy implementation in the Philippines, see: Stuart Creighton Miller, "*Benevolent Assimilation*": *The American Conquest of the Philippines*, 1899-1903 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Frank Hindman Golay, *Face of Empire: United States-Philippine Relations, 1898–1946* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1997); Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); David J. Silbey, *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899–1902* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007).

[8] Pete Ehrmann, "One of the Fastest and Most Thrilling Fights in Milwaukee Boxing History," *OnMilwaukee*, accessed June 10, 2020, https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/boxingsencio.

[9] Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart: A Personal History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 145.

Fresh from a revolution that upended three centuries of Spanish colonial rule in 1896, a newly independent Philippine republic sought global recognition as a nation state. However, following the U.S. acquisition of the archipelago from Spain in 1898, the lives of Filipinos became more directly intertwined with the interests of U.S. capital.[11] Literary scholar Iyko Day argues that "it was against [the nineteenth century] backdrop of Indigenous dispossession and the 'problem' of Asian migration that settler colonial expansion could be justified through ideologies of liberal democracy." [12] An American system of education driven by exceptionalist discourses ultimately racialized its supposed beneficiaries and continued a trend of U.S. expansionism in the spirit of settler colonialism. Under the pretense of more accessible opportunities for even the most impoverished family alongside the recent experience of revolution from Spanish colonial rule in 1896, this change seemed like it could be relatively beneficial for a fledgling republic. According to Carlos Bulosan, the education which accompanied U.S. troops seemed to suddenly blunt the atrocities of the Philippine-American War in the public's consciousness. Bulosan observed how "those who could no longer tolerate existing conditions adventured into the new land, for the opening of the United States to them was one of the gratifying provisions of the peace treaty that culminated the Spanish-American War."[13]

Iyko Day argues that by the 1920s, "Filipinos were in demand as another source of exploitable labor because U.S. exclusionary policies beginning in 1882 had effectively restricted the immigration of other Asians who had worked in California's fields and Alaska's canneries."[14] The establishment of a U.S. capitalist export economy in the Philippines intensified the rural poverty and urban class inequalities that pushed many working-class Filipinos to leave home.[15] The presence of Pinoy migrant laborers in the continental United States heightened interwar racial tensions, especially in California. Whiteness as a social construction with distinct modes of social capital was imagined as under fire from an othered population of laborers portrayed as job stealers and insidious agents of chaos during the Depression and New Deal periods.[16] In his memoir, *America is in the Heart*, Bulosan asserts that by the

---

[10] I use "(anti)conquest" according to *Alon: Journal for Filipinx and Diaspora Studies*'s thematic emphasis: "to highlight as well as recognize the ambiguities and ongoing questions related to our collective memories of colonization and the resistance forged against it" in the journal's call for papers.

[11] Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart: A Personal History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014 [1946]), xv.

[12] Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 16-17.

[13] Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, 5.

[14] Day, *Alien Capital*, 16-17.

[15] Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 26.

[16] See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit*

1910s "the younger generation, influenced by false American ideals and modes of living, had become total strangers to the older generation."[17] Exposed to heightened levels of urban and rural poverty in the Philippines, a growing population of young Filipino men sought economic uplift in the United States. These experiences in the context of a larger history of colored people's exploitation and exclusion reveal how the cultural influence of the interwar boxing industry informed Pinoy socialities and developed sensibilities of (anti)conquest for fighters and fans.

Historians of Pinoy boxing highlight the distinctions between fighters and fans, wherein icons of the sport were rallying points for transpacific ethnic unity. Dawn Bohulano Mabalon and Linda España-Maram rightly and convincingly argue that pugilists became symbols of Filipino perseverance within the racial structures of U.S. empire. Apocryphally, black soldiers introduced the sport of boxing to Filipinos resisting U.S. occupation on the northern island of Luzon during the Philippine-American War in 1899. These convergences of colored subjectivities illustrate how conditions of possibility were created in the interstitial spaces of empire between racialized groups.[18] The Philippine-American War brought thousands of U.S. soldiers to the Philippines between 1898 and 1913. Despite President Theodore Roosevelt's 1902 declaration of victory over Filipino insurgents, a consistent U.S. military presence on the islands generated increased rates of desertion, suicide, sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse, and drunkenness among the occupying forces. Boxing was billed as a solution to these derelictions of duty because of the sport's emphasis on discipline and abstinence. In 1902, former White House secretary Major Elijah Halford solicited $200,000 in philanthropic funds to construct a Philippine branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to provide boxing training to U.S. servicemen in Manila. In 1915, the YMCA opened its doors to Filipino prospects after promoters like YMCA director C.H. Jackson extolled the "Christlike and manly" virtues that boxing instilled in its practitioners.[19]

Boxing in general cultivated militant sensibilities in what Linda España-Maram identifies as a "tradition of countercultural exchange between subaltern peoples."[20] But these sensibilities were not limited to

---

from Identity Politics (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 5-12.

[17] Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, 5.

[18] For more on the links between boxing, black soldiers in the Philippines, and early Filipino boxing see: Theresa Runstedtler, "The New Negro's Brown Brother: Black American and Filipino Boxers and the 'Rising Tide of Color'" in *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem*, eds. Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 107; See also, Frank Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

[19] Joseph R. Svinth, "The Origins of Philippines Boxing," *Journal of Combative Sport* (July 2001), accessed April 10, 2020, https://ejmas.com/jcs/jcsart_svinth_0701.htm; See also, Linda España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture*, 1920s-1950s (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 75-84.

[20] Runstedtler, "The New Negro's Brown Brother," 105.

a one-sided transmission from fighters to fans. While not exclusively for Pinoy audiences, boxing reoriented the processes of historical meaning-making for Pinoys living within disenfranchising structures of U.S. capitalism. They modeled counterhegemonic tactics that troubled Pinoy marginalization by organizing collective memories toward everyday survival. Fans likewise transmitted their counterhegemonic, militant sensibilities to boxers before, during, and after their performances in the ring.[21] The fine work on boxing by previous scholars provides a basis for asking and answering more questions about how fans and fan experiences shaped boxers' performances within the boxing industry.

This article highlights the fighters, fans, contested social spaces, and cultural technologies of the transpacific boxing industry in its California context between 1920 and 1941. Filipino migrants responded to their precarity by producing and consuming culture.[22] They asserted the terms of their existence while cultivating militant organizing consciousnesses punctuated by refusals to pay rent, violent work stoppages, and political campaigns to challenge the United States's transpacific imperial goals. More frequently, these working-class folks stubbornly asserted their contingent semi-autonomy through the ostentatious practice of the cultures of boxing and the sporting life. Within this larger working-class population, migrants' actions further contested assumed relationships to state and middle-class power while destabilizing categorical assumptions about the Filipino diaspora in California as a controllable, homogenous, and expendable labor source.

What sensations did fans and pugilists generate, mediate, and perpetuate around a fight? Who were boxing fans and how were they positioned in boxing's political economy? What were fans' roles in the social maneuvering of boxers? How did the physical spaces of the fight and the geographies of spectatorship function as critical junctures of popular cultural socialities? How were fights and fighters remembered? This article will address these thematic questions as it contextualizes the rise of the Great Pinoy Boxing Era.[23]

---

[21] Linda España-Maram's *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s-1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 73-103; Dawn Mabalon's *Little Manila is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 127-129.

[22] Here, I mobilize historian Eric Avila's assertion that structural geographies and consciousnesses around expressions of culture were historically essential for racially besieged populations in the United States to defend themselves and survive: "on the streets of the modern ghetto and barrio, culture provides one of the few avenues for empowerment and enrichment. Indeed, its creation is essential to the very identity of a community and its stubborn persistence against the daunting forces of erasure." *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), ix-x.*

[23] *The Great Pinoy Boxing Era, directed by Corky Pasquil and Agrifino Edralin, Jr. (San Francisco, CA: Center for Asian American Media, 1994), YouTube, accessed Feb 7, 2018,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0L3cOpG0Qx0.

"Knocking Down Opponents… Knocking Down Nickels:"[24] Boxing as Migrant Labor

Apart from a handful of icons like Pancho Villa and Ceferino Garcia, most of the hundreds of Pinoy boxers could not make a living within the industry alone. While a day of fighting might have yielded ten times more than what they would have been paid as agricultural or service workers, the grueling nature of training and travel were often difficult for journeymen fighters to sustain.[25] The personal and recreational demands of the sporting life also regularly led to fighters needing to refill their coffers. From amateurs to professionals, pugilists frequently shifted between their roles as spectated fighters and spectating fans as they worked for a dignity that could not be attained within the strict dictates of U.S. capitalist structures.

For example, Pinoy contender and featherweight champion of the Orient Pete Sarmiento earned over $150,000 in eight years fighting in the United States and lost most of it through gambling.[26] His manager, Frank Churchill, recalled how "almost everything he made went that way." Significantly higher payouts in the United States motivated the twenty-seven-year-old Sarmiento to fight Oaklander Al Crisp in San Francisco in September 1928.[27] Admitting that his fight career was nearing its end, the former longshoreman and streetcar conductor hoped to win enough prize money to finish constructing a house in the Philippines for his American wife and daughter.[28] While Sarmiento's consumerism might have been taken as a sign of financial irresponsibility through the rational economic lens of industry managers, the boxer's decision to spend his earnings seeking pleasure outside the workplace speaks to Sarmiento's bid for a dignity otherwise denied.

