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Exodus of champions : the great migration and the shaping of the civil rights activities of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman

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EXODUS OF CHAMPIONS: THE GREAT MIGRATION AND THE SHAPING OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVITIES OF FLOYD PATTERSON, SONNY LISTON, JOE FRAZIER AND GEORGE FOREMAN

by

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This research project involves an examination of the primary and secondary sources that have created and shaped the popular narratives of heavyweight champions Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. It will also examine the forces and influences that shaped their attitudes and actions during the civil rights era. This research will not only demonstrate that their opinions and activities during this time period were more complex than narratives in the popular press have claimed, but also that each man embraced and advocated integrationist policies in their adult lives. They not only proved to be far more politically aware and active than existing histories give them credit for, but they were also more active in their efforts to work for civil rights than most conventional histories give them credit for, allowing for an increased understanding of the civil rights activities of heavyweight champions.

Additionally, this work will also examine the popular narratives surrounding Muhammad Ali. By examining the less appealing aspects of Ali's personality, we can complicate our existing understandings of not only Ali, but also of the men who were often the target of his verbal attacks. Their responses to Ali, as well as to both the Black and White press illustrated the deep and complex nature of Black identity and expression that had emerged in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

While the intersection of sport and the Civil Rights era has been well documented from a number of angles and approaches, perhaps no athlete has been so thoroughly connected to this period in history as Muhammad Ali. His stances on Vietnam, race relations and religion during this period have provided a fountain of historical research and narratives on this turbulent period. However, the political and social activities of Ali's contemporaries have been largely ignored, as well as the influences on those activities. When we examine the individual histories and experiences of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman, we see that each man shared several similarities. All emerged from the rural south and into the cities of the north and west as part of the mass exodus now known to history as the Great Migration. This research will argue that this movement not only affected these men physically (specifically, the physical spaces they lived and worked in), but also helped to shape their ideas and understandings about racial identity, civil rights and race relations as young men and adults.

The purpose of this research is to examine the political and social activities and experiences throughout the lives of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. It will display the differences in opinion each man had on issues of segregation and civil rights and how they defined themselves against Ali's largely ignored, hardline segregationist stance. Finally, it will offer possibilities for reexamining not just the popularly accepted narratives of these four men, but also of Ali himself.

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PREFACE

The construction of Black identity and the social, cultural, and political maneuvering that accompanied it in the 19th century had far reaching effects on the Black community that lasted well into the Civil Rights era of the 20th century. (Throughout this work, "Black" will be used to identify people of African descent. In addition to the term not coming into use until the mid to late 1970s, these men did not identify as African American throughout their careers and lives, but rather as Black and American. As such, "Whites" will be used to identify Anglo Americans.) Despite being nearly one hundred years removed from slavery, Black males were being forced to reexamine their relationship not only with mainstream White America, but also to other Blacks as well. When we critically examine the experiences, opinions and viewpoints of former heavyweight champions Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman, these ideological confrontations have added importance. In addition to gaining new insight into the state of race relations and identity, we can begin to see these men as multilayered individuals whose actions and opinions will allow us to reevaluate our understandings of Black heavyweight champions and their political and personal ideologies during the Civil Rights era.

The purpose of this research is to examine the backgrounds, careers and politics of heavyweight champions Floyd Patterson, Charles "Sonny" Liston, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman, and examine how changes in our understandings of social, class and racial relations affected these men. By viewing these men and their political, social and cultural influences independent of their more outspoken contemporaries allows for

additional points of inquiry, analysis and the formation of new narratives from this turbulent era in American history.

Because the terms "politics" and "civil rights" are such broad and malleable labels, it is difficult to assign the term to each of these men without establishing definitions for both. For the purposes of this research, politics will be defined as the decisions an individual makes in regard to their social, cultural and physical mobility within an existing government. Civil rights will be defined as the basic set of protections and privileges citizens living and working under a unified government can expect to receive from that government.

With an open-minded approach to reclaiming and rewriting the careers and lives of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman, both in and out of the ring, we can begin to create new ideas and interpretations not just about their identity, but also about the circumstances and conditions that shaped their politics. Because of the often harsh, physical nature that shaped each man's worldview, much of their politics and ideologies were influenced by their dependence on their physical abilities and skills. This resulted in a pragmatic approach to both personal identity and the politics of American life, which placed individual and familial survival first, with questions of race often a distant second. Each man has gained a degree of notoriety for their athletic accomplishments, but many histories of the Black athlete during the Civil Rights era have minimized or ignored their feelings and thoughts on difficult issues like race relations and civil rights, allowing for the reclamation and reconstruction of these men and their experiences. Reexamining these men and the forces that shaped their

politics allows for a broader interpretation of the events, people, and personalities that came to define this very turbulent era of both American history and sport history.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter one will focus on outlining the scope and aims of this research. By examining the lives of Black heavyweight champions beginning with Jack Johnson, but specifically addressing Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman, we can begin to create a more complete picture of how these men not only understood the power of the title, but also how it affected their experiences throughout the civil rights era and beyond. By utilizing primary sources, autobiographies and biographies, we can begin to view Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman as figures that were far more complex and thoughtful than they are given credit for in many existing histories.

Chapter two will focus on the origins of Blacks in prizefighting, the legacy and impact of Jack Johnson, and how Johnson's legacy affected the championship of Joe Louis. Beginning with an examination of the role prizefighting played in Black life throughout slavery, we can begin to see just how complicated were notions of manhood as well as safely expressing that manhood. What existing research has demonstrated is that slaves, despite being subjected to emasculation, humiliation, and physical punishment at the whims of their masters, they still found ways to express their manhood and masculinity despite their enslaved status. Yet by the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Blacks, though legally free, were forced to exist under a system that closely mirrored slavery in a number of ways. It would be the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th that would see the rise of Jack Johnson as both an elite fighter and a challenger of the existing racial hierarchy.

Johnson's experiences as a Black athlete in the 20th century are most instructive in the changes of identity among Blacks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He displayed an identity that ran completely contrary to the ways in which Blacks were supposed to interact with Whites. As Johnson began to bend then break the social and cultural mores that existed between Blacks and Whites in the early 20th century, the meanings and expressions of Black manhood in America began to be internalized in a variety of different ways. Most significantly, it was a demonstration that Johnson, just like Booker T. Washington, did not speak for all Black people. Differences in class, occupation and even geographical region were just a few of the factors that affected the ways Blacks of the early 20th century navigated the landscape of the United States.

Johnson, however, became a public figure that shook both Blacks and Whites alike, albeit in different ways. Before and after Johnson held the heavyweight title, expressions of Black masculinity and identity were forced to conform to the racist stereotypes mainstream White America was not just comfortable with, but internalized as proof of their God given superiority. As Randy Roberts asserts, Johnson was forced to engage in a type of trickster behavior that was born not of innate, sycophantic tendencies, but of the need to survive in a White world, including the ring.

> One doesn't need a psychologist to see the origins of his complex personality. There were a crippled father and a childhood that had ended far too quickly. There were the lessons that Blacks raised in the Jim Crow South learned early, the rules that if not closely followed could cost a Black man his life.[1]

[1] Roberts, Randy. *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes.* New York: The Free Press, 1983 (xiii).

It is the second part of Roberts's observation that has special meaning for these men. Though Patterson was reared in the north, all four men not only had familial links to the south, but they were also well versed in the racial caste systems of the region. Much like Johnson, their strong southern roots dictated their early experiences and also affected how they navigated the very uncertain political terrain that came to define the civil rights era. These men were often criticized for being too politically moderate, but their actions and words as adults speak to the effects that racial discrimination in their lives had on them and their predecessors. This would be displayed most prominently in the politically charged atmosphere that defined the career of Joe Louis.

Louis is a complicated, but important figure for Black heavyweight champions, as his career was affected by the memory of Johnson and his disdain for the power American Whites held over Blacks. This legacy placed Louis in a difficult position politically and socially. Though we do know that Louis had strong feelings when it came to race discrimination in America, his handlers knew that the image he presented to both Blacks and Whites had to be carefully crafted and managed. This resulted in Louis appearing to have no political opinions, avoiding White women, and avoiding any kind of controversy. Though Louis's outwardly exemplary behavior was the model for which all future Black heavyweights would be measured, his successors would find their own ways in which to address problems of race relations between Blacks and Whites, as well as how Blacks related to each other throughout the Civil Rights era.

Chapter three will examine Arkansas race relations in the early 20th century, and how these relations affected the migration experiences of Blacks in Arkansas. Examining the history of race relations in Arkansas is important because it serves as an

example of the experiences that caused many Blacks to leave the south. Though Joe Louis was also a product of the Great Migration, leaving Alabama for Detroit with his family as a young man, examining the Arkansas of Sonny Liston's predecessors, as well as of his youth, can also serve as an example of the many shared migration experiences of Floyd Patterson, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. Though each man would leave from different states in the south, each experience was similar to that of Liston in Arkansas.

The threat of violence, crippling poverty and the search for more profitable, reliable sources of income were just a few of the factors that drove these men (and sometimes their families) out of the south and into the cities of the north and west. However, when we examine the experiences of Floyd Patterson as a southern transplant in a Northern city (specifically, New York), we can see the difficulties that southern Blacks faced upon arriving in their new homes. Often viewed with contempt and distrust by the existing Black populations, we can see that the north was often not the Promised Land that many believed it would be. As the Patterson's found out, substandard housing, a lack of reliable work that paid a living wage and a high crime rate were what awaited their arrival in New York.

Despite the hardships the family faced, it was here that Patterson not only found an outlet with boxing, but also slowly began to engage politically with the world around him. His experiences as an Olympic champion and heavyweight contender represent a transition from the legacy into which Joe Louis was forced. By the time Patterson captured the heavyweight title in 1956, he began to gradually make his opinions known on issues of civil rights, race relations, and discrimination in America. Though forced to

express these feelings and opinions cautiously at first, Patterson represented a change in what a Black heavyweight championship could mean and do for himself and the public at large.

Chapter four will focus on the experiences of Floyd Patterson, who at 21 years of age would become the youngest heavyweight champion in history until the arrival of Mike Tyson. Patterson's experiences are valuable because of his complex nature and his relationship to moderate and radical Black populations. Much of his occasionally erratic, odd behavior (he donned a fake mustache and beard to escape from the press after a loss to Sonny Liston) has overshadowed his dedication to civil rights, his work on behalf of the NAACP and his many acts of charity to underprivileged and delinquent boys, both Black and White. Though he would be forced to suffer insults and slights by racist Whites and Blacks who opposed his moderate political views, Patterson remained committed to the non-violent approach to gaining civil rights and racial equality.

Further complicating Patterson's championship was the ascension of Charles "Sonny" Liston. Though these men did not harbor any real animosity for the other, what they represented to Blacks and Whites alike was complicated. Patterson's political beliefs, as well as his association with influential men like President John F. Kennedy, Frank Sinatra and the NAACP's Ralph Bunche, created an image of peaceful integration and interracial cooperation. In the case of Liston, who by the time of his fight with Patterson had already served two separate prison sentences, he became a symbol of fear for both Black and White America.

Chapter five will focus on the (de)racialization of both Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson. Despite Liston's many quiet acts of charity and desire to be an accessible,

worthwhile champion for Blacks and Whites, the image created by both Black and White observers alike made him into an object of fear and suspicion. Though this did serve the purposes of some Blacks and Whites, it has resulted in a distorted view of the contributions and beliefs of both men. Additionally, this has resulted in a distorted set of narratives surrounding both men, which is due in large part to the efforts of Muhammad Ali and his devotion to the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam. When Patterson voiced his disagreement with the Black Muslim belief in racial separation and Black superiority, he was labeled an "Uncle Tom," a "rabbit" and an honorary white American by Ali and his followers.

In the case of Liston, his mysterious, often menacing presence put him at odds with many Whites, politically moderate Blacks, and the Nation of Islam, which he viewed with an air of suspicion and fear. In spite of his being at odds with certain groups of Blacks and Whites, some Black observers still found a use for Liston. Casting him as the ultimate object of Whites worst fears about Blacks, Liston's image was transformed into a type of racialized weapon. Ignoring his attitudes on integration and his many friendships with Black and White children, Liston was forced to take on the image crafted for him by more politically aggressive Blacks. Recognizing his limited ability to change public opinion, Liston presented an image of himself that, while profitable, was not truly representative of his actual beliefs and feelings.

Chapter six will focus on the migration experiences of Joe Frazier. Frazier's experiences in rural South Carolina and Philadelphia are important because they represent a convergence of the Black migration experience in both rural and urban settings. Raised with the poverty, discrimination and racism that defined much of Black

life in the south, Frazier developed an early understanding of the roles Blacks and Whites were forced to play in the rural south. Despite his own beliefs in racial equality between Blacks and Whites and the need for interracial cooperation, his decision to leave the south for the north was accelerated after an argument with a White man nearly turned physical. In the south of Joe Frazier's youth in the late 1950s and early 1960s, his perceived insolence could have ended in physical violence, incarceration or lynching.

Upon his arrival in the north (first in New York, then in Philadelphia), Frazier's strong connection to the south and his Gullah background eventually represented a fusion of the two cultures. After his 1971 "Fight of the Century" with Muhammad Ali, Frazier was able to articulate the frustration of southern Blacks at the slow pace of integration, that integration and equality still had not been achieved, and that continuing to stall would be detrimental to both Black and White Americans.

In spite of his hope for the future, his belief in integration and his possession of the heavyweight championship, the increasingly mean spirited, bigoted attacks of Muhammad Ali would serve to isolate Frazier from certain portions of the Black population. Much like Liston's acts of charity, Frazier's work with a variety of charitable causes was overshadowed by Ali's continued attacks on Frazier's limited education and somewhat reserved demeanor. By the time of their epic third battle in Manila in 1975, Frazier, now a former champion after being beaten by George Foreman the previous year, was forced not only to exist in Ali's shadow, but also to be largely defined by Ali's attacks, which were becoming increasingly vicious and dehumanizing in nature.

Chapter seven will focus on the rise of George Foreman during the end of the civil rights era, as well as experiences moving from the impoverished, largely segregated world of Houston, Texas to the Pacific Northwest. Foreman's experiences rising from poverty to an Olympic and heavyweight champion are representative of the end of both the civil rights movement as well as the Great Migration. And, like Frazier, Foreman's experience with the Job Corps, as well as his observations and interactions with the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) are representative of the changes that occurred for many Blacks who left the oppression of the south for a potentially better future in the north. His experiences also illustrate the divisions between Blacks on various political issues that were just as prevalent during the mid-1960s and early 1970s as they were during Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston's reigns as champion.

While authors such as Dave Zirin have characterized Foreman's victory celebration of waving a small American flag in the ring after winning the gold medal as an act of total allegiance to the existing White power structure when compared to the protests of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Foreman's autobiography as well as several primary sources demonstrate that his motives behind it were more complicated than they appeared. Additionally, it also allows for the possibility that not all Blacks, athletes included, felt the same way about America and American race relations, and that these diverse opinions are equally valid.

However, Foreman's encounter with Muhammad Ali in Zaire in 1974 is important, not because of Ali's triumph, but because of what the buildup to the fight was lacking. Despite Ali's efforts, he was unable to attach much of the dehumanizing, racially motivated insults that defined his encounters with Joe Frazier to his encounter

with Foreman. Unfortunately for the Ali public relations machine, by the mid-1970s his racially motivated insults against other Black fighters had lost much of their relevance and audience, and were lacking the meanings, however cruel, they had throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Though Foreman would lose his title to Ali in an upset, it had become clear that the emphasis Ali, the Nation of Islam and more radical, politically aggressive Black writers had placed on racial authenticity did not have the same urgency and importance that it once did. This is not to suggest that boxing had entered a post-racial era. While the heavyweight championship was still representative as the ultimate symbol of masculinity, its status as a symbol of racial superiority had waned greatly.

Chapter eight will focus on reexamining the existing narratives surrounding Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman. Specifically, these men and their experiences will be reexamined as largely separate from the Ali legend. By looking at each man's personal beliefs, politics, and how they asserted their own unique Black identities we can begin to see them as unique individuals whose worldviews were heavily influenced by their experiences in the segregated cities of the south and the uncertain, racially unstable surroundings of various cities of the north, particularly within Black communities.

In addition to these men and their individual criticisms and interpretations of Ali's actions and beliefs, another underrepresented area is the criticism and questions Ali received from members of the Black press. Though politically conservative, older White sportswriters like Jimmy Cannon regularly blasted Ali, he was also roundly and repeatedly criticized by certain members of the Black press, specifically by longtime

Chicago Defender journalist A.S. "Doc" Young. While Young was not opposed to Ali's anti-war stance, he openly criticized Ali's unquestioning belief in the racist teachings of the Nation of Islam and his merciless verbal assaults on other Black fighters. Perhaps most importantly, he questioned Ali's supposed dedication to the Black community. As Young would ask, what, specifically, had Ali done for American Blacks other than make speeches?

The aim of this research is to recognize the contributions, sacrifices and dedication of Black heavyweight champions before and during Muhammad Ali's career. Though Patterson, Liston, Frazier and Foreman never claimed to be "The Greatest," they still contributed to a variety of understandings and ideas of what it meant to be Black during an era of political upheaval. Both in and out of the ring, each of these four men, all of whom were influenced by the difficulty of growing up poor and Black in the segregated south, were able to look past the discrimination and hardship that defined their daily lives and work toward an integrated future in their own respective ways. In their own ways, each man helped contribute to an expanded set of ideas and beliefs of not only what the heavyweight championship represented, but also its power to advance a variety of social and political causes.

CHAPTER TWO

ORIGINS OF PRIZEFIGHTING IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Just as Patterson, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman had their own unique relationship and understanding of the politics of their day, so did their ancestors. But while their politics were shaped by the push for full and equal rights, surviving slavery largely shaped 19th century Black masculinity and identity. Primary documents demonstrate that Black males crafted a number of ways to preserve self, family and express masculinity. Not surprisingly, slaves used a combination of deception, accepting subjugation and the selective use of physicality to craft and express identity.[2] This chapter will examine the different expressions of slave survival in both physical deed and mental calculation, and examine Jack Johnson's impact on race and sport in the early 20th century.

David K. Wiggins argues in his research on the play patterns of slave children, games and play between slaves rarely broke down into serious physical confrontations, as physical abuse was perceived as a threat to the general well-being of the entire community. Wiggins does not claim that slave children never fought among each other, but that physical confrontation was a last and regrettable resort to solving problems. In addition, former slaves also recalled engaging in fun, spirited play, albeit largely in secret, with the children of their masters. Similar to slave communities, fighting and physical violence did not occur. This practicality and emphasis on peaceful interaction as children often carried over into adulthood.

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[2] Lussana, Sergio. "To See Who Was Best on the Plantation: Enslaved Fighting Contests and Masculinity in the Antebellum Plantation South." *The Journal of Southern History* Volume LXXVI, No. 4, November 2010 901-922.

Former slave Susan Davis Rhodes recalled that fighting and wrestling among males was not done for fun, but for survival. As she recalled, "in my day didn't know book learning but dey studied how to protect each other, and didn't believe in fightin' each other."[3] In an attempt to reexamine our understanding of these individuals, the context that shapes this line of thinking has to be critically examined. In Rhodes' case, she described an expression of masculinity that involved the preservation of personal relationships and sought to avoid serious confrontation while asserting self-respect and emphasizing personal dignity.

As Edward Baptist's research demonstrates, slaves were well aware of the tenuous nature of their daily existence and the ease with which families could be separated from each other or suffer various acts of physical violence on the slightest whim. In the case of former slave Ann Clark, she recalled how her father's forceful yet peaceful attempts to retain his humanity and dignity cost him his life.

> My poppa was strong. He never had a lick in his life…but one day the marster says, 'Sir you got to have a whoppin'. And my poppa says 'I never had a whoppin' and you can't whop me.' And the marster says, 'But I kin kill you,' and he shot my poppa down.[4]

This example is only one of the ways that diverse notions of masculinity within slave communities were demonstrated, but also is instructive of how easily that masculinity could be squashed by dominant Whites. Further complicating notions of

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[3] David K. Wiggins, "The Play of Slave Children in the Plantation Communities of the Old South, 1820-1860" in *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America*. Edited by David K. Wiggins. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997 (11).

[4] Edward E. Baptist, "The Absent Subject: African-American Masculinity and Forced Migration to the Antebellum Plantation Frontier" in *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004 (141).

Black masculinity were the outside observations from free Blacks and abolitionists about what "true" manhood involved. For those who had successfully escaped slavery, such as Frederick Douglass and David Walker, the path to freedom, while fraught with danger, was simple enough to obtain. However, as Martin R. Pierre's research argues, the historical construction of Black masculinity was extremely complicated during and after slavery.

> Views changed as shackles caused African American men to question the viability of their manhood. The captors became seen as the ultimate authority while African males were kept helpless and forced into a subordinate position. The protective function of the African males suffered as they were helpless to defend wives, mothers, sisters and daughters from sexual abuse at the whim of White captors.[5]

For Douglass and Walker, true manhood meant resisting all forms of enslavement, bondage and torture; a true man resisted any and all attempts to enslave him or his family, even at the cost of his own life. The slave who was unwilling to pay the ultimate price did not just deserve enslavement, but that he "ought to be kept with all his children or family, in slavery, or in chains, to be butchered by his cruel enemies." As escaped slave Lewis Clarke said, "A slave can't be a man" and so did not deserve to even exist.[6]

However, not all enslaved Black males saw themselves as emasculated because of their enslavement. In spite of these very clear distinctions drawn by free Blacks against their enslaved counterparts for their perceived lack of action and autonomy,

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[5] Pierre, Martin R., Mahalik, James R. and Woodland, Malcolm H. "The Effects of Racism, African Self-Consciousness and Psychological Functioning on Black Masculinity: A Historical and Social Adaptation Framework." *Journal of African American Men* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall 2001): 19-39. Print. (23)

[6] Baptist, 138.

enslaved men not only heard of these notions of heroic resistance, but they weighed the consequences of their actions, often by observing the actions of those around them or speculating about future outcomes. Many slaves knew on the most basic level that in "the midst of a social world atomized and then reshaped by forced migration, resistance to death meant not only physical but also social, psychic, and historical destruction."[7]

Despite these challenges, male slaves did find subversive ways to express their masculinity, engage with the world around them and promote, create and expand new families in a variety of forms. The emphasis and expression of manhood was not confined to a heroic death for a cause they must have known they could not overcome singlehandedly. Rather, manhood and masculinity were defined with the "accumulation of new relationships, obligations, and ways in which to care for others." This form of masculinity centered on survival, the family and exercising positive influence, however limited, over the fates of others in a shared community.

In spite of these selfless approaches to masculinity and survival in an era of uncertainty, masculinity also expressed itself in significantly less admirable ways. Baptist argues that manhood in slavery was not defined solely by the caretaker mindset, but also by outright selfishness and self-preservation. As Pierre asserts, White males' possession of "dominance, power and control" were the defining aspects of manhood that Blacks could only hope to achieve through behaviors that often straddled the spheres between self-serving and self-preservation.[8] Those who exhibited this behavior throughout the 19th and 20th century would eventually take on the identity of

[7] Baptist, 146.

[8] Pierre, 24.

"the outlaw, the gambler, the traveling man, and the wandering blues guitarist," becoming "men whose ambiguous dealings with both the devil and women became self-celebrated legend."[9]

These expressions of manhood, masculinity and the physicality that often accompanied them figure prominently in the historical record, but they are not the only means by which these traits were expressed, understood and passed on through generations. A variety of combat sports, particularly boxing and wrestling, occupied a significant and complex place in the lives of both slaves and masters. Though slaves were unable to demonstrate power and control over their masters, they could exercise these traits over each other in combat sports that usually offered a number of tangible rewards and benefits.

Whether staged by masters or among slaves themselves, physical combat sports served as a vehicle for male slaves to demonstrate control over their own bodies, over the bodies of others and subvert the practices of slave owners and overseers. Many of the uses of combat sport, while specific to their historical context, can be seen emerging in a different form among Black athletes in the 1900s. The next section will examine several of the origins, uses and understandings of prizefighting among Blacks in the 19th century.

The Role of Prizefighting in Slave Life

An examination of the notes and diaries of slave owners as well as the slave narratives collected by the WPA in the 1930s reveal the complex and often contradictory nature of combat sports for Black men who participated and Black

[9] Baptist, 158.

women who observed. One of those contradictions is how this violence was internalized among the enslaved. David K. Wiggins' research of play and sport among slave children revealed that slaves preferred cooperative play and games that did not emphasize violence. Additionally, Baptist's research on masculinity in slave culture viewed violence as generally disruptive to the greater good of the community. Sergio Lussana's research on slave fighting and masculinity in the antebellum south offers a distinctly different view of how slaves both internalized and used sports like boxing and wrestling.

Records demonstrate that slaves not only engaged in physical combat sports regularly, but that it was sometimes a source of pride and enjoyment for both spectators and participants alike. Former slave John Finnely recalled that fights were not merely a simple diversion for him, but something that kept him tied to his enslaved community when he considered escaping to freedom.

> I's think an' think 'bout gittin' freedom…I's think, well, I's gwine to run off….Den I's think ob some ob de 'joyment on de Marster's place dat I's lak, sich as de co'n huskin', nigger fights, an' de singin' an den I's don't know w'at to do.[10]

Finnely's recollections reveal much about the nature of combat sports among slave males. Slave communities used them as part of general celebratory practices akin to singing, dancing and drinking and also as part of community relations. And, while Wiggins assertion about slave children's play being largely non-violent in nature, Lussana's research argues that slave children not only boxed and wrestled, but that they often did so with their master's children. Slave Gabriel Gilbert recalled that the

[10] Lussana, 901.

children often played together "like brudder and sister" in a variety of games, which also included friendly boxing and wrestling matches. As Gilbert recalled, slaves would "hab fights and us fight de White boys and nigger jis' de same."[11] Though physical competition like boxing and wrestling was largely confined to Black and White males, boys and girls who participated in interracial games and competitions helped to circumvent the master-slave relationship, if only temporarily.

Among the adult population the consequences of physical combat for Blacks and Whites took on entirely different meanings. In addition to being a diversion among slaves during select times of the year, slave masters would pit slaves against each other, be it their own slaves or against slaves from neighboring plantations, often for money, bragging rights, or both. Because of the substantial investments that were often placed on slaves who were purchased solely for fighting, boxing and wrestling matches were rarely to the death, though they were still decidedly brutal particularly with the use of fighting slave collars (the heavy iron rings, similar to dog collars, were placed around the neck and fastened to chains. As Joyce Carol Oates notes, they can still be seen in various museum exhibits as either a part of a "specifically American/Southern history; sometimes as instruments of torture.").[12]

Black Prizefighting in the Early 20th Century

Just as the Civil War shook the social relationships of Blacks and Whites to their very foundations, the role that sport played for both groups also underwent significant change. While a sport like baseball could fairly easily exclude non-White competitors

[11] Lussana, 905.

[12] Oates, Joyce Carol. *On Boxing*. New York: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987 (65).

like Fleetwood Walker, other sports were forced to tolerate non-White competitors. Horse racing was a particularly prominent example of how the mindset and activities honed in slavery morphed into the world of professional sport.

The legacy of self-preservation that defined Black masculinity in slavery would surface and adjust to the world of late 19th and early 20th century America. For the purposes of this work, the legacy of Jack Johnson serves as an indispensible link to Black America's enslaved past, as well as to its tumultuous future in the 20th century.

In Johnson's time the majority of his detractors were White (though Booker T. Washington was among the most vocal critics of the Black elite). By the time of the civil rights era, these Black heavyweight champions would face similar pressures regarding masculinity, identity and manhood from both Blacks and Whites alike. Though the context was different, the central issues are strikingly similar when we examine the ways that Black heavyweights of the civil rights era handled many of the same prejudices and injustices Johnson did. This section will examine the political and social impact of heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, as well as his understandings and reactions to criticism from Blacks and Whites.

When examining later champions, we see the same awareness of changing social and political mobility that was capturing the hearts and minds of a significant number of Black citizens, but with similar sets of restrictions. While Patterson, Liston, Frazier and Foreman were able to push their social mobility farther than Johnson did, each was still aware that access to the privileges that mainstream White America enjoyed remained painfully out of reach.

The Legacies of Reconstruction and the Championship of Jack Johnson

As the Civil War drew to a close, expressions of Black manhood and identity had undergone massive changes both in and out of sports. Participation in the Civil War, emancipation and seizing political offices in many of the states that had formerly enslaved them resulted in a redefinition of Black manhood. However, while many Blacks began to see new possibilities in their social and political mobility, much of White America, still reeling over the loss of a social and economic system in which they reigned supreme, were desperate to find ways to retain even a fraction of the lives that had defined the south for centuries. As John Hope Franklin writes in *From Slavery to Freedom*, the Civil War may have destroyed slavery as an institution, but the actual enjoyment and experience of freedom was something else entirely. Where the intentions of Reconstruction did provide some positive change for southern Blacks, the overall result was one of repression and subjugation.

Outside of the political arena, attempts to return to some semblance of the days of slavery came in the form of numerous secret societies that engaged in any number of acts of domestic terrorism. While the Ku Klux Klan would emerge as the most notorious, they were by no means the only group available to White southerners who longed "to exercise absolute control over the Negro, drive him and his fellows from power, and establish 'White supremacy.' As Pierre's research argues, it was the exercise of power and control over Blacks that defined their sense of manhood and identity throughout slavery.

> Secret societies grew and spread when it became apparent to Southerners that their control was to be broken by Radical Reconstruction. For ten years after 1867 there flourished the Knights of the White Camelia, the Constitutional Union Guards, the Pale Faces, the

> White Brotherhood, the Council of Safety, the '76 Association, and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Among the numerous local organizations were the White League of Louisiana, the White Line of Mississippi, and the Rifle Clubs of South Carolina.[13]

These "clubs", coupled with a highly ineffective and undermanned presence of Union troops, resulted in a situation for Blacks that was little better than slavery. For those Blacks who attempted to make a living through farming, the practices of sharecropping reduced free Black men and women to a state akin to peonage in medieval Europe. Those who were subjected to the sharecropping system could be "lent" to other plantations, have their wages withheld or stolen, be jailed for any offense, real or imagined and then sent (though the practice bore more similarities to a slave sale) to any plantation in need of laborers. As one primary source indicates, the conditions of the average Black man or woman in the south were fraught with discrimination and subjugation at nearly every turn. Witnessing firsthand the intricacies of the convict labor system, the speaker recalled his experiences working for a man he only names as "the Senator." It is only when he and the other "free" laborers met to discuss their working conditions among themselves and local whites that he realized he and the others had been sold into slavery under a different name.

> It was made plain to us by some white people we talked to that in the contracts we had signed we had all agreed to be locked up in a stockade at night or at any other time that employer saw fit; further, we learned we could not lawfully break our contract for any reason and go and hire ourselves to somebody else without the consent of our employer; and, more than that, if we got mad and ran away, we could be run down by bloodhounds, arrested without process of law, and be returned to our employer, who, according to the contract, might beat us brutally or

[13] Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Vintage Books, 1969 (327)

> administer any kind of punishment he thought proper. In other words, we had sold ourselves into slavery---and what could we do about it?[14]

The speaker's reaction and interpretation of their situation speaks to the condition of both Blacks and Whites during the era of Reconstruction. Whites utilized any means necessary to retain power and control over their Black neighbors, be it with dishonest business contracts or false imprisonment. What weapons then, did the average Black person during Reconstruction have to combat this entrenched system of White political and social domination? As the Black man who recounted his experience in peonage explained: "…we had only our ignorance, our poverty and our empty hands."[15] Even by the time his recollections were published in 1906, he had heard rumors that peonage camps, installed shortly after the Civil War ended, were still in use in Georgia.

What, then, did this mean for Black conceptions of manhood and identity in the late 19th and early 20th century? As existing research and primary sources indicate, Whites were forming terrorist organizations and creating and/or utilizing political systems designed to keep Black men and women in a state of subjugation. For Black men, their notions of manhood and identity were in a state of flux. Often the choices were to accept laboring in conditions that were little better than slavery, or assert power and control over your own body, life and humanity and risk being brutalized, tortured or killed by groups like the Pale Faces or the Knights of the White Camelia. In

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[14] Frazier, Thomas R., ed. *Afro-American History: Primary Sources*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971 (104)

[15] Frazier, 104

sum, "our ignorance, our poverty and our empty hands" would be no match for the Rifle Clubs of South Carolina.

It was into this world of fear, uncertainty, discrimination and subjugation that Jack Johnson would be born in Galveston, Texas in the year 1878. Johnson's experiences and legacy are important because they illustrate the shift, however gradual, that would take place in the expressions and understandings of Black masculinity and identity. The long history of slavery and the perceived notions of "true" Black manhood resulted in this aspect of personal identity being contested by Blacks as well as Whites.

By the time of Johnson's birth, the effects of the Civil War continued to shape the lives, attitudes and decision making of Blacks throughout the. The failure of Reconstruction, the implementation of Jim Crow laws, and the general abandonment of southern Blacks by northern authorities left many southern Blacks vulnerable in their social, economic and political lives. Even though appreciable inroads had been made by Blacks in education, business and politics since the end of the Civil War, these gains were countered by the violent acts of groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the political disenfranchisement of Blacks through the use of such tactics as literacy tests and the poll tax.[16]

The end result of this political and social discrimination was that many Blacks in the south still lived in conditions that were not far removed from slavery. Even those Blacks who had attained middle class status also suffered from many of the same discriminatory policies as their lower class counterparts. Perhaps the most infamous and best known of these legal discriminatory practices was the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling

[16] Franklin, 333

of 1896, which "wrote the 'separate but equal' doctrine into American constitutional law" and would not be overturned until 1954.[17] As a youth, Johnson and thousands of other Blacks were placed in a very precarious position. Despite having their freedom guaranteed by the constitution, the legacy of slavery and the roles it had defined for Blacks and Whites alike was still fresh in the minds of those who had lived through slavery. This meant that the "appropriate" recognition of racial interactions between Blacks and Whites was still being internalized and practiced, not just by those of Johnson's generation, but also by those born in the 20th century.

What, then, were the influences on Johnson's conceptions of Black manhood and identity during the waning years of the 19th century? How did his parents, who may or may not have been slaves, impart their values (which were influenced by deferential behavior to Whites) on Johnson? Finally, how was Johnson representative of a sudden, violent change in the ways Blacks and Whites interacted? Finis Farr, one of Johnson's many biographers, poses important questions regarding the significance of the future champion's lineage.

> …had Johnson's father been a slave? Nobody knows. He may have been one of the 488,070 free Negroes in the South before the Civil War. It would seem that he was not one of the four thousand or more Negroes who themselves owned slaves, nor was he apparently, one of the thrifty and fortunate Negroes who owned land. No evidence can be found that Johnson's father ever had a trade, which is perhaps the strongest argument for the theory that he had been a slave before the war.[18]

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[17] Commager, Henry Steele, ed. *Documents of American History*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963 (628)

[18] Farr, Finis. *Black Champion: The Life and Times of Jack Johnson*. London: Macmillan, 1964 (5)

The mystery surrounding Johnson's father is important, not because of what is unavailable to us, but because of what we can learn from a reconstruction of his actions and interpretations of the world he lived in. Where Randy Roberts asserts that Johnson was a former slave from Maryland, both he and Farr agree that Johnson's father was a pious, hardworking janitor in a local school with extensive knowledge of the Bible. His mother Tina (also called Tiny) was described as "an intelligent woman", and was a well-liked and respected person in her neighborhood. It is fair to assume that the legacy of slavery and the stolen identities of those who survived it were central to his father's character, which he attempted to pass down to Jack. It is difficult to say just how successful Johnson's father was, as is evidenced during Johnson's days working as a longshoreman on the Galveston docks.

Another defining feature of Johnson's youth was his witnessing of, and participation in, numerous Battle Royals in and around Galveston and South Texas. As Roberts asserts, Johnson participated because he "enjoyed fighting and it helped to define him as a man." This speaks to Johnson's character when the various forms of Battle Royals are explained in greater detail:

> Battle Royals had only one theme but a number of variations. The single theme involved Black youth fighting Black youth in front of White spectators, who threw pennies and nickels to the victor. The lesson was obvious: rewards came from defeating your brother, not from joining him.

No matter who "won" or lost these contests, the larger outcome was never in doubt. Whites reasserted their dominance over Black self-image and bodies, while neutralizing one of the most dangerous elements in their midst. Black manhood continued to be defined through physicality, self-preservation, and the acceptance of

the inability to exercise power and control over either themselves or the Whites who goaded them on. As Roberts summarizes, the Royal participants were emasculated and humiliated "before each other and the White audience." But more importantly, Black youths were reminded, through merciless pummeling of each other, exactly where their place in society was, the emancipation of slavery notwithstanding.[19]

Because of Johnson's natural ability to move faster and punch harder, he soon became a frequent victor in these contests. Still forced to endure humiliation from both Royal promoters and crowds alike, Johnson's lack of conformity began to surface with his age. Leaving home more frequently, he rarely held a job for any appreciable amount of time, holding such positions as laborer, dockworker and occasional sparring partner. It would be on the docks that Johnson's refusal to bow to authority would take a potentially dangerous, life-altering turn.

