

“I HAD TO BEAT HIM FOR A CAUSE”: BLACK HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONS

AS ICONS OF RESISTANCE

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Introduction

In *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society*, historian Jeffrey T. Sammons defines boxing, rhetorically, as “a primitive, dangerous sport, nothing more nor less than two men hitting each other.” It is a dismissive definition, and one that Sammons knows is not necessarily accurate. He attempts to prove this point in his work as he traces the ways in which boxing enables us “to better understand ourselves and our place in society.”¹ To be sure, there are numerous historical examples that prove, as historian Thomas Holt argues, that boxing gives “graphic illustration to Clifford Geertz’s idea that what seems to be ‘only a game’ in a given culture is often ‘more than a game.’”² A prizefight can capture, and even concentrate, complex and sensitive social and cultural forces, as seen in the careers of culturally iconic fighters such as those who will be examined in this thesis.

Boxing, according to Holt, illustrated complex layers of the narrative of American culture and race in the twentieth century. Boxing is able to achieve this due to the very nature of the sport. It is “a sport focused on two bodies rather than on a team, and on a singular moment, ‘the fight.’ As a consequence, perhaps, the fighters and the fight assume qualities much like texts; indeed, before TV they were most often experienced *through* texts and thus lend themselves to something like a textual analysis.”³ We are able to see aspects of our society embodied by boxers, who are capable of acting as symbolic representatives of social causes, anxieties, and other phenomena. In the most

¹ Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Urbana: University of

² Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 78.

³ *Ibid.*, 77.

dramatic of instances, the clash of two boxers' bodies can be made to symbolize clashes of social forces, such as race and sex, as was the case when Jim Jeffries acted as a stand-in for the white race in his attempt to wrest the heavyweight title from Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion of the world. Athletes in general may symbolize causes, but in no other sport are these symbolisms able to do battle, one on one, with such serious social implications hanging in the balance.

Boxing, historically, has been perhaps the most racialized of all major professional sports in the United States. This is to say that race has played a central role in the politics of the sport since its inception, mirroring the role played by race in the broader politics of American life throughout United States history. From the dawn of American professional prizefighting, which for the purposes of this argument will begin with the adoption of the Marquess of Queensberry rules in North America in 1899, blacks were barred from holding the sport's ultimate prize, the heavyweight championship of the world. Jack Johnson was the first to break this color line in boxing in 1908, and a backlash bordering on mass hysteria on the part of whites obsessed with reclaiming what they felt to be their faltering manhood was to follow. White Americans were so threatened by the idea (one of their own creation, as we will see) that the black race might have produced the world's most powerful, virile man, that when their best hope to regain the title failed in 1910, the entire nation erupted in racial violence. Johnson had emerged as a powerful symbol of threatened white masculinity as well as the self-assertion of powerful black manhood, and with drastic consequences for many.

This thesis is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the symbolic power inherent in boxing, nor will it try to illustrate this power across the broad and complex

span of twentieth century American racial history. What this thesis does hope to do is to trace the lives and careers of the three most consequential black heavyweight champions of the century, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali, as cultural icons, and to examine the interplay between their careers, their symbolic importance in the broader society, and the wider struggle for black freedom in twentieth-century American life. Following Cedric J. Robinson's delineation of a black radical tradition, but this time in the sport of boxing, I do intend to emphasize the radicalism displayed by these black boxers inside and outside the boxing ring.

Rather than asserting the existence of a black radical tradition in boxing, however, the primary aim of this thesis is to examine the ways in which these three iconic black heavyweights were appropriated by white and black Americans as symbolisms of broader social, cultural and political issues in American life as well as the ways in which each actively participated in shaping their respective historical moments. This line of inquiry converges with Frederic Cople Jaher's argument that these three boxers "reflected forces at play in the national and the international rather than in the boxing arenas," as well as Holt's assertion that "African-American sports and cultural figures constitute a kind of synecdoche for America."⁴⁵ This paper will attempt to grapple with the ways in which Johnson, Louis and Ali forced whites and blacks to confront issues of race, gender, and representation.

If we attempt to, as Holt does, "trace an interesting trajectory" regarding the intersection of race and consumption from Jack Johnson and Joe Louis to former basketball superstar Michael Jordan, we find an evolution in the consumption of racial

⁴ Frederic Cople Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali," in *Sport in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Donald Spivey (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 182.

⁵ Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century*, 75.

images that produces many insights into each of their eras. Johnson and Louis, consumed as symbols, could be read as “texts on which the nation could work out its tensions and anxieties.”⁶ Johnson could be understood as symbolizing flagging white male power and the impending threat of modernity in the Progressive Era, or as Holt argues, “a threatening over-consumption” contrasted against Jeffries’ “solidity of production.”⁷ In the years following World War II, Louis was adopted by the mainstream as the symbolic representation of a superficially more inclusive American nationalism, despite his prior symbolic importance to African-Americans as a totem of powerful black manhood. In more recent times, Jordan has parlayed his success in basketball into his position as one of the world’s most profitable commercial pitchmen, having been the public face of Nike, an unprecedentedly successful multinational corporate behemoth. Beyond his greatness on the basketball court, he seems to stand out merely as a symbol of exploitation and Euro-American global imperialistic capitalism in an age of ubiquitous consumerism. In a sense, Jordan has closed the loop back to Johnson’s threatening “over-consumption,” with the images of black cultural figures bought and sold as products.

Yet, through their radical assertions of black male power, Johnson and Louis were, in their respective primes, able to rise above this pattern of symbolic consumption as symbols of empowerment for an entire race. So did Muhammad Ali, on perhaps the grandest possible scale, with his status as an international symbol of radicalism made possible by the lives and careers of Johnson and Louis before him. If the radical pasts of all three men are forgotten, whitewashed of their racial and political significance, then there will be nothing left to differentiate these men from the walking sports commodities

⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁷ Ibid., 79.

of today. Journalist Max Wallace is correct in his assertion that “Muhammad Ali, not today’s two-dimensional corporate pitchmen,” should be “the standard by which all athletes are judged.”⁸ Yet we must not go so far as Wallace to assert that today’s athletes owe everything to Muhammad Ali, for Ali owes everything to Joe Louis, Jack Johnson, and the many black athletes who fought to break down color barriers in professional sport.

Chapter 1 looks at the tumultuous life and career of Jack Johnson, who became the first African-American to overcome the color barrier to the heavyweight title through a blend of undeniable talent and an assertive, outspoken persona that played upon white fears of their manliness being in decline. How did Johnson come to symbolize not only powerful black manhood, but also white male anxiety? Why did his triumph over Jim Jeffries result in such widespread racial violence? How did the broader politics of white manliness and civilization become entangled in the career of a black prizefighter? Why did Johnson actively pursue sexual relationships with white women, and how did this play into his grave threat toward white male supremacy?

In Chapter 2, I look into the career of Joe Louis, the next black heavyweight champion to follow Jack Johnson. Following Johnson’s loss to white challenger Jess Willard in 1915, blacks were again barred from fighting for the heavyweight title for over two decades. Louis was able to overcome boxing’s color line, this time for good, as blacks regularly held the title after the reign of Louis. The chapter asks how it was that Louis was successful in overcoming this barrier, as well as how mainstream America could accept Louis as the symbolic representation of American democracy in his 1938

⁸ Max Wallace, “BACKTALK; Today’s Athletes Owe Everything to Ali,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2000. Accessed May 31, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/30/sports/backtalk-today-s-athletes-owe-everything-to-ali.html?pagewanted=3&src=pm>

bout with German heavyweight Max Schmeling. Though Louis ascended to the heavyweight throne largely due to a deferential, accommodating public persona, his symbolism to African-Americans as a strong, courageous and powerful black man inspired black men, women, and youth across the country. Louis acted as a bridge between the unabashed nonconformity of Johnson and the international symbolic brilliance of Muhammad Ali. Without Louis, no such radical tradition in sport could have been possible.

Chapter 3 traces this tradition of black radical self-assertion through the life of Muhammad Ali. The chapter examines his personal and political transformation from a proud, patriotic Olympic gold medalist in 1960 to a radical black nationalist and member of the Nation of Islam, a militant black separatist organization. His rise to glory made possible by the legacies of Johnson and Louis before him, Ali established himself as the archetype of a new kind of assertive, outspoken black athlete. His ascendancy mirrored the self-assertion that characterized the civil rights movement in the 1960s, as the masculinist politics Ali embodied came to define the broader movement in the latter part of the decade, giving rise to the militant black power movement. The chapter is primarily concerned with tracing his developing radicalism to its peak, when Ali refused to be inducted into the United States Army during the Vietnam War.

A central theme to this examination is that of “masculinity,” as well as its more rigid synonyms “manhood” and “manliness.” While “masculinity” is a catch-all term for those qualities that differentiate men from women, “manliness” is used to evoke the kind of white Victorian virility that many Americans feared was under threat at the turn of the century by the effete trappings of civilized society, while “manhood” can be used to

capture traits such as power and self-assertion more concretely in other contexts.⁹ The politics of black self-assertion in the face of rampant oppression is often tied directly to the language of manhood, a linkage that also ties the “manly art” of boxing to these politics of blackness.

⁹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18-19.

Chapter 1: Jack Johnson, The Great Black Hope

“A boxing match is like a cowboy movie. There’s got to be a good guy and there’s got to be a bad guy. And that’s what people pay for—to see the bad guy get beat.”

-Heavyweight Champion Sonny Liston

“Boxing is a celebration of the lost religion of masculinity, all the more trenchant for its being lost.”

-Writer Joyce Carol Oates

On July 4, 1910, Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion of the world in the sport of boxing, met challenger James J. Jeffries, the best of a long line of white challengers sent into the ring to dethrone the champion. A former heavyweight champion considered one of the all-time greats of the sport, Jeffries had been retired since 1905. In Johnson’s autobiography, he recalls that “an insistent cry went up from the country” for Jeffries to come out of retirement to face Johnson. “It was said he was the only ‘white hope’ available and that he must meet me in order to keep the title in the possession of the white race.”¹⁰ For many whites, finding a legitimate “white hope” was of great importance to their race. This effort was unsuccessful until Jeffries, who as champion had always refused to fight a black contender, and had criticized former champion Tommy Burns for giving Johnson the opportunity to challenge for the title, was lured out of retirement.

¹⁰ Jack Johnson, *In The Ring and Out* (New York: The Two Continents Publishing Group, 1977), 134.

Johnson, a black man, holding the title of world champion in 1908, was a horrifying sight to behold for much of white America. As author Graeme Kent put it, “To have such a proud and independent man as heavyweight champion, a position Eldridge Cleaver, spokesman for the militant Black Panthers movement, has called ‘the ultimate focus of masculinity in America,’ was regarded by many whites as an affront to white supremacy, to be rectified quickly.”¹¹ The title of champion in boxing, almost exclusively denied to black fighters, was a crown of manly virtue, and white men turned to violent sports such as boxing in an effort to reinvigorate their collective masculinity. Few things could challenge the already besieged notions of white masculinity more than the rise of a black heavyweight champion such as Jack Johnson.

A flamboyant, boastful, but supremely skilled fighter, Johnson had left a trail of white contenders in his wake after capturing the heavyweight crown from Burns in 1908. Promoters eagerly searched the ranks of top white heavyweights only to find second-rate challengers until Jeffries was finally pressured into reentering the ring. Jeffries entered the fight as the heavy favorite due to his exemplary record, having defended the world heavyweight championship nine times, an unprecedented feat. Johnson, on the other hand, did not boast as impressive a record, having lost several fights earlier in his career. The *Herald* acknowledged that “prejudice” may have influenced perception of Johnson’s achievements among boxing enthusiasts, yet cautioned that he had never defeated an opponent of Jeffries’ caliber. However, the article added, “there is something about this

¹¹ Graeme Kent, *The Great White Hopes* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2005), xii.

muscular, cool-headed, cold-blooded black man that has caused the belief that Jeffries is going to have the fight of his life.”¹²

Yet for all the bluster and buildup, the bout was decidedly uncompetitive. Jeffries was beaten from the opening bell, unable to muster any offense against the younger, faster and stronger champion. Former champion “Gentleman” Jim Corbett, betraying his nickname, tried to distract Johnson by shouting obscenities. As Johnson toyed with Jeffries, he playfully taunted both former champions. After requiring assistance from his cornermen to answer the bell for the fifteenth round, Jeffries staggered to the middle of the ring where he found Johnson waiting to deliver more punishment. Jeffries was knocked down twice before a vicious right hand felled him for the third and final time. The referee raised Johnson’s hand raised and he was quickly rushed from the ring as the white spectators howled with anger at the fall of Jeffries.

The white mainstream press reacted to the defeat of Jeffries with the same dismay and bitterness. The fight was described by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as “a tragedy . . . [a] tremendous, crushing anticlimax.”¹³ More ominously, the *Los Angeles Times* published the following warning to black readers: “Do not point your nose too high. Do not swell your chest too much. Do not boast too loudly.”¹⁴ The *New York Daily Herald* reported, “As the blacks read the story of their man’s triumph, their pride mounted higher and higher. At the same time the disappointment of some of the more rabid of the white

¹² “Johnson Never Beat Good Man,” *Los Angeles Herald*, May 8, 1910. Accessed January 23, 2012. <http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cdnc/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&cl=search&d=LAH19100508.2.166.35&srpos=4&e=-----en--20--1--txt-IN-jack+johnson+jeffries+1902---#>

¹³ Kent, *The Great White Hopes*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

population grew into anger,” anger which eventually led to rioting.¹⁵ In fact, a series of race riots erupted in every Southern state as well as in several Northern states after the news of Johnson’s easy victory spread. The widespread violence resulted in an estimated eighteen blacks dead and hundreds more injured.

In Houston, Texas, a black man named Charles Williams “had his throat slashed from ear to ear” by a white man on a streetcar after news of the fight’s result had been released. According to *The Democratic Banner* of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, Williams’ murder came after he “announced too vociferously his appreciation of Jack Johnson’s victory at Reno.”¹⁶ In Columbus, Ohio, a parade organized by “hilarious negroes” rejoicing over Johnson’s victory was met by an angry mob of 150 whites. The parade participants were attacked, resulting in numerous injuries, including the severe beating of one reveler who had shouted, “Hurrah for Johnson!”¹⁷ The *Tacoma Times* published a summary of the race riots that erupted all over the country. The list included “wholesale lynchings” in Wilmington, Delaware, riots in New Orleans triggered by newspaper bulletins about the fight, a black man “hanged to a lamp post” in New York City, and a black constable who was “killed by negroes whom he was attempting to arrest for ‘shooting up the town,’ in celebrating Johnson’s victory.”¹⁸

¹⁵ “Whites and Blacks Riot,” *New York Daily Herald*, July 5, 1910. Accessed December 14, 2011. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1910-07-05/ed-1/seq-2/;words=Riots+RIOT+riot+riots+rioting+RIOTS+.-Rioting>.

¹⁶ “Negro Enthusiast Killed,” *The Democratic Banner* (Mt. Vernon, Ohio), July 5, 1910. Accessed April 2, 2012. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88078751/1910-07-05/ed-1/seq-1/;words=RIOT+Jack+Johnson?date1=1910&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=&date2=1911&proxtext=jack+johnson+riot&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1>

¹⁷ “Riot at Columbus,” *The Democratic Banner* (Mt. Vernon, Ohio), July 5, 1910. Accessed April 2, 2012. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88078751/1910-07-05/ed-1/seq-1/;words=RIOT+Jack+Johnson?date1=1910&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=&date2=1911&proxtext=jack+johnson+riot&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1>

¹⁸ “Toll of Death Aftermath of Johnson’s Victory,” *Tacoma Times*, July 5, 1910. Accessed April 2, 2012. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88085187/1910-07-05/ed-1/seq-1/;words=riots+riot+rioting+Riots+RIOTS+Rioting?date1=07%2F04%2F1910&rows=20&searchType=ad>

It would seem incredulous that such widespread violence could ensue over the resolution of a sporting event. In *Manliness and Civilization*, historian Gail Bederman asks, “Why should a mere prizefight result in riots and death?”¹⁹ Clearly, there was much more to this classic confrontation than simple pugilism. Bederman explains, “From its inception . . . the Johnson-Jeffries fight was framed as a contest to see which race had produced the most powerful, virile man.”²⁰ White Americans, heavily invested in the outcome of the fight, fell prey to the characterization of the bout portrayed by the mainstream press, which “focused on the relative manliness of the white and black races.”²¹ A bout billed as the confirmation of white masculine superiority had reached an unimaginable outcome for whites. The very embodiment of white manliness had fallen to a superior black foe.

After defeating Jim Jeffries, Jack Johnson had established himself as an overwhelmingly threatening specter over already faltering notions of white supremacy, which were rooted firmly in the discourse of masculinity. The boisterous, hard-living, ostentatious heavyweight champion outraged white Americans with his taunting of white opponents, flashy displays of affluence, and sexual companionship with both white and black women. So tumultuous was Johnson’s title reign that even some blacks were made uncomfortable by his success. Writer Al-Tony Gilmore explains of African-American sentiment over Johnson:

On the black side, there was never a monolithic black reaction to Johnson at any time during his reign as champion. To some, he was a magnificent anachronism because he

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¹⁹ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 4.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid.

refused to acquiesce to the racist laws and customs of the nation. He was a hero because he challenged white supremacy. Still, there were others who liked the champion but cautioned him to curtail his way of living. On the other hand, Johnson was deplored by many of his race because he exacerbated the racial fears and hostilities of whites.²²

Black fears about Johnson's provocative character were confirmed in the hours following his victory over Jeffries. Johnson challenged white supremacy, the notion underpinning American racism in the early nineteenth century, by the very nature of his title. As heavyweight champion of the world, Johnson was a totem of black masculine power, as well as a direct challenge to ideas of white masculine superiority, ideas that were already sternly challenged by the turn of the twentieth century.

White masculine identity at the turn of the century was characterized as "vigorous Anglo-Saxonism," a practice of strenuous activity and Protestant self-denial.²³ The Progressive Era was a time of white male anxiety over the loss of manliness and virility. This anxiety was related to several factors. In 1891, the Bureau of the Census announced that the period of American frontier expansion had come to a close. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" in 1893 asserted that the rugged American identity had been forged in the taming of the wild and the opening of the West by brave American pioneers. The closing of the continental frontier alarmed Turner and many other white Americans, who were left to wonder on what ground could the American dynamism, rooted in manly conquest of the untamed wild, be preserved. A new frontier was soon reopened overseas in the era of imperialism. The war in the Philippines in 1898 proved a

²² "Jack Johnson and the White Supremacy Issue," *New York Times*, August 17, 1975. Accessed April 2, 2012.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F1071EF93C5915768FDDAE0994D0405B858BF1D3>

²³ Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 78.

trying exercise for notions of white masculinity, which were understood to be what set American troops apart from Filipinos and was to be guarded at all costs.²⁴

In addition, amongst the American upper and middle class, turn of the century life left men fearing the loss of their masculinity. Historian Elliott J. Gorn explains that “large numbers of men, especially members of the old Eastern elite, dwelled on their own ineffectuality and ‘overcivilization’ in the face of potent new captains of industrial wealth.”²⁵ The American economy’s capacity to produce items of luxury had outstripped demand, creating a problem of overproduction. A large segment of the workforce thus toiled either in the production of luxury items or in white-collar work. The wide availability of luxury goods as well as the transition from producing necessities to fineries clashed with manly Victorian values of economic autonomy and self-denial.²⁶ These economic changes also resulted in the wide availability of low-level clerical positions with little or no possibility of promotion to more responsible work.

This shift coincided with a decline in opportunities for entrepreneurship. As Bederman explains, “[n]o longer would the dream of manly independent entrepreneurship be achievable for most middle-class men.”²⁷ The nervous struggles and excessive brain work endured by professionals and businessmen were believed to be the cause of a newly discovered disease, “neurasthenia.”²⁸ The disease was characterized by a general malaise thought to be brought upon by the loss of male virility. Sociologist Franklin Giddings observed in 1901 that the “struggle for existence” endured by middle-

²⁴ Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies*.

²⁵ Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁷ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

class men in the early twentieth century was “fraught with peril,” thus giving them an “unusual adoration of power.”²⁹ Giddings’ assertion was informed by Social Darwinian ideals. Middle-class life was a matter of survival of the fittest, and these men were forced to look to avenues other than work in order to reclaim the manliness necessary to survive.

For some white American men looking to reclaim their lost masculinity, military service was a means of embracing the vanishing ideal of the rugged frontiersman. Historian Gary Gerstle argues that the creation of the Rough Rider narrative, drawn from the exploits of Theodore Roosevelt’s combat regiment at San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War, represented an alternative to the narrative of masculine identity that had characterized the American frontier. Military combat offered a “milieu . . . in which Americans from the densely populated and industrial East could escape the excessive gentility, effeminacy, and regimentation of civilization and make themselves over into the hardest of Kentucky backwoodsmen.” Moreover, even those who did not fight could participate in this narrative “by imagining themselves as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, Geronimo and Cochise, Teddy Roosevelt and Rough Rider hero Bucky O’Neil,” all figures widely portrayed in the press and popular culture of the late nineteenth century. At the core of this imagination was a yearning for the rugged masculinity of the bygone frontier era amongst Euro-American men. Masculine ideals appealed to the Eastern industrial upper class looking to identify with national mores “embedded in the American psyche.”³⁰

²⁹ Franklin Henry Giddings, *Democracy and Empire* (New York, 1901), 317-18. Cited in Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 187.

³⁰ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 41.

Another avenue toward reclaiming one's virility, one especially popular amongst the Eastern upper class, was amateur sporting activities. Starting in the 1890s, college sports became increasingly popular as did contests in "gentlemen's athletic clubs" purely for the sake of testing one's masculine prowess. Gorn explains, "Athletic strife grew especially important to a society that was rendering life soft with material comforts and empty with religious skepticism. Sports taught valuable lessons to young men from prosperous families, showing them how to suppress their social and spiritual doubts with bursts of vigorous energy." While prosperity amongst the industrial upper class threatened to quash the manly virtue embedded in old American narratives, "[v]iolent sports and rugged stress seeking . . . allowed men such as Theodore Roosevelt to have it both ways, to enjoy their legacy of material comfort while denying that they had lost any of the masculine selflessness of pioneers and soldiers." The upper-class embrace of sport was further informed by the Darwinian metaphor—men sought confrontation to fulfill the idea that social life was a matter of survival of the fittest, and "death to the weak."³¹ Roosevelt himself extolled the virtue of sporting activities as a means of reclaiming the rugged masculinity of a bygone era. He hoped that a return to the "strenuous life" would help white men to reclaim their flagging potency. "There is a certain tendency to underestimate or overlook the need of the virile, masterful qualities of the heart and mind. . . . There is no better way of counteracting this tendency than by encouraging bodily exercise and especially the sports which develop such qualities as courage, resolution and endurance," said Roosevelt in 1890.³²

³¹ Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 188-89.