While Sarmiento "found he could make more money knocking out opponents than knocking down nickels," his frequent return to unionized work underscores how Pinoy boxers' constant geographical movement straddled lines of migrant labor and pugilism, frequently troubling the racial scripts deployed to control Pinoy routes of sociality.[29] When they fought, Pinoy boxers pulled from their labor experiences to trouble interwar racial logics. Clever Sencio was working in the fields of Leyte when he developed a passion for boxing in his mid-teens upon hearing of [Pancho] Villa's stirring victories."[30] Sencio's contemporary, Pablo Daño, worked as a Manila taxicab man prior to his debut in San Francisco's boxing circuit. These examples do not just highlight how fighters were fans at various levels of proximity to the sport. That each fighter sustained intense popularity throughout their careers undermined white social perceptions of Pinoy laborers as shiftless, undisciplined workers. Fighters like Sarmiento, Sencio, and Daño translated their experiences as traditional laborers onto their work as fighters. Fans who witnessed these spectacular performances related this fighting spirit to their own militant labor organizing and personal attempts at freedom.

---

[24] "Filipino Fighters Entertain Ring Fans," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Apr 21, 1941; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. 21.*

[25] A journeyman fighter could hope to earn around ten dollars in one night of fighting, while agricultural work often paid about one dollar per day. See Mabalon and España-Maram.

[26] Sarmiento's journalist friend, Damon Runyon, remarked that Sarmiento "fought upwards of 300 battles [over twelve years], made perhaps $300,000, and spent it all." See Mike Casey, "Whirlwind: Pancho Villa Was Dempsey in Miniature," *CyberBoxingZone* (2007), accessed March 3, 2019, http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/casey/MC_Villa.htm.

[27] A *Washington Post* article printed a month before the Sarmiento-Crisp fight mentioned that "the most [Sarmiento] got for any one fight [in the Philippines] was about $600, as contrasted to nearly $7000 for fighting Bud Taylor in the U.S.A."

[28] "Boxer Seeks to Recoup Fortune," *Washington Post* (1923-1954); Oct 15, 1928; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Washington Post*, 14.

[29] "Filipino Fighters Entertain Ring Fans," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Apr 21, 1941;*

Fans participated in the sporting life through amateur competitions like the "Far Western National Fistic Tourney" held on November 1, 1926, in San Francisco's Dreamland Auditorium that attracted eighty-six Pacific Coast "ringsters."[31] While some fought "unattached," many of these pugilists were affiliated with sports associations across California. Clubs like the Los Angeles Athletic Club (L.A.A.C.) and the Olympic Club in San Francisco enrolled Filipino agricultural and service workers inspired by the successes of their prizefighting idols. Manilatown sporting clubs across California also provided a space for fans to try their luck in the ring and train alongside fellow Pinoys. Though cash prizes sometimes incentivized participation, most amateur boxing tournaments yielded no prize money. That did not deter boxers from paying to fight for local recognition.

"Big-time amateur boxing" held regularly at the Olympic Auditorium and the L.A.A.C. in Los Angeles attracted thousands of "rabid fans." In December of 1934, Filipino George Alcantara fought in the main bout against L.A. favorite Herbie Hansford for a "silver trophy [presented by] Doris Roche, New York musical comedy star."[32] Future flyweight championship prospect Diosdado "Speedy Dado" Posadas recalled being "one of the thousands of admiring Filipino boys who crowded around" Pancho Villa during a gymnasium visit in 1923. While he admitted that "[Villa] never knew me," the amateur's proximity to

---

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, 21; Natalia Molina, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 6-9. Molina defines "racial scripts" as the shared processes of racialization that marginalized groups experience under historically contingent racial projects which also give rise to "counterscripts that offer alternatives or directly challenge dominant racial scripts."

[30] Ed Tolentino, "Villa vs. Sencio: the Tragic Fate that Befell Boxers in First All-Filipino World Title Fight," *Spin.Ph*, https://www.spin.ph/boxing/villa-vs-sencio-and-the-tragic-fate-of-two-boxers-in-first-all-filipino-world-title-fight, accessed Aug 8, 2020.

[31] "Amateur Ringmen Clash," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Nov 2, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B3.

[32] "Ring Foes Vie Tonight," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Dec 3, 1934; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, 12.

the champion motivated Dado in the early stages of his career.[33] In 1941, Dado joined Pete Sarmiento in coaching super-featherweight prospect Jimmy Florita for his debut at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles.[34] While some boxers may have hoped to fight professionally, most amateurs sought *communitas* and visibility in the counterhegemonic spaces constructed through the sporting life.[35]

To afford the sporting life, amateur pugilists worked in fields, canneries, and hotels to save enough money to train and travel. This oscillation between multiple sites of labor challenges arguments like those made by Vlad Rosca that "excepting punching in the ring, many boxers hardly knew anything else… boxing was their job, and if they wouldn't have boxed, they would have struggled in life."[36] Boxing was already an inherently precarious career defined by struggle where success was often fleeting. As Linda España-Maram notes, around one hundred forty-seven men applied for boxing licenses from the California State Athletic Commission in 1935. Members of this group—which included Pinoy, Mexican, and black fighters—were either unemployed or worked unskilled jobs. Boxing provided a space of interracial exposure that, for Pinoys, stirred up memories of solidarity built with black boxing soldiers in the Philippines since 1898.[37] For many Pinoys, boxing was another form of migrant work—one with high risks and sometimes high rewards—that reflected the time, sweat, and blood Filipino migrants were willing to invest into an alternative way to make a living (and live) despite constant threats of erasure.[38]

Many Filipino boxers supplemented their income by working other jobs that exposed them to militant union organizing in the process. For example, featherweight Pete Sarmiento worked as a streetcar conductor and longshoreman to supplement his boxing income.[39] Even Sarmiento's proximity to stardom did not exempt him from needing employment outside of prizefighting. His membership in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 13 throughout the interwar period would have exposed him to the union's militant activism in Southern California, especially during the 1934 West Coast waterfront strikes.

---

[33] Kay Owe, "Speedy Dado, King of Filipino Flyweights, Battles Ernie Peters Tuesday Night," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995); Feb 17, 1929; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times pg. A4.*

[34] Lemos Faces Florita at Olympic Tonight," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Oct 21, 1941; *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, 20.

[35] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (1998), trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford University Press, 2009); Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). I am pulling from Turner and Esposito's anthropological discussions of *communitas* as the shared feelings of togetherness felt by liminal groups within a broader sociocultural structure grounded in experiences of "constitutive alterity." Esposito frames community as obligatory debt, not "property" to be defended against outsiders.

[36] Vlad Roşca, Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, "The Political Economy of World Heavyweight Boxing during the Great Depression," *Theoretical and Applied Economics Volume* XIX 1, no. 566 (2012): 134.

[37] Linda España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 91.

[38] For more on early twentieth century boxing as a form of waged labor, see Louis Moore's *I Fight for a Living: Boxing and the Battle for Black Manhood, 1880-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); For the cultural and social reach of boxing, see Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[39] "Filipino Fighters Entertain Ring Fans," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Apr 21, 1941;

As the sport of boxing developed into an influential transpacific cultural institution, Filipino fans influenced pugilists' performative politics in and out of the ring. Proximity to fans' migrant labor experiences informed boxers' ring entrances, fighting styles, and conspicuous consumerism. A fighter's popular rise prompted investigative articles into their lives and gave fans more opportunities to tether their aspirations to them. For example, Diosdado "Speedy Dado" Posadas was reported to be "the best educated of all the Filipino boxers. He is studying now. His reading is of the better type of American books."[40] While steeped in the exceptionalist language of benevolent assimilation, the highlighting of Dado's intellect contradicted white narratives of Pinoys' lack of intelligence. An image of Dado sitting ringside in a pinstripe suit intently reading a magazine appealed to middle-class Pinoy community boosters making a case for independence in the U.S. Congress. Working-class fans might have compared the refined image of Dado outside the ring to his aggressive persona during the fight. In any case, prevailing narratives of Pinoys as aloof, complacent, and submissive were altogether destabilized by fighters and fans supporting each other in the arena.[41] As they worked and performed in interconnected urban and rural spaces, Pinoy boxers and their fans destabilized assumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality while negotiating claims to power, space, and citizenship during this period. The growth of radio technology and fight films added new possibilities for boxers' media promotion. Broadcasts and shows presented boxing as a manly art, giving Pinoy pugilists and fans opportunities to cultivate sensibilities outside the arena that troubled white social expectations that may not have coincided with promoters' economic intentions.[42]

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, 21.

