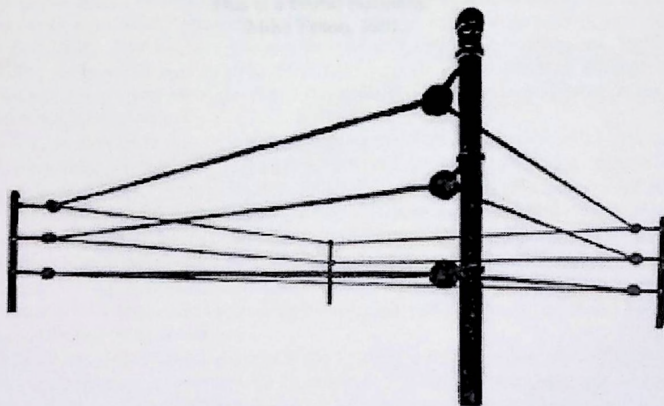


THE HURT BUSINESS

Myth, Race, and Politics in Professional Boxing
by Matt Haber



"In the ring you're in the hurt business. Getting hurt, giving hurt..."

I got no illusions about boxing—none.
This is a brutal business,”
Mike Tyson, 1991.

Acknowledgments

During the writing of this essay I have been indebted to a number of people without whom this project would never have come as far as it has. My name may be the only one that appears on the cover, but it was with their support and input that I have written what you are about to read.

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my advisor, Kobena Mercer, whose guidance and commentary never failed to bring me new insights that hadn't occurred to me before. His close readings of my early drafts and his precise criticism transformed a bloated, indulgent piece of writing into the slim, fight-ready contender you see before you. Just as every fighter needs a good trainer to realize his full potential, every writer needs a good editor to create a work worth reading.

Also offering guidance and suggestions were Jeffrey Sammons and Loïc Wacquant, both of whom took time out of their own busy schedules to share their knowledge of boxing with me. Their written works helped me research this project and their input helped point me in the right directions.

Much thanks must also go to the friends who took it upon themselves to read, discuss, and help edit this essay and who indulged me in my boxing obsession over the last year. Tanya Bezreh's critical readings of my drafts improved my work throughout its development. Javier Garcia also read an early draft of Chapter Two and helped me reformulate my arguments. Thanks to Dave Sollors, Harris Wulfson, Sarah Manguso, Greg Drudy, Tia Farrell, Mariam Ghani, Ericka Echavarria, Aimée Papazian, Sasha Tisdale, Carlo Martino, Karun Muñoz, Jessica Almeleh, and others who discussed this project with me at length and helped me strengthen many of my ideas with their suggestions and generally encouraged me throughout the writing. Thanks should also go out to Oriane Kets de Vrie, whose enthusiasm for amateur fights at the Church Street Boxing Gym galvanized my interest in boxing early on.

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It may seem grandiose to dedicate an undergraduate thesis, but after six months of work, a little grandiosity might just be in order. I'd like to dedicate this essay to all the fighters whose lives and work have inspired me in my writing. The extraordinary careers of fighters like Muhammad Ali, Joe Louis, Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Mike Tyson, and others have shown me the lengths an individual can go with enough will and determination. The commitment to boxing exhibited by even the lowest club fighters I've been exposed to has inspired me greatly. May they all keep fighting the good fights.

Matt Haber,
May 7, 1998, New York.

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Introduction

For the sports-minded cultural critic, 1997 and 1998 were truly the best times to approach the subject of boxing as a nexus for race, class, and politics in America. On an almost daily basis, the newspapers and sports press brought more scandals, more heroes, more examples, more *motivations* for writing about professional sports as a location where African American culture and politics meet and are interpreted and marketed for the global audience.

Sometimes the onslaught of images and texts threatened to overwhelm even the most diligent reader of culture and push the needles of one's critical instruments into overdrive. Who were the most important African American athletes this year? Jackie Robinson, whose epoch-making break of baseball's color barrier celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in the spring of 1997? The women of the Women's National Basketball Association, who themselves broke a much older glass ceiling as they hit plexi-glass backboards across the country? O.J. Simpson, whose guilt was established (ambiguously, for some) in a Los Angeles Civil Court house? (This year, it seemed that Simpson was speaking directly to cultural critics, making such simplistically-coded statements as "I believe in my heart I'm going to get it all back in spades" in the February 1998 issue of *Esquire* Magazine: you didn't have to be semiotician to know which way the signs flowed.) Latrell Sprewell, the Golden State Warriors basketball player who broke down the age-old paternalistic relationship between athletes and their "white shadows" by throttling his coach during practice because he couldn't take anymore criticism? Dennis Rodman, Michael Jordan, and a host of others also popped up in the news this year, begging the question: Who is this year's most significant African American athlete?

Without a doubt, the media settled the question by anointing 21 year-old PGA Masters champion Tiger Woods. Tiger was everywhere in 1997: winning the Masters in an impressive fifteen strokes, shilling for Nike, declining an invitation to the White House to honor Jackie Robinson, cracking racist jokes in *GQ*, and smiling hugely on a billboard over Times Square. Woods became this year's model of a double-bind Black athletes have been dealing with since at least the days of Joe Louis: embraced in part as a 'representative' of his race, Woods' race was quickly made irrelevant.

But even as Tiger was burning bright, he became a reminder of the scarcity of truly impressive African American athletes in 1997. Despite rising salaries, impressive skills, and a few stand-out heroes like Michael Jordan, there hasn't been anyone who has captured the imagination of the world since Muhammad Ali burst unto the scene thirty-five years ago. Many athletes have shown impressive skill in their chosen sports like Ali and some have even managed to create public personas as interesting, playful, and engaging as his as well. But there hasn't been anyone who has so thoroughly challenged the constraints of his own sport and pushed them to places no one had ever thought of before, as Muhammad Ali had in boxing. Michael Jordan may be the highest paid professional athlete ever, but only Ali would be crowned "Athlete of the Century" in the May 1998 issue of *GQ Magazine*.

Perhaps it is fitting then to write as much about Ali—and his sport—as I do in the following essay. Despite retirement and debilitating illness, Muhammad Ali remains the most interesting athlete in the mass imagination. Furthermore, if the recent spate of boxing-related films (*The Boxer*, Jim Sheridan, dir.; *TwentyFourSeven*, Shane Medows, dir., etc.), books (*More than a Champion*, Jan Philip Reemtsma; *Dark Trade*, Donald McRae, etc.) and other manifestations of collective interest in the sport are correct,

perhaps boxing is now the most interesting sport in the mass imagination as well. It is that enduring interest that the following essay attempts to address.

For the boxer, history is the ultimate opponent. Any fighter who wishes to succeed in the ring must do battle with history in order to defeat himself and his class. In no other sport is the burden of history—both the sparse history of the ring and the larger historical narrative of social development and change—more present than in prizefighting. As A.J. Labadie, one of boxing's first publicists, wrote, put it in the introduction to *The Great Contest*, "It is a great thing to feel that all that separates you from the early Victorians is a series of punches to the nose." (Viking Press, NY, 1956, page 1). Every fighter is expected to share this view: before him though at each step of the way the ring's contemporary fighter like Mike Tyson is only barely existing. Round One does a legend like Muhammad Ali, and Ali, in turn, was only barely or never lighter than the first Louis. The past weighs heavily upon the contemporary boxer, extending his capacity of those who came before him and his responsibility to history, the burden of history and overthrow it at the same time. In this sense, the boxer is both the representative protector of history and the radical resistant erasing the past with every punch.

Connections between the preservation of boxing's history and the development of its future lies mythology, the foundation upon which the sport is constructed. Myths of boxing's legendary past, myths of method and man, and mythical myths of the individual's struggle against social forces all come into play upon the raised canvas of the boxing ring. It is through the interpretation and reinterpretation of these myths that the sport defines and re-defines itself with the passing of each successive era. Boxing mythology serves to explain the present by connecting it to the past just as it reinterprets the past through the use of the present.

For the boxer, history is the ultimate opponent. Any fighter who wishes to succeed in the ring must do battle with history in order to define himself and his times. In no other sport is the burden of history—both the arcane history of the ring and the larger historical narrative of social development and change—more present than in prizefighting. As A.J. Liebling, one of boxing's most prolific chroniclers, put it in the introduction to *The Sweet Science*, "It is a great thrill to feel that all that separates you from the early Victorians is a series of punches to the nose," (Viking Press, NY, 1956; page 1). Every fighter is connected to those who came before him through an exchange of blows: in the ring, a contemporary fighter like Mike Tyson is only twenty or thirty fights removed from a legend like Muhammad Ali, and Ali, in his day, was only twenty or thirty fights removed from Joe Louis. The past weighs heavily upon the contemporary boxer, reminding him constantly of those who came before him and his responsibility to take-up the burden of history and overthrow it at the same time. In this sense, the boxer is both the conservative protector of history and the radical revisionist rewriting the past with every punch.

Somewhere between the preservation of boxing's history and the development of its future lies mythology, the foundation upon which the sport is constructed. Myths of boxing's legendary past, myths of manhood and race, and universal myths of the individual's struggle against social forces all come into play upon the raised canvas of the boxing ring. It is through the interpretation and reinterpretation of these myths that the sport defines and re-defines itself with the passing of each successive era. Boxing mythology serves to explain the present by connecting it to the past just as it reinterprets the past through the use of the present.

Looking at boxing, it is instructive to understand why myth has been such an important part of the sport. Why has mythology been so meticulously cultivated and painstakingly preserved? "What gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless" writes Claude Lévi-Strauss in 'The Structural Study of Myth.' "[I]t explains the present and the past as well as the future" (Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books, NY, 1963; page 209). So it is through myth, then, that one can begin to understand boxing.

An important key to interpreting boxing mythology—and the actual sport as it has been practiced in the United States during the twentieth century—is to acknowledge that professional prizefighting has been dominated by African American males since at least the time of Jack Johnson, who held the World Heavyweight title from 1908-1915. Boxing's mythology had always incorporated race from as far back as the days of bare-knuckle fighting in England when Irish and Jewish fighters battled for respect and social mobility. According to historian Elliot J. Gorn, "Members of ethnic groups—Irishman, Blacks, Jews—were especially drawn to the ring because of their lowly social and economic status and because it offered a chance to compete against Englishmen on an equal footing" (*The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*, Cornell University Press, NY, 1986; page 29). But with the ascendancy of the Black prizefighter in America, the tension surrounding race in this country has come to be inextricably bound to the sport, and its practitioners have become repositories into which their society's fantasies and fears of race have been placed.

Since discussions about race in this country are almost always conducted in protective, coded language, the place where these fantasies and fears are most flagrantly on display is in writing about boxing—a safe space

that has allowed writers to speak openly about a sport while speaking covertly about race. Almost all writing about boxing is, in essence, writing about race in America and as such, it begs close scrutiny. As boxing in this century has come to be dominated by African American fighters, the sport's chroniclers have remained overwhelmingly white, thus ensuring that the cultivation and maintenance of the sport's (and in a sense, racial) mythology has been in the hands of white mythologists. It is through the eyes of the white writer that we have come to see the sport of boxing, and it is against his interpretations, then, that we must struggle to redefine the African American boxer.

What is it that draws the white writer to boxing? One could fill an entire library with the works of some of this century's pre-eminent white authors who have written on the subject of boxing and on particular fighters. Literary stars like George Bernard Shaw, Ernest Hemingway, A.J. Liebling, Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, Joyce Carol Oates and a minor constellation of lesser-known writers have each taken it upon themselves to celebrate, sentimentalize, and generally lend literary 'credibility' to what most consider a brutal past-time, the stuff of throw-away sports newspapers and pulp novels.

White writers have "trailed behind fighters like star-struck teenagers trailing behind rock stars" according to Gerald Early, but in many ways, what these writers have actually been trailing has been fantasies of manhood and ethnicity and their own subjectivity (Early, *Culture of Bruising*, Ecco Press, Hopewell, NJ, 1994; page 20). Rarely, if ever, does the white writer approach boxing from a position that is not overtly racialized and top-heavy with fantasy notions of manhood and courage. The writer who wishes to describe and analyze boxing, must also contend with the already existing narratives of

race and manhood and imagine not only the sport, but re-imagine race as well. This process reveals as much about sport and race as it does about the sensibilities of the writer, his or her ability to interpret race issues in this country and attempt to understand the lives of African Americans. When reading the work of white writers on boxing, one must always bear in mind the words of Ralph Ellison, who in his 1949 film review 'The Shadow and the Act' warned that "Obviously these [works] are not about Negroes at all: they are about what whites think and feel about Negroes" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, Quality Paperback Book Club, NY, 1994; page 277).

Those thoughts and feelings, one begins to realize when reading the works of A.J. Liebling, Norman Mailer, Budd Schulberg, and others, is an uneasy ambivalence towards the African Americans and all that they represent socially, culturally, and politically. This ambivalence—equal parts fear and desire—is given expression through boxing, but grows out of the larger context of American race relations in the twentieth century.

One of the earliest writers to address boxing was William Hazlitt. Writing in 1822, Hazlitt sketched-out many of the characteristics of boxing literature that would come to be codified in later generations. Indeed, Hazlitt's 'The Fight' has come to be seen as a canonical text in the literary sub-genre of boxing literature, giving Norman Mailer the title for his 1975 book about the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman fight in Kinshasa, Zaire, and inspiring Budd Schulberg throughout his essay collection *Sparring with Hemingway* (Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1995). Furthermore, many of the themes Hazlitt sketches out in that seminal essay—themes of manhood, sportsmanship, and racial identity—recur in the works of contemporary

authors. 'The Fight' can be seen as literary seed from which an entire genre has grown.

Writing before the advent of the Queensbury rules (the rules of boxing conduct that are still intact to this day), Hazlitt found in the anarchic, bare-knuckle brawls he witnessed the embodiment of a certain form of manhood (and, in a sense, English identity) that is still upheld in the sport today. Hazlitt's description of the boasts of Tom Hickman as "not manly... not fighter-like," is strikingly similar to the critiques of the immodest Muhammad Ali, who was criticized by some writers 150 years later for calling himself 'The Greatest of All Time' (*The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, A.R. Waller, ed., J. M. Dent & co., London, 1902-04; pages 8-9). Modesty, a trait that Hazlitt respected most in his boxer, is still very much expected of contemporary fighters. For Hazlitt, modesty not only describes the character of the fighter, but the character of his nation: "Courage and modesty are the old English virtues; and may they never look cold and askance on one another!" ('The Fight,' page 1). It is in the linking of the boxer's character to the character of his nation that the racial and cultural dynamic in boxing literature began as well; this is another of Hazlitt's enduring influences.

Before boxing crossed the Atlantic and came to be defined through America's racial sensibilities, it was seen as a reflection of England's national character, as described by Budd Schulberg in 'White, Black, and Other Hopes':

"Not on the down side but on the rise was England then [19th century], stretching its imperial muscles and staking out its claims to world supremacy. The prize ring was a natural extension of a vital island people bound for glory. The image of the Britisher—his self-image—was of a tough 'un, scrappy, aggressive, never-say-die. British tars liked to think of themselves as the toughest people on earth" (*Sparring With Hemingway*, page 36).

The link between English imperialism—the expression of a tiny island nation's will-to-power on the global stage—and boxing is particularly salient. The image of the boxer challenging each opponent one after the other in order to claim supremacy has powerful resonance with English (and, in a more general sense, European) colonialism.

The comparison between boxing and colonialism becomes particularly useful when looking at boxing's contemporary champions. With the rise of African American (and in certain divisions, African) boxers, Schulberg's colonial narrative has been subverted, overthrown in a sense; the image of the 'scrappy, aggressive' Englishman in the ring has been replaced by the image of Jack Johnson taunting his white opponents as he defeated them. In Johnson's day, the investment of social and political power within the ring was so great for many white boxing fans and sports writers that many believed "the security of white civilization and white supremacy depended upon the defeat of Jack Johnson" (James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, Arno Press, NY, 1968; page 66). As James Weldon Johnson tells it:

"One of these writers assumed the role of both prophet and comforter and before the Reno battle [between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries] wrote in the red-blooded style of the day that Jeffries was bound to win because, while he had Runnymede and Agincourt behind him, the Negro had nothing but the jungle; that the Negro would be licked the moment the white man looked him in the eye" (*ibid.*).

Camped in these terms, the 1910 fight between Johnson and Jeffries was not merely a contest between men, but a battle between a legacy of European colonialism and the hope for an anti-colonial future. The realization of this anti-colonial narrative instilled fear in the hearts of many white fight fans and writers who celebrated Jeffries, the latest in a long line of 'Great White Hopes,' yet watched the myths of racial supremacy they had held so dearly fall away with the newly-crowned African American champion. As if to

compound the meaning of what had just transpired (and as a desperate act of racial 'maintainence'), immediately following Jack Johnson's victory there were race riots throughout the country in which white mobs attacked African Americans. As a result of these riots, Congress banned the inter-state exhibition of fight films for fear of further civic disturbance (Johnson, 66-67). It was clear to everyone, white and Black, that after Jack Johnson, everything about boxing had changed. In the minds of many, the next thing to change would have to be this country: for whites, this idea brought fear, for Blacks, hope.

Hazlitt's account of the bare-knuckle fight he witnessed in 1822 also set the tone of later boxing literature by combining breathless prose with acute analysis, a style that has remained intact to this day. Echoes of Hazlitt's exuberance and calculated whimsy can be heard in the writing of A.J. Liebling, this century's pre-eminent practitioner of the *boxing-lettres*.