During his first day on the docks, Johnson was warned of a bully who would physically punish any other workers who failed to hand over their money. Johnson flatly refused (in large part because he had no money at the time) and agreed to a fight with his co-worker. When the man charged at him, Johnson promptly lodged a steel hook into his would-be assailant's shoulder, immediately ending the fight. When word of this altercation reached his parents, Finn reports that his parents soundly scolded him because they knew of the consequences that could result from this behavior. Johnson's response was simple, yet it reveals the practicality and tolerance that defined Black masculinity at the turn of the 20th century: "Tough times make tough people."[20]

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[19] Roberts, 7.

[20] Finn, 8.

This incident and the multiple responses to it are telling. Part of Johnson's reaction can be attributed to an inborn confidence and courage that would evolve with him as he grew into adulthood. The reaction of Johnson's parents (anger born from fear over the possible retaliation of Galveston's White population, particularly in the case of his father, a former slave) bears similarities to many of the stories recorded in the slave narratives. Physical confrontations, outside of situations sanctioned by dominant White society for their entertainment, had the very real possibility of severe, potentially fatal, punishments. While men like Frederick Douglass were applauded for their willingness to engage in self-defense, we cannot make the assumption that the mindset of preserving the family at the cost of perceived public standing was a reasonable price to pay.

Johnson's actions, observations and interpretations are by no means new to historians. Randy Roberts[21], Al-Tony Gilmore[22] and Jeffrey Sammons[23] are just a few of the authors who have tried to identify and analyze the social and political significance of Johnson's actions. One point that all of these authors agree on is that Johnson was viewed as a threat to the accepted racial hierarchy of the United States.

In spite of his courage, daring, and skill, Johnson, like other Blacks of his day, was forced to utilize subversive aspects and tactics in his efforts to protect and fashion a

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[21] Roberts, Randy. *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*. New York: The Free Press, 1983.

[22] Gilmore, Al-Tony. *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson*. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1975.

[23] Sammons, Jeffrey. *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

new type of Black manhood in his own rapidly changing world. Similar to the Black heavyweights who dominated boxing during the civil rights era, Johnson demonstrated unique awareness of exactly how mobile he could be, both socially and physically. He presented this to the public when he was asked why he would only fight White challengers.

Johnson flatly stated that he would not fight other Blacks because there was no money or prestige to be earned by beating members of his own race. This decision was born not of racism, but largely of self-interest. In a manner similar to Jim Corbett, Jackson also drew the color line upon obtaining the championship. Demonstrating a selfish, yet practical attitude, Johnson flatly stated that he had nothing to gain and everything to lose by risking losing his title to other Black fighters.

While drawing the color line failed to endear him to moderate Black activists like Booker T. Washington, who vehemently disagreed with most of Johnson's behaviors and attitudes, Johnson's expression of a new type of Black masculinity and identity demonstrates aspects of slave crafted masculinity expressed through the activities of a free man. In sum, Johnson demonstrated an uncanny knowledge of how far to push the existing racial order, but he also understood that his own color would only allow him to push so far before it might cost him his livelihood, freedom and life.

When examining later champions, we see the same sort of awareness of changing social and political mobility that was coming to Black citizens, but with similar sets of restrictions. And though these later champions were able to push the limits farther than Johnson did, each was still painfully aware that access to the privileges that mainstream White America enjoyed was still just beyond their grasp.

By the time Johnson became a fighter of note in the early 20th century, restrictions in society at large were firmly entrenched in the prize ring as well. Just as "separate but equal" had been the law of the land since 1896, so were Blacks excluded from the title in heavyweight professional boxing, a sport that not only signified athletic excellence, but also was the ultimate display of masculinity. Unlike the heavyweight division, it was acceptable for Blacks in lower weight classes to fight for world championships, as those titles did not hold the same cultural meaning.

Having a non-White heavyweight champion would not only signify that Blacks possessed attributes and skills equal to those of Whites, but that they would dare to see themselves as the social equals of Whites, giving rise to a new understanding of Black masculinity and pride. White fighters, journalists and sports fans alike knew the racial hierarchy, expectations of deference, and Blacks accepting second class status as citizens were in serious danger of being permanently upset, if not completely destroyed.[24]

Many of these fears and stereotypes about Johnson and Black males as a whole provided leading writers and entertainers of the day with ample material to advance notions of White supremacy and to perpetuate misunderstandings of Black masculinity, behavior and identity. Among the most notorious was author Jack London who constantly railed against Johnson during his days both as a contender and as a champion. Despite his sound thrashing of Burns for fourteen rounds, London's conception of Black identity was a mirror image of those recorded by slave owners in the 19th century. Instead of seeing a new, albeit frightening, type of assertive, confident

[24] Sammons, 33

Black male, London saw only a "care-free", overgrown child, little more than a minstrel clown.[25]

Confirming White America's worst fears, Johnson's decisive victory over Burns sent shock waves through Black and White communities across the nation. In the case of those like London, Johnson was nothing more than a representation of Black animalistic tendencies that, tragically, inexplicably, somehow overcame the intelligence and composure of the entire White race. It would be Johnson's victory over the "Great White Hope," Jim Jefferies, in 1910 that created the most havoc in Black communities across the country. When Blacks in larger cities like Houston, Baltimore, and Los Angeles dared to celebrate their victory in public, they were stepping outside of their normal, culturally acceptable identities that Whites had internalized for generations in an act that Whites viewed as absolute defiance. Some Black citizens, particularly those in southern cities, knew what this transformation meant and immediately grabbed their families and retreated to places of safety to wait until White America's collective fury had abated.

For those who dared to celebrate in the open, despondent Whites greeted their acknowledgement of cultural transformation with either physical violence or murder. What makes this episode all the more disturbing is the reaction and opinions of some members of the Black elite. Rather than use the incident to draw worldwide attention and outrage to America's entrenched system of racial injustice and oppression, Blacks in positions of leadership turned the dead into martyrs to advance the cause of civil rights. William Pickens, speaking from a position of security, must have been far safer

[25] Boddy, Kasia. *Boxing: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008 (182).

in celebrating the martyrdom of murdered Blacks than a young Louis Armstrong, who was ordered to stop in the middle of his paper route and hurry to his New Orleans home as quickly as possible and not emerge until the violence had subsided.

> For some, the dead became martyrs in the struggle for equality. William Pickens, later field secretary of the NAACP, wrote in the *Chicago Defender* that 'it was a good deal better for Johnson to win, and a few Negroes to be killed in body for it, than for Johnson to have lost and all Negroes to have been killed in spirit by the preachments of inferiority from the combined White press'.[26]

Upon hearing such a statement, it is difficult not to be reminded of the sentiments of David Walker and Frederick Douglass in their scolding of the enslaved who were not willing to rise up and die to claim their manhood. When we examine these events, including attempts by a small number of Black media outlets and a few members of the Black elite to spin murder into martyrdom, we again see Johnson's keen awareness of his contributions to Black uplift, and the limits of what his achievements in the world of athletics actually meant to mainstream White society.

Johnson's fall from grace after his victory is well known and documented, but needs to be acknowledged even briefly because of the long term affects his reign as heavyweight champion would have on boxing for both Blacks and Whites. His 1912 conviction under the Mann Act brought on by his openly sexual relationships with numerous white women was just one of his mounting troubles. A hard partying lifestyle, dwindling finances, gradually eroding skills and reflexes signaled the end of Johnson's reign as heavyweight king, which was finally culminated with a knockout loss to Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba, in 1915. Johnson's status as a symbolic threat to White

[26] Boddy, 183.

masculinity and dominance was finally silenced by Johnson's yearlong imprisonment at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. However, Johnson still managed to keep an air of mystery about him when he claimed in 1916 that he had agreed to throw the Willard fight, igniting a controversy that *Ring* magazine would revisit in 1956 and again in 1969, long after his death in 1946.

With Johnson's exit from the heavyweight scene, Americans would not see another Black heavyweight champion until Joe Louis' rise to prominence in the 1930s. Louis's life and career are notable not just for his record, but because it marks a difficult period of transition not just for Louis, but for the Black heavyweight champions who would begin the era of Black domination in heavyweight boxing. Unfortunately for Louis, the specter of Johnson still remained throughout much of his career. Blacks and Whites interpreted the impact of Johnson on Louis's reign differently. For Whites, they feared Louis would be the second coming of Johnson, complete with all of the social unrest he happily created. For Blacks, Louis would come to represent the possibility of control, power, and autonomy that had proved to be so elusive since even before the Civil War. Though Louis would come to represent Black manhood, masculinity and identity, Black men and women alike came to see him as a symbol of racial uplift. With Black masculinity and identity assured, the hopes for Black femininity would be uplifted as well. The following section will briefly examine the life and career of Joe Louis, the meaning and impact of his legacy on Black and White Americans and on future Black heavyweight champions.

The Many Meanings of Joe Louis

Louis was born to sharecropper parents Lily Reese and Munrow Barrow in Layfayette, Alabama on May 13, 1914. After his parents separation, Louis, his mother and seven brothers and sisters emigrated north to Detroit in 1926. He would not take up boxing until 1932, but proved to be a quick study, turning professional in 1934. As Dominic Capeci and Martha Wilkerson's research demonstrate, Louis's trainers and managers not only saw athletic potential in Louis, but also the potential for disaster. John Roxborough, Julien Black, and Jack Blackburn knew that they had a potential future champion in their employ, but they were all old enough to remember the upheaval that Johnson had created.

To that end, every member of his team made deliberate, consistent efforts to shape and mold Louis into a role model to Blacks and a non-threatening, docile champion to Whites. Despite their ostensibly noble intentions, their attempts at shaping Louis's image were often fraught with racism.

> Managers John Roxoborough and Julien Black echoed this message of Black dignity. Aware of the resentment triggered by Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight champion (who challenged racial mores and fled conviction for violating the Mann Act), they instructed Louis in clean living and sportsmanlike conduct; Jack Blackburn, Louis's trainer and father-like confidant, constantly berated "that fool nigger with his white woman, acting like he owned the world."[27]

Additionally, Louis was instructed never to taunt or gloat over a beaten White opponent and to refrain from speaking his mind on potentially controversial issues, specifically the state of race relations in the 1930s and 1940s. In spite of these restrictions, Louis

[27] Capeci, Jr., Dominic J. and Wilkerson, Martha. "Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1933-1945." *Journal of Sport History* Vol. 10, No. 3 (Winter, 1983) Pg. 6

quickly rose to prominence, winning sixty-nine out of seventy-two fights. However, it would be his fights against Primo Carnera and Max Schmelling that would possess the most meaning for Blacks and Whites alike, albeit for different reasons.

After his defeat of Primo Carnera in 1935, Black Americans began to attach a new set of meanings to Louis as both a man and athlete. With the majority of Blacks greatly opposed to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in October of that year, Black support of Louis had multiple layers. While they cheered Louis's triumph as a victory over fascism, they also cheered the representation of Louis as a Black man who freely controlled his own movements and refused to be physically dominated by an ostensibly White male. Marcus Garvey, who was a strong supporter of Louis, addressed his victory over Carnera in terms of a blow for racial uplift.

> If nothing else, in the realm of boxing, the Negro has raised the status of the black man. As a fact the black man is considered the only dangerous competitor of the white man in the ring and he has knocked him out so often as to leave the impression that he is safely the world's champion.[28]

By the time Louis captured the title from James "Cinderella Man" Braddock in 1937, he found himself in the unique position of being the first Black heavyweight champion since Johnson. However, when he lost his title to Max Schmelling in 1936, the two years between their rematch would permanently alter Louis's professional and public image.

With the ascension of Hitler and the Nazi party, Max Schmelling was, however unwillingly, cast as the model of ultimate Aryan superiority. Yet when Louis knocked out Schmelling in one round (hitting him so hard that he broke a bone in Schmelling's neck), Blacks and Whites again attached various meanings to Louis's victory. For many

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[28] Zirin, Dave. *A People's History of Sports in the United States*. New York: The New Press, 2008 (81)

Whites, including future President Jimmy Carter, Louis had once again struck down an enemy of freedom and democracy. He was living, breathing proof that the American system could defeat the forces of evil. Once again, as with Carnera, many Black Americans had the same feelings, but with addendums. Author Richard Wright, who referred to both Louis and Schmelling as puppets, was still able to decipher the larger meanings of what the fight meant to many of America's Black communities as a whole.

> At the beginning of the fight there was a wild shriek which gradually died as the seconds flew. What was happening was so stunning that even cheering was out of place. The black puppet, contrary to all Nazi racial laws, was punching the white puppet so rapidly that the eye could not follow the blows. It was not a fight, it was an act of revenge, of dominance, of complete mastery.[29]

Despite Wright's general contempt for seeking uplift through sport, his descriptions of Louis's triumph over Schmelling was the culmination of what Blacks had been seeking both psychically and physically. Black over White in prizefighting was no longer just a victory; it was the domination, control and power over Black oppressors that had not been seen on such a grand stage since the tumultuous days of Jack Johnson. While Wright was correct that a victory in a political arena would have had far greater tangible results, he had to appreciate the sense of shared accomplishment and triumph that so many American Blacks felt that evening and beyond.

Though Louis's career and life would slowly spiral downward until he was a shriveled remnant of his former self, his legacy, like Johnson's, would loom large over the next crop of Black heavyweight champions. However, the political and cultural landscape would shift once again. As Black domination of the heavyweight

[29] Zirin, 83

championship coincided with the beginning of the Civil Rights era in the mid-1950s, a different type of champion slowly began to emerge. Where Louis was ordered to remain silent on issues of race discrimination and inequality, his successors began to slowly but steadily make known their opinions and positions on issues.

However, an experience Louis shared with Patterson, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman was the impact of the Great Migration. Just as Louis's family had come north in search of better opportunities and greater freedoms, so would his successors. However, their migration experiences will be examined independently of Louis's because of how their experiences coming from the south to the north affected both their athletic careers and their different approaches to the civil rights struggles of the nineteen fifties, sixties and seventies.

The following chapter will examine and summarize the factors that contributed to the Great Migration, as well as how the lives and careers of Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston were affected by this 20th century exodus of Blacks from the south to the north. Because stories of southern migration within different states share a large number of the same characteristics, the Arkansas of Sonny Liston and his forebears before and during migration will serve as representative of larger migration experiences. Consequentially, the experiences of Floyd Patterson, whose family migrated to Bedford-Stuyvesant from rural Waco, North Carolina, shortly after his birth in 1935, will serve as representative of the transitional challenges southern Black families often faced upon their arrival in the north. An analysis of these two men and their experiences in the south and north can offer insight into how transplanted Blacks

not only navigated these changes in location and culture, but also help to explain how they navigated the tumultuous political world of their adulthoods.

By utilizing their autobiographies, biographies, and studies of the long-term social, political, and cultural effects of the Great Migration, we can begin to reexamine how each athlete's sense of identity, expressions of masculinity, understandings of race relations and politics were all shaped in unique ways. For example, Liston, who was already a hardened ex-convict by the time his professional career began, had a far different relationship to and with politically moderate Blacks than the soft-spoken, Roman Catholic convert Floyd Patterson. Each man's ways of traversing the delicate political and social conditions that defined the push for civil rights are reflective of the numerous personalities that were, in their own specific ways, agitating for the same dignity, security and freedom most of White America took for granted.

Though these different social and political movements seem unrelated on the surface, they are interconnected in the creation of the greatest era of heavyweight boxing in American history in that they allowed for personal growth and a strong, proud assertion of a racial identity that could have cost them their lives in the rural south. We explore this interconnection by forcing ourselves to look past the win/loss record of each man and into the larger forces that have cemented their respective places in history. In the case of Sonny Liston, a mixture of poverty, racism and the threat of physical violence were among the factors that not only made daily life restrictive, but also helped to facilitate movement out of the south.

CHAPTER THREE

ARKANSAS, RACE RELATIONS AND ORIGINS OF THE GREAT MIGRATION IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

With the specter of Jack Johnson fading and the eventual retirement of Joe Louis, a Black presence in the heavyweight championship would be noticeably lacking until the arrival of Floyd Patterson in the 1950s. Despite the success of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics and Louis's defeat of Schmeling in their 1938 rematch, the racial turmoil and Black masculine uplift that accompanied Johnson's reign was noticeably absent throughout Louis's time as champion and would not begin to be challenged until Floyd Patterson became champion in 1956. However, America's past and present race relations meant that Patterson and those who came after him were not always entirely free to speak their mind, a situation that was influenced by the Southern roots of Patterson and some of his contemporaries, particularly Sonny Liston.

The link between the southern roots of Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson may appear to be anecdotal on the surface, but this link offers insight into the creation of their unique identities as Black, male athletes reaching their physical and intellectual maturity during the early days of the Civil Rights era. What a deeper examination of the primary and secondary sources also reveals is each man's willingness to live and work in an integrated America. Each man moved at different times and under different circumstances; however, it was in various cities outside of the south where they were routinely confronted with the racist attitudes their forebears were forced to endure. In spite of this, they began to forge new attitudes toward, and understandings of, their situation with other Blacks and Whites in their efforts to enjoy some level of peace and

prosperity. Though many Blacks and Whites remained wary of each other, a growing number were beginning to accept the fact that poverty was often colorblind, and interracial cooperation was an unavoidable fact of work and life. Because much of the unrest regarding Arkansas race relations revolved around class and occupational differences and inequities, the term lower class shall include such occupations as manual and agricultural labor as well as other occupations that do not require advanced education and specialized training; the label middle class shall include such occupations as physician, lawyers, educators, clergy and other positions that require extended education and specialized training. The next section will examine race relations in Arkansas in the early 20th century.

Arkansas Race Relations in the Early 20th Century

By the time of Sonny Liston's birth in Arkansas in the 1930s (Liston's official date of birth is still a matter of debate, but Liston researchers place his date of birth somewhere between 1929 and 1932.[30]), Black-White race relations had progressed little since the Civil War. The failure of Reconstruction and the rigid enforcement of Jim Crow laws created a situation for rural Black Arkansans that was not far removed from slavery.

While they had been subjected to countless acts of violence both before and after the Civil War, one of the most notorious acts of violence in Arkansas came on September 30, 1919, when a congregation of about one hundred Black men, women, and children were fired upon by three men in a car who had driven up outside the Hoop

[30] http://www.thesweetscience.com/news/articles-frontpage/15175-a-birthday-for-sonny-liston Accessed 15 Nov. 2014

Spur Lodge church just outside the town of Elaine. After an exchange of gunfire between church guards and the men in the car that resulted in the death of one White man, a mob of between 600 and 1000 Whites from several nearby counties assembled to seek retribution. As several posse members admitted in sworn affidavits, they indiscriminately killed defenseless men, women and children, some of whom were busy picking cotton at the time of the attack. Bessie Ferguson interviewed survivors of the massacre in 1927 and found that the slaughter had also taken on a more sinister meaning.

> A party of twelve men from Mississippi equipped with eleven guns and an axe created havoc wherever they went…Barberism [sic] such as cutting off the ears or toes of dead negroes for souvenirs and the dragging of their bodies through the streets of Elaine are told by witnesses.[31]

Former slaves interviewed for the WPA slave narratives reported their rights, lives and property were subject to the greed and misplaced anger of poor Whites. Lynching, lack of economic opportunity, and lack of access to basic social services such as public education and healthcare resulted in Black rural communities with living conditions similar to those found in third world communities. Quoting Michael Dougan's *Arkansas Odyssey*, author Grif Stockley recounts some of the observer's recollections of the conditions of rural Blacks in Arkansas in the 1920s and 1930s.

> Sharecroppers lived in box houses, thrown together from rough lumber without studding. Screen wire and electricity were nonexistent. Houses were rarely painted and had newspapers or colorful pictures tacked to the walls to keep out the cold. The family lived around the cook stove, ate from an oil cloth covered table, and slept as many to an iron frame bed as family size dictated.[32]

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[31] Stockley, Grif. *Ruled By Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas from Slavery to the Present*. Fayeteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2009 (164)

[32] Stockley, 211.

Calling the race riots of 1919 a "critical juncture," Fon Louise Gordon argues that the political activism and activity of Black lower class citizens began during this period and throughout the Great Depression. It also represented a political split for Arkansas' working class population from the Black middle class who, by virtue of their more specialized training, served as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and pharmacists. It was the Black middle class, however, who inadvertently helped to reinforce Arkansas's entrenched system of White supremacy.

Because lower class Blacks largely depended on the Black middle class for essentials such as health care and education, middle class Blacks occupied a tenuous place in Arkansas's racial hierarchy. As Gordon argues, Arkansas's Black middle class focused solely on changes that mattered little in the daily existence of the majority of Arkansas Blacks. Though it would be the middle class who would spearhead the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s, the political landscape of early 20th century Arkansas did not support these ambitions.

> The prosperity of the middle class, in fact, largely rested on segregation, for they taught Black children, preached to Black congregations, and owned businesses patronized almost exclusively by Blacks. Although they resented their status as second-class citizens, they had little complaint with the economic status quo that underlay the misery of the masses.[33]

Despite the longstanding history of only interacting with the middle class to receive necessary goods and services, many of Arkansas's working class Blacks would benefit in a variety of ways with the onset of World War II. Like Blacks everywhere,

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[33] Gordon, Fon Louise. *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995 (137).

whether on the front lines overseas or in wartime production plants, rural Blacks in the south were undergoing significant changes in a variety of tangible and intangible ways. Many returning Black veterans had found a new sense of self-esteem and confidence. They also began to recognize the possibility of opportunities outside the south, while friends and family members who traveled north to find work wrote home with promises of plentiful, steady work, good wages and less racial discrimination. Though this mass movement can trace its origins to between 1910 and 1915, the Great Depression and World War II would see the greatest exodus of Blacks out of the south.

It was in the 1930s and 1940s that the Black exodus from the south would directly impact the lives of both Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston. Despite leaving their respective places of birth under different circumstances, each man was directly affected by his decision to leave the south for the north. While places like St. Louis and Bedford Stuyvesant initially promised better economic and political security, each man would suffer hardships that were similar to what they experienced in the south. The following section will examine the origins and effects of The Great Migration on America, as well as the different ways Patterson and Liston were affected.

Origins of the Great Migration

Nicolas Lemann's study of the Great Migration begins in rural, impoverished surroundings that were similar to those of Patterson, Liston and Frazier. Lemann argues that the sharecropping culture that had kept race relations in a tolerable position for Whites since the end of the Civil War was rocked to its core. From 1910 to 1970, an estimated 6 and a half million Blacks left the South for the North, with 5 million of them leaving after 1940 alone. For landowning Whites, the sharecropping

system served dual purposes: it provided them with a source of cheap, abundant labor and kept some semblance of the racial hierarchy they had enjoyed before the Civil War.

Lemann's research suggests that White landowners in Mississippi and other states were largely responsible for the mass exodus of Black agricultural labor. The main culprit in this massive shift was the creation and eventual perfection of the automated cotton picker. Since 1927, International Harvester had been searching for a machine that not only could harvest cotton, but also was reliable. However, their inability to mass-produce their machine allowed John and Mack Rust to emerge as a legitimate threat to International Harvest's place as the authority on scientific farming. By the time the Hopson machine was perfected in the 1940s, the future of cotton, as well as the futures of the people who picked it, was in serious question.

> In an hour, a good field hand could pick twenty pounds of cotton; each mechanical picker, in an hour, picked as much as a thousand pounds---two bales. In one day, Hopson's eight machines could pick all the cotton in c-3, which on October 2, 1944, was sixty-two bales. The unusually precise cost accounting system that Hopson had developed showed that picking a bale of cotton by machine cost him $5.26, and picking it by hand cost him $39.41. Each machine did the work of fifty people.[34]

With the success of Hopson's machine, Whites no longer depended on Blacks to harvest the cotton that a large number of planters depended on. With little in the way of economic opportunity outside of agricultural work, Blacks were forced to leave their ancestral homelands in search of work. In the north, efforts to increase migration came from sources such as the *Chicago Defender*, who sent their publisher, Robert S. Abbott, to start "The Great Northern Drive" in 1917.

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[34] Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992 (5).

For those planters who did depend on access to a substantial amount of human labor, Black migration spelled doom for their livelihood. White planters began to use a multitude of tactics to keep Blacks in their physical and psychological place. Outside agitators like Abbott and other recruiters were hit with substantial fines or jail time. Additionally, Blacks that were caught wandering too far from home or work were cited for vagrancy and jailed. Local law enforcement even went so far as to arrest Blacks who happened to be in the vicinity of the local train station.

Much of the exiting research on Blacks that migrated from the south to the north has produced similar narratives. A number of social and environmental factors helped to spur the mass exodus of Blacks from southern cities. The biographies and autobiographies of Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson demonstrate the ways in which this movement affected each man and their respective families.[35,36] When we combine their personal narratives and recollections of their time inside and outside of the south with the existing research from historians and social scientists, we can begin to make inferences about the myriad factors that could have influenced their approach to the tumultuous political landscape of the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s.

The following section will examine some of the macro level conditions that shaped Black life as a whole in Arkansas, and how those changes affected people such as the Liston family on an individual level. We can begin to produce narratives that differ from generalized statements about the influences for Black movement out of the south,

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[35] Tosches, Nick. *The Devil and Sonny Liston*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000.

[36] Levy, Allan H. *Floyd Patterson: A Boxer and A Gentleman*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008.

and we can also offer specific evidence as to how Liston's involvement in this massive physical movement of Blacks helped to shape distinct, unique identities for Patterson and Liston as both Black and American.

Factors Affecting the Migration Experience

As Lemann's work on Black migration demonstrates, those families and individuals who left the south for cities in the north did so for a variety of reasons. However, research before and after Lemann's confirms that the reasons for migration were as diverse as the people themselves. A common thread that exists in each explanation is the search for more comfortable living and working situations. When we insert the Liston family and their movements into the grand narratives that explain the motives behind migration, highly personal, complicated elements are added to the existing narratives that are not as easily explainable.

While the Great Migration's beginning and end dates are generally accepted as occurring between 1910 and 1970, the causes that ignited this exodus are still the subject of debate. Stewart Tonlay's research on Black migration is consistent with Lemann and others in that they cite economic and social pressures as the main catalysts for migration during the early twentieth century. With the onset of World War I and the restrictions on European immigration that resulted from it, southern Blacks had increased incentive to try and find better living and working conditions in northern, midwest, and western cities. Aided by an informal network of established

transportation routes and networks created by those who had migrated before them, southern Blacks began to explore opportunities outside of the south.[37]

What Eichenlaub, Tolnay, and others suggest is that this decision to leave the south is much more complicated than that offered by Nicolas Lemann in his study of the causes of Black migration. Where Lemann singles out the perfection of the mechanical cotton picker as the main culprit, other scholars have identified several other factors, both tangible and intangible, as partially responsible for adding momentum to Black migration. For the purposes of this research, the identification and analysis of less tangible factors such as family disruption, discrimination, and general wellbeing of Black migrants adds depth to both the larger narratives of this episode in American history as well as the factors that influenced the social development of Liston, Patterson and Frazier.

One under-observed component of the Great Migration was the resulting physical violence that all too often accompanied daily life for many Blacks in the rural south. Tolnay and Beck's research on lethal violence during the first 30 years of the twentieth century is invaluable for several reasons. They acknowledge what they identify as the "push" and "pull" factors of migration; if the "net attractiveness of a potential destination outweighs the net attractiveness of the place of origin, migration is expected to occur."[38]

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[37] Suzanne C. Eichenlaub, "Moving Out but Not Up: Economic Outcomes in the Great Migration." *American Sociological Review* Volume 75, No. 1 (2010): 101-125. Print.

[38] Stewart E. Tolnay, and E.M. Beck, "Black Flight: Lethal Violence and the Great Migration, 1900-1930." *Social Science History*. Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 347-370. (351).

Along with the "net attractiveness" of relocating out of the south, research has also unveiled the darker, more desperate side of the exodus. Tolnay and Beck's study of violence and the Great Migration found that violence was another key component in the reasons Blacks were leaving the south in such large numbers. Acknowledging the violence that accompanied the Great Migration serves several purposes. First, it offers another explanation as to why Blacks were leaving southern states in such large numbers. Second, it acknowledges the lasting effects of slavery, the effects of Jim Crow, and institutionalized racism that has become a significant part of the south's identity. Third, it offers a glimpse into the agency Black citizens in the south (in this case, Sonny Liston) exercised over their own lives, bodies and property.

As Tolnay and Beck's research asserts, the fear of mob violence and lynching for any transgression, real or imagined, terrorized enough Black residents of the south to flee to the north. In addition to mob violence, local law enforcement acted with lethal force against Blacks on a regular basis. Citing statistics from the late 19th and early 20th century, southern Blacks were citing violence, both mob and state sanctioned, as one of the leading reasons to leave the south.

> By many accounts, violence terrorized southern Blacks, especially where lynchings were common. A report by the U.S. Department of Labor (1919: 107) concluded that "another of the more effective causes of the exodus, a cause that appeals to every Negro whether high or low, industrious or idle, respected or condemned, is the Negroes' insecurity from mob violence and lynchings."[39]

It was this landscape of fear, discrimination and intimidation that affected the lives, attitudes and identities of many southern Blacks. Yet it was not solely the threat

[39] Tolnay and Beck, 357.

of violence that resulted in massive out-migration for southern Blacks. In the case of southern states, fear, combined with smothering oppression and the threat of violence provided many families and individuals reason enough to flee to the north. In the case of Sonny Liston, the Arkansas he called home was drastically affected by this mass exodus, but had its own unique relationship regarding race, economics, and labor relations. The following section will examine Arkansas in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the effects of the Great Migration on all of its citizens.

For Arkansas's Black population, forces that were similar to other southern states initiated Black migration. However, these migrants also had their own set of unique conditions and factors that either impeded or enhanced their ability to remain in place or relocate. As Donald Holley's work on Arkansas migrants suggests, inside of the similarities that linked migration and southern states together, each state had specific factors that influenced the migratory patterns of its citizens. Economics, mechanization and lack of access to natural resources (in this case, farmable land) helped to create a tenuous climate for both Black and White rural farmers and laborers. By 1920, Arkansas would lose 200,000 citizens, and would continue to steadily lose population until World War II. Holley cites the wok of Professor William H. Metzler, who determined in 1940 that the greatest crisis facing the state was agricultural in nature.

> A study of the ratio of farm population to agricultural resources in the state indicates that we have 350,000 to 500,000 more people in the farm areas of the state that can be supported at a desirable standard of living. Farm resources can be expanded but not enough to take care of them.

> These people will gradually be forced to migrate either to cities and towns or to other states.[40]

As Metzler's research revealed, Arkansas was one of the most over-populated states in America in relation to the amount of available, arable land. With U.S. entry into World War II, Arkansas, like other states, saw increased out migration as members of the rural population left to take jobs in wartime production plants. Among those who left was Helen Liston, who would eventually make her home in Saint Louis, Missouri. The life she left behind, as the younger wife of an abusive, impoverished tenant farmer, would eventually follow her to her new home in the person of approximately 13-year-old Charles "Sonny" Liston. However, as Tonlay, Holley and Eichenlaub's research has proved, migration was not always as glamorous as the migrants had dreamed or had been told. Poor housing, discrimination from Blacks and Whites and unreliable sources of employment were just a few of the obstacles waiting for southern transplants in cities across the nation. The following section will examine the underlying factors that would cause Sonny Liston to migrate from Arkansas to Saint Louis.

Sonny Liston, Arkansas and Agricultural Labor

By the time of Sonny Liston's birth in the late 1920s or early 1930s, Arkansas's rural community was in a state of flux. The increased mechanization of cotton farming and harvesting changed the state of labor in Arkansas, and Blacks and Whites were leaving Arkansas in growing numbers. For those who remained behind, sharecropping, which never offered much in the way of financial stability, left them in a tenuous

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[40] Donald Holley, "Leaving the Land of Opportunity: Arkansas and the Great Migration." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly.* Vol. 64, No. 3 (Autumn, 2005), pp. 245-261 (247).

situation. Contending with the elements, lack of arable land, and being routinely cheated during every harvest was simply a way of life for Black sharecroppers. In spite of the efforts of agricultural collectives and unions, the relation between sharecroppers and landowners usually favored the latter. The existing system kept Black farmers poor, dependent on landowners, and helped replicate conditions that were as close to slavery as possible. In Phillips County of 1920, a situation would arise that would once again lay bare the existing inequalities but with a far more tragic end.

> A typical sharecropper in the county in 1919 raised fourteen bales of cotton, or seven thousand pounds at forty-three cents per pound. Each bale contained a half ton of seed valued at $70.00 per ton. Therefore, the sharecropper's crop was worth $3,500. During the year, the farmer typically bought or "took up" goods worth only $23.50. But in settling with the plantation owner, the value of goods came to exactly the value of his crop. With the weight of the law and custom behind the plantation owner, the sharecroppers had little alternative to enduring this corruption and injustice.[41]

When Phillips County's Black farmers did come together to form Progressive Farmers and Household Unions of America, their aim was simple: debt relief and a more equitable process of settlement with land owners through the legal process. In sum, Black farm workers wanted to stop being cheated by White landowners. Despite the fact their unionization efforts were peaceful and legal, Whites internalized the very thought of unionization among Black laborers as revolutionary, foreign and dangerous.

The immediate response of Helena and Phillips County law enforcement, business and civic leaders (who named themselves the Committee of Seven) was to charge the Progressive Union with conspiracy to murder the White population and seize control of the surrounding counties. With the support of Governor Charles H.

[41] Gordon, 136.

Brough and the arrival of the United States Army, the "revolution" was quickly and violently crushed.

When the hysteria of the mob finally abated, the official death toll was placed at five Whites, "an indeterminate number of Blacks," and over 100 Blacks arrested. The legal system helped to crush the revolutionary spirit further, as 73 of the 122 Black citizens who were indicted by a grand jury were charged with murder. The accompanying "trials" resulted in the death penalty by electric chair for twelve defendants, while 67 others pleaded guilty and received sentences ranging from one to twenty-one years in prison. However, thanks to the efforts of the NAACP and the Citizens Defense Fund Commission, the twelve men sentenced to death were freed between 1923 and 1925, and the 67 other men who were sentenced were also freed.[42]

In addition to smashing any hope that Black farmers may have had of unionizing in hopes of gaining fair compensation for their treatment, we can see the trickledown effect to individual farmers and landowners who, though not in Phillips County, were close enough to have caught wind of the results of the events of 1919. When we examine the stories and recollections of the Liston's and the family whose land they labored on near Forrest City, we can see the long reaching effects that events like those of 1919 may have had on race relations between Blacks and Whites. In the case of Sonny Liston, we see how it may have factored into family members decisions to leave the south for the promise of a better life in the north and west.

While the distance between Phillips County and the Morledge plantation is significant, it seems unlikely that members of the Morledge plantation, from George Sr.

[42] Gordon, 137.

to the day laborers, had not heard at least some version of the events that occurred in Phillips County during their occasional trips to the town commissary; as "the farm was located seventeen miles from town", and multiple round trips had to be made several times per year to settle accounts at the commissary. We can at least speculate that the families who worked the Morledge land began to wonder if there might not be something better in store for them in other locations.

Just 45 miles to the South of Phillips County during this time lived tenant farmer Tobe Liston, his wife Helen, and their ever-growing family. According to Nick Tosches' work *The Devil and Sonny Liston*, Liston's place of birth was on the 2,500 acre cotton plantation of George Morledge, Sr., and stretched into both Cross and St. Francis counties. It was here that the Liston family worked and lived in crushing poverty, farming cotton on 50 acres of land rented from the Morledge family as tenant farmers, rather than sharecroppers. Paul S. Taylor, who has researched plantation life and practices in the United States from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, explained the significant differences of each.

> Under sharecropping, the worker lives on a small plot belonging to a landlord, and performs the labor on it necessary to produce a staple crop. He receives remuneration in the form of a share of the product, usually a half. Although often called a tenant, the sharecropper is more laborer than tenant, because he does not participate in management.[43]

Despite the differences between the two systems, both served the same basic purposes: providing White landowners with a steady source of cheap labor and keeping the newly

[43] Paul S. Taylor, "Plantation Agriculture in the United States: Seventeenth to Twentieth Centuries." *Land Economics.* Vol. 30, No. 2 (May, 1954), pp. 141-152 (143).

emancipated Black population under a certain level of control, both economically and socially.

In the case of the Liston family, nearly 30 people in all, the system they labored under offered little in the way of economic security, promised nothing in the way of advancement, and yielded nothing in abundance but continued sweat, poverty and misery.