[40] Kay Owe, "Speedy Dado, King of Filipino Flyweights, Battles Ernie Peters Tuesday Night," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Feb 17, 1929; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. A4.*

[41] "Priest Interview with Filipino Catholic Club of Los Angeles," *James Earl Wood Collection of Material concerning Filipinos in California* (collected ca. 1929-1934), BANC MSS C-R 4, Reel 4; BNEG 2234, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

[42] See Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) and Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

“Some of the Most Colorful Scrappers:”[43] Framing the Sport and Sporting Life

The sport of boxing was more than consumer leisure. The structures of sport and the sporting life mirror the racialized power relations of the society in which they are embedded.[44] For Filipinos in California, boxing was a locus of violence and possibility. Public social spaces were often sites of racial convergence where overarching political tensions and social biases mingled with the emotional intensity of the fight. The boxing world’s rings, gyms, stadiums, theaters, pool halls, and bars were contested terrains wherein Pinoy fighters and fans envisioned and witnessed alternative futures in their constant struggles for dignity. These struggles were often centered—though less often contained—in the regulated violence of two men in the squared circle. The context surrounding Clever Sencio’s final fight illustrates the fleeting possibilities in the work of boxing and the affects attached to the actions of what one sportswriter described as “some of the most colorful scrappers in ring history—the Little Brown Brothers from the Philippines.”[45]

On the morning of April 21, 1926, a window washer in Milwaukee’s Plankinton Hotel found Sencio lying dead on a blood-soaked bed. The pugilist succumbed to a post-fight cerebral hemorrhage. Authorities rushed to the scene as a frenzy of alarmed phone calls, harried investigations, and a coroner’s assessment ensued. After a cursory examination of the evidence, Milwaukee County District Attorney Eugene Wengert promptly dismissed the boxer’s death as “just one of those unfortunate things that happen in any sport.” But Sencio’s transpacific fans were not so callous in mourning one of their rising stars. Boxing was not just any sport. Fan responses coincided with deeper experiences with the sport’s disruptive possibilities.[46]

News of Clever Sencio’s death quickly spread out of Wisconsin as reports of the “battling mite from the Philippines” succumbing to a post-fight cerebral hemorrhage reached California and the Philippines within the week. Sencio made his name and fanbase by putting on spectacular performances in California arenas. Of his thirteen U.S. fights, nine were in stadiums in Los Angeles, Vernon, San Francisco, or Hollywood, and only one of these contests ended in an official loss. The media lauded Moldez for his gameness, a term that encapsulated a fighter’s manly willingness to put body and record on the line to give the fans a show. The wanton abandon Sencio displayed through his sheer aggression in the ring regularly made thousands of spectators cheer him on through thirty minutes of fighting.[47] In just over six months from 1925 to 1926, Clever Sencio became an established name in the California boxing scene. Analysts argued that he was the spiritual successor to the late Francisco "Pancho Villa" Guilledo, Sencio's former opponent, who won the world flyweight championship in 1923.[48] Because of this popular momentum behind him, Sencio's death sent white industry promoters and Pinoy fans reeling.

---

[43] “Filipino Fighters Entertain Ring Fans,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Apr 21, 1941; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. 21.*

[44] C.L.R. James writes of these dynamics as they applied to cricket in the British West Indies in *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

[45] “Filipino Fighters Entertain Ring Fans,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Apr 21, 1941; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. 21.

[46] A.P. Night Wire, “Sencio Dies After Battle,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Apr 21, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B1; “Bud Taylor’s Fist Kills Sencio: Filipino Second Ring Victim of Terre Haute Boxer,” *Washington Post* (1923-1954); Apr 21, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Washington Post*, pg. 15.

True to his popular perception,[49] Sencio spent the previous night in the Milwaukee Auditorium dazzling spectators over ten rounds of what was dubbed by one sportscaster as "one of the fastest and most thrilling fights in Milwaukee boxing history" against white Terre Haute powerhouse Charles "Bud" Taylor.[50] A reporter from the *Milwaukee Journal* described how, "for nine rounds, furious and torrid from each gong to the other, Sencio held Taylor on even terms… his incessant punches [leaving] red blotches up and down the American's torso." Taylor, the betting favorite, put everything he had into the tenth round. Reporter Sam Levy observed how, "in Bud's last-round rally, there was a spring, an alertness, a snap and a marked ambition to destroy the little man from Manila."[51] That manifested ambition resulted in the Pinoy being unable to walk back to his dressing room after the fight.

Sencio added a loss to his record and unrecoverable damage to his body. But his performance was "cheered by thousands who were sentimentally inclined in favor of the little, brown-skinned boxer against his American opponent."[52] *Milwaukee Journal* reporter Manning Vaughan extrapolated Sencio's performance, characterizing Filipinos as a race displaying "fanatical courage" against overwhelming odds. The flyweight contender put on a "marvelous exhibition of gameness… against the taller and harder-hitting Taylor;" a feat that earned him something far more valuable than an official victory: respect.[53]

---

[47] A.P. Night Wire, "Sencio Dies After Battle," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Apr 21, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B1.

[48] "New Filipino Boxer After Bantam Crown," *Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); *Jan 15, 1927; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender, pg.* 8.

[49] Kay Owe, "Fernandez to Battle Taylor: Filipino Meets Bud Tuesday in Olympic Feature," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Mar 4, 1928; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A5; Ed Tolentino, "Villa vs Sencio: the tragic fate that befell boxers in first all-Filipino world title fight," *Spin.Ph*, https://www.spin.ph/boxing/villa-vs-sencio-and-the-tragic-fate-of-two-boxers-in-first-all-filipino-world-title-fight, accessed Aug 8, 2020.

[50] Pete Ehrmann, "One of the Fastest and Most Thrilling Fights in Milwaukee Boxing History," *OnMilwaukee*, accessed June 10, 2020, https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/boxingsencio.

[51] Article by Sam Levy in the *Milwaukee Journal* cited in Pete Ehrmann, "One of the Fastest and Most Thrilling Fights in Milwaukee Boxing History," *OnMilwaukee*, https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/boxingsencio, accessed June 10, 2020.

[52] A.P. Night Wire, "Sencio Dies After Battle," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Apr 21, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B1.

[53] A.P. Night Wire, "Sencio Dies After Battle," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Apr 21,

With respect came recognition and opportunities for more fights, as when sportswriters confidently asserted that Pinoy journeyman Angel De la Cruz "displayed enough ability" in his decisive victory over Alkie Akol in 1925 "to insure himself of future battles."[54] More fights meant greater prospects for financial bulwarks against the poverty that typically forced pugilists to seek manual or service jobs under white bosses. Just as important, the respect earned through a game boxing performance gave fighters and fans a means to "be judged as an equal, which every Pinoy craved."[55] The energy gained from satisfying this craving stayed with Pinoys long after fight night and even reached fans who could not physically witness these exciting displays.

Like most matches after 1921, the play-by-play commentaries for the Sencio-Taylor bout were broadcast over public airwaves to eager listeners gathered around radios in social sites around California.[56] The advent of radio sports broadcasting in 1921 amplified the ability of fans to participate in fight night as listeners who channeled and projected their energies in support of their favorite fighters. Continued cultural relevance also allowed fans to tether their militant imaginations to their favorite fighters. For example, in 1933 one sportscaster described how Pinoy super-featherweight Varias Milling "created a furore (sic) last year by knocking out Earl Maestro, then considered the country's leading feather, in nine rounds. In New York he upset the vaunted Timmy Hayes in whirlwind fashion."[57] The popular following generated by the momentum of Milling's impressive performances gave Pinoys fans a reason to invest in his fights; investments which sustained Milling's career from 1923 to 1939.

Filipino fans encountering the structural regimes of U.S. empire inspired and energized their pugilistic heroes with their support. Reading against the archival grain allows for reasonable speculation that, because most Filipino boxers experienced the precarity of working-class poverty, many sought a career that promised financial security at its highest levels. Pugilists were acutely aware of (or at least personally felt)

1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B1.

[54] "Bud Taylor Whips Sarmiento in Olympic Ring," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Nov 19, 1925; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B1; For a reference to De La Cruz and other Asian/Pacific Islanders in sports, see Joel Franks, *Crossing Sidelines, Crossing Cultures: Sport and Asian Pacific American Cultural Citizenship (Second Edition)* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 2010 [1999]): 40, 1-60.

[55] Peter Bacho, *Dark Blue Suit and Other Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 110.

[56] As Paul A. Rodell emphasizes in *Culture and Customs of the Philippines* (CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), radio was introduced in the Philippines in the 1920s as an American enterprise. There were only a handful of radio stations—mostly in Manila—that played exclusively anglophone content until the 1940s. The format imitated U.S. radio with variety shows, news, and recorded music. It's unclear whether interwar Philippine radio broadcasted U.S. fights in real time, but boxing news quickly updated Philippine media outlets with bout results. The "Filipinization" of Philippine radio occurred in earnest after WWII.

[57] "Filipino Boxer Meets Burl Tomorrow," *Washington Post (1923-1954), Nov 13, 1933; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post, pg. 16.*

the consequences of broader disenfranchising structures. Their pursuit of pleasure through conspicuous consumption speaks to a struggle for dignity and recognition to which fans could relate. [58] Because fighters and fans often exchanged roles, these sensibilities could not be contained to a single industry-mediated space or within any one Filipino group. Boxers' struggles for pugilistic supremacy entwined with boxing fans' active support for fighters in and out of the ring.[59]

Migrant fans who packed arenas on fight night drew energy and inspiration from pugilistic performers. Equally important, fans' continued support helped sustain a fighter's relevance within the boxing industry. Regardless of a boxer's record, if fans clamored hard enough, bookkeepers, venue promoters, and fight managers often conceded for the sake of a profitable show. Boxers giving fans their money's worth generated revenue for venues intent on filling seats every week. In 1928, flyweight Diosdado "Speedy Dado" Posadas was credited with generating "the largest turnout of Filipino fans Los Angeles has ever had" in his Tuesday-night semi-wind-up against Louis Contreras. Over the previous year, Dado was locked into exclusive fighting appearances in San Francisco venues because of his popularity. The city's promoters guaranteed Dado forty percent of house earnings "to hold him as a drawing magnet."[60] News of Dado fighting in Southern California energized his Pinoy fanbase in the region and tickets sold out almost immediately. In 1930, over fifteen thousand spectators filled Hurley Stadium in East Hartford, Connecticut to watch Italian American featherweight champion Christopher "Bat Battalino" Battaglia defend his belt against Pinoy challenger Ignacio "Young Fernandez" Ortis. Newspapers announced that "many prominent fight fans from New York and New England will be in the crowd tomorrow night," including East Coast Pinoys who would have made the trip to witness the momentous bout. [61] Even toward the height of the Great Depression, Pinoy fans were eager to direct their energies and support toward Pinoy boxers.