³² *Ibid.*

Among the most violent of these sports, bare-knuckle boxing held the potential to fulfill the turn-of-the-century man's desire for strenuous, violent, man-against-man competition. Under the London Prize Rules, however, boxing was perhaps too brutal to be accepted as a mainstream sport. Though disapproving of the brutality inherent in bare-knuckle contests, Roosevelt was an avid observer of boxing and even held gloved sparring sessions in the White House.³³ Roosevelt was not alone in his discomfort over the brutal nature of bare-knuckle boxing. However, Duffield Osborne hailed boxing as the saving grace of masculinity in the article "A Defense of Pugilism" published in *The North American Review* in 1888.

Come then ! [sic] let thinking men who value their manhood set themselves in array, both against the army of those who, unmanly themselves, wish to see all others reduced to their own level, and against the vast following who, caught by such specious watchwords as "progress," "civilization," and "refinement," have unthinkingly thrown their weight into the falling scale. Has mawkish sentimentality become the shibboleth of the progress, civilization and refinement of this vaunted age? If so, then in Heaven's name leave us a saving touch of honest, old-fashioned barbarism ! [sic] that when we come to die, we shall die, leaving men behind us, and not a race of eminently respectable female saints.³⁴

Far from decrying brutality, Osborne calls sharply for brutality in order to rescue the American male from the supposedly effeminate trappings of prosperity and "civilization." The adoption of the Marquess of Queensberry Rules in 1889 in the United States allowed for the regulation of boxing. Boxers were to compete with gloved hands

³³ Ibid., 195-97.

³⁴ Duffield Osborne, "A Defense of Pugilism," *The North American Review*, April 1888. Accessed April 4, 2012.

<http://www.jstor.org.eres.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/stable/25101480?seq=6&Search=yes&searchText=defense&searchText=pugilism&list=hide&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Ddefense%2Bof%2Bpugilism%26acc%3Don%26wc%3Don&prevSearch=&item=1&t1=71&returnArticleService=showFullText&resultsServiceName=null>. Cited in Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 201.

and fouls such as kicks, low blows and wrestling throws were disallowed. The result was the appearance of a more civilized sport while encouraging fighters to stand their ground and slug it out, thus fulfilling the conflicting needs of upper-class whites to tone down the brutality of boxing while affirming the manly combativeness of the sport.

A heavyweight champion boxer was just the kind of powerful, rugged symbol of masculinity whose image was extolled by the likes of Roosevelt and Osborne. The heavyweight champion was looked upon as an “Emperor of Masculinity,” in the words of writer and historian Gerald Early.³⁵ Bederman argues, “Late Victorian culture had identified the powerful, large male body of the heavyweight prizefighter (and not the smaller bodies of the middleweight or welterweight) as the epitome of manhood.”³⁶ Americans, obsessed with physical strength and brawn, were drawn to the ideal of large, powerful physical specimens as strongman Eugene Sandow, who performed feats of strength at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair.³⁷ Size and strength were to be conflated with white masculine superiority, and these ideals were extended into the prize ring.

Thus, men viewed by white Americans as “unable to wield political and social power” were barred from making any claim to the heavyweight title.³⁸ African-American heavyweights had been excluded from title contests since the beginnings of the sport. In the late 1880s, the African-American boxer Peter Jackson was thought to have a particularly strong chance of toppling the longtime titleholder John L. Sullivan, whose advanced age and drinking habits had taken a toll on his skills and conditioning. But, Sullivan adamantly refused to fight Jackson, and Sullivan’s manager would not allow his

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8.

³⁷ Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 187.

³⁸ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8.

fighter to risk the “humiliation of being defeated by a Negro.”³⁹ If such a confrontation had taken place, it is likely that Jackson would have prevailed. On May 21, 1891, Jackson had fought top white heavyweight contender Jim Corbett to a “no contest” decision in what amounted to a four-hour and five-minute, sixty-one round tactical stalemate. But rather than elevating Jackson to the status of a top contender, the fight had instead generated intense interest in a Corbett-Sullivan title match in 1892. The washed-up Sullivan proved no match for his younger, quicker challenger, and although Corbett won the title, Jackson never received a title fight.

Whites were very uncomfortable with the idea of interracial boxing matches. In 1892, champion John L. Sullivan issued a challenge to all contenders, but with one condition: “In this challenge I include all fighters—first come first served—who are white. I will not fight a negro. I never have and I never shall.”⁴⁰ In 1897, a white spectator in New Orleans was so affronted by a match between a white man and a black man that he interrupted the match. He exclaimed, “The idea of niggers fighting white men. Why if that scoundrel beat that white boy the niggers would never stop gloating over it, and as it is we have enough trouble with them.”⁴¹ The late nineteenth century in America, particularly the South, was a racially nightmarish period characterized by segregation and Jim Crow. Blacks were systematically suppressed by a combination of violence, election corruption, and a heavily gendered emphasis on white supremacy.⁴²

³⁹ Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 18.

⁴⁰ Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!: The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975), 26.

⁴¹ Dale A. Sommers, *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans, 1850-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 183. Cited in Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 26.

⁴² Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 194.

Most notable among the methods of black suppression employed by whites were electoral restrictions stripping the vote from poor blacks and lynchings.

Lynching became “the ultimate expression of Jim Crow,” as argued by American political activist Scott Nearing. Aside from murder and felonious assault, blacks were regularly lynched on charges of rape, “insulting a white woman, writing to or paying attention to white women,” or “proposing to or eloping with a white woman.”⁴³ Black suppression was inextricably linked to gendered notions of white supremacy, which focused closely on the protection of white women from supposedly bestial, hypersexual black men. According to Bederman, turn-of-the-century white men “used ideas about white supremacy to produce a racially based ideology of male power.”⁴⁴ These ideas were prevalent in the world of professional boxing, as black heavyweights were barred from fighting for the world championship for fear of the ultimate symbol of virile manliness becoming the possession of a supposedly inferior race. Such attitudes amongst whites regarding interracial contests continued to pervade boxing through the career of Jack Johnson.

Jack Johnson was born on March 31, 1878, in Galveston, Texas. Growing up in a segregated society in the wake of Reconstruction, he entered the boxing ring as a young man because he couldn’t make a living outside it. In the years following Reconstruction, black farmers and laborers were forced to purchase much of their means by credit, and given little to no opportunity to earn sufficient income to cover their debts. This regime of debt slavery held the aspirations of Southern blacks in check, as did violent reprisals at the hands of whites for any perceived threat to their superiority brought upon by black

⁴³ Scott Nearing, *Black America* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 206.

⁴⁴ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 5.

success.⁴⁵ In Dallas, he worked as a carriage painter for Walter Lewis, a local amateur boxer. As Johnson recalled in his autobiography, “[Lewis] soon learned of my proclivities with the gloves, and enthusiastically set about improving my knowledge of boxing. I was only fifteen years old, but he engaged me in some fast encounters, and I began to have a glimmering of the possibilities of the ring as a career.”⁴⁶ At the age of sixteen, he returned to Galveston and began to develop a reputation as a pugilist. Having exhausted any worthwhile opportunities in the ring, Johnson jumped rail cars until he arrived in Springfield, Illinois. In Springfield, he participated in a battle royal.⁴⁷ “There were four men in the fight beside myself. I was hungry; my great ambition as the fight began was to eat; and I feared that if I did not win the fight, I might not have an opportunity to eat.”⁴⁸ Emerging victorious from the battle royal, Johnson’s reputation was furthered, and though he was beaten in Chicago by an opponent named Klondike, he made a decision to train in earnest for a career as a professional fighter.

Johnson later returned home and survived the great Galveston hurricane of 1900, continuing to fight for small purses, and honing his ring skills along the way. His first major opportunity would come in Los Angeles on May 16, 1902 against Jack Jeffries, the younger brother of heavyweight champion James J. Jeffries. Johnson made easy work of Jeffries for four rounds, toying with the hometown fighter. In the fifth round, he knocked out the young Jeffries. When his older brother stepped into the ring to help, Johnson

⁴⁵ Leon Litwack, *Trouble In Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), Kindle edition, location 2556.

⁴⁶ Jack Johnson, *In the Ring and Out*, 34.

⁴⁷ A battle royal is the type of fighting exhibition depicted by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, in which the participants, all black, were thrown into the ring blindfolded and fought to the last man left standing for a meager reward.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

taunted him, saying, “I can lick you, too.”⁴⁹ He demonstrated a brash, almost playful style in this fight. As his skills grew, Johnson challenged the stylistic conventions of boxing. With quick feet, excellent defense, and a proclivity for engaging spectators in playful conversation while fending off opponents, Johnson was the antidote to the prevailing style of manly confrontation, in which fighters moved little and traded their hardest punches until one finally gave way. His style, interpreted as a race style, was antithetical to Anglo-Saxon manliness; his defensive maneuvering and calculated application of offense were interpreted as sneaky and underhand.

The fight made headlines in Los Angeles, but the accounts written were unfailingly racist in character. The *Los Angeles Times* offered its assessment of Johnson and his boxing style: “Mistah Johnsing is one of those Africans who look too black to have the heart of a fighter, but he has not yet shown the white feather.”⁵⁰ Only white pugilists were believed to have true “heart” in the ring, the manifestation of their rugged Anglo-Saxon manhood. African-American pugilists were commonly dogged by racist stereotypes that they were “weak in the stomach,” “yellow when under pressure,” and “less able to think on their feet than their white opponents.”⁵¹ These ideas were tied to pseudo-biological notions of white supremacy.

In 1904, the Station for Experimental Evolution was founded with the sponsorship of the Carnegie Institution. “With broad support from the federal government, prominent jurists, and scientists at major universities, researchers there pursued a decades-long, but scientifically flawed, project to collect data on the inherited characteristics of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁰ “White Men Fight Blacks,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1902.

⁵¹ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 125.

Americans.”⁵² The findings of such institutions reinforced ideas of white supremacy. The notions held by whites of black inferiority have clear ties to the concept of hierarchical race classifications, a product of eugenicist thinking which proved to have great public sway. These ideas also influenced the perception among whites of black prizefighters. As for the theory that blacks were soft in the middle, Peter Jackson offered a firm rebuttal. “Hit a nigger in the stomach and you’ll settle him, they say, but it never occurs to them that a white man might just as quickly be beaten by a wallop in the same region.”⁵³

Though writers were contemptuous about Johnson’s ring prowess, the result of the fight was indisputable and Johnson had demonstrated that he could be a lucrative draw, if only because whites wanted so badly to see him beaten so their notions of white manhood could be confirmed. Johnson went on to blaze a trail of destruction along his path to winning the World Colored Heavyweight Championship against Ed Martin in 1903. Still, he was denied a chance to fight the elder Jeffries for the world title. Jeffries, like Corbett and Sullivan before him, refused to allow a black fighter to challenge for the crown. In 1904, Jeffries, courting retirement, denied rumors that he had agreed to fight Johnson. He asserted to the press, “I will never fight a negro. I am entirely in the hands of the press and the people. Any white man they choose I will fight on six weeks’ notice.”⁵⁴ None of these white heavyweight champions wanted to risk losing the championship to a black man, knowing the racial implications of such a turn of events.

⁵² Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 240.

⁵³ Fred Dartnell, *Seconds Out!: Chats About Boxers, Their Trainers and Patrons* (New York: Brentano, 1924), 72.

⁵⁴ “Jeffries Talks of Quitting Ring,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1904. Accessed April 5, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9E01E4D6123AE733A2575AC1A9679D946597D6CF>

Jim Jeffries retired as champion in 1905 still true to his promise not to fight a black challenger. Johnson had to wait until December 26, 1908 to receive his title chance in Sydney, Australia against Tommy Burns, a poorly regarded heavyweight champion from Canada.

The Johnson-Burns championship bout of December 26, 1908 took after place years of badgering from Johnson for a title fight. Waning interest in boxing after the retirement of Jeffries allowed for such an unprecedented event to take place, but notably not on American soil. Burns, a game fighter but not nearly the same caliber as Jeffries, certainly subscribed to some of the racist notions regarding black boxers, particularly that Johnson would fold under pressure, which may partially explain his willingness to take such a great risk in fighting Johnson. However, Burns was badly outmatched in this historic title bout. The fight was not a fight so much as it was a dismantling. It had been abundantly clear from early in the fight that Burns would be easy prey for the challenger's brawn and defensive mastery. In fact, Johnson prevailed so convincingly that the writer Jack London concluded simply, "There was no fight."⁵⁵ In dominating Burns, Johnson had not only captured the heavyweight title, but also dismantled pseudo-biological notions of black inferiority in the prize ring.

The black press chose not to comment extensively on Johnson's victory, but several papers made statements about the significance of Johnson breaking boxing's "color line." The overall response of the black press fell short of outright jubilation; it instead revealed an ambivalence ranging from boastfulness to measured appreciation, or outright silence. Ward cites the exultance of periodicals such as the *Richmond Planet*

⁵⁵ Graeme Kent, *The Great White Hopes* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 6.

and *Colored American Magazine*.⁵⁶ In addition, a letter in rhyme and verse written to the *Indianapolis Recorder* by Rots D. Brown of Muncie, Indiana, captured the symbolism of Johnson's assertion of black power:

This is only an example of the Negroe's might;

He is a man when a midget, he is a bear when a giant.⁵⁷

On the other hand, the *Chicago Broad-Ax* dedicated only one softly worded paragraph, buried in the back pages, to Johnson's historic achievement, reporting that Johnson "has become the heavy weight champion prize fighter of the world, and that is going some for a Colored man."⁵⁸ The *Chicago Defender*, a leading black paper, gave no coverage to the fight. It is likely that the black press chose not to trumpet news of Johnson's victory fearing reprisal from the white community or even outbreaks of racial violence. As seen only two years later with the widespread rioting and violence that followed Johnson's victory over Jim Jeffries, these fears were indeed justified.

Yet, Johnson's victory over Tommy Burns, while jarring, had not been met with a great deal of alarm by white Americans. The fight was hardly covered by the mainstream press, and while sportswriters including Tad Dagan of the *New York Evening Journal* "stressed the superiority of Johnson over Burns,"⁵⁹ most mainstream press coverage was tinged with racism. "The *Raleigh News and Observer* reported that a 'Texas Darky' had won the title but devoted only one paragraph to the fight. A cartoon showing a

⁵⁶ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 131.

⁵⁷ "The Johnson-Burns Fight," *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 16, 1909. Accessed April 7, 2012. <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/IRecorder&CISOPTR=15822&REC=2>

⁵⁸ *Chicago Broad Ax*, January 2, 1909, page 6. Accessed April 7, 2012. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024055/1909-01-02/ed-1/seq-6/;words=Burns+Jack+Johnson?date1=12%2F26%2F1908&date2=01%2F31%2F1909&searchType=advanced&lccn=sn84024055&proxdistance=5&state=&rows=20&ortext=&proxtext=&phrasertext=&andtext=jack+johnson+burns&dateFilterType=range&index=1>

⁵⁹ Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 28.

caricatured, thick-lipped, wide-eyed Johnson holding a watermelon and the championship belt proclaiming, ‘Golly, old Santy sho’ was good to me’ was carried in the *Dallas Morning News*.⁶⁰ The *New York Times* offered more balanced coverage, but noted, “Johnson, it was said by some, had a ‘yellow streak.’”⁶¹ Though whites were certainly distressed by Johnson’s ascendance to the heavyweight throne, Burns was not a highly regarded champion, and therefore Johnson’s victory was viewed as inconsequential to the race question.

The defeat of Burns could easily be dismissed by the white press. He was considered far too small, at five-feet-seven-inches and 175 pounds, to be a great champion. Moreover, his Canadian nationality and desire to be an international champion prevented American whites from accepting Burns as the guardian of Anglo-Saxon manliness and white American racial superiority. Johnson had not yet beaten the man considered to be the best the white race could offer. Whites believed that Jim Jeffries “was capable, if he chose, of restoring heavyweight supremacy to the white race.”⁶² Jack London believed that Jeffries was the only worthy challenger available, as he wrote, “Jeffries must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson’s face. Jeff, it’s up to you!”⁶³ The retired ex-champion took on the role of “Great White Hope” for whites anxious to see the title taken back from the brash Johnson. As long as Jeffries remained undefeated, Johnson’s title could be called into question.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁶¹ “Jack Johnson Wins; Police Stop Fight,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1908. Accessed April 7, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9A02EFDA113EE233A25755C2A9649D946997D6CF>

⁶² Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 33.

⁶³ Ibid., 32.

Johnson successfully defended his title three times while whites attempted to court Jeffries out of retirement. Black jubilation over Johnson's victories was on the rise during this period. The black press grew more assertive in its praise of Johnson after the champion had proved his staying power. An editorial in the *Chicago Defender* posited, "If Jack Johnson wins his battle on July 4, it can be said that he is really the best man on earth." Mainstream papers such as the *Los Angeles Herald*, lacking the opportunity to disparage Johnson's boxing ability, instead assaulted his character outside the ring. A 1910 article titled "Johnson Still Disgracing Himself" decried the champion's penchant for joyriding in high-performance automobiles and declared that "[h]is escapades are the most disgraceful that history charges against a champion or near-champion of the ring."⁶⁴ Powerless to end Johnson's title reign, whites looked for any means of subordinating Johnson. His displays of wealth, flashy gold teeth, fast cars and liaisons with white women were frequent targets of outrage.

Johnson's in-ring success as well as his boisterous personality and complete disregard for race etiquette fueled white desire for Jeffries to come out of retirement and teach Johnson a lesson. Beanie Walker, a former screenwriter of the Laurel and Hardy silent films, wrote of Jeffries in the *San Francisco Examiner*, "The sooner the big boy arrives home, the better it will be for the peace of mind of the fight followers of this country."⁶⁵ In April 1909, the *Chicago Tribune* published a drawing of a little blond girl asking the retired great: "Please, Mr. Jeffries, are you going to fight Mr. Johnson?"⁶⁶

⁶⁴ "Johnson Still Disgracing Himself," *Los Angeles Herald*, March 26, 1910. Accessed April 9, 2012. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042462/1910-03-26/ed-1/seq-12/?words=Johnson+Jack+disgraceful?date1=1836&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=&date2=1922&pr oxtext=jack+johnson+disgrace&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=4>

⁶⁵ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 164.

⁶⁶ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 2.

This was yet another gendered representation of white supremacy. Jeffries would be counted upon not only to beat Johnson, but to protect the daughters of white men.

An editorial in the British magazine *Boxing* was even more imperative, portraying Jack Johnson as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance and connecting the Johnson-Jeffries fight to the broader project of Euro-American imperialism:

The Russo-Japanese War proved that a coloured people could conquer a white nation in war even under modern conditions and ever since there have been signs of unrest among the subject nations, displaying itself in India, in the Philippine Islands, and elsewhere. Then came Jack Johnson's great triumph over Tommy Burns and White and Black stood before the world in suddenly inverted positions again. Here we are, the hitherto dominant race, compelled to recognize that an American negro, the descendant of an emancipated slave, is the principal figure, our acknowledged master at the one great physical sport in which actual personal superiority can ever be authoritatively tested. Does anyone imagine for a moment that Johnson's success is without its political influence, an influence which has only been checked from having full vent by the personality of Jim Jeffries?⁶⁷

The editor's words revealed anxiety over white supremacy not only in the realm of sport, but also in national and international politics. The same racist presuppositions over the inherent inferiority of non-white peoples that justified slavery, the same notions that led Russia to underestimate gravely the fighting capability of the Japanese, were to be tested once and for all in the ring upon the meeting of Johnson and Jeffries. Johnson, a black "emperor of masculinity," resisted white supremacy, besting challenger after white challenger, man against man. By the eve of his bout with Jeffries, Johnson could be seen as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance who threatened to upset the very notions

⁶⁷ Ibid.

underpinning white supremacy in America and Euro-American imperialism abroad. In the midst of all this anxiety and change, Jeffries was needed to be the savior of white manhood.

On July 4, 1910, Jeffries entered the ring in Reno to a champion's ovation by the largely, if not totally, white crowd. As Johnson made his entrance, the crowd gleefully sang along to the ringside band's rendition of "All Coons Look Alike to Me."⁶⁸ From the opening bell, the "Great White Hope" was hopelessly outclassed, and Johnson punished, taunted and jeered his beaten challenger for fifteen rounds before, mercifully, knocking him out. The following day, whites lamented the fall of their challenger. The *San Francisco Examiner* ran the headline, "JEFFRIES MASTERED BY GRINNING, JEERING NEGRO," while the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* ran a cartoon of Uncle Sam pointing to the visage of Johnson and asking, "Who'll wash that off?"⁶⁹ White anger over the defeat of Jeffries spilled over into race riots that erupted in nearly every major American city and dozens of other locations. The riots surely represented an outbreak of race violence, but as argued by Jill Dupont and Thomas C. Holt, Johnson's victory represented the inevitable tide of modernity. "Jeffries was portrayed as coming out of nature and the wilderness: he was brute strength, a natural fighter. Johnson was of the city, a high, fast-living dandy. . . . In myriad ways, Dupont argues, Jeffries stood in at this moment of intense socioeconomic change for a simple and comforting past, while Johnson was the angst-ridden future."⁷⁰

Historian Geoffrey C. Ward views Johnson's defeat of Jeffries as a tremendous victory for African-Americans muted by a terrible white backlash. "No event since

⁶⁸ Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 42.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁷⁰ Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century*, 78-79.

emancipation forty-five years earlier seemed to mean so much to negro America as Johnson's victory. And no event yielded such widespread racial violence until the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., fifty-eight years later."⁷¹ It was a time of black jubilation, yet the violence that followed reminded all of the stakes involved in such a contest. The greatest challenger to Johnson's reign as heavyweight champion had fallen, and whites across America seemed to take out their anger on the black race. Yet, while many black Americans rejoiced over Johnson's triumph, many were also uncomfortable with his boisterous personality, his affairs with white women, and white anxiety surrounding his exploits.