> The Listons were tenant farmers, not sharecroppers. The difference was in the breakdown of pay and expenses. Sharecroppers worked the land with seed, fertilizer, beasts of burden, and equipment furnished by the farm operator, and when the crop was sold, they got fifty percent. Tenant farmers rented their acres, either with cash or a promised portion of the crop to come. They furnished three-quarters of the money, the owner got the rest.[44]

While it is impossible to know the aspirations and plans of other Black families, what we do know is that the Liston family's struggles with daily survival left them little time or energy to be worried about the formal education of the children. The economic realities of their household placed importance on working and earning, while time spent gaining an education in even the most rudimentary subjects was seen as lost income. George Morledge Jr., the only surviving member of the Morledge family who remembered the Liston's at the time of Tosches' research, paints a very matter of fact, often stark, picture of what life was like for the tenant farmers and sharecroppers who worked his family's land. Morledge's comments also can offer insight into the mindset of the ruling White class of planters.

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[44] Tosches, Nick. *The Devil and Sonny Liston*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000 (22).

Morledge Jr.'s recollections of his family's days as plantation owners to families such as Liston's offer up a version of slavery that, while not as ideal as slavery in its original form, was tolerable enough under the conditions they were given. Stating at one point that "it wasn't too bad, or they wouldn't have stayed", Morledge paints a picture of his family as benevolent and patriarchal. Schools, healthcare, even the occasional forgiveness of debt on a failed crop, were all features of the ostensibly serene, peaceful existence of those who toiled on the land that Morledge considered "like family."

Despite Morledge's perception that plantation life resembled a large extended family, he was quick to point out the stark inequalities between himself and those who worked for his family as natural divisions between Blacks and Whites. In Sonny's case, of the many issues that would plague him for nearly all of his adult life was his level of education. Though Sonny would have his own unique reasons for not attending school as a teenager, Morledge's description of the education that was available to Liston and other school age children operated as a type of Catch 22 in this largely self-contained world of tenant farming.

> 'If their mother and father wanted to send them to school, they sent them to school,' Morledge said. 'If they didn't' want to send them to school, they didn't.' One way or the other, there was no school during the cotton-chopping months of June and July or during cotton-picking time, which could stretch September to March, depending on the weather.[45]

As Tobe Liston reasoned, if his children were old enough to make it to the dinner table, they were old enough to work. The end result was Sonny working in cotton fields from dawn to dusk by around his eighth birthday, and returning home to a cypress-board

[45] Tosches, 23.

shack, which, as his mother remembered, "had no ceiling," forcing her "to put cardboard on the walls to keep the wind out."

While Tosches's description of the hardscrabble existence of the Liston clan in Arkansas both before and during the Great Depression is visceral and vivid, it offers little in the way of examining the larger social and political changes that affected rural Blacks throughout the American south. Though there is little in the way of concrete evidence regarding such seemingly basic information as the whereabouts or exact dates of birth of certain family members, there is available relevant research regarding the economic and political factors that may have affected the Morledge family, and also may have contributed to Liston and his mother's decision to leave the south for ostensibly better living and working conditions in the north.

Available research on sharecropping and tenant farmer culture in the American south in the first half of the twentieth century has cast the economy and the way of life that sustained it as the closest, legal replication of slavery that White landowners could legally enjoy in their current situation. Paul Taylor's research on plantation labor in the south asserts that this was not just their only alternative to slave labor, but it also served the purpose of regaining some of the control over the physical and mental energy of Black farm laborers that was largely lost with the onset of emancipation.

With the ravages of the Great Depression, Arkansas's rural Black farming population, including the Liston's, were thrust into an even more precarious position. As the depression wore on into World War II, the Liston clan, bit by bit, abandoned the Morledge place for other agricultural work in nearby areas or became part of the wave of migrants leaving the south to seek work in the more industrialized north and west.

However, Alexander Yard's research on farm workers, economic modernization and the unionization of Arkansas tenant farmers offers a number of direct explanations as to what may have influenced their decisions to leave the farm they had called home for over 20 years, for better or worse.

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) was a collection of farmers and agricultural laborers throughout Arkansas who unionized in order to agitate for better wages and working conditions. Writing in 1936, STFU recruiter and activist, Lula Parchman, demonstrated that the desire of farmers and sharecroppers like the Listons was to attain a measure of independence. The recognition that there was a social and economic world outside of their independent counties and plantations apparently was not lost on members of the Liston family who grew tired of the Morledge world and the dearth of limited opportunities available to them. As Parchman expressed, "I am tired of being drove from place to place and being denied of the chance to live Independent." She repeatedly expressed in her writing and speaking a desire to live independently; the question of what they sought to live independently from lends itself to a number of evolving narratives revolving around those who would be affected by the Great Migration.

As Yard's analysis of the letters of STFU members reveal, those who expressed a repeated desire for independence, freedom and autonomy interpreted these ideas in very broad terms. Some saw freedom in terms of renting land where they chose, owning their own farms and equipment, or the chance to begin their own operations independent of the existing planter class. Though there is no written evidence of their expression of these sentiments, family lore asserts that both Helen and Sonny Liston, as

participants in the Great Migration, were able to conceptualize an independence that existed outside of the confines of rural Arkansas.

By 1945, Helen Liston, who reportedly "didn't know but to go to church and chop cotton," had grown tired of Tobe Liston's abuse and the hardscrabble existence of tenant farming. She left her home and numerous children, including Sonny, and moved to Forrest City to live with family for approximately a year before eventually settling in Saint Louis, Missouri where she took work in a shoe factory in 1946. While his mother's path out of the south took a more predictable path, Liston's exodus from the fields of Arkansas, while unique, echoes with the intangible yet identifiable concept of freedom and autonomy that colored the letters of Lula Parchman and others some 10 years before. Despite Sonny's inability to read the letters of Parchman and others (or if he had ever even heard of them), his actions as a teenager reflect the mindset of the STFU members his family must have encountered in the 1930s.

> 'One morning,' he said, 'I got up early and thrashed the pecans off my brother-in-law's tree and carried the nuts to town and sold them. That gave me enough money to buy a train ticket to St. Louis. I figured the city would be like the country, and all I had to do was to ask somebody where my mother lived and they'd tell me she lived down the road a piece.'

Specific details of how Sonny and Helen reunited are unclear. One version has him as bewildered, lost and asking the first person he sees, a homeless, alcoholic man, if he knew his mother. Incredibly, the man says he does, and leads him to her. Another version has the local police happening across a lost and confused Sonny wandering downtown St. Louis in the middle of the night, where, after feeding him at an all-night café and hearing his story, they eventually find Helen and deliver Sonny to her. Regardless of how Sonny arrived at her doorstep, upon their reunion, Helen asked her

son why he had come to St. Louis. His response, while simple, echoes the sentiments and desires of the millions of Blacks who would eventually leave the south in search of better lives in the north and west:

> I say, 'Sonny, why you come here?' And he say, 'Mama, I got tired of that cotton patch.'[46]

Liston's arrival in St. Louis in the 1940s is well documented from the date of his arrival to his first stay in prison. From a standpoint of historical study, Liston's arrival from the rural south to a Midwestern workhouse/prison is often presented as a given, natural progression.[47] His time in prison is important because it was there that Liston would begin to learn the skills that would take him away from his life of material desperation and want. However, his identity as a Black male in a largely segregated America would present him with a set of problems from which no amount of ring success could free him.

In Liston's case, police records and primary sources easily establish that life in major cities for Black transplants from the south often proved extremely difficult. Importantly, studies of his life and career usually do not make an effort to explain the forces that created these conditions or to place them in a specific historical context. This serves to naturalize the "bad nigger" mystique of Liston, adding further to his ominous legend, but doing little in the way of offering possible, plausible explanations to the creation of these circumstances.

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[46] Tosches, 37.

[47] For an additional examination of Liston's life of crime and time in prison, see Steen, Rob. *Sonny Liston: His Life, Strife and the Phantom Punch*. Great Britain: JR Books, 2003.

What, though, of the social and political forces that helped shape (and in Liston's case, nearly derail) the life of Black migrants from the south upon their arrival in the north? Examining existing research on the phenomena that brought migrants to major urban centers and how they simultaneously retained and morphed their identities can offer insight into how their approach to race relations and civil rights influenced their approach to the Civil Rights movement. Additionally, this examination demonstrates that these migrants were the products of a culture and a place that emphasized the survival of the individual and the family by relying on the cooperation and unity of entire Black communities. The demands of these situations, coupled with large-scale constant movement, left little room or time to argue over the validity of one Black identity over another.

While Liston's migration experience was somewhat unique in that it involved two lengthy prison stays, Floyd Patterson's experience with the Great Migration is instructive in that it demonstrates many of the darker aspects of this mass exodus.

The following section will examine Floyd Patterson's experience in New York as a southern transplant exemplifying the unique, often difficult, experiences of migrants in northern cities.

Patterson Transplants to New York

Much like Liston, Patterson was born in the south in the heart of the Great Depression. As Patterson biographer Allan Levy's research asserts, the Patterson family differed little from the Liston's except in the number of family members and the labor their father's performed. Where Tobe Liston attempted to support his large family by

subsistence cotton farming, Thomas Patterson worked as a laborer for the Seaboard Railroad Company, while Floyd's mother Annabelle took whatever work was available as a domestic. Though Levy does not go into the level of detail that Tosches does regarding the severity of poverty the Patterson's lived in, the images are similar enough.

> The Patterson family of Waco, North Carolina, was one of the many shack-dwelling poor who eked out a marginal life in the South. They lived in the country of Cleveland County, forty miles west of Charlotte. Jobs were few. Any redress to economic or political woes was non-existent, and, as in most of the South, in Cleveland County there lurked the ever-present threat of racial violence from the Klan and its many comrades.[48]

The conditions for Patterson, Liston and others were, by most accounts, nearly identical to each other, differing only by state. What, then, of the conditions that brought them out of the south? What were the conditions and systems in place that convinced Patterson's father, Thomas, he had "nothing to lose" by leaving rural North Carolina with his wife and children for the unknowns of the urban north? Here is where research on migratory patterns of Blacks can offer hints into the possible thought processes of that huge group with "nothing to lose" and may help to explain why they made the decisions they did.

For men and women like Thomas and Annabelle Patterson, the Southern economy had little promise for the majority of Blacks, who worked primarily as farmers, laborers, or domestics. Limited opportunities, along "with the deep and persistent social obstacles faced by southern Blacks" (e.g., political disenfranchisement,

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[48] Levy, Allen. *Floyd Patterson: A Boxer and a Gentleman.* North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008 (1).

inferior schools, and racially motivated violence) created a hope that economic conditions available in the north were worth the risk of uprooting families.[49]

These types of life altering decisions involved careful planning, consideration, calculated risk-taking and a number of extended, largely informal information networks. Townsand Price-Spratlen's work on Depression Era migration and urban prosperity addresses the decision to migrate, but also helps to explain what drove migrants and the tangible and intangible means that were deliberately utilized to make migration possible. In his article "Between Depression and Prosperity? Changes in the Community Context of Historical Black Migration," Price-Spratlen identifies the set of factors that specifically aided migration as ethnogenesis. Though the process only has four key features, the underlying factors need to be quoted at length.

> Ethnogenesis is "the process by which ethnic and racial groups refine a sense of 'urban place,' by developing and refining a communal social structure and a collective ethos from the interplay between sociocultural characteristics and American social structure. Groups have been shown 'to establish social networks and communication patterns as the bases of their institutional and communal life….'"[50]

When we examine the available material on the Patterson family's decision to leave North Carolina, the assertion of having "nothing to lose" demands that we unpack a number of factors that, required migrants to be informed of the risks and rewards of their potential decision, assume that life elsewhere would be substantially better than

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[49] Stewart E. Tolnay, "The Great Migration and Changes in the Northern Black Family, 1940 to 1990." *Social Forces,* Vol. 75, No. 4 (Jun., 1997), pp. 1213-1238 (1214).

[50] Townsand Price-Spratlen, "Between Depression and Prosperity? Changes in the Community Context of Historical African American Migration." *Social Forces,* Vol. 77, No. 2 (Dec., 1998), pp. 515-539 (516).

their current living conditions, know of a welcoming community, and also have access to "formal and informal social networks" to inform their decisions.

As Price-Spratlen asserts, the four basic components of the social structure through which families like the Patterson's would have received their information regarding occupation, community and living situations would have been community newspapers, job placement support, churches, and volunteer organizations.[51] Since Patterson's family moved when he was about a year old, his main memories and identifications are with the slums and tenements of Bedford-Stuyvesant in New York, leaving us with little in the way of information as to how the family arrived in New York instead of, for example, St. Louis.

Because of the unsteady existence that his father's employment with the railroad offered, it is most likely that his information about better opportunities in the north came largely by word of mouth, local newspapers, or the church. Despite being a devout Roman Catholic for his adult life, Patterson was raised in a Baptist household, so it is not unlikely to assume that the church may have been a more reliable and consistent source of information for Thomas Patterson regarding employment and living conditions in the North than the available Black newspapers that may have been circulating in and around the Waco area. Additionally, we also do not know how literate either of Patterson's parents was, so the informal network provided by the church and the local community offered the most reliable sources of information on migration opportunities.

[51] Price-Spratlen, 517.

As Patterson biographer W.K. Stratton notes, given their occupations (farm worker, laborer, domestic) and rural location, the most probable way the Pattersons received any information of note concerning the North came by word of mouth. In Thomas Patterson's case, he received word from relatives that relocating the family to the North offered the most promise. The dissemination of these types of opportunities by relatives and friends demonstrates several features of Black ethnogenesis, particularly in terms of migratory momentum. The Pattersons and others looking to alleviate at least some of the discrimination and oppression they endured obviously saw migration as at least part of an overall solution.

In terms of economic and occupational opportunity, the Black ethnogenic process of the 1930s saw Blacks flooding from rural areas into urban centers in search of overall general advancement. The problem, as Price-Spratlen argues, was that the availability for economic advancement in major Black urban centers was insufficient for the glut of Black farmers and laborers who "were essentially evicted" from rural farm areas. Though the Pattersons were not farmers, this eviction meant that major cities and Black urban centers would lack opportunity for sustained employment and advancement and would offer only more poverty and discrimination.

For many Black families, this would also include their new homes in neighborhoods like New York's Brownsville and Bedford-Stuyvesant.[52] The decision to uproot from family, community and region was not made with the sort of fatalistic approach Levy assigns to it.[53] Existing research demonstrates that this decision

[52] Price-Spratlan, 518.

[53] Levy, 9.

involved a number of factors, individuals, and sustained deliberation about the positives and negatives of migrating versus remaining. Those involved in migration were not guided by an unidentifiable magnetism but by substantiated reports of improved living conditions in all areas of life.

Despite the thorough and complex nature of the decision making process, the end result of the Patterson's move was the trading of southern rural poverty for northern rural poverty. Except for the unfamiliar surroundings, what they encountered upon their arrival in New York must have seemed eerily reminiscent of what they had endured in North Carolina. Much like the south, crumbling buildings, back breaking work, constant crime, and segregation were all part of their daily existence. Their experience, along with others, was part of the disappointment that accompanied the Great Migration. As Floyd Patterson would later write, his time in the slums of Brooklyn inevitably shaped his worldview.

Within a few years of the other, both Patterson and Liston were experiencing the more brutal aspects of life outside the south. Poverty, lack of emphasis on education, racism and police brutality was just a few of the hardships each man was faced with as a youth. While we have excellent and detailed documentation as to how each man's childhood was negatively affected by the conditions they lived in on a daily basis, research on them as individuals does little to explain how outside social and political forces may have shaped their particular worldview regarding race relations. Utilizing Floyd Patterson's experiences in Brooklyn as a primary example, the following section will examine life among Black communities in major urban centers during and after World War II.

Life in Major Black Urban Centers During and After World War II

As Patterson biographer W.K. Stratton notes, the world that Thomas Patterson moved his family into in Bedford-Stuyvesant bore little resemblance to reports that he had most likely received from family members. Upon their arrival in New York, they found more poverty but of an entirely unfamiliar kind. Perhaps the most disorienting was their reception by the established Black community. Despite sharing commonalities that extended beyond just race, urban born Blacks often resented and ridiculed rural migrants as an invading force competing for already scarce jobs, something that Thomas Patterson was forced to deal with on an almost daily basis.

As for young Floyd, he faced his own unique set of trials and tribulations. In addition to the self-inflicted psychological torment he endured at home (he recalled feeling like a drain on the family because he was unable to earn money to contribute to the household), outside the home he was forced to contend with random acts of violence from both the police and street gangs like the Fulton Street Bishops. Floyd learned quickly that outside of his brothers there was no hope of relief or shelter from the threat of violence because "for young Blacks in Bed-Sty the notion of police protection was a joke." Patterson's low self-esteem reached a boiling point when one day, as a young child, he scratched an "X" through his picture in a family portrait, saying to his mother, "I don't like that boy."[54]

In addition to the looming threat of robbery and violence, crowded streets filled with garbage, cramped living conditions and a lack of physical stability within those homes defined everyone's daily existence. Patterson recalled moving to at least seven

[54] Levy, 10.

run down apartments as a child, with the only common denominator being the inadequacy. Patterson recalled: "The only windows were in the rooms in the front and the back, and it was always too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, and never big enough."[55] With all of these obstacles to contend with, the problem that proved most distressing to the survival of the family was a working situation for Thomas that proved just as difficult as that he had faced in North Carolina.

Despite the economic promise that the wartime boom promised to neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville, men like Thomas Patterson found the economic reality far different from what they had been led to believe. When the wartime boom abated, Black transplants found themselves scrambling for limited jobs in an already oversaturated market, and Thomas Patterson was no exception. Working seven days a week, often from six a.m. to one a.m., Thomas Patterson was rarely able to find steady, gainful employment in one area. His various jobs included construction, the sanitation department, longshoreman, and at the "mob-controlled Fulton Fish Market on the East River waterfront in lower Manhattan." This list also does not include the various "odd jobs" he worked on weekends to earn extra income for his family, while Patterson's mother Annabelle worked first as a maid then in a bottling plant. In spite of his incredible efforts, the family was still migratory even within their new city.

In this environment, things like education and civil rights activism often took a backseat to the daily struggle for survival as the Pattersons and other migrants

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[55] Stratton, W.K. *Floyd Patterson: The Fighting Life of Boxing's Invisible Champion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012 (3).

competed with new arrivals from the south for a scarce number of jobs and adequate housing. Yet even in this harsh landscape, Stratton notes one very important distinction between New York and the south. Despite the hardship that marked everyday life and the very real discrimination they faced, they were still free from the terror and uniquely Southern oppression that defined Black life in the south. This freedom, however slight, would come to shape Patterson's thinking as an adult.

> Yet Bed-Stuy was a place where Blacks were free to speak much more openly than they could back in North Carolina. The Pattersons would have been exposed to the progressive concepts of W.E.B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and to the street-corner preachments of radicalized followers of Marcus Garvery, something that would have been unheard of in the south of the 1930s and 1940s.[56]

The New York of Patterson's childhood was one of many contradictions and inequalities. However, these inequalities were not a natural occurrence but the very direct result of racially discriminatory policies in areas such as housing, employment and education. All of these were areas that would directly affect the upbringing and worldview of young Blacks like Floyd Patterson. For the purposes of this research, it is important to identify factors that may have affected his worldview as a younger man. This will offer insight into how he viewed his relationship to both White and Black America as an adult.

Examining the writings and observations of authors and cultural critics who were Patterson's contemporaries will also lend a face and voice to the figures that explain Northern poverty and racism on a macro level, bringing individual voices and perspectives to larger social forces. As Patterson offered little specific commentary on

[56] Stratton, 2

the poverty of his youth (he also spent a significant amount of time away from the city at the Wiltwyck School for Boys in Esopus, New York) author and New York native James Baldwin can lend a voice, as well as a similar perspective, to the factors that contributed to the difficulty that defined life in many Black urban centers.

In one of the first known instances of "White flight" in the United States, Bedford-Stuyvesant's White residents began fleeing for other sections of the city. As real estate agents began buying these "graceful brownstones on tree lined streets" for a fraction of their true value, the homes were summarily gutted and refurbished to cram as many people in as possible. "In 1930," Stratton writes, "fewer than thirty thousand non-White residents lived in the neighborhood, but that changed quickly with wave after wave of Black immigrants. Soon, Bed-Sty became yet another large Black ghetto."[57] The once tree-lined streets were soon filled with trash, gangs and unemployed or underemployed residents. The stately brownstones had been converted into "railroad flats," apartments of four to five rooms in a line, without doors or hot running water, and heated by a coal or oil stove.

Corroborating Stratton's assessment of the physical world the Pattersons inhabited are the observations and experiences of Harlem resident James Baldwin. Though Baldwin freely admitted that he was not an athlete and did not completely understand boxing, he was close enough to Patterson in both age and proximity to offer perspectives on life for Blacks in New York in the years after World War II. During an interview he conducted with Patterson after each man had risen to stardom in their respective professions, Baldwin admits that, while he did not understand how a man as

[57] Stratton, 2

gentle and introspective as Patterson could engage in a sport like boxing, he acknowledged feeling a common connection with him, much like they shared as youths in New York.

When examining some of the social conditions that contributed to the poverty and general feelings of despair that affected Patterson as a youth, several conditions and characteristics are identifiable with Patterson's experiences when he references them, however indirectly, in discussions concerning his childhood. Though published in 1968, Gerald Leinwald's work *Poverty and the Poor* highlights some of the conditions that account for urban, mostly Black poverty during the 1960s. As we apply this analysis to existing research and other informal sources we can begin to see that the poverty of Patterson's New York, as well as the attitudes and feelings that grew from it, were not naturally occurring tragedies that only struck communities of color.

Leinwald's work is informative because it acknowledges the roles that race, education and discrimination had in creating the poverty that plagued poor communities in the urban north, recognizing that "in the slums of northern cities the bulk of the poor are Negroes." Additionally, he also recognizes the diversity within the types of poverty. Insular poverty, which exists in communities where all members are poor, is cited as being particularly devastating. Because of the conditions that force all members of the community to exist in poverty, Leinwand asserts that escaping this type of situation, such as existed in Bedford-Stuyvesant during and after World War II, was difficult, if not nearly impossible.

Noting the characteristics that poor people in America tended to share, Leinwand was able to compile a sort of checklist to determine if an individual and/or

their family was poor. A feature of his list that is interesting, yet reveals much about the state of poverty in urban areas, is his recognition of race as part of this checklist. Though the list is too long to be quoted at length, he identifies several key factors that applied directly to the Patterson family: be non-White, a member of a family with more than six children under 18, fewer than eight years of education, and came from the south.[58]

The problems that Patterson spoke most often and vividly about were those addressed in Leinwand's work including the daily struggles of his family and his own reluctance to attend school for a number of reasons, chief among which was his need to avoid ridicule from classmates and his desire to get a job so he could contribute to the family. Despite tremendous efforts at obtaining gainful employment, his father was consistently working three or more manual labor jobs well into his forties.

These issues, combined with Patterson's insecurities about his own intelligence and poor initial school experience, led him to become one of the faceless, poor Black youth who made up the bulk of Bedford-Stuyvesant's population. Even James Baldwin, who recounted that he would have to depend on his mind instead of his body to get him out of Harlem, had it drummed into his mind that education was "a child's game that one could not win," and that survival took precedence over such games.[59]

Despite Thomas Patterson's routine fifteen-hour workdays (excluding odd jobs on weekends) and his mother's willingness to do whatever work was available, all while

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[58] Gerald Leinwald, ed. *Poverty and the Poor*. New York: Pocket Books, 1968 (20)

[59] Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage Books, 1963 (18)

raising eleven children, they were still seen by middle class Blacks and Whites of all classes as just another collection of lazy welfare recipients. Blamed primarily for all of the social problems that plagued major urban areas, lower class Blacks like Patterson were mired in a cycle of crime, poverty and despair that was nearly impossible to break.

As author Kenneth Clark observed about Harlem, its lower class was seen as "subject peoples, victims of greed, cruelty, insensitivity, guilt, and fear of their masters."[60] This "fear of their masters" had switched from southern-based hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan to the New York police force. As Patterson biographer Alan Levy noted, Patterson was the recipient of multiple beatings as young as the age of ten for petty crimes such as stealing sodas. For Baldwin, he would experience both the physical and mental abuse of the local police for such crimes as crossing into the wrong neighborhood. In addition to the physical humiliation of being unnecessarily frisked and mocked about his supposed sexual prowess, he was then beaten up and left in an empty lot in Harlem. In addition, he was also reminded of where he was and was not welcome in his home city.

> I was thirteen and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, 'Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?'[61]

Though Patterson and Baldwin would not meet until adulthood, the two men would express an appreciation and admiration for the other's sensitivity, perception and

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[60] Pinkney, Alphonso. *Black Americans*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975 (68)

[61] Baldwin, 19

gentleness in worlds that were forged by cruelty and privation as both young men and adults.

Until his departure for Wiltwyck, Floyd Patterson fit most, if not all, of the stereotypes held by many outside of the Bed-Stuy ghetto. He saw his father work himself into exhaustion on a daily basis, his mother struggle to feed the family, and was subjected to numerous moves from one slum to another whenever money became scarce, which was often. While never denying that he stole and was a truant (he would often hide in movie houses or subways for several days at a time before returning home or being arrested), the circumstances surrounding his life and affecting his decisions offers insight into his mindset and reasoning.

For Patterson, his tormentors existed inside his own psyche as well as in the classroom and on the streets. This meant that school was simply a way to stay out of trouble, not a means of self-improvement. By the age of ten, he was already a well-known truant and barely literate, but he cared little if he went on to the next grade or not. School served little purpose except to remind him of how little he or anything about him mattered, and that any hope of improvement was futile.

> "No matter what I did everybody was always laughing at me…---the dirt on my face, the torn, shabby…clothes I wore, and the way I couldn't read or write or answer a question." "Lots of times in school," he recalled, "I'd know the answer and say to myself 'Raise your hand, you dope, you know it.' But I couldn't."[62]

By the end of World War II, the number of Patterson children had grown to seven. Seeing the growing number of mouths to feed and the hopeless struggle both of his parents waged to care for the family, Patterson engaged in behaviors that he

[62] Levy, 11

reasoned would either lessen the strain on his family's resources or, if nothing else, remove himself from the list of burdens on his parents. His reactions and reasoning deserve to be quoted at length because they not only offer an explanation for the behavior of some lower class urban Blacks, but also humanizes the observations of authors and social scientists.

> While hiding in the subway, Patterson would dream about somebody giving him a tremendous amount of money and going home and giving it to his mother. By 1945, the family had seven children. With such a conflict haunting him, he would sometimes return home with some food, almost always stolen of course. While he knew stealing was wrong, and he later recalled that he never stole money, he was driven by the notion that he had to do something to help his family. Stealing repeatedly, Patterson was inevitably caught and arrested. One time he stole a mound of dresses for his mother, so many that he piled them on his head and attempted to walk home on the street with them at 2 A.M., actually thinking he would not be caught. In the era of World War II and the Cold War, no-nonsense sensibilities among officers of the New York Police Department were dominant. The police were in anything but a generous mood in regard to any child stealing, let alone if he did so habitually. The fact that he was Black, of course, made matters even worse. The children's psychological and economic conditions were irrelevant.[63]

Despite the near miraculous turnaround that occurred during Floyd's time at the Wiltwyck School and his early success in boxing, by his teenage years he was still insisting to his parents that he drop out of school, find a job, and continue boxing, which he did (though he never earned a high school diploma, as an adult he always made it a point to encourage young people to do so). While he continued boxing throughout his teens, he also found a job delivering groceries, handing over all of his wages to his mother in an effort to help support his family.

[63] Levy, 12

In spite of Floyd's efforts, his father continued to work multiple jobs to support his wife and eleven children in Bedford-Stuyvesant, which they would not be able to escape until Floyd's success as heavyweight champion in the 1960s. However, Floyd had, by this time, defied conventional expectations of what Black males from major urban centers in Cold War America were supposed to do in the conditions where he and others were forced to live. One of the more remarkable aspects of his story, however, is his lack of commentary regarding race and its impact on his formative years. Though other authors pointed out that both Blacks and Whites were responsible for his success, he rarely mentions race and how it affected his situation.

Like the NAACP representatives and the Marcus Garvey disciples that Stratton speculates the Pattersons might have been aware of, there was little time to worry about race when there was always another uncertainty lurking. As Patterson reflected on the hunger, uncertainty, threats of violence, substandard living conditions, isolation and the mental and emotional torment that defined most of his childhood, he summarized his feelings in one sentence: "I never seemed not scared."[64]

Patterson, Liston and Multiple Black Identities

By the time Patterson captured the heavyweight championship in 1956, external social and political forces had begun to significantly change the way Blacks saw and presented themselves. The non-violent agitation of Martin Luther King Jr., along with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was forcing White America to confront its publicly and privately condoned acceptance of

[64] Levy, 10

racism and discrimination. Believing that integration was the only way that all Americans could enjoy true equality, the gathering Civil Rights movement continued to preach an attitude that mixed compassion with practicality when it came to matters of integration in America.

After winning the championship, Patterson's activities concerning Civil Rights and social causes often came second to his obligations to defend his title. His civic activities included a lifetime membership in the NAACP, collaborating with Jackie Robinson to build an integrated housing complex, and founding and funding the Patterson Homes, a halfway house for boys who had graduated from the Wiltwyck School. But perhaps his most important statement came shortly after he became champion. When he would reflect, as he often did, on the prejudice and discrimination he and his family faced all their lives, he recalled the helpless, conflicted feeling he had about not being in a position to fight back or speak out in any way. Now, as heavyweight champion, his position had changed but his memories had not. In his typically cryptic fashion, he shared his plans with the press.

> 'Segregation and discrimination were not anything new to me,' he said. 'I had lived with them all my life, and like a good many Negroes, I was powerless to do anything about them until I gained a distinctive position.'[65]

When Patterson and Liston were signed to fight in 1962, both Black and White media represented their matchup in similar terms: the gallant Patterson versus the evil Liston. As for the fighter's themselves, their responses to such simplistic understandings of their personalities and motives proved each man to be far more

[65] Stratton, 74

complex than most people suspected. Patterson, when pushed about his feelings about Liston and his criminal past, replied in the thoughtful, empathetic way he would be known for.

> 'The president of the United States, Ralph Bunche, all the big celebrities, all the big leaders of the country,' he said, 'they made Liston a bad guy, and I was a good guy. I don't ever want to endure that pressure again.'

When asked about the comparisons between himself and Liston, he dismissed them: "I don't think anyone should be compared. 'This guy's better than him because he's a nice guy. This guy's been in jail, this guy's no good.'"[66] Liston, displaying the enigmatic character that would prove maddening to reporters and friends alike, was more blunt:

> 'Patterson says it's the Mob that keeps him from fighting me,' Sonny said; 'but I'm the only Mob he's worried about.'[67]

Despite both of Liston's decisive victories over Patterson, each man held a quiet respect for the other, and they were largely in agreement on matters of civil rights in America. More importantly, they both understood the reality of their situation as both athletes and Blacks in society, and that the power their position as champion held was shaky at best. Another dynamic of their competitive relationship that is under evaluated is the role that their respective journeys and heritages played in the formation of the identities they displayed as elite athletes. Liston's identity, forged by hardship, mistrust and fear in rural Arkansas, represented an image of Blacks that White America could easily identify, understand, and, oddly enough, with which they were comfortable. Despite his physical prowess, White Americans could rest easy in

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[66] Tosches, 160

[67] Tosches, 161

the knowledge that Liston could still be controlled and, if necessary, neutralized. Be it through prison or the denial of licenses by state athletic commissions, Liston could still be held in check.

Patterson can be examined in a similar manner, despite the differences in region and circumstance. Coming from some of the worst slums in New York, he came to represent a type of American dream that emphasized hard work, honesty and nobility in victory and defeat. But, like Liston, his identity could be examined, consumed and reduced by White America to a comfortable level of potency. As unsatisfying as the image of Patterson as the heavyweight champion could have been to White Americans, he could still be controlled to a degree, just like Liston. When Patterson tried to purchase a home in a White suburb, White Americans quickly and happily remembered that whatever physical prowess and fear his image could conjure up, Patterson, as a Black male in America, could still be rendered powerless.

When Patterson ignored the pleas of the NAACP and agreed to meet Sonny Liston to defend the heavyweight title of the world, civil rights leaders across the country held their collective breath. After Liston disposed of Patterson in the first round, their collective anguish was palpable. Instead of the quiet, self-effacing, politically moderate Patterson who was the embodiment of the promise of Black America, the heavyweight champion was now a political wildcard. Civil rights leaders emitted a collective anguished cry when the championship was violently seized by Sonny Liston. A barely literate, surly, menacing, former ex-convict was not the image that Black leaders and progressive Whites had when they envisioned what type of Black American would be representing the race on the athletic front.

Yet Liston, like Patterson, had come to utilize certain aspects of his personality as a means of protection from outside ridicule and embarrassment. Upon closer inspection, Liston would prove to be a far more complex, understanding and caring individual than anyone had reason to believe. In a conversation he had with *Sports Illustrated* reporter Jack McKinney after winning the championship from Floyd Patterson detailing his plans on what he planned to do as champion, McKinney was struck not only by the amount of charitable work Sonny wanted to engage in to help both Blacks and Whites, but also by his respect and reverence for Joe Louis. However, what resonated with Liston was not for Louis's athleticism. For Sonny, it was a matter of the respectability and dignity Louis carried himself with that resonated most deeply.

> I know it was in the papers that the better class of coloured people were hopin' I'd lose, even prayin' I'd lose, because they was afraid I wouldn't know how to act…I remember one thing so clear about listening to Joe Louis fight on the radio when I was a kid. I never remember a fight that the announcer didn't say about Louis, 'A great fighter and a credit to his race'. Remember? That used to make me feel real proud inside.

However, Liston's plans were not just limited to the integrationist causes. As the selfless, giving aspects of Liston's personality continued to come forth, he spoke of his sincere desire to help children of all colors to not have the same negative experiences that negatively affected his future.

> It says now I'm the world's champion, and that's just the way it's gonna be. I want to go to a lot of places---like orphan homes and reform schools. I'll be able to say, 'Kid, I know it's tough for you and it might even get tougher. But don't give up on the world. Good things can happen if you let them.'[68]

[68] Steen, 128

Though their reigns as heavyweight champion were separated by five years, Patterson and Liston each expressed a desire not only to represent their race in an exemplary manner, but also to foster goodwill among all people. In spite of being pitted against each other twice and taking different approaches to American politics, each man wanted the same thing: an America where they could live and work in peace. Despite Liston and Patterson's exit from heavyweight legitimacy at the hands of Muhammad Ali in the 1960s, both Patterson and Liston would experience their own unique growth and maturation when it came to their personal politics. The following chapter will focus on the political development of Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston in the 1960s.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE POLITICAL GROWTH AND MATURATION

OF FLOYD PATTERSON AND SONNY LISTON

By the late 1950s, the forces that had caused millions of Blacks to migrate from the south to the north had abated somewhat, but the flow still came. Despite the uncertainties that Liston and Patterson had faced in their experiences in impoverished urban settings, they and other Blacks chose to remain in Northern and Midwestern cities looking for better opportunities. Where Liston's worldview and personality were largely influenced by the multitude of social and economic hardships that the rural south offered, Patterson's upbringing in the slums of New York offered the other side of the Great Migration and revealed a stark truth: whether in the south or north, the idea of an Black promised land was beginning to seem less and less plausible.

Further complicating these notions of identity, social equality and basic dignity were the growing number of events and personalities that accompanied the late 1950s and early 1960s. Legal decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education*[69] in1954 and Martin Luther King's bus boycott were demonstrating to White America, whether they agreed or not, that Blacks wanted to enjoy the rights and privileges that had been largely withheld from them since the country's inception. While many advocated integration as the only avenue by which to obtain full citizenship, the growing Black Muslim movement asserted that total separation of Black and White was the only way to obtain true equality.

[69] Commager, 619

In spite of the legacy of caution and fear that often defined the formative years of each man and their forbearers, Liston and Patterson still demonstrated a desire to live in an America that allowed them to move and operate as they pleased. Aware of the risks that came with becoming politically active, each man made his position and opinions known but in ways that were reflective of their unique upbringings. Each man's desire to live in an integrated society was often intentionally distorted by more militant Blacks as a desire to live and act like White people. Yet even a cursory examination of their views on integration and civil rights reveals not so much a desire to live with Whites, but to enjoy the same rights, freedoms, and privileges White America not only took for granted but often fought to keep from Americans of color.