That Pinoy fans were willing to spend days' wages to purchase tickets in the typical price range of one to three dollars speaks to the significant sociocultural impact boxers had on the people they represented.[62] These microsocial acts of support energized the efforts of everyday survival of the Filipino diaspora in California during the interwar period. Peter Bacho observes that boxing and the sporting life around it had the potential to "suspend society's norms, those rules that embodied a racial and social order favoring color over ability, class over potential."[63] Yet despite Pinoys' fistic dominance in the ring, white cultural curators and Pinoy middle-class social gatekeepers often attempted to temper these attempts at self-determination by cooperating with the law-and-order apparatus of the state.

---

[58] Mike Casey, "Whirlwind: Pancho Villa Was Dempsey in Miniature," *CyberBoxingZone* (2007), accessed March 3, 2019, http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/casey/MC_Villa.htm.

[59] Christopher G. Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press*, 1998). Small argues that composition or performance of a musical work is a small part of a broader practice of the world of music production. In a similar way, the ring was only a small part of the broader world of boxing.

[60] Kay Owe, "Fernandez to Battle Taylor: Filipino Meets Bud Tuesday in Olympic Feature," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Mar 4, 1928; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A5.

[61] "Battalino to Risk His Title Tonight: Featherweight Champion Is to Meet Fernandez, Filipino Boxer, in East Hartford," Special to the *New York Times* (*1923 – Current file*), Jul 14, 1930; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Times*, pg. 27.

For example, following a 1930 rise in anti-Filipino race riots in California, San Francisco's chief of police "revoked all police-department leaves… centering the major strength of his department on the Filipino section to quell summarily any further indication of trouble" after an anonymous tip suggested that Pinoys planned to raid the nearby presidio for arms and ammunition.[64] This Filipino section of the city south of Market Street was home to a large working-class population of Pinoy day laborers and service workers. In response to this substantial mobilization of police resources and law enforcement's call to suspend all Pinoy boxing matches, Pinoy middle-class boosters concerned with community safety and intent on maintaining an image of respectability for the benefit of Philippine independence pledged "confidence in local officials to preserve order." Tomasa Selim Maribus, president of the Philippine Women's Association of California, urged Pinoys in San Francisco "to cooperate in the maintenance of the principles of amity and good will." A.B. Ines, secretary of the Filipino Law Students' Club at San Francisco's Lincoln University appealed to Governor Young to "suppress news of the riots between Filipinos and whites occurring in various parts of the state" in the interest of fostering peace.[65] As these examples suggest, tensions over the social wellbeing of Pinoys in California often intersected with the sporting cultures of boxing and reinforced the ideologies of benevolent assimilation as they played out in the United States.

Racialized perceptions of "native," "ethnic," or otherwise "savage" fighters defined coverage of Filipinos in fights, reinforcing notions of Pinoys' ultimate inferiority for white observers peeved by their race's fighters' losses and invested in maintaining the sport's color line.[66] Boxers who desired to stay relevant, let alone attain legendary status as icons of the sport or potential hall-of-fame inductees, were required to stay active, regularly subjecting their bodies to violent damage in the name of masculinity, "gameness," and white industry surveillance.[67] This necessity to stay centered in, or at least adjacent to, the spotlight however, also made them just as beholden to routes of migrant labor as seasonal agricultural, cannery, and hospitality workers. The image of autonomy in the sporting life was often undermined by a paternalistic industry that claimed the rights to Pinoy boxers' movements and ownership of their bodies. George Parnassus, welterweight champion Ceferino Garcia's manager, often referred to the knockout artist as "his Filipino."[68] Frank Churchill, perhaps the most influential white manager in Manila, paternalistically referred to his fighters as "my boys."[69] Regardless of any actual affection Parnassus or Churchill may have felt toward the fighters they managed, the hierarchies implicit in this language reinforced narratives of Filipino subservience to white colonial projects. Still, boxers were positioned to utilize the resources of the industry to produce racial counterscripts that fans could identify and appropriate.

---

[62] "Pete Sarmiento, Sensational Fighter, to Tackle Marks in New Olympic Fight Emporium," *San Pedro Daily News* xxiii, no. 195, Sept 18, 1925.

[63] Peter Bacho, *Dark Blue Suit and Other Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

[64] "Race Crisis Broadens: Filipinos Draw Nation's Eyes," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Jan 30, 1930; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. 1.*

[65] "Race Crisis Broadens: Filipinos Draw Nation's Eyes," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Jan 30, 1930; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. 1.*

[66] See Theresa Runstedtler's *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

Boxing was a dangerous sport. For all the talk of fame, glory, and fortune, a fighter's alternative might have been violent squalor. Pinoy boxers carried memories of this precarity with them in their training camps, their media obligations, and their fights; memories of struggle acutely rooted in personal experiences of racial, class, and gendered oppression in the Philippines and in the United States. Boxers who worked outside of the ring and the gym shared the radical imaginations of their fans; they were fans themselves. Their decision to embark on a pugilistic career was neither uniquely courageous nor altogether radical in and of itself. It was one of the riskier of the few options available to them. In the transient interstices that defined a career and life in the sport, however, opportunities to destabilize impactfully these regimes of race arose.

"The Little Fellows Draw a Big Crowd:"[70] Sensing and Selling Transpacific Pinoy Boxing

On May 8, 1936, the Hollywood Legion Stadium in Los Angeles presented a high-stakes welterweight[71] headliner: a rematch between

---

[67] A.P. Night Wire, "Sencio Dies After Battle," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Apr 21, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B1; Mike Casey, "Whirlwind: Pancho Villa Was Dempsey in Miniature," *CyberBoxingZone* (2007), accessed: March 3, 2019, http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/casey/MC_Villa.htm; For more on the broader dynamics of manliness and masculinity in boxing, see Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization; A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States*, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[68] "Dutch Boy Eyes Title," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Oct 22, 1934; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. 9.

[69] Frank G. Menke, "The Man Who Put the Philippines on the Map," *The Ring*, Jan 1923.

[70] "Oh, For Crying Out Loud!" *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Jul 29, 1924; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg. B1.*

[71] The New York State Athletic Commission standardized U.S. professional boxing's weight divisions by 1920. The welterweight division's fighters weighed in between 140

Dutch-Irish prospect Jackie "Kid" Burke and Pinoy sensation Ceferino Garcia. In addition to the five thousand people in attendance, the event would have reached several thousands more gathered around radios across the United States. News reports during fight week predicted that "every radio [in Burke's hometown of Ogden, Utah] will be tuned in for the blow-by-blow description." With betting odds at 10 to 8 in favor of "the 'big city' fighter, Garcia, whip[ping] the 'small town' boy," Burke, fans and industry promoters invested heavily into the bout's outcome. Thinking of the future, matchmaker Charley MacDonald offered a guaranteed purse of $10,000 to white fighters Jimmy McLarnin and Tony Canzoneri to fight the headliner's victor.[72] This speculation was common and the betting economies surrounding fights represented broader structures of capital exchange in and adjacent to the boxing industry during this period. Moreover, the media's characterization of Garcia as a "big city fighter" in reference to his residence in Los Angeles indicates that Filipino fighters were not necessarily foreigners; a view that troubled a white social structure invested in excluding Filipinos. The marketing of the Burke-Garcia headliner reveals the intimate connections between the interwar boxing industry and the sporting lifeways of Pinoy fighters and fans.

The boxing industry in the United States experienced a surge in popular demand by 1920. An increase in Americans' general postwar wealth incentivized spending on leisure activities such as baseball games, jazz concerts, and boxing matches that were steadily taking on the flare of theatrical productions. Major U.S. cities became spaces of boxing promotion that centered public attention on the spectacle of fistic violence.[73] While initially centered in East Coast venues like Madison Square Garden in New York City, the boxing industry's economic success quickly spread west as industry promoters looked to tap into fans' growing enthusiasm for the fight game. The July 1921 National Boxing Association's world heavyweight title fight between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier in Jersey City's Boyle's Thirty Acres arena garnered $1,789,238 in official ticket sales—a gate[74] figure that justified fight promoter George L. "Tex" Rickard's billing of the bout as the "Fight of the Century."[75] Between 1921 and 1929, the number of boxing arena spectators in New York alone numbered around 1.5 million. Several more millions filled California arenas throughout the interwar period.[76]

---

and 147 pounds.

[72] "Jackie Burke Underdog in Legion Battle with Garcia," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); May 8, 1936; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A13.

[73] Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Gerald R. Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014) and *Sport and the American Occupation of the Philippines: Bats, Balls, and Bayonets* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

[74] In boxing, a gate refers to the total money earned in official ticket sales for any given event.