Several black newspapers were frank in their reporting of the bout. The *Indianapolis Recorder*, in its assessment of the fight's significance, put Johnson's victory in proper perspective for the exultant black masses: "No such spectacle as the one inside the graded tiers of humanity has ever been seen. Probably in this country no such spectacle will be seen again. It was the fight of the century. It was the prize of the century, also."⁷² Taking note of white anger surrounding the defeat of their challenger, the *Chicago Broad Ax* reported the irony that the "twenty thousand sports who witnessed the memorable fight . . . displayed far more tolerance than the preachers and the so-called Christians who hated to see the black Samson win . . . and think it is a burning shame and an everlasting disgrace for a Negro prize fighter to knock out a white prize fighter."⁷³

⁷¹ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 217.

⁷² "A Clean Knockout," *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 9, 1910. Accessed January 20, 2012. <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/IRecorder&CISOPTR=18699&REC=5>

⁷³ "John Arthur Johnson Still Holds The Championship Belt of the World," *Chicago Broad Ax*, July 9, 1910. Accessed January 20, 2012. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024055/1910-07-09/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>

While the *Broad Ax* acknowledged “great rejoicing on the part of the colored population throughout the United States,” it also noted that “some pin-headed city and state officials in various sections of the country will not permit the moving pictures to be exhibited in their respective cities and states.”⁷⁴ New York City Mayor William Jay Gaynor moved to suppress the distribution and exhibition of the fight film in his city, but encountered significant legal difficulty in doing so. In the South, the movement to ban newsreel of the fight was widespread, and several cities successfully prevented the newsreel from being shown in public. Former president Theodore Roosevelt expressed grave misgivings not only over exhibition of the films, but also the sport of boxing itself. Deploing the “very unfortunate display of race antagonism,” and the race riots triggered by the fight, Roosevelt stated:

I sincerely trust that public sentiment will be so aroused and make itself felt so effectively as to guarantee that this is the last prizefight to take place in the United States, and it would be an admirable thing if some method could be devised to stop the exhibition of the moving pictures taken thereof.⁷⁵

Johnson’s victory caused Roosevelt to reverse his position on boxing. The newsreel footage of the fight depicting Johnson thrashing Jeffries was a stern challenge to white supremacy. If Jeffries could not defeat Johnson, then at least the evidence of Johnson’s superiority could be suppressed, and the practice of prizefighting banned to prevent further upsetting the status quo.

The black press decried efforts to ban the fight film, observing that “The Clansman,” a play by Thomas Dixon based on his racist novel of the same name, was

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ “Jack Johnson Sees Jeffries Defeated,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1910. Accessed April 9, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9E07E4DC1E39E333A25757C1A9619C946196D6CF>

exhibited in major American cities with no public outrage while film of the Johnson-Jeffries bout was being suppressed. The play portrayed African-Americans as ignorant, bestial, and hypersexual, while praising the exploits of white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Julius F. Taylor of the *Chicago Broad Ax* argued that the play, “which depicts a Negro raping a white woman” was “glorified” by whites “as the noblest work of their hand-made God.”⁷⁶ Black papers wondered aloud why “The Clansman” and news of the public lynching of African-Americans could be tolerated, while public uproar and racial violence accompanied the Johnson-Jeffries fight.

In direct response to the Johnson-Jeffries fight, Rep. Seaborn Roddenberry of Georgia and Sen. Furnifold Simmons of North Carolina introduced bills in Congress seeking to ban the importation and interstate transportation of fight films. Following Johnson’s victory over white challenger Jim Flynn, Congress was successful in passing bill S. 7027 on July 31, 1912, suppressing newsreel footage of prizefights. Roddenberry called the Johnson-Flynn bout “the grossest instance of base fraud and bogus effort at a fair fight between a Caucasian brute and an African biped beast that has ever taken place.” He continued, “No man descended from the old Saxon race can look upon that kind of contest without abhorrence and disgust.”⁷⁷

By 1910, Jack Johnson had risen to the position of undisputed heavyweight champion of the world and had become “the nation’s most powerful symbol of black manhood.” This was a position that opened him to vicious attacks from the white press and political establishment.⁷⁸ White newspaper editors and legislators, unable to unseat

⁷⁶ *Chicago Broad Ax*, July 9, 1910. Cited in Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 86.

⁷⁷ Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 89-90.

⁷⁸ Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164.

Johnson from the heavyweight throne, turned to his affairs with white women as a means of assassinating his character. Interracial sexual relationships, particularly those between black men and white women, were viewed as illicit and unnatural, and laws barring interracial marriage were passed throughout the United States after the Civil War. After 1910, Johnson was targeted by lawmakers as the symbol of racial miscegenation and its dangers. Lynching was a common method for whites to enforce the boundaries of illicit sexual relationships, one extolled by Governor Cole Blease of South Carolina as the best means of discouraging “black brutes” from approaching white women.⁷⁹

A white woman by the name of Etta Duryea married Johnson in 1911, only to be publicly vilified for having entered into an interracial marriage. Their tumultuous relationship was hindered by Johnson’s continued association with other women. Johnson’s extra-marital activities left Etta in a state of depression that would ultimately consume her. Johnson also proved to be a violent husband; his outbursts once required Etta to be hospitalized. Yet, her depression was also the result of being treated as a “social outcast.” Etta committed suicide by gunshot to the head in September 1912. Shortly before her death, she confessed to a black female neighbor, “All of my misery comes through marrying a black man. Even the negroes don’t respect me. They hate me. I intend to end it all.”⁸⁰ Etta’s suicide was looked upon by anti-miscegenationist whites as a cautionary tale, vindicating their warnings of the dangers of interracial marriage.⁸¹

The suicide of Etta did not end Johnson’s interest in white women. Even while still married to Etta, Johnson had taken a strong interest in an eighteen-year old white

⁷⁹ Ibid., 166.

⁸⁰ “Mrs. Johnson Tries Suicide,” *New York Times*, September 12, 1912. Accessed April 9, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9904E3D8123CE633A25751C1A96F9C946396D6CF>

⁸¹ “Reflections on a Suicide,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1912.

prostitute called Lucille Cameron. When Johnson announced plans to marry her in December 1912, Cameron's mother pursued charges of abduction against Johnson. According to historian Peggy Pascoe, "journalists paid little attention to the facts of the story; they quickly cast Jack Johnson as a symbol of dangerously predatory black male sexuality and Lucille Cameron as the picture of innocent white womanhood."⁸² This perception was common in the racist discourse surrounding interracial marriage during the early 1900s. Black men were cast as threatening, hypersexual despoilers of white feminine virtue, and interracial marriage was looked upon as an abomination, an unnatural act with damaging consequences for the preservation of the white race.

Lucille Cameron's decision to marry Johnson would likely preclude any return to her family and friends in Minneapolis. The editor of the *Broad Ax* speculated that "her past friends and old associates would have coldly turned their backs on her . . . and for all the time to come they would have pointed the forefinger of scorn and contempt at her, for permitting herself to fall in love with a big Black smoke or 'Nigger' as most of the cultured White ladies and gentlemen take much pleasure in referring to all Colored folks when there are no Colored persons in sight."⁸³ The article predicted Cameron would experience many of the same conflicts that drove Etta Duryea deeper into the depression that claimed her life. Black men were not the only ones scorned for breaking the "color line" in marriage; white women also bore the brunt of such transgressions, even as they were publicly showcased as embodiments of innocent white femininity despoiled by black men.

⁸² Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 164-165.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Nonetheless, Johnson and Cameron were married on December 4, 1912, provoking widespread white outrage, as a determination amongst the white political establishment to make Johnson pay for his crimes against the existing racial order. A federal prosecutor termed Johnson the nation's "foremost example of the evil in permitting the intermarriage of whites and blacks."⁸⁴ While whites were nearly unanimous in their condemnation of Johnson, the scandal divided African-Americans. Some of the black press had by now soured on the heavyweight champion. The black *Philadelphia Tribune* headlined one story "Jack Johnson Dangerously Ill, Victim of White Fever."⁸⁵ And while the *Chicago Defender*, the nation's most consequential black newspaper, was unwavering in its support of Johnson and his right to marry whomever he wished, others within the black community saw Johnson as a troublemaker who was undoing the progress made by African-Americans by stirring up white popular outrage. In an address before the Detroit YMCA, Booker T. Washington berated Johnson for having "misrepresented the colored people of this country" and accused him of "doing a grave injustice to his race."⁸⁶

The *Chicago Broad-Ax* expressed the widespread sense of black ambivalence about Johnson's marriage to Cameron. An article published in the paper days after the couple were wed defended Johnson's decision to marry Cameron, although the editor also noted that Johnson had not been a particularly good husband in his previous marriage, and expressed a hope that he will "prove . . . that he is not naturally brutal in his makeup, when it comes to dealing with delicate and frail women and that he can

⁸⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁸⁵ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 307.

⁸⁶ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 308

become or make a model and dutiful husband.”⁸⁷ Evoking the fragility and helplessness of a young woman, the newspaper criticized Johnson for unleashing a great deal of trouble upon his new bride but praised his sense of manly duty:

In conclusion . . . he must be given the credit however distasteful it may seem to many, for having the courage and manhood, to stand by her and to lawfully marry her, after he had gotten her into so much serious trouble.⁸⁸

Despite his travails, to this editor at least, Johnson was still the preeminent symbol of black “manhood,” and as such the editorial hoped Johnson would continue to uphold his duties as a man, inside the ring and out.

Matters came to a head on October 18, 1912, when Johnson was arrested under the Mann Act, a federal law aimed to eliminate “white slavery” by prohibiting interstate transport of females for “immoral purposes.” While originally intended to combat underage prostitution and interstate sex trafficking, the Mann Act could also be used to prosecute men, such as Johnson, who were guilty of entering socially unacceptable sexual relationships. With the cooperation of Belle Schreiber, a white woman with whom Johnson had a prior sexual relationship, prosecutors had little trouble winning their case against Johnson, and his conviction under the Mann Act forced him to flee the country for France. He had broken the color line in boxing, but some white Americans were determined not to allow him to break the color line in the institution of marriage.

The Johnson-Cameron scandal touched off a firestorm of legislation aimed at outlawing interracial marriage. By 1913, the majority of US states had anti-miscegenation laws in effect, and such laws had been introduced in the state legislatures

⁸⁷ “Miss Lucile Cameron side stepped her mother Mrs. Cameron-Falconet after she Emerged from Prison,” *Chicago Broad Ax*, December 7, 1912. Accessed January 25, 2012.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024055/1912-12-07/ed-1/seq-1/>

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

of a further eleven states where miscegenation laws were not currently in effect.⁸⁹ In addition, the House Committee on the Judiciary was set to consider the Roddenberry amendment, which sought to impose a federal ban on interracial marriage, and Congress was also considering a bill to outlaw interracial marriage in Washington, D.C. The fledgling National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was placed in an awkward position: opposed to anti-miscegenation laws, the organization was wary of getting involved in such a heated sexual issue. Much of the NAACP's money came from white donors who preferred a more conservative, accommodating approach to race issues. If it directly opposed these anti-miscegenation laws, the NAACP would find itself facing the primary object of white outrage at this time: sexual relationships between black men and white women, and it would risk losing a major share of its white support. On the other hand, the NAACP "planned to build its political future on the slippery legal rights black voters had struggled to secure in northern states," and allowing so many northern states to pass anti-miscegenation laws unopposed would have a catastrophic effect on these plans.⁹⁰

The February 1913 issue of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's monthly periodical, marked a pivotal moment in the history of the organization, one in which the Jack Johnson scandal would play a large role. The publication showed some ambivalence about defending Johnson in the section "Along the Color Line," noting that in Chicago "hundreds of colored men and women have been discharged from their work on account of the Jack Johnson episode," while Johnson himself had purchased "a \$35,000 house in

⁸⁹ Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 168.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

a fashionable district.”⁹¹ However, the editor of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois, defended Johnson in an editorial titled “Intermarriage”:

Let those people who have yelled themselves purple in the face over Jack Johnson just sit down and ask themselves this question: Granted that Johnson and Miss Cameron proposed to live together, was it better for them to be legally married or not? We know what the answer of the Bourbon South is. We know that they would rather uproot the foundations of decent society than to call the consorts of their brothers, sons and fathers their legal wives. We infinitely prefer the methods of Jack Johnson to those of the brother of Governor Mann of Virginia.⁹²

The most important reason to oppose miscegenation laws, argued Du Bois, was a “moral” one. As he argued:

[S]uch laws leave the colored girl absolutely helpless before the lust of white men. It reduces colored women in the eyes of the law to the position of dogs. Low as the white girl falls, she can compel her seducer to marry her. If it were proposed to take this last defense from poor white working girls, can you not hear the screams of the “white slave” defenders? What have these people to say to laws that propose to create in the United States 5,000,000 women, the ownership of whose bodies no white man is bound to respect?

Note these arguments, my brothers and sisters, and watch your State legislatures. This winter will see a determined effort to insult and degrade us by such non-intermarriage laws. We must kill them, not because we are anxious to marry white men’s sisters, but because we are determined that white men shall let our sisters alone.⁹³

This conservative line of reasoning enabled the NAACP to protect the right to intermarriage without explicitly threatening notions of the “sanctity” of white women. Instead of confronting the issue directly, the organization portrayed itself as defending

⁹¹ “Along the Color Line,” *The Crisis*, February 1913, 169.

⁹² W.E.B. Du Bois, “Intermarriage,” *The Crisis*, February 1913, 180.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

the institution of marriage “to protect civilized morality.” Pascoe argues that NAACP lobbyists “positioned themselves as protectors of Black women, proponents of in-group marriage, and opponents of illicit interracial sex.”⁹⁴ They thus crafted an argument that circumvented the charged discourse of biological racial inferiority by seeking to “uphold conventional notions of sex and gender.”⁹⁵

The efforts of the NAACP to fight miscegenation laws in northern states were successful for the time being. However, new laws were routinely proposed in the years to follow, and the organization’s strategy had to evolve accordingly as the tone of racial discourse changed over time. The NAACP’s battle against anti-intermarriage laws came largely as a direct consequence of both the career and extracurricular affairs of Jack Johnson. When it became clear that no white man could beat him in the ring, the white establishment turned to the convenient issue of interracial sex in order to remove Johnson from the picture. These measures proved successful, as Johnson remained in exile from the United States for seven years after his Mann Act conviction. The result of the Cameron affair and the proposed Roddenberry amendment banning interracial marriage was the adoption of miscegenation laws in half of the twenty states where such laws did not previously exist.

Conclusion

An overconfident, undertrained Jack Johnson defended his title against white challenger Jess Willard on April 5, 1915 to white challenger Jess Willard. The fight was held in Havana, Cuba, despite the outcry of American expatriates there, due to Johnson’s fugitive status in the United States. Willard was a strong fighter, and while Johnson got

⁹⁴ Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 179.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

the better of the fight for the first twenty rounds, he grew tired and succumbed to a somewhat curious knockout in round twenty-six. The white press expressed joy over Willard's victory and proclaimed that there would never again be a black heavyweight champion. Willard was later rechristened "The Great White Hope," having succeeded where the great James J. Jeffries failed.⁹⁶ Fresh off his triumph, Willard declared that he would not face another black opponent, blaming black-white confrontations in the boxing ring for racial tension outside the ring. In essence, Jack Johnson was blamed for the white racial violence that erupted following his victory over Jim Jeffries.

Willard reminded his supporters of the shameful outrage that followed Jack Johnson's championship victory: "Who doesn't remember all the sickening 'white hope' business? And just as ignorant white men thought their race disgraced, so did a lot of ignorant colored men think that their race had been proved the better by Johnson's victory."⁹⁷ Such a statement allowed white boxers like Willard to avoid black boxers, and at the same time to pose as responsible citizens concerned about issues of public order, and even racial reconciliation. Willard revealed that white fighters had a great deal to lose by falling to a black opponent. White boxers like Willard remembered the tremendous pressure heaped upon the broad shoulders of Jim Jeffries, who was called upon to save the honor of the white race and reaffirm white supremacy. As black pugilists were effectively barred from challenging for the heavyweight title, black athletes were also barred from competing in other major sports leagues.

⁹⁶ "Great White Hope Jess Willard Succumbs," *Ocala Star-Banner*, December 16, 1968. Accessed January 30, 2012. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=19681216&id=xeEpAAAAIBAJ&sjid=TgUEAAAAIBAJ&pg=4001,4475999>

⁹⁷ Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness*, 381.

In 1915, the same year Johnson lost the title to Willard, the D.W. Griffith Film “The Birth of a Nation” was released. The film, based on the Dixon novel *The Clansman*, “celebrated the redemption of the old South from the alleged ravages of political domination by blacks and Northern carpetbaggers during Reconstruction.”⁹⁸ The interpretation of Southern history offered by the film, with whites refused the vote by an army of blacks and white women terrorized by bestial, infantile “Sambo”-types, offered a look into the racial and masculine anxieties of white men in the Progressive Era. The NAACP attempted to block the distribution of the film, ironically invoking the same efforts to censor films of Johnson’s victory over Jim Jeffries.

These same fears were evoked by the reign of Johnson, who not only was aware of white male anxiety, but played upon it to bolster his image as the “bad nigger.” He slept with both white and black women, but married only white women. Gilmore argues, “In his world of sportsmen, booze, broads, diamonds and defiance, the white woman was the supreme status symbol.”⁹⁹ His taunting and toying with white opponents, argues scholar William Pinar, “communicated a black man’s right to dominate white men sexually.” With effeminized whites desperately clinging to their manhood, black men like Johnson were imagined as “superstud rapists intent on savaging white women that were in fact stand-ins for white men.”¹⁰⁰ With the color line reestablished in boxing, whites would no longer have to fear symbolic domination and feminization by another muscular, powerful black heavyweight champion.

⁹⁸ Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century*, 80.

⁹⁹ Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!*, 153.

¹⁰⁰ William Pinar, *The Gender of Racial Politics and Violence in America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 410-411.

Now in exile, Johnson moved to Spain in 1916, where he tried his hand at bullfighting. After a series of near-fatal accidents, he relocated to Mexico, where he fought several bouts. In 1920, Johnson chose to turn himself in to federal officials. He served one year in Leavenworth federal penitentiary, and upon his release he returned to the boxing ring, continuing to fight exhibition bouts until 1945, by which time he was sixty-eight years old. Johnson died on June 10, 1946, after a serious automobile accident. His lasting legacy was long since cemented, as black heavyweight prizefighters through the 1920s and into the early 1930s were systematically denied any opportunity to fight for the heavyweight title.

Chapter 2: Joe Louis, Race Icon to National Hero

“Two hours after the fight the area between South Parkway and Prairie Avenue on 47th Street was jammed with no less than twenty-five thousand Negroes, joy-mad and moving to they didn’t know where. Claspings hands, they formed long writhing snake-lines and wove in and out of traffic. They seeped out of doorways, oozed from alleys, trickled out of tenements, and flowed down the street: a fluid mass of joy. White storekeepers hastily closed their doors against the tidal wave and stood peeping through plate glass with blanched faces.”

-African-American author Richard Wright, after Joe Louis defeated Max Baer

“I shall never forget the crowd that night which saw fit to give Schmeling, a Nazi, a greater hand than it did an American-born world champion.”

-Columnist Fay Young, after the second Louis-Schmeling bout

A crowd of 80,000 spectators packed New York’s Yankee Stadium to witness a bout between Joe Louis, the first black heavyweight champion since Jack Johnson, and Max Schmeling for the world title on June 22, 1938. The fight had been hailed not merely as a contest between two of the best heavyweights of the era, but as a confrontation between the United States and Germany, democracy and fascism. Louis had compiled an exemplary professional record and become a prominent symbol of black masculinity before facing Schmeling in 1938. Moreover, Louis was the hope of many in the democratic world to beat back the Nazi regime and its doctrine of Aryan superiority. Schmeling entered the contest as “a symbol of a political philosophy,” in the words of historian Heywood Broun, one “expected to dramatize the new German anthropological

theories and demonstrate Nordic superiority.”¹⁰¹ The drama surrounding the symbolic importance of both fighters was unmatched in any other sporting event to date.

In 2005, decades after the 1938 Louis-Schmeling bout, sportswriter Richard O’Brien characterized the event as “a stand-in for the looming world war.”¹⁰² Americans both black and white united in support of Joe Louis, directly contradicting the hostility of the white community against black prizefighters that went back to Jack Johnson’s era and long before.¹⁰³ Among Louis’ supporters were blacks eager to see “Joltin’ Joe” best any of his opponents, especially white ones. Louis also enjoyed the support of whites anxious over the rise of Nazi fascism, and the stern challenge it posed to American ideas of freedom and democracy. As Jaher argues, it would take “the adjustment of traditional prejudices in an era of limited but expanding tolerance” and the threat of a world war for white Americans to rally around a black heavyweight champion, thus clearing the way for the many black heavyweight champions to follow after Joe Louis.¹⁰⁴

But before Louis could stand in for the democratic world in a symbolic representation of a looming world conflict, he first had to overcome the color line in boxing, which was reestablished and upheld after the defeat of Jack Johnson by Jess Willard in 1915, as well as the overall invisibility of black people in American public life. The narrative of Joe Louis, argues historian Thomas R. Hietala, “exemplified the fulfillment of human potential over social proscription” in the eyes of idealists. Yet, he notes, it must be acknowledged:

¹⁰¹ Lewis A. Erenberg, *Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁰² Richard O’Brien, “Two For The Ages,” *Sports Illustrated*, September 19, 2005. Accessed April 18, 2012. <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1108765/2/index.htm>

¹⁰³ Erenberg, *Greatest Fight of Our Generation*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Jaher, “White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali,” 181.

However satisfying the epic of Joe Louis, his fame and fortune were an anomaly among his people. In hailing his accomplishments, white writers often overlooked or underestimated the barriers to black progress both in and beyond the world of sports. More attuned to their communities, black journalists also praised Louis but reminded white Americans that his experience was the rare exception and not the general rule.¹⁰⁵

Louis had rare talent in his favor, but had many obstacles to overcome on the way to becoming a champion, not the least of which was navigating both the invisibility of blacks in American life as well as the haunting, sexualized legacy of Jack Johnson.

In his work, *Ringside: A Treasury of Boxing Reportage*, Budd Schulberg argued in that “Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* was an apt title for the entire black race in America in the 1930s. In the eyes of white people, it simply did not exist.”¹⁰⁶ The color line in boxing and other major professional sports served to maintain this condition of black invisibility. Jack Johnson had been the most talked-about man in America during the tumultuous period between his title victory over Jeffries and his prosecution under the Mann Act. African-American masculine power was on full display in the muscular presence of Johnson, and white America was made deeply uncomfortable. The color line in boxing, reestablished and reinforced in boxing following Willard’s victory, again relegated African-Americans to the background of American life.

