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Boxing Darwin's Shadow: Jack Johnson and Joe Louis's Historical Challenges to American Racism

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

If the enemy leaves a door open, you must rush in.
– Sun Tzu

In any society there are always certain individuals who emerge to challenge and point out the problems that exist within social structures. These individuals come from different walks of life and often emerge from the most unexpected portions of society. While such people are not always able to effect change on their own, they serve the purpose of focusing the public discourse on the structures and ideologies that most need attention and restructuring. Their inability to bring about the change on their own is due to the fact that such social critiques are routinely met with resistance from those who benefit from the existing societal structure. This dynamic can be summarized in the Newtonian law which suggests that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. This project is a study of two individuals who challenged racism in America and the societal reactions aimed at countering those challenges. Jack Johnson and Joe Louis were two boxers who were able to challenge a racial ideology based on white supremacy through symbolic action within the boxing ring. The media emerged as the primary force in opposing the boxers' symbolic challenges. I will argue that despite the media's attempt to lessen the impact of the boxers' symbolic threat, Johnson and Louis were able to create a symbolic space which revealed the inconsistencies of white supremacist ideology. An examination of the media's reaction to these boxers allows for a deeper understanding of the forces at work in the creation of social change.

In order to fully set the stage for this examination it is important to consider two theoretical foundations which were integral to both boxers. Firstly, the sport of

boxing occupied a unique space in the social imaginary and provided a unique set of symbolism which was fully utilized in the boxers' challenges to the racial order. Secondly, the use of Social Darwinism as the theoretical and scientific justification of white superiority proved to be the underlying target of the boxers' symbolic attacks. In order to see the connection between boxing and Social Darwinism, it is important to first understand each in the context of American history.

From the earliest years of its existence America had to struggle over how to deal with issues of race. For hundreds of years, America's agricultural industry survived and even thrived on the backs of black slave labor. While blacks were the key functionaries in the early agricultural system they were also viewed as the societal outcasts and ontological others. Black slaves were transformed into an animalistic race of beings that were subhuman and needed the civilizing and domesticating force of slavery to save their worthless lives. When slavery finally came to an end with the Emancipation Proclamation and the conclusion of the Civil War, it was eventually replaced with a system of intense oppression and violence. Any and all attempts on the part of blacks to demonstrate their equality or superiority were quickly squashed. Institutional oppression continued and blacks were prevented from demonstrating their equality throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of the most common, yet often unheralded, ways for blacks to circumvent the oppressive system was through sport. Athletic competition proved to be a venue in which blacks could compete on reasonably equal grounds and thus create a new social narrative that placed them on equal footing with whites.

Sport has come to fill many different roles in society. It is not only seen as a competition between two athletes or groups of athletes, but also as a form of entertainment and a breeding ground for identity construction. Modern boxing is unlike many other sports in that it focuses on two individuals in a small and confined space, engaged in an epic battle to physically overpower the opponent. The two boxers find themselves on an elevated platform, with spotlights shining on their sparsely covered bodies; with no one to come to their aid should they falter. These competitors are left to fend for themselves in a ring where they are confronted with an opponent who has as his sole purpose the other's total and complete destruction. Despite the rules of the sport, boxing remains one of the most primitive forms of athletic competition as it highlights the basic human instinct of survival and self-defense.

In the process of this physically taxing battle, the competitors' identities are created, exotified, and commodified for the sake of its audience. The boxers in the small ring are the object of the audience's gaze and have no ability to vocalize and describe their identities as they are limited to conveying their identity through fistic action. The fighters are reduced to using their bodies as weapons against their opponents for the enjoyment of the onlookers. Due to the inability of the boxers to have complete control over their identities, boxing serves as both an interesting and troubling sport for black Americans to take part in because their bodies and identities have historically been exotified and commodified in a similar way. During slavery, blacks were exploited and oppressed for the sake of their bodies as opposed to their intellect or any other attributes. As a result, the black slave's body becomes a

desirable commodity, which parallels the fascination with the physicality of the black male body when it steps in to the ring. The level of emphasis that is placed on the boxer's physicality and masculinity is unrivaled in sports and has played a significant role in society's ability to accept these athletes as tolerable public figures. In a sport such as boxing where only certain athletes receive significant public support, questions arise as to who decides which boxers are acceptable and what criteria are used to gauge the athlete's acceptability. One way of addressing these questions is to examine the pages of print media as they often serve as the battleground of public opinion, where the media and the public can voice their opinions. The symbolism inherent in the sport and the ability of the media and sporting audience to stress or overlook the physicality of any given fighter leaves the fate of that boxer's long-term legacy in doubt.

One of the attributes that is most valued and most apparent in the sport of boxing is the physicality of its fighters. In his book entitled *The Beauty of Sport* Benjamin Lowe writes, in part, about the centrality of the athletic form in sport. Lowe writes, "The athlete, as representative of the 'best' human physique, brings his natural beauty to the sport domain. It is the acceptance of this feature of nature, the athlete as ideal form, based on the equal acceptance that there is beauty in nature, which tends to make it axiomatic that sport is beautiful in natural terms."[1] What Lowe's statement points out is that the beauty of the athletic form places the body as a form of nature or natural beauty. This description positions the physical athlete closer to nature, which is often an undesirable position to be in because one runs the risk of being considered subhuman and animal-like. While some sports may have the

[1] Benjamin Lowe, *The Beauty of Sport* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 12.

ability to distance themselves from the stigma of being "close to nature," boxing has its roots in a seemingly natural form of expression. In describing the sport of prizefighting, author John Dudley writes that boxing is a contest for "physical and strategic domination between two men, a reenactment of an instinctive, primal struggle for survival."[2] Similarly, Robert Edgren places boxing in a longstanding historical tradition when he notes that, "The same combative spirit that animated the cave man can be seen at every glove fight that takes place in a modern ring."[3] What these two statements suggest is that boxing thrives on the primal instincts in humans and is far from being a high-class or civilized sport. The direct links that Dudley and Edgren make to boxing's primitiveness delegitimizes the sophisticated physicality of the athletes as they are simply represented as having the same primal urges as cavemen.

Not only is the boxer's body perceived as a key part of a primitive struggle, it also becomes the sole focus of the fighter's training efforts. The goal is to mold the body into its perfect form so that the fighter will be in the best position to compete against any and all opponents. Therefore, the combatants are forced into a position in which they must cultivate their physicality and masculinity for a contest that portrays them as possessing only a primitive form of beauty. Joyce Carol Oates points out that boxing is one instance in which the ideal athletic form is closely tied to the athlete's own personal identity as well as the sport itself. Oates notes that, "Like a dancer, a boxer 'is' his body, and is totally identified with it."[4] The boxer's success is wholly

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[2] John Dudley, "Inside and Outside the Ring: Manhood, Race, and Art in American Literary Naturalism," *College Literature* 29.1 (Winter 2002): 54.
[3] Robert Edgren, "Fighters By Nature," *Amateur Athletic Foundation* 43 no.3 (Dec 1903): 343.
[4] Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Garden City, NY: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987), 5.

dependent on his ability to manage and manipulate his body in the ring without anything or anyone to aid him. While boxing requires a focus on the physical, it also ties the boxer's identity to that physicality, thus reinforcing the belief that black boxers were little more than a natural and physical form of being. This tethering of identity to physicality can be problematic because it does not allow these fighters to exist outside of their physical form. In essence, the black boxers are perceived as incapable of substantive thought and are rendered voiceless, apart from any messages they can convey through their physical actions.

As a result of the focus on the physical, it would seem as though boxing would be an unpopular sport marked by brutish pugilism. Despite the potential logic of this assumption, boxing actually proved to be a very popular sport. Part of the reason for this popularity was the extreme masculinity displayed by the fighters in the ring and the desire on the part of audience members to capture and internalize some of that masculinity for themselves. In the case of sport, and boxing in particular, there is a unique relationship between the object and the observer. In a strange way, the audience "found in them [the boxers] a confirmation of their own manliness and position in society."[5] The fight had become a form of entertainment that allowed the spectator to identify himself with the masculine exhibition taking place in the ring while also maintaining a degree of separation from the uncivilized actions of the boxers. In this respect the spectators had the best of both worlds in that they could integrate the masculinity of boxing into their own identity without having to incorporate the primal features of the sport's history. Dudley notes that in the late nineteenth century, the male body was increasing in importance and the societal elites

[5] Dudley, 54.

saw the "primitiveness as a necessary corrective to their increasingly sedentary lives."[6] This only complicates the relationship between the boxer and the upper-class spectator because it creates a condescending and codependent relationship between the two parties. On the one hand, the boxer requires the interest of the spectator in order to make his skilled fighting a successful financial venture. On the other hand, the social elite and intellectuals depended on the primitive masculinity inherent in boxing to compensate for their own lack of masculinity. This was not an equal relationship because the boxers were being portrayed as inferior and primitive, yet they were seen to possess a quality which was sorely lacking and highly valued among portions of the social elite.

While the boxers exhibited a masculinity that drew spectators in to the sport, it was important that the spectators also keep their distance because of the interconnection between boxing symbolism and Social Darwinism. The stress boxing placed on the physicality and masculinity of its participants while also opening itself up to connections with primitiveness, fits nicely into the parameters of Social Darwinist thought. As two fighters would throw punches at each other until one proved his physical superiority, the combatants were also engaging in the Darwinian idea of "survival of the fittest." According to Dudley, the boxing ring was the "perfect ground for the Social Darwinism so prevalent during the progressive era."[7] In this respect, boxing posed a significant threat to the social hierarchy in American society. Boxing was a sport dominated by lower and working class individuals who used the sport to "demonstrate physical prowess and manliness and to gain

[6] Dudley, 58.
[7] *Ibid*, 64.

recognition which bureaucratic occupations did not always supply."[8] The very fact that the social elites had to rationalize boxing to the point where they had placed themselves above the sport, with regard to sophistication, demonstrated their insecurity in this realm of physical combat. The Social Darwinian overtones of the sport make boxing a place in which people could transcend and, to some degree, change existing social hierarchies. If those on the bottom of the social ladder defeated those higher on the ladder, then the rational justification for the social hierarchy would be eliminated and a new social order would have to be constructed. The symbolism that is inherently intertwined with boxing matches exposes inconsistencies in social hierarchies and social ideologies, especially regarding race and class. In a society which affixes different values and characteristics to people of different races and socioeconomic classes, any action which disproves the existing ideologies serves as a challenge to the continued existence of these seemingly unfounded beliefs. Thus, boxing theoretically has the potential to effect social change and eliminate racial and class barriers that exist in sport, and society at large.

In order to comprehend the full connection between boxing and Social Darwinism it is important to understand the original context which gave rise to Social Darwinist thinking. One of the ideas that is central to Social Darwinism is the notion of evolution. While he was not the only scientist to come up with ideas of evolution, Charles Darwin is often credited with making such concepts part of the public vernacular. When Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, he, like all other scientists, was trying to understand the world in which he lived. He did not set out to explain how humans had changed over time, but rather to explain how the world

[8] *Ibid*, 56.

came to be populated with such a great variety of plants and animals. It was from this scientific inquiry that he was able to articulate his theory of evolution. In this theory of evolution, Darwin recognized that new species arise through a process of selection in which an organism's most advantageous traits are passed on to its progeny which eventually leads to new species.[9] In order for his theory to function properly it was based on three premises: "The first was that all organisms reproduce, the second was that even within a given species each organism differed slightly from any other, and the third was that all organisms competed for survival."[10] While Darwin's belief in this natural selection process was primarily aimed at explaining the existence of plant and animal life, there were many connections that could be made to humanity. Darwin stayed away from making any connection to humans in *The Origin of Species*, but that did little to stop others from making the connections for him.

One of the most prominent figures who made a distinct connection between Darwin's theory of evolution and humans was Herbert Spencer. Spencer was able to adapt Darwin's plant-and animal-based notion of evolution to the social and cultural arena of humanity. He felt that "human societies, like biological species, operate according to the principles of natural selection, are governed by competition and fitness, and evolve from an undifferentiated (homogeneous) and primitive state to one of differentiation (heterogeneity) and progress."[11] This adaptation of evolution has a clear and direct connection to Darwin's theory in that Spencer touches on Darwin's three founding premises. Another way in which Spencer spoke of evolution was as

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[9] Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 24.
[10] Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 6.
[11] Dennis M. Rutledge, "Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race," *Journal of Negro Education* 64 no. 3 (1995): 244.

"the survival of the fittest," which was a phrase he penned in 1874.[12] This notion of the fittest surviving is an idea which has an immensely ambiguous quality about it. At first glance, the concept seems to suggest that the more rugged and well-equipped of a given species will ultimately survive and pass on those desirable traits to its offspring, thus creating superior progeny. While such an understanding of the concept might be adequate for certain plant and animal species, a number of questions remain unanswered when it comes to humans. How does one determine what traits are desirable and what constitutes "fittest?" Due to humans' vast capabilities of thought, reasoning, and communication, there are a great many qualities or traits which could be considered desirable. Unlike some other animals, humans have found ways of surviving without relying strictly on physical traits such as speed and strength. Because there is no obvious or clearly-defined hierarchy of desirable traits for humans, a need for such a hierarchy arises if Spencer's application of Darwinian theory was to take hold.

It is from this point that Social Darwinism emerges as a slightly different take on Darwin's evolutionary theory, or Darwinism. What Social Darwinism does that Darwinism does not is claim that the scientific "determinism extends to not just the physical properties of humans but also to their social existence and to those psychological attributes that play a fundamental role in social life, e.g. reason, religion and morality."[13] While the notion of Social Darwinism, in and of itself, does not create a hierarchy of social and physical traits, it can easily be adapted to support such a hierarchy. In other words, Social Darwinism could be used as a way of

[12] *Ibid*.
[13] Hawkins, 31.

justifying a hierarchy and maintaining a specific power structure if there was such a structure that needed justification. Rather than being an impartial scientific fact, Social Darwinist thought had all the makings of being used as a form of social control and creating a rational basis for power. One of the most obvious applications of Social Darwinism in America was as a means of justifying slavery and reinforcing white European dominance over blacks and other racial minorities. All that was needed to use Social Darwinism to achieve these goals was to construct a hierarchy of traits and characteristics which placed Europeans above any and all others. This idea of creating a hierarchy, however, was a departure from the objectivity of science and instead an instance of positioning and manipulating scientific theories to justify a preconceived social order. The hierarchy was "designed to prove European and White American superiority over Africans, Native Americans, Asians, and Latin Americans…. The Social Darwinist argument was used to prove and validate already existing institutional structures."[14]

In constructing the basis for the social order, the first step was to create some sort of system by which people could be differentiated. Skin color was used as a means of differentiation as early as 1684 by Francois Bernier when he attempted to separate humans into roughly six distinct groups.[15] After race became the common means of differentiating people, an entire ideology had to be constructed such that "the Negro was at the bottom and the white man at the top."[16] This was the easy part of the process, as all that was need was for people to adopt any sort of ideology that

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[14] Rutledge, 245.
[15] Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (Williamsburg, VA: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 217.
[16] *Ibid*, 226.

degraded blacks without also doing so to whites. One of the most widespread beliefs seemed to be that blacks were closer to Apes than they were to whites. In essence, blacks were pushed to the extreme outer edge of human classification and only a thin line separated them from a beast or animal. By portraying blacks as savages and animals, whites were able to use slavery as a means of reinforcing the baseless claims of blacks' animalistic nature. During slavery, blacks were treated as animals and savages which ultimately reinforced the belief that they were subhuman and that they deserved to be on the bottom of the social hierarchy. This created somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy as "The everyday buying and selling and deeding and trading of slaves underscored the fact that Negroes, just like horses, were walking pieces of property."[17] Blacks' social position as animals and pieces of property reduced them to merely physical beings with no social capacity.

What the evolution of Social Darwinism clearly highlights is its malleability and adaptability to fit ever-changing circumstances while continuing to justify the existing power structure. The ideology of Social Darwinism required the creation of a hierarchy of desirable traits and attributes. In addition, if one is to follow the theory's rationale of natural selection, the lowest group in the hierarchy will increasingly dwindle in number and eventually become extinct. Inherent in Darwinism is a fluid notion of progress in which people at all levels of the social order are advancing and evolving, which would mean that those on the bottom would never be equal to those on the top. In the case of the racial hierarchy, whites will always remain at the top of the hierarchy because they possess the most desirable traits and are constantly passing those on to their progeny. Another reason for the

[17] Winthrop, 233.

continued stability of the social order is the fact that those at the top are in the positions to determine what is deemed to be "the fittest" and the most "desirable" traits. According to natural selection, those who are in power must be in power because they are the fittest and are superior to those who are not in power. Therefore, Social Darwinism can be used to justify current hierarchies while also being able to accommodate new reasons for the superiority of those in power.

An example of the ability for Social Darwinism to adapt to changing standards involves the emergence of intelligence testing. In 1905, Alfred Binet and Théophile Simon created the first "practical intelligence test," which was eventually altered and became known as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale.[18] The test was originally designed to measure sensory and motor skills in an attempt to "prove inherent differences between the social classes in England."[19] From the outset, the test was designed as a means of reinforcing contemporary social hierarchies rather than supplying data from which an underlying truth would be uncovered. The test was essentially altered and tweaked until it supported the superiority of upper-class whites and the inferiority of lower-class whites and minorities. Binet and Simon's test "did not create or cause racial discrimination or oppressive behavior; it simply enabled certain Whites to better justify long-standing ideological assumptions, policies and oppressive behaviors."[20] The case of testing demonstrates that the social power hierarchy had received a new means of justification that revolved around intelligence. The Social Darwinist idea of the fittest being at the top of the social order had just received a slight alteration, as intelligence was now a highly valued trait that

[18] Rutledge, 246.
[19] *Ibid*.
[20] *Ibid*, 247.

separated whites at the top from blacks at the bottom. The apparent objectivity of the tests gave intelligence an aura of validity as the superiority of whites could be proved based on the results of the tests.

One of the first tests of the validity of white supremacy came in the first decade of the twentieth century with the rise of the first dominant black heavyweight boxer. Jack Johnson exploded onto the American sporting scene as an embodiment of nearly everything that whites despised and feared about blacks. Johnson was a physically menacing figure inside and outside the ring who dominated his opponents while also demeaning and embarrassing them in the process. Johnson's legendary defeat of the white Tommy Burns in 1908 obliterated the notion of white superiority in the boxing ring. While the fight created a significant stir across the country because it was "a reversal of race privilege," that brought shame to whites and pride to blacks, it did not ultimately eliminate prejudice or discrimination in America.[21] Despite the fact that it did not create equality between the races, Johnson's win did create a crisis in the Social Darwinist notion of survival of the fittest and the justification of whites remaining at the top of the social power structure. The creation of intelligence tests around this same time period provided an opportunity for intelligence to be made more salient as a justification for the social hierarchy. These tests were not created as a direct response to the threat of boxers like Johnson, but rather as another alternative way to justify white superiority according to a new characteristic: intelligence. As it pertained to boxing, the tests served as a backup to white superiority in the event that black physicality proved superior to white physicality. While Johnson posed a monumental threat to any notion of white

[21] Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 30.

physical dominance over blacks, the intelligence tests provided a way for whites to remain in power while also downplaying the importance of physicality in the evolutionary process.

