

From Hated to Hero: How the dominant contemporary media and  
cultural memory have appropriated Jack Johnson, Joe Louis  
and Muhammad Ali as modern-day all-American heroes

By

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I am the shark. I need to keep moving forward or I will surely perish.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One</b> Introduction	1
<b>Chapter Two</b> Boxing, The Heavyweight Crown and Johnson, Louis and Ali	39
<b>Chapter Three</b> Johnson vs. Jeffries: the battle for racial supremacy	78
<b>Chapter Four</b> Louis vs. Schmeling II: the first black, white hope	156
<b>Chapter Five</b> Ali vs. Frazier: the fight for the nation's soul	200
<b>Chapter Six</b> Conclusion: lost in transition	257



## Chapter One

### Introduction

*"Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory."*<sup>1</sup>

Franklin P. Jones

The day after Christmas, 1908 in Sydney, Australia, the black American, Jack Johnson, stood across a boxing ring from the white French-Canadian, Tommy Burns. Although he was fifteen pounds lighter and more than five inches shorter than Johnson, Burns, the world heavyweight-boxing champion, was a six to four betting favorite. Johnson was the first black<sup>2</sup> man to be given the opportunity to cross the "color line" and fight for the heavyweight crown.<sup>3</sup> Film cameras were rolling shortly after 11:15 a.m. when the opening bell rang and the battle commenced. The story on page eight of the *New York Times* the day after the fight noted that in the fourteenth round, "the police, seeing Burns tottering and unable to defend himself from the savage blows of his opponent, mercifully stopped the fight."<sup>4</sup> When it became obvious that Johnson was going to knock the white Burns off his feet the police also ordered the film cameras to stop rolling.<sup>5</sup> The last frame of film that was captured freezes with Burns falling forward after Johnson landed a hard right hand to the left side of Burns' head.<sup>6</sup> Jack Johnson was

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<sup>1</sup> 1953 January 25, *Illinois State Journal and Register*, Assorted Smiles by V. Y. Dallman (Editor of The State Register), Quote Page 10, Column 3, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I will be, for the most part, using the terms blacks and whites to describe African-Americans and Caucasians. This is not meant as a pejorative but as a way to simply and clearly refer to the U.S. citizenry when discussing the reactions of entire communities of black people and white people who were being talked about in the press and in the films. Other terms may be used as well. There are instances where the wording (in the form of quotes) in newspapers or books includes other terms referring to African-Americans. These include Negro, colored and the n-word. When talking about race and history in the United States these words are printed in the texts and are often quoted to show the racism that existed.

<sup>3</sup> "JACK JOHNSON WINS; POLICE STOP FIGHT." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 8. Dec 26 1908. ProQuest. Web. 31 July 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Rsmorodinov. *Jack Johnson vs. Tommy Burns* (film freezes at 10:09). YouTube, 1908, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i4YtsnMvIM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i4YtsnMvIM).

<sup>6</sup> Losnevitzy. "1908-12-26 Jack Johnson vs Tommy Burns (ROUNDS 1,5,8,11,14)." *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Nov. 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZ\\_Dguh9hEE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZ_Dguh9hEE).

now the first black man to possess one of the most coveted titles in all of sport at the time – World Heavyweight Boxing Champion.

For years scholars have looked at how the press covered Jack Johnson – and two other iconic black heavyweights - Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali.<sup>7</sup> The social, cultural and political impact of each of the three black heavyweight boxers during their time as active competitors has been studied at length. Largely overlooked is how the contemporary media remembers and presents the three men today, and in particular, how contemporary presentations of these men differ when compared with the presentation of each at the time they were fighting. The texts constructed by the journalists at the time provide details that can be analyzed to help determine how the press was delivering information to society on three internationally known black Americans with regard to their race and racial norms during each period. In particular, when each of these men fought in the biggest fight of their individual careers. I will be analyzing texts in both the black press and the white press. At times I will be going back and forth between stories from several different newspapers. In order to aid the reader white newspaper names will be followed by (WP) and black newspapers (BP).

Jacco Van Sterkenburg, Annelies Knoppers and Sonja De Leeuw, citing Stuart Hall, note that it is through the media that sport helps “people formulate and put into action ideas about skin colour and cultural heritage that are then carried over into the rest of society.”<sup>8</sup> When examining race in news texts, Michael Thornton said:

Racial ideology provides lenses to interpret and evaluate events, people, and

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<sup>7</sup> Past researchers have looked extensively at each man individually. There is also a smaller body of work looking at all three together as well.

(Johnson example) Phillip J, H. (2012). Reexamining Jack Johnson, Stereotypes, and America's White Press, 1908-1915. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 23(3), 215-234.

<sup>8</sup> Van Sterkenburg, J., Knoppers, A., & De Leeuw, S. (2010). Race, ethnicity, and content analysis of the sports media: A critical reflection. *Media Culture & Society*, 32(5), 821.



issues, is rooted in ideas about ability, intellect, emotional disposition, etc., and infuses the process of how culture is publicly presented and, in turn, is related to how society is perceived to be structured.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to what the journalists were writing about Johnson, Louis and Ali when they fought, articles often noted reactions by average Americans, both black and white, who observed these events. These texts can also provide a glimpse into what some Americans, black and white, felt about these three black American men when they fought in socially and culturally relevant boxing championships.

And finally, this dissertation will also show how the newspaper coverage evolved over time as each fight and fighter represents a different historical era, socially, politically and racially, in the United States. This dissertation will be looking at the coverage of each match and the boxers in their historical presence and comparing that to more contemporary understandings of the impact of the fights and the fighters. This analysis will be done both collectively and longitudinally which should result in a more meaningful view of how media coverage of these men, and what they represent, has evolved over time. That is, how the cultural memory of each man has developed from the time they lived and fought until the time they are being remembered in a media product.

### **Dissertation Plan**

In this dissertation I will present case studies of three black heavyweight-boxing champions from the twentieth century: Jack Johnson in 1910, Joe Louis in 1938 and Muhammad Ali in 1971.<sup>10</sup> In the ring, each of the three competed in matches that were so

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<sup>9</sup> Thornton, Michael C. "Policing the Borderlands: White-and Black-American Newspaper Perceptions of Multiracial Heritage and the Idea of Race, 1996–2006." *Journal of Social Issues* 65.1 (2009): 106.

<sup>10</sup> There have certainly been other well-known black heavyweight champions, like Floyd Patterson, George Foreman and Mike Tyson. But, fame for Patterson came from the fact that he was a soft-spoken "gentle giant." While Foreman is remembered in the ring for famously losing the title to Ali in Zaire, his biggest claim to fame outside the sport is a low-fat cooking appliance. As a boxer, Tyson was known as a one-punch knockout artist and for biting off a piece of Evander Holyfield's ear during a championship match. Outside of the ring Tyson was convicted of rape and served prison time. He is perhaps best known today for popular appearances in

big as to be labeled the “Fight of the Century” (FOC).<sup>11</sup> Out of the ring, all are known for actions that contributed to a social, political or cultural conversation that was reported on the pages of newspapers while each of the three was alive, and remembered in the media to this day, after all three have passed.

The main focus of this dissertation is a comparative analysis of the archival accounts to contemporary documentary film and media accounts of all three fights (FOC1, FOC2 and FOC3) and the boxers. The main questions that will attempt to be answered are:

1. Looking at how each FOC and each man is presented, what are the differences between the archival newspaper accounts and the contemporary media representations?
2. Using cultural memory as its theoretical framework, this dissertation will attempt to answer the question, *why* did the changes in the presentation of each FOC and each man occur?
3. How did the presentation of these culturally relevant events and the black male icons involved develop over time from Johnson in 1910, to Louis in 1938, to Ali in 1971 in both the black and white press.
4. What are the similarities and differences in how the black and white press presented these fights and these men?

In this dissertation the contemporary media representations will be considered the “cultural memory” of the past events. As Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning note in their handbook on cultural memory, Maurice Halbwachs first developed the concept of cultural memory as a theory in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Halbwachs, a French philosopher, referred to it as, *memoire collective*, or, collective memory. Erll gives a “provisional definition of cultural memory as, “the interplay of present and past in

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“The Hangover” series of movies. I do not believe that any other boxing champions had the lasting social, cultural and political impact of Johnson, Louis and Ali, particularly since they wore the heavyweight crown. Sugar Ray Leonard and Floyd Mayweather were popular boxing champions in lighter weight divisions, for example.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson vs. Jefferies (1910), Louis vs. Schmeling (1938), and Ali vs. Frazier (1971).

<sup>12</sup> Erll, Astrid, and Nünning Ansgar. *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, preface, 2008.

socio-cultural contexts.”<sup>13</sup> That is, the idea that our memories as a society are constructed as a group and these memories tend to evolve over time based on social and cultural changes over time. Hence I will be focusing more on the social and cultural aspects of change that would result in changes to the stories of the fights and the fighters and therefore, cultural memory.

As noted earlier, the presentation of all three of the FOCs in the press had racial superiority components that appeared in the press. The racial rhetoric evolved from more explicit to more implicit between Johnson in 1910, Joe Louis in 1938 and Muhammad Ali in 1971. Additionally, by looking at newspaper accounts on anniversaries of FOC2, an attempt will also be made to see roughly when the presentation of this fight and the fighters began to evolve into the version that is present in the cultural memory.

The racially charged rhetoric in the coverage of the Jack Johnson versus Jim Jeffries fight, which is the subject of chapter three, was often overtly and explicitly presented on the pages of the papers as a competition to prove racial superiority. The *Chicago Tribune* (WP) noted before the fight that some white people, who predicted that Jeffries might lose, could be “accused of personal animosity to the hope of the white race.”<sup>14</sup> In the black newspaper, the *Topeka Plaindealer* (BP), after the fight it was noted that Johnson showed himself to be superior both physically and intellectually and, using the verbiage of slavery, claimed that, “Jack Johnson is Jeffries’s master in every respect.” The story graciously noted that most of the negative racial comments about Johnson prior to the fight were “kept up by the lower elements of whites.” After also giving credit to the white men who helped to train Johnson, the story proclaimed, “The victory of Johnson

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> H, E. K. "JOHNSON HAS MANY BACKERS." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 2. Jun 12 1910. ProQuest. Web. 3 Jan. 2017.

will go a long ways toward proving that a colored man if given an opportunity will accomplish as much toward developing the country as the white.”<sup>15</sup>

Professor, author and historian Jeffrey Sammons said, “You can’t talk about Ali and Jack Johnson without talking about Joe Louis as a bridge ...”<sup>16</sup> In 1938, Joe Louis was the heavyweight crown holder when he faced the German, Max Schmeling, in a boxing ring at Yankee Stadium in New York. Today, historians note that this fight was infused with the geo-political drama of the white Nazi-sympathizer facing off against the black American in the shadow of Hitler’s march toward world dominance. The fight between Louis and Schmeling is the subject of chapter four. With regard to this fight, historian Gerald Early<sup>17</sup> said, “Almost immediately after the contract was signed this fight turned into something political.”<sup>18</sup> Others noted because of his opponent in the ring, most white people in America were fully in support of Louis. Historian Lewis Erenberg<sup>19</sup> wrote that the prospect of this fight had “transformed Louis from a primarily African-American hero into an all-American idol.”<sup>20</sup> But newspaper accounts in the lead up to, and aftermath of, the match told a different story. The black and white press noted after the fight that it was only black Americans who were in the streets celebrating the Louis victory. Not only were white people not celebrating, they often clashed with the black celebrants with many instances of violence in the streets that night. The *Chicago Tribune* (WP) text from the day after the fight showed that in the city of Chicago, a large white

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<sup>15</sup> “Johnson is Still World's Champion!” *The Topeka Plaindealer*: 4. July 8, 1910. Readex. Web. 10 Jul. 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Hauser, Thomas. *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*. New York :Simon & Schuster, 2006. P. 206. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Merle Kling Professor of Modern letters, of English, African, African American studies, American culture studies, and Director, Center for Joint Projects in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>18</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008. *YouTube*. YouTube, 07 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Professor Emeritus of History at Loyola University

<sup>20</sup> Erenberg, Lewis A. *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. 134.

crowd hurled, “lynch threats” along with a “barrage of overripe vegetables” at the black crowd celebrating the Louis victory.<sup>21</sup>

Thirty-three years later, in the third Fight of the Century, unlike FOC1 and FOC2 the match would not be between a black and a white fighter. Chapter five will be examining the battle between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in 1971. When both men stepped into the Madison Square Garden ring, the champ, Frazier, and the challenger, Ali, were African-American. Even so, race, religion and politics created battle lines between the two fighters. It was only Ali’s third match since returning to the ring from his forced layoff from boxing. After refusing to be drafted to serve during the height of the Vietnam War, Ali was charged with the federal crime of draft evasion and spent more than three years idle from the sport. Ali was awaiting the Supreme Court’s decision on his appeal as press coverage of the upcoming fight ensued.

As noted at the time, when Frazier, a Christian, refused to call Ali by his Muslim name (choosing instead to call him, Cassius Clay), Ali responded by labeling Frazier an “Uncle Tom.” Ali was outspoken about his beliefs against the war and in favor of civil rights. Frazier was not. In addition to the Tom label, Ali was quoted in the press calling Frazier “the white man’s champ,”<sup>22</sup> while noting that black people who will attend the Madison Square Garden match will be supporting him and not Frazier.

In 2000, HBO produced and broadcast a documentary film about the fight called, “One Nation ... Divisible.” The title refers to the racial, political and religious division that the film says surrounded the match. Chapter five will show how much of these socio-political elements were actually noted in the white and black press at the time and will

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<sup>21</sup> COLORED FOLKS MARCH AND YELL 'AH TOLD YOU SO': South Side Celebrates ...Winn, Marcia. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 23, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:27:47).

also analyze how a fight between two black men ended up with black versus white racial overtones in the cultural memory.

Before I describe what readers will encounter in each chapter I will present an explanation of the theory, cultural memory, and the method used to analyze the texts, critical discourse analysis.

## **Theory and Method**

### *Cultural Memory*

Following Alan Confino, I define cultural memory as simply, “the ways in which people construct sense of the past.”<sup>23</sup> That is, over time, the shared depictions of an event may be altered or revised. This new version of the event may become the one that is more commonly remembered by a person, group or a society.

Halbwachs – who is widely known as a key scholar around collective memory -- wrote about how memory of historical events can become shared in a society. He noted that these events are remembered based on what can be extracted from eyewitnesses and texts, like the newspaper. Halbwachs said that even when a population is made up of those who did not witness an event from the past, the citizenry share the memory of these past events. He said, “These events occupy a place in the memory of the nation.”<sup>24</sup> Halbwachs noted that those things that have occurred in the years since the occurrence of the historic event would ultimately impact this collective memory. He said, “a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present.”<sup>25</sup> In agreement, David Middleton and Steven D. Brown cite

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<sup>23</sup> Confino, Alan. “Memory and the History of Mentalities.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, 2008, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice, 1877-1945. *The Collective Memory*. New York :Harper & Row, 1980. Print. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Halbwachs, p. 69.

Frederick Bartlett who argued, "...remembering is primarily concerned with how the past is constructed in the present to serve the needs of whatever actions we are currently engaged in."<sup>26</sup> As Harald Welzer notes:

...both individual life stories as well as the stories of collectives are continuously re-written in the light of new experiences and needs of the present. One could say that each present, each generation, each epoch creates for itself that past which has the highest functional value for its future orientations and options.<sup>27</sup>

Calling these collective memories, *mentalities*, Confino writes that it was Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch who:

...called for a new kind of history that explored, beyond the usual political history of states and kings, the social and economic structures of a society as well as its "mental tools" (*outillage mental*), namely, the system of beliefs and collective emotions with which people in the past understood and gave meaning to their world. This history of mentalities (*histoire des mentalites*) provided a whole new approach to the study of the past, as it took seriously the history of collective representations, myths, and images. The history of collective memory—of how societies remember their past, how they represent it and lie about it—was viewed as one important part of this endeavor.<sup>28</sup>

In the conclusion of this dissertation I will consider the motivation of those who construct the contemporary media version of these three men. If the examples of the contemporary media that portray the memory of the past of each boxer are revised or altered, why were the stories altered? This dissertation will be arguing that the cultural memory of the three boxers is, for the most part, developed through the contemporary media representations of the men. With regard to media influence on cultural memory, Siegfried J. Schmidt says:

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<sup>26</sup> Middleton, David, and Steven D. Brown. "Experience and memory: Imaginary futures in the past." *Media and Cultural Memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung* (2008): 242.

<sup>27</sup> Welzer, Harald. "Communicative memory." *Cultural memory studies: an international and interdisciplinary handbook* 8 (2010): 295.

<sup>28</sup> Confino, p. 77.

... individual as well as social remembrances are fundamentally influenced by media, which play a crucial role in the elaboration of remembrances in media offers and which regulate the career of topics in the public sphere.<sup>29</sup>

As noted above, Febvre and Bloch say this new history of mentality is “beyond the usual political history of states and kings, (and) the social and economic structures of a society as well.” But is it really? When a documentary filmmaker like Ken Burns chooses Jack Johnson as the theme for one of his much-celebrated PBS events, for many of those watching it may be their only reference point to this once internationally known figure. While some, like Confino, believe the cultural memory usurps the filters of states and kings, Erik Meyer notes that even in contemporary media there is a “politics of history.” This dissertation will be building on Meyer who, noted the politics involved in the construction of historical accounts when he wrote:

Not only representatives of the political-administrative system are involved therein, but also individuals and groups who possess a privileged access to the political public sphere. In addition to politicians, this elite includes journalists, intellectuals, and scholars.

Burns, and the other more contemporary journalists, biographers and scholars who will be quoted in this dissertation are, as Meyer noted, elites who due to their “privileged access” may strongly influence contemporary societies perceptions of the three men studied in this document.

The documentary films that depict the three men will, whether modestly or dramatically, likely be skewed from the depiction of the men in the archives. Confino asks: “Why is it that some pasts triumph while others fail? Why do people prefer one

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<sup>29</sup> Schmidt, Siegfried J. "Memory and remembrance: a constructivist approach." *Media and Cultural Memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung* (2008): 200.



image of the past over another?”<sup>30</sup> This dissertation will attempt to answer this question in the case of the FOCs and the three boxers.

This matters because when the creators of contemporary texts, who are often white and exist in places of privilege, choose to tell the stories of black icons, like Johnson, Louis and Ali, they are in effect appropriating the memories of these African-Americans for their own profit and reward. This appropriation is often designed to build these black icons into “all-American” heroes. One result of building these men into heroes is to show white America that it will eventually be accepting and appreciate black Americans who were at one time seen as lesser citizens. These black citizens, who contributed greatly to society and culture, will finally be recognized for their contributions. That is, when the time is finally right white America can, in effect, forgive itself for its past transgressions and move on. The effort here is also an attempt to show these texts, the documentary films in the case of this dissertation, become the cultural memory for a nation.

As noted previously, I will be examining how the representation of each of these matches and these men have changed in contemporary media as compared to how the press represented them at the time each was champion. That is, how the cultural memory of each has evolved over time. Jan Assman and John Czaplicka said that cultural memory is based in the actual memory of the historical event but also on the group’s “capacity to reconstruct” the event using a “contemporary frame of reference.”<sup>31</sup> As noted previously, the contemporary media will, in the main, be from documentary films that depicted each

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<sup>30</sup> Hall, John R., Laura Grindstaff, and Ming-Cheng Lo. "Culture and Collective Memory." *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. London: Routledge, 2012. P. 81. Print.

<sup>31</sup> Assman, Jan, and John Czaplicka. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 130. Jstor. Web. 25 Mar. 2014.

boxer's life story. Additionally, contemporary biographies, books, websites and academic articles will be cited as well.

The films analyzed in this dissertation should not be considered the definitive cultural memory. They are presented as emblematic of the cultural memory of these three boxers and more recent stories of their lives. The films are contemporary texts (with text being as defined in this introduction) that can be used as convenient vessels of information that can be studied against the contemporaneous newspaper coverage. The films should be seen as very salient “images” that are components of shaping contemporary societies remembrance of the three men and the three FOCs. The effort here is an attempt at what Jeffrey K. Olick said is “to understand the complexities of remembering” with the knowledge that this memory is “a negotiation between the desires of the present and the legacies of the past.”<sup>32</sup> The hope is that this comparison will provide some insight into how the presentation of each of the FOCs and the three men changed vis-a-vis the stories that were and are told about them when they lived and after they are gone. I will also attempt to determine the motivation behind why the presentations of the fights and the men have evolved over time. The three documentary films I analyzed are:

- “Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson,” (PBS, 2004)
- “Joe Louis: America’s Hero Betrayed,” (HBO, 2008)
- “Ali-Frazier 1: One Nation ... Divisible” (HBO, 2000)

It is likely that many of those who viewed the Jack Johnson and Joe Louis documentaries possessed no prior knowledge of these men. Therefore, these films constructed the

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<sup>32</sup> Olick, Jeffrey K. “Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, by Astrid Erll et al., Gruyter, Walter De, & Co., 2008, p. 159.

viewer's complete memory of each man. In his introduction to the translation of Halbwach's *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser said:

When it comes to historical memory, the person does not remember events directly; it can only be stimulated in indirect ways through reading or listening or in commemoration and festive occasions when people gather together to remember in common the deeds and accomplishments of long-departed members of the group. In this case, the past is stored and interpreted by social institutions.<sup>33</sup>

When Coser wrote about memorializing an occasion he was speaking of commemorative events like Independence Day in the U.S. or Bastille Day in France. But the documentary films of the three fighters can be seen as similar occasions of commemoration. In the case of Johnson, Louis, and for some viewers of the Ali documentary, the social institution is broadcast and/or cable television. Unlike a Fourth of July parade or picnic, the occasion for people to “gather together to remember in common the deeds and accomplishments of long-departed members” was the airing of the films.

Coser talked about tribal members passing down stories through commemorative dances and ceremonies.<sup>34</sup> These tribal events often occur with group members gathered around the flames of a roaring fire. Similarly, audiences were “gathered,” albeit simultaneously as individuals, to see and hear the stories by watching the documentaries in front of the flicker and glow of their televisions where they encountered the stories of each of these iconic sports figures.

While the Johnson and Louis documentaries are biographies about each fighter's life, their FOCs are discussed at length in each of the films. The Ali documentary's primary focus is his match against Frazier (FOC 3). I consider the documentary film

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<sup>33</sup> Coser, Lewis A., translator. *On Collective Memory*, by Maurice Halbwachs, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

genre to be a legitimate form of journalism and is therefore an apt comparison to the archival newspaper stories from the past.

Astrid Erll says that, “Judging from its prevalence and impact, ‘film’ seems to have become the leading medium of popular cultural memory.”<sup>35</sup> In this quote Erll is actually referring to fictional films when she posits that even the fictional film can impact the cultural memory. Lumping fictional films in with the documentary, Erll says:

Cultural memory is constituted by a host of different media, operating within various symbolic systems: religious texts, historical painting, historiography, TV documentaries, monuments, and commemorative rituals, for example. Each of these media has its specific way of remembering and will leave its trace on the memory it creates.<sup>36</sup>

I believe, in fact, that viewers would find more credibility in the documentary form as a source of factual information about a subject. That is, when a viewer engages with the HBO documentary on Muhammad Ali, this text is seen as more credible and truthful than “Ali,” the bio-picture starring Will Smith.

As noted previously, the multi-semiotic nature of film allows for actual moving images of all three of these boxers. The footage of Frazier speaking for himself in the documentary adds credibility to that text allowing more opportunity for viewers to develop a cultural memory based on the text. And while Erll believes feature narrative films have become “the leading medium of popular cultural memory,” the documentary film should be more impactful on the cultural memory and should make for a more relevant comparison to the archive. And although Erll lumps together fictional films and

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<sup>35</sup> Erll, Astrid. “Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, 2008, p. 395.

<sup>36</sup> Erll, Astrid. 2008, p. 389.

documentaries, she also agrees that “non-fictional media” have “developed their own ‘rhetorics of collective memory.’”<sup>37</sup>

As noted, this dissertation will be examining how the contemporary media present the FOCs and the three men using acclaimed documentary films that were produced to tell, in the case of Johnson and Louis, the life stories of each. “One Nation ... Divisible” tells the story of the lead up to the first Ali versus Frazier fight and the 1971 fight itself. In addition to these films, contemporary academic accounts and biographies of the fighters will be analyzed. These contemporary media accounts will be compared to newspaper coverage of each of the boxers at a key moment in each fighter’s career. The baseline for comparison will be contemporaneous newspaper coverage of each fighter surrounding what was arguably the biggest fight in each boxer’s career. The fighters and time periods will focus on:

- Jack Johnson versus James Jeffries on July 4, 1910 (FOC1)
- Joe Louis versus Max Schmeling on June 22, 1938 (FOC2)
- Muhammad Ali versus Joe Frazier on March 8, 1971 (FOC3)

As noted previously, these three matches were so culturally significant that they were each labeled “the fight of the century” at the time of their occurrence. There were racial, social, cultural and political components surrounding each of these fights that made them a big draw for people who may not have necessarily been fans of boxing but were still drawn to the newspaper coverage of these fights. Coverage of Ali, who had converted to Islam, included religious elements as well. That is, the racial and socio-political aspects of these fights made them more salient as events, which likely drew readers to these

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<sup>37</sup> Erll, Astrid. 2008, p. 392.

stories that may not have read about other matches in which these fighters participated, or even paid attention to boxing coverage prior to these fights.

For example, when Johnson fought Jeffries the press overtly and explicitly presented the match as a battle for racial supremacy. Then, in 1938 - with the looming threat of Nazi world domination - many today believe that Louis's battle against Schmeling, considered a Nazi sympathizer, also was a battle for racial *and* ideological supremacy. And even though both Ali and Frazier were black, in 1971 there were overt and explicit mentions of race, religion and politics in that match-up as well.

### *Sport, Culture and Racial Politics*

As noted earlier, the cultural memory is the main focus of this dissertation. In the cases of the three boxers, the racial and socio-political representation in the media of each is an important component to the evolution of the cultural memory. Athletic competitions are said to be “raceless” because they have traditionally been considered a great racial equalizer.<sup>38</sup> That is, winners and losers are determined purely on ability and without regard for skin color. And while there may be some truth to that, for decades there have been debates over the importance of sport on society, culture and politics – particularly with regard to race. Regarding the influence of sport on culture, Dale A. Somers said:

... sport influences practically every aspect of modern civilization and plays sometimes an indirect and passive and sometimes an active and direct role in the culture-creating process, if we use culture in the broadest sense of the word.<sup>39</sup>

Siding with Somers, this dissertation will lay out the role that media coverage of Johnson, Louis and Ali may have had in influencing the view of race on American culture, both

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<sup>38</sup> Early, Gerald Lyn. "Performance and Reality: Race, Sports, and the Modern World." *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011. 190. Print.

<sup>39</sup> Somers, Dale A. Preface. "The Rise of Sports in New Orleans; 1850-1900." Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972. xi. Print.

inside and out of the boxing ring. As Gerald Early notes regarding Jackie Robinson's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1949:

(Robinson) was also the great representative man, who knew more tellingly than anyone else, as a tormented lion in his brief, tough middle age, that no great black athlete is only an athlete.<sup>40</sup>

While many, both past and present, believe that politics and sport should not mix, much of white America (and the press) also disliked it when athletes who were afforded an international stage to compete (and sometimes, speak), used that stage to speak in a manner that might be considered against America. That is, many white and black journalists believed that because athletes, and in particular black athletes, were able to enjoy the "privilege" of sport, they should not use that privilege as a means to disavow the country that they were representing, sometimes on an international stage. In the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP), this "privilege" that athletes are afforded was noted. In a column that offered excuses for the connection between "seamy characters" and the sport of boxing, the writer noted that without the influence of organized crime, "a number of Negro and white boxers would not have lavished in fame and fortune, no matter how brief the occasion."<sup>41</sup>

A prime example of the mix of sport and politics came in Mexico City in 1968. Most are aware of the raised fists and bowed heads of U.S. track athletes John Carlos and Tommy Smith at their Olympic medal ceremony that year. Their stand resulted in the ejection of the two athletes from the Olympic Village in Mexico and condemnation from politicians, the public and the press at home. Because the games took place in the hot climate of Mexico City, they were scheduled in October rather than mid-summer. That

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<sup>40</sup> Early, Gerald. 2011, p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> Matthews, Leslie. "The Sports Whirl" *New York Amsterdam News*: 29. Feb 05 1966.

was one month before a heated U.S. Presidential election. While then Democratic Vice Presidential nominee Edmund Muskie said the athletes should not have been expelled from the Olympics, their protest, he said, “probably should not have been made.”<sup>42</sup> The views of many Americans could be seen in the press in the form of letters to the editor. Most of those letters in newspapers following the stand displayed disgust toward Carlos and Smith.<sup>43</sup> Harry Edwards who, prior to the Games, had attempted to organize a total boycott of the 1968 Olympics by American black athletes encouraged Carlos and Smith. Edwards noted that many in politics, like Muskie, decried the effort claiming that sport and politics should not mix.

Just one week after Carlos and Smith raised their fists on the medal stand, George Foreman walked around the Olympic boxing ring waving a small American flag after winning a gold medal in boxing. While today, this image is not nearly as famous as the one of Carlos and Smith, at the time it was certainly presented in both the white and black press as displaying a great deal of positive political symbolism and nationalism, particularly in the shadow of the Carlos and Smith display. In the black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* (BP), columnist, A. S. “Doc” Young, called Carlos and Smith “sensational” and “freakish Negroes” who got a lot of attention from the press while noting that the flag waving Foreman “didn’t get the coverage he deserved.”<sup>44</sup> Shortly after the Olympics in 1968 Edwards decried that while Carlos and Smith were ejected

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<sup>42</sup> “Black Olympians Given no Hearing, Muskie Declares.” *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition) (1960-1973): 19. Oct 22 1968. ProQuest. Web. 11 July 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Easley, Samuel H. “SILENT PROTEST’ AT OLYMPICS.” *Chicago Tribune* (1963-Current file): 20. Oct 23 1968. ProQuest. Web. 11 July 2016.

<sup>44</sup> DOC YOUNG, A.S. “GOOD MORNING SPORTS!” *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition) (1960-1973): 32. Nov 13 1968. ProQuest. Web. 11 July 2016.



from the games after making a political statement, Foreman was praised for an act that Edwards deemed equally as political:

For his blatantly political performance Foreman was not criticized or ejected from the games. For his behavior was in the interest of the establishment and of white folks. On his return home he was treated as a hero – by whites.<sup>45</sup>

In “The Souls of Black Folk,” W. E. B. Du Bois presented his theory of “double consciousness” for black Americans. Du Bois wrote:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>46</sup>

This two-ness can be seen in the two acts in Mexico City in 1968. That is, in acting in the interest of black Americans, Carlos and Smith as distinctly representative of Du Bois’ Negro. With his patriotic flag waving on an international stage, Foreman acted as the American. While Du Bois’ use of the term Negro was meant positively to indicate a level of autonomy for black Americans, by the 1960s the term had negative connotations to many.

Cornel West believes that when black athletes, like Johnson, Louis and Ali, excel at sport that the results for black culture are positive. West says that it helps to promote a cultural integration of the races, what he calls an “Afro-Americanization of white youth.” He believes that the black sports hero:

... has put white kids in closer contact with their own bodies and facilitated more human interaction with black people . . . This process results in white youth—

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>46</sup> Du Bois W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 11. Print.

male and female—imitating and emulating black male styles of walking, talking, dressing and gesticulating in relation to others.<sup>47</sup>

Because of the one-on-one nature of the sport, boxing provides an excellent opportunity to analyze how discrimination was being presented on the pages of the press from Johnson to Ali. This dissertation will be analyzing whether the archive presented a message that, as West noted, promoted a more positive cultural integration of the races, or one that – even with the world-class athletic accomplishments of the three men – presented them in a negative racial light. This will be compared to the same presentation in the documentary films.

The coverage of sports has emerged as an important component in modern media with sports proving to be a cultural and societal touchstone. This means the opportunity for more socially, politically and culturally relevant research of the *coverage* of sports is expanding as well. According to Farrington et al.:

This is an important gap in research given the increasing social and cultural prominence of sports journalism and the fact that sports reporting has the power and ability to shape people’s opinions on contentious issues such as ‘race,’ racism, ethnicity, nationalism and belonging.<sup>48</sup>

While there has been adequate study on white press coverage of Jackie Robinson and baseball’s “color line” in the 1940s, there is not a great deal of academic research existing concerning black Americans and sports coverage in the early to mid-sixties. Jason Peterson looked at print media coverage of the previously mentioned 1968 protest on the Mexico City Summer Olympics medal stand by Carlos and Smith.<sup>49</sup> Peterson believed that “the white press interpreted this historical moment (the protest on the stand) as an act

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<sup>47</sup> Hoberman, John M. “Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race.” Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 86. Print. (find original source)

<sup>48</sup> Farrington, et al: 3.

<sup>49</sup> After winning gold and bronze medals in the 200 meter dash, Smith and Carlos lowered their heads and raised a black-gloved hand as a sign of protest over racial inequities in the United States.

of disrespect, both to America and the Olympics.”<sup>50</sup> In writing about newspaper sports coverage of the protest, Peterson noted that, “because of anger towards Smith and Carlos, news values such as balance and objectivity were often sacrificed.”<sup>51</sup> The coverage of a heavyweight championship-boxing match is a sports news story. In the lead up to a fight, stories often prognosticate about who is likely to win the match. The coverage in the past also included - often daily - reports from each of the boxer’s training camps where the writers assessed the readiness of each fighter. The analysis of the coverage of the lead up to the three fights in this dissertation will also be looking at how closely the journalists followed the news values of balance and objectivity in reporting from the training camps.

### *The Archive*

The main data used for the archival analysis<sup>52</sup> of the three fights, when possible,<sup>53</sup> will be drawn from six newspapers: three white papers<sup>54</sup> - the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, and *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and three black papers - *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*. The exception for this will be black press coverage of Jack Johnson. The *Chicago Defender* (BP) was first published in 1910 but the archive for the paper in that year does not exist online or in print form. The *New York Amsterdam News* (BP) and the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) did not exist in 1910. A newspaper archive search online of all African-American newspapers that existed in 1910 will be substituted. And while the *Amsterdam News* (BP) and the

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<sup>50</sup> Peterson J. “A ‘Race’ for Equality: Print Media Coverage of the 1968 Olympic Protest by Tommie Smith and John Carlos.” *American Journalism* [serial online]. Spring2009 2009;26(2):100.

<sup>51</sup> Peterson, 105.

<sup>52</sup> All of the archival newspapers used for this dissertation were accessed through the University of Wisconsin-Madison library’s archives. All were viewed as digitally scanned versions of the original printed newspaper.

<sup>53</sup> In 1910, the year of the Jack Johnson vs. Jim Jeffries match, *The New York Amsterdam News* and *Pittsburgh Courier* did not yet exist. Because of this additional black newspapers and magazines are analyzed. These additional media were also found through the UW-Madison library system and were viewed as digitally scanned versions of the original print stories.

<sup>54</sup> While some may use other verbiage, like mainstream press, to describe newspapers like the *New York Times* in the early to mid-twentieth century, I will be using white press and black press to disseminate between the two categories of newspapers.

*Defender* (BP) may be more recognizable because of their placement in New York and Chicago, Patrick Washburn notes that by 1940 the (*Pittsburgh Courier*) (BP) had become a national paper with “twelve branch offices and fourteen national editions that were published from coast to coast.” Washburn said it was the most read black paper in the nation.<sup>55</sup>

As noted earlier, these six papers as a collective will be called the archive (the individual stories in the newspapers will be referred to as the texts). These newspapers were chosen because they all had high circulation at the time of these boxers prominence and because of the convenience factor that digital historical archives for all six papers are accessible online. Coverage from the *New York Times* (WP), *Herald/Tribune* (WP) and the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) also made it into local papers in other parts of the country via wire service.<sup>56</sup> As noted earlier, this dissertation will be analyzing the coverage of each of the boxer’s “fight of the century.”

The analysis of the archive for each FOC will cover five weeks, beginning one month prior to the date of the fight and will continue through one week after the fight. Since all of these papers are available and searchable in digital form, the keywords used in the searches will simply be both fighters’ names with the temporal parameter of each FOC. The articles written in newspapers about the FOCs and the three men were relevant to the readers because of their exalted stature. That is, because these men had each achieved the title of world heavyweight boxing champion they were more socially and

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<sup>55</sup> Washburn, Patrick Scott. *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, Northwestern University Press, 2006, p. 140.

<sup>56</sup> This is an example from the Ali vs. Frazier fight. David Condon wrote a column called “In the Wake of the News.” It was distributed by the Chicago Tribune Press Service. Condon, David. "Old Ballyhoo Missing from 'Fight of the Century'." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*, Feb 28 1971, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Oct. 2018.

culturally significant. The fact that all three were black was most certainly evident in the articles that appeared on the pages of the press.

Part of the analysis of these texts will be to see how journalists presented each boxer as an athlete, a representative of the black race in America, and as an American citizen. One of the reasons that Johnson, Louis and Ali are socially, culturally and politically significant is because they were often presented in the press as being representative of the *entire* black race. As Melanie Bush notes, “whites are seldom taken as representatives of their race, whereas people of color frequently are.”<sup>57</sup> Noting his racial importance to the entire black race when Johnson won the title, the black press wrote, “no event in forty years has given more genuine satisfaction to the colored people of this country than has the single victory of Jack Johnson.”<sup>58</sup>

In some instances I will also be looking at how the black press responded directly to claims made in the white press at the time. There is evidence that the black press would present an, at times, overt and explicit counter argument in response to claims made about Johnson, Louis and Ali in the white press with regards to the actions by the fighters both in and out of the ring.

While some may use other verbiage, like mainstream press, to describe newspapers like the *New York Times*, throughout this dissertation the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Herald/Tribune* will be identified as the white press and the *New York Amsterdam News*, *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* (and

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<sup>57</sup> Bush, Melanie E. L., and Melanie E. L. Bush. *Everyday Forms of Whiteness: Understanding Race in a "post-racial" World*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011. 151. Print.

<sup>58</sup> Morgan, Denise C. "Jack Johnson: Reluctant Hero of the Black Community." *Akron L. Rev.* 32:3 (1999). 535.

others) will be identified as the black press.<sup>59</sup> Throughout this document the contemporaneous newspaper coverage from when each of the fights occurred will be called the *archive*. As Aleida Assmann noted: “The archive is the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past.”<sup>60</sup>

The purpose of using both the archival white and black press coverage of each fighter is multi-pronged. First, it is to show some of the obvious differences in the coverage of these men in the white and the black papers, particularly when it comes to race. At least at the time of Johnson (1910) and Louis (1938) there was distinct information segregation when it came to adequate coverage of black issues in the white press. *New York Age* magazine noted in 1921 that most black Americans were not interested in the white papers because they generally only highlighted black Americans “if it appeared they might have committed a crime.” The exception to this, the magazine noted, was black athletes and entertainers who the white press “covered occasionally.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, in order to look at society as a whole when discussing prominent black men in America during the periods when these three men were boxing, a researcher must look at the sources where many black people and many white people were getting their information.

The black press evolved considerably over the time period from Johnson to Ali. Roland Wolseley noted that prior to the 1930s, Johnson’s time, the *Chicago Defender* (BP) was more radical in its proclamations about race. Wolseley said that:

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<sup>59</sup> Additional black newspapers will be analyzed for the Johnson vs. Jeffries fight because only the *Chicago Defender* existed in 1910 (the first year the *Defender* was published).

<sup>60</sup> Assman, Aleida. “Canon and Archive.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, 2008, p. 102.

<sup>61</sup> Washburn, Patrick Scott. *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, Northwestern University Press, 2006, p. 123.

After the early 1930s the paper settled down to a modified news policy on racial events a social philosophy asking patience, and moderation in matters of racial change and conflict.<sup>62</sup>

Patrick Scott Washburn writes that it was in the 1950s that the black newspapers began a steep decline in circulation, noting a “spiral downward in influence and circulation in what became a stunning free fall.”<sup>63</sup> According to Washburn the black press was experiencing a resurgence at the time of Ali vs. Frazier. Washburn said:

From 1971 to 1974, the number of black papers increased by thirty to more than 200 in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia, and the overall circulation went up 600,000 to 1.4 million.<sup>64</sup>

Washburn also said that, unlike the standard of objectivity often attached to the white press, the black press was known for its “advocacy journalism.”<sup>65</sup> The founder of the *Defender*, Robert Abbott, said: “... although the paper must be accurate, there would be no objectivity, because this was an advocacy press.”<sup>66</sup> Washburn also noted that the black papers were “outspoken and blunt advocates for blacks.”<sup>67</sup>

When it came to these three prominent black men, one question that this dissertation will attempt to answer is, what can be expected of the black press in terms of tone and style when covering the three? And did this tone and style change over the span of time covering the three boxers? Will we see more of Wolseley’s view that the black newspapers will present these prominent black boxers with text that expresses “moderation in matters of racial change and conflict”? Or will the coverage be more akin

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<sup>62</sup> Wolseley, Roland Edgar. *The Black Press, U.S.A.* Ames: Iowa State UP, 1971. P. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Washburn, p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Washburn, p. 202.

<sup>65</sup> Washburn, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Washburn, p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> Washburn, p. 6.

to Washburn's view that the black press will be "outspoken and blunt advocates" for the three?

As noted by Washburn, the black press was experiencing resurgence in circulation by 1971. This was certainly a politically turbulent time in the United States, as well as for Ali. His Supreme Court case regarding his military draft deferment would be argued and decided within weeks after the fight. The opinions of the American populace with regard to the Vietnam War had shifted significantly by 1971. In April, 1967, when Ali refused military conscription, only 37% of Americans surveyed believed the U.S. made a mistake by going to war. By 1971, that number had ballooned to 61%.<sup>68</sup> Daniel Lucks noted that while black Americans "eagerly enlisted" for service in the early years of the Vietnam War, by the late 1960s most had abandoned that belief "that military service was a civil rights imperative."<sup>69</sup> For these reasons a comparison between the white and black press in reporting on the lead-up to the Ali-Frazier fight should display a dramatic difference between how the two present Ali. That is, it should be expected that the black press will be more in line with Washburn's description as being way more outspoken advocates in favor of Ali when compared to the white press.

While the main goal of this dissertation is to determine the differences between how the FOCs and each fighter were presented in the press at the time each participated in the "fight of the century" compared to how each is presented today, an analysis of how the black and white press presented each fighter based on politics, religion, nationalism and race will also be noted throughout. These are the elements that will most likely be of

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<sup>68</sup> Gallup, Inc. "The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison." *Gallup.com*, 15 June 2004, [www.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx).

<sup>69</sup> Lucks, Daniel. "African American Soldiers and the Vietnam War: No More Vietnams." *The Sixties A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, p. 1., [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17541328.2017.1303111](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17541328.2017.1303111).



interest when comparing past to present. These are also the key cultural components of each of the matches that made the fights and the men such cultural icons.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be utilized to examine the texts and to determine how these texts presented the fighters. Following Norman Fairclough, the goal of CDA in this dissertation is the examination of the texts to see if there is, what Fairclough calls, an *ideological discursive formation* that, for all intents and purposes, results in a presentation of the FOCs and the three boxers as “non-ideological ‘common sense.’”<sup>70</sup> In Fairclough’s words:

I shall refer to ‘ideological discursive formations’ (IDFs for short), in accordance with what I have said above about the inseparability of ‘ways of talking’ and ‘ways of seeing’. In doing so, I shall make the simplifying assumption, which further work may well challenge, that there is a one-to-one relationship between ideological formation and discursive formations.<sup>71</sup>

Fairclough et al, note that critical discourse analysis (CDA) may be utilized in a variety of different ways. They go on to say that the thing that brings all of these analytical processes together “is a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society.” And, what makes CDA unique is “its view of the relationship between language and society.”<sup>72</sup>

Journalism students are taught that in order to report a breaking news story they should stick to the facts and create their text in a completely objective manner.

Torkington notes, though, that news reporting is not always “just a straightforward reporting of the facts.” Torkington continues:

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<sup>70</sup> Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language*, Routledge, 2013, p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Fairclough, 2013, p. 40.

<sup>72</sup> Fairclough, Wodak & Dijk, 1997: 357.

A typical news story does not report the events in chronological order, but ‘focalises’ a particular aspect of the story, includes and excludes certain parts and sets up relationships between the events and characters.<sup>73</sup>

Torkington, citing Reisigl and Wodak, uses a method of analysis in her research, which defines members of different nations in terms of in-groups and out-groups.<sup>74</sup> (This idea of in-group versus out-group, we will see, is of particular interest in the rhetorical battle between Ali and Frazier before FOC3. The social identity of these two will be looked at more deeply in chapter five.) Norman Fairclough et al note that CDA starts with a topic for the research and they provide racism as one example of a topic.<sup>75</sup>

For the purpose of analysis in this dissertation, IDFs will be the way the archives and contemporary texts – the “ways of talking” about the fights and the fighters – may be shown to be the “ways of seeing” the events and the men. Fairclough says this “way of seeing,” becomes the non-ideological *common sense*.

The CDA utilized in this dissertation is also in line with what Meriel Bloor and Thomas Bloor call *Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Bloor says:

This branch of grammar stresses the importance of social context (the context of culture and the context of situation) in the production and development of language, both historically and in terms of meaning in individual discourse events.<sup>76</sup>

In each of the three case studies the temporal and cultural context of the texts must be considered. For example, in the case of Jack Johnson, the coverage of his fight with Jim Jeffries was presented in the press in 1910, only forty-five years after the end of slavery in the United States. In looking at the analysis of the contemporary texts, one must

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<sup>73</sup> Torkington, Kate. 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Torkington, 967.

<sup>75</sup> Fairclough, Norman ; Wodak, Ruth Dijk, Teun A. van, "Critical Discourse Analysis." *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. London: Sage Publications, 1997. 357-58. Print.

<sup>76</sup> Bloor, Meriel, and Thomas Bloor. *The practice of critical discourse analysis: An introduction*. Routledge, 2013: 2.

consider that these were constructed after many socio-political changes had occurred since, e.g., the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

In looking at the texts in the archive and the contemporary media, which presented the three boxers, one of the main elements of ideological formation has to do with the racist depiction of each man. As Barbara J. Fields noted in her seminal essay on race and ideology, science and those in the know understand that race is constructed. Therefore, she says, “Race is a product of history, not of nature.”<sup>77</sup> But it can be assumed that journalists who created most of the texts presenting Johnson, Louis and Ali, in the archives followed a racist and not a constructionist belief.

Following Terry Locke, the CDA utilized to read the texts will also involve an attempt to adequately *interpret* the meaning of the texts. Locke defines interpretation as, “an act of reading or analysis which makes meaning of a text.”<sup>78</sup> An attempt will be made to make meaning of the texts, particularly in the context in which they were constructed. Additionally, I will be considering what Fairclough refers to as “absences from texts.” He notes that:

Textual analysis can often give excellent insights about what is ‘in’ a text, but what is absent from a text is often just as significant from the perspective of sociocultural analysis...<sup>79</sup>

Thornton agrees with Fairclough, noting, “Textual analysis assumes that the significant items may not recur, but by their absence, have the greatest weight.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Fields, Barbara J. "Ideology and race in American history." *Region, race, and reconstruction: Essays in honor of C. Vann Woodward* (1982): 152.

<sup>78</sup> Locke, Terry James. "Critical Discourse Analysis." *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Continuum, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>79</sup> Fairclough, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Thornton, (2009): 109.

In analyzing the contemporary texts, this dissertation will consider that the documentary film, as Fairclough says, is “multi-semiotic.” That is, in addition to the spoken language that is utilized in the documentary film, there are both still and moving images, sound effects and, often, a musical score.<sup>81</sup> Also, in the case of the Burns documentary, actors are used to re-create the voices of many of the principle characters, including Johnson himself. All of these elements will be considered when analyzing the film products.

While there may be some suggestions in this dissertation that the texts utilized in this study played a role in how readers of the newspapers and audiences of the films reacted to these texts, audience reception is not a focus of this dissertation. For one thing, it would be impossible to determine how the audience was reacting to the texts, particularly in the much older archives. However, there are some incidences in each case of what the “person on the street” was thinking about the three events because they are quoted within the stories in the archive. With regard to audience reception Fairclough cites John Morley when he says that, of late, there is a great deal of criticism when media studies do not adequately consider the audience reception of a given text. But, Fairclough continues:

...there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, by abandoning textual analysis in favour of analysis of audience reception. The interpretation of texts is a dialectical process resulting from the interface of the interpretative resources people bring to bear on the text, *and* properties of the text itself. Textual analysis is therefore an important part, if only a part, of the picture, and must be defended against its critics (Brunsdon 1990).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Fairclough, 2013, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Fairclough, 2013, p. 9.

Fairclough also introduces a form of cultural memory in his discussion of CDA. As noted earlier, he says that a dominant ideological discursive formation occurs when the discourse of an ideology becomes accepted “as non-ideological ‘common sense.’”<sup>83</sup>

This “common sense” is very similar to what is defined as the cultural memory. This is very much an argument in this dissertation. That is, the texts in the documentary films, the discourse within these products, become what Fairclough says is the common sense. They form the cultural memory with regard to these fights and these fighters.

### **The Structure of the Dissertation**

For those who may not be completely aware of the sport of boxing, chapter two will give more detailed information about the history and the relevance of the sport. People from all economic levels and social classes have celebrated boxing and boxers. Additionally this chapter will provide information about the cultural salience of the heavyweight championship. When Jack Johnson won the crown, the heavyweight champion was considered the “world’s toughest man.” The cultural impact of a heavyweight title match could also be seen when Ali and Frazier fought for the title in 1971. Movie star Burt Lancaster, who was a fight fan, served as the “color commentator” for the closed-circuit television broadcast of the match. Frank Sinatra, who took pictures as a hobby, was a ringside photographer for *Life* magazine. Norman Mailer, a boxing enthusiast, wrote this about Ali in an essay about FOC2 for *Life* magazine:

Muhammad Ali begins with the most unsettling ego of all. Having commanded the stage, he never pretends to step back and relinquish his place to other actors—like a six-foot parrot, he keeps screaming at you that he is the center of the stage. “Come here and get me, fool,” he says. “You can’t, ‘cause you don’t know who I am. You don’t know where I am. I’m human intelligence and you don’t even know if I’m good or evil.” This has been his essential message to America all

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<sup>83</sup> Fairclough, p. 27.

these years. It is intolerable to our American mentality that the figure who is probably most prominent to us after the President is simply not comprehensible, for he could be a demon or a saint. Or both!<sup>84</sup>

In addition to a myriad of artists and actors, from LeRoy Neiman to Diana Ross, another boxing enthusiast, Bob Dylan, attended the fight as well. Chapter two will also contain background information on each of the three boxers.

Chapter three will be the first of the three case studies of the fights and the boxers. It will present analysis of the archive surrounding the Johnson versus Jim Jeffries championship fight in 1910. This was the first “Fight of the Century.” This will be compared to the Burns documentary as well as additional contemporary media. It was a battle to see who would be considered the “toughest man in the world:” A black man or a white man. While the Burns documentary presented the white press covering the fight as being extremely racist toward Johnson, this chapter will show otherwise. That is, that much of the press coverage of Johnson at the time was extremely respectful of the first black heavyweight champion for both his physical and intellectual capabilities. The coverage at the time also showed a surprising level of support from white Americans who were noted in the press coverage as favorable to Johnson as well.

Chapter four will be the case study of the coverage of Joe Louis. It will look at the archive coverage of the second fight of the century – Louis versus Max Schmeling. In the biographical documentary on Louis’ life, Louis’ son appears to recount his memories of his father and his second fight with Schmeling. Because of the timing of this fight, 1938, many today look back at Louis’s fight against a German in the lead up to World War II as a significant moment both culturally and politically. The cultural memory believes that

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<sup>84</sup> Cite the Life magazine.

because Louis was facing an enemy of America in the form of the Nazi-sympathizing Schmeling he was the first black-white hope and he “transcended” race. Newspaper coverage at the time showed quite the opposite.

Chapter five will look at the archival coverage of the first fight (of three) between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in 1971. In addition to the archival data, one interview with a journalist will be included in this chapter. While there are no reporters alive today who personally covered Jack Johnson or Joe Louis, one *New York Times* (WP) reporter, Robert Lipsyte, who was assigned to cover Ali was interviewed about his, and other reporters, coverage of Ali as the boxer progressed from an Olympic gold medalist to professional world boxing champion. Lipsyte was the only reporter in Miami with Ali at his home when the U.S. government changed the fighter’s draft status in 1966. Insight from Lipsyte will also be used in this dissertation in an effort to analyze how the *New York Times* (WP) and other newspaper reporters and columnists felt about Ali.

The documentary about the fight frames it as a socio-political battle that matched the politics of the day. That is, Ali was on the side of those who were against the war in Vietnam and were for the civil rights movement. Frazier, the film said, represented white conservatives in America who were for the war and not necessarily for more advances in the rights of African-Americans. But both the white and black newspapers did not make the socio-political battle the main focus of their coverage.

The final chapter, chapter six, is the conclusion of this dissertation. In this chapter I will discuss how the cultural memory of the three FOCs and the three fighters have evolved when compared to the original coverage of the fights and the fighters. That is,

the way that all are presented today is quite different from their presentation at the time. The reasons for this will be presented in the conclusion.

### **So What?**

By taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem during the 2016-2017 National Football League season, Colin Kaepernick reignited the debate over the role of the black athlete as a political actor – a debate that started, at least implicitly, with Jack Johnson and continued with Joe Louis. Muhammad Ali made political pronouncements in an overt and explicit manner that had never been witnessed in popular American media by a black athlete. The most famous black athlete after Ali was Michael Jordan. With his multi-million dollar product endorsements, Jordan was famously silent when it came to making political statements.

Today, the cultural significance of the black athlete as a political actor is, once again, a salient issue in the American press and society. And while some may argue that the allure of boxing to a fan base has long since passed, keep in mind that while multi-million dollar contracts in the big three sports – football, basketball and baseball – seem like daily occurrences, the *Forbes* 2015 list of highest paid athletes had a professional boxer in the top spot for the third time in four years.<sup>85</sup> That athlete, Floyd Mayweather, managed to compete in another well-publicized boxing match in 2017. After two years, Mayweather came out of retirement to fight Conor McGregor. It was one of the most anticipated sporting events of that summer, drawing 4.5 million viewers and \$400 million

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<sup>85</sup> Badenhansen, Kurt. "With \$300 Million Haul, Floyd Mayweather Tops 2015 List Of The World's Highest-Paid Athletes." *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, 10 June 2015. Web. 22 June 2016.



to the television pay-per-view broadcast. Mayweather earned \$180 million making him, once again, one of the highest paid athletes in the world.<sup>86</sup>

In popular films, boxing stories are attractive to both fans and critics. Many well-regarded feature films have been produced with boxing stories as their basis. There may only be one every few years, like “Raging Bull” or “Cinderella Man,” but the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences often recognizes the boxing film with an Oscar nomination, including in 2015 with another episode in the “Rocky” series of pictures. Why? Because, with all due respect to Joyce Carol Oates, boxing stories *do* make great life stories.<sup>87</sup>

Many cite Jackie Robinson for breaking the “color line” in sport in 1947. But, Jack Johnson became the first black American to compete against white opponents on a “major league” athletic stage.<sup>88</sup> He won the heavyweight title in a boxing ring 39 years prior to Robinson’s first appearance on a major league baseball diamond. Robinson was wearing a baseball uniform and surrounded by his white teammates. Johnson faced his opponent, one-on-one, stripped to his waist with his black skin fully exposed to the fans and film cameras.

Joe Louis repeated this feat eight years before Robinson’s. And while Robinson’s entre into professional baseball is seen as a key moment in the advancement of civil rights in the United States, after his retirement, Robinson himself was openly against Ali’s opposition to the war in Vietnam. “He’s hurting, I think, the morale of a lot of

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<sup>86</sup> Sport, Telegraph. “What Is the Mayweather vs McGregor Prize Money and How Much Did Floyd Mayweather Jr. Take Home?” *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 27 Aug. 2017, [www.telegraph.co.uk/boxing/2017/08/27/mayweather-vs-mcgregor-prize-money-much-floyd-mayweather-take/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/boxing/2017/08/27/mayweather-vs-mcgregor-prize-money-much-floyd-mayweather-take/).

<sup>87</sup> Later in this dissertation I quote Oates who said: “Life *is* like boxing in many unsettling respects. But boxing is only like boxing.” She was referring to those who would use boxing as a metaphor for life, or anything else for that matter.

<sup>88</sup> Although Oliver Lewis was the first black jockey to ride a horse to a win in the Kentucky Derby in 1875, at the time (and to some extent, today), the horses were considered the primary “athletes” in the sport.

young Negro soldiers over in Vietnam,” Robinson said.<sup>89</sup> Again, this is why it will be argued in this dissertation that Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali were more culturally influential on American attitudes toward race and politics than even someone as famously considered as Jackie Robinson. These three heavyweight-boxing champions should be considered, not simply as great athletes, but as black men who had a profound impact on sport *and* on society, politics and culture in the United States that exists to this day.

In the coming chapters, one of the things this dissertation will be analyzing is how the dominant white media presented Johnson, Louis and Ali in the archive when each man made his fame in the boxing ring. Sterkenburg, Knoppers, and De Leeuw, citing Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera, note that, “These discourses reflect inequalities of power in which powerful groups in society have more power to label, categorize and define the less powerful ones.” This dissertation will be working to fulfill Aleida Assmann’s directive. According to Assmann:

It is the task of others such as the academic researcher or the artist to examine the contents of the archive and to reclaim the information by framing it within a new context.<sup>90</sup>

While Assmann makes an excellent point, this dissertation will, in-effect, be reclaiming the information as a way to examine the facts surrounding the FOCs and the fighters in an attempt to clarify the “new reality” which has become the cloak placed upon the fights and the fighters.

That is, the first contribution of this analysis is to discover, not the “new context,” but instead to reclaim the original context. The cultural memory tells us that the FOCs

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<sup>89</sup> Zang, David. “SportsWars: Athletes in the Age of Aquarius.” Fayetteville: U of Arkansas, 2001. 102. Print.

<sup>90</sup> Assmann, Aleida. “Memory and the History of Mentalities.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, 2008, p. 103.

were surrounded by social, political and cultural elements that increase their importance in the memory. The reason for this will be discussed in the conclusion.

In her analysis of press coverage of an international football (soccer) game, Kate Torkington, citing Wodak et al, posits that even individual athletic achievements, like a boxer's in the ring, are sometimes seen by a country's citizens as a potential national achievement. She cites Alabarces et al when she says that; "one of the prevalent themes in media representation of national football is the construction of *individual heroes*, which is embedded in a long tradition of elevating sports personalities to heroic or epic status (emphasis added)."<sup>91</sup> The second contribution that this dissertation will attempt to make is to show that black heroes may only become heroes to all Americans, both black and white, when the dominant white media decides.

Elements of racism are overt and explicit in the coverage of all three fighters and FOCs. This is of particular interest in the cultural memory of FOC3 where racist elements are in evidence as well. That is, when both participants in the FOC are African-American, the cultural memory presents the event as a battle over race in a similar way as FOC1 and FOC2 when the opponents were white. In the documentary, and to a lesser degree the contemporaneous press coverage, the theme of "which black actor is blacker" is presented. It seems that the white producers of the film have determined which actor is right and which is wrong when the rhetorical battle over "blackest" ensued.

Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali were only able to become heroes to all of America when the dominant white media decided to construct them as heroes in their retelling of the "original experience." At the heart of this decision is the dominant

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<sup>91</sup> Torkington, Kate. 2010. MS. Universidade Do Algarve, Lancaster. Web. 5 Mar. 2014.

white media's privileged position which allows them to appropriate these black men as heroes to all - another form of racial appropriation by a dominant white culture.

## Chapter Two

### Boxing, The Heavyweight Crown and Johnson, Louis and Ali

*Few sports rely so heavily on personalities as boxing. Baseball and football, for example, have the mass appeal of the team as well as the individual. In the prize ring it is the supremacy of one man over another, and if the sport is universally great today it is because the men who wore the gloves in the past made it so.*<sup>92</sup>

Dr. Charles Larson, former president, World Boxing Association

#### Introduction

One of the most primal ways of proving physical superiority is fighting with nothing more than one's fists. An accomplished boxer might possess exceptional power, speed, endurance and wit. In the first line in his book on the history of heavyweight champions, John Durant wrote, "The fist is man's simplest natural weapon and the use of it goes back to the dawn of history."<sup>93</sup> One of the first recognized heavyweight boxing champions, John L. Sullivan, said in 1883:

Aristocratic gentlemen of Europe and sometimes in this country go out with a couple of friends and try to kill each other with swords or revolvers at twenty paces. Why don't they settle the question with their fists? There would be no loss of life, and it would be equally as effective in determining who is the best man.<sup>94</sup>

Records of men fighting other men as a competition reach back to the days of the Ancient Greeks.<sup>95</sup>

Boxing, historically, has been an avenue for those who would like to improve their socio-economic position in society. In his book about the history of the sport, Elliot Gorn said:

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<sup>92</sup> McCallum, John D. Foreword. *The World Heavyweight Boxing Championship; a History*. First ed. Radnor, PA: Chilton Book, 1974. vii. Print.