Willard held true to his word, facing no other black opponents over the course of his four-year title reign. Including Willard, the next eight heavyweight titlists after Johnson were, without exception, white. The white race claimed ownership of the heavyweight crown, uninterrupted, for twenty-two years. The names of several great champions adorn this list, including those of Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney, and Max

¹⁰⁵ Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 150-51.

¹⁰⁶ Budd Schulberg, *Ringside: A Treasury of Boxing Reportage* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 50.

Schmeling. The absence of African-American heavyweights from title consideration should not, however, be attributed to any lack of capable black challengers. Fighters such as George Godfrey and Harry Wills were more than worthy to stand toe-to-toe with any of the white champions of the post-Johnson era. Wills bore the honor of having destroyed Argentinian heavyweight Luis Firpo, who had taken Jack Dempsey to the limit in their famed 1923 bout, regarded as one of the greatest matches of all time.¹⁰⁷ Though Wills had earned the status of No. 1 contender from the New York State Athletic Commission and was slated to meet Dempsey, the champion instead fought white Gene Tunney in Philadelphia.

Black contenders were simply excluded from title contests, regardless of their ability, because the sport of boxing could not abide another Jack Johnson and the anxiety and violence which it was claimed would follow the success of another black heavyweight champion. Throughout the history of professional boxing, blacks were never expressly forbidden by the rules of the sport nor by its sanctioning bodies from fighting for the heavyweight title. Rather, the color line was enforced by unwritten conventions that all but forbade white champions from fighting black challengers. When Jack Dempsey defeated Jess Willard for the title in 1919, Dempsey asserted his refusal to accept any challenges from black contenders. For this, his public appeal amongst the white mainstream was greatly enhanced. The long reign of Dempsey signaled the end of the “black menace” in boxing, which allowed for the passing of legislation which legalized boxing in America once and for all.¹⁰⁸ The color line in boxing was a reflection

¹⁰⁷ Schulberg, *Ringside*, 52.

¹⁰⁸ Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 34.

of the racism that continued to pervade boxing as well as American life in the 1910s and 1920s.

Black athletes received little to no opportunity at the collegiate level and were barred outright from participating in mainstream professional leagues. Title-worthy black boxers such as Henry Wills were routinely denied opportunities to fight for the heavyweight championship. In addition, the mainstream press would only cover stories involving African-Americans when a scandal was afoot, as with Jack Johnson.¹⁰⁹ Louis needed to overcome all these obstacles in order to receive a chance at the heavyweight championship. How would he separate himself from the memory of Jack Johnson and the anxieties of white Americans over the rise of another dominant, hyper-masculine black heavyweight king?

Joe Louis knew his fair share about being invisible. He was born May 13, 1914 in Lafayette, Alabama, where he lived until 1926, when his family relocated to Detroit. Louis and his family struggled to get by in a hardscrabble urban neighborhood. He was a child of the Great Migration, in which over a million black Southerners moved to the industrialized North beginning at the turn of the century and especially after 1910. The migration, argues historian Cedric J. Robinson, started as a response to white suppression of African-Americans through segregation, violence, political corruption and Jim Crow. By migrating, blacks renounced “semi-slavery as the nation’s cheapest labor” and the oppression of a segregated society.¹¹⁰ The movement grew in a period of drought and cotton crop ruination brought about by the boll weevil in 1915 and 1916. In the North, blacks established a permanent foothold in the industrial workforce, but were mostly

¹⁰⁹ Gena Caponi-Tabery, *Jump For Joy: Jazz, Basketball & Black Culture in 1930s America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 2008), 117.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 194-95.

given the worst jobs available. Historian Stephen Tuck notes that while “the number of black iron and steelworkers jumped 18,220 in 1910 to 52,956 in 1930 . . . the percentage stuck as unskilled laborers only dropped from 73.6 to 73.5 percent.”¹¹¹

A lackluster student, Louis was unable to pass the sixth grade and needed to be placed in a vocational school where he took up carpentry. Like Jack Johnson before him, Louis lacked for opportunities to make a viable living, this time in the urban sprawl of industrial Detroit. Boxing eventually provided Louis with a way out, but while training and fighting amateur bouts as a youth, Louis worked briefly at Ford’s River Rouge plant. In these bleak surroundings, he and his family held higher aspirations, as did many African-American families who moved to the North seeking freedom, only to find their dreams deferred.

During Louis’ childhood, the politics of black advancement had seen several important developments. Among the most important was the rise of Pan-Africanism, an international movement to unite people of African descent which took center stage in the United States in the 1920s under United Negro Improvement Association leader Marcus Garvey. Garvey sought to improve the lives of black people throughout the Atlantic world by amassing the support of a unified black community. On August 20, 1920, a parade through the streets of New York opened the UNIA’s First International Convention of Negroes. The men who marched in the parade wore dress uniforms, while Garvey himself was clad in particularly extravagant military dress.¹¹² The parade was a demonstration of black strength in numbers, and Garvey’s choice of military regalia was a symbolic assertion of masculine power.

¹¹¹ Stephen Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle From Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 168.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 159.

The UNIA envisioned the organization of blacks all over the world uniting to create a new nation for those of African descent. Differing from other organizations looking to advance the cause of black freedom in the United States, the UNIA sought to bring together Africans with peoples dispersed throughout the Atlantic world in the African diaspora. Historian Theodore Vincent argues:

The UNIA's official demands, set down in a Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World, included the right to vote, a fair share of political patronage, representation on juries and on the judge's bench, and full freedom of press, speech, and assembly for all. The UNIA sought these basic freedoms primarily to create and strengthen a separate black world, while groups like the NAACP would utilize these freedoms primarily to create an integrated world. For Garveyites, there was the fraternal camaraderie of all the black people of the world. . . . Their affairs were designed to build a pride and confidence in blackness.¹¹³

Cedric Robinson identifies the UNIA as “the most formidable movement in the history of American Blacks” between 1918 and 1923, but it is especially notable for the international character of its politics. Garveyism was a new and appealing movement, as attested to by Garvey's extreme popularity amongst African-Americans.¹¹⁴

Garvey's plan was to culminate in the establishment of the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation, an international fleet of ocean liners which would link Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. Tuck illustrates the significance of such an endeavor: “In an age when large ships were symbols of national power, this was black business laden with meaning—as striking for its time as a space rocket named after Malcolm X

¹¹³ Theodore Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1972), 19. Cited in Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 215.

¹¹⁴ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 214.

would have been in the 1970s.”¹¹⁵ Garvey’s business idea had its share of detractors within the black community. The *Chicago Defender* did not believe that Garvey’s “scheme . . . to be either a sane or a practicable one,” but in a 1919 editorial the paper acknowledged the need to publicize Garvey’s efforts in order to keep its readership fully informed.¹¹⁶ Garvey captured the attention of many blacks through pageantry and big ideas such as the Black Star Line, thus giving himself a stage upon which to declare his anti-imperialist politics.

In 1920s Harlem, a new cultural awakening took hold through poetry, the sounds of jazz and blues music, and literature. This mostly literary movement, the Harlem Renaissance, was seen by its sponsors as vital to the black equality struggle. James Weldon Johnson, an African-American author and early civil rights activist, explained, “No people that has produced great literature . . . has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.”¹¹⁷ In Harlem, talented African-Americans would prove their worth as men of words in service of the larger struggle for freedom and equality. Author Jonathan Gill described the movement as “a joyful reinvestment in an ancient, African inheritance.” This cultural revitalization went hand in hand with the new black international politics of Garvey.

This was the era of the “New Negro,” a term defined by historian Theresa E. Runstedtler as “a progressive, politically savvy African American.”¹¹⁸ The term “New

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹⁶ “Weekly Comment,” *Chicago Defender*, September 27, 1919. Accessed April 18, 2012. https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs104v/201204181945/48585/3748/out.pdf

¹¹⁷ James Weldon Johnson, *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson*, ed. Sondra K. Wilson, vol. 2 (New York, 1995), 59. Cited in Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be*, 172.

¹¹⁸ Theresa E. Runstedtler, “In Sports the Best Man Wins: How Joe Louis Whipped Jim Crow,” in *In the Game: Race, Identity, and Sports in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Amy Bass (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 49.

Negro” had previously been applied to the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, but perhaps found its most popular manifestation in the form of Garvey and his overtly masculine assertions of black power. Though the Black Star Line failed due to financial mismanagement, and Garvey was deported after being convicted of mail fraud, the international character of black politics and Pan-Africanism continued to endure as his supporters in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States carried on his visions through the 1930s. As Martin Luther King remarked in 1965, long after Garvey’s death in 1940, Garvey “was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel he is somebody.”¹¹⁹

The young Joe Louis struggled to achieve his own sense of destiny in Detroit during the Great Depression. His mother dreamed that Joe would someday “be something—anything besides hauling ice and coal and making cabinets.”¹²⁰ Louis left the River Rouge plant in January of 1933 to pursue boxing as a full-time occupation. He was a rising star as an amateur, fighting his way to an impressive record and catching the attention of influential observers. John Roxborough, a local numbers runner, convinced Louis to turn professional after the young light-heavyweight won the Detroit Golden Gloves tournament in 1934. He was only twenty years old.

Louis left Detroit to begin training as a full-time professional in Chicago, where he had the backing of Roxborough and Julian Black, a Chicago numbers boss. In Chicago, Louis also met his new trainer, an embittered black ex-pugilist named Jack Blackburn. Blackburn initially had no interest in training Louis to be a heavyweight contender, a position influenced by Blackburn’s own experience as a fighter in the post-

¹¹⁹ Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be*, 164.

¹²⁰ Joe Louis with Edna and Art Rust, Jr., *Joe Louis: My Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 19.

Johnson era. Upon being offered the job of training Louis, Blackburn replied to his associates, “I don’t care how good he is. He’s the wrong color. Bring me a white boy so I can make some money.”¹²¹ Julian Black was eventually able to entice Blackburn with enough money to take on the duty of training his new prospect, and Blackburn agreed to train Louis after the rookie fighter promised the grizzled old pro that “there would be no time wasted.”¹²²

By the time he faced well-regarded white contender Lee Ramage in Los Angeles on February 22, 1935, Louis had built a very impressive undefeated record, mostly in the Midwest. Louis swiftly defeated Ramage, scoring a knockout in the second round. The *Chicago Defender* opined that the current champion, Max Baer, might not have been able to do better himself. Present at the bout were entertainers Mae West and Bing Crosby, both among Louis’ backers.¹²³ West and Crosby themselves established footholds as entertainers in New York City mixed-race cabarets in the 1920s. Their backgrounds, as well as their support of Louis, indicate at least a somewhat changed racial climate by the 1930s. Indeed, it is unimaginable that a pair of high-profile white entertainers would have turned out in support of Jack Johnson. As a director, West attempted in 1931 to cast an African-American actor in her play, *The Constant Sinner*, to play her lover. The play’s producers rebuffed this idea, as “intimacy between black men and white women had been taboo in New York theater.”¹²⁴ White abhorrence of interracial sexual

¹²¹ Schulberg, *Ringside*, 52.

¹²² Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life*, 36.

¹²³ “Joe Louis K.O.’s Ramage in 2 Rounds,” *Chicago Defender*, March 5, 1935. Accessed February 6, 2012.

http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs103v/201202061958/20791/3570/out.pdf

¹²⁴ Jill Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 136.

relationships, a discomfort exploited by Jack Johnson in the creation of his “bad nigger” persona, continued to pervade the era.

The American music scene in the 1930s did not necessarily possess a radical edge, but swing music, a highly popular genre in the 1930s, showed an interracial character that appealed to those on the left who advocated the breaking of American race boundaries. As Gary Gerstle argues:

The music itself was a blend of African American and European influences, and it brought together a variety of black and European ethnic musicians who learned from each other, imitated and challenged each other, and in the process, created something genuinely American.

Few swing musicians were members of the Communist Party, but many identified themselves as left, and they fought to attain in their bands and in the broader society as well what they had achieved in their music—racial mixing, hybridity, and respect. Benny Goodman began participating in interracial recording sessions in 1933 and formally integrated his band in 1936. Artie Shaw’s orchestra toured with the black singer Billie Holliday for eight months in 1938, and Charlie Barnet’s orchestra did the same with another black singer, Lena Horne, in 1941.¹²⁵

Integrated swing bands, however, were still subject to racial hostility. The interracial character of swing had not erased color barriers in American popular entertainment, and these barriers still barred black heavyweights from contending for the world championship. If Joe Louis was to overcome the color line in boxing, he would need to distance himself as much as possible from the specter of Jack Johnson.

Sheer talent, which Louis undoubtedly possessed, would not be enough alone to elevate him to the heavyweight championship. The prevailing social order of segregation

¹²⁵ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 164.

and inequality continued to subordinate African-Americans, even in the North. In 1925, just months before Louis' family migrated to Detroit, a black doctor named Ossian Sweet was tried for murder after shooting into an angry white mob that had surrounded his home. Sweet's transgression against the racial order was that he had purchased a home in a white neighborhood. Sweet was acquitted, but historian Thomas Sugrue argues that Sweet's ordeal "demonstrated the risk of violating the sanctity of racial boundaries."¹²⁶ The young Joe Louis entered a world of boxing that was a microcosm of the prevailing racial order. Though the turn-of-the-century obsession with manliness amongst whites had diminished by the 1930s, racial etiquette, which Jack Johnson had firmly rejected, needed to be observed by Louis and his backers if the young heavyweight was to have any chance of success.

Louis had achieved at least a measure of legitimacy amongst the white public, largely due to his handlers' careful management of his public persona.

White papers approvingly printed John Roxborough's seven commandments to Louis:

1. He was never to have his picture taken along with a white woman.
2. He was never to go into a nightclub alone.
3. There would be no soft fights.
4. There would be no fixed fights.
5. He was never to gloat over a fallen opponent.
6. He was to keep a "deadpan" in front of the cameras.
7. He was to live and fight clean.

Louis' managers were deeply fearful of any connection drawn between their fighter and the infamous Jack Johnson. "Roxborough instructed him: 'We never, never say anything

¹²⁶ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 24.

bad about an opponent. Before a fight you say how great you think he is; after a fight you say how great you think he was. And for God's sake, after you beat a white opponent, don't smile."¹²⁷ Louis recalled, "They told me I had to live my life both professionally and personally a certain way. They remembered how Jack Johnson had ruined boxing for blacks, especially for black heavyweights."¹²⁸ Johnson, in fact, approached Louis' camp looking to train the young prospect. Not only did Roxborough rebuff Johnson, but he also "told him how he had held up the progress of Negro people for years with his attitude," and that Johnson was a "low-down, no good nigger."¹²⁹

The "seven commandments" dictated to Louis were clearly in response to the legacy of Johnson, who was blamed not only by whites, but even by Louis himself for the reinstatement of the color line in boxing that had excluded black title contenders since 1915. Most notable among the commandments was the first. The public outrage over the Lucille Cameron affair and Johnson's subsequent Mann Act conviction was Johnson's public undoing. Roxborough and Black needed Louis to steer clear of any similarities to Johnson, including the "golden smile" so frequently referred to by white writers. But above all, Louis could not be seen with white women, or he would expose himself, just as Johnson had, to the vengeance of the white political establishment.

Moreover, Louis was expected by some in the black community to redress the damaging legacy left by Johnson. In 1935, the *Pittsburgh Courier* deemed Louis "destined to bridge the gap which Jack Johnson had opened between the races," and described Louis in the early phase of his career as "an unheralded emissary of good-

¹²⁷ Caponi-Tabery, *Jump For Joy*, 116.

¹²⁸ Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life*, 39.

¹²⁹ Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, 154.

will.”¹³⁰ To bridge this gap, Louis needed to balance the threatening hyper-masculinity of Johnson with a large measure of temperance and public “good-will” in order to maintain a positive image. Inviting outrage, as Johnson did, would surely have derailed his career.

Through the very careful construction of a non-provocative public image, Louis was able to showcase his talents at Yankee Stadium in New York on June 25, 1935 against former world champion Primo Carnera of Italy. Carnera was a six-foot-six, 260 pound giant, a dangerous opponent, who worked as a carnival strongman before turning to professional boxing. Despite his enormous size, Carnera was not regarded as a knockout puncher, but rather as a hulking bear of a fighter who would wear smaller opponents down with his superior leverage. The *Chicago Defender* cautioned readers that Carnera would have tricks up his sleeve, as Louis was “getting big enough now to be the target of those who fear him as a threat to [heavyweight champion] Max Baer.”¹³¹ More importantly, however, the Carnera fight marked the first significant occasion of Joe Louis being called into service as an international representative of the black race.

The Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was threatening to invade Ethiopia, one of the few remaining independent countries in Africa. The symbolic importance of Louis besting his Italian foe was acknowledged within the African-American press. Already Louis was described in the *Defender* as “Detroit’s hope to bring back the world’s

¹³⁰ “The Life Story of Joe Louis,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 23, 1935. Accessed April 20, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/pittsburghcourier/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs104v/201204210345/56496/27741/out.pdf

¹³¹ “What ‘Tricks’ Will Carnera Use on Louis?,” *Chicago Defender*, April 20, 1935. Accessed February 6, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs103v/201202062020/34317/3565/out.pdf

heavyweight championship to his race.”¹³² The political significance of the Carnera bout, however, disconcerted the young boxer who was not yet ready to see himself as a symbol of racial aspiration for the black community. As Louis recalls in his autobiography,

Funny thing how a lot of trouble brewing in Europe could affect us . . . The whole world was looking. Lots of black groups came up to camp telling me that I represented Ethiopia. They talked to me about Marcus Garvey, who I hadn't even heard of. They told about his plan for black people to go back to Africa. They put a heavy weight on my twenty-year-old shoulders. Now, not only did I have to beat the man, but I had to beat him for a cause.¹³³

The cause was Pan-Africanism, a cause relatively unfamiliar to the young fighter. Louis was being called on to support a movement which was a forerunner to the African independence struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Whether he was comfortable with it or not, Louis became for many black people in the diaspora, and even in Africa itself, the symbolic representation of African independence against the Italian behemoth.

Louis was well aware of the tension building before his bout with Carnera, and the symbolism of the fight against the backdrop of Mussolini's threats to invade Ethiopia. There was talk of canceling the match, as fears escalated of racial conflict and violence in the wake of the bout. To add to this, Professor Rayford W. Logan of Atlanta University, a Pan-African activist, stated his grave concern over the bout. He said, "I am afraid that the defeat of Carnera by Louis will be interpreted as an additional insult to the Italian flag, which will promote Mussolini to start again the recent attempt by Italy to annihilate

¹³² "Following Joe Louis," *Chicago Defender*, June 8, 1935. Accessed February 6, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share3/pqimage/hnirs101v/201202070355/57198/3842/out.pdf

¹³³ Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life*, 58.

Abyssinia.”¹³⁴ The *Defender*, weeks before the fight, reprinted a column titled “Can’t We Keep Bigotry Out of Sports?” by Bill Corum of the *New York Evening Journal*, a white evening paper which boasted the largest circulation of any in the United States. In the column, Corum stated plainly, “If two men, white, brown, black, green, red or yellow, can’t go out and engage in a sporting contest without creating bitterness and hatred, then indeed we have reached a pretty pass in our so-called civilization.”¹³⁵ At least one prominent voice amongst the white mainstream press was calling for civility in the latest reiteration of the race war in the boxing ring, a far cry from the days of Johnson and Jeffries. But the column perhaps unfairly downplayed legitimate African-American outrage over the coming invasion of Ethiopia, which would be settled at least symbolically between the “Man Mountain” and the “Brown Bomber” in advance of any shots fired on the actual battlefield. Clearly there was more at stake than the outcome of a mere prizefight.

The fight itself, before a crowd of sixty thousand at Yankee Stadium, the largest crowd to witness a fight in New York City since 1927, was hardly in doubt from the toll of the opening bell.¹³⁶ Carnera had no punching power for Louis, and the young black heavyweight brushed aside Carnera’s roughhouse tactics. Louis recalls, “I remember in the fifth round we clinched, and I picked him off his feet. That’s when he spoke to me the only time in the fight. He said, ‘Oh . . . oh . . . oh . . .’ His eyes bulged out in

¹³⁴ “Says Louis Has Given Il Duce Excuse For War,” *Chicago Defender*, July 6, 1935. Accessed April 20, 2012.

http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share3/pqimage/hnirs102v/201204210417/29894/6658/out.pdf

¹³⁵ “Daily Scribe Answers Critic on Louis Fight,” *Chicago Defender*, June 1, 1935. Accessed February 6, 2012.

http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share3/pqimage/hnirs101v/201202070426/41242/3837/out.pdf

¹³⁶ Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life*, 59.

surprise. Then he said, ‘I should be doing this to you.’¹³⁷ Louis hammered away at Carnera with his right hand, knowing Carnera had nothing to offer in response. The Italian’s advantage in size was of no concern to Louis, who remarked, “I always did like to fight big guys, anyway. They gave me a bigger target to punch.”¹³⁸ Louis slugged his way to a sixth-round technical knockout of the Italian in the first true test of Louis’ ability to prevail over championship-caliber opposition.

Memories of Jack Johnson’s victory over Jim Jeffries remained fresh on the minds of some observers, who worried that race rioting would inevitably follow a bout with sensitive racial and political implications. Yet, no such violence erupted after the conclusion of the Louis-Carnera match. The *Philadelphia Tribune* commented on the absence of rioting in the wake of the fight, “The race riot was only in the minds of those who do not want colored people to have a chance.”¹³⁹ In stark contrast to coverage of Johnson, white papers such as the *San Francisco Examiner* stressed that Louis posed no threat to whites, even referring to Louis as “the Booker T. Washington of the prize ring.”¹⁴⁰

Many of the sportswriters for white publications accepted Louis as the top heavyweight after his destruction of Primo Carnera. After the fight, the *Utica Post-Dispatch* ran a column restating the observations of several prominent sportswriters from well-known papers, all complimentary of Louis. Ed Frayne of the *New York American* placed Louis in the company of the great white heavyweight champions of the past half-century. He wrote, “Louis is possibly the greatest heavyweight boxing has produced. He

¹³⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹³⁹ Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, 170.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

hits as hard as Dempsey and boxes as well as Corbett and is as fine a ring general as Tunney.”¹⁴¹ Jimmy Powers of the *New York News* echoed this praise, stating, “Louis is the hardest hitter since Dempsey and the best heavyweight I have ever seen.” Jack Johnson had never received such praise from the mainstream press during his career. When he was compared to white fighters, it was always in unflattering terms.