Many of the problems concerning the legacies of Patterson and Liston stem from the lopsided reporting and interpretations of them as athletes and individuals. Pieces such as Eldridge Cleaver's "Lazarus Come Forth" and Leroi Jones's "The Dempsey-Liston Fight" were attacks on Liston and Patterson's meanings and their authenticity as Black men. In the popular press, the reporting on Liston and Patterson in various newspapers and periodicals like *Sports Illustrated* ("Can A Man Turn A Whole Town Rotten In One Night?" by Jack McKinney) and newspapers like *The Greater Milwaukee Star* ("Sad night in White America) we are left with pictures of men who are driven only by a desire to lose their Blackness and to become as close to White as possible.

Perhaps one of the best examples of this comes from Dave Zirin's chapter on Ali in his 2008 book *A People's History of the United States*. In describing Patterson's relationship to Ali and the country as a whole, Ali is cast as the noble revolutionary and

Patterson as the shuffling Uncle Tom who deserved the physical and psychological punishment Ali unnecessarily heaped on him.

> Floyd Patterson, who wrapped himself tightly in the American flag, challenged Ali and said, 'This fight is a crusade to reclaim the title from the Black Muslims. As a Catholic I am fighting Clay as a patriotic duty. I am going to return the crown to America.'

Zirin later references Cleaver's "Lazarus Come Forth" as more evidence of Patterson's obsequious nature. However, when the *Sports Illustrated* piece "I Want to Destroy Clay" (which, along with Cleaver's work will be addressed later in this research) is read in its entirety, it is not a hyper-patriotic treatise. Rather, it is Patterson's interpretation of the Black Muslim message, his own experiences (positive and negative) as a Black man in America, and the factors that influenced his politics.

The comments and observations each man made regarding his formative years is particularly valuable for the insight provided into their specific experiences and may offer some insight into their adult lives. Liston, unsure of the exact date of his birth, never had a childhood, and whose psyche was forged by physical pain, want and anger. Of Liston's mysterious death, Tosches appropriately describes Liston's life: "A guy who knew Sonny once said, 'I think he died the day he was born.'"[70]

As for the extremely complicated Patterson, the defining features of his childhood were not much different. As W.K. Stratton notes, Floyd's impoverished surroundings, near homelessness and constant fear and guilt all contributed to his fragile mental and emotional state.

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[70] Tosches, 7

> ...the young Floyd Patterson had problems beyond those of a typical ghetto kid, problems that mystified his parents, his teachers, and ultimately himself.[71]

What cannot be disputed is that Patterson and Liston were both the products of troubled homes, difficult daily lives and the stress of being poor and Black in a segregated America. The fact that each man was able to attain the level of success he did in his professional and personal live was nothing short of remarkable. Yet by the time they had reached adulthood biologically, each man would have his identity as a Black male subjected to attacks from a number of different sources. For those pockets of White America who still believed in racial segregation, Black dominance over one of the most respected titles in all of sport was difficult to endure. The thought of a Black heavyweight champion with an opinion on civil rights would prove even more difficult to stomach, even if it was a "Good Nigger" like Patterson.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, active participation in the Civil Rights movement by athletes across a variety of sports was becoming more acceptable. Where they initially could have hoped to only have to deal with the racism and hostility from portions of White America, Patterson and Liston would also have to face the rancor of Muhammad Ali, the threat of physical violence from the Black Muslims, and political and social isolation from a growing number of ostensibly "militant" Blacks (who, amusingly enough, would for a time include future *Today* show and HBO's *Real Sports* host Bryant Gumbel[72]).

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[71] Stratton, 3

[72] http://www.tvguide.com/celebrities/bryant-gumbel/bio/195060/ Accessed June 11, 2015

Despite the hardships that defined each man's childhood, in his own way, each would demonstrate an understanding of the momentum of the Civil Rights movement, its meaning for current and future generations, and go on to represent their beliefs and feelings with quiet dignity and courage. Further complicating each man's political expression would be the rise of Muhammad Ali, his own political growth and conversion to the Nation of Islam, and the relentless assaults Patterson and Liston were forced to endure from him and the Muslims both during and after their careers. While the Nation of Islam's influence as a national organization was fairly limited, both Patterson and Liston were forced to confront them under different circumstances. Patterson in the press when he addressed their separatist ideology, and Liston, first during his time in prison and possibly again as champion, where it is rumored that the Muslims threatened Liston's life unless he lost to Ali.

The following sections will examine the political beliefs and expressions of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, and several Black nationalists and cultural critics who interpreted their actions. In order to begin creating new narratives, addressing the main narratives that served to make each man more than a foil to Ali must be reexamined. Each man was forced to deal with certain stigmas that accompanied their personal and political beliefs and ultimately led to the crafting of one-sided, incomplete narratives. For Liston, his criminal past and lack of education made him into an object of fear for Whites and an object of disdain from politically moderate Blacks. For Patterson, his desire to live and work where and how he pleased in America, and his willingness to work within existing political and social systems to achieve that end,

earned him the label of a sycophant for the White establishment, a sellout, and a puppet for politicians like John F. Kennedy.[73]

The purpose of reexamining these men during their athletic prime is not to give a blow-by-blow account of their reigns as heavyweight champions. Rather, it is to examine their movements and thought processes outside of the ring, offer additional explanations as to what influenced their political affiliations and illustrate how, tacitly and overtly, they often supported each other in a variety of ways. Most noticeably, the ways these men defended themselves and each other against a growing number of radical, militant Blacks both in and out of the ring will be presented. For the purposes of this research, militant will be defined as someone who is an advocate of overthrowing or completely replacing an existing system of government, and is willing to utilize discord or violence to achieve that end

The Political Growth and Development of Floyd Patterson

By the time of Floyd Patterson's Olympic victory in Helsinki in 1952, his mind was not on the growing political movements that would come to define the rest of the 1950s and 1960s. Upon his return home to Bedford-Stuyvesant, he soon came to recognize that, while his gold medal earned him respect and prestige within certain circles in American society, it was not going to provide financial relief for himself or his family.

> In 1952 five Black Americans entered the ring on the world stage, and all five emerged as champions-winning for their country its greatest Olympic boxing triumph. But the champions' race went largely unremarked upon

[73] Walton, Mac. "Sad night in white America" [Milwaukee] *The Greater Milwaukee Star*. 6/27/1970: Pg. 16. Print

> in an America in the grips of a Red scare, an America where most schools were segregated and Blacks were expected to know their place.[74]

In the case of Patterson, he was not returning to a stable life in America with a wealthy group of investors ready to finance and support his budding pro career; the life he left behind was remarkably similar to the one which he returned. Though he was now an Olympic champion, he was still lacking a high school diploma and his family was still living a hardscrabble existence. In spite of his parent's protests that he return to school, Patterson reasoned that the only hope he and his family had for a real future rested on his ability to make a living with his body. Patterson also demonstrated his ability to overlook race when it came to the survival of himself and his family when he made his decision to turn professional. Though he and two of his brothers had already been under the tutelage of local Italian-American trainer Cus D'Amato since before Floyd's trip to the Olympics, he had to reassure his parents, who were somewhat concerned about his choice of profession, that his decision would benefit them all. As he explained to them, his trust in D'Amato would not just help him achieve success as a professional, but it would help the family enjoy a marked degree of financial stability.[75]

When we examine Patterson's early life, career, and budding political consciousness, what is striking about his recollections is his lack of concern with race. Whether among other Blacks or with Whites, Patterson's initial concerns are for the survival of his family and himself. In three available biographies written about Patterson, his formative years, much like Sonny Liston, were largely defined by the

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[74] Stratton, 32

[75] Levy, 26

struggle for survival of self and family, and racial ideology meant little without a home to live in or food to eat. As a teenager returning home to a rundown apartment housing his parents and ten other children and nothing but a series of manual labor jobs and part time work at the Grammercy Park Hotel, Patterson's racial pride, which he had always carried in a quiet, reserved manner, would have to wait until his professional situation had stabilized.[76]

When Patterson had finally achieved his goal of becoming heavyweight champion of the world in 1956, he was, as Stratton asserts, well aware of the social and cultural changes occurring in America, yet he remained largely silent. Several key Civil Rights developments of the early 1950s (the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, the murder of Emmitt Till and *Brown v. Board of Education*) aroused enough passions among both Black and White Americans that Black athletes, particularly one aspiring to remain heavyweight champion and who valued his livelihood, would have to exercise extreme caution in how vociferous they were in their views and opinions.

However, his silence can help to complicate not just existing accounts of Patterson, but also the existing accounts of his contemporaries. Patterson's knowledge of the existing racial climate, his lucrative but still precarious position as a professional athlete, and his reliance on an integrated management and legal team to protect and further his career is evidence of a practical, measured decision to protect himself, voice his opinions and make his contributions where appropriate. The decision to speak out or remain silent on controversial issues involved deliberate calculation as well as a degree of cooperation, much of it interracial. In Patterson's case, his awareness of the

[76] Stratton, 34.

political climate surrounding him, his willingness to cooperate with the members of his camp, both Black and White, all while considering the needs of himself and his family, dictated his political maneuvers.

As Patterson began to settle in to the life of heavyweight champion, his political activism gradually gained momentum, though not always in a manner of his choosing, and not without difficulty from both Blacks and Whites. Whites who had no desire to integrate rebuffed him in whatever way they could, while a growing number of militant Blacks turned Patterson's stance on integration and tolerance against him. Labeled an Uncle Tom by a growing portion of the Black population and still treated as a second class citizen by southern Whites, Patterson found himself placed in a difficult position: still at the mercy of the racist portions of White America, yet too politically moderate and patient for an increasingly militant, increasingly impatient Black population.[77]

However, one of the most important moments of the development of Patterson's beliefs on religion and civil rights came with the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963. Joining forces with Jackie Robinson, Patterson went to Alabama, not to regain the spotlight as he had already lost his title to Liston, but because he believed in the sacrifice that people in the south were making. Upon Patterson's return from Alabama, he was blasted by portions of the Black population when he declared that the Black Muslims were little more than a Black version of the Ku Klux Klan, and that he had

[77] "Are Bigots Really Making Floyd Patterson Run?" *Los Angeles Sentinel* [Los Angeles] Thursday, May 14, 1964: Pg. 4B (Print)

no respect for them or their values, including the belief in Black superiority and racial separation, an issue they had been preaching since the early 1960s.[78]

Further complicating matters for Patterson was the omnipresent yet mysterious devil that was Sonny Liston. All during Patterson's quest for Olympic gold and the heavyweight title, Liston remained on the fringes of both the heavyweight elite and the conscience of politically active Blacks. This left Patterson with the unenviable task of dealing with Liston as both a legitimate challenger for the title and a potential political nightmare. As a lifetime member of the NAACP and personal guest of President John F. Kennedy, Floyd was urged not to grant Liston a title fight, believing that if Patterson lost, it would severely damage the work and achievements of civil rights activists. After dispatching Ingemar Johansson in two out of three bouts, Patterson had little choice but to confront Liston.

Yet when Patterson was approached for an interview with acclaimed writer and fellow New Yorker James Baldwin before his fight with Liston, his reflective, self-effacing, introverted nature was no longer an asset, but a window into how complex a Black male, who was also an athlete, could be. The following section will examine the interactions between Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston and James Baldwin

Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston and James Baldwin

By the time of Sonny Liston's ascension to contender in the early 1960s, very few people, Black or White, knew exactly what his intentions were. Who he allied himself with, what he did or didn't know, and, perhaps most alarming, what he was capable of

[78] "Ali Calls Race Separation The 'Only Hope' For Negro." *The Daily Defender* [Chicago] Nov. 2, 1967: Pg. 5, col 1

were questions the entire boxing world was asking. For those who observed Liston as a political vessel, his attitudes and actions primarily served to further complicate matters that enflamed the baser passions and fears of both Blacks and Whites.

Yet In spite of the dangerous, mysterious persona that he very deliberately presented, Sonny proved to be far more complex and layered when it came to issues of race, discrimination and social justice. While multiple narratives exist surrounding Liston and his time as a heavyweight contender and champion, his opinions and thoughts on challenging social issues during his life receive far less attention. While his opinions were often hampered by his limited reading ability, he was often described as quick witted, thoughtful and analytical when it came to his understandings of seemingly complex issues, his general conduct described by Norman Mailer as "dark, brimming, eloquent, reproachful…."[79]

Before challenging Patterson for the title, Liston was asked why his past garnered so much negative attention compared to that of Patterson and Joe Louis. While not blaming his adulthood mistakes on his childhood, Liston did acknowledge that being poor and Black in the south during the 1930s and 1940s offered little in the way of support for wayward youths like himself. Citing a ghostwritten piece for the *Chicago-American*, Steen provides evidence that in spite of the public perception of Liston as a cold, unfeeling monster, at his core he was anything but. When speculating about his childhood and the experiences that shaped it, he offers an honest, mournful assessment of what he could have been had his environment and circumstances been different.

[79] Steen, 112

> In the first place, I probably came from a worse environment than they did. They were raised in the north, in Detroit and New York, where people are at least aware of the juvenile problem. I was raised in the south, which is just now tackling the problem. I'm sure I would have been better had I been fortunate enough to meet a [Cus] D'Amato…You know what I often wonder about? Where were all those people who claim they were interested in juvenile delinquents when I was coming along as a kid?[80]

As the Liston and Patterson fight drew nearer, James Baldwin, who, like his contemporary Norman Mailer knew little about boxing ("I know nothing whatever about the Sweet Science or the Cruel Profession or the Poor Boy's Game."), gained unique perspective into the difficult contexts that were developing around the fight. After spending some time with both fighters, Baldwin was able to determine, correctly, that there was never any sort of dislike, grudge, or enmity between the two fighters. As Baldwin observed, they were two Black athletes who were preparing to do their work, and that the apparent dislike they had for each other was nothing more than a pitiable attempt by bored journalists to build interest in the fight.

> Dispatches went out every day, typewriters clattered, phones rang; each day, carloads of journalists invaded the Patterson or Liston camps, hung around until Patterson or Liston appeared; asked lame, inane questions, always the same questions; went away again, back to those telephones and typewriters; and informed a waiting, anxious world, or at least a waiting, anxious editor, what Patterson and Liston had said or done that day. It was insane and desperate, since neither of them ever really *did* anything. There wasn't anything for them to do, except train for the fight.[81]

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[80] Steen, 59

[81] Baldwin, James. *The Cross of Redemption*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010 (208)

As for the fighters and their dislike for one another, Baldwin described Patterson as a true gentleman, found Liston to be polite and fairly agreeable, and described their supposed feud "as limp and tasteless as British roast lamb."

When Baldwin observed and interviewed Patterson in greater depth before his first fight with Sonny Liston in 1962, both his and Patterson's celebrity had already been firmly established. Despite never having met Patterson, as well as Baldwin's admitted ignorance of boxing, he reported feeling a type of kinship with Patterson that extended beyond their shared experiences growing up poor and Black in New York. Though he does not analyze Patterson's political opinions overtly, his descriptions point to the complexities and contradictions that plagued Patterson as both an athlete and person of color.

Baldwin notes that Patterson, in occupying these dual identities, is difficult to understand, making him an object of curiosity and a second-class citizen to Whites and a cultural stranger to Blacks. When acknowledging these contradictions, Baldwin sees in Patterson the unique ability to bring to "a simple activity a terrible note of complexity." As Baldwin noted, Patterson's personality and analytical nature forced Blacks and Whites to realize that such straightforward activities and concepts as boxing and racial solidarity did not exist independent of the other. On the contrary, these two could create something far more nuanced.

> This is his personal style, a style which strongly suggests that most un-American of attributes, privacy, the will to privacy; and my own guess is that he is still relentlessly, painfully shy-he lives gallantly with his scars but not all of them have healed-and while he has found a way to master this, he has found no way to hide it;…[82]

[82] Baldwin, 211

When Baldwin spoke of scars, the racially motivated acts and insults that occurred during Patterson's reign as champion were numerous, but he also speaks to Patterson's complex personal nature as well as his understanding of changing race relations in America. W.K. Stratton relates a story that, while not recognized as the defining moment in Patterson's political development, certainly helped contribute not only to the scars Baldwin spoke of, but also to his ability to not just live with them but to display them proudly.

During a five-city exhibition tour, Patterson's travels took him through several cities throughout the Midwest and into the south. Upon his arrival in Fort Smith, Arkansas, in 1957 he was again reminded of his place as a Black person in a largely segregated America. Facing a hostile reception from an all-White audience upon his arrival at the train station, Patterson and his entourage were saved from further humiliation and possible injury by White Pastor Samuel Delaney of the St. John the Baptist Catholic Church. Unbeknownst to Patterson, Delaney had been working for the last eight years to make his congregation more accepting of integration, as well as being part of the movement to integrate local public schools. Offering Patterson and his camp transportation, he also insisted they be his personal guests at the church rectory.

This incident and others allowed Patterson to both reveal and cultivate the thoughtful, reflective nature that would make him the bane of sportswriters and political activists who wanted their athletes' feelings to be as uncomplicated as their athletic mission. Not only had Patterson been painfully aware of segregation and discrimination for his entire life, he also knew that speaking his mind and heart would have little impact until he had attained a certain prominence. When he became

heavyweight champion, Blacks and Whites, whether they supported him or not, cheered his athletic accomplishments or not, supported his politics or not, would have to hear what he had to say, like it or not.

> While champion from the late 1930s into the 1940s, Joe Louis had never decried racial prejudice in the United States. Patterson would break with the Louis tradition. As he made his exhibition tour, he decided that the time was right to begin speaking out."[83]

Aware of the difficulties that his predecessors had endured, Patterson was more reflective about his own trials and tribulations while realistically examining what contributions he could make to his present and future. Despite the discrimination he had suffered at the hands of Fort Smith's White population, he made several important personal decisions. In maintaining and supporting Delaney's efforts, Patterson would donate $3,000 for the improvement of Delaney's church, as well as purchasing a lifetime membership in the NAACP. It would be moderate, measured moves such as these that would earn him the allegiance of leaders and celebrities like President Kennedy, Jackie Robinson and Martin Luther King Jr., but also the scorn of Muhammad Ali.

Because they were of a similar mindset on the state of race relations in America, Baldwin is able to present a picture of a man who is at odds with the country he calls home, but who is aware that he is in a unique, albeit tenuous, position that can exert significant influence, for either positive or negative change. Patterson's actions as a private citizen, coupled with his very cautious nature within the world of boxing, resulted in the production of a Black heavyweight champion who skewed the comfortable, political narratives Blacks and Whites had grown accustomed to.

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[83] Stratton, 74

He also demonstrated an awareness and savvy understanding of the press, their questions, and the weight his responses carried to both the Black and White community. While he seemed to enjoy confusing reporters with his enigmatic answers to seemingly simple questions, it was not done to upset their sensibilities or make for good copy. Rather, it was the product of a relationship bred of caution and mistrust. This sense of caution was displayed when Floyd, questioned about his reception by European fans during an overseas exhibition, replied that they were "much warmer than here," but also emphatically stated he did not "want to say anything derogatory about the United States", and that he was "satisfied." Instances like this proved to Baldwin that Patterson's effectiveness as champion came in his ability not only to confuse the press who were already struggling with Patterson's personality, but also in his ability to demonstrate that the worlds of athletics and politics were not mutually exclusive, and they invariably intersected. As Baldwin observed,

> Life's far from being as simple as most sportswriters would like to have it. The world of sports, in fact, is far from being as simple as the sports pages often make it.[84]

Eldridge Cleaver, the Heavyweight Championship and "True" Blackness

While Baldwin was not the only writer or reporter to take a serious interest in Patterson (Baldwin described his writing for the fight as writing "in its most primitive sense…" while Gay Talese authored thirty-seven articles on Patterson during his career), Baldwin's interview before his fight with Liston, his dialogue with Patterson and his reflections on him as an athlete and a human being provide special insight into understandings of race and politics in the early 1960s. Most importantly, while

[84] Baldwin, 212

Baldwin does acknowledge he and Patterson came from the same general neighborhood, he knows that geographic similarities do not equal spiritual or emotional bonds. It is his probing of Patterson's understanding of the difficulty involved in being himself - a young, famous Black athlete - and how that translated into wounds more psychic than physical.

Additionally, each man shares a tacit understanding of how change, acceptance and tolerance will come in American life. Both openly rejected the idea of revolution and overthrow, knowing that such an ideology was simply not realistic and would create only more heartbreak and pain. In order for their hopes to be realized, each man understood the other as an ally in the struggle to have their shared humanity and dignity recognized. It is this last point that needs special consideration. Patterson and Baldwin's hopes were both durable and delicate. As Baldwin wrote, this idea, like Patterson, was "tough and proud and beautiful," but at the same time was "terribly vulnerable."[85]

Though Patterson's commitment to his ideals would never waiver, his vulnerability would be tested with the onset of a more militant, less patient ideology for change. Though Muhammad Ali and the Nation of Islam did repeatedly voice their disdain and disrespect for Patterson's belief in peaceful, gradual integration, as well as being a Roman Catholic, their radical stance, strict code of conduct, and borderline fanatical devotion to Elijah Muhammad struck many Black citizens (Sonny Liston, Floyd Patterson, Joe Frazier and George Foreman among them) as strange, divisive, impractical and frightening.

[85] Baldwin, 210

An essay from a then-incarcerated Eldridge Cleaver lays bare the very deep divisions in Black thought that Patterson knew were a distinct consequence of speaking his mind and becoming politically active during and after his time as champion. Despite Patterson's reserved demeanor, charitable works, and devotion to peaceful integration, Cleaver shapes Patterson into White America's champion. Because of Patterson's refusal to take an aggressive, militant stance, Cleaver sees the mainstream civil rights movement and its followers, primarily Patterson, in very distinct, non-negotiable terms: a sycophantic lackey of White America who did not deserve to be called men, inadvertently echoing the sentiments of 19th century abolitionist David Walker. Because Patterson was not willing to abandon the ideals that he and Baldwin shared, to Cleaver and others he was now an honorary White man, and should expect no unity or solidarity from the Black community.

With the publication of *Soul on Ice* author Eldridge Cleaver represented the promise and punishment that awaited Black males who embraced a more aggressive approach to affecting change in 1960s America. Writing from Folsom Prison in 1965, Cleaver's topics included religion, the war in Vietnam and race relations. It would be Patterson, however, to whom he would attach special meaning. At the time of Cleaver's book publication in 1967, Patterson was already several years removed from being a serious contender for the heavyweight crown. Thanks to his two losses to the feared and much reviled Sonny Liston, Cleaver cast Patterson as the ultimate symbol of a bygone era of Black obsequiousness in both sport and the quest for racial equality in America.

In his piece "Lazarus, Come Forth," Cleaver reduced Patterson to little more than a sycophant who was content to subsist on the scraps that White America left him, both in and out of the ring. His athletic and personal achievements were removed from their context and presented as the actions of a man who was too stupid, too scared, or too much of a toady to American Whites to recognize what being "truly" Black meant. However, Cleaver's indignation and contempt are not limited to Patterson. Advocates of nonviolent, peaceful integration are all lumped by Cleaver into the same category. Noting a history of Whites in power using Black entertainers and athletes as tools of appeasement for Black unrest, Cleaver characterizes these efforts as a type of betrayal, and the participants as nothing more than contributors to an "Uncle Tom cool-out."[86]

Citing the rioting and destruction that engulfed Watts as proof, Cleaver asserted that the efforts of athletes and entertainers to promote racial harmony were a waste of time and only made things more difficult for Blacks across America. Systematically crushing or minimalizing more controversial Black leaders like Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X and elevating athletes and other celebrities to positions of prominence meant no significant progress could be achieved. To Cleaver, the presence of entertainers did more harm than good.

> The effect was to take the "problem" out of a political and economic and philosophical context and place it on the misty level of "goodwill," "charitable and harmonious race relations," and "good sportsmanlike conduct."[87]

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[86] Eldridge Cleaver, "Lazarus, Come Forth" in Cleaver, Eldrige. *Soul on Ice*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968 (90)

[87] Cleaver, 88

While Cleaver's opinions were by no means the singular voice on race relations during this period, his voice was part of an increasingly vicious crescendo that continued to pit Floyd Patterson against Muhammad Ali as both an athlete and an individual. Calling Ali a "genuine revolutionary" and the "first 'free' Black champion" served to mythologize Ali and add to his legend while serving to minimize Patterson's political and social contributions. Labeling him the leader of the "mythical legions of faithful darkies who inhabit the White imagination," Patterson had become a second-class citizen to those portions of the Black community who followed Muhamad Ali's lead by calling him the "Rabbit."

Much of Cleaver's praise and adulation is directed at the efforts of Muhammad Ali and Elijah Muhammad to break free from White control of the heavyweight championship and to reimagine its meanings to Americans as a whole. Cleaver likens the successes of Ali and the Nation of Islam as a type of revival, a rebirth, on par with the resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus.

> And just as Jesus was summoned to the cave to raise Lazarus from the dead, Elijah Muhammad had been summoned by God to lift up the modern Lazarus, the Negro, from his grave. "Come out of her, my people!" cries Elijah Muhammad. Cassius Clay, shedding his graveyard identity like an old dead skin, is one who heeded Elijah's call, repudiating the identity America gave him and taking on a new identity---Muhammad Ali. Floyd Patterson did not heed Elijah.[88]

What, then, were the benefits of those who did heed Elijah? More specifically, what were the effects on Cleaver, Ali, and the Nation of Islam as a whole when news of Elijah Muhammad's extramarital affairs with Muslim girls barely half his age became public? Did they relent from their hardline stance when it was revealed that Elijah's son

[88] Cleaver, 95

Herbert had, in essence, stolen nearly half of Ali's earnings since becoming his manager? Of Ali, Herbert said, "You don't have to be brilliant to hustle Ali. He's a setup." As for Herbert, his own behaviors were not in line with the basic tenets of Muslim ideology. Journalist Mark Kram described Herbert as "a subatomic particle", "lethal", and "insatiable" in his desires and appetites, particularly for gourmet cuisine and White women.

> Herbert was a subatomic particle in Ali's life, a certain lethal kind that cannot be seen even under a powerful microscope, their existence known only by their effects. With Herbert, sometimes you thought you saw something, but look back and all you had was a three-piece suit, a hat, brim up and down over his eyes. Others thought of him as a pudgy member of the old *Our Gang* cast, and still others viewed him as an insatiable King Farouk. Far too jolly company for a description of the son of Elijah.[89]

Cleaver and others lauded the Muslims for not just taking control of the heavyweight title, but wrestling it away from White promoters, managers and their Black puppets willing to tear each other to pieces for a few dollars. This begs the question: how, then, did Cleaver and other Black militants respond when the truth about the Muslims, the prophet Elijah, Herbert and others who profited from "Ali's sweat and pain" became known? In the minds of those who believed so completely in the possibility of societal revolution and the rhetoric of Muslim racial separation, was it somehow more honorable, or at least more tolerable, when Blacks in positions of power stole from other Blacks, as the Muslims did from Ali?

While Cleaver's influence on Black revolution in the 1960s was minimal, his actions in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s only added confusion to an already

[89] Kram, 180.

clouded legacy. After a failed presidential campaign in 1968 and a confrontation with the police, Cleaver fled to Paris. While in exile, he would later reemerge in 1975 with the design and production of his "Penis Pants." Feeling males had been "castrated in clothing," Cleaver said the pants were a statement of his personal stand "against penis binding."[90] After less than successful sales of the item, Cleaver later converted to Mormonism and became a conservative Republican before dying in 1998 at the age of 62.[91]

Yet Cleaver and others failed to revisit their earlier narratives and positions, refusing to recognize that the greed of Blacks was just as powerful as that of Whites and that in this case, the treachery cuts even deeper. In the case of the Muslims and Ali, they were able to utilize Black power, revolution and the emasculation of the White race to garner popular support while gaining control of the Ali myth and the assets that came with it. As Patterson would show in the future, he may have been a pawn in their eyes, but unlike Ali, he had been controlling his own moves on the board for quite some time.[92]

Floyd Patterson's Response to Black Militants

Despite his belief in eventual social and political equality for all Americans, Patterson only gave added ammunition to the Muslim message of segregation when he

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[90] http://www.messynessychic.com/2013/08/01/the-1970s-political-activist-who-invented-penis-pants/ Accessed April 28, 2015

[91] http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/us/eldridge-cleaver-black-panther-who-became-gop-conservative-is-dead-at-62.html Accessed April 28, 2015

[92] Cuddy, Jack. "Champion Floyd Patterson Most Powerful Dictator Since Gene Tunney: King of Kings Is Own Boss." *The Chicago Defender* May 19, 1962: Pg. 20. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Web. Accessed 9 Oct. 2014

authored an article for *Sports Illustrated* entitled "I want to destroy Clay." When read fully and placed in the proper context, Patterson's article is not a declaration of blind allegiance to the White mainstream power structure, nor is it an outright condemnation of the new, more militant approach to Black political ideology. Instead, it is a defense of his politics, his religion, and his belief in the possibility of an integrated America. Despite the unfortunate choice of titles for the article, Patterson's reasons for wanting to regain the title are more complex than his title would suggest.

Most importantly, Patterson made it clear that he harbored no ill will toward Ali or his choice of religion. What Patterson did take issue with was the divisive nature of Muslim ideology and rhetoric, which he viewed as completely counterproductive to the goals of all American Blacks. As Patterson said in his assessment of Ali, "He has a right to believe what he believes, but harm has been done to the Negroes' cause and the way the rest of the world regards it by the one who calls himself Muhammad Ali. I don't deny him his rights. By the same token, I have mine."[93] Patterson's statement, though brief, underscores the very complex and multifaceted nature of Black identity during this period of the civil rights movement.

Patterson's statement also reveals that a single person or group did not universally represent Black Americans. When Patterson's criticism of the Nation of Islam's ideology is viewed against Patterson's own religious and political beliefs, he articulates a feeling among Blacks that were more moderate politically and believed in the gradual, non-violent ideology of Martin Luther King Jr. and the NAACP. In spite of

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[93] Patterson, Floyd and Gross, Milton. "I Want To Destroy Clay." http://www.si.com/vault October 19, 1964: n. pag. Web Accessed 9 Oct. 2014

the attempts of Eldridge Cleaver to paint Patterson as a sycophantic Uncle Tom, a close reading of Patterson's article and the control he exerted over his own career show him to be anything but.

At no point in his piece does Patterson make any effort to hide his political or religious leanings. By this time a devoted convert to Roman Catholicism, he specifically outlined his objections to a member of the Nation of Islam possessing the heavyweight title and the power that came with it. As Patterson correctly points out, basic Muslim rhetoric from Elijah Muhammad himself asserted that the races could never peacefully coexist and, therefore, must separate. Muhammad Ali, demonstrating the devotion Elijah Muhammad was able to elicit from his followers, not only believed in this idea, he also believed that total separation would be achieved by 1970 because, to quote Ali, "Elijah Muhammad predicted it and everything he predicted comes true."[94]

As Patterson correctly asserted, the power of the heavyweight championship, coupled with the massive social changes that had already occurred by 1964, gave the title a large amount of symbolic power, and the man who held that title had added responsibility. For Patterson, the heavyweight champion had a responsibility to all Americans, not just Blacks. While he was conscious of the objections and fears that members of the NAACP as well as powerful White politicians and policy makers had regarding Liston, Patterson was also aware that racial solidarity, at least in his sphere of

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[94] "Clay Considering Muslim Ministry." *Daily Defender*. Aug. 12, 1964. Pg. 32, col.3. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/imageserver/pagepdf_download.cgi?RECORD=HNP_68423_19640812_0133&PAGES=32&WARNING=N&DOWNLOAD=N Accessed 29 Sep. 2014

athletic expertise, was more important than the objections of civil rights leaders or politicians.

When Patterson agreed to his first fight with Liston in 1962, the stakes were raised exponentially. President Kennedy invited him to the White house and, less than subtly, told him he had to win, while Martin Luther King Jr. and members of the NAACP begged him not to take that fight. When Patterson analyzed the situation on his own, he realized that he was not just a man of multiple identities, but also a man of multiple loyalties. He believed in Kennedy's intentions as president regarding civil rights, and he believed in King's non-violent approach to integration. In addition to his own feelings about being both Black and American, President Kennedy reaffirmed Patterson's identities while encouraging him to keep the title out of Liston's hands.

> The cameras clicked. At the end, the President gave Patterson a gold tie-clasp, a replica of the Kennedy PT boat, for good luck. He also said: 'We are determined to give Negroes a chance to use their capabilities and qualifications which they have not had a chance to use in the past.'[95]

It was Kennedy's desire to "give Negroes a chance" that resonated with Patterson during his interactions with Kennedy, Liston and various civil rights leaders. The need for a second chance, in spite of the past, resonated most loudly with Patterson as he spoke with, and on behalf of, Liston. Underneath these larger notions, however, are connections to personal identity and racial solidarity. Though Patterson did not mention race as a factor in his decision to meet the physically and symbolically dangerous Liston, his statements infer his dedication to racial uplift.

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[95] *The Washington Post* 20 Jan. 1962. Pg. D11. Web. http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/index Accessed 12 Feb. 2015

> It seems so ironic to me now when I remember how some people reacted when I agreed to meet Liston in 1962. He had a criminal background. Certainly, his past associations were not the best. Dr. Ralph Bunche and some officials of the NAACP, of which I am a life member, thought that Liston should not have been given the chance to fight for the title. They felt that if he became the champion he could bring discredit to the Negroes' position. My feeling was that the title brings out the best in a man, and so many people in the Negro community had never been given the chance to rise above the surroundings in which they had been pushed.[96]

Though Liston voiced nothing but contempt for Patterson in public, he proved himself to be a gracious winner in private, thanking him for the opportunity before the fight and readily agreeing to give Patterson a rematch after it. However, the "problem" of Liston had begun even before his defeat of Patterson. Most Whites feared him even more than they feared average Blacks, while Blacks involved in the push for civil rights feared having him be recognized as the most physically dominating athlete on the planet. Liston biographer Rob Steen relates an incident in which the NAACP, who railed against the match for months, approached Liston in a somewhat disingenuous manner after his victory over Patterson.

> Why did Sonny distance himself from the civil rights activists? The blow was parried, just. 'The NAACP wanted to make a political thing out of me fighting for the championship,' he grunted. 'I didn't see any sense of that. Boxing is a sport, not politics. After all the trouble they caused me, the NAACP had the nerve to ask me for $500 when I won the championship. Actually, they didn't ask me---they asked my lawyer. But it was the same thing, and I said no.'[97]

Feared by Whites, distanced from Blacks, and both looking to take advantage of him, Liston became painfully aware that being the most physically dominating male

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[96] Patterson, Floyd and Gross, Milton. "I Want To Destroy Clay." *Sports Illustrated*. October 19, 1964.

[97] Steen, 137

athlete on the planet would only earn him so much goodwill, and that his race could (and would) be used against him by both Blacks and Whites. Like Patterson, Liston found himself attempting to navigate the worlds of White Americans as a whole in addition to the ideologies and actions of Black, politically moderate civil rights leaders. Despite his best efforts and intentions, Liston's movements in either world were viewed with suspicion, mistrust and scorn. The following section will examine the experiences of Sonny Liston during his time as heavyweight champion.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE (DE)RACIALIZATION OF SONNY LISTON AND FLOYD PATTERSON

After winning the championship in 1962, Liston's thoughts immediately centered on the best possible ways he could represent his identities as heavyweight champion, Black man and American. Though he is rarely given credit for it, Sonny Liston was not just aware of the added scrutiny that being a Black heavyweight champion involved, he readily embraced it. As early as 1962, Liston did something that a number of sportswriters, both Black and White, did not expect.

Liston quickly demonstrated a keen understanding of his potential value as a Black heavyweight in a country that was wrestling with the problems of segregation. However, he was also painfully aware of how difficult life in America could be when one had to bear the burden of being Black in segregated America as he did. Though his own views on race were fairly liberal (he particularly did not care about race when it came to befriending and helping children) he also knew that it did not matter how many titles he held or fighters he beat if White America decided to label him the "Bad Nigger." What the primary and secondary sources reveal is that Liston, still carrying his significant psychic and physical scars, found a way to survive by crafting two distinctly different public personas that would confuse the press and allow him to dictate the course and tone of the stories narratives they produced about him.

Liston, the man who was routinely, often gleefully, blasted by members of the press and the boxing world in general for being baleful, sullen, and mean-spirited could be equally playful, gentle and remarkably introspective. For the press and the majority of boxing fans, his ability to slide effortlessly between the image of the devil on earth

and the quick witted, charismatic prankster often proved too confusing for them to process. Tragically, Liston was more useful to the press and the boxing world at large when he had only one identity, and that was of the scowling, hulking Black menace. In spite of his true personality, it was the image of evil that garnered the most attention, and thus, the most profit. As author Timothy Hackman asserts, Liston exercised the same sort of duality that Jack Johnson and Joe Louis had, albeit in a different form.