<sup>93</sup> Durant, John. *The Heavyweight Champions*. 4th ed. New York: Hastings House, 1971. 1. Print.

<sup>94</sup> "THE MANLY ART." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 10. Oct 21 1883. ProQuest.Web. 21 June 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Sugden, John Peter. "Boxing and Society: An International Analysis." Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1996. 10. Print.

Members of ethnic groups – Irishman, blacks, and Jews – were especially drawn to the ring because of their lowly social and economic status and because it offered a chance to compete against Englishmen on an equal footing.<sup>96</sup>

One of the elements of boxing that makes it stand out racially, when compared to other sports, is the clothing that a boxer wears. A boxer's body in the ring is more exposed than one might encounter in other sports like, for example, football. This meant that when a black fighter faced off in the ring against a white fighter, with the full head and torso of both participants fully revealed, the racial differences were patently obvious.<sup>97</sup>

While boxing has found participants and fans among those on the lower end of the economic and education scale, intellectual notables such as, Ernest Hemingway, George Plimpton, Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates also showed tremendous interest in the sport. It was Oates who said: "Life *is* like boxing in many unsettling respects. But boxing is only like boxing."<sup>98</sup> She was referring to those who would use boxing as a metaphor for life, or anything else for that matter. Oates also contended that boxing is not a "sport" like baseball or basketball because those are games that are played. As Oates noted, "one doesn't *play* boxing."<sup>99</sup> And while many may agree or disagree with Oates when it comes to boxing as a metaphorical tool, it is this aspect of the sport – this lack of "playing" –

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<sup>96</sup> Gorn, Elliott J. "The Manly Art: Bare-knuckle Prize Fighting in America." Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986. 29. Print.

<sup>97</sup> In football, a player's entire body is covered (although the arms are visible on many) with the helmet and facemask making it difficult to identify players on the field of play. Fans watching a football game are located much farther from the playing surface as well. The average boxing ring may only be 20 feet across and fans are located right up against the ring itself. In the 1990s black professional football players (like Emmitt Smith of the Dallas Cowboys) began removing their helmet on the field after an especially good play or a touchdown. The act of removing the helmet was a way for a player to get individual recognition while on the field. In 1997 the National Football League, or NFL (sometimes referred to as the "No Fun League," see: Seifert, Kevin. "Animating the Best No Fun League Celebrations." *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 17 Nov. 2016, [www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/18060372/best-no-fun-league-celebrations-were-penalized-nfl-2016](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/18060372/best-no-fun-league-celebrations-were-penalized-nfl-2016).) enacted a rule, often referred to as the "Emmitt Smith Rule," (see: Haaf, Landon. "The 11 NFL Rule Changes Inspired by Cowboys Players." *WFAA*, WFAA, 28 Mar. 2017, [www.wfaa.com/article/sports/nfl/cowboys/the-11-nfl-rule-changes-inspired-by-cowboys-players/287-426219509](http://www.wfaa.com/article/sports/nfl/cowboys/the-11-nfl-rule-changes-inspired-by-cowboys-players/287-426219509).) that remains to this day. The rule states that a team will be penalized if a player voluntarily removes his helmet while he is still in the field of play (see: Boadu, Richard. "Dez Bryant Had No Idea Taking His Helmet Off Was Against the Rules." *SI.com, Sports Illustrated*, 4 Nov. 2013, [www.si.com/extra-mustard/2013/11/04/dez-bryant-had-no-idea-taking-his-helmet-off-was-against-the-rules](http://www.si.com/extra-mustard/2013/11/04/dez-bryant-had-no-idea-taking-his-helmet-off-was-against-the-rules).) If a player's helmet comes off involuntarily as a result of a play, that player must go to the sidelines and sit out for a play so as to not have a player "accidentally" lose his helmet and get personal recognition on the field. Perhaps the NFL prefers that players, as much as possible, should be seen on the field as members of a collective who can only accomplish their goals as part of the group and not as individuals. That is not the case in boxing. It is quite obvious in a boxing ring when a black body faces a white body.

<sup>98</sup> Oates, Joyce Carol. *On Boxing*. Garden City, NY: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987. 4. Print.

<sup>99</sup> Oates, 19.

that has helped boxing to develop as an important symbolic touchstone both culturally and politically in the world. That is, as will be noted in this dissertation, when boxers face off in the ring the serious nature of the match – the extreme physical stakes that are being risked – have led boxing to be seen as more symbolically relevant than other sports. And historically no match was more symbolically relevant than when the men at the very top of boxing's weight divisions, the heavyweights, fought.

In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, physical fitness was becoming a priority in the United States. Citing the benefits of boxing throughout his life, Theodore Roosevelt hired former boxer Mike Donovan to work as the Roosevelt family's boxing trainer.<sup>100</sup> At about this same time, prizefighting was starting to be seen as uncivilized. To evade the law, prizefights were often spur of the moment events that drew an audience by word of mouth and happened in fields just outside of the city limits. Matches sometimes took place on floating river barges to avoid interruptions by law enforcement.<sup>101</sup>

One such "outlaw" match took place just after the turn of the last century. The combatants were Joe Choynski and Jack Johnson. Choynski, a white heavyweight, is given a great deal of credit for improving Jack Johnson's skills as a boxer. In 1901 Choynski worked with Johnson while the two served time in jail after the Texas Rangers raided their match in Galveston. It seems the Rangers actually were on hand to watch the fight, waiting until after Choynski had knocked out Johnson before entering the ring and arresting the fighters. The two served three weeks in the city jail. During that time

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<sup>100</sup> *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line*, by Runstedtler, Theresa, University of California Press, 2013, p. 34.

<sup>101</sup> Smith, Red. "12 Chateaubriands for John L." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Jan 14 1977, p. 22. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 May 2018 .

Choynski and Johnson would spar daily in the jails courtyard where Choynski coached Johnson to develop his defensive style.<sup>102</sup> A distinction was made by many between *training to box*, or sparring, and “prizefighting;” actual boxing competition between two men in an organized match. Christian churches in the U.S. were responsible for some of the most outspoken opposition to prizefighting.<sup>103</sup> This was especially true when it came time for a black fighter to face a white man in the ring.

The intent of this chapter is to contextualize the socio-political, racial and cultural importance of the sport of boxing, the heavyweight championship and the men who are analyzed in the ensuing chapters in this dissertation. The chapters will address the role of media and cultural memory in the analysis of the data.

### **The Heavyweight Crown and Race**

*Being a black heavyweight champion in the second half of the twentieth century (with black revolutions opening all over the world) was now not unlike being Jack Johnson, Malcolm X and Frank Costello all in one.*<sup>104</sup>

Norman Mailer

*It was the singular most important title in the world outside of being a general or president.*<sup>105</sup>

Bert Sugar (boxing historian on the heavyweight title)

The heavyweight champion is said to “wear the heavyweight crown.” This recalls an air of nobility associated with holding the title. Actual nobility came through bloodline. One was born into the crown. Perhaps this is why the relationship between race and the heavyweight title was so precarious in the early part of the twentieth century. A black

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<sup>102</sup> *The Big Black Fire*, by Robert H. DeCoy, Holloway House Pub. Co., 1969, pp. 40–42.

<sup>103</sup> Roberts, Randy. *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*. New York: Free, 1983. 93-95. Print.

<sup>104</sup> Mailer, Norman. *King of the Hill: Norman Mailer on the Fight of the Century*. New York: New American Library, 1971. 29. Print.

<sup>105</sup> Burns, Ken, director. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson--A Film Directed by Ken Burns--Part 1*. PBS, 2005, at 00:14:58.



man was not a part of the proper bloodline – the Caucasian line – and, in the minds of many, therefore could simply not rightfully wear the crown. That is, white society was perhaps accustomed to the fact that in 1908, when Jack Johnson became the first black man to wear the crown, blacks in America were no longer human chattel but, for some, it was not okay for a black man to reach the level of nobility that was associated with boxing’s heavyweight champion.

When a boxer competes against an opponent, the rules of boxing have determined that both fighters should be relatively equal in weight. This is due to the fact that the heavier fighter, for the most part, throws harder punches. This means that, generally, the best fighters in the heavyweight division can beat the best fighters in the lower weight classes. The Marquess of Queensberry rules in 1910 sanctioned that the heavyweight division consisted of boxers who weighed a minimum of 176 pounds with no maximum weight. The heavyweight delineation was modified several times over the years. Today a fighter over 200 pounds is considered a heavyweight.<sup>106</sup> With no upper limit on weight, the heavyweight champion was not only the “king” of the ring, but also symbolically, the physical king of the world. With regard to the symbolic importance of the title in the early twentieth century Philip J. Hutchison said:

...promoters and the press had crafted the heavyweight championship title to represent the epitome of masculinity, a strategy that complemented parallel discourses of civilization, nationalism, and Whiteness.<sup>107</sup>

The press was interested in the heavyweight crown because, as Hutchison noted, it carried with it a high degree of national and racial pride. It was also one of the most recognizable symbols in sports. Ask most people on the streets of the United States today,

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<sup>106</sup> “Weight Divisions.” *BoxRec*, [boxrec.com/media/index.php/Weight\\_divisions](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Weight_divisions).

<sup>107</sup> Hutchison, Phillip J. “Reexamining Jack Johnson, Stereotypes, and America’s White Press, 1908–1915.” *Howard Journal of Communications* 23.3 (2012): 220. Web.

“Who is the heavyweight boxing champion?” and it is doubtful you will get many correct responses.<sup>108</sup> This same question asked on those same streets in the early through late twentieth century (the period covered in this dissertation) would, most likely, elicit the correct answer. The man who wore the crown as the world heavyweight champion in those days was known, not just among those who were avid boxing fans, but also throughout popular culture.

When the heavyweight champion defended his title, newspapers often positioned the stories on the front page - many above the fold, and, in some instances above the banner.<sup>109</sup> But why was the press so interested in the world heavyweight-boxing champion? Consider that in the same manner that the Olympic 100-meter dash gold medal winner is the titular “fastest man on the planet,”<sup>110</sup> the heavyweight-boxing champion was considered to be, physically, the “toughest man on the planet.” Norman Mailer said of the holder of the crown:

...for the heavyweight champion of the world is either the toughest man in the world or he is not, but there is a real possibility he is. It is like being the big toe of God. You have nothing to measure yourself by.<sup>111</sup>

In the lead up to the first heavyweight match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in 1971, in a story he wrote for the *New York Times* (WP), Columbia professor Victor S.

Navasky offered this quote from Eldridge Cleaver:

In America we give maximum expression to our blood lust in the mass spectator sport of boxing. Some of us are Roman enough to admit our love and need of the sport. Others pretend to look the other way. But when a heavyweight

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<sup>108</sup> At the time of this writing, there are actually four champions recognized by four different sanctioning organizations. The most widely recognized would be, Deontay Wilder. A fighter from the United States, he holds the WBC belt.

<sup>109</sup> Boyack, James E. "Psychological Superiority Will Beat Joe--Schmeling." *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), City Edition ed.: 1. May 21 1938. ProQuest.Web. 1 Apr. 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Findling, John E., and Kimberly D. Pelle. *Historical Dictionary of the Modern Olympic Movement*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996. 432. Print.

<sup>111</sup> Mailer, Norman. *King of the Hill: Norman Mailer on the Fight of the Century*. New York: New American Library, 1971. 29. Print.

championship fight rolls around, the nation takes a moral holiday and we are all tuned in. The boxing ring is the ultimate focus for masculinity in America, the two-fisted testing ground of manhood, and the heavyweight championship as symbol, is the real Mr. America.<sup>112</sup>

Historian Theresa E. Runstedtler wrote that, at one time, the ability of a person or a group of persons to fight was considered a political and cultural status symbol for ethnicities and entire nations. She noted that Teddy Roosevelt followed this line of reasoning when he said his experience in the ring played a role in his success as a military leader in the Spanish-American War. Runstedtler noted that this same school of thought was tested when African-Americans, like Jack Johnson, began to ascend to great heights in the boxing ring:

Wherever they traveled, Johnson and other black boxers publicly disrupted not only mainstream ideals of the white male body and white body politic but also the racial fictions of the degenerate stage dandy.<sup>113</sup>

Randy Roberts, citing Dale Somers, noted that when John L. Sullivan, who was white, held the title he was considered “the greatest fighter in the world; Sullivan is an American; *ergo* America is the world’s greatest country.”<sup>114</sup> Therefore, if a black man could become the heavyweight champion, as Runstedtler noted above, it was counter-intuitive to the argument of those who clung to the belief in innate white supremacy. That is, according to white supremacists, a black champion from the United States did not just make white Americans look bad, it made America look bad in the eyes of the rest of the white world. Speaking of those Americans who clung to the idea of white supremacy and boxing, Roberts said:

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<sup>112</sup> VICTOR S. "All our Conflicts on Violence, Sex, Race and Money." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 14 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Mar. 2018.

<sup>113</sup> *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line*, by Runstedtler, Theresa, University of California Press, 2013, p. 33.

<sup>114</sup> Roberts, Randy. *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*. New York: Free, 1983. 17-18. Print.

Such heady theories became blurred when blacks fought whites. White theorists could not use a victory by a black fighter over a white boxer as an indication of America's special fitness; indeed, such an outcome tended to diminish the "scientific" racial stature of white Americans.<sup>115</sup>

The symbolic racial power of the *heavyweight* title is also evident in the fact that, throughout the early days of the sport, there were often black titleholders in lower weight divisions. Therefore, the white boxing power structure would allow black fighters to compete for the championship belt in those weight divisions below heavyweight since the lower weights did not possess the symbolic hegemonic significance of the larger than life men who wore the heavyweight crown.<sup>116</sup> The first black boxing title-holder was the Canadian born George Dixon. At 118 pounds, Dixon won the bantamweight championship in 1890, 18 years before Johnson was even given the chance to fight for the heavyweight title.<sup>117</sup>

In addition to the publicity that the champion garnered *inside* the ring by capturing the heavyweight crown, due to the notoriety that accompanied the prize, he was often afforded a podium where he could speak as a public figure outside the ring. By the 1960s, Muhammad Ali was able to use this podium to present an overt and explicit message about race, religion, politics and war. Although they did not explicitly promote racial equality, the achievements and actions of Johnson and Louis also presented, albeit symbolically, a racial message that went against the white hegemonic status quo.

### *Boxing and the media*

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<sup>115</sup> *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*, by Randy Roberts, W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2017, p. 18.

<sup>116</sup> Gilmore, Al-Tony. "Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson." Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1975. 27. Print.

<sup>117</sup> "George Dixon, An Early Champion Boxer." *African American Registry*. N.p., n.d. Web.

*Writers have long been attracted to boxing, from the early days of the English Prize Ring to the present time. Its most immediate appeal is that of the spectacle, in itself wordless, lacking a language, that requires others to define it, celebrate it, complete it.*<sup>118</sup>

Joyce Carol Oates

Boxing does not have a season, like baseball, or hockey. On any given week during the year there is a fight card scheduled somewhere. And while there may be a fight card each week occurring somewhere in the world, on average, there may be only one major fight card per month that draws attention from fans.<sup>119</sup> Boxing coverage on traditional platforms peaks in the week leading up to a major fight. For example, ahead of the Ali-Frazier fight in 1971, the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) wire services were supplying newspapers around the country with two or three articles per day about the events surrounding the lead-up to that fight (e.g., ticket prices, comments from the fighters, sparring session results, etc.). Boxing *enthusiasts* differ from other sports fans as well. While most interested football or baseball observers have a favorite – usually local – team they follow, most boxing enthusiasts enjoy watching boxing. That is, any boxer at any weight level from any country (although, they probably have a favorite fighter or two). And while some fans of a particular baseball team may have developed that interest through a parent or grandparent, boxing fans cannot really do that with individual boxers. While a baseball team may have existed for more than a century (with individual players changing over time), a boxer’s career is finite based on age, and abilities.

This more nationalized nature of matches makes boxing coverage in the twentieth century more salient than many other sports. As they did covering the Ali-Frazier fight,

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<sup>118</sup> Oates, 50.

<sup>119</sup> Compared to 162 Major League Baseball games for each of the 30 teams each season – or, 2,430 games.

the AP and UPI wire services regularly covered big fights in the last century. This meant that stories would be delivered in newspapers, in large cities and small, all across the country. Throughout the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, big fights and their coverage in the press were more akin to coverage of the Super Bowl today. This meant that the press coverage and the “water cooler” talk of the fight were national in scope. But, unlike the Super Bowl, boxing matches are between two individual men (or women), not two teams of athletes. In the week before the Super Bowl reporters might talk to a dozen or more players from each team about the upcoming game. In a fight there are really only two participants for the writers to speak with and about (although a boxer’s trainer, manager, or fans may, on occasion, be quoted). This meant that the individual fighters who were presented in the coverage were more widely known in popular culture and therefore had the potential to be more culturally significant. The names of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali were more nationally salient during their prime as boxers than the New England Patriots, Denver Broncos or Dallas Cowboys are today.

### **The Fighters: Jack Johnson**

*Jack Johnson has harmed rather than helped the race. I wish to say emphatically that his actions do not meet my approval and I’m sure they do not meet the approval of the colored race.*<sup>120</sup>

Booker T. Washington

John Arthur “Jack” Johnson was born in Galveston, Texas on the last day of March 1878. As an adult, Johnson was known for flaunting racial convention in Jim Crowe America. This may have stemmed from his boyhood days on the Texas coast. As a boy he hung out with a group of white kids; “I ate with them, played with them and slept at their homes,” Johnson said. “No one ever taught me that white men were superior

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<sup>120</sup> Shropshire, Kenneth L. *Being Sugar Ray: The Life of Sugar Ray Robinson, America's Greatest Boxer and First Celebrity Athlete*. New York, NY: BasicCivitas, 2007. 44. Print.

to me.”<sup>121</sup> Johnson’s parents were both freed slaves. The realities of slavery vis-à-vis his father were likely apparent in young Jack’s daily life. But it was Johnson’s mother, Tina, who had a greater influence on him. It would be his mother who first taught him how to fight.<sup>122</sup>

As a first generation freedman, Johnson lived the unapologetic life of emancipation. As an adult, everything about Johnson went against every layer of racial and social order in the first decade of the twentieth century. As Randy Roberts said, “He embodied the white man’s nightmare of racial chaos.”<sup>123</sup> Much of the negative feelings of whites toward Johnson were based on his preference for white women. And, it wasn’t just whites who disliked his choice of lovers. Even black intellectual leaders at the time, like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, were “cautious” about their feelings regarding Johnson. Du Bois, like much of White America, was opposed to interracial marriage although, unlike most whites, he did not believe that the practice should be outlawed.<sup>124</sup>

According to contemporary literature many average black Americans were not all that enamored with Johnson either. But this was not over his preference of lovers. Denise C. Morgan noted:

... the anger of the Black community was also a product of their fear that Johnson’s objective was to associate himself with those on the upper rungs of the racial hierarchy rather than to dismantle the hierarchy.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ward, Geoffrey C. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 2004. Print. PG.21

<sup>122</sup> Roberts, 4.

<sup>123</sup> Roberts, 6.

<sup>124</sup> Roberts, 160.

<sup>125</sup> Morgan, Denise C. "Jack Johnson: Reluctant Hero of the Black Community." *Akron L. Rev.* 32 (1999): 531.

While Morgan noted that Johnson wanted to be more closely associated with whites out of the ring, his dislike for his white opponents in the ring was sometimes obvious. Randy Roberts wrote that in his championship fight against the white Tommy Burns:

Before the white audience, Johnson punished Burns. And he enjoyed every second of it. But punishment was not enough. Johnson wanted to also humiliate Burns. He did this verbally. In almost every taunt Johnson referred to Burns in the diminutive. It was always “Tommy Boy” or “little Tommy.” And always a derisive smile accompanied the words.<sup>126</sup>

Roberts noted that it was in the 1960s when Muhammad Ali began to question the racial status quo in America that Johnson was, to some degree, re-discovered. But, Roberts revealed that the real Johnson did not actually fit the mold of a race hero that sixties radicals had built for the man. While the radicals may have appreciated the way Johnson overtly and explicitly poked White America in the eye fifty years earlier, agreeing with Morgan, Roberts posited that, unlike the sixties radicals, Johnson desperately wanted to be accepted by whites.<sup>127</sup>

Of course the main reason that many white people were not fans of Johnson was also based on the crown that he wore. As noted above, the heavyweight title in Johnson’s time carried with it a great deal of nationalist and racial pride. Roberts quotes Dale A. Somers, who said:

When the prize ring produced men capable of beating all rivals in such rigorous, primeval struggles, it seemed to justify America’s competitive system to prove the value of the system’s scientific underpinning.<sup>128</sup>

This American ideal, as noted by Somers, that with enough hard work and determination anyone in this country could rise to the top, would emerge during Joe Louis’s and

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<sup>126</sup> Roberts, 66.

<sup>127</sup> Roberts, 229.

<sup>128</sup> Roberts, 17-18.



Muhammad Ali's times as well. That is, the beliefs by some that boxing matches were "raceless" because the best fighter will prevail without regard for race.

After Johnson won the heavyweight title, a search began for a white heavyweight to beat Johnson; the search for the so-called, "Great White Hope." As noted earlier, the heavyweight crown was considered such an important cultural icon that many white people did not believe the crown should be worn on the head of a black fighter. After the search for "white hopes" proved fruitless, many white Americans urged Jim Jeffries, the former title holder who had retired undefeated, to return to the ring to snatch the crown off the head of the black man. But just how did Johnson end up as the first black man to wear the vaunted crown?

### *Chasing Tommy*

Before Jack Johnson became the first African-American to fight for the championship, black heavyweights were not given an opportunity to fight for the title, period. White heavyweight champions, like John L. Sullivan, drew a "color line," refusing to compete against a black fighter in a championship bout, although white heavyweights competed against black fighters when the title was not on the line. Jim Jeffries, a little more than a year before winning the championship, fought black heavyweight Peter Jackson.<sup>129</sup> But since black heavyweights did not get many opportunities to fight white heavyweights the top black fighters ended up fighting against each other – a lot! In 1907 Jack Johnson and Joe Jeannette faced off inside the ring five times. Roberts wrote of this phenomenon:

The four or five very talented black heavyweights were forced by economic necessity to fight each other. No fighter realized this grim fact more than Sam

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<sup>129</sup> "James J. Jeffries." *BoxRec*, [boxrec.com/en/boxer/9022](http://boxrec.com/en/boxer/9022).

Langford, the great heavyweight from Nova Scotia. He fought Jeannette fourteen times, Sam McVey fifteen times, and, incredibly, Harry Wills twenty-three times. Langford fought the lesser black heavyweights Jim Barry twelve times and Jeff Clark eleven times.<sup>130</sup>

As noted in chapter one, this color line really only existed in the heavyweight division.

Black fighters did compete and win championships in lower weight classes.

By 1903 Jack Johnson had emerged on the boxing scene as a good defensive fighter who also packed a powerful punch. He had won the “World Colored Heavyweight Championship,”<sup>131</sup> but he wanted to compete against the white champ, Jim Jeffries, to become the World Heavyweight Boxing Champion. Johnson even went to Jeffries’ bar to challenge Jeff’s to meet him in the ring. Legend has it that Jeffries invited Johnson to fight him in the bar’s cellar. The legend claims Johnson declined the invitation and Jeffries declined to meet Johnson in a boxing ring before retiring.<sup>132</sup>

After Jeffries retirement Marvin Hart won the title before quickly losing it on his first title defense against Tommy Burns.<sup>133</sup> Johnson finally saw a crack in the color line when Burns said, if he could be guaranteed \$30,000, he would meet Johnson in the ring with the title on the line.<sup>134</sup> Johnson had begun following Burns around the world with the hope of getting the new champion to agree to a match. An agreement was almost reached in England before Burns departed for Australia in August of 1908. Staying on Burns’ tail, Johnson would arrive in Perth just two months later. A promoter in Australia

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<sup>130</sup> *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*, by Randy Roberts, W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2017, p. 45.

<sup>131</sup> “World Colored Heavyweight Championship.” *BoxRec*, [boxrec.com/media/index.php/World\\_Colored\\_Heavyweight\\_Championship](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/World_Colored_Heavyweight_Championship).

<sup>132</sup> *Bert Sugar on Boxing: the Best of the Sport's Most Notable Writer*, by Bert Randolph. Sugar, Lyon's Press, 2005, p. 77.

<sup>133</sup> “World Heavyweight Champion.” *BoxRec*, [boxrec.com/media/index.php/World\\_Heavyweight\\_Champion](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/World_Heavyweight_Champion).

<sup>134</sup> Roberts, Randy. *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*. New York: Free, 1983. 53. Print.

managed to meet Burns' price while Johnson agreed to the match for \$6,000.<sup>135</sup> For the first time in boxing history, a black man would be fighting the white titleholder with the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship on the line. Looking at film of the fight, Johnson - slightly taller than six feet - appears like a Goliath compared to the five feet seven inch Burns, playing the role of David.<sup>136</sup> But, this time, Goliath would win.

On Boxing Day (December, 26) in 1908, Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion of the world. In the U.S., the *New York Evening Journal* (WP) seemed to greet the news of the fight with a reasonable level of respect and followed the "raceless" argument with regard to fights between white and black fighters.<sup>137</sup> Others, like novelist Jack London, immediately began a crusade to find a white opponent to defeat Johnson. London is given credit for labeling this potential challenger the "white hope;" a Caucasian man who could return the crown to, what many considered, its rightful people.<sup>138</sup>

Roberts noted that some sportswriters at the time treated the Johnson victory rhetorically in terms that equated it to Armageddon. Superlatives like, "greatest tragedy, deepest gloom, saddest day," and "darkest night," were seen on the pages of some newspapers.<sup>139</sup> There was a good news-bad news dichotomy for African-Americans after Jack Johnson grabbed the heavyweight crown. The good news, a black man had held the title. The bad news, the white sports power structure decided that they were not going let

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<sup>135</sup> Sugar, 2005, p. 78.

<sup>136</sup> "Jack Johnson vs Tommy Burns." *YouTube*, 5 July 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i4YtsnMvIM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i4YtsnMvIM).

<sup>137</sup> Gilmore, Al-Tony. "Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson." Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1975. 29. Print.

<sup>138</sup> Runstedtler, Theresa. "In Sports the Best Man Wins How Joe Louis Whupped Jim Crow." *Sport in America*. From *Wicked Amusement to National Obsession*. Ed. David Kenneth Wiggins. N.p.: n.p., 1995. 110. Print.

<sup>139</sup> Roberts, 54.

you play anymore. Timothy Davis noted this double-edged sword phenomenon regarding African-American achievements in sports. Davis wrote:

Ironically, the success and acclaim that African Americans had achieved in horseracing, cycling, and baseball ultimately limited their participation opportunities. African-American success in sporting endeavors contradicted the theories of black inferiority and invoked fears of many whites of sports being taken over by African Americans.<sup>30</sup> In addition, white players were jealous of the success of black athletes.<sup>140</sup>

After Johnson lost the title to the white Jess Willard in 1915 it would be more than 20 years before another black heavyweight, Joe Louis, would be given the opportunity to compete for the heavyweight crown. The presentation of Jack Johnson in both the white and the black press at the time laid the foundation for how black heavyweight champions, like Louis, would be presented in the press in the future.

As noted in the introduction, the Jack Johnson case study, chapter three, will be an analysis of the press coverage of Johnson's fight against Jeffries in 1910 in both the black and white newspapers. This will be compared to the cultural memory of Jack Johnson and the fight vis-à-vis Ken Burns' documentary series that aired on national public broadcasting in 2004. Based on its title, Burns' two-part documentary on Johnson, "Unforgivable Blackness," frames Johnson as a hero based on how he ultimately overcame overwhelming hatred by whites at the time he was fighting. Surprisingly, this same frame was not explicitly presented on the pages of the press who covered the first, "Fight of the Century."

### **The Fighters: Joe Louis**

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<sup>140</sup> Davis, Timothy. (2008). Race and sports in America: An historical overview. *Virginia Sports and Entertainment Law Journal*, 7(2), 291-311.

*Joe Louis was a Martin Luther King with boxing gloves on. He gave us black people hope.*<sup>141</sup>

Drew Bundini Brown, boxing corner man for Muhammad Ali

The dislike for Jack Johnson was so strong that, as noted above, a black man was not even offered the opportunity to compete for the heavyweight championship for more than two decades after Johnson lost the title. Even after 20 years, remnants of the feelings toward Johnson were so evident that when Joe Louis's manager, John Roxborough, tried to hire trainer Jack Blackburn, Blackburn declined the offer stating that, because of Jack Johnson, no black fighter would even be offered a title shot. Author Gerald Suster said:

There was only one problem in marketing this swift, young and powerful panther of a fighter: he was black. After the excesses of Jack Johnson, could the American public stomach a black world heavyweight champion?<sup>142</sup>

In order to try and convince Blackburn, Roxborough assured him that Louis would be given specific rules that he had to follow both inside and outside of a boxing ring. These seven "commandments" were explicitly constructed to give Louis the appearance of the anti-Johnson.

1. He was never to have his picture taken with a white woman.
2. He was never to go to 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 "dead pan" in front of the cameras.
7. He was to live and fight clean.<sup>143</sup>

Louis agreed to live by the rules and Blackburn agreed to train Louis. Because of the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, Louis was considered by some in the press to be either dull or ignorant.<sup>144</sup>

This is a conundrum that many black athletes would face. While the complaint against

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<sup>141</sup> McCallum, John D. "The World Heavyweight Boxing Championship; a History." First ed. Radnor, PA: Chilton Book, 1974. 198.

<sup>142</sup> *Champions of the Ring: the Lives and Times of Boxing's Heavyweight Heroes*, by Gerald Suster, Robson Books, 1994, p. 154.

<sup>143</sup> Louis, Joe, Edna Rust, and Art Rust. *Joe Louis: My Life*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1997. 38-39. Print.

<sup>144</sup> Smith, Wilfrid. "One of Two Words Describes Joe Louis; what's Your Guess?" *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*, Jun 06 1937, p. 2. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 May 2018.

Johnson was that he was a little too “exciting,” Louis’ effort to be the anti-Johnson led some to believe that he was too boring. After training under the tutelage of Blackburn, on Independence Day of 1934, Louis made his professional boxing debut against veteran heavyweight, Jack Kracken, a six foot, two inch Norwegian who lived in Bremerton, Washington.<sup>145</sup> Louis knocked Kracken out in the first round.<sup>146</sup>

By June of 1936, Louis had faced 24 opponents and was undefeated. Many boxing experts believed that Louis was unbeatable when he signed to fight former heavyweight champion Max Schmeling. Louis was an eight to one betting favorite when he entered the ring against the German, Schmeling. Unfortunately, Louis believed the hype about himself. He had recently taken up golf and was completely enamored with the game. In the lead up to the fight, he spent more time on the golf course than he did in the gym.<sup>147</sup> Schmeling earned an upset victory by knocking Louis out in the 12<sup>th</sup> round. The underdog German was lauded as a national hero and praised by Adolph Hitler upon his return to Berlin.<sup>148</sup> While most white Americans did not think too much of the loss, black Americans had a difficult time listening on the radio as Louis was counted out lying on the ring canvas. Historian Gerald Early noted that Louis was indeed a hero who represented the aspirations of all black Americans and when he was beaten by Schmeling this was felt by all of black America.<sup>149</sup>

Louis spent the next two years working his way back, winning the heavyweight crown from James Braddock along the way. Two years after Schmeling beat Louis, he

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<sup>145</sup> Boxrec, [boxrec.com/en/boxer/120764](http://boxrec.com/en/boxer/120764).

<sup>146</sup> "Joe Louis." BoxRec. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 July 2016.

<sup>147</sup> Louis, Joe, et al. *Joe Louis: My Life*, Ecco Press, 1997, pp. 83–83.

<sup>148</sup> "Germany Acclaims Schmeling as National Hero for His Victory Over Louis." *New York Times* (1923-Current file): 1. Jun 21 1936. ProQuest. Web. 15 July 2016.

<sup>149</sup> *America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008.

was scheduled to battle the German again. In 1938, with Hitler working to expand the Third Reich and promoting a Nazi belief in white racial supremacy, many today believe the battle between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling represented much more than just a boxing match for the heavyweight championship crown. To some it is remembered, at least metaphorically, as a geo-political battle between Nazi Germany and the democratic America. Today, many present the second Louis vs. Schmeling match as a key moment in the lead-up to World War II, framing the fight in this geo-political manner. Because of this, some even called Louis a black version of the “white hope.”

In 2008 the late comedian and activist Dick Gregory noted that in the match against the German and Nazi sympathizing Schmeling, Louis was seen as the first black man in America to be considered a “Great White Hope.”<sup>150</sup> Gregory was referring to the commonly held belief today that white Americans were strongly behind Louis in his fight against Schmeling. But, was there evidence of this in the press at the time? Contemporary media also play up the geo-political nature of the battle between the American, Louis, and the Nazi sympathizing Schmeling. A biography of Joe Louis on the History Channel’s website<sup>151</sup> says that:

...the press imbued the bout with international political significance, portraying the match as an epic battle between Nazi ideology and American democratic ideals...<sup>152</sup>

Again, was this geo-political conflict with regard to the boxing match presented in the press in the lead up to the fight or is this a construction of the cultural memory? Looking at newspaper coverage just two days before the match took place in 1938, we might be

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<sup>150</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008.

<sup>151</sup> While wiki sites like Box Rec and a site for a cable television network are normally forbidden in academic research, the point here is to compare popular public opinion today, the cultural memory, against newspaper portrayals of the event at the time of the fight. These sites are certainly indicative of popular public opinion.

<sup>152</sup> History.com Staff. "Joe Louis." History.com. A&E Television Networks, 01 Jan. 2010. Web. 12 May 2016.

surprised to read that one of the fight's promoters complained that the press was more focused on Babe Ruth and Sea Biscuit<sup>153</sup> than they were on a match that today is called "the greatest fight of our generation."<sup>154</sup>

As noted in Early's statement above, today Louis is presented as being a hero to *all* Americans in his 1938 battle against Schmeling. Contemporary media believe that, to some degree, this resulted in Louis being immune to the racial problems of the time. Runstedtler said in 2010 that after Louis beat Schmeling in 1938, "white America embraced the black heavyweight champion as a national hero."<sup>155</sup> But how did Louis' journey to this point begin?

Louis was born, Joseph Louis Barrow, in Lafayette, Alabama on May 13, 1914.<sup>156</sup> His father, Munroe Barrow, the son of a slave, worked the Alabama cotton fields as a sharecropper. Louis was only two-years-old when his father was institutionalized for mental illness. His mother, Lillie Reese, would remarry and, along with his seven siblings, the entire family moved to Detroit as part of the Great Migration.<sup>157</sup> Louis was good with his hands and took advantage of that by studying to be a cabinetmaker and playing the violin. A neighborhood friend introduced him to boxing when he was just 11 years old. Louis worked his way up through the amateur ranks as a teenager raking up 50 wins, 43 by knockout, with only four losses.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> RING PROMOTERS DEPLORE APATHY OF NEWSPAPERS: Coolness to Title Bout ..., Ward, Arch. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 21, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 17

<sup>154</sup> Erenberg, Lewis A. *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.

<sup>155</sup> Runstedtler, Theresa. "In Sports the Best Man Wins How Joe Louis Whupped Jim Crow." *Sport in America*. From *Wicked Amusement to National Obsession*. Ed. David Kenneth Wiggins. N.p.: n.p., 1995. 42. Print.

<sup>156</sup> "Joe Louis." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Inc., 10 May 2018, [www.britannica.com/biography/Joe-Louis](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Joe-Louis).

<sup>157</sup> "Joe Louis." *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, 14 Mar. 2018, [nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/joe-louis](http://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/joe-louis).

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*



As noted above, Louis turned pro in 1934 and was undefeated, and many thought he was simply unbeatable, before his surprising defeat at the hands of Schmeling in 1936. Louis was determined to avenge the loss and won his next 11 fights, nine by knockout. One of those knockouts, against Jim Braddock in June of 1937, would earn Louis the heavyweight crown. He fought three more times, knocking out all three opponents, before he would face Max Schmeling in a ring for their much anticipated rematch in 1938.

The Joe Louis case study, in chapter four, will be analysis of the presentation in both the black and white newspapers at the time of the second Louis versus Schmeling fight in 1938. These results will be compared to the cultural memory vis-à-vis the HBO documentary film about Louis' life. The film first aired on the cable channel in 2008. The film's title, "Joe Louis: America's Hero Betrayed," indicated that he was a hero first and was later betrayed. The betrayal comes from the fact that late in his boxing career the United States government went after the boxer over back taxes that he owed. In looking at the newspaper coverage of Louis at the time of the second Schmeling fight we will see that he was not presented as a geo-political warrior for democracy – a hero – who battled the white supremacy of Nazi Germany.

In barroom arguments, some still consider Louis to be the greatest heavyweight fighter of all time. Louis successfully defended his title 25 times and reigned as champion for 11 years and eight months.<sup>159</sup> Only Ukrainian boxer Wladimir Klitschko held the title longer. He lost the crown in 2015 after defending it for exactly 12 years.

### **The Fighters: Muhammad Ali, a.k.a., Cassius Clay**

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<sup>159</sup> "Joe Louis." *BoxRec*, [boxrec.com/en/boxer/9027](http://boxrec.com/en/boxer/9027).

*"I am America," he once declared. "I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me – black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own. Get used to me."*<sup>160</sup>

Barack Obama (quoting Muhammad Ali after his death)

In August of 1960, young and personable, Cassius Clay was featured in a *Chicago Tribune* (WP) story from the summer Olympics in Rome. The headline on page 3 of the sports section read, "Champ Boxer Proves a Champ Ambassador." The feature story told about a group of female athletes from the United States Olympic team. According to the Associated Press copy, the girls "exuberant living" in the Olympic Village had become a bit of a scandal in Rome during their off time at those summer games. "'We felt,' said an official, 'that some of the girls were putting more effort into the dance floor than they were on the field, so we asked them to tone it down.'"<sup>161</sup> The article was highlighting the rising talents of Clay, who had "taken over from United States girls jitterbuggers as Uncle Sam's unofficial goodwill ambassador to the 1960 Olympic Games."<sup>162</sup>

In Rome, Clay was asked by a Russian reporter about racial discrimination in America, and the boxer responded: "Tell your readers we got qualified people working on that problem, and I'm not worried about the outcome. To me, the USA is the best country in the world, including yours."<sup>163</sup> This marked one of the few times in that decade that Ali's actions on a world stage would be highlighted on the sports pages as *pro-American*.

Known then by his family name - Cassius Clay - he was six foot, one-and-a-half inches tall and tipped the scales at just 176 pounds. After winning the gold medal in the

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<sup>160</sup> "Statement from President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama on the Passing of Muhammad Ali." The White House. The White House, 04 June 2016. Web. 14 July 2016.

<sup>161</sup> Associated Press, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 26, 1960, C-3.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Hauser, Thomas. *Muhammad Ali: His Life and times*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991. 28.

light-heavyweight division at the Summer Olympic Games in Rome, he spoke humbly and with a bit of a Southern drawl, evidence of his birth state of Kentucky.<sup>164</sup>

**Cassius Clay Wins  
1st Professional Bout**  
Louisville, Oct. 29 (AP) — Cassius Clay, the Olympic light heavyweight and Golden Gloves heavyweight champion, made his professional debut tonight by beating Tunney Hunsaker in a six round fight at Freedom hall.

A little over one month after returning from Rome with the highest honor that an amateur fighter can obtain, an Olympic Gold Medal, Cassius Clay was victorious in his first *professional* boxing match. Most readers probably overlooked the one column, seven-plus lines of copy on page

8 in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP).<sup>165</sup> On the same topic, *The New York Times* (WP) outdid the *Tribune* with two more lines of type on the seventh page of their sports section.<sup>166</sup>

In May of 1961, with five more wins under his belt, Clay was promoted in a feature story headlined, “Man with a Future.” *New York Times* (WP) columnist Arthur Daley noted: “This good-looking boy is a charmer and is so natural that even his more extravagant statements sound like exuberance instead of braggadocio. On him they look good.” Daley’s last line in the piece read: “Here is a refreshing and highly personable young man.”<sup>167</sup> Daley would soon change his tune about Clay.

Later that summer, while in Las Vegas to fight Duke Sabedong, Clay met a man with a perfectly coiffed curly gold mane. George Raymond Wagner offered the young up-and-coming boxer a little advice that would ultimately aid in creating Clay’s public persona. Wagner and Clay met in the locker room after Wagner, also known as Gorgeous George, won a wrestling match before an audience of 5,000 *booing* spectators inside the new Las Vegas Convention Center. Wagner, who at age 46 was nearing the end of his

<sup>164</sup> “Muhammad Ali Interview on His Name.” *YouTube*, 15 Nov. 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxFHQd-rj0A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxFHQd-rj0A).

<sup>165</sup> “Cassius Clay Wins 1st Professional Bout.” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*, Oct 30 1960, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 21 May 2018.

<sup>166</sup> “CLAY WINS PRO DEBUT.” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Oct 30 1960, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 29 May 2018.

<sup>167</sup> By, ARTHUR D. “Sports of the Times.” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, May 14 1961, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 29 May 2018.

illustrious wrestling career, was symbolically passing the torch to Clay. “You got your good looks, a great body, and a lot of people will pay to see somebody shut your mouth.” Wagner continued, “so keep on bragging, keep on sassing, and always be outrageous.” Prior to this, Clay himself admitted that, while not completely humble, he certainly was no braggart.<sup>168</sup>

Cassius Clay took Wagner’s advice and the untraditional step of proclaiming loudly and forcefully to any reporter within shouting distance his greatness. His style *in* the ring was also not traditional and many reporters liked to point this out. “This was offensive to these reporters,” recalled *New York Times* (WP) reporter, Robert Lipsyte. “They were offended by the way he fought. Instead of moving his head from side-to-side to slip punches he leaned back. No successful boxer had done that.”<sup>169</sup> Many writers and former fighters would make the mistake of publicly proclaiming that Clay’s unusual style was a detriment that would eventually be exposed once he faced a better opponent.

As, mentioned above, one of those was *New York Times* columnist, Arthur Daley. Writing in his “Sports of The Times” column in September of 1962, he described Clay as “slightly immodest” and “likeable.”<sup>170</sup> Less than two months later Daley’s writing suggested that he already is finding Clay to be less likeable. “This amusing charmer used the device of braggadocio to gain attention. He has gained it.” Daley continued, “...his boasting now begins to irritate. He certainly won few friends in his post-fight ‘I’m the greatest’ proclamations.”<sup>171</sup> By July 1963 Daley also began to question Clay’s boxing skills when he wrote that Clay is “an overrated extrovert” adding that the “Louisville Lip

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<sup>168</sup> John Capouya, anonymous review of *Gorgeous George: the Outrageous Bad Boy Wrestler who Created American Pop Culture* (Harper Entertainment, 2008). <http://www.booknoise.net/gorgeous/ali.html> (accessed October 21, 2011)

<sup>169</sup> Mederson, Mark. Interview with Robert Lipsyte. Phone interview, October 21, 2011.

<sup>170</sup> Arthur Daley, *The New York Times*, September 22, 1962, 59.

<sup>171</sup> Arthur Daley, *The New York Times*, November 19, 1962, 45.

talks too much.” In the second paragraph of his column subtitled, “Arousing Anger,” Daley opined, “Clay is lousing up his public relations by his boasting and it’s high time he eased off and let his fists serve as spokesman.” Further down the column Daley quoted a boxing trainer who was giving his expert opinion on Clay’s boxing talents (although the trainer did not want to be identified). At this point Cassius had fought and won 20 fights as a heavyweight professional. Subtitled, “Severe Handicaps,” Daley quoted the trainer. “Clay doesn’t know how to fight,” he said. “Clay ducks and rolls his head. He’s always showing off, as if someone oughter (sic) give him a medal. He doesn’t keep his hands up and he doesn’t seem to learn anything.”<sup>172</sup> In just over two years, Daley went from writing about Clay’s bright future as a boxer and noting his personality as that of a “charmer” to presenting opinions that Clay was an overrated loud mouth.

One year earlier, in February 1962, Clay was in New York to fight for the first time on boxing’s biggest stage -- Madison Square Garden. Surrounded by a gaggle of New York sports writers the day before the fight, Clay announced that boxing “needs more guys to liven it up,” and he said confidently that he was the right man to accomplish that task. After only 10 professional fights the 20-year-old Clay boasted that he would fight the current title-holder, Floyd Patterson, “tomorrow if they could make the match.” The un-credited *New York Times* (WP) writer found Clay “convincing” when he announced that if he lost to his opponent Sonny Banks the next evening he would “take the first jet plane out of the country.”<sup>173</sup>

Writers and fans were taking note of the young boxer who was now becoming quite adept at the art of self-promotion. The next evening Clay was “chided by fans” as

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<sup>172</sup> Arthur Daley, *The New York Times*, July 25, 1963, 41.

<sup>173</sup> “Clay Expects to Enliven Boxing as Well as Win World Crown.” *New York Times* (1923-Current file), Feb 07 1962, p. 60. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 May 2018.

soon as he entered the arena for the Banks fight and the fans “chortled with glee every time yon Cassius was tagged with anything resembling a solid punch.” *New York Times* (WP) sports writer Robert Teague noted: in the third round “everything went Clay’s way. In fact, he began looking almost as capable as he says he is.”<sup>174</sup> With a portion of the crowd in the Garden that night actively and loudly cheering for Clay -- to lose, the young boxer was proving successful at heeding the old wrestler’s advice. Gorgeous George’s torch was now burning brightly in the hands of a new “gorgeous” athlete.

By 1964, the lanky former Olympian was now six foot three with 34 more pounds packed on to his muscular frame. In February Clay met the champion, Sonny Liston, in a ring in Miami Beach in a battle for the heavyweight crown. It must be noted that Liston was to 1960’s boxing what Mike Tyson was in the 1980s and early 90s. That is, someone whose fists were nearly lethal – one good punch could end a fight. Both Liston and Tyson became famous behind their left hook.

In the months leading up to the fight the sports columnists and writers were nearly unanimous in agreement when writing about who they thought would win; Liston by a knockout. Covering the fight in Miami Beach, Robert Lipsyte wrote in his story for the *New York Times* (WP) that “Only three of 46 sportswriters covering the fight had picked [Clay] to win” before the fight.<sup>175</sup> When Sonny Liston was unable to answer the bell to begin round seven that night in Miami Beach, it set off a scene of pure bedlam. Clay was screaming and bouncing around the ring. At one point he leaned over the ropes to the

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<sup>174</sup> By, ROBERT L. "CLAY STOPS BANKS IN FOURTH ROUND." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Feb 11 1962, p.

<sup>173</sup> *ProQuest*. Web. 22 May 2018.

<sup>175</sup> By ROBERT LIPSYTE Special to The New York Times. "Liston 7-1 Choice to Beat Clay Tonight and Keep Heavyweight Title." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Feb 25 1964, p. 34. *ProQuest*. Web. 29 May 2018.

press at ringside yelling, “I shook up the world,” and, “I am the greatest!”<sup>176</sup> Clay’s upset victory was presented in the press the following day with an air of suspicion.

The majority of the type on page 18 of the *Berkshire Eagle* (WP) was devoted to post-fight coverage of Clay’s upset over Liston, including reactions from people who had watched the fight.<sup>177</sup> Two of the stories highlighted the unlikelihood of Clay’s ability to beat an unbeatable foe – one article even noted that Liston’s purse was being upheld while an investigation took place. Another piece quoted fans who, upon leaving a closed circuit broadcast of the fight, suspected a “fix.” The headline read, “Most Viewers Decline To Believe It Was Real.” The writer, Roger O’Gara, called it a “synthetic victory” and a “fiasco.” O’Gara observed fans leaving the broadcast who “caustically spoke about a fix.” The article included a claim from a skeptic that “Cassius’ dance of delight started before the inspection party adjourned across the ring.”<sup>178</sup> This theme would be repeated on the sports pages of papers across the country and around the world.<sup>179</sup> While Clay had beaten another black fighter, some white Americans were not happy that a boastful black man, the “Louisville Lip,” was now the heavyweight titleholder, suggesting in the press that the only way he could have won was by cheating.

Just four years after the humble, soft-spoken kid from Kentucky won a gold medal in Rome, Clay now spoke loudly and forcefully. The press would soon discover that the vocal new champion had also experienced a religious conversion and a name change. The white press, who found him rather charming four years earlier at the

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<sup>176</sup> katis999. “Sonny Liston vs Muhammad Ali I.” *YouTube*, 1 Aug. 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=z\\_fd2WFWzE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_fd2WFWzE).

<sup>177</sup> “Berkshire Eagle.” *Berkshire Eagle*, 26 Feb. 1964, [access-newspaperarchive-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/us/massachusetts/pittsfield/berkshire-eagle/1964/02-26/page-18/berkshire-eagle?ndt=bd&pd=24&pe=28&pem=2&py=1964&pm=2&pey=1964&pf=cassius&pl=clay&psb=relevance](http://access-newspaperarchive-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/us/massachusetts/pittsfield/berkshire-eagle/1964/02-26/page-18/berkshire-eagle?ndt=bd&pd=24&pe=28&pem=2&py=1964&pm=2&pey=1964&pf=cassius&pl=clay&psb=relevance).

<sup>178</sup> Roger O’Gara, *The Berkshire Eagle*, February 25, 1964, 18.

<sup>179</sup> La Notte, Milan, Italy called it a “pastetta,” Italian slang for a fix – London Daily Mail sportswriter Jim Manning says it’s “too puzzling to have an explanation” - noted in AP story by Murray Rose, seen in the *Charleston Daily Mail*, February 27, 1964, 26.

Olympics, now began to openly show disgust for the new heavyweight champion.

Preferring to be called Muhammad Ali, the boxer was now presenting his personal and political philosophy before the press.

By 1966, the boastful young boxer and the strident black political activist blended together when, preparing for a title defense, Ali was informed that his status had been changed and he was now eligible to be drafted into military service where he could serve in Vietnam. For many veteran sportswriters the words and actions of the athlete, whom many still referred to as Cassius Clay, were bad enough. Combine those with the words and actions of the political activist who was now a devout Muslim named Muhammad Ali, and the results were simply unacceptable to many.

It was during one week in 1966 that Clay truly became Ali. Or, in Du Bois' paradigm of double consciousness: when the black American Cassius Clay became the autonomous black man (Negro), Muhammad Ali. Although he had announced his name change two years earlier, it was in the weeks after the fighter made the statement, "I ain't got no quarrel with those Vietcong," that his political activism would become overtly aware to the American people and explicitly presented on the pages of the nation's newspapers.

#### *The week Clay became Ali*

Throughout U.S. history African-Americans saw military service as an opportunity to prove their claims for equal rights, particularly during wartime.<sup>180</sup> That belief began to slowly shift during the progression of the Vietnam War in the 1960s. As African-Americans began to demand civil rights from their government at home, many

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<sup>180</sup> Washburn, Patrick Scott. *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, Northwestern University Press, 2006, p. 4.



also began to question why they were being drafted and were dying abroad in disproportionate numbers when compared to their fellow white Americans.<sup>181</sup>

In March of 1964, then Cassius Clay had failed the Selective Service's mental aptitude test two times and was classified as 1-Y: unfit for military service.<sup>182</sup>

Nearly two years later, in February of 1966, Muhammad Ali, the World Boxing Council (WBC) champion, was training in Miami for a heavyweight title fight with Ernie Terrell. The six foot, six inch, 212-pound Terrell was the World Boxing Association (WBA) heavyweight titleholder. The fight, scheduled for March 29 in Chicago, would unify the WBC and WBA titles making the winner of the bout the undisputed world heavyweight-boxing champion.

At this same time the U.S. government made a drastic change in their military draft requirements. The Army's pool of draft-eligible men was running low so they decided that the lowest score for eligibility on the mental aptitude test would be cut in half, from 30 to 15 – Ali's score. As the newspapers reported, this meant that his selective service board in Louisville could switch his status from 1-Y to 1-A. On February 17, the Louisville draft board did just that and reclassified Muhammad Ali as 1-A. Ali was suddenly eligible to be drafted into military service. With reporters at his home and calling his phone in Miami, Ali first asked, "Why me?" Then, with many reporters asking him his feelings about the enemy in Vietnam, he responded, "I ain't got

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<sup>181</sup> Moskos, Charles C., and John Whiteclay Chambers. *The New Conscientious Objection: From Sacred to Secular Resistance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993., 48-51.

<sup>182</sup> Raymonds, Jack, Special to *The New York Times*. "Cassius Clay Rejected by Army." *New York Times*: 1. Mar 21 1964. ProQuest. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.

no quarrel with those Vietcongs.”<sup>183</sup> *New York Times* (WP) reporter Robert Lipsyte was with Ali at that moment. He recalled later:

There it was. That was the headline. That was what the media wanted. In the minds of some of the “old guard” sportswriters - on top of everything else that they disliked about Muhammad Ali - now they could add to the list, un-patriotic.<sup>184</sup>

And with that, a media maelstrom would be unleashed. Now, it was not just his fight with Terrell that was in question. Many in the press would begin to question Ali’s manhood, his patriotism, and even his citizenship. For Ali, the real fight was about to begin. Over the next few weeks in the pages of the newspapers, these two stories – the fight with Terrell and Ali’s draft status - became explicitly intertwined. As Ali and the Illinois Athletic Commission battled to keep his championship fight with Ernie Terrell in Chicago, many in the press seemed to be openly hoping to see Ali facing enemy fire on a battlefield in Vietnam.

Even before Ali’s re-classification and remarks, the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) had printed several stories explaining why they were against having the fight between Terrell and Ali take place in the Windy City. After the Vietcong remark an editorial on the *Tribune’s* op-ed page appeared the next day with the photo caption, “Clay protests.” Headlined, “THE RELUCTANT HERO,” the relatively short piece covered a lot of ground. Readers were assured that the editorial board had been right all along in not wanting an Ali fight in Chicago:

All this screaming and simpering makes us more certain than ever that we were right the other day in wishing that someone would ask for an injunction to save

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<sup>183</sup> While there is some dispute over the exact wording of this statement – for example, some say that Clay did not use the word, quarrel.

<sup>184</sup> Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1991), 144-145.

Chicago from the spectacle of watching a would-be draft dodger defending his title...<sup>185</sup>

Two days later, on February 21, the pages of the *Tribune* featured seven different articles regarding the fight and Ali's comments. Among these, readers encountered the following headlines and texts:

- **Champ's Complaint Irks GIs Back from Viet Nam**  
Cassius Clay's lament that the government is picking on him was greeted with derision and disgust by United States service men who have served in Viet Nam and also by recruits. (page one)<sup>186</sup>
- **V.F.W. Urges Kerner to Block Clay Fight**  
The (VFW) post commander...said "he practically denounces his citizenship when he makes statements like he made." (page two)<sup>187</sup>
- ***Clay and Muslim Pals Figure to Strike it Rich Here***  
Cassius Clay and his Black Muslim friends stand to profit handsomely from Clay's scheduled heavyweight championship bout with Ernie Terrell March 29 in the International Amphitheater. (sports, page one)<sup>188</sup>

On that same day, the Illinois State Athletic Commission was on the phone with Ali, working to save the fight.

While the *Tribune's* pages exploded with coverage in the days immediately following Ali's statements - featuring 25 different articles between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of February - the *Chicago Defender* (BP) printed only three stories. Although the *Defender* had been following the news that his status could change, none of the three stories immediately after the re-classification mentioned Ali's controversial response to the status change – the Vietcong remark. The first mention of the comment came on the 22<sup>nd</sup> when the paper ran a story quoting Ali's phone conversation with the athletic commission

<sup>185</sup> "THE RELUCTANT HERO." *Chicago Tribune*: 10. Feb 19 1966. ProQuest. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

<sup>186</sup> "Champ's Complaint Irks GIs Back from Viet Nam." *Chicago Tribune*: 1. Feb 21 1966. ProQuest. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

<sup>187</sup> "V.F.W. Urges Kerner to Block Clay Fight." *Chicago Tribune*: 2. Feb 21 1966. ProQuest. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

<sup>188</sup> "Clay and Muslim Pals Figure to Strike it Rich here." *Chicago Tribune*: C1. Feb 21 1966. ProQuest. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

on Monday, the 21<sup>st</sup>. Appearing on page 64 – the front-page of the sports section – of the *Defender* readers saw a large headline that spanned the entirety of the page: **IAC Delays Fight Decision**.<sup>189</sup> The article quotes Ali’s phone conversation with commission members where, as the sub headline to the article said, “Clay Apologizes For Bitter Words.” The article quotes Ali, saying he apologized directly to the governor and to the commission. It continued with an apology from Ali “to the public for having his big mouth open to make these statement (sic).”<sup>190</sup>

*Chicago Tribune* (WP) readers would see a similar text in an above-the-fold front-page story. Headlined – **State Reconsidering Clay Fight** – readers were informed that Ali had apologized for his remarks and that “He said he wants to do anything he can to show that he didn’t mean what he said.”<sup>191</sup> The piece noted that plans to cancel the fight were now on hold. The private phone apology was not quite enough so the commission created a public media event. This time there would be news film cameras rolling and the press on hand so Ali could appear before the commission on Friday to, for all intents and purposes, re-enact the phone apology. The *New York Times* (WP) did not do a story on the phone call but did print an AP story on Tuesday that noted Ali was to appear before the commission on Friday to apologize in person.<sup>192</sup> With the apology event scheduled, the Illinois Athletic Commission believed they still had one final public opportunity, with the eyes and ears of the press on hand, to keep the boxing match on schedule and in Chicago.

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<sup>189</sup> "IAC Delays Fight Decision." *Chicago Daily Defender*: 64. Feb 22 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.

<sup>190</sup> "IAC Delays Fight Decision." *Chicago Daily Defender*: 64. Feb 22 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.

<sup>191</sup> "State Reconsidering Clay Fight." *Chicago Tribune*: 1. Feb 22 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014 .

<sup>192</sup> "Clay Plans to Apologize in Chicago for Remarks about Draft Classification." *New York Times*: 17. Feb 22 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.

Dressed in a dark suit and a bow tie, Ali sat stiffly upright in a hard wooden chair before the Illinois State Athletic Commission. Commissioner Joe Robichaux (the lone black man on the three-member board), said, “Mr. Clay...” “Muhammad Ali, sir,” Ali interrupted. With his teeth clinched, he spoke with a high level of defiance but without any contrition. Robichaux continued: “Do you think you’re acting like a people’s champion?” “Yes sir,” Ali responded. Robichaux appeared flummoxed as he tapped the table and looked to the other members of the commission with his mouth open.<sup>193</sup> This is not the public display that the commission had in mind when they called together the news media as witnesses where they planned to hear a contrite Ali re-enact his phone apology. The *New York Times* (WP) printed an AP story with the observation that, “When Clay and Commissioner Joe Robichaux began yelling at each other, a recess was called until a later date.”<sup>194</sup> The *Defender* (BP) noted, after the meeting the commissioners “retreated in confusion when Clay did not apologize to them or the public.”<sup>195</sup> There would be no second meeting. In a front-page story the next day, the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) displayed this headline in large, bold letters and all caps: **CANCEL CLAY FIGHT-DALEY**. The article quoted Chicago Mayor, Richard J. Daley, who offered his opinion that the fight should be canceled. The story also quoted Ali’s answer when Commissioner Triner asked if he was apologizing for his unpatriotic statements: “I’m not apologizing for anything like that because I don’t have to,” Ali responded.<sup>196</sup> The piece reported that the Attorney General had deemed the fight illegal over an issue with the licensing and the fight was officially cancelled. The article noted

<sup>193</sup> *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*. Dir. Bill Siegel. Katemquin Educational Films, 2013. DVD.

<sup>194</sup> "LICENSE FOR BOUT IS CALLED ILLEGAL." *New York Times*: 37. Feb 26 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014 .

<sup>195</sup> "Clay-Terrell Decision Today." *Chicago Daily Defender*: 28. Feb 28 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014 .