[75] "Sport: Prizefighting's Million-Dollar Gates," *Time*, March 8, 1971, accessed Feb 10, 2020, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,904805,00.html.

[76] Vlad Roşca, Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, "The Political Economy of

Eighty thousand fans bought tickets to see the Dempsey-Carpentier fight in person and analysts estimated another three hundred thousand people tuned in to the special radio broadcast. The July 1921 edition of the radio communications journal *Wireless Age* claimed that the bout's color commentary would "go hurtling through the air to be instantaneously received in theaters, halls and auditoriums scattered over cities within an area of more than 125,000 square miles."[77] Rickard guaranteed Dempsey and Carpentier $300,000 and $200,000, respectively, to fight. Each pugilist was also promised 25 percent of the profits from the motion picture produced of the bout.[78] These expenditures added to the $250,000 dollars Rickard spent to build the outdoor venue in New Jersey. With tickets priced between $5.50 and $50, Rickard more than recouped his losses in the coming weeks. Tickets sold so well that Rickard mused how he should have charged fans double.[79] Owing to Rickard's vigorous promotional push, the hype around the fight was so big that gamblers had placed approximately $500,000 in official bets through Wall Street brokerage houses between January and July of 1921. Florida's St. *Petersburg Times* predicted that bets would continue "until the hour of the fight" and "probably will run into the millions" internationally.[80] They did. Regardless of which fighter won, the scope, pageantry, and financial speculation surrounding the Dempsey-Carpentier fight made one thing undeniable: the boxing industry was a private economic powerhouse by the beginning of the interwar period. Rickard's role in promoting the fight illustrated the earnings potential for boxing in the age of radio and film. This economic potential informed the cultural impact of boxing in the Philippines. American advertising of boxing in the Philippines enticed young men touched by the violence of rural and urban poverty to fight for their lives.

White promoters mobilized racial logics to institutionalize Filipino boxing training. Sensing the earnings potential of Filipino boxers, promoter Frank Churchill recalled in a 1923 interview that he "felt certain that if [Filipinos] got a chance to try conclusions with the truly greats in their particular divisions, they would go on to championships."[81]

Boxing became part of the civilizing mission of the American government in the Philippines as private interests looked to make a transpacific profit. Joe Waterman, one of the most prominent white

---

World Heavyweight Boxing During the Great Depression," *Theoretical and Applied Economics Volume* XIX (2012), No. 1(566), pp. 127-142.

[77] "July 2nd Fight Described by Radiophone," *The Wireless Age* 6, no. 10 (July 1921).

[78] Jack Doyle, "Dempsey vs. Carpentier, July 1921," Radio, Sports, Marketing, *PopHistoryDig.com*, Sept 8, 2008, accessed July 8, 2020, https://www.pophistorydig.com/topics/dempsey-vs-carpentier-1921/.

[79] "Jack Dempsey vs. George Carpentier," *BoxRec*, Aug 31, 2016, accessed March 19, 2020, https://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Jack_Dempsey_vs._Georges_Carpentier.

[80] "Millions Bet on Big Fight," St. *Petersburg Times*, July 2, 1921: pg. 1, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=888&dat=19210702&id=vwZPAAAAIBAJ&sjid=DU0DAAAAIBAJ&pg=3064,68103.

[81] Frank G. Menke, "The Man Who Put the Philippines on the Map," *The Ring*, Jan 1923.

American promoters in Manila, celebrated Filipinos' involvement in boxing as a "triumph of U.S. neocolonial stewardship" when he claimed that "the Filipino as a boxer has done more in two years for Philippine independence and to eradicate the cock fighting evil, than the insurrectos and propaganda politicians have done in twelve times the length of time."[82] The Philippine boxing industry utilized the civilizationist logics of U.S. imperialism to build a popular transpacific following for Filipino fighters while attempting to reinforce white superiority.[83] Regardless of how much they actually believed it, fans bought into the mystique of Pinoy pugilists fighting with "all the primitive savagery and fury of the jungle."[84] Quick to capitalize on these images, white promoters built a transpacific fight industry around the notion that to watch a Filipino fight would be to witness a battle of civilizations.

By 1920, Waterman, alongside promoters Frank Churchill and Bill and Eddie Tait, controlled the fight game in Manila, making the Philippines a staging point of Asian pugilism into the United States. Waterman claimed that "the native [Filipino] is manlier, cleaner and healthier because of his interest in boxing."[85] That interest was coerced by industry promoters taking advantage of the urban and rural poverty generated by American occupation. Columnist Frank G. Menke credited Waterman, Churchill, and the Taits with convincing U.S. colonial officials that training facilities like the YMCA "breed and develop" capable, respectable fighters that would "menace the middleweight, lightweight, and light heavyweight kings of the universe," drawing profitable crowds attracted to the social and cultural politics of pugilism's global color line.[86]

The YMCA and Churchill's Olympic Athletic Club in Manila were not the only spaces of Filipino pugilistic training and performance. The U.S. Pacific Fleet enlisted Filipinos as cooks and mess stewards after 1902. To pass the time, and perhaps to earn the respect of white servicemen, Filipinos like Eddie Duarte engaged in shipboard boxing. *Ring* magazine reported that in the breaks between routine cable-laying assignments onboard Army support ships traveling from Manila to the U.S. West Coast, Duarte "made his first public appearance at the Olympic club, of Tacoma, Washington. He fought an American Indian and won the decision in four rounds."[87] Although several dozen Filipino boxers likely fought within the military sporting circuit, their prospects for anything outside of local prominence were low because the War Department prohibited soldiers from fighting civilian pugilists until 1923.

---

[82] Runstedtler, "The New Negro's Brown Brother," 114; Joe Waterman, "Boxing Replaces Cock Fighting," quoted in Runstedtler, "The New Negro's Brown Brother."

[83] In her article on the Australia-Philippines boxing circuit, Rebecca Sheehan defined sport as a nexus that distinguished men from women and "played a role in strengthening, representing, or attempting to win back Anglo-Saxon power." See Sheehan, "'Little Giants of the Ring:' Fighting Race and Making Men on the Australia-Philippines Boxing Circuit, 1919-1923," *Sport in Society*, 15:4, 447-461, accessed July 8, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2012.672232.

[84] Jack Singer, "Garcia Stops Blair in Third," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); June 18, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A7.

[85] Joe Waterman, "Boxing Replaces Cock Fighting," quoted in Runstedtler, "The New Negro's Brown Brother," 114.

[86] Frank G. Menke, "The Man Who Put the Philippines on the Map," *The Ring*, Jan 1923.

[87] Carroll Alcott, *The Ring* (Oct 1928), quoted in Joseph R. Svinth, "The Origins of

Civilian promoters like Churchill circumvented these restrictions by charging admission to unsanctioned fights just outside the Army bases in Corregidor and the Naval bases at Subic Bay. Weekly bouts drew upwards of ten thousand Filipino spectators and gambling on the outcome meant that promoters, fans, and fighters also had financial incentives uncommon in military-sanctioned fights.[88] The convergence of radio, film, and promoter cartels established Filipino boxing as a global contender for popular attention and inadvertently created "a forum for countercultural resistance" for Pinoys in California by giving them an accessible space to watch their countrymen's struggles for dignity unfold.[89] To echo Linda España-Maram's argument: fighters and fans "embedded their narratives" into the structures of the boxing industry, "defying its assumptions about race and ability."[90]

The Golden Age of Radio boosted the Golden Age of Pinoy Boxing. The fledgling radio industry was just gaining traction by the beginning of 1920. Soon after the federal government relinquished its private control of wireless radio technology after World War I, General Electric purchased the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America and renamed it the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) on November 20, 1919. RCA administrator and future company president David Sarnoff claimed to have predicted that the radio industry would yield around $75 million in gross returns by 1920, a figure Sarnoff vastly underestimated. The Dempsey-Carpentier fight in 1921 was broadcasted over RCA radios in bars, restaurants, theaters, and radio clubs, while tens of thousands of people stood outside *New York Times* Building in Times Square listening to fight updates.[91]

The Dempsey-Carpentier fight strengthened popular demand for radio ownership and RCA's profits soared. By 1923, there were over five hundred radio stations across the United States, a marked increase from the thirty stations opened the year before. Around three million people owned or accessed a radio.[92] Serialized programs like the "Amos n' Andy" show increased radio sales further—from 650,000

Philippines Boxing," 2001.

[88] Joseph R. Svinth, "The Origins of Philippines Boxing," *Journal of Combative Sport* (July 2001), accessed April 10, 2020, https://ejmas.com/jcs/jcsart_svinth_0701.htm.

[89] Runstedtler, "The New Negro's Brown Brother," 107, 121.

[90] Linda España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 92. See also, Kristin L. Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[91] Captain L. S. Howeth, "Attempts to Establish a United States Government Radio Monopoly," *History of Communications-Electronics in the United States Navy* (1963), 313–318.