After beating Carnera, the next logical step was a shot at the heavyweight title, for which Louis would have to wait patiently. Though many white sportswriters had accepted Louis, there were still racial barriers to overcome. In an article reprinted in the *Chicago Defender* after the fight, the white columnist Blinkey Horn of the *Nashville Tennessean* made a startling admission. Addressing the likelihood that Joe Louis would not be granted a championship fight because of white anxiety about creating another Jack Johnson, he warned, “The boys (meaning promoters) do not seem to mind a Negro sitting on a throne like Joe Walcott amongst the welters, Tiger Flowers ruling the middles, Joe Gans amongst the lightweights, etc., but they have a boycott against a smoke hued heavyweight being emperor. They had too hard a time getting the title away from Jack Johnson.”¹⁴² Horn went on to allege that Johnson had been coerced into losing the title to Jess Willard by a promise to drop the charges against him under the Mann Act. Horn contended that Johnson’s knockout had been suspicious, and that after being counted out by the referee, Johnson had sprung to his feet. “Few victims do that,” argued Horn.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ “Sports Writers Hail Louis as Next Champ,” *Utica Post-Dispatch*, June 26, 1935. Accessed February 8, 2012.

<http://fultonhistory.com/Newpapers%20Disk2/Utica%20NY%20Daily%20Observer/Utica%20NY%20Observer%201935.pdf/Utica%20NY%20Observer%201935%20-%204132.PDF>

¹⁴² “A Southern Gent Warns Joe Louis,” *Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1935. Accessed February 10, 2012. [https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/745081092.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jul+13%2C+1935&author=BERT+CUMBY&pub=The+Chicago+Defender+\(National+edition\)+\(1921-1967\)&edition=&startpage=14&desc=A+SOUTHERN+GENT+WARNS+JOE+LOUIS](https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/745081092.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jul+13%2C+1935&author=BERT+CUMBY&pub=The+Chicago+Defender+(National+edition)+(1921-1967)&edition=&startpage=14&desc=A+SOUTHERN+GENT+WARNS+JOE+LOUIS)

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

Horn was not the first man to express suspicions about the Willard victory, but his admissions were unusual for a white mainstream sportswriter, particularly a southerner. They indicate a shift in American racial climate from the Johnson era which would prove favorable for Joe Louis.

But white promoters in New York City were still uneasy about the prospects for a Louis title fight against a white champion, and not all writers were able to get past the issue of Louis' race. Caponi-Tabery notes the racist character of the many nicknames bestowed upon Louis by the white press, among them "the Detroit Negro", "chocolate chopper", and "Mike Jacobs's pet pickaninny."¹⁴⁴ Worse yet, Louis' unmatched skill and ferocity were not attributed to his talent or hard work in training, but to the animalistic qualities that white writers believed came naturally to black athletes. Paul Gallico of the *New York Daily News*, a highly respected sportswriter and radio personality, wrote in his column in 1935:

He lives like an animal, fights like an animal, has all the cruelty and ferocity of a wild thing. What else dwells within that marvelous, tawny, destructive body? The cowardice of an animal? The whipped lion flees. The animal law is self-preservation. Is he all instinct, all animal? Or have a hundred million years left a fold upon his brain? I see in this colored man something so cold, so hard, so cruel that I wonder as to his bravery. Courage in the animal is desperation. Courage in the human is something incalculable and divine. It acquits itself over pain and panic.

Observers such as Gallico marginalized Louis' accomplishments, won through discipline and rigorous training. Instead, his record was attributed to "the cruelty and ferocity of a wild thing." Jack Johnson had also been the object of racial stereotyping, but instead of

¹⁴⁴ Caponi-Tabery, *Jump For Joy*, 117.

bestializing Johnson, white writers often referred to the “yellow streak” believed to be prevalent in black prizefighters.

By this time, white sportswriters had begun to acknowledge the reality that black fighters were just as capable as their white counterparts to succeed in the ring. But bigoted writers such as Gallico refused to credit Louis with attributes believed, in the spirit of racial nationalism, to be traits exclusively possessed by the white race. Intelligence, morals and courage were believed to be hallmarks of whiteness, and though Louis displayed all three, he tended not to receive his due from the white press.¹⁴⁵ Louis was never credited with the intelligence necessary for any boxer to rise to the rank of a top contender, or with the smarts that enabled him to defuse the questionable tactics Primo Carnera used to win the world championship years earlier. Louis also went unrecognized for his refusal to resort to dirty tactics. Perhaps most hurtful of all, Louis’ courage and his willingness to stand toe-to-toe with a much larger, stronger opponent, even to the point of manhandling the Italian giant, was reduced to mere animal mechanism. As the overtly racist sportswriter Grantland Rice put it, “The great Negro boxer is rarely a matter of manufacture, like many white boxers. He is born that way.”¹⁴⁶

While the white press was divided between acceptance, and even in a few cases praise, of Louis’ excellence, and stale Darwinian rhetoric which characterized Louis as a mere animal, the black press was unabashed in its support of Louis. The *Pittsburgh Courier* ran the fight as its front-page headline.¹⁴⁷ The *Chicago Defender* underscored the significance of Louis’ victory to the new internationalism of black politics. The paper

¹⁴⁵ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Caponi-Tabery, *Jump For Joy*, 120.

¹⁴⁷ “Joe Louis Wins!,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 29, 1935. Accessed April 23, 2012. https://secure.pqarchiver.com/pittsburghcourier/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs101v/201204231853/32814/10882/out.pdf

published a photo of Louis standing over his beaten foe and a caption reading: “Ethiopia Stretched Forth A Hand And Italy Hit The Canvas.”¹⁴⁸ The response marked the beginning of a crucial chapter in the life and career of Joe Louis as a symbol of black pride and power.

The Carnera fight marked the first definitive instance of Louis as a symbol of the broader politics of black resistance. As Runstedtler explains, “The sport of boxing offered yet another arena in which New Negroes could express their racial militancy, albeit vicariously, through the hard punches and prosperous lifestyle of men like Joe Louis.”¹⁴⁹ The symbolism of Joe Louis had taken on political life after his defeat of Carnera, Mussolini’s darling. In addition, Louis would now be counted on by African-Americans as a role model for black youth, now having given “the masculine New Negro ideal unprecedented, mass appeal.”¹⁵⁰ As the fan mail published in the *Defender* following Louis’ victory over Carnera showed, many African-Americans viewed Louis as an idol, pinning their hopes on the twenty-year old to bring honor to their race. One particularly powerful letter to Louis entreated him to set a proper example to black youth.

Now, Joe, don’t let us down. It’s really pathetic the way we’ve been humiliated and sold out as a race. Somehow, I don’t believe you will do this. And I know you wouldn’t if you could just hear these youngsters bragging about you. We older ones are a bunch of skeptics anyway. If you lost your next fight to a fourth rater, some of us would say to the rest, ‘Well, he never was so hot, if you ask me.’ But the kids wouldn’t say it. No sir! It would be a racial calamity for them. You wouldn’t let them down, will you Joe?¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ “Defender Fight Extra “Scoops” City,” *Chicago Defender*, June 29, 1935. Accessed April 23, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hmirs101v/201204210415/08287/19673/out.pdf

¹⁴⁹ Runstedtler, “In Sports the Best Man Wins: How Joe Louis Whipped Jim Crow,” 49.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ “Fan Mail Piles Up For Joe Louis, Ring Great,” *Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1935. Accessed February 9, 2012.

The letter concludes with a final plea, clearly evoking the painful memory of Jack Johnson's scandalous era: "So whatever temptation comes whether wrapped up in a bottle, or in a skirt, we hope you'll just think of the million little brown and black boys who want to be 'just like Joe Louis.'" After Louis read the letter, he said, "That's good. I like to get letters like that and I'm going to try and keep faith with the kiddies."¹⁵² Such a measured response was typical of the soft-spoken pugilist, but whether he truly realized it or not, the hopes of many within the black community rested upon his muscular yet callow shoulders.

Having inspired scores of African-Americans with his victories, Louis also seemingly elevated the image of blackness in the minds of whites. His carefully crafted public image was on constant display in popular America, as Louis became an advertising pitchman for a variety of consumer products, from hair pomade to castor oil. Never did he shill for whiskey and cigarettes, though the potential income tempted the young pugilist. The ads featuring Louis contrasted with other marketing schemes featuring images of African-Americans, most infamously that of Aunt Jemima, who entreated consumers to "[h]appify your folks today" with a stack of delicious pancakes. Louis instead was well spoken and depicted against objects of affluence. Yet these images did not faithfully reflect the lives of black Americans at this time, whose progress was still slow and rife with barriers and setbacks.¹⁵³

After defeating Carnera, Joe Louis trampled both Paulino Uzcudun and the former titleholder Max Baer, who had earlier suffered an upset loss for the heavyweight

https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs103v/201202090450/24356/754/out.pdf

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, 175.

championship against James “The Cinderella Man” Braddock, an unlikely new champion to be sure. Although Louis had risen to the rank of top contender for the title, the German fighter Max Schmeling had also been agitating for a title chance, and promoters much preferred to deal with Schmeling. But, they would be unable to hold Louis at bay for long, and it was clear that Schmeling would have to defeat Louis to get a title shot against Braddock. Writer Paul Gallico, who had earlier questioned Louis’ courage, warned Schmeling, “To my friend Max Schmeling—stay in Germany. Have no truck with this man. He will do something to you from which you will never fully recover. You haven’t a chance.”¹⁵⁴

No one expected Schmeling, who was regarded as a great fighter but past his prime, to be competitive against Louis. However, he remained quietly confident. After observing the Louis-Uzcudun bout in 1935, during which Louis struck his hapless opponent with so much force he lifted Uzcudun off the canvas, he remarked, “I see something,” to the laughter of the American press. No one knew what he could possibly have seen. Louis had the appearance of flawlessness. Even Adolf Hitler expressed a sense of dismay “that Schmeling was risking Germany’s reputation in a fight against a black man when there was so little chance of victory.”¹⁵⁵ Schmeling calmly and confidently assured Hitler that all would turn out for the best, apparently believing that he had found a weakness in the redoubtable Joe Louis.

The bout was scheduled to take place on June 22, 1936 at Yankee Stadium. No sooner was the fight scheduled than the German press began “a campaign to denigrate Louis. It called for a boycott by Schmeling on the grounds that no self-respecting Aryan

¹⁵⁴ Chris Mead, *Champion—Joe Louis: Black Hero in White America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 86.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

should lower himself by entering the ring with a black man.”¹⁵⁶ As noted by Jeffrey Sammons, both fighters created public uneasiness as likely challengers to Braddock, who was long since over the hill and likely overmatched by either man.¹⁵⁷ While there were questions as to “the public’s readiness for a black champion,” US promoters were also loathe to allow the heavyweight crown to be “held hostage by Adolf Hitler,” who would no doubt use Schmeling’s title as a propaganda tool in his efforts to prove the superiority of the Aryan race, in their view sullyng the title’s legitimacy.¹⁵⁸ However, one of these fighters would meet Braddock for the world championship, and the overwhelming favorite was Louis. Sports columnist Al Monroe of the *Chicago Defender* warned Schmeling of his impending demise: “You may see the third round, Max, then again you may not, but, Max, it is safe to warn you that the bell will never ring to start you out of your corner for the fourth round.”¹⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the black press viewed Louis as a sure bet against Schmeling, and the *Amsterdam News* ran a cartoon humorously depicting men jumping off a pier to their doom in the event of a Schmeling victory.¹⁶⁰

When Max Schemeling and Joe Louis met, the weakness Schmeling had observed in Louis’ previous bouts proved decisive. Possibly overconfident and lulled by his enthusiastic public support, Louis trained laxly for the fight, choosing to dedicate more time to his golf game than preparing for the savvy German. It showed in the fight. Louis led with his left jab, as usual, but continually dropped his left hand after throwing the jab,

¹⁵⁶ Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 107.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ “Al Monroe Has Plenty of Advice for Max,” *Chicago Defender*, June 6, 1936. Accessed February 10, 2012.

https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs104v/201202110408/43278/10185/out.pdf

¹⁶⁰ David Margolick, *Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink* (Westminster: Knopf Publishing Group, 2005), 145.

leaving an opening for Schmeling to counter with his right. After absorbing several hard right-hand counterpunches from Schmeling over the course of the fight, Louis was knocked out in the twelfth round. As Sammons put it, the mainstream press “turned on him like a lover scorned, questioning his will, his intelligence, and his ability; some suggested that he was no more than a media creation, having built his reputation on has-beens.”¹⁶¹ Some writers even celebrated Schmeling’s triumph as a victory for white supremacy. The Southern writer William McG. Keefe declared that the “reign of terror in heavyweight boxing was ended by Schmeling. The big bad wolf had been chased from the door. It took [Schmeling] to prove that the black terror is just another fragile human being.”¹⁶² Having lost his previous air of invincibility, Louis was swiftly abandoned by most white northern writers who washed their hands of the “Brown Bomber,” and even browbeat him in racist fashion for his failings. The loss to Schmeling, in the eyes of many whites, reduced Louis to the ranks of so many “race fighters” deemed unable to compete with white heavyweights at the upper crust of the profession.

Within the black community, few could believe that Louis had been defeated and many struggled to find an explanation. The Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey “blamed Louis’ selfishness and narrow-mindedness: while Schmeling felt responsible for all of Germany, to Louis it was all about himself and how much money he would make.”¹⁶³ Garvey’s statement captured the weight of racial responsibility Louis carried on his shoulders every time he stood in the ring, especially against white opponents. “We wish Joe well,” stated Garvey, “but we hope he has learnt a lesson from the fight, that when a white man enters the ring in a premium bout with a black man, he realizes that he

¹⁶¹ Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, 108.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Margolick, *Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling and a World on the Brink*, 190.

has in his hands the destiny of the white race.”¹⁶⁴ In Garvey’s view, Louis had failed to recognize this fact. Consequently, many African-Americans felt let down by Louis, who did not yet possess the maturity to truly understand what he was fighting for: black pride and the political aspirations of the black community. His chance to exorcise the ghost of Jack Johnson appeared to have fallen by the wayside.

The stage was now set for Schmeling to receive his title opportunity against Jim Braddock, and the Nazi regime worked feverishly to stage the fight before a German audience in Berlin. Hitler knew as well as anyone that Braddock stood little chance against Schmeling. But Braddock’s manager, Joe Gould, had no intention of letting the heavyweight crown go to Nazi Germany.¹⁶⁵¹⁶⁶ Gould instead made a deal with Joe Louis’ promoter, Mike Jacobs, and Louis was slated to meet Jim Braddock for the heavyweight championship on June 22, 1937. It would be the first time a black heavyweight had faced a white champion since Jack Johnson fought Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia in 1908. Schmeling had positioned himself as the top contender for Braddock’s title by defeating Louis, yet Louis received the first shot at the overmatched champion. Despite the efforts of so many white Americans to bar African-American heavyweights from contending for the world title, offering a title chance to the black contender seemed preferable to seeing the heavyweight crown fall into the grip of the Nazi regime. The color line in heavyweight boxing had finally fallen because of the threat posed by the Aryan supremacy of the Third Reich.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Schulberg, *Ringside*, 58.

¹⁶⁶ In telephone negotiations with Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, Goebbels agreed to all the terms set by Gould except one: “I want you to let all the Jews out of the concentration camps.” Without saying a word, Goebbels hung up.

For African-Americans, the Louis-Braddock bout was a momentous occasion. Black America had waited over two decades for another African-American contender to receive an opportunity to win the title that had been held exclusively by whites since Jess Willard defeated Jack Johnson in 1915. In his autobiography, Louis recalls the throngs of poor blacks who gathered to witness Louis' chance at glory:

Half of them must have been on welfare, but Lord knows what they sacrificed to see me. I had a responsibility to them. Later, I heard trains, cars and busloads of black people were coming from all over the country. All the black hotels were filled. Black people were sleeping in hotel lobbies, renting space to sleep over at night clubs and cafes. And there was a fair share of black people at ringside, those who could afford it—the gamblers, the doctors, the lawyers, the gangsters. Most of the black folks, though, were sitting around their radios, making little parties, chipping in on beer or booze, and waiting to cheer for me or cry for me.¹⁶⁷

Louis now realized that more was at stake in this bout than his own professional accomplishments. Scores of African-Americans were counting on him, willing him to win.

Seizing his chance for redemption, Louis destroyed Braddock. Caponi-Tabery notes that the white press “devoted more coverage to Braddock’s courage than to Louis’ skill, but the black press was ecstatic.”¹⁶⁸ Malcolm X wrote in his autobiography of Louis’ championship victory, “[A]ll the Negroes in Lansing, like Negroes everywhere, went wildly happy with the greatest celebration of race pride our generation had ever known. Every Negro boy old enough to walk wanted to be the next Brown Bomber.”¹⁶⁹ After over two decades, the heavyweight color line had finally been broken. Yet the

¹⁶⁷ Louis, *My Life*, 116.

¹⁶⁸ Caponi-Tabery, *Jump For Joy*, 125.

¹⁶⁹ Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 24.

ghost of Jack Johnson had not been fully exorcised. The *Chicago Defender* printed a statement by Louis, who remarked: “I have read several newspaper accounts advancing the report that my winning the world’s championship would involve some Race issues. Well, I am happy to say that my conduct as champion will be the same as my conduct before I was champion.”¹⁷⁰ The new champion understood very well that he was a representative of his race, and his comments show how aware he was that his actions would be closely scrutinized by whites. Joe Louis never stirred up trouble, but his remarks show that Louis’ historic title victory did nothing to change the fact that African-Americans would continue to be held to strict standards of public and private behavior by condescending white Americans.

Louis had overcome long odds to secure the world’s heavyweight championship, but he was not satisfied with this record. When supporters took to calling Louis “Champ” after he defeated Braddock, the new champion declared, “I don’t want nobody to call me champ till I beat that Schmeling’.”¹⁷¹ Louis made several title defenses before he met Max Schmeling in a highly anticipated rematch on June 22, 1938. Between the first Louis-Schmeling bout and the rematch two years later, Nazi Germany had already overrun Czechoslovakia and Austria, and the rest of Europe was under threat. Joe Louis was no longer just the symbolic representation of African-American masculinity, or even of American ideals, but had become a representative of the entire democratic world when he entered the ring to face Schmeling, the Nazis’ prized commodity. For the first time, white and black Americans embraced a cause which united them in support of Louis and

¹⁷⁰ “Louis to Conduct Self as Champion,” *Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1937. Accessed February 13, 2012. [https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/745382442.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jun+26%2C+1937&author=DAVID+W+KELLUM&pub=The+Chicago+Defender+\(National+edition\)+\(1921-1967\)&edition=&startpage=7&desc=Louis+To+Conduct+Self+As+Champion](https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/745382442.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jun+26%2C+1937&author=DAVID+W+KELLUM&pub=The+Chicago+Defender+(National+edition)+(1921-1967)&edition=&startpage=7&desc=Louis+To+Conduct+Self+As+Champion)

¹⁷¹ Schulberg, *Ringside*, 58.

the success of a black heavyweight champion. In a critical development, nationalism had trumped race. In a turn of events never before imaginable, President Franklin D. Roosevelt invited Louis to visit him in the Oval Office. Roosevelt felt Louis' brawny arms and said, "Joe, these are the muscles we need to beat Germany."¹⁷²

However, as Fay Young of the *Chicago Defender* noted incredulously, when the fight took place Yankee Stadium audience was packed with Schmeling supporters. He wrote, "I shall never forget the crowd that night which saw fit to give Schmeling, a Nazi, a greater hand than it did an American-born world champion."¹⁷³ Unbelievably, Schmeling had received a strong ovation from many in the crowd for the fight, despite the symbolic identification of Schmeling as an agent of Nazism. Young recalls a roar from the crowd when Schmeling let loose a strike which glanced off of Louis' shoulder, one of only two punches thrown by the German in the entire bout. "These folks at once sensed another victory—not for the Germans but for the white race. Even Jews who sat around me cheered for Schmeling."¹⁷⁴ It seemed that even the specter of Hitler and Nazism paled in comparison to the enduring scourge of American racism. Though it would be satisfying to imagine the second Louis-Schmeling fight as a moment for Americans of all races to unite against the threat of fascism and the barbarism of the National Socialist regime, such accounts of the fight audience's behavior paint a far less hopeful picture.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ "The Stuff Is Here," *Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1938. Accessed February 13, 2012. [http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/761405982.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jul+2%2C+1938&author=FAY+YOUNG&pub=The+Chicago+Defender+\(National+edition\)+\(1921-1967\)&edition=&startpage=9&desc=The+STUFF+IS+HERE+..](http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/761405982.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jul+2%2C+1938&author=FAY+YOUNG&pub=The+Chicago+Defender+(National+edition)+(1921-1967)&edition=&startpage=9&desc=The+STUFF+IS+HERE+..)

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

The fight was grossly uncompetitive, a brutal knockout for Louis after just two minutes of the first round. Schmeling vehemently protested after the bout that he was fouled with an illegal kidney punch, which paralyzed his body and left him completely exposed to the hard punches which felled him for good. The Louis victory was greeted by uncontained jubilation in Harlem, as revelers took to the streets gathering whatever they could to make noise in celebration of the champion's triumph. "Private cars cruised, streaming banners. THE BLACK RACE IS SUPREME TONIGHT, one said."¹⁷⁵ One African-American man in Harlem recalled a moment of serenity, a temporary break in race tensions, after hearing news of Louis' victory. "I remember for a while I wasn't mad at any white person," he said.¹⁷⁶ Black author Richard Wright described Louis as "the concentrated essence of black triumph over white, long-nourished hate vicariously gratified."¹⁷⁷ His status as a race icon was forever cemented with a hard right hand flush to the jaw of his Nordic adversary.