<sup>196</sup> Wiedrich, Robert. "CANCEL CLAY FIGHT--DALEY." *Chicago Tribune*: 1. Feb 26 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014 .

that, “The city of Chicago and the state of Illinois have been saved from a disgraceful heavyweight fight.”<sup>197</sup>

The fight was shopped to several U.S. cities – all declined. Terrell decided to drop out of the match over a contract dispute. Ali fought – with George Chuvalo as the opponent - on the date scheduled, but the venue was now Toronto, Canada. Ali’s next four fights (after the remark) would take place outside of the United States. In his first 22 fights, only one had happened on foreign soil.<sup>198</sup> With his defiance at the press apology event, Ali worked to transform the accepted position of the athlete - and in particular, the black athlete - in the public discourse and at the public podium. Although he had announced his name change two years prior, within one week in February 1966, he went from a submissive apologist to a defiant resister. He truly became Muhammad Ali.

One year later, on April 28, 1967, Muhammad Ali stood still at the Selective Service induction as 45 other young men stepped forward. By merely standing still, Ali took a profound stand – he officially refused conscription into the United States Army on the grounds that he was a conscientious objector. Upon leaving the Houston Customs House, where the induction center was located, Ali repeatedly responded, “No comment,” to questions from the reporters. The boxer was facing thirteen television cameras and dozens of microphones from media outlets around the world that were on-hand to document the event.<sup>199</sup>

### *The politics of boxing*

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<sup>197</sup> "A WISE DECISION AT LAST." *Chicago Tribune*: 20. Mar 03 1966. ProQuest. Web. 8 Dec. 2014 .

<sup>198</sup> "Muhammad Ali's Ring Record." ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, 10 Nov. 2003. Web. 08 Dec. 2014.

<sup>199</sup> By ROBERT LIPSYTE Special to The New York Times. "Clay Refuses Army Oath; Stripped of Boxing Crown." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Apr 29 1967, p. 1. ProQuest. Web. 29 May 2018.

As Ali moved his rhetoric from inside the boxing ring and onto the public podium he challenged the conventional use of the public space. As noted in chapter one, many believed that politics and sport should not mix. This was particularly relevant in the case of Ali and the politically turbulent 1960s and 70s in the United States. While many frowned when athletes took a political stand, many politicians were happy to smile and wave while standing with an athlete.

With the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, many historians pinpoint 1968 as a pivotal year for politics, society, culture and race relations in the United States. As noted in the last chapter, two other socio-political occurrences that year are commonly cited as politically antithetical in nature. One, the racially motivated protest by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Olympics in Mexico City, was seen as a radical and militant pro-civil rights act. Just days later George Foreman waved a small American flag in the ring after winning a gold medal in boxing. When Carlos and Smith raised their fists on the Olympic podium in 1968, like Ali in 1966, they challenged the conventional use of the public space. When Foreman smiled and waved a small American flag it was seen as positive and patriotic, particularly just a week after Carlos and Smith's display. In the aftermath of a victory for one's nation, Foreman's display of patriotism was in keeping with a more conventional use of the public space. Following the Carlos and Smith protest and the Foreman flag wave, a letter to the editor was printed in the *New York Times* (WP). The writer praised Foreman and the black coach of the U.S. Olympic boxing team, Pappy Gault:

It was, indeed, unfortunate that, since last week's disgraceful demonstration against the United States, by two black American track medalists, not one other medalist had countered their action. I salute George Foreman and Pappy Gault.<sup>200</sup>

On the same day, *Times* readers saw that Foreman had been courted by both Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey to come on the Presidential campaign trail. The piece said that Nixon liked Foreman's patriotism while Humphrey wanted George for his Job Corps experience. George explained that he chose to go with Humphrey and the Job Corps:

You know, in this country, a guy like me had a thousand fallbacks. No matter how many times I failed, there was always someone to pick me up, until finally I got somewhere on my ninth or 10<sup>th</sup> try. I don't know whether I'd get picked up if Nixon was President, but I've been reading a lot, and I know Humphrey helped to start the Job Corps. So I'm for him. Seems like we need him to be elected.<sup>201</sup>

Both the Carlos and Smith and George Foreman events occurred on an international stage. Carlos and Smith's during the playing of the *Star Spangled Banner*. Amy Bass posits that the playing of the anthem at sporting events can be "transformative moments of national expression" which she calls, "performative nationalism." She believes that these moments can allow athletes "to create an alternative mode of protest when more traditionally sanctioned channels are unavailable."<sup>202</sup> While both Nixon and Humphrey were willing to flaunt an athlete's accomplishments for their political benefit, when the *athlete* decides to take advantage of this "alternative mode of protest," the blending of sport and politics is generally frowned upon.

William Gillis noted that by 1970, in order to adequately cover athletics, it was necessary for the sports pages of the nation's newspapers to be "reflective of the upheaval

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<sup>200</sup> "Too Much Flag-Waving?" Friedman, Julian R. *New York Times* (1923-Current file) [New York, N.Y.] 03 Nov 1968: 224.

<sup>201</sup> Olympic Boxing Champion Is Used as Symbol by Both Major Candidates. By R. W. APPLE Jr. Special to The New York Times. *New York Times* (1923-Current file)[New York, N.Y.] 03 Nov 1968: 84.

<sup>202</sup> Bass, Amy. *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2002. xx.



in American society – particularly with regard to race.”<sup>203</sup> Gillis contended that many of the older generation in the sports writing community like Dick Young, Jimmy Cannon and Arthur Daley, “were dismayed by the changes they saw in society and sports.” Gillis said journalists like Young, Cannon and Daley “were representative of an overwhelmingly white, aging and borderline racist sports writing corps.”<sup>204</sup> He also believed that those white sportswriters didn’t “re-assess their racial views and even question U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War” until the late sixties.<sup>205</sup> *New Yorker* magazine editor, David Remnick, specifically credits Muhammad Ali as the catalyst that led most of the sportswriters to question their racial and cultural assumptions. According to Remnick, “Red Smith, whose columns had been so hostile to Ali early on, was just one of many Americans who came out of the late sixties... seeing the world [and] Ali in a different way.”<sup>206</sup> Gillis and Remnick point out that many in the sports press began to see the error in their ways with regard to Ali in 1971 when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in his favor in his conscientious objector draft status.<sup>207</sup>

The analysis for the Ali case study, chapter five of the dissertation, will be based on black and white newspaper coverage in the lead up to the third “fight of the century,” Ali versus Joe Frazier in 1971. It was about this time that the entire nation’s opinion of the war in Vietnam was shifting as well.<sup>208</sup> This coverage will be compared to the cultural memory, vis-à-vis the HBO documentary from 2000. The topic of this film was solely on the first Ali versus Frazier fight in 1971.

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<sup>203</sup> William Gillis, “Rebellion in the Kingdom of Swat: Sportswriters, African-American Athletes and the Coverage of Curt Flood’s Lawsuit against Major League Baseball,” *American Journalism*, 26, 2 (2009): 69.

<sup>204</sup> Gillis, 69

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> David Remnick, *King of the World*, (New York: Vintage, 1998), 305.

<sup>207</sup> “Clay v. United States 403 U.S. 698 (1971).” Justia Law. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Oct. 2016.

<sup>208</sup> Rosentiel, Tom. “Youth and War.” *Pew Research Center*. N.p., 21 Feb. 2006. Web. 10 Feb. 2017.

Looking at press coverage following Ali's death, many commented that it was the moment when he surprised those watching the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta to light the cauldron, the media and most of the nation had change their mind about the controversial boxer. Robert Lipsyte who covered Ali as a young sports reporter for the *New York Times* (WP) recalled:

The beatification of Muhammad Ali [was complete], especially now that he is silent and non-threatening. That very touching, almost magical moment at the Olympics in '96 when he lit the torch -- that shaking Parkinson's hand -- I cried.<sup>209</sup>

After Ali upset Sonny Liston to win the heavyweight title in 1964 at only 22 years of age, he famously shouted to a reporter interviewing him inside the ring, "I shook up the world."<sup>210</sup> One can argue that Ali's impact outside of the ring was far greater than his performance in it. As President Obama said in his statement honoring the fighter upon his passing, "Muhammad Ali shook up the world. And the world is better for it. We are all better for it."<sup>211</sup>

## **Conclusion**

By the time Ali had beaten Liston to win the heavyweight title white society was no longer angrily and openly killing or beating black Americans in the streets when a black man wore the heavyweight crown. But, as with Johnson and Louis, many in the press pummeled Ali by questioning his legitimacy as the champion. And, like Johnson and Louis, sports writers were also openly questioning Ali's intelligence. The press also often opined that black athletes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were living a privileged existence, not based on their abilities as athletes, but because their abilities offered rewards that

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<sup>209</sup> Lipsyte interview (Mederson, 2011).

<sup>210</sup> Mrvideouploads1. "Muhammad Ali - I Shook up the World." *YouTube*. 21 Apr. 2012. Web. 14 July 2016.

<sup>211</sup> "Statement from President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama on the Passing of Muhammad Ali." *The White House*. 04 June 2016. Web. 14 July 2016.

included a high level of fame and fortune – or, as Murray noted of Ali, the privilege to beat up white people for money. This same claim of privilege is evident to this day when an athlete like former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick decided to take a knee during the playing of the national anthem in support of the Black Lives Matters movement. Forty years after Carlos and Smith, many in the white Establishment once again frown upon Kaepernick’s unconventional use of the public space during the playing of the National Anthem.

Throughout this dissertation the argument will be made that as heavyweight boxing champions, Johnson, Louis and Ali were controversial figures both socially and politically. That, to some degree, their mere existence in the public space tested the white Establishment’s political and racial conventions.

### Chapter Three

#### The First Fight of the Century: Johnson worked while Jeffries went fishing

*Achilles had his hubris and his heel, after all, as well as his great strength and prowess. It's what you do with it. So for me, Jack Johnson is heroic in a huge, Shakespearean, tragic way --and it's his "unforgivable blackness" in the end that brings him down.*<sup>212</sup>

Ken Burns (2005, in a Q&A about the release of "Unforgivable Blackness")

*Those not familiar with America's dark past of racism may be shocked at the open hostility shown by the media of that era.*<sup>213</sup>

Walter Belcher (2005, Tampa Tribune review of "Unforgivable Blackness")

### Introduction

On Monday evening, January 17, 2005, television audiences across the United States had their first opportunity to view director Ken Burns' documentary film, "Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson." The 214-minute film was broadcast in two parts on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) stations across the United States and focused on the life of African-American boxer Jack Johnson.<sup>214</sup> After the success of his films on the Civil War, baseball and jazz music, when "Unforgivable Blackness" debuted, Burns could arguably have been considered one of this country's most recognizable and respected documentary filmmakers.<sup>215</sup> In the film Burns presented Johnson as a hero, not necessarily for what the boxer did, but because Johnson did these things while, according to the film, being roundly hated by the people and the press in this nation. One-minute and twenty-seconds in to part one of the film the deep-bass voice of Keith David, the film's narrator, says: "For more than thirteen years Jack Johnson was

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<sup>212</sup> Buchholz, Brad. "THE GREAT CONTRADICTION; A Conversation about America, Race and 'Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson' with Documentary Filmmaker Ken Burns." *Austin American Statesman*, 15 Jan. 2005, p. e1.

<sup>213</sup> Belcher, Walt. "King of the Ring." *The Tampa Tribune*, 17 Jan. 2005, p. 1.

<sup>214</sup> Part two was broadcast the following evening, January 18, 2005.

<sup>215</sup> While Michael Moore may draw greater popular media attention than Burns, Moore is known for presenting a politically one-sided bias in his films, which, in the minds of some, would reduce the credibility of his product. It can be argued that the fact that Burns' films aired on PBS and are historical in nature this will lead audiences to consider Burns to be more intellectually credible as a source of factual information than Moore.

the most famous - and the most notorious African-American on earth.” Less than two minutes later, David’s voice tells viewers:

To most whites, and to some African Americans, Johnson was a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace, and a danger to the natural order of things.<sup>216</sup>

In his book, titled, “Bad Nigger,” historian Al-Tony Gilmore writes:

John Arthur Johnson, whether viewed as a villain or a hero, was one of the most important figures in the world in the early decades of the twentieth century. Lambasted by American whites because he was unbeatable in the ring and practically ungovernable outside of it, Johnson was loved, hated and feared by blacks for the same reason.<sup>217</sup>

But did the people and, in particular, the press actually dislike Johnson to the degree that Burns displayed throughout his film and scholars have written about in academic tomes? Was Johnson, as the film’s narrator said, “a perpetual threat . . . to most whites, and to some African Americans”? And was Johnson, as Gilmore said, “loved, hated and feared by blacks”?

Part one of Burns film fades up on images of a large crowd of white men waving and tipping their hats to the camera as it pans and dollies among the large crowd. Before the opening credits and the title of the three-and-a-half-hour film are shown, viewers then see moving pictures of two boxers in training. The town filled with white men is Reno, Nevada. The two fighters are (John Arthur) “Jack” Johnson and (James Jackson) “Jim” Jeffries. Keith’s voice tells viewers that this massive crowd – the narrator noted that 15 special trains had arrived just that day to bring attendees to the fight - was in Reno to “see

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<sup>216</sup> Burns, Ken, director. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson--A Film Directed by Ken Burns--Part 1*. PBS, 2005.

<sup>217</sup> Gilmore, Al-Tony. *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson*, W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2017, p. 3.

a prizefight unlike any that had ever taken place before.”<sup>218</sup> Burns’ entire story of Johnson begins with this singular iconic moment from the boxer’s life: his championship fight against Jeffries. The first thing viewers of the film will be told about the fight (FOC1) is that on July 4, 1910, thousands of, mostly, white men converged on “the little desert town” of Reno to see this spectacle. By opening his film with the Jeffries fight, Burns was tipping his hand to let viewers know that this match was one of the biggest moments in the life of the man who they would be learning about over the next two-hundred-plus minutes of film.

This chapter will look at how the cultural memory, vis-à-vis Ken Burns’ PBS film, “Unforgivable Blackness,” compares to contemporaneous newspaper coverage of Johnson. In particular the Johnson versus Jeffries World Heavyweight Boxing Championship fight on July 4, 1910. The story of FOC1 provided bookends to the first half of Burns’ film. Prior to the opening credits, the film fades up on scenes from Reno in the days before the fight and Part One of the film ends with the fight and its bloody aftermath. Looking at the structure of Part One of Burns’ film, the filmmaker certainly seemed to consider this fight to be perhaps the biggest moment in Johnson’s life as a boxer inside the ring.<sup>219</sup> As noted in chapter two, the lead up to this fight took years. It essentially can be traced to the moment Jeffries retired as the undefeated titleholder. It then moved to Johnson winning the title. But, to many whites in America Johnson’s win was illegitimate. These naysayers could point to a number of reasons for their claim without even explicitly stating race as the main reason. Johnson won the crown from a Canadian in a fight that took place half a world away, in Australia. They would also

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<sup>218</sup> Burns, Ken (at 00:00:23).

<sup>219</sup> Part Two, *The Fall*, focuses on Johnson’s legal trouble with the government based on his relationships with white women. That is, it focuses more on the boxer’s fight with the U.S. government than his fights in the boxing ring.

claim that Jeffries was the rightful holder of the crown because he had not actually lost the title since he retired having never lost a fight.

When Jack Johnson stepped into a boxing ring to face Jim Jeffries in 1910, one might expect that the majority of those writing in the white press at the time would be openly racist toward the first African-American to wear the heavyweight title crown. Especially if those looking back at the press coverage had already seen Ken Burns' documentary featuring Johnson's life story. This chapter will present the coverage in the lead up to and in the immediate aftermath of the fight. Burns' film will also be deeply analyzed to determine how the cultural memory of Johnson, vis-à-vis the film, compares to the presentation of Johnson at the time of this iconic event.

The film depicted a much different view of Johnson than what was seen in the black and white newspapers at the time of FOC1. In the film Johnson is depicted as roundly hated by most whites and even some blacks in America at the time of the fight. This is done using a number of methods. As noted earlier, film is a multi-semiotic medium and Burns used multiple methods to present his version of Johnson. First is through the words of the voice-over narration in the film. Secondly, the audience saw racist images while the words of the narrator were spoken (images of lynching, for example). One other method that had an impact on the audience would be the voices of film actors who were used to read the words of the characters in the story. Most notably was the use of Samuel L. Jackson as the voice of Jack Johnson. This will be discussed at length later in this chapter. Next I will detail the analysis of the coverage of the black and the white press coverage of FOC1 in the weeks surrounding the event in 1910.

*The Black Press in 1910*

Robert S. Abbott's first run of *The Chicago Defender* (BP) was 300 copies that he printed in his landlord's kitchen on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1905. Abbott's paper first gained national attention when he hired J. Hockley Smiley in 1910. With Smiley on board, *The Defender* broadened its focus from local Chicago interests and established itself as having the broader national interest of issues that affected black Americans.<sup>220</sup> Using the standard search parameters, the *Chicago Defender* had six stories on the fight, all of which were published prior to the match. The *Defender* does not have any issues in their archive for the two weeks between July 4 and July 18, which means there were not stories to analyze in the week after the fight.<sup>221</sup> An extension of the time parameter to one month after the fight finds the first post-fight story appeared on July 23. Seven additional stories appeared with the extension, three on July 23 and four on July 30.

The *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) and *The New York Amsterdam News* (BP), which will be used in the Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali chapters, were not available for analysis in this chapter. The *Courier* began publishing in 1907 but archives are only available starting in March of 1911.<sup>222</sup> The *Amsterdam News* first published in December of 1909 but the archival copies of the paper begin with those published beginning in November of 1922.<sup>223</sup> Therefore, in order to get an adequate sample size of articles about the fight in the black press a different search was utilized. An online search was conducted via the Readex (Newsbank) site that has an extensive collection of African-American newspapers from 1827 through 1998. Using the same time and keyword

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<sup>220</sup> "Newspapers the Chicago Defender." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, [www.pbs.org/blackpress/news\\_bios/defender.html](http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/defender.html).

<sup>221</sup> In fact the digital archive of the *Defender* does not show any stories in the weeks between July 4 and July 18, 1910. Further investigation is necessary to determine the reason for hole in the digital archive of the paper.

<sup>222</sup> New Pittsburgh Courier Online Archives, Real Times Media, [pqasb.pqarchiver.com/pittsburghcourier/advancedsearch.html](http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/pittsburghcourier/advancedsearch.html).

<sup>223</sup> An email response directly from the *Amsterdam News* says that the archive for the newspaper begins in 1922.



parameters noted in chapter one, the search found 28 stories in the month leading up to the fight and 30 in the week after the fight. The newspapers that published stories were:

*Indianapolis Freeman*  
*The Wichita Searchlight*  
*The Broad Ax*  
*The Cleveland Gazette*  
*Savannah Tribune*  
*Topeka Plain Dealer*

The smaller sample size (compared to the number of results in the white press) is due to the fact that all of these publications were weekly. Based on the dates of the articles that appeared in the results, all of the papers published on Saturdays with the exception of the *Topeka Plain Dealer* (BP), which published on Fridays. Therefore starting the time parameter one month before the fight was adjusted to Friday, June 3. Because they were weekly publications, the first stories after the July 4 fight did not appear until Friday, July 8 in the *Plain Dealer* and July 9 in the rest of the papers. The fact that there were more stories in one week after the fight (30) than appeared in the month before the fight (28) could be because the black press may have not been completely convinced that Johnson would win. Once he was victorious it seems the papers wanted to give more coverage to the event than before it occurred. It must be noted that the white press also showed a disproportionate number of stories after the fight as well. In the four weeks before the fight the white press published 297 stories (an average of 74.25 stories per week) while they published 159 in the first week after the fight.

#### *Race and media*

From Jack Johnson to Colin Kaepernick (Boyce, 2017, Kane, Tiell, 2017, Lindholm, 2017) the racial stereotype of black athletes in the media has been the subject of a great deal of academic study as well as immeasurable barroom debates. In their study

of race in sports media, Jacco Van Sterkenburg, Annelies Knoppers and Sonja De Leeuw write:

The most common stereotypes embedded in such broadcasts are those of the naturally gifted, strong, black male athlete, and the intelligent and hard-working, white male athlete ... They construct a mind–body dualism, in which black male athletes are explicitly associated with superb bodies and implicitly with unstable minds.<sup>224</sup>

In 2005, just before his film aired nationally, Burns' participated in a question and answer session with the *Austin American Statesman* (AAS) (WP). The *Statesman* asked Burns specifically about this same racial stereotype in newspapers:

AAS: I noticed in the echoes of some of the old sportswriters' words a parlance that still exists. Today's white athlete is so often described as smart and cagey and wily. The black athlete seems forever celebrated for his athleticism. . .

Burns: Just think about Rush Limbaugh -- the great drug addict and hypocrite -- remarking that Donovan McNabb wouldn't be where he was if he wasn't black. And then Donovan McNabb had a season second only to Peyton Manning.<sup>225</sup> But even today, if you compare descriptions of Donovan McNabb and Peyton Manning, there's an attribution of intelligence to Manning, and there's something "natural" and "gifted" to Donovan McNabb.<sup>226</sup>

It is evident from this interview that after making his film Burns believed that newspaper writers, during Johnson's time as a competitive boxer, were presenting this stereotype about black athletes being more gifted physically while white athletes possessed greater intellect and worked harder. Looking at black and white press coverage of the fight, do we find that writers followed these same racial stereotypes when writing about Johnson and Jeffries? Were there differences between how the white press presented the two

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<sup>224</sup> Sterkenburg, Jacco Van, et al. "Race, Ethnicity, and Content Analysis of the Sports Media: a Critical Reflection." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2010, p. 822., doi:10.1177/0163443710373955.

<sup>225</sup> Donovan McNabb was a highly acclaimed black quarterback in the NFL. Peyton Manning was a highly acclaimed white quarterback in the NFL.

<sup>226</sup> Brad Buchholz, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF. (January 15, 2005 Saturday). THE GREAT CONTRADICTION; A conversation about America, race and 'Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson' with documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. *Austin American-Statesman (Texas)*. Retrieved from Nexis Uni.

athletes compared to the black press with regard to these same stereotypes? Based on Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers and De Leeuw, we should expect to find the white press focusing on Johnson as the more physically superior and Jeffries more intellectually capable and harder working. In fact, the white press at the time actually presented both Johnson and Jeffries in ways that went against what we might expect from the time period. That is, those who wrote about Johnson in the pages of the white press in the lead up and aftermath of the fight presented the heavyweight champion with a surprising level of respect for both his athletic and intellectual abilities. At the same time they admonished Jeffries for his lack of a strong work ethic in his preparation and training before the fight.

As noted in chapter one, this chapter will be looking at five weeks of newspaper coverage in both the white press and the black press surrounding the Jack Johnson versus James Jeffries fight on July 4, 1910, FOC1. The fight was for the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship and, as noted in the introduction, was given the moniker, “Fight of the Century,” by the press at the time. This chapter will be comparing contemporary media depictions of Johnson, what is written and said about the fighter, to what was written about Johnson in the black and white press in the weeks leading up to and immediately following one of the most iconic and salient moments in the fighter’s life: his World Heavyweight Boxing Championship fight with Jim Jeffries. How does the cultural memory compare to what the press was writing at the time?

### **The film and the newspapers**

*More generally, the shape of contemporary media societies gives rise to the assumption that—today perhaps more than ever—cultural memory is dependent on media technologies and the circulation of media products (see Esposito; Rigney; Erll; Zelizer; Zierold: all this volume).<sup>227</sup>*

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<sup>227</sup> Erll, Astrid, et al. “Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, 2008, p. 9.

Astrid Erll (from the introduction to the “Cultural Memory Studies Handbook”)

*The film and the Academy*

Early in Burns’ film the voice-over tells the audience about the racism that was evident in heavyweight boxing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Viewers are told about John L. Sullivan, considered by some to be the first heavyweight champion in the modern age,<sup>228</sup> and Sullivan’s declaration that he “can beat any son of a bitch in the world - any son of a bitch provided he was white.”<sup>229</sup> Historian Randy Roberts then appeared on screen noting how the press portrayed black boxers. Roberts said:

With black boxers every trait that was a positive trait they tried to turn it into a negative trait. If a black boxer was tough and could withstand punishment, well, he could withstand punishment because his skull was thicker – because he was insensitive to pain, that it really was a sign of some larger inferiority. ... If he was a smart boxer, a wily boxer, then he was slightly deceptive – that there was something untrustworthy about his activity in the ring.<sup>230</sup>

Was this true in the lead up to the Johnson Jeffries fight? How did the black and white press describe Johnson and Jeffries’ physical and intellectual abilities?

One area on which contemporary media (including the Burns film) focuses to explain why Johnson was so hated at the time is his preference for dating and marrying white women. In writing about a boxing tour that Johnson took in Australia in 1907 (three years before his fight against James Jeffries), historian Randy Roberts noted that, while in Sydney for a fight, it was rumored in the press that Johnson had married a white woman. While Roberts said the rumor was false, he wrote that, “These stories were *as*

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<sup>228</sup> The modern age is considered the time after the Marquess of Queensberry rules were adopted (around 1867) and gloves were used instead of bare fists.

<sup>229</sup> Burns, Ken, director. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson--A Film Directed by Ken Burns--Part 1*. PBS, 2005, at 00:15:55.

<sup>230</sup> Burns at 00:21:12.

*widely followed* as Johnson's ring activities" (emphasis added).<sup>231</sup> For this passage, Roberts cited Australian professor Richard Broome from his chapter in a sports history book from 1979.<sup>232</sup> And in Burns' film, after being informed that Johnson began dating Hattie McClay, a white woman, in 1907, viewers then heard the narrator say:

Between 1901 and 1910, 846 Americans were lynched in the United States. Seven hundred and fifty-four of them were African-Americans. Some murdered merely because someone had whispered that they had been too familiar with white women.<sup>233</sup>

This narration is heard while a camera slowly zooms in to the image of a hooded man hanging from a rope with a crowd of white men gathered around.

Roberts (citing Broome) said that the press in 1907 were interested in Johnson's relationships with white women outside the ring as much as his activities in the ring. In his film Burns claimed that Johnson's activities with white women were widely known through the press. Burns lets his audience know (by showing a man being lynched) that these actions in the first decade of the twentieth century were not merely disliked; they were potentially deadly for black men like Jack Johnson. At the time of FOC1 Johnson was married to Hattie McClay, who was white. Roberts noted that while in Australia the press there reported on rumors of Johnson having a white wife as much as they did his boxing. In the five weeks surrounding FOC1 how often did the American press report on Johnson's wife and her race?

As noted in the previous chapter, Johnson won the championship after defeating Tommy Burns in a bout in Sydney, Australia on December 26, 1908. Ken Burns' film

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<sup>231</sup> Roberts, Randy. "Changes in Attitudes, Changes in Latitudes." *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*, Robson Bks., 1992, p. 48.

<sup>232</sup> Cashman, Richard I., et al. "The Australian Reaction to Jack Johnson, Black Pugilist, 1907-9." *Sport in History: the Making of Modern Sporting History*, University of Queensland Press, 1979, pp. 344-345.

<sup>233</sup> Burns, Ken, director. *Unforgivable Blackness: the Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. PBS Distribution, 2004. (at 38:50).

noted that after winning that fight, Johnson's first stop after departing Australia would be in Canada. The film then noted that Johnson "had to fire his white manager Sam Fitzpatrick after a quarrel about the presence of Hattie McClay." It was in March of 1909 when Johnson and McClay disembarked in Victoria, British Columbia. The voice over then says:

And when the American press saw that the heavyweight champion of the world was traveling with a white woman, all hell broke loose. The finest hotel in Victoria refused him a room – so did five of its competitors.<sup>234</sup>

Burns presents the information about Johnson travelling with McClay and then said that "all hell broke loose" when the American press reported this. He followed this immediately with the line that Johnson was refused a room at "The finest hotel in Victoria," which was followed by "five of its competitors." Because these two items are presented in such close proximity, one following the other, viewers likely see this as evidence that Johnson was six times refused rooms at hotels in Victoria because he was travelling with the white McClay, further emphasizing the point that it was his culturally unacceptable relationship that led to Johnson being refused a room at the hotels. But, according to Rachel Zellars, Canadian race relations were not necessarily any better than race relations in the United States during the first decade of the last century.<sup>235</sup> As was often the case in the U.S., Johnson, even as heavyweight champion, was likely denied a room at the six hotels because of *his* race, not McClay's. In his biography of Johnson Roberts wrote about this very moment. In the book Roberts wrote that the manager of the hotel apologized but said the hotel observed the color line meaning, regardless of Johnson's status as the heavyweight champion, he would be denied a room. Unlike the

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<sup>234</sup> Burns at 55:21 of part one.

<sup>235</sup> Zellars, Rachel. "Opinion: Canada's Long History of Racism." *Montreal Gazette*, Postmedia, 19 Aug. 2015, [montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/opinion-canadas-long-history-of-anti-black-racism](http://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/opinion-canadas-long-history-of-anti-black-racism)

film, Roberts did not frame this as based on the fact that his white wife accompanied Johnson but simply the way things were, even in Canada, in 1909. Roberts also noted that Johnson was disappointed with the way he had been treated while in Australia and was hoping for better treatment in Canada but the first thing that happened was the refusal of rooms at the hotels. Additionally, evidence that reports about Johnson's travel companion led to "all hell breaking loose" in the American press was not supported at this point in the film either. While Johnson's relationship with McClay certainly was not conventional in the U.S. or Canada in 1909, the example as presented in the film should not have been presented as evidence to support the claim that whites, and some blacks, based on *this relationship*, hated Johnson.

Both Roberts and Burns have posited that Johnson's relationships with white women, as presented in the press, were one of the reasons whites, and some blacks, profoundly disliked the heavyweight champion. In the lead-up to his fight with Jeffries, did the white and black press write about Johnson's wife and her race to the extent that Roberts and Burns claim in their texts? And, if so, did the press present this relationship to the readers in the taboo manner that Burns noted in his film? As noted above, historian Al-Tony Gilmore wrote that Johnson was "lambasted" by white Americans and "loved, hated and feared" by black Americans. Did the white press lambaste Johnson and did the black press write about him in ways that could be characterized as "loved, hated and feared" as Gilmore writes?

There are moments in Burns' film that seem to contradict its overall theme – that Johnson was roundly despised by whites in America. Nearly one hour into Part One, the sound of Wynton Marsalis's trumpet is the background music as the voice-over

introduces viewers to an area of Chicago known as the Levee District. The trumpet track is made to match the dirty and raw atmosphere being projected in the film's narration track with a wa-wa sound when Marsalis adds a plunger as he plays his horn. Viewers are told that the Levee District "was home to 500 saloons and 500 whorehouses," adding that "Johnson was welcome almost everywhere."<sup>236</sup> According to the Chicago Historical Society, this was indeed an area plagued by prostitution and run by organized crime. The Chicago Police Department and some in city government were often paid to look the other way when it came to vice in the Levee District.<sup>237</sup> This was also an area that was frequented mostly by whites and yet Johnson, as noted in the film, "was welcome almost everywhere." This would indicate that there were indeed a number of white Chicagoans who welcomed Johnson, at least when it came to hanging out with them at saloons and bordellos which employed white prostitutes. While the film is telling viewers that Johnson was hated by whites and that all hell broke loose when whites found out about his relationship with the white McClay, who happened to be a former prostitute, at least among the mostly white crowd that were frequenting Chicago's Levee District, he was welcomed "almost everywhere." This included the bordellos where he engaged with white prostitutes.

Many of those who frequented the district were considered at the time to be "sports" or part of "the sporting" crowd. In the film Roberts says:

A great word that we have lost is, the sport. Everything had to be larger than life. The sport drank in a certain way. He dressed larger than life. He wore diamond stickpins. He wore wide lapels. They frequented houses of prostitution. ... They were in the know. And Jack Johnson was the quintessential sport.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Burns (at 00:58:31).

<sup>237</sup> Baldwin, Peter C. "Vice Districts." *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, Chicago Historical Society, [www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1304.html](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1304.html).

<sup>238</sup> Burns (at 00:27:55).



While this reaction to Johnson in the Levee District may not be in line with how most of white America felt about him, at least among the white “sports,” Johnson seemed to be very much accepted. Although Burns gives this example in his film, he does not contextualize it in a way that let the viewer know that this particular white crowd not only did not hate Johnson, but welcomed him in their midst. He was welcomed as a drinking companion with the white men and as a sexual companion with the white women.<sup>239</sup>

The massive number of people who were in Reno for the fight were, very likely, mostly “members” of this sporting crowd as well. Although it was noted in one story that half of the crowd in the arena to watch the match “never saw a fight before,”<sup>240</sup> which would indicate that many of the whites in Reno at the time were not normally members of the sporting crowd. Throughout the Burns film, Johnson is seen being surrounded by these white sports who were smiling and shaking hands with Johnson. Several of these images are from Johnson’s Reno training camp. The boxer is seen surrounded by crowds of smiling white men. Still images from the training show Johnson in the ring of the camp with a large crowd of white men and women watching the champion as he trains for the fight. One of the moving images shows a white man smoking a cigar who had handed, presumably, his young child to Johnson.<sup>241</sup> All are smiling as Johnson hands the baby back to the man with the cigar. This particular scene is reminiscent of politicians who shake hands and kiss babies. Many of these images include black men, shoulder to

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<sup>239</sup> The voice-over in the film does note that there was one bordello in the district, The Everleigh Club (called the most opulent bordello outside of new Orleans), where Johnson was not welcomed. It is noted that George Little, Johnson’s white manager at the time, helped to get Johnson into the Everleigh in 1909. In his book, *Unforgivable Blackness* (which was a companion to the film), Geoffrey C. Ward writes about Johnson’s experiences at the Everleigh. In the book, Ward notes that perhaps five of the prostitutes who had engaged with Johnson were fired. According to the film, Johnson eventually took nine of the prostitutes to his hotel room. All nine, according to the film, would eventually be fired. Burns at 00:58:31 and Ward, Geoffrey C. *Unforgivable Blackness: the Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. Yellow Jersey Press, 2015, pp. 146 - 148.

<sup>240</sup> By JOHN L SULLIVAN Special to The New York Times. "JHONSON WINS IN 15 ROUNDS; JEFFRIES WEAK." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 1. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 Feb. 2018.

<sup>241</sup> Burns at 1:20:05.

shoulder, smiling with the white men. This is more evidence that, at least among the crowd in Reno, there were white men who supported Johnson at a high enough level that they would smile and shake hands with the black champion and also trusted him to handle an infant child. These images are presented without being contextualized in the film as evidence that at least some whites *did* support Johnson.

While the analysis of the Burns film presented above is based more on concrete visual and textual evidence of what can be seen and heard in the film, this next example is somewhat more abstract. This example focuses on what Norman Fairclough called the semiotic nature of the film medium. Fairclough wrote:

... texts in contemporary society are increasingly multi-semiotic; texts whose primary semiotic form is language increasingly combine language with other semiotic forms. Television is the most obvious example, combining language with visual images, music and sound effects.<sup>242</sup>

In the case of the Burns film, none of the main characters that could tell their story are alive to tell it in their own voice. While the semiotics of film allow for the viewer to see Jack Johnson, the technology that was available during the time covered in the film had not advanced beyond the silent stage. There are plenty of moving images of Johnson, both inside and outside of a boxing ring, but we do not hear Johnson's actual voice at any point during the film.

Burns made the creative decision to, at times, have actors portray the voices of the people who were being quoted. For the voice of Johnson in his film, Burns chose the actor Samuel L. Jackson. In a review of Ward's book – which was a companion to the film - in the *New York Times* (WP) in 2004, David Margolick wrote that no recordings of

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<sup>242</sup> Fairclough, Norman. "Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language." *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language*, Routledge, 2013, p. 4.

Johnson's voice existed.<sup>243</sup> A quick search of YouTube today shows this claim is not, in fact, true. Two examples can be found on the social media video site (and more exist<sup>244</sup>). One begins with Johnson speaking and looking directly into the camera. In it, Johnson is the orchestra leader for a ragtime band. It appears to have been produced in the 1920s.<sup>245</sup> The other was from 1944. Johnson, who was 67 years old and was raising money for U.S. war bonds by doing some light sparring with Joe Jeanette, another black heavyweight who Johnson had fought several times before winning the title. In both of these videos Johnson can be clearly heard speaking. As noted in chapter two, Johnson was born and raised in Galveston, Texas. In both of these recordings a light Texas accent can be detected when he speaks. An even better example can be found in the compact disc set "Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry," which is the companion to Tim Brooks book of the same title.<sup>246</sup> This recording is incomplete but it was Johnson talking about the fight with Jeffries and it was recorded in 1910, shortly after the fight occurred. In these recordings he sounds nothing like the voice of Samuel L. Jackson portraying Johnson in the Burns film.

In the Burns film Samuel L. Jackson actually sounds much more like one of his most famous characters he played in a feature film, the role of Jules in "Pulp Fiction." While the character of Jules famously has a change of heart after narrowly being missed by several gunshots fired at close range, he was still a killer for hire. Jackson's character in "Pulp Fiction" may be best remembered by moviegoers for angrily reciting a Bible

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<sup>243</sup> Margolick, David. "The Great Black Hope." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 2. Nov 07 2004. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 June 2017.

<sup>244</sup> A short audio recording of Johnson from 1914 was presented on a BBC radio program but it is of poor quality. "Jack Johnson." *BBC Radio 4*, BBC, [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0112fv5](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0112fv5). In his book, *Lost Sounds*, Tim Brooks devotes a chapter to Johnson and audio recordings of the boxer that exist (Brooks, Tim. *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry*, 1890-1919. University of Illinois, 2005.)

<sup>245</sup> madocseren. "Jack Johnson's Jazz Band - Tiger Rag." *YouTube*, YouTube, 14 Oct. 2007, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsWBX3cBKAQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsWBX3cBKAQ).

<sup>246</sup> Jack Johnson. "My Own Story of the Big Fight." *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry*, 1891-1922, 1910.

quote before shooting a man in the film. In his book on communicative memory, Harald Wezlar called plays, novels and films “cultural products.” Wezlar wrote that “narrative and visual media always have at least one subtext.”<sup>247</sup> Wezlar said that these subtexts may result in an:

... atmospheric tinge of a report that is passed on and determines the image and interpretation of the past, while the contents themselves—the circumstances of the situation, the causes, the sequences of events, etc.—can be freely altered, in a story.<sup>248</sup>

For viewers of “Unforgivable Blackness” who had also seen “Pulp Fiction,” the recognizable voice of Jackson could potentially result in an “atmospheric tinge” to their consideration of the persona of Jack Johnson. That is, a conflation of one of Jackson’s most famous roles, Jules the hit man, with that of Jack Johnson. Remember that early in the documentary, when defining Johnson, the voice-over tells viewers that:

To most whites, and to some African Americans, Johnson was a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace, and a danger to the natural order of things.<sup>249</sup>

Combine this rather minacious description of the man with the voice of Jules from “Pulp Fiction” and viewers might have developed a mental image of Jack Johnson that did not match the reality of the boxer’s true persona.

Buchholz’s noted in his story in the *Statesman* that Burns “found hours of moving picture footage of Johnson.”<sup>250</sup> It would be surprising if in this research that Burns did not also come across the old sound clips of the boxer. With this in mind, it appears that Burns’

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<sup>247</sup> Welzer, Harald. "Communicative memory." *Cultural memory studies: an international and interdisciplinary handbook* 8 (2010):

287.

<sup>248</sup> Welzer, 295.

<sup>249</sup> Burns, Ken, director. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson--A Film Directed by Ken Burns--Part 1*. PBS, 2005.

<sup>250</sup> Buchholz, Brad. “THE GREAT CONTRADICTION; A Conversation about America, Race and 'Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson' with Documentary Filmmaker Ken Burns.” *Austin American Statesman*, 15 Jan. 2005, p. e1.

choice of Jackson for the voice of Johnson was not made with an ear toward accuracy but more flair toward the dramatic.<sup>251</sup> That is, with descriptions of Johnson in the opening moments of the film as "...a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace, and a danger to the natural order of things," the voice of Samuel Jackson attached to the description and images of Johnson create a persona in the minds of the viewers that did not seem to match the real Jack Johnson. The cultural memory of Johnson is being tinged with racist and stereotypical views of the large black male as dangerous and violent.

### **The White Press Coverage**

*New York Age* magazine noted in 1921 that most black Americans were not interested in the white papers because they generally only highlighted black Americans "if it appeared they might have committed a crime." The exception to this, the magazine noted, was black athletes and entertainers who the white press "covered occasionally."<sup>252</sup>

Patrick Washburn (2006)

In chapter one, Bush noted that people of color are often presented as being representative of their entire race. This was evident in the white press (WP) as soon as Jeffries agreed to fight Johnson. J. H. Phillip said:

... after nearly a year of media frenzy in trying to arrange a fight between Johnson and Jeffries, the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* greeted the announcement of the fight with the respective headlines: "Jeffries matched to fight Negro" (1909) and "Jeff and Negro to meet today" (1909).<sup>253</sup>

By not identifying him by name these headlines certainly display a racist attitude toward Johnson. That is, the white Jeffries is named but Johnson is simply identified by race. But,

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<sup>251</sup> On the boxing wiki site, BoxRec, the use of Jackson as the voice of Johnson was discussed in a thread about rare recordings of Johnson's voice. One of those posting noted, "Yeah, I think Ken Burns must have asked Samuel Jackson to use his super-cool, inner-city John Shaft voice as Jack Johnson ... I think as far as tone and delivery Jack Johnson sounded more like Nelson Mandela (or rather Nelson Mandela sounds like he did)." "Jack Johnson Speaks !!.....(Rare Recordings of His Voice)." *Boxrec*, [boxrec.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=114619](http://boxrec.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=114619).

<sup>252</sup> Washburn, Patrick Scott. *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, Northwestern University Press, 2006, p. 123.

<sup>253</sup> Phillip J. H. (2012). Reexamining Jack Johnson, Stereotypes, and America's White Press, 1908-1915. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 23(3), 221.

overall, in the text of the archive in the weeks surrounding the fight, how did the white newspapers present Jack Johnson to their readers?

Considering the way Johnson was presented in the Burns film, we might be surprised to see evidence in the white press coverage of the fight that shows some white people seem to actually *like* the black champion. One story that appeared in the *New York Tribune* (WP) about a month before the fight shows that even a racist preacher can recall an event that indicates white support for Johnson. Reverend Dr. Cortland Myers of Boston said, “I hope ‘Jack’ Johnson gives the white man the worst beating he or any other one ever experienced.” While that *sounds* like pro-Johnson sentiment, it was in fact part of the good reverend’s plea that the fight should never take place because it “is nothing more than hell transferred to earth.” Myers noted this personal anecdote about Johnson:

“A year ago the Grand Central Station in New York was crowded as never before, and the mass of humanity there overflowed into the street. . . . Was it a president they had come to meet or a king? No, it was the great, burly, muscular, uncouth negro, “Jack” (sic) Johnson.”<sup>254</sup>

Why choose this example? Because Myers noted the massive crowd that turned out to support Johnson in New York. While it is possible that this “mass of humanity” was mostly black, Myers said that “thousand and thousands” had come to see Johnson who he called, “the lowest of low” and whom he said looked like the “missing link.” Since Myers described Johnson in such racist terms it is likely that he would also identify what he described as a “mob of cheering humanity” by their race if the majority of the crowd were not white. Christian sentiment against the match would surface again after the fight when it came time for film of the event to be shown around the nation.

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<sup>254</sup> “SNAPS PISTOL: KILLS WIFE.” *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 1. Jun 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Feb. 2018.

While *New York Age* magazine claimed above that the white press occasionally covered black athletes, the Jack Johnson versus Jim Jeffries fight in 1910 proved to be an extreme exception in the press coverage. Both the white and the black press covered the first FOC1 extensively. Reporting on the massive coverage of the match, the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) wrote that 100 expert telegraph operators and extra equipment were brought to Reno to send out news of the fight, and:

One wire official said that outside of the San Francisco disaster of 1906<sup>255</sup> no greater volume of matter has been handled for a single event in the history of telegraphy ... Added to what has been written during the last year and the history of the two men would fill as many volumes as that of any king or president that ever lived.<sup>256</sup>

The *New York Tribune* (WP) reported that, "There has been no election nor great disaster in recent years for which the bulletins were watched so eagerly."<sup>257</sup>

Jack Johnson was featured in the newspapers, often in multiple stories each day, in the month leading up to and the week after his fight with Jeffries. A story in the *New York Times* (WP) confirmed that the press reported on the fight like no other sporting event in history:

The fight has produced one remarkable situation that has never before attended a public event outside of a National political conference, and that is the newspapers' side of it. There are more regular newspaper men and special artists camped in this town to-night than there has been in any dozen sporting events heretofore. The newspapers have practically taken this fight to themselves, and almost every detail connected with it or with the principals has a side to it directly attributed to the papers or their reporters.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> It was in 1906 that the massive earthquake and fire occurred in San Francisco that killed, according to a 1972 NOAA report, more than 3,000 people.

<sup>256</sup> "BRIEF NOTES OF THE BIG FIGHT." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 24. Jul 05 1910. ProQuest. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>257</sup> Jr, J. B. "Will You Ever See those Fight Picture's? that Depends." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 1. Jul 10 1910. ProQuest. Web. 16 Mar. 2017.

<sup>258</sup> Special to The New, York Times. "CROWDS FLOCK TO RENO." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 11. Jun 25 1910. ProQuest. Web. 18 Feb. 2017.

As noted in chapter two, the fight had originally been scheduled to take place in San Francisco but under pressure, mostly from religious organizations, the governor of California had decided to prohibit the fight in his state. Reno not only welcomed the fight, but apparently white fight fans in Reno also roundly welcomed Johnson when he arrived in that city. Based on the next two stories from the *New York Times* (WP) it seems that Johnson was quite popular with the crowd in Reno that came to see the fight. The first story, headlined “JOHNSON HAS MANY FRIENDS,” said this about the fighter:

One of the surprising things in connection with the coming fight between Jeffries and Johnson is the strongly entrenched (sic) place Johnson occupies in the minds of so many hereabouts. Notwithstanding the carelessness the black champion has displayed in his training, he has many friends for the big issue on July 4.<sup>259</sup>

In spite of what was seen in other stories about his training, this story goes on to say that Johnson does not avoid sweets or alcohol and stays up late in the evening. This is punctuated by noting, “that Johnson has upset all the rules and traditions of fight training.” The references to Johnson’s training in this story were from his time in California before the fight was cancelled there. Perhaps the writer is insinuating that “hereabouts” are friendly toward Johnson because he likes to socialize in the evening after the training has ended. The next story, though, seems to indicate that Johnson was in fact popular with the crowd that had already gathered in Reno on the day that Johnson arrived.

Written by John L. Sullivan – the former white champion who drew a color line - the story lets readers know that an overwhelming crowd had turned out to greet Johnson when he arrived in the dusty desert town. Sullivan wrote:

The floating population of the town, which comprises the biggest part of the census here at present, was all keyed up in expectation of the big fellow’s arrival and the Railroad Superintendent of the Southern Pacific here was besieged on all

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<sup>259</sup> Special to The New York Times. "JOHNSON HAS MANY FRIENDS." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 9. Jun 23 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Jan. 2017.



sides with all manner of inquiries, so that by the time the train did arrive the plaza adjoining the railroad station was black with humanity.<sup>260</sup>

While Sullivan uses the word black to describe the scene, this seems to be based more on the size of the crowd not their race. Films of the streets of Reno that showed crowds in the street proves they were nearly all white. Sullivan's story noted that the train was four hours late, yet the crowd stuck around waiting for the champion to arrive. The area near the train station was so crowded with people that Sullivan said the best vantage point to see Johnson was second floor windows of nearby buildings. While it could be argued that the crowd in Reno was merely curious to see Johnson because he was one of the two participants in the highly anticipated fight, there is evidence that this was not the case.

As noted in chapter one, Fairclough and Thornton often focus on what is not in texts. Looking at the article from the *New York Times* (WP) reporting on *Jeffries'* arrival in Reno, there is no mention of a crowd of any size that turned out to greet the former champion upon his entrance to the city.<sup>261</sup> Now, consider how Johnson was portrayed in the Burns film as being roundly hated by whites in the battle against Jeffries. Looking at the Burns film showing the crowded streets of Reno when the fight occurred, we rarely see a black face among the throng of people. The stories presented above show that Johnson had a large crowd of white people who turned out to greet him in Reno while there was no report of a similar welcome for Jeffries.

Both fighters' Reno training camps were open to the public. Several stories noted how welcome fans and reporters felt at Johnson's camp while Jeffries was not quite as open to fans at his camp. Sullivan wrote:

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<sup>260</sup> By JOHN L SULLIVAN, Special to The New, York Times. "JOHNSON ARRIVES AT BATTLE GROUND." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 11. Jun 25 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 18 Feb. 2017.

<sup>261</sup> Special to The New, York Times. "JEFFRIES ARRIVES AT NEW QUARTERS." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 9. Jun 23 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Jan. 2017.

Johnson does not object to the gaping as much as Jeffries does. The big fellow does not like it worth a cent . . . If “Jeff” had it his way there would be a fence fifty feet high around the house and the grounds.<sup>262</sup>

While Jeffries was not enamored with the crowds, a story a week before the fight said, unlike the fighter’s Reno arrivals, both camps had large crowds of spectators to watch the boxers work. As noted in another story by Sullivan, the crowds were large at both fighters’ camps even though Johnson’s camp was farther away from town, which made it harder to get to.<sup>263</sup> The same story estimated that there were now more than 300 news reporters in town covering the event. It also gave readers a hint about how hard each fighter was working in their preparation for the match. The first sentence in the story read: “Jack Johnson was the only working man besides the carpenters around Reno today.” The story noted that Johnson shadow boxed for an hour, threw a medicine ball and hit the heavy bag. What the crowds at both camps really wanted to see was the boxers sparring with other fighters. On this day Johnson was not scheduled to spar but decided to step in the ring. Johnson then sparred with two boxers for a total of seven rounds. Readers are then told “Jeffries spent a very quiet day . . . going fishing in the morning and directing affairs at the baseball grounds in the afternoon.”<sup>264</sup> Readers are getting a hint at what would become a trend in the coverage from the training camps.

*Both fighters are preparing for the match*

An hour and twenty minutes into the Burns film, the voice-over said, “In the weeks leading up to the fight, and with more than 500 reporters descending on Reno,

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<sup>262</sup> BY JOHN L SULLIVAN Special to The New, York Times. "JEFFRIES SPENDS SUNDAY FISHING." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 8. Jun 27 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Feb. 2017.

<sup>263</sup> Sullivan, John L. "LITTLE BETTING ON BIG FIGHT." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 13. Jul 01 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 5 Jan. 2017.

<sup>264</sup> Special to The New, York Times. "JOHNSON IS CONFIDENT." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 8. Jun 27 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 18 Feb. 2017.

every detail of the two boxers' training made international news." In the days and weeks before the fight, a great deal of the ink spent in the white press was about how each man was preparing for the fight of the century.

Some of the first scholarly research on racial stereotypes by Daniel Katz and Kenneth Braly in 1933<sup>265</sup> can give us an indication of the racial stereotypes that many whites in America believed about blacks at the time. That is that a black man like Johnson was presumed to be lazy and less intelligent than his white, harder working, challenger. Therefore, in an analysis of the text in the white press that reported from the camps where both fighters were preparing for the championship fight, it can be expected that the white press would present this stereotype. But the first story in the data set from the *New York Tribune* (WP) provides a glimpse at what would become a trend in the coverage of how both boxers were executing their training for the big match. The story noted that:

After a nine-mile run and a half hour turn with the pulley weights, James J. Jeffries decided he had enough for one day, and spent the afternoon fishing for trout.<sup>266</sup>

The story, headlined: "JEFF TAKES TO FISHING," continued by letting readers know that Johnson bested Jeffries by three miles, having run 12 miles in training that day. It also noted that Jeffries had intended to return to his training camp later in the day but instead spent the rest of the day fishing. Of the 135 stories in the *Tribune* (WP) from the five weeks surrounding the fight, 78 were printed in the four weeks while the boxers were training before the fight. Within those 78, 15 stories reported on Jeffries going fishing or not training hard while reports from Johnson's camp were noting his hard work.

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<sup>265</sup> Katz, D., & Braly, K. (1933). Racial stereotypes of one hundred college students. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 28(3), 280-290.

<sup>266</sup> "JEFF TAKES TO FISHING." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 10. Jun 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 1 Mar. 2017.

Less than a month before the fight readers of the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) were informed that Jeffries had a slight thumb injury which, according to the sub-headline, made “Fishing Far More Attractive than Boxing.” The text noted:

Once again Jim Jeffries did not live up to his programme to-day, and for the fourth time the boxing between him and Jim Corbett was postponed. ... but Jeffries decided that he wanted to go fishing, and fishing he went, accompanied by a party of friends.<sup>267</sup>

The former heavyweight champion James Corbett was working as Jeffries’ trainer and the plan had been in place for four days for Jeffries and Corbett to spar but Jeffries kept cancelling this work. Within the same story readers saw just the opposite from Johnson.

After noting “Jack Johnson has always been a systematic worker,” the story said:

Without any intention of putting on the gloves the negro strolled into the big pavilion where Al Kaufman was working and decided to do a little work himself. He wrestled around with the medicine ball to warm up and then finished with four rounds of fast boxing with Kaufman.<sup>268</sup>

The story let readers know that Jeffries put off sparring that was scheduled for the day. At the same time readers see that Johnson actually sparred with Kaufman, (a former heavyweight contender who had lost to Johnson a year prior). This was not scheduled for that day’s training but was added by Johnson. Readers of the *Tribune* are seeing that the black man is more motivated and a harder worker than the white man choosing to add more work to his training while Jeffries cancelled his planned work choosing to take it easy and go fishing.

A story on June 26 once again noted that Jeffries had skipped training for fishing but noted that this was part of his plan for getting ready for the fight. The story said, “Jeffries has his own ideas about how to get into trim, and no matter what his trainers or

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<sup>267</sup> "JEFF NURSING A THUMB." *New - York Tribune* (1900-1910): 8. Jun 10 1910. ProQuest. Web. 1 Mar. 2017.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

the whole world may say, he is going to follow them out,” indicating that the white challenger was rather defensive about his habit of choosing fishing over fighting. The writer of the piece, which did not include a byline, then goes on to say:

He has varied the monotony of daily runs, shadow boxing and real boxing with hunting and fishing trips. He is very fond of the last named sports, and believes that in indulging in them while training he is safeguarding himself from becoming stale in the best possible manner.<sup>269</sup>

And there is an indication in one story that average people, who were reading about the preparations for the fight, were getting this message from the press reports.

The headline for the story, “JEFF READY TO FIGHT,” would belie the text within the story; the scuttlebutt was that Jeffries was lazy while Johnson was working hard. The *headline* was based on comments from Corbett who had a message to Jeffries’ wife. Jeffries had finally fulfilled his promise to spar with Corbett a day earlier. Corbett wanted to assure Mrs. Jeffries that her husband was not only ready, but would win the fight. But, the story also noted that journalists had been told that those reading about the preparations for the match were not convinced that Jeffries was training hard enough.

From the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) on June 12:

The visiting newspapermen have told Jeffries the impression prevails in the East that he has been doing little hard work since he began training. ... Jeffries spent the day in Big Basin, where the trout are larger than those near Ben Lomond [the site of his training camp]. He did not return to camp until after sunset, having left early in the morning.<sup>270</sup>

After reading that journalists told Jeffries a lot of people believed he was not working hard, the story then lets the readers know that Jeffries spent the entire day fishing. This was followed by a short piece noting that Johnson, on the other hand, had worked hard all

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<sup>269</sup> "Golden Age of Prize Fighting is Surely with Vs at Present." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 1. Jun 26 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Mar. 2017.

<sup>270</sup> "JEFF READY TO FIGHT." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 8. Jun 12 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Mar. 2017.

day with “determination” and that he had “indulged in a carnival of boxing” where he faced multiple sparring partners. Corbett, known by the nickname “Gentleman Jim,” who was trying to reassure Mrs. Jeffries that Jim was ready, would also eventually come to the same conclusion as the people in “the East” that Jeffries did not train hard enough for the fight.

A story in the *New York Tribune* (WP) that was published the day of the fight quoted several fighters and trainers. With the training camp complete and only the fight ahead, Corbett noted that he thought Jeffries should have trained harder, saying, “Personally, however, I’m sorry he has not done more fast work, such as boxing and shadow dancing.”<sup>271</sup> Another article on the same page (there were nine stories in the *NY Tribune* about the fight that day) said the day before the fight Johnson had completed his regular morning run (eight miles<sup>272</sup>) that day while “Jeffries did absolutely no work during the day.”<sup>273</sup> The headline for that story, “RING SUPREMACY AT STAKE IN RENO FIGHT,” indicated that the fight would determine the superiority of the boxers and not the races.

In an article that was probably of interest to many people who were considering placing a wager on the fight, 25 boxers, boxing trainers and associates from both camps all gave their predictions about who they believed would win the fight. Published in the *New York Tribune* (WP) on the day of the fight, this was the last word from experts that readers would encounter before the actual contest.<sup>274</sup> With the first seven opinions

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<sup>271</sup> "OPINIONS OF TRAINERS." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 4. Jul 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 Mar. 2017.

<sup>272</sup> "DELANY REACHES CAMP." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 4. Jul 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 3 Mar. 2017.

<sup>273</sup> "RING SUPREMACY AT STAKE IN RENO FIGHT." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 4. Jul 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 3 Mar. 2017.

<sup>274</sup> "OPINIONS OF TRAINERS." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 4. Jul 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 Mar. 2017.

coming from members of Jeffries' training camp, the structure of the story certainly favored the white challenger. While all seven certainly believed Jeffries was going to be the victor, in the first opinion from Sam Berger, his manager, Berger said of the white fighter's training: "I would have liked to have seen him do much more boxing." The next opinion from Corbett, as mentioned previously, also said that he was "sorry" that Jeffries had not done more work in his training. As would be expected, readers were told by the next five men, all of who were paid members of Jeffries' camp, that Jeffries worked and trained hard and was in good condition for the fight. Only four of the 25 quoted in the story were from inside the Johnson camp. Two of the men quoted, G. L. "Tex" Rickard (the fight promoter) and John L. Gleason, talked about the fact that they believed the fight was "on the square." (There had been some talk early on in the training that the fight was fixed.) Rickard and Gleason also said that they appreciated the "fair and unbiased" reporting about the lead up to the fight from the Associated Press. George Harting, who was identified as the "official timekeeper" for the fight, also did not predict a winner. Of the 22 who offered a prediction on the outcome, one – boxer Jack Root – said Jeffries would win a short fight and Johnson, due to his conditioning, would win a longer fight. The other 16 picked Jeffries.

While there were certainly reports in the *New York Times* (WP) that Jeffries was training hard, like the *New York Tribune* (WP), the *Times* also let readers know that, at times, Jeffries was shirking training in favor of fishing. Of the 89 stories in the *Times* before the fight, seven explicitly noted that the white challenger had gone fishing in lieu of training. The first fishing story appeared on June 9 and told readers that Jeffries had

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skipped sparring to go fishing in the morning, promising to return for more training in the afternoon. The story noted that either the fishing was too good or that he forgot his promise to return that afternoon to work. It then noted that, in addition to a group of interested spectators at the camp who waited to see the fighter train, there was a group of newspaper reporters:

The most keenly disappointed of the large number of camp visitors were several Eastern newspapermen, who expected to get a line on Jeffries to-day in his boxing bout with Corbett.<sup>275</sup>

A *Times* story on June 27 was published with the headline, “JEFFRIES SPENDS SUNDAY FISHING.” Readers saw another fishing story the next day. Both stories also included descriptions of Johnson’s hard work in camp:

In the afternoon he [Jeffries] sat around and did a little fishing. Johnson put in a full day, starting in the morning with a road stunt and boxing in the afternoon.<sup>276</sup>

While the story was headlined, “BOTH FIGHTERS TRAINING HARD,” readers are told that, in fact, it was only Johnson who was willing to put a full day of work in while Jeffries spent half of his training day fishing.

In the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), readers were seeing a similar trend as readers saw in the two New York papers. Of the 130 stories in the *Tribune* search results that were published in the month before the fight, 12 noted that Jeffries had spent training time fishing or was not training as hard as many believed he should.<sup>277</sup>

In his very first report from the Jeffries camp Corbett said he went along with Jeffries for the morning run. The subhead for the article that ran on page 11 of the paper reads, “JEFF IS GLUTTON FOR WORK ON ROAD.” Corbett noted that he and another

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<sup>275</sup> "SULLIVAN KNOCKED OUT." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 11. Jun 10 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Jan. 2017.

<sup>276</sup> Special to The New York Times. "BOTH FIGHTERS TRAINING HARD." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 3. Jun 28 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Feb. 2017.

