Description of project

I am working on a project on Afro-Cuban heavyweight boxer Teofilo Stevenson. Stevenson dominated the amateur boxing world in the 1970s and 1980s. He was one of only three fighters to win three Olympic gold medals, taking home heavyweight titles at the 1972, 1976, and 1980 Olympic Games. In the 1970s, American boxing promoters hounded Teófilo Stevenson to come to the United States and fight heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali. They offered him millions and promised fame and glory. But the Cuban amateur boxing champion rejected what might have tempted others. His response to those who questioned his decision was a simple one: “What is a million dollars against eight million Cubans who love me?”

The Cuban government banned professional sports in the early 1960s. Cuban athletes hoping to profit from their talents often faced the difficult decision of having to defect to the United States. The story is now a familiar one thanks to the many Cuban baseball players who have gone on to have successful careers and earn lucrative sums in the Major Leagues. Less familiar are the stories of Cuban athletes – especially boxers – who chose patria (homeland) over profits. And yet Cubans have done extremely well in the world of amateur boxing, and on the island the sport rivals baseball in popularity.

My project will use Stevenson’s life story and professional career to tell a post-1959 Cuban national history framed in the context of the global color line and global Cold War.