Writing for *The New Yorker* during the late 1940s and early 1950s (with a few dispatches dispersed through the early sixties), Liebling succeeded in capturing the look and feel (and, at his most evocative, even the smell) of professional prizefighting before television became the only medium through which most spectators observed the sport. Liebling's approach to boxing was that of the bemused outsider, the literary raconteur slumming among the hoi polloi at the old Madison Square Garden or out at the Polo Grounds, writing about an activity that most would consider an affront to his education and his social station, and an enigma (if not an anathema) to the elite readers of William Shawn's *haute* intellectual publication. Liebling's work is best described by Gerald Early as representing "the worldly wise intellectual in the low-life jungle" (*Tuxedo Junction*, The Ecco Press, NY, 1989; page 166).

For this reason, there is a tangible sense of class antagonism to Liebling's pieces. As Liebling himself recounts his tenure as *The New Yorker's* first (and only) boxing correspondent, "I had written a number of long boxing pieces for the *New Yorker* before 1939, but I dropped them then, along with the rest of what Harold Ross used to call 'low life,' in order to become a war correspondent. Low-life was Ross's word for the kind of subject I did best" (*Sweet Science*, 6). One can almost hear the pride in Liebling's description of his editor's elitist condescension towards boxing: Liebling seems to have enjoyed his own status as chronicler of the 'low life'—a rather antiquated term people usually use when describing a (literal or figurative) ghetto, such as Luc Sante's 1991 social history of 1920's New York, *Low Life*. A.J. Liebling, it is safe to say, enjoyed his 'ghetto' status among the swells of *The New Yorker* much as other well-heeled intellectuals who identify across class lines do when they are accused of lacking that most intangible of establishment entitlements, 'class.' The excitement of crossing class and race lines (knowing all the while that due to certain entitlements, one is free to cross back any time) is an undeniable draw for many writers of a certain background and disposition. Liebling, like his contemporary and fellow boxing enthusiast Ernest Hemingway, was "a high-brow with lowbrow affectations," the literary equivalent of a 'weekend warrior' shedding his white dinner jacket to mince among the masses (Schulberg, *Sparring With Hemingway*, page 23). Liebling's (and Hemingway's) interest in boxing appears to have been a form of role playing, a way for these respected men of letters to examine their own class fantasies and fears on the page and on the ground. The ambivalence these men brought to the context of the sport mirrors their ambivalence to the sport itself: the question of whether the spectacle they are witnessing is worth praising or condemning runs

throughout their works on boxing and informs their complicated and ambivalent views of the African American boxer.

Reading Liebling, there is also a sense in which *The New Yorker* as a whole was using its own literary and intellectual cache to lend credibility to (but also gently mock) the sport of boxing: "I doubt whether many of the people who read Liebling's boxing pieces in *The New Yorker*...cared much about boxing," writes Fred Warner in his afterword to *A Neutral Corner* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 1990). "Most of his readers accepted exposure to a brutal and alien sport because they loved good prose, and Liebling could write well about anything" (239). The recipe was simple: A 'good' writer can make even the 'worst' subject matter palatable to the 'right' readers. Joyce Carol Oates, in her book-length treatise *On Boxing* (The Ecco Press, Hopewell, NJ, 1995) speculates that "The problem for Liebling and for *The New Yorker* must have been how to sell a blood sport like boxing to a genteel, affluent readership to whom the idea of men fighting for their lives would have been deeply offensive" (53). Liebling's solution, Oates suggests, is his use of humor and playful condescension to properly frame the sport and its practitioners and spectators:

"I sense myself uneasily alone in disliking much of Liebling, for his relentlessly jokey, condescending, and occasionally racist attitude toward his subject. Perhaps because it was originally published in *The New Yorker* in the early 1950s *The Sweet Science: Boxing and Boxiana—a Ringside View* is a peculiarly self-conscious assemblage of pieces, arch, broad in its humor, rather like situation comedy in which boxers are 'characters' depicted for our amusement. Liebling is uncertain even about such champions as Louis, Marciano, and Robinson—should one revere or mock?" (Oates, *On Boxing*, 53).

For the most part, Liebling chose the latter option, depicting his fighters through their idiosyncrasies and denying them their hard-won dignity in the ring. In contrast to Liebling's tendency towards mockery and caricature,

African American writers who addressed boxing around the same time found humanity and political meaning in their subjects. After Joe Louis defeated Primo Carnera in 1935, the NAACP's house organ, *The Crisis* published an editorial in which the magazine expressed feeling "something like ecstasy" at his victory (John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athlete's*, Houghton Mifflin Company, NY, 1997; page 27). (Historically, the Carnera-Louis fight was framed as a microcosm of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1934, according to Jeffrey Sammons' *Beyond the Ring*. The association of politics and militarism lent the proceedings an air of seriousness and international intrigue that Liebling would never have attributed to a mere boxing match [University of Illinois Press, IL, 1990; pages 101, 111].)

A.J. Liebling's major contribution to boxing literature is his sincere desire to turn the crude gestures and broad symbolism of the ring into a sort of aesthetic, an expression not unlike dance or music, deserving similarly precise reading and consideration. Almost by definition, Liebling's approach precludes a more complex understanding of boxing or an examination of the political, social, and racial implications of the sport. Writing about even the most politically and racially loaded fights of his day, Liebling refuses to dirty his hands with politics. An example of this can be found in his 1963 essay on the second Floyd Patterson-Sonny Liston bout, "Starting All Over Again" in which Liebling mentions the young Cassius Clay, who showed up at the fight in Las Vegas to create advance publicity for himself. The writer proves himself to be blissfully unaware of the fighter's politics, partially due to Clay's discretion about his Muslim affiliations but due mostly to Liebling's inability to see the young fighter as anything other than "a handsome giant" (*Neutral Corner*, 234). How could a venerable writer as astute as Liebling miss Clay's early (though nonetheless bold) expressions of Black pride? There is an

almost willfull ignorance to the complexity of the African American fighter perpetuated in Liebling's work, a refusal to acknowledge the depth of what is plainly presented before him. Unfortunately, Liebling died a few months after writing "Starting All Over Again," so he was never to witness the era of Muhammad Ali, and the boxer as freedom fighter or factor the mounting tensions of race in America into his vision of boxing.

Through its various starts and stops, advances and retreats, the African American struggle for freedom in this country has at times been bitter to say the least; for Liebling to even consider the taste of that struggle in his boxing pieces would be to dilute the sweetness of the science he so admires.

If A.J. Liebling's work suffers from its refusal to acknowledge race, Norman Mailer's work suffers from his over-determination of race issues, his foregrounding of race before all else in boxing. For Liebling, boxing is primarily an aesthetic text which he approached with a critic's eye; for Mailer, it is primarily political, to be approached with a polemicist's thumping fist.

One reason for this difference can be found in the vastly different social and political roles African Americans assumed at the times each writer was observing the sport of boxing. Liebling could not see the racial dimmensions of boxing during the forties and fifties because the politics of race were subsumed by other issues. During the sixties and early seventies, at the height of Mailer's boxing reportage, race issues were foremost on the American political agenda and refusal to acknowledge their importance would be impossible. But looking at race—and boxing—Mailer does not see the most important social issue of his day as much as he sees himself, or some distorted image of himself, that he returns to time and again: even as he makes race central to all of his boxing pieces, Mailer consistently places his

own identity at the center of his work and situates everything else—sports, race, politics, manhood—around himself.

There is a photograph of Muhammad Ali and Norman Mailer from 1965 that neatly captures the nuances of their relationship as only a photograph can. More than any of the thousands of words Mailer has written about Ali, this photograph (Figure one) shows the writer's personality as it relates to the fighter as well as fighter's to the writer. By extension, it can be said that the image also explicates the relationship of the white writer to the African American boxer, a relationship fraught with tension, both real and playful.

The picture shows Ali and Mailer arm-wrestling as a small crowd looks on in the background, but more than that, the picture shows the true nature of each man's character as it related to the other. Ali, inexplicably dressed in formal wear, is facetiously straining against Mailer's limp-wristed grip. The relationship can thus be gleaned: Mailer is bemused by Ali, Ali is vamping for Mailer's benefit. With his out-size show of effort (the clenched teeth, straining wrist), Ali is clearly mocking Mailer's strength and ability in the contest, but Mailer, through his detachment (not looking at his opponent, smiling distractedly) is mocking Ali's commitment. Taken in 1965, the photograph conveys a momentary connection between the two men that can be seen as a microcosm for a thirty-year plus relationship. Explicit in the photograph is an ease and mutual admiration that goes beyond the contrived arm-wrestling pose and all it implies about the matching of two of this century's greatest American egos: it is clear in this photo, that Norman Mailer and Muhammad Ali were drawn to one another for both the qualities they shared and those they could not.

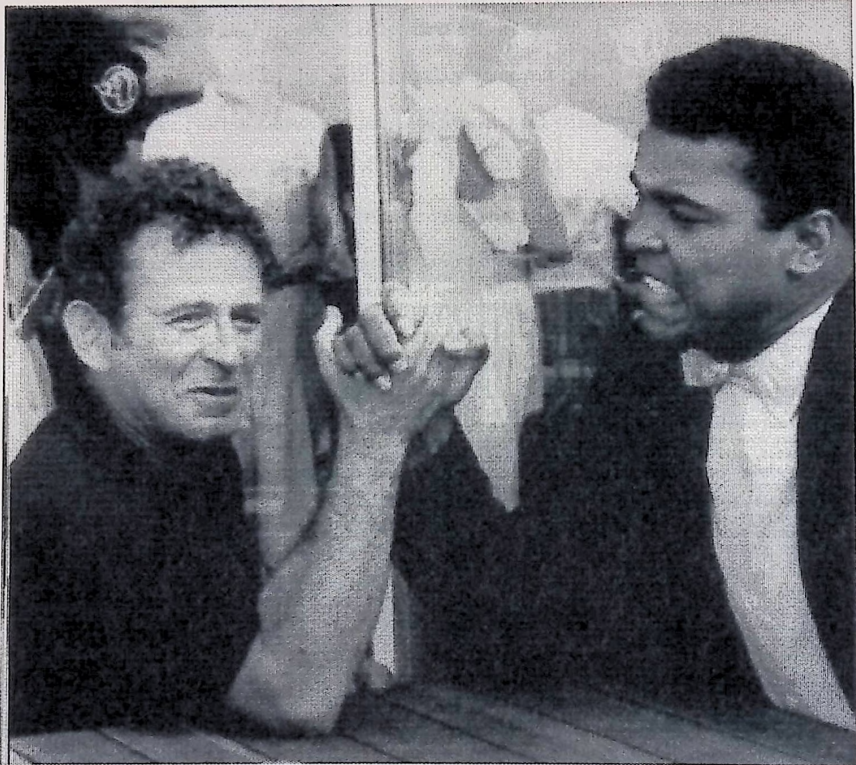


FIGURE ONE: "The match between Ali and Mailer is so perfect that Mailer does not even have to comment upon it," Carl Rollyson, *The Lives of Norman Mailer*.

For Mailer, it was love at first sight. Here is how Mailer describes his first impression of Muhammad Ali, then known as Cassius Clay, at the second Floyd Patterson-Sonny Liston fight in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1963:

"[Clay was] a kid as wild and dapper and jaybird as the president of a down-home college fraternity, bow tie, brown-and-white shoes, sweet, happy-go-lucky, *raucous*... He was like a beautiful boy surrounded by doting aunts" (Mailer, *Existential Errands*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1972; page 12).

Mailer's attraction to Ali remained constant, as he described him eleven years later after fame, politics, religion and infamy changed the fighter greatly. In *The Fight* (Vintage Books, NY, 1975), Norman Mailer's 1975 account of Ali's most famous fight, the so-called Rumble in the Jungle against George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire in 1974, the author makes clear that even as times and politics change, love remains the same:

"There is always a shock in seeing him again. Not *live* as in television but standing before you, looking his best. Then the World's Greatest Athlete is in danger of being our most beautiful man, and the vocabulary of Camp is doomed to appear. Women draw an *audible* breath. Men look *down*. They are reminded again of their lack of worth. If Ali never opened his mouth to quiver the jellies of public opinion, he would still inspire love and hate. For he is the Prince of Heaven—so says the silence around his body when he is luminous" (Mailer, 3).

That combination of lust (as projected through the reactions of women) and envy is key to understanding Ali's appeal in Mailer's eyes. But there is more, since Mailer clearly identifies himself with Ali—thinks himself very much like Ali—and, in doing so, uses Ali as a projection of his own immense and oft criticized self-love. Mailer's love for and identification with Muhammad Ali calls to mind Sigmund Freud's assertion that "At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away" (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, W.W. Norton & Company, NY, 1961;

page 13). Mailer's literary image of Ali becomes an almost embarrassingly obvious projection of himself since, "Against all evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact" (*ibid.*). This 'fact'—specious though it might be—runs throughout Mailer's musings on Ali and the writer's own ambivalence towards himself (evident in his alternately self-celebratory and self-effacing essays in a book like *Advertisements for Myself*) becomes ambivalence towards the fighter.

It is no wonder Mailer conflated Ali with himself. The similarities between the two deserve close attention. Both men achieved great success at an early age: Ali with his surprising defeat of Sonny Liston at age 22 and Mailer with the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* at age 25. Celebrated the world over, reviled for their sometimes unwelcome pronouncements on politics, admired for their cultivation of hipster personas, both men went on to earn more money and accolades for work of increasingly poorer quality: Muhammad Ali and Norman Mailer were both made into legends too quickly and too early in their lives to fully define themselves any other way. Both men retained a childish hunger for the media spotlight, desire for fame at any cost, well into their adulthoods. According to Carl Rollyson, author of *The Lives of Norman Mailer* (Paragon House, NY, 1991), "The match between Ali and Mailer is so perfect that Mailer does not even have to comment upon it in *The Fight*. They are both aging champs with self-reflexive styles designed to triumph over their faults and weaknesses. Both men enter their bouts and books under a cloud; it is not clear whether they can pull off another win" (269). Watching the fighter's career, Mailer drew on many of those 'self-reflexive' styles in the development of his writerly persona.

Observing Ali's 1974 bout with George Foreman, Joyce Carol Oates couldn't help but think of Norman Mailer who was present at the fight:

"[W]atching a tape of Ali on the ropes enticing, and infuriating, and frustrating, and finally exhausting his opponent by an offense in the guise of a defense, I pondered what sly lessons of masochism Mailer absorbed from being ringside that day, what deep-imprinted resolve to outwear all adversaries" (*On Boxing*, page 198).

Oates seems to be suggesting that in the latter stages of his career (as he was attacked with equal virulence from the left by feminists like Germaine Greer and from the right by conservatives like William F. Buckley) Mailer internalized Ali—literally *ate the other* (to echo bell hooks' phrase)—and applied the boxer's much-maligned rope-a-dope style of passive defense to the context of writing and criticism. By sheer force of will, it seems, Norman Mailer turned himself into Muhammad Ali, the ultimate object of his (ambivalent) love and desire.

But for Mailer, there was one thing that further complicated his love for—and identification with—Muhammad Ali: race. Muhammad Ali's Blackness confuses Mailer to no end: the complexities of Ali's identity and the racial politics of the time distract and overwhelm Mailer even as those complexities draw him to the fighter. This sense of confusion comes through as Mailer describes his reaction to Muhammad Ali (a description that might express Mailer's feelings for all segments of the Black population): "He is *fascinating*—attraction and repulsion must be in the same package. So, he is obsessive. The more we don't want to think about him, the more we are obliged to" (*Existential Errands*, 4). Try though he might to take on the issues of race, Black Power, white liberal guilt, and Otherness in his essays about Muhammad Ali (and boxing in general), Mailer always winds up being beaten by these same issues, pushed against the ropes of the racial debate, as it

were, and pounded into submission by a rope-a-dope of his own muddled and problematic misunderstanding. For this literary Great White Hope, race is too great an opponent for him to overcome.

Throughout his career, Norman Mailer has always taken it upon himself to defend and celebrate society's outcasts: he has written passionately (if ambivalently) about Black Power (various essays starting with *Existential Errands*, 1972), Lee Harvey Oswald (*Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, 1995), the Yippies (*Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, 1968), serial killer Gary Gilmore (*The Executioner's Song*, 1979), and others whom 'proper' society holds in contempt. For Mailer, these figures represent nothing less than rebels against the mores and manners of society: they are the heroic rogue figures who embody, in Mailer's mind, a return to some sort of pre-civilized world in which 'might made right' and men 'were men.' It is no accident, then, that Mailer saw fit to delineate the dichotomy between civilization and its discontents (to echo Freud) by naming his 1966 collection of short stories, essays, and fragments *Cannibals and Christians*.

Mailer's romanticized view of society's rogues (revolutionaries, madmen, criminals) and buccaneers (boxers, bullfighters, criminals) grows out of a long tradition of intellectuals idealizing actions they themselves would never undertake and persons whom they would never fraternize with. Mailer identifies the essence of courage in the actions of the rogue, and celebrates their individuality and hubris in the face of society's opposition, but where he consistently goes wrong in his admiration for the bravura of these characters he so idealizes is in his repeated (and most uncritical) addition of race into the equation. For Mailer, the rogue is the spiritual brother of the African American male. (For Mailer, it is always a male.) The Black male is, for Mailer, the ultimate psychic outlaw, the rogue figure living, as Mailer put

in 'The White Negro,' "on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy" (from *The Portable Beat Reader*, Ann Charters, ed., Viking, NY, 1992; page 589).

In that seminal 1957 essay (first published in *Dissent*, then as a stand-alone pamphlet called *The White Negro*), Mailer attempts to explain the Beat Generation by comparing their existential outlook and social marginalization during the Eisenhower era as being that of the African American male, in whom Mailer sees the essence of his much beloved rogue figure:

"So it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries. But the presence of Hip as a working philosophy in the sub-worlds of American life is probably due to jazz, and its knife-like entrance into culture, its subtle but so penetrating influence on an avant-garde generation..." (Charters, ed., page 589).