It is with this understanding of boxing and Social Darwinism that one can begin to see the reasons why the sport of boxing, more than many others, posed a formidable social challenge to a racial ideology founded on Social Darwinism. The ability for Social Darwinist thinking to adapt to nearly any situation and still maintain the same power relations is a testament to the pseudoscientific nature of Social Darwinism as well as the difficulty in overcoming hierarchies based on race. While Social Darwinism had adapted to new justifications for white superiority it could not entirely prove white superiority because history was proving that blacks were not becoming extinct, despite their "inferior" traits. What was taking place within the ideology of white superiority was the elimination of physicality from the domain of white superiority. As a result, the physicality of blacks was used as a justification for their inferiority while intelligence was the trait on which whites had a complete monopoly. Rather than being seen as representative of masculinity and power, physicality was transformed into a way of connecting blacks to subhuman creatures. Frantz Fanon notes the way blacks were symbolically created when he writes, "The Negro symbolizes the biological danger.… To suffer from a phobia of Negroes is to be afraid of the biological. For the Negro is only biological. The Negroes are animals. They go about naked."[22] It is important to note the similarities between the portrayal of blacks as animals and the way Lowe describes the body as being close to

[22] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 165.

nature. In both cases, the athlete and the black person are equated with the physical, the natural, and as a result, the subhuman.

While attempts were still made to use physicality in a derogatory manner, boxing provided an opportunity for blacks to transform what had been a limitation into a form of social empowerment. Joyce Carol Oates picks up on this very point when she writes that "boxing may be a way of cruelly assaulting one's self but it is most immediately a way of transcending one's fate."[23] In this respect, the similarities between the stigma of boxing and blackness created an opportunity for social change as it was a way for blacks to show their dominance over whites in at least one aspect of social life.

While boxing may very well be an avenue for social change, the effectiveness of the sport depends on the ability of people to equate boxing with the destruction of these social barriers. One way of maintaining the social hierarchy, while also allowing blacks to participate in boxing, was to focus on the physicality of the fighters and connect it with the racially inferior overtones that physicality had connoted. One instance in which the mixture of race and boxing are prominently displayed is in the description of the fight between Joe Louis and Tommy Farr in 1937. According to the first round description by the *Daily Sketch*:

> It was obvious that Farr's intention was to keep Louis moving. He did not intend to allow the negro to get positioned to let out his "murderous" left. Farr again went in and narrowly missed Louis's chin. The negro retaliated by shooting out his left aimlessly. Farr nipped in quickly and scored with a one-two punch to the head and body, and Louis replied with a left to the face.[24]

[23] Oates, 64.
[24] "Description of Fight," *Daily Sketch*, 31 August 1937.

One of the most striking aspects of this excerpt is the way in which Louis, the black fighter, is depicted as being dangerous and having a "'murderous' left." This choice of descriptive language could have been on account of Louis being the heavyweight champion, but there is no mention in the passage about Louis being anything other than a "negro." One of the effects of the needless use of "the negro" in place of "Louis" is that it distances the reader from Louis and portrays him as a somewhat anonymous and distant figure because his identity *is* his blackness rather than his name. While there are no overly egregious instances in which Louis is portrayed as subhuman, the general tone of the article focuses on the physical nature of the fight and not the fact that a Louis victory would have undermined the believed superiority of the white race. By focusing on the action and pugilistic aspect of the fight rather than the larger implications of the fight, attention is diverted away from boxing's ability to act as a force for social change.

Boxing occupies a unique space in the social imaginary as it is celebrated as an elite form of athletic competition while also being linked to the primitiveness of human nature. While athletic competition values the civilized creation of an ideal physique, boxing complicates the entire sporting world by creating a somewhat controlled, yet barbaric, fight to the death. Boxing is the rare combination of skill and grace with brutish violence. Many might argue that boxing is nothing but an opportunity to promote violence. In a radio show about boxing, reporter Stephen Brunt said "It doesn't look quite real. But the first time someone bleeds; or the first time you see someone hit and you see the pain in their face… or when one person is

hurt and you see the surge in the other athlete trying to put him away, [you see] the killer instinct, the aggression, that's bred out of us."[25]

Despite the presence of violence and brutality, the hyper-masculine nature of the sport creates an opportunity to expose and exploit upper-class deficiencies in order to create a more equitable society. Through a Darwinian struggle for survival, boxing becomes a sort of proving ground for different social classes to disprove notions of racial or class inferiority. More specifically, "The 'danger' of boxing at that time [1908] – and one of the reasons worried citizens wanted to abolish it – was that it might expose and humiliate white men in the ring."[26] The threat to white masculinity was not something that was limited to the beginning of the twentieth century with Jack Johnson, but continued well into the heart of the century with figures such as Joe Louis.

Both Jack Johnson and Joe Louis had to combat their opponents, a racially oppressive system, and an ideology in Social Darwinism that was able to adapt to different situations and provide justifications for white superiority. While the social circumstances and historical context surrounding Johnson and Louis were different, both used boxing as a way to break down the racial barriers for themselves as well as for many other blacks in America at the time. Even though boxing was a sport that demanded the same emphasis on physicality that was expected of blacks during slavery, Johnson and Louis were able to transcend the stereotypes and expose the contradictions in a system which functioned on the premise of white superiority, yet continued to witness black boxers dismantle their white opponents. Examining the

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[25] Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 166.
[26] Oates, 97.

life, career, and public reception of these two fighters not only demonstrates the importance of these figures in the struggle for racial equality in America, but also reveals the social responses which were used to alleviate the threat posed by these boxers. A comparison between the two boxers offers insight into the role of boxing and racial stereotypes in allowing for the rise of such dominant black athletes and the eventual challenges they posed to the system. While neither individual provided the theory or philosophical justification for equality, they did serve as the symbolic actions which forced society to constantly reexamine the social order. They did not show society a way to necessarily resolve the social inequalities, but they did reveal the inconsistencies in the American racial ideology to the world. The racial ideology at that point had placed whites on top due to a perceived superiority in all aspects of life. These two fighters were able to use their fists to suggest to society that the physical and masculine realm was one area of life in which whites were not consistently superior. Furthermore, if blacks could demonstrate their dominance over whites in certain things, how could whites continue to justify the maintenance of social structures that segregated the races and subordinated blacks? Johnson and Louis's success forced society to pay attention to the threat they posed to the social order and either reformulate new justifications for the ideology or allow it to completely crumble. Jeffrey Sammons notes that the "physical man stands for the potential of the individual and the survival of the fittest. He is the embodiment of the American Dream."[27] Black boxers' rise to the top of the sport opened the American Dream up to the black community because of the fact that their success in the sport had turned them into the physical or natural man. Nowhere in the American scene is

[27] Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 3.

the physical man more evident than in the boxing ring, which is where one would find the likes of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis.

With an understanding of the symbolic role of boxing and Social Darwinism in society, chapter two examines Jack Johnson the individual. In this chapter I argue that Johnson's unwillingness to conform to standards of white acceptability made him the subject of white fear and hate as well as enabled him to command a significant amount of national attention as a dominant boxer. In addition, the chapter shows how Johnson intentionally cultivated a flashy and confrontational image to toy with white fears and attract more public attention to his bouts.

Chapter three looks at the media's reaction to Johnson's position as a symbolic and dominant boxer. In this chapter I argue that the media response to different bouts correlated to the level of threat Johnson posed to continued white supremacy. I argue that Johnson's bouts against black boxers and unknown white boxers typically elicited non-racialized media responses. I also suggest that widely publicized bouts against popular white boxers resulted in racial attacks on Johnson as a means of protecting the racial ideology from any further damage.

From there, chapter four turns to Joe Louis and provides a brief historical analysis of his life and the social context that existed when he emerged on the boxing scene. This chapter argues that Louis's fluid identity was a direct result of his handlers' efforts to create a publicly acceptable black boxer. In addition, it was his acceptability which enabled him to challenge the racial ideology by representing America and the American military.

Chapter five examines the way the media dealt with Louis and his symbolic domination of his competition. In this chapter I argue that his acceptable public image deflected the public criticism during his time as an American symbol during his fights with Schmeling and time in the military. The absence of extreme criticism allowed Louis to remain in the national spotlight for a longer period of time and thus continue to challenge the existing ideology from his status as a national symbol.

Chapter six attempts to bridge the generational gap between the two fighters by bringing them together in order to better understand the process of social change. In this chapter I argue that Johnson and Louis's contrasting images were crucial in challenging the social order because they attacked the racial ideology on different fronts. In addition, I suggest that lasting social change was not achieved due to a combination of Johnson and Louis's limited social influence and the media response to their symbolic achievements.

With the increasing shift toward forms of scientific racism in America at the end of the nineteenth century, Social Darwinism surfaced as a seemingly sound justification for white supremacy. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, boxing emerged as an unlikely symbolic challenger to Social Darwinist thought. The symbolism inherent in the sport made it nearly the perfect battle ground to act out the survival of the fittest notions originally laid out by Charles Darwin and his contemporaries. The stage was set for an epic battle between black boxers and the racial ideology guarded by Social Darwinism. The only thing still needed were black boxers to accept the challenge and take on the racial ideology and its formidable protector.

Chapter 2: Fear Incarnate: Jack Johnson and His Times

The clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but
does not allow the enemy's will to be imposed on him.
– Sun Tzu

By many accounts Jack Johnson was not the most morally acceptable person to have ever captured the public's attention and imagination. In many respects, Johnson was the living embodiment of what black men were not supposed to be in the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite the public's obvious moral aversion to Johnson, there was something about him that continued to demand attention. If one were to imagine the ideal person to break some of the most rigid color barriers in the sport of boxing, few would likely conjure up images of a flashy, outspoken, brazen black man with an insatiable craving for white women. A character such as this would likely attract a significant amount of public ire and make countless enemies at a time when those fighting against the racist system could use as many allies as possible. At a time in American history when Jim Crow segregation was becoming increasingly entrenched in the culture, how was it that such an objectionable black man was able to challenge the racism in sport and society? Was Johnson's controversial character the very reason that he was able to challenge the racial hierarchy in boxing, or was he able to accomplish these feats in spite of his character? Based solely on his ability as a boxer, Johnson was the heavyweight champion of the world without question. However, this is only one part of the picture because it does not take into account the social and cultural barriers that stood between blacks and success in America, let alone the sporting world. There was something about Johnson, apart from his boxing prowess, that allowed him to become the first black

heavyweight champion in a society consumed by segregation, oppression, and inequality. In analyzing Johnson's rise to the pinnacle of the boxing world, it is important not to interpret Johnson's unique and controversial character as an impediment, but rather as an aid to his success. In an attempt to understand how it was possible for Johnson to conquer the boxing world, it is crucial to look beyond his most publicized fights in 1908 and 1910 (against Tommy Burns and Jim Jeffries respectively) to see him as an individual and not just a boxer. Johnson's impact stretched outside the ringed confines of boxing, and therefore it is important to examine not only his accomplishments in the ring, but outside as well.

John Arthur Johnson, the man who later came to be known as Jack Johnson, was born March 31, 1878 in Galveston, Texas.[1] His birth came only one year after Reconstruction had ended in America and southern whites were reclaiming positions of power and restricting the rights that blacks had gained after the Civil War. As a result, Johnson was born into a world of drastic political change as southern whites were attempting to remain in power without the crutch of slavery to support them. The racial and political atmosphere of the time created a scenario in which all of the odds were against Johnson having any sort of successful career, let alone one in the public spotlight. Despite these societal obstacles, Johnson was able to finish fifth grade before he left school in search of employment.[2] It was only when he acquired a janitorial position at a gymnasium that he really became interested in the sport of boxing.[3] For a young black boy interested in sports in the late nineteenth century, there were very few black athletes to admire and emulate. Johnson scoured the

[1] Lerone Bennet Jr., "Jack Johnson and the Great White Hope," *Ebony*, 60.3 (January 2005): 111.
[2] Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975): 10.
[3] Ibid.

athletic world for a sport with a gifted black star, and the first sport he looked to was not boxing. Johnson began by idolizing the black horse-jockey Isaac Murphy and then moved on to the famed cyclist Marshall "Major" Taylor.[4] It is important to note that Johnson was by no means a small man. In fact, he was quite a large individual from an early age, which was not conducive to the demands of being a jockey or cyclist. Even professional baseball was not a good fit at that time because no blacks were allowed on the teams.[5] With the lack of prominent black athletes to emulate, Johnson's position at the local gymnasium filled that void and brought him into contact with a sport in which he could excel and make a niche for himself.

The gymnasium Johnson worked at was owned by the German heavyweight Herman Bernau.[6] Not only was Johnson able to be in a boxing atmosphere and experience part of the culture firsthand, but Bernau also allowed Johnson to use the weights and hit the bags after he had completed his work.[7] This inside exposure to the world of boxing ignited Johnson's passion and inspired him to purchase two pairs of boxing gloves.[8] One might think it strange that Johnson purchased two pairs as opposed to just one. However, Johnson thought this through and decided that the second pair would not be used by him, but rather by the people he challenged on the streets. As Johnson's list of impromptu sparring partners grew, so did his reputation as the most skilled black boxer in Galveston. Johnson was clearly gifted when it came to the demands of the sport as "he was fast and hard to hit… and he already

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[4] Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004): 13.
[5] Ibid, 12.
[6] Ibid, 13.
[7] Gilmore, 10.
[8] Ibid.

displayed the brash, taunting style he would later make famous."[9] While a great deal of his skill likely came from natural ability and practice in Bernau's gymnasium, some suggest that his fighting skills developed as a necessity for surviving the dock work and other various jobs he had before finding work at the gymnasium.[10]

Johnson continued to fight and dominate his opponents, but his success did not immediately translate into a successful boxing career because there was little money for him to earn, due to his status as an unknown black boxer. He traveled around the country fighting occasionally in unheralded bouts and supporting this habit by procuring odd jobs in the area.[11] As Johnson's reputation and skill grew, he was increasingly able to rely on boxing as a steady source of income. One of the most notable results of his newfound income was that it revealed his desire for expensive luxury items and fashionable clothing. In regard to his spending habits, one source noted that "He loved fast horses, fast cars, and fast women…. He spent money freely on expensive champagne, tailored suits and handmade shoes and gave no thought to tomorrow or what people thought of him."[12] His expensive tastes and flashy style were characteristics that were not looked upon favorably by the white community. In many cases, whites perceived wealthy black people as arrogant and a challenge to white superiority. If Johnson did care about what other people thought of him, he would likely have spent his money on less conspicuous items so as not to pose as much of a threat to white society. Johnson's success in the boxing ring

[9] Ward, 13.
[10] Bennett, 111.
[11] Gilmore, 10.
[12] Bennett, 112.

occurred during the Jim Crow period and it was not natural for a black man to be capable of dressing on a par with whites and appearing as an equal.

It is this uncaring attitude toward the opinions of white society that allowed Johnson to epitomize what sociologist Samuel Strong calls the "bad nigger." Johnson's relation to the term becomes quite evident when one considers the definition as "the personality type who adamantly refuses to accept the place given to blacks in American society and who frequently challenges the outer perimeters of expected behavior."[13] In many respects, the "bad nigger" was the greatest fear of any southern white slave-owner during slavery because it was a character that would not tolerate oppression and had the greatest potential to rebel. These fears did not die with the end of slavery; they were carried over into Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era that followed. With Johnson's increasing fame and his unwillingness to conform to the white image of blacks, he became more threatening to the white supremacist order due to his increased national exposure and popularity within the black community. The more publicity that a nonconforming black man received, the more society might perceive such behavior as acceptable. This was not a conclusion that much of white America wanted anyone, especially blacks, to make.

While Johnson was climbing the black boxing ranks in the early 1890s, the white heavyweight champion of the world was John L. Sullivan. The Irish fighter from Boston symbolized the sport's transition to the modern era as he became the first heavyweight champion of the "gloved era."[14] Despite his dominance in the ring, his personal arrogance and braggadocio were strikingly similar to the personality

[13] Gilmore, 12.
[14] Ward, 15.

Johnson exhibited when he emerged on the boxing scene. Stories of Sullivan "saying he would pay fifty dollars to any man in the room who could last four rounds with him," were commonplace and the public was well aware of his boastful personality.[15] Due most likely to his race, the public was able to look past Sullivan's problematic personality and embrace him, which was something that the public was not able to do with Johnson only a few years later. The American public saw Sullivan not just as a dominant boxer, but as a real-life success story of the American dream. Author Geoffrey Ward described him as "the most celebrated American of his era, better known around the world than any president, and his climb from the immigrant streets of Boston held many meanings for his admirers: the triumph of the individual, the fulfillment of the immigrant dream, even American ascendancy over England, the traditional home of heavyweight champions."[16] This perception of Sullivan led the public to greatly respect him as a fighter and an American icon, which gave him a significant amount of influence over the public. As a result, Sullivan's statement that he was open to fighting any and all challengers as long as they were not black, influenced others to echo his sentiments. He unashamedly voiced this policy publicly by stating, "I will not fight a negro. I never have and never shall."[17] He took this personal belief a step further when he pronounced that "Any fighter who'd get into the same ring with a nigger loses my respect."[18]

All of these instances in which Sullivan publicly condemned and belittled black fighters had the effect of galvanizing white society against people such as

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[15] Guy Reel, "Richard Fox, John L. Sullivan, and the Rise of Modern American Prize Fighting," *Journalism History*, 27.2 (Summer 2001): 73.
[16] Ward, 15.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Algis Valiunas, "The Great Black Hope," *Commentary*, 119.3 (March 2005): 62.

Johnson. There are very few athletes in the history of sport who would willingly accept defeat or appear weak and insecure. Sullivan was by no means one of those exceptions. If one were to analyze Sullivan's anti-black statements, one could come to the conclusion that either he was an adamant racist or was unsure about his ability to defeat black boxers. It is possible that Sullivan recognized that the potential negatives of losing to a black fighter outweighed the potential positives that would come from defeating a black boxer. In order for an individual sport that claims to have one ultimate champion to retain its validity, it requires that the best competitors meet in a duel to determine sporting supremacy. For Sullivan, who was supposedly the best fighter in the world, to refuse to compete against an entire race of fighters, raises doubts as to whether he should have legitimately held the title of world champion. Despite the insecurity that can be interpreted from Sullivan's statements, his status as a Horatio Alger character who stabilized the sport of boxing, allowed people to overlook his fears and accept what he was saying as the virtual law of the land. Other elite white boxers who wanted to achieve Sullivan's success followed his racially exclusionary policy so as not to lower themselves to the level of fighting black opponents, as Sullivan had suggested. This set an unfortunate precedent of boxing segregation which Johnson would have to overcome in order to reach his ultimate goal of heavyweight champion.

Even though Sullivan's statements temporarily closed the door on Johnson's championship hopes, they did not stop Johnson from competing against lesser known white boxers. Unheralded white fighters were more willing to take a chance and compete against a black opponent because they desired exposure and had nothing to

lose in such a fight. In some respects, if Johnson were to defeat these unknown white boxers, there was little threat to the Social Darwinist and white supremacist order because these were obviously not the best the race had to offer. There is little doubt that racism still played a role in these less publicized interracial fights, but the fact that they did not take place in the national spotlight prevented any significant symbolic threat to white superiority. If this up and coming black boxer were to defeat a white boxer, it would be best for the long-term stability of the white supremacy doctrine that it not be covered too extensively in the media. Despite the lack of coverage, Johnson dominated his white opponents and often embarrassed them in the process. According to one account,

> Jack was too smart for them white fighters. He'd get them in a corner and pin their arms at the elbow joint between his thumb and index finger. Then he would smile sweetly and kiss them on the cheek. Man, this would make these fighters so mad they would forget about boxing and come out swinging wild. And that was all old Jack wanted. He'd step inside their leads and counterpunch them to death.[19]

Johnson's comportment in the ring did nothing to garner public support from the white community. His strategy in the ring was effective in angering his opponents to the point of blinding rage which shattered their discipline and allowed Johnson to defeat them. This however, was not necessarily the best course of action for Johnson's continued survival in a highly racist country. Few whites wanted to see a black fighter prevail in an interracial bout, and even fewer were willing to tolerate a black fighter embarrassing his white counterpart. While this did display his amazing ability to manipulate and outsmart his opponents, it also demonstrated his total disregard for what other people thought of him.