> Their essential duality---as champions they stood at the center of American society, while as black men they remained forever outside of it-contributed to their solitariness. Their legendary status, in other words, was largely created and defined by their outsider status.[98]

As Hackman rightly asserts, Liston "possessed both the physical ability to lash out at white America and a disposition that seemed to make him inclined to do so." However, what was the impact when the image and meanings of Sonny Liston were hijacked for political and personal gains? The following section will examine the use and appropriation of Sonny Liston.

Sonny Liston as Racialized Weapon

Speaking to the *Chicago Daily Defender* in November of 1962, Liston immediately made public his plans of helping societal "unfortunates". Though his plans were not overly specific, his main focus as heavyweight champion was "to go places where I can be of use to the public and myself." What is telling about Liston's declaration is that he made no distinction regarding race in his plans to help delinquent boys.[99] This would

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[98] Hackman, Timothy. "A Blues Song Just for Fighters: The Legend of Sonny Liston." *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature* XXVII:2, Spring 2010/Summer 2010: 1-22 (3)

[99] "What About Sonny Liston? Ring Giant Has Plans to Help 'Unfortunates.'" *Chicago Daily Defender*. Nov. 5, 1962. Pg. 21, col. 1.

be the beginning of a number of charitable acts that would distort Liston's image in the press and in the public consciousness. This resulted in Liston being forced to float between two identities: as the vicious, dangerous Black man that fight fans and journalists had made profitable through demonizing him, and the thoughtful, almost wistful spirit that belonged to the adolescent who left Arkansas because he dared to want a life beyond the family cotton patch.

In spite of the image he presented, Sonny proved to be far more complex and layered when it came to issues of race, discrimination and social justice. While multiple accounts and interpretations surround Liston's activities during his time as a heavyweight contender and champion, his opinions and thoughts on challenging social issues during his life receive far less attention. While his ability to express himself was sometimes hampered by his limited literacy and extremely suspicious nature, he was often described as quick witted, thoughtful and analytical when it came to his understandings of seemingly complex issues.

Though his associations with organized crime are largely what he is remembered for, perhaps the most complicated relationship Liston had was with other members of the Black community. Wary of more militant organizations like the Nation of Islam and viewed as a public relations nightmare by the NAACP, Liston utilized the uncertainty and fear Blacks had for him to his advantage. Leading up to his first fight with Patterson, he was well aware that significant portions of the American populace,

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http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/imageserver/pagepdf_download.cgi?RECORD=HNP_68423_19621105_0104&PAGES=21&WARNING=N&DOWNLOAD=N
Accessed 14 Sep. 2014

including president of the United States John F. Kennedy, were openly hoping for his destruction at the hands of Patterson.

Boasting a record of thirty-three wins against one loss by the time of his first title match with Patterson, Liston routinely demonstrated a keen understanding of what the public wanted to see, whether they were boxing fans or not. When asked by reporter and biographer A.S. "Doc" Young how he felt about his public persona, he embraced it. Being cast as the ultimate evil did not bother Liston for several reasons. He knew the value of being the "bad guy" in the morality plays that often grew out of boxing matches, and his role was a marketable one. More importantly, he knew what he would do if he were ever to become champion. His plans to act in a responsible, helpful and decent manner would confuse both boxing officials and sportswriters alike.

Upon his return from Denver, Liston was questioned about what he had learned. "I've been learning to be around different kinds of people," Sonny said. "What kind?" "The right kind." The reporter wished him to elucidate. "There are only two kinds of people. Good and bad, right?"[100]

Under the right circumstances, usually accompanied by his wife Geraldine or his mentor, Father Stevens, a side of Liston emerged that was contrite, thoughtful and optimistic about his future, if he were only given a chance to leave his past behind him. On his way back to Philadelphia, expecting a hero's welcome that never materialized (just one in a series of embarrassments and dashed expectations that led Liston to exclaim that he'd rather be a lamppost in Denver than the mayor of Philadelphia), Liston finally let his guard down to a member of his camp about his hopes for what he

[100] Tosches, 157

wanted to do with his new status as heavyweight champion. Recalling the admiration he had as a boy for Joe Louis (which continued into Liston's adulthood), he expressed a desire to interact with people of different races and from all walks of life and be a champion who represented all people, not just Blacks.

Despite the *Defender's* dutiful reporting of Liston's many quiet acts of charity and goodwill throughout his time as an elite fighter, including his very public show of solidarity with Colorado's civil rights leaders in 1963 who were marching and demonstrating in favor of the passage of President Kennedy's civil rights bill, his image was constantly in flux.[101] The critics who were most unwilling to recognize that he was more decent, insightful, and complex than he chose to reveal were often journalists from *Sports Illustrated*. While they and others often took a very biased stance toward Liston because of his conduct towards the media, his criminal past, and his organized crime connections, Liston's desire to live in peace, security and dignity during an era of political turbulence comes through in several interviews that were designed to perpetuate an image of him that the public lived in fear of, yet was still willing to consume.

As Patterson and Cus D'Amato continued to evade Liston, the pressure on Patterson began to build, both internally and externally. Yet through it all, he continued to ask the public to forgive Liston's past mistakes and focus on the potential for his future as an athlete and upstanding human being. Dismissing allegations that he was

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[101] "Sonny Liston Setup Will Eliminate Tax Problems." *Chicago Daily Defender*. Jul. 30, 1963. Pg. 21, col. 3
http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/imageserver/pagepdf_download.cgi?RECORD=HNP_68423_19630730_0120&PAGES=21_24&WARNING=N&DOWNLOAD=N
Accessed 14 Sep. 2014

speaking kindly about Liston as a type of prefight psychology or that he was trying to be a now gracious ex-champion, Patterson believed Liston could "be a good man" if he got "the chance to show what's within him," and that he could "surprise a lot of people."[102]

Liston's actions as champion demonstrated his keen understanding of several complicated, often difficult realities that came with being a Black athlete and celebrity. He understood the symbolic and cultural importance that his reign as champion meant to the Black community, particularly the NAACP. While his aspirations may have been, as Rogin curtly described them, little more than the lofty promises of a would-be politician, Liston was far more aware of the political nature of the sport than most gave him credit for when he compared his future reign as champion to an election being held in reverse ("Here I am already in office but now I have to go out and start campaigning"). Despite his limited literacy, he often made his points using insightful, deceptively clever jokes and analogies.

Further complicating the image and meaning of Sonny Liston was the use of his image by a number of severely disillusioned Blacks. Though he had no affiliation, Sonny Liston was seen as the perfect symbol of fear, contempt and unbridled rage in his personal and athletic persona. In spite of his numerous statements declaring his intention to try and use the symbolic power of the heavyweight champion as a positive influence on Blacks and Whites alike, parts of Black and White America alike saw more value in utilizing Liston as a weapon. Liston's desire to leave his past behind and create a new identity was secondary to the grand designs of would-be revolutionaries.

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[102] Rogin, Gilbert. "The Facts About The Big Fight." *Sports Illustrated*. Oct. 8, 1962 (4). http://www.si.com/vault/1962/10/08/670259/the-facts-about-the-big-fight Accessed 21 Jan. 2015

Perhaps no one was blunter in his assessment of Liston's value to Black America as a means of intimidation and fear than Leroi Jones (later Amari Baraka). In his essay "The Dempsey-Liston Fight," Jones paints Liston as a dark, sinister force to be feared not only by White Americans but also by Black Americans who were still committed to seeking gradual, peaceful change through the political process. Liston, because of his past and his very existence in the present, threatened the social order that White America felt so comfortable with, and that moderate Blacks were trying to operate within in their attempts to affect change on a larger scale.

Despite his desire to be accepted, help others, and live in peace in an integrated society, Jones, in this space, effectively hijacked Liston's control and production of his image. For political beliefs and symbolic needs, Liston was more useful if he could be transformed into a symbolic weapon against conservative Whites and as a producer of legitimate racial fear wielded by militant Blacks. Jones, as quoted by author Nick Tosches and others, saw Liston as "the big Black Negro in every White man's hallway," as "the huge Negro," the "bad nigger," and a "heavy-faced replica of every whipped up woogie in the world." Jones's intent is hard to determine, but he finishes his description of Liston as that of a simpleton, too ignorant to be driven by anything other than fury and vengeance, calling him "the underdeveloped, have-not (politically naïve), backward country, the subject people, finally here to collect his pound of flesh."[103]

How, then, did this image of Liston effectively appear to erase his good intentions and silence his words? What purpose was served by squashing his efforts to

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[103] Leroi Jones, "The Dempsey-Liston Fight" in *Home: Social Essays* . New York: Akashic Books, 2009 (156)

"be of use to the public"? His desire to be a champion for all people and to help under privileged and delinquent boys of all races and colors was noticed, but his political activities are nearly absent from any existing narrative. The Sonny Liston who agitated and supported the Civil Rights movement in the best ways he knew how, or quietly agreed to purchase ten thousand turkeys in support of comedian Dick Gregory's "Christmas for Mississippi" project, has been effectively silenced.[104] In sum, none of Liston's desires and feelings mattered to militant Blacks or conservative Whites, because that version of Liston did not serve their purpose.

As Jones saw it, the dichotomy between Liston and Patterson as public figures was simple but effective. Blacks that supported Floyd Patterson during his fights with Liston were simple-minded cowards who foolishly believed that the America that oppressed and degraded them was still their America, and that revolution was the only answer. For those militant Blacks looking for ways to frighten White America, Liston was the perfect weapon to physically and psychologically terrify White America and moderate Blacks. For racist Whites, Liston was the perfect example of why Blacks needed to be kept subservient and docile, and they felt Patterson fit the bill perfectly.

> Pollsters wanted the colored man in the street's opinion. "Sir, who do you *hope* comes out on top in this fight?" A lot of Negroes said Patterson. (That old hope come back on you, that somehow this *is* my country, and ought'n I be allowed to live in it, I mean, to make it. From the bottom to the top? Only the poorest Black men have never fallen, at least temporarily, for the success story.)[105]

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[104] Gregory, Dick. *The Shadow That Scares Me.* New York: Doubleday & Co., 1968 (14)

[105] Jones, 156

Unfortunately for Liston (and Patterson), their feelings, intentions and actions offered them limited support from both Blacks and Whites. While Patterson did enjoy support from such notable figures as Martin Luther King Jr. and Jackie Robinson, Liston was, for all intents and purposes, alone in his efforts to prove his worth as a Black man. Despite the support of his wife and several Catholic priests (though he studied Catholicism, he never officially converted to Catholicism) Liston would be forever linked to his criminal past by both Blacks and Whites alike. In spite of his efforts and good intentions, the beginning of the end came for Liston with the emergence of Muhammad Ali. Liston's two losses to him would effectively seal his fate, leaving behind a narrative that cast him as an enigmatic monster, easy enough to dismiss by both Blacks and Whites once his physical prowess had diminished.

When confronted with the NAACP and their concerns about Liston's viability as a celebrity athlete member, Liston understood why these activists were wary of him and his past. However, the only things he wanted other than to be the heavyweight champion was to be given the opportunity to show that his past did not define his future, and to be a positive influence for society at large. His long-term goals were rooted in creating positive change wherever he had the chance to do so. In Liston's mind, his goals were attainable with his status as champion and his desire to be accepted by all people, not just Blacks or Whites. As Nick Tosches writes, Liston's hard exterior hid a heart that was without racism, envy, or greed.

> As I write this, I remember a pleasant dinner I had not long ago with the casting director Vickie Thomas. Sonny Liston, she said, struck her as a man who in the eyes of the world was so big and so bad and so black, and yet so gentle inside. Would that it were so, I now think, for the sake of storytelling, if only for the sake of what we might want to believe, if only for the sake of the dignity of tragedy itself; if only for the sake of

> understanding. Liston's private acts of charity and kindness - to prisoners, the disabled, the poor - were many; his love of children was well-known; and he was a man without racism in him. "We were riding down Fremont Street downtown, and I was driving his car," remembered his Las Vegas friend Davey Pearl. "Bumper-to-bumper traffic. And he says to me, 'Stop the car.' I said, 'I can't stop the car here.' He said, 'Stop the goddamn car.' I stopped the car, and he runs out, and there's a little woman sitting on a little dolly selling pencils. He emptied out both pockets and gave it to her, just dropped it on her tray," Pearl said. "And it was a white woman, so there was no racial thing."[106]

Yet, in true Liston fashion, his duality and outsider status would emerge again. In another conversation with a Liston associate named Truman Gibson, Tosches candidly asked if Liston had a sense of right and wrong. Gibson's answer was blunt: "None."

While the remainder of Liston's career and life are largely defined by his criminal associates, multiple brushes with the law and allegations of substance abuse there still remained a weak, but significant number of voices that attested to Liston's desire to rise above the surroundings and circumstances that unfairly defined him for his entire life. However, as Liston would discover on several occasions, members of the Black community were fickle and often dismissive in their treatment of him and his efforts to contribute to the advancement of social justice for underprivileged children and people of color.

As his limited literacy forced him to depend on others to accurately record his thoughts and feelings on larger social and political issues, Liston would be forced to take on another set of identities. With the rise of Muhammad Ali and other prominent Black heavyweights in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Liston was not just an ex-champion. Rather, he was the product of a different era of Black oppression, limited

[106] Tosches, 177

opportunity, and a perceived inability to comprehend the importance that came with being both a person of color and a heavyweight champion. Author Langston Hughes was one of a handful of Liston's contemporaries who knew that Liston, who was useful only for the terror he instilled in Blacks and Whites alike, was still relevant in ways Blacks and Whites did not like to acknowledge but could not afford to ignore.

Though Liston does not receive the same attention and analysis that Floyd Patterson received from James Baldwin, he is the recipient of a brief, but relevant social commentary on race relations from poet Langston Hughes. In Hughes' piece, "Thorns in White Man's Sides" he creates a fictional dialogue between an unnamed character and a character named Simple. Though he does express reservations about the role of the Black Muslims ideology, Simple admits to a fondness for any "Negroes who is a thorn in White folks' side." Among the biggest thorns were prominent Black figures in politics, civic leaders, and entertainers. For Simple, Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dick Gregory all found their way into "White folks' side" and all Blacks were better for it.

It is here Hughes and Simple come to the issue of Sonny Liston, the Black Muslims, and the question of equal rights for all Black people, however radical their political beliefs or sordid their personal pasts. As long as White people were continually reminded that Blacks of all stripes were not content and growing more impatient by the day, issues of ideology, questionable political maneuvering, and criminal pasts simply added to White folks' pain. Hughes' debate with Simple offers an unequivocal stance on the issue of Black agitation. As long as it was occurring, all participants should be given praise and blame.

> 'I always try to take a broad view of things,' I said, 'to weigh both sides.' 'Between God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell,' said Simple, 'there is no both sides. You is you ain't, you are or you isn't. You believe in equal rights for all - including Sonny Liston - or you don't, for the Black Muslims - or you don't, for Adam Powell - or you don't.'[107]

Hughes only mentions Liston briefly in his fictional conversation, yet it is his status as a thorn, an irritant, in all Whites' sides, that has relevance in the narratives that sports writers, authors, and cultural commentators have constructed around Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, and Muhammad Ali. Yet while history has given Ali the honor of being a counterculture hero and poetry spouting iconoclast, the legacies and narratives of Patterson and Liston have been simplified and watered down to fit images that authors and consumers of conventional narratives are comfortable consuming. Multiple narratives by Black and White authors easily compartmentalize Liston and Patterson into two neat categories: Patterson as the "Uncle Tom"[108] and Liston as the "bad nigger."[109]

Hughes' piece is also further evidence of the diverse opinions and messages that Blacks were both creating and choosing to either internalize or reject outright. Though Hughes depiction of Simple and his companion seems to be fairly straight forward ("…there is no both sides."), they allude to the issue of choice as it pertained to the Black community at this historical moment. The point Simple tries to make is whether one

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[107] Hughes, Langston. "Thorns in White Man's Side." *Chicago Defender*. Apr. 27, 1963. Pg. 8, col. 5. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/home/home.do Accessed 12 Sep. 2014

[108] Cleaver, 91

[109] Jones, 156

believed in the Black Muslims or not, believed in Sonny Liston or not, each group deserved the right to be heard and treated with respect and dignity.

As the 1970s began and Muhammad Ali's legend continued to expand while his ring exile drew slowly to a close, a shift was beginning to occur in the meaning and importance of the heavyweight championship of the world. Though Black fighters would hold the title exclusively throughout the 1960s and 1970s, increased political and racial tensions that had quietly existed between Black fighters began to take on a more intense, increasingly personal and vicious slant.

Whereas Liston and Patterson's turmoil centered on how to best represent Black identity, Muhammad Ali and the Nation of Islam pushed the issue to an area that not only questioned Black identity and representation, but also Black authenticity. What made Patterson and Liston's interactions different was each man's acknowledgement and respect for the others identification as Black, along with a shared political agenda. Though each man was honest and open with his opinions about the other, the question of racial identity and authenticity never figured into their exchanges. With Ali's return to the ring in 1971, the tone, intensity and increasingly racist nature of his taunts were used, sadly enough, by Ali, the Muslims and growing numbers of militant Blacks and liberal Whites to identify, categorize, and ultimately demean his Black opponents.

Patterson, Liston, and the Need for Revised Narratives

Focusing on and overemphasizing the extreme elements of Patterson and Liston's personalities inside and outside the ring makes the process of further canonizing Ali that much easier and allows producers and consumers the luxury of ignoring the complex nature of the two men who were largely responsible for helping to

create the definition of Ali that is so recognizable, safe, and comfortable. Why, then, are we so quick to downplay or ignore the complex, unsettling, and often confusing aspects of Patterson and Liston's careers, behaviors, and personalities? Are we afraid that this may somehow diminish Ali's legend? Or will we have to consider that Ali was not the only Black boxer of the civil rights era to suffer personally and professionally from the turmoil that defined heavyweight boxing from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s?

The legend of Muhammad Ali has been inspected, examined and glorified from any number of angles by authors of varying disciplines, experiences and interests. From those interested in constructing legitimate biographies (Thomas Hauser's *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*[110]) to the quasi-spiritual (Davis Miller's *The Tao of Muhammad Ali*[111]*)*, every aspect of his life, career, and cultural resonance has been recounted, reexamined, and reinterpreted in multiple ways. Each of these works pays homage to a man of extreme athletic talent, conviction and charisma.

Yet with the construction of these narratives, the legend of Ali continues to grow while the narratives of his contemporaries are turned into little more than historical footnotes and inconvenient speed bumps for "The Greatest" to roll over on his way to immortality. For Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston, whose time as heavyweight champions and contenders covered the beginning and height of the Civil Rights era, examining the primary sources that helped to create Ali's legacy while diminishing and

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[110] Hauser, Thomas. *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1991.

[111] Miller, Davis. *The Tao of Muhammad Ali*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996.

obscuring others reveals much about the changing nature of Black identity, resistance, and survival within athletics before Ali came to prominence.

Sports Illustrated's editorials by numerous authors on both Patterson and Liston do more than simply chronicle their respective rises to prominence and each man's slow fade into athletic and social obscurity, both due in large part to Ali's athleticism and the growing national influence of the Nation of Islam. Despite the subjective tone that many of the authors take toward Patterson and Liston as athletes and individuals, their interpretations of their surroundings, past, and futures exposes a depth of feeling and understanding that reveals much about the transformation of Black American male identity in America throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Patterson demonstrated that a Black heavyweight champion was capable of analytical, perceptive thought on relevant, potentially volatile issues, of social and political change. For Liston, his complex, often unpredictable, nature reflected the struggles, insecurities and challenges that a large number of Black Americans were forced to confront, but often lacked the necessary tools to adequately do so.

By the 1970s, much of the furor, excitement and uncertainty that defined the careers of Liston, Patterson, and even Ali, were changing. Sonny Liston had died in 1970 under mysterious circumstances that are debated even today, Floyd Patterson had retired in 1972, and Muhammad Ali, still years from retirement, was beginning to show signs of physical deterioration. However, it would be only Ali who would be remembered as one of a few athletes who would speak about difficult issues like the Vietnam War and the omnipresent problems of race and racism in America.

For the two heavyweight champions who would have to contend with Ali's now legendary status throughout much of the 1970s, the Ali legend and its rhetoric had devolved into something more vicious and personal than their predecessors could ever have imagined. Where the attacks on Patterson and Liston were mostly confined to their conservative political positions or their support of integrationist policies, the venom of the latter stages of Ali's career that he freely visited upon Joe Frazier and George Foreman would include notions of patriotism, and a heightened mistrust of Blacks who did not embrace the separatist ideology of the Black Muslims.

Like their predecessors, Frazier and Foreman, though athletically gifted, fell victim to a set of political and social circumstances that their backgrounds and life experiences largely did not prepare them for, with Ali being the force they expected least. The weapons Ali would use against Frazier and Foreman would be their poverty, lack of education, religion and politics. Ali succeeded against both men, effectively stripping them of their Black identities, ostracizing them from the Black community, and largely denying them their rightful place in history. However, if we critically examine Frazier and Foreman's reactions to the politically volatile situations they found themselves in, new narratives emerge that add greater complexity to existing works that only allow Frazier and Foreman to be represented as foils to Ali's still burgeoning hero status.

The Identity Crisis of the Heavyweight Championship

What the primary sources do suggest, mostly on the part of sportswriters and outside observers, is that the nature and meaning of the heavyweight championship

were in flux by the late 1960s and early 1970s.[112] Part of this was due to the vacuum that was created when Muhammad Ali's three and a half year exile began in 1967 and did not end until 1971. During this period, the question was literally WHO was actually the heavyweight champion? This would not be settled until the end of an eight-man tournament won by Jimmy Ellis, who was promptly beaten by Joe Frazier, which journalist Mark Kram described as "an exit out of limbo."[113] With Frazier's victory and Ali's resurgence, a different problem concerning race would emerge, but it would be primarily between Black fighters, and as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, changing notions of Black identity and its meanings would come to affect those who would hold the title.

This crisis can be traced back to the heavyweight reigns of Joe Louis, Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston. After Joe Louis had set the standard for the "proper" way a Black heavyweight should behave, Floyd Patterson filled in perfectly with his measured, even behavior, modesty, and moderate political views. Though Patterson's notoriety initially came from being the world's youngest heavyweight champion and being the first man to win the title twice, he would demonstrate several other qualities that would change the ways in which future titlists would and could present themselves in public and private.

Perhaps most maddening to the sensibilities of the press was Patterson's admission of his own humanity, personal flaws, and his numerous and varied interests

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[112] Unger, Norman O. "State of Confusion…Will the 'real' champ please stand up?" *Daily Defender* [Chicago] February 27, 1971: Pg. 29, col. 4

[113] Kram, Mark. "Show Biz Is Out, Boxing Is In." February 16, 1970. Print.

(Patterson enjoyed flying so much he earned a pilot's license, and he also had an interest in snakes for their swiftness and sharp strikes, a hobby he acquired at Wiltwyck[114]). He was lauded for his athletic ability and dedication to his craft, but scolded and questioned for his lack of viciousness inside the ring. In one incident, he once stopped fighting after knocking an opponent's mouthpiece out, then helped the referee search the ring for it until it was found. Patterson demonstrated that, unlike Louis, Black heavyweight champions were capable of interpreting their place in sport as being more than just a credit to their race, and saw opponents, Black or White, as more than just slabs of meat who could run but could not hide. For Patterson, the question of identity was not the issue. The luxury Patterson enjoyed, to a point, was arriving at a time when there was a measure of personal and career safety for a Black heavyweight champion who chose to speak his mind on controversial topics.

Liston, despite his athletic and financial success, was never able to truly break free from the previous labels and identities he had been saddled with. This desire to agitate and be politically active is treated with a sense of wonder and confusion by journalists from *Sports Illustrated* as well as authors from publications. An analysis of the primary sources reveals a press and media outlets that were uncomfortable with champions of color who formed their own opinions, revealed their own identities, and spoke their minds on difficult issues.

Yet as Patterson and Liston faded from prominence toward the end of the 1960s, the emergence of Joe Frazier and George Foreman would usher in a new type of suffering and sacrifice similar to what Patterson and Liston had to endure in the

[114] Levy, 14

political, cultural and athletic arena. Though they would not be subjected to the same sorts of attacks from the same sources as their predecessors, they would be forced to reassert their identity as Black and Americans primarily from Black militant groups.

By the time Frazier and Foreman's careers began to rise, the political and social power of the Nation of Islam had greatly affected how a Black champion who was not a Muslim would be treated by the organization. The Black boxers who questioned, disagreed with, or simply dismissed the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam as little more than a Black interpretation of the goals of the Ku Klux Klan had to not only endure being scolded by Ali, but also by his fans who identified with his struggle against the U.S. government. This resulted in eventual alienation by portions of the Black community, who cast them as Uncle Tom's, establishment dupes, and tools of White oppression.

It was this ideology of divisiveness and separation that Frazier and Foreman ran headlong into during their reigns as heavyweight champions. As Muhammad Ali and his followers believed, Frazier and Foreman represented a bygone era in which Black behavior was defined by obsequiousness, ignorance and deference to the White power structure. Yet, like Patterson and Liston before them, Frazier and Foreman would prove to be far more complex in their various identities and their assertions of those identities. More importantly, they knew the situation that confronted Black and White Americans who, in many ways, were still struggling with aspects of integration and equality into the 1970s. The following chapter will examine the cultural heritage and political influences of Joe Frazier.

CHAPTER SIX

JOE FRAZIER AND THE CONVERGENCE OF RURAL AND URBAN BLACK IDENTITY

Perhaps the most well-known among the rivalries between Black heavyweights in the Civil Rights movement are the narratives surrounding Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali, as well as with Black and White America as a whole. What makes Frazier's narrative worth reexamining are his links to a uniquely Black and American identity by virtue of his birth into the Gullah culture of South Carolina, its emphasis on survival and community, and aspects of that cultures' subsequent transplantation into the urban spaces of Philadelphia in the 1960s. Sources reveal that he faced discrimination throughout his youth and adulthood. And he, like Patterson and Liston, faced the problem of race in American life with a far more practical, realistic approach than existing narratives give him credit for. In recounting the tale of how his father lost his left arm (a gunshot wound from a man named Arthur Smith stemming from an argument over a woman), Frazier explains the realities of the south of his day when he explains why his father's assailant was released almost immediately.

> Arthur Smith went to jail for the shooting, but he didn't stay there for long. As my momma put it: "if you were a good workman, the white man took you out of jail and kept you busy on his farm.[115]

Taking his tacit understanding of race relations in the south in the 1940s and 1950s with him upon his arrival in the North, Frazier can be viewed as symbolic of the transition between rural and urban Blacks. By the time Frazier was in his early teens, he had experienced the discrimination and inequality of the south for long enough to

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[115] Frazier, Joe and Berger, Phil. *Smokin' Joe: The Autobiography*. New York: Macmillan, 1996 (2)

know that there "wasn't nothing ahead but bad times and a low-rent life for a man like me."[116]

As Frazier and the Civil Rights movement came of age in the early 1960s, the question of Black identity continued to change. By the time Frazier won the championship in 1970, his multiple identities as a rural southerner and an urban Black male placed himself and others on the defensive in both their personal and professional lives. The following section will examine the experiences of Joe Frazier and the multiple identities that he and other Blacks fought to retain and expand upon as members of the new, working poor.

Joe Frazier, Black Identity and the Influence of Gullah Culture

Frazier would offer a mix of the experiences of Liston and Patterson: old enough to know the social and economic realities that came with being poor and Black in the south, young enough to be influenced by the social, political and cultural changes occurring in the urban north. With a strong connection to his cultural and ancestral heritage, Frazier's experiences would serve as a bridge between the rural Blacks still arriving in major urban centers and the growing number of Blacks finding more and more ways to engage with the American mainstream while still maintaining a strong, distinct Black identity – in Frazier's case his link to Gullah culture.

Forged during and after slavery, and boasting a strong connection to African culture, this unique way of life, customs and practices provided its members with a sense of racial pride. The separation from and distrust of outsiders was often looked down upon by other more "refined" Blacks due in large part to Gullah culture's

[116] Frazier, 19

continued reliance on culturally specific practices and beliefs that had carried them through slavery and into the twentieth century. Further ensuring their reliance on each other was the addition of the Gullah language.[117]

The very distinct, sometimes mysterious culture that Blacks in the Sea Islands and low country of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida had forged over several hundred years relied on loyalty, togetherness, and secrecy, which was necessary to survive the harsh realities of manual labor and subsistence farming. Similar to Liston, Frazier, the youngest of eleven children, did not have a stereotypical childhood. As Frazier described it, he "was never little or played little. I ran with my father"[118] and that he "seemed as if he had been born at the age of twenty-one."[119]

Residing in Beaufort, South Carolina, the Frazier family was largely immersed in and influenced by most aspects of the Gullah culture, particularly the poverty. Frazier's father, Rubin, was able to grow little on his land except watermelons and, much like Liston's father, Tobe, Rubin Frazier claimed to have fathered twenty-six children. In addition to his father's efforts at subsistence farming and the sale of bootleg corn liquor (called White lightning or tussac in Gullah) which the younger Frazier helped his father brew and deliver by the age of seven, Rubin, like other sharecroppers, worked an additional job as an overseer on the land of the Bellamy's, a nearby White family.

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[117] For an example of the unique nature of the Gullah language, see John M. Rhame, "Flaming Youth: A Story in Gullah Dialect." *American Speech,* Vol. 8, No. 3, (Oct. 1933) pp. 39-43.

[118] Frazier, 5

[119] Kram, 52.

Alongside Rubin was Frazier's mother, Dolly, who not only worked in the fields, but also in a local tomato cannery as well as picking crabs on an assembly line. What little free time she had was spent contributing to the family larder by catching catfish, blackfish, croaker, bass, crab and flounder. Additionally, she was deeply in tune with her Gullah roots and surroundings, and made it a point to instruct Joe and his siblings in the meanings of the natural world and what it meant for them.

Though he would later describe her beliefs and stories as "superstitions" and "voodoo," his mother was demonstrating her connection to Gullah culture and its explanations of the natural world. Two such warnings were that a "swarm of crows meant death, a strange noise in a walk by a graveyard meant that 'the people were buried alive.'" [120] Frazier's mother was part of a Gullah culture that often utilized aspects of the supernatural to explain the more difficult or troubling aspects of the everyday world, while still accepting the tenets of Christianity. Gullah researcher Albert Stoddard asserts that African beliefs and understandings of the natural world allowed for a connection to African culture, even when combined with Christianity.

As Frazier's mother imparted to him, the world around him was full of otherworldly spirits, particularly at night. Researcher Albert Stoddard, Frazier and others, while not always citing specifics, mentioned a particularly wariness of the dark in the Laurel Bay area.[121] Frazier would say that nights were so dark you often could not see your hand in front of your face, creating a feeling that the "air was full of

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[120] Kram, 56.

[121] Albert Stoddard, "Origin, Dialect, Beliefs and Characteristics of the Negroes of the South Carolina and Georgia Coasts." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3, September, 1944, pp. 186-195 (191).

danger," while others were more specific as to what dangers the dark held. Citing former High Sheriff J.E. McTeer, Mark Kram writes that the power of the dark, whether it held menace or not, was felt intensely by the people. McTeer saw that

> …the people "rushed inside at dusk, saying nothing aloud inside of what they believed and feared." It had an extra Blackness, he wrote, "carried here by their forefathers, sensed rather than seen." Drums beat across the swamps, "root doctors" knelt on their knees in graveyards at night and dug for the juju that would cure illness and bring good times to their patrons or evil to their enemies; the Black art of "Root" pervaded.[122]

The conditions and culture of Frazier's youth shed light on his very deep, real connection to a culture that was both African and America. Within this culture, where the natural world could bring both punishment and reward, there was also a keen awareness of the importance of identity and personal honor. Not only does it demonstrate Frazier's strong connection to his own Black identity, but also why Frazier longed for vengeance against Ali until close to his death. Ricki Lights, a Philadelphia doctor who was also raised in Gullah culture, knew that such personal attacks on Blackness and authenticity were not taken lightly, and those that crossed that line should expect to receive the harshest penalties.

Both McTeer and Lights spoke of the power of both memory and the natural world as it related to Joe Frazier, his identity, and his pride as a Black man in America. McTeer claims that the "Geechee threw a bone on Ali before their first fight." If Frazier had known it were a black catfish bone, he "didn't have to know much else, such was the enabling power of the belief in it." While the validity of this incident cannot be verified,

[122] Kram, 54.

its contents speak to the belief in Gullah culture, its power and its distinctive mixture of African and American approaches to life.

This examination of this very distinct set of cultural beliefs demonstrates the multifaceted, complex nature of Black identity in America, and how those identities were expressed, understood and often blended. Additionally, it demonstrates the pride that Frazier, and many other Gullahs, had in their identity as both Black and American. Regarding being called an Uncle Tom, Frazier freely admits in his autobiography that for a significant amount of time, he misunderstood "Uncle Tom" for "Peeping Tom." For those in Gullah culture, accusing someone of being a race traitor may bring a death penalty for the offending party.

> 'I don't think Frazier knew the term Uncle Tom,' says Ricki Lights, a poet and medical doctor in Philly who was raised there. 'You never heard it. To call a Gullah an Uncle Tom would be asking to die. I mean it.'[123]

For the world that Ali understood, refusing to acknowledge his Muslim name was grounds for physical punishment and social ridicule. For Frazier and his world, the issue of name went beyond mere insult: it was an attack on family, identity and nationhood. As Lights understood it, to attack the man was akin to attacking the race itself, and a feud that could only be settled with blood was the only natural outcome.

In addition to the Frazier family having a strong connection to Gullah culture and its connection to the natural world, the family also possessed a unique working class culture that, when examined closely, was very similar to that of the Liston family. Much like their experience on the Morledge's land, education beyond the most basic levels for Frazier was something that was speculated about, but quickly forgotten. As Frazier

[123] Kram, 54.

writes in his autobiography, education was not a priority in his household or for other Black families in the area. Though he did attempt to attend school for a time, Frazier cites several reasons why he chose to work rather than go to school, the most pressing being the need to contribute financially to the family.

In conditions such as these, formal education was most often viewed as secondary, not terribly important for daily life and, most importantly, a loss of potential income. In Frazier's case, he was more fortunate than others in that his normal working days would "begin after school and run past midnight." In this environment, school and politics were secondary to work and the business of survival. Living in one of the more rural parts of Beaufort, the Frazier family, like other sharecroppers, was preoccupied with more immediate, potentially hazardous problems like having enough to eat and repairing holes in the roof and walls.

Dating back to the late 19th and early 20th century, Black education was fraught with discrimination, misappropriated funds and a significant lack of spending on necessities like textbooks, classroom supplies, and teacher salaries. However, as Louis Harlan's research on education in South Carolina asserts, cotton picking "still flushed pupils and teachers out of the rural schools."[124] In surroundings such as this, it was small wonder that for Frazier, like Liston and Patterson before him, the importance of school was far less important than the immediate results that work, legal and otherwise, held for him and his beloved father.

While the question of Frazier's education and intelligence were often used by Ali to insult and demean him, what is usually absent is an examination of the amount of

[124] Harlan, Louis R. *Separate and Unequal*. New York: Atheneum, 1969 (209).

discrimination and neglect that school aged Black children in the rural south endured. While there were a number of obstacles working against him (working past midnight, having to walk four miles each way to school), Frazier asserts that even if his situation were different, his mind was restless and eager. However, what helped make his decision to leave school and go to work early speaks to the structural inequalities that defined life for many Blacks in the rural south.

> Truth is, I wasn't much for school, which in those days wasn't all it could have been for the colored. To begin with, the schoolhouse back then was segregated, which in the Beaufort of that time meant separate and unequal. Unequal in every way. The length of the school term for Blacks was shorter than it was for whites, and what public money there was for education went mostly to white schools.[125]

Black youth like Frazier lived in a culture that placed little importance on the potential rewards education might provide in the future, instead placing the emphasis on wage labor, which directly impacted family survival in the present. With an historical lack of emphasis on education for the young and a rapidly changing economy sweeping over the south, by the 1950s rural Blacks in the south were engaging more readily with the possibility of seeking subsistence in more urban areas. The following section will examine Joe Frazier's transition from rural to urban life and culture.

Joe Frazier as Northern Transplant and Heavyweight Champion

After leaving school, Frazier went to work with his father on the Bellamy plantation. As he described it, their family land raised next to nothing, save for the occasional crop of cotton and watermelon. Working the "white man's land" could not sustain families, which meant finding extra work.

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[125] Frazier, 7

> So that made life a scramble for survival. And in that part of South Carolina it meant you worked on the white man's land for a day's wages. Momma had done it since she was a girl of five. For fifty cents a day, she'd work from sunup to sunset pulling radishes, cutting cabbage, and digging potatoes for a white man named Trask.

Frazier descriptions of his own time working in the field for the Bellamy's are stark but reveal much about the nature of Black and White relations as they pertained to labor. Though the south had long since been removed from Reconstruction, White land owners attempted to replicate slavery as closely as possible. This meant that Black laborers in the 1950s and 1960s were still little more than chattel, even if they were allowed to return home at the end of the day.