Conclusion

Having defeated Max Schmeling in their second bout, Joe Louis had already been showcased as an emblem of the democratic world in the face of Hitler and fascism. In 1942, Louis volunteered for the U.S. Army following America's entrance into the Second World War. He was offered a commission, but coveted the opportunity to share company with the everyman soldier, and joined the enlisted ranks. After his induction into the Army, Louis was requested by the Navy Relief Society to give a short speech to the troops. Overwhelmed by stage fright, Louis nevertheless was able to collect himself and make a statement which no doubt delighted the military's top brass and was used to

¹⁷⁵ Margolick, *Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling and a World on the Brink*, 314.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Hietala, *The Fight of the Century*, 185.

inspire the war effort both at home and abroad. “I’m only doing what any red blood American would do. We gonna do our part, and we will win, because we are on God’s side,” he said.¹⁷⁸ This quote, along with Louis’ photograph and namesake, was emblazoned on posters encouraging Americans to do their part to support the military’s efforts against the Axis Powers. Louis, the first black heavyweight champion of the world since Jack Johnson, had become a symbol of 1940s American patriotism.

Images of Louis extolling the war effort, just like images of Louis shilling hair pomade in the ‘30s, were happily disseminated by whites eager to promote their own causes and products but averse to promoting black racial advancement in any meaningful way. Notions of “value and entitlement,” according to Holt, are colonized by racism, allowing black advancement to be “linked to big government.” Louis was co-opted by white Americans in “a pattern of representation in which a racial image is appropriated for nonracial (or shall I say supraracial) ends.”¹⁷⁹ The same could easily be said for another legendary African-American athlete, Jesse Owens, the hero of the 1936 Berlin Olympics who rebuked Hitler’s claims of Aryan supremacy by winning four gold medals in track and field. Owens, like Louis, was appropriated as a stand-in for America and democracy as a whole on the eve of Germany’s advance. Yet Owens was neither invited to the White House nor recognized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and his status as an amateur athlete was stripped away after Owens attempted to capitalize on commercial offers after returning to America, ending his career. Holt argues that “African-American sports and cultural figures constitute a kind of synecdoche for America.”¹⁸⁰ Perhaps we may take this argument one step further to assert that these figures do constitute this kind

¹⁷⁸ Louis, *Joe Louis: My Life*, 174.

¹⁷⁹ Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century*, 75.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

of synecdoche, but only insofar as they are useful for consumption on the part of the ruling white political, cultural and economic establishment.

Throughout the course of World War II, Louis continued to make appearances and fight in exhibition bouts for USO shows. After the war concluded, Louis fought mostly exhibition matches until retiring in 1949 as an undefeated heavyweight champion. It would have been an uplifting story befitting an undeniably great champion, perhaps the greatest of all time in boxing, if the story of Joe Louis as a prizefighter had ended there. Sadly, the Brown Bomber's career did not end on a triumphant note. Louis was forced back into the ring, seeking any paycheck available in order to pay back hundreds of thousands of dollars to the IRS in back taxes. Louis, like so many other athletes all the way to the present day, encountered drastic financial difficulties.

The thanks he received from the United States government, for which Louis gave prime years of his career in order to "do his part," was a bill for back taxes that would drive the former champion into financial ruin. In addition to being forced to fight younger, better opponents such as Rocky Marciano, who dealt Louis a terrible beating, Louis also finally resorted to lending his namesake and face to advertisements for liquor and cigarettes. He turned to participating in farcical professional wrestling matches in the 1960s and spent his final years working as a greeter, in essence a circus attraction, at the Caesars Palace casino in Las Vegas.¹⁸¹¹⁸² His once-proud image, that which had so recently been emblematic of America's crusade against Nazism, had been reduced to the

¹⁸¹ Dave Meltzer, "Boxers in wrestling a rich tradition," Yahoo! Sports. Accessed February 20, 2012, <http://sports.yahoo.com/box/news?slug=dm-boxers032608>.

¹⁸² Greg Beacham, "Joe Louis' son grateful for boxer father's enduring memory," *USA Today*, February 22, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2012, http://www.usatoday.com/sports/boxing/2008-02-22-3830455257_x.htm

promotion of vices. Bruised and tarnished, Louis' presence faded from significance in American life.

Louis had been, in essence, a microcosm of his era. As Sammons argues, "The no-win dilemma of cooperation or noncooperation that followed Louis affected every black in the country. He showed that regardless of the degree of whitewash, total assimilation for blacks was impossible."¹⁸³ He was accepted as a legitimate contender for the heavyweight title, if reluctantly, largely due to his own acceptance of the condescending standards for black behavior that characterized his heyday. He was a hero to black youth and almost universally embraced by the black press, but only gained such acceptance from white America as long as he could be used as an emblem of a superficially more inclusive American nationalism. Even then, a staggering number of observers favored Max Schmeling in their second confrontation on the eve of Hitler's attempt at world conquest. After he had outlived his usefulness, Louis was so easily forgotten by the very government who had utilized him as a de facto spokesman, so quickly relegated back to invisibility.

¹⁸³ Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, xviii.

Chapter 3: Muhammad Ali, Icon of Black Power

“. . . [T]he Ali legend has become frozen into its most useful form, one that delivers hope and comfort through the ideas of racial reconciliation and universal humanism.”

-Nigerian columnist Salifu Usman

“I was determined to be the one nigger that the white man didn’t get. Go on and join something. If it isn’t the Muslims, at least join the Black Panthers. Join something bad.”

-Muhammad Ali

For one night, the eyes of the world turned to Kinshasa, Zaire, expecting to witness the end of the legendary career of Muhammad Ali. October 30, 1974, according to several prominent observers, including Ali’s friend and verbal sparring partner Howard Cosell, would be the night on which the world said goodbye to the former heavyweight champion of the world. Ali was a 3-1 underdog to his fearsome opponent, titleholder George Foreman, a younger, stronger, and presumably better fighter. Before meeting Ali in Zaire, Foreman had destroyed Joe Frazier, a fighter believed by many to be Ali’s equal. The aging legend was to be outclassed, beaten mercilessly, and cast aside into retirement. The only problem was that no one had told Ali, who strode to the ring with his trademark swagger and braggadocio, nor did anyone tell the crowd of sixty-thousand, nearly all black Africans, who packed the Stade du 20 Mai and chanted, “Ali, bomaye,” Lingala for “Ali, kill him!”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Dave Anderson, “Ali Regains Title, Flooring Foreman,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1974. Accessed May 29, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=FA0D11FF35551A7493C2AA178BD95F408785F9>

In this fight, Ali was motivated just as much by personal dislike for Foreman as he was by the chance to regain the title. He assailed his intimidating black foe as an “Uncle Tom,” accusing Foreman of being a representative of the same white oppressor that had subjugated millions of blacks. Ali used this characterization of Foreman to drum up support from the Zairian people, who not long ago were colonial subjects of Belgium. “I look on this man I’m fighting as a Belgian! He is the oppressor of all black nations. I must defeat him in order for all of us to be free. I look upon him as the power structure in America who holds 40 million black people in subjugation. This is not a boxing match. This is a holy war. War!” cried Ali to a crowd of Zairians and members of the press just days before the fight. “This Foreman represents Christianity, America, the flag. I can’t let him win.”¹⁸⁵ He also looked to punish Foreman for castigating his 1968 Olympic teammates, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, for their infamous demonstration of black resistance and solidarity on the medal podium.

Ali entered the ring in Kinshasa looking to settle these scores with the heavily favored champion. In the opening round, Ali stung Foreman with jabs and right crosses, and then danced away before Foreman could counterattack. But as the fight progressed, Ali’s trademark foot speed and lateral movement all but disappeared. The veteran fighter leaned against the ropes, allowing Foreman to fire away with vicious punches to Ali’s body and head. Ali deftly avoided many of these blows, and though he could not shield himself entirely from the onslaught, he was able to withstand the punishment. Foreman continued to swing wildly, but by the eighth round the young titleholder had fatigued. A tired Foreman was helpless to stop the turning tide, as Ali freed himself from the ropes

¹⁸⁵ Jim Murray, “Going to Market,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1974, Section III, p. 1.

and unleashed a lightning-quick combination that dispatched Foreman. Ali, ever the artist, admired his work from a distance as Foreman stumbled to the canvas. The assembled press watched in disbelief, and the sixty-thousand in attendance erupted in cheering and swarmed the ring, leaving Zairian police to contain this joyous mass of humanity. Ali, whose title was stripped from him in 1967 following his refusal to be inducted into the Vietnam War, finally reclaimed his crown as king of the heavyweights.

Author Norman Mailer, who had come to Zaire to cover the fight, sat on a plane to Dakar on his journey back to New York the day after the event. He was awakened by the voice of the pilot, announcing that “the good people of Dakar are convinced that the Heavyweight Champion is on the plane, and they want to see Muhammad Ali in person so a couple thousand of them are out at the airport now.”¹⁸⁶ Though Ali was, in fact, not on the plane, a mob of thousands of his African fans swarmed the aircraft upon its landing in Dakar, convinced that their idol was onboard. The crowd would not leave, even going so far as to search the plane, only to be convinced, rightly, that Muhammad Ali would never hide from his people in an airplane bathroom.¹⁸⁷

How was it that this American prizefighter, one of otherworldly talent to be sure, was accepted by the people of independent but downtrodden and mismanaged third world country as their symbolic representative? Furthermore, how did Muhammad Ali become such a representative of black radicalism around the world? The answers are not necessarily to be found in an examination of the “real” Muhammad Ali, which has perplexed biographers, historians, and sportswriters alike since his heyday. Instead, we must look to his controversial public image, one that developed following his political

¹⁸⁶ Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 228.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.

and personal transformation from Cassius Clay, a loudmouthed Olympic gold medalist with a histrionic flair, to Muhammad Ali, a radical black nationalist, anti-war totem, symbolic hero of the civil rights movement, and the most recognizable face in the world.

Still just as widely recognized today, Ali currently suffers from Parkinson's disease, which has slowly ravaged his motor capacity, and taken away his legendary spoken voice. As his body deteriorated, his politics softened, as did American perception of his personality and past. His 70th birthday and the star-studded gala celebration in Las Vegas of his life and accomplishments came earlier this year amid heavy publicity. Ali is now viewed as a symbol of charity and love, a far cry from the days in which he was reviled by white America.¹⁸⁸ Yet Salifu Usman, a columnist for the Nigerian publication *Leadership*, highlights a piece of Ali's narrative rarely confronted by the American press, that "Ali's return to glory comes at a price; it is predicated on the whitewashing of his past and the silencing of his voice."¹⁸⁹ The Muhammad Ali of today is a harmless figure whose past has been rendered safe for public consumption, left devoid of his brilliant radicalism. At the height of Ali's militancy, he stood at the leading edge of the ideological struggle between integration and separatism, acquiescence and resistance. Like no athlete before him, Ali seized upon the true significance of the heavyweight championship of the world, the crown of masculinity, for the cause of black empowerment.

Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. was born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky, a segregated Southern city. Just over a month before his birth, Pearl Harbor

¹⁸⁸ "Celebrities join Muhammad Ali for Vegas gala," *USA Today*, February 18, 2012. Accessed March 7, 2012. <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/boxing/story/2012-02-18/muhammad-ali-gala-los-vegas/53147334/1>

¹⁸⁹ Salifu Usman, "Muhammad Ali at 70 – the Life and Times of a Legend," *Leadership*, January 21, 2012. Accessed March 7, 2012. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201201230658.html>

was bombed by Japan, triggering America's entrance into the Second World War. While the United States Army proudly displayed the face and namesake of heavyweight champion Joe Louis in its promotion of the war effort, African-American troops faced terrible discrimination on the ground. Gerstle argues that while white Americans could participate in the "reenactment of the Rough Riders script on a massive scale" in the form of the deployment of the military to Europe and the Pacific, "all branches of the military remained largely segregated," thus nearly eliminating the contributions of blacks and Asians while formerly opposed strains of Euro-Americans could come together as one to repel the Axis Powers.¹⁹⁰ Accounts of the war in film portrayed young American boys as transforming "from civilians into warriors," and learning to disavow "whatever prejudice they may have harbored toward the Jew, the Dago, or the Mick in their bunch."¹⁹¹ A new, racialized vision of American identity would be forged from the war, but blacks and other supposedly lesser races were to be excluded from this newfound harmony.

The black press trumpeted progress in the integration of the war effort, such as the *Chicago Defender's* 1943 piece on the dispatching of an all-black flying unit trained at the Tuskegee Institute to active combat duty.¹⁹² However, the *Defender* prominently noted that this would be a segregated unit operating from a segregated base. There was some reason to be hopeful for more meaningful efforts to integrate the military, as the Army Air Corps announced plans to train white and black bomber crews together, as reported by the *Defender* in September, 1943. But far more often, the news was much more somber. In June of 1943, a disturbance outside a Lancashire, England, pub

¹⁹⁰ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 203-04.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁹² "Jim Crow Airbase for 99th in N. Africa," *Chicago Defender*, June 12, 1943. Accessed May 29, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share3/pqimage/hnirs101v/201205292036/24915/28605/out.pdf

frequented by black servicemen erupted into violence as black soldiers clashed with white MPs, leaving seven injured.¹⁹³

After the conclusion of the war, black veterans found that serving in the war did nothing to erase their status as second-class citizens. In 1947, a mob of angry whites stormed the Fernwood Park Homes project in Chicago, when several black veterans moved in with their families. The resulting melee led to the stoning of policemen sent to protect residents and the beatings of blacks pulled at random into the fracas.¹⁹⁴ In addition, African-Americans in Detroit in the post-war years were “systematically shut out of the private real estate market,” according to Sugrue, and “trapped in the worst housing, in strictly segregated sections of the city.” Sugrue continues, arguing that “[t]he process of housing segregation [in Detroit] set into motion a chain reaction that reinforced patterns of racial inequality.”¹⁹⁵ Whether in the traditionally segregated South or the purportedly more progressive North, African-Americans faced nearly insurmountable barriers to equality in the post-war era.

Among these barriers was the segregation of schools and public facilities, which continued to oppress black Americans. In the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in which the Supreme Court declared segregated public schools to be unconstitutional, white Citizens’ Councils appeared throughout the South to stifle the efforts of integrationists. The racial politics of the councils was, again, highly gendered. They argued, for example, that school integration would inevitably lead to sexual relations between black men and white women. As one councilor put it, “The door to the

¹⁹³ Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 154-55.

¹⁹⁴ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 235.

¹⁹⁵ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 34.

school room is the door to the bedroom.”¹⁹⁶ Echoing these sentiments, President Dwight Eisenhower expressed privately to Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, “These [segregationists] are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negroes.”¹⁹⁷ The unwillingness of the United States government to enforce the *Brown* decision, largely due to the efforts of Citizens’ Councils, ensured that blacks would continue to use segregated facilities, and black youth such as Cassius Clay would attend segregated public schools.

By 1960, these African-American youths engaged in acts of resistance aimed at desegregation that would blossom into the civil rights movement. In February of 1960, four North Carolina A & T freshmen sat at a “whites only” lunch counter in Greensboro and ordered food. They remained there in protest after being refused service. One of the students later recalled, “I probably felt better than I’ve ever felt in my life. I felt as though I had gained my manhood.”¹⁹⁸ These students, along with the many others who participated in sit-ins that followed across the South, not only asserted their right to use of the same facilities as whites, but also broke the pattern of invisibility that had afflicted black Americans for decades. Black youth would no longer settle for a place in the background of American life, hidden from view. They formed protest groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which enjoyed the support of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

¹⁹⁶ Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 41.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹⁸ William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 83.

SNCC strove to break free of gendered racial oppression upheld by Southern whites, primarily by confronting obstacles to the black vote.

In the world of professional sport, the color line was broken in baseball with the major league debut of Jackie Robinson for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Early in his career, Robinson was dogged by crowds of hecklers shouting threats and racial epithets, as well as bigoted opposing players who threw at his head and spiked his legs at every opportunity. Robinson, though deeply disturbed by his constant alienation, tolerated each incident stoically. Author Dave Zirin contends that although “Robinson’s true personality was angry, combative, and confrontational,” his carefully constructed public image as “a quiet, subservient, soft-spoken gentleman” provided what whites considered to be the model for African-American behavior.¹⁹⁹

Robinson had done a great deal to break down color barriers in professional sport, which was widely appreciated among African-Americans. A 1962 retrospective of Robinson’s career printed in the *Chicago Defender* lauded Robinson’s lasting achievements: “. . . [I]n 1946, when [Branch] Rickey signed Robinson, Joe Louis was the only Negro athlete who ranked as a national idol. Today there are many.” Despite all of this, Robinson was cast by black radicals in the 1960s such as Malcolm X as an “establishment hero.” This was largely due to his condemnation of black entertainer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson at a hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee.²⁰⁰ A new, more radical kind of black athlete would follow after Robinson, and parallel the growing self-assertion of black men and women in the civil rights movement.

¹⁹⁹ Dave Zirin, *What’s My Name, Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 45.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

In 1960, a young Cassius Clay won the gold medal in heavyweight boxing at the Rome Olympics, following in the footsteps of Jesse Owens and Floyd Patterson as successful African-American Olympic athletes. Patterson, the former world heavyweight champion, who had recently suffered an upset loss to Swede Ingemar Johansson, was present at the Rome Olympics, and was unceremoniously upstaged by the boisterous youngster, who “paraded around the village with the gold medal draped around his neck” during a “royal reception at which king Clay was holding court,” reported the *Chicago Defender*. In Rome, Clay declared his intent to enter the professional ring immediately after returning to the United States. In a moment of dramatic irony, Clay spoke of meeting Patterson, “I found out one thing—my reach is longer than Patterson’s. I might have to fight him some day and I better know all about him.”²⁰¹

Delighted with his gold medal, the symbol of his accomplishments in representing his country on the world stage, upon returning to America Clay wore it nearly everywhere he went. Clay was to begin his career in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, under the management of a group of local white businessmen who were impressed by his potential and were not yet put off by his rapid-fire rhetoric, which had been mostly playful and good-natured to this point. On his return from Rome, Clay, already fond of rhyme and verse, recited an original poem capturing his pride, patriotism, and braggadocio.

To make America the greatest is my goal
So I beat the Russian and I beat the Pole
And for the USA won the medal of Gold.

²⁰¹ “Olympic Winner Eyes Pro Ring,” *Chicago Defender*, September 7, 1960. Accessed February 17, 2012. [https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/878957022.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Sep+7%2C+1960&author=&pub=Daily+Defender+\(Daily+Edition\)+\(1956-1960\)&edition=&startpage=A23&desc=Olympic+Winner+Eyes+Pro+Ring](https://secure.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/878957022.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Sep+7%2C+1960&author=&pub=Daily+Defender+(Daily+Edition)+(1956-1960)&edition=&startpage=A23&desc=Olympic+Winner+Eyes+Pro+Ring)

The Greeks said, You're better than the Cassius of Old.²⁰²

Though more playful and bold than Joe Louis, Clay seemed to be following the accommodating, acquiescent legacy of Louis in the earliest phases of his career.

Historian Frederic Cople Jaher argues that, at the outset of his career, "Clay was publicly portrayed as warm, patriotic, clean-living, enthusiastic, friendly, articulate, humorous, and obedient to his white managers."²⁰³ Yet Clay was already far more assertive than Louis ever had been publicly, setting the stage for his synergy with black self-assertion in the civil rights movement.

Like the young Louis, Clay also seemed at first to be uninvolved personally in matters of race relations, and this made it easier for Clay to gain the financial and promotional backing of boxing's mostly white power brokers, but these gains came at the price of the usual white condescension. The white mayor of Louisville, Bruce Hoblitzell, gleefully received the triumphant Olympian after the Rome games, stating publicly that "[Clay] acts like you would like a young American to act after receiving so much acclaim and so many honors. If all young people could handle themselves as well as he does, we wouldn't have any juvenile problems. He's a swell kid."²⁰⁴ The mayor's praise of Clay's accomplishments in the ring was accompanied by a backhanded slap at black youth, who were at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the South. Clay would continue to be a "swell kid" in the eyes of the white establishment so long as he continued to behave obediently and avoid stirring up trouble.

²⁰² Dave Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 58.

²⁰³ Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali," 169.

²⁰⁴ Jack Olsen, *Black is Best: The Riddle of Cassius Clay* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 86.

The mayor also approved the message that Clay had given to a Russian reporter in Rome, who had asked about the condition of blacks in America. As Ali regretfully recalled in his later autobiography:

“Why, Cassius stood up tall, ‘Look here, Commie. America is the best country in the world, including yours. I’d rather live here in Louisville than in Africa ‘cause at least I ain’t fightin’ off no snakes and alligators and livin’ in mud huts.’ He sho’ told ‘em!” He put his arms around me. “He’s our own boy, Cassius, our next World Champion. Anything you want in town’s yours. You hear that?”²⁰⁵

An Olympic gold medalist with the potential for greatness in the professional ring, Clay’s support by the white establishment following his triumph in Rome was contingent on his distance from the civil rights movement and his unabashed American patriotism and anti-communism.

Over a decade before Clay’s Olympic triumph, Jackie Robinson had been utilized by the white establishment in a similar manner. Though Robinson tired of being targeted by angry white fans and racist opponents, he was called upon to project the image of a man who “succeeded the right way,” argues Zirin. “The U.S. government, in the early stages of the Cold War, needed such an image to project internationally that the United States was a color-blind society and not, as claimed by the USSR, a bastion of racism.”²⁰⁶ Additionally, segregationist rhetoric in the South was rife with anti-communist sentiment. As historian Steve Estes contends, conflating civil rights with communism allowed Southern segregationists to “defend democracy abroad while denying it at home.”²⁰⁷ His public belittlement as a white puppet by the mayor of Louisville reflected the travails of

²⁰⁵ Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Random House, 1975), 63.

²⁰⁶ Zirin, *What’s My Name, Fool?*, 45.

²⁰⁷ Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 53.

Joe Louis. Clay was the “All-American Boy” only insofar as he was of use in burnishing the image of the American establishment. He later acknowledged the youthful naivety of his statement, recalling in his autobiography, “the instant I made it I felt I had gotten caught up in some big white net.”²⁰⁸

The young Clay, a good-natured, playful yet sometimes annoying braggart, wore his gold medal proudly as a symbol not only of his own triumph but also his accomplishments on behalf of a proud country, not fully acknowledging the grim state of race relations within it. After returning home to Louisville after the Olympics, Clay entered a Louisville restaurant with the gold medal around his neck. He ordered a hamburger and was denied service. “Whatever illusions I’d built up in Rome as the All-American Boy were gone. My Olympic honeymoon was over. I was back in my Old Kentucky Home,” said Ali of the episode.²⁰⁹ Clay, upset at his being denied service to the point of having no words to utter, chose to express his dismay by throwing his prized gold medal into the Ohio River. His embarrassment at the Louisville restaurant was a reverberation of the feelings held by black veterans of World War II who felt that they had earned the right to be treated as equals at home after fighting for their country abroad, only to be reintroduced to the blight of segregation. According to Zirin, this rejection “started the eighteen-year-old on a political journey that would define his era.”²¹⁰

Clay rose quickly through the heavyweight ranks, defeating notable fighters such as former light heavyweight world champion Archie Moore, Doug Jones, and well-regarded British heavyweight Henry Cooper. Clay employed a style reminiscent of Jack

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 69.