<sup>277</sup> A list of these stories can be found in the references.



boxer from the camp, who had also gone along on the run, could not maintain Jeffries's pace. Both had quit early and decided to walk back to camp while Jeffries said he was "going down a couple miles further." Corbett's report goes on to build Jeffries up to somewhat mythical physical proportions:

When we were about a mile and a half from camp we felt the earth shake and then heard a terrible noise. We thought there was a runaway horse coming along and jumped out of the way. But it was Jeffries tearing along at a good pace, the perspiration streaming down his face. We stopped him and he took a couple of long breaths. One minute after that you never would have thought he had been running at all, so he left us on the road and tore for home.<sup>278</sup>

Corbett went on to say that Jeffries told him "that he had never trained so hard in his life, and I [Corbett] can see for myself that it is true." Again, the sources for information about how hard Jeffries is training are Jeffries and Corbett (and Corbett was working in Jeffries' camp).

The header underneath the above report by Corbett read: "JOHNSON HAS EASY DAY." Without a byline, the piece said that, "Jack Johnson did little work at his training quarters today ... Johnson did nothing in the way of strenuous exercise." This story was published on June 4, the same day that the *New York Tribune* (WP) posted the story with the headline, "JEFF TAKES TO FISHING." As noted above, the report from the New York paper told readers that Johnson had actually run 12 miles the day before while Jeffries had run only nine. And while Jeffries had done some weight work after his run, he "decided he had enough for one day, and spent the afternoon fishing for trout."<sup>279</sup> This shows that Chicago readers were given a much different story about how both fighters trained.

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<sup>278</sup> Corbett, James J. "He has His Dignity to Sustain and He also has the Last Guess." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 11. Jun 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>279</sup> "JEFF TAKES TO FISHING." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 10. Jun 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 1 Mar. 2017.

While Corbett's opinion on the white challenger is obviously biased and perhaps misleading, it appears he was trying to quell rumors about Jeffries' work ethic. In this report from the camp, Corbett said:

No matter *what any of you may hear to the contrary*, Jeffries is rounding to in a truly remarkable manner, and all around the camp are simply delighted with his work (emphasis added).<sup>280</sup>

In the last report on both fighters' preparation that appeared in the *New York Times* (WP) under the headline, "FIGHTERS END HARD TRAINING." The *sub-headline* is more indicative of how hard both fighters were working: "Johnson works, but Jeffries goes fishing." With just a few days before the fight, the story tells readers that Johnson sparred with two fighters for a total of seven rounds and says that spectators "are very favorably impressed." Readers then were told that Jeffries, on the other hand,

... has a few pounds of fat on him where it shows, and he certainly hasn't done anything lately to take it off. He spent to-day up in the river somewhere fishing.<sup>281</sup>

A story that appeared in the newspaper on the day of the fight had John L. Sullivan's name on the byline. Sullivan had ventured to both men's training camps to get a statement from each fighter about how they felt the day before the match. Sullivan wrote that when he got there, Jeffries was gone fishing.<sup>282</sup> Another story in the *Times* on the same page let readers know that Johnson actually ran eight miles while Jeffries fished. When Johnson returned after the brisk run, readers were told that he was perspiring freely, but did not seem tired.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Corbett, James J. "He has His Dignity to Sustain and He also has the Last Guess." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 11. Jun 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>281</sup> Special to The New, York Times. "FIGHTERS END HARD TRAINING." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 3. Jul 01 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Feb. 2017.

<sup>282</sup> By JOHN L SULLIVAN Special to The New, York Times. "I'LL WIN -- JEFFRIES; CAN'T LOSE -- JOHNSON." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 14. Jul 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 Feb. 2018 .

<sup>283</sup> Special to The New, York Times. "HARD TASK TO FEED THROG." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 14. Jul 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 Feb. 2018.

As noted earlier, Katz and Braly offered some of the first research that indicated the lazy black stereotype in 1933. In the month leading up to the fight, readers of the white newspapers were getting a picture that Jack Johnson was training hard while Jeffries often chose to go fishing instead of working. While this goes directly against the stereotype, readers were also getting a message that Johnson was a bit of a racial outlier. Just two days before the fight, Sullivan affirms that Johnson is, in the minds of many at the time, a bit of a racial aberration. In a story in the *New York Times* (WP) with a byline by Sullivan, the ex-champion says, “Johnson is far above the average negro, both mentally and physically ...”<sup>284</sup>

This was particularly evident in a piece published in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) a week before the fight. Richard H. Little is credited as the author of the column titled, “Round about Chicago.” The text is shown as a conversation between a white barber and a black shoeshine man, named Cal, as both worked. There is a great deal to unpack in the piece. First, Cal is represented in the piece using a hyper-racist depiction of his dialect while speaking. The two have a back and forth where the barber compares blacks to animals and then they talk about the fight. This long exchange is the most significant in the piece:

“You don’ know nothing about hit,” said Cal. “Lill Ahtha hain’t a goin’ to lay down, no such thing. Cause why? Ef he winds dat fite he’ll be de biggest colored man in de world. He sure will. White people kin go to congress an’ to de senate, an’ be presider of de whole Nuinted States, but a nigger hain’t got no chance at all. He kain’t be a better poltikan er a better nothin’ den a white man, excep dess one thing. Mebbe he kin be a better prize fiter. Dat’s de one place where hits a straight show down between de white man and the cullud man. Mistah Johnsun know dat. Dere hain’t no money in de world dat’s a goin’ to keep him from whuppin’ dat Mistah Jeffries.”

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<sup>284</sup> By JOHN L SULLIVAN Special to The New, York Times. "JEFFRIES WILL TRY FOR QUICK VICTORY." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 3. Jul 02 1910. ProQuest. Web. 6 Feb. 2018.

“Tut, tut, Cal,” said the barber. “Don’t fool yourself. Anybody nowadays will do what you want if you hand him enough. Look at the legislature. If you can buy the legislature, don’t you suppose you can buy up a prize fighter?”

“Ah don’ know nothin’ about dat legislatur,” said Cal. “Ah don’t know whedder dey did, an’ I don’ know whedder dey didden’t. Ah know dis: Heah’s all de cullud people in de Nuinted States a wantin’ dat Mistah Johnson to whup dat Mistah Jeffries. An’ nen if he do whup ‘im Mistah Johnson will be dess de bigges’ man in de worl’. Dar hain’t no man a goin’ to lay down when he’s got dat to fite for. No siree.”<sup>285</sup>



Figure 1

The image of Cal (Figure 1) associated with the story is every bit as racist as the depiction of his words. Looking at the image and trying to read Cal’s words are difficult, at best, but the text actually offers readers of the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) a great deal of information that says a lot about the fight and the morality of the races. Before this exchange Cal had said he

was not really interested in boxing but then explains the importance of this particular boxing match in the mind of black Americans, even for those who don’t like boxing, if Johnson should be victorious. Cal said, if Johnson wins the fight he would be the most famous black man in the world. Cal then touches on the racial significance of the fight when he says that black Americans want Johnson to beat Jeffries, and if he does, he will be the biggest man in the world. When the barber talks about politicians, Cal says that a black man in America really does not have the opportunity to be a better politician than a white man but he can be a better fighter because in the ring, it is a “straight show down.” That is, in 1910 this is one of the only areas that a black man can compete directly and fairly with a white man. The white barber said Johnson would take the money and throw the fight and then claims, given the right amount; *anybody* would take the money, and

<sup>285</sup> Little, Richard H. "Round about Chicago." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 6. Jun 27 1910. ProQuest. Web. 4 Jan. 2017.

uses white politicians as his proof. Cal's response is that there are more important things than money and, for Johnson, pride in his race is certainly more important than any amount of money.

It is not clear whether or not this story is supposed to represent an actual conversation that the writer observed in a barbershop or it is one that he concocted. But it may not matter if it was real or not. In fact, it may be more significant if it was concocted in the mind of Richard Little, the writer. Perhaps Little wrote this in an attempt to be humorous but, upon further review, we can see that it is actually very telling about the pride and integrity that the shoeshine man has while sitting at the feet of his white customers.

While the piece, at first glance, appears to be intended to show the ignorance of Cal, it is doubtful that Little realized what he was really saying when he wrote this piece – that the black shoeshine man showed much greater moral fortitude than the white barber. It is also doubtful that many of the white readers of the piece realized exactly what it is that Cal was saying either because, along with the picture, it is difficult to get past the racist dialect that Little chose to use for Cal's message. Cal appeared on the pages of the *Tribune* two more times - once on the day of the fight<sup>286</sup> and again shortly after the fight when he was given the chance to comment about the Johnson victory.<sup>287</sup>

In one of the last articles that appeared before the fight, *Chicago Tribune* (WP) writer Thomas T. Hoyne wrote:

It will be the greatest battle ever fought, and perhaps, the last great battle fought for the heavyweight championship this century. It is seldom two such men who

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<sup>286</sup> Little, Richard H. "Round about Chicago." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 8. Jul 04 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 8 Jan. 2017.

<sup>287</sup> Little, Richard H. "Round about Chicago." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 8. Jul 12 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Jan. 2017.

seem, on paper, so evenly matched, are contemporaries. It has never occurred before in the annals of pugilism; it may never occur again.<sup>288</sup>

The next day, news of the battle would be received, as it took place, via wire reports at a number of locations including outside of the *New York Times* office in Times Square. As the press would report, the match did not turn out to be “greatest battle ever fought.” And while the “contemporaries,” may have been “evenly matched” on paper, in the boxing ring, the match turned out to be quite lopsided.

*Johnson proves superior*

“The fight of the century is over and a black man is the undisputed champion of the world,” wrote John L. Sullivan as the first words in his accounting of the fight in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP).<sup>289</sup> Of the crowd that had gathered to hear reports of the fight outside of their offices, the *Chicago Tribune* noted:

J-E-F-F-E-R-I-E-S K-N-O-C-K-E-D O-U-T I-N T-H-E F-I-F-T-E-E-N-T-H R-O-U-N-D

THE TRIBUNE announcer yelled this out through a megaphone, and the crowd yelled? No, it kind of said, “O,” and then moaned a bit, and then there was a cheer. And why not? The crowd concluded that the better fighter had won.<sup>290</sup>

A recap of the fight in the *New York Tribune* (WP) said, “The youth and *science* of the negro made Jeffries look like a green sloth, the reviled Johnson a black panther, wonderful in his alertness and defensive tactics”<sup>291</sup> (emphasis added). Tex Rickard, the promoter and referee of the fight, was quoted in the *New York Times* (WP) saying, “Jack

<sup>288</sup> Thomas, T. "DOES A NATIONAL WEAKNESS FOR HERO WORSHIP MAKE BRUTES OF US ALL?" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 1. Jul 03 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Jan. 2017.

<sup>289</sup> Sullivan, John L. "Jack Johnson, and Tools which Brought Him World s Pugilistic Victory." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 25. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>290</sup> "THOUSANDS HEAR TRIBUNE RETURNS." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 26. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>291</sup> "JEFFRIES FALLS BEFORE JOHNSON." *New - York Tribune* (1900-1910): 1. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 Mar. 2017.

Johnson is the most wonderful fighter that ever pulled on a glove.”<sup>292</sup> Rickard said in the same story that he believed before the event, “away down in my heart that Jeffries would be the winner of the fight.”



Figure 2

Looking at the top half of the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) from July 5, 1910 (Figure 2), we see how editors prioritized the information that their readers would be seeing. Two of the first three columns on the page, looking from left to right, contained news of the fight.<sup>293</sup> Two of the next three columns reported on the sudden death of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States and a collision between two trains that killed 19 people. This appears to be an indication that the editors of the *Tribune* believed their readers would be more interested in reading the first reports on the fight than the unexpected death of the Chief Justice and a report on a massive train crash. *The New York Times* (WP) front page had a similar layout with two fight stories,

<sup>292</sup> "OUTCLASSED HIM, JOHNSON DECLARES." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 3. Jul 05 1910. ProQuest. Web. 6 Feb. 2018 .

<sup>293</sup> The second story reports on the violence after the fight in cities across the country. More analysis of this part of the coverage will be presented later in this chapter.

one on the far left and one on the far right, with the stories on the Chief Justice and the train wreck lodged in between.

Looking at the headline of the first fight story in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), readers are told that it was Jeffries' more advanced age that defeated the challenger. The sub-headline reads: "White Man, a Shell of Former Greatness, Beaten Down by Youthful Negro Antagonist."<sup>294</sup> While it can certainly be argued that Jeffries six-year ring layoff was a reason for his loss, his age should not have been considered a factor. Jeffries, at age 35, was only three years older than Johnson, who was 32 when he entered the ring. Looking at other stories of the fight in the *Tribune* we see some contradictions in what the editors were writing in the headlines compared to the text of the stories. Another sub-headline for this story gives us our first example of what would become a trend in the post-fight reporting: "Outfought, Outboxed, Outscinded, the 'Big Bear' is Plaything for the Black Panther." A box just above the byline tells readers that there is a "special four page pink fight supplement" in the *Tribune* that day. In all, 20 stories appeared in the Chicago paper on July 5 that had some mention of the fight or the fighters. While the subhead mentions that Jeffries was "outscinded" by Johnson, indicating greater intellect, the text in this story questions the champion's intelligence. While the headline said Jeffries age was partially to blame for his loss to Johnson, the story gave credit to Johnson for being better than Jeffries regardless of their ages:

It is doubtful if even in his best days Jeffries could have won ... He [Johnson] demonstrated further that his race has acquired full stature as men; whether they will ever breed brains to match his muscles is yet to be proven.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Beach, Rex E. "JOHNSON AND AGE DEFEAT JEFFRIES." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 1. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.

<sup>295</sup> Beach, 1910.



The story goes on to note that it is unlikely that anyone will beat Johnson before saying that age would eventually be the biggest threat to his title. The piece, written by the novelist Rex E. Beach, is filled with flowery prose lamenting the “tremendous, crushing” ... “tragedy” that had occurred when the white man lost while also describing Johnson as, “a living, life size bronze, chiseled by the cunning hand of a master,” which matches the stereotype of the greater physical capabilities of the black athlete. Beach’s story finishes with what he observed out the window of his Reno hotel when he returned after the fight. It was Jack Johnson in the street below:

He had no mark upon his person as he bowed his thanks to the bellowed greeting the street offered him. The last picture is of a giant black man shaking the hand of a newsboy as he runs beside the champion’s motor car with a surging mass of humanity behind.<sup>296</sup>

Again, contrary to what we saw and heard in the Burns film, Beach writes his personal observation published the day after the fight that Johnson’s car was followed by a “surging mass of humanity” indicating that there was, in fact, a great deal of support for Johnson among the white crowd that had gathered for the fight in Reno. Beach also dispels a myth that has reached the cultural memory. Gail Bederman’s first line in her book, “Manliness & Civilization,” reads: “At 2:30 p.m. on July 4, 1910, in Reno, Nevada, as the band played, ‘All Coons Look Alike to Me,’ Jack Johnson climbed into the ring to defend his title against Jim Jeffries.”<sup>297</sup> After noting that there was a *rumor* before the fight that the brass band in the ring would play the racist song, Beach reported, “but

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> “Remaking Manhood through Race and Civilization.” *Manliness & Civilization: a Cultural History of Gender and Race In the United States, 1880-1917*, by Gail Bederman, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 1.

feeling was too high perhaps, and they favored us with a selection of national airs, at which the multitude rose and cheered.”<sup>298</sup>



Figure 3

Looking at the front page of the *New York Tribune* (WP) we see a slightly different positioning of the stories. The train wreck gets top priority on the upper left with three fight stories positioned above the fold. Reading from left to right, a story about post-fight violence appears first followed by two fight stories below the banner to the right. The chief justice story (not seen above) was just below the lower photo in the third column.

Most of the stories about the fight in the white press that were published on July 5 spoke of the disappointment over the Jeffries loss while at the same time showing admiration for the skill of Johnson. A story in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) is similar to many stories that readers encountered on the day after the big fight. Headlined, "LOS

<sup>298</sup> Beach, 1910.

ANGELES IS DOWNCAST," it quoted Rickard who said, "I could not help but feel sorry for the big white man as he fell beneath the champion's blows."<sup>299</sup>

In hindsight it is easy to see why the Jeffries loss was immediately presented this way. In the two years since Johnson won the title in 1908, white America had been searching for a great white hope to "take the title back." After exhausting the possibilities whites had decided that it was Jeffries - who was champion when he retired undefeated - who could finally accomplish this. As noted in chapter two, Johnson won the title from a Canadian in Australia. Perhaps FOC1 became so big because it was the first time the best black American would face, who many believed to be, the best white American fighter and the fight would take place in the United States. Therefore when even this effort failed; many whites were disillusioned about their "superiority" over their black neighbors. But starting a day later, perhaps once the initial shock wore off, the white press seemed to be presenting Johnson in a different light. The press began writing about the champion as not only physically superior but against the racial stereotype, also more intellectually capable than Jeffries as well. An op-ed in the *New York Times* (WP) showed what the editorial board of the paper thought of Johnson and the victory:

Johnson showed not only that he had greater available strength and endurance than Jeffries, but that he brought to his task greater intelligence and skill, a sounder judgment, equal courage, and a perfectly fair, manly, and honorable standard of behavior. ... By the tests the white man had elected to apply the black was the "better man" in every sense. However disappointing and irritating that may be to those who longed to see "the nigger licked," it cannot but have some influence on their view of the inherent relations of the two races.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> "LOS ANGELES IS DOWNCAST." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 25. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>300</sup> "THE RACE QUESTION." *New York Times* (1857-1922): 6. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Feb. 2018.

In the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) there was similar admiration shown for what Johnson accomplished against his white opponent. While the story was mainly about how poorly Jeffries had performed, it said this about the heavyweight champion:

Johnson's repartee, his coolness in the ring, the terrible power of his punches, his marvelous judgment of distance, and his almost uncanny quickness and boxing skill are the talk of the town.<sup>301</sup>

This story was filed from Reno the day after the fight. It notes that this description of Johnson during the fight was the "talk of the town." This indicates that the writer was hearing this from whites who had attended the fight and were still in Reno the next day.

Also on the 7<sup>th</sup>, *The New York Tribune* (WP) ran a story that noted the Nevada governor had "no regrets" about allowing the fight to take place in his state. The piece then went on to say that while the spectators at the fight were "overwhelmingly for Jeffries," readers were then told this about how that same crowd felt about Johnson:

... when the black man demonstrated his complete superiority in every way and won the battle of thinking, seeing and acting simultaneously, as the result of greater mentality, speed and vitality, no demonstration of reproach or insult was offered in any manner.<sup>302</sup>

Fight spectators - who the story said were pro Jeffries - after witnessing Johnson's domination saw that the black fighter had shown himself to be both physically and intellectually superior to the white fighter. This reaction from the white crowd in Reno matches the reaction from the crowd in Chicago that was getting fight results outside of the *Tribune* offices. As noted above, the mostly white crowd in Chicago, "moaned a bit,

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<sup>301</sup> "JEFFRIES LEAVES FOR RANCH." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 11. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>302</sup> "NO REGRETS ABOUT FIGHT." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 8. Jul 07 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

and then there was a cheer. And why not? The crowd concluded that the better fighter had won.”<sup>303</sup>

A story in the *New York Tribune* (WP) followed this theme that it was not just Johnson’s physical skills but also his mental abilities that proved his greatness. Six days after the fight the writer, listed at the end of the piece as J. B. Jr., says that Johnson “physically is what Shakespeare was mentally.” J. B. then noted the intellectual capabilities of the black man as well. He offered as his reasons Johnson’s relaxed manner and humor before and during the fight:

That is the gift of the superman, of the supreme genius. When a man has more than enough brains to treat the subjects that he deals with so that he has a playful tone even toward the most terrible themes, then we call him a poet.<sup>304</sup>

This representation of Johnson in the press at the time of the fight goes against what the cultural memory would lead us to believe about how whites felt about Johnson at the time. When the press presents the black man in the fight as “superior in every way” against his white opponent, this also goes against what the academy might lead us to believe about racial stereotyping at the time. That is not to say that extreme racism was not the norm. The point is that this analysis shows the press did not openly and consistently present this theme in the coverage of the fight.

Another one of the themes that ran throughout the coverage before the fight was that the black man would turn “yellow” once he stood across the ring from the white man. That is, that it was somehow inherent in the black man to be frightened simply because his opponent was white. After the fight, this theme was presented as, basically, being

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<sup>303</sup> "THOUSANDS HEAR TRIBUNE RETURNS." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 26. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>304</sup> Jr, J. B. "Will You Ever See those Fight Picture's? that Depends." *New - York Tribune* (1900-1910): 1. Jul 10 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Mar. 2017.

turned on its head. The section head in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) story read, “NO YELLOW IN BLACK.” Referring to Johnson the story said, “His yellow streak, of which so much as been said, was not there.”<sup>305</sup> After noting that there was a keen admiration for Johnson’s ability as a fighter in the *New York Times* (WP), the story continued, saying:

In all the fight talk and the dissection of yesterday afternoon’s event one thing stands out sharply—there is no more mention of Johnson’s yellow streak, the thing that *has been written and talked about ever since he came into ring prominence*. The experts who sat within the sound of the blows he delivered at will agree in saying that not once did he give an indication of that fear.<sup>306</sup> (emphasis added)

The post-fight coverage actually was presenting examples that it was, in fact, the white fighter who ended up being the yellow one. The main headline for the story was: “NATURE OF JEFF CAUSE OF DEFEAT.” The sub headline under this read: “Fear of Physical Consequences Always Blot on the White Man’s Ring Career.” In the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), the writer, Hugh Keough (listed as H. E. K. in the byline), tore in to Jeffries, claiming that the white fighter had shown signs of fright before and during fights throughout his career. Keough wrote that Jeffries “never fought willingly” and Jeffries had “tried to run out every time he has approached a match.” The writer then said that before the Johnson fight, Jeffries “was led to the ring like a doomed man to the electric chair.”<sup>307</sup>

The best evidence that Jeffries was scared before the fight came directly from the boxer’s mouth. The headline in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) story read, “AT LAST

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<sup>305</sup> Beach, Rex E. "JOHNSON AND AGE DEFEAT JEFFRIES." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 1. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.

<sup>306</sup> Special to The New, York Times. "JEFFRIES OFFENDED FOLLOWERS AT RENO." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 3. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Feb. 2018.

<sup>307</sup> H. E. K. "NATURE OF JEFF CAUSE OF DEFEAT." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 2. Jul 10 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Jan. 2017.

JEFFRIES TALKS.” The subhead below that was, “Big Fellow Believes He Suffered from Stage Fright.” The article noted that his performance was so dismal that many were suggesting that Jeffries was drugged before the fight.<sup>308</sup> The story said the rumor was false and, “The truth of the matter is, Jeff had a narrow escape from a mental and physical wreckage when he met the negro in the ring at Reno.” The story was published nearly a week after the fight and noted that Jeffries was just beginning to recover from mental fatigue:

Today for the first time since the fight, say friends who have been with him constantly, he seemed himself and talked rationally. It was feared his mind was entirely gone. ... Jeff had to stop several times during the interview to collect his thoughts. It will be a long time before he regains his normal health, if he ever does.<sup>309</sup>

A *New York Tribune* (WP) story quoted a “well known sporting authority who talked with Jeffries.” He said:

“He was whipped before he left Moana Springs [his training camp] for the ringside,” said the man. “He felt that he was to fall before the negro, and it was too much for him to face. As the hour approached his nervous condition became such that his mind lost all control over his body.”<sup>310</sup>

One of the most surprising post-fight articles about Jeffries’ performance came from one of his trainers. The last story with James Corbett’s byline actually made the strongest argument that Jeffries was emotionally broken before the fight. The same man who had claimed that his fighter was training hard before the fight said his “predictions were a thousand miles out of the way.” As Johnson pummeled Jeffries in the 15<sup>th</sup> round, Corbett, who described Jeffries physically in mythical proportions before the fight, reportedly

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<sup>308</sup> Historically boxing matches have often been cloaked in rumors of a “fix.” Since organized crime was often involved in wagering on matches, there were some fights that were later proven to have been “fixed” when one of the fighters was paid to take a “dive.” This same theme would surface in Muhammad Ali’s career in 1964. Ali surprised nearly all of the sports writers covering that championship match by defeating Liston. Many believed Liston to be unbeatable.

<sup>309</sup> “AT LAST JEFFRIES TALKS.” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 1. Jul 10 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Jan. 2017.

<sup>310</sup> “JEFF TRYING TO FORGET.” *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 8. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

yelled to Johnson as he “ran forward with outstretched arms, crying: ‘O, go back; don’t hit him,’”<sup>311</sup> after Jeffries fell to the canvas for the last time. He explicitly apologized for his fighter’s performance in the ring. Under a section head that read, “Jeff in a Daze,”

Corbett said:

... the last three days before this fight the man was in a sort of a daze, and the only way that I can possibly figure out his miserable showing was the fact that he had been worrying for the last three days, not so much about getting a licking, because, in my opinion, a gamer fellow never lived, but because his whole nervous system went back on him.<sup>312</sup>

Again, this goes against the cultural memory today, which claims that Johnson was disrespected and even despised by most of white America. Remember in the Burns film Johnson was described as “a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace, and a danger...” to whites and some blacks. The white press at the time was, in fact, telling readers that Johnson should be respected for his extraordinary physical abilities in his fight against the white man who many believed to be the greatest who ever lived. Readers were also told that the black man used his intellect to outsmart the white fighter. And, even though the white press had presented the message before the match that many believed Johnson would emotionally wilt when he faced his white opponent, it was the white man, according to the white press, who was emotionally broken before, during, and after he faced his black opponent. That it was Johnson who displayed outstanding courage in the battle.

### *The white wife factor*

While, as mentioned earlier, the Burns film claimed that it was the white press coverage of Johnson’s white wife that created a great deal of the animosity toward the

<sup>311</sup> PRESS, ASSOCIATED. "JEFFRIES BLAMES AGE FOR DOWNFALL." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 23. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.

<sup>312</sup> "AT LAST JEFFRIES TALKS." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 1. Jul 10 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Jan. 2017.



black champion. But in the five weeks of white press coverage surrounding the fight there were 456 stories about the fight and the fighters in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times* and the *New York Tribune*. Of these, there was only *one* mention of Johnson's wife that identified her as white.<sup>313</sup> In fact, there were an equal number of mentions of Jeffries' wife as Johnson's in each of the three papers.<sup>314</sup> The single mention of Johnson's wife being white was in the *Chicago Tribune* and was in the week after the fight. The story reported on an incident when Johnson's train, travelling from Reno to Chicago, stopped in Ogden, Utah. The piece reported that a crowd of 5,000 turned out to greet the champion including three white men that the headline called, thugs. The story notes that three "toughs" threatened Johnson and used an epithet, which angered the champion. Again, a very large crowd turned out to greet the champion. While the story notes that he shook "hands with a few colored admirers," it seems safe to assume that a crowd of this size in Ogden, Utah would be made up mostly of whites indicating a show of support for the black fighter.<sup>315</sup> This goes against the Burns film, which called Johnson roundly hated by whites at the time. The same event was reported in the *New York Tribune* (WP). While it did mention that Johnson's wife was present when the trouble occurred, it did not identify her as white.<sup>316</sup>

As Johnson's train continued from Utah through Wyoming another story about a huge and welcoming crowd appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP). The story noted that a crowd of around 5,000 showed up at the station in Cheyenne, Wyoming to greet the

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<sup>313</sup> "JOHNSON IN RAGE AT THUGS' INSULT." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 11. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 8 Feb. 2018 .

<sup>314</sup> There were two stories mentioning Jeffries' wife and two mentioning Johnson's wife in the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Times*. The *Chicago Tribune* mentioned both men's wives three times each.

<sup>315</sup> "JOHNSON IN RAGE AT THUGS' INSULT." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 11. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>316</sup> "JOHNSON REACHES OGDEN." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 8. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

champion. The paper noted that this crowd included around 1,000 “colored soldiers.”

This indicates that 4,000 in the crowd were white. The paper said the people at the station:

... surrounded the champion’s private car, the crowd greeting the champion with wild yells and waving of hats. ... Flowers were showered on him and the people forced their way into Johnson’s car to shake his hand.<sup>317</sup>

Once Johnson arrived in Chicago the *Tribune* (WP) reported a massive crowd turned out to cheer him there as well. “Fully 15,000 persons jammed Monroe street (sic) when it became known he was in the loop.”<sup>318</sup> This is further evidence, via the white press, that there were white Americans who not only admired the black champion, but also liked him enough to turn out in giant numbers to see him. Even in Cheyenne, Wyoming where they greeted and cheered him as his train passed through their city after defeating the white former champion. While some may claim this was merely an opportunity for whites to get a glimpse of a celebrity, these examples are shown as evidence to disprove the characterization made in the cultural memory about the level of hatred against Johnson. It is doubtful that these same people would turn out to cheer, shake hands and throw flowers at a man whom they despised. And while some may argue that readers were already aware of the color of his wife’s skin before this fight, therefore the press did not have to report that, remember the evidence presented earlier that this fight was followed, and even attended, by people who were not interested in boxing prior to this match.

### *The fight film controversy*

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<sup>317</sup> "The Game Fighter is He Who Fights Gamely and Smiles in Defeat." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 13. Jul 07 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Jan. 2017.

<sup>318</sup> Eckersall, Walter H. "JOHNSON TO BE MOTOR PILOT." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 1. Jul 10 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Jan. 2017.

A great deal of the coverage in the white press in the week after the fight focused on the fight film. There were debates about whether or not film of the fight should be shown in theaters around the country, and even around the world. Considering prize fighting was illegal in most states at the time, some used this as an excuse why a film of a fight should be illegal as well. In an editorial titled, "DISPLAYING CRIMINAL SCENES," the *New York Tribune* (WP) made this very case. The piece used the example of a group of criminals who said they got the idea for their caper from a film they had scene.<sup>319</sup> Of course, as Dan Streible noted in his book on the history of early boxing films, there were around 100 fight films produced between the years 1897 and 1907, so perhaps calls for prohibition of this film had more to do with Johnson's race than his profession.<sup>320</sup>

A series of short stories about the opposition to the film noted that in the U.S. much of this opposition was led by religious organizations like the Tidewater Virginia Interdenominational Ministerial Union. The headline in the story in the *New York Tribune* (WP) said, "MOVEMENT SPREADS ABROAD," then let readers know in the subhead, "Opposition to Pictures in England, Australia, Africa and India."<sup>321</sup> The *Tribune* story then said:

The United Society of Christian Endeavor, which has branches in every city and town in the country as well as in many foreign countries, has begun an international campaign against the exhibition.<sup>322</sup>

<sup>319</sup> "DISPLAYING CRIMINAL SCENES." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 6. Jul 08 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

<sup>320</sup> "Introduction." *Fight Pictures: a History of Boxing and Early Cinema*, by Dan Streible, University of California Press, 2008, p. 2.

<sup>321</sup> "VIRGINIA MINISTERS PROTEST." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 3. Jul 08 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

<sup>322</sup> "TO BAR FIGHT PICTURES." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 4. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

In addition to the fight film, another frequent story in the press after the fight was about the violence that occurred in cities across the nation when the result of the fight was announced.

*The violent aftermath*

One of the reasons given for opposing the fight film at the time was the concern over safety for blacks that might attend a screening. The headline in the *New York Times* (WP) read, “BAR FIGHT PICTURES TO AVOID RACE RIOTS: Washington, Atlanta, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Cincinnati Fear Effect on Negroes.” Perhaps in an effort to bolster this argument, the story began with a list of deaths due to violence after the fight results were announced. After noting that several cities had taken steps to prevent the showing of the film, the piece said,

In each instance the officials were stirred by the race fights, and in some cases actual riots which followed the receipt of the news of Johnson’s victory.<sup>323</sup>

The concern over safety for black viewers of the films was, perhaps, a legitimate one. But a story noting that the legislature in the state of Georgia had enacted a law banning the film showed that at least some were acting directly based on racism. Breaking the new law would result in “a heavy penalty,” and the story noted that passage of the law was “received with heavy cheering in House and Senate.”<sup>324</sup> The story said, “The outburst against the pictures is frankly admitted to be due to the fact that the negro won the fight.”

Many of the stories about the violence in the streets after the fight explicitly noted that the attacks were whites against blacks. But, oddly, they often faulted blacks for being the victims of the attack. A story in the *New York Tribune* (WP) four days after the fight

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<sup>323</sup> “BAR FIGHT PICTURES TO AVOID RACE RIOTS.” *New York Times* (1857-1922): 3. Jul 06 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Feb. 2018.

<sup>324</sup> Special to The New York Times. “GEORGIA TO ENACT A LAW.” *New York Times* (1857-1922): 3. Jul 07 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Feb. 2018.

quoted Missouri governor Herbert Hadley who expressed his feelings that the fight was really meaningless. Hadley then went on to say that the violence was, essentially, based on the fact that blacks were expressing their support for Johnson's victory:

“While I propose to do all that I can to protect the negroes in their rights and to prevent and punish acts of violence against them, the negroes must understand that only by their own conduct can they secure the respect of the people.”<sup>325</sup>

Hadley was quoted saying that blacks were “provoking” the violence that was being perpetrated against them because of their pleasure over the black mans success.

Looking at the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) (figure 2) from the day after the fight, we see the report of the dead and injured across the nation. The list at the top of the story spells a city in Georgia, Uvaldia, while the text in the story spells it, Waldia. The story is reported on the 5th in the *Tribune* as a post-fight issue, but it was reported in the *New York Times* (WP) on July 4. The story noted that the incident took place in a construction camp where black workers were housed. These workers were bragging that Johnson would beat Jeffries and this, “so enraged the white people of Uvaldia that a party was formed to clean out the camp.” Three of the black workers were killed and several injured, according to the story. The report also noted, “The fire of the whites was so deadly that the negroes fled from the camp into the woods, where they are being hunted by the whites.”<sup>326</sup> The story does not offer any condemnation for any of these actions.

Many of the post-fight violence stories tended to frame the events as being the fault of both the whites and the blacks in the clashes. The same *Chicago Tribune* (WP) story included this report:

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<sup>325</sup> "FIGHT RESULT MEANINGLESS." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 3. Jul 08 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.

<sup>326</sup> Special to The New, York Times. "THREE KILLED IN UVALDIA." *New York Times (1857-1922)*: 4. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Feb. 2018.

... white ruffians set fire to a negro tenement house, threw stones at windows whenever a frightened face appeared, and tried to keep the tenants inside by blocking the exits.<sup>327</sup>

While this story indicated that none of the tenants were injured, it also noted that the police arrived quickly and there were no arrests reported. In the same article another New York incident is noted. The story said a black man who was trying to buy a newspaper was approached by a white gang and asked to comment on the fight. The black man said he was “neutral.” The story then reported:

“Let’s kill the coon,” said the gang of men and rushed for him. The negro drew a wicked looking stiletto and held them off until the police came. He and three of his assailants were locked up.<sup>328</sup>

We see that when the police showed up quickly to attempts by whites to burn a tenement with the black residents inside, no arrests were reported. When a white gang attacks a black man, the black man being attacked ends up being one of the men arrested by the police.

Many of these incidents were reported as being instigated by blacks who were celebrating the victory. These two were noted in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), the first from Houston, Texas where, “A negro’s throat was slashed by a white man. The black jeeringly had proclaimed Johnson’s victory.” The story called these “battles” even though the text usually noted that it was whites attacking blacks. It said that these incidences occurred in “the streets of practically every large city in the country” where blacks “were set upon by whites and killed or wounded because of cheers for Johnson’s victory.”<sup>329</sup>

These stories are obviously indicating the extreme level of racism of whites, in particular

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<sup>327</sup> "ELEVEN KILLED IN MANY RACE RIOTS." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922): 1. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.

<sup>328</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 1910.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*.

– “white ruffians” – against blacks in the streets in 1910. This is obvious evidence of the level of racism that existed at the time. The argument I am offering is that this same level of racism did not fully materialize in the way that the white press presented Jack Johnson on these same pages and which, in his film, Burns said existed at the time. That is, the majority of these stories did not indicate any condemnation in the reporting of the extreme violence of racist white citizens against black citizens. The implication seems to be that those who were writing and printing these stories were letting white and black citizens know that even though Johnson was easily able to beat Jeffries in a boxing ring, groups of white citizens were still physically capable of beating and killing individual black citizens on most city streets.

Only 45 years after slavery ended, at least some whites may have felt threatened by Johnson’s victory. Their racial order had been upended. Some whites may have been trying to push back on this by trying to prove physical superiority when average white citizens (average meaning not professional boxers) engaged in violent and deadly acts against average black citizens in the streets. Many of the stories listed high numbers of injuries and a number of deaths to the black citizens involved in the incidents, while there were some reports of whites injured, there were no reports of whites killed. Perhaps the white press was so diligent in reporting this as a way to reassure their white readers that outside of the boxing ring, groups of whites were still able to maintain physical superiority over individual blacks. That is, as noted earlier, while the white press reported that Johnson was indeed exceptional in his fight against Jeffries, these average blacks in America certainly were not, and needed to be shown this. Or, as one story noted, the

white men beating and killing blacks “wished to demonstrate that at any rate ten white men were better than one negro.”<sup>330</sup>

Also after the fight, Richard Little of the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) presented Cal the shoeshine man’s take on the events. Cal, the piece noted, had put a fair amount of money on Johnson including in a wager with the white barber. Again, whether real or fictional, Cal made some profound observations. Cal is presented as having a conversation with a white man labeled, the “fat customer.” The customer asked Cal if he had stopped laughing since the fight. Cal responded that he was not laughing because he did not want to start a race riot. With regard to the Johnson victory and the violent aftermath Cal said:

“When de black man fite in de ahmy de white people say de cullud troop dun fite noble, but when he fite in a prize fite hits a stahtin’ of a race wah to mention de fac’ out in publick.”<sup>331</sup>

Again, Cal is presented in the over-the-top racist dialect while offering a great deal of intelligence and wisdom. This idea that whites in America would consider the black man who fights in the army noble but a race war starts when a black heavyweight defeats the white man fighting in the boxing ring. Particularly when black Americans rejoice over the victory (or, even if they do not). This same theme about military service would present itself again with Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali. White readers were then told that Cal had outsmarted the white barber. The last line in the story read, “And Cal sat down in the corner and figured out in a notebook what his total winnings would amount to after the barber paid up.”<sup>332</sup>

### **The Black Press Coverage**

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<sup>330</sup> Jr, J. B. "Will You Ever See those Fight Picture's? that Depends." *New - York Tribune (1900-1910)*: 1. Jul 10 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Mar. 2017.

<sup>331</sup> Little, Richard H. "Round about Chicago." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 8. Jul 12 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Jan. 2017.

<sup>332</sup> Little, 1910



The black press tended to downplay characterizing the fight as a battle for racial supremacy following Early's idea that many see sports as "raceless," and focusing more on the idea that "the best *fighter* would win." In *The Freeman* (BP), for example, the focus was more on the money that could be won or lost gambling on the fight:

... the two men are the greatest athletes the world has produced at the same time equally matched in every way. ... This is by no means a race supremacy battle. It is a battle for thousands of dollars. The race question was raised by sporting editors throughout the world on Jeffries as the bull fighters (sic) would raise the red flag to enrage the bull. And it has its effect on Jeffries. It is well that the colored man does not take this race question too seriously, as Jack Johnson is fighting to retain the championship and \$200,000.<sup>333</sup>

The piece noted that the white press (sporting editors) are the ones who had raised the race question. As noted in chapter two, this is based on the call for Jeffries to return to the ring to fight Johnson after efforts to find a "white hope" to return the heavyweight crown to the head of a white man had failed. This story noted that this call to get Jeffries back in the ring was akin to waving a red flag in the face of a bull. That is, the paper is telling readers that the call from whites in America to take the crown from the undeserving black man resulted in raising Jeffries' ire enough to get him to agree to the match. *The Freeman* (BP) points out that Johnson is more interested in keeping that title and making a fortune, in the meantime.

In a straight inflation calculation, the \$200,000 that Johnson was expected to earn for the fight would be equivalent to about five million dollars today.<sup>334</sup> But a simple inflation calculation does not really capture the true worth of a fight like this in contemporary dollar value. The closest comparison today to Johnson vs. Jeffries might be the Floyd Mayweather vs. Conor McGregor fight in 2017. There were racial undertones

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<sup>333</sup> "Johnson and Jeffries Championship Battle." *The Freeman*: 7. Jul 02 1910. News Bank. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>334</sup> Admin. "US Inflation Calculator." *US Inflation Calculator*, Coin News Media Group, [www.usinflationcalculator.com/](http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/).

that were noted when both men were promoting the fight.<sup>335</sup> Based on pay per view and sponsorship revenues, each fighter was estimated to net around \$100 million.<sup>336</sup>

Every story in the black press that offered a prediction about the fight declared Johnson would be victorious, with the exception of one. One month before the fight, *The Freeman* (BP) published a story that gave a detailed estimation of the fight. A white astrologer, who based his prediction on the birth date of both fighters, offered his belief that Jeffries would be victorious because Jeffries:

... considers that he has a principle at stake. He counts himself the champion of the whole white race. He feels that the negro has no right to place himself on an equality with any white man, and therefore he is the white champion against the black usurper, and he proposes to teach him a lesson.

The astrologer is not named but is labeled “the wise one” in the article. The text in *The Freeman* (BP) was offered without any rebuttal and ended with the astrologer saying that Johnson “lacks both the character and brains of his white opponent.” A white man in the black press offers a prediction that was just the opposite of what a black man in the white press detailed. Consider the story in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) where Cal the shoeshine man said that Johnson would not throw the fight because of his principles as a proud black man were greater than those of white politicians. The context of each must, of course be considered. The white man offering his opinions in the *Freeman* is an astrologist. The first line in the story reads:

Some astrologist, or soothsayer, or something like that (not a Negro either), has been consulting the stars concerning the forthcoming battle between Johnson and Jeffries.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Kilgore, Adam. “Racial Conflict Sells Boxing Matches. Mayweather and McGregor Are Its Latest Pitchmen.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 23 Aug. 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/sports/boxing/racial-conflict-sells-boxing-matches-mayweather-and-mcgregor-are-its-latest-pitchmen/2017/08/23/780e9bb6-876b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.fe543d16a686](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/boxing/racial-conflict-sells-boxing-matches-mayweather-and-mcgregor-are-its-latest-pitchmen/2017/08/23/780e9bb6-876b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html?utm_term=.fe543d16a686).

<sup>336</sup> Reinsmith, Trent. “Conor McGregor Made 'Around' \$100 Million for Floyd Mayweather Fight, Knows He Would Win Rematch.” *Forbes*, Forbes Media, Llc, 1 Nov. 2017, [www.forbes.com/sites/trentreinsmith/2017/11/01/conor-mcgregor-made-around-100-million-for-floyd-mayweather-fight-knows-he-would-win-rematch/#f9c0c2f1d13c](http://www.forbes.com/sites/trentreinsmith/2017/11/01/conor-mcgregor-made-around-100-million-for-floyd-mayweather-fight-knows-he-would-win-rematch/#f9c0c2f1d13c).

<sup>337</sup> find citation

He is then labeled a “wizard.” Perhaps readers were being told that the man was not credible and so his words should be read with a grain of salt. But, the message is certainly clear in what the white “wizard” had claimed – that it was, in essence, Jeffries pale skin that would ultimately secure his victory.

In the case of Cal, his claims are presented to readers of the *Tribune* (WP) in what may be a similar fashion, i.e., the extremely racist dialect. As noted earlier in this chapter, white *Tribune* readers might also have read Cal’s claims and chuckled, not taking the shoeshine man’s offerings with much seriousness or credibility either. One difference is that *Tribune* readers heard from Cal after the fight as well while the astrologer did not reappear on the pages of the *Freeman* (BP) to offer a reaction to his misguided prediction. While Cal is presented, again, using the racist dialect after the fight, he at least gets the opportunity to gloat a bit over the fact that his pre-fight prognostication was right on the money. So right on, in fact, that Cal was able to financially profit off of the fight.

### *Training*

A story in the *Freeman* (BP) listed Johnson’s daily routine from the time he woke up until the time he went to bed. Noting Johnson stuck to a strict routine, and Jeffries did not, it said:

Johnson is a stickler for doing one thing at a certain hour each day. On the other hand, Jeffries, while working hard and faithfully, follows a plan that allows him to do practically what he feels like. The wisdom of the daily sameness of Johnson’s plan or the wide rang of Jeffries’ work will not be known until Independence day (sic).<sup>338</sup>

Two weeks later the *Freeman* quotes Johnson’s new manager (after Johnson had fired his old one), Tom Flanagan, who spoke directly about the champion’s training:

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<sup>338</sup> “Kaufman Joins Johnson; The Champion Delighted. Blacksmith Feels Training Would be Beneficial;” *The Freeman*, 4 June 1910, p. 7.

“The reports that Johnson has been taking off weight too rapidly, either because of managerial troubles or overwork are exaggerated. I have watched Jack very closely since my arrival from Canada and I can truthfully say that I never saw an athlete round to condition in more satisfactory manner.”<sup>339</sup>

In fact, Flanagan is addressing “reports” that Johnson is training *too* hard. The story noted that Johnson would be participating in daily sparring sessions. This accounting of his training matches those in the white press that Johnson was working hard. Remember that stories about Jeffries in the white press also noted rumors from out east about the white challenger’s level of work in his camp. Those stories noted that Jeffries was not training hard enough and was choosing to skip some of his sparring sessions. On the same day and the same page in the *Freeman* (BP), a story noted the rumors that Jeffries was not working hard enough in his training. The electronic scan of the story made much of the text difficult to read but the sub-headline was completely clear and read: “Boilermaker Able to Stand Training, and Gossip About His Unfitness is Premature, Says Wrestler.”<sup>340</sup> Frank Gotch was a wrestler who was working in Jeffries’ camp. Prior to his career in boxing, Jeffries had worked in a factory that made boilers, which led to his nickname, the Boilermaker. Gotch went on to say that he believed Jeffries was not showing the public all of his training and he thought he was doing his sparring in “secret.” This is the only time this excuse showed up in the white or black press. Readers of the black press were being told the same thing as readers of the white press. That is, many people were talking about Jeffries and his lack of a strong work ethic in his training sessions.

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<sup>339</sup> “Tom Flanagan, Johnson’s New Manager, Satisfied with Champion’s Condition;” *The Freeman*, 18 June 1910, p. 7.

<sup>340</sup> “Jeffries Pleases Gotch. Boilermaker Able to Stand Training, and Gossip About His Unfitness is Premature, Says;” *The Freeman*, 18 June 1910, p. 7.

Just two days ahead of the fight, readers of the *Freeman* (BP) were being told that Johnson was a self-made man. It also noted that, while he is “the superior man of all men in athletics,” the black champion also:

... has more official brains than any man connected with staging the greatest of all amusement affairs in the history of the world. He has single handed (sic) made every one connected with the fight come to his terms. Heretofore all other black battlers have left all their cares and affairs in their managers hands ... They all ended up broke.<sup>341</sup>

The story predicted an easy Johnson win. While this story did not go quite as far as Keough in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), who *after* the fight declared that Jeffries had never been that good, this story noted that while some are predicting Jeffries would be able to take Johnson out with one punch, the story noted this is “silly talk” since Jeffries did not have one punch power at any time in his career.

As noted previously, the white press published stories that noted some of the religious leaders who were opposed to the fight based on their basic opposition to prize fighting in general. This continued after the fight as an explanation for why they were also opposed to the film of the fight. A month before the match the *Freeman* (BP) explicitly accused white religious leaders of racism in their outspoken calls to prohibit all prize fighting. The story quotes the white Rev. George D. Wolf who said, “I am against all prize fighting, and would help in any manner possible to prevent this fight in particular.” The text in the *Freeman* continued:

It hinges on the sentence, “This fight in particular.” The *Freeman* will not discuss the right or wrong of prize fighting, but it will say it boldly that it is amazed at the seeming alarm of the gentlemen of the cloth, and that it regards this alarm of the “tinkling cymbol” (sic) and “sounding brass” kind [of] ridiculous and hypocritical in view of the fact that never before in the history of prize-fighting did the white

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<sup>341</sup> “Johnson and Jeffries Championship Battle;” *The Freeman*, 2 July 1910, p. 7.

ministers offer opposition to the prize-fight promoters, when the championship was at stake between white men, but this particular fight has aroused them.<sup>342</sup>

The story does not have a byline and appears to be written by the newspaper's editorial board when it refers to the "Freeman" as the voice in the story. There were no examples in the white press archive that questioned the motives of religious leaders in their opposition to the fight or the film as this piece in the black press did.

Touching on some of the themes from the white press, one story in the *Freeman* mentioned two things. The main point of the story was to report on a \$10,000 wager that had been placed by Andy Craig on Jeffries. The story does not indicate Craig's race but notes that Jeffries is the 10 to 6 betting favorite in the fight and this may create concern for Johnson. Touching on the theme that Johnson might prove to be "yellow" when he faced the white man, the story continued:

It is said that faint heart never won fair lady[.] Some such notion holds to an extent in everything. Spiritual cowardice is as much of a hindrance to success as physical defection. It stands to reason that if it could be made to appear to Johnson that if he were not the favorite by such great odds he would have some serious reflection if he didn't become downright skittish.

The difference between this story and the ones presented in the white press was this one then goes on to note that it is likely that Johnson would "buoy up under knocks and cuffs" like these. The story also noted that the fight is a "matter of brawn" and even if Johnson beats his challenger, "nothing will be undone to make for the supremacy of the white man." Again, while the white press may have been pushing this message that the fight really was nothing more than a boxing match, that message did not become pervasive in the press until after the fight. As the *Defender* (BP) noted:

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<sup>342</sup> "Ministerial Opposition to the Jeffries-Johnson Fight." *Freeman*, 4 June 1910, p. 3.

It will do Johnson's race good and no one knows this better than the white men who are responsible for the over-estimation of the event—before the event. After the event, however, it is called a pure contest of brutality and Johnson is represented as simply the “best brute.”<sup>343</sup>

It is likely that the reference to the white men who predicted Jeffries victory prior to the fight was a direct reference to the white press. In fact, since the *Defender* (BP) was published in Chicago, perhaps this was a direct reference to Corbett who had reported so glowingly on Jeffries preparations before the fight in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP).

A story in the *Cleveland Gazette* (BP) before the fight predicts what the white press did not discover until after the fight. Under a sub-headline that read, “JEFFRIES AFRAID OF JOHNSON,” the story quotes Bill Delaney, Jeffries' former manager, who said, “I know Jeffries well and know that he is now and always has been afraid of Johnson.”<sup>344</sup> Remember the white press suggested before the fight that one reason why Johnson would likely lose was because of his “yellow” streak. They did not correct this until after the fight when they said Jeffries was the one who appeared to be afraid. The black press is presenting Jeffries as scared before the fight.

While the black press tended to shy away from presenting the fight as a racial contest, one article in the search did include a racial supremacy message. Although one of the sub-headlines to the piece reads, “FIGHT NO RACE ISSUE,” readers found this in the fourth paragraph (the first part of the quote below is a reference to the fact that, as noted in chapter two, the California Governor had booted the fight from San Francisco and Reno was the new fight venue):

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<sup>343</sup> Wm Pickens Special to the, Chicago Defender Alabamian. "TALLADEGA COLLEGE PROFESSOR SPEAKS ON RENO FIGHT." *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966)*: 1. Jul 30 1910. ProQuest. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>344</sup> “Johnson Will Win Says Bill Delaney Jeffries' Former Manager And The Man Who ‘Made Him’;” *Cleveland Gazette*, 25 June 1910, p. 1.

Now that Governor Dickerson of Nevada has stated emphatically that he will not interfere with the battle, despite the thousands of petitions he is in receipt of requesting him to stop the proceedings, it seems more probable than probable that on the arid plains of the Sage Brush state the white man and Negro will settle the mooted question of supremacy.<sup>345</sup>

While this could be based on the idea that the question of supremacy is simply between the two fighters, since it was written as white against black and not Johnson against Jeffries, it certainly seems to be more about racial supremacy rather than individual athletic superiority. The story goes on to espouse the greatness of Johnson's abilities and predicts that he will win the fight. It ends by noting that after the fight has ended:

... when the din of mingled cheers and groans have died away in the atmosphere, there will be deep mourning throughout the domains of Uncle Sam over Jeffries' inability to return the pugilistic scepter to the Caucasian race.<sup>346</sup>

With the reference to the scepter readers of the *Defender* (BP), two days before the fight, are told that the heavyweight titleholder is considered a king. It again rings with the belief that the fight is not just between the two individuals but the black race versus the white race when it notes that the scepter will not be returned to the Caucasian race. The story also accurately predicted that Johnson's victory will bring a mix of cheers and groans.

In all of the stories in the black press there was not one mention of Johnson's wife. In Burns' film, Professor Early noted that Johnson was open about his relationships with white women and this got the boxer into a lot of trouble. It was then noted in the film that, "the trouble came from both sides of the color line."<sup>347</sup> The film then quotes the *Nashville Globe*, a black newspaper that said Johnson was wrong for this. A story in the *Defender*

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<sup>345</sup> Stovall, Jackson J. "JACK JOHNSON AND JAMES JEFFRIES." *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1905-1966): 1. Jul 02 1910. ProQuest. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>346</sup> Stovall, Jul 02 1910. ProQuest. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>347</sup> Burns at 00:56:30.



(BP), though, noted that, “If more of our men were as considerate of our women as Jack Johnson is, what a great race of people we would be.”<sup>348</sup>

*The fight happens*

In Ken Burns’ film the voice-over notes that as soon as Johnson won the fight whites rushed the ring and Johnson’s crew formed “a protective circle” around him, implying that the white crowd rushed the ring with intent to do harm against the black champion.<sup>349</sup> But none of the papers noted this, in fact the *Cleveland Gazette* (BP) said:

There was not a sign of hostility toward the black as he worked his way along one of the runways leading from the ring, in fact it was apparent that his victory was neither a surprise nor a disappointment to a big crowd who watched the fight.<sup>350</sup>

This was evident to some degree in the white press as well. Describing the moments immediately after the fight ended and the crowd rushed the ring, the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) wrote:

... when the champion’s head appeared above the throng that surged about him in his corner, he was given the reward of fair play and the recognition of merit in the form of a lusty cheer in which all who were not dazed by the overwhelming defeat of their pride joined heartily. Johnson was hailed as a great man, the greatest man probably who ever stripped in the prize ring...<sup>351</sup>

At this same moment (described above in the *Tribune*), the Burns film described the crowd as “grim and silent” as they left the arena while Johnson’s arm was being raised.<sup>352</sup>

The sub-headline in a story in the *Topeka Plaindealer* (BP) read, “Takes Only Fifteen Rounds to Show Big White That Color Can't Predominate Over Brains and

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<sup>348</sup> "Editorial Article 4 -- no Title." *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1905-1966): 2. Mar 26 1910. ProQuest. Web. 15 Dec. 2017.

<sup>349</sup> Burns at 1:36:34.

<sup>350</sup> “Jeffries Put Out Colored Man Proves Himself Superior Fighter Age Outmatched By Youth Former Champion,” *Cleveland Gazette*, 7 July 1910, p. 2.

<sup>351</sup> Keough, Hugh E. "JOHNSON WINNER BY KNOCKOUT BLOW." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 23. Jul 05 1910. ProQuest. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.

<sup>352</sup> Burns at 1:36:42.

Skill.”<sup>353</sup> This is a direct jab at white Americans who, prior to the fight, considered that Jeffries could beat Johnson purely on the color of his skin. The text of the story said, “A majority of the American white people injected color into the contest as soon as the articles of agreement had been signed...” The writer noted that, “The color line should not be dragged (sic) into contests for superiority.” The story then pointed out something that was not mentioned in the white press. It said those who made the fight a race issue and used “aliases” in describing Johnson were “kept up by the lower elements of the whites.” The story then suggested “The better class of white and colored people should stand together...” to fight “race haters be they white or black.” The white press did not discern that those who partook in violence, for example, were a lower class of whites.

The *Washington Bee* (BP) offered a direct response to the white press by complimenting one paper and excoriating another. In the first addition after the fight the paper called out most of the white press for trying to convince readers that “Jeffries was the master of the situation.” One exception to this, according to the *Bee*, was the white *Washington Herald* (WP) who “treated this colored fighter with fairer consideration.” The *Bee* (BP) then went after the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) and writer Rex Beach. As noted previously in this chapter, Beach was willing to give Johnson credit for his physical abilities in the victory but then questioned, “whether they will ever breed brains to match his muscles is yet to be proven.”<sup>354</sup> To this the *Bee* responded:

(Beach) ought to know that the colored man is the equal to the white in every particular, and he will demonstrate his equality on educational and other lines if he is given the same opportunity as Johnson was given.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> “Johnson is Still World's Champion. Takes Only Fifteen Rounds to Show Big White That Color Can't Predominate,” *Topeka Plaindealer*, 8 July 1910, p. 4.

<sup>354</sup> Beach, 1910.

<sup>355</sup> “The Fight,” *The Washington Bee*, 9 July 1910, p. 4

The black press believed that the Johnson victory should be seen by the white press, and white people, as an example that, if given the opportunity, black Americans can excel in other areas as well.

*The violent aftermath*

In one of the last stories that readers of the *Freeman* (BP) would see *before* the fight the paper was concerned about what could happen on the 4<sup>th</sup> should Johnson win. The story once again calls out the white press for associating the racial supremacy test with the fight before saying it is really a battle for money. The story then warned:

It is well that the colored man does not take this race question too seriously ... This race question will get many a man in trouble on the Fourth of July if he carries it too far.<sup>356</sup>

Sylvester Russell warned readers of the *Defender* (BP) not to openly celebrate a Johnson win as well. Russell suggested betting “all your money on Johnson,” but noted, “The Fourth, I tell you, will be a dangerous day, and a very large evening.”<sup>357</sup> Once again, the black press was able to better predict the violent aftermath in the streets after the fight results were announced. No such warning was seen in the white press prior to the fight.

One of the differences between the white press and the black press with regard to the violence after the fight, the black press did not give the story nearly as much ink. There were four stories in the black press, one story about the violence in each of these papers, the *Cleveland Gazette*, *The Freeman*, the *Washington Bee* and the *Plaindealer*. And those stories occupied less column space than the stories about the violence in the white press. For example, in the *New York Tribune* (WP) in the week after the fight there were ten stories directly mentioning the violence with several other stories about the film

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<sup>356</sup> “Johnson and Jeffries Championship Battle,” *Freeman*, 2 July 1910, p. 7. Readex.

<sup>357</sup> “SYLVESTER RUSSELL.” *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966)*: 4. Jul 02 1910. ProQuest. Web. 17 Jan. 2018.

prohibition that noted the violence as well. As noted earlier, perhaps the motivation of the white press was an attempt to reassure their white readers that, outside of the boxing ring, whites were still able to maintain physical superiority. As for the black press and their choice to not focus a great deal on the violence, the reason may be found in a story from the *Chicago Defender* (BP). Talladega College professor, William Pickens, wrote it. The professor said, “certain clamorous newspapers of the white race, north and south, insisted and kept insisting that it was to be a ‘great race battle.’”<sup>358</sup> Again, speaking directly to the white press, Pickens pointed out the fact that the white papers, which picked Jeffries before the fight, were focusing on the violence against black Americans after the contest. The professor said:

White editors who so nobly fought Jeffries’s battles before the fight, have found one consoling reflection since the fight, viz: that the victory of the black man “will do the Negro race harm.” How, I ask, in the name of heaven can it harm a race to show itself excellent?<sup>359</sup>

Later in this essay the professor offers one of the most poignant opinions seen in any of the newspaper stories in the entire archive. That the black citizens who died in the violence after the fight were, in essence, necessary martyrs in the effort to advance the cause for black equity:

But, sincerely now, it was a good deal better for Johnson to win and a few Negroes be killed in body for it, than for Johnson to have lost and all Negroes to have been killed in spirit by the preachments of inferiority from the combined white press. It is better for us to succeed, though some die, than for us to fail, though all live.

As this analysis has shown, the white press presented Jack Johnson with a surprising level of respect and admiration. This feeling among the writers in the white press did not

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<sup>358</sup> Wm Pickens Special to the, *Chicago Defender* Alabamian. "TALLADEGA COLLEGE PROFESSOR SPEAKS ON RENO FIGHT." *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966)*: 1. Jul 30 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>359</sup> Wm Pickens Special to the, *Chicago Defender* Alabamian. "TALLADEGA COLLEGE PROFESSOR SPEAKS ON RENO FIGHT." *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966)*: 1. Jul 30 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

expand to the black race writ large. Professor Pickens explicitly called out the white papers for what they would have said about this fight and white supremacy had Johnson failed to beat his white challenger.

### *The film*

There were only a few stories in the black press about the prohibition of the fight film. One, in the *Washington Bee* (BP), took exception with the reasoning that the film should be prohibited as a safety precaution for black citizens. The story noted that when “The Clansman” (an historical romance of the KKK) was shown, there were no violent outbreaks by whites against blacks. The story called this concern “folly” because, as the story noted, there were separate movie theaters for blacks and whites in 1910:

... and certainly the whites, if they fight, will fight among themselves, and the blacks will do likewise. How can there be a clash between the races under the circumstances?<sup>360</sup>

The fact that the blacks and whites would be watching the film in different theaters was not even mentioned in the white press. Instead, the white papers presented the idea that the film should be prohibited as a safety measure for blacks. Of course these same papers also claimed, without apology, blacks should *expect* violence against them if they rejoiced openly over the Johnson victory.