[92] Jack Doyle, "Dempsey vs. Carpentier, July 1921," Radio, Sports, Marketing, *PopHistoryDig.com*, Sept 8, 2008, accessed July 8, 2020, https://www.pophistorydig.com/topics/dempsey-vs-carpentier-1921/.

sets in 1928 to 824,548 sets in 1929. As writer Tom Lewis points out, "restaurants and movie theaters found they had to broadcast the show over loudspeakers if they were to keep customers."[93] Boxing matches became expected programming alongside musical performances, political chats, and news reports. According to Tom Lewis, on fight day, public venues broadcasting fights "enabled listeners to experience an event as it happened… people witnessed it with their ears and imaginations."[94] In 1923, over twenty thousand white and nonwhite spectators gathered in the Polo Grounds in New York witnessed Francisco "Pancho Villa" Guilledo's spectacular knockout of Jimmy Wilde to become the first Filipino (and Asian) fighter to win a world championship. The official gate was over $95,000—an impressive number for a non-heavyweight fight.[95] Filipino pugilists fighting in California increased their reputation-by-proxy as exciting fighters following Villa's victory. After 1923, news of Pinoys on any fight card virtually ensured arenas packed with a visible crowd of Pinoy fans. Filipino fans also listened to their countrymen's fistic prowess over radios, visualized their gameness, and projected those fighting experiences onto militant counternarratives to white violence. Once the structures of the U.S. boxing industry and broader public accepted Filipinos as viable fistic contenders, fighters and fans mobilized boxing resources to carve out spaces of opportunity and survival for themselves and their peers.

Frank Churchill recalled investing $25,000 to bring Francisco "Pancho Villa" Guilledo and Elino Flores from Manila to the U.S. boxing circuits to build the general reputation of Pinoy boxing. Churchill paternalistically mused in 1923—after Villa had beaten Polish-American Johnny Buff to claim the American Flyweight Championship in 1922—that "when I arrived in the United States no one regarded me or my boys very seriously. They didn't think the Filipinos could fight." Due to industry gatekeepers' initial indifference toward Filipino pugilists, the Pinoys found themselves "into the 'sticks' time and again where they fought tough fights and tougher opponents for about one-twentieth of the money they would have received if they had stayed home and fought in Manila."[96] After a string of newspaper losses,[97] Guilledo and Flores built up undeniable winning streaks fighting in East Coast arenas. Radios broadcasted their victories to an international audience. Pinoy migrant workers in California rallied behind a growing group of Pinoy pugilists whose ring gameness embodied and inspired a militancy that could be channeled toward strategies of survival and political resistance. For example, by 1924 Pinoy fighters like Young Nationalista, Speedy Dado, and Flash Sebastian headlined weekly events across California, thrilling crowds and prompting reporters to note that "the little fellows… draw a big crowd" wherever they performed.[98] In 1928, lightweight Lope Tenorio "attracted attention in the west by his sensational fighting."[99] Continued successes prompted one sportscaster to remark, "whether you believe in dreams or not, you'll see Sencio at least try to make his come true."[100] Clever Sencio was one among hundreds of boxers who weaved the dreams of their sporting lives with their own experiences as fans oscillating between work in and out of the ring. These experiences converged onto the most recognizable space of conflict and possibility in the sport: the boxing arena.

---

[93] Tom Lewis, "'A Godlike Presence': The Impact of Radio on the 1920s and 1930s," *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 6, no. 4. *Communication in History: The Key to Understanding* (Spring, 1992), pp. 26-33.

[94] Lewis, "A Godlike Presence," 27; See also Tom Lewis, *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Created Radio* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

[95] Ed Tolentino, "Villa vs Sencio: the Tragic Fate that Befell Boxers in First All-Filipino World Title Fight," *Spin.Ph*, accessed Aug 8, 2020, https://www.spin.ph/boxing/villa-vs-sencio-and-the-tragic-fate-of-two-boxers-in-first-all-filipino-world-title-fight.

[96] Frank G. Menke, "The Man Who Put the Philippines on the Map," *The Ring*, Jan 1923.

[97] Common during the interwar period, in the event that a bout had no clear winner—such as if neither fighter had been knocked out by the end of the fight or another pre-arranged condition had not been met—an official "no decision" would be declared. In this case, ringside reporters and sportswriters reached a consensus and declared a winner or called the fight a draw. Newspapers would print this decision to inform the public. A newspaper decision (annotated "NWS" on official fight records) could vary regionally, with a fighter's hometown newspaper declaring him the winner despite a

"The Rafters Ring with Their Cheers:"[101] Fight Fans and the Spatial Politics of the Arena

Diosdado "Speedy Dado" Posadas was not the first Pinoy boxer to be called "the little brown doll of the Philippines" when in 1929 sportswriter Paul Lowry praised the pugilist's ability to pack the 15,000-seat Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles.[102] That moniker was used by white promoters and newsmen to describe controversial flyweight champion Francisco "Pancho Villa" Guilledo until his death in 1925. Historians argue that these feminine characterizations of boxers, whose in-ring performances reinforced masculine stereotypes reflect active attempts by white society's gatekeepers to invalidate Pinoy pugilistic success, downplaying their cultural impact on Filipino migrant populations in

---

consensus to the contrary. The widespread adoption of the National Sporting Club of London's rules by the end of the interwar period established a system of round scoring by judges that eliminated the NWS practice. See "Newspaper decision" on *BoxRec*, https://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Newspaper_decision.

[98] "Oh, For Crying Out Loud!" *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Jul 29, 1924; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. B1.

[99] "Filipino Lightweight Makes Gotham Debut," *The Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945); *Jan 27, 1928; ProQuest pg. 9.*

[100] "Filipino Boxer On Way Here: Clever Sencio to Fight La Barba in Great Go," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Mar 21, 1926; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, pg.* A5.

[101] Paul Lowry, "Filipino Boxer Cops Decision: Little Brown Doll Displays Worlds of Class," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Sep 11, 1929; ProQuest Historical Newspapers:* Los *Angeles Times, pg.* A1.

[102] Paul Lowry, "Filipino Boxer Cops Decision: Little Brown Doll Displays Worlds of Class," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Sep 11, 1929; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A1.

an attempt to maintain white racial projects.[103] Fans who witnessed Pinoy fighters' ferocious tenacity in the ring saw the structures of these emasculations destabilized in real time. Possibilities for reimagining Pinoy identity opened in the troubling of these racial scripts, even as the physical spaces of the fight focused the boxing industry's economic power. The arenas in which the drama of fight night unfolded were sites of intense meaning-making for Pinoy fans; but fighters also mobilized fans' support to create meaning for their labor within the arena.

The boxing arena was where people across California witnessed what one sportswriter described as "brown-skinned boys who are 50 per cent speed and the other 50 percent heart."[104] Pinoy fighters in the lighter weight divisions offered a different spectacle from the heavyweight icons that filled popular imaginations throughout the interwar period. Heavyweight stars like Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, and Max Schmeling drew audiences for their size and power.[105] In the case of Johnson, as Theresa Runstedtler explains, he and other "powerful black bodies became the visual portents of racial Armageddon, at once feared and desired by white sporting audiences and celebrated by people of color around the world."[106] At first glance, Pinoy fighters were not as physically intimidating as their heavyweight coworkers. That sportscasters regularly emphasized the physical stature of "little lion-hearted Filipinos"[107] in their commentaries speaks to an obsession with height, size, and strength rooted in U.S. colonial discourses of Filipinos' socially constructed bodily inferiority. [108] Yet these smaller pugilists became substantial visual portents for white bosses invested in keeping their labor supply docile and for a Pinoy middle class concerned with keeping their countrymen respectable. In the ring, fans looked for a good show and fighters were determined to oblige them.

The energy of arenas filled with Pinoy fight fans bolstered the disruptive politics of the ring. Spaces of pugilistic performance in cities like Stockton, San Francisco, and Los Angeles were designed to give even the furthest spectators a chance to feel the action in front of them. For example, the Hollywood American Legion Stadium opened in Los Angeles in 1921 with a capacity of eight thousand people, pitched seats for better viewing, and a ventilation system that recycled air every ten minutes.[109] L.A. fight crowds were notorious for being particularly rowdy at the Hollywood Legion and promoter Tom Gallery frequently attributed that to the quality of the fighters he took credit for securing at his venue. In 1929, Gallery boasted that "five Filipinos fighting on the same bill should create plenty of action for the Hollywood American Legion stadium fight fans tomorrow night… some of the best Filipino fighters in the game,"[110] including Speedy Dado. When Dado returned to the Legion in 1933 to soundly defeat Korean pugilist Jo Tei Ken, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the "idol of the local Filipino colony… dispelled whatever doubt existed over his superiority over his fellow-oriental."[111] The optics of pugilistic supremacy mattered regardless of opponent, but consistent Pinoy victories over white fighters particularly inflamed racial tensions outside the ring.

---

[103] Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart* and España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila.*

[104] Paul Lowry, "Filipino Boxer Cops Decision: Little Brown Doll Displays Worlds of Class," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Sep 11, 1929; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A1.

[105] Johnson was arguably one of the most recognizable black fighters of the early twentieth century. Dempsey and Schmeling, both white men, were equally popular for their knockout power.

[106] Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 33.

[107] Kay Owe, "Fernandez to Battle Taylor: Filipino Meets Bud Tuesday in Olympic Feature," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Mar* 4, 1928; *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times*, *pg.* A5.

[108] For more on the historical connections between Filipinos' physical stature and the American colonial project in the Philippines, see Gideon Lasco, "'Little Brown Brothers': Height and the Philippine-American Colonial Encounter (1898-1946)," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 66, *no.* 3, *Sept* 2018, *pp.* 375-406 (*Ateneo de Manila University*), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2018.0029; Gerald R. Gems, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism (Lincoln*, NE: *University of Nebraska Press*, 2006).