One need not even address the loaded language with which Mailer makes his point: the dated Cold War imagery in his invocation of 'totalitarianism and democracy,' the view of African American culture as inherently insurgent and sexual in his description of jazz as making a 'knife-life entrance' into, and having a 'penetrating influence' on, American culture. For Mailer, African American culture is filled with sex and violence and is seductive to the white hipster for that very reason.

According to Mailer, the white hipster—and by extension, Mailer himself—desires the social and cultural marginality of the African American male, a figure who is so beneath society's contempt that he is, therefore, free to act as he wishes. And in Mailer's view, he wishes to act only as a brute, of course:

"Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk. The cameos of security for the average white: mother and the home, job

and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible. The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body..." (Charters, ed., page 590)

The preceding quote only begins to show the racial baggage with which Mailer approaches boxing: his hyper-, almost self-parodying masculine view of life as 'war, nothing but war' and his conception of 'the Negro' [*respectful capitalization, his*] as the perfect warrior echoes throughout his writings on boxing as in his 1971 essay "King of the Hill" in which Mailer describes Joe Frazier as "the human equivalent of a war machine." For Mailer, the African American male—and in his mind, the boxer more than any other—lives in a Hobbesian state of nature, a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Collier Books, 1962, page 100)

In Mailer's defense (and reading much of Mailer's works on race and boxing, standing at his defense is a nervous place to be, to say the least), he is clearly attempting to update the sport's codified mythology by incorporating American race relations into boxing's mixed bag of metaphors. Mailer struggles to update Hazlitt's notion of the boxer as an embodiment of "courage and modesty" by inscribing it upon African American males in the context of late twentieth century race relations. There is no way that Hazlitt (or even Liebling, who fumbled absent-mindedly past the deeper meanings of boxing on his way to creating fluffy vignettes) would delve as deeply into the racial meanings of manhood—reverse, in a sense, the notion of white

manhood by placing its final realization in the hands of Black men—as Mailer does in his works on boxing. Clumsy and bald-facedly racist though his works might be, Mailer manages to update boxing’s mythology by incorporating race in a manner that had never before been attempted by any white writer. For this reason, Mailer’s writing is perfectly suited to the career of Muhammad Ali, a fighter who in his own way attempted the same thing within the ring, albeit in a more direct and successful manner. Ali racialized the ring—smashed older notions of manhood and forced boxing’s mythology to shift with the social tides of his time—just as Mailer racialized boxing writing at exactly the same moment. Looking again at the photograph, arm-and-arm in 1965, grappling for the delight of their small crowd of onlookers and photographers, Norman Mailer and Muhammad Ali were a perfect match, flattering and challenging one another as they complimented and improved upon themselves.

“What fascinates Mailer is not sports—a subject that apparently, beyond boxing and bullfighting, did not interest him a great deal—but the escape from the white, civilized death wish,” writes Gerald Early in *Culture of Bruising* (58). The African American male—especially the boxer—is the opposite of the Corporation Man or the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, whom the hipsters of the fifties and hippies of the sixties so reviled for his conformity to middle class values. White bourgeois existence, for Mailer, is spiritual death on an installment plan: the African American male is freedom incarnate. To Norman Mailer, “the Black man is metaphorically the white male’s unconsciousness personified” (Early, *Tuxedo Junction*, 138). The Black man (like the psychopath, whom Mailer also celebrates in “The White Negro”) becomes all the white man has repressed—his id, in a sense—and in the boxing ring, Mailer sees the return (and exaltation) of the elements

of that repression. To Mailer's mind, hiding just beneath the surface of white civilization, *beneath the surface of the white civilized man*, is the ultimate negation of the values and precepts of that civilization: The Black man.

Writing in a different context, Frantz Fanon theorized that:

"European civilization is characterized by the presence, at the heart of what Jung calls the collective unconscious, of an archetype: an expression of the bad instincts, of the darkness inherent in every ego, of the uncivilized savage, the Negro who slumbers in every white man" (*Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Weidenfeld, NY, 1967; page 187).

As Early puts it, "For Mailer, the Black is always the id-dominated beast, the heart of the white man's darkness" (*Tuxedo Junction*, page 137).

Where else then, would Mailer go to find the true heart of that darkness, than Africa itself, where he travelled as a journalist for *Playboy* Magazine in 1974 to report on the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle" in Kinshasa, Zaire.

With Mailer's history of racial commentary in mind, the resulting two-part article and the book he wrote about it a year later called *The Fight*, come to be seen as less a chronicle of the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman fight than as an extension of the author's explorations of race, manhood, and, as ever, Norman Mailer. *The Fight* reads like a breathless epic—an attempt to capture and update Liebling's panoramic omnipresence—but what the reader mostly takes away is a sense of the author's racial subjectivity and his quest for those id-dominated repressed elements of the human psyche with post-colonial (yet still 'primeval') Africa as the background.

Central to Mailer's thesis in *The Fight*, is his own ambivalence towards African Americans. Writing about himself in the third-person throughout the book, Mailer writes "[H]e knew that he had not only come to report on a fight but to look a little more into his own outsized feelings of love and—

could it be?—sheer hate for the existence of Black on earth,” (37). A parallel to those feelings of “outsized” love and hate can be seen in any fight fan’s embrace/rejection of boxing itself, which journalist Hugh McIlvanney describes as being fraught with “residual ambivalence” (*McIlvanney on Boxing*, Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1997; page 15). Mailer’s attraction to, and repulsion from, “the existence of Black on earth” is merely a re-articulation of boxing’s central appeal/repellence through the complicated looking glass of race.

The Fight (as well as much of Mailer’s other essays on boxing) suffers from a desire to create an epic narrative where it is not needed: “The actual fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman had to be one of the most boring on record” (Early, *Tuxedo*, 139). Even when appropriate, epic writing, as any author will tell you, is exhausting work: facing down history, politics, larger-than-life personalities, and The Big Questions of Life can be more dangerous than sparring with a prizefighter. The risk of being beaten by one’s own subject is constant, so it’s no wonder Mailer’s prose is so purple around the edges: he came away from the Rumble in the Jungle with more bruises than both Ali and Foreman.

If Liebling’s essays on boxing contained an undeniable element of class antagonism, he managed to keep it mostly between the lines and show it through implication. Mailer, writing from a radically different stylistic and political stance, makes his own antagonism perfectly clear to the reader: “[H]is love affair with the Black soul, a sentimental orgy at its worst, had been given a drubbing through the seasons of Black Power. He no longer knew whether he loved Blacks or secretly disliked them, which had to be the dirtiest secret in his American life” (Mailer, *The Fight*, 35). Dirty in his American life, yes.

But in Zaire, for some reason, Mailer's racist id is liberated as never before and roams free throughout *The Fight*.

Strangely, Mailer never once interrogates the central question asked by this "dirtiest secret": Why would he travel all the way to Africa to examine his contempt for *African Americans*? Hugh McIlvanney, another white writer present in Kinshasa, reported in a dispatch for the London *Sunday Times* that "The Zairese people are warm, helpful and charming" and by all accounts of the "Rumble in the Jungle," Mailer would have found no reason to express any ill will towards his African hosts (*McIlvanney on Boxing*, page 55).

It is, however, in the symbolic importance of Africa as the location for this fight, that Mailer's antagonism towards Blacks in America comes sharply into focus: A strongly Afrocentric current ran through the promotional build-up to the "Rumble in the Jungle." With the emergence of the Black Panthers and internationally-focused African American radicals, it didn't take a Cassandra to figure out that the newly-erected billboards along the highway in Zaire reading "*Un Cadeau de President Mobutu au peuple Zairois... et un honneur pour l'homme noir*" ("A gift of President Mobutu to the Zairois people... plus an honor to the Black man") had powerful symbolic implications to the American racial scene (*The Fight*, page 19-20). In 1967, Kwame Ture (née, Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton wrote that "Black Power means that Black people see themselves as part of a new force, sometimes called the 'Third World'; that we see our struggle as closely related to liberation struggles around the world," (*Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, Vintage Books, NY, 1992; page xix). One can almost feel Mailer's blood turn cold as a Zairean official boasts that this event is, "A fight between two Blacks in a Black nation, organized by Blacks and seen by the whole

world" (*The Fight*, pages 19-20). Perhaps listening to this description and observing the overwhelming pride and support that the Africans had for Muhammad Ali and the ease with which the fighter tied America's race issues to those in Africa, Mailer was reminded of the title of one his books, and shuddered at the thought of true *Armies of the Night* rising up not only in what had once been colonial Africa (Conrad country not ten years earlier!), but in America as well.

Almost as an act of psychic self-defense—as a means of insulating himself from the fear and dread induced by his African sojourn—Mailer had to draw deep from his reservoir of racial animosity for *The Fight*:

"How his prejudices were loose. So much resentment had developed for Black style, Black snobbery, Black rhetoric, Black pimps, superfly, and all that virtuoso handling of the ho. The pride Blacks took in their skills as pimps!... He could not really bring himself to applaud the emergence of a powerful people in American life—he was envious. They had the good fortune to be born Black" (41).

That envy—"an insulting kind of love" is how Gerald Early described it in *Tuxedo Junction* (page 137)—was recognized by Ishmael Reed in his 1978 essay 'The Fourth Ali.' "Reading *The Fight* again... I realized that what I had mistaken for racism in Mailer's writing was actually frustration... frustration that he couldn't be Black" (Reed, *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1982; page 48). Reed also suggests that during the fifties and sixties the author surrounded himself with "freeloader Blacks" and "hustlers who turned Mailer sour on Blacks in general," which might account for his bilious contempt (page 48).

The Fight is filtered through complex feelings of envy commingled with hatred, desire with disgust, but what also comes through in Mailer's racial polemicizing is a sense of his own close identification with African Americans. "Mailer," Early tells us, "has constructed his own sense of

himself identifying not simply with the rights of the Negro but with the Negro's darkness" (*Culture of Bruising*, page 59). Mailer's impatience with African Americans—expressed as a sort of love affair gone bad in *The Fight*—mirrors his ambivalence towards himself. Writing about himself in the third person, Mailer says, "He had already had a love affair with himself, and it used up a good deal of love. He was no longer pleased with his presence" (*The Fight*, 31). Through his close identification with African American males, Mailer had yet again confused his own ego with the object of his love. Mailer's feelings about African American males is, again, an out-growth of his feelings about himself: That "sentimental orgy" that had gone too far, was an extension of his own love affair with himself that had begun to go bad with middle age and mediocrity setting in for the writer.

This close identification goes a long way towards explaining why Mailer feels the need to frame the African American male boxer in such a highly racialized way: Mailer needs the boxer as 'Other' in order to fully define himself. According to Oates, one obstacle to Mailer's understanding of his subject is in his "recognition that the boxers are *other*..." (Oates, *On Boxing*, 54). Mailer surely sees Ali—and by extension other Black fighters like Joe Frazier or George Foreman—as enigmas to be riddled over: "We have to recognize that there is no way to comprehend [Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier] as men like ourselves—we can only guess at their insides by a real jump of our imagination into the science Ali invented—he was the first psychologist of the body" (*Existential Errands*, 8). Ali remained an incomprehensible cipher for Mailer throughout his career because Mailer contended that he was incapable of comprehending that psychology. The irony, of course, is that that psychology was Mailer's own construct, a thing he projected onto Ali. The thing that so befuddled Mailer was not Muhammad

Ali himself, but the author's own *misunderstanding* of Ali as filtered through his desire and disgust, admiration and animosity.

Muhammad Ali, ultimately, proves too complex for Norman Mailer to understand. The complicated psychology of that "first psychologist of the body" proves to be too much for Mailer to contend with, and after he completed *The Fight* in 1975, the author never wrote at length about Ali again. (Mailer, along with George Plimpton, pops up in the 1996 documentary *When We Were Kings* to lend some on-the-scene accounts of the fight in Zaire, but for both were mostly re-hashing stories they'd each told before.)

Ali's psychology has always fascinated and confounded the writers who have followed the development of his career over the last thirty-eight years. In his essay 'Big Match at Highbury,' Hugh McIlvanney quotes Ali's long-time trainer Angelo Dundee as saying, "'People say 'Who is he like, who does he fight like, who does he live like?' All I can say is, like nobody I ever knew'" (*McIlvanney on Boxing*, page 29). Ali's style in the ring, his alternately flamboyant and earnest public persona, his pride and modesty, political conviction and seeming irony *were* confusing and contradictory. Budd Schulberg describes Ali's identity as residing within a series of "Chinese Boxes" that concealed the layers-upon-layers of the fighter's complex, paradoxical persona ("The Chinese Boxes of Muhammad Ali" from *Sparring with Hemingway*, pages 143-157). More than any American this century, Ali embodies the words of the previous century's pre-eminent American poet, Walt Whitman:

"Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

("Song of Myself," from *Leaves of Grass*, Vintage Books/Library of America, NY, 1992; page 88, lines 1324-1326).

Ali certainly does contain multitudes. As Hugh McIlvanney contends, "The champion boasts that he could handle three opponents in one night. If their names were Freud, Adler and Jung they would still take a beating" (*McIlvanney on Boxing*, page 29).

Prompted by McIlvanney, one imagines Sigmund Freud collapsed on the stool in his corner like Sonny Liston in 1964 breathlessly telling his trainers, *I can't go on*, as Ali dances around the ring, triumphant. Indeed, Ali would also be a worthy opponent for Carl Jung, drawing from his own bag of archetypes and symbols which Ishmael Reed identifies as "American images, images mostly derived from comic books, television, and folklore" ("The Fourth Ali," pages 43-44).

The insertion of these images into his press conferences and public pronouncements (as when he described Sonny Liston as a 'bear' or called Floyd Patterson 'the rabbit') is another way in which Ali updated boxing's mythology to incorporate African American folklore and culture. Jeffrey Sammons finds traces of African American folkloric tradition in Ali's persona, stating, "A case can be made that Ali was the consummate trickster of Black folklore, the fast and clever rabbit evading dogs, bears, and gorillas—the signifying monkey outwitting no less than 'the man'" ("Ali as Sixties Protest Symbol," from *Muhammad Ali, the People's Champ*, Gorn, ed., University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1995; page 164).

Ali was clearly aware of these traditional symbols and tropes and used them as a means of bringing the old definition of boxing—the gallantry, the man alone, Hazlitt's 'courage and modesty'—closer to his own individual sensibility: the sensibilities of African Americans. Look, for example at Ali's

description of the 'Near Room' as relayed by George Plimpton in *Shadow Box* (Lyons & Burford, Publishers, NY, 1977). The 'Near Room' is:

"[A] place to which, when he got into trouble in the ring, he imagined the door swung half open and inside he could see neon, orange and green lights blinking, and bats blowing trumpets and alligators playing trombones, and where he could hear snakes screaming. Weird masks and actors' clothes hung on the wall, and if he stepped across the sill and reached for them, he knew that he was committing himself to his own destruction" (page 17).

With its invocation of a surreal juke joint populated by a cast of anthropomorphic characters and screeching with the sounds of jazz music, 'The Near' room calls to mind imagery from such arcane African American folk cultural artifacts as the voodoo-obsessed horror songs of Screamin' Jay Hawkins like the 1958 single, "Alligator Wine" or the scatological children's poem "Ball of the Freaks" which tells of a similar bacchanal that incorporates aspects of sexual terror and violence suppressed in the psyche (Dennis Wepman, et. al., *The Life: The Lore and Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976; pages 108-112).

In his description of "weird masks and actors' clothes hung on the wall" Ali might as well be discussing the psychological masks and disguises described by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. Taking as his premise that Black identity (not just in America, but all over the world) has been shaped and defined from without by whites who have themselves framed the psychology through which we understand the very notion of the self, Fanon asserts that "[T]he first impulse of the Black man is to say *no* to those who attempt to build a definition of him" (page 36). Looking into that 'Near Room,' Ali refuses those masks and costumes on the wall and boldly resolves to define himself.

This is where boxing myth collides with individual identity. The sweeping associations, the pat conclusions, and the social impulses of the mythologist—in this instance, the boxing mythologist—are not enough, finally, to explain the idiosyncrasies, the contradictions, and the uniqueness of the individual. Mythology, almost by definition, is too universal in its impulses and, for that reason, unable to explain an individual as extraordinary as Muhammad Ali.

Or, for that matter, any man who steps into the arena and wishes to challenge history.

The preceding chapter of this essay deals with the mythology that undergirds the sport of boxing as it is practiced in the United States. Reading boxing through its literature—a literature largely composed by white authors—it is possible to imagine a sort of "psycho-colonialism" of the sport by persons who have imposed their own interpretation upon a space dominated, at least on the level of practice, by African Americans. In this equation the African American boxer is thrust into the native whose investment in boxing's space (both mythic and actual) is minimal, or to speak the white author, then, is thrust into the colonist whose investment in boxing is maximal. Like any colony, the psycho-colonialism of boxing is layered with the contradictions of racism and language, and tension from both within and without.

Round Two

It is fitting, then, that that chapter should conclude with a quotation from Henry James, one of this century's most radical post-colonial thinkers, that boxing's cultural myths are unidirectional. The next step is for the colonized to throw off the yoke of their colonizer. This chapter deals with boxing mythically: the sport whose mythology masks history and the political meanings of the sport boxing does affect not without complications. The politicization of boxing, this chapter argues, is a form of decolonization. The redrawing of boxing's meanings and mythology, sometimes by its practitioners, sometimes by sports thinkers, has always with the politics of the moment in mind. So it is to James once again that we must look to understand the process of decolonization.

"The dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing, I dream that I beat and conquer. But I spend a sleep in low stride, or that I am followed by a band of enemies which never catch up with

The preceding chapter of this essay dealt with the mythology that under-girds the sport of boxing as it is practiced in the United States. Reading boxing through its literature—a literature largely composed by white authors—it is possible to imagine a sort of 'psychic colonization' of the sport by outsiders who have imposed their own interpretation upon a space dominated, at least on the level of practice, by African Americans. In this equation, the African American boxer is likened onto the native whose investment in boxing's space (both mythic and actual) is intrinsic, so to speak; the white author, then, is likened onto the colonist whose investment is extrinsic. Like any colony, the psychic colonization of boxing is layered with the ambivalence of racism and fraught with tension from both within and without.