### *An editorial cartoon*

One of the most extraordinary examples found in the black press prior to the fight was this editorial cartoon (Figure 4) from the *Chicago Defender* (BP). It appeared on the front page of the paper on the second of July, their last edition before the fight.<sup>361</sup> This is a prime example to show that, at least to some in the black press, this fight was

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<sup>360</sup> “What a Folly;” *The Washington Bee*, 9 July 1910, p. 4.

<sup>361</sup> *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1905-1966): 1. Jul 02 1910. ProQuest. Web. 17 June 2017.

considered to be a socio-political event even if it was not a battle for racial supremacy. Johnson is presented without additional text added to his image other than his name; although, Johnson does appear to be more gracious by using both hands during the ritual of the pre-fight handshake. As it turned out on the day of the fight, Johnson appeared in the middle of the ring to shake hands but Jeffries stayed in his corner refusing to participate in the pre-fight ritual.<sup>362</sup>



Figure 4

In addition to Johnson and Jeffries, Uncle Sam is also inside the ring. In boxing there is only one other person who is inside the ring during a fight; the referee (also called the “third man in the ring”). The boxing referee is the authority that oversees the match. Based on the rest of the cartoon, Uncle Sam appears to be the overseer of a systematic and systemic white racist authority and standing behind Jeffries in the ring. Black readers of the *Defender* (BP) were seeing the paper’s position that racism in the country was fully supported by the policies of the United States government. On his legs we see the words, “public sentiment.” It appears the artist presented “public” as the white public. The legs support the body while standing so with these words being presented on

<sup>362</sup> Burns at 1:30:39.

Sam's legs, it appears the artist was saying that the white public fully supports the government's racist policies and actions. The cartoon portrays Uncle Sam as the Devil with horns and a long pointy tail indicating that these policies and actions are the embodiment of evil.

Uncle Sam's position in the picture presents him as being solidly behind Jeffries both literally and figuratively. Sam is telling Jeffries, "We're here with you this time, go ahead." Perhaps this is in line with what the white press was telling their readers when they presented several stories emphasizing the reconciliation between Sullivan and Corbett. That is, when Jeffries was champion prior to his retirement, like Corbett and Sullivan, he had drawn the color line. During Jeffries training Sullivan and Corbett seemed to reconcile over the idea that it was now okay that Jeffries was crossing this line, perhaps, in order to reclaim the title for the white race. Uncle Sam's words, we're with you this time, may be a similar level of permission for Jeffries to cross the color line.

Moving outside the ring we see the crowd at ringside. While stories covering FOC1 did note that there were some black ticket holders, in boxing, the ringside seats are the best vantage point for the fight and are the most expensive. Looking at black & white film and pictures of the fight, it is difficult to discern if there were any black faces among those in the crowd at ringside. In this cartoon two days before the fight the artist depicts the ringside seat holders as white birds, ala, Jim Crow with one audience member holding a sign that reads "Jim Crow Delegates Ring – Side."

Like Johnson, Jeffries image is not making a political statement by itself. Perhaps this is to indicate that it is not the boxer that the artist dislikes but what the boxer represents in his shadow. It is in the "shadows" of Jeffries that we see what Johnson is

actually fighting: “Negro Persecution,” “Race Hatred” and “Prejudice.” Negro persecution appears to be the most hidden of the Jeffries image – furthest back in the shadows. Race hatred is less hidden and even appears to have a bit of light shining on its face, the light also revealing a club in the hand of hatred. This seems to indicate that there is some light on white violence against blacks in the country. Prejudice is the first shadow making it, for all intents and purposes, in the open. Again, this seems to be more indicative of the fight being a socio-political event than a battle for racial supremacy.

The text that appears below the cartoon appears to be in the form of a poem. It is titled, “The Fourth of July, 1910-1776,” and reads:

Think, in 1776 the Colored Man Fought the British to Give the American his Freedom and To-Day (1910), Which Should Be a Nation’s Fight, the Colored Man is Forced to Fight Jim Crow Delegations, Race Prejudice and American Public Sentiment--If He Wins in the Face of All of This, He is Truly Entitled to a Carnegie Hero Medal.

The title seems to indicate that while the U.S. gained independence on July 4, 1776, on this July 4, in 1910, should Johnson win, blacks in the U.S. will be gaining a level of independence as well. The caption also says that the fight against racism should be universal - across the nation, particularly since African-Americans were willing to fight for the United States in the Revolution. The caption continues that Johnson is, in effect, fighting all of these in his match against Jeffries. And, should he win he deserves a Carnegie Hero Medal (today known as the Carnegie Hero Fund), which is to public citizens who risk their lives to save others.<sup>363</sup> As noted earlier, the Burns film presents Johnson as a hero today. While the film, and some in academia, presented Johnson as

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<sup>363</sup> “Home – Carnegie Hero Fund Commission.” *Carnegie Hero Fund Commission*, [www.carnegiehero.org/](http://www.carnegiehero.org/).



disliked by some blacks at the time of this fight, he is being presented here by the black press to black readers as, heroic at the time of FOC1.

## Conclusion

*Jack Johnson has harmed rather than helped the race. I wish to say emphatically that his actions do not meet my approval and I'm sure they do not meet the approval of the colored race.*<sup>364</sup>

Booker T. Washington (1912)

*"Not all black people are proud of Jack Johnson," Mr. Matthews said at the park site. "Some families don't want him as a role model. They think he was an 'uppity Negro.'"*<sup>365</sup>

Douglas S. Matthews (the African-American city manager on the development of a park and statue honoring Jack Johnson in his hometown, Galveston, Texas in 2012)

The two quotes above occurred 100 years apart. This is indicative of the fact that more than a century after Jack Johnson became the first black man to win the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship he remains a polarizing figure. And while Washington made the statement above two years after the fight, it was reported that he had a special wire set up at Tuskegee in order to get live reports of the fight in 1910.<sup>366</sup> The cultural memory would lead us to believe that most of Jack Johnson's actions in his personal life in 1910 can be deemed as inappropriate, even dangerous, for a black man living in America at the time. But looking at the text in the archive of the black and white press in the coverage of the biggest fight in his career, we have seen that this inappropriateness was not presented to the degree that many today would have us believe. For example, in the Burns film there was a great deal of talk about how much animosity there was toward Johnson due to the fact that he was married to a white woman. Among

<sup>364</sup> Shropshire, Kenneth L. *Being Sugar Ray: The Life of Sugar Ray Robinson, America's Greatest Boxer and First Celebrity Athlete*. New York, NY: BasicCivitas, 2007. 44. Print.

<sup>365</sup> Hoinski, Michael. "A Century Later, Galveston's Nod to Jack Johnson." *The New York Times*, 30 June 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/us/galveston-pays-tribute-to-jack-johnson-100-years-later.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/us/galveston-pays-tribute-to-jack-johnson-100-years-later.html).

<sup>366</sup> "Jess Willard: Heavyweight Champion of the World (1915-1919)." *Jess Willard: Heavyweight Champion of the World (1915 1919)*, by Arly Allen and James Willard Mace, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017, p. 10.

the 456 stories in the white press archive only one mentioned the race of his wife. And without other media, not even the radio was in regular use, these newspaper stories were where most people were getting their news.

Johnson certainly lived his life in the manner that he preferred and without regard for consequences. Perhaps we should consider the fact that Jack Johnson had no “role model” from which to draw in determining his attitude and actions. There was no black athlete that reached the level of success and the resulting fame and public observation from which Johnson could model his behavior. As noted in chapter two, Johnson grew up in Galveston palling around with white kids. He felt that they did not treat him any differently than the other kids. Johnson is quoted in Burns’ film and Ward’s book<sup>367</sup> saying, “I’ve found no better way of avoiding race prejudice than to act with people of other races as if prejudice did not exist.”<sup>368</sup> While Johnson certainly faced prejudice, his quote above may have something to do with the way the white press was presenting him immediately before and after his fight with Jeffries; mostly with respect for his hard work and his physical and intellectual capabilities.

While Booker T. Washington was perhaps the second best known black man in America in 1910, it is doubtful that Washington was seen as directly competing against and beating white *intellectuals* the way that Johnson did against his white opponent in FOC1. And, in a similar fashion, there were really no similar black stars, particularly athletic stars, to which white people could compare Johnson. That is, white people may not have necessarily known, at first, exactly what to think of Johnson either. Is it possible

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<sup>367</sup> The quote is attributed to Johnson’s autobiography, *Jack Johnson: In the Ring and Out*.

<sup>368</sup> Ward, Geoffrey C. *Unforgivable Blackness: the Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. Yellow Jersey Press, 2015, p. 40.

that the evidence presented in this chapter (which shows a surprising level of respect toward the fighter in the coverage surrounding the Jeffries fight) indicates that the white press actually respected Johnson at the time because he was successful? His athletic success made him extraordinarily wealthy. This afforded him the ability to dress well and to drive a nice automobile, which at the time was indicative of achieving the American dream. He owned a home and like many successful athletes today, bought a home for his mother as well. These were things that average white Americans were also striving for. Maybe it was not until his relationships with white women were more commonly known did many white Americans turn against Johnson, but the text in the archive of the black and white press at the time of the Jeffries fight does not indicate this either.

In the same vein that Johnson did not have a role model in which to establish his behavior as a successful black athlete, perhaps the white press did not have a similar past example in order to establish their prejudices against Johnson. This is not to say that there were no examples of racism presented in the white press accounts in the archive. There were certainly plenty. But it is somewhat surprising to see the level of respect the white press offered Johnson in the lead-up to the match and, in particular, the post-fight coverage. It is particularly surprising when these texts from the archive are compared to cultural memory representations of Johnson, vis-a-vis the contemporary media and even academia.

“Unforgivable Blackness” sets Johnson up as a hero, of sorts. It represents him as someone who poked racist white America in the eye and, based on *his* beliefs about race, was “ahead of his time.” Both black America and much of white America today can see the overtly racist whites at the time as the villains which then places Johnson in the role

of the unapologetic hero. While the Burns' film may present Johnson as the hero because he accomplished so much while being treated so despicably by white America, white press accounts surrounding the Jeffries fight present Johnson with at least a level of respect for his abilities as a fighter. And the black press explicitly presented him as a hero. Surprisingly the white press presented Johnson as not just physically capable of beating his formerly unbeatable white opponent, but also noted that Johnson "outsmarted" his white opponent as well.

In chapter one Gerald Early is quoted noting that sports offers a level playing field and is considered, therefore, to be "raceless" since many believe the better person (athlete), regardless of race, will be proven out in the athletic competition. While the black press followed this line of thinking more often in the Johnson vs. Jeffries fight, the white press tended to portray the fight as a battle for racial supremacy before the fight. After the fight the white press tended to drop the supremacy aspect, without apology, in favor of making it more about the better fighter winning the fight (although they did offer some excuses in the form of a frightened Jeffries). While it is easy to recognize a level of hypocrisy in this rhetorical shift by the white press, there is a level of racial equality presented here as well. At least at that moment in time, in the days after this iconic sporting event, that was followed so closely across the nation, the coverage in the black and white press, for the most part, showed an example of what Early noted; athletic competition at this point could be seen as raceless. As noted, the hypocrisy is obvious but for a brief time following this fight, at the very least, most of the texts in the white and black press were telling readers that race did not matter in this boxing match; the better man, the black man, won due to his superior abilities both physically and intellectually.

Where race did matter was in the streets. After the fight the white press devoted a lot of coverage to the violence that occurred. Most of this violence was white citizens who were unprovoked but chose to turn their displeasure with the outcome of the match into physical, sometimes deadly, attacks against blacks.

As noted in this chapter, the black press often responded to, or spoke directly to, the white press. While the text in the white press archive showed that they were respectful of Johnson after he won, Professor Dickens posited that this might not have been the case had the black man lost to the white man. Dickens indicated that, had the fight gone the other way, the white press would have followed their message before the fight, framing a Jeffries win as proof of white supremacy.

Based on how the black and white press presented Johnson after the victory, readers were being told about an exceptional black American. Based on the analysis in this chapter we should not, to any degree, come to the conclusion that this meant that there was not a high degree of racism presented in these very same texts. As noted above, in Chicago readers of the *Tribune* (WP) were introduced to another black man in the city – Cal the shoeshine man. Johnson could certainly have been seen as an outlier – an exception to the racial rule at the time that the majority of African-Americans in the city were nothing like Johnson because *Tribune* readers knew of Cal. Reading the text that was written as the voice of Cal was difficult. Cal is presented as being unintelligent as the barbershop's shoeshine worker. The picture associated with the story displayed a gross stereotype as well. Although a closer look at what was actually presented in the Cal example shows that he had outsmarted his white employer as well.

The purpose of the analysis presented in this chapter was to compare the contemporaneous coverage in the black and white newspapers in the weeks surrounding this iconic moment in Johnson's life to the cultural memory of the moment vis-a-vis Ken Burns documentary "Unforgivable Blackness."

*Don't "blame" Burns*

The analysis presented in this chapter shows that the contemporaneous coverage of the Johnson vs. Jeffries fight is quite different than the cultural memory in the form of the same moment in the Burns film (and some in academia would lead us to believe). As the director of the film Burns is not necessarily doing the "remembering." He is constructing a narrative based on others who do the remembering, in particular the historians who were interviewed for the film. Although he does speak for the film, i.e., he takes ownership of the text when he does press about the film in 2005. We must consider that as a filmmaker Burns was trying to tell an interesting story that would appeal to a large audience. This is understood. Perhaps this is why much of the information presented in Part One of "Unforgivable Blackness" did not line up with what has been shown in the texts in the archive. The point of this research is to show that the film is a big part of the cultural memory of Jack Johnson and this memory, perhaps, is biased based on the film. In all fairness, the film tells a very generalized narrative of how Johnson was seen during about 13 years of the boxer's life. This chapter focuses on a particular moment within those years. But, again, this analysis does show that when the film also portrayed this particular moment in Johnson's life, that portrayal was dissimilar to how the press was portraying the boxer at that time.

Based on what scholars have said about the construction of the cultural memory, perhaps the depiction of Jack Johnson in Ken Burns' film with regard to FOC1 is actually distorted based on the events that occurred in Johnson's life after the fight. Astrid Erll said:

What is known about a war, a revolution, or any other event which has been turned into a site of memory, therefore, seems to refer not so much to what one might call the "actual events," but instead to a canon of existent medial constructions, to the narratives and images circulating in media culture.<sup>369</sup>

While part two of the Burns doc, "The Fall," may be correct in presenting how the public felt about Johnson at that time, this depiction was overlaid in the memory of the fighter in Part One as well. In the Burns film, noted at the start of this chapter, Johnson was described as "a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace, and a danger..." to whites and some blacks. But leading up to and immediately after his victory over Jeffries it appears that those writing in the newspapers didn't feel that way about him. But, of course, the filmmaker was aware of the "fall" - all of the things that happened to Johnson after the fight - and these events influenced his presentation of Johnson at the time of the fight.

*Who got it right?*

Many examples presented in this analysis show that the black press did a better job at judging many aspects of the fight in their coverage prior to the event. First, based on their knowledge of both fighters they were better at predicting the outcome of the fight. They accurately noted both Johnson's and Jeffries' abilities as boxers, which the white press didn't present until after the fight. The black press noted, before the fight, that

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<sup>369</sup> "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory." *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, by Astrid Erll, Walter De Gruyter, 2008, p. 392.

Jeffries would be afraid of Johnson in the ring. Before the fight the white press told readers that Johnson was “yellow” and would cower in the ring. Again, after the fight the white press told readers that it was in fact Jeffries who was unnerved. In hindsight we can see that this was due to the fact the white press was relying on biased sources in order to get their assessment of Jeffries. There was one person presented in the white press who did a good job of seeing who Jack Johnson really was.

In the end, it was the shoeshine man in the Chicago barbershop who it seems offered the best opinion about Johnson in the white press. This same man, who the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) portrayed as so stereotypically unintelligent, actually made the smartest commentary on the fight and the fighters in the white papers. With the hope of each man’s race upon them, as Cal said, it was Johnson who was not just the better fighter but the better man. Not just physically superior, not just technically better, but he showed the heart and the ambition of a man who was willing to work harder to prove his overwhelming ability against his white opponent.

With a deep analysis of the stories, though, we can see that the white press was telling readers Johnson was hardworking, talented and smart. Although the white press also made it clear - through the shoe shine man and in their focus on the violent aftermath of the fight – that Johnson was the exception, not the race rule. That is, the average working black American, like Cal, was still presented by the white press as ignorant. The white press also wanted to show that groups of average white American men were physically superior and capable of beating and killing individual average black American men. Perhaps the message in the corpus of the white press archive is, “Johnson can get



away with being uppity because he's the exception. The rest of you better not be too happy about this or you may pay the price with your lives."

## Chapter Four

### Louis vs. Schmeling II: The first black, white hope

*Some black mother's son, some black father's son, was the strongest man in the world.*  
 Maya Angelou (recalling when Joe Louis won the heavyweight title in 1937).<sup>370</sup>

#### Introduction

The first things viewers of the 2008 HBO documentary on Joe Louis' life see are iconic images of the nation's capitol; The capitol dome, headstones at Arlington cemetery, the bronze statue of Marines raising the U.S. flag at Iwo Jima and the colossal marble figure of Abraham Lincoln at his memorial. Viewers then hear narrator Liev Schreiber say: "In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with their country in crisis, Americans found (a) hero among their own." Schreiber's golden voice was heard over images of Joe Louis knocking down Max Schmeling in their second fight.

The HBO film about Louis's life in 2008, "Joe Louis: America's Hero Betrayed" (AHB), was premised with words and images explicitly portraying Louis as an American hero for beating the German Schmeling. Schreiber continued:

His stage was so big that downtrodden Americans, regardless of their age or race, felt a glimmer of hope creep into their lives just by watching him. In the end he was a common man who reached the top and brought an entire country with him.

Schreiber was letting viewers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century know that Louis was worshipped by all of America in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But is this really the way all of America, in particular, white America, felt about Joe Louis?

Today it is called "the greatest fight of our generation,"<sup>371</sup> and the "Fight of the Century."<sup>372</sup> A record audience of more than 70 million<sup>373</sup> people around the world

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<sup>370</sup> Sandomir, Richard. "A Black Boxer Whose Opponents Included Segregation." *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/02/23/arts/television/23sand.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/23/arts/television/23sand.html).

<sup>371</sup> Erenberg, Lewis A. *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.

gathered by their radios to listen as Joe Louis, a black American, faced Max Schmeling, a Nazi-sympathizing German, in a boxing ring on June 22, 1938. Just two years prior, in their first meeting, Schmeling had bested Louis by knocking him out in the twelfth round.

In the HBO film, contemporary books, articles, and on websites, the second fight is remembered as more than a rematch between two heavyweight boxers. It is instead presented as a geo-political metaphor with Louis playing the democratic United States hero and Schmeling the fascist German villain. In media and academia today it is considered contextually as an important cultural and political moment in the lead-up to World War II and beyond. Today, Louis is presented as being a hero to *all* Americans and, to some degree, immune to the racial problems of the time. In AHB, Professor Gerald Early<sup>374</sup> said, “Almost immediately after the contract was signed this fight turned into something political.”<sup>375</sup> Theresa E. Runstedtler, a historian at American University, said in 2010 that after Louis beat Schmeling in 1938, “white America embraced the black heavyweight champion as a national hero.”<sup>376</sup>

In his 2006 book, historian Lewis Erenberg<sup>377</sup> wrote that the prospect of this fight had “transformed Louis from a primarily African-American hero into an all-American idol.”<sup>378</sup> And, historian Lauren Skarloff wrote in 2002 in *The Journal of American History*:

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<sup>372</sup> “The Fight of the Century: Louis vs. Schmeling.” *NPR*, NPR, 25 Nov. 2006, [www.npr.org/2006/11/25/6515548/the-fight-of-the-century-louis-vs-schmeling](http://www.npr.org/2006/11/25/6515548/the-fight-of-the-century-louis-vs-schmeling).

<sup>373</sup> “The Fight.” *American Experience*. PBS, 22 Sept. 2004. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

<sup>374</sup> Merle Kling Professor of Modern letters, of English, African, African American studies, American culture studies, and Director, Center for Joint Projects in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>375</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008. *YouTube*. YouTube, 07 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

<sup>376</sup> Runstedtler, Theresa. “In Sports the Best Man Wins How Joe Louis Whupped Jim Crow.” *Sport in America*. From *Wicked Amusement to National Obsession*. Ed. David Kenneth Wiggins. N.p.: n.p., 1995. 42. Print.

<sup>377</sup> Professor Emeritus of History at Loyola University

<sup>378</sup> Erenberg, Lewis A. *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. 134.

Black and white Americans particularly delighted in Louis's defeat of the German Max Schmeling in 1938 (Germans had hailed the latter's 1936 victory over Louis as a sign of Aryan superiority).<sup>379</sup>

Skarloff cited the fact that the live crowd at the fight was racially mixed to support her statement. But, in their post-fight coverage, the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) noted that of the 80,000 people on hand for the fight at Yankee Stadium in New York, the crowd was pretty evenly split – half for Louis and half for Schmeling.<sup>380</sup> And, in a post-fight story in the *New York Times* (WP) that focused on reaction to the fight in Germany, it was noted that there was concern before the match that the crowd in Yankee stadium “would be overwhelmingly against Schmeling,” but instead, the German was greeted “with a tremendous ovation.”<sup>381</sup>

In AHB, comedian and activist Dick Gregory recalled that Louis was a hero to all Americans, both white and black, and was the first black man to be seen as a “Great White Hope” because, against Schmeling, he was facing a common enemy to all Americans.<sup>382</sup> The boxing website *BoxRec*, says that Louis was admired by a plurality of Americans even before his second match with Schmeling, noting that he was a “hero to an entire generation” from the moment he landed on the national boxing stage:

Americans *of all colors, sexes, and creeds* saw in him the ideals of freedom, competition, and patriotism that made him the perfect symbol of national pride during the troubled years of the Great Depression and then World War II (emphasis added).<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Sklaroff, Lauren Rebecca. “Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the ‘Negro Problem’ during World War II.” *The Journal of American History* (2002) 89 (3): 970.

<sup>380</sup> ROUZEAU, EDGAR T. "ROUZEAU GIVES GLOWING ACCOUNT OF JOE'S VICTORY." *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), City Edition ed.: 17. Jun 25 1938. ProQuest. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

<sup>381</sup> "Hitler, Goebbels Send Tokens to Console Schmeling's Wife." *New York Times* (1923-Current file): 22. Jun 24 1938. ProQuest. Web. 20 May 2016.

<sup>382</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008

<sup>383</sup> "Joe Louis." *Boxrec*. Wikipedia, n.d. Web. 10 May 2014.

A biography of Joe Louis on the History Channel's website<sup>384</sup> says that:

Louis is perhaps best known for his legendary matchups against German boxer Max Schmeling. Schmeling defeated Louis when they first fought in 1936, and in the runup (sic) to their 1938 rematch, *the press imbued the bout with international political significance, portraying the match as an epic battle between Nazi ideology and American democratic ideals* (even though Schmeling was never a member of the Nazi Party). When Louis defeated Schmeling by knockout in the first round, Louis became an *American hero* (emphasis added).<sup>385</sup>

The History Channel explicitly says that “the press imbued the bout with international political significance,” in reporting on preparations for the heavyweight title match, but noted that Louis became an “American hero” *after* defeating Schmeling. Again, these examples are indicative of how Louis is idolized in the cultural memory vis-à-vis media texts today. But how did American newspapers in 1938 actually present the second Louis versus Schmeling fight? Was Joe Louis written about as a national American hero and Max Schmeling as the Nazi villain? Were the geo-political implications overtly presented on the pages of newspapers at the time? And did white Americans, as Gregory said, view Louis as the first black, “Great White Hope?”

Using examples from six newspapers (three white and three black), this chapter will present evidence that most journalists in the white press in the lead-up to the second fight between Louis and Schmeling did not present the American, Louis, as a hero to all. Black journalists, on the other hand, did write about Louis as a hero. But most of these texts noted Louis as a hero to “the race” not the country. That is, black newspaper writers presented Louis as a hero to their black readers.

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<sup>384</sup> While wiki sites like Box Rec and a site for a cable television network are normally forbidden in academic research, the point of this paper is to compare popular public opinion today against newspaper portrayals of the event at the time of the fight. These sites are indicative of popular public opinion.

<sup>385</sup> History.com Staff. "Joe Louis." History.com. A&E Television Networks, 01 Jan. 2010. Web. 12 May 2016.

In the lead-up to this, the second fight of the century (FOC2) the white press did not present Louis as a hero to their white readers. In fact, the white press often presented Schmeling in more positive terms both physically and intellectually than Louis. While some of the texts did note some of the political elements associated with the event, this was much more explicit in the black press than in the white newspapers. This chapter will also look at press accounts of FOC2 in the years after the match to try and determine at what point white newspapers actually began to present Louis as a hero and attach the geo-political context to the bout that is seen today in academic literature and popular media.

In chapter three we saw that the cultural memory presents Jack Johnson as a hero for overcoming the extreme racism that existed. The Burns film, and others, explicitly cited the news media at the time for presenting overtly racist texts when talking about Johnson. While the majority of the nation was most certainly devoutly racist toward its black citizens, the last chapter revealed the level of respect that was afforded Jack Johnson in the white press in the coverage of FOC1 in 1910. Many will find it surprising that Louis, who is seen in the cultural memory as a hero today, would actually be presented with a lower level of respect in the white press in FOC2. Particularly since Louis was matched against an opponent from Nazi Germany while Johnson was fighting a fellow white American who was considered, at the time, a hero to most whites.

As noted in chapter three, perhaps this had something to do with the fact that Johnson was the first African-American to reach the height of international fame that he achieved. That is, those who were writing about him in the white press were not sure exactly what to make of him in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, his fight against Jeffries.

In this chapter I hope to show that the feelings of whites toward blacks in the Untied States had actually become more racist - at least on the pages of the white newspapers, when presenting Joe Louis. A plurality of those who wrote about Jack Johnson seemed to present him as accomplished, both physically and intellectually, for easily defeating Jeffries. But recall that this was often presented as an anomaly. That is, Johnson was the black exception, not the rule. Nearly three decades later the writers presented Louis often using racist rhetoric to describe a man who is seen in the cultural memory today as “transcending” race in 1938. The white press was no longer willing to offer a black man in America as exceptional.

Louis was burdened with the remnants of Johnson’s persona that would become a guide for what *not* to do. As noted in chapter two, this led to the “seven commandments” that Louis was told he needed to follow if he hoped to be offered the opportunity to compete for the heavyweight-boxing crown. These were developed as a guide for Louis in an effort to make him appear as the “anti-Johnson.” This included the first commandment, which stated that Louis was never to have his picture taken alone with a white woman.<sup>386</sup>

Once Johnson lost the crown in 1915, the color line would once again be drawn. No African-American heavyweight was even given the opportunity to challenge the white champion prior to Louis in 1937.

### **Louis vs. Schmeling: Contemporary Coverage vs. Cultural Memory**

Jan Assman and John Czaplicka said that cultural memory is based in the actual memory of the historical event but also on the group’s “capacity to reconstruct” the event

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<sup>386</sup> Louis, Joe, Edna Rust, and Art Rust. *Joe Louis: My Life*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1997. 38-39. Print.

using a “contemporary frame of reference.”<sup>387</sup> In the case of FOC2, recollections may have been reconstructed using additional memories of the prominent events that occurred in the years just after the event and beyond. That is, the proof of Nazi atrocities after the Allied victory over Hitler in World War II and the evolution of white America’s attitude toward black Americans after the advancements in civil rights in the 1960s. In retrospect, this fight is more easily recalled as a key moment in the lead up to the War, a conflict that was not necessarily expected in 1938, and Louis is more easily recalled as a hero to both black and white Americans. That is, when recalling the match, contemporary historians, and even those who observed the event at the time, make up a group that has reconstructed the moment and attached additional meaning to it. This leads to the first research question: How did the six newspapers in 1938 portray community reaction to FOC2, and what kind of cultural memory was forming at that time by the press?

With the prospect of Louis facing Schmeling, a German who was known to be a Nazi sympathizer, how did the black newspapers present FOC2? With the idea of the explicit Nazi belief in white supremacy, did the text in the black press focus on this racist ideology in their coverage? This leads to the second research question: What kind of narrative differences can be discerned between the three white newspapers and the three black newspapers in their coverage of the fighters and FOC2? For example, did black journalists attach additional meaning to the event by focusing on Louis as an American, in particular a “good” American, or a hero who was essentially representing his country or his race in this fight? And, in contrast did they present Schmeling as a representative of Nazi Germany, the enemy, or as the villain?

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387 Assman, Jan, and John Czaplicka. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 130. Jstor. Web. 25 Mar. 2014.



As I have shown, it is well established that the cultural memory, vis-à-vis contemporary media, presents the 1938 Louis-Schmeling fight as a key moment in the lead up to the War. In speaking about the match in 2006, Historian Lewis Erenberg said: "...it (was) an international global event that was broadcast worldwide. It had tremendous political implications in the battle of democracy against fascism."<sup>388</sup> But were these geo-political implications emphasized in newspaper coverage of FOC2 in 1938? This leads to the third research question: How often and to what degree were the geo-political implications of the fight used in the six newspapers in their coverage in 1938?

*The lead-up to the match*

In the first fight between Louis and Schmeling in 1936, Louis was the heavy favorite. Prior to meeting Schmeling for the first time, Louis had won his first 24 professional fights – 20 of them by knockout – while Schmeling had lost three of his last eight fights. Many in Germany did not believe Schmeling had much of a chance so, when he upset Louis by knocking him out he received a hero's welcome at home. This included a personal meeting with Adolf Hitler.<sup>389</sup>

While most white Americans did not think too much of the loss, black Americans had a difficult time listening on the radio as Louis was counted out lying on the ring canvas. Professor Early noted that Louis was indeed a hero who represented the aspirations of all black Americans and when he was beaten by Schmeling this was felt by

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<sup>388</sup> "The Fight of the Century: Louis vs. Schmeling.". NPR, 25 Nov. 2006. Web. 09 Apr. 2014.

<sup>389</sup> SCHMELING GUEST OF HITLER AT LUNCH, Wireless to THE NEW YORK TIMES.. New York Times (1923-Current file) [New York, N.Y.] 28 June 1936: S4. Accessed online.

all of black America.<sup>390</sup> While listening to Louis fight on the radio, Bill Cosby recalled in AHB: “You could feel hearts thumping. Because, if Joe loses, our whole race will be down.”<sup>391</sup>

In her analysis of press coverage of an international football (soccer) game, Kate Torkington, citing Wodak et al, posits that even individual athletic achievements, like a boxer’s in the ring, are sometimes seen by a country’s citizens as a potential national achievement. She cites Alabarces et al when she says that:

... one of the prevalent themes in media representation of national football is the construction of individual heroes, which is embedded in a long tradition of elevating sports personalities to heroic or epic status.<sup>392</sup>

With the success of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin still fresh in the minds of many Americans,<sup>393</sup> it would seem quite logical for the press to attach similar nationalistic and racial comparisons when reporting on FOC2 just two years later.

While the website *BoxRec* says today that Louis was cheered by both black and white Americans from the moment he hit the national stage as a boxer (his first professional fight was in 1934), when the ink hit the pulp of newsprint in the white press covering his previous fights, Joe Louis was most certainly no hero. In the *New York Daily News* (WP), sports editor Paul Gallico said of Louis in September of 1935:

Louis, the magnificent animal.... He eats. He sleeps. He fights.... 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.<sup>394</sup>

<sup>390</sup> Levine, Joe, director. *Joe Louis: America's Hero Betrayed*. YouTube, (0:14:12) Hbo, 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s).

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Torkington, Kate. 2010. MS. Universidade Do Algarve, Lancaster. Web. 5 Mar. 2014.

<sup>393</sup> Although, perhaps our views of Jesse Owens as a hero for beating Germans in Hitler’s presence in Berlin is a cultural memory that has grown in importance since 1936. That is, an analysis of newspaper coverage of Owens at the time of the Berlin Olympic Games may show that he wasn’t presented as explicitly heroic then as he is today.

<sup>394</sup> As quoted in: Mead, Chris. "Black Hero In A White Land." *A New Book Illuminates the Pivotal Role Played by*. Sports Illustrated, n.d. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

Instead of defining Louis as a hero, Gallico presents just the opposite. Gallico attributes a positive aspect of Louis's ability as a fighter, his bravery, to Louis being more animal than human. This certainly reflects an extreme example of racist rhetoric that was used throughout U.S. history. But it is presented here to show the level of disgust directed at Louis by some in the white press three years before his fight with Schmeling. We can see that Louis is disliked in 1935 and that would not change in the lead-up to FOC2.

As noted by Early and Cosby above, when Louis competed in the ring, he was certainly a hero to all of *Black* America and this was certainly reflected on the pages of the black press. In the 1930s Louis was the only black heavyweight fighting on the main stage. All of his professional fights, at that point, were against white men and his wins were presented in the black press as significant steps toward racial equality. In the *Chicago Defender* (WP), sportswriter James Reid said of Louis in 1938:

Everytime (sic) Louis' glove has exploded on the chin of his opponent he has likewise smashed into smithereens the false prophets of racial inequality. This if no more will furnish wells of inspiration for generations yet unborn.<sup>395</sup>

While Reid's reference to future generations is directed at black Americans, his prediction seems to match what is presented in the cultural memory as representative of the inspiration Louis is to all Americans today.

### **The film and the newspapers**

#### *The film*

It is plain from the title, "America's Hero Betrayed," that the 2008 HBO film wants audience members to know that Joe Louis was a national hero first whom his country then betrayed. At around 11 minutes into the hour and fifteen-minute film,

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<sup>395</sup> Reid, James M. "Reid Cites Qualities Of Louis Which Have Inspired Race Youth: GLAD TO MEET CHA, CHAMP! THE CHAMP AND ONE ..." *Chicago Defender* [Chicago] 25 June 1938: 7. Accessed online.

viewers are told that, as a young up-and-coming professional fighter, the white press was beginning to take notice. Louis biographer Chris Mead said that some in the white press were also including negative racial stereotypes in these texts as well “(describing) him as a stereotypical darky – lazy, liking watermelon and chicken - sleeps a lot.”<sup>396</sup> Just two minutes later the narrator said, “At a time when the sport of boxing as well as the country itself was mired in a depression, Louis was a savior.”<sup>397</sup> The film has a tendency to go back and forth a bit: as above, one moment hinting that Louis was disliked, and the next moment presenting him as a hero.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the first image of Louis in the opening sequence of the film was of him knocking down Schmeling in FOC2. Their second fight was featured prominently in the film and the idea that Louis was a socio-political hero to all Americans was, for the most part, presented as well. Bill Cosby said of Louis in the lead up to the fight, “Certainly we as a race of people needed someone to say that we could do something that white people held on a pedestal.”<sup>398</sup> Early continued, “White Americans accepted Joe Louis as this sort of emblem of the United States – an emblem of American democracy.” Cosby punctuated that with, “Joe Louis was, the man.” But Schreiber’s voice-over added a qualifier when he said, “... in 1938, Americans still did not speak with a single voice.” Schreiber was referring to white Americans. This was followed by Jimmy Carter who said, “I hate to say it but many of the white people in the south didn’t want to see Louis win.” As noted earlier, the film goes back and forth a bit. Carter’s comment was followed by Paul Shulder, a white New Yorker, who said, “Well

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<sup>396</sup> Levine, Joe, director. *Joe Louis: America's Hero Betrayed*. YouTube, (0:11:47) Hbo, 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s).

<sup>397</sup> Ibid, 0:13:45.

<sup>398</sup> Levine, Joe, director. *Joe Louis: America's Hero Betrayed*. YouTube, (0:28:24) Hbo, 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s).

Brooklyn, the neighborhood that I lived in, was practically all Jewish and we were all hoping and praying that Joe Louis would kick the shit out of him.” Carter’s comment is the only time that whites were presented as not pulling for Louis in FOC2. The film is letting viewers know that there were some whites in America that may not have been pulling for Louis, but that is presented as limited to Southern whites and followed by a white northerner who says whites in Brooklyn were for Louis. So the cultural memory is presenting the south in the United States as the only part of the country that was openly racist toward a black American who was a hero to the rest of the nation at the time.

The film continued this theme that all of America is pulling for Louis. Joe’s childhood friend, Walter Smith, said that before the fight, “He had more pressure than any boxer in his life because he was carrying the country.”<sup>399</sup> Lester Rodney, who was a sports editor and columnist for the *Daily Worker* (a newspaper published by the Communist Party), covered the fight in 1938. He was 97-years-old when he appeared in the film.<sup>400</sup> He said, “It was the biggest pre-fight buildup you ever heard. Thousands of people would come just to watch him spar. It, it was an international event.”<sup>401</sup> Rodney’s comments are heard over images of Louis at his camp. As noted earlier in this dissertation, Thornton and Fairclough suggest that the absence of certain elements are as important as the presence of others. What the film does not mention is that Schmeling also attracted large crowds to his training camp in Speculator, New York.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid, (0:30:15).

<sup>400</sup> McLellan, Dennis. “Lester Rodney Dies at 98; Daily Worker Sports Editor Fought Segregation in Major League Baseball.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 25 Dec. 2009, [www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-xpm-2009-dec-25-la-me-lester-rodney25-2009dec25-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-xpm-2009-dec-25-la-me-lester-rodney25-2009dec25-story.html).

<sup>401</sup> Levine, Joe, director. *Joe Louis: America's Hero Betrayed*. YouTube, (0:29:45) Hbo, 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y83kTl95qI&t=1917s).

<sup>402</sup> Adams, Caswell. "Louis's Mates make Him Toil in Camp Bouts." *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962): 24. Jun 14 1938. ProQuest. Web. 23 Mar. 2016.

Three days before the fight, the headline in the *New York Herald Tribune* (WP) read: “Negro is Betting Favorite, but German Is Strongly Backed.”<sup>403</sup> The story below the headline said odds makers listed Louis as a 2-to-1 favorite while noting the fans think differently:

The odds don’t exactly mirror public or expert opinion because every four persons out of five approached either on the local boulevards or in the sylvan bowers of the training retreats at Pompton Lakes or Speculator, shrillingly shout that the German is a cinch to win again.

Again, the public on the scene of the training camps are picking Schmeling. While this may have something to do with the crowd – fight fans – who were potentially making their pick based on who they consider to be the better fighter, it still shows favoritism of Schmeling over Louis by Americans which goes against the cultural memory of Louis as an all American hero. And the *Herald* editors show a bit of favoritism as well. Note the headline labeled Louis a “negro” and Schmeling a “German.” That is, identifying Louis by his race instead of the American versus the German.

Entering the ring, Louis was defending the heavyweight title. In AHB Dick Gregory recalls listening to FOC2 on the radio. Gregory presents his memory in detail, right down to the tone of the ring announcer that evening:

There was a difference in the announcer’s voice. That night it sounded like they loved him. Sounded like he wasn’t a nigger to them. Joe had become an American.

But, how does Gregory’s memory of FOC2 compare to the newspaper coverage at the time of the match?

As noted in the introduction, the newspapers as a whole are referred to as the archive. The main data used for the analysis will be drawn from six newspapers: three

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<sup>403</sup> Adams, Caswell. "80,000 to See Louis-Schmeling Heavyweight Title Bout at Yankee Stadium Wednesday Night." *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962): 1. Jun 19 1938. ProQuest. Web. 24 Mar. 2016.

white papers - the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, and *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and three black papers - *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*. These newspapers were chosen because they all had high circulation and because of the convenience factor that historical archives for all six papers are accessible online. The second Louis-Schmeling match took place in New York City and the fighters conducted their training in New York State and New Jersey within driving distance of the city. This made it convenient for the three New York papers to cover the lead-up to the fight, and the contest itself, in-person.

A search was conducted using the key words “Joe Louis” and “Schmeling” and limiting the search to articles, front page, editorials, editorial cartoons and letters to the editor. As seen in chapter three with Johnson and Jeffries, the editorial cartoon is a form that can be prone to portray the match-up as geo-political in nature. The search parameter starts with May 11, 1938, the day that the contract was publicly signed for the match. As noted previously, Early said, “Almost immediately after the contract was signed this fight turned into something political.”<sup>404</sup> The search goes through June 30, 1938 about a week after the match took place.

While I looked at coverage extending to one week after all three FOCs, after Schmeling unexpectedly won the first fight against Louis in 1936, the nationalist interest in Germany was much more overt than before that fight.<sup>405</sup> In recalling the first fight, Arch Ward in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) wrote, “Nazi Germany made the most of the victory.....They used it as added evidence of the so-called superiority of the Nordic

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<sup>404</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008. *YouTube* (@ 0:27:40). *YouTube*, 07 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

<sup>405</sup> Liu, Kevin. "Louis vs. Schmeling: Politics and Race in the Ring." *The Concord Review* 10th ser. 21.1 (2010): 296. Online. Web. 30 Mar. 2015.

race.”<sup>406</sup> After Louis defeated Schmeling, did the black and white press in the United States have a similar reaction – adding additional nationalist rhetoric to the American fighter?

This search returned a total of 347 results: *New York Times* (85), *New York Herald Tribune* (73), *Chicago Daily Tribune* (77), *The New York Amsterdam News* (37), *The Chicago Defender* (39) and *Pittsburgh Courier* (36). As noted in the introduction, I will be using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to delve into the text of the articles from the six papers. It is this relationship between the language of the journalists in 1938 and the geo-political, political and cultural atmosphere the society was experiencing at the time that will be studied here. The critical approach for this study is an analysis of the narrative representation of the fight and the fighters as well as the presentation of culture and politics in newspaper texts about this championship-boxing match.

Louis vs. Schmeling II has already been researched and analyzed effectively in terms of race (Edmonds, 1973; Wiggins, 1988).<sup>407</sup> While racism was certainly a motivating factor in the way FOC2 and the fighters were often presented in the texts, it will not be the specific focus in this analysis.<sup>408</sup> As noted earlier, Louis in the 1930s was not presented in the white press as a hero but he was often written about as a hero to his race (for example, the white press often published articles that noted the public celebrations by black citizens after Louis’ victories). In fact, Louis was nearly always presented in white newspapers as intellectually slow but, sometimes, physically superior.

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<sup>406</sup> Ward, Arch. "In the WAKE of the NEWS." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963): 2. Jun 22 1948. ProQuest. Web. 12 May 2016.

<sup>407</sup> Edmonds, Anthony O. "The Second Louis-Schmeling Fight-Sport, Symbol, and Culture." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 7.1 (1973): 42-50. Print.

Wiggins, William H., Jr. "Boxing's Sambo Twins: Racial Stereotypes in Jack Johnson and Joe Louis Newspaper Cartoons, 1908 to 1938." *Journal of Sport History* 15.3 (1988): 242-54. Web. 19 Mar. 2014.

<sup>408</sup> Race will be considered in order to compare the way that Louis is presented today, as a hero to all Americans, versus the way he was presented in 1938, as a hero to only black Americans.



Again, these descriptors in the white press match racist stereotypes but the focus here is to see how press coverage at the time matches the cultural memory of the fight and the fighters today.

Joe Louis biographer Chris Mead appeared in the film several times. One of those times he noted what the American people thought about the match. Mead said: “The symbolism of Joe Louis fighting a representative of Nazi Germany was not lost on the American public in 1938.”<sup>409</sup> In the coverage surrounding FOC2, did journalists use terms or context that would present Louis as a “good American,” or as defending America against the German? Looking at Schmeling, was the German boxer presented as a representative of fascism or as the villain? Using CDA, I looked at the geo-political factors that might be represented in the coverage. That is, how each of the fighters was portrayed in the newspaper archives in terms of political affiliation or as the good or bad national citizen. The words “German” or “Germany” were not considered to be political when attached to Schmeling. While use of the terms could most certainly be construed as being tinged with nationalism, particularly in 1938, it must be considered that, throughout history, international boxers who fight in the United States are often described in the press using their nation of origin. This research will determine to what extent the press “focalized” the match in terms of the relationship between the fighters as political actors and the international politics that could be used metaphorically to present FOC2. As noted above, these are the things that have bubbled to the surface in the cultural memory vis-à-vis the HBO film and even academic texts.

### *The press coverage of FOC2*

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<sup>409</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008. *YouTube* (@ 0:27:56). *YouTube*, 07 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

The three white papers generally did not offer much in the way of direct community reaction to Louis-Schmeling via actual comments from community members. But, some community response could be discerned from the texts. For example, when Schmeling arrived by train in Amsterdam, N.Y. on his way to his training camp in Speculator, N.Y., *The New York Times* (WP) published an Associated Press (AP) story depicting how a large crowd had turned out to greet the German fighter. Because this was more than a month before the match, it can be assumed that most of this crowd was not made up of German nationals who had traveled to the United States to attend the event (a piece that was published just days before the match told of an ocean liner that had arrived in New York carrying a contingent of fans from Germany who traveled to attend the match), but from white community members in the area. The piece quotes the boxer's manager who said that the warm welcome by "*several thousand persons*" would do a lot to boost Schmeling's confidence (emphasis added). Schmeling's manager was quoted in the piece: "This is by far the best welcome Schmeling has ever received up-State. It means a lot to him – I can't emphasize that too strongly."<sup>410</sup> This indicates that a large crowd of Americans showed up to welcome and support the German fighter more than a month before he would face off against Louis, their fellow American. That is, this large crowd of Schmeling fans in America preferred the white German to the black American. While it's possible this large crowd was made-up of a large number of first generation German-Americans, the goal of this research is to see how the fighters were presented to the readers in the press.

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<sup>410</sup> CROWD GREETES SCHMELING: German Tells Amsterdam Fans He Will Beat Louis Again *New York Times* (1923-Current file); May 18, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009) pg. 25

One week earlier the *Times* (WP) presented a public lunchtime debate between two men. The quoted dialogue included Mr. Jack Doyle (unofficially known as the New York betting commissioner) who scoffed at Joe Louis' abilities as a boxer in favor of Max Schmeling. Doyle, described as "the Sage of Broadway," is quoted saying that the belief that Louis could defeat Schmeling is "what's wrong with the country."<sup>411</sup> Doyle says: "If you will explain to me why anybody should believe Louis will beat Schmeling, I will explain to you why you should believe the world is flat."<sup>412</sup> Just one week before readers were told that a crowd of several thousand fans warmly greeted Schmeling, readers were presented a case for how wrong they are if they believe Louis can win this fight. White readers of the *Times* were not encountering a message that presented Louis as a hero.

As seen in chapter three and FOC1, a great deal of the coverage in the lead up to FOC2 focused on the training camps of both boxers. The sportswriters would analyze each fighter's ability and fitness level based on training and sparring sessions. These texts noted the size and response of the fans who attended both fighter's training sessions, since these were open to the public. Both camps were well attended by fans indicating that both fighters had a large fan base.<sup>413</sup> The coverage did indicate that members of the black community were in attendance at the Louis camp. A *New York Times* (WP) story noted that 3,794 attended a sparring session and hundreds were turned away.

He was surrounded at every step by worshipful admirers, mostly of his own race, and his every move — to the ring, in there and back to his dressing quarters —

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<sup>411</sup> Sports of the Times: Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. Boxing Lesson, Absolutely ..., JOHN KIERAN, *New York Times* (1923-Current file); May 11, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2010) pg. 24

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Adams, Caswell. "Louis's Mates make Him Toil in Camp Bouts." *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962): 24. Jun 14 1938. ProQuest. Web. 23 Mar. 2016.

was drunk in avidly by the fans who paid \$1.10 apiece for the privilege of watching the workout.<sup>414</sup>

The fight itself was brief. In the first round Louis knocked Schmeling off of his feet two times but Schmeling managed to rise and continue. Schmeling hit the canvas for the third time after Louis connected with a hard right hand to Schmeling's head. A white towel was thrown into the ring from Schmeling's corner before the referee ended the fight.

In the film, Dorothy Mann, a childhood friend of Louis, said of the first round knockout, "That was the happiest moment in America when Schmeling could not get on his feet."<sup>415</sup> Mann indicated that the entire country, black and white, was celebrating the Louis victory. But how did the newspapers report the aftermath of Louis' win?

In addition to coverage of Louis' fights, white newspapers would also include an additional story, or stories, about large groups of black fans that took to the streets to celebrate following a Louis victory. This trend continued after Louis defeated Schmeling. In a *New York Times* (WP) article noting the party that ensued on the streets of Harlem just after the fight ended, Louis was presented as a hero to his fellow black Americans: "Harlem's celebration of the victory of its hero, Joe Louis, over Max Schmeling..."<sup>416</sup>

The article continued with a quote from the city's police commissioner. Extra police had been placed on the streets due to concerns over street violence after the fight. Upon hearing of a peaceful celebration, the commissioner said: "This is their night, let them have their fun." As noted above, contemporary texts posit that in the lead up to the

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<sup>414</sup> By JOSEPH C NICHOLS Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES. "Overflow Crowd Watches Louis Engage in Hard Sparring Session." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Jun 13 1938, p. 26. ProQuest. Web. 5 Mar. 2016.

<sup>415</sup> HBO film @ 0:33:42.

<sup>416</sup> "HARLEM CELEBRANTS TOSS VARIED MISSILES." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 14. Jun 23 1938. ProQuest. Web. 31 Mar. 2015 .

match and after he defeated Schmeling all Americans celebrated Louis as a hero. But this article published the day after FOC2 presents the New York celebration and hero worship as confined to the black neighborhood of Harlem. That is, the people of Harlem are celebrating “their” hero. There was no indication in any of the newspaper texts that white Americans celebrated the Louis victory.

The *New York Herald Tribune* (WP) printed a small Associated Press article the day after the fight headlined: “Chicago Negro Citizens Dance in Street with Joy.”<sup>417</sup> An article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (WP) the day after the fight also noted a street celebration by “Louis’ jubilant brethren” after Louis beat Schmeling. This photo (Figure 5) accompanied the article:



Figure 5

The headline for the photo reads: “Whooping it Up as Their Boy Makes Good Again.”

With the picture of the all black crowd, white readers could see that Louis’s defeat of Schmeling was celebrated by black Americans.

<sup>417</sup> New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962): 22. Jun 23 1938. ProQuest. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

You may recall that after Johnson beat Jeffries in 1910, there were incidents in many cities in the U.S. where violent and deadly clashes took place. These appeared to be initiated by white citizens who disliked the idea of black citizens being “too happy” about Johnson’s win. This theme would be repeated after Louis won, but without nearly the level of violence associated with Johnson’s win.

While the cultural memory would suggest that whites were happy that Louis defeated Schmeling, this was not presented on the pages of the newspapers at the time. The story mentioned above in the *Tribune* (WP), which noted the celebration of black citizens, continued with mentions of whites in the streets as well. The text of the article noted that a group of whites, who had expected this type of celebration, waited on a street corner and as black celebrants made their way down the street, they were met “with a barrage of overripe vegetables” and later by a large white crowd who had gathered and yelled “many lynch threats.”<sup>418</sup> Not only were the white Chicagoans not *celebrating* the Louis victory along with their black neighbors, they were explicitly demonstrating *against* the crowd with an attack and even death threats.

Today, ESPN.com says: “When ‘The Brown Bomber’ avenged his loss to Germany's Max Schmeling -- viewed as a Nazi symbol -- the entire country celebrated, not just African-Americans.”<sup>419</sup> But the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) text from the day after the fight shows that in the city of Chicago, the large white crowd hurling “lynch threats” along with a “barrage of overripe vegetables” at the black crowd celebrating the Louis victory certainly did not consider Joe to be a hero, even after he defeated Max Schmeling. None of the six papers contained text presenting that all Americans were celebrating

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<sup>418</sup> COLORED FOLKS MARCH AND YELL 'AH TOLD YOU SO': South Side Celebrates ...Winn, Marcia. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 23, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 19.

<sup>419</sup> Schwartz, Larry. "'Brown Bomber' Was a Hero to All." ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, n.d. Web. 12 May 2016.

Louis as an American hero either before or after the win. The fact that White America was not celebrating the Louis victory was not presented in the HBO film.

The black press was much more open to surveying members of the community and printing their opinions in stories about FOC2. For example, *The New York Amsterdam News* (BP) offered a long list of 124 citizens in one piece whose opinions about the fight and the fighters were quoted. Other than a short introduction, the piece consisted of “a wide cross-section of opinion,” on the fight which was drawn from the streets of Harlem and, from “Persons in all walks of life,” men and women who “were quick to offer their opinions of the outcome of the fight.”<sup>420</sup> This followed a tradition in the black press to quote community members rather than “official” sources.

Hemant Shah and Michael Thornton noted that the ethnic press has a tendency to use more citizen witnesses as sources and even to “interpret the significance and meaning of the facts,”<sup>421</sup> and this was evident in stories in the black press covering FOC2. Government officials rarely spoke to black journalists in those early years. According to Donald Ritchie, black reporters were shut out of the White House press corps until Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940.<sup>422</sup>

At no time within the articles found in the parameters of this search did the white newspapers present Louis as explicitly American or as a hero, other than to black Americans. In fact, Louis was often described as unintelligent while Schmelling was often presented as a smart fighter (the suggestion was often made that this higher level of

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<sup>420</sup> BOMBER HOLDS HEAVY EDGE IN LOCAL OPINION: Predictions Influenced In ... *The New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1938); Jun 18, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993) pg. 1.

<sup>421</sup> “Newspaper Coverage of Interethnic Conflict: Competing Visions of America.” *Newspaper Coverage of Interethnic Conflict: Competing Visions of America*, by Hemant Shah and Michael Charles Thornton, Sage, 2004, pp. 233–233.

<sup>422</sup> Ritchie, Donald A. *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps: The History of the Washington Press Corps*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2005: 28.

intelligence was how Schmeling would beat Louis). In the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (WP), for example, Schmeling is described as smart and proud:

Schmeling is cool, courageous, and intelligent. He will plan his fight, and keep to these plans. He will be buoyed by his belief in *his demonstrated supremacy* and an inherent pride in *the race he represents*. Schmeling will take quite a beating before he goes down, if he goes down. Schmeling, once victorious, will be more difficult to whip this time. And the record shows his complete dominance in the previous fight (emphasis added).<sup>423</sup>

While the cultural memory would have us believe that, at the time, Louis was a distinctly American hero in his battle against the German, this story appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, where the emphasized wording seems more appropriate for a German newspaper at the time. With the use of the terms regarding Schmeling's race and supremacy, this article could certainly be categorized as representative of displaying racial overtones. But the purpose of quoting it is that it shows, once again, that Schmeling is presented as the favorite of the white press against Louis. Even going as far as to follow a white supremacy line of reasoning in predicting that Schmeling will defeat Louis.

In the black press, *The Chicago Defender* (BP) and the *The New York Amsterdam News* (BP) depicted Louis, Schmeling and FOC2 in much different ways than in the white press. As seen in FOC1 with Johnson and Jeffries, courage was often presented in the coverage of the lead-up to FOC2. The *Defender* (BP) wrote that it was widely known that Schmeling lacked the “intestinal fortitude of a great fighter” and described him as “yellow” or uncourageous.<sup>424</sup> This is just the opposite of the text above from the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), which opined that Schmeling was courageous, and, because of this and his strong pride, “will take quite a beating before he goes down.”

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<sup>423</sup> LOUIS MUST BORE IN IF HE WOULD BEAT SCHMELING: Bomber Needs a Style Like Armstrong's. Smith, Wilfred. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 12, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990).

<sup>424</sup> IT'S NEWS TO ME, Monroe, Al. *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967); Jun 4, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975) pg. 9



One week later, the *Tribune* presented an article that seemed to indicate that the writer did not admire the exact same qualities in Joe Louis. The lead up presented Louis as courageous in the first meeting of the two boxers due to the fact that he stayed on his feet with Schmeling for several rounds after being hit solidly to the head a number of times. But, comparing Louis to a horse, the writer questioned whether this is really admirable:

Gameness is a serviceable attribute, but it is no divine gift, after all. I have seen dray horses pulling loads up the West 14<sup>th</sup> street hill in Dubuque whose outstanding trait was ability to keep going. That did not necessarily increase anyone's admiration.<sup>425</sup>

In the HBO film viewers are presented with the theme that Louis was an American hero when he faced Schmeling. But *Tribune* readers in 1938 were told that the same attributes that were presented as courageous in Schmeling were, in Louis, good for a work animal but not admirable in the black American boxer. As noted earlier, this paper is not explicitly about racism but this is, at the very least, implicitly racist rhetoric in the white press. Consider that many today posit that, because of his ability in the ring, Louis was able to overcome the racial divide in the United States. On the website for the Smithsonian Institution it says, "Not only would Louis dominate his sport during this period, he *transcended the color barrier* and was cheered by Americans of all races" (emphasis added).<sup>426</sup> The white press at the time did not present this to their readers.

In the black press, an article highlighting a rumor that Louis may buy or build a luxury Harlem hotel, *New York Amsterdam News* (BP) readers are told, not that Louis is unintelligent but, that he is a good businessman who is on the board of directors of the

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<sup>425</sup> LOUIS RETAINS HIS GOOD POINTS, HIS WEAK, TOO. Ward, Arch. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 19, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. A1.

<sup>426</sup> "Joe Louis." *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, Smithsonian Institution, 14 Mar. 2018, nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/joe-louis.

Mutual Life Insurance Company. And when it comes to business and boxing, Louis “has proved to be an apt pupil” at both.<sup>427</sup>

In the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (WP) and the *New York Times* (WP) there is no mention of Louis’ business acumen. Instead, it is Schmeling - under a sub-headline reading, “He’s a Champion Businessman” - who is presented as being in complete control of all of his business dealings surrounding FOC2:

Max is his own boss ... Schmeling plans his diet. He made his own contract for the fight, and personally will collect his 20 percent of the net receipts ... When the fight pictures are distributed for exhibition in Germany, Schmeling will make those arrangements.<sup>428</sup>

While white papers often described Joe as inarticulate and “sleepy eyed,”<sup>429</sup> readers of the black papers were being told about a man who is smart, both inside and outside of the ring – as a fighter and a businessman. Considering the verbiage used in the white press in FOC1 in 1910, where Jack Johnson was described as more scientific and the smarter fighter against fellow American Jim Jeffries, it is surprising to see the white newspapers describing the business acumen and intelligence of the German fighter who was known to be a friend of Adolph Hitler. Particularly when we can see the evidence in the black press that Louis had his own business ventures in American business at the same time.

Remember the newspaper accounts in the white and black press in the lead-up to FOC1 displayed some distinct differences in how the training for Johnson and Jeffries was progressing in the lead-up to their match. While Johnson worked hard, Jeffries went

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<sup>427</sup> Sift Reports That Joe Louis May Buy Harlem Hotel: Say Brown Bomber ..., *The New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1938); Jun 11, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993) pg. 1.

<sup>428</sup> PRO-SHMELING FANS CHEER HIM IN LAX WORKOUT: Max Says He's Boxing Just to Keep Fit. Smith, Wilfrid. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 20, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 15.

<sup>429</sup> Ward, Arch. "LOUIS, SCHMELING FIGHT FOR TITLE TONIGHT: CHAMPION IS 5 TO 2 FAVORITE TO BEAT GERMAN PREDICT A \$1,000,000 GATE. SCHMELING AND LOUIS BATTLE SECOND TIME SCHMELING SEEKS TO TAKE RING CROWN FROM LOUIS TONIGHT." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), Jun 22 1938, p. 17. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 May 2016.

fishing. Watching film of Louis' first-round drubbing of Schmeling in 1938, it is obvious that Louis was much better prepared and much more motivated in their second meeting. But just days before the fight the white press presented Louis' preparation and state of mind as less than adequate. And looking at the coverage of the training sessions of Louis and Schmeling, there was a great deal of difference between how the white press analyzed these sessions when compared to the black press.

One way that writers attempted to measure training progress was by assessing each fighter's performance in sparring sessions. Reports in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (WP) painted a different picture in the preparedness of each man just days before the fight. From the Schmeling camp - in a story with the sub-headline, "Confidence, Snap - Mark Final Drive" - the article read:

First, Schmeling is in excellent physical condition. Secondly, his legs carried him at a spritely pace for eight rounds, in sharp contrast to Joe's shuffle in his drills at Pompton Lakes. And, most important, Schmeling's every action indicated supreme confidence in his system of training and his belief that he will beat the champion.<sup>430</sup>

Just one day later, reporting from the Louis training camp, the *Tribune* headline read, "RIGHTS BOUNCE OFF LOUIS' CHIN IN FINAL DRILL." The article said:

While Trainer Jack Blackburn seemed satisfied with the champion's condition, there were many spectators who left the final session more doubtful than ever about the outcome of the fight with Schmeling.<sup>431</sup>

Just forty-eight hours before the fight was scheduled to start, the *Tribune* (WP) told readers that Schmeling is confident and well trained for the fight and that he is both physically and emotionally strong. This is in sharp contrast to Louis who is described as

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<sup>430</sup> SCHMELING'S A SCHMELING FAN AND MEANS IT!: Confidence, Snap Mark Final Drive. Smith, Wilfrid. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 19, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. A4.