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[19] Gilmore, 20.

Johnson was notorious for toying with his opponents, but at times he would also be very wary of how he was coming across to the public and other fighters. In order to avoid scaring off his competition and the viewing public, he would shy away from knocking out his opponents in favor of winning the matches on points.[20] This tactic could have been perceived as just another instance of Johnson toying with his opponents but it also was a rather well thought-out strategic move. If Johnson displayed the full extent of his power from the opening bell of each match then he would have frightened away future opponents as well as caught the public's attention as a dangerous black fighter. This approach did not fool many of his opponents as they were well aware of his power and skill despite the public's belief that Johnson was not a dominant power puncher.[21] What this reveals is Johnson's tremendous awareness of his public image and how he could manipulate situations to his advantage. All of this would not have been possible if he did not have the boxing skill to complement his exceptional strategic mind. However, his skill of manipulation, combined with his apparent disregard for what others thought of him, is a somewhat odd combination. On the one hand, Johnson did not seem to care that his conspicuous consumption often rubbed people the wrong way. On the other hand, Johnson appeared to adjust his boxing style in order to appeal to the public and not present himself as an overly threatening pugilist. In either instance, Johnson was in the position to control how others perceived him, whether he chose to be a flashy dresser or a reserved fighter. Johnson's primary concern was looking out for himself

[20] Nat Fleischer, *The Heavyweight Championship* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1949), 147.
[21] Ibid.

and getting what he wanted and this is prominently displayed in his deception in the ring and his disregard for black fashion faux pas.

Johnson's attempt to conceal the full extent of his ability did not last indefinitely. His deception was made quite apparent to the public in his bout with the formidable Stanley Ketchel. This was not the most natural of pairings, considering Ketchel was a middleweight and some forty-five pounds lighter than Johnson.[22] While unorthodox, the meeting of a heavyweight and middleweight drew a large number of fans to the bout. According to reports that emerged following the bout, both boxers had agreed before the fight not to knock the other out.[23] This secret agreement was one of the reasons that Johnson was able to convince Ketchel to fight, for Johnson's extra weight and power would not bode well for Ketchel's chances. A defensive fight to be decided on points would give the fans a long match and would also help Johnson mask his power. The resulting match was slow, plodding, and methodical until the twelfth round when the entire demeanor of the bout changed dramatically. When the two fighters were in close quarters, Ketchel unleashed a vicious blow to Johnson's head that was intended to be the last punch of the night. The punch floored Johnson, but not for long, as he quickly leapt his feet. Ketchel's attempt to knock out Johnson with the punch indicated his failure to keep to the agreement. When Johnson returned to his feet he turned loose a lethal punch that landed squarely on Ketchel's face. The blow not only ended the fight, but knocked Ketchel unconscious and broke all his teeth off at the gums.[24] Such a display of

[22] Fleischer, 148.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

punching power revealed to the public that Johnson was such a dominant fighter that he could end a match whenever he wanted with only one punch.

Jack Johnson's life as a boxer was an ongoing battle over the acceptability of his public image. When a talented athlete competes for the highest prize in a given sport, he or she acquires a public persona that requires constant care and redefinition. This was especially important for blacks in the national spotlight at the beginning of the twentieth century due to the racism that pervaded American society. Lynching in the American south posed a constant threat for any black person who rubbed people the wrong way. Lynching was not only a threat to blacks but also to the continued social order of a society structured on a system of laws. As early as 1901, states such as Alabama recognized the problem of lynching and addressed it in the constitutional conventions. At the convention, it was noted that "in the last ten years over one hundred citizens of Alabama have been taken by mobs from sheriffs and jails, and murdered."[25] Recognition of this problem did little to quell the problem, as it continued to pose a constant threat to any unpopular black man in the South.

Johnson's controversial personality put him at risk of making enemies with vast numbers of whites who would not hesitate to lynch a black man. Despite his tense relationship with the media and American public, Johnson avoided lynching and other forms of mob violence. When Johnson was finally able to fight and defeat the elite white boxers of his era, such as Tommy Burns and Jim Jeffries, he became one of the most despised and feared black men in America because he had defeated the best that white-America had to offer. Surprisingly, Johnson remained physically

[25] "Report of Debate at the Alabama Constitutional Convention, June 22, 1901," in *Lynching in America*, ed. Christopher Waldrep (New York: New York UP, 2006), 151.

unharmed after these fights and it was his lifestyle that ultimately allowed America to rein him in. While much of white America was attempting to deal with the blow Johnson had dealt to the notion of white superiority, Johnson did not alter his behavior as he continued to appear in public with fine clothing and white women.

The authorities finally caught up with Johnson when he was arrested and convicted in October 1912 of violating provisions of the Mann Act. The White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, which was popularly known as the Mann Act, prohibited the transfer of women across state borders "for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purposes."[26] Johnson was accused of kidnapping and transporting an eighteen year old prostitute by the name of Lucille Cameron across state borders.[27] Part of the reason that Johnson's act received such a high degree of public scorn was due to the fact that his wife had died only a few weeks earlier. On September 11, 1912 Johnson returned home to find his wife Etta lying lifeless on her bedroom floor after having taken her own life with a single bullet to the head.[28] Jack was never seriously believed to have been involved in her death as it was determined that her bouts with depression had finally proved too much for her to withstand. Reporters who were around Johnson in the hours and days after the event noted his extreme sadness, as could be expected from any grieving husband who had lost a partner. In describing Johnson's mood, one reporter commented, "Never had Johnson looked so dark….He was a black man garbed in black."[29] Even in a moment of obvious sadness, the reporter could not resist commenting on Johnson's race, as if

[26] Ward, 298.
[27] Valiunas, 63.
[28] Ward, 291.
[29] Ibid, 292.

there was a degree of skepticism that blacks possessed the same emotional spectrum as whites. While Johnson's unfortunate circumstances likely steered some public sympathy in his direction, he squandered any gains he had made by showing up in Chicago with a white woman, less than three weeks after Etta's funeral. As a result of his failure to conceal his relationship with the white Lucille Cameron, Johnson was arrested on October 4, 1912.

Despite the fact that the American south was a hotbed of racial violence, and Johnson was undoubtedly a lightning rod for racial hatred, it was his promiscuity and love of white women that ultimately led to his downfall. Unlike other black athletes at the time who would have preferred to stay out of the public's gaze, Johnson embodied a combination of stubbornness and arrogance that often attracted the media, whether he desired it or not. His arrogance and flashy style made him perfect fodder for the public spotlight, but his stubborn refusals to care about other peoples' perceptions of him often lost him popularity points with the public. This is one instance which highlights the complexity of Jack Johnson and the slight reluctance of the black community to embrace him as an icon for their race. A significant portion of the black population would join Johnson in celebrating his victories, but this did not translate into unyielding support for his other actions outside the ring. The upper and middle class blacks were often the ones who saw Johnson and other black boxers as "a source of embarrassment and resentment."[30] Even though the increased emphasis on intellectualism among upper-and middle-class blacks might have necessarily pitted them against black boxers, Johnson did make public blunders which

[30] John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 14.

did not help his cause. Author and Historian Geoffrey Ward characterized the situation perfectly when he stated, "Jack Johnson was a master of timing in the ring, seemed always to know just when to strike, when to lie back and wait. Outside the ropes, that mastery often deserted him."[31]

Johnson's appearance with a white prostitute less than a month after the death of his beloved wife only reinforced white fears of the oversexed black man who would prey on white women. The way Johnson comported himself on many occasions suggests that he enjoyed toying with the stereotyped notions of blacks. Along the same lines of the overly sexual black male, Johnson was known on occasion to "wrap his penis in gauze in order to astonish white reporters."[32] By drawing attention to his artificially enlarged penis, he was not only playing with white fears to draw attention to his matches, he was also engaging in the discourse of dominance in a new way. Images of an overly-sexualized black man had been used historically as a justification for oppressing blacks in order to protect white civility and white womanhood. Johnson's invocation of this stereotype was a way of suggesting that blacks were superior to whites with regard to sexual prowess. If whites were to concede the realm of physical dominance to blacks at some point, it would follow that, whites would also be admitting inferiority with regard to the physical sexual act. Johnson's wrapped penis served as a symbol of white fears as well as a reminder to white society of what was at stake should black boxers prove their superiority over whites in the ring.

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[31] Ward, 296.
[32] Valiunas, 63.

There is a fine line between acting in a manner that reinforces stereotypes of blacks and one which shows the fallacy of such beliefs and effectively dispels the myths. Jack Johnson's public image could easily have been represented in such a way that made him into the living symbol of what whites feared most about black men. Johnson did little to distance himself from these stereotypes and instead chose to use them to his advantage in intimidating his opponents both inside and outside the ring. Again, Johnson was more concerned about looking out for himself than he was for bettering the status of blacks in America.

In order to understand the full extent of Johnson's accomplishments in the ring, it is important to be aware of his humanity and the ways in which his life outside the ring impacted his triumphs within the ring. It becomes quite apparent with any examination of Johnson's life that he was a flawed character. His success in the sport of boxing did not require a pristine reputation. In fact, each and every time he stepped into the ring, he was able to transcend his controversial lifestyle and become an equal competitor on an even playing field, if only for a few short rounds. Boxing provided Johnson the opportunity to achieve a higher degree of status and prestige than most black men were able to at that time in America. In essence, the sport was a vehicle for upward social mobility at a time when such a concept was not a reality for blacks.

Apart from his physical boxing ability, his controversial character was likely one of the key factors that enabled Johnson to survive so long in the public spotlight. In a twisted way, Johnson's role as the "bad nigger" could have been tolerated by the white community due to the fact that there was a segment of the black community

that was reluctant to completely identify with this aspect of Johnson. A black icon is not as symbolically threatening to white superiority if he can be portrayed as an immoral man who is an exception rather than the rule, when it comes to black men. If it could get to the point that Johnson was so vilified that blacks could not identify with him, then the symbolic power of his actions and accomplishments would wither and ultimately undercut any symbolic damage that his boxing did to the racial ideology of the times. In addition, his image as a somewhat unlikable icon set the stage for other fighters to appear and portray themselves as the antithesis of Johnson and claim public support as a result of that difference. Considering Johnson's vilification in the media as an aide to his symbolic success runs counter to the white perception that being a humble and hardworking black man is the best course of action. Despite the media's portrayal of Johnson as a black lowlife, there was something about the sport of boxing that allowed the total destruction of his white opponents to immortalize him in a way that could not be threatened by a somewhat immoral character.

Johnson's ability to frustrate and irritate the white public not only allowed him to appear as a somewhat non-threatening character, it also served to focus national attention on his interracial bouts. While it was the policy of most elite white boxers to stay away from black competitors, Johnson's image made him the perfect person for white fighters to defeat in order to teach blacks a lesson. Johnson was the ultimate example of a black man who did not know his proper place in society, according to white standards. This very fact raised the symbolic stakes of any and all fights he had against white opponents. With white superiority being the dominant

racial ideology of the times, Johnson had to be physically and mentally inferior, and therefore a white boxer should, and must, defeat him. As Johnson continued to parade around America with all the luxuries usually reserved for white Americans, he was only enlarging the target on his back for white boxers.

Johnson's domination of the boxing world in the first decade of the twentieth century coincided with the creation of intelligence testing. As Johnson's symbolic status as a powerful and unrelenting black warrior grew, it appeared as though the scientific community was preparing to counter any social impact by creating these intelligence tests. While the tests were not created to specifically counter Johnson's symbolism, they had the effect of shifting the desired characteristic from physicality to intelligence. This shift ensured that the racial hierarchy would not crumble if Johnson or any other black boxer were to assert his racial superiority by defeating all of his white competitors. With intelligence as an increasingly desirable characteristic, "test results only confirmed what they [whites] believed only ideologically: that there was a White ethnic hierarchy, and that this hierarchy, despite differences, stood atop all other races, especially the African American."[33] The emergence of these tests shows that justifications for white superiority were constantly evolving to counter new threats and not just allow people like Johnson to dismantle an entire hierarchy.

The story of Jack Johnson's life is not a study in simplicity, but rather of complexity. His ability to navigate and manipulate the space between self-image and public-image gave him the ability to achieve personal and career success despite being perceived by much of white society as an unacceptable black man. While his

[33] Dennis M. Rutledge, "Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race," *Journal of Negro Education* 64.3 (1995): 247.

boxing skill was dominant, his mental ability to manipulate his opponents for his own purposes was unmatched at that time in history. During a time when blacks struggled for any scraps of equality that remained from Reconstruction, Johnson had created a larger-than-life persona that demanded so much attention that people could not just ignore him. Johnson had molded his public image into the living embodiment of all the white fears of blacks. He was a physically imposing fighter who craved white women, wrapped his penis with gauze, and had all the economic luxuries afforded to whites. This image was something so feared by whites that they would scour the earth for a Great White Hope that could defeat this black force. It is with the sport of boxing as a medium that Johnson was able to manipulate white fears and ultimately challenge the legitimacy of white supremacy. Society would not tolerate such a character outside the world of sport. Boxing, with its fundamental premise of equality, was the only social arena that could accept a character such as Johnson. Johnson's entrance into the sporting spotlight left his ability to effect social change largely in the hands of the media and those who interpreted his image and conveyed it to the public.

Chapter 3: Raising the Stakes: Race and Power in the Media Coverage of Jack Johnson

What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only
wins, but excels in winning with ease. But his victories bring
him neither reputation for wisdom nor credit for courage.
-- Sun Tzu

Johnson's professional boxing career, which began in the late 1800s and blossomed in the early years of the 20th century, is both a tale of boxing achievement and a dialogue between a successful black man and society. His increasing success on the national stage forced the media to give his fights attention and provide analysis for the reading public. By examining the different ways in which the media respond to Johnson's appearance and his victories it becomes apparent that the media vacillate between two common responses. Due to the level playing field which is created through the sport of boxing, one way the media portray Johnson is by analyzing his boxing skill and achievements. The other typical response to Johnson was an excessive focus on race that served as an attempt to diminish his significance as a boxer. The occurrence of each of these responses was not random, as the type of response seems to be connected to the degree of threat that an event posed to the racial ideology. In order to fully understand the reasons for the media's varied responses to Johnson it is important to examine instances in which race was heavily stressed and occasions when boxing skill was stressed.

While boxing was always a sport that required skill, it did not always have the credibility necessary for boxers to be elevated as honorable athletes. By the 1900s much of this had changed as boxing was not merely a form of athletic barbarism, but rather a more prestigious and refined sport that adhered to specific rules, regardless of

the participants' skin color. The introduction of the Queensbury Rules to boxing did not in and of itself invalidate the racial code of the times, but it did provide stability and the appearance of equality as all competitors were supposed to abide by common rules. The Queensbury Rules regulated such things as type of gloves and shoes, duration of each round, and the circumstances which determine a victory.[1] How long could an ideology of black inferiority remain if the boxing ring was becoming a place offering a semblance of racial equality in the form of fistic battles conducted in a "civilized" way?

In order to understand the racially charged atmosphere that Johnson was up against, one must take note of the bout between the black Billy Woods and the white Harry Foley. The June 1903 fight was thoroughly dominated by Woods from the opening bell until the fight ended in the fourth round. What seemed to be a rather straightforward, one-sided fight, evolved into a chaotic scene with a surprising turn of events in the fourth round. After Foley was knocked down several times in the opening rounds, the two fighters became locked-up in close quarters and Woods, "with his left arm or hand, heeled him [Foley] under the chin, crooked his neck and half-threw him to the floor."[2] While all indications were that Woods had knocked-out his white opponent, the referee signaled that Woods had committed a deliberate foul and awarded the victory to Foley. When the decision was announced by the referee, "Woods acted as if he wanted to thrash everyone in the ring, but the officers forced him back to the ropes with drawn clubs, awed him into silence and then cleared the

[1] "Queensbury Rules," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March 1903, p. 10.
[2] "How it Happened." *Los Angeles Times*, 10 June 1903, p. 11.

ring."[3] While it is not entirely surprising that a boxing match concluded with a controversial decision, the stakes were higher for black boxers, as they had to combat their opponents in the ring as well as negative stigmas in society. The Woods-Foley match was just one example of a victory being snatched away from a black fighter. In addition, Woods' outburst after hearing the decision opened him and other black fighters to the criticism of being dirty or unsportsmanlike fighters. Not only would Jack Johnson and other black boxers have to compete against other fighters but they also had to compete against the negative stereotypes created by their fellow pugilists, such as Woods.

At times, the anti-black stigmas against boxers were not merely in the minds of the spectators but also played a heavy role in the decisions made by athletic clubs and boxing promoters. In light of the Woods-Foley fiasco, the manager of the Century Athletic Club decided "that the club would not give any more fights in this city between white men and blacks, and hereafter all contests would be between men of the same color."[4] Woods' actions during the fight not only made him appear to be a dirty fighter, but also one lacking self-control, as evinced by his tirade following the referee's decision. This provided the perfect opportunity for clubs and promoters to exclude blacks because there was no way of guaranteeing that the black combatant would fight with discipline and honor. The result of such a decision meant that any progress toward a truly interracial sport was halted as black fighters were forced to remain separate from white boxers. Even newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*

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[3] Ibid.
[4] "Pugilism," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 1903, p. 11.

recognized that the segregation of boxing was constraining some of the elite boxers and preventing them from facing the best competition.

With the increasing number of barriers set up to prevent black boxers from achieving success, it would seem as though the most likely figure to break through these barriers would be a quiet, non-threatening, and humble black fighter. Jack Johnson, however, did not even remotely resemble this boxer profile. Not only could Johnson attract attention for his pugilistic skill, but he also drew attention as a result of his personality and style. In its February 11, 1903 edition, the *Los Angeles Times* devoted an entire article to describing Johnson's flashy attire and fashion sense. In describing Johnson, the reporter wrote that, "The clothes that garmented the strolling colossus spoke emphatically. In place of wrinkles in his trousers there were orderly creases."[5] The reporter's statement reveals the stereotyped impression of blacks which assumes that poorly-kept clothing and a disheveled appearance were the norm for blacks. As a result, this depiction of a well-dressed black boxer was something out of the ordinary, and therefore became something newsworthy for white civilians.

Two spectators who witnessed the well-dressed Johnson commented, "that doesn't look like the stripped nigger I saw at Hagard's last Thursday night! This fellow is dressed like an African millionaire."[6] Whether these comments were aimed at demeaning Johnson or applauding his superior sense of style, they portrayed him only as a reflection of his clothes. To these spectators, Johnson's identity was consumed by his appearance and their perception of him changed from that of a "nigger" to that of an "African millionaire," on account of his improved attire. The

[5] "Wear Purple and Diamonds," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 February 1903, p. 13.
[6] Ibid.

article referred to Johnson as a professional but mentioned nothing else about his identity, other than occasionally calling him a "nigger" or "dead-swell coon."[7] The constant presence of these racially derogatory terms reminds readers of the race of the individual as well as his subordinate social position. Could an individual as flashy and outspoken as Jack Johnson be taken seriously by society and the white media or would he be seen as a mockery of boxing and a fittingly poor representative of the black race?