It is fitting, then, that that chapter should conclude with a quotation from Frantz Fanon, one of this century's most radical post-colonial thinkers: once boxing's colonial myths are understood, the next step is for the colonized to throw off the yoke of their colonizer. This chapter deals with boxing reality: the space where mythology meets history and the political meanings of the sport become clear, albeit not without complications. The politicization of boxing, therefore, can be seen as a form of decolonization, the reclaiming of boxing's meanings and messages, sometimes by its practitioners, sometimes by social thinkers, but always with the politics of the moment in mind. So it is to Fanon once again that we must look to understand the process of decolonization:

"[T]he dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with

me (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, NY, 1961; page 52).

It is the dream of the boxer, then, to strive; it is his nature, to challenge.

In 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois famously proclaimed that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Penguin Books, NY, 1982; page 54). Looking back on the century just two years before its end, those words have proved most prescient. The twentieth century has brought monumental advances in the cause of racial equality and social advancement for African Americans in the United States, but it has also brought complications, backtracks, and violent conflicts. While the battle for racial equality in America has been fought in the courts and in the streets since at least the Abolitionist movement, its advances and obstacles have been mirrored in the boxing ring, an arena in which the over-arching narratives of the twentieth century have been distilled into discreet scenes played for the edification and amusement of the masses.

"The mimetic politics of boxing as performance are the politics of race relations in this country as engineered for the benefit of the ruling class" writes Gerald Early (*Culture of Bruising*, page 22). Early is suggesting that the boxing ring has been used as a space for a symbolic presentation of politics—a mimetic space in which the opposing ideologies of the day literally do battle against one another.

A salient example of this symbolic ideological warfare was the series of bouts between Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston in the early 1960s. Beginning with their September 1962 title fight in Chicago, Illinois, Floyd Patterson and

Charles "Sonny" Liston battled for the very meaning of Blackness and Black manhood during an era already unsettled by issues of African American civil rights in the South, urban crime and poverty in the North, and the growing debate between progressives and conservatives in the national media about 'race problems.' Their battle did not end until July of 1963 when they met once again in Las Vegas, Nevada (Stanley Weston and Steven Farhood, *The Ring: Boxing the Twentieth Century*, BDD Illustrated Books, NY; 1993. pages 147; 151).

With their highly-charged political overtones, the Patterson-Liston fights stand as one of the clearest instances in which the boxing ring has been used by fighters, promoters, and pundits as a primary forum for political debate, even if that debate involved more brute force than reasoned argument. Looking closely at the Patterson-Liston fights and the issues they addressed, one can see the political uses of boxing as well as boxing's use of politics and how each enriches and informs the other.

When world heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson met Sonny Liston on September 25th at Chicago's Comiskey Park, neither man entered the ring alone: with them they each brought complex racial baggage and the hopes and fears of an entire nation.

Patterson brought with him the hope for racial integration. Standing behind him were no lesser progressives than President Kennedy and Eleanor Roosevelt (*Culture of Bruising*, page 50). According to Jeffrey T. Sammons, Patterson was considered the Black "white hope," an African American fighter whom white America not only admired, but identified with (*Beyond the Ring*, page 197). Much weight rested upon the back of Floyd Patterson, a celebrated member of the NAACP, for whom "responsibility sat upon him like a comic cut-back in a silent film where we return now and again to one

poor man who has been left to hold a beam across his shoulders" according to Norman Mailer. "There he stands, unable to move... The responsibility to beat Liston was too great to bear" (Mailer, *Existential Errands*, page 11).

Sonny Liston, on the other hand, brought with him a sense of Black alienation and desperation that was only beginning to surface in the racial discourse of the time: Watts—and innumerable American ghettos from New York to Los Angeles—had yet to burn, but the heat was beginning to be felt across the country. While not overtly political (indeed, Liston never aligned himself with any ideology) Patterson's opponent came to represent a growing population of African Americans living outside of the bounds of mainstream society, people who populated urban centers, were targets for government-sponsored social programs, and who presented—by virtue of their existence more than by any actions—a threat to the safety and well-being of white America. Sonny Liston was not endorsed by any Presidents or former First Ladies from whom he drew support and political inspiration; instead, he had other powerful people standing behind him, namely, the Mob, in the form of manager Frankie Carbo and his associate Frank "Blinky" Palermo (Sammons, 179).

Sonny Liston entered the ring at Comiskey Park that early Autumn evening as the living embodiment of white racial anxiety: the quintessential 'Bad Negro.' As Amiri Baraka wrote in his 1968 essay collection *Home: Social Essays* (here quoted by David Chandler in the introduction to *Boxer: An Anthology of Writings on Boxing and Visual Culture*):

"Sonny Liston is the big Black Negro in every white man's hallway, waiting to do him in, deal him under for all the hurt white men, through their arbitrary order, have been able to inflict on the world" (Chandler, et. al., ed., MIT Press, 1996; page 23).

As far as the sporting establishment and the media saw him, Charles "Sonny" Liston was nothing less than rootless, anti-social hostility rising out of the murky nether-world of the Black ghetto made frightfully, menacingly real. Floyd Patterson was all that stood between this scourge and the world heavyweight championship.

The pressure to uphold the positive, conciliatory image of the integration-minded African American was so great for Floyd Patterson that when he lost the fight in just over two minutes (126 seconds) he was deeply shamed as both a fighter and as a political aspirant. Back in March of 1961, Patterson had lost to a Swedish fighter named Ingemar Johansson and was so humiliated by the loss that he fled the arena and literally hid his face in shame beneath a fake beard and hat (Patterson, with Gay Talese, "In Defense of Cassius Clay"; *Esquire*, August 1966, page 55-58). But to lose as the world heavyweight, as he did in the first of his two fights with Sonny Liston, was even worse: the racial conflict built into their encounter only compounded his sense of failure. And when Floyd Patterson failed, he did not fail alone: "Floyd Patterson was the symbolic spearhead of a counterrevolutionary host, leader of the mythical legions of faithful darkies who inhabit the white imagination" fantasized Eldridge Cleaver in 1968 (Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, Delta Books, NY, 1968; page 93). Patterson, in Cleaver's equation, was letting down the white American public that relied on him and, unforgivably, he had been defeated by the worst kind of criminal thug, a "thumbcrusher for the Mob" who would now hold the world heavyweight title for another two years (Early, *Tuxedo*, 1993). Furthermore, the hopes and yearnings of integration-minded, middle class African Americans ("the mythical legions of faithful darkies" in Cleaver's caustic, nationalist language) also rested within Patterson's gloved fists. They, too, must have been disappointed by the

replacement of the socially conscious, middle class Black champion by a fighter whose prison record was longer than his legendary reach.

The question of American racial harmony—not to mention the question of perceived Black menace—was made uncomfortably apparent in the Patterson-Liston match-up. Expressing typical white anxiety—tinged with ironic hyperbole—Joyce Carol Oates writes: “[T]o watch Liston overcome Patterson in tapes of their fights in the early 1960s is to watch the defeat of ‘civilization’ by something so elemental and primitive it cannot be named” (Oates, *On Boxing*, 75).

With Liston firmly in place as “The Champ Nobody Wanted” (to quote the subtitle of A.S. “Doc” Young’s 1963 biography of the fighter), the ‘Bad Negro’ became the dominant image in the American mind. *Esquire* Magazine’s scurrilous cover artist, George Lois, played upon this widely-held sense of white disappointment and fear by portraying Sonny Liston as a menacing Black Santa Claus for the cover of the December 1963 issue of the men’s magazine (Figure two). As Lois recounted in his book *Covering the ‘60s: George Lois and the Esquire Era* (The Monacelli Press, NY, 1996):

“Sonny Liston was perfect for the part. By now he was known by everyone as the meanest man in the world. He was a sullen and surly champion, a ‘street nigger.’ He had served time for armed robbery and didn’t give a damn about his image. This newest heavyweight champion of the world flaunted his surly, menacing image at a time when rising racial fever dominated the headlines” (Lois, 70).

For *Esquire*, the cover was the perfect expression of Radical Chic (despite the fact that Tom Wolfe wouldn’t coin that particular phrase for another seven years). It was an ironic (and iconic) celebration of Black villainy and white fear: transforming the dark visage of Sonny Liston into the beatific personage of Father Christmas smashed racial conventions in the face in more ways than one.



FIGURE TWO: "Liston glowering under a tasseled red-and-white Santa Claus hat, looks like the last man on Earth America wants to see coming down its chimney," *Sports Illustrated*.

At the time, *Sports Illustrated* described the cover as "*Esquire* thumb[ing] its nose at its white readers" (Lois, 70). Bringing the fear of Black anger into the white domestic sphere, *SI* continued, "Liston glowering under a tasseled red-and-white Santa Claus hat, look[s] like the last man on Earth America want[s] to see coming down its chimney" (*ibid.*).

Someone at *Sports Illustrated* clearly appreciated the cover so much that the December 29th 1997-January 5th 1998 Year-in-Review double issue of the magazine featured an updated recreation of *Esquire's* Black Santa Claus with boxer Evander Holyfield in the place of Liston (Figure three). The difference between these two covers is that George Lois and his photographer, Carl Fischer, were using their image of a Black Santa Claus to play against the public's image of their cover subject while *Sports Illustrated's* use of Holyfield plays directly into the fighter's image as a devout Christian and nice-guy fighter. *Sports Illustrated's* cover drains the irony out of *Esquire's* by refusing to confront the uneasy ideas implied by the juxtaposition of aggression (boxing) and altruism (holiday gift-giving). *Esquire's* cover is "one of the greatest social statements of the plastic arts since Picasso's *Guernica*" according to *Time Magazine*, while *Sports Illustrated's* is one of the greatest statements of celebrity image management since the ascendancy of the Public Relations era (Lois, 70).

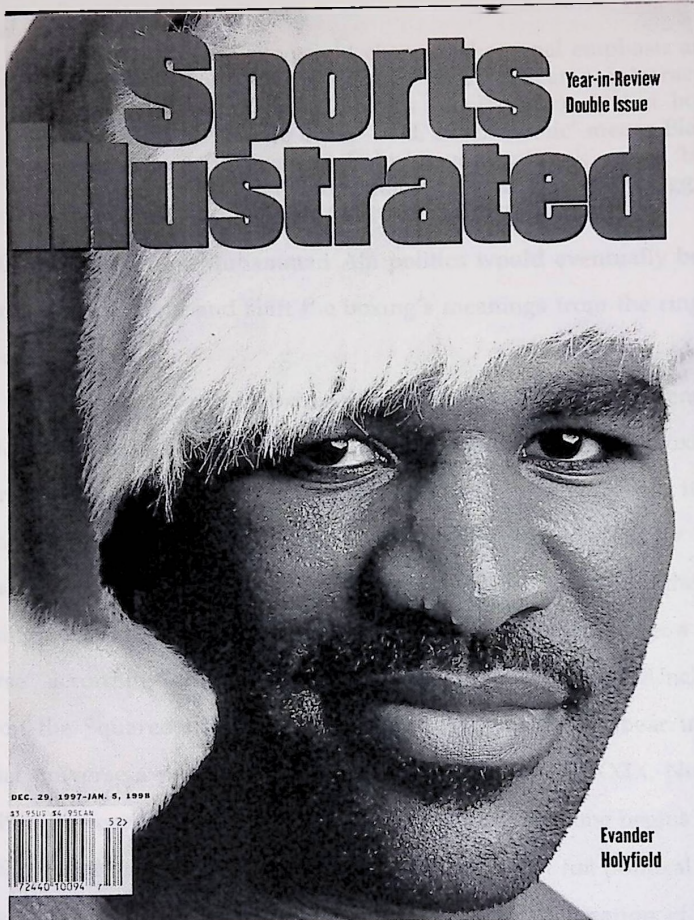


FIGURE THREE: *Sports Illustrated's* cover drains the irony out of *Esquire's* by refusing to confront the uneasy ideas implied by the juxtaposition of aggression and altruism.

Despite being racially homogeneous, Floyd Patterson's fights with Sonny Liston were still seen as a race conflict writ large and changed boxing's political character forever:

"The Patterson-Liston fight changed the racial emphasis and then the most publicized title bouts became intraracial instead of interracial... Just as the Patterson-Liston bout became in the public mind—and, now, 'public' means Black and white collectively—a fight between a 'punk' and a 'bad nigger,' the first Ali-Liston match became the 'crazy nigger' versus the 'bad nigger'" (Early, *Tuxedo*, 118).

With the coming era of Muhammad Ali, politics would eventually be in the foreground of the fight and shift the boxing's meanings from the ring to the real world.

"Racial contrast gives boxing matches... a tawdry, cheap sensational significance" writes Gerald Early in *Tuxedo Junction* (119). But boxing also gives racial conflict a tawdry, cheap sensational sense of closure that it should not have. As David Chandler says, "The boxing match is neatly framed, squared off by the ring" (Chandler, ed., *Boxer*, page 13). So, too, are the politics of boxing neatly framed and squared off. "[T]he square symbolizes a discreet universe" according to Larry Neal's 1972 *Partisan Review* essay 'Uncle Rufus Raps on the Squared Circle.' "That is to say, it brings to bear upon the material universe a particular sense of order" (Volume XXXIX, Number 1, page 49). Replace the word 'material' with 'political' and one begins to sense the hollowness of boxing's potential as a true medium for political change. Boxing's power is in its reflection of politics, not in its creation of political advances; its ability to do so is, admittedly, limited.

Boxing matches are timed by discreet three minute rounds separated by one minute breaks as prescribed by the Queensbury rules, created in England in 1866 (Elliot Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*;

pages 204-206). These time constraints define the parameters of the conflict within the ring yet do not reflect the way conflicts are resolved in the larger arena of American life. Civil rights are not won in discreet three minute rounds; the struggle for freedom is not contained within roped-in, elevated squares. "The fighters in the ring are time-bound" writes Oates, but the struggle for social and political advancement is not (15).

This is where Early's pronouncement that boxing is "mimetic politics... as performance" is fully realized: Boxing does not create political advances, it merely reflects and refracts them. Boxing matches are not victories in the same way that court cases such as *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) are and boxers cannot be political figures like Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. Yet Early maintains that "one could argue that the three most important Black figures of twentieth-century American culture were prizefighters: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali" (*Culture of Bruising*, page 13). (One could also add Mike Tyson to that triumverate, as Keith Piper did in his installation *Four Corners, A Contest of Opposites*, from 1995.)

What exactly does Early mean by this? I think the key idea for Early is "American culture," not American politics. (The subtitle of his book, *The Culture of Bruising*, is, after all, "Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture.") Johnson, Louis, and Ali (and, by extension, Tyson) have all presented complex images of African American manhood and embodied differing, contradictory degrees of investment in the beliefs and values of this nation: Looked at for their extra-ring behavior and acceptance by the American public, each man represents a different image of race in this country as reflected through the times each fighter was at the height of his career.

Where boxing succeeds politically is in the way the sport has placed issues of race, class, and gender at the forefront of its own mythology. The boxing ring has acted as a "discursive and representational space" in which these complex issues are examined openly for the world to see and interpret (Gilane Tawadros, *Boxer*, i.). The canvas of the boxing ring can be likened to the artist's canvas and, as such, it deserves the same close examination. Like any work of art or text worth reading, what is revealed says as much about the creator as it does about the spectator.

Boxing, as it has been practiced in twentieth century America, has been a racialized phenomenon. "The history of boxing—of fighting—in America" according to Joyce Carol Oates, "is very much one with the history of the Black man in America" (*On Boxing*, 65). Every twentieth century fighter of note has been African American, a fact that has forced the iconography of the sport to be inextricably tied to the iconography of race.

It wasn't always like this. Boxing—the rule-bound sport of hand-to-hand combat—was first developed as a pastime in 17th century England according to Elliot J. Gorn's *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (23). Before the sport's more violent and anarchic elements (bare fists, unlimited rounds, scratching, wrestling holds, etc.) were eliminated by the Marquis of Queensbury in 1866, boxing celebrated a long and bloody history in England. With very few exceptions, boxing was the bailiwick of the white working class and the entertainment of the upperclass (Gorn, 27-29).

During the early era of boxing, class difference was the defining metaphor at play in the ring. As discussed earlier, though, race was always a factor in the sport's ethos. (Recall the English investment in the fighter as a symbolic representative of the nation and Elliot Gorn's acknowledgement of Black, Jewish, and Irish participation in 18th and 19th Century boxing.) Many

of the class conflicts imbedded in the early days of the sport remain to this day, but when boxing crossed the Atlantic, its defining metaphor was transformed by the racial structure of American society and soon became as much an issue of race as it had been of class.

Boxing, like many contemporary African American forms of expression, grew out the legacy of slavery. Joyce Carol Oates echoes the frequently iterated history of forced Black-on-Black boxing matches among Southern slaves in *On Boxing*: "[W]hite slave owners commonly pitted their Negro slaves against one another in combat, and made bets on the results" (65). While this image of dehumanizing violence enforced by slave owners is a resonant, seemingly appropriate image of the cruel and brutal plantation system, boxing historian Elliot Gorn is somewhat more skeptical about the existence of these fights:

"That masters had slaves fight each other is a common motif in Afro-American and white southern folklore, and such fights probably did take place... However, there is no substantial proof that the practice was widespread. Except for white rough-and-tumble fighting, boxing was known but not particularly popular in the pre-Civil War South. Even brutal masters recognized the need to protect their investments, and in the name of productivity slaveowners generally discouraged violence among their bondsmen" (*Manly Art*, 34-35).