<sup>431</sup> RIGHTS BOUNCE OFF LOUIS' CHIN IN FINAL DRILL: But He Says He's Better and Set for Max. Ward, Arch. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 20, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 15.

“shuffling” through his sessions. The word “shuffling” harkens back to the racist connotations of the slave trade when slaves were shackled and had to shuffle to walk in order to not fall on their faces. In the context of a boxer’s training, it can be read to mean that the fighter is flat-footed (when he should be bouncing on the balls of his feet), merely going through the motions and is unmotivated.

The text the next day raised more doubts about Louis’ readiness for the match. The headline for the Louis article in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) indicated that he is being hit often with a right-handed punch. Schmeling was known to have a powerful right punch. In fact, it was right hand punches from Schmeling that led to Louis being counted out on the canvas in their first fight in 1936. This article went on to say that Schmeling “who was good enough to win by a knockout” in the first fight was seen to be punching even *harder* in the training sessions for this fight. This piece also noted that Louis was still the betting favorite but the odds had dropped in the last day.

Reports from the training sessions in the *New York Herald Tribune* (WP) also generally presented Schmeling as appearing to be better prepared for the match than Louis, with Louis characterized as not working hard enough in his preparation. In a piece headlined, "Confident Schmeling shows Excellent Endurance and Condition 18 Days before Louis Bout," readers are told that Schmeling, “is an amazing athlete, carefully hiding his gifted imagination under cover of his yearning to retain the heavyweight championship.” And that, “His confidence is contagious.”<sup>432</sup>

This was not the case in the black papers. The black press presented glowing, sometimes over-the-top, reports from the Louis sessions and often pointed out

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<sup>432</sup> Adams, Caswell. "Confident Schmeling shows Excellent Endurance and Condition 18 Days before Louis Bout." *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962): 1. Jun 05 1938. ProQuest. Web. 21 Mar. 2016.

weaknesses in Schmeling's preparation and work with sparring partners. A report from the Louis camp in *The New York Amsterdam News* (BP) contained this headline and two sub-headlines:

**Brown Bomber More Vicious as Date Nears**  
**RECORD CROWD FINDS LOUIS IN SAVAGE FORM**  
**Three Sparring Partners Receive Vicious Battering**

The writer went on to explicitly call out the negative reports from the Louis' camp that were published in the white newspapers:

Rifling his blows across with a ferocity that chilled the blood of the onlookers, Joe erased all rumors of staleness and widedness (sic) provoked by stories in white dailies last week as he followed each of his sparring partners relentlessly pumping punches through every opening.<sup>433</sup>

As noted in the introduction, the black press often presented a competing narrative to what was written in the white press. The writer specifically noted that he had read the more negative accounts of Louis' training in the white dailies. Characterizing the accounts of Louis' poor performance in training as "rumors," this piece provided reclamation of the word "savage" to counteract the description in the white press of Louis as "shuffling." Unlike the comparisons between white and black press accounts of the training sessions in FOC1 (where the white press presented Johnson more favorably than Jeffries), there appears to be a rivalry at foot here between the presentation of Louis in the black newspapers and those in the white press. The black press is directly and intentionally responding to the negative accounts of Louis in the white press.

During Louis' run up to, and reign, as the heavyweight champion, black Americans exalted the fighter as a hero to the race. Evidence of this can be seen in newspaper coverage of Louis that goes back to when he first garnered national coverage

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<sup>433</sup> Brown Bomber More Vicious As Date Nears: RECORD CROWD FINDS LOUIS IN ... *The New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1938); Jun 18, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993) pg. 19.

as a professional fighter. In 1934, after only five professional fights, the *Chicago Defender* (WP) labeled him a “New Sensation.”<sup>434</sup> In his “Speaking of Sports” column in the *Defender* in December, 1934, Al Monroe questioned Louis’ ability. Two weeks later he noted that “hundreds” of readers had taken exception with his opinion and wrote letters to him to let him know how wrong he was.<sup>435</sup> That same month, January, 1935, The *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) noted in the lead-up to his first professional fight in Pittsburgh that Louis had “literally been given the key to the city.”<sup>436</sup>

The white press had a different opinion of Louis in those same early years. In the *New York Daily News* (WP), sports editor Paul Gallico said of Louis in September of 1935:

Louis, the magnificent animal.... He eats. He sleeps. He fights.... 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.<sup>437</sup>

Three years later, a few days before FOC2, the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) presented Louis as a hero to its readers with an “exclusive” photo of the boxer that the *Courier* offered as a “souvenir” from the famous Brown Bomber to his million Courier readers.” A full page of Louis photos was also presented on the first page of the second section of that day’s paper. The accompanying story about the fight noted that public interest in this fight was extremely high but specifically noted that it was due to the fact that it was

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<sup>434</sup> "Joe Louis Fights in Detroit; After Sixth Win in Row: New Sensation." *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*, Sep 08 1934, p. 16. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 May 2019.

<sup>435</sup> Monroe, Al. "SPEAKING OF SPORTS." *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*, Jan 05 1935, p. 14. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 May 2019 .

<sup>436</sup> "Predict Sellout for Joe Louis Fight at Duquesne Garden: PREDICT SELLOUT FOR BOUT AT GARDEN Joe Louis, K. O. Sensation, Looks Like Real Champion; Entire Town is Buzzing." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, City Edition ed., Jan 12 1935, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 May 2019.

<sup>437</sup> As quoted in: Mead, Chris. "Black Hero In A White Land." *A New Book Illuminates the Pivotal Role Played by*. Sports Illustrated, n.d. Web. 18 Mar. 2014. <<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1119907/6/index.htm>>.

simply going to be a great heavyweight boxing match, not for the geo-political ramifications:

With observers predicting that the battle will develop into one of the most deliberate, most scientific and most punishing exhibitions of fist-craft in boxing history, interest among fight fans has soared to an all-time high.<sup>438</sup>

As noted, contemporary accounts of Louis, like the HBO film, present him as a hero to all Americans in his matches against Schmeling, and sometimes even before that event. But, looking at how he was presented to readers in the six newspapers at the time of FOC2, it was only the three black newspapers that offered Louis as a hero to their readers. RQ3: How often and to what degree were the geo-political implications of FOC2 used in the three white newspapers and the three black newspapers in their coverage in 1938?

As noted earlier, viewers of the HBO film were told, “The symbolism of Joe Louis fighting a representative of Nazi Germany was not lost on the American public in 1938.”<sup>439</sup> But, did the six newspapers present explicit references to these geo-political circumstances at the time of FOC2?

### *The White Press*

Of the 235 articles in the three white newspapers, only five in the search results noted a geo-political frame in the lead-up to the match. Two of these noted a potential boycott of the fight in New York from the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights (most of these mentions noted that the influx of fans from around the country to see FOC2 will mean that the boycott will have no noticeable effect on ticket sales). For example, the *New York Herald Tribune* (WP) described Schmeling as a

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<sup>438</sup> EDGAR T ROUZEAU, Staff C. ""GUNNING FOR KNOCKOUT"-LOUIS." *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950), City Edition ed.: 1. Jun 18 1938. ProQuest. Web. 8 Apr. 2016.

<sup>439</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008. *YouTube* (@ 0:27:56). YouTube, 07 Dec. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

national hero in Nazi Germany in a story about the possibility of a boycott. The story noted that Mike Jacobs, the promoter of the fight, offered 10% of the net profits of the match “to the President’s Refugee Aid Committee to further the rehabilitation of refugees from Germany, Austria and other European countries.” “Jacobs said his announcement was in no way to be construed as a move to head off formation of an anti-Nazi boycott of the fight because of the participation of Schmeling, a *German*.”<sup>440</sup>

In the *New York Times* (WP) just two days after the official signing of the contract for the match, John Kieran in his “Sports of the Times” column did a rather lengthy piece called, “Fighting Words.” It was a response to a letter from a reader that commented on a previously published piece by Kieran about sportsmanship. The letter writer, Hugo K. Kessler, was on the side of those who wanted a boycott of the fight. Kessler wrote:

I say that by openly rejecting this fight here, it will be a very definite warning to the Hitler mob that this country wants representatives from abroad who, if they earn money here, will put it to some worthy purpose and not that our brethren abroad may be humiliated with whips which our money will buy for their oppressors.<sup>441</sup>

While the boycott and its presentation in the press were geo-political in nature, readers were also reading that this event should not be seen as anything more than a boxing match. Kieran responded that Louis and Schmeling are not politicians and should not be seen as representatives of their nation or their nation’s government:

To link a prizefighter with a political program, or to view a prizefighter as the official standard-bearer of a race, a creed or a nation still seems to this observer to verge on the fantastic.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> "Jacobs Offers Roosevelt Refugee Fund 10% of Louis-Schmeling Net Profits." *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962): 23. May 13 1938. ProQuest. Web. 21 Mar. 2016.

<sup>441</sup> Sports of the Times: Fighting Words For Business Purposes The Olympic ... KIERAN,JOHN. *New York Times* (1923-Current file); May 13, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2010) pg. 25.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.



Using the letter from a reader, the entire text is filled with the geo-political frame that is today associated with this event. But, this was more than a month before the match and Kieran dismissed the idea that the fight or the fighters should be connected in any way with nationalism, politics or race. The piece is structured as a discussion by using portions of the reader's letter, which are immediately countered with a response from Kieran. Kieran argued the same thing as many sports writers when politics is associated with sporting events, like Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem. That is, politics and sport don't mix.

Also in the *New York Times* (WP) before the fight was one more story that presented a geo-political element to the fight. It was an AP story highlighting complaints from Dr. Joseph Goebbels' office about unfair treatment in the U.S. press. Goebbels was denying reports that if Schmeling lost he would be arrested upon his return to Germany.<sup>443</sup>

A very brief mention of FOC2 appeared on the op-ed page of the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) just days before the fight. The three-paragraph piece, titled, "NAZI FURY," was focused on Hitler and the Nazis who had just occupied Austria a little more than a month prior. In the very last sentence the fight was presented as a method by which Hitler could indulge "public opinion for his prize fighter Schmeling," stating that this is in conflict with the "barbarism" that the "Hitlerites" are exhibiting in Europe.<sup>444</sup> While the reference to FOC2 was very minimal, this opinion from the editorial staff of the paper

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<sup>443</sup> DER ANGRIFF COMPLAINS: Goebbels Organ Sees U. S. Press Making Racial Issue of Fight, *New York Times* (1923-Current file); Jun 22, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2010) pg. 28.

<sup>444</sup> NAZI FURY. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 18, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 10.

seems to support the idea that the match was a propaganda tool for Hitler and the Nazis and therefore should not be allowed to take place here.

Another piece that appeared in the sports section of the *Tribune* touched lightly on the geo-political ramifications of FOC2. Headlined, “Money Is Only Small Part of Stake in Title Fight,” the writer, Wilfred Smith, presented several things that each fighter would risk in this match. Smith noted that after being upset by Schmeling in the first fight, Louis’ reputation as a great champion was at stake. And for Schmeling, the former champion, if he were victorious he would be the first heavyweight in history to recapture the crown. Smith noted that both fighters would be representing their people – Schmeling, the Germans and Louis, *black* Americans. It is at this point in the rather lengthy piece that the “stakes” (beyond the money) for each fighter were presented in explicitly geo-political terms under a section titled, “Both are Idols.” About Schmeling, Smith said:

He is an idol in his home land, but he must win again from Louis or he loses his value to a government which teaches the physical and intellectual supremacy of the Nordic.

About Louis:

The hero worship of Louis by members of his *own race* was born of similar circumstances. To a people generally economically dependent, Louis’ meteoric career was as stimulating as a parade of Brown Shirts along Unter Den Linden is to the Germans (emphasis added).<sup>445</sup>

The piece ended with Smith declaring that the winner would reach the height of “pugilistic fame.” In the quotes above Smith certainly directly addressed that politics was one element that was at stake in the fight. But, Smith compared Schmeling - who was fighting for *all* Germans - to Louis, who was fighting for *black* Americans. Keep in mind that these quotes were near the end of the long piece. Near the top of the story he stuck

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<sup>445</sup> Money Is Only Small Part of Stake in Title Fight: MONEY IS SMALL PART OF STAKE IN TITLE FIGHT. Smith, Wilfrid. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 16, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 19.

more closely to what was at stake for each man as a boxer but not as a representative of his home country. He does imply the geo-political ramifications by noting that there would be interest from a large international audience of radio listeners. And while he wrote, “No heavyweight contest has been so significant,” he never again stated precisely why. The terminology used in the two quotes above would certainly cue the readers to the political ramifications associated with this fight but that seems to be as far as Smith was willing to extend himself in writing about the geo-political elements associated with FOC2.

After the Louis victory over Schmeling, four stories appeared in the white press tinged with geo-political overtones. The *New York Times* (WP) published three pieces together that all were focused on responses to the loss in Germany. The headline read: “Hitler, Goebbels Send Tokens To Console Schmeling’s Wife.” All of these, from the AP with a Berlin dateline, were on the nationalist and political elements of FOC2 in Germany. In what today may read as oddly ironic, the first piece noted that Hitler had sent a condolence message and Goebbels had sent a bouquet of flowers to Schmeling’s wife – noting that “the press carried no comment from either man, however, on the one-round defeat of Schmeling by Joe Louis.”<sup>446</sup> A shorter version of this also appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (WP).

#### *The Black Press*

The search returned 112 articles that were written about The Fight in *The New York Amsterdam News* (37), *The Chicago Defender* (39) and the *Pittsburgh Courier* (36). The black press was certainly more willing to implicitly and explicitly present the fight

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<sup>446</sup> Hitler, Goebbels Send Tokens to Console Schmeling's Wife: Anny Ondra ... *New York Times* (1923-Current file); Jun 24, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2010) pg. 22.

and the fighters in a geo-political context. Perhaps the writers and the readers of the black newspapers were more focused on the belief by the Nazi party in white supremacy.

The *Amsterdam News* (BP) presented a story about a group of “youths” who had won a trip from North Carolina to see the match. The chaperone for the trip was identified as white and one of the young men quoted in the piece was also identified as white but the race of the other two young men was not noted. Although the article was published on June 25, after the fight, the quotes were gathered before the event. Without a specific attribution as to which of the young men provided the text, the story quotes one who said: “I am for Louis because he’s a good colored boy and Hitler is no good.”<sup>447</sup> Another brief mention of politics appeared in a story about a survey of New Yorkers who were from the West Indies. The story promotes the idea that West Indians living in New York City, “100,000 black and brown men, women and children,” supported Louis. One quote from a man who was identified as a surgeon was quoted saying: “I am rooting for Louis. I am going to see the fight from ringside, and if he knocks the Nazi cold in the first round, it will be suitable to me.”<sup>448</sup>

While those examples were not too overtly political in nature, one article in the black press did explicitly note the geo-political elements of the fight. Oddly enough, an illustrator for *The New York Amsterdam News* (BP) wrote the story as a first-hand account. Charley Chase began by apologizing for the quality of his piece since he was an artist and not a writer. It was formatted as a letter to his editor that starts with, “Dear Boss.” Chase recounted the experience he and two staff writers had when they first

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<sup>447</sup> Malliet, A.M. Wendell, “N. C. Youths Win Trip to Big Bout,” *The New York Amsterdam News*; Jun 25, 1938 New York, pg. 11. Accessed online.

<sup>448</sup> Malliet, A.M. Wendell, “‘We Too,’ West Indians Holler as Harlem Fans Flock to Louis,” *The New York Amsterdam News*; Jun 25, 1938, New York, pg. 11. Accessed online.

arrived at the Schmeling training camp. I believe it is safe to assume that all three staff members for the *Amsterdam News* were black based on this quote about Chase's observations when they first entered the camp:

Joe Jacobs, Schmeling's Jewish manager, personally escorted us over to the press section at the ringside, where we were the center of attraction at this Nazi-sympathetic community. I couldn't tell whether these Germans were sizing us up as traitors to our own Joe Louis or whether they took us for spies from Pompton Lakes (the location of Louis' camp)...<sup>449</sup>

The letter continued with Chase talking about his and his fellow journalists first meeting with Schmeling, whom Chase called, "the Fuehrer's envoy." They talked to Schmeling about their experience attending the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. After noting how friendly the fighter was, Chase ended with:

After it was all over we all shook hands, wished him the usual "best of luck" and left with the feeling that it was too bad that such a personable and swell guy as this had to be a Nazi.<sup>450</sup>

In determining in-groups and out-groups, Torkington notes that among the way these groups can be presented in the press is as a positive self-presentation and a negative other-presentation through a "syntactic and semantic representation of social action and social actors."<sup>451</sup> Chase presented Schmeling in the above text in the role of the other. Schmeling was a decent person through most of the text but Chase predicates the entire article with a negative representation of Schmeling's national identity – "too bad he is a Nazi." It must be noted as well that within this text Louis is mentioned five times, and all five of these were in the context of "boxer" not in any political terms. That is, Louis was not the example of the national self in this text. Instead it was the three journalists that

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<sup>449</sup> Chase, Charlie, "Cartoonist Chase Writes About Trip to Speculator," *The New York Amsterdam News*; Jun 18, 1938, New York, pg. 18. Accessed online.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Torkington, 967-968.

Chase defines in somewhat political tones when he said that the “Nazi-Sympathetic community” in the training camp may have looked at them (three black journalists) as either “traitors” to their race, or “spies” for their fellow black man. Chase presented himself and his fellow journalists as the “self” in this nationality dichotomy against Schmeling’s Nazi “other.”

While the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) did not offer many geo-political implications when talking about the lead-up to FOC2, the post-fight stories certainly did. The post-fight edition featured a huge, all-cap headline and multiple pictures on the front page and above the banner. The caption under one of the pictures read, “Joe’s punches are sounding like explosions throughout the length and breadth of Naziland. Heil Hitler!”<sup>452</sup> Another photo caption says, “The defeat stunned Germany.” As noted earlier, the *Courier* reported in one story that the mostly white crowd at the fight was half for Louis and half for Schmeling. Another recap of the fight in the *Courier* is rife with geo-political rhetoric:

Max trembled to his feet and again the champion’s rapier right found the jaw of the Destiny Man. And as the Nazi was jerked erect by the punch and then started to crash stiff-bodied to the resin, a towel came hurling into the ring from his corner.

... Marked antagonism to the thing which Schmeling represents was shown by the hisses and boos which greeted his appearance in the ring. The friend of Hitler, the playmate of Goebbels, and thus a passive exponent of the Jewish purge, Fascism and the mailed fist, the former champion realized then, if not sooner, that his type has few sympathizers in the crowd.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> CHESTER L WASHINGTON, Sports E. "JOE KO'S MAX: JOE SMASHES WAY TO QUICKEST VICTORY BY K. O. IN FIGHT HISTORY GOING! SCHMELING ON THE FLOOR FIRST TIME ... GOING!! AND HERE'S CHALLENGER DOWN AGAIN ... GONE!! END OF TRAIL A FIGHTING FURY CALLS HIS SHOT! PICTURES ILLUSTRATE POWER AND SPEED OF LOUIS AS HE KAYOES SCHMELING." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, City Edition ed., Jun 25 1938, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 May 2019.

<sup>453</sup> W, ROLLO W. "STING OF MAXIE'S RIGHT UNLEASHES FURY OF BOMBER." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, City Edition ed., Jun 25 1938, p. 17. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 May 2019.

Keep in mind that another story in the same paper on the same day noted that the crowd was split 50-50 for the fighters, so that would indicate that there were, most likely, some “sympathizers in the crowd.”

In a previously mentioned article from the *Amsterdam News* (BP) was found the only piece written in all six newspapers that presented Louis as an *American* hero. While the headline presented Louis as a local hero, when readers turned to page 12 to read the rest of the story, they were greeted with a series of eight photographs from the Louis training sessions and a huge list of opinions and predictions about FOC2 from black citizens. Ruth Du Pree Wilson, identified as a saleslady who resides at 215 West 35<sup>th</sup> Street, said, “Just now the public is treating Louis with the respect due an American, instead of a Negro champion.”<sup>454</sup> Of the 347 articles analyzed in this study, Ms. Wilson’s comment was the only one discovered that attaches American directly to Joe Louis. And this comment came, not from a journalist, but from a member of the public. It can be assumed that when Ms. Wilson said “the public” she is referring to white Americans. She opined that all of America was starting to recognize Louis with respect, not just black Americans. While many in the public may have agreed with her, this was the only newspaper text found in the search results to indicate this.

The HBO film presented several examples to indicate that the cultural memory believes Louis was a hero to all Americans in his 1938 fight against Schmeling, and in other contemporary media – before the fight - using direct quotes from some who were alive at the time of the fight. But, as seen here in the press accounts at the time, Louis was

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<sup>454</sup> BOMBER HOLDS HEAVY EDGE IN LOCAL OPINION: Predictions Influenced In ... *The New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1938); Jun 18, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993) pg. 1.

no hero to most of white America in his fight against the Nazi-sympathizing German. So, when did this attitude toward Louis begin to shift?

### **If Not Then, When?**

A small piece in *Jet* magazine in 1994 noted the fact that the bronzed right glove that Louis wore in FOC2 had been donated to Detroit's Cobo Center. Etched into the marble stand that holds the glove are the words: "THE GLOVE THAT FLOORED NAZI GERMANY." Below this, it says that the display of the glove is, "Honoring the courage of Joe Louis a hometown hero who made our nation proud."<sup>455</sup> The question becomes; when did the white press begin to present a message about Louis that is more akin to the one that is seen engraved in marble above and in the HBO film?

One way to try and discover the answer is to look at how the press wrote about Louis on the anniversary of the event. Using the same newspapers and the same search words but changing the dates, we can see if, or when, the white press began to present the matchup in similar terms to those we see in contemporary media. Two searches were conducted – one using the days June 20 to June 25, 1939 – one year after the June 22, 1938 fight date – and those same days in 1948 – ten years after FOC2. Both searches garnered results, mainly because Louis was preparing for an upcoming fight on those dates in 1939 and 1948.

In 1939, Louis was preparing for a title defense against Tony Galento. The reason search results using Schmeling's name appeared is because articles often listed Louis' previous quality opponents to support their prediction that Louis, the heavy favorite in the match, should easily defeat Galento. The *New York Herald Tribune* (WP), for example,

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<sup>455</sup> Jet 5 Dec. 1994: 47. Web. 16 May 2016.



predicted that Louis was a one-to-ten betting favorite over Galento noting that, “He squashed Nathan Mann in three, Harry Thomas in five and year ago (sic) hospitalized Max Schmeling, his lone conqueror, in one short frame.”<sup>456</sup> In all six papers these are the only mentions of FOC2 in 1939.

Ten years after the fight, Louis is still not being presented as a hero to, at least to some of, white America. In a preview to the 1948 Walcott fight, the *Chicago Tribune* (WP) says:

New York, the most blasé city in America, is backing Louis. His own folks from New York’s Harlem and Chicago’s south side want him to win. It is because they like the man who has been tremendous (sic) credit to their race and to sport, and not because they dislike the likable Walcott.

This indicates that whites in New York and blacks in New York and Chicago are pulling for Louis in his upcoming fight. But, the story goes on to note that black fans are presented as supporting Louis for more than just his ability as a boxer. While Louis is not necessarily being presented as a hero on the pages of the *Tribune*, in a column by Arch Ward, we start to see some of the geo-political rhetoric that can be found associated with Louis-Schmeling today. Ward actually goes back to the first Louis-Schemlling fight in 1936 to make the connection between the battle between the two fighters and the political ramifications:

Joe Louis has belted more opponents into oblivion than any other heavyweight in boxing history, but only once was there any personal animus in his preparations.....That was against Max Schmeling in their title match shortly before the war.....Schmeling had beaten Louis before the Golden Glover had won the heavyweight championship.....Nazi Germany made the most of the victory.....They used it as added evidence of the so-called superiority of the Nordic race.....The more Joe read about the propaganda the madder he grew.....He told camp followers he would convince Schmeling and Nazi

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<sup>456</sup> Adams, Caswell. "Louis Rules 1-to-10 Favorite to Defeat Galento in Title Match at Yankee Stadium Wednesday." *New York Herald Tribune* (1926-1962): 1. Jun 25 1939. ProQuest. Web. 10 May 2016.

Germany that the result of their first match was an accident.....It's a matter of record that he knocked out Schmeling in the first round.<sup>457</sup>

In recollection, we find that Ward can more easily connect FOC2 to World War II, noting that the bout took place “shortly before the war.” In actuality, it would be more than four years after the match that U.S. troops would officially be involved in WWII. But, it frames the political motivations as more personal for Louis and not Americans in general.

The *New York Times* (WP) presented a very similar message on the tenth anniversary, also setting up Louis' motivation in 1938 by talking about the loss to Schmeling in 1936, noting that after Schmeling won the first fight, he returned to Nazi Germany and, “was hailed as the arch-apostle of the doctrine of Aryan supremacy over an inferior race.” The writer, Arthur Daley, connects the geo-political motivation for FOC2, but actually says that this was Louis' motivation and it was misguided:

The Dark Destroyer seethed at those transatlantic taunts. Schmeling, his mind poisoned by the Hitlerian doctrines, was prostituting a once noble sport to his own ignoble ends. In his vanity he had read into one fight a significance which wasn't there. As a philosopher, Louis is strictly of the cracker-barrel variety, but he instinctively knew that there was something fundamentally wrong about that branch of philosophy which bases its syllogistic structure on a specific premise leading to a general conclusion. There was only one way he could answer that argument—with his fists.<sup>458</sup>

Daley notes that it was Louis's “vanity” that “read into one fight a significance which wasn't there.” That is, Louis, based on his ego, built up the fight to be his one-man war against Nazi Germany, a geo-political context that Daley believed did not exist.

Maybe because they had already written about Louis as a hero at the time of the match and had explicitly noted the geo-political ramifications, the three black newspapers did not play up the first or tenth anniversary of the event. While the search of 1939 and

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<sup>457</sup> Ward, Arch. "In the WAKE of the NEWS." Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963): 2. Jun 22 1948. ProQuest. Web. 12 May 2016.

<sup>458</sup> By, ARTHUR D. "And in the Third Corner -- Father Time." New York Times (1923-Current file): 4. Jun 20 1948. ProQuest. Web. 12 May 2016.

1948 returned 28 results in the three white papers, the same search in the three black newspapers only returned eight results, none of which mentioned Louis as a hero or the geo-political nature of Louis versus Schmeling.

### Conclusion

One example to indicate the degree to which the press was *not* focused on FOC2 as a major cultural and political event in 1938 came from an article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that was written two days before the match. Promoters for the event complained that the press was giving too much ink to Babe Ruth and was much too apathetic about the fight:

“What has come over the newspapers, anyhow?” Mr. Lewis demanded to know. “Have they completely lost their sense of values? Do they no longer recognize an event of vital interest to millions and millions and shall I say millions of people.”<sup>459</sup>

In addition to Ruth, journalists and readers were also interested in another major sporting event that was scheduled for May of that year - another “Match of the Century” - the horse race between Seabiscuit and War Admiral (the race had to be postponed and rescheduled for November but it was still featured in the press at the same time as preparations for FOC2). The above quote would indicate that the press in 1938 may not have seen the boxing match as quite the spectacle that the public did at the time, or the media does today. For example, in his book *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation*, Erenberg notes that anti-Nazi demonstrators were not allowed inside Schmeling’s training camp with their picket signs.<sup>460</sup> If the geo-political elements were so palpable, why didn’t any of the three white newspapers report on that politically charged moment?

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<sup>459</sup> RING PROMOTERS DEPLORE APATHY OF NEWSPAPERS: Coolness to Title Bout ..., Ward, Arch. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); Jun 21, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1990) pg. 17

<sup>460</sup> Erenberg, Lewis A. *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006: 141.

If Joe Louis really was a hero to all Americans, as depicted today, why was he presented in both the white and the black press as a hero only to his race? It seems that the collective memory of those that are revisiting Louis vs. Schmeling today is reconstructed in a way that presents the event and the participants in a markedly different way than these six newspapers did at the time. Advances in civil rights in the United States, in particular, may have resulted in recollections of Louis to present him as a representative and a hero to all Americans. ESPN.com said:

In a time when his people were still subject to lynchings, discrimination and oppression, when the military was segregated and African-Americans weren't permitted to play Major League Baseball, Joe Louis was the first African-American to achieve hero worship that was previously reserved for whites only.<sup>461</sup>

And potentially the atrocities that were discovered after World War II are combined with Max Schmeling, presenting him as the Nazi villain - the “arch-disciple of the Master Race” - in the press on the tenth anniversary of the fight, and beyond.<sup>462</sup> But, this chapter has demonstrated that white newspapers at the time were not as apt to explicitly and overtly present the geo-political, societal and cultural undertones that were connected to the fight and the fighters.

In 2018 the Smithsonian website says that when he defeated Schmeling in 1938:

Instantly Louis became more than just a champion. At a time when boxing was at its zenith and the heavyweight champion was considered the greatest athlete in the world, Louis achieved even more. He became a hero to Americans of every race and background.<sup>463</sup>

It is clear that today, based on the cultural memory, Louis versus Schmeling is presented as more than just a boxing match between two heavyweight fighters. And the fighters

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<sup>461</sup> Schwartz, Larry. "'Brown Bomber' Was a Hero to All." ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, n.d. Web. 12 May 2016.

<sup>462</sup> "And in the Third Corner -- Father Time." Arthur Daley. New York Times (1923-Current file): 4. Jun 20 1948. ProQuest. Web. 12 May 2016.

<sup>463</sup> "Joe Louis." *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, Smithsonian Institution, 14 Mar. 2018, nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/joe-louis.

themselves - particularly Louis - are presented much differently than in the press at the time. Using a simple internet search regarding FOC2 today, we find texts describing Louis as, “revered as a national hero by both blacks and whites.”<sup>464</sup> But those who were reading newspapers in the lead-up to the fight in 1938 encountered a much different message about the match and the men involved. Even 10 years after, not a lot had changed on the pages of the six newspapers in this study. Louis was still not presented as a hero to all of America. (An analysis of the reasons why will be discussed in chapter six, the conclusion.)

As mentioned earlier, the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP) offered a long list of 124 citizens in one piece whose opinions about the upcoming fight and the fighters were quoted in the lead-up to FOC2. Among these we encountered a quote from Ms. Ruth Du Pree Wilson. She was a saleslady from 215 West 35<sup>th</sup> Street in New York. Ms. Wilson was one black voice in one black newspaper in 1938 that considered Joe Louis a hero to all of America.<sup>465</sup> The only person writing about or being quoted in the newspapers at the time of FOC2 that presented Joe Louis in the same frame as the cultural memory today: An American hero.

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<sup>464</sup> "On This Day: Joe Louis Knocks Out Max Schmeling." On This Day: Joe Louis Knocks Out Max Schmeling. Dulcinea Media, 22 June 2011. Web. 22 May 2016.

<sup>465</sup> BOMBER HOLDS HEAVY EDGE IN LOCAL OPINION: Predictions Influenced In ... *The New York Amsterdam News* (1922-1938); Jun 18, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993) pg. 1.

## Chapter Five

### Ali vs. Frazier: The fight for the nation's soul

*On March 8, 1971, the eyes of the world were focused on a small square of illuminated canvas. Whatever you did, whoever (sic) you were - that night - that's where you wanted to be.*<sup>466</sup>

Thomas Hauser, Muhammad Ali biographer

*He said, "Don't you know I'm God?" I said, "God, you in the wrong place tonight."*<sup>467</sup>  
Joe Frazier (quoting a ring conversation with Muhammad Ali)

### Introduction

After the opening credits, the first line uttered by iconic documentary film narrator Live Schreiber<sup>468</sup> was, "Why was this fight so much more about America than it was about boxing?"<sup>469</sup> Playing off of the words in the Pledge of Allegiance, the title for the HBO Sports documentary was, "Ali Frazier 1: One Nation ... Divisible." The title and Schreiber's words are references to the socio-political components that the film says surrounded the first fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. This would be the third heavyweight championship battle in the twentieth century to be so big that it was called the "Fight of the Century,"<sup>470</sup> (FOC3). Like Jim Jeffries in the first fight of the century, Muhammad Ali had not lost his heavyweight championship crown to another fighter. As noted in chapter three Jeffries had retired, undefeated, from the sport before returning to the ring to face Jack Johnson. After he refused to be drafted into the United States military the World Boxing Association had stripped Ali, who was also undefeated, of his championship crown and the New York State Athletic Commission had stripped

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<sup>466</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:01:28). HBO, 2000, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sP16dBgmokw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sP16dBgmokw).

<sup>467</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:46:35).

<sup>468</sup> Schreiber may be most recognized as the voice-over talent for the PBS documentary series, *Frontline*.

<sup>469</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:46:35).

<sup>470</sup> Ali and Frazier would meet two more times. Their series of fights is considered by boxing fans and writers to be one of the greatest in boxing history. Many believe that the third fight may have resulted in permanent physical damage to both men.

Ali of his license to box.<sup>471</sup> Ali's refusal to be conscripted was based on his claim that he was a Muslim minister. The official reason as stated by the New York State Athletic Commission for stripping him of his license was that Ali's "refusal to enter the service was detrimental to the best interests of boxing."<sup>472</sup> At the time of the fight, March 8, 1971, Ali was waiting for the Supreme Court of the United States to rule on his appeal for his 1967 federal conviction of draft evasion. While the New York State Athletic Commission had restored his license to fight Frazier, Ali was still facing a five-year prison sentence and a \$10,000 fine as he prepared for the match.

Throughout the first four chapters of this dissertation I have looked at how the cultural memory has changed the stories about the fights of the century and the fighters who were involved. Suggestions have also been made about why the memory has altered the stories of the FOCs and the fighters. One major factor that may impact the cultural memory, vis-à-vis the documentary film about Ali versus Frazier, is that many of the people involved in FOC3 were still available to recall the 1971 event in the film, which was produced in 2000. This included Frazier himself but not Ali (who was suffering from Parkinson's disease and rarely spoke publicly at that point). These first-hand accounts from those involved in an event are referred to by Astrid Erll as "the first level of cultural memory."<sup>473</sup> But, as Erll noted, even these first-hand accounts can be "shaped by external factors." That is, even first-hand accounts of those who were present can be altered by contextual factors that have occurred since the event took place.

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<sup>471</sup> While most states have an athletic commission that issues licenses to boxers and matches, New York was considered the top commission in the country. Once New York decided to not issue Ali a license to fight, other states followed suit. It was Georgia State Senator Leroy Johnson who, in 1970, led the effort to get Ali's first fight sanctioned after the imposed layoff. See: GRAVES, GARY B. "Ali Returned to Ring with Ex-Georgia Senator in His Corner." *Sandiegouniontribune.com*, 21 Aug. 2016, [www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-ali-returned-to-ring-with-ex-georgia-senator-in-2016jun09-story.html](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-ali-returned-to-ring-with-ex-georgia-senator-in-2016jun09-story.html).

<sup>472</sup> "Champion Heavyweight Boxer Is Stripped of World Title after Refusing US Army Draft." *The Guardian Archives*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 29 Apr. 2013. Web.

<sup>473</sup> Erll, Astrid, and Nünning Ansgar. "Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook." *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, 2008. p. 5.

Like the Johnson-Jeffries, and Louis-Schmeling fights, the cultural memory of Ali-Frazier is cloaked in social, political and racial elements, even though both participants in this fight were black.<sup>474</sup> Having spent his early years working as the son of a sharecropper in South Carolina, Frazier was considered, by some, to have experienced a more conventional, blue-collar black experience. Ali, on the other hand, was raised in a relatively middle class lifestyle in the West End, a black suburb, of Louisville, Kentucky. In 1971, Ali was an outspoken opponent of the war in Vietnam while, because of his status - married with children, Frazier was exempt from the military draft. Although he was not as publicly overt about his religious beliefs, Frazier was a Christian who insisted on calling Ali, Cassius Clay. Ali considered this to be, not just a personal insult but also, a lack of respect from a fellow black man in a nation that had historically mistreated and murdered black people based on their skin color.

Ali's first fight after returning to the ring in 1970 was against Jerry Quarry. Quarry, who was white, also used the name Cassius Clay when referring to Ali. But in the lead up to their match Quarry publicly stated his support of Ali's political positions,<sup>475</sup> something Frazier had not done.

In chapter three we saw the uncomplicated and surprising presentation of Jack Johnson in the white press. That is, Johnson was presented as harder working and more intelligent when he easily defeated his opponent, Jim Jeffries, (the White Hope) in the ring in 1910. We also saw the presentation of Johnson in the cultural memory (Ken Burns film) as heroic for what the film framed as his ability to overcome the hatred he experienced along with the extreme racism that existed in the United States at the time.

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<sup>474</sup> Condon, David. "In the Wake of the News." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*: 1. Mar 02 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Mar. 2018.

<sup>475</sup> Hall, John. "Ring-Rusty Clay 17-5 Choice Over Quarry." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 2. Oct 26 1970. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Apr. 2018.



Joe Louis was also presented as a hero to all Americans in the cultural memory (the HBO film) when recalling FOC2 and his life. But in the press at the time we only saw one mention of Louis as an American hero in his fight against a Nazi-sympathizing German. That mention came from one African-American woman in one story in a black newspaper. Louis was presented as greatly admired by the writers in the black newspapers in 1938 that often quoted black Americans who were huge supporters as well. But, in the film, Louis is called the first black man who was a “white hope.” That is, the cultural memory believes Louis transcended the racial division of the day and became a hero to white Americans in his fight against the German, Schmeling. The actual presentation of Louis in the white press at the time of FOC2 displayed blatant racism against the heavyweight boxer and his black supporters. The narrative in the press at the time was also, mostly, uncomplicated, focusing more on the fighters, their training and their prospects for winning. This belief that a heavyweight-boxing match could represent more than simply the battle between two men would arise again in the cultural memory of when Muhammad Ali faced Joe Frazier in 1971.

In the HBO film (2000) about FOC3 both the nation and the fighters are presented in the cultural memory as socio-political actors. The match is presented as a metaphor for this extremely complicated and politically charged time in the history of the United States. In FOC1 and FOC2, our main actors, Johnson and Louis, faced off against white opponents giving the fights obvious racial battle lines. The cultural memory of Jack Johnson says he is a hero for overcoming extreme and blatant racism in 1910. Joe Louis is called the first black, white hope - a hero in the cultural memory for defeating Nazism in the form of his white German opponent. And while both fighters were black in FOC3,

in the cultural memory, vis-à-vis the 2000 film about the event, Muhammad Ali is presented as representative of Black America and his opponent, Joe Frazier as battling for the more conservative White America. Why is it that the cultural memory, in the form of media products created by white filmmakers, prefers to make these epic battles racial battles?

In the film about the fight, and some in the press in 1971, tried to determine which of the two, Ali or Frazier, was actually “blacker.” This leads to an interesting racial conundrum that can be seen in the film about the fight: the idea that even though FOC3 is a battle between two African-American boxers, the element of black versus white became a theme within the HBO film (2000). And viewers of the film were told that Ali had committed the mortal sin in 1971 of calling Frazier an “Uncle Tom.”<sup>476</sup> But was this racial division presented in the press at the time of the fight? This leads to the first research question in this case study.

RQ1: While the cultural memory presents FOC3 and the fighters as representative of the explicit socio-political divide that was prevalent in the United States in 1971, how much did the press focus on this in the lead-up to the fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier?

One of the elements that I have identified that contributed to the socio-political focus of this battle between Ali and Frazier came down to a rather simple bit of identification: Frazier’s decision in 1971 to refer to Muhammad Ali as Cassius Clay.

### **That’s a black mans name**

A decent measure of the cultural memory might be to find out what younger people know about a person or an event. When I talk about Muhammad Ali in my introduction to mass communications class, many of the students are surprised to learn

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<sup>476</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:24:18).

that the boxer lived the first 22 years of his life as Cassius Clay. Most are also surprised to learn that many in the United States at one time, disliked Ali, whom they see as a beloved American icon. Ali was given his new name in 1964. In a filmed interview that year Muhammad Ali was asked about his new name and, with his chin high and a smile on his face, he replied:

*Ali:* That's the name given to me by my teacher, the honorable Elijah Muhammad. That's my original name - that's a black man's name. Cassius Clay was my slave name. I'm no longer a slave.

*Reporter:* What's it mean?

*Ali:* Muhammad means, worthy of all praises, and Ali means, most high.<sup>477</sup>

Ali was extremely proud of the name that had been bestowed upon him by his spiritual “teacher,” a man whom he considered to be a prophet from God. Ali believed his old name to be associated with slavery and white America while his new one was a black name. He wanted all to know and all to call him, Muhammad Ali. Calling this his “original” name meant that Ali considered this, not Cassius Clay, to be his birth name. With his Muslim name and religion, Ali would soon be speaking out overtly and explicitly against the injustices of racism in America. Seven years later, Joe Frazier was still addressing Ali as Cassius Clay.

Prior to his fight with Frazier, Ali faced two other black heavyweights who appeared to mock the fighter by using what Ali considered the “white slave name,” Cassius Clay. Ali faced Floyd Patterson in the ring in 1965<sup>478</sup> and Ernie Terrell in 1967.<sup>479</sup> Biographers and journalists have framed Ali's verbal confrontations outside of the ring with Patterson, Terrell and Frazier as a stain on Ali's legacy. Historian Randy

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<sup>477</sup> "Muhammad Ali Conversion Interviews 1964 1965 1966 1967 1969." YouTube. *YouTube*, 8 Dec. 2007. Web. 11 Apr. 2015.

<sup>478</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Floyd Patterson." *Boxrec*, [boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Floyd\\_Patterson](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Floyd_Patterson). Accessed April 4, 2018.

<sup>479</sup> "Muhammad Ali vs. Ernie Terrell." *Boxrec*, [http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad\\_Ali\\_vs.\\_Ernie\\_Terrell](http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Muhammad_Ali_vs._Ernie_Terrell). Accessed April 4, 2018.

Roberts said: “Except for occasional humorous barbs, Ali’s white opponents were treated with dignity and respect. But things got ugly with Floyd Patterson, Ernie Terrell, and Frazier.”<sup>480</sup>

This was an unusual racial shift in the treatment of his opponents compared to Jack Johnson. In chapter two I quote Roberts who noted that when Jack Johnson fought “Against white boxers his loose defensive style was tinged by a shade of cruelty. He carried opponents to deal out more punishment.”<sup>481</sup> Roberts also noted that Johnson’s taunts were not just physical. Regarding Tommy Burns, the white champion Johnson defeated to win the title, Roberts said:

Johnson wanted to also humiliate Burns. He did this verbally. In almost every taunt Johnson referred to Burns in the diminutive. It was always “Tommy Boy” or “little Tommy.”<sup>482</sup>

It is easy to understand why Johnson would physically and verbally taunt white opponents in 1910. But why did Ali choose to publicly punish, both rhetorically and physically, fellow black Americans? Particularly when, as Roberts said, he treated white boxing opponents with dignity and respect.

I will suggest that, to Ali, when Patterson, Terrell and Frazier openly chose to refer to him as, Cassius Clay, this was not just a personal affront but also a betrayal to their black race. In the HBO film Ali biographer Thomas Hauser said:

There was a lot of resentment on Ali’s part as to what he had been through. And to Muhammad Ali Joe Frazier had become the symbol of his oppressors.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Hauser, Thomas. "The Unforgiven." Editorial. *The Guardian* [New York] 3 Sept. 2005: n. pag. Web. 11 Apr. 2015.

<sup>481</sup> *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*, by Randy Roberts, W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2017, p. 43.

<sup>482</sup> Roberts, p. 63.

<sup>483</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:46:35).

The film also showed a clip from the *Mike Douglas Show* from just prior to the fight. Joe Frazier appeared with Muhammad Ali with Douglas positioned between the two fighters. Douglas goaded Frazier by asking him, “What do you call Muhammad?” To which Joe responded, “I call him Clay.” Regarding Frazier’s choice to use Clay, Bryant Gumbel noted in the film:

Only those who were bigots, rednecks, hard liners continued to call him Clay, almost as an insult. And when Frazier chose to do that too, to a lot of African-Americans it was kind of like, “Hey, who you siding with here? Take a look in the mirror.”<sup>484</sup>

Although the fact that Frazier chose to identify Ali as Clay was mentioned in the HBO film, the decision over what to call Ali at the time of the fight was not a big focus in the production. Looking back at the coverage, both the black and white press had difficulties with regard to how they would identify Ali in their newspapers in the lead-up to FOC3. This will be addressed later in this chapter.

But, as Gumbel noted, to many African-Americans the choice by Frazier to explicitly use the name Clay was seen as a slight against the entire black community because it was seen as identifying more with conservative white America. While the element of racial identity between the two black boxers was not the focus of most of the newspaper coverage at the time of the fight, the film and the cultural memory made this an issue. That is, the film devoted time to the theme of which of the two fighters was actually “blacker.” This is where the racial lines of FOC1 and FOC2 existed in FOC3 as well.

*“C.C. Muhammad Ali” vs. “Main Street Joe”*

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<sup>484</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:27:58).

Interestingly both the black and the white press at the time of the fight were still having issues over the name, Muhammad Ali. In the white press writers went back and forth between the names Cassius Clay and Muhammad Ali within the stories about FOC3. This was also true of some black journalists and fans quoted in the black press. Even though it had been seven years since Cassius Clay had publicly declared that he now wanted to be referred to as Muhammad Ali, journalists were having a tough time with what to call the dethroned champion. *New York Times* (WP) reporter Robert Lipsyte recalled some of the few disputes that he had with editors over coverage of Ali on the sports pages of the *Times*.

The only time there was real pushback was after he announced that he was Muhammad Ali and I started to refer to him as Muhammad Ali in stories. Not the sports editor but the top editor of the paper decreed that, until Cassius Clay changed his name in a legal court of law we were going to call him, Cassius Clay. So, there was a struggle.<sup>485</sup>

Lipsyte noted that, “My point was, we didn’t make a big fuss about calling John Wayne, or Rock Hudson, or Cary Grant by *their* (laughs) legal names, why are we making such a fuss about this guy?”<sup>486</sup>

In 1971, how did the newspapers deal with the name? Did the white press choose to use Clay or Ali? Since he had declared in 1964 that Muhammad Ali was his “black” name, did the black press follow Ali’s request to be identified by this name or did they identify him as Cassius Clay?

In the five weeks surrounding the fight in 1971, the *New York Times* (WP) used a couple of different devices in dealing with the name. One way was to mention, “Ali

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<sup>485</sup> Mederson, Mark. Interview with Robert Lipsyte. Phone interview, October 21, 2011.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

began his career as Cassius Clay.”<sup>487</sup> *Times* writers often just settled on, “Ali, also known as Cassius Clay.”<sup>488</sup> It would seem that seven years after announcing his name change - with all of the news about Ali’s conversion to the Muslim faith and his refusal to be drafted - it was unlikely that regular readers of the *Times*, or any newspaper, would need to be reminded what his name used to be. But the *Times* was not the only paper to have an issue with the name. The *Chicago Tribune* (WP) used similar devices like, “Ali, who came into the world as Cassius Clay...”<sup>489</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* (WP) tended to use Muhammad Ali more consistently than the other white newspapers.

The black press had similar issues with using Ali’s new name. *Chicago Defender* (BP) columnist A .S. “Doc” Young had a unique approach referring to him as “C. C. Muhammad Ali.”<sup>490</sup> A United Press International (UPI) story in the *Defender* simply switched from using Ali to using Clay. The *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) used, “Cassius (Muhammad Ali) Clay” in one story.<sup>491</sup> The majority of the other identifiers in the *Courier* used Muhammad Ali. Like the *Los Angeles Times* (WP), the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP) also almost exclusively chose Muhammad Ali to identify the fighter.

Retired heavyweight champion Joe Louis offered his prediction for the outcome of the fight in a short UPI story. “Clay has never fought anyone like Joe,”<sup>492</sup> the former titleholder said. Unlike Ali, the newspapers had no issues with what to call Joe Frazier.

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<sup>487</sup> By, ARTHUR D. "Sports of the Times." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2018.

<sup>488</sup> "Muhammad Ali: Man of Controversy." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2018.

<sup>489</sup> ROLLOW, COOPER. "There'LI be A Fight Tonight, Folks.." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*, Mar 08 1971, p. 2. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Apr. 2018.

<sup>490</sup> DOC YOUNG, A.S. "GOOD MORNING SPORTS!" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 24. Feb 09 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

<sup>491</sup> "Ali, Frazier Getting Tuned Up for Big Fight." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 16. Feb 27 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>492</sup> "JOE LOUIS TABS FRAZIER TO BEAT ALI ON MONDAY." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 04 1971, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Apr. 2018.

But, in analyzing the coverage surrounding the fight journalists often identified Frazier, as Louis did, by simply using Frazier's *first* name in stories and headlines. This goes against the Associated Press convention of, after using the full name on first mention, using the last name in stories. In the *Los Angeles Times* (WP), Charles Maher wrote a profile piece on Frazier headlined, "Right and Powerful." In it Maher said that Frazier was calm and composed in training camp:

Asked how he is holding up under all the noise coming from the other camp, Joe said very calmly: "I don't pay any attention to it. I think it's crazy anyway. . . . You see a crazy man go around and run his mouth off and everybody's standin' around lookin' at him and laughin' and listenin' at him talk his craziness. A man with sense got nothin' to say."<sup>493</sup> <sup>494</sup>

The familiar "Joe" is most evident in the front-page headline in the *Chicago Defender* (BP) the morning after the fight. The giant letters read, "JOE WINS!" With the exclamation point added, it appears the *Defender* was happy about the outcome. The giant photo shows Ali falling, the result of a Frazier left hook, during the fifteenth round of the fight. The headline could be compared - with regard to the excitement level it appeared to be attempting to arouse - to press announcements about V.E. or V.J. days at the end of World War II. This image (Figure 6) shows the entire front page from that day. The only normal sized text is the photo caption on the page. But what was the motivation by the press in choosing to use such familiarity with Frazier's name?

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<sup>493</sup> Maher, Charles. "Right and Powerful." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Feb 23 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Mar. 2018.

<sup>494</sup> Maher and Frazier were referring to Ali when they noted the noise from the other camp and the crazy man running his mouth off. As noted in chapter two, this was a common theme when referring to Ali. That is, he talked too much and needed someone to shut him up. In a review of a Frazier biography, Mark Bradley echoed what many said about Frazier, that he "let his fists do his talking." (Bradley, Mark. "CHAMPS LOUIS & FRAZIER: NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOES." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 31 July 1996, [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/07/31/champs-louis-frazier-not-your-average-joes/9939f07b-3f3b-485b-ade1-82c175db39e9/?utm\\_term=.59fc982f19b7](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/07/31/champs-louis-frazier-not-your-average-joes/9939f07b-3f3b-485b-ade1-82c175db39e9/?utm_term=.59fc982f19b7).) That is, while Frazier could not keep up with Ali rhetorically, he could shut him up with his fists. As Dave Anderson noted in the *New York Times*: "They're coming in the hope of seeing Frazier silence Ali after a decade of noise..." (By, DAVE A. "Frazier and Ali: Morality Drama Unfolds." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 2. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Mar. 2018.)





Figure 6

next Joe Louis.”<sup>496</sup> Robert Lipsyte recalled that many older reporters working at the time considered Joe Louis to be “their ideal of a sports figure.” Lipsyte said this was because: “Louis was respectful of the writers. He was, in their sense, the grateful negro who understood his place.”<sup>497</sup> Lipsyte noted that Ali, in the minds of many of the old reporters, “was breezy and sometimes disdainful.”<sup>498</sup> Or, as Dick Edwards wrote in the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP):

This is no rap on Joe, because he is just that, a good Joe, but when you tell it like it is, it’s Ali, who attracts the folks. Most of them come to see him get his head handed to his body on a silver platter because the Establishment is against him because in the not too far distant past he would have been “an uppity nigger”, whatever that is.<sup>499</sup>

<sup>495</sup> Gregory, Sean. “Joe Frazier, Former Heavyweight Boxing Champ, Dies at 67.” *Time*, Time Inc., 8 Nov. 2011, content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2098907,00.html.

<sup>496</sup> Reuters. “Joe Frazier, Ali’s Greatest Foe, Dies.” *U.S. News & World Report*, U.S. News & World Report, 8 Nov. 2011, 7:47 am, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2011/11/08/joe-frazier-alis-greatest-foe-dies.

<sup>497</sup> Lipsyte, Robert. Telephone interview conducted by Mederson. October 21, 2011.

<sup>498</sup> Lipsyte, 2011.

<sup>499</sup> Edwards, Dick. “The ‘Oracle’ Picks Muhammad in Six.” *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Mar 06 1971, p. 33. ProQuest. Web. 18 Apr. 2018.

With precision and without apology Edwards illustrates the polarization. Frazier is a “good Joe” while Ali is the “uppity nigger.” Perhaps this is why journalists often preferred referring to Frazier using the more familiar, Joe.

Consider also the nicknames and the usage of “Joe.” The Oxford Dictionary online defines “average Joe” as the ordinary or “everyman.”<sup>500</sup> Other examples of Joe as part of a phrase to indicate the everyman are: Regular Joe, Joe Lunchbucket and Joe Sixpack – or as Edwards said, “good Joe.” Writing about Frazier in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP) the day after the fight, Jim Murray said: “Joe Frazier comes to work, like a guy who brings his lunch in a pail, turns on the machine and doesn’t stop till the whistle blows.”<sup>501</sup> Perhaps the writers felt less intimidated by Frazier or maybe they just saw him as more likeable. In the HBO film (2000), reporter Jerry Izenberg said of Frazier: “He got into a gym, he trained, you pointed him in the direction and he went. That was it. He knew nothing about politics - nothing about gamesmanship.”<sup>502</sup>

Joe, the name, was one simple syllable. Joe, the man, was uncomplicated and apolitical at a time when politics was ever present. While the frame of Frazier as white did not appear regularly in the newspaper coverage of FOC3, there were a couple of examples in the white press in 1971. We see an example of this in a story in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP) headlined, “Main Street Joe,” which implicitly labels Frazier as white. The story, which focused on getting predictions about who would win the fight, used Frazier as an identifier. The writer, John Hall, said the best place to get astute predictions about the outcome of the fight was at the Main Street Gym. Hall surveys

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<sup>500</sup> “Average Joe | Definition of Average Joe in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries* | English, Oxford Dictionaries, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/average\_joe.

<sup>501</sup> “Feet of Clay.” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 09 1971, p. 2. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Apr. 2018.

<sup>502</sup> Levine (@ 00:23:55).

people in the boxing gym (there was no indication of the race of those surveyed), most of who refer to Ali as Clay. Fifteen people were questioned by the gym's proprietor who found that 12 were picking Frazier, with only three favoring Ali. In the last line Hall said: "Either way, Ali or Clay, who needs Broadway? Main St. belongs to Joe . . ." <sup>503</sup> Main Street is, of course, where regular people can be found; while Broadway is where one finds glitz and glamor. Frazier is a Main Street Joe. But in 1971, Main Street Joes, regular Joes, good Joes and Joe Lunchbuckets also tended to be white. A story in the *New York Times* (WP) touches on this idea that Frazier was seen as favored by whites while Ali was the favorite of blacks.

Another story that connects Frazier to the white power structure appeared in the *New York Times* (WP). Two days after the fight Arthur Daley, writing in the *Times*, talked about what fans said as they left the match at Madison Square Garden, the site of the live fight, and at the Harlem Armory, a CCTV location. In the text of his story Daley used the name, Ali, but tells readers some of what he had written in his handwritten personal notes on the fight. In his notes Daley used, Clay. Daley said black viewers saw Ali as "a black folk hero." Upon leaving the Armory disappointed black attendees were quoted; Daley wrote:

"Whitey won again," shouted one heartbroken watcher, angrily dismissing the Frazier victory as a pre-arranged coup by the Establishment. It matters not that Joe's skin is darker. Ali is their boy and he can do no wrong. <sup>504</sup>

There is a great deal in these few words. While the quote could, perhaps, be referring to the idea that Frazier was more representative of the white power structure, Daley frames it as an accusation of conspiracy by the black Ali fan that the fight was fixed by the white

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<sup>503</sup> "Main Street Joe." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 04 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Mar. 2018.

<sup>504</sup> By, ARTHUR D. "The Mirror Told a Distressing Tale." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Mar 10 1971, p. 49. *ProQuest*. Web. 18 Apr. 2018.

Establishment to favor Frazier. Daley used the word “boy” to describe Ali and Joe to identify Frazier. He also pointed out that black fans were wrong to consider Ali their “boy” since it was “Joe” who actually had the darker skin. Daley uses the level of blackness in the fighter’s skin tone to determine which fighter is, in his mind, actually “blacker.” The “who is blacker” element will be addressed later in this section. As shown above, while the press did not seem to have an issue with what to call Frazier, the HBO film did find fault with what Ali was calling Frazier; in particular, Ali’s use of one racially explosive name: Uncle Tom.

While Ali is seen calling Frazier an Uncle Tom in the film,<sup>505</sup> the press did not spend a great deal of ink on this in 1971. In the 85 stories about the fight that appeared in the *New York Times* (WP) results, the words “Uncle Tom” did not appear at all. In 79 stories in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), there were zero mentions. The *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) and the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP) did not address Ali’s use of Uncle Tom in their coverage of the fight either. *Los Angeles Times* (WP) staff writer Dan Hafner was at the Ali camp in Miami Beach and noted a reference to Frazier as “Uncle Tom” but it was from a fan at the camp and not Ali himself. Hafner said that Ali was “extremely confident” about beating Frazier when he addressed the fans at the camp. Hafner wrote of the fans: “One showed up at camp carrying the following banner: ‘Kill Uncle Tom Frazier.’” Hafner offered no comment on the poster.<sup>506</sup> In an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP) six days after the fight, Max Lerner, who contributed his political views to the *Times*, noted that it was Ali who had conjured the frame of racism into the fight. Lerner wrote:

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<sup>505</sup> Levine (@ 00:27:39).

<sup>506</sup> Hafner, Dan. "PUNCH LINES." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Feb 21 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Mar. 2018.

And Ali is welcome to keep that black-white “Uncle Tom” foolishness that he injected into the pre-fight war of nerves. He can have it. If it is possible to achieve color-blindness anywhere in our lives, it ought to be possible in boxing.<sup>507</sup>

As noted in chapter one, Gerald Early posited that many believe sport offers a balanced playing field when it comes to race. And while this is generally associated with the idea of black and white athletes competing against each other, in this case it is directed at the two black fighters competing in FOC3. Lerner appeared to be one of those believers when he injects his belief in “color-blindness” in the athletic arena. Lerner says the use of Uncle Tom by Ali was merely part of the pre-fight buildup. Several others, including Ali biographer Thomas Hauser, said Ali’s criticisms of fellow black fighters were merely a way to gain a “psychological advantage” over his opponent.<sup>508</sup> Biographer David Remnick said there was an “undertone of humor” in Ali’s taunts and shrugged off the comments as a ploy to market the fights. Remnick wrote:

In order to promote a fight and psych himself up, he would customarily gin up some sort of seriocomic animosity against his opponent and find a way to cast him as the dupe of the white establishment. The performances became ritual ...<sup>509</sup>

Larry Merchant, one of the original financial supporters of Joe Frazier,<sup>510</sup> said of the Tom comments, “I never took it seriously.” Merchant said that he did not believe Ali actually meant it.<sup>511</sup>

Consider that the cultural memory attaches the label of white to Frazier and black to Ali. But in the press at the time, quite the opposite appeared. That is, some writers in

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<sup>507</sup> Lerner, Max. “The Big Fight and the Public.” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 14 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 Mar. 2018.

<sup>508</sup> *Muhammad Ali, the Greatest: ESPN Sports Century*. Season 2, episode 42, @ 25:28, 19 Sept. 2000.

<sup>509</sup> *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero*, by David Remnick and Salman Rushdie, first ed., Random House, 1998, p. 272.

<sup>510</sup> Merchant was a member of Cloverlay, Inc., a group of Philadelphia businessmen who bought shares to support Frazier when he first turned professional in 1965. Merchant was a sports journalist at the time. He is best known, perhaps, as an on-air personality for HBO Sports.

<sup>511</sup> *The Fight of the Century: Ali vs. Frazier March 8, 1971*, by Michael Arkush, John Wiley & Sons, 2008, p. 152.

both the white and black press were trying to identify Frazier as the “blacker” of the two men as Daley did in the *New York Times* (WP) story quoted above. Another story that touched on the “who is blacker” theme appeared in the black press. In the *Chicago Defender* (BP) readers were told that both Ali *and* Frazier inserted the issue of race into the pre-fight war of words.