Despite focusing on Johnson's outward appearance, a surprising number of newspaper articles took Johnson seriously and referred to his ability within the ring. It was a rare incident when Johnson's race was not made entirely salient, but that was also a common practice when writing about any black boxer. In that respect, Johnson was usually treated in the same manner as his black counterparts. Some newspapers, however, sent conflicting racial messages within the same article. At several points, one article refers to Johnson as a "grinning coon," a "hunky coon," and just simply a "darky."[8] The racially-charged adjectives used to describe Johnson appear to suggest that the purpose of the article was to demean Johnson, but several other places in the article suggest that Johnson was by far the superior and more honorable fighter. The same article went on to note that Johnson was "good-natured" and the victim of "three deliberate fouls of a particularly atrocious nature."[9] These three deliberate fouls referred to three instances in which the white fighter, Fred Russell, kneed Johnson and one instance of punching him in the groin. The focus on Russell's dirty tactics suggests that race was not made to be the only important factor in the

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[7] Ibid.
[8] "Furious Mob At Ringside," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 December 1902, p. A4.
[9] Ibid.

interracial bout. The article instead portrayed Johnson in a more positive light, despite his race, while harshly criticizing Russell for fighting dishonorably. Essentially, the merit and skill of the fighters was able to trump any of the societal stigmas associated with race, as it affected the depiction of the match. The tone of the article did not particularly condemn Johnson but rather offered a somewhat evenhanded chronicle of the fight with the occasional racial slur thrown-in. Such an article demonstrates the two ways that the media allowed their readers to interpret the fight. The criticism of Russell points to an evaluation of the bout based on skill, while the racial epithets thrown about offer race as an alternative way to judge the worth of the combatants.

Even if the aim of many of the articles is a discussion of boxing skill and prowess, it is telling that the continued focus on race makes it the only dimension of Johnson's identity. Oftentimes journalists recognized that Johnson was the premier black fighter of the time and the only way to learn the full extent of his talent was for him to square-off against the elite white fighters of the day. One 1903 *Washington Post* article makes it quite clear that Johnson had immeasurable talent, but it also became evident that Johnson was being judged by the actions of others.[10] The article admits that despite Jack Johnson's potential, the public was reluctant to "get enthusiastic over any newcomer" because Johnson's counterparts "have shown themselves to be of mediocre ability, to say the least."[11] The mediocrity of other black boxers not only made the public less likely to accept newcomers such as Johnson, but also made white boxers less likely to agree to interracial bouts because

[10] "Prize Ring Chat," *The Washington Post*, 8 November 1903, p. TP10.
[11] Ibid.

such bouts would be totally one-sided. While this logic might have satisfied many people of the time, the perceived superiority of white boxers should have made black-white bouts a non-threatening issue for whites' continued dominance. The fact that white boxers continued to show unwillingness to fight black boxers suggests a degree of insecurity that speaks to the fallibility of a racial hierarchy with whites at the top. This is the same type of insecurity which could be inferred from John Sullivan's reluctance to fight against blacks. By late 1902, Johnson had not faced any quality white competition, yet a weakness in the racial ideology was already beginning to reveal itself.

With an apparent opportunity for restructuring the racial hierarchy, the question arises as to whether boxing is a venue that could provide enough social and symbolic power to break through the ideology. The problem with boxing is that it is a game and is not necessarily seen as a microcosm for real-world race relations. In addition, some portions of the public felt that boxing had a tendency to attract certain undesirable character traits in its combatants. According to one *Washington Post* journalist, "In no branch of sport is excessive self-esteem so unpleasantly apparent as in pugilism.... nine-tenths of the wearers of the padded gloves are afflicted with undue appreciation of their own merits."[12] The article continues by noting that "Ninety per cent of pugilists are illiterate, ill mannered, badly dressed, and ill tempered. The exceptions to the rule make the offenses of the majority stand out more prominently. A very large number of boxers are very ready to use their fists to gratify their spite, and but for fear of arrest would do so more frequently."[13] What this suggests is that

[12] "Boxers and Wrestlers," *The Washington Post*, 7 December 1902, p. 23.
[13] Ibid.

boxers, whether black or white, are little more than uneducated thugs who are overly arrogant and only able to express themselves through violence. Based on this perception, it would logically follow that boxers should constitute a non-respected portion of the population. According to this same source, "It has been held that in a majority of cases the possessors of great strength were animated by a feeling of pity for the weak, but this does not apply to the boxer."[14] The depiction of boxers as thoroughly depraved individuals effectively knocks athletes off of their symbolic pedestal and paints them as nothing more than boys acting out their aggression. How could Jack Johnson's success and personality survive the harsh criticisms and stereotypes affixed to boxers of his time period? How could Johnson become a symbolic challenger of white superiority when boxers were perceived as nothing more than dueling hoodlums?

In the February 6, 1903 article entitled "Jack Johnson Beats Martin," what begins as a simple report on the events of one bout becomes a telling sign of the racial atmosphere of the times. From the very outset of the article, the journalist has a great deal of praise for both fighters even though both competitors were black. According to the article, "it was one of the best fights seen here in a long time, for the boxing was very clever."[15] Given the racially tense context of America in the early part of the 1900s, it is surprising to come across an account of an all-black fight that is nearly devoid of obvious racial slurs. While it is difficult to make any definitive determination as to the reason for the rather positive portrayal of the bout, there are at least two possible conclusions that one could reach. Firstly, the positive report could

[14] Ibid.
[15] "Jack Johnson Beats Martin," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 February 1903, p. A1.

be representative of the larger society and mean that there is no racial bias on the part of the reporter or society as a whole. This, however, is unlikely to be the case due to the lack of social upheaval resulting from other more degrading depictions of blacks that regularly graced the newspapers. Also, it is possible that this specific reporter was an abnormally egalitarian person, but it is unlikely that this journalist would retain such a position if his or her views were in such discord with the rest of society.

Another scenario that could explain the surprising description of the bout is that Johnson, boxing, or sport in general, has the ability to transcend race to a certain extent. Despite the fact that most journalists are supposed to report on the factual events that take place, in many instances racial prejudice has a habit of finding its way into the article anyway. In this article, the journalist is able to focus on the merits of the two fighters and the quality of the fight. This suggests that the ability of the fighters was able to supercede the importance of race and the two people in the ring became colorless combatants. At this period in American history, a focus on skill rather than race is more the exception than the rule, but the fact that such lapses in prejudice can occur points to the potential of boxing to transcend the confines of racist ideology.

Johnson's bout with Ed Martin also provides a glimpse of a typical public reaction to an all-black boxing match. By 1903, it was not totally unheard of for blacks to fight whites, but racially homogenous matches tended to be a more common occurrence. The symbolism of a fight pitting two blacks against each other is not a very threatening event, as it pertains to the continued existence of a white dominated racial hierarchy. Two black athletes fighting against each other does not challenge

the ideological hold that whites have on masculinity and physical prowess. The racial homogeneity of the bout does not give society the opportunity to use the outcome of the match as a means of gauging the superiority of one race over another. Due to the fact that a white fighter did not take part in the fight does not allow for any interracial comparisons, which does nothing to dislodge whites as the superior beings. However, this begs the question as to whether the account of the fight would have been different had one of the combatants been white and the other black.

One way of attempting to address such a question is by comparing the description of the Johnson-Martin fight with that of the Johnson-Jack Jeffries bout. In one account of the fight, the reporter immediately informs the readers of the fighters' race, thus invoking the racial stereotypes and subtly telling the reader who should win. Rather than discussing the events of the fight and the skills of the fighters, race becomes an entirely different way of describing and analyzing the fight. The article's second subtitle makes race salient, as it reads, "Too Much Color for 'Brother Jack.'"[16] In fact, that subtitle does not even make any reference to Johnson being a person, but instead Johnson's entire identity is wrapped up in his skin color. In one of the first references to the outcome of the fight, the article notes, "Jack Jeffries lasted just five rounds in front of a good-natured black animal named Johnsing[*sic*]."[17] This depiction of Johnson as a black animal is in stark contrast to the description of him as a mere combatant in the article covering the Johnson-Martin fight. While the article reduces Johnson to a color, it also appears problematic for the racial ideology as it suggests that it was race that beat Jack Jeffries, not skill. This interpretation of the

[16] "Pink Furies Blaze Away," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 May 1902, p. A1.
[17] Ibid.

subtitle implies that blackness was superior to Jeffries that night, which effectively challenges any notion that whites are inarguably superior.

Despite Johnson's victory over the white Jack Jeffries, the article makes no explicit mention of its being a threat to the superiority of whites. This is somewhat surprising, given the fact that the journalist made it quite clear that Jeffries should have won on racial grounds alone. This was made evident when the article asserted that "By rights Brother Jack ought to have won. He is a fine-looking young fellow, with a figure like a Greek god, muscles all glistening with health. Mistah Johnsing[*sic*] is a long, lean bullet-headed, flat-chested 'coon.'"[18] This description appears more focused on degrading Johnson and complimenting Jeffries than on discussing the quality of athletic competition. The depiction of this interracial bout is much more focused on race than the article that chronicled the Johnson-Martin bout. Such differences appear to be consistent with the level of symbolic threat to the racial hierarchy that each fight posed. With two black fighters competing, the outcome of the bout has no way of logically repositioning blacks as superior or more masculine than whites. As a result, there is little need for racial slurs and derogatory descriptions in order to portray the blacks in a clearly inferior way. However, when Johnson defeated the white Jack Jeffries, Jeffries was likened to a god while Johnson was described as a beast. Johnson's victory created a symbolic threat to white dominance and therefore slurs and insults were used to make it clear that Johnson was, and would always be, the inferior being. The drastic differences in the way bouts were reported on depending on the race of the fighters is indicative of the

[18] Ibid.

instability of white superiority, as evident by the obvious attempts to dehumanize and emasculate Johnson.

Unlike the previous article, one *Los Angeles Times* article entitled "Public Refuses to Accept Color Line," hints that society has called for boxing champions to fight other combatants regardless of their race.[19] While the two other articles were simply examples of how fights were racialized, this piece brings in the public as a third party that calls for equality in the sport. "The cardinal principle of fighting as laid down by John L. Sullivan, the father of modern pugilism, is that a champion must meet all comers."[20] In essence, the article suggests that sportsmanship and fair-play trumps the importance of race in boxing. This request on behalf of the public is telling because it is issued despite the impact it could have on the racial order, should white fighters start losing to blacks. Either the public is unaware of the symbolic impact or it does not see such a potential impact as threatening or important. While it is unclear what the true motivation was behind the request, it does suggest that the public cared more about quality competition than it did about the racial symbolism of any given fight. Regardless of public sentiment, if there is a social space to challenge the racial status quo, then it seems as though sport offers a setting in which merit and skill have the potential to overshadow race.

While the racial stakes might have been high for Johnson's bout with Jack Jeffries, they were even higher for Johnson's match with the white champion Jim Jeffries. Up until the 1910 meeting between the two, Johnson was able to fight only a few white opponents, all of whom possessed poor skills and were no challenge for the

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[19] "Public Refuses to Accept Color Line," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 October 1903, p. 11.
[20] Ibid.

black champion. A match with Jim, the more accomplished of the Jeffries, would not only provide Johnson with a greater challenge in the ring, but also with the potential to break down the barriers which prevented the top black boxers from squaring off against the most elite white boxers. With the racial tensions as high as they were at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is no surprise that Jeffries was reluctant to agree to the fight. From Jeffries' point of view, he had little to gain and a significant amount to lose in a fight with Johnson. On the one hand, if Jeffries won, he could solidify the dominance of white physicality and masculinity. However, if Jeffries lost, it would open the door for full-scale interracial boxing as well as raise questions about the continued superiority of whites. This last piece is the most important because not only would a loss suggest that blacks could be better boxers than whites, it would also jeopardize the ideological justifications for societal oppression against blacks, as codified in such Supreme Court decisions as *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

With Jeffries continuing to resist any agreement to battle Johnson, it opened the door for other prominent white boxers to accept the challenge and step into the media spotlight that Jeffries avoided. One boxer who capitalized on the opportunity was Jim Corbett who, according to *The Macon Daily Telegraph*, was going to "challenge Jack Johnson, defeat the negro, and regain the world's championship simply to retain the title among white pugilists."[21] Many criticized Corbett's challenge as a shameless attempt to get his name in the headlines, as a fight between the two never fully materialized. One of the likely reasons for this is that Jeffries was considered by many to be a better fighter, and it was believed that Johnson should face the best. On account of age alone, the forty-two year old Corbett was ten years

[21] "Boxing," *The Macon Daily Telegraph*, 4 January 1909, p. 10.

older than Jeffries and as a result, Jeffries should be considered the more fit and able fighter.[22] In addition, Jeffries defeated Corbett twice in his career, once in 1900 and again in 1903.[23] The search for an adequate competitor for Johnson, after he defeated Tommy Burns in 1908, was coupled with a sense of urgency, as if someone needed to defeat Johnson to put him in his place and fix this racial mistake that had allowed Johnson to become champion. The *Charlotte Observer* noted, "If the number of challengers that are being issued almost daily to Jack Johnson are any criterion, it looks as though some time in the far distant future an opponent might be worthy of the big negro's mettle."[24]

After months of refusing to take on Johnson, the *San Jose Mercury News* reported on March 1, 1909 that Jeffries had agreed to a fight.[25] Jeffries' announcement came with little explanation as to what had changed his mind and convinced him to accept the fight. He makes no reference to his previous unwillingness when he notes in the statement that, "I feel obligated to the sporting public at least to make an effort to reclaim the heavyweight championship to the white race…. I think it no more than right that I should step into the ring again and demonstrate that a white man is king of them all."[26] Jeffries' statement takes an interesting spin on what seemed to be the public's reasoning for urging Jeffries to accept the fight. His comments also convey a degree of doubt in his personal abilities by saying he will try to beat Johnson, rather than exuding the type of confidence typical of most boxers. The previously mentioned *Los Angeles Times* article, "Public

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[22] "Who Will Meet Johnson?," *Charlotte Daily Observer*, 18 January 1909, p. 3.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] "Jeffries Now Says He Will Fight," *San Jose Mercury News*, 1 March 1909, p. 7.
[26] Ibid.

Refuses to Accept Color Line," argued that it is the duty of a true champion to accept all challengers, regardless of race. On the other hand, Jeffries' statement suggests that the public wanted him to fight Johnson because the white race needed to reclaim the heavyweight championship. It is not much of a stretch to think that for some portions of the public racial revenge and superiority served as the primary motivations. However, Jeffries seems to insinuate that the public is only interested in reaffirming a racial ideology rather than calling for fair-play and sportsmanship.

Following the agreement by both parties for a scheduled bout on July 4, 1910, the media began to focus increasingly on Johnson in ways that had nothing to do with boxing. One example of this is the frequent mention of Johnson having a white wife. While there is nothing inherently wrong with noting that Johnson was in an interracial relationship, it becomes suspicious when the articles begin emerging with greater frequency after Jeffries agreed to the fight. One such article is titled "Johnson Has White Wife," and only mentions his wife in the first paragraph, stating that Johnson, "and his white wife, a former Philadelphia woman, who threw in her lot with him after his fight at Sydney," were arriving in British Columbia for a scheduled fight.[27] The way the journalist constructed the article suggests that he or she was aware that references to Mrs. Johnson's race would likely create a public uproar and generate dislike for Johnson. As his wife's race became a popular topic in the media, reports surfaced that certain States, such as Texas, would prosecute Johnson if he brought his white wife into their State.[28] Certain newspapers even felt it necessary to print Johnson's denial that his wife was white at all. According to the article, Johnson

[27] "Johnson Has White Wife," *Charlotte Daily Observer*, 10 March 1909, p. 8.
[28] "Champion Johnson May Be Prosecuted," *The Lexington Herald*, 14 March 1909, p. 2.

asserted that his wife "Is three-fourths negro blood."[29] While journalists had plenty of time to speculate about Mrs. Johnson's race and stir public unrest before the fight was even agreed upon, it was only two weeks after Jeffries agreed to the match that a number of stories about Johnson's wife suddenly appeared.

When the excitement over Johnson's wife subsided, many newspapers began focusing more on the enormity of the fight. Whether entirely accurate or not, some articles referred to the fight as a world-wide event that seemed to be of more importance than any other fight in recent history.[30] The *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that approximately "10,000 visitors are crowded into this desert city [Reno] tonight… many of whom have traveled from the far corners of the earth."[31] Newspaper reports were turning what had appeared to be a racial battle of mostly American importance, into an event of international magnitude. With such a well promoted and long anticipated fight, there is always the danger of the fight being fixed. After spending time with both camps in Reno, Jack London felt comfortable in saying that "There is not one man on the ground who entertains the slightest suspicion that the fight is fixed in any way… Depend upon it, the big fight is absolutely on the square."[32] London's assurance that the bout was going to be fair only solidified the symbolism of the fight as neither boxer would be able to fall back on the excuse of cheating as having determined the outcome of the fight. The high racial stakes of the fight made London's comments logical as it was unlikely that either boxer would throw the fight because Johnson had so much to gain and Jeffries had much to lose.

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[29] "Johnson's Wife a Negress," *The State*, 17 March 1909, p. 11.
[30] "Whole World Awaits Result of Big Fight," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 4 July 1910, p. 1.
[31] Ibid.
[32] "No Thought of Fake in Fight; Jack London," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 4 July 1910, p. 1.

On the morning of July 5, 1910, newspapers around the country covered Johnson's complete domination of Jeffries. In the fifteenth round, "Jeffries was dragged to his corner, bleeding from nose, mouth and a dozen cuts on the face. He had a black, closed eye and swollen feature and he held his head in his hands, dazed. Johnson walked out of the ring without a mark on his body."[33] Not only did Johnson defeat Jeffries, but he also left a lasting impact on the sizable crowd which was present to watch the fight. According to one source, at the end of the match, "Referee Tex Rickard raised the black arm and the great crowd filed out, glum and silent."[34] While one would assume that the entire black population would have been overjoyed at the news of Johnson's victory, apparently many blacks were disappointed because they had placed bets on Jeffries and lost money as a result.[35] As much news as Johnson's victory was, a great many articles were devoted to covering the massive riots that took place in the fight's aftermath. Most of the incidents involved black celebrants being shot, cut, or beaten by whites in retaliation for Johnson's victory over his white opponent.[36] Newspaper reports tended to portray the white populace as being vengeful and violent toward innocent black citizens. With the racial ideology having just absorbed an enormous blow by Jack Johnson's fist, the papers could not help highlighting the uncivilized manner in which many whites conducted themselves following the bout.

While Johnson's superiority was evident in the bout, he solidified his symbolic domination with his post-fight comments. With only a few words of praise

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[33] "Former Champion Fails to 'Come Back' And Negro Retains The Coveted Title," *Charlotte Daily Observer*, 5 July 1910, p. 1.
[34] Ibid.
[35] "Quarter Million Fight Gate Money," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 5 July 1910, p. 1.
[36] "Results Cause Riots," *Charlotte Daily Observer*, 5 July 1910, p. 1.

for his defeated opponent, Johnson was quoted as saying, "I won from Mr. Jeffries because I outclassed him in every department of the fighting game."[37] He continued by complementing Jeffries for giving it his all, but Johnson wasted no time in going on to note that "I could have fought for two hours longer. It was easy."[38] While some of Johnson's comments appeared to be complimentary, they actually served more as attacks on the racial order which he had just recently shattered. Johnson essentially asserted that his highly qualified white opponent had fought to the best of his ability but still was not good enough to be a challenge for Johnson. This not only suggested that blacks were more equal than previously believed, but also that blacks could be vastly superior to whites. In the days that followed the fight, the Jeffries camp was virtually silent as it licked its wounds. Rather than attempting to justify his loss, Jeffries' lack of comment left his legacy and image in the hands of the media. One of the media reactions to Jeffries' loss was that the public had been overconfident and overly generous in giving Jeffries support. The problem was that the faith they put in Jeffries was misplaced because the image in their head was the "Jeffries of six years ago."[39] The article suggested that people still believed that the earlier Jeffries of the recent past would have been able to knockout the champion. In essence, the media deflected a great deal of blame from Jeffries and attributed it to his age and the public's false hope.