When agricultural laborer Fermin Tobera was killed during the Watsonville Riots in January of 1930, California authorities concerned with Filipino-led backlash focused their concerns onto the Pinoy boxing circuit. A story in the *Chicago Tribune* acknowledged the disruptive potential of fighters and fans towards California's racial regimes, noting that State Boxing Commission chairman William H. Hanlon was "particularly fearful" that another Pinoy boxer's victory over a white fighter would instigate a riot in the confined spaces of the arena.[112] Hanlon issued an order to California boxing promoters to "clamp down the lid of the Filipinos" as the riots raged.[113] Hanlon's statement coincided with word of a plot to steal arms and ammunition from the Presidio garrison in San Francisco following news that the Filipino Federation of America building in Stockton was firebombed. Despite these authoritative demands, calls to ban Pinoy-white bouts were summarily ignored by California promoters and inspectors. Boxing was too important to the industry's interwar economy and to fans' desire for pleasurable entertainment.

On February 1, 1930, following reports that Hanlon's boxing ban "created a furore (sic)," boxing commissioners in multiple cities converged to make sure that "the attempt of the California boxing moguls to bar Filipino scrappers fell flat." James Woods of Southern California and Charles Traung of San Francisco met with Governor Clement Young and attained official support to defy Hanlon's orders. Boxing inspector Frank Moran relayed the news that promoters could continue to use Pinoy fighters. Reporters characterized the boxing industry's internal dispute as a failure to "draw the color line against Filipino boxers."[114] Despite boxing moguls' objections and growing concern over Filipino-led violence, Tom Gallery succeeded in matching Pinoy Luis "Young" Carpentero in a fight against Tommy Gardner for a packed Hollywood Legion crowd on January 31, 1930.[115]

---

[109] Hollywood Legion Stadium, *BoxRec*, modified May 26, 2019; accessed June 12, 2020, https://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Hollywood_Legion_Stadium.

[110] Kay, Owe, "Filipino Boxers Show on Hollywood Program," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Jan 10, 1929; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A10.

[111] "Dado Whips Jo Tei Ken in Sensational Battle," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Jul 15, 1933; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. 5.

[112] "Bar Filipino Boxers in Fear of Coast Riot," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jan 30, 1930; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Tribune*, pg. 1.

[113] "Remove Ban on Filipino Coast Boxers," *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); Feb 8, 1930; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Defender*, pg. 8.

Reporter Paul Lowry reported that when Speedy Dado earned a referee's decision against Chicagoan Ernie Peters at the Olympic in 1929, the "gallery packed with every Filipino bus boy, bell hop and roustabout in the city made the rafters ring with their cheers." Once again, Dado reinvigorated Pinoy fans' hopes of seeing one of their fellows win the flyweight (or any) world title. Sports news noted how "the Filipino's countrymen are wild about him. They even rival the Mexican hero worship for Bert Colima. In Dado is seen (sic) the reincarnated Pancho Villa."[116] The hopes fans placed onto their favorite fighters were mutually exchanged. When Pancho Villa refused to cancel his Oakland appearance against Canadian Jimmy McLarnin on July 4, 1925 despite an infected tooth, Villa claimed that he did not want to disappoint his fans or have them feel that they invested their time and money to see him fail to perform. Villa lost by decision after a sensational ten rounds. He died from blood poisoning in his wounded jaw two weeks later. Referee Billy Roche recalled sadly that Villa "was too game for his own good."[117] This obligation to demonstrate their gameness motivated Pinoy boxers to keep fighting for their fans. Boxers insisted on fighting partially for the payday. However, some Pinoy boxers' insistence also reflected a pugilist's disruptive politics—however incidental they may have been—informed by their relationship to the fandom.

In refusing to postpone his fight, Pancho Villa defied every industry promoter's orders to recuperate. After all, between his crowning as the first Filipino world flyweight champion in 1923 and his loss to McLarnin in 1925, Villa had won twenty-three out of twenty-five fights without being knocked out—a stellar record by any account. His manager, Frank Churchill, was wholly invested in keeping him as a popular draw. Strategic withdrawals were common in the sport, and Villa had been suspended for pulling out of a scheduled title defense against

---

[114] "Remove Ban on Filipino Coast Boxers," *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); Feb 8, 1930; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Defender*, pg. 8.

[115] "Filipino Boxers Are Barred from Coast Rings Following Riots," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (1923-2003); Feb 1, 1930; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *St. Louis*, pg. 8.

[116] Paul Lowry, "Filipino Boxer Cops Decision: Little Brown Doll Displays Worlds of Class," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); Sep 11, 1929; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*, pg. A1.

[117] Mike Casey, "Whirlwind: Pancho Villa Was Dempsey in Miniature," *CyberBoxingZone* (2007), accessed March 3, 2019, http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/casey/MC_Villa.htm.

Frankie Genaro in New York on September 16, 1924. Villa decided to wait out his suspension in Manila, where in May of 1925 he defeated Clever Sencio to retain his flyweight crown in front of fifty thousand people.[118] Villa was a boon to the interwar boxing industry and letting him fight injured would have been bad for business. But fighting—and winning—against a white fighter on the day of American independence would have held special meaning for Pinoys fully aware of the ongoing debates over Philippine independence and Filipino migrant exclusion at this time; particularly in California where most of his fans lived, worked, and paid to watch him fight. In choosing the feelings of his fans over the economic logics of the boxing industry, Villa's gameness destabilized the industry's plans to promote him as a profitable main eventer. His memories of poverty in the Philippines and his professed love for his fans motivated him and his spiritual successors to literally put their lives on the line.

"The New Filipino Hope:"[119] Boxing, (Anti)Conquest, and Making Pinoy Identities

As the borders of the imperial nation-state calcified—first after 1924 and again after 1934—Filipino print media produced in communities along the U.S. west coast functioned as mouthpieces for militant voices to express resistance to their marginalization. Such obstacles kept Pinoys from citizenship rights they believed they deserved. These dreams were born from a colonial reeducation project initiated even as American forces decimated the Philippine populace since 1899. Filipinos' colonially imbued status as U.S. nationals meant that they were not explicitly affected by the immigration restrictions or quotas prior to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. Even after the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 reclassified Filipinos as "aliens" and set strict immigration quotas, Pinoys made use of legal loopholes to continue entering the country. Pinoy boxing moved alongside the national politics surrounding debates over Philippine independence during this period.

After 1924, Filipinos migrating to the United States began to construct identities that compounded and complicated regional allegiances from the Philippine Islands. As laborers in American fields, canneries, hotels, and homes, Filipinos began to define themselves through their acculturation through identities—centered on claims to Americanness that reflected their unique status as U.S. nationals—these became the focal point in assertions of belonging to the nation-state whenever the laws critically shifted to exclude them. Pinoy pugilistic success was used as a marker of Filipinos' readiness for self-governance at the same time as the sporting life was viewed as a facilitator of less respectable habits. Runstedtler describes how Pancho Villa "embraced the same urban culture of the dandy … enjoyed the underground nightlife of the city, the art of ostentation, and the company of white women." These actions generated tensions within the Pinoy communities in California and heightened white outrage toward them.[120] Hearing of Villa's audacity also energized the Pinoy working class besieged by the violent structures of labor and respectability. For Pinoy laborers and fans, the boxing arena was an intimate space of leisure and survival.

---

[118] Ed Tolentino, "Villa vs Sencio: The Tragic Fate That Befell Boxers in First All-Filipino World Title Fight," *Spin.Ph*, accessed Aug 8, 2020, [https://www.spin.ph/boxing/villa-vs-sencio-and-the-tragic-fate-of-two-boxers-in-first-all-filipino-world-title-fight.](https://www.spin.ph/boxing/villa-vs-sencio-and-the-tragic-fate-of-two-boxers-in-first-all-filipino-world-title-fight)

[119] "New Filipino Boxer After Bantam Crown," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967); Jan 15, 1927; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender, pg.* 8.

Boxing news participated in this survival attempt. Filipino workers reading about fights actively interpreted these events as members of an interconnected network of migrant workers across the Pacific Coast. Linda España-Maram suggests that "for laborers absent from the fight, the coverage served as more than a vicarious experience; it allowed them to participate in the stories of their compatriots who witnessed the event. For participants, reading about an experience once-removed became a tool for the remembering and reordering of that experience."[121] Here, the notion of *participation* is key to understanding the significance that fighters like Guilledo—and those following his example—held for the survival of Filipino migrant communities during this period. Fans participated by buying tickets, attending fights, and throwing their support to their favorite fighters. Boxers also participated by mobilizing their positionalities as migrant laborers to channel fan support toward impressive performances (regardless of the outcome) in the ring.

One demonstrative example of the role promoted matches played in the lives of Pinoy communities during this period is an article building hype for two superstars who emerged following Guilledo's death. On October 18, 1930, the Manila-based *Philippines Herald* published an article in its sports section promoting a boxing match between Pablo Daño and Eulogio Tingson at the Olympic Stadium in Manila. The "main tilt" scheduled for that evening was billed as "an interesting battle" with the odds heavily in Daño's favor. At twenty-two years of age, Daño was touted as the "hardest hitting flyweight since the days of the late Pancho Villa and considered among the ranking flyweights of the world by American experts." The 112-pound Daño was expected to use his relentless "physical force" to overwhelm his opponent. At eighteen years old, Eulogio "Little Pancho" Tingson was a "ranking contender in the local flyweight division and one of the most popular fighters of the locality." He had the hometown advantage but, according to the article's author, not much else. "[Little] Pancho's speed and cleverness will again be put to a test," the article stated, "but if he makes the mistake of trading punches with Daño this evening it will be curtains for him." Little Pancho's status as an underdog was reinforced by the author's conclusion that, barring some major improvement in skill, “his possibility of even holding [Daño] to a draw [was] rather remote.” Even the article’s title reflects the author’s confidence in the outcome of the fight: “Seeks Tommy’s Scalp” over an image of Daño standing with his gloved hands at his sides.[122]

---

[120] Runstedtler, "The New Negro's Brown Brother," 119.