Even though it’s an all-black event, racial slurs have marred the buildup. Like Frazier calling Ali a ‘con’ (sic) “He’s no leader of black people,” Frazier spouted. “I’m blacker than he is.”... Ali has retorted by calling Frazier a ‘tom.’<sup>512</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* (WP) also presented Frazier as “blacker” in one story. Writer Dan Hafner said the two fighters have “contrasting styles” in their training regiment:

Frazier is training in a dingy gym in a South Philadelphia ghetto. ... He is living the quiet life in a small downtown Philadelphia motel. But in Miami Beach, Ali trains in a gym in an all-white neighborhood, lives in a luxurious hotel suite and clowns and jokes through his workouts.<sup>513</sup>

Hafner framed Frazier as “blacker” when he noted that he has embedded himself in the “ghetto.” Frazier is also living in a small *motel*. He then framed Ali as, not just less black, but more like the “white” man in the fight. Ali is not in a ghetto but training in a white neighborhood and, Hafner claimed, living in a luxurious Miami Beach *hotel suite*. But Ali’s training center was rundown as well. It was described as “a hot, sweat-stained, threadbare place, (where they) used to nail plywood to the floorboards rotted by termites.”<sup>514</sup> Ali was also not living in a “luxury hotel” but in an apartment in a Jewish retirement home in Miami.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> LEE D JENKINS Daily Defender, Sports Editor. "Frazier Choice to Whip Ali." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)* (1966-1973): 25. Mar 08 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

<sup>513</sup> Hafner, Dan. "PUNCH LINES." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Feb 21 1971, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 May 2018.

<sup>514</sup> Robertson, Linda. "On Day Ali Is Buried, Fans Pay Homage at New 5th Street Gym in Miami Beach." *Miami Herald*, 10 June 2016, 9:52 pm, [www.miamiherald.com/sports/fighting/article83149657.html](http://www.miamiherald.com/sports/fighting/article83149657.html).

<sup>515</sup> *The Fight of the Century: Ali vs. Frazier March 8, 1971*, by Michael Arkush, John Wiley & Sons, 2008, p. 151.

While the HBO film (2000) on a macro level framed Ali as black and Frazier, white, this attempt to prove which fighter was “blacker” was seen in the film as well. In the film Bryant Gumbel recalled, with regret, that at the time of the fight in 1971 he wrote a story calling Frazier a white champion in black skin.<sup>516</sup> Gumbel also said in the film in 2000, “In many ways Joe lived the African-American experience to a much truer extent than Ali did.”<sup>517</sup> But this comparison is rather misguided. Ali never proclaimed to be the “blacker” of the two men. Ali’s proclamations were that, through his religion and his political stands, he was representing the interests of all African-Americans in the United States at the time. Ali’s claim was, in fact, that Frazier’s political impotence favored the white power structure. That is, to Ali, Frazier’s silence on these issues spoke volumes. And Frazier’s use of the name Clay, for Ali, was the explicit proof to back this charge.

### **The contemporary film versus the contemporaneous coverage**

*For this sharp, fast-paced, fascinating program that had wide appeal even to non-boxing fans and put the “Fight of the Century” into a cogent historical context, a Peabody Award goes to Ali-Frazier I: One Nation...Divisible.*<sup>518</sup>

Christiane Amanpour, the 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Peabody Award ceremony

In his Peabody Awards acceptance speech, Joe Lavine, producer of “One Nation ... Divisible” said that he remembers listening to the live round-by-round re-cap of FOC3 on the radio the night of March 8, 1971. “What made it special is that it was more about society in their times than just a championship fight,”<sup>519</sup> Lavine said. Lavine’s film frames the fight as a metaphor for the battles over race, religion and politics in the United

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<sup>516</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:29:04).

<sup>517</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:23:40).

<sup>518</sup> “Ali-Frazier I: One Nation...Divisible.” *Peabody Awards*, accessed April 4, 2018. [www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/ali-frazier-1-one-nation...divisible](http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/ali-frazier-1-one-nation...divisible).

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*

States in that pivotal year. That is, the fight between Ali and Frazier was framed as a fight for this nation's divided soul.

According to the film, which first aired on HBO in 2000, conservative whites, that tended to be Christian and supported the Vietnam War, were in Frazier's corner. And, according to the film, African-Americans, along with anti-war protestors and civil rights activists, stood solidly behind Ali in this battle. As noted in the introduction, the first line that the audience hears from the film's narrator said the fight was "so much more about America than it was about boxing."<sup>520</sup> Prior to this line from the narrator, there was a series of quick sound bites from several people who would appear throughout the film; these included, "It became bigger than life," and, "This was the Crusades. Patriotic America versus radical America." Writer Stanley Crouch said, "Here's this collision between the black militant and the black Tom. Who's gonna win?" It was at this point that Hauser noted that it was not just Americans who were interested in this fight but:

On March 8, 1971, the eyes of the *world* were focused on a small square of illuminated canvas. Whatever you did, whoever (sic) you were - that night - that's where you wanted to be (emphasis added).<sup>521</sup>

So viewers are told in the first minutes of the film that this fight represented a battle for the soul of the nation that was "bigger than life," more like an American "Crusades," between a militant and a "Tom," and was the focus of people all over the globe. But what did the newspapers present as salient for this fight? Was this same division over race, politics and religion overtly evident in the black and white newspaper coverage of the fight? The film made claims that the fight was bigger than simply a sporting event. In

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<sup>520</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:46:35).

<sup>521</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:01:28).



addition to sports stories about the fight, did the press present the fight and/or the fighters in other stories within the pages of the newspapers beyond the sports section?

If we see the film as representative of the cultural memory, one aspect of the production of this film should make it more similar to what the contemporaneous newspapers were saying about the fight and the fighters in 1971. The writer for “One Nation ... Divisible” was Dave Anderson. Anderson, who worked for the *New York Times* (WP) as a columnist in 1971, wrote several of the stories that were analyzed in this chapter. It is likely that Anderson wrote the words read by Liv Schreiber, whose voice is heard throughout the film.

By the time this film was produced in 2000, Muhammad Ali, who suffered from Parkinson’s disease, was no longer speaking on camera for television interviews. Ed Bradley tried to get Ali to do a sit down interview with him for *60 Minutes* four years earlier. Ali had apparently agreed to be interviewed but changed his mind once Bradley and the television production crew arrived. In his voice-over for the story, Bradley said:

Today it is increasingly difficult for him to talk. There is a constant shaking of his hands, rigid walk, sometimes a vacant stare. Still, people tend to dismiss his physical limitations and are respectful of the sometimes-awkward silence their questions receive.<sup>522</sup>

This means that Ali could not speak for himself to comment about any of the criticisms leveled at him in the film. And the criticisms were plentiful. Frazier, on the other hand, *was* interviewed for the film. Perhaps this was one reason why, nearly from the start, the film seemed to favor Frazier in the recollection of the lead up to the fight, the fight itself, and the fighters. Frazier was able to tell his side of the story of the fight while Ali could not.

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<sup>522</sup> Bradley, Ed. “1996: 60 Minutes Profiles Muhammad Ali.” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 17 June 2016, [www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-muhammad-ali-ed-bradley/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-muhammad-ali-ed-bradley/).

Just over two minutes into the film, viewers hear Schreiber's deep voice say: "To understand March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1971, you had to know who these fighters were (pause) *and* where they came from."<sup>523</sup> At this point, both fighters' early lives are presented. Muhammad Ali, viewers are told, was brought up in a comfortable middle class family with aunts who were teachers. Frazier, on the other hand, viewers are told "was as different from Ali as night and day."<sup>524</sup> Frazier is from "the hunger capital of America" and was the son of a sharecropper. His young working life in the fields is described in a way that makes him appear to have been living the life of a slave.

He would arrive in the morning a little after dawn and he'd say, "Morning boss." And the boss would say, "To the mule." And the day would end and he would say, "Quittin' time boss." And the boss would say, "In the morning."<sup>525</sup>

A picture was being painted for viewers to see Frazier as a hard worker whose family struggled to make a living in an area rife with hunger, while Ali had a relatively easy middle class upbringing. Ali is then shown winning an Olympic gold medal in Rome. Ali is seen smiling coming off a plane, in his hometown of Louisville, with the gold medal around his neck and a welcoming crowd around him. Viewers are *not* informed of the story about what happened next.

Upon his return to Louisville, Ali did receive a hero's welcome at the airport and, with the gold still draped around his neck, was honored by his hometown with a parade.<sup>526</sup> A week later he convinced two friends to join him at a Louisville restaurant where he wanted to treat them to lunch. Ali believed that the gold medal would be his ticket in to the whites-only lunch counter. Upon ordering a cheeseburger and a Dr. Pepper

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<sup>523</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:02:03).

<sup>524</sup> Levine, (at 0:02:10).

<sup>525</sup> Levine, (at 0:02:20).

<sup>526</sup> Wilson, Stan. "Muhammad Ali Returns to the Olympic Stage, Once Again, in London." *CNN*. Turner Broadcasting, 28 July 2012. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.

the gum-chewing waitress said, “We don’t serve coloreds.” A dejected Ali and his friends were told to leave the restaurant.<sup>527</sup> After being praised publicly as a hero upon his triumphant return to Louisville it must have felt as if he had been punched in the face when he was then refused a meal in his own hometown. Some believe that it was at this moment that the seeds for his eventual social and political activism had been planted.<sup>528</sup> But viewers of the film are not told about this key moment of racism against Ali that might yield sympathy toward Ali from viewers. Instead, Ali is seen as easily moving from Olympic champion to professional and then to the heavyweight champion. And they see this ease compared to the economic and professional struggles, viewers are told, that Frazier had endured.

Viewers are then told the popular new champion, changed. Schreiber said: “But now that he was the champ he suddenly announced that he was a Black Muslim.”<sup>529</sup> This use of “Black” Muslim was a misnomer by the man who wrote the voice-over script for the 2000 film, Dave Anderson. As noted above, Anderson also wrote for the *New York Times* (WP) and covered the fight. He used the phrase in 1971 in the *Times* as well.<sup>530</sup> Ali did not like it when black was added to Muslim and often pointed this out to journalists. According to author Thomas Hauser, “Black Muslims is a press word. It’s not a legitimate name.”<sup>531</sup> In an ITN television interview in March 1967, a reporter asked Ali, “Are the Black Muslims taking you for a ride?” Ali corrected the reporter, “I said not

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<sup>527</sup> Holland, Jeffrey Scott., Mark Scurman, and Mark Moran. *Weird Kentucky: Your Travel Guide to Kentucky's Local Legends and Best Kept Secrets*. New York: Sterling Pub., 2008. 42. Print.

<sup>528</sup> Zirin, Dave. *What's My Name, Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2005. 58-59. Print.

<sup>529</sup> Levine, (at 0:04:20).

<sup>530</sup> By, DAVE A. "Frazier and Ali: Morality Drama Unfolds." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 2. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Mar. 2018.

<sup>531</sup> Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1991), 82.

Black Muslims, Muslims.”<sup>532</sup> By the time of the making of the film in 2000, Anderson should have been well aware when he wrote this script that Black Muslim was a misnomer. And the audience heard Black Muslim while they saw images of Elijah Muhammad speaking to a large crowd of followers. The only words from the speech from Elijah Muhammad the audience of the film would hear were: “I challenge the white man with being the greatest liar on Earth.” This was immediately followed by a brief video of news anchor Mike Wallace looking into the camera and speaking on network television. The black and white image is from a show called *Newsbeat* in 1959.<sup>533</sup> In the clip in the HBO film Wallace said: “A group of negro dissenters is taking to street corner steppladders across the United States to preach a gospel of hate.”<sup>534</sup>

Frazier was also shown in the film as having worked his way up as an amateur, peaking when he qualified to join the U.S. boxing team for the Olympics. Viewers are cued to be sympathetic to Frazier when the voice-over noted, “even with a dislocated thumb, Joe Frazier won the Olympic heavyweight gold medal at Tokyo in 1964.”<sup>535</sup> Viewers are told that this was four years after Ali won an Olympic medal, “but when Joe returned to Philadelphia, that gold medal did not pay the bills.” After just hearing that Ali was able to parlay his medal into a lucrative professional career, viewers are told about Frazier’s post-Olympic hardships.

Unlike Ali, Frazier could not begin a professional boxing career due to the thumb injury. Without a source of income viewers are told, “Joe Frazier came home from the

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<sup>532</sup> ITN Reporting '67: No. 18: Item 2, *Cassius Clay v Draft Board*, March 5, 1967, You Tube video, 4:08, posted by: MuhammadAliTV, June 7, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUmHAKtuu-8>.

<sup>533</sup> “How Mike Wallace Introduced Malcolm X to America.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, [www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/how-mike-wallace-introduced-malcolm-x-to-america/2015/02/19/4905e478-b88d-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a\\_video.html?utm\\_term=.a361ac22a643](http://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/how-mike-wallace-introduced-malcolm-x-to-america/2015/02/19/4905e478-b88d-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a_video.html?utm_term=.a361ac22a643).

<sup>534</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:04:30).

<sup>535</sup> Levine, (at 0:05:24).

Olympics with a busted thumb and a busted bankroll.”<sup>536</sup> The injury required surgery and a long recovery before he could begin to earn a living. As viewers see, Frazier was married and had children. Then, the film continued the story of Frazier’s hardship.

*Philadelphia Daily News* (WP) columnist Stan Hochman remembers what happened next. Hochman recalls that he was on a radio show when he asked listeners to “contribute toys for Joe’s kids.”<sup>537</sup> Over a picture of Frazier, his wife and their three kids standing in front of a Christmas tree smiling, Frazier tells viewers that people from all around the world sent gifts and money to him and his family. It is reminiscent of many a heartwarming Christmas story where money and gifts pour in at the last minute. In this story it was to save Joe Frazier and his family’s celebration of the biggest Christian holiday of the year. Again, this story followed Ali’s post Olympic path to the “Black” Muslims. The juxtaposition is quite obvious. Just prior to Frazier’s Christmas story of love, viewers are told that Ali followed a religion that renowned television journalist Mike Wallace said preaches hate.

Frazier is then presented in the film as more in the image of Joe Louis. As noted in chapter four, Louis was told explicitly as he rose through the ranks of professional boxing to present himself in a manner that would be less threatening to white America. The voice over in the HBO film referred to this and sports journalist Jerry Izenberg affirmed it:

*VO*: For the anti-Ali voices, Joe Frazier was a throwback to another era.  
*Izenberg*: Frazier was, was out of the Joe Louis mold - was always very obliging (heard over images of Frazier signing autographs). Always smiled. ...The other guy was a whole revolution.<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Levine, (at 0:05:43).

<sup>537</sup> Levine, (at 0:05:53).

<sup>538</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:11:42).

Viewers of the film are told that Frazier is more like the affable Louis and Ali is such a threat that he is likened to “a whole revolution” in one black body. That revolution came, in part, because of Ali’s refusal to serve in the Vietnam War. In the film Frazier is seen in 2000 saying that he was disappointed when Ali was stripped of his title and license to fight but, “We know the rules and regulations of our land and if he didn’t fulfill it, well therefore, whatever the consequence that he had to pay and that was his thing (sic).” The inference from Frazier is that he follows the Establishment’s rules while Ali does not. Ali’s refusal led to his exile from boxing.

Frazier was continually presented in a sympathetic light in the film. For example, in the years when Ali was not allowed to box, the film noted that he struggled financially. According to the film, it was Frazier who came to his rescue - both financially and career-wise. The film claimed that Frazier was on Ali’s side. Not for his stance against the war but in his effort to return to boxing. A member of Frazier’s team in 1971, Butch Lewis was interviewed for the film in 2000. He said:

Joe himself felt that which had happened to Ali was unfair. And he said this to Ali, eyeball to eyeball. Whatever it takes for me to lend my support to you and getting licensed again, I’ll be there for you.<sup>539</sup>

Then, the film noted, Frazier even went to Washington, D.C. to lobby on Ali’s behalf. But this lobbying was not based on Ali’s federal prosecution for refusing to serve in the war, but to help him return to boxing. What the film did not say is that once Ali could be licensed to fight again, Frazier could face Ali in the ring and earn a big payday. As writer Dave Wolf said, “Joe wanted Ali back in the ring, because Joe wanted universal acceptance as the best in the world, and he knew that couldn’t happen until he’d beaten

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<sup>539</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:12:36).

Ali.”<sup>540</sup> Frazier’s “benevolence” in working to get Ali licensed to fight again served him as much as Ali.

In addition to working to help get Ali licensed, viewers of the film are told that Frazier was also willing to help Ali financially. After noting that Ali had asked a reporter for \$100 to do an interview, the film said that Frazier “put some love in his hand.”<sup>541</sup> The “love” was, according to Butch Lewis, “a couple-a-thousand dollars.” The story continues with Ali accepting the cash in Frazier’s limo. But upon exiting the car, Ali then immediately shouted to a crowd of bystanders that Frazier had Ali’s title. Again, the film presented a generous Frazier versus an ungrateful Ali.

Several other moments in the film seemed to support a frame that identified Frazier as the choice of white America with Ali favored by black America. For example, after noting that Ali’s first fight back after the exile was going to be in Atlanta, Georgia, viewers see and hear Martin Luther King, Jr.’s widow, Coretta, thanking Ali for being a “champion of justice and peace.”<sup>542</sup> This is immediately followed by the images and voices of several white Georgians who were against letting Ali fight in their state including the openly racist Lester Maddox.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Bryant Gumbel recalled associating Frazier’s use of the name Clay as siding with the racists and bigots and rhetorically asking Frazier, “Hey, who you siding with here?”<sup>543</sup> In a contemporary interview for the film, Alvin Cooperman, who worked with Madison Square Garden at the time of the fight, said, “The

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<sup>540</sup> Wolf, Dave. *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, by Thomas Hauser, Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 217.

<sup>541</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:14:07).

<sup>542</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:18:05).

<sup>543</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:23:25).

polarization of political attitudes began to cloak the fighters in those opinions.”<sup>544</sup> This is immediately followed by a comment from an unidentified white man who said, “This fella they call Clay, or Muhammad Ali, whatever it is he wants to call himself, is a disgrace to the nation.” After hearing another interviewee say that Frazier was seen as the “anti-Ali,” Bryant Gumbel said of Frazier, “He was one of them and Ali was one of us.”<sup>545</sup> While Gumbel may not have meant to say it explicitly, at this point viewers were seeing Frazier as the favorite of whites and Ali the favorite of blacks. But what did the white and black press say about this at the time? This leads to the second research question.

RQ2: Analyzing the coverage by the three white newspapers and the three black newspapers, did press coverage in 1971 match the cultural memory? That is, did press coverage show that African-Americans were overwhelmingly favoring Ali and whites Frazier in the fight?

It has been written and said that when Ali, shaking from Parkinson’s disease, made a surprise appearance to light the Olympic flame in Atlanta in 1996, he had come full circle – from hated to beloved. Recalling the moment, writer Idy Uyaoe said: “... a man who placed conviction and belief ahead of career and popularity, had returned home to the embrace of his most ardent adversaries.”<sup>546</sup> Sportscaster Bob Costas recalled that event in 2016. He said, “Every time I think about that moment I get goose bumps.”<sup>547</sup> But this film, produced just four years later, tended to frame Frazier in a better light than it did Ali.

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<sup>544</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:31:40).

<sup>545</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:32:25).

<sup>546</sup> Uyoe, Idy. “Muhammad Ali -- The Greatest Olympian.” *Around the Rings - Welcome Home!*, 15 June 2016, [aroundtherings.com/site/A\\_\\_56171/Title\\_\\_Muhammad-Ali---The-Greatest-Olympian/292/Articles](http://aroundtherings.com/site/A__56171/Title__Muhammad-Ali---The-Greatest-Olympian/292/Articles).

<sup>547</sup> Feherty. “Bob Costas on Muhammad Ali Lighting Olympic Torch.” *Golf Channel*, NBC Sports, 13 Aug. 2016, [www.golfchannel.com/video/costas-feherty-greatest-olympic-moment/](http://www.golfchannel.com/video/costas-feherty-greatest-olympic-moment/).



How did the newspaper coverage of the fight in 1971 compare to the film, which was produced in 2000? While the film set up both fighters as having led dramatically different lives, what did the print media focus on in the lead up to the fight? How was each fighter presented on the pages of the black and white newspapers?

*The Newspaper Coverage*

*In part, people are apt to complain about the high pay of athletes because they have long accepted the romantic, upper-class idea that money corrupts sports and that athletes ought to be inspired by the love of their sport and the spirit of competition and not driven by money, as if high-performance athletics was just another form of work.*<sup>548</sup>

Professor Gerald Early

Patrick Washburn said the white press and their white reporters were having a difficult time trying to relate to black readers in the 1960s. In order to help they began hiring black reporters. This meant that some of the best and brightest newly graduated black journalism students were opting for better pay and more opportunity at the white-owned papers, which created additional problems for the black papers.<sup>549</sup> The daily white papers were also beating the weekly black papers on civil rights coverage.<sup>550</sup> But at the start of the next decade, at the time of FOC3, the black press was experiencing a slight resurgence:

From 1971 to 1974, the number of black papers increased by thirty to more than 200 in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia, and the overall circulation went up 600,000 to 1.4 million.<sup>551</sup>

Therefore, at the time of the fight, the black press was certainly relevant. But with more white newspapers snatching up newly graduated black journalism students, this meant

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<sup>548</sup> *A Level Playing Field African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, by Gerald Early, Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 9–10.

<sup>549</sup> *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, by Patrick Scott. Washburn, Northwestern University Press, 2006, pp. 191–192.

<sup>550</sup> Washburn, 2006, p. 194.

<sup>551</sup> Washburn, 2006, p. 202.

that many of the black writers who remained at papers like the *Defender*, the *Courier* and the *Amsterdam News* tended to skew older and more conservative.<sup>552</sup> But this more conservative message, now appearing on the pages of the black press, may have had more to do with economics than the age of the journalists. This conservatism, Washburn said:

... was largely intentional because black publishers faced a dilemma unlike any they had every faced before. The Columbia Journalism Review stated it succinctly in 1970: "It [the black press] finds itself trying not to be too conservative for the black revolutionaries, and not too revolutionary for white conservatives upon whom it depends for advertising."<sup>553</sup>

So, how did the black press present the battle between Ali and Frazier? Remember in the first chapter of this dissertation, Washburn said the black papers were often "outspoken and blunt advocates for blacks."<sup>554</sup> But did the black writers choose sides based on this depiction of the fight? In the ink and pulp of these publications, did black journalists choose sides when it was one black man versus another? And did the white press side mostly with Frazier? The film calls Frazier the favorite of the Establishment. With the battle for civil rights in full swing in 1971, we can assume that most black Americans did not think favorably of Establishment ways. Do we find this overtly expressed in the black press coverage? This leads to the next research question:

RQ3: Based on the analysis, how did the black press present the fight and the fighters? Did the majority of the text in the black press openly favor Muhammad Ali over Joe Frazier based on the fact that Ali was an outspoken supporter of civil rights while Frazier was not?

Unlike the coverage of FOC1 and FOC2, by the time of FOC3 television news and sports had become a big competitor for the print newspapers. While this research is not looking

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>554</sup> Washburn, p. 6.

at TV coverage, the film (2000) and the newspapers (1971) did discuss this aspect of the fight.

By 1971 broadcast television had become a big player when it came to national media habits in homes across America. In fact, a story in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP) the weekend before the Monday fight wrote about the extensive TV coverage of the event:

And we have television dutifully reporting, analyzing and building up Monday's closed-circuit fight like it actually *is* the biggest thing to happen on the planet earth. No less than six Frazier-Ali specials will occupy the schedule over the weekend, dwarfing the spring start of baseball, the Lakers, hockey and, yes, even golf.<sup>555</sup>

But this change in technology did not seem to significantly skew the amount of coverage by the newspapers when compared to the previous two fights. The total number of stories analyzed in the black and white newspapers in the five weeks surrounding the Johnson-Jeffries fight was 513; for the Louis-Schmeling fight – 347, and for Ali-Frazier - 366. So while there was most certainly plenty of television hype for the match, this did not seem to deter the printed press from adequately covering the fight as well.

As was done in chapters three and four and FOC1 and FOC2, this chapter looks at newspaper coverage in the five-week period surrounding the Ali vs. Frazier fight on March 8, 1971. To reiterate, the focus of this dissertation is to compare how the contemporaneous newspaper coverage of each fight compared to contemporary media representations of the fights – the cultural memory - mainly through documentary films about the fighters, or in this case a film that focused solely on the fight.

One area that differed in the coverage compared to the 1910 and 1938 bouts was that both Frazier and Ali held their camps in cities that were a fair distance from New

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<sup>555</sup> Page, Don. "Frazier, Ali before the Circuit Closes." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 06 1971, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Apr. 2018.

York City and Madison Square Garden, the fight venue. Joe Frazier had begun his training in the Catskills but due to a lot of snow (which slowed his morning runs) he decided to go home to Philadelphia to train.<sup>556</sup> Ali's camp was in Miami Beach, where his trainer Angelo Dundee had a boxing gym. Some in the press noted this was a problem in the build up for the event but did not really offer an explanation why the disparate locations of the camps created a problem in covering the fight preparation. In fact, in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), Robert Markus wrote an entire column about covering Frazier's training. Markus noted how easy it was to get to the gym where Frazier worked from the hotel where Markus was staying in Philadelphia.<sup>557</sup> Unlike the fights in 1910 and 1938, there was no daily reporting in any of the papers about how each fighter's training was progressing.

According to *New York Times* (WP) columnist Arthur Daley, covering big fights 50 years ago was *easier* because the fighters set their camps near the venue where the fight was to take place. Remember in 1910 both Johnson and Jeffries were training in, or near, Reno, Nevada. Daley noted:

This was an era when boxing writers lived at camp with the fighters for a month in advance, dashing off yards of imperishable literature each day as accomplished operators of the ballyhoo machine.<sup>558</sup>

What Daley fails to mention is that writers had to travel to get to the training camps, like Reno, and he could easily have flown to Florida or Pennsylvania with a typewriter to give daily reports on how each fighter was developing. And while it would require a writer in Philadelphia *and* Miami Beach to cover both camps, if we look back at coverage of the

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<sup>556</sup> By MICHAEL STRAUSS, Special to The New York Times. "Frazier Shifts to Escape Snow." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 46. Feb 09 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Feb. 2018.

<sup>557</sup> Markus, Robert. "Along the Sports Trail." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*, Mar 02 1971, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Apr. 2018.

<sup>558</sup> By, ARTHUR D. "The Muted Role of the Ballyhoo Drums." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 49. Mar 03 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Mar. 2018.

first two fights of the century, there were usually at least two writers; one embedded in each camp. The main beef that Daley offered in his column was that, because tickets for the fight at Madison Square Garden sold out so quickly, no promotion was really necessary. That is, there was no motivation for the event promoter to woo the journalists to come to Philadelphia and Miami.

It actually seems as if Daley was more concerned that promoters were not openly courting the writers than he was about access to the camps. There was certainly no reason he could not have travelled to cover either one of the camps in person. By 1971, jet travel had become quite common. Daley could have easily driven to Philadelphia or taken a flight to Miami Beach from New York City in a matter of hours. Compare that to writers from the *New York Times* who had to travel by train clear across the continent to get to Reno to cover the camps of Johnson and Jeffries in 1910; the “era” Daley waxed nostalgically about in the quote above.

### *CCTV and the fight*

One of the aspects of FOC3 that Arthur Daley, and other writers, disliked was the fact that the fight was being shown on closed-circuit television (CCTV) at venues around the country (as well as on free television around the world). This meant more revenue because U.S. viewers would have to buy tickets to watch the telecast at the venues, rather than in their homes on network television for free. Daley wrote:

Once upon a time the live gate was the only concern of boxing’s propaganda ministers. But since theater television [CCTV] became the tail wagging the dog, the system has changed.<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> By, ARTHUR D. "The Muted Role of the Ballyhoo Drums." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Mar 03 1971, p. 49. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 May 2018.

In the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), Robert Markus agreed with Daley. Markus wrote that the fighters are not motivated to promote the fight because they are already guaranteed \$2.5 million. He said that since the live gate is sold out, there is no need for Madison Square Garden to promote. Markus continued: "That leaves the promoters of the closed circuit telecast, the guys who put up most of the money. Nobody seems to be paying too much attention to them."<sup>560</sup>

While the option to watch movies and sporting events on a pay to view basis at home is common today, in 1971, in order to view the match outside of the actual live fight venue, large screens and video projectors were set up at facilities that could accommodate the tall screens and large crowds. It was estimated that 350 locations would be staged across the U.S. to show the Ali-Frazier fight.<sup>561</sup>

The HBO film barely mentioned the closed circuit television-viewing element of the match,<sup>562</sup> an element about which journalists at the time, as we will see, had a lot to say. Each fighter was guaranteed \$2.5 million for the match before any tickets had been sold and regardless of how many CCTV tickets were sold, since the fighters were not promised a cut of that revenue. As big as this fight was, a share of the ticket sales at the live venue was simply not enough to lure the fighters into the ring.

Ticket prices at the Garden ran as high as \$150 for a single ringside seat. The man in charge of setting ticket prices at the Garden, Harry Markson, said that while this price was higher than usual he still considered it a bargain for a ringside seat to a fight of this

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<sup>560</sup> Markus, Robert. "Along the Sports Trail." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*: 1. Mar 01 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Mar. 2018.

<sup>561</sup> By, WILLIAM N. "Worldwide Televising of Fight is the Biggest Item in a \$25-Million Gamble." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Mar. 2018.

<sup>562</sup> In the film, mentions of the CCTV aspect of the fight were brief. The first mention of Perenchio and Cooke as promoters came at 19:30. The two were mentioned in the context of guaranteeing the two fighters \$2.5 million each. While ticket prices for the live fight at Madison Square Garden were mentioned at this point, there was no mention of CCTV. At 29:30 the CCTV is mentioned briefly but only to say that Burt Lancaster had been selected as one of the CCTV ringside fight announcers. There was a brief mention at 34:30, which noted that tickets to CCTV were \$30, the highest for any fight, and it was noted that they were, for the most part, sold out.

magnitude.<sup>563</sup> Using an inflation calculator, this same ticket would cost about \$1,000 in 2019.<sup>564</sup> Even with \$150 ringside tickets, the actual live event gate only totaled \$1.25 million.<sup>565</sup> This was nowhere near the amount needed to pay the two fighters and a profit for the venue.

As noted in chapter three, in 1910, promoter Tex Rickard took a huge chance by putting up the cash needed to entice Jim Jeffries to come out of retirement and face Jack Johnson in the ring in Reno, Nevada. Rickard was relying, in part, on the financial gain from the fight's film that could be copied and shown around the globe. A similar risk was taken to lure Ali and Frazier into a ring in 1971. The reason that the purse for the two fighters totaled \$5 million was because Jerry Perenchio and Jack Kent Cooke had gambled on moving images of this fight as well. But this time, fans could witness the fight live on big screens at remote locations around the United States. It was estimated that the two had invested \$25 million to present the closed circuit telecast around the nation.<sup>566</sup> A \$25 million gamble on a CCTV financial windfall from the match - a windfall that was projected to net them as much as \$20 million in profit.<sup>567</sup>

But writers like Daley were not happy about this new model for financially supporting a sporting event; even one as big as a heavyweight championship that matched two undefeated heavyweights like Ali and Frazier. Perhaps one of the reasons Daley was concerned about a CCTV sports revolution was because of a story that appeared in his paper about a Spanish bullfighter. Manuel "El Cordobes" Benitez was in

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<sup>563</sup> By, DAVE A. "Ticket Shortage has Markson Ducking." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Feb 14 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Feb. 2018.

<sup>564</sup> "US Inflation Calculator." *US Inflation Calculator*, Coin News Media Group, [www.usinflationcalculator.com/](http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/).

<sup>565</sup> By, DAVE A. "Frazier and Ali: Morality Drama Unfolds." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 2. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 Apr. 2018.

<sup>566</sup> Anderson, 1971

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*

New York to finalize a CCTV telecast of one of his upcoming bullfights that would be presented live from Spain in 100 locations around the globe, including Madison Square Garden. As part of the promotion for the bullfight telecast, Benitez was going to be attending the Ali-Frazier fight.

The use of closed-circuit television to present boxing matches was nothing new. Boxing was one of the first sports to take advantage of this technology with the first CCTV fight on June 15, 1951 when Joe Louis fought Lee Savold.<sup>568</sup> But it seemed that the scale of the Ali-Frazier fight made the fact that it was not going to be available on broadcast television in homes for free made this different. And the journalists at the time were, for the most part, not very happy. In the *New York Times* (WP), Jack Gould was concerned that CCTV was going to make sports events, like the fight, financially out of reach for people who could not afford the high price of tickets rather than being able to watch for free at home. Gould wrote:

The TV medium once opened to all, regardless of station, is becoming a restricted instrument and the fight may be the handwriting on the wall for the future of much entertainment and big sports.<sup>569</sup>

Gould also complained that the full live fight would not be available on radio either, only round-by-round recaps after each round had ended.

Writing in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP) two weeks before the fight, John Hall seemed skeptical about how successful the CCTV ticket sales were going to be. Hall wrote:

As the saying goes, there are still good tickets available for the Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight telecast at the Forum—35 days AFTER Jack Cooke predicted they would be sold out on the first weekend of public sale.<sup>570</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> *The Fight of the Century: Ali vs. Frazier March 8, 1971*, by Michael Arkush, Wiley & Sons, 2008, p. 105.

<sup>569</sup> By, JACK G. "The Fight: TV Fan Counted Out." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 67. Mar 08 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Mar. 2018.



Another story in the *Los Angeles Times* that appeared after the fight also complained about the price of a ticket to the CCTV, noting that the price to simply watch the fight on a screen “was more than one pays for a live seat to the World Series or Super Bowl ...” The writer, John Hall, noted that “some promoters are greedier than others”, but Hall seemed to also fault the fans who were willing to *buy* tickets when he said that the public has the power to choose, or not, to pay the high prices.<sup>571</sup>

As noted by Early in the quote at the top of this section, the high pay of athletes is often blamed for corrupting athletics. Early said in 2011 that some believe “athletes ought to be inspired by the love of their sport and the spirit of competition and not driven by money.”<sup>572</sup> Perhaps some of the journalists felt this way about the fighters in 1971. Nearly a month before the fight Robert Markus, writing for the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), seemed to be blaming Ali and Frazier for the high cost of CCTV tickets. Markus wrote that, the purse of \$5 million for this fight equated to more money “than Joe Louis earned in his entire career.” Markus continued: “To pay this huge guarantee ... promoters Jack Kent Cooke and Jerry Perenchio are determined to extract every loose nickel from the pockets of the sporting public.”<sup>573</sup> Fellow *Tribune* writer David Condon complained that the CCTV promoters “tried to squeeze so much blood from a turnip that there is talk of auctioning off Frazier’s fashionable shorts.” Condon wrote Cooke and Perenchio, the CCTV promoters, had “victimized the public.”<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> Hall, John. "It must be Spring." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Feb 22 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Mar. 2018.

<sup>571</sup> "Cost of Cheers." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 15 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 Mar. 2018.

<sup>572</sup> *A Level Playing Field African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, by Gerald Early, Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 9–10.

<sup>573</sup> Markus, Robert. "Along the Sports Trail." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*, Feb 10 1971, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 May 2018.

<sup>574</sup> Condon, David. "In the Wake of the News." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*: 1. Mar 11 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

Prior to the fight, in the *New York Times* (WP), William N. Wallace let readers know that the fight could be seen on home television in Thailand where viewers will hear the fight announcer, Don Dunphy's, call translated into "lao lao mue."<sup>575</sup> David Gould, in the *Times*, also complained that the fight could not be viewed at home for free in the U.S. Gould wrote, "Who cares about 148 million freeloaders? Only the 2 million with cash in hand warrant tender-loving care."<sup>576</sup>

While the white press was complaining about the huge payoff to the fighters and the cost of a CCTV ticket, the black press saw it differently. In the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP), Ted Carroll wrote that the huge purse for the fighters was well worth it:

Five million dollars!

Two heavyweight fighters, Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, will become the highest paid human beings in history for approximately an hours (sic) work ... In view of what the bout is expected to realize financially throughout the world, they are not being overpaid.<sup>577</sup>

While the cultural memory indicates that Frazier was not supported by many in the black community, the black press was cheering both fighters for scoring a huge financial windfall for FOC3. While Carroll saw the worth in the two African-American fighters, many in the black press were concerned about who was ultimately benefitting from the work of the two men. Again, while the cultural memory has framed the fight as racial between Ali and Frazier, here the black press is seeing racial divisions in the *economics* surrounding the fight, not the fighters. In particular, problems resulting from the two white men who were raking in the dollars from the high cost of the CCTV tickets.

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<sup>575</sup> By, WILLIAM N. "Fans Abroad Will Hear Bout in Native Tongues." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 47. Mar 08 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Mar. 2018.

<sup>576</sup> By, JACK G. "The Fight: TV Fan Counted Out." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 67. Mar 08 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Mar. 2018.

<sup>577</sup> Carroll, Ted. "Boxers to make History." *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Mar 06 1971, p. 32. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 May 2018.

In the *Chicago Defender* (WP), Norman Unger wrote a three-part series that detailed “the conflict surrounding the promotional aspects of the March 8 heavyweight championship fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier.”<sup>578</sup> The controversy was over the lack of inclusion of black businesses in the CCTV financials for the fight. The Philadelphia chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference accused the whites profiting from the CCTV promotion of initiating “a format which has been geared to directly rape the black community of its assets, growth potential and spirit.” The first story in the series ended by saying, “very few black supporters of boxing will have the opportunity to see or promote in what has been considered by many as the greatest fight of the century.”<sup>579</sup>

The *Defender* (BP) reported on the white promoter’s response to the controversy two weeks later. CCTV promoter Jerry Perenchio could not understand why African-Americans were concerned over white ownership of the event.

“It seems off to me,” said Perenchio, “that here we have two black fighters, each guaranteed \$2.5 million in the biggest payday in history, and yet because our organization is not black-owned and operated, we have received threats of boycotts planned for the night of the fight.”<sup>580</sup>

Perenchio did not seem to understand that black entrepreneurs would like a stake in an event that featured two black men and a large number of black spectators. Simply compensating the two black participants, both of whom were already financially well off, was not enough. The complaints against Perenchio and Cooke also charged that black entrepreneurs were not getting the opportunity to set up more CCTV locations in places

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<sup>578</sup> Unger, Norman O. "TV Title Bout Deals Stir Controversies." *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1966-1973)*: 1. Feb 20 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

<sup>579</sup> Unger, Norman O. "TV Title Bout Deals Stir Controversies." *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1966-1973)*: 1. Feb 20 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

<sup>580</sup> Unger, Norman O. "Ali-Frazier Bout has it's Troubles." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 24. Feb 15 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

like historically black colleges. Complainants also asked that tickets in the few black neighborhoods where the fight was being shown should offer lower ticket prices.<sup>581</sup>

In the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP), a weekly, 11 stories appeared in the search result in the month before the fight. Out of those, five talked about the CCTV. Like the *Defender*, the *Courier* focused on the fact that blacks were not benefitting financially from the CCTV dollars that were expected to come from the ticket sales. The first story in the *Courier* search results, a column by Bill Nunn, noted that a lot of people have been “turned off” by what was happening with the CCTV.<sup>582</sup> A second story about CCTV appeared the same day and on the same page in the *Courier*. It reported on a suit filed against Perenchio and Cooke. In addition, the suit named two black businessmen, labeled “black Benedict Arnolds” in the story, who had “conspired to grab promotional and closed-circuit rights” to the fight.<sup>583</sup> The story, six columns wide, covered a lot of space on page 16 of the *Courier*. Three black promoters were named as the plaintiffs in the suit. The in-depth *Courier* story said the suit noted that, in fact, black promoters had outbid the Perenchio and Cooke by \$200,000. The piece ended with a call for a possible boycott of the fight by blacks.

The call for a boycott grew louder five days later when the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) reported that Charles Harris, director of the Direct Action Coalition, asked that the fight not be shown in Pittsburgh if the electricians union hired to set up the CCTV

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<sup>581</sup> "Ali-Frazier Fight Promoters Sued for \$45 Million by Black Rivals." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 16. Feb 06 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>582</sup> NUNN, BILL, J. "CHANGE OF PACE." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 16. Feb 06 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>583</sup> "Ali-Frazier Fight Promoters Sued for \$45 Million by Black Rivals." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 16. Feb 06 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

equipment did not admit its first black member.<sup>584</sup> One week later, the *Courier* reported that Muhammad Ali supported the Pittsburgh boycott over the union issue.<sup>585</sup> Seven days later the *Courier* was able to report in a front-page story that the threatened boycott had worked. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 5, had agreed to accept Willy Harris into the union's ranks and the boycott was called off.<sup>586</sup>

As noted earlier, CCTV itself was nothing new, but the technology used to present this fight did offer some cutting edge technological elements. "Tiny" wireless microphones were going to be worn by the trainer in each fighter's corner during the fight. The referee for the fight would also be wearing a wireless microphone. Microphones on trainers and the referee for matches are commonplace today. According to one of the men organizing the technical elements of the CCTV, Fred DeFrancesco, he planned "to give this fight a TV sparkle never seen before."<sup>587</sup> The canvas in the ring, traditionally stark white, was going to be gray in an effort to reduce the glare from the bright television lights. The story in the *New York Times* (WP) noted that even the sweaters worn by corner men and the towels used in the corner's between rounds would be red or green rather than white because of lighting issues.<sup>588</sup>

As noted at the start of this section, the HBO film offered very little focus on the CCTV element of the fight. As we can see, the press at the time devoted a great deal of pre-fight, and even some post-fight, coverage to CCTV. The cultural memory, vis-à-vis

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<sup>584</sup> "Ali-Frazier Fight Artists, Writers, Actors, may Not be seen Musicians, Poets Unite in in Pittsburgh Area Committee to Free Angela." *New Pittsburgh Courier* (1966-1981), City Edition ed.: 28. Feb 13 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>585</sup> "Ali Backs Union Bias Fight." *New Pittsburgh Courier* (1966-1981), City Edition ed.: 2. Feb 20 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>586</sup> "IBEW UNION ACCEPTS FIRST NEGRO." *New Pittsburgh Courier* (1966-1981), City Edition ed.: 1. Feb 27 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>587</sup> Anderson, Dave. "TV Fight Center: And in this Corner... Cecil B. DeMille." *New York Times* (1923-Current file): 1. Feb 21 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Feb. 2018.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

the HBO documentary, seems to have forgotten the importance of this particular aspect of the event. While the newspapers predicted that CCTV was going to become the norm in sports coverage, suggesting that everything from bullfights in Spain to the Super Bowl would only be viewable in a pay to watch model, these prognostications proved wrong. Perhaps this is why the film did not spend much time talking about this aspect of the fight.

Boxing was one of the first sports to take advantage of this model and continues to be one of the biggest to continue utilizing it today. In 2017 the ability to charge viewers to see a fight live at *home* via pay-per-view (PPV), proved once again to be an economic windfall for boxing. The Floyd Mayweather versus Conor McGregor match, nicknamed “The Money Fight,” grossed more than \$600 million in international PPV sales.<sup>589</sup>

*The socio-political and racial factors in the press*

*People growing up today don't have any sense at all of how hated and despised and feared and reviled (Ali) was.*<sup>590</sup>

Ron Kuby, Civil Rights Attorney and Legal Activist

As noted earlier, from the title forward, the HBO film’s main focus was the racial, social, political and divisions in America that FOC3 and the fighters represented. And while the newspaper coverage of the fight *did* talk about these components in the lead up to the fight, journalists sometimes mentioned these in the context of how unimportant they were. For example, this column from the *Chicago Defender* (BP), that actually downplayed the non-fight components. After noting that the fight should be “a delightful evening’s entertainment” and “a pleasant diversion,” A. S. “Doc” Young wrote:

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<sup>589</sup> Maziq, Brian. “Mayweather-McGregor Fight Scored Second-Most PPV Buys Of All Time.” *Forbes*, 14 Dec. 2014, 7:51 pm, [www.forbes.com/sites/brianmaziq/2017/12/14/floyd-mayweather-vs-conor-mcgregor-ppv-was-the-second-biggest-ppv-of-all-time/#4d8e0cd76a90](http://www.forbes.com/sites/brianmaziq/2017/12/14/floyd-mayweather-vs-conor-mcgregor-ppv-was-the-second-biggest-ppv-of-all-time/#4d8e0cd76a90).

<sup>590</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:09:22).

But, contrary to what some people want to believe, this fight has absolutely no importance as a socio-political extravaganza. This fight cannot significantly alter the course of world events. It will solve no racial problems nor will it alleviate any of the suffering in the universe. It is folly to think it can or will.<sup>591</sup>

Young wrote two days later that, “To some auditors, it has socio-political significance. But that’s not true.”<sup>592</sup> Contrary to what Young wrote, consider the example of the electricians union noted earlier. Due to a threatened boycott of the CCTV venue in Pittsburgh, the first African-American was selected to join the union. While the cultural memory presents the fight as having socio-political significance on a macro level, the story of this “first” for a black man in Pittsburgh shows that there was at least one example of a micro socio-political impact associated with the event.

After FOC1, the lack of political and racial interest in the fight and fighters was noted in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP). The *Times* was quoting the “Rt. Rev. Gino Concetti,” who spoke of the fighters in the Vatican newspaper.

Father Concetti said Frazier and Ali “are above all two men of the same fundamental character. The color of their skins, the ideals that have been attributed to them have less interest, are secondary, compared with the primary value of the human person.”<sup>593</sup>

Fr. Concetti’s quote was part of a story in the Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, which called boxing “primitive.”

The *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP), a weekly, only published 11 stories prior to the fight. As noted earlier, many of these stories focused on the CCTV aspect of the fight. While the CCTV certainly involved race and politics, it was not the socio-political

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<sup>591</sup> DOC YOUNG, A.S. "GOOD MORNING SPORTS!" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 24. Mar 01 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

<sup>592</sup> DOC YOUNG, A.S. "GOOD MORNING SPORTS!" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 26. Mar 08 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 21 Mar. 2018.

<sup>593</sup> "Frazier Uncertain about Return Bout, Will Rest Awhile." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 10 1971, p. 2. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 May 2018.

elements generally associated with the fight and the fighters in the cultural memory. The *Courier* did not present the Ali-Frazier racial or political elements until after the fight. Using Ali's moniker, the *Courier* called Frazier "The Greatest" in the headline of their re-cap of the fight. The story said this about the racial and political elements of the fight:

Ali went into the fight as the sentimental favorite among blacks because they thought he had been wronged in having his crown lifted because of his failure to be drafted into the armed service. They wanted him to win to revenge his wrongs.<sup>594</sup>

The *Courier* went to the streets after the fight to find out what African-Americans in Pittsburgh thought. Nine people gave their opinions. Of those, only one, Henry Wages, explicitly said he favored Ali. Five did not really say whom they were for while three were for Frazier. Melvina Reid said: "I was glad Frazier won because Clay was always bragging about what he was going to do to Frazier. He ended up not doing anything." Crystal Henderson said: "I knew Frazier was going to win because Cassius Clay runs his mouth too much."<sup>595</sup> While the film portrayed Ali as the favorite of blacks, we can see that the black press offered evidence that showed, at least, some African-Americans at the time were Frazier fans.

Before the fight Jim Murray wrote a column for the *Los Angeles Times* (WP) where he interviewed former NFL running back Jim Brown. Murray strayed from the subject, Brown, and decided to focus on Ali and his religion. He claimed, "99% of the black people sympathize with the Muslims," before he asked Brown if the Muslims "advocate genocide." Brown responded that the Muslims "are really a very peaceful

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<sup>594</sup> Special to, the C. "FRAZIER'S 'THE GREATEST', DEFEATS all IN 15." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 1. Mar 13 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>595</sup> "Pittsburghers Speak Out on Ali-Frazier Fight." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 4. Mar 20 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.



people.”<sup>596</sup> Murray had a history of writing columns that were critical of Ali’s intelligence, his religion and his name change. After Ali failed his second military aptitude test in 1964, Murray wrote:

My favorite Mohammedan, Abdul the Bull Bull Ameer, or Ivan Skavinsky Skivar, or whatever the name is on his mailbox this morning, had a narrow escape the other day. I don’t mean he almost lost his heavyweight championship, I mean he almost passed an intelligence test. He was trying his level best. That was the trouble. Old Abdul’s problem is, he can’t figure out how many apples you have left if you take a third of them away. He’s only good at simple problems – like what is good for a whole race of people, or the whole world, for that matter.

Murray proceeded to present his version of an intelligence test that “Abdul” could pass.

One of Murray’s fake multiple-choice questions was:

Abdul has known a life of persecution. But which was the cruelest form? That he was:  
 (A) Encouraged and paid to knock white men senseless in England, America and Italy;  
 (B) Selected to represent the United States of America in the Olympic Games and hailed as a national hero when he won;  
 (C) Permitted to earn a million dollars which a committee of treacherous white men have foully invested for him so that he will not know want in his old age?<sup>597</sup>

In 1971, in the lead-up to the fight, Murray was still critical of Ali’s name. He wrote a column that was a spoof where he pretended to interview an old-time boxing cut man. Murray, writing the responses of the cut man, referred to Ali as an “Ay-rab.”<sup>598</sup> After Frazier won the fight, Murray attempted to downplay the socio-political nature of the fight when he wrote:

I suppose it will be taken in some quarters as a victory for hot dogs and apple pie, the Fourth of July and moonlight along the Wabash. And it’s safe to belong to the American Legion again and “pick up your troubles in your old kit bag”—but actually it was just a fist fight (sic).<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Murray, Jim. "Brown no Bad Actor." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 2. Feb 21 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Mar. 2018.

<sup>597</sup> Jim Murray, *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1964, B-1.

<sup>598</sup> "Don't Bet on Fights." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 2. Mar 04 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Mar. 2018.

<sup>599</sup> "Feet of Clay." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 2. Mar 09 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Mar. 2018.

Murray's post-fight story also included the references mentioned earlier in this chapter that seemed to describe Frazier as the average white factory worker who "comes to work, like a guy who brings his lunch in a pail." He ended the piece by positing that this loss signaled the end of Ali as a boxer. Murray wrote that Ali "will be back ... But it will never be the same." He continued, "An era has ended."<sup>600</sup> Ali would, in fact, be back. He would beat Frazier twice (in 1974 and 1975) and win the heavyweight championship two more times as well.

A few stories in the black and white press did, indeed, focus on the socio-political and racial elements that were associated with the fight and the fighters. Most of these keyed in on Ali's politics with occasional mentions of Frazier's lack of politics. Robert Lipsyte wrote an extremely long piece for the *New York Times* (WP). Published on the Sunday before the fight, it continued on eight pages in the paper and covered Ali's entire life. It was headlined, "I Don't Have to Be What You Want Me to Be."<sup>601</sup> This was a quote from Ali at the press conference the day after he won the championship in 1964. As Lipsyte noted in the story, the quote in the headline was followed by Ali's pledge, "I'm free to be who I want." Lipsyte covered the religious and political aspects of Ali's life without suggesting that black fans would be favoring him or that whites were for Frazier.

*FOC3 in black and white*

The HBO film (2000), as evidenced earlier in this chapter, certainly framed the fight as a racial and cultural battle with Frazier representing the white Establishment and

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<sup>600</sup> "Feet of Clay." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 2. Mar 09 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Mar. 2018.

<sup>601</sup> By, ROBERT L. "' I Don't have to be what You Want Me to be,' Says Muhammad Ali." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 8. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Mar. 2018.

Ali black America and the anti-establishment. As noted, this frame did not regularly appear in black and white press coverage in 1971. But it did appear on a few occasions.

The long story by Lipsyte above appeared in the Sunday *New York Times*, the day before the fight. Indicative of the salience of FOC3 at the time, there were 17 stories that included some information about Ali and/or Frazier that were published in the *Times* on that single day. Appearing on page three of the sports section there was one story about Frazier and one about Ali. The headline over the two stories was, “Frazier and Ali: Morality Drama Unfolds at the Garden Tomorrow Night.” The top story on the page was headlined, "Joe Frazier: A Relentless Champion." Underneath that was one headlined, “Muhammad Ali: Man of Controversy.” There was no byline on either piece. The headlines fit the stories. Frazier, it says, “always has been a laborer,” whose title reign is characterized by his “determination instead of dazzle.”<sup>602</sup> The Ali story, on the other hand, said: “In his decade of discord, Muhammad Ali has inspired devotion or antagonism, but never indifference.” It continued by saying that when he was stripped of his title for refusing the draft, “he soon developed into a martyr of the black revolution.”<sup>603</sup>

While the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP) did not seem to present much of the political or racial implications of the fight in the days and weeks before the fight, in a post-fight story they certainly did. The *News* was a weekly so the first post-fight stories did not reach their readers until five days after the fight. The paper reported on the fight by attending the CCTV screening before a largely black audience in Harlem. The writer, Dick Edwards, noted that 95% of the overflowing crowd of 10,000 was for Ali. Edwards said that after Ali lost, “grown men and women openly cried.” But, he also noted that

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<sup>602</sup> "Joe Frazier: A Relentless Champion." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2018.

<sup>603</sup> "Muhammad Ali: Man of Controversy." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2018.

Frazier was seen “with a new respect by Black People.” Edwards said that Frazier had been seen as a “Black White Hope” (the same moniker applied to Joe Louis in the HBO film when he fought Shcmeling). The story then quotes activist Harry Edwards who had appeared at a mostly white college the day after the fight. Harry Edwards seemed to be echoing the claims of Jesse Jackson, noted earlier. To the white college students Harry Edwards said: “I hope your man won the fight, because BOTH OF MINE DID!”<sup>604</sup> Harry Edwards seemed to be saying that whites in the audience were likely fans of Frazier while as a black activist, he felt both men came out on top. The story’s writer, Dick Edwards, concurred. He finished the piece by saying, “Every fair minded sportsman must concede that both men came out of the fight ten feet tall.” The *Chicago Defender* (BP) reported on a poem being written about the fight by Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks. The story noted that Brooks’ winning the Pulitzer was another black accomplishment in a “monument to a growing black legacy of excellence already represented by both Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali.”<sup>605</sup>

Diggs Datrooth, writing for the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP), said before the match that there were a lot of people interested in the fight:

Much of the interest stems from the barring of Ali from the ring for so long and the tremendous emotions developed therefrom—you either sympathize with him or hate him. So now after the Establishment attempted to drown him, Ali is coming back with far greater appeal because of it and posed to gain much more for a single fight.<sup>606</sup>

This note on FOC3 is just one piece in a long column by Diggs on black issues that he posted from Washington, D.C. This is a black man writing for a black newspaper

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<sup>604</sup> Edwards, Dick. "All Ali at the Armory." *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*: 1. Mar 13 1971. ProQuest. Web. 21 Mar. 2018.

<sup>605</sup> "Poet to Pen Poem." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 13. Mar 03 1971. ProQuest. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

<sup>606</sup> DATROOTH, DIGGS. "National Hot Line." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 9. Feb 13 1971. ProQuest. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

audience and who seems to be letting the Establishment know that by trying to stop Ali, they have in fact increased interest in the fighter and this fight. The result is, perhaps, a larger payday than if they had not tried to “drown him.” Perhaps Diggs is offering this as an example of how fighting the Establishment can actually prove financially beneficial. Notice also that Diggs is addressing his black audience and saying of Ali, “you either sympathize with him or hate him.” Compare this to the frame as seen in the HBO film that claimed Ali was, for all intents and purposes, the overwhelming favorite of black Americans.

In the *Chicago Defender* (BP), A. S. “Doc” Young was open about his favoritism for one of the fighters -- Frazier. While Diggs said that the interest in the fight was because of Ali, Young said “It takes two to make a fight.” He continued:

And it is precisely because Joe Frazier was around, and fighting, while Muhammad Ali was waltzing with the military that 1) the heavyweight division is still alive and 2) the forthcoming fight looms as one of the all-time-great sporting events. Frazier, to his everlasting credit, is a fighter. He is, like Ali, Afro-American. He is a credit to the human race.<sup>607</sup>

In another column Young seemed to think Ali had the edge as a boxer but then said, “Joe Frazier, in my view, is the better MAN (his emphasis).”<sup>608</sup> At 51 years-old at the time of the fight, perhaps Young could be considered one of the aging reporters that Washburn said existed in the black press at the time.<sup>609</sup> Civil rights activist Harry Edwards even labeled some of the more conservative black sports journalists at this time, like Young, “Uncle Toms.”<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> DOC YOUNG, ,A.S. "GOOD MORNING SPORTS!" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 24. Mar 01 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

<sup>608</sup> DOC YOUNG, ,A.S. "GOOD MORNING SPORTS!" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 26. Mar 08 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 21 Mar. 2018.

<sup>609</sup> Washburn, p. 195.

<sup>610</sup> Edwards, 34-36.

While Young's bias in favor of Frazier was obvious, there is evidence in the *Defender* that people on the street appeared to be more divided. A Chicago high school student sent a poem to the paper. In it, the student picks Frazier over Ali.<sup>611</sup> In Unger's piece about the problems with the white ownership of the CCTV, he noted both men had support from the black community. Unger wrote: "Black supporters of Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier" will not be able to see the fight due to high ticket prices.<sup>612</sup> Civil rights leader the Rev. Jesse Jackson had a column in the *Defender* under the name, 'Country Preacher.' Jackson recalls the racism exhibited toward Jack Johnson before he noted that Joe Louis was an inspiration for his family when he was growing up. Even Reverend Jackson, a devout proponent of civil rights, did not show a bias when he wrote: "But, whomever wins, black people will gain because their image will be reflected with clarity from the opening call to the closing announcement."<sup>613</sup> A UPI story in the *Defender* the day after the fight described Ali and Frazier at the end of the fight like this:

No dancing steps came to him [Ali] any more and he was left sobbing with remorse on the ropes as he became a mere punching bag for the man he had hoped to playfully torture. . . . With the victory, Frazier earned his niche among sports immortals, Ali became simply another man who tried and failed.<sup>614</sup>

While a white journalist could have written the UPI story, it was presented to the readers of a black newspaper. Recall the front page of the *Defender* the day after the fight with the extraordinarily large headline, JOE WINS! The bias on that front page certainly seemed to favor Joe Frazier. Similarly the front-page post-fight story in the *Pittsburgh*

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<sup>611</sup> Cherokee, Charlie. "Article 1 -- no Title." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 5. Feb 15 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

<sup>612</sup> Unger, Norman O. "TV Title Bout Deals Stir Controversies." *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1966-1973)*: 1. Feb 20 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.

<sup>613</sup> Jackson, Rev. J. L. "Country Preacher on the Case." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1966-1973)*: 11. Mar 06 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

<sup>614</sup> "Frazier Pummels Ali, Captures Unanimous Nod." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*: 24. Mar 09 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 21 Mar. 2018.

*Courier* (BP) carried the headline, “FRAZIER’S ‘THE GREATEST’, DEFEATS ALI IN 15.”

Prior to the fight a story in the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP) touted the amount of black involvement in the fight. The picture that accompanied the story showed several black kids getting autographs from Frazier. The first words in the caption of the photo, showing a young girl standing in front of Frazier, read: “YOU CAN TELL WHO SHE’S FOR.”<sup>615</sup> Debra Bush’s column in the *News* after the fight quoted several women gathered at “Artie’s Showplace” to wait for results of the fight. Of the 11 women who were quoted, six were for Frazier, three didn’t express a bias and two were for Ali. While Bush, the writer of the piece, said she had been “praying for a Muhammad Ali win,” Barbara Maddox said she was “‘Glad’ Frazier won,” and she “wants to know how much Clay will run his mouth now.”<sup>616</sup>

While the above examples show support from black journalists and citizens for Joe Frazier on the pages of black papers in 1971, there were some examples in the white press of white support for Ali among the citizenry as well. In the *New York Times* (WP) Ali was quoted talking to the “virtually all white crowd” who were on hand to watch his training. “You my kind of people,” Ali said to the crowd. “The little hard workers. Not those people who want to pay \$500 for a ticket to see my fight.” The story said the gym was packed with people and sweltering.<sup>617</sup> Another story that noted white fans in the Miami gym appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP). It opened with:

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<sup>615</sup> Edwards, Dick. "All Eyes on BIG FIGHT." *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Mar 06 1971, p. 1. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 May 2018.

<sup>616</sup> Bush, Debra. "Jamaica and Queens Report." *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Mar 13 1971, p. 26. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 May 2018.

<sup>617</sup> By JOE NICHOLSSpecial to The New, York Times. "Ali Feeds Fans a Potpourri of Tough Lip and Fast Fists Steamed in Hot Air." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 45. Feb 17 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Feb. 2018.