²¹⁰ Zirin, *What’s My Name, Fool?*, 58.

Johnson's, emphasizing speed over strength and slick defense over brute force. It was a style truly his own, one denounced by (white) boxing purists as technically unsound. But most of Clay's opponents had been unable to lay a glove on him; his combination of speed and reflexes, unprecedented in a man of his size, seemed nearly impossible to solve. After defeating Cooper, the path was clear for Clay to face Sonny Liston, the current world heavyweight champion.

Liston, a scowling brute of a fighter, entered the contest against Cassius Clay as an overwhelming seven-to-one favorite. The intimidating presence of Liston was augmented by his connections to organized crime; having worked as a leg-breaker for anti-labor organizations, Liston's fight career had been promoted by the Mafia and he was banned from boxing in several states. Liston also possessed a criminal record for such felonies as robbery and assault. He had gained the heavyweight title by destroying then-champion, and white favorite, Floyd Patterson in the first round, beating the hapless champion senseless in the process. Patterson had been "revered" by whites "for his Louis-like humility and gratitude to white America," according to Jaher, who contrasts Liston as the "bad nigger" of the early 1960s.²¹¹

Clay was already being portrayed as an arrogant and uppity young black man, one who caused white discomfort by reflecting the new self-assertiveness and confidence of black youth and their refusal to abide by tired racial etiquette requiring deference to whites. Jaher argues that Clay wore what he terms the "white hat" against Liston as seemingly the lesser of two evils, but it would appear that popular sentiment was largely against the brash young upstart.²¹² Ticket sales for the fight were slow, according to

²¹¹ Frederic Cople Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali," 170.

²¹² Ibid.

Robert Lipsyte of the *New York Times*, as Liston was expected to destroy Clay in timely fashion. Lipsyte also noted that Clay, while seemingly more appealing than Liston to the mainstream audience, did not make a compelling protagonist. “Tomato-red Cadillacs and an occasional ‘I’ll beat him,’ are about all the boxing world can stand from a hero,” while “[e]ndless doggerel and flights of fancy,” as Clay was prone to, were not looked upon so favorably.²¹³ White sportswriters had already bestowed such unflattering nicknames upon Clay as the “Louisville Lip,” reflecting the young fighter’s non-stop boasting as well as the desire of whites to see this uppity braggart whipped, just not by Liston. Between the “bad nigger” and “Mighty Mouth,” white spectators were left without much of a rooting interest.

More ominously for whites, rumors swirled that he was connected to the Nation of Islam (NOI), a militant black separatist group referred to derisively by the white press as the “Black Muslims.” The NOI, led by Elijah Muhammad, offered uplift through self-defense and black nationalism, and was decidedly more radical than other, more integrationist civil rights organizations such as Martin Luther King, Jr.’s SCLC. In truth, Clay had been aware of the NOI as far back as high school, and he had met the fiery black leader and NOI minister Malcolm X in 1962, beginning a close friendship between the two. Clay continued to consult with Malcolm for spiritual guidance in Miami in the days before the fight.²¹⁴

Malcolm X joined the NOI while incarcerated in Massachusetts from 1946 to 1952. His father, Earl Little, had been a Garveyite and a member of the Lansing,

²¹³ Robert Lipsyte, “Liston 7-1 Choice to Beat Clay Tonight and Keep Heavyweight Title,” *New York Times*, February 24, 1964. Accessed February 20, 2012.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F30612FF3A5C147A93C7AB1789D85F408685F9>

²¹⁴ Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 100.

Michigan chapter of the UNIA. The NOI taught a brand of black self-determination based on personal dignity and self-defense. The teachings of Elijah Muhammad, though unorthodox, were centered on his assertion that white men were “devils” created by a mad black scientist.²¹⁵ These ideas appealed to Malcolm, who had confronted the horrors of white supremacy from a young age. In 1931, Earl Little died under mysterious circumstances. Though authorities ruled the death an accident, Malcolm later came to believe that his father had been murdered by whites angry over Earl’s adherence to the black nationalism of the UNIA. As the organization’s most eloquent minister, Malcolm advocated the NOI’s “masculinist liberation theology” and underscored the path to true manhood offered by the NOI’s brand of Islam.²¹⁶

To Malcolm, the Clay-Liston fight had incredible symbolic importance. Malcolm told Clay, “It’s the Cross and the Crescent fighting in a prize ring—for the first time. It’s a modern Crusades—a Christian and a Muslim facing each other with television to beam it off Telstar for the whole world to see what happens! Do you think Allah has brought about all this intending for you to leave the ring as anything but the champion?”²¹⁷ Clay’s friendship with Malcolm marks a critical juncture in the political transformation of the once-patriotic former Olympian turned black radical. This was the first instance in his professional career of Clay approaching a prizefight as an opportunity to further a much wider political agenda, one which was still developing in the mind of the talented youngster, but had clearly taken a radical turn and was destined to shape an entire era of resistance.

²¹⁵ Peniel, Joseph E. *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2010), 36.

²¹⁶ Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 88.

²¹⁷ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 313.

Though unaware of the full extent of the relationship between Cassius Clay and Malcolm X, whites seemed discomfited by rumors of Clay's involvement with the NOI. Lipsyte commented further on the happenings surrounding the Liston bout, which signaled the true beginning of Clay's political consciousness:

The reporters downgraded him, Liston called him a "fag," and the promoters thought so little of the youngster that they threatened to replace him unless he scotched the prefight rumors by publicly renouncing the Muslims.

If anything could strengthen his ties to the Muslims and reinforce their declamations of white perfidy, it was that threat. Malcolm X, Clay's guest in Miami then, apparently counseled Clay to call their bluff. When Clay told the promoters that he was pulling out of the fight, they quickly withdrew their threat. To Clay it was the first inkling of what he would consider Muslim power.²¹⁸

Though discomfited by the rumblings of Clay's potential radicalism, historian Michael Ezra argues that whites could at least comfort themselves with the notion that "he was going to get smashed by Liston and therefore fade into insignificance anyway."²¹⁹ Threats to call off the fight were silenced, and Clay continued with his madcap style of self-promotion.

The loquacious Clay spent much of his time before the Liston bout attempting to get under the sullen champion's skin. Clay dogged Liston, following the champion from location to location, even picketing Liston's training headquarters. Clay regularly assailed Liston for his less than dashing appearance, referring to his foe as "The Big Ugly Bear." Undergoing a selective service examination about a month before the fight, Clay

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Michael Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 65.

quipped that “Liston was rejected by the army because he was too ugly.”²²⁰ The antics would prove a staple of Clay’s self-promotion, but they did not win him any supporters leading up to the Liston bout, despite the champion’s unpopularity. The *Chicago Defender* reported that “if Cassius keeps talking,” then in addition to being the bettors’ favorite, “Sonny will be the sentimental favorite, too—a proposition deemed entirely impossible a year or so ago.”²²¹ By 1964, Clay had abandoned the Louis tradition of humility and deference in favor of a far more radical approach reminiscent of Jack Johnson. As a result, a glowering, sullen, mob-backed former felon carried the grudging favor of both white and black boxing fans prior to meeting Clay in Miami Beach.

Liston looked menacing as ever in the ring, but could not catch Clay, who danced from side to side, showing off his incredible lateral footwork. In the first two rounds, the champion reached with his jab and swung with wild hooks, hitting little more than air. By the sixth round, Liston was all but beaten, sustaining severe punishment and offering little in exchange. When Liston refused to get off his stool to start the seventh round, Clay raised his hands in victory and danced to the center of the ring. Robert Lipsyte reported with a tone of incredulity, “Incredibly, the loud-mouthed, bragging, insulting

²²⁰ “Oh No, Clay Worried? Yes, But Over His Draft Status, Not Liston,” *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1964. Accessed February 20, 2012. [http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/880927332.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jan+27%2C+1964&author=&pub=Chicago+Daily+Defender+\(Daily+Edition\)+\(1960-1973\)&edition=&startpage=22&desc=Oh+No%2C+Clay+Worried%3F+Yes%2C+But+It%27s+Over+His+Draft+Status%2C+Not+Liston](http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/880927332.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jan+27%2C+1964&author=&pub=Chicago+Daily+Defender+(Daily+Edition)+(1960-1973)&edition=&startpage=22&desc=Oh+No%2C+Clay+Worried%3F+Yes%2C+But+It%27s+Over+His+Draft+Status%2C+Not+Liston)

²²¹ “See Clay Aiding Gate, Lowering Popularity, By His ‘Loud’ Antics,” *Chicago Defender*, January 29, 1964. Accessed February 20, 2012. [http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/881993662.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jan+29%2C+1964&author=&pub=Chicago+Daily+Defender+\(Daily+Edition\)+\(1960-1973\)&edition=&startpage=21&desc=See+Clay+Aiding+Gate%2C+Lowering+Popularity%2C+By+His+%27Loud%27+Antics](http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/881993662.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Jan+29%2C+1964&author=&pub=Chicago+Daily+Defender+(Daily+Edition)+(1960-1973)&edition=&startpage=21&desc=See+Clay+Aiding+Gate%2C+Lowering+Popularity%2C+By+His+%27Loud%27+Antics)

youngster had been telling the truth all along.”²²² The *Chicago Defender* reported of observers as far away as Sweden being shocked by the news of Clay’s upset.²²³ Barely anyone could believe that Cassius Clay could have triumphed in, let alone survived, a bout with the powerful Liston.

With two of his cornermen locked to him in joyous embrace, Clay took off for the edge of the ring, dragging his supporters along with him, opening his mouth to the gathered press as wide as he could, and shouted, “Eat your words!” Clay leaned against the ropes, pointing to members of the press, and told each individually, “I fooled you!” When interviewed at the center of the ring, Clay crowned himself “king of the world” and ranted of his greatness, “I look great, I don’t have a mark on my face, I upset Sonny Liston, and I just turned twenty-two years old. I must be the greatest! I shook up the world!”²²⁴

Clay had entered the ring as an annoyance, the “Louisville Lip,” a loudmouth who deserved a firm beating. He emerged from his bout with Liston as the youngest heavyweight champion in boxing history, and after shaking up the boxing world, he would soon shake up the world of racial politics in unforgettable fashion. The day after the fight, Clay declared his name to be Cassius X, renouncing his “slave name” as Malcolm had done years before. Much to the dismay of the white reporters in attendance, he revealed publicly, for the first time, the separatist politics which had been

²²² Robert Lipsyte, “Clay Wins Heavyweight Title as Injured Liston Fails to Come Out for 7th,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1964. Accessed February 20, 2012.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F40710FE395415738DDDAF0A94DA405B848AF1D3>

²²³ “Clay’s Victory Upsets Swedes,” *Chicago Defender*, February 27, 1964. Accessed February 20, 2012.

[http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/882001902.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Feb+27%2C+1964&author=&pub=Chicago+Daily+Defender+\(Daily+Edition\)+\(1960-1973\)&edition=&startpage=37&desc=Clay%27s+Victory+Upsets+Swedes%3B+Floyd+Is+Eyed](http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/access/882001902.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&type=historic&date=Feb+27%2C+1964&author=&pub=Chicago+Daily+Defender+(Daily+Edition)+(1960-1973)&edition=&startpage=37&desc=Clay%27s+Victory+Upsets+Swedes%3B+Floyd+Is+Eyed)

²²⁴ *Muhammad Ali: The Whole Story*, DVD, directed by Joseph Consentino (Atlanta: Turner Home Entertainment, 2001).

developing in him from the moment he became familiar with the teachings of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam: “In the jungle, tigers stay with tigers, blue birds with blue birds, red birds with red birds.”²²⁵ The statement reflected the philosophy of the NOI, as explained by Estes, that “the only way African Americans could ever be truly free was to separate themselves from the white man, not by going back to Africa, but by carving out sovereign states in America.”²²⁶ Clay announced his adherence to the Muslim religion, and revealed a brand of masculine black nationalist self-assertion that all of a sudden made Sonny Liston a white favorite in comparison.

Sensing the dismay of the gathered white press, Clay continued, “I don’t have to be what you want me to be. I’m free to be who I want.”²²⁷ The horrified white establishment now confronted a threat even greater than Jack Johnson had been. He was an eloquent, politically conscious black nationalist, not shy in the least to express his opinions on American life. Though Clay had not explicitly announced his membership with any black radical faction, in the eyes of white Americans, the heavyweight champion of the world was a “Black Muslim.” The white reaction to Clay’s statements was a mixture of horror and derision. Ed Lassman, the president of the World Boxing Association, claimed that Clay was guilty of “provoking world-wide criticism and setting a very poor example for the youth of the world.”²²⁸ The WBA sought to strip Clay of his

²²⁵ Robert Lipsyte, “I’m Free to Be Who I Want,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1967. Accessed February 20, 2012.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F10A1EFC355C13778DDDA10A94DD405B878AF1D3>

²²⁶ Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 88.

²²⁷ Robert Lipsyte, “I’m Free to Be Who I Want.”

²²⁸ John Cottrell, *Man of Destiny: The Story of Muhammad Ali formerly Cassius Clay* (Letchworth: The Garden City Press Limited, 1967), 181.

newly acquired title. Lassman punctuated his remarks by asserting, “The entire nation is bitter about Clay.”²²⁹

Days later, Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali, a name given to him by Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. In doing so, he cemented not only his conversion to a radical brand of Islam, but also his political transformation from naïve patriotism to black separatist radicalism. In a comprehensive article for the *New York Times* on the rise of Muhammad Ali, Robert Lipsyte commented on the public backlash against the new champion:

Clay violated the code. As long as he was amusing, his immodesties could be tolerated.

Once he started to jerk fans back to the problems of the real world he became a spoiler of the daydream that sports is a never-never-land where motivation is uncomplicated and a result is final and pure. Who, after all, was Cassius Clay if he could be Cassius X? And what’s in a name like Muhammad Ali?²³⁰

Ali’s greatest transgression to this point was associating the heavyweight title of the world with black politics. He had gone beyond the self-assertion of black youth that animated the civil rights era by aligning himself with a radical organization outside the more conservative civil rights mainstream. Moreover, at the intersection of race, politics, and sport, Ali threatened to complicate, or even destroy, old notions of African-American representation in the white imaginary. Ali would not be ignored, nor would his image be co-opted as Joe Louis’ name and face had been as representations of a superficially more inclusive American nation.

Not all African-Americans were pleased with Ali’s radical persona. Former champion Floyd Patterson, a favorite amongst whites who had been destroyed by Liston

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

in two successive bouts, was outspoken in his criticism of Ali and his politics. Just as Patterson had fought symbolically for deference and humility in the face of Liston, the felon and mafia thug, he would again represent these values against the separatism of Ali and the Nation of Islam. Patterson penned a scathing critique of Ali (to whom he still referred as “Clay”) in a 1964 *Sports Illustrated* guest column titled “I Want To Destroy Clay”:

I am a Negro and I’m proud to be one, but I’m also an American. I’m not so stupid that I don’t know that Negroes don’t have all the rights and privileges that all Americans should have. I know that someday we will get them. God made us all, and whatever He made is good. All people—white, black and yellow—are brothers and sisters. That will be acknowledged. It will just take time, but it will never come if we think the way the Black Muslims think.

They preach hate and separation instead of love and integration. They preach mistrust when there must be understanding. Clay is so young and has been so misled by the wrong people that he doesn’t appreciate how far we have come and how much harm he has done by joining the Black Muslims. He might just as well have joined the Ku Klux Klan.²³¹

The former champion went on to lament the missed opportunity for Ali to become the most respected heavyweight titlist since Joe Louis, a figure much more consistent with the politics of peaceful integration. Ali was portrayed by Patterson as another Jack Johnson, a threat to the progress made by African-Americans in the struggle for civil rights. As a Catholic and a patriot, Patterson promised to “return the crown to America.”²³² Ali responded to Patterson’s statement, “I don’t know what he means. I’m

²³¹ Floyd Patterson and Milton Gross, “I Want To Destroy Clay,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 19, 1964. Accessed February 28, 2012.

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1076508/1/index.htm>

²³² Zirin, *What’s My Name, Fool?*, 63-64.

an American. But he's a deaf, dumb and blind so-called Negro who needs a spanking."²³³

Ali and Patterson met in their championship bout on November 22, 1965 in Las Vegas. The fight lasted a long, lopsided twelve rounds and Ali slowly and systematically brutalized the ex-champion. Ali had been strangely quiet in the days before the bout, although he did admit that he was motivated by Patterson's crusading, and he had threatened to punish his foe over the course of seven to eight rounds out of spite.²³⁴

Robert Lipsyte of the *New York Times* reported that Ali had mocked Patterson throughout the course of the bout, toying with his prey, calling his shots and pulling back any time he felt he had "jerked the butterfly's wings too hard."²³⁵ Clearly, Ali had set out to punish the dogged yet overmatched Patterson on account of the ex-champion's "trying to create a religious war between Islam and Catholicism."²³⁶ However, the bout was more than a religious confrontation. It was a symbolic clash between militant black radicalism and the more mainstream politics of gradual integration. The symbolism must not have been lost on Ali, as he made Patterson pay dearly for every word of his public criticisms of the champion's politics.

Another integrationist and sporting legend, Jackie Robinson, was saddened by Patterson's defeat and displeased by Ali's provocative character. While acknowledging

²³³ "Cassius Mad, Vows To 'Punish Patterson,'" *Chicago Defender*, November 3, 1965. Accessed February 29, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs104v/201202292015/31513/22044/out.pdf

²³⁴ "Religious 'Slur' Sparks Cassius-Floyd Training," *Chicago Defender*, November 16, 1965. Accessed February 29, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share3/pqimage/hnirs104v/201202291925/10936/26875/out.pdf

²³⁵ Robert Lipsyte, "Clay Knocks Out Patterson in the 12th And Keeps Heavyweight Championship," *New York Times*, November 23, 1965. Accessed February 29, 2012.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F00816FA3D5D167A93C1AB178AD95F418685F9>

²³⁶ Ibid.

the champion's ring excellence, Robinson offered a stark criticism of his behavior in a column for the *Chicago Defender*.

The tragic [sic] is that Clay's attitude reveals that he has not grasped the vision of the great and splendid opportunity which is his. The heavyweight championship of the world is not—and should not be simply an opportunity to make money. With the championship comes a ringing challenge—for a real champion has a chance to do so much good for the young people of the world. Clay has that chance to do so much for the young people of the world. Clay has that chance—to accomplish beautiful things for his people—including the Muslims.²³⁷

Robinson (still referring to the champion as “Clay”) portrays Ali as a selfish opportunist, not as the prominent black activist Ali truly was. It appears that, as Ali's activism was well outside the conservative politics of integrationism, Robinson could not accept Ali as a role model for black youth. This difference of opinion foreshadowed a rift which would develop in the larger civil rights struggle as black youth began to question whether patience and nonviolence would be sufficient to achieve the goal of true freedom.

After defeating Patterson, Ali's momentum appeared unstoppable until February of 1966, when he was rated 1-A by the Louisville Draft Board and selected for induction into the United States Army for service in Vietnam. The war had already been under protest by SNCC in 1965, who, as explained by Gerstle, contended that Vietnam “represented another instance of imperial, white America seeking to impose its will on a colored race, in this case the Vietnamese.” Civil rights activists questioned how America could be fighting for freedom and democracy in Southeast Asia if these ideals were

²³⁷ Jackie Robinson, “Clay's a Champ, But.....,” *Chicago Defender*, December 4, 1965. Accessed March 2, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs103v/201202291908/24095/19658/out.pdf

denied to American citizens at home, as they had experienced first-hand.²³⁸ African-American activist and organizer Stokely Carmichael of SNCC urged blacks to “confront the question of Vietnam.” Carmichael contended, as long as the war directed attention and resources more badly needed in the American South overseas, “it’s going to be in our interest to stop the war. Not even on a moral issue but a very practical issue.”²³⁹ Vietnam would prompt a radicalization of SNCC following the election of Carmichael to the position of chairman in March of 1966.

An irate Ali was befuddled by news of his reclassification from 1-Y, an ineligible rating, to 1-A. When asked his opinion by a local reporter on the war, Ali gave his infamous response, “I ain’t got no quarrel with the Viet Cong. No Viet Cong ever called me nigger.”²⁴⁰ His statement reflected the position of Carmichael and SNCC on the war, which was becoming more widely accepted among civil rights activists. Ali objected to Vietnam on racial grounds, declaring that he would not be pressed into a war by a white establishment in which he would be tasked with the killing of other dark-skinned people. His battle with the Louisville Draft Board coincided with the efforts of Carmichael to connect Vietnam with civil rights. As argued by historian Daniel Peniel, Carmichael “insist[ed] that American violence overseas made domestic debates about nonviolence moot.”²⁴¹ Moreover, urban black activists saw their own growing revolt in a similar light to the revolt of the Viet Cong; both were dark-skinned groups locked in a violent struggle to break free of white American oppression.²⁴²

²³⁸ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 315.

²³⁹ Peniel, *Dark Days, Bright Nights*, 116.

²⁴⁰ Ali, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, 124.

²⁴¹ Peniel, *Dark Days, Bright Nights*, 123.

²⁴² Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 301.

Through his objection to Vietnam and rejection of nonviolence, Carmichael began to forge a nascent Black Power movement, in which the masculinist resistance politics espoused by Malcolm X and symbolically embodied by Muhammad Ali began to characterize the wider struggle for black freedom. Civil rights organizations such as SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were in communication with Malcolm, reflecting a shift not only in Malcolm's politics toward the mainstream, but also in the civil rights movement away from nonviolence.²⁴³ Although Malcolm was killed in 1965, gunned down by assassins on orders from Elijah Muhammad, the previous civil rights strategy of gradual integration began to give way to militancy. By late 1966, SNCC had voted to expel white members from the organization, and Carmichael adopted the image of a black panther to symbolize the more hard-edged politics embraced by SNCC. The same year, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. The militant politics was perhaps best elucidated by Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, who wrote in his 1968 collection of essays *Soul on Ice*, "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it."²⁴⁴

On April 28, 1967, Ali refused induction into the military before a draft board in Houston, Texas. Throughout his ordeal, which included a trial and conviction by an all-white jury in Houston for violating Selective Service laws, Ali faced constant death threats from incensed whites.²⁴⁵ Ali was also stripped of his world championship and forced into a three-year exile from the ring. He appealed his conviction, asserting his right to conscientiously object to the war based on his Muslim religious beliefs.