The divisiveness and the obvious impact of the fight led many states to debate whether to allow photographs and movies of the event to be displayed or distributed at all. While some states had not decided, others felt "It would be wrong to show

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[37] "I Outclassed Him, Johnson Declares," *New York Times*, 5 July 1910, p. 3.
[38] Ibid.
[39] "Jeffries Offended Followers at Reno," *New York Times*, 6 July 1910, p. 3.

these horrible pictures, first because the children have to be protected and it is the children who would be most seriously affected if such exhibition were allowed… The showing of the pictures would have a bad effect upon the men and women of the community, also, and would I think, tend to induce attacks upon the blacks."[40]

On many occasions, newspaper articles referred to Johnson's amazing boxing ability and his cleverness in the ring. However, in other instances, the journalists were all too willing to refer to him as a beast, coon, or ruffian. While in most matches the reporters could choose whether to focus on race or skill, Johnson's match with Jim Jeffries did not provide such an opportunity. The tremendous amount of media attention surrounding the fight did not allow race to be separated from skill, and as a result, the two were intertwined and each fighter became more than just a boxer; they each became symbols. Johnson represented, in part, the oppressed black populace, while Jeffries symbolized the white public attempting to reassert its dominance over blacks. This was not a match that had to take place for ideological purposes alone, but the demand for fairness, which is integral to sport, forced Jeffries to take on Johnson. Instead of social movements forcing a battle between the races, the very structure of boxing required that the best competitors compete, regardless of race or class. As much as the public and media attempted to downplay the symbolic importance of Johnson's victory over Jeffries, the outbreak of violence and the censoring of fight-images suggest something quite different. This fight was advertised as a battle between the races and the continued well-being of the racial hierarchy was put on the line. However, when the fight was over, the media's references to the racial overtones of the bout immediately ceased. A racialized

[40] "Sentiment is Divided," *Charlotte Daily Observer*, 7 July 1910, p. 1.

interpretation of Johnson's victory would have undermined the validity of a white-dominated social order. There is little doubt that had Jeffries won, the newspapers would have continued to focus on the racial impact of the fight, as it would have provided justification for the racial ideology. Even though the media attempted to divert attention, Johnson's victory broke down the existing racial ideology and created an opportunity for a new position for blacks in society, if only for a moment.

When Johnson emerged on the boxing scene in the late nineteenth century, the sport had gained a significant amount of credibility by instituting a standardized set of rules such as the Queensbury rules. These rules allowed for a focus on the merits of the individual fighters rather than the unique rules used in the fight. While the coverage of Johnson's match against Ed Martin did mention the race of the two fighters, the bulk of the article was able to focus on the skill of the two boxers because the bout did not pose any threat to white dominance. Even Johnson's match with Fred Russell was analyzed in terms of the fighting tactics used by the fighters rather than the interracial nature of the fight. The fact that Fred Russell was a relatively unknown white fighter did not pose much of a threat to the racial ideology because their losses could be understood as a reflection of their skill rather than race. However, when Johnson fought Jack, and later Jim, Jeffries, the bouts received a great deal of national attention and the race of the boxers was made salient through reports leading up to the fight. This racial emphasis made race as much of a predictor of success as boxing ability and therefore the outcome of the fight would have to be explained, at least partly, in racial terms. This caused an increase in the racial stakes of the fight, and consequently, an increase in the threat to the racial ideology. The

more threatening Johnson's bouts became, the more focused the media became on his race. This media response effectively minimized the bouts' impact on the racial ideology by disparaging the black fighter and not allowing blackness to be equated with legitimate dominance. This type of media response made it difficult to expose the weaknesses in the racial ideology because the media quickly resealed any punctures Johnson had made in the ideology.

Chapter 4: Breaking the Mold: The Life and Career of Joe Louis

Walk in the path defined by rule, and accommodate yourself
to the enemy until you can fight a decisive battle.
– Sun Tzu

One problem that arises in an examination of any famous individual who lived in a previous lifetime is that all too often; his or her life is simplified into a series of statistics or a list of activities and accomplishments. This is especially true in the case of sporting icons as they are overly susceptible to being reduced to an average, a win-loss record, or any of a number of other statistical categories. If one were to summarize Joe Louis's life in such a way it would likely note that Louis "has defended his title more times than any man in the history of boxing. His total of twenty-five championship battles more than doubles the record of any previous heavyweight king," and continue by noting his "seven defenses in one year, knockouts of twenty-two of the twenty-five challengers, an average of only six and a half rounds for the twenty-five battles."[1] Such a stunning list of accomplishments surely solidifies Louis's place among boxing greats, but it does very little to distinguish him from other great boxers throughout history. Louis was a much deeper and more complex individual than a series of statistics could possibly convey. This complexity was intentionally cultivated by his handlers as they desired to create a publicly acceptable fighter who would not be limited by his race. As a result of his created image, the media began to protect him from damaging stories. In addition, Louis's acceptable persona enabled him to symbolize different nations such as Ethiopia and America. All of these side effects of his constructed image point to the

[1] Nat Fleischer, *The Heavyweight Championship: An Informal History of Heavyweight Boxing from 1719 to the Present Day* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1949): 245.

fluidity of Louis's identity, which put him in a position to affect social change in a wider range of social situations. While Louis's fluid identity eventually proved to be a unique and powerful asset, his meager beginnings did nothing to set him apart from his peers.

Joe Louis Barrow was born May 13, 1914 in a rundown shack in Lafayette, Alabama.[2] He was the seventh child of Munroe Barrow, who worked on a cotton field, and Lillie Reese, who was the daughter of former slaves.[3] Louis was born at a time when America was still attempting to deal with its first black heavyweight champion, as Johnson had captured the championship only six years prior. As a result, Louis initially faced many of the same racial and society challenges that Johnson faced during his rise to boxing stardom. At this point in American history the country had not even approached racial equality or harmony, as Jim Crow laws continued to oppress blacks throughout the southern states. In addition to the encoding of racism into American law, the beginning of the twentieth century marked the rise in popularity of social Darwinism which effectively used science to justify racism. It would be difficult for anyone to argue that Louis entered the world on anything even remotely resembling a level playing field with whites. Louis's early childhood home on the cotton fields of Alabama served as a constant reminder of slavery and the oppressive past that most southern blacks had endured only a half century earlier. As a result of the lingering shadow of racism, it was difficult for many blacks to make ends meet, and the Barrows were no exception. Joe's parents struggled for years to support their family. This struggle ultimately took its toll on the

[2] Ibid, 243.
[3] Patrick Myler, *Ring of Hate* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2005), 5.

family as Joe's father was institutionalized, and Louis's mother consequently remarried a few years later.[4] After the new marriage, twelve year old Joe and the family moved to Detroit to capitalize on the industrial jobs available at Ford.

Whether it was a result of the move to Detroit when he was only twelve or his uninterest in education, Louis was only schooled up to the fifth grade level.[5] This lack of education did nothing to draw attention away from his notoriously slow and somewhat stuttering speech. The combination of slow speech and limited years of schooling led many of the people around him to conclude that he was an unintelligent "slow-thinking boy."[6] However, such a stigma was not necessarily an impediment to future success because blacks were routinely viewed as unintelligent. When the family reached Detroit, Louis had little problem landing a job working on an ice wagon. While this type of work did not require a great deal of intelligence or social skill, it did involve a significant degree of physical strength. These ice wagons would travel to various parts of the city delivering ice and it was Louis's job to carry the ice from the wagon to the customers who sometimes lived in apartments up several stories. Carrying 100 pound blocks of ice undoubtedly required a lot of natural strength, but it also built up Louis's strength which undoubtedly became a valuable asset for him when he eventually took up boxing. In addition to working on the ice wagon in Detroit, he was part of a neighborhood gang that would occasionally "steal fruit from a wagon or throw mud at policemen… [Or] sneak into the movies when the

[4] Fleischer, 243.
[5] "Black Moses," *Time*, 29 September 1941, 60.
[6] Ibid.

cashier's back was turned."[7] While this gang did not get overly involved in a life of crime, it was through this gang that Louis acquired a reputation among his friends as an excellent fighter. In 1931 this reputation led a friend by the name of Thurston McKinney, a boxer himself, to insist that Louis take boxing lessons to capitalize on his natural ability as a fighter.[8] Training in the pugilistic art was a departure from his typical hobbies, as he had learned to play the violin quite well as a child and young adult. Even though it was quite an adjustment from music to boxing, this new sport allowed Louis to reinvent himself and no longer feel insecure about his slow speech.[9]

Louis continued to box and train at the Brewster Street Boxing Center in the Black Bottom section of Detroit, and quickly became the most formidable fighter there.[10] Despite losing his first amateur bout, Louis was able to achieve moderate success in his first year. It was not until he met John Roxborough that he really began to blossom as a fighter. Roxborough was a somewhat successful businessman who ran a local numbers game and took a great interest in Louis when he first saw him fight. In order to further mold Louis into a great fighter, Roxborough brought in Chicago businessman Julian Black. Together, Black and Roxborough were able to lure the former black lightweight boxer, Jack Blackburn, into their cohort.[11] While Roxborough, Black, and Blackburn continued to train Louis, they were able to land Louis a job at the Ford manufacturing plant in Dearborn, MI in order for him to

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[7] Earl Brown, "Joe Louis the Champion, Idol of His Race, Sets a Good Example of Conduct," *Life*, 8:25 (17 June 1940): 53.
[8] Ibid.
[9] *The Fight*. Produced and directed by Barak Goodman, 90 min. PBS Paramount, 2004, Videocassette.
[10] *Time*, 60.
[11] *Time*, 62.

support his boxing.[12] The process of training Louis was more involved and more comprehensive than just teaching him proper boxing technique. Louis's mangers set out to create a dominant boxer accompanied by a perfectly acceptable and humble public image. They were well aware of the public backlash that had occurred after Jack Johnson had become the first black heavyweight champion of the world by embarrassing nearly every white opponent he faced. Author Jeffery T. Sammons notes that it was quite evident during Louis's early years that the South would not even consider qualified black competition "since the reign of Jack Johnson."[13] Johnson's impact had hardened the public against allowing another black man of his character to attract so much national attention. As a result, the next black heavyweight contender had to be the antithesis to Jack Johnson by not challenging and threatening the values of white society.[14]

Louis's three handlers were well aware of the racial climate of the 1930s and to what degree Jack Johnson's career and image had contributed to that climate. They decided that in order to create a successful black boxer they had to teach him the proper way to conduct himself in public and in private. The most overt way they did this was by giving Louis a list of things he should and should not do. The list included: "never have you picture taken alone with a white woman, never go into a nightclub alone, have no soft fights, have no fixed fights, never gloat over a fallen opponent, keep a solemn expression in front of the cameras, live and fight clean."[15]

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[12] Brown, 53.
[13] Jeffrey T. Sammons, "Boxing as a Reflection of Society: The Southern Reaction to Joe Louis," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 16:4 (Spring 1983): 25.
[14] *The Fight*.
[15] Joe Louis Barrow, Jr and Barbara Munder, *Joe Louis: 50 Years An American Hero* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 43.

By no means was Louis a perfect individual, but his handlers wanted to conceal anything that might jeopardize his reputation and success in the fight game. Louis's image was manipulated by Roxborough even before Black and Blackburn had joined on to construct this new fighter. During Louis and Roxborough's first meeting, Roxborough effectively shortened Louis's name to something more to his liking. According to reports, Roxborough asked Louis what his name was and when Louis replied "Joe Louis Barrow," Roxborough retorted, "That's too long, I'll just call you Joe Louis."[16] Even from their first encounter, Roxborough had begun cultivating a fighter just the way he wanted. Louis made the whole process very easy as he willingly embraced his newly shortened name and the list of rules that eventually followed. In many ways, Roxborough and his two colleagues were sculptors in the way they took an uneducated boy from the streets of Detroit and molded him into the exact shape they wanted. While it is difficult to know the extent to which Jack Johnson's image was an intentional creation or performance, there is no avoiding the central role that Louis's handlers had in creating Louis's public persona.

Constructing both a skilled fighter and an image to go along with it was certainly not an easy task. According to an article printed in *Time* Magazine, the author suggests that the handlers were successful for four specific reasons: "the astuteness of Joe's managers; 2) the promotional genius of Mike Jacobs and his Hearst henchmen; 3) the change in the U.S. attitude toward Negroes since Jack Johnson's day; 4) Joe's naiveté, natural reserve and disinterest in liquor and tobacco."[17] It is easy to undervalue the importance of this image transformation

[16] *Time*, 60.
[17] Ibid, 62.

because people would like to believe that the only thing needed to succeed in the boxing world is fighting skill. In order to minimize the racial bias that persisted in the ring, Louis's handlers instructed him to attempt to knockout his opponents as often as possible.[18] While Louis's image was acceptable to white society, he remained a black individual. His blackness did not allow him to completely rely on his public image to protect him from racism in his fights which required a back-up plan. This strategy was an attempt to avoid leaving the decision up to the judges because they could easily rely on anti-black bias and hand the fight to Louis's white opponents. By knocking out his opponents, Louis could take racist judgment calls out of the equation and use his amazing punching power to decisively end matches. This was not always a possible course of action so it was imperative that Louis have a positive public image to rely on in case the result of the match was out of his hands. Black men in the 1930s and 1940s were confronted with so many barriers to success that, in many ways, good relations with the public was just as important as fighting skill. This was especially the case since Jack Johnson retired from the fight game because there was an extreme reluctance on the part of America to allow another black fighter to climb to the pinnacle of the sport. These circumstances required Louis and his managers to be hyperaware of racism and make every attempt to counter as much of that racism through image and discipline.

The maintenance of Louis's public image became a difficult task because he did not always strictly adhere to the rules put forth by his managers. As Louis steadily demolished his competition and compiled an impressive record, his popularity and income grew exponentially. His fame and improved financial

[18] Donald McRae, *Heroes Without a Country* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 19.

situation opened doors for him in white society that had previously been closed. Much more than most blacks, Louis was able to mingle with rich whites and enjoy exclusive public outings on account of his popularity. This was more a result of his celebrity status than anything else, but it is significant because white society often made an exception for Louis despite his race. By the late 1930s, Louis was spending long periods of time away from his wife Marva as he would travel the country fighting and living a very public life. Louis's marriage became strained due to his hectic schedule and the occasional rumor that Louis was spending time with various women. One such incident in 1938 involved a New York City dancer by the name of Marian Egbert who was reported to have spent time with Louis on several occasions.[19] The rumors put Marva in a difficult position as she was forced to comment on the situation and reassure the media that Louis and Egbert were merely friends and that it had no impact on their marriage. However, the truth was that the media's increasing invasiveness into their personal life, accompanied by Louis's constant absence, was having a negative effect on their marriage.

In addition to the Marian Egbert situation, it eventually became known that Louis had cultivated a relationship with the famous jazz singer Lena Horne. By 1943 Louis privately admitted to Marva that he wanted to marry Horne but felt it improper to leave Marva and his newborn child at that time.[20] Louis's close relationship with Horne reportedly ended with a scuffle. Louis recalled, "Lena started cursing me like nobody ever had… Before I knew it, I hit her with a left hook and knocked her on the bed. Then I jumped on her and started choking her. The thing, thank God, that saved

[19] Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 305.
[20] Ibid, 308.

her was that her aunt was in the apartment."[21] In addition to his relationship with Horne, Louis was known to have "One, three or four girls… after a fight, each going in and staying fifteen to twenty minutes."[22] While numerous stories eventually became public after Louis's career began to wind down, most of these incidents were well concealed from the public at the height of his career. These extra-marital relationships reveal the incredible ability of Louis's handlers to conceal his sexual promiscuity to such an extent that it did not prevent his ascent to boxing greatness.

Despite the rare report of Louis being seen in public with different women and the occasional gossip-column about the fragility of Louis's marriage, the media did not focus too much attention on these possible marital indiscretions. With the specter of Jack Johnson continuing to linger in the minds of fight fans, it is surprising that the media did not pounce on the opportunity to draw the connections between Johnson's infamous womanizing and Louis's public appearances with Ms. Egbert. Louis and his handlers had spent so much time cultivating his image so that it would be nearly impossible to draw connections between the two fighters' lifestyles. However, this incident carried with it the potential to undo all of their hard work. If the racial climate had significantly improved since the early 1900s then that would have explained the media's leniency, but this was not the reality, as their uneasiness remained about having another dominant black champion. It is unlikely that this was simply an example of the media failing to recognize the incident's potential to tarnish Louis's image. This suggests that Louis occupied a unique space within society such that his race did not attract as much public scrutiny and condemnation as many other

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

black athletes. Louis had come to embody the quiet, humble, obedient stereotype of the good black man who was not threatening to white America. Historian Thomas Hietala notes that the majority of black and white journalists "ignored or excused what Louis did privately so long as he behaved well publicly."[23] As long as people were unable to see or hear about his indiscretions, then Louis would continue to be publicly portrayed as the acceptable black man. The media obviously felt it beneficial to continue to uphold Louis as a model black citizen who could be idolized by black America and potentially lead to the next generation of blacks embodying this non-threatening lifestyle and personality. There are few instances during this period in which a black public figure's positive public image was actually protected and maintained by the white media.

While Louis's personal life was only sparingly covered, his entry into the United States' Army in 1942 attracted significant attention and made Louis one of the media darlings of the early 1940s. After defeating the German fighter Max Schmeling in their 1938 rematch, Louis was heralded by many Americans for having delivered a decisive knockout blow to Nazism. In many ways, Louis's entrance into the army was a continuation of his fight against the Nazi regime. There were few Americans who could raise the country's confidence in the war as much as Louis. After defeating the symbol of Nazism in the ring, Louis was now headed off to Europe to knockout more Germans for the U.S. Army. A group of black leaders of the time remarked that "America's armed forces have in Joe Louis a champion of Democracy, whose great influence for building unity, can become a key factor in giving America the strength to administer the knockout blow to the forces of

[23] Ibid, 309.

Hitlerism."[24] According to reports, even President Roosevelt acknowledged Louis's importance when he met with Louis and admitted, "Joe, we need muscles like yours to beat Germany."[25] Such an image was powerful in the minds of many Americans, despite the fact that Louis's role in the war was as removed from combat with Germans as possible. Louis's decision to enter the army was widely embraced by top army officials because they had plans to put Louis's symbolic power to good use.