> I remember working the farm when I was a boy. I'd say, "Good morning, boss," and he'd say, "To the mule." At noon, I'd say, "Lunchtime, boss," and he'd say, "One o' clock." And in the evening, I'd say, "Good night, boss," and he'd say, "In the mornin'."[126]

In spite of this hardship, the culture and life that supported Black, Gullah and American culture found ways to not only survive the discrimination but also to thrive in different ways, one of which was pride in the community. In David Goldfield's analysis of Ernest J. Gaines *A Gathering of Old Men*, a tale of fiction reflecting the changes intensified integration brought to the south after World War II, Goldfield identifies many of the changes that defined daily life for Blacks before the onset of mechanization in agricultural labor. Though Gaines's novel revolves around the murder of a White man by a Black man, the Black characters lament the loss of their former way of life, which defined many of the novel's Black characters. Despite the physically demanding labor, crippling poverty and constant racism and discrimination faced from their White

[126] Frazier, 121

neighbors, they speak of their difficult past with a fondness and appreciation for the solidarity that it fostered.

> Y'all remember how it used to be? Thirty, forty of us going out in the field with cane knives, hoes, plows-name it. Sunup to sundown, hard, miserable work, but we managed to get it done. We stuck together, shared what little we had, and loved and respected each other.[127]

As Frazier recalled, the sense of working together, laughing together, community and kindness was just as strong in real life as it was in the novel. Describing how certain items were community items, Frazier's description was simple: "That's how people were in those times. There was a strong sense of community, of poor black people looking out for and helping one another."[128]

Though Goldfield is examining a work of fiction, Gaines's description of life in the rural south could very well have come from Frazier's experiences as both a young man in Beaufort and a member of this aspect of Black identity that often struck fear into urbanized, "mainstream" Blacks. Like the characters in Gaines's work, Frazier was not only aware of the changes in the way of life that his parent's toiled under for their entire lives, but he also understood that the promise of a better life, both financially and socially, would never be available to him in the rigidly segregated, discriminatory world of South Carolina in the 1950s.

Despite this sense of community Frazier, like other Blacks, began to grow restless with rural life and to tire of the constant discrimination and racism. However,

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[127] David Goldfield, "The Urban Crusade: Race, Culture and Power in the American South since 1945." *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, The South (1997), pp. 181-195 (182).

[128] Frazier, 12

unlike Frazier's parents and his peers, he did not always respect the racial hierarchy that dictated daily life and custom in Laurel Bay which helped to hasten his departure from the south.

After working for the Bellamy's for close to seven years, Frazier began to inch closer and closer to physically challenging the existing racial hierarchy. Work, much like school, had a different set of expectations for Blacks and Whites and Frazier was growing increasingly wary of it. While a street fight with a local White boy allowed him to demonstrate that he was "just as much a man" as his opponent, it would take a final incident that had the potential to end in lynching before he left the south for good.

In 1959, after refusing to back down when a White overseer on the Bellamy plantation threatened to beat him with his belt, Frazier and his mother both arrived at the same conclusion. The incident provided an impetus for Frazier to hasten his departure. Despite only being fourteen years old, Frazier's mother urged her son to leave, telling him, "Son, if you can't get along with White folks, then leave home 'cause I don't want you gettin' hurt."[129]

Even with the small luxury of having an older, established family member in the city to ease his arrival in New York, he soon found the North culturally unfamiliar and offering little in the way of stable work or economic promise. By the time of his seventeenth birthday, the still unemployed Frazier, now living in Philadelphia and expecting a child with his girlfriend Florence, began stealing cars and selling them to a local junkyard for fifty dollars apiece. Research on urban labor among the Black community in major cities in the 1950s and 1960s demonstrate that Frazier's difficulty

[129] Kram, 57.

in finding and maintaining employment was not unique to his situation. He, like the Patterson family and, to a degree, Sonny Liston, existed under a combination of occupational displacement and exaggerated or unrealistic expectations of life in northern cities, which tended to hurt their employment chances.

While Frazier never speculated about the possibility that racial discrimination may have affected his early search for work upon his arrival in Philadelphia, there is also the strong possibility that, given his upbringing and current circumstances (unemployed and expecting a child), he could not afford to spend mental and emotional energy worrying about racial discrimination. He eventually, as Kram writes, "talked his way" into a position on the killing floor at the Jewish owned Cross Brothers slaughterhouse. It was during his time at the slaughterhouse that he took up boxing at a local Police Athletic League gym. Though he began boxing in an effort to lose weight he had gained during his time in New York and Philadelphia, his dedication to the sport would eventually win him a gold medal at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Even with his success in the Olympics, Frazier, now a father of two, returned home to a very precarious existence. Suffering a severely broken thumb in the Olympics, Frazier was barely able to work at Cross Brothers slaughterhouse, requiring him to take a second job as a janitor. At one point, the Frazier family was so close to destitute that local sportswriter Stan Hochman organized an informal collection of money and gifts from the citizens of Philadelphia so the family could have a Christmas. In addition to the variety of gifts that arrived at their door, one was "a golf bag full of

five-dollar and one-dollar bills" taken up in a collection headed by Cecil B. Moore, an attorney and aide to the city councilman.[130]

Still uneducated and underemployed, Frazier's experiences were similar to those of others who left the south in search of a better life. An episode that occurred at Cross Brothers slaughterhouse shortly before Frazier's entrance into the professional ranks encapsulates much of the drudgery, fear, uncertainty and hopelessness that defined the migration experience for many Blacks who found the north to be nothing like the image they had crafted for themselves or been sold by relatives.

> Back to Cross and more stitches; one day a bull escaped inside and headed right for Joe; it was shot dead. With all the blood, the smell, the long hours, cut off from the gym in a full-time way, he began to feel like one of those steers, shackled and hoisted just before the rabbi slit its throat. He told Florence: 'Man, I gotta get outta there.'[131]

After Frazier's Olympic triumph, several incidents reveal the tenuous state of race relations between not just Blacks and Whites, but within the Black community. Upon his return from Tokyo, Frazier and his manager Yancy "Yank" Durham, who was also Black, sought financial backing from local Philadelphia businessmen, similar to the Louisville syndicate that funded Muhammad Ali's early professional career. Frazier and Durham, seeking to keep the publicity and profits from Frazier's career in Philadelphia's Black community, approached local Black businessmen offering them shares of stock in Frazier. To their surprise, Black businessmen rejected Frazier and Durham outright. Concerns over his height (5'10) and weight (approximately 205 pounds) overrode any feelings they may have had about community, racial solidarity and uplift. As Frazier

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[130] Frazier, 37

[131] Kram, 59

recalled, the "doubt that those Black brothers had" did sting, but it forced him to recognize that, while unity was important, under certain circumstances, particularly where money was involved, those idealistic notions only went so far.[132]

The rejection experienced by Frazier and Durham by Philadelphia's Black business community speaks to the sense of pragmatism and the strong survival instinct many Blacks were forced to have. This often resulted in making financial and personal decisions that trumped any notions of racial unanimity when it came to the wellbeing of individuals and families. After recovering from his thumb injury and the sting of rejection by Philadelphia's Black businessmen, Frazier's manager Durham decided to handle his promotions, managerial duties, and training himself.

> Yank and I agreed that rather than waiting for someone to back my career, we should go ahead by ourselves. The hell with arms-too-small and all that. 'We'll go it ourselves,' said Yank, 'until somebody steps forward. Okay?' 'Do you believe in me?' I asked. 'Goddamn right I do.'[133]

Frazier and Durham's practicality extended one step further when people began to step forward wanting to finance Frazier's budding career. By 1965, Frazier and Durham had assembled an interracial group of forty investors who purchased "eighty-odd shares of stock at $250 a share" in Frazier. The group, Cloverlay, paid Frazier a salary of $100 per week, plus 50% of his purses that he earned for the first three years. Additionally, he was also given a job as a salesman for a maintenance firm for an additional $60 per week.

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[132] Frazier, 36.

[133] Frazier, 37.

As Frazier recalled, it was "just the arrangement" he'd been hoping for. The fact that both Whites and Blacks bankrolled him mattered little to him. The ability to provide for himself and his family overrode any sort of animosity or ill will he may have harbored against Whites or Blacks. When it came to the business of living, Frazier, like Liston and Patterson, did not have the luxury of dissecting the inequitable nature of American race relations. Rhetoric and speeches would not feed hungry families.

However, despite Frazier's approval of the deal he and Durham had made with the Cloverlay group, his experience with Whites in the south and Blacks in the north did not allow him to operate under any illusions as to what he or the Cloverlay investors were seeking to gain from their arrangement. By 1968, the number of Cloverlay investors had grown from 40 to 500, and the value of shares in Frazier was up from $250 to $8,200 each. In spite of the vast growth of Frazier's purses, he had a practical, realistic understanding of what he and the Cloverlay investors were in boxing for. Civil rights, solidarity and political activism were not the primary motives of the Cloverlay investors and Frazier knew it. As he told Murray Olderman in a 1968 interview, there was only one thing he could expect the Cloverlay investors to give away for free.

> 'Cloverlay,' he says bluntly, 'give nothin' extra but tombstones, and you got to be dead to get one of them.'[134]

Frazier's cynical, slightly morbid analysis of the relationship he had with Cloverlay was representative of the growing willingness of Black heavyweight champions who were finally able to break free of the Joe Louis mold of silent deference

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[134] Murray Olderman, "Cast In The Marciano Mold" in *Best Sports Stories, 1969 Edition*. Ed. Irving T. Marsh and Edward Ehre. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1969. 194-196. Print. (196).

in both their professional and personal lives. In the early 1960s, Patterson had quietly broken away from the protection and guidance of Cus D'Amato and began guiding his own career. Similarly, Sonny Liston also exercised more control over his own career by switching managers who could arrange a title bout for him (politically, he also openly participated in a march with Civil Rights workers to launch a letter writing campaign to pressure congress to approve President Kennedy's Civil Rights program which, considering Liston's near total illiteracy, is somewhat ironic).[135]

By the time of Joe Frazier's ascension to the top of the heavyweight ranks in 1968, Black boxers, while still holding Louis in high esteem, were gaining the confidence and available platforms to speak their minds, exert more control over their own careers, offer honest opinions on controversial issues and become active in agitating for political change. While Muhammad Ali would garner the majority of the attention as the political catalyst in the struggle for Black equality among athletes, his contemporaries were not only expressing their racial identities, but also demonstrating a very clear understanding of their relationship with White America. Though Patterson, Liston and Frazier were not opposed to integration (each man demonstrated his willingness to live in an integrated society in a variety of ways, from participating in civil rights marches to threatening to boycott fights that were held in segregated arenas), they were also realistic about the state of race relations in the United States and were equally realistic with how much they could legitimately accomplish as celebrity athletes.

[135] Tosches, 152

However, their efforts, opinions and contributions to civil rights and racial equality in the U.S. would be nearly erased with Muhammad Ali's refusal to be inducted into the United States army. Though Patterson and Liston were largely relegated to second tier status as legitimate challengers to the heavyweight title by this time, it would be Joe Frazier who would bear the brunt of the scorn and ridicule that some militant Blacks heaped upon the more moderate faction that favored gradual change through peaceful, political action.

When we examine the political and social opinions of Joe Frazier during the years of Muhammad Ali's exile, we can see the very serious divisions that were pushing portions of Black America to a breaking point. By the time of Ali's exile, the war in Vietnam had split the United States on a variety of fronts. Those in favor of the war were often White, blue collar and politically conservative, while those who opposed it were often young, college age, minorities and liberal. Fair or not, sides were quickly drawn and conflict came immediately.[136]

Joe Frazier found himself in the middle of this socially and politically volatile firestorm in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Existing histories have largely oversimplified his understandings and feelings of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. While Ali was roundly and unquestioningly praised for his anti-war stance, Frazier was only beginning to feel the sting that large portions of Black America and some liberal Whites would heap upon him.[137] Because Frazier was not only

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[136] *Ali-Frazier I: One Nation…Divisible*. Joe Lavine, Producer. Executive Producer Ross Greenburg. HBO, 2000

[137] For the experiences of an African American conscientious objector who did not have the luxury of national celebrity and the political power of the Nation of Islam

married, but had four children by the late 1960s, he was exempt from the draft, though he did make a point of mentioning in his autobiography that he had volunteered for military service at the age of fourteen.[138] No narratives about Sonny Liston and the Vietnam War are available, though his status as a convicted felon, his marriage to Geraldine and the uncertainty surrounding his true age most likely kept him off the draft roles.

Because Frazier was politically moderate on most topics, particularly concerning the Vietnam War, his critics would, in a manner that was almost identical to what happened to Patterson, attempt to paint him as an apolitical, simple-minded Uncle Tom, and later a stooge of conservative White America and Richard Nixon. Fair or not, he was viewed as a traitor to Black America and poster boy for pro-war, conservative, White Americans who subtly pointed to him as an example of what a true American and athlete should look like, and also an example of how a Black champion should conduct himself.

By 1971, Ali's three and one- half year exile from professional boxing had come to an end, though he never had left America's collective conscience or attention. Despite Frazier's undefeated record and capturing the heavyweight title in 1970, the era in history he was in and the growing anger among Black Americans resulted in his identities as both a Black man and an American being under constant attack with Muhammad Ali leading the charge. Though Patterson and Liston were also forced to

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to support him, see Daly, James A. and Bergman, Lee. *Black Prisoner of War: A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir*. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1975.

[138] Frazier, 54

endure Ali's verbal assaults, by the late 1960s, his attacks on other Black athletes skill, identity and racial authenticity had taken on a more vicious, increasingly personal turn.

Unfortunately for Frazier and other Black heavyweights of this era, they simply did not have the personalities to match Ali's verbal torrents about Vietnam or the state of race relations in America. What comments they did make were only the most basic, and were non-controversial. For Frazier and his contemporaries, including Jimmy Ellis (a former sparring partner for Ali) and Jerry Quarry (the lone legitimate White heavyweight contender during the 1960s and 1970s), and later George Foreman, their focus rested almost entirely on overcoming Ali's near mythic status. In Frazier's case, his background as the product of a sharecropping family steeped in Gullah culture did not just limit but hurt his appeal to an increasingly agitated and angry Black population, who far too quickly cast him as a backward remnant of the days of slavery.

Unable and unwilling to separate himself from the culture and heritage that defined him, Frazier was quickly cast as a byproduct of the Reconstruction era. Despite the relentless onslaught on Frazier's authenticity as a Black man, his experiences, as with those of other Black heavyweights, including Ernie Terrell and Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams, were more recognizable as part of the more difficult aspects of the Black experience than Ali's. Similar to the experiences of Patterson and Liston, Frazier, Terrell and Williams all treated boxing the same way: as a tough, dangerous, painful job. To men such as these who had worked their entire lives, both in and out of the ring, fighting paid bills; speeches and protesting did not.

For Ali, these men and their pragmatic, straightforward approach to boxing, life and politics, were easy targets and offered ample material to sustain interest in Ali as an

athlete and celebrity. Despite being exiled from prizefighting, Ali often used these men to build his own ego, keep him relevant to the world at large and gave him an additional mouthpiece to trumpet the ideals of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. What Ali failed to recognize (or chose not to) was that each of his foils not only identified with the hardscrabble existence of their forebears, but also took pride in that aspect of their heritage and drew strength from that identity. When Terrell, a "former friend and sparring mate" drew Ali's ire by calling him Clay before their 1967 bout, he offered a measured, frank assessment of Ali as a fighter, man and religious figure.

> I got nothing against him or his religion. But he's an extremist, and they all twist things. He's always been a liar. He's just a punk, can't think for himself, and he'll always be a punk.[139]

Terrell's observations demonstrate that not only were other Black fighters not afraid of Ali, but they openly derided his authenticity as a genuinely religious man and a Black man. Beginning with Patterson, each of Ali's notable opponents was forced to defend themselves, their heritage and their own various identities, which, in terms of difficulty and instability, were light years removed from any sort of discomfort Ali would attempt to claim defined his childhood. In the case of Frazier, for whom he saved his most personal and racist attacks, Ali's rhetoric only reinforced Frazier's identification with his Gullah heritage and the hard road he had to travel to become an elite fighter. To Frazier, "Clay was like a big spoiled kid who needed to have attention, and would do anything to get it." In the world that Frazier and others like him inhabited, attention and respect were only given to those who earned it through hard,

[139] Kram, 126

physical work, sacrifice and dedication to family and friends. Ali, in their eyes, was anathema to the values that defined a "real" man.

> While he was dodging the draft, and talking about it on the lecture circuit to pay his bills, I was earning my upkeep by getting down with the Bonavenas and the Quarrys. I had fought my way up from nothing. I'd earned my way with hard work, work that was owed respect. But this scamboogah thought nothing of talking about me as if I was some head-scratching dumb nigger.[140]

Because of larger social and political changes, particularly a growing dissatisfaction against non-violent integration, Frazier, Terrell and Patterson were being forced to defend their own backgrounds, racial identities, and manhood. For Frazier, things would be especially difficult as the timing of his ascension to the heavyweight championship in 1970 coincided with rapid and violent changes in America's social and political landscape, particularly for American Blacks.

Lost in the mounting chaos were Frazier's own opinions, ideas and beliefs about race relations and identity in America. As his earlier comments about the Cloverlay group made clear, Frazier never had any illusions about what Whites in America were willing to do for him and what they expected in return. Five years after turning professional, Frazier was recognized as the world heavyweight champion. With Ali still in exile yet still idolized and adored by a large number of Americans as the real champion, those who fought to replace him faced serious opposition in and out of the ring.

When the Supreme Court overturned Ali's conviction in 1971, a match between Ali and Frazier was inevitable. When the two finally met in March of 1971, the meaning

[140] Frazier, 76

of the fight for both Black and White America was on the line and hotly contested. A Frazier victory meant yet another triumph for the White establishment, while an Ali win meant a victory for militant Blacks, guilty White liberals and self-styled revolutionaries all across the country.

A number of journalists, researchers and documentarians have all examined the social, political and cultural meanings of the fight from myriad angles and perspectives. Works like Michael Arkush's *The Fight*, Mark Kram's *Ghosts of Manila*, and HBO's 2000 documentary *Ali-Frazier I: One Nation…Divisible* are just a few of the works that examine the multiple meanings that Americans of all colors attached to the fight. Despite Frazier winning a unanimous fifteen round decision, the victory would only be the beginning of a type of alienation from much of the Black community. Hailed as a victor despite the loss, Ali's defeat made him more popular than ever among his followers. As boxing historian Bert Sugar dryly noted, the "winner that night was the loser, the loser that night was the winner."[141] Unable to sway the public's opinion, Frazier went about trying to represent the role of both a heavyweight champion and a Black American the best way he knew how.

After his victory, there are two seminal moments that go largely overlooked in existing histories of Frazier's life both in and out of the ring. His address to the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1971 and an article he authored for *Ebony* magazine the following year offer insight not just into Frazier as an individual, but also

[141] *Ali-Frazier I: One Nation…Divisible*. Joe Lavine, Producer. Executive Producer Ross Greenburg. HBO, 2000.

shows the depth and variety of feeling that existed among all Blacks regarding the state of race relations in America.

Though his address did not offer specifics on how to combat issues like discrimination and institutionalized racism in America or even South Carolina, Frazier demonstrated an understanding of several things. He had learned that American race relations were fraught with discrimination and inconsistencies in all walks of life for most American Blacks as he had lived through it as a young man in South Carolina. Another key point Frazier made was that he and most American born Blacks had long since established America as their home, that they had no intention of moving to Africa, and that peaceful coexistence between Blacks and Whites was not just possible, it was the only solution.

Though he was well aware that his comments and opinions would likely be used against him, Frazier spoke simply and honestly about his understanding of the state of race relations in South Carolina and America at large. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not offer solutions to the race problem in America.[142] Instead, he drew from his own experiences as a young man in segregated Beaufort, and recognized that interracial cooperation was the only way that Black and White Americans would be able to live together. Despite the prejudice and discrimination he had faced from Whites, he speculated about what the future for both Black and White South Carolinians would involve and segregation was not a realistic option. When addressing the question of racial equality and civil rights, Frazier spoke in broad terms

[142] "Ali Offers Solution to Race Problems: Separate." *Daily Defender* [Chicago] April 30, 1968: Pg. 2, col. 3. Print.

concerning the lives and patterns of Blacks and Whites. America could not continue to wait for the honorable Elijah Muhammad's guarantee of total racial separation which was supposed to have already been achieved back in 1970.

Given the dates for Elijah's prophecy of a separate America for Blacks, there is the question of where in America this land would be. Considering that numerous individual Native tribes, as well as organizations like the American Indian Movement (AIM) had been engaged in protracted legal battles for decades attempting to regain control of their ancestral lands, the conversation between Muhammad and native activists regarding whose land would be given to American Blacks to start their own country would have made for an interesting discussion between the two groups.[143]

Like Patterson before him, Frazier's opinions and comments reveal other issues. First, the rhetoric of the NOI and Elijah Muhammad, however appealing it may have been to militant Blacks, was not universal. Even with the rising appeal of groups like the Black Panthers (who were dealing with internal turmoil of their own[144]), American Blacks remained divided on the best way to achieve equality. Additionally, among those who still believed in non-violent, peaceful integration, at least one significant setback shook their faith in that ideology to the point that even Dr. King, the face and soul behind the movement, was beginning to show signs of fatigue and doubt.

During a march with striking sanitation workers on March 28, 1968, some marchers began smashing store windows and fighting with police. After being taken to

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[143] For a history of the Native American civil rights movement in the twentieth century, see Steiner, Stan. *The New Indians*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1968.

[144] Walton, Jr., Hanes. *Black Political Parties: An Historical and Political Analysis*. New York: The Free Press, 1972 (199)

safety, King, in a conversation with Reverend Ralph Abernathy, suggested that maybe "we just have to give up and let violence take its course" and that they lived "in a sick nation." By the time of his assassination on April 4, 1968 King's optimism had dimmed significantly; the title of the final sermon he was set to deliver at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta was "Why America May Go to Hell."

In the rioting that followed, particularly in Washington, D.C., the divisions between violent and pacifist Blacks were encapsulated in the sentiments of former Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Stokely Carmichael: "Now that they've taken Dr. King off, it's time to end this non-violence bullshit."[145] Despite the turmoil, violence, and unrest, Frazier and other Blacks accepted the reality that America was a land of multiple beliefs, ethnicities, and colors. Survival dictated that peaceful, integrated coexistence was necessary for "our people."

> We must save our people and when I say "our people" I'm not speaking about Blacks only. I mean Whites and Blacks. We need to quit thinking who's living next door, who's my little daughter going to play with, who is she going to sit next to in school. We don't have time for that.[146]

Despite his victory over Ali, Frazier's moderate, integrationist stance still kept him in Ali's shadow both in and out of the ring. With he and his family forced to endure taunts that were becoming decidedly cruel in nature, Frazier took to the media in an attempt to defend himself against Ali's attacks on his athletic ability, intelligence, and his identity as a Black American. A year into his reign as heavyweight champion,

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[145] Isserman, Maurice and Kazin, Michael. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 (235).

[146] "Joe Frazier Home: Addresses Solons." *The Chicago Defender.* April 8, 1971: pg. 34, col. 1. Web. Accessed 16 Mar. 2015

Frazier, who had grown increasingly irritated with Ali's antics, was forced to go on the defensive in the press and utilized the tactic employed by Floyd Patterson and Sonny Liston (in a slightly different degree, considering Liston's limited literacy) to counter Ali's vitriol.

Beginning with an interview printed in the *Chicago* Defender, Frazier makes a point that is remarkably similar to those made by many of the track and field athletes involved in the 1968 Olympics. Just as many of those athletes resented and resisted Harry Edwards's tacit assumption that he spoke for all Black athletes, Frazier rejected Ali's numerous claims that he was representative of all Black Americans. Making a relevant point, Frazier asked his interviewer what, specifically, had Ali done for the Black community other than anoint himself its unofficial leader and spokesman? Frazier was also scathingly honest when he acknowledged the economic gap that existed between himself and the average Black person in America.

> He's hurt the poor Blacks. They can't possibly live the way he and I can and they can't afford what he and I can. Yet somehow they think they can after they hear him sound off. You can't speak for the Blacks. We're all individuals and I know I don't want someone speaking for me and I'm sure most other people don't want someone speaking for them.[147]

Frazier's brief statement identifies several important differences that existed within Black communities all across America and not just among elite athletes. Though he did believe in Black militancy, empowerment and self-determination in America, Frazier was also very honest about the role that economics played in that struggle. He was enough of a realist to know that the average Black man, who often had to struggle

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[147] "Frazier gains on Ali in 'talk bracket'." *Chicago Defender*. Saturday, January 12, 1974: Pg. 24.

with a lack of economic opportunity as well as racial discrimination, might not be able to identify with the rhetoric of a millionaire athlete, even a Black one.

However, it would be Frazier's article in *Ebony* magazine in 1972 that would demonstrate just how deep his alienation from much of the Black community had become. Like Patterson, Frazier did not author the article out of spite or malice but as a matter of defense. Because of his soft-spoken nature and personality, he was simply not able to defend himself verbally with the speed and quantity for which Ali was famous. Given the time to collect and express his thoughts and feelings, Frazier was able to assert his authenticity as a Black man and raise several inconsistencies in Ali's harangues to American Blacks that deserve examination.

One of Ali's main talking points that Frazier argued against most vehemently and logically was the Nation of Islam's push for racial segregation in America. While Frazier does mention the ironic nature of this argument given the racial makeup of the Louisville syndicate that helped give Ali his start and his integrated corner (his trainer, Angelo Dundee, was White), he also analyzed Ali's rhetoric as it applied to most Blacks across America. Frazier made informed, valid opinions about the role that economics, fame and opportunity play in the lives of Black Americans but his most important observations concerned race relations in America.

Like Patterson, Frazier acknowledged the discrepancies that existed between Blacks and Whites in the early 1970s. However, both men displayed their racial and nationalist pride when voicing their opinions on integration and segregation in America. While Frazier made no secret of his love for his country (he would constantly accuse Ali of cowardice for refusing induction into the army), he was also acutely aware

of its shortcomings and inconsistencies. Frazier argued that the rhetoric of Ali and the Muslims was largely impractical for average Blacks because of the economic disadvantages most faced but that fiery rhetoric and race baiting hurt their overall goals of social equality.

> I feel I have no right to preach race hate because anything I say reflects on the little man in the ghetto. Most of the Black racists, like Ali, go into the ghetto and preach their race hate about Whitey. They get the brothers all worked up and then they go to their fine luxurious homes far away from the ghetto while the cops beat on the poor misguided Blacks who thought they could take things into their own hands.[148]

While Frazier's views on race and politics are not unusual, his views on militancy do not align with the accounts crafted by Black or White sportswriters of the era and certainly not with the tirades of Ali that many had taken as the gospel truth. Though he did not believe in the violent tactics endorsed by groups like the Black Panthers, Frazier did believe in the value of speaking out against the injustices that Blacks faced on a daily basis. As he saw it, militancy was only effective when delivered with a specific message and in a non-violent manner. Just "rapping and getting everybody stirred up" served no purpose and did nothing to advance relations between Blacks and Whites. One only had to recall the experiences of Black tenant farmers in rural Arkansas in the first half of the 20th century to see how terribly wrong "getting everybody stirred up" could potentially turn for poor Blacks in America. If we consider Frazier's hasty exit from South Carolina after standing up to a White man, it is easy to understand why he favored such a cautious approach when it came to the possibility of racially motivated physical conflict.

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[148] Frazier, Joe. *Ebony*. "Cassius Who?" May 1972: Pgs. 68-76. Print. (72)

He believed American Blacks and Whites would never be separate from one another and coexistence was going to become a reality. With Muhammad Ali's situation with the draft and the shaky relations between Blacks and Whites in America, he was ultimately molded into the unofficial champion of White America. In spite of his views on the condition of Blacks in America and the intimate knowledge of discrimination he experienced growing up in the segregated south, Frazier was forced to defend himself in the press in a battle of words and sentiment that, with even the most logical and relevant arguments, he had no chance of winning. Despite his physical battering of Muhammad Ali, the war for the hearts and minds of America's Black citizens was ultimately won over by proponents of a system that asserted the racial superiority of Blacks, advocated segregation in all facets of daily life, and ridiculed and isolated those Blacks who believed in integration and interracial cooperation.

As Richard Hoffer asserts in his work *Bouts of Mania*, Ali's "entrepreneurial cruelty" created a scenario that allowed Ali to create a work of fiction that was more closely related to Frazier's (an impoverished victim of intense segregation) than his own (a stable, secure, working class lifestyle, home and neighborhood).

> …Ali said he "was too ugly to be champ…too dumb to be champ." But this was outrageous. Frazier the White man? Frazier, of southern poverty, raised in discrimination, was far Blacker than Ali was, a kid raised in middle-class comfort, more advantages than Frazier could have dreamed of. "He's the wrong kind of Negro," Ali said. "He's not like me, 'cause he's the Uncle Tom. He works for the enemy." Ali was actually calling him an "Uncle Tom"?[149]

[149] Hoffer, Richard. *Bouts of Mania: Ali, Frazier, and Foreman---and an America on the Ropes.* Boston: Da Capo Press, 2014. (53)

Claiming to be the central figure of a struggle "his people" were "fighting every day in the streets," Ali's symbolic struggles came from the safety of his college lectures and from one of his several mansions in mostly White neighborhoods, something that was conveniently overlooked by a Black press that was near hysterical with hero worship, however cruel and disingenuous that hero might be. This meant that Frazier's assessment of himself and his value as a social and cultural symbol became fodder for his continued alienation from the Black press, militants and liberals. To these groups, Frazier's declaration of "I don't want to be no more than I am" earned him intense scorn and immediate, permanent status as an Uncle Tom.

By the time of their final encounter in Manila in 1975, the culture that surrounded (some might say consumed) each man and their athletic lives had changed drastically. Largely gone was the intense struggle over racial identity and authenticity that had helped define the careers and lives of Patterson, Liston and Frazier. The passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 prohibited discrimination in public places such as movie theaters and hotels while the 1968 Fair Housing Act outlawed discrimination in housing.[150] These changes, coupled with the gradual end of the Vietnam War and the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974, left America a country "that lurched from one catastrophe to the next, no end in sight," and that the decade was bookended "by dishonor and dysfunction."[151]

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[150] http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=97 Accessed 9 Apr. 2015.

[151] Hoffer, 1

Where, then, did this leave some of the most well-known athletes of the 1960s and 1970s? By 1975, with Floyd Patterson living quietly in retirement and Sonny Liston deceased for five years, Frazier, Foreman and Ali continued to do battle with each other. But as the decade and the athletes went on, questions and understandings of racial authenticity and Black pride took on an entirely different tone. As a new crop of Blacks began filling the ranks of the heavyweights, they were demonstrating a decidedly different approach to issues of race. Mainly, they remained largely silent on the topic.

George Foreman, joined by Ken Norton, Larry Holmes and the Spinx brothers, Michael and Leon, were aware of their status as Black males in America. But decidedly absent from their time in the 1970s and into the 1980s was the lack of a defining cause to set them in opposition to each other. Both Patterson and Frazier had to defend their racial identities against Ali, which often divided Black and White opinions about them. While Ali was opposed to the Vietnam War, Patterson and Frazier openly questioned his loyalty to his country. Where Ali preached racial separation and segregation, Patterson had long been a lifetime member of the NAACP while Joe Frazier worked with other athletes and personalities to try and secure the release of prisoners of the Vietnam War, both Black and White.[152]

By 1975, issues of civil rights, Black identity and racial pride did not have the same personalities driving them nor the same fervor and urgency giving them importance. What, then, caused Ali to continue to attack members of his own race and

[152] "Frazier asks POW's release." *Chicago Defender* 17 6 1971, 30, col. 1. Web. 14 Apr. 2015. http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/?accountid=14663 Accessed 9 Feb. 2015

dictate the narratives of those he believed to be inferior to him? Did he truly believe his own superiority? Was it simply the only way he knew to garner publicity and sell tickets to his fights? Or was he so desperate for attention, approval and external validation that he was willing to do and say nearly anything to have it? Much like the exploitation of Ali by Herbert Muhammad, was it somehow more acceptable and tolerable if it was one Black man calling another Black man an ignorant, Uncle Tom gorilla?

According to Mark Kram's *Ghosts of Manila*, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ali not only increased the pace of his claims of being "The Greatest," he also began to believe that he was better than his contemporaries, both in and out of the ring. During the flight to Manila, Kram questioned Ali about the cruelty he only saved for Black fighters. Ali's answers are telling in that they reveal his very complicated relationship with members of his own race as well as with Whites. After first claiming it was because his opponents (Patterson and Ernie Terrell, specifically) called him by his "slave name," the conversation turned to Frazier.

> 'I don't hate Frazier,' he said. 'But I don't like him, either. He's got an idea he's my equal.' Did Frazier scare him? 'Not fear fear. Only 'cause he ain't normal. *That* bothers me. Man takes punches to the head like him can't be normal. Too stupid to be normal.'[153]

Not all Blacks in sport were so dismissive of Ali's rants against other Blacks. In September of 1975, A.S. "Doc" Young addressed the question of Ali's behavior in his long running "Good Morning, Sports!" column. Calling Ali "the most insensitive so-called black man in the history of sports," Young found that he was not alone in

[153] Kram, 164

expressing concern over Ali's attacks on other Blacks. Citing *Chicago Sun-Times* journalist Lacy J. Banks, Young found that his fellow scribe was not just uneasy with Ali's tactics, but offended by them. As Banks said, "I have to be honest with you. I have a gut revulsion against blacks aping the stereotyped images the racist whites still nurse of black people."

Yet as the same article would show, it was not just sports journalists or athletes who knew about the potential dangers of Ali's Black on Black attacks. As Chicago-based psychiatrist, Dr. Ellis Johnson, attempted to explain, Ali's brand of racism might be, as Ali would claim, profitable in that it increased interests in future fights. However, that profit could come with a heavy price as Banks ended his opinion "on a rather weak note: 'I sure hope Ali does not overdo this.'"[154] As the lead up and aftermath of Manila would show, Ali would not just "overdo this." Part of his legacy would be built on his attacks against other Blacks in order to gain the approval of anyone, Black or White, who was willing to give it to him. The following section will examine the impact of the "Thrilla in Manila" on the legacy and memory of Joe Frazier.

The Legacy of Manila

By 1974, Frazier was largely considered to be physically decimated and well past his prime. In Jamaica in 1973, after being knocked down six times in two rounds by Foreman and losing his title, his friends and family begged him to retire. Yet when Ali shocked boxing pundits with his eighth round knockout of new champion George Foreman in Zaire, Frazier demanded another match for the title. What made their

[154] Young, A.S. "Doc". "A Reason To Hate." *Chicago Defender* [Chicago] 29 Sep. 1975: 26. ProQuest Web. http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/index. Accessed 5 Jan. 2015

encounter odd outside the choice of the Philippines to host the match was Ali's choice of tactics to create interest in the fight was his reliance on racial slurs that he reserved for Frazier.

Unlike his encounters with Floyd Patterson and Ernie Terrell, Ali intensified his attack by repeatedly calling Frazier an ape and a nigger. Unlike Patterson, he was not even the White man's champion or an Uncle Tom. Ali's use of the slur served to dehumanize Frazier in a way he had not done before. As Frazier correctly observed, Ali's tactics revolved around robbing his opponents of their manhood and racial identity. As Ali continued to hold court during training sessions, his attacks elicited racist comments and slurs from both Blacks and Whites alike. For Ali, the attention and the perception of positive reinforcement overrode any allegiance he had with Blacks and gave Whites a temporary respite from their status as devils.

> 'Gorilla,' he then said. He waited, then came at them with a louder 'Gorilla. Joe Frazier!' a guy in the back shouted, looking like an arriviste Hell's Angel. 'No!' a young White woman with a pasty face, blond hair like straw, and the décolletage of a barmaid shouted at ringside. 'The ape man! Ape! Ape!'

Pleased with the crowd's reaction, even after a member of the crowd responded that the Filipinos would look at Frazier and assume that all American Blacks were "Jist niggers!" Ali responded with appropriately feigned injury at the racist slur that he frequently used to describe Blacks he believed to be inferior to him. "Aint that the truth," he said. "Jist niggahs and freaks. They gonna say that about me?"[155]

While the story of Ali and Frazier's final conflict in Manila has been well documented, the question of their respective legacies has received less attention.

[155] Kram, 167

Where Ali and his thorough viciousness would be largely forgiven or readily overlooked for more innocuous quotes, the problem of his attacks, coupled with the period in history when he decided to use them, illustrate a much deeper division among American Blacks. Unfortunately for Frazier and others, there was little in the way of compromise or understanding their experiences would generate. Just as Ali strove to do, they were not seen as proud, assertive Black men like him; to Ali, the rest were just "niggahs and freaks."