In his autobiography *Narratives in the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the author does recount that some slaves spent their "Sabbath... wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky" (Gates, ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Penguin Group, NY, 1987; page 303). These practices were condoned because slave owners would "much rather see [slaves] engaged in those degrading sports than see [them] behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings" (*ibid.*)

Nowhere does Douglass recall any forced Black-on-Black boxing matches, an omission which might or might not be explained by Gorn when he suggests that "Promoting fights would have undermined the very discipline [slave owners] sought to bolster"¹ (35).

Historical accounts on the topic may be incomplete, but regardless of whether slaves were ever actually forced to fight one another for their owners' amusement, this image has resonated well into the latter half of the twentieth century, cropping up, for example, in boxing promoter Don King's description of the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman fight in Kinshasa, Zaire as bringing boxing (or, more grandiose still, African Americans in general) "from the slave ship to the championship" or in the eerie "battle royal" sequence in Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* (1952). (Another example of the boxing-slavery connection is in the fact of one-time Heavyweight Champion Ken Norton starring as a renegade slave in the Seventies plantation-set exploitation film *Mandingo*.) One possible reason for the persistent belief in this hazy past is as an explanation for twentieth century boxing's control by white managers, promoters, and spectators who, perhaps without even realizing it, are perpetuating a system that can be likened onto chattel slavery. Most boxers' life stories include at least one tale of abuse or exploitation at the hands of managers and promoters that dramatize a consistent image of the fighter as victim: one need only look to who is actually in the ring risking his life and limb and who is sitting in the VIP seats collecting a third of what's earned at the match, to recognize the

¹ Historian Jefferey T. Sammons has told me in conversation that Gorn's hypothesis about the economic contradiction of a slave owner encouraging his slaves to box is perhaps incorrect since, throughout the legacy of plantation slavery, slave owners frequently acted against their own economic self-interest. Sammons further directs readers to slave narratives that have mentioned boxing as proof that the sport was likely engaged in for the amusement of owners and as a steam-valve for hostility on the plantation.

disparity between labor and management. Deft as ever, Muhammad Ali told Ishmael Reed in 1980 that for those (mostly white) promoters and managers who control boxing, "the Black man's role in the sport should be limited to boxing and carrying the bucket while the white men count the money" ("The Fourth Ali"; *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, page 63). Boxing has always been trapped in the nexus of organized crime, Hollywood's entertainment establishment (including television production), and the big business of sports promotion, creating a dangerous triple-punch combination that invariably fells even the most savvy and vigilant fighters. (cf. Jake LaMotta, with Joseph Carter and Peter Savage, *Raging Bull: My Story*; Sammons, *Beyond the Ring*, chapter six, "The Unholy Trinity: Television, Monopoly, and Crime"; and John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis*, pages 40-43 for more on the shadowy underside of boxing.) More deadly than any opponent, this powerful triumvirate has been responsible for the downfalls of most fighter who compete in the elevated arena of big-time professional prizefighting.

African American boxers are like most African Americans who make their livings and create their identities in the public eye of American life: they are subject to the defining gaze of white America and, for that reason, are vulnerable to its powers. When Ralph Wiley describes boxers as being "slowly... destroyed for the pleasure and leisure of voyeurs" he might as well be describing a jazz musician like Charlie Parker or an actor like Paul Robeson, both of whom suffered very public processes of (self-) destruction partially brought on by the constraints of racism and limited social mobility available to African Americans in this country (Wiley, *What Black People Should Do Now: Dispatches from Near the Vanguard*; Ballantine Books, NY,

1993; page 159). But for the boxer, this process is worsened by the physicality of the sport and the presumed legacy of heroic self-sacrifice it implies.

While the legacy of slave-boxing is questionable, a legacy of self sacrifice has undeniably been a theme in African American participation in American life since the days of plantation slavery. Continuing into the early part of the 20th century as large numbers of Black men enrolled for military service and died for the United States during World War I (David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Oxford University Press, NY, 1981; chapter 1 "We Return Fighting," pages 3-24), and carrying on into the present, African American sacrifice has been both a source of racial pride and self critique. In boxing, however, sacrifice is a way of life onto itself.

bell hooks begins her essay on painter Jean-Michel Basquiat "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-Membering Basquiat" with the following quote which she attributes simply to a Black church song: "Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?" (hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation*, Routledge, NY; 1994, page 25). hooks's use of that church song recalls the importance of sacrifice as a theme in African American culture, a culture that has had to endure unrelenting pressure and intervention from without in order to grow and maintain its integrity from within. Developing as it has in a white supremacist society that has rationed its entitlements—suffrage, mobility, education, economic inclusion, dignity—in sparing portions to African Americans, Black culture has had to adopt an ethos of sacrifice in order to get by on so little for so long. Returning to the context of boxing, Joyce Carol Oates waxes quasi-spiritual as she muses:

"If the boxing ring is an altar it is not an altar of sacrifice solely but one of consecration and redemption. Sometimes" (*On Boxing*, 112).

The sacrifices made in the ring—as well as in the larger arena—might bring redemption, be it economic, social or, as Oates suggests, spiritual, but as her one-word qualifier implies, that redemption is only realized sometimes. The redemptive—and by implication, spiritual—dimension of boxing is endlessly played upon in the sport's mythology, whether in the title of Rocky Graziano's 1955 autobiography *Somebody Up There Likes Me* or in the subtitle of *The Ring* magazine, which declares itself "The Bible of Boxing," making the sport a form of religion in and of itself. And in this particular religion, sacrifice is one of the cardinal virtues.

For the Black boxer, sacrifice is as much a part of his life as it is a part of his sport.

Loïc J.D. Wacquant recounts in exhaustive detail the philosophies and processes of sacrifice in his aptly-titled essay "Sacrifice" (forthcoming in Gerald Early, ed., *Graywolf Forum Two*, 1998):

"Any 'pro' fighter worthy of the name knows that he ought to give himself over to his trade body and soul... His commitment cannot but be all-embracing and all-consuming. He must put his craft before everything else, be it his family and friends, his wife or lover(s), his job (when he has one) and all extant mundane concerns. His physical, mental, and emotional energies are to be conscientiously cultivated, preciously preserved for, and methodically channeled towards one purpose and one purpose only: maximizing fistic prowess and attaining peak performance in the ring" (p.2)

As Wacquant makes clear, the prototypically 'masculine' trait of self sacrifice—sacrifice for family, ideology, economic advancement, personal integrity—is glaringly over-determined in boxing's hyper-masculine symbolic universe:

"He who wishes to enter and rise in the pugilistic cosmos... must be prepared to slaughter all of his profane interests on the altar of the ring... For sacrifice lifts him above his everyday station to thrust him into a special moral and sensual universe. A fighter becomes a greater man when he

renounces those common things that common men cannot forego. For, as Emile Durkheim wrote in his celebrated analysis of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, '[a]fter he has submitted himself to the prescribed prohibitions, man is not the same as he was. Before, he was an ordinary being... After, he has moved closer to the sacred by the mere fact that he has distanced himself from the profane. He has purified and sanctified himself by the very fact of detaching himself from the lowly and the trivial things that previously burdened his nature'" (*ibid*, 11).

"In sacrificing himself," Wacquant concludes, "he has engendered a new being out of the old" (*ibid.*). Success in the ring demands total commitment, which is just one of the qualities of the sport that makes it appealing to men—especially men of a certain social class—who seek something, *anything*, that will help define them, bracket their experience, and become the center of their lives.

That sacrifice, however, is not made for oneself alone. In his *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, René Girard plumbs the very depth of religious faith and devotion, asserting that:

"Even when the sacrifice is performed by a single person, that person usually acts in the name of everyone involved. The community affirms its unity in the sacrifice, a unity that emerges from the moment when division is most intense, when the community enacts its dissolution in the mimetic crisis and its abandonment to the endless cycle of vengeance" (Girard, with Oughourlian, et. al., Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA; 1987; page 24).

Girard's words call to mind both Lévi-Strauss analysis of the way myth creates social unity amid a culture's contradictory ideas as well as Gerald Early's interpretation of boxing's mimetic politics: For the boxer's sacrifice to assume true meaning (and perhaps, in a certain sense, for the boxer to experience transcendence in both a spiritual and social sense), it must articulate the abstract needs and desires of the community. The boxer's sacrifice must not be without meaning to his community if he wishes to assume the sacred role

of the scapegoat: "[T]he community attempts to consolidate its fragile hold on things under the still strong impressions of the crisis and its resolution" (Girard, 28).

Implied in the notion of sacrifice (as embodied by the scapegoat) is representation, a form of testifying visually. Photographs of boxers—performing their craft in the ring, training in the gym, etc.—are evocative precisely because it is through the representation of the sport, and the athletes' commitment to it, that the need for sacrifice Girard identifies is articulated. The boxer gives up his life in a sense (Wacquant goes to great lengths to show how the boxer subsumes his entire life to his sport), so that others do not have to.

Complicating this notion further is the role of representation of African American males in the context of American society. In his discussion of Keith Piper's boxing-themed installations and photo-montages, Kobena Mercer finds repeated references to the original sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ: "[T]he cruciform body is visually central to Piper's work precisely because the Black male body in Western culture is overburdened with the symbolic weight of more contradictory meanings than any mortal could ever hope to bear" ("Anatomies of the Body Politic, Its Central Nervous System: 1991-1996," forthcoming, 1998 catalog essay for *The New Museum*; page 61). The boxer as Christ is a notion endlessly iterated in the annals of the sport's literature and mythology. Oates suggests that "The triumphant boxer is Satan transmogrified as Christ," but, as with all things, this idea is complicated by race (*On Boxing*, 153). The African American boxer becomes Christ—or, that is Christ-like—as well, but in a more ambivalent way that suggests the complexity of his place in society: the Black boxer becomes both the Satan figure *and* the Christ figure. This was a role first assumed by Muhammad Ali

and later by Mike Tyson, according to Gerald Early. Both men, "[D]riven by the peculiarities of youthful Black honor, want[ed] to be the national hero and the national devil simultaneously" ("Mike's Brilliant Career," from *Transition*, Issue 71; page 54).

In addition to sacrifice, the other values traditionally associated with manhood in the West are codified in the boxing ring and used as symbolic mortar in the construction of the sport as well as the identities of its participants: "Boxing is a purely masculine activity and it inhabits a purely masculine world" writes Oates (70). She continues:

"In this world, strength of a certain kind—matched of course with intelligence and tirelessly developed skills—determines masculinity. Just as a boxer is his body, a man's masculinity is his use of his body" (72).

As the abstract discourse of the sport shifts to the concrete reality of the body a more racialized and politicized view of boxing comes fully into play. The Black body has always been the symbolic terrain on which the battle for racial domination and liberation has been fought in this country. The Black body—for the purposes of this essay, the Black male body—has always been a site of acute fear and loathing but also of desire and envy. John Hoberman begins his *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997) with the following aphorism from Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act*:

"I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant."

Ellison's proposal suggests Albert Einstein by way of Malcolm X: If America has advanced, it is because it stood with its heel on the necks of Negro giants.

Ellison's Negro giant is winkingly brought to life in Jean Lagarrigue's three-page illustration of Muhammad Ali in the November 1969 issue of *Esquire Magazine* (Figure four). The picture imagines the boxer as Swift's

Gulliver, bound and besieged by 'the little people,' and speaks directly to the boxing giant's troubles with the government, the draft board, the media, and others who had conspired to keep him out of the boxing ring after his refusal to fight in Vietnam ("Muhammad Ali and the Little People," by Irwin Shaw; pages 121-125). Lagarrigue's illustration is particularly deft in its depiction of the United States military (acting on behalf of the nation as a whole) planting an American flag in the fighter's body in a parody of the famous World War II era photograph (later a memorial sculpture) of the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima on February 19, 1945. Visually, the illustration depicts the Black male body as the site of ideological warfare.

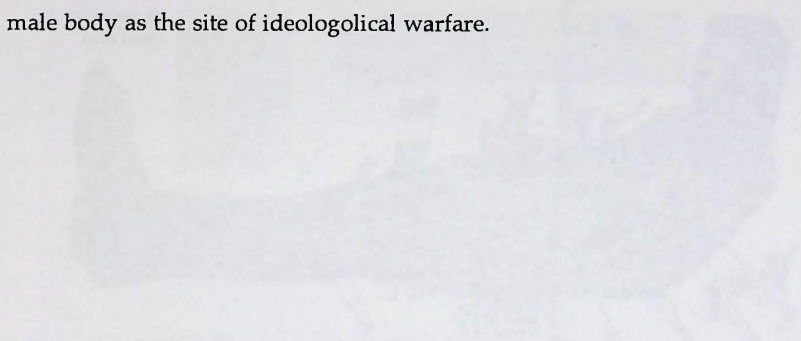


FIGURE 1. "I propose that we take the white and yellow flag and plant it in the body of a Negro man," Ralph Ellison, *Beloved*, 1947.

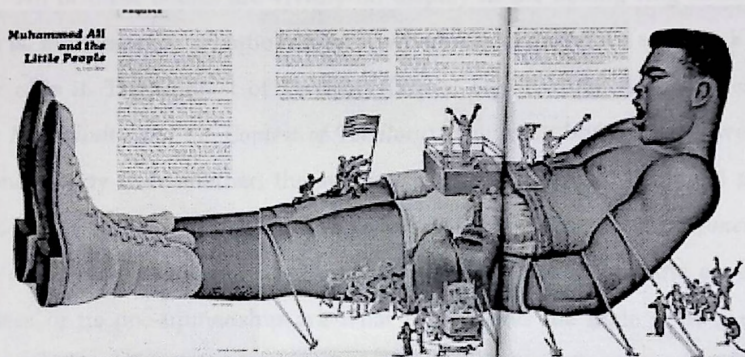


FIGURE FOUR: "I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant," Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*.

In the racial discourse of the twentieth century, the Black male body has been imagined and re-imagined in every possible way to suit every possible agenda. In the American racial imagination there is the heroic body of Black Power; the violent, hyper-sexualized body of white fear; the broken body of Black victimhood (made terrifyingly real in the person of Emmet Till, whose short life Muhammad Ali has always identified with); the 'naturally' athletic body of racialized sports discourse and myriad others.

All of these bodies are vividly on display in the boxing ring since the sport is, in its essence, a battle between two bodies engaged in, as artist Keith Piper calls it, *The Contest of Territory* (Piper, *Step Into the Arena: Notes on Black Masculinity and the Contest of Territory*). The male body—the power of one male body over another, the symbolism of the defeated, damaged male body, etc.—is the very *meaning* of the sport as Early notes in *Tuxedo Junction*: “The one-on-one encounter, the rewards of its brinksmanship, the egotistic excesses of its one-upmanship are what boxing and the male body mean” (137). Placing these bodies in conflict, designing a perilous situation from which only one man can, by definition, walk away champion, serves the same function as Girard’s idea of the “impression of conflict and resolution” that brings cohesion to the community. This is an idea understood implicitly by former Heavyweight Champion Floyd Patterson, who wrote in 1966 that:

“There is so much hate among people, so much contempt inside people who’d like to think they’re moral, that they have to hire prizefighters to do their hating for them. And we do. We get into the ring and we act out other people’s hates. We are happy to do it” (Floyd Patterson and Gay Talese, “In Defense of Cassius Clay,” from *Esquire*, August 1966; page 55).

The body in boxing does not merely occupy a symbolic role. For men (and in some cases women) of a certain socio-economic background, boxing is

an avenue of economic advancement, a career that might elevate the social station of the participants or provide a decent standard of living. The body, therefore, becomes the professional boxer's meal ticket, his training in the ring becomes his vocational education. As Wacquant seeks to explain in his 'Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers':

"How [do] practioners of a particular bodily craft (boxing), most of whom are embedded in a social setting that puts a high premium on physical force and prowess (the contemporary Black ghetto), conceive of, care for, and rationalize—in both Weber's and Freud's sense—the use of their body as a *form of capital*?" (from, *Body & Society*, Volume 1, Number 1, March 1995; page 65).

What is lost in the romantic idealizing of boxing as a competition between individuals struggling in the ring (or the equally romantic politicizing of the sport as Black men battling for primacy among and against one another) is the reality that for many men, boxing is literally a struggle and battle, though not for any symbolic attainment, but instead for economic survival.

As Wacquant suggests, "The fighter's body is simultaneously his means of production, the raw materials he and his handlers (trainer and manager) have to work with and on, and for a good part, the somatized product of his past training and extant mode of living... The boxer uses what Marx calls 'the natural forces of his body' to 'appropriate' that particular part of nature that is his own body so as to optimize the growth of these very forces" (*ibid.*, 67). Boxing, therefore, can be seen as a potentially lucrative economic option in a post-industrial economy that places a low premium on African American labor: the boxer, through his years of rigorous, self-sacrificing training can thus be re-framed as the ultimate skilled laborer. The boxer's social station creates his need to pursue a career in the sport and can also be seen as the source of his 'passion' and 'dedication' in that pursuit. As it is taught to young men in the so-called ghettos (Oates, 86) and promoted as one of the few

chances afforded the poor, boxing speaks to the disadvantaged in a voice that they understand. The language of boxing, with its emphasis on sacrifice, determination, pride, hope, and defeat is also the language of poverty in America. (All sports, of course, offer the promise of advancement and social mobility for African American youths shut out of other avenues of advancement such as education and work by social forces. The commitment among African Americans to sports has been analyzed—and lamented—at length by John Hoberman in *Darwin's Athletes*.)