In order for the military to maximize Louis's usefulness they had to manipulate and reconstruct his image. For the army, "The official construction of Joe Louis involved a depoliticization of the Brown Bomber as he became the quintessential symbol of Americanness; Louis was overtly disconnected from charged racial issues, instead representing black patriotism and black citizenship."[26] The only way that Louis could become a truly valuable symbol for the army was to keep him alive and to focus on his status as an American rather than a black man. The army put him through the same training required of every soldier but then kept him out of combat by sending him on a boxing exhibition tour throughout the various military camps. While there was likely a portion of white America that saw Louis as nothing more than a black man and therefore expendable, the military felt that he was of more use as a morale booster and symbol of American dominance than he would be as just another soldier in the field. It was not the military's intention to necessarily break down racial barriers and inequalities, but it was nearly impossible for the military to

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[24] Alexander J. Young, Jr., "Joe Louis, Symbol" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1968), 54.
[25] Ibid, 117.
[26] Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, "Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the Negro Problem During World War II," *The Journal of American History* December 2002 <http://www.historycooperative.org//journals/jah/89.3/sklaroff.html> (25 Feb. 2007).

prevent Louis from symbolically showing the patriotism and equality of blacks. Scholar Rebecca Sklaroff notes, "When Louis was featured in military boxing exhibitions, on film, and on war posters, the iconography was not easily divorced from the racially charged definition it implied. Furthermore, as the most visible black figure of the war era, portrayed as a moral, patriotic man, Louis countered racial stereotypes frequent in popular culture."[27] Louis's acceptance into this patriotic organization, combined with his public popularity, gave him a great deal of power to affect change within the army. One way he was able to use his leverage was in desegregating some of the military athletic teams from which his fellow black soldiers were previously prohibited from joining. When Louis heard that Jackie Robinson was not allowed to play on the football and baseball teams at Fort Riley, KS on account of his race, he spoke to a Brigadier General and insisted on the elimination of the segregated policy.[28] Louis's sway within the army proved significant as Robinson was thereafter allowed to compete.

Louis's acceptance into the army was not only a daring career move for him, but it was also a risky move for the army. First of all, Louis was at the top of the boxing world and showed no signs of relinquishing his title to any challenger. This success also provided him with a significant amount of popularity in the white and black communities as well as a sizable bank account to support any and all of his hobbies. It is also important to recognize that Louis was only twenty-eight years old and in his physical prime as a boxer when he decided to enlist in the army. By joining the army in the beginning of 1942, Louis was giving up some of his best years

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

as a professional boxer, not to mention possibly being removed from the spotlight and risking his loyal following. Louis ended up boxing for most of his time in the army and as a result he did not have to jeopardize his life or his place in the spotlight. From the army's perspective, enlisting a very popular black figure was dangerous because it would likely elicit calls to desegregate the army. The army also used Louis as a form of advertising which was dangerous because it made a black man the face of the military, during a period in which racism and inequality were staples of American society. Pictures of Louis in uniform appeared on numerous war posters and offered a "rare depiction of a black man in an aggressive pose," let alone the fact that it was an armed black man.[29] It was this very type of image that had been frowned upon by southern Democrats who did not want blacks to get the idea that it was acceptable to be armed and violent. In addition, images of an armed black man conjured up the historical fears of an armed and rebellious slave who would attempt to overthrow his oppressors. The presence and circulation of these images suggests that Louis was non-threatening enough to prevent the public from drawing too many connections to the past fears of armed black men. The potential of Louis's aggressive military image to threaten white America was somewhat mitigated by the focus on Louis as an American icon and not just a black icon. This shift in Louis's symbolic status allowed the white public to ease its fears as it was made clear that Louis was fighting on their side.

Apart from the fear of using an armed black man as an American symbol, another reason that Louis was a problematic military icon was that he was not always a representative of America. Years before the military began using him as a

[29] Ibid.

figurehead; Louis was about as far from being an American symbol as possible. As Louis was building his career record in 1935, he found himself pitted against a hulking Italian boxer by the name of Primo Carnera. While the fight was a not even a contest for Louis, the international political setting at the time made the fight important. In an effort to create an Italian Empire, the Italian dictator, Mussolini ordered an invasion of Ethiopia in the beginning years of the 1930s.[30] With Carnera's status as an Italian and Louis as a black man, the fight was billed as one between Italy and Ethiopia. While the impetus for making the connection to Ethiopia was solely due to Louis's race, it was not an unimportant link because "For black America, Ethiopia stood as a lonely symbol of black achievement, resistance, freedom, power, and ultimately the last, best hope of African independence."[31] In addition, the fight "came to stand for the overall unequal struggle between Africa and Europe, between blacks and whites," as a result of the fact that "the war pitted an aggressive European imperial power against a much weaker, unoffending African country.[32] This interpretation of the international conflict draws many direct parallels to the struggles blacks had to face in America. The ancestral connection that many black Americans had with Africa, as a result of slavery, enabled many blacks to temporarily embrace Louis's Ethiopian image. In this fight, black Americans had the opportunity to symbolically confront and resist their historical oppressors through the fistic brilliance of Joe Louis. Few reporters made the direct connection between the unsolicited Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the way whites had oppressed their blacks

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[30] James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 28.
[31] Ibid, 30.
[32] Joseph E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1994), 154.

throughout American history. The media's failure to link the two situations is significant because with Louis's victory, he had symbolized the triumph of the black man over his white oppressor. While the media had portrayed Louis as an Ethiopian for the sake of the fight, its failure to address the symbolism of the fight's outcome stymied any chance of the fight affecting change in the racial ideology or social order.

While Louis came to represent different nations and ideologies on a national level, he was also influential in keeping the sport of boxing alive and popular in America. Since Jack Johnson had lost his title in 1915 and faded from the boxing scene, there was a prolonged twenty year period in which blacks were unable to claim the championship. The period was also noted for its lack of dominant fighters, as most of the heavyweight competition at the time was mediocre at best.[33] Jack Dempsey was a notable fighter who dominated in this period, but he was one of the only boxing greats who emerged from this era. Louis's emergence onto the boxing scene, in many ways, was at a time when the sport needed a dominant fighter to rescue and provide validity to the struggling sport. This was also in the middle of the Great Depression at a time when the American public would welcome the entertainment provided by a dominant boxer. "Joe Louis came to symbolize many things to many people. To those mired in abject poverty, he represented upward social mobility and success against great odds."[34] Louis epitomized the idea of the "People's Champ" as so many Americans could identify with his underprivileged background. Even though Louis was black, the Horatio Alger story of his life offered

[33] Mark D. Coburn, "America's Great Black Hope," *American Heritage*, 29.6 (1978): 84.
[34] Hietala, 150.

a glimmer of hope for a more prosperous future, at a time when upward mobility was little more than a dream for most Americans.

In his 1981 eulogy for Louis, the Reverend Jesse Jackson said, "All champions are not heroes. Heroes are born of necessity. Heroes heed a need. Joe is our hero because he responded when we needed him…. With Joe Louis, we had made it finally from the guttermost to the uttermost."[35] Jesse Jackson's remarks at Louis's funeral serve as a fitting encapsulation of the indelible mark that Louis left on the game of boxing. As Jackson notes, heroes emerge at times when they are needed to fill a role and accomplish a task. Louis came onto the boxing scene when the sport could have benefited from a dominant and charismatic fighter who could raise the level of competition and draw fans to the sport. Other than in the black community, there were very few people calling for the emergence of a dominant black fighter as the memory of Jack Johnson still haunted the sport. With the social circumstances of the Great Depression and heightened international tensions, there is no doubt that the country and the sport needed a hero to rally around. Few would have predicted that the hero would be any color other then white. The attention to detail and close scrutiny by Louis's handlers gave Louis the opportunity to both appear in the public spotlight and remain in it due to the fact that they had constructed a rather uncontroversial boxer. Louis offered the public an alternative to the outspoken and rebellious form of masculinity Jack Johnson put on display in the first decade of the twentieth century. Instead, Louis was able to exude a humble and reserved type of masculinity that was less threatening to whites inside and outside the ring. He did not taunt or toy with his opponents in the ring, nor did he give in to media attempts to get

[35] Barrow, 240.

him to speak ill of his fellow boxers. For the most part, Louis was able to keep his private life concealed from the media and was rarely seen breaking his handlers' rules.

While Roxborough, Black, and Blackburn went to great efforts to vault Louis into America's good graces, their role in Louis's career raises questions as to the symbolic power of his accomplishments. While Louis did possess some of the same qualities that were stressed for the sake of his public image, some of the rules were obviously not to Louis's liking. In many respects, the extent to which his handlers went to manufacture this new person was reminiscent of the days of blackface minstrelsy in which actors painted their faces black and toyed with white fears by recreating stereotyped black portrayals. Even though Louis was not mocking blacks and black culture, he was using historical stereotypes to mask his true identity in order to gain public acceptance. Despite the fact that Roxborough, Black, and Blackburn were all black, the same puppet-puppeteer relationship was present with the three handlers pulling the strings. These men had indeed constructed a fighter who could achieve acceptance in America, but in doing so they had recreated a black stereotype that displayed nearly every trait whites desired in a black man. The obvious upside of this image was that Louis did not scare away as many white fighters, thus giving him greater access to quality white competition. However, this also involved restricting Louis's freedoms and personal desires so that he would conform to white standards of morality.

While Joe Louis attempted to distance himself from Jack Johnson in so many ways, Louis's rise to stardom was ironically facilitated by his historic connection to

Johnson. For Louis, Johnson was both the image he was fighting against and the character he needed in order to juxtapose himself. Jack Johnson had accomplished an incredible feat in 1908 by capturing the heavyweight championship, but the backlash that followed resulted in the erection of a new racial barrier upon Johnson's retirement. Johnson had entered the ring, dominated his opponents, broke the racial barrier, and then left the sport in nearly the same condition that it was when he entered; as the space he had created for racial equality sealed up behind him. When Louis came onto the scene, he had to reassure the public that he was not the second-coming of Jack Johnson and that he would not challenge the status quo. In order to make these differences apparent, Johnson's image had to constantly be re-invoked so that Louis could portray himself as the more acceptable fighter and person. Louis could not really shake Johnson's shadow, but in many ways it was crucial that he not lose that connection because so much of his identity depended on it. In addition, Louis had to exaggerate the racial aspect of his character in order to break down the barriers obstructing his success. Rather than only portraying himself as a morally acceptable person, he also had to stress the fact that he was an obedient black man in order to appear harmless enough to have an opportunity for the championship. Louis had to fashion himself as the epitome of racial acceptability in order to ultimately invalidate the prevailing racial hierarchy of the times.

A significant part of Louis's success as a boxer was a result of his ability to manage and manipulate his image. Oftentimes this management was done by his handlers or a protective media that shielded him from a significant amount of public scrutiny. Throughout the course of his career, Louis's image went through a great

deal of change as he was seen as the antithesis of Jack Johnson, a symbol of upward social mobility, a black American hero, a symbol of Ethiopia, and ultimately as an American hero. All of these changing images points to the fluidity of Louis's public reputation. This ability to appeal to so many different groups of people did not allow his accomplishments to be minimized and therefore, his challenges to the racial hierarchy had to be addressed. The importance of Louis's public image to his image in the boxing ring highlights an important dynamic between these two realms. Public willingness to accept Louis's non-violent and harmless public image shows a seeming disregard for the obviously violent image that any boxer possesses when stepping in to the ring. This is significant because allowing Louis to physically destroy white opponents in the ring provided him an opportunity to challenge white superiority in a publicly acceptable manner. Louis only had to maintain a humble and docile public image in order for him to avoid public scrutiny as he violently and methodically defeated white America.

Chapter 5: Black Chameleon: The Media's Reluctant Acceptance of Joe Louis

He will win whose army is animated by
the same spirit throughout all its ranks.
–Sun Tzu

With the emergence of Joe Louis as a socially respectable version of the first black heavyweight champion, society was forced to decide the extent to which Louis would be accepted. While Louis was obviously a more likable character than Johnson, there was a great deal of doubt and unease about allowing another black athlete to become champion. All of this ambivalence and uncertainty is evident in the way the print media reported on Louis's triumphs and defeats. It is in this media realm that the fluidity of Louis's public image becomes both apparent and a valuable asset for him. This can be seen in the manner in which Louis was treated during his fights with Schmeling as well as his time in the military. With the Louis-Schmeling fights portrayed as battles between America and Germany, Louis came to represent America. While not explicitly saying that Louis was a second-class citizen, the newspapers used a subtle but steady regiment of racially derogatory comments to qualify Louis's national symbolic status. Despite these references to his race, Louis also received a significant amount of support from the white and black media which allowed him to become an American icon without too much resistance. Louis's acceptable image enabled him to become a national symbol and challenge the racial ideology by virtue of his status as a symbolically superior individual.

In most newspaper articles about Louis in the 1930s and 1940s, journalists peppered their pieces with a mix of racially derogatory comments and admiration for Louis's skill and prowess in the ring. As Louis continued to dominate his opponents

while adhering to his handlers' rules of proper etiquette, he presented the media with the increasingly difficult task of defining how a successful black fighter would be accepted in a society that abhorred blacks but adored boxing. This battle over Louis's public acceptance was not only fought on newspaper pages across the country, but it was also an issue that needed to be resolved in the minds of all Americans. The connection between the media representation of an icon and the public's feelings toward that figure is not always synonymous. However, the media provides a framework or lens through which the public is able to judge, analyze, and understand the importance of public figures. In the case of Joe Louis, the media was a source of authoritative views that had the ability to reinforce positive or negative portrayals of Louis to the public each and every day.

By the 1930s, black-owned and operated newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Age* had become established businesses with sizable black readerships. On the other hand, papers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post* were widely-circulated, predominantly white newspapers. Both black and white newspapers covered Louis's career even though their treatment of the dominant fighter was rarely identical. Examining the way both the black and white media represented Louis is important in understanding the racial landscape of the time as well as the unique space Louis occupied in the realm of public perception. One of the best places to begin such an analysis is also one of the most difficult periods in Louis's professional career. In June 1936, Louis squared-off against a formidable German opponent by the name of Max Schmeling. Despite Louis's being the heavy favorite, Schmeling surprised the public and defeated Louis,

handing him his first professional loss. After recovering from the defeat, Louis returned in 1937 to take the heavyweight championship from James Braddock and become only the second black heavyweight champion in history. The following year, Louis and Schmeling arranged for a rematch of their 1936 bout. In the two years since their last fight, much had changed, as Hitler's Nazi regime had become an international symbol of race hatred and Joe Louis had become the new champion. When the 1938 rematch finally took place, Louis destroyed Schmeling and retained his heavyweight crown. In this two year period from 1936 to 1938, Louis had experienced the highs and lows of his boxing career. In essence, Louis's career was at its most fragile point in 1936, while in 1938 he had reached the pinnacle of symbolic dominance. It is with this as a contextual background that one can begin to see the media's uncertainty as to how to deal with a dominant fighter of Louis's skill and racial symbolism.

Prior to the first fight in June of 1936, it was widely held throughout the media that Louis was an overwhelming favorite to defeat the German Max Schmeling. In an illustration published in the June 6, 1936 edition of the *Chicago Defender*, the artist attempted to display the differences between the fighters by portraying Schmeling as a regimented and disciplined individual and Louis as a slow and tired leisure fanatic.[1] Despite the fact that the paper was black-owned and operated, it did not shy away from painting Louis as a boxer with an arguably inferior work ethic. Articles in the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Age* consistently presented confident predictions of Louis's domination of Schmeling. An example of this confidence is evident in the headline in the June 20, 1936 edition of the *Chicago*

[1] "Extreme Opposites," *Chicago Defender*, 6 June 1936, p. 14.

Defender which read, "Schmeling Is Slated To Kiss Canvas In Early Round."[2] It was not a secret that Louis was the more dominant and heralded fighter, but both of these black newspapers made it abundantly clear that the black competitor was going to have no trouble defeating his opponent.

The white mainstream newspapers conveyed the same type of optimism in a Louis victory, although the confidence in Louis was less blatant and exaggerated than it was in the black newspapers. While still predicting a Louis victory, the *Washington Post* column entitled "This Morning… With Shirley Povich," portrays Louis in a somewhat infantile and inferior manner. In the article Povich writes, "The writing of anything but his name is a severe task for the Bomber. His faith in the telephone is almost childish. After he uses the dial, he expects the party on the other end to know instantly who is calling without the formality of introducing himself."[3] While Povich makes it quite clear that he believes Louis to be the superior fighter, he uses his article to belittle Louis and write about other aspects of his character which are inferior to his German counterpart. Povich suggests that while the black fighter may emerge victorious, he is little more than an unintelligent child. Another article of note appeared in the *New York Times* in which the journalist describes Schmeling and not Louis as possessing a "savage" fighting style.[4] This is worth noting because it uses the image of savagery which has historically been used as a way of dehumanizing blacks, but in this instance the journalist uses the imagery to describe the white Schmeling. In making this reference to Schmeling, the imagery is used to

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[2] "Odds Favor Louis by Knockout," *Chicago Defender*, 20 June 1936, p. 1.
[3] Shirley Povich, "This Morning… With Shirley Povich," *Washington Post*, 17 June 1936, p. 19.
[4] James P. Dawson, "Outburst of Savage Punching Marks Final Workout of German at Napanoch, While Brown Bomber Batters Three Sparring Mates in Closing Session as Family Looks On," *New York Times*, 17 June 1936, p. 33.

compliment him on his toughness inside the ring. The ease with which the journalist reverses the typical use of the word conveys the ability of the media to elevate the status of the non-favored and non-American fighter in order to prevent idolization of a black competitor. As a result of Louis's status as an American symbol during the fight, he was afforded better treatment than a normal black American, despite the fact that journalists such as Shirley Povich would remind readers that Louis was little more than an unintelligent and inarticulate heap of muscles.

Following Louis's loss to Schmeling in the 1936 bout, an interesting theme emerges in the two black newspapers. Both the *Chicago Defender*[5] and the *New York Age*[6] provide speculations and rumors that suggest Louis was unfairly defeated. These two papers both present very serious reports that Louis was believed to have been "doped," which explained his stunning defeat. Such a conspiracy theory is not even mentioned in the June 20, 1936 fight articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*. In these three newspapers, several references are made to the tremendous upset and Schmeling's sound execution, while alluding to the argument that Louis's loss was partly a result of his overconfidence.[7] This reaction was only briefly voiced in the *New York Age* and *Chicago Defender*. The two black newspapers also make several references to the loss of hope in racial progress as a result of Louis's defeat. In an article entitled "Race's Tri-Legged Stool of Hope Now Wobbly, Only 1 Leg Remains," the author writes, "What the Race lost in money was as dust to diamonds compared with the loss is suffered in hope… Louis' defeat was

[5] "Probe Report That Joe Louis Was Doped," *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1936, p. 1.
[6] "Investigation By Age Reporters Reveals No Proof Of Doping Rumors," *New York Age*, 27 June 1936, p. 1.
[7] John Lardner, "'I Quit,' Moans Joe," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 1936, p. 18.

the second severe blow the Race has suffered within the last few months."[8] Also, the headline "Harlem Downcast By Joe Louis' Defeat," made the sense of despair in black communities such as Harlem quite evident.[9] Louis was not able to recapture the approval and trust of the public until his victory over Jack Sharkey in August of that year, in which one article asserted that the "Bomber's Great Victory Reinstates Him With Public."[10] The Schmeling bout had raised so many questions about Louis's ability that it took this victory over Sharkey to win back approval and solidify his position as a dominant boxer.

In the period of time between the first and second Schmeling fights, Louis had returned to his winning ways and had even claimed the heavyweight championship. Despite having rebounded well from his first professional loss, the media still had doubts about his ability because he had yet to defeat Schmeling. When the two met in 1938, Louis's complete domination and first round knockout of Schmeling silenced many of his doubters. Following this second bout, both white and black newspapers chronicled Louis's return to glory. Many of the articles in the *Chicago Defender* and *New York Age* spent several paragraphs describing the celebrations and spontaneous parades which erupted in black neighborhoods after the Louis victory. The references to Louis as a racial hero were much more evident in the black newspapers following the second fight. One such article in the *Chicago Defender* read, "Everything 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

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[8] Enoc P. Waters Jr., "Race's Tri-Legged Stool of Hope Now Wobbly, Only 1 Leg Remains," *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1936, p. 14.
[9] St. Clair Bourne, "Harlem Downcast By Joe Louis' Defeat," *New York Age*, 27 June 1936, p. 1.
[10] "Louis Batters Way Back to Glory With Smashing Rights," *Chicago Defender*, 22 August 1936, p. 1.

of inspiration for generations yet unborn."[11] Articles such as this make it clear that the black media were well aware of the racial and societal impact that Louis had when he knocked out his opponents. The unwillingness of the white media to point out this symbolic dimension of his fights did not deter the black media from alerting its readers to the racial stakes.