During the isolation of Frazier and Patterson, George Foreman arrived on the professional heavyweight scene as the civil rights movement was drawing to a close. Despite his seemingly supernatural strength and ostensibly foul temperament, Foreman's experiences and observations as a young man and a professional adult allude to the changing nature of the political and cultural arena. These changes, coupled with Foreman's own experiences with an increasingly integrated America, are evidence not so much of the creation of a post-racial society but of one that was producing more continuity among Black identities. The following chapter will examine the experiences and observations of George Foreman during the 1968 Olympic games and his first reign as heavyweight champion.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GEORGE FOREMAN AND THE TWILIGHT OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

Of the four boxers in this study, George Foreman has a unique place in history, both in and out of the ring. In addition to being heavyweight champion of the world, Foreman came of age as an athlete and young man during the twilight of the Civil Rights era. Where the exodus of Patterson, Liston, and Frazier from the south was created and undertaken by either the individual or by families, Foreman's journey was different as it was dependent entirely on the liberal policies of Lyndon Johnson and the creation of the Job Corps.[156]

The creation of the Job Corps would prove to be a turning point in Foreman's life which was defined by urban poverty. Before the creation of this and other programs, he was well on his way to falling into the widespread poverty, crime, and violence that defined daily life in Houston's Fifth Ward. By the time of his arrival in the Pacific Northwest, Foreman was able to contemplate a career path that involved education, vocational training, service to others, and offered far more promise than the life of crime and indolence that he led in Houston.

It would be Foreman's time in the 1968 Olympics and his reign as heavyweight champion that would mark a significant transition in the ways Black identity was internalized, understood, and expressed in the last half of the 1970s and beyond. Though Foreman's transformation during his first and second careers as a professional fighter were by no means conventional, he symbolizes a transition from the ways Black

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[156] Parker, Franklin. "Salvaging School Failures: The Job Corps Acts." *The Phi Delta Kappan.* 49.7 (1968): 362-369. Web. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/ Accessed 10 Sep. 2014

fighters were able to express themselves to the public and each other as athletes and as individuals. Additionally, a significant amount of the infighting and racially motivated rancor between Black fighters that was largely the result of the Ali myth was rapidly disappearing after 1975 and the "Thrilla in Manila."

While Foreman was subjected to conflicting notions of what "true" Black identity was and how it was supposed to be expressed during the 1968 Olympics, his professional career was not as deeply affected by questions of race as his predecessors. Though Foreman's patriotism and belief in the American system of government put him at odds with more militant and politically disillusioned Blacks, he was not subjected to taunts of Uncle Tom, "White America", or gorilla, as Floyd Patterson and Joe Frazier were forced to endure. Despite Ali's victory over Foreman in Zaire in 1974, "The Greatest" failed in his efforts to alienate Foreman from his own racial identity or depict him as an honorary member of the White establishment as he had done to Patterson and Frazier.

What makes Foreman's first reign as heavyweight champion noteworthy is the period in history in which he captured it. Patterson, Liston, and Frazier's reigns as champion all coincided at one time or another with the apexes of the civil rights and Black power movements, fundamentally altering the meaning and interpretation of what it meant to be both Black and a world champion. By the time of Foreman's triumph at the 1968 Olympics and the first several years of his professional career, the urgency and energy that powered the push for equal rights had begun to dim, with many of the key leaders dead or simply fading from public view (in the case of Stokley Carmichael, he eventually immigrated to Africa and took the name Kwame Toure).

These changes meant that the formative years of young people of Foreman's age were not as drastically defined by images of policemen attacking non-violent marchers, or peaceful protestors being blasted off their feet by fire hoses.

This is not to suggest that young Black people were free from the effects of racism and discrimination, or that the United States had entered into a post-racial era. As the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) and other independent observers would correctly assert, American racism was alive and well at the end of the 1960s. What Foreman symbolizes is a change in approach and understanding of how civil rights were being obtained, different methods in confronting and overcoming discrimination, and new understandings of how Blacks identified themselves, not just in comparison to Whites, but also to other Blacks.

Patterson and Frazier had asserted in the early and late 1960s, respectively, that no one Black person could claim to speak for all Black people, and George Foreman would also adhere to this position during the 1968 Olympics and his early professional career. Though the once-in-a-lifetime personalities, events and leadership that had defined the early civil rights movement were largely gone, the change in Black self-concept and identity that had been created was still alive throughout the 1970s. Just as the leaders changed to fit their audience, the people changed to fit their own changing set of unique circumstances. The following section will examine George Foreman's early life, influences and experiences growing up in Houston's Fifth Ward.

Houston's "Bloody Fifth"

When George Foreman was born on January 10, 1949, his formative years were similar in many aspects to those of Patterson, Liston and Frazier. Born the fifth of seven

children, his formative years were defined by grinding poverty and desperation. As Foreman recalled, "anger and hunger shaped my youth." And, like the other three boxers in this study, Foreman's mother came from a sharecropping background near Marshall, Texas. Like countless others, she sought better employment opportunities in larger, more industrialized cities.

Upon Foreman's birth, the family (who was usually without patriarch J.D. Foreman, a railroad worker) left Marshall for Houston, which they hoped would be their "shot at big wages and indoor toilets." However, the dream of a better life never came. Despite the best efforts of Foreman's mother, Nancy Rae Nelson, she found herself in a position almost identical to that of Floyd Patterson's father. Even with working two jobs, seven days a week, the family was constantly on the brink of destitution. This situation was further exacerbated by the family's unstable living conditions. Foreman's mother, who usually brought home under $30 per week, often had to make choices between paying the rent and feeding her family. This meant that the family moved constantly, sometimes into homes that did not have reliable electricity. The only consistent features of the homes they moved into were that they were dirty, dark, cramped and infested with rats and other vermin.

Through it all, Nancy Rae Nelson somehow managed to keep the Foreman family intact, an effort that was not lost on Foreman as a young man or as an adult. His reflection on what his mother experienced trying to feed and care for her seven children largely on her own speaks to the larger feelings of disappointment and desperation that many Black families encountered in their quest for social mobility. Despite his mother's efforts to make her children believe that if they held on and

worked hard, they too would someday have enough to eat, clothes to wear, and be able to go to school. Foreman recalled his mother's existence was defined largely by anxiety and uncertainty.

> We lived mainly on the nickels and dimes she made. When I think of the pain Mom had to overcome in order to put on a happy face, and when I imagine being in her position and having to do the same, I cry in gratitude and admiration. What does it feel like to know that you're doing everything you can, and still your kids are hungry? (Is it possible that only I was feeling hungry all the time?)[157]

Outside of the Foreman home, the Fifth Ward, aka the "Bloody Fifth" to the locals, was much like Bedford-Stuyvesant of Floyd Patterson's youth as it offered a number of temptations and dangers from both other residents and the local police. In this environment normal childhood experiences like regular school attendance was not a priority for Foreman who remembered that teachers treated students differently based on their appearance and quality of their clothing. Having repeated several grades several times, Foreman decided his future in junior high was driven solely by athletics, specifically football. In addition to having little internal motivation, his teachers, mostly Black, stated that many of them were destined to fail and should not expect to go any farther in school than junior high.

Despite the differences in geography, Foreman's experience with education is nearly identical to the experiences of Patterson, Liston, and Frazier. With the exception of Patterson, each man's attempts at gaining the most basic education ended with him either going to work, or, in Liston's case, prison. In Foreman's case, his education ended before even finishing junior high. Without any structure at home or school, by age 15,

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[157] Foreman, George and Engel, Joel. *By George: The Autobiography of George Foreman*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995 (5)

Foreman, who had grown to over six feet tall and weighed 185 pounds, quickly turned to a life of crime and indolence.

What is revealing about Foreman, Patterson, Liston, and Frazier, are the ways in which each of these men not only utilized crime but also rationalized the crimes that they committed. Crimes were not committed out of boredom or for excitement, but out of necessity. Patterson stole out of a desperate desire to help his family; Liston attacked and mugged people to feed himself; Frazier stole cars and sold them to junkyards because he was unable to find gainful employment. As for Foreman, he stole for many of the same reasons but his explanation as to WHY he stole reveals much about the prospects that awaited poor young Blacks in American ghettoes. If a person needed something, there was nothing wrong with taking it.

> Now, this may be hard to believe, but I can truthfully claim that I didn't understand how serious a crime it was to take someone's money; it seemed the same as picking apples off a tree that didn't belong to you. It wasn't arrogance, but ignorance, kind of like my son's thinking faded blue jeans meant poverty. For me in those days, the law was the law of the jungle, where the end justified the means. *Survival*.[158]

Foreman's interpretation of his actions and belief in "the law of the jungle" may also help to explain why he and his predecessors approached their professional boxing careers as business first, and issues of racial equality and civil rights a distant second. All four men's formative years were affected in some way by uncertainty, instability, and criminal activity as not just displays of youthful indiscretion, but a means of ensuring survival. However, even with the desperation that surrounded his daily existence, Foreman's love for his mother helped provide a gradual departure from his

[158] Foreman, 16

career as a criminal. As he would tell *Ebony* magazine in April of 1973, he and his friends attempted to add purse snatching to their collective criminal arsenals, but met with little success when they began to see their victims as more than walking currency, but as their own sisters, mothers and grandmothers.

> 'That didn't work out too well,' Foreman admits, 'because Charles and I came from a matriarchal family and cared too much for our mothers. We'd end up dropping the purse when a woman would cry: 'Lord Jesus, don't take my money!' It hurt us so we would leave the purse.'[159]

Though Foreman's criminal career ended after he resorted to covering himself in the mud beneath a sewer pipe to throw police dogs off his scent, there was still the dependence on brute strength and his ability to physically dominate others that helped him to survive the dangers that defined daily life in the Fifth Ward. While Foreman vowed never to steal from old ladies again, hammering other boys and grown men into submission with his fists to get what he wanted was another matter.

Despite his readiness to resort to physical violence, Foreman's teenage years were defined by his ability to eventually leave behind the violence of Houston. Even with no education, skills or definitive plans for his future, Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 acknowledged that poor, young Black males were at a decided disadvantage in education, training and employment opportunities. Though the war on poverty was not aimed at minority youth specifically, the impact it had on Black males was significant. Writing for *The Journal of Negro Education* in 1965, author Deborah P. Wolfe called the Economic Opportunity Act "the most significant piece of legislation affecting the American Negro today," as it sought to

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[159] Robinson, Louie. "New Boss of the Heavyweights." *Ebony* April, 1973: 35-43. *http://www.ebony.com/archives*. Web. Accessed 6 Mar. 2015 (38)

address the root problems and causes of poverty in America. As it related to Blacks, government studies in 1965 discovered that, of the two million Black families in America living on annual incomes under $3,000, roughly 74% resided in the South, and some 53% of those lived in urban areas.

Upon closer examination, the act and the programs it created were practically tailored to Foreman and his situation. The Job Corps, created under Title I, Part A, of the act, was aimed at addressing the needs of educationally and economically disadvantaged young people, aged 16-21. Education Chief Wolfe cited several factors that contributed to the number of youth, particularly Black youth, who were at risk of adding to the already high numbers of impoverished Black young people whose futures were fraught with crime and desperation. Wolfe and others felt that the program could serve those who "because of extreme instances of poverty or lack of employment have become discouraged."[160]

While frequenting a local pool hall, Foreman overheard a Job Corps commercial featuring his heroes Johnny Unitas and Jim Brown. He would later recollect that the two things about the advertisement that profoundly affected him were the men delivering the message, and the message itself: "You can get a second chance." In spite of all the trouble he had caused and had been a part of, he still expressed a desire to not only please his mother but also to make a better life. After signing the necessary documents, Foreman and a friend boarded a plane for the first time in their lives headed for Grants Pass, Oregon and the Fort Vanney Training Center.

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[160] Deborah P. Wolfe, "What the Economic Opportunity Act Means to the Negro." *The Journal of Negro Education*. Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter 1965), pp. 88-92 (88).

The journey of George Foreman from out of the confines of urban poverty in Houston closely resembled that of Floyd Patterson years earlier in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Each expressed feelings of alienation, fear and uncertainty about the world that existed outside of their respective ghettoes. Each man recalled being taken aback by the sight of nature (Patterson in upstate New York, Foreman in the Pacific Northwest), clean air and vast forests. For Foreman, who idolized movie cowboy Roy Rogers and fantasized about the type of life he saw on "Leave it to Beaver", the Job Corps center was "the place of my heroes and fantasies."

For the first time each man found a structure and routine that was largely absent from his formative years. This would prove especially important for Foreman, who began physically terrorizing other Job Corps residents almost immediately upon his arrival. It was not until he met the woman he called his surrogate mother, cafeteria cook, Mrs. Moon, that things slowly began to change. Though he still continued to harass and physically abuse other residents, he slowly began to take advantage of the educational opportunities that Job Corps offered. He also developed the habit of carrying a dictionary with him to look up and learn words he did not know, a habit that was identical to Floyd Patterson's.

And, like Patterson, Foreman found that the true turn around in his behavior, identity, and self-esteem came when a counselor suggested he take up boxing. Despite his early difficulties separating boxing from street fighting, Foreman learned quickly and easily won his first amateur bout. The excess energy that came from anxiety, fear, and rage that Patterson and Foreman both had were channeled into athletics. Having their intellectual needs met, they were able to address their emotional and mental

distress through boxing, which provided them with an appropriate outlet for energies that had previously led them to encounters with their local police.

However, the similarities in their education and boxing experiences also speak to the tragedy that defined the childhood and young adult life of underprivileged Black males like Sonny Liston. Liston, the oldest and most disadvantaged of the three, exhibited the exact same violent and anti-social tendencies that Patterson and Foreman exhibited, but he was not provided with the same outlets for his energy and turmoil that his contemporaries would have. When Liston wistfully lamented about where were the people who cared about juvenile delinquents when he was growing up, like Vivian Costen at Wiltwyck for Floyd Patterson and Mrs. Moon in Grants Pass, Oregon for George Foreman, the answer is cynical, yet simple: United States politicians were not yet interested in offering the type of help that poor, disadvantaged, discouraged young people, particularly Black males, needed in terms of education and social skills. As Liston's experience proved, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was easier and more convenient to find an excuse to throw them in prison and forget them.

In an article for *The Phi Delta Kappan*, author Franklin Parker compared the effectiveness of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the Great Depression with the mission of the Job Corps in that each had similar goals. Where the main goal of the CCC was conservation work and an emphasis on economic opportunity, a key difference between the CCC of the 1930s and the Job Corps of the 1960s was the emphasis on education in addition to a variety of vocational training, something that Parker cites as an afterthought of the CCC. Where the programs of the 1930s were aimed primarily at instilling economic and psychological confidence in the American workforce, the

programs of President Johnson's Great Society sought to address the needs of individuals whose basic needs and development were largely ignored or neglected. Perhaps most important for Job Corps recruits was the emphasis on basic education, study skills, and the overall development of the individual.

As Parker correctly asserted, the education system as it currently existed in the 1960s had a rousing success rate among middle and upper class young people. However, one factor that is missing from his analysis is the issue of race. President Johnson's Great Society programs sought to address poverty throughout the United States; poverty noted as crippling young Americans of all colors and ethnicities. As the experiences of Floyd Patterson and George Foreman illustrated, children from slums and various other impoverished areas received little in the way of the support and nurturing that their suburban counterparts took for granted. Lacking material resources and experienced, dedicated instructors, Parker referred to schools in impoverished urban and rural areas as "all too frequently" being "forced to use beginning or inept teachers" and constantly lacking the most basic supplies and materials at all grade levels.[161]

For Foreman, the change in environment and approach to education paid dividends fairly quickly. After graduating from the Job Corps with a certification in general electronics repair, he returned to Houston and easily passed the G.E.D. exam. After temporarily falling back into his old habits of smoking, drinking and fighting, he returned to the Job Corps center at Pleasanton where he continued to work on his boxing skills, entering as many amateur tournaments as possible in preparation for the

[161] Parker, 363

1968 Olympics. After several minor setbacks, Foreman secured a spot on the Olympic team and soon found himself with front row seats to the beginning of protest and unrest the likes of which the Olympics had never seen in the persons of Harry Edwards, Tommie Smith, John Carlos and the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR).

Foreman's time at the Olympics and his interaction (or lack thereof) with the OPHR is possibly one of the most fertile areas for reexamination as well as the crafting of a new narrative about the myriad identities and perceptions that surrounded Black athletes in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. While existing accounts have rightly praised the courage and sacrifice of Tommie Smith and John Carlos protesting at the 1968 Olympics, the observations and interpretation of George Foreman, who understood the star status the track athletes had in the games, helps to explain the difficulty that other athletes had to endure.

George Foreman is representative of the Black athletes from the Olympics who were forced to defend their political and personal ideologies to the United States at large as well as to friends and family. Despite his pride at having earned his GED, he would be in for a rude awakening when he encountered the college-educated members of the U.S. track team. In spite of overcoming tremendous odds, Foreman would be divided from other Blacks in a manner similar to what Muhammad Ali would do to him in Zaire in 1974. As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, Foreman and others who lacked certain prerequisites (education, militancy, business associates) would be cast as Black in appearance only, something no amount of medals or championships would be able to alleviate. The following section will examine George Foreman's initial impressions and observations of the 1968 Mexico City games and the members of the OPHR.

The Olympic Project for Human Rights

When the boxers of the 1968 U.S. Olympic team arrived at their training facility in New Mexico, OPHR representatives eventually arrived and eyed the team members with a mixture of disdain and apathy. Quickly recognizing that there were no media darlings among the group who had the established notoriety and celebrity of a star like UCLA's Lew Alcindor, the OPHR members delivered a few speeches about the nature of the boycott and its importance and quickly left. Edwards' people made it clear that these athletes were not the faces they wanted representing his movement.

Speaking some three decades after the games for the HBO documentary *Fists of Freedom*, Tommie Smith asserted that the protest was being constructed and executed around a "platform of knowledge."[162] In a scene that must have been eerily similar to what Foreman had experienced during his time in elementary and junior high school, members of Edwards' camp displayed a sort of elitism and aloofness in whom they deemed worthy to participate in their movement. When OPHR representatives "passed us by the way a freight train would a hobo" and deliberately excluded the boxers from any involvement in a possible boycott, Foreman identified several important ideological features that would never allow someone like him to take part in the type of boycott Edwards was proposing.

First, they aimed to win the hearts and minds of major college stars like Alcindor to give the movement added attention, something that Alcindor immediately lent to the movement when he refused to take part in the games. Second, Foreman simply did not

[162] George, dir. *Fists of Freedom: The Story of the '68 Summer Games*. Writ. Steven Stern. HBO, 1999. Film. 16 Apr 2015.

see America and the establishment in the same way that Edwards, Tommie Smith, John Carlos and others saw it. For OPHR members, their time in college allowed them the luxury to speculate, talk and dream of upsetting and recreating the existing social and political order. Though Smith and Carlos had come from difficult surroundings as younger men, their time at San Jose State allowed them to live in, as Foreman saw it, a type of fantasy world. Quite naturally, the worldview and reality of a college student was far removed from that of someone like Foreman, who would blow up his often-empty lunch bags so his classmates would think he had something to eat for the day.

> College is a world of youth, exuberance, and talk---not reality. Whether the students' anger was righteous, I don't know. I knew only that their world wasn't the one I saw. Maybe I was ignorant, but even at its most desperate and violent, the world I'd grown up in hadn't made me mad. I'd never, not for a day, felt inferior to anything or anyone. Yes, I'd been hungry. But I always believed I would develop skills and earn a living for me and my family. How could I protest against "the establishment," when that establishment had created the Job Corps for guys like me?[163]

For Foreman, whose formative years were often defined by constant struggle, hunger, and the need to survive, the notion of protesting a nation that allowed him to escape poverty and desperation (though that often meant ignoring the social and historical circumstances that often put people of color into such squalid conditions) simply did not make sense. Additionally, he did not feel complete solidarity with the project's organizers, as he speculated that he "experienced prejudice in a way that Harry Edwards and his colleagues maybe had not." As he reflected on his interactions with elementary and junior high teachers, being the same color as his teachers and other authority figures in the Fifth Ward did not gain him any special treatment, as they

[163] Foreman, 55

unfairly judged him and others while making assumptions about what sort of failures they would be as adults, if they lived that long.

It would be these early experiences, both positive and negative, that would create two separate narratives surrounding George Foreman's Olympic experience and legacy. Where Smith and Carlos were largely remembered for making a sacrifice that would have far reaching effects on their futures as athletes and individuals, historians would reduce Foreman's Olympic experience to little more than a display of hyper-patriotism by a naïve teenager. Though much would be made, and rightfully so, of the suffering that members of the OPHR endured (most notably Smith and Carlos, who were banned from the games for life and suffered severe professional and personal losses, including the suicide of Carlos's wife), Foreman would face harsh alienation from the Black community as well as a crisis of personal identity regarding his actions during and after the games.

If Foreman's reaction to his Olympic victory seemed overly exuberant or a slap in the face to the protests of Smith, Carlos and the Black Power movement as a whole, a review of Foreman's past could help to expand on existing accounts and explain why the OPHR lacked unanimity among United States athletes. As Foreman rightly pointed out, college was a world of fantasy, a type of fairytale land where its members had the luxury of choosing which injustices that could address, like the hiring of more Black coaches or protesting which teams they would/would not compete against. In the world of the Fifth Ward, access to food and shelter trumped their concerns about the number of Black teachers in their school. For someone of his background, America and his experiences with it simply held different meanings and offered different experiences

then it did for those who had the fortune to be exposed to the diversity of experience and ideas found on college campuses.

With the ripple effects of the medal stand protest still reverberating in the minds of Blacks and Whites alike, Foreman began to see more of the differences between him and the San Jose State athletes who garnered the majority of the negative attention during the games. Additionally, he also became painfully aware of how differently he and the OPHR members were being portrayed in the press.

Despite the venom hurled at Smith and Carlos by journalists like *The New York Times* Arthur Daley, who characterized their gesture as "disgraceful, insulting, and embarrassing," Foreman never resorted to name calling or insults when asked about the OPHR and its members.[164] For all intents and purposes, he was an outsider who was not privy to the meaning or execution of the message. In addition to their line of thinking originating from a place and culture that was largely alien to him, he took his analysis a step farther. Several years after the games, Foreman would explain what caused his actions in 1968, his feelings about America and his place in it, and also his understanding of the Black Power salute on the medal stand.

Though his actions after his victory over Russia's Ionnis Chepulis would immediately make him the ultimate symbol of pro-war patriotism, his explanation for his actions was not that of an overzealous patriot or a sycophantic Uncle Tom. Rather, it was a demonstration of appreciation from someone who had been conditioned to believe he was destined to be a failure and was incapable of learning. In spite of this, he

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[164] Daley, Arthur. "Sports of The Times: The Incident." *New York Times* [Mexico CIty] 20 10 1968, S2. Web. http://media.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu Accessed 16 Apr. 2015.

was able to count on someone to "pick me up, until finally I got somewhere on my ninth or 10th try."[165]

When Foreman's autobiography is compared with the initial responses to the controversy that surrounded the 1968 games, it demonstrates the benefit of hindsight in a reexamination of the event and the people who were a part of it. It also allows athletes like Foreman, Liston, and Patterson the opportunity to have a greater voice where past accounts are often less than critical of significant events and the major players in them. The following section will examine the primary and secondary sources surrounding the 1968 Olympics. By examining the movements and feelings of Smith, Carlos and Foreman, we can begin to craft a better understanding of the diverse feelings and actions of the athletes who were affected by this complicated, far-reaching historical moment.

George Foreman and the OPHR Fallout

The reactions to the protest of Smith and Carlos on the medal stand were as swift as they were vengeful. Olympic officials called for their immediate and permanent expulsion from the games, while journalists like Shirley Povich, John Hall, and Brent Musberger all reacted with horror and disgust at their attempt to "politicize" the games, making their return to the United States that much more difficult. However, the different perspective George Foreman is able to offer on this seminal moment in the struggle for civil rights offers a view that is closer to center than that of Smith, Carlos, or the journalists who called for the symbolic crucifixion of the pair.

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[165] Apple, R.W., Jr. "Olympic Boxing Champion Is Used as Symbol by Both Major Candidates." *The New York Times*. Nov. 3, 1968: pg. 84. Print.

As for Foreman, the only initial responses that were disseminated to the American public fell in line with the conservative views of the reporters and authority figures that condemned the protest and looked to vilify those who supported it. Arthur Daley's comments left the American public with the perception that Foreman was entirely unsympathetic, not just with the cause of the OPHR, but with the feelings of all Blacks in America who were tiring of constant discrimination and oppression that had long been part of their daily existence.

Renowned journalist Shirley Povich, who had written that Foreman was "admittedly out of sympathy" with the protest and its members, scolded Smith and Carlos for their lack of patriotism and characterized the two as "fading figures" who were "bypassed by other interests in the Games."[166] While Povich barely mentions Foreman, he puts significant symbolic and ideological space between him and the OPHR participants, praising those Black athletes who chose not to participate in the protest along with those who protested by remaining at home. The actions of the sprinters, however, mattered little for the future, as Povich predicted that their relevance would fade once their physical prowess and the memory of their accomplishments began to dwindle.

With the attention being paid to Smith, Carlos, and their expulsion from the village, the media scrutiny inevitably turned to the remaining members of the team who were also part of the OPHR. As Smith and Carlos departed, the pressure of continuing the spirit and mission of the OPHR fell largely onto 400-meter favorite Lee Evans. A

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[166] Povich, Shirley. "This Morning…With Shirley Povich." *The Washington Post*. October 24, 1968: K1. Web. Accessed 12 Jan. 2015.

member of the famed San Jose State track team and core member of the OPHR, Evans was part of the planning and execution of the boycott from the beginning.

Once the games began and it became clear that the Black athletes were going to compete, the question was what statement each individual would make, should they take the medal stand. As the Americans continued to dominate the sprints, Evans found himself in the unenviable position of having won the gold medal in the individual 400-meter dash several days after Smith and Carlos had protested and been expelled from the games. The question that surrounded Evans immediately after his win was what sort of protest, if any, he was going to make on the medal stand.

As Evans would recall decades later in the *Fists* documentary, he feared that there was no way he could even follow, yet alone equal, the power of Smith and Carlos's gesture.[167] Unfortunately for Evans, he would be proven correct. After he and fellow medal winners Larry James and Ron Freeman took silver and bronze, respectively, they donned Black berets in support of the ideals and sacrifices of the Black Panther Party. Despite the American sweep of the 400-meter dash, the three were ridiculed and scolded for not offering up a sacrifice on the level of Smith and Carlos. By the time of Foreman's gold medal victory, the actions of all the Black American athletes were closely scrutinized, and Foreman's decision to wave a small American flag would prove among the most explosive and divisive of all.

Yet Foreman's autobiography presents a different aspect to the event that was not as clear-cut as the one presented by Povich and other journalists covering the games. Though not invited into the OPHR clique, Foreman nonetheless observed Smith

[167] *Fists of Freedom*. George Roy, Director. Home Box Office (HBO), 1999.

and Carlos from a distance. Without the benefit of the news (which, he readily admitted, he did not seek out during his time in the Olympic village) to, in his words, "'explain' and magnify what they'd done," he was left to try and decipher the magnitude of their protest largely on his own. Lacking the camaraderie of the OPHR, but still seeing them as teammates and fellow Olympians, Foreman recalled feeling anger, but not the type of anger born of racial injustice.

As his rage grew over what he called Smith and Carlos's expulsion "from our family," he threatened to not compete in his own gold medal match. After deciding to go ahead and fight, Foreman beat Chepulis to win the gold, placing the eyes of the world squarely on him. Much like his counterparts on the track, attention was now paid to what the Black heavyweight gold medalist would do to protest. In a gesture that would endear him to conservative sports writers and alienate him from Black revolutionaries, Foreman grabbed a small American flag, waved it, and bowed to the four sides of the ring. While history would cast his celebration as either a betrayal of racial solidarity or a show of allegiance to White, conservative values, his explanation and the reasoning behind his gesture speaks more to the integrationist leanings and philosophies of Patterson, Liston, and Frazier.

> Despite the later press reports and most people's interpretation, my waving the flag wasn't exactly the gesture of patriotism it appeared to be. Nor was it a counterdemonstration to Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The truth is less simple. For the weeks I'd been in the Olympic Village, I'd seen hundreds of young men who could have been my brothers. 'Hey, how're you doin', homeboy?' I'd say to a fellow coming back from a workout. But instead of responding in English, he'd speak some language that sounded about as intelligible as gargling. I soon learned that your flag and your colors were what identified you.[168]

[168] Foreman, 59

Foreman's explanation speaks not only to the diversity of solidarity that existed among this very turbulent time in American history, but also to an acknowledgment that skin color alone was often not enough to automatically unify people of color, even when they came from the same country. Where Foreman had been separated from the OPHR because of his social and athletic status, he was also separated from other Blacks because of their lack of a shared nationality. What Foreman and his predecessors recognized to varying degrees was that without a guarantee of solidarity within skin color, as Muhammad Ali would continually remind them, the idea of, and identification with, a shared nation would often prove to be a reliable point of unification. This raises an important and difficult set of questions: how does one replicate a once in a lifetime, generation defining moment? What are the consequences of trying? And, perhaps the most difficult question, can it even be done?

Also lost in the discussion are the voices and motives of those who chose either not to participate or distance themselves from Edwards and the OPHR. Amy Bass's *Not the Triumph but the Struggle* examines the motives of those athletes who chose to work with the OPHR and the consequences of their decisions. More importantly, her study also includes the voices of those who did not participate. Though he was not a member of the Olympic team, Bass includes the voice of Emmett Ashford, who became major league baseball's first Black umpire in 1966. Despite Ashford characterizing the idea of a protest on the whole as a "wrong" move by "impressionable kids", Ashford makes a brief but important observation about the effect that economics may have had on their

political activism. As Ashford noted, "The ones who came up the tough, tight way aren't complaining."[169]

Despite his own misgivings about the legitimacy of the protest, Ashford's observation about the gravity of an athlete's financial situation is an important, under-examined aspect of the choice to participate or not. In addition to the financial implications of boycotting the games, George Foreman was not the only Black athlete who either felt reluctance about the boycott or rejected the notion outright. When *Ebony* magazine conducted a survey of the top American track athletes, the responses were divided for a number of reasons. Some saw the boycott as pointless, others had records to defend, and others wanted to represent America.

This dichotomy among the athletes is valuable to the creation of a new understanding and interpretation of the events of the games. What the voices of the athletes prove is that the Black athletes in the 1968 games did not possess a singular identity, and that Harry Edwards did not speak for everyone. The variety of opinions regarding Black participation in the games speaks to the diverse ideas and opinions that characterized Black athletes in those games. Additionally, they reveal the depth of pragmatism that Black athletes had to have when it came to their careers as athletes and private citizens.

In a survey conducted by *Ebony* magazine concerning the proposed boycott, we are allowed insight into the diversity that existed among Black athletes. This is crucial to the construction of new narratives that may emerge from this very tumultuous

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[169] Bass, Amy. *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002 (95)

period. Where existing works like HBO's *Fists of Freedom* and Dave Zirin's *A People's History of Sport in the United States* recount the actions of Black athletes in a very one-sided manner, the voices of the athletes demonstrate that Blacks were not unified in their thinking, and they exhibited a level of critical analysis that few people expected them to have.

The opinions of Harry Edwards, whose personal stake in the Olympic Games was far different from that of the athletes, tended to dominate many of the conversations regarding the nature, meaning and execution of any proposed protest. Because of Edwards's speaking ability, personal magnetism and presence in the public eye, his beliefs often became the official opinions of the movement, whether those who were participating agreed or not. As the words of hurdler Larry Edwards suggest, the members of the 1968 Olympic track team were incredibly diverse in their feelings, and were not shy in explaining those feelings.

> The basic elements of the Olympics is individualism, a factor which is being superseded by the advocates of the boycott…when the Black man stands on the victory stand, he can say to the world with his head held high, 'Look at me, I'm just as much a man as anyone could hope to be…although I'm not always treated as one.'[170]

Larry Edwards' voice was but one in a sea of diverse opinions regarding the effectiveness of the OPHR's proposed mission. As the primary and secondary sources show, the range of feelings and considerations that affected the actions of the athletes was significant. Where overwhelming feelings of competitiveness and nationalism drove some athletes to take part in the games, others were influenced by the possible

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[170] "Should Negroes Boycott the Olympics?" *Ebony* March, 1968: Pgs. 110-116 (114) *http://www.ebony.com/archives*. Web. Accessed 6 Mar. 2015

rewards and accolades that a strong showing in the games would offer them that they may not otherwise have had. However the athletes may have felt, the voice that rang longest and loudest belonged to OPHR organizer Harry Edwards. Though he was not a participant in the games and his future was not tied to his physical abilities, Edwards took it upon himself to become the representative voice of all Black athletes in the games.

> For years, we have been participating in the Olympic Games carrying the U.S. on our backs to victory and race relations are worse than ever. It's time for Black men to stand up and refuse to be utilized as performing animals for a little extra dog food.[171]

While he was the orchestrator of a potentially volatile movement that would affect a number of lives in myriad ways, the fact remained that the athletes in question stood to lose far more than he, allowing Edwards to lead from the rear. Though the opinions on the boycott covered both ends of the spectrum, perhaps the most critical voice came from UCLA high jumper and hurdler David O. Smith. Smith's voice offers important insight into the division that existed within the movement. He acknowledges the problems of race relations in America, but also recognizes the importance of the individual to agitate for change in the manner they believe would be the most effective. Smith is also representative of the conflict that a number of Black athletes felt regarding the boycott. Similar to Patterson, he acknowledged the problems that Blacks in America faced, but questioned the methods and tactics of addressing those problems.

> I agree with Edwards on certain points, but I don't go along with him dictating the movements of Negro athletes. I'd really like to see more

[171] Ibid, 114

> Blacks in the games. I'd like to see Black domination of the games, really.[172]

Smith was not alone in his criticism of Edwards's motives. As with Ali, *Chicago Defender* columnist A.S. "Doc" Young was critical of the language, approach and means by which Edwards attracted and kept followers. What Young took special issue with was Edwards's blanket assumptions about the motives of all Blacks and Whites concerning the question of an Olympic boycott. Calling Edwards the "High Priest of the Olympic Boycott," Young took obvious offense to Edwards labeling any Black journalists who opposed or questioned the boycott as sellouts or traitors. As Edwards said, "I don't have time for 'mongoloid' idiots and Uncle Toms." Just like Ali, Edwards drew stark divisions between those who embraced his message without question (militants, revolutionaries, "true" Blacks) and those who disagreed with or questioned him (Uncle Toms, sellouts, "mongoloid" idiots). As Young observed about Ali, this sort of thinking and approach was self-serving in the extreme and only aided in padding the ego and goals of Edwards.

Particularly important is Young's recognition of the desire for control that Edwards sought to exert over both the movement and its participants. Though John Carlos would not accuse Edwards of being an opportunist until years after the 1968 games, Young accused him of such behavior months before the games even began. While some of his labels about the overall plans of Edwards are hyperbolic ("They want to be God"), Young's observations can attest that the desire for control over young, Black athletes was definitely a concern for Edwards.

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[172] Ibid, 114

> They are wrong, too, in their habit of trying to blackjack all Negroes into accepting every thought or move or decision of "blacks" merely because they are "black." They would usurp our right to think and to dissent. We are automatically finks whenever we don't follow which ever Lord High Priest it is who is speaking out THIS WEEK.[173]

While the games would affect everyone involved, from Edwards to Evans, in different ways, it would not be until Foreman returned to the United States that the lasting impact of the OPHR and the actions of Smith and Carlos on the meaning and memory of the games would be presented to him. Much like Muhammad Ali eight years earlier, Foreman enjoyed the trappings of his Olympic victory, which included meeting various celebrities and political figures, including outgoing President Lyndon Baines Johnson and his childhood hero, actor Roy Rogers. However, Foreman would begin to understand the true impact of the OPHR protest upon his return when he began to see posters of Smith and Carlos in their iconic pose not just in private homes, but also in schools, community centers, and other public venues.

Despite his triumph, he began to feel an isolation and estrangement that was more intense than the feelings generated by the OPHR members who had offered them half-hearted lip service about a proposed boycott during the lead up to the games. The rejection and estrangement he received upon his return offered a special sting. He was not just ostracized from other Blacks, but from Fifth Ward Blacks that he had known since childhood and who had suffered through the same hunger, hopelessness, and desperation that defined everyone's daily existence.

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[173] Young, A.S. "Doc." *Chicago Defender* 16 July 1968. P.24, col. 1. Chicago Defender. Web. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/home/home.do Accessed 10 Mar. 2015

The defining moment for his own interpretation of his Olympic legacy came during a chance encounter on the streets of the Fifth Ward with a friend he had not seen since before the Olympics. Despite Foreman's medal and fame, his acquaintance rebuffed his greeting, grew silent, and scolded him for his lack of solidarity with the more militant U.S. athletes.