The parallel between African American labor in the post-industrial economy and boxing is that of the latter obscenely amplifying the traits of the former as it mirrors them. Labor is dehumanizing and dangerous at the lowest eschelons of the post-industrial economy. It is doubly so in boxing. The promise of advancement is an illusory carrot dangled just out the worker's reach. It is triply so in boxing. Exploitation and financial manipulation at the hands of unscrupulous employers and institutions hurt the worker. It is infinitely so in boxing. The risk of injury and death without the safety-net of insurance or unions is present in many jobs available to the poor. It is frequently and tragically so in boxing. "The one word that comes to mind more than any other watching fighters work in the gym is 'proletariat.' These men are honestly, and in a most ghastly way, *toiling*, and what is more striking is how much more grotesque this work is than, say, *the* nightmare of an assembly line" (Early, *Tuxedo*, 125).

For many, though, that 'nightmare' of assembly line labor is not even an option, so boxing becomes one of the opportunities available in the 'alternative economy' (to echo Angela Davis's phrase) of the American ghetto. "Black males" according to Mercer, "have developed various 'hustles' which have developed as a means of maintaining the equation between

masculinity and economic independence" (Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*; Routledge, NY, 1994; page 144). Boxing can be linked not only to sports like basketball (with its evanescent promises of college scholarships and professional glory) but with other possible 'ways out' of poverty such as drug dealing and rapping. Rappers have so consistently decried the scarcity of options for the urban Black male outside of sports, entertainment or crime that the theme is practically *de rigeur* in the raps-to-riches narratives of artists like the late Notorious B.I.G. who raps:

"If I wasn't in the rap game, I'd probably have a key knee-deep in the crack game
Because the streets is a short stop
Either you slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump-shot"
("Things Done Changed," from *Ready to Die*, Arista Records, NY; 1994).

As Early writes in *Tuxedo Junction*: "Boxing is another culture, available to a boy who cannot be a singer, a preacher, or a thief (which are really the only other job-training programs readily available to the lower class)" (129).

Another appeal boxing holds to the marginalized 'ghetto' male is in what Wacquant refers to as the 'moral and sensual universe' of the boxing gym. In its support for the individual, its instillation of confidence, its ability to provide stimulation, discipline, and direction, and the sense of shared purpose it imparts on all who enter, the boxing gym is a social sphere *nonpareil*. For the African American male growing up in an urban environment increasingly bereft of social programs, community centers, after-school programs, and safe social settings, the gym can be a second home, its trainers, sparring partners, and similarly-committed fighters a surrogate family for those who experience the 'tangled web of pathologies' that Daniel Patrick Moynihan associated with the American ghetto in his controversial 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Furthermore,

as far as social spheres go, the gym is among the most positive and produces life-affirming results while providing its adherents with an outlet for the pressures that life's challenges may foster: "Boxing's brutal physicality has provided an escape form the dwarfing structures, choking pollution, crowded urban centers, and uncontrolled technology that threaten our primacy as the architects of modernity" (Sammons, 235). It also acts as the proverbial 'steam-valve' for the release of underclass rage.

"[O]ne of the standard arguments for *not* abolishing boxing is in the fact that it provides an outlet for the rage of disenfranchised youths, mainly Black or Hispanic" writes Oates (86). While Oates is correct in her description of this 'standard' pro-boxing argument it is, however, an argument that is frequently employed incorrectly. Many commentators tend to suggest that the physical release of boxing, the fostering—and ultimately, releasing—of anger is a productive outlet in the lives of those on the social and economic margin (Sammons, 252). Others suggest that the sport gives "potentially dangerous men something 'safe' with which to occupy their time" as Early does in *Tuxedo Junction* (180). Still others suggest that the commitment to boxing's eating habits, training regimen, and lifestyle requirements builds character and discourages pathology (Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel About Their Trade" from *Theory and Society*, Volume 24, Number 4; page 499).

These are all valid assumptions about boxing's appeal to its adherents, but it is often overlooked that boxing, with its institutionalized rules, time periods, and containment within the prescribed space of the ring, brings a sense of much needed order to the random, senseless chaos of urban life. Outside of the ring, life can be unpredictable and dangerous; inside the ring, everything is predictable and relatively ordered (Wacquant, "The Pugilist

Point of View" page 497). The boxer's experience in the ring may be violent and painful, but at least it's ritualized and structured: the violence and pain experienced in life is erratic and relentless.

Returning to the notion of the boxing ring as a mimetic space for the engagement in symbolic battles, the ring can also be the space for symbolic assault on the institutions that impinge upon the life of the fighter. The ring can be the site of symbolic-psychological warfare against those factors in the fighter's life that are as unreachable as they are overwhelming: "[I]t is reasonable to assume that boxers fight one another because the legitimate objects of their anger are not accessible to them" writes Oates in *On Boxing* (63). You can't beat City Hall, the thinking goes, but you can beat your opponent in the ring. Ironically, however, because the symbolic-psychological warfare is conducted, in large part, by a 'victim' against his fellow 'victim'. "You fight what's nearest, what's available, what's ready to fight you," writes Oates, echoing years of rhetoric about Black-on-Black violence and self-destruction. "And, if you can, you do it for money" (*ibid.*)

This is where the psychological, symbolic, social, and even spiritual aspects of boxing collide head-on with the realities of the market: all of the pain, striving, accomplishment, and defeat experienced on the microcosmic level in the gym and in the ring are eventually marketed for the (mostly white) spectator's enjoyment. It is true that the sport appeals to African Americans and other groups in this country, but as shown in the previous chapter, the symbolic coding of boxing works hand-in-glove with the coding of race in this country, playing upon the assumptions (and directly into the needs) of white spectators. As discussed in the previous chapter, there have been African American responses to boxing from authors like James Weldon

Johnson and others, but as it has been promoted and consumed in this country, boxing has appealed directly—and most profitably—to whites.

As in few other contemporary phenomena, boxing matches present a very real spectacle of brutality without the mediating influences of scripts, actors, directors, and special effects. The violence perpetrated in the ring is unmistakably real; so, too, is the drama of the encounter. Despite the best efforts of the sport's promoters and chroniclers to bring meaning—political, personal, social, etc.—to the proceedings, the essence of the occasion cannot be denied: men punching one another into submission as the crowd applauds.

Yet boxing remains popular among spectators, reaping profits numbering in the billions and riveting audiences in stadiums the world over and on television almost everytime a major heavyweight bout is presented. Many spectators are doubtless attracted to sport for many of the reasons discussed earlier in this essay: the politics of the ring; the display of heroic masculinity; the charisma of certain fighters, etc. But at heart, there is an undeniable element of blood lust on the part of the spectator. There is an almost ecstatic desire on the part of the spectator to witness real violence and to come away from such a battle unscathed.

The spectator's ecstatic state begins before the first punch is even thrown, as the anticipation of what is about to be witnessed takes over the spectator. "[As] the fight approached," wrote Norman Mailer in his essay on the first Patterson-Liston fight (here quoted by Early in *Tuxedo Junction*), "[Pete] Hamill and I had been growing nervous in a pleasant way, we were feeling that mixture of apprehension and anticipation which is one of the large pleasures of going to a big fight" (Early, 188).

The mixture of apprehension and anticipation Mailer describes eventually gives way to excitement and ecstasy as the spectator becomes so

involved in the action he or she is witnessing: shouting, cursing, and fights among audience members are all par for the course at a boxing match. After the July 1997 Mike Tyson-Evander Holyfield title bout in Las Vegas, Nevada gunshots were allegedly heard in the MGM Grand Casino adjacent to the arena: while the report turned out to be incorrect, many people saw such violence as a logical extension of the night's main event (Rick Reilly, "Fear and Clothing in Las Vegas" from *Sports Illustrated*, Volume 87, No. 1 July 7, 1997; page 47). In September of the same year, rapper Tupac Shakur was gunned down on the Vegas Strip shortly after leaving another Mike Tyson bout at the MGM Grand (Rob Marriott, "Ready to Die," from *Vibe Magazine*, Volume 4, Number 9; page 81). These and other examples show how the violence perpetrated in the ring can spill out into the arena and beyond. The heightened sense of anxiety and hostility a boxing match engenders can lead to all forms of post-fight mayhem. (Richard Hoffer, author of *A Savage Business: The Comeback and Comedown of Mike Tyson*, also points out that the post-fight euphoria contributes to reckless gambling in Las Vegas casinos, another reason why venues like the MGM Grand book these huge events and contribute to the inflated purses for fighters.)

The reason for this heightened sense of anxiety and hostility is explained by Oates as follows:

"To watch boxing closely, and seriously, is to risk moments of what might be called animal panic—a sense not only that something very ugly is happening but that, by watching it, one is an accomplice. This awareness, or revelation, or weakness, or hairline split in one's cuticle of a self can come at any instant, unanticipated and unbidden; though of course it tends to sweep over the viewer when he [*sic.*] is watching a really violent match" (*On Boxing*, 102).

"I feel it as vertigo—breathlessness—a repugnance beyond language: a sheerly physical loathing," she concludes (*ibid.*). "That it is, also, or even primarily, self-loathing goes without saying."

Watching a boxing match taps into some dark place in the psyche, it feeds an unconscious desire to release aggression that society and super-ego suppress. (In my own experience attending amateur boxing matches in lower Manhattan's Church Street Gym I can testify to this fact personally. While watching a particularly violent round between two welterweights, my otherwise civilized, educated companion turned to me and asked, "Wouldn't you *love* to see them fight to the end just once?" The look in her eyes was that of pure exhilaration.) Watching a boxing match can reduce even the most sedate individual to a state of frenzied agitation. As Malcolm X described the 1964 Ali-Liston title fight in Miami, Florida in his *Autobiography*, "I folded my arms and tried to appear the coolest man in the place, because a television camera can show you looking like a fool yelling at a prizefight" (Haley, Grove Press, NY, 1966; page 307). The vicarious thrill the spectator experiences can only be fully realized in the knock-out. Regardless of its round-for-round presentation of pugilistic skill, a boxing match is usually a disappointment to spectators if it does not end with a properly dramatic climax.

The focused, individualized power expressed by the boxer in the ring is something that eludes most ordinary people. Even as the boxer tends to be an outsider—made such by the constraints of race, class, social mobility—he is privileged in the sense that he can act as no other man is allowed by law or super-ego. There is a certain undeniable grace afforded the boxer by this position as a privileged outsider: despite being confined within the ghetto of his sport (the very name of the sport—'boxing'—implies confinement,

containment) and the larger ghetto of race and class in this country, the prizefighter is free in a certain sense. To look at a photo of Muhammad Ali standing triumphant over the sprawled-out body of Ernie Terrel, arms raised over head, is to see a man as truly free, truly victorious. (This picture clearly appealed to Keith Piper who used it as the background for the text accompanying his essay "New Eastern Front: Modernity/Christianity/Islam: The Black Boxer & the Contest of Territory.")

That grace can bring the boxer a sort of serenity, according to Ralph Wiley. Wiley, the author of numerous books and essays on Black culture and politics, wrote his first, little known book about boxing. *Serenity: A Boxing Quest From Sugar Ray Robinson to Mike Tyson* (Mainstream Publishing Company, Edinburgh, 1989) is a unique boxing book in that it does not seek to explain or interpret the sport along political or social schema, but rather takes as its premise that "In spite of their circumstances fighters indeed have serenity to a greater degree than ordinary people" (page 1).

Brutality may be boxing's symbolic legacy, but serenity is its unlikely result. Looking at photographs of Muhammad Ali, long-since retired and rendered virtually mute and incapacitated by Parkinson's Syndrome (brought on by years of fighting, most believe) is to see a man so serene, so transcendent, that the traces of that wild, loud-mouthed young fighter the world once knew are a distant, bittersweet memory. According to Wiley, Ali has found a serenity that many people can never know.

In the next chapter, I will look at Ali and the other fighter who has revolutionized prizefighting in the second half of the century, Mike Tyson. Using the framework of myth and reality discussed in the prior two chapters, each man's contribution to his sport and his meanings as an icon will be interpreted.

looked at side-by-side Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson appear to be very different fighters and very different men. Ali is remembered by light fans as the dancing, party-loving, charismatic victor who parlayed his ring talent and self-promotion into an international career as the first three-time Heavyweight champion. Tyson is remembered as the most feared power slugger the Red Star ever not only lost the title during his prime, but was sent to prison on rape charges. It should be noted that for the purposes of this essay, Mike Tyson's career is being considered in the present tense. While his boxing license has been suspended and he has terminated his relationship with his manager, Don King, it is generally assumed that Tyson still has a few years ahead of him in the ring. With his flashy rhetoric, his fancy garb, and his flamboyant manner, Ali brought a sense of glamor and self-reflection from a boxing Tyson is aggressively anti-glamorous and unimpressed about himself and his sport. Where they differ most, however, is in the fact that Muhammad Ali has spent much of the last thirty-two years of his public life exercising politics and speaking out on race issues, while about his last fight nearly twenty years ago, Mike Tyson has remained virtually silent about politics and has rarely taken up the cause of race in his public statements and actions.

Despite their differences, however, there remains an impulse on the part of spectators and fight fans to draw parallels between Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. These parallels are telling not so much for what they reveal about each fighter, but for what they reveal about the nature of boxing mythology and the spirit of the times that created Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. Significant comparisons are inevitable, such as the one sketched out by

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Mark Kram in "The Tiger King," from the April 1996 issue of *Esquire* Magazine:

"There is a tendency to forge a narrative link between Ali and Tyson because of their exiles and religion. Ali in the first half of his career was detested then immortalized; the reverse is true of Tyson" (p. 79).

Setting aside the simplicity with which he draws it, Kram's equation might be just the right place to begin discussing Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. With Kram's small narrative flip, Tyson becomes Ali in reverse. As will be shown in this chapter, the manner in which Mike Tyson achieved his success and notoriety *were* reversals on the Ali formula, but then again, the times during which he did so were in many ways the reverse of Ali's as well. Tyson's construction of his persona and the politics that he reflected, deflected, and implied were all reversals on Ali.

Every fighter carries with him a myth of his own creation, a story—usually moral or inspirational in nature—that explains why he became the type of fighter that he is. As far back as Tom Molineaux's tale of literally boxing his way out of slavery in the nineteenth century, these creation myths have brought insight into the fighters they purport to explain and have added to the meanings of the sport. Despite their differences, Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson employed nearly identical creation myths in the construction of their personas: looking at these myths together, it is possible to imagine that Ali and Tyson came from the same place, at least symbolically. It is where they moved from these origins that Ali and Tyson distinguish themselves from each other.

According to their respective biographers, Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson were each introduced to boxing through petty thefts. Muhammad Ali's oft-repeated creation myth contends that a twelve year-old Ali, then known by the name he later renounced, Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., first entered the

Columbia boxing gym in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky to report his bicycle stolen. Distracted, Clay sobbed to Joe Martin, a Louisville policeman who ran the gym that "If I catch that boy who took my bike, I'm gonna whup him good!" Martin, the sort of legendary, benevolent white male authority figure who always seems to pop-up in the mythically-constructed lives of young Black athletes, entreated the young boy that if he wanted to 'whup' the thief, he would have to learn how to box. The year was 1954, and Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. would embark on a career path that would eventually bring him to the height of his sport, the center of his era's politics, and the renown of the whole world. ("The Life and Times of A Living Legend," from *The Ring: Special Issue, Muhammad Ali*, Volume 2, Number 1; page 7)

A quaint story to be sure. A young Black boy wronged goes on to discover his true calling in life through the benevolent intervention of a kindly white man. (A police officer, no less.) The will of the young Clay shines through in this story, his refusal to let any set-back or slight hold him back is a nicely realized foreshadowing of the man he was to become later in life. Looking at the most famous photograph of Cassius Clay from that period (Figure five) one can see the determination in the twelve year-old's eyes, the confident raised chin that led him through many a fight, both inside and outside of the boxing ring.



FIGURE FIVE: One can see the determination in the twelve year-old's eyes, the confident raised chin that led him through many a fight, both inside and outside of the boxing ring.

In another creation-type myth, Clay returned to Louisville after winning the gold medal for boxing in the Rome Olympics in 1960 and was accosted by a racist motorcycle gang that wanted to steal his medal. After fighting off the gang, Clay reportedly discarded the medal in the Ohio River refusing to let the toughs have it and rejecting all that the medal symbolized at the same time. "I held the medallion just far enough out so that it wouldn't tangle in the bridge structure," Ali wrote in his autobiography, *The Greatest*, "and threw it into the black water of the Ohio. I watched it drag the red, white and blue ribbon down to the bottom behind it" (ask quoted by Thomas R. Hietala, "Ali and the Age of Bare-Knuckle Politics," from *Muhammad Ali, The People's Champ*, edited by Elliot J. Gorn; page 120-121).

Again, the individual slight becomes the impetus for personal and public development, but this particular scenario sets young Clay on a more politicized, racialized trajectory. As with the story of the bike, the telling of this tale suffers from a bit of self-mythologizing, but it goes a long way towards explaining Ali's confidence, both individual and racial. These myths tell Ali observers that his pride, his racial awareness, and his sense of justice were all instilled in him during his youth and contributed to making him the man that he is today.

Mike Tyson's creation myth also involves a theft, but it does more to explain the anger, distrust, and self-protective stance that Tyson would assume throughout his career.

According to biographer Montieth Illingworth, Tyson's childhood as a petty criminal and gang member in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn began when at nine years-old, he discovered an older boy taking a bird from his roof-top pigeon coop. When recounting those early, thugish years during

which Tyson ran with the improbably named Jolly Stomper Gang and reportedly mugged old ladies by asking to help them with their groceries, his love for his pigeons and his commitment to his pigeon coop stood out to many later Tyson mythologists as a testament to the ferocious fighter's inner sweetness. Much of the early press reports on Tyson cited his long childhood criminal record, yet presented the fighter's love for his pigeons as evidence of his tenderness and inner complexity. It is interesting, then, that the source of much of his outward hostility—both pugilistic and social in nature—grew from an assault on his beloved birds.