While the reports in mainstream newspapers immediately following the fight did little to welcome Louis as a National hero, they did occasionally hint at the importance of the fight. One *New York Times* headline the day after the fight read, "Thoughts of Recession Forgotten as Large Crowd Invades Stadium."[12] As the headline suggests, the fight had the power to make people forget about their economic difficulties for at least one evening. Some might argue that sport and entertainment are little more than forms of escapism, and on this occasion it certainly filled that role. The bout had such tremendous symbolic power that it allowed people to forget about their severe economic conditions even though the fight only lasted two minutes and four seconds. Another interesting twist that emerged were reports in the *Los Angeles Times* that depicted Schmeling as a German idol whose 1938 loss had brought great sadness to his European homeland.[13] Similarly, a *New York Times* article on the same day reported that "All Germany…was thunderstruck and almost unbelieving at the unexpected news."[14] These two reports closely mirror the articles written after Louis lost the first fight in 1936, in which Harlem and other black

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[11] James M. Reid, "Reid Cites Qualities of Louis Which Have Inspired Race Youth," *Chicago Defender*, 25 June 1938, p. 7.
[12] Fred Van Ness, "Thoughts of Recession Forgotten as Large Crowd Invades Stadium," *New York Times*, 23 June 1938, p. 15.
[13] "Germany in Mourning Over Moxie's Loss," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 June 1938, p. A10.
[14] "Idol's Downfall Saddens Germans," *New York Times*, 23 June 1938, p. 14.

neighborhoods grieved over their fallen hero. These public reactions to the fights reveal that Louis and Schmeling were not simply portrayed as national symbols to give the media something to talk about, but because citizens from both countries actually identified with these fighters.

The international circumstances surrounding the second meeting between the two fighters offered the media a convenient way to embrace the bout as a match between two warring ideologies. The conflict with Germany enabled the American media to scrutinize the oppressive National Socialist regime in Germany while disassociating America from the same indiscretions by making the black fighter an American symbol. However, the American media was quick to avoid connecting Louis's national prominence with some sort of American egalitarianism. Louis's matches with Schmeling could easily have been portrayed as a modern battle of the races, comparable to Jack Johnson's bout with Jim Jeffries in 1910. The salience of race was trumped by that of national identity and the victory was used to reinforce American superiority over Germany instead of challenging the superiority of whites over blacks domestically. While much of the significance of a black national symbol was overlooked by the media, the challenge to white superiority remained in Louis's status as a black American fighting the white European enemy. America was able to cope with having a black man as the face of America for one boxing match but the persistence of such an image would have raised a new sort of challenge to the racial norms of this period.

While Louis was challenging the racial status quo through sport, the late 1930s and early 1940s the struggle over racial equality took place outside the ring as

well. In 1937, President Roosevelt appointed a black lawyer by the name of William Henry Hastie to be the judge of the Federal District Court in the Virgin Islands. This appointment made Hastie the first black man to break the color barrier in the federal judiciary. Hastie's quiet disposition and thorough educational background made him the safest choice to break the color barrier and serve as a "ceremonial black to quiet the unprecedented militancy of Blacks."[15] While such a token appointment was indicative of the continued racism in America, there were much more blatant forms of racism evident in Congress. One such example in 1939 involved Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo who had proposed a bill that would facilitate the movement of millions of black Americans to Africa. In what came to be known as the Greater Liberia Bill, Bilbo suggested that the United States acquire 400,000 square miles of land in Africa, adjacent to Liberia, and pay black laborers to prepare the land for the settlement of millions of black Americans.[16] Rather than garnering support from fellow white supremacists, Bilbo was able to amass most of the signatures for his petition from the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, led by Mittie Maude Lena Gordon.[17] This group was composed primarily of black Americans who already had a desire to move to Africa. While the bill ultimately failed, it displayed the continued attempts to rid America of blacks, despite the fact that a black man such as Joe Louis had come to represent America through his battles with Max Schmeling.

While these instances point to the continued debate about blacks' role in America, events in the early 1940s were likely influential in pushing Louis toward

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[15] Lerone Bennett Jr., "Chronicles of Black Courage: William H. Hastie Set New Standard by Resigning Top-Level Post to Protest Racism." *Ebony* 10 (August 2001): 97.
[16] "Mr. Bilbo's Afflatus," *Time*, 8 May 1939, p. 14
[17] Ibid.

military service. In October of 1940, President Roosevelt ordered that blacks receive equal opportunities and treatment in the Armed Forces. A White House statement issued on October 9, 1940 stated that "It is the policy of the War Department that the services of Negroes will be utilized on a fair and equitable basis."[18] While the order did not desegregate the Army, it did stipulate that organizations were to be open to blacks. Another attempt to open the Army to blacks was made the following year, as the War Department authorized the formation of an all-black squadron in the Air Corps. In July 1941, black cadets at the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama began training to form the 99th Pursuit Squadron.[19] These attempts to increase black representation suggested that the military was trying to be more racially progressive. When Louis agreed to join the military in 1942, he was stepping into a situation which would prove to be mutually beneficial for him and the military.

Louis's entrance into the military provided just the opportunity for him to remain as the symbol of American might, despite the country's past and present racial problems. The enlistment of such a high-profile athlete drew national attention and put the media in a position where it had to decide how to handle the racial significance of such an event. The first stories and headlines of Louis's entrance into the United States' Army were scattered throughout the sports sections of mainstream newspapers and the front pages of black newspapers in the early part of January, 1942. Louis's announcement that he would enter the Army came on the heels of his defeat of Buddy Baer on January 9, 1942. What made this bout notable was the fact that Louis was putting his title on the line in a fight in which he had agreed to donate

[18] "Negroes to Get Fair Treatment." *Los Angeles Times*, 10 October 1940, p. 5.
[19] William Alexander Percy, "Jim Crow and Uncle Sam: The Tuskegee Flying Units and the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe during World War II," *Journal of Military History* 67.3 (July 2003): 777

his entire winnings to the U.S. Navy Relief Fund. The newspaper coverage of these two events was remarkably similar in both black and mainstream newspapers. The caption of a front-page picture of Louis saluting the American Flag in the *Chicago Defender* referred to Louis as a "true American."[20] While such a description of Louis might seem to be inconsequential, it is important because it marks a trend in black and mainstream newspapers in which Louis is increasingly described as an American as opposed to a "Negro."

In addition to captions solidifying Louis's American identity, Louis's commitment to the Army elicited a great deal of praise for his boxing ability as well as his importance to the black race and humankind. Former presidential candidate Wendell Willkie was quoted as saying to Louis that "in view of your attitude it is impossible for me to see how any American can think of discrimination in terms of race, creed or color."[21] In a February 7 issue of the *Chicago Defender*, an entire article was devoted to praising Louis as an upstanding individual and member of the black race. Journalist F. J. Davis wrote that Louis "set up an outstanding example for men of all professions to follow in rising from the bottom to the top."[22] Davis went on to say that Louis "ought to be a living emulation for the youth of his race."[23] Such reports seem somewhat out of place, considering the racial climate of the times and the fact that a physically imposing black man who repeatedly knocks out white opponents is the one whom black children are instructed to emulate. With Louis's entrance into the military, his depictions changed from a barely clothed physical

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[20] "'Bomber' In Army, Salutes the Colors," *Chicago Defender*, 17 January 1942, p. 1.
[21] "Willkie Praises Louis," *Chicago Defender*, 17 January 1942, p. 24.
[22] "Joe Louis—The Man," *Chicago Defender*, 7 February 1942, p. 24.
[23] Ibid., 24.

specimen armed with lethal fists to a fully uniformed American, armed with a gun. The symbolic overtones of idolizing an armed black man posed a direct threat to white supremacist ideology and served as a visible image of black empowerment. While the fears of allowing blacks to have guns still existed in society, Louis had come to symbolize somewhat conflicting images which in some ways made him a race-neutral public figure. Louis could not completely escape his blackness, but his image as an acceptable black man allayed many fears that he inspire other blacks to use the guns against white America. In addition, the fact that Louis had symbolized America in his battle against Schmeling reassured whites that he was fighting for their cause. These different images Louis came to represent allowed him to partially hide his blackness as he disguised himself as an American. The recognition of Louis as a black cultural icon and even a national icon was always present in the black newspapers. The most noticeable difference in Joe Louis's image took place in the white mainstream newspapers.

Despite completely unnecessary and somewhat frequent references to Joe Louis and fried chicken in *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* articles, the mainstream newspapers tended to praise Louis as a fighter and a goodhearted human being. On January 8, the *Hartford Courant* praised the fact that Louis was trying so hard to raise money for the Navy Relief Fund when they wrote, "He is deeply in earnest about doing something for his country right now."[24] Columnist John Kieran for the *New York Times* went a step further in calling Louis "simply grand" and noting that "By his bearing and his actions it may be that he has done more for the

[24] "Louis Does Everything in Power to Help Gate for Title Defense Friday Night," *Hartford Courant*, 8 January 1942, p. 15.

Negro race than any man since Booker T. Washington."[25] This serves as a departure from most 1938 mainstream articles in that it portrays Louis as an upstanding person outside the realm of boxing. Rather than painting Louis as merely a black boxer, John Kieran humanizes Louis and allows for a discussion of Louis's character and personality that does not entirely revolve around what he had accomplished in the ring. Humanizing any black, whether a cultural icon or not, was noteworthy because it broke away from the historical characterization of blacks as animalistic and being closer to nature.

Kieran's rather positive portrayal of Louis is not to suggest that all mainstream newspaper columnists painted Louis in the same way. Oftentimes, reporters would find a place in each article to counterbalance any compliments with insults. In one such instance, a *New York Times* article qualifies a noteworthy Louis quote by prefacing it with, "Joe is no master of the King's English. He fumbles his tenses and drops his final consonants."[26] With this insult setting the stage, the article finally acknowledges Louis's patriotic statement and reports him as saying, "We're goin' to do our part and we'll win 'cause we're on God's side."[27] After revealing Louis's eloquent quote, the article refers to Louis as simply "an American soldier," and makes no reference to his race.[28] This failure to remind the reader of Louis's blackness indicates the reporter's unwillingness to make clear connections between brilliant quotes and blacks because it could suggest a level of intelligence that blacks were not supposed to have. This article demonstrates that mainstream newspapers in

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[25] "A Champion All the Way," *New York Times*, 13 January 1942, p. 25.
[26] "On God's Side," *New York Times*, 16 May 1942, p. 14.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid, 14.

the 1940s continued to find ways of subordinating blacks as they can only note the brilliant eloquence of a black icon after describing him as an inferior wordsmith. This mix of compliment and disparagement was more typical of the period as a careful journalistic balance was struck in order to ensure that Louis remained in the category of exceptional black man rather than exceptional human being. It was important to highlight Louis's race and any character deficiencies in order to maintain his racially subordinate status as well as keep the American racial ideology intact. The extent to which newspapers disparaged blacks varied from article to article but few were completely devoid of racist rhetoric.

One of the general trends that emerged in mainstream newspapers in 1942 was an apparent desire to rank Louis among the greats in boxing history. While such debates are somewhat common in the world of sports, the early part of 1942 yielded a great many of these discussions over Louis's rightful position in the history books. One such debate took place over a two day span in Shirley Povich's column in the *Washington Post*. In his January 12 column, Povich reluctantly stated that he would have picked Jack Dempsey to defeat Joe Louis in a hypothetical match between the two fighters. Povich was quick to note that the very fact that he hesitated before picking Dempsey is "high tribute to any man."[29] Two days later, Povich quoted significant portions of a critical and biting letter sent to him in response to his choice of Dempsey over Louis. In his letter, the gentleman writes that Povich's article "is so blocked with white supremacy that it is sickening," and he continues by saying, "I have noticed several of your pieces trying to lessen the greatness of Joe Louis."[30]

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[29] Shirley Povich, "This Morning… With Shirley Povich," *Washington Post*, 12 January 1942, p. 14.
[30] Shirley Povich, "This Morning… With Shirley Povich," *Washington Post*, 14 January 1942, p. X18.

What is important about these two columns is that they show, on the one hand, a white columnist who considers a black fighter to even be in the same league as a boxing great like Jack Dempsey; and on the other hand, an impassioned citizen who chides a columnist in failing to recognize Louis's unique place in history. Povich's original article, in which he circuitously praised Louis for being mentioned in the same sentence as Dempsey, reveals a degree of uncertainty in his choice as his hesitation seems to predict that the public will likely take issue with his decision. If Povich had chosen Louis over Dempsey it would have undermined the legacy of one of the greatest white fighters in history as well as anointed a black man the ultimate athlete in a sport that had tried for so many years to prevent interracial competition. Whether it was in reference to Povich's column or not, an article in the *Chicago Times* picked up on this same undervaluing of Louis when it noted, "Some white sports writers continue, even now to resurrect Jack Dempsey. It is high time that this particular type of writer comes down off his perch and gives full credit to Louis."[31]

In the first few months of 1942, it became apparent that Joe Louis's entrance into the military had ingratiated him with the media and enabled him to become more of an icon than he was after defeating Schmeling in 1938. While articles about Joe Louis in both black and mainstream newspapers appeared to be sparser, the characterizations of Louis in those articles were more positive. This observation is supported by Alexander Young Jr. when he writes that, "his winning the title was much more important than his defending it. This was particularly true when it was

[31] "Louis 'Placed A Rose' On Abraham Lincoln's Grave," *Chicago Defender*, 31 January 1942, p. 24.

discovered that his defense of the title was quite often an easy chore."[32] Joe Louis's boxing ability was no longer in doubt after he won the title, and therefore Louis became a more stable national figure. Rather than depicting Louis as merely an accomplished black fighter, even mainstream newspapers began to speak of Louis as an American hero and a credit to his race. While it was not necessarily the best for continued white supremacy to see recurring images of an armed black man, it did provide a way to channel Louis's destructive power toward German Nazi's and not against the American racial ideology that he was damaging every time he defeated a white opponent in the ring.

If Joe Louis was going be kept from completely undermining the white supremacist ideology in America, then it was important that he somehow be disassociated from the black masses and occupy a unique space in the social imaginary. When it became evident that Louis was not just a short-lived success story but was going to be in the public spotlight for quite some time, the media had to find a way to disconnect the racial symbolism from Louis's victories. One way that the media was able to accomplish this was by emphasizing his national identity when he took part in bouts against international fighters such as Max Schmeling. While there was a definite tension that existed when a black man was used to represent the collective American identity, it was an opportunity for the media to utilize his success to further America's reputation. The racial overtones of the Louis-Schmeling fight were subsumed by the national overtones, which effectively took Louis's race out of the entire equation. Another way to minimize Louis's symbolic effect was to make

[32] Alexander J. Young, Jr., "Joe Louis, Symbol" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1968), 56.

references to his slow speech and his perceived lack of intelligence in order to suggest that he was little more than a physical machine. Constant referrals to his shortcomings allowed whites to retain their intellectual superiority while ceding physical dominance to blacks. Equating blacks with the physical was not a radical departure from the historical portrayals of blacks during slavery as they were referred to as chattel and used as sources of labor, alongside animals. Louis's public image was not under attack in the same manner that Jack Johnson's was, so the media relied on his intellectual shortcomings to separate him from the superior white race.

While the military was able to put Louis's symbolic status to good use within the army, his symbolic impact was not limited to the army during the years he served. Louis's stint with the army had the potential of removing him from the spotlight and thus causing his threat to the racial ideology to fade and disappear. By 1942, Louis's title defenses had become somewhat routine and uninteresting which led to less prominent coverage in most major newspapers. However, joining the military refocused the national spotlight on Louis as he was making a public commitment to serve his country. This move drew not only media attention, but positive coverage from both black and white media outlets. Other black athletes such as Jesse Owens, who had become one of the most prominent black athletes by 1936, had disappeared from the pages of most black and white newspapers. Owens's symbolic defeat of Hitler and Aryan supremacy in the 1936 Olympic Games had a tremendous national impact, but was somewhat lost and forgotten by 1942. The fact that Owens had fallen out of the public spotlight was surprising because many believed that Owens had more potential to have an impact on racial politics. Both Owens and Louis had

become adept at sending social messages by using their bodies, but reporters such as Shirley Povich still gave the edge to Owens. In a 1936 column Povich wrote, "If either were ever to figure in the uplift of the race, then Owens would be that man. Louis might capture the imagination of the folks who laid great store by physical prowess and the dynamite concentrated in a left hook, but Owns, an honor student at Ohio State University, seemingly fitted the time-worn description—a gentleman and a scholar."[33] This makes it quite clear that despite the physical accomplishments of both athletes, it was Owen's intellect that would set the two apart. Povich was not the only one to put a higher value on the mind than the body, as the rise of intelligence testing in the early 1900s had started this trend.

Despite Povich's predictions, Louis was the one who was able to continue to attract positive media attention throughout his lengthy career. His longevity in the pages of national newspapers solidified his iconic importance and he continued to be a challenge to the racial hierarchy. By joining America's fight against Germany, Louis was not only able to maintain his public image but expand it. According to an article in the *Hartford Courant*, "Joe is something of a symbol badly needed by the Allies in this War. He symbolizes speed, power, attack, a realistic outlook on the job on hand and a complete belief in the old saying that it is deeds instead of words that count."[34]

Louis's ability to survive and even thrive in the media was a result of the adaptability of his public image in different situations. Rather than being constrained to a singular and totalizing identity, Louis's public image comprised different aspects

[33] Shirley Povich, "This Morning… With Shirley Povich." *Washington Post*, 5 August 1936, p. X18.
[34] "Dave Boone's Homespun News Slants," *Hartford Courant*, 12 January 1942, p. 3.

of his character which conveyed different messages to the public at different times. As Louis was climbing the boxing ranks he was largely seen as a humble and non-threatening black athlete who was a more acceptable version of Jack Johnson. When Louis defeated Max Schmeling in 1938 he came to represent American dominance over Germany. Finally, joining the army in 1942 solidified Louis as an image of American power and nationalism. Louis came to mean many things to many people at different periods in his career. Apart from the original image of a humble and soft-spoken young fighter, which was an intentional creation on the part of his handlers, the other symbolisms Louis came to represent were a product of the situations he put himself in and the media's interpretation of those scenarios. Oftentimes the media were able to manipulate and spin his public image in ways that made him a symbol of American power as opposed to black power. In many respects Louis did not have a great deal of control over his symbolic representation as it was dictated for him. Despite his incomplete control over his public image, his ability to remain a focus of the national spotlight forced the media to deal with his blackness as well as his symbolic power. The media served as a battleground on which Louis's significance was constantly contested and debated, but it was Louis who put himself in positions to force this debate to take place. While the fluidity of his public image made him a somewhat malleable character in the media, his success as a black man had to be reconciled with the racial ideology that placed blacks in subordinate positions. Even though Louis did not present the same type of problems as a Jack Johnson, he still dared society to come to terms with a black man who challenged the racial status quo.