²⁴³ Ibid., 299.

²⁴⁴ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1991), 84.

²⁴⁵ Ali, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, 124-25.

According to author David Remnick, Ali's lawyer, Hayden Covington, told Ali, "This isn't like any case I've had before. Joe Namath can get off to play football and George Hamilton gets out because he's going with the president's daughter, but you're different. They want to make an example out of you."²⁴⁶ Covington's statement suggests that Ali was targeted by the government for induction, leaving Ali with the choice to likely take on a tour with the USO, fighting exhibition bouts for the troops as Joe Louis did in WWII, or to refuse and go to prison. Either way, the government would succeed in suppressing Ali's black radicalism. The political establishment, however, could not have known that Ali's struggle against the government over Vietnam would transform Ali into an international symbol of protest influencing a new wave of resistance.

Journalist Max Wallace contends that Ali's example helped inspire Martin Luther King to speak out publicly against the Vietnam war in 1967. The face of civil rights had finally expressed criticism of the government's preoccupation with overseas imperialism, reconciling with Carmichael's position that the war had shifted badly needed attention and resources from the civil rights struggle.²⁴⁷ In the *New York Times*, columnist Gene Roberts decried King's antiwar position, lamenting that King had given up the middle ground position that "had made King appear so invaluable to those who had hoped they could build a new civil rights coalition around him."²⁴⁸ Roberts reflected the dismay of whites and conservative blacks who felt alienated by King's turn toward a more radical position. King was branded a "traitor to the cause" by *Time* magazine, and President Lyndon Johnson mocked him as "the crown prince of the Vietniks," referring derisively

²⁴⁶ David Remnick, *King of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 289.

²⁴⁷ "Dr. King to Press Antiwar Stand," *New York Times*, March 24, 1967. Accessed May 28, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F50813FA3458117B93C6AB1788D85F438685F9>

²⁴⁸ Gene Roberts, "Dr. King and the War," *New York Times*, April 14, 1967. Accessed May 28, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F50911FA3C5A157B93C6A8178FD85F438685F9>

to the wider antiwar movement which was gaining incredible momentum amongst American youth, white and black.²⁴⁹ Though King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, his attacks on Vietnam marked a key development in the growing radicalism of the black freedom struggle.

This new radicalism extended into the world of sport and was highly influenced by the outspokenness and courage of Muhammad Ali. In 1967, black professional football players refused to play in the AFL All-Star Game in New Orleans because of racial discrimination in the city's social clubs.²⁵⁰ Black power was displayed on the world stage at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, when African-American track runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gold and bronze medalists respectively in the 200-meter race, raised black-gloved fists in a black power salute on the medal podium as "The Star-Spangled Banner" played in the background. Hands raised, they stood at the podium shoeless, expressing solidarity with impoverished African-Americans.²⁵¹ Smith and Carlos were summarily dismissed from the Olympic Games for their gesture. Larry Casey of the *Chicago Defender* wrote in defense of the beleaguered sprinters, "They decided to run for the medals but still wanted to show the world in some manner that they were calling attention to the inequities the black man suffers in the U.S. and the world."²⁵² After returning to America, John Carlos told a student rally, "The chance to do something for your people comes only once. If you pass it up, you'll never get another chance. And once you do something for your people, you feel beautiful

²⁴⁹ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, 337.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 340.

²⁵¹ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 303.

²⁵² Larry Casey, "Sports Ledger," *Chicago Defender*, October 22, 1968. Accessed March 7, 2012. http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share3/pqimage/hnirs101v/201203071617/37781/26612/out.pdf

inside.”²⁵³ His statement echoed the feelings of the Greensboro lunch counter demonstrators in 1960. More and more, black athletes were refusing to be utilized as icons of national pride and unity, as Louis had done, choosing instead to use their notoriety to advance the cause of black empowerment.

Smith and Carlos were slammed by white Americans, including some of their own teammates. Bob Seagren, gold medalist in the pole vault, admonished Smith and Carlos for what he considered a “cheap” display. “If it wasn’t for the United States they wouldn’t have been there. I don’t think it was very proper. If they don’t like the United States, they can always leave.”²⁵⁴ But perhaps the stiffest criticism of Smith and Carlos came from another black man, heavyweight boxing gold medalist George Foreman, who rebuked the two activists by waving a miniature American flag after winning the gold medal. Proudly, Foreman proclaimed, “Don’t talk down the American system to me. Its rewards can be there for anybody if he will make up his mind, bend his back, lean hard into his chores and refuse to allow anything to defeat him. I’ll wave that flag in every public place I can.”²⁵⁵

Ali would need to wait patiently for the chance to make Foreman pay for his remarks. In 1970, his boxing license was reinstated in New York, clearing him to fight again. He defeated Jerry Quarry and Oscar Bonavena, but was beaten by decision by Joe Frazier in the first of their three unforgettable bouts. In 1971, the Supreme Court rendered a unanimous decision in *Clay v. United States*, reversing Ali’s conviction and

²⁵³ “Carlos, Smith Feel ‘Beautiful,’” *Chicago Defender*, October 24, 1968.

²⁵⁴ “Smith, Carlos Lead Press On Merry Chase In Airport,” *Chicago Defender*, October 22, 1968. Accessed March 7, 2012.

http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender/display_pdf.pdf?filename=/share4/pqimage/hnirs102v/201203071617/32952/12953/out.pdf

²⁵⁵ Mailer, *The Fight*, 101.

ending his legal troubles. Ali fought brutal contests against Ken Norton and Joe Frazier to earn a heavyweight title fight against Foreman in Zaire, where he was received as an international hero. Over the years, dark-skinned peoples the world over had taken notice of Ali's struggle against American imperialism. While Ali spoke out on Vietnam, demonstrators in Guyana picketed the U.S. embassy in support of the beleaguered former champion. In Karachi, young Pakistanis demonstrated, as did a mass contingent of protestors in Cairo, Egypt.²⁵⁶ Ali's defeat of Foreman and reclaiming of the title that had been his prior to his refusal to be inducted was the signature moment of Ali's career. It was the height of his international notoriety as well as his athletic peak. It was also, according to Ali, an inroad to much wider and more substantial causes than pugilism:

Nobody is ready to know what I am up to. People in America just find it hard to take a fighter seriously. They don't know that I'm using boxing for the sake of getting over certain points you couldn't get over without it. Being a fighter enables me to attain certain ends. I'm not doing this for the glory of fighting, but to change a whole lot of things.²⁵⁷

Conclusion: Race Icons to Commodities

When Muhammad Ali was cleared to fight again in 1970, he returned to the ring a changed fighter. Prior to his three-year exile, Ali looked nearly unbeatable against the likes of Patterson, Cleveland Williams, and Ernie Terrell. The legal struggle surrounding Ali's conviction robbed the greatest heavyweight of the twentieth century of his prime years. Post-exile, his unprecedented speed and skill were in decline, as were his religious and political radicalism. In 1975, he left the NOI, converting to orthodox Sunni Islam.

²⁵⁶ Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?*, 67.

²⁵⁷ Mailer, *The Fight* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 79.

He used his wit not to do battle with the white political establishment, but to browbeat archrival Joe Frazier in flourishes of self-promotion. As Zirin argues,

The slower Ali wowed crowds with his ability to take a punch, and he took them all until he was physically destroyed. Ali's almost complete incapacitation and consequent isolation coincided with the downturn of the freedom struggle in the mid to late 1970s. He was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1984, but the symptoms began to emerge much earlier. The more isolated he became, the more he turned away from militant politics to spirituality and prayer.²⁵⁸

With the black power movement all but destroyed in the mid-1970s by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO counterintelligence program, radical black politics were once again relegated to the background of American life. Not coincidentally, Ali grew less radical over the same period as his career came to an end.

Today, the Muhammad Ali known to mainstream America has been whitewashed of his radical past. In 1996, Ali returned to the Olympics, not in protest, but to light the Olympic Torch at pre-Games ceremonies in Atlanta. He was featured in a series of 2004 television ads for IBM, in which a blond child watches old footage of Ali, stripped of its racial context, before the now immobilized former champion strains to say, "Shake up the world." He is now unable to speak, his disease having robbed him of the voice that defined a generation of black dissenters. In a *Los Angeles Times* article marking his seventieth birthday, Zirin argues,

In recent years there has been a cottage industry in Ali revisionism aimed at diminishing his relevance, courage and impact. Ali has been made safe for public consumption.

²⁵⁸ Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool?*, 71.

When appearing in public, he's presented as little more than a muted symbol of a troubled past.²⁵⁹

In 2012, at the "Power of Love" gala celebrating his seventieth birthday in Las Vegas, Ali was feted by celebrities, entertainers and athletes who celebrated his now whitewashed legacy. The *Las Vegas Review Journal* ran an article commemorating the event titled "Former foes hail Ali's humanity," in which the most radical thing said of Ali was that "he was such a free spirit," by lightly-regarded former heavyweight Chuck Wepner.²⁶⁰

The rehabilitation of Muhammad Ali, from radical black nationalist, antiwar hero, and protest icon to harmless figurehead for love and peace, reflects a broader trend in the representation of African-American sports figures. The most widely known black athlete to follow Ali, Michael Jordan, is recognized for his greatness in all corners of the globe. In the age of satellite communications, Jordan's basketball exploits were available to be seen nearly anywhere there was television. But no global social movements were inspired by Jordan's public image. Instead, multinational corporations such as Nike were built on Jordan's transcendent capacities as an endorser. In fact, the only social movement inspired by Jordan was a temporary backlash against Nike's reprehensible labor practices. Described by fellow basketball great Julius Irving as "less a person than something of a 24-hour commodity," Jordan was paid \$20 million yearly as an endorser, while child laborers in Nike's Indonesian manufacturing plants "earn[ed] the equivalent

²⁵⁹ Dave Zirin, "Muhammad Ali at 70: What he meant, what he means," *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 2012. Accessed May 29, 2012. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/18/opinion/la-oe-zirin-ali-20120118>

²⁶⁰ Steve Carp, "Former foes hail Ali's humanity," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 19, 2012. Accessed May 22, 2012. <http://www.lvrj.com/sports/former-foes-hail-ali-s-humanity-139622503.html>

of under \$2 for an eleven-hour day, making shoes that sell for \$70 to \$150 in the West and that cost \$5.60 to make.”²⁶¹

At the height of his celebrity, Jordan was the public face of Nike, McDonalds, and the NBA, all multinational entities that profited immensely from a new imperialism: the forcible domination of culture and new global markets by Euro-American capitalists. Aided by global telecommunications, cheap international labor, and aggressive marketing featuring luminaries such as Jordan, these entities “not only change buying habits in a society, but modify the composition of the society itself,” as historian Walter LaFeber argues.²⁶² In the United States, impoverished African-Americans suffer disproportionately from the new brand of soft imperialism embodied by “24-hour commodities” such as Jordan. Air Jordan sneakers, featuring Jordan’s silhouette as a logo, were so highly coveted as status symbols in inner-cities that poor black youth have used sometimes deadly violence to acquire them. As Holt argues, “When ghetto kids kill each other for a pair of brand-name sneakers, it brings home that this economy of symbols is not just serious; it’s deadly serious.”²⁶³

The public image of Jordan, as with the vast majority of today’s black popular cultural figures, is a stark departure, if not degeneration, from the memory of the radical pasts of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali. These three boxing greats proved that sporting icons can participate in, help to define, and transcend much broader social and political issues than their mere athletic achievements. The current popular representation of Ali as a harmless, defanged figurehead of love and peace, while

²⁶¹ Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century*, 110-11.

²⁶² Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 156-57.

²⁶³ Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century*, 113.

comforting to some, belies the fact that there is still a great deal of subversive power contained in the memory of his radicalism. Meaningful efforts at resistance by those who continue to be oppressed today may still be germinated through the radical deeds of popular athletes still to come. Perhaps black athletes of the future could take a lesson from the pasts of these three heavyweight icons, to whom they will owe their very status as public figures.

Conclusion: Where Have the Heroes Gone?

It may seem incredulous to assert the symbolic power of three great heavyweight prizefighters at a time in which boxing seems to be all but irrelevant in American popular culture. With the widespread proliferation of boxing sanctioning organizations beginning in the 1960s, the sport is now governed by four squabbling factions, each promoting its own version of the world title. Today, this means that, at any given time, there can be up to four boxers claiming to be “world heavyweight champion.”²⁶⁴ The social and political significance of the heavyweight crown has all but vanished, as today’s crop of heavyweight boxers lacks a single dominant, compelling fighter capable of captivating mainstream attention. Heavyweight fighters are no longer looked upon as embodiments of wider social and political forces nor do they function as stand-ins for the most troubling of public issues. They simply lack the significance, notoriety, and ability to capture public imagination to act as such today.

Though the lighter weight classes are not as completely devoid of marketable talent, they are not far removed from the same insignificance. Writing for *Forbes Magazine*, sports business observer Kurt Badenhausen asserts that the sport of boxing, though troubled, is not yet dead from a commercial standpoint. He points out that among the world’s 100 highest-paid athletes, the top two are boxers Floyd Mayweather, Jr. and Manny Pacquiao. These two boxers continue to draw a great deal of money every time they enter the ring, and Mayweather enjoys even further profitability by acting as his own promoter. Pacquiao, on the other hand, benefits from lucrative endorsement deals

²⁶⁴ John Sugden, *Boxing and society: An international analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 49-50.

with major corporations.²⁶⁵ Pacquiao is a hero in his native Philippines; the African-American Mayweather, on the other hand, seems to espouse little more than his own personal financial gain. Yet both are aging superstars nearing the end of their respective careers, and are the only two mainstream attractions left in the sport. Moreover, unlike the three great heavyweight champions studied in this thesis, neither fighter transcends passive representation of their times in American life.

The same can be said of the last truly dominant heavyweight champion of the world, Mike Tyson. At twenty years of age, Tyson was crowned the youngest heavyweight champion in boxing history in 1986 after defeating Trevor Berbick. Tyson was an exceptionally fearsome boxer who overwhelmed opponents with power and intimidation. Beneath his ferocious exterior, however, was a fragile psyche and tragically underdeveloped social conscience. Growing up in one of the roughest neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York, Tyson was arrested forty times as a youth. Sociologist John Sugden, referring to former light-heavyweight champion Jose Torres's biography of Tyson, points out the ways in which Tyson's trainers "froze the ghetto experience in Tyson's consciousness," focusing the young heavyweight's "anger, predatory viciousness, and natural athletic power" upon his opponents.²⁶⁶ Tyson was trained to internalize the "dog eat dog" mentality of the ghetto and unleash it with ruthlessness and aggression in the ring.

While this application of internalized hypermasculine aggression was perfect for the ring, Sugden argues that "Tyson appeared to lose the ability to distinguish between himself as predator in the ring and his persona outside it" after the death of his trainer and

²⁶⁵ Kurt Badenhausen, "Boxing Is Not Dead Yet," *Forbes*, July 11, 2012. Accessed July 12, 2012. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2012/07/11/boxing-is-not-dead-yet/>

²⁶⁶ Sugden, *Boxing and society*, 184.

mentor, Cus D'Amato.²⁶⁷ His persona as ruthless predator inside the ring began to spill over into his personal life, finally culminating in his 1992 conviction of rape and subsequent three years' imprisonment. After his release from prison, Tyson returned to the ring, but was never again the same dominant fighter as he was before his conviction. He retired broken and destitute, his many sycophants long since having abandoned him after he ran out of money. Far from transcending the social crises of his times, Tyson ultimately fell victim to them.

The last heavyweight champion to both capture as well as directly influence the prevailing social and cultural crises of his historical moment was Muhammad Ali, following in the legacy of Joe Louis and Jack Johnson. After the end of Ali's career, no figure has emerged in the sport of boxing, or even professional sports in general, to match Ali's impact on influencing the major social crises of American life in his era. Michael Jordan may have surpassed Ali's level of international exposure, but never attempted to establish himself as a worldwide symbol of resistance, instead electing to become a ubiquitous symbol of consumerism. Today's professional athletes, whose earning potential depends greatly on their marketability as endorsers, do not have nearly the same political and social significance of the three legendary heavyweight champions examined in this thesis. An interesting loop can be traced from the radical pasts of these fighters to the present reality of athletes as little more than totems of consumerism.

From the turn of the century through the Progressive Era, Jack Johnson challenged white supremacy in unprecedented fashion, asserting black masculine power and mobilizing white male retaliation on a national scale. He stoked and consciously played upon white male anxiety about what was perceived to be the decline of Anglo-

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

Saxon masculine virility. Economic difficulties such as declining opportunities for entrepreneurship brought upon by a condition of overproduction in the country's economy denied white middle-class males the chance to become "self-made men." Anglo-Saxon men looked to sports and other leisure activities as means of reclaiming what they perceived to be the rugged manliness of a bygone era. As a result, the rise of a black heavyweight champion such as Jack Johnson was an unspeakable challenge to white supremacy.

As symbols, Holt and Dupont argue that Johnson, beyond the mere color of his skin, stood in for these very difficulties which besieged white manliness. He was an unmistakably urban character, a lover of fast cars, mink coats and wild parties. His flashy, outspoken persona and blatant displays of affluence conjured images of city life and a budding American consumerism. Johnson's foil, Jim Jeffries, stood for the opposite; Jeffries played the part of a rugged outdoorsman and had the look of a tough, no-nonsense Anglo-Saxon strongman. The fight between the two was billed as a contest of the races, but it was also a moment for white men to hope for the return of a simpler, supposedly more favorable time. As it turned out, the "angst-ridden future" of urbanization, consumption and racial conflict won out both inside and outside the ring.²⁶⁸

The era of Jack Johnson also forced white Americans to confront the issue of interracial marriage. No white prizefighter could beat Johnson in the ring, but white mainstream newspapers, especially in the South, did what they could to bring down the champion by assaulting his character. At the same time, white male lawmakers seized upon the public outrage caused by Johnson's marriage to Lucille Cameron as an opportunity to pass anti-miscegenation laws in many of the states in which no such laws

²⁶⁸ Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century*, 78-79.

already existed. Ultimately, the issue of black male-white female sex gave white officials the chance to get rid of Johnson by charging him with violation of the Mann Act. Johnson's flight to Europe eventually led to his losing the heavyweight title under suspicious circumstances.

The legacy of Johnson assured that no black man would hold the heavyweight title until the 1930s, when Joe Louis broke through the color barrier in boxing by not only symbolizing, but furthering the more respectable image of African-American men in the years leading up to and following World War II. Following in the footsteps of the Garvey movement and the Harlem Renaissance, which looked to assert the respectability of the black race (and particularly black men) through international business, intellectual activity, and demonstrations of community organization, Louis constructed a deliberately non-provocative persona in order to rise through the heavyweight ranks. His deferential and dignified public behavior proved essential in overcoming the unwritten but fully enforced barrier against black heavyweight champions following the tumultuous reign of Jack Johnson.

Symbolically, Louis stood as a representation of Ethiopia in its struggle to repel an oncoming invasion by fascist Italy in 1935. As heavyweight champion, he burnished the popular image of black men as his face and namesake were used by manufacturers to sell luxury items. In his second bout against Max Schmeling, Louis stood in for the democratic world against the specter of Nazi Germany's plans for world domination. During the war, while black men slowly began to receive opportunities to serve overseas in combat units, Louis enlisted in the U.S. Army and promoted the war effort in propaganda campaigns. Yet, all his contributions to the war effort were seemingly

forgotten when the IRS pursued millions of dollars in back taxes from Louis after the war, leaving the former champion broken and destitute. Louis had contributed a great deal in enhancing the respectability of black men from the 1930s through the years following WWII. He also helped to reconcile, in the eyes of many African-Americans, the haunting legacy of Jack Johnson and the white popular outrage Johnson unleashed. However, there was no truly post-racial moment in the legacy of this champion, as evidenced by the many white men who cheered Schmeling in their 1938 bout.

Still, the ascendance of Louis made it possible for blacks to fight for the heavyweight title with regularity, allowing for the rise of Muhammad Ali, who directly challenged segregation, white supremacy, and American imperialism. He began his boxing career as a playfully loquacious yet deferential and patriotic Olympic gold medalist who routinely encountered the ugliness of segregation and searched for answers to American racial questions. Upon meeting Malcolm X in the early 1960s, the young Cassius Clay began a personal and political transformation that would see him embody a new kind of black cultural figure. His embrace of black separatist politics and membership in the Nation of Islam provoked a great deal of white outrage and, in a situation somewhat reminiscent of Jack Johnson, also alienated some blacks.

In many ways, Ali embodied the youth movements of the civil rights struggle in the 1960s. He was young, politically active, and unafraid to declare his opinions on racial conflict and stand by them. His refusal to fight in Vietnam echoed the efforts of radical civil rights leaders like Stokely Carmichael to center their efforts toward black freedom on Vietnam. Both Ali and civil rights leaders questioned why such vast resources and attention were focused on an imperialist project in Vietnam while the rights

of African-Americans were routinely denied and their troubles ignored domestically. Ali transcended the racial and social issues of his time, influencing civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. to take a stand on Vietnam as well as inspiring other black athletes to demonstrate their resistance to the current racial and political order. He was the prototype of a new kind of black athlete, one who would use the fame and notoriety of professional sporting achievements to advance causes of resistance and radicalism. Unfortunately, Ali was also the last of his kind to date.

Hopefully, this thesis will help to preserve the memory of these black heavyweight champions' radical pasts while reminding readers that athletes have the power to greatly influence American culture and society, as Johnson, Louis and Ali did. However, it would appear that the loop has been closed from the symbolic "overproduction" of Jack Johnson to the rampant consumerism of today. Today's millionaire athletes have not proven themselves able or willing to use their status as popular cultural figures to advance political and social progress, and the radical pasts of these three heavyweight champions are being whitewashed in order to accommodate this present reality. As athletes become increasingly inclined to construct themselves as marketing tools, we must remember that cultural figures have the power to both reflect and actively influence the prevailing issues of their eras, and we must hold them to the standard of the three great heavyweight champions of the twentieth century.

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