As Illingworth recounts:

"One day Tyson found an older boy taking a bird out his coop. They argued, and the boy ripped off the bird's head with a single, vicious twist of his hand. Tyson went into a blind rage and pounced on the boy, punching and kicking with every ounce of strength he could muster" (Illingworth, *Mike Tyson: Money, Myth and Betrayal*, Birch Lane Press Books, , NY; 1991. page 5).

As with Ali, the character of the man and fighter is found in the actions of the boy: each of Tyson's adult personae—'Kid Dynamite,' 'Iron Mike,' 'Dracula'—were born in that moment of rage against the boy who assaulted his bird. "I fucked him up so bad," Tyson told Donald McRae. "I was so angry, like I can still taste the feeling. After that I got off on the violence. I saw its power" (*Dark Trade*, Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1996; page 30). For writers looking to explain Tyson's intensity in the ring, his life-long sense of being under seige by outsiders, and his menacing sense of selfishness and self-protection, that first 'knock-out' is by far the most significant of his life.

Of course, these writers were helped along in their mythologizing by Tyson's handlers, who used that story to great effect in the fighter's early career: "Years later, when Tyson became heavyweight champion of the world, that moment of rage would be constructed into an epiphany. Tyson played

along. It fit ever so conveniently into his public persona as some primal force of destruction. Tyson would cavalierly recount that and other seminal events as if he had found not just liberation but, when the urges were tempered into systematic violence, empowerment as well" (Illingworth, page 5).

Whether that moment brought Tyson any sort of liberation or empowerment is open for debate: the violence within him—later in his life it would publicly be attributed to manic depression—propelled that nine year-old boy to success and fame as a boxer, but just how free and empowered Tyson has been in his career and life has always been at the center of his persona.

For Muhammad Ali, liberation and empowerment were always the goals of his career. From his victory speech after his surprising defeat of Sonny Liston in 1964 (a fight in which Liston was favored 7 to 1), Ali (then still known publicly as Cassius Clay but secretly known by his first Muslim name, Cassius X) told the press "I don't have to be what you want me to be" and proved it throughout his life (Oates, 195).

More often than not, the type of liberation and empowerment Muhammad Ali espoused was not merely for himself, but for African Americans as a group. After his conversion to Islam, Ali foregrounded race issues in a way that no other African American public figure—much less an athlete whose livelihood depended on a certain degree of white acceptance—had before. Unlike any fighter before him, Ali used the boxing ring to fight not only his opponents but the Good Fight, and in so doing, radically redefined the role of African American men in public life. From the moment he publicly announced his conversion to Islam after defeating Liston in Miami on, Muhammad Ali became the most complex African American male to ever be given a forum in the media and on the world political stage.

"I'm fighting for my God and my people," Muhammad Ali said days before entering the ring in Kinshasa, Zaire to fight George Foreman in 1974 (as quoted by Jack Newfield, *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., NY, 1995; page 69).

"I'm not fighting for fame or money. I'm not fighting for me. I'm fighting for the Black people on welfare, the Black people who have no future, Black people who are wineheads and dope addicts. I am a politician for Allah... I want to win so I can lead my people" (*ibid.*).

By the time he uttered those words, Ali was already a leader of his people, a politician in a certain sense. As Leonard Sheeter recounts in "The Passion of Muhammad Ali" (*Esquire Magazine*, April 1967), the fighter's actions were studied closely by young African Americans, his style was adopted by many. He also lectured at colleges across the country and preached on behalf of the Nation of Islam, thus ensuring that his face and message remained in the public eye even during his three year exile from his profession. During the lead-up to the Rumble in the Jungle, Ali told Norman Mailer, "I'm going to be the Black Kissinger" (*The Fight*, 78), and like his counterpart in the White House who will forever live in infamy for his secret seige on Cambodia—Ali dropped bombs, many of which exploded assumptions and ideologies that had locked the progress of American racial discourse during the tumultuous 1960s.

Politically, Muhammad Ali stood at an important moment in American history in general, and African American history specifically. Emerging from Louisville, Kentucky in the early part of the 1960s, it was easy to see Ali's affinity with the Southern Civil Rights movement. After winning the world heavyweight championship in 1964, Ali and his entourage drove by bus from Florida to Massachusetts, where he was to train for his rematch against Sonny Liston; as George Plimpton recounts it in

Shadow Box: An Amateur in the Ring, the trip was punctuated by a confrontation between Ali's trainer, Drew "Bundini" Brown, and the proprietor of a segregated restaurant in Georgia (Plimpton, 111-121). The bus trip, which was essentially a publicity stunt, proved to be a powerful, localized political statement: here was the Black world heavyweight boxing champion driving through the segregated South with his African American entourage and a group of white Northern sportswriters, discussing Islam, cracking jokes about race, and confronting bigotry head-on in Georgia. One can draw a parallel between Ali's time aboard 'Big Red' (as the bus was called) and the Southern Freedom Rides that swept through the South two years earlier. The difference, of course, was that the Freedom Riders sole purpose was to fight segregation and register African American voters. Ali's trip, on the other hand, was a mission to promote himself, as well as his politics. These two motivations, however, were inextricably bound together for Muhammad Ali, for whom each personal advancement was an advancement for his race.

Despite his Southern roots, Ali's racial politics were more directly influenced by ideas from the North (as well as, in a certain sense, from the East) as dictated by Elijah Muhammad and his Nation of Islam.

At the time of Cassius Clay's conversion to Islam (by no lesser an NOI emissary than Malcolm X), little was known of the group outside of its Black separatist following. White fight fans, promoters, and the media were affronted by Clay's association with a group whose leading spokesman had appeared numerous times on television espousing his organization's beliefs about the 'blue-eyed devil white man' and the 'so-called Negro' in America (Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, page 197). Resistance to Clay's conversion was so strong among sportswriters and their editors that his name

change was not fully accepted until well into the 1970s. Ali literally had to earn his new name in the ring, as an ex-UPI writer told Ishmael Reed in 1980:

"[A]n argument broke in the U.P.I. press room when Ali fought Frazier for the Heavyweight Championship for the first time. They didn't know what to call him. They decided, finally, to call him Ali if he won the fight, Clay if he lost" (Reed, "The Fourth Ali," from *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, page 41).

Now renamed Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay stood at the front of a new political and cultural vanguard that was developing in the mid-1960s. Fusing elements of the Civil Rights Movement, Black urban culture (as embodied by the hustler and the dozens-playing hipster—traits later combined with Marxism and taken up by the Black Panthers), the internationalist agenda of the Nation of Islam, and the growing anti-establishment sentiments felt by young people of all races on America's college campuses, Ali cultivated a singular persona that seemed to perfectly articulate the conflicting feelings of his particular American decade. "He represented the New Black of the 1960s, who was the successor to the New Negro of the 1920s, glamorous, sophisticated, intelligent, international, and militant" (Reed, 62). As early as 1964, Budd Schulberg compared Cassius Clay to his soon-to-be-defeated opponent Sonny Liston and concluded, "While Sonny is a throw-back, Cassius is a throw-forward" (*Sparring With Hemingway*, 137). Indeed, Clay/Ali was very much a throw-forward—and in the process of becoming such, he pushed forward his times.

With his refusal to be inducted into the Army and to fight in Vietnam, Ali further pushed himself into the center of American controversy. As U.S. involvement in Vietnam began to fall from public favor, and even the most ardent 'hawks' were calling for an end to the war, Ali's convictions were seen as articulating the growing national sentiment. "We have a theory about the

heavyweight championship," writes Budd Schulberg in his 'White, Black, and Other Hopes,' "that somehow each of the great fighters to hold the title manages to sum up the spirit of his time" (Schulberg, *Sparring With Hemingway*, page 46). Through the various stages of his public development, Ali definitely summed up the spirit of the sixties.

Mike Tyson also summed up the spirit of his times, but whereas the story of Muhammad Ali has been mythologized and reformulated to fit the changing perceptions of the idealistic 1960s, the story of Mike Tyson suffers from the political languor and cynicism that characterized the 1980s. It is easy to tie Muhammad Ali to the yearnings and advances of his times and to conclude that the fighter was on the side of the good and admire him for it. Bursting onto the public scene in the 1980s, there was no Good Fight for Mike Tyson to wage and it is difficult to muster admiration for the fighter who so embodied the spirit—good and bad— of his times.

In the absence of tidier political demarcations and with the questionable advances in the realm of African American politics during the eighties, Mike Tyson's rise to the empyrean heights of his profession and his subsequent fall can be seen as a fable about the decade's excess and moral bankruptcy. If Ali's story was that of a Black man using all the tools at his disposal to advance himself and his people, the Tyson story demonstrates the submersion of many of those social advances and the limited ways in which a young Black male could advance himself in post-Civil Rights era America. "I shook up the world!" Ali exclaimed after beating Sonny Liston in 1964; Mike Tyson, it can be argued, didn't so much shake-up the world as he was shaken by it.

Of all the metaphors used to describe Mike Tyson's pugilistic style, the ones most often employed by sportswriters are mechanical in nature: "When

Tyson fought well, he functioned like an efficient machine of destruction" (Illingworth, 57); "[A] robot—a high-tech fantasy of sheerly masculine threat and aggression" (Oates, 129); "[A] Reaganite cyborg, a fighting machine indifferent to anything outside the corporeal elimination of his opponent" (Mercer, "Anatomies of the Body Politic, Its Central Nervous System: 1991-1996," page 55). As the fighter's nickname implied, there is something coldly inhuman and mechanical about "Iron" Mike Tyson. Much has been made of Tyson's "blunt, clinical" style (Remnick, "Kid Dynamite Blows Up," *The New Yorker*, July 14, 1997; page 49), his "single-mindedness" in the ring (Oates, 172). Unlike Ali, who frequently fought over vendettas (one is reminded, for instance, of his 1967 bout with Ernie Terrell, during which Ali punctuated each jab with the demand, "What's my name?" after Terrell addressed him in the pre-fight press conference as 'Clay') Tyson's destructive actions are all business, never personal. "In the ring you're in the hurt business," Tyson told Donald McRae in 1991. "Getting hurt, giving hurt... I got [*sic.*] no illusions about boxing—none. This is a brutal business" (*Dark Trade: Lost In Boxing*, page 37).

This is the sort of discourse one might expect from Sherman McCoy, Tom Wolfe's unctuous, supremely successful Wall Street trader in his ur-eighties novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). The cynical and calculating barbarity and ruthless self-protection employed by McCoy and his real-life counterparts on Wall Street ('Masters of the Universe,' in Wolfe's parlance) can also be found in the ring performance and persona of Mike Tyson: the only cause worth championing during the boom-years of the eighties, it seems, was one's own. Tyson is also similar to Masters of the Universe in his unabashed embrace of free market capitalism, his hook-or-by-crook approach to aquisition. The single-minded pursuit of money is made evident in a

photo of the fighter and an unidentified man that ran in *The Ring Magazine* in 1989 (Figure six). The image plainly shows Tyson revelling in the spoils of his July 21, 1989 bout with Carl Williams; the smug look in his eyes can only begin to explain the links between Tyson's earning of wealth through quick, first-round KO's and the exorbitant salaries of Wall Street traders under the junk-bond inflated economy of the 1980s. Tyson is credited with rekindling the public's interest in boxing after the Ali era by linking the sport's symbolic framework to the symbols of the times: "The hardbody aesthetic of the eighties, the backlash against Sixties generation feminism, the ascendancy of rough over soft and ambition over dropping-out" is how David Toop described Tyson's success in 1987 ("Glove Story," from *The Face Magazine*, June 1987, page 80). As he rose from amateur phenomenon to the youngest Heavyweight Champion the world had ever known, Mike Tyson articulated the prevailing ethos of his times everytime he stepped into the ring to deliver his preternaturally powerful jabs with a "bad intention in a vital area" (Oates, 121).

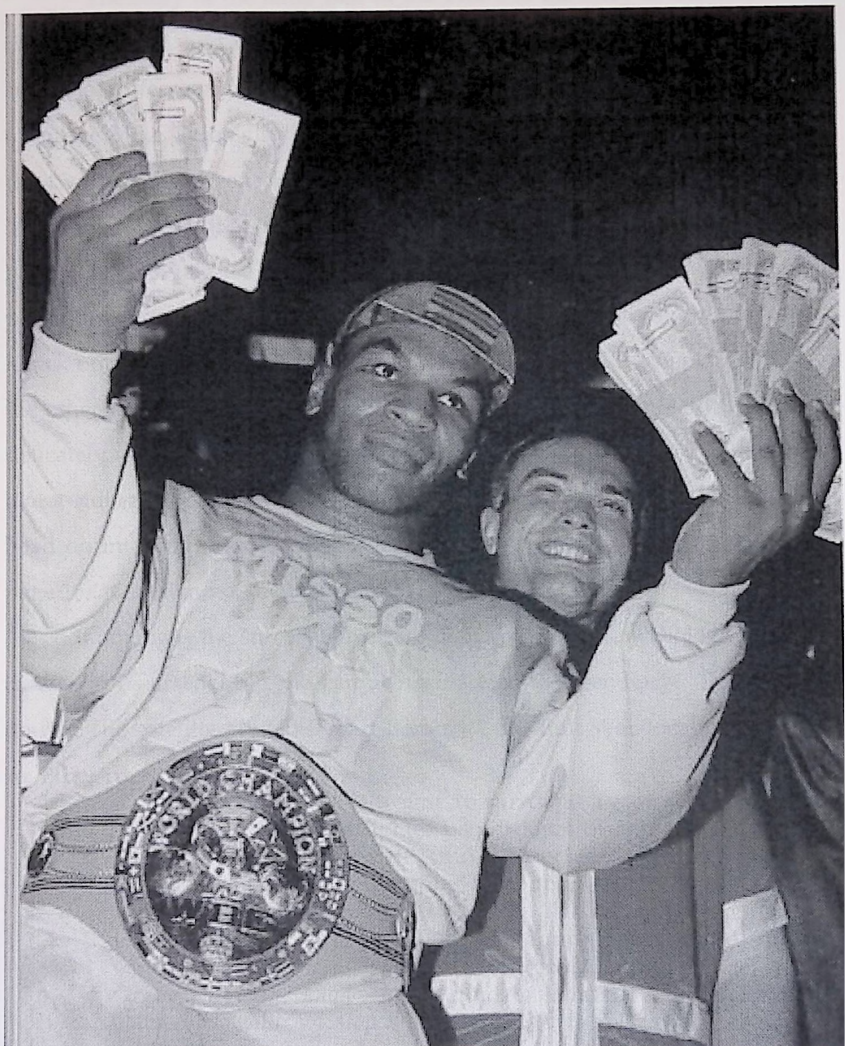


FIGURE SIX: The cynical and calculating barbarity and ruthless self-protection employed by Sherman McCoy and his real-life counterparts on Wall Street can also be found in the ring performance and persona of Mike Tyson.

"The story of the latter half of the 1980's is the story of the ascendancy of the specialist, and within this ascendancy Tyson has come to represent the supreme professional," suggests Keith Piper ("Step Into the Arena," page 18). Compare Mike Tyson's style to Muhammad Ali's and the difference between the two becomes even clearer. William Dettloff, writing for *World Boxing Magazine* laments that Tyson relies "exclusively on power punches" ("If He Never Fights Again... How Will Mike Tyson Be Remembered?" Winter 1997; page 50) and in the words of Gerald Early, Tyson is "mostly an intimidator, a knock-out artist" ("Mike's Brilliant Career," *Transition* 71, page 51). Ali, on the other hand, "played with punches, was tender with them, laid them on as delicately as you put a postage stamp on an envelope, then cracked them in like a riding crop across your face, stuck a cruel jab like a baseball bat held head on into your mouth..." (Mailer, "King of the Hill," *Existential Errands*, page 16). One danced, the other simply destroyed.

If boxing is the surrogate warfare many of its chief mythologists claim it is, then Ali's arsenal ran the gamut from stealth to incendiary. Tyson's is all power: The satellite-guided 'Smart-Bomb' of the Gulf War localized in a fist. As Piper continues:

"The mythology which came to surround Tyson was that of Boxing machine, the fighter pared down of any superfluous detail, anything which could interfere with his sole programming for devastating his opponent. Like the line for the classic 'Tech-Noir' film *The Terminator*, the mythological Tyson like the android played by Schwarzenegger: *Can not be bargained with, can not be reasoned with, knows know pity, or remorse, or pain, and absolutely will not stop... ever*" (*ibid.*)

As with all myths, this is one lies somewhere uneasily between fact and fiction. It is true that at the height of his powers, Tyson can be precise and remorseless, but he is never been a fully mechanical being. There is deep

emotion visible in the Tyson persona (as evidenced in the pigeon story), and the cultivation of his myth has relied on that fact in many ways. As McRae notes, Tyson was always meant to be "a sensitive soul snared in an ogre's body" (*Dark Trade*, page 35).

One of the more amazing sights in Barbara Kopple's 1993 documentary, *Fallen Champ: The Untold Story of Mike Tyson*, is footage of a fifteen year-old Tyson weeping before the 1982 National Junior Olympics in Colorado. According to Donald McRae, Tyson had won his first four fights but suffered "an emotional collapse" before he was to begin his fifth and final bout (*Dark Trade*, page 38). Standing outside the arena with his trainer Teddy Atlas, the young Tyson attempts to regain his composure as he sobs, "It's all right now... I'm Mike Tyson... everybody likes me, yes, everybody likes me... I've come a long way, I'm a fighter now, I'm Mike Tyson" (*ibid.*). That insecure, frightened young boy's words echo in most of Tyson's public statements, such as his jailhouse interview with *The Ring Magazine* in which he said plaintively, "My life is useless. I don't care a damn about my life" ("Tyson's Choice," page 100). This same insecurity would dog Tyson throughout his career, culminating in his self-destruction and imprisonment for the rape of Desiree Washington. No matter how successful he was in the ring, a desperate sense of fatalism and fear (qualities fostered in him by his stern, wraithlike trainer-cum-father figure, Cus D'Amato) overwhelmed Tyson from his boyhood on. As David Remnick writes just before Tyson would destroy his career for the second time by biting Evander Holyfield, "It was as if Tyson knew something that no one else knew—not his accountants, not his managers. He was convinced of his own wretched end" ("Kid Dynamite Explodes," *The New Yorker*, page 51).