Joe Louis's impact on society was not limited to the confines of a boxing ring, but extended into the realm of politics, both domestic and international. Throughout Louis's career, Social Darwinism and Jim Crow continued to exist in America which made any successful black man a threat to the social order. Every time Louis knocked out a white opponent and proved his athletic superiority, it was a challenge to the white supremacy codified in law and ideology. Also, Louis's ability to symbolize different nations and national aims at different times posed new threats to white supremacy. In his fights against Schmeling as well as during his stint in the American military, Louis came to symbolize America. While blacks had always formed an integral part of American society since slavery, this was one of the first times in which a black person had come to represent the entire nation. In a country that remained largely segregated and saw blacks as inferior beings, the presence of a black national icon suggested that blacks were just as capable of achieving success as whites. Furthermore, Louis had come to represent the national dominance despite the fact that his black identity was reminiscent of the docile and obedient black slave stereotype. How could an inferior being that symbolized docility be the international image of American power? And how could a black man symbolize American power and dominance if blacks were not even the most dominant race in America? Louis's symbolic position in America raised these questions and they had to be answered in order for the white supremacist racial ideology to continue. The very posing of these questions exposes weaknesses in the ideology and creates a space for social discourse. Just as Louis had opened fissures in the ideology by felling white

opponents, he was also able to create the same openings through his image as American power and dominance.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night,
and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.
– Sun Tzu

While Jack Johnson and Joe Louis reached the height of boxing dominance in different eras, they were both able to transcend the limits of the boxing ring and effect change in the realm of American racial ideology. However, each fighter emphasized different aspects of his character and intentionally evoked different stereotypes in order to effect this change. One of the ways that Johnson and Louis were able to attract the public spotlight was through careful cultivation of a distinct personality. On the one hand, there is Johnson who represented the outspoken, confrontational, and rebellious black man who was a perceived threat to the white community. On the other hand, Joe Louis was a quiet and humble black man with a mild speech impediment. These characteristics made Louis an acceptable symbol of blackness, as he did not openly challenge white authority while also confirming stereotypes of an uneducated and unintelligent black man.

The primary point of comparison between Johnson and Louis's public impact were two of their most publicized fights against white opponents. While these publicized fights represent comparable instances in their careers, they actually reveal more differences than similarities in the way they were able to attract the public spotlight. For Johnson, his battle with Jim Jeffries in 1910 was an instance in which the symbolic overtones of the fight were made abundantly clear in the media. The first black heavyweight champion posed such a significant threat to white superiority that a search took place throughout the white boxing community to find a formidable

opponent for Johnson who could redeem the white race. Due to a combination of Johnson's boxing ability and a scarcity of quality white competition, promoters lured heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries out of retirement to fell this black goliath. Joe Louis's battles against German Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938 were embedded with the same types of racial overtones as Johnson's bout with Jeffries. In some respects, the Louis-Schmeling fights had more social symbolic potential as they incorporated issues of nationality and militarism with race, which remained as crucial a part of American ideology as it had been in 1910. However, one of the critical differences between Johnson's and Louis's key fights was that the racial symbolism of the Louis-Schmeling fight was trumped by the nationality of the two fighters. The American media tended to favor Louis in both his fights on account of his nationality, while disregarding the importance of his race to some degree. The international political context of the late 1930s and the looming specter of World War II enabled Louis to move from being a black hero to becoming an American hero and thus garner the support of much of the American public. This type of representational shift was not available to Johnson in 1910 as there was no way that he could be portrayed as anything other than a menacing black man who must be stopped. The way Johnson had constructed his persona did not require that the public see him as anything other than black. Johnson's symbolic power lay in the fact that he was the epitome of the bad black man who was unstoppable despite all attempts to impede his progress. Louis's ability to become a national symbol and Johnson's inability to transcend his race leads one to question why such a difference existed.

The social and historical context surrounding each boxer's epic bouts is important in understanding the different public treatment of the two boxers, but it is only one part of the equation. The Johnson-Jeffries fight came at a time when the public was still recovering from the shock of having its first black heavyweight champion. Never before in boxing history had a black fighter been able to conquer the white ranks and stand alone atop the boxing world. In addition, this was at a time in American history in which Social Darwinism was gaining in popularity and intelligence tests were being created in order to justify an existing social order on the basis of perceived intelligence. Many blacks at this time were less than one generation removed from the institution of slavery which had labeled them as nothing more than property. While slavery had officially ended, the belief that blacks were a subhuman species persisted and resulted in numerous lynchings throughout the country, especially in the South. It was within this unrelenting ideology of black inferiority and racial hatred that Johnson emerged as a boxing prodigy who was in the crosshairs of every white boxer, after claiming the championship in 1908.

The social and historical context surrounding Louis's bouts with Schmeling in the late 1930s were not devoid of racial oppression and inequality, but they were also not made as salient as they were in 1910. America in the 1930s remained marred by Jim Crow laws in the South as well as the occasional legislative attempt to send black Americans to Africa. Blacks remained segregated in the military throughout the decade, which was representative of the inability of America to fully accept blacks into all aspects of society. Despite the continued systemic oppression of blacks, this decade also saw some strides toward equality as the Supreme Court had ordered

certain colleges to admit black students. If substantial racial progress was taking place during the period, it was slow at best. When Louis began dominating his opponents in the middle of the 1930s, international political circumstances were salient issues that Louis came to symbolize. With the invasion of Ethiopia by Italian forces in 1935 as an international backdrop, Louis's fight with Italian Primo Carnera led the media to portray the fight as a symbolic performance of the Ethiopian-Italian conflict. Similarly, Louis's 1938 bout with Schmeling was at a time when Germany's racially and politically oppressive system was quite apparent to the international community. As a result, the bout came to represent American power against German fascism. The international climate during Louis's early career played a key role in enabling the media to overlook his American racial identity in favor of using him as a figure representative of America or Ethiopia.

Louis's representations in the media did not consistently overlook his race in favor of his American nationality. Instead, the media displayed little loyalty toward Louis as they chose to focus on his race at times and his nationality at other times. In his 1935 match against Primo Carnera, Louis came to represent Ethiopia on account of his race. Despite Louis's status as an American, the white media put their support behind Carnera and Louis was left to represent the black American population and the citizens of Ethiopia. However, only one year later, in his 1936 bout with Max Schmeling, Louis symbolized all of America. The fact that Louis was able to represent white America in addition to black America suggests that Louis was seen as such a harmless character that he could represent any race of people without posing a threat to white superiority. In each of these international instances, Louis became a

true symbol of these identities as many whites vilified him in his fight with Carnera but fully supported Louis in his fights against Schmeling. Louis's ability to switch between representing white-America and black-America was a challenge to the racial ideology because blacks were not supposed to be more symbolically powerful than whites. The media reminded the public that Louis was black in the 1935 bout, but still allowed him to represent all of America in his 1936 match. In addition, it is important to recognize that Louis came to represent nations as a result of these international contexts and the fluidity of his image. Johnson's more rigid identity did not allow him to symbolize larger international issues or nations as he was entirely defined by his race. While international and domestic contexts were important, another factor contributed to Johnson and Louis's acceptance in their respective eras.

The personality and character of both boxers figured prominently in the differing ways they were treated in the media. Johnson was an outspoken individual who had no second thoughts about conducting himself in a manner that contradicted the status quo. Rather than remaining quiet and staying out of the spotlight when outside the ring, Johnson loved the media attention and rubbed much of the public the wrong way. In almost every aspect of his personality, Johnson defied the common models of how a black man was supposed to act and comport himself. Johnson's unwillingness to conform to this model of inferiority led the media to portray him as nothing other than a dangerous black man who did not know his proper place in society. Louis, on the other hand, lived an entirely different lifestyle and cultivated a completely different public image. Due in part to the public dislike for Johnson in the early part of the century, Louis's handlers decided to manipulate and mold Louis so

that he would become the perfect antithesis to everything Johnson symbolized. The creation of such an image was made easier by the fact that Louis was a quieter and more humble individual from the start. This public image, which intentionally drew positive comparisons to Jack Johnson, required Johnson's name and image to be kept alive in the public imaginary so that Louis could represent the acceptable and endearing black fighter. The greater public acceptability of Louis's image enabled him to transcend his race at times in order to symbolize different nations and different interests. Louis's more fluid identity allowed his racial identity to take a back seat to his American identity at times, which was a possibility not open to most black Americans. The images that Johnson and Louis utilized were nothing new in American history as they closely resembled the images whites had of the dangerous rebel slave and the docile obedient slave. Both fighters were well aware of these historical representations and used them in their own way to achieve fame and success in a white world.

While both boxers attempted to manipulate public perceptions through their carefully crafted public images, they also attempted to counter racism through specific actions in the ring. One way they attempted to do this was in their different strategies with regard to knocking out opponents. Despite the fact that Johnson had presented himself as an overly masculine individual who coveted white women and liked to embarrass his opponents in the ring, he tried to avoid knocking out his opponents so as not to frighten-away future competition. On the other hand, Louis appeared to be a humble and soft-spoken black man who was well-liked by the public, yet he attempted to knock out all of his opponents as quickly as possible to

avoid leaving the decision to the judges. Both strategies were pursued for logical reasons, but they seemed to be matched with the wrong boxer. Even though Johnson had no qualms about angering the public, he pursued a more passive knockout strategy in order to give other fighters the belief that they could defeat him. Johnson had spent much of his career molding his public image to fit the stereotype of the rebellious black man, but in this case he played the role of the trickster in attempting to deceive the public into thinking he lacked boxing power and ability. Louis distanced himself from this type of image as he had made great efforts to appear gentle and acceptable outside of the ring, yet he was vicious in the ring as he went for the knockout each match. Like Johnson, Louis's typical public image was akin to the stereotype of the docile black man. However, when he stepped in the ring, Louis shed that caricature in favor of a more rebellious one that displayed the full extent of his power and boxing ability. What these strategies reveal is that both fighters were excellent at managing their public image and controlling their power in the ring in order to attract the type of competition they wanted. Regardless of how rigid their images appeared, both Johnson and Louis were able to navigate the world of black stereotypes and utilize the caricatures that were most appropriate for certain occasions.

Despite their different public personas, each fighter utilized his image to send repeated messages about the fallacies and contradictions that formed the basis for a white supremacist social order. Even though Johnson was not able to transcend his racial identity, he used his bad black-man image to ensure that most of his fights were well-covered in the media and turned into significant spectacles. While sending

social messages through his boxing might not have been his underlying intent, his racially charged symbolism made all of his fights with white opponents significant. If Johnson was continually defeating all of his white opponents, would that not suggest that he was more fit than his white counterparts? And if Johnson were deemed to be fitter than his white opponents, then how could Social Darwinism continue to be used to justify white superiority? Each time this menacing black figure felled a white opponent, he was providing proof that Social Darwinism could not sufficiently justify white superiority. Another way Johnson was able to attract attention and raise the stakes of his fights was to toy with ideas of sexuality. On occasion, Johnson would wrap his penis in gauze to make it appear larger in an effort to fit into the stereotypical image of the hypersexual black man. While this was obviously an antic to most observers, it raised fears in whites that Johnson was going to steal and rape white women, in the same way that stories have frequently portrayed blacks throughout American history. Not only were white opponents trying to defeat Johnson to reclaim the superiority of the white race, they now had to fight to symbolically defend their white women from this apparently hypersexual being. Whether it was part of his act or not, Johnson's well-known affinity for white women did nothing to quell fears that he was stealing white women from white men. Through the cultivation of this complex image of what whites both feared and hated, Johnson was able to remain in the spotlight as a symbolic threat until a white opponent could defeat him.

The fluidity of Louis's identity allowed him to represent different groups of people at different times and ultimately penetrate the inner sanctum of white

acceptance from time to time. While Johnson and Louis were both equally American, it was only Louis who was able to incorporate his American identity into his public image. In the minds of the American public, Johnson was never going to be anything other than a black man. For Louis, however, the political landscape of the times coupled with his acceptable persona enabled him to symbolize America in his fights with Schmeling and during his time in the military. When Louis defeated prominent white fighters such as Max Schmeling he exposed the same weakness in the Social Darwinist justification of white supremacy that Johnson had thirty years earlier. For a black man to be the face of America when it was about to fight in a world war was unheard of at the time and was an extreme departure from the subordinate status society assigned to all blacks. In order for Louis to be accepted as a symbol in a non-sport setting, some concession had to be made in the racial ideology that would allow a black man to be symbolic of millions of whites who were deemed superior. Symbolism on this level implies that the symbol has something in common with and is representative of the American masses. This new symbolic acceptance does not make sense in terms of the social and racial order which had gone to great lengths to separate whites from blacks. In order for Louis to remain as an American symbol it was necessary for the racial ideology to deal with and adapt to this new challenge so that Louis could be an exception to the rule of black inferiority.

With Johnson and Louis showing the inconsistencies of white supremacy through symbolic action, they were able to temporarily tear down the justification for black oppression. Every time Johnson defeated a white opponent and every time Louis came to symbolize America instead of blackness, a crisis occurred in the

existing racial ideology because these blacks were proving that they were not inferior. The way that these newly created spaces in the ideological fabric were able to be resealed was by allowing the media time to adapt the ideology to these new threats. Part of this adaptive process was to deemphasize the importance of the boxers' accomplishments by painting Johnson and Louis as exceptions to the rule of black inferiority. In order for lasting change to take place the partial space that had been opened in the ideology needed to be extended and remain open for a longer period of time. It was necessary for the media and public to focus on this rupture before it was resealed so that it could force people to rethink their own racial ideologies and set out on a course toward fundamental change. Johnson and Louis were able to repeatedly cause this rupture but they did not have the ability to sustain it for a necessary length of time. Rather than being one of the forces promoting this social change, the media helped to reseal the rupture by glossing over the racial overtones of fights, at times, and focusing on the character deficiencies of the fighters when they posed too much of a threat.

By using their bodies to expose contradictions within white supremacist thought, Johnson and Louis served their purpose in drawing attention to these societal problems. The fact that boxing is an individual sport and these two boxers were individuals limits the social impact they can have because there will be a point where they will be removed from the monolith of blackness and exhibited as exceptional individuals who do not reflect the black masses. In one sense, the role of the boxer is similar to that of a mime trapped in an infamous invisible box. In this instance, the mime can show an audience the limits and confines of the box through physical

action, but the mime cannot escape the box on his or her own. In addition, if the mime stops conveying the shape and size of the box through actions, then the audience will likely forget the size and shape of the box and, thus, be unable to aid in the mime's escape. Just as the mime's voice has been muted, the emphasis on physicality and athletic performance renders the boxers audibly silent, as they are forced to speak only with their bodies. Their symbolic physical action in the ring exposes a rupture in the racial ideology, but due to their societal positions, is unable to remedy the problem on their own. In order for the rupture to remain open, it requires that the boxers continue to expose it by defeating white opponents and drawing attention to the parameters of the rupture. When Johnson and Louis go for a time without recreating the fissure, it gives the ideology time to reform and adjust to the boxers' new threats.

One of the reasons that Johnson and Louis were unable to restructure the ideology on their own was a result of their unique position as boxers. Their position within the sport of boxing both limited their social symbolic impact as well as put them in a position to send symbolic messages. The dual nature of this situation is a result of the extreme physicality of the sport and the emphasis it places on the body and appearance of its combatants. In boxing, the audience focuses on the physical features and skills of the fighters in order to determine who will emerge victorious. While this emphasis on the body helps divert attention away from social inequalities in favor of a focus on merit and skill, it also draws attention to physical appearance, and consequently the race of the fighters. The boxing realm places both fighters on an equal playing field which was a step-up for many black competitors, when fighting

a white opponent. However, the historical depiction of blacks as animals could have easily been reinforced due to the emphasis on physicality over mental acumen. In this manner boxing provided a unique stage for blacks to engage in the discourse of equality, but also ran the risk of being undermined by attributing black success to their animalistic and inferior nature. These characteristics of boxing played a significant role in limiting Johnson and Louis's ability to prolong the rupture in the racial ideology. Due to their membership in the sporting community, Johnson and Louis's social influence was limited to opening the rifts in the ideology and it was necessary for others to take up the struggle and continue to expose the fallacies of the ideology. The susceptibility of these fighters to media scrutiny, in the form of stereotyped racial attacks or character attacks, put them in a position in which they could be discredited at any time and lose the social status they had accumulated. The racial stereotypes and fears ran so deep in America that black public figures could at any time be portrayed as uncivilized animals or threatening demons. The public status of boxing offered too many ways to downplay the importance of the fighters' symbolic actions that the inconsistencies in the ideology could only be temporarily exposed, and not long enough to create sustained social change.

The ultimate goal of breaking down the racial ideology was to deemphasize race's importance as an indicator of human value. However, Johnson and Louis's ability to challenge societal norms from different positions required that they continue to emphasize race in order to fit in to stereotyped categories. This is a significant tension that lies at the heart of their symbolism, in much the same way that a tension existed for Louis when he needed to invoke Johnson's image in order to show his

own departure from that image. In a similar way, Johnson's and Louis's race had to be made salient in order for them to expose the uselessness of race. Exposing the problems within the social order and racial ideology required that both fighters become blackness in order for them to contradict notions of black inferiority. This constant focus on race limited the social impact of the boxers to a certain extent. By linking their identities to blackness they were giving up their ability to eventually transcend the boundaries of race. While Louis's nationality was allowed to supercede his race at times, it was only for a limited period of time and society always returned to acknowledging him as a black man, first and foremost. In the end, Louis's identity as American hero was short-lived, while his identity as a black man was ever-present.

As tempting as it might be to separate Johnson and Louis as a result of the fact that they are chronologically separated in time, it is important that they remain linked because of the interconnectedness of their identities. The emergence of a Joe Louis type of boxer was a direct result of the style and identity that Jack Johnson displayed in the early twentieth century. The media's disdain for Johnson at the time virtually acted as an advertisement for the emergence of a humble, quiet, and uncontroversial black boxer. Louis and his promoters consciously constructed just such a boxing image in order to be the next black in line to the heavyweight championship. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that without Jack Johnson there would be no Joe Louis, because Louis's image relied so heavily on its departure from Johnson's. Similarly, it is unlikely that Jack Johnson would be as well known if it were not for Joe Louis constantly invoking Johnson. The historical interconnectedness of these two individuals is not a result of their similarities, but because they defined

themselves as nearly polar opposites. From these two different identity positions, they were able to challenge the same ideological system from different angles. The media had to deal with attacks coming from social outcasts such as Johnson and social insiders such as Louis. These two different points of attack required the media to respond to challenges from all directions, if it was going to maintain the existing racial ideology.

These two boxers are not examples of people who completely restructured the world, but rather showed that social change is a long process and that it is also achievable. Whenever social change is necessary, society needs certain people to take the lead in exposing the fallacies of a flawed system and continually providing people with a glimpse, if only for a short time, of what society could look like one day. In the case of Johnson and Louis, sport was the vehicle through which they were able to attract the public spotlight and use their symbolic power to expose a failed racial ideology. Their example also reveals that the politics of colorblindness are not the solution to the racial problems plaguing America. Johnson and Louis were able to challenge the racial ideology by invoking race in order to dismantle the structures that had been built up around race. The argument that racial problems can be fixed by not seeing race is problematic because it ignores the existence of racist systems and denies people the ability to invoke race as a means of breaking down the oppression. If the colorblind trap does not lure too many people in, sport will continue to be a vehicle for social change. Sport relies on a founding assumption that all competitors have an equal opportunity to emerge victorious. In this respect, sport can represent an oasis of equality amidst a worldwide desert of racism, oppression, and inequality.

The symbolic power of sport remains a strong tool for social change that must continue to be utilized in order to uncover weeds of inequality that threaten to kill our American garden.

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