[121] España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 81.

The *Herald*, an English-language publication by Filipinos representing pro-independence politicians in the Philippines and abroad, circulated its material throughout the Pacific and the United States. Many articles discussed abuses by the Philippine government and regularly denounced the United States’s imperialist policies in the Pacific. Additionally, articles frequently highlighted developments in the Filipino peasant unrest of the 1930s, women’s suffrage campaigns, and the threat of Communism in the Pacific. Each monthly issue of the *Herald* in the 1930s consisted of prominent sports and lifestyle pages highlighting major athletic and cultural events in the Philippines and the United States. Several sports sections discussed anticipated boxing matches held in Manila and U.S. cities, identifying the threads of transpacific U.S. imperialism. The scalping metaphor, the downplaying of the Little Pancho fight, and the general pretentiousness in the author’s tone comprise a tonally bizarre promotional approach suggesting that these seemingly straightforward cultural materials possessed an undergirding political motivation.

Fernando “Young Tommy” Opao earned a decision victory over Daño on August 30, 1930. After that, Young Tommy was billed as Daño’s national rival. A rematch would have stoked the imaginations of fans and promoters, alike. That enthusiasm may explain why much of the article dismisses Little Pancho’s chances and highlights Daño’s supposed thirst for vengeance against Opao. In addition to the grudge-match angle, the article makes a point to highlight the fighters’ regional origins: “the Negros [Occidental] flash” versus the flyweight and bantamweight champion “hailing from Cebu.” Despite there being no official records of Daño holding titles in two separate weight divisions at this time (although he was the Pacific Coast Flyweight Champion, he would not win the California State “World” Bantamweight Title until 1935), the appeal of the potential fight lay in the inter-regional feelings of competition it produced.

This article is one among several published in the Philippines and in the United States reflecting excitement at watching two of the period’s most popular fighters engage each other for a second time. The prospective grudge match—which would not occur until 1935 and ended with Daño knocking Young Tommy out in the eighth round in front of a packed audience in Los Angeles’s Olympic Auditorium—diverted much of the conversation away from Daño’s imminent contest with Little Pancho. Indeed, the article proceeds to relay Daño’s excitement at the prospect of “a return contest with Young Tommy before the end of the year and his chances tonight will determine his chances against the champion if they should ever meet." The characterization of Young Tommy as a champion is a curious editorial choice, as none of Opao's professional records indicate that he became a champion before 1931. But if the readers of this article anticipated a relatively certain Daño victory, the very game Little Pancho, "primed for tonight's contest," would prove that he was not a mere steppingstone.

---

[122] “Seeks Tommy’s Scalp,” *The Philippines Herald*; *Sports Section*, *Saturday*, Oct 18, 1930.

Later reports of the fight described the "midget fighters" battling for all twelve rounds, with judges scoring the fight to a draw. Living up to the article's claim that the fight card would be a "special event [that would] furnish enough fight and cleverness to satisfy the most rabid stadium supporter," the main tilt was indeed an "interesting battle;" though not in the ways predicted. Daño would never get the better of Little Pancho in their four subsequent meetings. Fighting to two more draws and losing twice to Little Pancho via judges' decisions, Daño would go on to an impressive and storied career while never quite meeting the expectations set forth by the *Herald*. Understanding the publication's origins can furnish further insight into why the Daño article downplayed Little Pancho's chances, inaccurately reported fighter accolades, and promoted a future contest between regional rivals instead of an imminent bout. The article's validation of Daño's credentials based on assessments by "American experts" suggests a dynamic of respectability possibly linked to the *Herald*'s politics.

Given that the United States in the early twentieth century had established itself as a global authority in the sport of professional boxing, linking Daño's qualifications to American standards and evoking the name of a Filipino sports hero (the late Pancho Villa) who dominated white Americans in the ring may have furthered a case for Philippine self-governance during this period. While this article alone cannot be used to support this claim entirely, considering it as part of several publications making similar assertions suggests that the politicization of symbolic cultural figures must be considered alongside discussions of more direct forms of political engagement as mediated through news publications. Filipino workers derived a sense of purpose and inspiration in the continued successes of these icons in the ring. Watching and reading about fights, España-Maram argues, "became a collective experience and, win or lose, the potential of the brown body symbolized by the pugilists became part of the stories Filipinos told themselves about themselves and their experiences."[123] Ideals about Filipino masculinity, tenaciousness, and militancy were reflected in and derived from performances in the ring. At the same time, knowing the stakes inherent in providing a game performance was a collective experience for Pinoy boxers vying for status as the new Filipino hope.

Francisco "Pancho Villa" Guilledo—along with his cohort of pugilists—was used by the Filipino diaspora of the 1920s and 1930s as an exemplar; an example of the possibilities and probabilities accessible by living in the United States. Guilledo is an epistemological subject and boxing is an episteme by which the dynamics of racialization, gendering, and class conflict previously described reflected currents in politics and economics. Here, boxers and boxing do the work of geopolitics by creating a genre around which narratives of alterity can be constructed. The image of Pancho Villa and his peers represented a form of militant resistance that may not have been intended by the performer, but whose cultural effects were intimately tied to structures of U.S. empire and Pinoy bodies' survival within it. As prizefighters often do, Guilledo fought for money to improve his own individual positionality. In the process, his actions were marked by the U.S. nation state as immediate threats to the social order because of their disruptive possibilities. Guilledo's pugilistic image became one of the identifying markers of resistance for his fans.

---

[123] España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 81.

* * *

On January 15, 1927, the *Chicago Defender* announced that Pacific Bantamweight Champion Ignacio "Young Fernandez" Ortis "will leave shortly for the United States determined to bring back to the Philippines the world title held by Pancho Villa and almost won by the late Clever Sencio." Touted as "the new Filipino hope," Fernandez—a stablemate of Villa and Sencio under the management of Frank Churchill—ignited the imaginations of his countrymen. That it was Fernandez who sustained fans' "unshakeable conviction that the featherweight championship of the world belongs to the Philippines" in the wake of Villa's and Sencio's deaths was entirely incidental.[124] Contenders like Speedy Dado and Pete Sarmiento were also characterized as "Filipino hopes" and interwar sports pages were replete with headlines of Filipino boxer "invasions" of the United States.[125] Pinoys in California policed and surveilled by structures of oppressive labor, anti-miscegenation law, racial segregation, and mob violence looked to the ring and its performers for inspirational strategies of (anti) conquest. This conviction would have been felt just as intensely by fighters pressured to bring victory and dignity to their names and, by proxy, to Pinoys living and working during the interwar period.

In 1921, at the onset of the Great Pinoy Boxing Era, a sportswriter for *The Boxing Blade* magazine unwittingly articulated the long-historical processes of (anti)conquest Pinoy fighters and fans engaged with during their convergence around the sporting life of boxing:

It is by no means a secret that the fellow who lands the first wild haymaker generally wins the bout. Is that boxing? Is that what a majority of fans want? One can hardly blame top-notchers for declaring that some of their best tricks are appreciated only by close followers of the sport. My advice to fans in general, is to banish the thought of a knockout and try to make mental score of the progress of each boxer. Watch the short, snappy blows. Watch how the man who receives them, acts. Time and again, a short clip on the jaw puts a boxer out on his feet and no one realizes it.[126]

---

[124] "New Filipino Boxer After Bantam Crown," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jan 15, 1927; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Defender* pg. 8.

[125] "Four Filipino Boxers to Sail for an Invasion of U.S.," *New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Feb 26, 1931; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Times*, pg. 26.

Pinoys in California were close followers of boxing's intimacies and radical potential to mobilize fighters and fans around social politics of dignity and militancy within U.S. racial regimes. Each bout, each show of gameness and support around the ring, destabilized the racial assumptions of Filipinos as docile expendable labor beyond it. When white social custodians and gatekeepers of Pinoy respectability received these counterhegemonic actions, their push to reinforce the racial scripts demanding that Pinoys be subservient to white social order reveals the power that fighters and fans deployed in the intimacies of the boxing arena.

These moments of counter-racial scripting were fleeting and needed constant renegotiation. But as fighters and fans moved along routes of pugilistic labor, they constructed a vibrant sporting sociality—learned in the crucible of the Philippine revolution from Spain and the succeeding struggle against U.S. colonial rule—to stagger racial, classed, and gendered expectations. The short, snappy blows of (anti)conquest that Pinoy fighters and fans managed to land on the structures of California's racial regimes created spaces of opportunity for migrant communities to create infrastructures of survival that would last them through the interwar period. Boxing was not just a sport. The sporting lives of pugilists and fans gave Pinoys a fighting chance against transpacific settler-colonial oppression.

---

[126] "Boxer Must Be Showman," *Boxing Blade*, Dec 9, 1922, 2.

This page intentionally left blank