In order to (over) compensate for his lack of confidence and fear of losing, the crying, fifteen year-old Mike Tyson (who not three years earlier was being beaten up by classmates in Brownsville, Brooklyn and called 'Sissy Boy') had to turn himself into Iron Mike—an invincible foe to any and all challengers. To intimidate his opponents, Tyson threatened to "make [them] cry like a woman" (Remnick, 49) and boasted after his victory over Jesse Ferguson in 1986 that he broke his opponent's nose because, "I want[ed] to punch the bone into the brain" (Oates, 151).

Politically, Tyson could not be more different from Ali. Whereas Ali publicly aligned himself with the Nation of Islam and spoke out against racism, imperialism, and U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Mike Tyson has remained virtually mute in this regard.

Politically, Tyson was only useful as a symbol. To some, Tyson's 'Up From Thuggery' (to echo Greg Tate's phrase) tale represented a powerful narrative for the lives of lower-class African American men growing up in the post-industrial city during the eighties. With his conviction for rape, Tyson became a martyr on whose behalf all forms of anger at the criminal justice system (not to mention 'uppity' Black women who 'cry rape') could be played out. Tyson as victim had a strong heroic appeal to African American males, many of whom showed up for Tyson's 1994 'home-coming' rally Don King held in Harlem for a reported \$1 million (Hoffer, *A Savage Business*, Simon & Schuster, NY; 1998; page 25). This preposterous event (Tyson never lived in Harlem, and he certainly did not plan to make it his home) was vigorously protested by Jill Nelson and other prominent African American women for its implied support for a convicted rapist, yet brought out hoards of Black men and women to cheer for the man whom Don King called "our future" (Early, "Mike's Brilliant Career," page 46).

Undeniable, though, was Tyson's support in the Black urban community—a group he'd mostly distanced himself from in the early days of his career as he surrounded himself with his white trainers, managers, and friends. As Tyson languished in prison during the early part of the 1990s, "[t]he public was forced to fill this empty vessel with meaning, to take his violent history, his horrifying success and equally terrifying failures, and perverse glamour of his prison term, and construct its own terrible attraction" (Hoffer, 35). For some African American males, this took the form of wearing T-shirts emblazoned with Tyson's face and a slogan cribbed from *The Terminator* films, "I'LL BE BACK" thus fully realizing Keith Piper's comparison of the robotically menacing Tyson to Arnold Schwarzenegger's cyborg assassin (Kevin Powell, "What Kind of Power He Got?" from *Vibe* magazine, September 1995, page 80). Spike Lee, who frequently layers his films with hidden political statements and allusions even saw fit to erect a billboard of Mike Tyson on the set of his film *Do The Right Thing* so that looming hugely over his fantasy construction of Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood was a sign that read "BROOKLYN'S OWN MIKE TYSON," as if to remind the world of Tyson's absence as he spent his jail time.²

Instead of speaking out on politics, Tyson tends towards discussing his profession and the manner with which he intends to do harm to his opponents. "I threw punches with bad intentions" goes one famous Tyson truism, "I was trying to hit him behind the ear... in a vital area" (Wiley,

² According to Wynn Thomas, production designer for Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, this billboard was a priority for the director: "When it comes to production design, Spike leaves the broader picture up to me, but he does get specific about details. The Mike Tyson mural, for example, he was very specific about this, to the point of being crazed. Mid-way through pre-production he decided he just had to have this mural, even though it wasn't originally budgeted for" (as quoted in *Do the Right Thing: A Spike Lee Joint*, Spike Lee with Lisa Jones, Fireside Press, NY, 1989; page unnumbered).

Serenity, page 187). While Ali spoke in a way that menaced certain factions of white America (not to mention less radically engaged factions of Black America), Tyson's only aim is to menace his opponents through an onslaught of verbal threats.

This sort of intimidation tactic is well-known in the sport of boxing since at least the days of Muhammad Ali, but with Tyson, it takes on a much more sinister tone. When Tyson exclaimed to Donovan "Razor" Ruddock at a press conference in 1991 that "I can't wait to kiss those great big lips of yours. I'm gonna make you my girlfriend," Donald McRae could not help but be uneasily reminded of his alleged comments to Desiree Washington as he raped her in a Chicago hotel room that same summer: "Don't fight me! Don't fight me, mommy!" (McRae, pages 26; 41). (Tyson later told McRae that his comments to Ruddock were merely "ghetto words, they're not meant to be analyzed by all those white reporters" [36].)

This form of verbal intimidation is a technique pioneered by Muhammad Ali, a fighter known for 'psyching out' his opponents long before they entered the ring. The quickness and intensity of Ali's fists were only rivalled by the speed and sharpness of his tongue.

Ali's rhyming verse (and his uncanny ability to predict the round in which his opponent would lose) have gone on to become a part of popular culture legend, but the nature and meaning of many of Ali's taunts speaks to conflicting notions of race and manhood. Indeed, many of his jeers were none-too-subtle racial attacks on his opponents, even—especially—if his opponents were Black.

"Ironically, Ali while playing the role of the militant Muslim, denigrated his Black opponents in ways that one would have expected from a

racist white, or a Black ill at ease with his collective identity" writes Gerald Early in *Tuxedo Junction*:

"He called them 'stupid,' and 'ugly,' he said that they 'couldn't talk' and that they should not be allowed to 'represent the race.'" (page 119)

One is immediately reminded of Sonny Liston, whom Ali chastised for living in a mostly white neighborhood, or Joe Frazier, whom he compared to a gorilla during their "Thrilla in Manila" in 1975, or his statement in *When We Were Kings* that George Foreman is "too ugly" to represent African Americans. These and other comments seem designed to set Ali apart from his opponents, but whether consciously or not, his characterizations of them were filtered through generations of racist assumptions about African American intelligence, beauty, and propriety.

Remnick describes Ali's verbal assaults as "camp comedy," but beneath his playful demeanor, Ali was making some rather harsh indictments (Remnick, 49). "Whilst much of it could be seen as derived from traditions of Black humorous insult and counter insult, sometimes known as the 'dozens,' it too often tended to express itself in terms of the dark skinned Black male as ugly, as ignorant, as sub-human" (Piper, 18).

One possible explanation for Ali's assumption and manipulation of certain racist stereotypes in his demonization of his opponents comes from Kobena Mercer, who suggest in his *Welcome to The Jungle* that,

"[C]ertain aspects of Black masculinity seem to be based on an unconscious *identification* with the hegemonic white master model, in which acquisition of a masculine identity always appears to depend of the 'othering' of someone else's" (167).

Furthermore, Like Tyson (who continued his assault on 'Razor' Ruddock, by asking, "Don't you know you're really a transvestite?") Ali also frequently questioned his opponent's manhood, as when he told George Foreman, "I'm

going to beat your Christian ass, you white flag-waving bitch, you" (Mailer, *The Fight*, page 101). Not only was Ali questioning his opponents as African Americans, but he was challenging them as men.

Masculinity is central to the sport of boxing. In every way, the sport is meant to display manhood of a certain type and present a challenge to it at the same time. "Boxing is a purely masculine activity," writes Oates, "and it inhabits a purely masculine world" (*On Boxing*, page 70). Every challenge in the ring is a contest of manhood, and every defeat, a loss of the same. "I wanted to prove my manhood," Trevor Berbick lamented after his defeat by Mike Tyson in November of 1986, "that was a mistake" (Oates, 156). "Masculinity in these terms," Oates observes, "is strictly hierarchical—two men cannot occupy the same space at the same time" (75). When Ali challenged his opponents' manhood, he was essentially raising the stakes of the contest, bringing the central metaphor of his sport into the open. In so doing, Ali also opened himself up to critique as an embodiment of those values he challenged.

One need only to listen to Muhammad Ali from his early period to realize that the form of masculinity he embodied was unique for his time. During a time when manhood was still mostly articulated by the Man in the Grey Flannel Suit of the fifties, Ali's oft-quoted pronouncement that he was "pretty" (or, as he once put it, "[P]retty as a girl!") represents a challenge to (and a softening of) America's dominant masculine ideal.

For a man to proclaim himself 'pretty'—particularly an African American man (this was years before the phrase "Black is beautiful" entered into American racial discourse)—was to cloak himself, at least metaphorically, in a sort of feminine drag. This presentation of masculinity, Jeffrey Sammons suggests, was meant as a challenge to his opponents and one

of the keys to developing of a persona the likes of which had never been seen in the ploddingly masculine realm of professional prizefighting:

"Ali mastered the techniques of oppositional villainy by adopting qualities men like to associate with women. He harped on his good looks, referring to himself as pretty, not handsome. He acted emotional, even hysterical, in contrast to the stoic calm or menacing gaze expected of warriors about to enter combat" ("Rebel with a Cause: Muhammad Ali as Sixties Protest Symbol," from *The People's Champ*, Gorn, ed., page 162).

In this sense, then, Ali embodied a new type of manhood. No one could deny his masculinity as a fighter—Ali was, of course, the young upstart who felled the 'unbeatable' Sonny Liston and went on to conquer so many others—but outside of the ring, he displayed a knack for combining elements of the feminine with the masculine. This, it can be argued, was another form of protest Muhammad Ali brought to his sport.

Of course it must be noted that at the time, Ali was also a member of the Nation of Islam, one of the most unabashedly patriarchal organizations in America. While he might have proudly proclaimed himself 'pretty' and marvelled at his own ability to 'dance,' Ali was also an adherent to the Nation's strict code of masculine conduct. When not dressed in his more relaxed street clothes, Ali could be seen outside the ring dressed in the dark suits and bow ties favored by members of the Nation of Islam and comporting himself as rigidly as other Black Muslims. In the 1970's, at the height of his rivalry with Joe Frazier, Ali chastised his opponent's sartorial style by telling him, "I seen [*sic*.] pimps dress like this. They gonna look at you and respect you, but not like they would if you dressed up in a double-breasted suit with a vest... [T]he darker your clothes look, the more sophisticated [you look]" (as quoted by Toop, "Glove Story," page 90). Clearly, Ali was wrestling with conventions (both of the Nation of Islam and of the nation at large),

sometimes challenging them, sometimes adhering to them. Always, though, he managed to present some small form of transgression into his style, as Early notes: "Ali always wore more hair in the 1960s and 1970s than was standard for the rank-and-file member of the Nation of Islam, a conservative organization built on the ideas of a present-centered religion, petit bourgeois respectability, and an identification with the East" ("A Reading of *The Greatest*," from *The People's Champ*, page 75).

Mike Tyson's embodiment of manhood, it seems, is far more traditional to the boxing world. His early appeal to many fans was in his appropriation of older boxer's styles and a self-conscious harkening back to an older, more stoic masculinity than the one found in Ali or the later fighters who molded themselves in his image. In contrast to Ali, Tyson wears his hair "trimmed savagely short, Dempsey-style" (Oates, 122). Like Joe Louis, Tyson is rarely photographed smiling, instead he continually cultivates an air of menace that fight fans have traditionally associated with a fighter's manhood: to soften himself at all—as Ali did while reciting poetry at the Bottom Line during the early sixties, for instance—would be a risk to his masculinity.

But Tyson practiced his own forms of 'oppositional villainy' (to borrow Sammons phrase). When going up against Pinklon Thomas in May of 1987, Tyson told him to "suck [his] dick," a pronouncement many used as strong anecdotal evidence of Tyson's alleged homosexuality (Ralph Wiley, *Serenity*, page 188). Tyson, according to Wiley would frequently hug and kiss his trainers in full view of his challengers and fans, leading Rick Talley, a sports writer, to proclaim of his fight with Pinklon Thomas, "Boxing has come to this. One guy's named Pink and the other one's a fag" (*ibid.*) (This is not so strange according to Oates, who observed similar behavior on Tyson's part

and concluded that "boxing's eerie combination of violence and childlike affection... as spontaneous as it is traditional, and as natural as it is apparently contradictory, lies at the very heart of boxing" [123].)

As noted earlier, much of Tyson's appeal to fight fans has been in his appropriation of boxing history and myth in the construction of his persona. From the very beginning of his career, Tyson and his handlers tried to position the young fighter as the synthesis of all the fighters who'd come before him: In a sense, Tyson was supposed to be the end of boxing history (Early, "Mike's Brilliant Career," *Transition Issue 71*, page 53). In interviews Tyson would rhapsodize about obscure, old time fighters, having studied tapes of them and read about their lives, and positioned himself as a worshipful student at the feet of the fight game's great masters.

For fight fans obsessed with the arcane history of the sport, Tyson was seen as a fellow fanatic, albeit one who moonlighted as a practitioner. "This affection for the old guys told us something good about this kid," writes William Dettloff in the winter 1997 issue of *Boxing World Magazine*. "We don't see it too often today, athletes paying their respects to those who went before them, so it was charming when, with a child's smile in his eye, Tyson praised the legendary tenacity of Stanley Ketchel, or the ethereal skills of Jack Johnson" (35-36).

By positioning himself thus, Tyson sought to fashion himself boxing's ultimate student, because, according to Early,

"It was never the intention of D'Amato, Jacobs, and Cayton [Tyson's trainer and managers, respectively] to make Tyson merely a champion, but to have the public recognize him as the greatest heavyweight fighter ever, the heir to a legendary patrimony" (*Transition*, page 54).

The efforts of this ambitious student of boxing, however, can be seen as direct challenge to the image of Muhammad Ali and *his* legendary (and

largely uncontested) role as "The Greatest of All Time." (It's interesting to note that while Tyson was always seen as student, Ali once proclaimed himself the 'professor' of boxing, thus re-inscribing boxing's long-held Oedipal relationship between its older and younger generations.)

By attempting to position himself as the end of boxing history, Tyson approached the levels of hubris that ultimately destroyed him. Ali could call himself 'The Greatest of All Time,' but somewhere in his pomp there was an undeniable modesty, an ironic deference for the limits and powers of his abilities. Tyson never allowed himself the same awareness. Alluding both to the Superman comic book series ('The Man of Steel') and Public Enemy's anthemic "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos," *The Source* magazine titled its 1995 post-prison interview with Tyson "Black Steel" (Number 72, September 1995). Sadly, after too many defeats outside of the ring and declining abilities within, the man whom they called Iron Mike, proved too susceptible to rust.

In the end, Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson will forever remain key figures to boxing fans and theorists. Their contributions to their sport are undeniable, and their myths, unavoidable.

...the book's title, which is a nod to the fact that the author is not a doctor, but a writer. The book is a collection of essays, and it is a very readable and enjoyable read. The author's writing is clear and concise, and he does a great job of explaining the science behind the book's title. The book is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the history of medicine and the role of the doctor in society.

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Most books written about boxing contain an essay or a chapter in which the author defends the sport against its detractors. A salient example of this sort of essay as advocacy is Hugh McIlvanney's "The Case for the Hardest Game," in which the author—a journalist who has covered American prizefighting for a host of English publications for over thirty years—tries to reconcile the sport's barbaric, voyeuristic elements with its history and popularity.

"A sport with such apparently primitive objectives is bound to be seen by many as morally reprehensible," writes McIlvanney (*McIlvanney on Boxing*, page 16). Indeed, the arguments against boxing are numerous: the harm it inflicts on the participants (sometimes resulting in death, usually resulting in long-term illness both mental and physical); the hostility and agitation it instills in the viewers; the primitivism of it all. But where others find brutality and violence, McIlvanney finds nobility and courage.

The same traits that drew a writer like William Hazlitt to boxing in 1822 continue to draw enthusiasts today. Having taken up where Hazlitt left off, Norman Mailer continued to celebrate boxing's varied qualities—both vices and virtues—and added to the mystique of the sport. To read the boxing press (as well as coverage of boxing in mainstream media) is to hear the echo of Hazlitt and Mailer and other writers who have constructed the framework through which we understand the sport today. But always, these authors seem to feel the need to defend the sport, as if they can write away its more distressing, anarchic elements and somehow place it above reproach.

I would argue that this is not necessary. In the preceding essay, I have attempted to trace the development of boxing's mythology and the political meanings that have grown out of the sport as it has been practiced in the United States over the last century. Boxing, like any cultural phenomenon, is

a complex and contradictory thing, embodying many negative, dangerous qualities that sit side-by-side with many hopeful, exciting qualities. Taken as a whole, boxing is too vast, too expansive in its incorporation of politics, race, manhood, individuality, sportsmanship, intelligence, and emotion to simply be condemned. Of course, the same is true in reverse: boxing is too expansive to simply be embraced as well.

Boxing—and its practitioners—holds an undeniable mystique precisely because it is such a rich, complex expression. The struggles of a fighter can have far-reaching social and political meanings (like those of Muhammad Ali or Joe Louis) and touch sports fans and writers who wish to hang their hopes and fears on an individual who articulates the yearnings of a society. A fighter can also represent more internal, personal struggles (Mike Tyson comes immediately to mind) that similarly touch upon needs and feelings of individuals.

Boxers are, first and foremost, individuals engaged in individual battles of will and skill, but their actions speak not only for themselves but for others as well. There is great meanings to be found in the boxing ring—personal and political—that somehow manage to speak to us all. Watching a fighter go about his paces is to be reminded that one always acts alone, but that one's actions have meaning to others. Boxing, in a sense, reminds us all that we are part of something, some legacy of history (and myth) and some movement towards the future.

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