Jimmy Smith, a 12-year-old white boy, watched with awe today as Muhammad Ali worked four fast rounds to conclude boxing preparations for his heavyweight championship match with Joe Frazier. The kid couldn't have mirrored more reverence had he been in church.<sup>618</sup>

After noting that Jimmy's mom was with him, the story identified her as the wife a United States coastguardsman. At a time when Ali was portrayed as being disliked by folks who supported the war, this story shows at least one example of support from a military family.

The film said white supporters of the war at home were for Frazier but one story in the newspapers showed that actual soldiers in Vietnam supported Ali. A story after the fight in *The Los Angeles Times* (WP) included several short pieces that offered reactions from around the world that included the Vatican newspaper quote mentioned previously.

The piece noted:

Ali was an overwhelming favorite with American GIs in South Vietnam. One black serviceman listening to a broadcast transmitted by Armed Forces Radio, commented, "I want to see that Frazier beaten so bad."<sup>619</sup>

The piece said that for each second in the fight the fighters made \$926 and also included a quote from *Tass*, the Soviet news agency, which claimed "Ali was illegally deprived of the world title in 1967." The *Los Angeles Times* (WP) also noted that the telecast of the fight would be shown in countries across the globe.<sup>620</sup> The *New York Times* (WP) said that while the World Series and the Super Bowl are big in the U.S., boxing is followed internationally which, "is another factor in the impact of the title showdown."<sup>621</sup> Recall

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<sup>618</sup> Condon, David. "In the Wake of the News." *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file)*: 1. Mar 05 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Mar. 2018.

<sup>619</sup> "Frazier Uncertain about Return Bout, Will Rest Awhile." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 2. Mar 10 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 Mar. 2018.

<sup>620</sup> "35 Countries to View Ali-Frazier Title Battle." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 07 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Mar. 2018.

<sup>621</sup> By, DAVE A. "Ticket Shortage has Markson Ducking." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Feb 14 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Feb. 2018.



that in the film Hauser claimed the fight was the focus of people around the world. The fact that the telecast was seen around the world, along with the quotes from the Vatican newspaper and Tass in the Soviet Union, seem to provide evidence that Hauser was correct in this claim.

*The fight outside of the sports pages*

“Artur Rubenstein played his final recital of The Music Center Season Monday night,” Jack Smith wrote in his lead in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP).<sup>622</sup> Rubenstein, the classical Polish pianist, was on the last tour of his long and distinguished career. Smith had missed an opportunity to see Rubenstien perform some 30 years earlier in Hawaii and did not plan to miss the pianist on his farewell tour. Smith said his ticket was for seat 7 in row 12 of section A. He wrote that the recital was scheduled to begin at 8:30 and, he continued, “I imagine it was about then, or a few moments later, that the audience grew suddenly still.” Smith had to “imagine” the scene because his ticket got him into the Los Angeles Forum to watch Ali versus Frazier on a large CCTV screen instead. Smith’s story appeared on the front page of section four of the *L.A. Times* that day; a section devoted to features on book, music and television. This is one example of many that indicated how FOC3 transcended sport.

Another example in the *L.A. Times* that day that actually did appear in the sports section was written by Florence Mal. Readers saw that injured Los Angeles Lakers point guard, Jerry West, had been released from Centinela Valley Hospital following knee surgery. The story noted that, although he was in a leg cast, he had attended the CCTV

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<sup>622</sup> Play it again, Artur, Joe, Ali." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File): 1. Mar 10 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 Mar. 2018.

screening of the fight the evening after his release.<sup>623</sup> The *Times* noted the Unitarian Church held their tri-monthly meeting on March 8 in spite of the “lure of the month’s super-sports event – the Frazier-Ali fight.”<sup>624</sup>

Some stories simply used the fight as a metaphor. Hazel Garland wrote a society column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP). It seems Hazel had been out sick the week prior to the fight. Upon her return it was noted that the flu had “knocked the column out of circulation” the way that Joe Frazier had knocked Muhammad Ali down in the fight.<sup>625</sup> We can see that the fight was salient enough that it made its way into columns and stories well outside of the sports section of the papers.

### Conclusion

In the HBO film (2000), Bryant Gumbel recalls how deep the divisions in the country were at the time of the fight:

I think it’s very difficult for people in hindsight to understand how deep the divisions in America were. There was violence in the streets – there were hardhats beating the hell out of long-hairs every day.<sup>626</sup>

While Gumbel’s words may be true, the newspaper coverage surrounding FOC3 in 1971 did not focus on the socio-political aspects that the cultural memory has attached to the event. Civil rights attorney Ron Kuby said in the film that people today might not realize just “how hated and despised and feared and reviled” Muhammad Ali was at the time of the fight. Again, while this may be true, the newspaper coverage at the time did not reflect this.

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<sup>623</sup> Mal, Florence. "Lakers Will Miss Him mostly on Defense, Says Jerry West." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 09 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 Mar. 2018.

<sup>624</sup> Boyarsky, Bill. "Issues Kept Low-Key as Candidates Debate." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 10 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 Mar. 2018.

<sup>625</sup> "Hazel Garland's Thing to TALK ABOUT." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 18. Mar 20 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

<sup>626</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:31:30).

The cultural memory vis-a-vis the film presented Joe Frazier in the lead-up to and the actual fight in 1971 in a sympathetic light. The sympathetic tone continued after viewers see that Frazier won the epic battle in the ring. The voice-over said, “This was Joe Frazier’s defining moment.”<sup>627</sup> Perhaps the film’s writer, Dave Anderson, set this tone. In a *New York Times* (WP) story the day after the fight, Anderson wrote: “In his failure, Ali not only lost, but more embarrassing, he was silenced.”<sup>628</sup> In a story a day later, Anderson again showed his favoritism for Frazier, writing that he “was in command” of the fight and after being hit by Ali, “literally laughed in Ali’s face.” Anderson wrote that when Ali was knocked down in the 15<sup>th</sup> round, “It was the final humiliation for the colorful 29-year-old deposed champion.”<sup>629</sup>

Frazier would lose his title two years later when he was humiliated in the ring by George Foreman. The referee stopped the fight, which was scheduled to go 15 rounds, in only the second round after Frazier was knocked to the canvas for the sixth time. Frazier lost to Ali two times in epic rematches. Boxing writer Burt Sugar said in the film:

And as Ali’s image, and myth, and name, and reputation grew, Joe’s was sure to suffer. The winner that night was the loser. The loser that night was the winner.<sup>630</sup>

Additionally, the film’s frame of Frazier as friendly to the Establishment continued after the fight as well.

In the film, as civil rights lawyer Ron Kuby says, “you had the sense that the bad guys won,” viewers see Frazier and his wife shaking hands with President Richard Nixon

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<sup>627</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:49:41).

<sup>628</sup> By, DAVE A. "Frazier Outpoints Ali and Keeps Title." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. Mar 09 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Mar. 2018.

<sup>629</sup> By, DAVE A. "Manager Foresees no Fights for Frazier before Next Year." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 49. Mar 10 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Mar. 2018.

<sup>630</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:54:54).

and his wife in the Whitehouse.<sup>631</sup> In Frazier's home state, South Carolina, the legislature invited him to speak after the fight. An African-American man had not addressed that body in 40 years. They had not invited him to appear when he rose to heavyweight champion one year earlier. Hauser said, "He was invited and accepted as the man who defeated Muhammad Ali."<sup>632</sup> Speaking to the 170 members of the state congress, three of who were black, Frazier said. "We must save our people." He continued, "and when I say our people, I mean white and black." Frazier received a 30-second ovation from the mostly white audience when he concluded his remarks.<sup>633</sup>

What "Joe" did not seem to understand was that Ali's deep dive into religion, race and politics were the additional components that at least some people in the United States, and many around the world, found admirable in Muhammad Ali. There were enormous personal and financial risks in the passionate fights that Ali engaged in outside of the ring; fights that Frazier chose not to simply avoid, but also openly disavowed. Evidence of this was shown in Frazier's decision to call Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay. While there was plenty of evidence in the press coverage of the fight that black writers and blacks on the street were also using Clay instead of Ali to refer to the fighter, we must also consider the interview with Ali in *The Black Scholar*. As the heavyweight champion, Frazier was in a position of celebrity. Frazier had a place at the "podium" and Ali noted it should be explicitly used to support advancing civil rights in America. Ali's commitment to these battles created passion toward him by fans and critics alike. Frazier, as seen in this

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<sup>631</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:54:35).

<sup>632</sup> *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, by Thomas Hauser, Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 234.

<sup>633</sup> Anderson, Dave. "So. Carolina Legislature Hears Frazier." *The New York Times*, 8 Apr. 1971, [www.nytimes.com/1971/04/08/archives/so-carolina-legislature-hears-frazier.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/08/archives/so-carolina-legislature-hears-frazier.html).

chapter, did garner some of that respect for his ability to defeat Ali inside the ring on March 8, 1971, but that respect offered no currency outside of a boxing ring.

One concern that is not overblown in the film or in the press coverage at the time is the division in this country based on race. In one of Jim Brown's responses in the Murray interview in the *Los Angeles Times* (WP), Brown said in 1971 that the current generation of both whites and blacks is "pretty together." Brown predicted, "Prejudice is in its last generation."<sup>634</sup> He seemed to believe that when the older generation died off, prejudice would die off as well. Nearly 50 years later we can see that Brown was perhaps somewhat idealistic in his prediction.

Many of those who witnessed Muhammad Ali holding the Olympic torch in Atlanta in 1996, trembling from advanced Parkinson's, believed that this was the final step toward his acceptance as an American cultural hero. But four years later, a Peabody award winning film presented Ali as much less sympathetic than his opponent, Joe Frazier. What the film did show was that Frazier, at least to one degree, had changed his view of Ali and his name.

Near the end of the HBO film (2000) in the interview conducted for the film, Frazier is talking about finally settling the differences between the two men. "I want to, like, throw the towel in," he said. "And I'm willing to say to Muhammad,"<sup>635</sup> he nods as he continued, "you heard that?" After nearly three decades, Frazier was letting viewers of the film see that he was finally willing to use Ali's chosen name.

It would take 16 years and Ali's death for him to be offered to an American television audience as truly worthy of hero status. In 2016, writing about his death and

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<sup>634</sup> Murray, Jim. "Brown no Bad Actor." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 2. Feb 21 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 23 Mar. 2018.

<sup>635</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier 1: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:27:26).

funeral (which was covered extensively on the cable news networks), CNN said that Ali “was a hero to many,” and noted “Ali made being a Muslim cool.”<sup>636</sup> It was obvious in the 1971 newspaper coverage and the 2000 film where Ali was most often identified as a “Black Muslim,” and part of a religion that was preaching “a gospel of hate”<sup>637</sup> that this was simply not the case.

Five years before Ali’s death, Robert Lipsyte explained the confusion that existed, which resulted in the love and the hate that Ali experienced throughout his life. For all of the things that Muhammad Ali was and was not – for all of the things that were written and said about him – Lipsyte said that Ali is today a legend, sometimes for the wrong reasons. But it all, both past and present, comes down to one thing according to Lipsyte: “I think he is a hero [but]... he is often vilified by people that just didn’t understand [him].”<sup>638</sup>

When looking at FOCs 1 and 2, I noted at the beginning of this chapter that the cultural memory, and to some degree the press coverage at the time, presented many aspects of these fights as battles over race – black versus white. In FOC3, when both boxers were black we can see in the analysis in this chapter that the battle was still often presented as black versus white. Or, at least, which of the two fighters is the blackest. We saw this in the films, created by white filmmakers, and in the white press to a greater degree than the black press. But, why is this? An attempt to answer this will be in chapter six, the conclusion.

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<sup>636</sup> McKirdy, Euan. “Muhammad Ali Funeral: ‘Ali Made Being a Muslim Cool!’” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 9 June 2016, [www.cnn.com/2016/06/09/us/muhammad-ali-funeral-services/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/09/us/muhammad-ali-funeral-services/index.html).

<sup>637</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:04:30).

<sup>638</sup> Lipsyte interview (2011).

*Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.*<sup>639</sup>

Maurice Halbwachs

## **Chapter Six**

### **The Conclusion: lost in transition**

When there is confusion over one language's version of a word or phrase when compared to a similar word or phrase in another language, it can be said that the true meaning was "lost in translation." It is often said that the full meaning and impact of certain words or phrases simply do not translate well from one language to another.

The same could be said when looking at what is written or said about a particular incident or person from one period of time to another. Because of the social and political events that have occurred over time, the contemporary context results in the event taking on a slightly, or even completely different meaning and significance when compared to when the event naturally occurred. Perhaps the cultural memory version of "lost in translation" could be, "lost in transition" since the meaning of the event simply did not transition exactly from the past to the present. As Halbwachs said above, the reality of the past simply did not have the "prestige" that we attach to it in the present. In *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, Aleida Assman quotes Italo Svevo, who said:

The past is always new; as life proceeds it changes, because parts of it that may have once seemed to have sunk into oblivion rise to the surface and others vanish without a trace because they have come to have such slight importance. The present conducts the past in the way a conductor conducts an orchestra. It wants these particular sounds, or those – and no others.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice, and Lewis A. Coser. *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press, 1992. P. 51.

<sup>640</sup> Assmann, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 7–8.

The documentarians who directed the films about the lives of these men are, in Svevo's words, the conductors. They have made choices about which "particular sounds" were presented to the audience of the stories of the fighters and the fights.

And while the case studies presented in this dissertation have found that the contemporary versions of the stories of the FOCs and these three men have certainly been altered, there may be more to this reconstruction than a simple matter of the geo and socio-political evolution culturally over the decades since each appeared on a national media stage. Halbwachs' word choice – prestige – may work best in determining why the stories have been embellished.

At the time of each of the fights of the century this dissertation has shown that the press was often trying to eschew the socio-political nature of the events and focus more on the competitors and their relevance to the competition. It would be many years before the socio-political relevance would be firmly attached to these events. Cultural memory theory tells us that this is because it is easier to contextualize these events when we look back through a filter that is constructed using all of the events that have occurred since the original event. As noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, David Middleton and Steven D. Brown cite Frederick Bartlett who stated, "... remembering is primarily concerned with how the past is constructed in the present to serve the needs of whatever actions we are currently engaged in."<sup>641</sup> With regard to Johnson, Louis and Ali, Bartlett's belief that the cultural memory alters the past to serve the present will be addressed later in the chapter.

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<sup>641</sup> Middleton, David, and Steven D. Brown. "Experience and memory: Imaginary futures in the past." *Media and Cultural Memory/Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung* (2008): 242.



I am going to take a brief look back at each of the case studies with additional comments about Joe Frazier. I will then look at a brief comparison between the black and white press with regard to their efforts to tell the stories of the FOCs and the fighters. I will then take a more macro view of the FOCs and the fighters in an attempt to determine what all three mean as a single entity. Overall, I have three major thesis statements from this work:

- The contemporary white hegemonic media have appropriated Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali. This appropriation is in the form of documentary films that serve to reward the filmmakers and to soothe the feelings of white viewers when it comes to past issues of race.
- In the telling of the stories about the FOCs and the main actors involved, the white media, both past and present, prefer to draw battle lines racially as black versus white. This showed up most obviously in the contemporary media product that told the story of FOC3, even though the two main actors are both African-American.
- When compared to the telling of the original events, the stories of the FOCs and Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali have evolved to meet criterion set by the dominant white media producers. Many of the elements that the white media present today differ from what the white media were saying at the time. When compared to the white newspapers, black newspapers telling the story at the time were more accurate in their portrayals of the events and the actors at the time the stories occurred. Many of the elements in the black newspapers at the time have carried forward and are being told by the dominant white media today.

An additional element that was uncovered through my analysis had to do with how the black press told these stories to their readers. In addition to simply reporting the stories at the time, African-American reporters were monitoring the white newspapers as well.

They did this so they could respond to misrepresentations by the white press in the coverage of the FOCs and the black actors involved.

### **Jack Johnson and FOC1**

As noted in the introduction, one of the goals of this dissertation is to attempt to determine why the collective memory of these three well-known men is considerably different than the press accounts of each at the time they were involved in what is arguably the biggest event in each man's career as a fighter. For example, in "Unforgivable Blackness," Ken Burns used quotes from newspapers at the time of the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries fight. But Burns (or the writer of the film) appears to be very selective with regard to which quotes were chosen. The newspaper quotes chosen for the film focused on presenting an extremely racist view of the white press toward Johnson.

In chapter three this dissertation looked at a larger collective of newspaper stories that appeared in the press at the time of the fight and found something quite different when compared to the film. It is certainly true that, to many, Johnson was considered to be not much more than a pariah at the time he fought Jeffries. But, as a whole, the press at the time displayed a surprising level of respect for Johnson which makes the newspaper clippings chosen for the Burns film appear to be, what some might refer to as, cherry-picked. One of the things seen in the white press of Johnson in 1910 is that these writers were, perhaps, more closely following a more contemporary professional journalism standard. That is, the reporters were more objective in their coverage of Johnson. They accurately described his physical ability and intellectual acumen when he easily defeated Jeffries.

The subtext in "Unforgivable Blackness" declared that Jack Johnson is a hero today because he lived in a rather carefree manner even though he was so hated and reviled at the time of FOC1. The narrator of the film told viewers:

To most whites, and to some African Americans, Johnson was a perpetual threat – profligate, arrogant, amoral, a dark menace, and a danger to the natural order of things.<sup>642</sup>

And the message in Burns’ film about the press at the time of FOC1 had an impact within the contemporary media when his film first aired. Writing a review of the film in the *Tampa Tribune*, Walter Belcher said:

Those not familiar with America's dark past of racism may be shocked at the open hostility shown *by the media* of that era (emphasis added).<sup>643</sup>

Looking at the coverage of Johnson in the black and white press in 1910 we can see that this is not at all how the writers spoke of Johnson. Upon closer review even images from Burns’ film showed evidence that there were plenty of white skinned Americans in Reno (the site of FOC1) who admired Johnson. After his victory the newspaper accounts of his long train trip from Reno to Chicago showed more evidence of this with large crowds of white admirers in Ogden, Utah and Cheyenne, Wyoming. The mostly white crowds gathered to get a glimpse of the champion and even to praise him for his accomplishment. The press did note that in Utah a few “thugs” did show up at the stop in Ogden who threatened Johnson and used an epithet, but that seemed to be the exception.<sup>644</sup>

Particularly since it was noted that 5,000 showed up to greet him in Cheyenne where the mostly white crowd greeted Johnson “with wild yells and waving of hats.” The story noted that the crowd then showered him with flowers.<sup>645</sup>

That is not to say that there was not at least a portion of white America that severely disliked black Americans. That could be seen in the press accounts of violence

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<sup>642</sup> Burns, Ken, director. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson--A Film Directed by Ken Burns--Part 1*. PBS, 2005.

<sup>643</sup> Belcher, Walt. “King of the Ring.” *The Tampa Tribune*, 17 Jan. 2005, p. 1.

<sup>644</sup> “JOHNSON IN RAGE AT THUGS' INSULT.” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 11. Jul 06 1910. ProQuest. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

<sup>645</sup> “The Game Fighter is He Who Fights Gamely and Smiles in Defeat.” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 13. Jul 07 1910. ProQuest. Web. 12 Jan. 2017.

against black citizens by whites in the aftermath of the Johnson victory. In addition to the violent aftermath, the white press also made it clear – through Cal, the shoeshine man – that Jack Johnson was the exception among black citizens in America. That is, the average working black American was still presented by the white press as ignorant (shoeshine man) and the average white Americans in a group was physically superior and capable of beating and killing average individual black Americans. The message in the corpus of the white press archive seems to be; “Johnson can get away with being uppity because he’s the exception. The rest of you better not get uppity or you will pay the price physically.”

But, as for Johnson himself, this was not seen in the newspapers at the time. This does not match the way Burns presented American’s feelings toward Johnson at this same time. I’ll repeat, this is in no way meant to make a declaration that racism did not flourish in the United States in 1910. The effort here is to show that Johnson, in addition to being the first African-American to achieve the status of world heavyweight boxing champion, also was able to be a symbol of achievement by an African-American for both black and white Americans well before Jackie Robinson suited up in the major league. Unfortunately this is not the frame in which he is presented in the Burns film.

But Burns is not the only one who occasionally misrepresented some of the feelings toward Johnson at the time. As noted in chapter three, the first line in Gail Bederman’s book, “Manliness & Civilization,” reads: “At 2:30 p.m. on July 4, 1910, in Reno, Nevada, as the band played, ‘All Coons Look Alike to Me,’ Jack Johnson climbed into the ring to defend his title against Jim Jeffries.”<sup>646</sup> But a newspaper story about the

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<sup>646</sup> “Remaking Manhood through Race and Civilization.” *Manliness & Civilization: a Cultural History of Gender and Race In the United States, 1880-1917*, by Gail Bederman, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 1.

fight wrote explicitly about this exact moment. After noting that there was a *rumor* before the fight that the brass band in the ring would play the racist song, Rex Beach reported in the *Chicago Tribune* (WP), “but feeling was too high perhaps, and they favored us with a selection of national airs, at which the multitude rose and cheered.”<sup>647</sup>

Writing about politics and cultural memory, Erik Meyers said that there is a politics to history and this often results in facts being misrepresented in favor of the politics of history’s author. Meyers said:

This process reveals forces and counter-forces competing for hegemony of discourse and interpretive patterns. Thus, the approach assumes the existence of a pluralistic public, functioning as an arena for these controversies. Not only representatives of the political-administrative system are involved therein, but also individuals and groups who possess a privileged access to the political public sphere. In addition to politicians, this elite includes journalists, intellectuals, and scholars.<sup>648</sup>

The question becomes, why would it be that the film would present a press opinion of Johnson that does not match the plurality of stories about the boxer at the time of the fight? Of course it could simply be that whoever conducted the research for the film did not engage in as extensive of a search as was done for this dissertation. But it is more likely that the overall press coverage of Johnson simply did not align with the narrative that the film was trying to portray - that of a universal hatred of Johnson by White America – hatred so extreme as to make Johnson, in the contemporary media portrayal of his life by Ken Burns, a modern day hero for overcoming it.

And while it is true that Johnson flaunted racial conventions, in chapter three we can see from press accounts from the time that Johnson was also welcomed in a mostly

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<sup>647</sup> Beach, Rex E. "JOHNSON AND AGE DEFEAT JEFFRIES." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*: 1. Jul 05 1910. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.

<sup>648</sup> Meyers, Erik. “Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, by Astrid Erll et al., Walter De Gruyter, 2008, pp. 175–176.

white saloon district in Chicago. With the exception of one brothel in that district, it seems that Johnson was also a regular and welcome visitor to the white brothels in Chicago as well. These accounts of welcoming by whites did not appear in any part of the Burns documentary – a televised event that has become a big part of the cultural memory of how Jack Johnson is remembered today.

Consider that the cultural memory portrays Johnson as roundly disliked by most whites and even some black Americans at the time he fought in FOC1. For example, at the beginning of chapter three Booker T. Washington is quoted. He said that Johnson “has harmed rather than helped the race.”<sup>649</sup> But Washington had a special wire setup in his Tuskegee office in order to receive live reports on the fight. Perhaps Washington’s public statements did not match his private beliefs.

Ken Burns appropriated Jack Johnson’s life story in order to create a compelling story of how Johnson was - according to Burns’ product - able to heroically overcome extreme racism. Burns even quoted a few newspapers at the time as evidence. But, as this dissertation has shown, the coverage in the papers at the time did not present this story of Johnson during the actual time surrounding FOC1.

Both the film and the white newspapers at the time drew clear racial lines in the telling of the story of FOC1 and the actors involved. There is no doubt that the element of white supremacy was a part of the telling of the story both then and now. But the black press at the time tended to downplay this element of the story. For example, considering the question of racial superiority, *The Freeman* (BP) said:

... the two men are the greatest athletes the world has produced at the same time equally matched in every way. ... This is by no means a race supremacy battle. It

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<sup>649</sup> Shropshire, Kenneth L. *Being Sugar Ray: The Life of Sugar Ray Robinson, America's Greatest Boxer and First Celebrity Athlete*. New York, NY: BasicCivitas, 2007. 44. Print.

is a battle for thousands of dollars. The race question was raised by sporting editors throughout the world on Jeffries as the bull fighters (sic) would raise the red flag to enrage the bull. And it has its effect on Jeffries. It is well that the colored man does not take this race question too seriously, as Jack Johnson is fighting to retain the championship and \$200,000.<sup>650</sup>

This depiction by the black press of the fight at the time is better aligned with how the story should be presented today. That is, it was simply a fight between two top boxers in a boxing ring. Also we can see that *The Freeman* was adding the element of the extraordinary financial windfall that Johnson would enjoy as a result of the fight. We saw this same element in the reporting in the black press about the earnings of Ali and Frazier in FOC3. While the white press tended to admonish the large payday for black athletes, the black press saw this as rightfully deserved. Particularly since white businessmen who promoted the events were going to enjoy large financial windfalls as well. As Professor Gerald Early said:

In part, people are apt to complain about the high pay of athletes because they have long accepted the romantic, upper-class idea that money corrupts sports and that athletes ought to be inspired by the love of their sport and the spirit of competition and not driven by money, as if high-performance athletics was just another form of work.<sup>651</sup>

This idea still exists to this day and is often mentioned the press as a reason athletes, in particular black athletes, should not express their political beliefs in public.

### **Joe Louis and FOC2**

Sandwiched between Johnson and Ali, Joe Louis perhaps suffered most during his career. As noted in chapter three, many in the white press seemed to be rather flummoxed when it came to what they should actually think of Jack Johnson. There was simply no black athlete-as-celebrity mold for Johnson to break. But Louis was burdened with the

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<sup>650</sup> "Johnson and Jeffries Championship Battle." *The Freeman*: 7. Jul 02 1910. News Bank. Web. 2 Jan. 2017.

<sup>651</sup> *A Level Playing Field African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports*, by Gerald Early, Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 9–10.

Johnson mold and as noted in chapter four, he was explicitly directed to appear in public as the “anti-Johnson.” He was told to follow seven “commandments” in order to be accepted by whites and the white media. Commandment six instructed him to keep a “dead pan” in front of the cameras. But because of this, newspaper accounts from the time show he was actually often criticized for his lack of personality and even unintelligent. He served his country in World War II but shortly after the end of the war, Louis was burdened with a high tax bill from the IRS. While the HBO documentary claimed Louis was considered a national hero at the time of his fight against Schmeling, this dissertation has shown the newspaper coverage at the time did not match that frame at all.

In FOC2, an event that was followed by an international audience, a black American battling against a white German (who was a Nazi sympathizer), one can certainly see why white Americans *should* have considered Louis a national hero. And, why the white press should have presented Louis in a nationalistically favorable light as well. Louis had done everything asked of him by following the “commandments” and altering his actions and demeanor in order to present himself in public as the anti-Johnson.

Unlike Johnson and Ali, Louis worked to not say too much before a fight and he certainly remained silent during his fights. Because of this silence he was criticized. He’s so quiet, the white press wrote, he must be dumb. Johnson was admonished for flashing his big, gold-toothed smile and the press often openly hoped that Ali’s opponent would be able to “button his lip.” Louis worked to remain expressionless – so, the press wrote, he must be dumb. As noted in chapter four, the white press even said his lack of emotion made him more animal than man. Looking at the coverage of these three it seemed the



white press believed that if the black champion talked too much, like Johnson and Ali, he was “uppity.” Talk too little, like Louis, and you are nothing more than a dumb animal.

I believe the most egregious example of appropriation in this dissertation is the one by the white media in telling the story of Joe Louis’s life in the HBO documentary. As shown in chapter four, the cultural memory, vis-à-vis the film, described Joe Louis as a hero today and claimed that he was a hero to all Americans in 1938 when he fought Max Schmeling. It is not difficult to see how this mistake could be made; Louis certainly should have been seen as a hero in FOC2. But the white press, and according to accounts of the aftermath of the match – many white citizens – did not truly view Louis as a hero. For the producers of the HBO product to make this claim is specious, at best. While the Burns film made mistakes in re-telling the events surrounding FOC1, the film about Louis and FOC2 was simply wrong. As noted in chapter three, other contemporary media and even academicians repeat this same misguided story: That Joe Louis transcended racial bigotry and was seen as a hero to all Americans in FOC2 in 1938. Or, as Dick Gregory said, Louis was the first black man in America to be seen as a “white hope.” As noted in chapter four, the narrator of the film about Louis said:

His stage was so big that down-trodden Americans, regardless of their age or race, felt a glimmer of hope creep into their lives just by watching him. In the end he was a common man who reached the top and brought an entire country with him.<sup>652</sup>

But, as seen in this dissertation, that was simply not the case.

While FOC2 has been portrayed in the cultural memory as a key moment in the lead-up to World War II, this element was not explicitly noted with any regularity in the

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<sup>652</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008. *YouTube*. YouTube, 07 Dec. 2011. @ 00:00:42. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

black or white press at the time. In the introduction to their handbook of cultural memory studies, Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning said:

The first level of cultural memory is concerned with biological memory. It draws attention to the fact that no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts. From the people we live with and from the media we use, we acquire schemata which help us recall the past and encode new experience ... In short, we remember in socio-cultural contexts.

It is these “socio-cultural contexts” that appear to have revised the story of Louis and FOC2. That is, in 1938 the United States was still four years away from actually entering World War II and nearly three decades away from making any real civil rights advancement. But looking back on the story of the fight and Joe Louis, these elements seem to have altered the view and, perhaps, tell a story of what should have been.

Out of all three of the case studies in this dissertation, perhaps Maurice Halbwachs’ quote at the beginning of this chapter applies most accurately to the cultural memory of Joe Louis. Halbwachs said:

Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.<sup>653</sup>

Halbwachs used a key word here that works well with the cultural memory of FOC2 and Louis: Prestige. Looking backward it is easy to see that the story of FOC2 and Joe Louis deserved more prestige than they received at the time.

But, as was the case with FOC1 and Jack Johnson, the black press more accurately presented Joe Louis at the time. The presentation of Louis in the white press at the time differs dramatically from the way Louis is remembered today. While the white press was presenting Louis using racist rhetoric, the writers in the black newspapers were

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<sup>653</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice, and Lewis A. Coser. *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press, 1992. P. 51.

presenting Louis as heroic. The presentation of Joe Louis in the black press more accurately describes the Louis that is remembered today.

### **Muhammad Ali and FOC3**

It was the socio-political elements of the Ali versus Frazier fight that were not a tremendous focus of the newspaper coverage of the event at the time it occurred. But the documentary from its title, “One Nation ... Divisible,” forward made the fight a battle between political poles – left against right – and even a racial fight – black against white.

In his essay on how the cultural memory commemorates war, Jay Winter noted that the ending of WWII is commemorated and celebrated in many ways. Winter found that the end of the war in Vietnam really has no such site of memory:

There was no moral consensus about the nature of the conflict; hence there was no moral consensus for what was being remembered in public, and when and where were the appropriate time and place to remember it (Prost).<sup>654</sup>

Could this be why Ali is so closely associated with the war today? He is remembered as a hero for offering an explicit and unpopular public protestation of a war that, overall, was relatively popular at the time,<sup>655</sup> but is now publicly remembered as unpopular. This may be due to the cultural memory vis-à-vis media representations as well. When students get a history lesson about the Vietnam War, film and images of the protests are often front and center. This may be why many today believe the war was always unpopular even though a Gallup poll from the time showed this was not the case. Ali’s anti-war stance can be seen as something about this unpleasant time that can be remembered in a positive light. That is, at a time when the nation was struggling with civil rights and when blood and treasure were being lost on foreign soil for no logical reason, a black man was

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<sup>654</sup> Winter, Jay. “Sites of Memory and the Shadow of War.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, by Astrid Erll et al., Gruyter, Walter De, & Co., 2008, p. 62.

<sup>655</sup> Gallup poll, [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning\\_history/vietnam/vietnam\\_pubopinion.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm), accessed November 1, 2011.

standing up and speaking truth to power – therefore something good *did* come out of that low point in our nation’s history. Again, a self-congratulatory and nationalistic “pat on the back” by the hegemonic white media who, as seen in chapters two and five, often excoriated Ali for his actions and protests at the time.

The same can be said for Louis and his victory over Schmeling. In a nation that gave very little opportunity for its black citizens to flourish, Louis can be presented today as a geo-political warrior who fought for both black and white America in a prescient effort to defeat a white supremacy foe on an international stage. Louis also enlisted in the military and “helped the war effort” by putting on boxing exhibitions, mostly for white soldiers. Again this allows both black and white Americans today to feel particularly good as they commemorate this event. As seen in the film, black Americans can praise Louis as a thumb in the eye to white America: Louis in the role of unappreciated hero who fought to protect the honor of a nation even though at the time the nation regarded him as holding something less than full citizenship. White America can (as with Ali) point to FOC2 and Louis and say that race relations must not have been all *that* bad if the nation could rally behind this African-American man who fought against *real* racism, German white supremacy, in the form of Schemling in the ring.

### **Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier**

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, one of the elements the white media (past and present) incorporated into the telling of the stories of the FOCs was race. And, while the *opponents* in the fights of the century were not the primary focus of this dissertation, in the discussion of race and social identity, Ali’s opponent, Joe Frazier, cannot be ignored. As noted in chapter five, the cultural memory of their fight, vis-à-vis

the documentary film, made it a battle of race and politics. Both fighters authenticity as African-Americans was questioned. Frazier himself, and the film (and on rare occasion the press at the time) were trying to claim that it was Frazier who is more authentically black based on his experience growing up as the poor son of a Southern sharecropper. It was even noted that Frazier had darker skin than Ali – he was literally “blacker.”<sup>656</sup>

Frazier saw himself as someone who was able to achieve the “American Dream,” which perhaps led him into a comfortable position of assimilation. And although Frazier said he considered himself to be “blacker” than Ali, he did not seem to truly embrace his identity as a black man. In his speech to the South Carolina legislature (after his victory over Ali) he said that he really did not consider himself to be either white or black. It is Frazier who, in effect, is offered as the hero in the cultural memory vis-à-vis the HBO documentary about FOC3.

The belief that all any citizen in America, regardless of race or station in life, has to do is work hard and you will achieve the “American dream.” This was even noted in the very first words uttered by the narrator in the HBO film about Joe Louis:

No other place has held out so much hope to so many, or spawned such mythic tales of heroism. No other country has been so defined by its belief that anyone can reach unattainable heights with nothing more than sheer will, hard work and a bit of luck.<sup>657</sup>

At a time when Ali and much of Black America were fighting for equality, Frazier seemed to fall in line with this conventional “bootstrap” belief. That is, all any citizen had to do was pick themselves up, work hard enough and they can achieve fame and fortune in this land of milk and honey. Frazier seemed to be okay with going along and getting

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<sup>656</sup> By, ARTHUR D. "The Mirror Told a Distressing Tale." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Mar 10 1971, p. 49. *ProQuest*. Web. 18 Apr. 2018.

<sup>657</sup> *Joe Louis - America's Hero Betrayed (Documentary)*. HBO, 2008. *YouTube*. YouTube, 07 Dec. 2011. @ 00:00:04. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

along. Not only that, he did not seem to understand why Ali was willing to risk everything and become an outspoken opponent of a system that Frazier felt had treated him just fine. As Frazier said, “To me, it feels like he’s stepping in to politics and that’s a little bit out of my line.”<sup>658</sup> Frazier went on to say: “He’s no leader of black people,” Frazier spouted. “I’m blacker than he is.”<sup>659</sup>

Based on Ali’s experience with Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, he was not comfortable going along – even though he too was living, at least financially, comfortably among the middle class. Perhaps Frazier identified more as a boxer and the heavyweight champion. Based on his experiences Ali identified as black first. As noted in the introduction, W. E. B. Du Bois said that black Americans have to struggle with what he called the “double consciousness.” One as American and one as black American:

One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>660</sup>

During Ali’s imposed exile from boxing he often spoke about the fact that he may be imprisoned and may never box again. His self-identity as a boxer became unimportant to him when he was facing a five-year prison sentence based on his religious stand. His identity as a Muslim and an African-American were the top two elements of his self-identification.

Based on this, perhaps Frazier, the boxer, may have simply identified Ali as a boxer and a boxing opponent first. But when Ali confronted Frazier about his identity as a black man, Frazier had to confront this identity himself. Frazier’s response was not to

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<sup>658</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:09:50).

<sup>659</sup> LEE D JENKINS Daily Defender, Sports Editor. "Frazier Choice to Whip Ali." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1966-1973)*: 25. Mar 08 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

<sup>660</sup> Du Bois W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 11. Print.

try and offer outspoken support for the black community. In fact, as noted in the last chapter, he actually questioned Ali's authenticity in supporting the black community.

As noted above, each fighter's blackness was evident in the film but was also touched on in the press at the time of the fight as well. The white press, like the film, seemed to side with Frazier on this. As noted in chapter five the white press in 1971 perhaps wanted to side with Frazier as a way to support the ideology of the American Dream and the belief that, in the main, whites in America were not racist. That is, Frazier was black and was able to achieve the "American dream." The implication in the film and the white press at the time was, it was not color that was holding black Americans back but a simple lack of motivation and effort. As noted above, Frazier seemed to believe in this as well.

The *black* press was willing to go along with this to some degree as well. Their motivation may have been more about not wanting to be too confrontational because, in 1971, they did not want to set back the small advances in civil rights that had occurred in the recent years. The black press may have also been motivated by a desire to not support division in the ranks of Black America. They, perhaps, wanted to show a high level of cohesiveness within the group. The racial division that was evident between Ali and Frazier could be seen as a sign of weakness in the Black community at a time when strength was existentially important for the group. Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, writing about group cohesiveness and social identity, said:

It is well documented that for all practical purposes the term 'cohesiveness' is used to refer only to interpersonal attraction (Cartwright 1968; Hogg 1985b, 1987; Lott and Lott 1965; McGrath and Kravitz 1982; Turner 1984; Zander 1979). Interpersonal liking becomes 'the "cement" binding together group members' (Schachter *et al.* 1951: 229) and hence the *sine qua non* of psychological group formation or group belongingness: 'without at least a minimal attraction of

members to each other a group cannot exist at all' (Bonner 1959:66; see also Shaw 1981). This rapid restriction of the concept of group cohesiveness has been accompanied by an equally rapid and complete abandonment of its background in Lewinian field theory. What remains is the belief that mutual liking transforms a collection of individuals into a group.<sup>661</sup>

This may also account for why even liberal whites, like Lipsyte - who supported Ali - perceived Ali's rhetoric toward Frazier (as well as Patterson and Terrell) as a potential crack in the cement that bound together African-Americans in 1971. In 21<sup>st</sup> century terminology, in 1971 Ali was "woke," while Frazier and many in the black press (and also liberal whites) simply were not.

Looking at FOC1 and Johnson, and FOC2 and Louis, as noted above, both the men and the battles have been appropriated and re-framed by the contemporary white media and, hence, the cultural memory: Johnson and Louis have been built up to be heroes today. As noted previously in this dissertation, when I introduce news media accounts of Muhammad Ali to freshman college students in my classroom today, many are surprised to learn how the press treated Ali in the 1960s and 1970s. That is, they believe him to be an American icon and a hero today. The example used here, the HBO film about FOC3, does not really match the examples of the cultural memory found in FOCs 1 and 2. The appropriation of Ali in the HBO film does not appear to be a complete one. That is, Ali does not necessarily come across as the hero in the film. It took until Ali's death and the wall-to-wall cable news media coverage of that event for the appropriation of Ali to be complete. Perhaps that is what makes the ultimate difference in the presentation of a black hero in the white media: Their death, or, at the very least, the element of time. The stories of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis are far enough in the past that

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<sup>661</sup> Hogg, Michael A. *Social Identifications*, edited by Dominic Abrams, Routledge, 1998, p. 84.



their presence as a threat to the white status quo has faded while Muhammad Ali's, at least at the time of the HBO film, had not.

Just days after Joe Frazier beat Muhammad Ali in 1971 Bill Nunn, writing for the *Pittsburgh Courier* (BP) was gloating about predicting that Frazier was going to win the match. In what can be seen as extremely prescient in hindsight, Nunn also predicted there would be a re-match and that Ali would win – there was, and he did. Nunn also predicted there would then be a third Ali-Frazier fight – there was. He also predicted that Ali would win his case before the Supreme Court of the United States. Nunn went five for five.<sup>662</sup> When it comes to determining which of the stories seemed to “age better,” the story in the white press or the black press, the example above is one that shows once again that the black press did a better job.

While the stories about the CCTV element of FOC3 did not really carry much weight in the cultural memory, the idea of who was financially benefiting from CCTV did. The white press was very concerned about how this was going to impact the audience for events like the Super Bowl in the future. That is, was everyone going to have to pay to see the big sporting events because of the element of pay to view? The black press focused a great deal of effort prior to the fight reporting on the CCTV element of the event. But the black press was more interested in the economics of the CCTV telecast and how Black America could benefit from the efforts of an event that featured two prominent black actors. The white press complained that CCTV was responsible for what they considered to be the overpayment of athletes, the \$5 million

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<sup>662</sup> NUNN, BILL, J. "CHANGE OF PACE." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, City Edition ed.: 16. Mar 20 1971. *ProQuest*. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

payout that was split between Ali and Frazier.<sup>663</sup> This amount seemed quite fair to Ted Carroll in the *New York Amsterdam News* (BP).<sup>664</sup> In the *News*, Dick Edwards said after the fight, “both men came out of the fight ten feet tall.”<sup>665</sup>

The black press seemed to be more interested in supporting all of Black America and less concerned with the interests of just Ali or Frazier. That is, blacks were not as concerned over which individual fighter won. It appears that because of the massive focus on two great black athletes (and all of the money that was spent, much of which spent by whites, to come see two black men compete), the black press felt black America was a winner either way. Black pride was the winner. And this was particularly relevant in March 1971.

### **In the end**

One thing that can be said about the comparison of the black press to the white press in the archives, like Nunn’s predictions in the *Courier*, the black press, for the most part, got it right. That is, the black press was more likely to present all three men as heroes at the time of each of the FOCS. What was written in the black press is more similar to what the cultural memory has to say about each of the three boxers today. They were, for the most part, presented as heroes at the time of their FOCs. The same could not be said about the presentation of the boxers in the white press at the time. Perhaps this should not be surprising. All three were more likely to be seen as heroic to the black writers and black readers of the black newspapers at the time of each FOC. It took the white media decades to come to these same conclusions.

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<sup>663</sup> Markus, Robert. "Along the Sports Trail." *Chicago Tribune* (1963-Current file), Feb 10 1971, p. 1. ProQuest. Web. 6 May 2018.

<sup>664</sup> Carroll, Ted. "Boxers to make History." *New York Amsterdam News* (1962-1993), Mar 06 1971, p. 32. ProQuest. Web. 6 May 2018.

<sup>665</sup> Edward s, Dick. "All Ali at the Armory." *New York Amsterdam News* (1962-1993): 1. Mar 13 1971. ProQuest. Web. 21 Mar. 2018.

As noted in the introduction in chapter one, one question that this dissertation attempted to answer is, what can be expected of the black press in terms of tone and style when covering the FOCs and the three fighters? And did this tone and style change over the span of time covering the three boxers? Roland Wolseley noted that prior to the 1930s, Johnson's time, the *Chicago Defender* (BP) was more radical in its proclamations about race. Wolseley said that:

After the early 1930s the paper settled down to a modified news policy on racial events a social philosophy asking patience, and moderation in matters of racial change and conflict.<sup>666</sup>

Patrick Washburn said that, unlike the standard of objectivity often attached to the white press, the black press was known for its "advocacy journalism."<sup>667</sup> The founder of the *Chicago Defender* (BP), Robert Abbott, said: "... although the paper must be accurate, there would be no objectivity, because this was an advocacy press."<sup>668</sup> Washburn also noted that the black papers were "outspoken and blunt advocates for blacks."<sup>669</sup>

We could see that the black press did advocate for Jack Johnson and Joe Louis and presented both as heroes in FOC1 and FOC2. And based on the socio-political build-up around the fight presented in the HBO film, we might have expected to find the black press being in full and open support of Muhammad Ali and strongly against Joe Frazier. Oddly, it was Muhammad Ali where we found some black papers not offering full-throated support. This may seem surprising in 1971 with the war and civil rights so culturally prominent. As noted by Wolseley above, the black press often presented a more moderate view when it came to racial change and conflict. But recall what the

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<sup>666</sup> Wolseley, Roland Edgar. *The Black Press, U.S.A.* Ames: Iowa State UP, 1971. P. 8.

<sup>667</sup> Washburn, p. 8.

<sup>668</sup> Washburn, p. 83 (or 84, need to check this to get exact page and see if it is a direct quote from Abbot).

<sup>669</sup> Washburn, p. 6.

*Columbia Journalism Review* said about the black press in 1970 when many black papers were struggling to stay financially afloat:

It [the black press] finds itself trying not to be too conservative for the black revolutionaries, and not too revolutionary for white conservatives upon whom it depends for advertising.<sup>670</sup>

Perhaps the business interest for the paper in 1971 outweighed the papers salience as a vessel for promoting the advancement of the rights of their readers.

This may have had more to do with the fact that both actors in FOC3 were black. That is, whoever won, an African-American was still going to be the heavyweight champion. What we saw in the black press in 1971 is that, for the most part, they did not seem to openly choose sides between Ali and Frazier. Recall the comment made by Jesse Jackson who said, “whomever wins, black people will gain.”<sup>671</sup> And civil rights activist Harry Edwards was quoted from a speech to a white college crowd. He said that both of his men won the fight.<sup>672</sup>

All three of the documentary films featured in this dissertation, at the time of this writing, can be accessed for no cost via Youtube. That is, these texts are all available to anyone who has access to a device and the internet. When it comes to cultural memory and access to media, Astrid Erll said:

More generally, the shape of contemporary media societies gives rise to the assumption that—today perhaps more than ever—cultural memory is dependent on media technologies and the circulation of media products (see Esposito; Rigney; Erll; Zelizer; Zierold: all this volume).<sup>673</sup>

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<sup>670</sup> “The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom.” *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, by Patrick Scott. Washburn and Clarence Page, Northwestern University Press, 2006, pp. 195–195.

<sup>671</sup> Jackson, Rev. J. L. “Country Preacher on the Case.” *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1966-1973)*: 11. Mar 06 1971. ProQuest. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

<sup>672</sup> Edwards, Dick. “All Ali at the Armory.” *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*: 1. Mar 13 1971. ProQuest. Web. 21 Mar. 2018.

<sup>673</sup> Erll, Astrid. “Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook.” *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, by Astrid Erll et al., Walter De Gruyter, 2008, p. 9.

Easy access to these films and the stories of the FOCs and the fighters, I believe, makes them even more salient as instruments of the cultural memory. Although when “Unforgivable Blackness” originally was broadcast it drew a large audience, one had to be watching the Ken Burns documentary at the time and on the channel where it aired on PBS in order to engage with this product. It can now be seen at virtually any time or place. The same can be said of the other two HBO products on Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali. At the time of their original airing viewers needed to pay a subscription fee to their cable or satellite company to access these films. Many, particularly younger, people today are more likely to access video products via a device and Youtube than a home television.

In chapters three and four, it was shown that the cultural memory, vis-à-vis the contemporary films, present Jack Johnson and Joe Louis as heroes. Perhaps the reconstruction today of them as heroes is an attempt by the white hegemonic media, and thus white society, to offer forgiveness to itself for its past actions and/or inactions toward these men, and African-Americans in general (more on this later in the chapter). The presentation of Muhammad Ali in the film was, for the most part, different than Johnson and Louis. Ali, throughout the majority of the film, was more goat than hero. That is, until the very end when boxing writer Burt Sugar said:

And as Ali’s image, and myth, and name, and reputation grew, Joe’s was sure to suffer. The winner that night was the loser. The loser that night was the winner.<sup>674</sup>

It must be considered that Ali was still alive in 2000 when this film was produced.

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<sup>674</sup> Levine, Joe. *Ali Frazier I: One Nation Divisible*, (at 0:54:54).

As with Johnson and Louis, death would eventually bring high acclaim to Ali as well. Several magazines would produce special editions dedicated to Ali upon his passing in June of 2016. *Life* magazine, which had last published as a weekly in 1978, was resurrected to print a 96 page edition titled, “Ali: A Life in Pictures,” after the fighter’s death. *Sports Illustrated*, *Time* and *People* all printed special commemorative editions about the fighter as well. On page 110 of the 112-page tribute to Ali (written by Robert Lipsyte), *Time* quoted Dick Gregory who said:

If people from outer space came to Earth and we had to give them one representative of our species to show them our physical prowess, our spirituality, our decency, our warmth, our kindness, our humor, and most of all our capacity to love—it would be Ali.<sup>675</sup>

Death appears to be the key component in the cultural memory conversion of an individual from heel to hero.<sup>676</sup>

The fact that all three of these men have been historically used as political footballs continues to this day. On May 24, 2018, President Donald Trump granted a pardon to Jack Johnson for his Mann Act conviction, something Ken Burns had lobbied for shortly after completing his documentary film. Trump, known for his own racist political rhetoric against Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players who knelt, stated that Johnson’s conviction had been “racially motivated.”

Once Jack Johnson was no longer champion and had served time for his “crime” of being with white women (once he had been put in his place), white America realized one thing – they would no longer stand for another Jack Johnson. Then, more than 20

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<sup>675</sup> Lipsyte, Robert. “Round 7: the Torchbearer.” *Time*, 6 June 2016, p. 110

<sup>676</sup> I assign a paper about Ali (and media coverage from 1960 to 1971) to undergraduate students at a small, midwestern liberal arts college where I teach. When asked what they think about the coverage of Ali in those days, the answer nearly always comes back that they were surprised about how much Ali was disliked, even hated, at the time. These students, most of whom are freshman, mostly know about the boxer from the coverage of his death in 2016. They believe that he had always been considered to be an icon and a hero.

years later along came Joe Louis. His handlers knew enough to present Joe as the “anti-Johnson.” This allowed him to, at the very least, compete for the title and, to some degree, be accepted by whites. Whites could admire the fact that he was successful as a boxing champion and that Joe seemed to “know his place.” That is, he was not uppity. Although, as could be seen through chapter four, today many believe Joe was more popular among whites at the time than he actually was and even “transcended” race.

Then, Muhammad Ali burst onto the scene. He was as dominant in the ring as Louis and Johnson but more in your face than any athlete before or since. Ali didn’t just subtly question the racial status quo; he was loud, proud and, at times, angry about white hegemony. There was a progression from his time as a humble young man who won an Olympic medal to a more boastful showy fighter to someone who was politically outspoken and disliked by many. As seen in chapter five, this led many in the press to long for the day of a black champion from the mold of Joe Louis.

Again, this is why it has been argued in this dissertation that Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali were more culturally influential on American attitudes toward race and politics than even someone as famously considered as Jackie Robinson. These three heavyweight-boxing champions should be considered, not simply as great athletes, but as black men who made an impact on sport *and* on society, politics and culture in the United States that exists to this day. That is, at the time of Johnson and Louis (1910 and 1938) these men were salient examples in the press of strength and achievement. Johnson was an example that could be shown to be stronger, braver and smarter than the man who was considered the epitome of white supremacy. While Louis possessed similar traits, it took white media several decades for his story to be positioned in the cultural memory

with due respect. Today he is seen as a victorious geo-political warrior for all Americans. And based on his pronouncements about war, religion and race, Ali's impact continues to inspire today. In addition to his socio-political impact, Ali is still relevant as a marketing tool as well. His image, words and voice have been used to sell everything from pizza to sporting equipment. In 2012 Louis Vitton featured a poem by Ali in a video commercial. Ali's words were read by Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def) while calligraphy artist Niels Shoe Meulman painted the word Dream on the canvas of a boxing ring in which both men were standing.<sup>677</sup> While this is certainly an example of more media appropriation, in this case Ali's family gets to share in the profits.<sup>678</sup>

This dissertation has attempted to show that while all three men were both liked and disliked at the time of their big fights, after their deaths, each is presented as being completely heroic. Johnson for overcoming such blatant racism and for being mistreated by the U.S. government; Louis for beating the Nazi-sympathizing Schmeling and for being mistreated by the U.S. government; and Ali for being an outspoken anti-war and civil rights advocate who was unfairly targeted by the U.S. government.

Unlike Ali, Johnson and Louis did not openly make pronouncements about advancing civil rights. For this, many people might not see the importance of Johnson and Louis when compared to Ali. As noted previously, most people cite Jackie Robinson, the first black player in Major League Baseball, as a civil rights sports icon. But the sport in which Johnson and Louis competed - boxing itself - made their contributions more significant than Robinson's. Looking at Robinson and his game, Professor Gerald Early wrote:

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<sup>677</sup> Louis Vitton. "Dream." *YouTube*, 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZG0Vz5Y55vk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZG0Vz5Y55vk).

<sup>678</sup> Sandomir, Richard. "Businesses Explore New Ventures to Cash In on the Muhammad Ali Brand." *New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/sports/businesses-explore-new-ventures-to-cash-in-on-the-muhammad-ali-brand.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/sports/businesses-explore-new-ventures-to-cash-in-on-the-muhammad-ali-brand.html).



All of this was easier to accomplish because Robinson played baseball, a “pastoral” sport of innocence and triumphalism in the American mind, a sport of epic romanticism, a sport whose golden age is always associated with childhood.<sup>679</sup>

Johnson and Louis stood inside a small boxing ring in the center of a large, mostly white, crowded stadium or arena. Johnson and Louis were stripped to the waist exposing for all to see the skin tone of them and their foe. No shirt. No hat. No helmet. As Oates said, one doesn’t play boxing.”<sup>680</sup> They competed with their fists, directly and physically against their white opponents. Not team against team but man to man. The significance of that cannot be overstated.

Muhammad Ali used the foundation provided to him by Johnson and Louis and the podium provided to him as the heavyweight champion to overtly and explicitly promote an argument for racial equality. While Johnson and Louis may have not been making quite as significant of an overt and explicit case as Ali at the time of their fights of the century, their contributions cannot be overlooked. Particularly since the cultural memory has re-imagined each of them today as national heroes.

*Taking a stand and taking a knee*

In 2016, when National Football league quarterback Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel during the pre-game national anthem, many excoriated him. Even though he silently knelt, many reacted by saying he was making too much “noise.” At the time of this writing his NFL contract had expired and he was left unemployed. But the shoe and sports gear corporation Nike saw an opportunity to make money off of Kaepernick’s activism. The tag line for the campaign featuring Kaepernick could easily have been

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<sup>679</sup> Early, Gerald L. “Performance and Reality: Race, Sports, and the Modern World.” *A Level Playing Field*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England, 2011, p. 186, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbt9x.9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbt9x.9).

<sup>680</sup> Oates, 19.

applied to Muhammad Ali in the 1960s – “Believe in Something. Even if it Means Sacrificing Everything.” History is indeed repeating itself.

What does the evidence from these three case studies tell us about the future of Colin Kaepernick, or the next African-American athlete who chooses to use the podium of sport and media to take a stand? This belief, even after everything that has been presented in this dissertation, that sport and politics should not cross boundaries certainly still exists in the debate over Kaepernick’s stand – or, knee. That is, athletes should not present their political views within the “field of play.” Before the start of the 2018 season, the NFL had enacted a new rule, which attempted to do exactly this. This rule states that a player may not kneel in the public’s view during the anthem but the player can choose to stay out of view in the locker room – beyond the field of play.<sup>681</sup> In other words, keep your politics to yourself. The white establishment owns the podium and prefers to maintain their control over that space.

Based on what was presented here can an assumption be made about Kaepernick’s future? Perhaps that he will eventually be presented in the dominant white media as a hero - after his death – and after additional scenes of police brutality against African-Americans are presented in the traditional media over many years. As Shanto Iyengar noted,<sup>682</sup> perhaps when the traditional media presents these events as thematic rather than episodic, then media consumers will understand the motivation behind Kaepernick and his fellow athletes who chose to take a stand by kneeling during the anthem. Kaepernick may even be presented as a hero in a documentary film about his life

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<sup>681</sup> Person. “Roger Goodell’s Statement on National Anthem Policy.” *NFL.com*, National Football League, 23 May 2018, [www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000933962/article/roger-goodells-statement-on-national-anthem-policy](http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000933962/article/roger-goodells-statement-on-national-anthem-policy).

<sup>682</sup> Iyengar, Shanto. “Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty.” *Political Behavior*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1990, pp. 19–40., doi:10.1007/bf00992330.

and his political battle against the white Establishment and the National Football League. That is, once the dominant contemporary media has determined that it is *his* time to be a hero.

As noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, all of this matters because when the creators of contemporary texts, who are often white and exist in places of privilege, choose to tell the stories of black icons, like Johnson, Louis and Ali, they are in effect appropriating the memories of these African-Americans for their own profit and reward. This appropriation is often designed to build these black icons into “all-American” heroes. One result of building these men into heroes is to show White America that it will (eventually) be accepting and appreciate black Americans who were at one time seen as lesser citizens. These black citizens (Johnson, Louis and Ali), who contributed greatly to society and culture, will finally be recognized for their contributions. That is, when the time is finally right White America can, in effect, forgive itself for its past transgressions and then decide it is time to move on.

I believe the contribution of this dissertation to the study of cultural memory and media representation of race is seen in the build-up of the men and their role in the FOCs. That is, one way the white hegemonic media can build up these three men today is to build up the stories about the FOCs. If the producers of the texts are able to add significance to the FOCs as key moments in the nation’s history, they can build up the reputations of the actors involved as key players in these important moments as well. Keep in mind that the presentations of these three men are not offered using rhetoric that would explain that hindsight has made the events more salient. That is, in the films the text does not qualify any of the claims with words like, “looking back today we can now

see the importance of this moment.” These texts declared that the moments were known to be extremely important at the time. As noted in chapter one, Michael Thornton said:

Racial ideology provides lenses to interpret and evaluate events, people, and issues, is rooted in ideas about ability, intellect, emotional disposition, etc., and infuses the process of how culture is publicly presented and, in turn, is related to how society is perceived to be structured.<sup>683</sup>

In the case of Joe Louis, the cultural memory claims that he was the first black, white hope and that, in his battle against Schmeling, Louis was able to transcend race. The newspaper texts showed otherwise. Perhaps this misrepresentation of history has to do with the idea from many that we should simply not talk about the negative elements of our past.

Maybe this is similar to the way that many white Americans today are so apt to pronounce, “get over it” when it comes to a discussion of slavery or colonialism, or any questionable actions in our past. In 1987 plans were underway at the Smithsonian Institution to display the front fuselage of the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan in 1945. Controversy erupted over a plan to show a graphic photo of ground zero that showed melted lunchboxes and incinerated bodies. The exhibit would also call into question the need to drop the bomb in the first place. This telling of a historical moment became marred in controversy with many criticizing the way the story would be told. U.S. Representative, Newt Gingrich said of the plan: “Americans are sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country.”<sup>684</sup>

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<sup>683</sup> Thornton, Michael C. "Policing the Borderlands: White-and Black-American Newspaper Perceptions of Multiracial Heritage and the Idea of Race, 1996–2006." *Journal of Social Issues* 65.1 (2009): 106.

<sup>684</sup> Post, Robert C. *Who Owns America's Past?: The Smithsonian and the Problem of History*. S.L.: Johns Hopkins Univ, 2017. pp. xii-xiv. Print.

In a question and answer session in the *Austin American Statesman* when his film was about to air, Ken Burns noted this same phenomenon.

You know, I get hate mail -- not a lot, but enough that it's disturbing. Mail that says, "Why are you bringing this up. You must be a (racial slur) lover." And I go, "This proves that it isn't over, that we haven't solved this question."<sup>685</sup>

Those writing letters to Burns, like Gingrich, seem to prefer to not even mention the skeletons in the closet, which they prefer be closed and locked away. Even though the nation and the government mistreated Johnson, Louis and Ali, it is more comforting to see them as heroic today – to prove “we learned our lesson.” Not only for their accomplishments as boxing champions but because they were able to, for the most part, overcome their mistreatment. Does the hegemonic white media want to present their mea culpa as a way to say, we admitted our mistake, so now we can move on? Perhaps it is also a way for the establishment to say, “get over it.” Once the mea culpa is announced and the problem “solved,” then we can be expected to pretend the mistakes are all behind us. But have we learned, or is the coverage of Kaepernick in news media today showing that we are destined to repeat these same mistakes? Will the white hegemonic media continue to portray politically active black athletes using racist rhetoric until years later when *they* determine that the athlete is, in fact, finally due to be presented as a hero?

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<sup>685</sup> Buchholz, Brad. “THE GREAT CONTRADICTION; A Conversation about America, Race and 'Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson' with Documentary Filmmaker Ken Burns.” *Austin American Statesman*, 15 Jan. 2005, p. e1.