> 'Man,' he said, his voice slow and pained, 'how could you lift up the flag that way when the brothers were doing their thing?' He was speaking the words everyone else thought. They hit me like a hammer. It was true; I really didn't belong. What a homecoming. Imagine---the Olympic heavyweight champion, an outcast.[174]

Foreman, much like Sonny Liston after he won the title from Patterson, felt publicly and personally ostracized from much of the Black community. While his color made him a member of the Black community, his circumstances dictated that as a social and political entity, he was a community of one. He was being forced into a version of history that rightly celebrated sacrifice, but did not allow for the explanation of why everyone could not or would not sacrifice. As Foreman described it, the Panthers, OPHR and Black militants were in a "different army" than the one he was in, and he never really understood why.

Nursing this very palpable hurt through the beginning of his professional career, Foreman's concern turned inward. This hurt would eventually explode into a series of pro-establishment articles written by both Foreman and a number of White journalists that would largely rob Foreman of any sort of ability to express himself or his views on civil rights. And, like Liston, whom he came to befriend and whose mannerisms and attitudes he attempted to emulate during his early professional career, Foreman

[174] Foreman, 62

avoided speaking publicly on issues of race or discrimination in America. Despite the feelings and questions he harbored internally, the George Foreman of the late 1960s that the world would come to know appeared to lack the sophistication, analytical ability, or even the empathy to have feelings for anyone other than himself, irrespective of race, color or gender. As Foreman admitted, he was well on his way to becoming a second Sonny Liston.

All of this attention created a negative image of Foreman that would have a lasting impact on his personal and professional legacies. Journalist Arthur Daley severely criticized the protestations of Smith, Carlos, and Edwards, while loudly praising Foreman's celebration. Foreman's perceived unshakeable patriotism and love of country allowed him to remain "unmoved" by the protest and the turmoil that surrounded it despite the internal confusion he described feeling both during and after the games.[175] Unfortunately for him, he was also placed in a position similar to Floyd Patterson and Joe Frazier. Despite his own knowledge of self, his identity as a Black American was routinely questioned. While Patterson and Frazier authored articles in publications like *Sports Illustrated* and *Ebony* to defend themselves against the attacks of Muhammad Ali, Foreman was forced to prove his legitimacy against the collective memory of what may be one of the most recognizable and powerful protest symbols in 20th century sport.

Foreman's efforts at explaining his political positions and reasserting his identity as Black and American were not successful. Much like Patterson's poorly titled piece for *Sports* Illustrated, Foreman's article did little to endear him to Black Americans who still

[175] Daley, S2

idolized Smith, Carlos, Edwards and Ali. After winning the heavyweight championship, Foreman authored an article entitled "Don't Knock the American System to Me!" for *Nation's Business* in April of 1973.

This attempt to defend his identity and explain his own experiences regarding equality in America was either ignored or twisted against him and cited as further proof that he was nothing more than a tool of the establishment. Still remembering the outright rejection he had endured from Olympic athletes in Mexico and friends at home, his decision to trumpet the positives of the American system and the emphasis on the Horatio Alger myth is not entirely surprising.[176]

> So don't talk down the American system to me. I know what men go through to make it run. I also know that some of its rewards can be there for anybody, if he will make up his mind, bend his back, lean hard into his chores and refuse to allow anything to defeat him.[177]

Though his assertions and observations came some five years after the Mexico City games, they demonstrate that the situation concerning the Black power movement, the boycott and racial solidarity were far more complex than current accounts would indicate. As *Fists of Freedom* and other research on the games have demonstrated, Smith and Carlos did suffer the most severe backlash after their expulsion from the games. However, they did enjoy an almost cult like following among Blacks who were

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[176] http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v31n3/mcglinn.html Accessed 5 Mar. 2015

[177] Foreman, George. "Don't Knock the American System to Me!" *Nation's Business*. April 1973: 61, 4; (42) ABI/INFORM Global. http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/231754007?accountid=14663 Accessed 25 Apr. 2015

militant, college students, or simply disenchanted and angered with the slow pace of civil rights progress in America.

This combination of factors created a serious concern for Black athletes who were considering speaking out about the inequalities they faced, both in their athletic and personal lives. Even the manner of protest was now a matter of discussion and potential discrimination; as Lee Evans discovered, those who did not, or were not able to, protest in an appropriately powerful and captivating manner were subject to suspicion, derision and scorn from some Black Americans who were demanding a statement as captivating and powerful as that they had seen on the 200 meter medal stand in Mexico City.

It would not be until Foreman's fight with Muhammad Ali in 1974 that his feelings about racial identity and solidarity would begin to undergo significant changes and help to forge his feelings about both Blacks and Whites that he would carry into his later adult years. The following section will examine Foreman's initial foray into professional prizefighting and how it influenced his understandings of race and identity.

The Changing Meanings of the Heavyweight Championship

By 1970, Foreman had compiled a professional record of 21-0. Though he had established himself as a legitimate force in the heavyweight division, his identity as an athlete and public figure was still in a state of flux. Still alienated by much of the Black community for his celebration after the gold medal match in the 1968 Olympics, his personal and professional life were somewhat mixed when it came to matters of racial solidarity. For much of the reporting surrounding his professional career, discussions

about Foreman's views on race and race relations are largely absent. This can be explained in part by Foreman's own experience with race discrimination he faced as a young man, as well as his own evolving understandings of race relations as an adult, which were influenced by a Holocaust survivor.

> I know from my own life that the issue of prejudice is much broader than the frame into which people usually try to squeeze it. What separates us is not color, but behavior. I once came across some words by Victor Frankl, a man who'd survived terrible atrocities in a Nazi concentration camp at the hands of men who, after all, were the same color as he: 'There are only two races of people in the world, the decent and the indecent.'[178]

Though this approach to understanding and internalizing race relations in America may come across as impractical, it speaks to the diversity among Blacks regarding race that was displayed most prominently during the civil rights era of the 1960s, as well as echoing the sentiments preached by Martin Luther King Jr. that someday, people "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."[179] Where Malcolm X (for a time) preached racial separation and Black superiority, Martin Luther King and others spoke of the need for understanding, compassion and a massive change in behavior.

Another possible explanation was the odd, somewhat awkward reception Foreman received on multiple occasions from older, established Black athletes across a variety of sports. When Foreman had the opportunity to meet Jim Brown, he recalled being snubbed and quickly dismissed by two athletes in particular: New York Knicks

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[178] Foreman, xi.

[179] Howard-Pitney, David. *Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s*. 1st edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. 107. Print.

guard Walt Frazier and former Cleveland Browns running back Jim Brown, who Foreman recalled gave him "only a polite smile and limp handshake. Not even eye contact. *So that's how it's really done*."[180]

But perhaps the strangest moment in the development of Foreman as a world class Black athlete came during a meeting he had with Muhammad Ali in 1969. In the infancy of his professional career, Foreman had a chance encounter with Ali at the 5th Street Gym in Miami. To Foreman, Ali occupied the same legendary status as his other idols Jim Brown and Johnny Unitas. As Ali called out to Foreman, who was "in absolute joy," the younger man wondered what sort of wisdom or sage advice he might receive from the former champion. What occurred next was, according to Richard Hoffer and Mark Kram, who both tell near identical versions of the incident, an exchange took place between the two that, to Foreman, was puzzling and completely lacking in any kind of substance, guidance, or anything particularly meaningful.

> Ali said to him: 'Don't move. I'll be right back.' He came back with a briefcase. George envisioned it containing hundred dollar bills, or maybe Ali's title belt. He opened the case, revealing a telephone, then said: 'Can call any place in the world in a second. Nice, huh? Become a champ and you'll have one.' George just looked at him. 'Is that it?' Ali replied: 'You think I was gonna give you something for nothing.'[181]

The common thread that connects Foreman's early interactions with famous, politically active Black athletes was their generally apathetic approach toward him as someone who might have opinions on matters outside of professional sports. Was the fallout of his Olympic celebration still following him into his professional career and

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[180] Foreman, 79.

[181] Hoffer, Richard. *Bouts of Mania*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2014 (9).

still isolating him from the Black athletic community? Upon seeing his celebration at the 1968 Olympics, Ali remarked: "Look at that fool jumpin' around. Who's he tryin' to bullshit? He can punch some. Might make some money with him."[182]

When Foreman and Ali finally met each other in Zaire in 1974, the landscape of both the heavyweight scene and the civil rights movement had changed dramatically. Frazier had lost his championship to Foreman in stunning fashion in 1973, followed by another loss in a rematch with Ali in January of 1974. By the time a title fight between Foreman and Ali was set for October of that same year, the racially charged atmosphere that had defined Foreman's Olympic triumph in 1968 and Frazier's victory over Ali in 1971 had waned significantly.

As Richard Hoffer's research asserts, it was not that America had magically leapt from wrestling with the issues of racial discrimination and inequality to a post-racial utopia. The loss of key civil rights leaders, the debacle that had become the Vietnam War, and an overall distrust of elected officials served to unite a large number of Americans in opposition to the establishment and longstanding notions of law and order. While problems of race and inequality still loomed, the polls demonstrated that Americans, Black and White, were unhappy, fearful, and more than a little irritable with their overall quality of life. "This kind of malaise," a Princeton historian told *Time*, "atrophies the will of the people."[183]

As this malaise related to Foreman and Frazier, they continued to exist in an odd sort of racial and social limbo. Frazier, his identity twisted and distorted by the passion

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[182] Kram, 163

[183] Hoffer, 133

and rage of militant Blacks during the apex of the civil rights movement, was still viewed with suspicion by many in the Black community. Still cast as an Uncle Tom and an outcast, any hopes that Frazier had of reclaiming any control over his public identity and legacy were dashed with his third and final fight with Ali in Manila in 1975.

Foreman, however, provided a different problem when it came to the perception of who was and was not truly Black. When he seized the title from Frazier, issues of race, identity and authenticity were largely absent from the existing conversations surrounding their encounter. Though Ali still found a way to garner attention, the fact remained: a seemingly apolitical, even more physically devastating clone of Sonny Liston now controlled the heavyweight championship and everything that came with it. By the time of his title defense against Ali in 1974, a number of other factors, none of which involved race, had aided Foreman's transformation from the good natured, flag waving Olympian into a menace more physically dangerous and sullen than Liston.

What makes Foreman's transformation throughout 1974 and 1975 was his ability, however unintentional it may have been, to largely minimize Ali's now dated attempts at controlling the understandings and meanings of Blackness in his fights. The time and circumstances of Ali's first fight with Frazier lent itself perfectly to creating and exploiting divisions in political ideologies among Blacks. When Zaire was awarded the fight in 1974, it was not just the historical moments of the late 1960s and early 1970s that had changed the nature and meaning of the encounter. The characters, the setting and even the insults all served to distort the ostensible meaning behind the fight: an all-Black promotion, starring two elite, Black athletes, in the heart of Africa.

The involvement of Don King, recently released from prison for a 2nd degree murder conviction, and the equally suspicious presence of Herbert Muhammad and the Nation of Islam and their impact on the event was complicated. As Richard Hoffer, Mark Kram, Norman Mailer and others were able to quickly deduce, the aim of King and the NOI was not to inspire Black Nationalism or promote Zaire as accessible to the Western world ("A fight between two Blacks in a Black nation, organized by Blacks and seen by the whole world;…"[184]). In short, Zairoi president Mobutu was able to offer both parties the largest amounts of money. The shallow attempt of injecting racial pride or solidarity of any kind into the fight, despite King's extensive wardrobe of brightly colored dashikis or Ali's laying claim to the Zairois as "his people," were undermined by a number of factors, greed and deception not the least among them.

Largely absent from popular accounts surrounding the fight is Foreman's very active, deliberate role in derailing, however slightly, Ali's attempts at separating him from his identity as a Black man. Though Ali had come to rely on Frazier as a reliable means of reaffirming his own Black identity, Foreman was simply not the source of negative Black stereotypes Ali had come to depend on. Additionally, Foreman refused to enter into verbal sparring contests with Ali, instead viewing him with a sort of bemusement, a sort of jokester who was a reliable source of lowbrow amusement. Two of Foreman's observations and interactions with Ali offer insight into how Foreman not only viewed Ali as an individual, but also as an ostensibly devout Muslim.

During one of the many press conference "confrontations" that came to define much of the Ali mystique, he quickly made Foreman the butt of a joke. When Foreman

[184] Mailer, Norman. *The Fight*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975 (20)

responded by ripping Ali's jacket, Ali's response surprised Foreman on a number of levels. An enraged Ali, restrained by several people, responded by calling Foreman a "'Christian!" and a "blankety-blank!" After listening to "an endless stream of obscenities," Foreman, more bewildered than angry, attempted to dissect the encounter. His initial feeling was to question Ali's religious commitment, as he "figured a man who swore so effortlessly and creatively wasn't exactly God-fearing…"

His other source of confusion was Ali's use of the word Christian. Though Foreman had not yet fully embraced Christianity with the fervor he would as an older man, the Christian influence of his mother still held some sway on his view of the world as well as his own identity. As a result of the encounter, his view of Ali and the Muslims (whom he credited with influencing his decision to stop eating pork in the late 1960s) changed drastically. Much like Liston, Patterson and Frazier before him, Foreman's attitude towards the Muslims went from a mix of puzzlement and curiosity to one of mistrust and cynicism, due in large part to Ali's obscene outburst.

> And while I wasn't completely ready to adopt their ways, in this time of great emptiness I'd inched closer toward becoming a Muslim---until Ali's poor manners ended my flirtation. I figured if a religion couldn't make you into a better person, it had no purpose at all, and if his was the true face of Islam, I didn't want to see it in my mirror.[185]

Exactly how close Foreman actually came to embracing Islam is debatable. However, Foreman's opinion of Ali, his religion, and Ali's boorish behavior fell in line with the observations of Floyd Patterson, Sonny Liston, Ernie Terrell and Joe Frazier. Yet he was not forced to take his criticisms to the press in an effort to save face with the Black press or general public. Additionally, Ali, unlike in previous encounters, was not

[185] Foreman, 105

as successful in his attempts to include race in his encounter with Foreman. Strangely enough, while he would not attack Foreman in his familiar manner in America, he would revert to his familiar behaviors upon his arrival in Africa.

What, then, can we infer about the changes in American society and within Ali himself? Where he had freely labeled Patterson, Frazier and Terrell as Uncle Toms, puppets and champions of the White race, he attacked Foreman differently. Until the fighters reached Africa, Ali insulted Foreman's religion, boxing skills and general temperament, but not his race. Was it a change in Ali's thinking, or was it an understanding, that by the mid-1970s, the general population of American Blacks and liberal Whites no longer responded to his race based attacks with the same fervor that they had ten years earlier?

It is difficult to assess what Ali's true feelings were regarding his own relationship to "authentic" Blackness and how it affected his persona as a celebrity athlete. His opinions of Africans molded and twisted quickly depending on the situation. Before his departure, he warned reporters that if they offended the people of Zaire, they would "put you in a pot, cook you and eat you." By the time of his arrival in Kinshasa, he preached about the beauty and sophistication of African Blacks, particularly their general proficiency with English, French and "African." Commented Ali: "We can't even speak English that good."[186]

Unable to reassert his own Blackness at the expense of other Blacks as easily as he had done in the past, Ali was forced to find a new angle with which to distance Foreman from the Black population (both African and American) while reinforcing his

[186] Hoffer, 147

own racial identity. However, Ali could not label Foreman a "White American" as he had Floyd Patterson and he could not label him an "Uncle Tom" as he had Frazier. Foreman proved to be a particularly difficult code to crack when it came to asserting and reinforcing a racial identity. The few comments he did make rarely involved race, and when they did, they were far from inflammatory.

Ali, lacking the ready source of racially based comments he had utilized so well and consistently against Frazier ("I can't say George Foreman is a White man."), immediately began exploiting what little knowledge he had picked up from assistant Gene Kilroy during the flight to Zaire. Memorizing the bare minimum of Kilroy's brief lecture on the Belgian history of occupation of Zaire, Ali now had the ammunition he needed to, in his mind, reinforce his own Blackness while distancing Foreman from his own. Landing several hours before Foreman, Ali immediately began pandering to the crowd who had come to see him before scornfully announcing, "George Foreman is a Belgium (sic)."

Unfortunately for Foreman, it would be his choice of pets that would prove to be his undoing with both the people of Zaire and his control over the reports that would emerge from his time in Africa. Foreman, who by his own admission was in a state of mental and emotional turmoil stemming from a nasty divorce, often found peace in the material items he was now able to purchase with his earnings from boxing. Dogs, particularly German Shepherds, were among his favorite possessions (he once paid $21,000 for a single dog). Among the items he demanded to bring to Zaire for the length of his training camp was his German shepherd Daggo. Upon his arrival, the

crowd on the tarmac recoiled in horror at the sight of the dog, a living symbol of the police brutality they had endured at the hands of the occupying Belgians.

> Foreman stepped forth to greet this wonderful nation with a huge German shepherd at his side, the kind of animal that was once used in crowd control, a vicious reminder of their occupied past. The crowd gasped as Daggo pranced into their midst. Was it possible? Was it just like Ali had said? Was Foreman a "Belgium"?[187]

This incident, coupled with Ali's constant insistence that he and the people of Zaire shared a common cause and heritage, spelled the beginning of the end for the first part of Foreman's career. After suffering a surprising eighth round knockout at the hands of Ali, Foreman would retire a short time later to pursue his calling as preacher. Though he would find success during his comeback in the mid-1990s when, at the age of forty-five, he would become the oldest man to ever win the heavyweight championship, he would have to reinvent himself for this new age and generation. With the benefit of advanced age, plus a softer presentation (both in his public persona and physical appearance), Foreman was able to remake his fortune and his image both in and out of the ring because of his ability to not only relate to Americans of all colors, but also of various ages.

The conditions that shaped Foreman's initial career as a heavyweight did not occur in a racial limbo. As Foreman's first career wound down, so did the civil rights movement. This meant that for those civil rights athletes who continued to fight on (most prominently Ali and Frazier), their relationships to each other, as well as how they defined each other's legacies, began to take on a different shape. By the time of

[187] Hoffer, 148

Ali's retirement in 1981, the furor over race and authenticity that had defined the narratives and careers of others before him was now rendered almost entirely mute.

When Ali suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of much younger former sparring partner (and future heavyweight champion) Larry Holmes, attempting to draw sides along racial lines would have aged Ali even more than the sight of his sagging stomach flesh that continued to push over his trunks. However, there was still the legacy of Blackness, authenticity and the role of Ali in defining it for other fighters against their will. Despite this, Patterson, Liston, Frazier and Foreman still crafted legacies that, in their own specific ways, emphasized the more positive aspects and aims of the civil rights movement and the unity it sought to instill in Blacks and Whites. The following section will examine how the legacies of Patterson, Liston, Frazier and Foreman can be reexamined and refashioned, in spite of Ali's racism, venom and general bad behavior.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PATTERSON, LISTON, FRAZIER AND FOREMAN: OVERCOMING THE ALI LEGACY

Much has been invoked about the political convictions of Muhammad Ali, the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s and the spirit of revolution. Largely lost in the excitement are the political influences and leanings of Patterson, Liston, Frazier and Foreman. Outside of race, each man had his own opinions and beliefs about what direction the country should be headed, why it should go that way, and who they felt was best qualified to lead it. Unfortunately for history, the exact political leanings of Sonny Liston are nearly impossible to identify. All we can know for sure is that he, like his contemporaries, called America his home but was hurt and angered by many of its policies. The following section will examine the factors that influenced the political beliefs and actions of Patterson, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman.

The Question of Personal Beliefs and Politics

Much like their individual backgrounds, exploring the conditions that influenced Patterson's, Liston's, Frazier's and Foreman's political leanings and personal ideologies during and after their careers can help to explain several areas of their lives. Issues of religion, patriotism and identity were far more complicated than previous accounts present. What the individual voices reveal on difficult issues like race and identity are strong ties to America as country and as an idea. Most importantly, these men in their own ways criticized America's toleration and encouragement of racial discrimination. Existing narratives often paint their opinions as something they were born with not something that grew and changed with them as they interacted with the world around them.

The same can be said of the religious and personal convictions of each man. As with his politics, Ali has been given significant praise for his conversion to the Nation of Islam. For Patterson, his conversion to Roman Catholicism as a young adult only added fuel to Ali's rhetoric that he was truly the White man's champion. Conversely, Liston's faith, like his politics, is somewhat unclear. Though he did take some instruction in Catholicism, he was not a convert at the time of his death.

In Frazier's case, his strong Baptist faith and connection to his Gullah roots were often viewed as a holdover from the days of slavery, making it easier for those like Ali to present him to Black and White Americans as shuffling, singing Uncle Tom. Perhaps the most extreme, though, is George Foreman's experience with becoming a born-again Christian. As he described it, after a loss to Jimmy Young in 1977 God came to him in such a strong, visceral fashion that it caused him to retire from boxing in his dressing room immediately. After his experience, he began preaching on street corners and opened his own church and would not return to fighting until 1987.

The purpose of this research is not to trumpet one political party or religious faith over another, but to examine the different ways that these particular Black athletes attempted to make sense of America's rapidly changing social and political landscapes. Under scrutiny from significant portions of both Black and White America, each man found ways to utilize both faith and politics to reaffirm his own public and private identity.

Asserting and Reclaiming a Black Identity

What, then, were the various identities that these men assumed in both their personal and professional lives? A reexamination of existing accounts demonstrates

that their various identities were fluid, not so much by personal choice but often out of necessity. Of these four men, it would be Floyd Patterson who would offer the most impassioned, logical, and informed responses to accusations from Ali and portions of the Black population. In Patterson's case, he was accused of wanting to be White in both appearance and deed, and militant Blacks used his conversion to Roman Catholicism as proof of that desire. When we examine his conversion more closely, his decision was not made out of a desire to become symbolically White, but to please his girlfriend (and later wife) Sandra and her parents. In spite of his initial reason for converting, Patterson eventually embraced Catholicism wholeheartedly, even to the point of giving Eucharist. Yet his conversion in his early twenties would prove to be a point of his undoing throughout his interactions with both Ali and a growing number of increasingly angry Blacks

Unfortunately for Patterson, his choice to publicly defend his identity and faith against Ali's attacks were immediately used against him. One of the best-known insults he leveled at Ali was his continued refusal to address him by his Muslim name. Though Patterson biographer W.K. Stratton asserts that Patterson and Ali's relationship outside of the ring and away from the cameras was cordial and even friendly, the intensity and severity of Ali's taunts suggest a desperate need for Black approval, insecurity about his own faith, genuine cruelty, or some combination of the three. In an interview for their 1965 bout, Patterson made his position clear on a number of points. While he respected Ali's decision to join the Nation of Islam, he refused to call him by his Muslim name until Ali stopped attacking him and labeling him as a Roman Catholic-White-

man's rabbit, which would not happen until both Patterson and Ali had retired from the ring.

Patterson would further complicate the situation in a piece he wrote for *Sports Illustrated,* entitled "I Want to Destroy Clay." Much like the interview he gave for the magazine, Floyd explained in his own words what he meant when he said he wanted "to return the title to America." While Ali would spin Patterson's argument into an anti-Black manifesto and further alienate Patterson from an even larger portion of Black Americans, his explanations for wanting "to destroy Clay" convey his ideas of racial identity and respect of self and others. Despite the misleading title, Patterson's concern was not so much the physical destruction of Ali, but of what the heavyweight championship could mean and do as a symbol to both Black and White Americans. As Patterson understood Muslim rhetoric, the title would be an additional symbol of Black physical and ideological superiority, something that was anathema to Patterson's personal and political beliefs.

There is another small but meaningful incident between Ali and Patterson that serves to complicate our understandings of Patterson and his ability to effectively taunt Ali and those outside the ring who continued to question his racial identity. During the build up to their second fight in 1972, Ali promised to knock out "the rabbit," and while he was asleep, get an "Uncle Tom bandana" and tie it around Patterson's head while he was unconscious. When pressed to explain why he continued to call Ali Clay, Patterson's response was honest, condescending and more than a little defiant.

> Cassius Clay is a nice name. I like it. That's what his mother calls him. She carried him for nine months, and, after all that aggravation, she named him Cassius Clay. It's a nice name.[188]

While Patterson did suffer two losses to Liston, his opinion of Liston as a man and what he could mean to Black America differed from the opinions of both Black and White civil rights activists. Even though Patterson was a proud, lifelong member of the NAACP, he respectfully disagreed with their feelings about Liston and the damage his past could do to the present and future of Black America. Rather than try to hide Liston in the shadows, Patterson approached the matter with practicality and optimism. When it came to Liston and the title, Patterson felt that the "title brings out the best in a man" and that "so many in the Negro community had never been given the chance to rise above the surroundings into which they had been pushed."

His attitude of compassion and understanding also contributed to his firm sense of right and wrong when it came to race relations in the United States. When he addressed the topic of race, Muhammad Ali, and the Nation of Islam, some saw Patterson's blunt, honest assessment of the man and the group as an act of race betrayal. A closer reading of the primary sources reveals that Patterson, like Liston, Frazier and Foreman, possessed a deep, realistic understanding of what was wrong with race relations in America. Patterson, like Ali, found comfort in religion, but demanded that his racial identity and his beliefs, both religious and political, be respected.

> I am a Negro and I'm proud to be one, but I'm also an American. I'm not so stupid that I don't know that Negroes don't have all the rights and

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[188] Unger, Norman O. "Ali says Patterson will apologize to 'momma.'" *Daily Defender* [Chicago] September 22, 1972: Pg. 34, col. 1

> privileges that all Americans should have. I know that someday we will get them. God made us all, and whatever He made is good. All people---White, Black and yellow---are brothers and sisters.[189]

In a single paragraph, Patterson would voice the feelings and opinions of Liston, Frazier, and Foreman on race, integration, and faith. Though each man would express these same sentiments in different ways, Patterson's words are representative of the group and their desire to live in an America that not only allowed for the existence of multiple groups, but also celebrated those differences. However, his conservative politics also served to alienate him from both Blacks as well as young White liberals. Despite being a staunch advocate of integration, peace and tolerance, Patterson publicly supported America's involvement in Vietnam. During the course of several visits he made to U.S. soldiers, he repeatedly told them to ignore the reports of American protestors, as they were an uninformed minority and did not represent a majority of U.S. sentiment about the war.[190]

Yet Patterson's views on Vietnam are important when it comes to the question of reexamining legacies and memory. While his dedication to civil rights and integration are admirable, his support of the Vietnam war and increasingly conservative politics later in life demonstrates the value of reexamining Patterson and his contemporaries as a whole to try and determine how athletics may have shaped their politics and vice-versa. This last point is especially instructive when we reexamine the complicated legacy of Muhammad Ali. The point is not to demean or belittle a legacy, but to

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[189] Patterson, Floyd and Milton Gross. "I Want To Destroy Clay." *Sports Illustrated* Oct. 19, 1964: n. pag. Print

[190] Stratton, 195

interrogate the available sources in hopes of providing fresh inquiry and exploration for the future. If such an interrogation can provide fresh questions, positive and negative, about the Ali legacy, then the same can be attempted for the legacies of Patterson, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman as well. The following section will examine and question part of the long and complicated legacy of Muhammad Ali.

Reexamining the Ali Narrative

Why, then, are the accounts that surround Ali largely bereft of the supposed disrespect his contemporaries had for his religious and political beliefs when the primary sources demonstrate exactly the opposite? When it came to Ali's early relationship with Floyd Patterson, Ali did not just cast him as an Uncle Tom or the epitome of obsequious Black man; he was unequal to Ali in all areas, including his immortal soul, his physical being, and even his diet.

> I've got an unseen power going for me. There'll be almost 4 billion Muslims praying for their brother in Islam. We've got sympathizers in his own camp. How is he going to buck all this? This little, old, dumb pork chop eater don't have a chance. From eating pork he's got trillions of maggots and worms settling in his joints. He may even eat the slime of the sea.[191]

Also absent from most reporting on Ali are the depths of Ali's beliefs, as well as his feelings toward Whites in general and Blacks who did not follow his religious and political beliefs. While we do know that Ali was devoted enough to Islam to risk significant jail time, it is rare that we see the less appealing aspects of Islam that he mostly accepted wholeheartedly. In addition to believing that Blacks and Whites would be completely separated by 1970 because Elijah Muhammad predicted it, Ali also

[191] Rogin, Gilbert. "Rabbit Hunt In Vegas." *Sports Illustrated*. Nov. 22, 1965: n. pag. Print.

believed in a stranger, more violent act of Allah's apparent will that would go farther than the separation of Blacks and Whites; it would bring the complete destruction of the White race.

As Ali reported to *Sports Illustrated*'s Gilbert Rogin, the Muslim "Mother Plane" would soon be coming to destroy the "White devils" of the world. According to Elijah Muhammad, this celestial vehicle of genocide was "a half-mile by a half-mile square…It is capable of staying in outer space six to twelve months at a time without coming into the earth's gravity. It carries 1,500 bombing planes with the most deadliest explosives." Rogin's interview with Ali also reveals that the champion was fond of spending his time staring into the night sky, observing the stars and weather, awaiting its arrival, a pastime that would also be verified by Mark Kram. Rogin, who described Ali as "a strange, uncommon man" was made privy as to what to expect when the day of reckoning came for every White person in the world.

> Said Clay the day before the fight: 'On a clear night when you can see all the stars, look for the brightest. Watch it for a while. You'll see it shaking, that high up. Little White objects jump off it, make a circle, come back. Those are the bombers. On them are Black men who never smile…'[192]

What Ali fails to address are the fates of his "many Catholic friends of all races" that would have been inevitably destroyed in the Mother Planes' attack on the whites of the world.[193]

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[192] Rogin, Ibid

[193] For a full description of the "Mother Plane" and its role in the destruction of the White race, see https://noitemple15.wordpress.com/the-fall-of-americathe-mother-plane/ Accessed 4 Apr. 2015

In public and private, Ali believed himself to be a superior man and athlete to Patterson as well as most of his other Black opponents. To Ali, Patterson was a sycophant who longed desperately to be White and curry White favor, and he had to be punished. During their first fight, it was so clearly one sided that Ali's own corner was begging for their fighter to finish Patterson, who, prior to the fight, had severely injured his back. Displaying the separationist ideology of the Black Muslims in his verbal assault on Patterson, Ali ignored his corner's pleas to knock Patterson out. Instead, he elected to drag the contest out, continually taunting Patterson with mutters of "…come on White American." Ali's racially based taunts against other Blacks would only grow more personal, cruel and unnecessary as his career progressed into the 1960s and 1970s, yet this imperfection in his myth is noticeably absent or only given brief mention in most retellings of his personal and professional achievements.

One of the areas of the Ali legacy that does deserve further interrogation is his strong objections towards interracial relationships and marriage. What he found to be particularly offensive was the potential offspring of such unions. Conveniently ignoring the significant quantum of Irish blood he inherited from his mother's ancestors, Ali's opinions about the problems of race mixing and bi-racial children are largely absent from existing histories. What is the purpose of ignoring this aspect of his personality and beliefs during a period in his life when matters of race were clearly very important to him?

Speaking to *Ebony* magazine in April of 1969, Ali (who would be referred to by *Ebony* reporter Louie Robinson as "saintly"[194]) was blunt in his assessment of interracial marriage and children. His views on race mixing deserve to be quoted at length to demonstrate devotion to NOI rhetoric as well as the complicity of the Black press in not only refusing to distance themselves from his comments, but continually seeking them out for those sections of Black America that had the misfortune to be even the slightest bit different from him.

> All of Ali's lectures and sermons hew a rock-hard Black Muslim line, though each bears his inimical personal touch. Thus, an Ali "argument" against inter-racial marriage---a cardinal no-no in the Black Muslim faith---goes like this: 'No intelligent Black man or Black woman in his or her right Black mind wants White boys and White girls comin' to their homes, schools and churches to marry their Black sons and daughters to produce little pale, half-White, green-eyed, blond-headed Negroes. And no intelligent White man or woman in his or her right White mind wants Black boys and Black girls comin' around their homes, schools, and churches to marry their White sons and daughters and in return introducin' their grandchildren as little mixed-up kinky-headed, half-Black niggers.'[195]

Instead of rebuking or even acknowledging the contradictory nature of Ali's statements (particularly his many dealings with White fans, politicians and businessmen), reporter Hans Massaquoi and the editors of *Ebony* instead chose to attack former opponents who disagreed with his beliefs, labeling them and their supporters as "White washed Blacks." Speaking with Mark Kram about the subject of a possible moon landing during a drive to Milwaukee, Ali wished to fill the first ship to the moon with all the earth's

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[194] Robinson, Louie. "New Boss of the Heavyweights." *Ebony* April, 1973: 35-44. *http://www.ebony.com/archives*. Web. Accessed 6 Mar. 2015 (37).

[195] Massaquoi, Hans J. "The Unconquerable Muhammad Ali." *Ebony* April, 1969: 168-178. *http://www.ebony.com/archives*. Web. Accessed 6 Mar. 2015 (174).

White women because "They *dangerous*," and to fill another ship with "all those kinky-headed half-Black niggers from mixed marriages."[196]

Strangely enough, Ali's complicated relationship with "acceptable" Blackness and how it should be presented to the public at large even extended to his own children. Placed on the cover of *Ebony* for the fifth time in 1972 (he would make the cover of *Ebony* twelve times between 1967 and 1982), Ali profiler Hans Massaquoi authored an article on the home life of the Ali family. By this time Ali had fathered four children (three girls and one boy) with second wife Belinda. It was here that the question of authenticity would be presented in the form of Ali's infant son Ibn (Arabic for "son of").

As photographer Issac Sutton snapped pictures of the family while Massaquoi inquired about the nature of Ali's daily routine with his growing family, the conversation turned to his newborn son's features, most prominently his straight, jet-Black hair. Noticing that Ali was clearly pleased with his son's hair being straight, Massaquoi inquired why, correctly observing that Black children's hair was kinky more often than not. Ali lectured both Massaquoi and Sutton on the inauthenticity of Blacks that not only had naturally curly hair, but that "Afros are a nee-grow [*sic*] invention. Africans don't wear no afros."[197]

Perhaps the most perplexing and happily ignored aspect of the Ali legacy was his perceived and actual relationship with his Black and White supporters. While routinely claiming poor Blacks as "his" people, his actions demonstrated an altogether different

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[196] Kram, 94

[197] Massaquoi, Hans J. "The Private World of Muhammad Ali." *Ebony* September, 1972: 145-152. *http://www.ebony.com/archives*. Web. Accessed 6 Mar. 2015 (145).

feeling towards many of his Black supporters. One of the more public contradictions involves his purchase of a home in an upscale section of Philadelphia. Among the most symbolic and glaring of these contradictions is Ali's choice of homes in the various cities he would call home. Richard Hoffer's *Bouts of Mania*, one of the few works that acknowledges some of these contradictions, relates an exchange on a college campus between Ali and a crowd of supporters who came to one of the many speeches he delivered during his 3½ year exile.

Despite identifying himself as "the Black people's champion" and vehemently claiming that all Blacks related to him completely, Ali's experiences with "his people" did not always reflect this belief. For this engagement, Ali would arrive in a large, pink Cadillac to an auditorium filled with college students who were generally disillusioned with his claims of empathizing with their situation. His explanation as to why he needed an expensive home in a mostly White suburb not only failed to quell the crowd, but angered them.

> …although he didn't know it when he accepted the gig, he was about to get an auditorium full of grief for living in a $91,000 house in a Philadelphia suburb, a backward validation of sorts. 'Why do I want to live in a rat bin and have a rat bite my child?' he argued, the crowd booing this little comfort. So, no, he didn't have to live in a rat bin, at least that.[198]

Ali's defense over his choice of homes is not only representative of the desires of a number of Black athletes across a variety of sports, but also has several similarities to an incident involving Floyd Patterson and his family in 1964. Like Ali, Patterson's athletic achievements had earned him a fairly significant fortune and Patterson strove to ensure that neither he nor his family would ever have to live in the types of homes he

[198] Hoffer, 7

had lived in in Brooklyn, which were actually rat infested. Not long after his purchase of a $140,000 home in Scarsdale, New York, *The Los Angeles Sentinel* reported on the various types of harassment against Patterson and his family (including his wife being refused service at the local beauty salon and his children repeatedly being called nigger and sambo by schoolmates) forced the family to sell the home.[199]

Yet when the issue of Patterson's choice of home and neighborhood were presented to the White press, some viewed it as an act of symbolic White washing and racial treason. In journalist Mac Walton's recollection of the first Ali-Patterson fight, "Sad night in White America," Walton attacks Patterson's professional and private lives. He refers to Patterson as a "Great White Hope," who danced "to the music of Whites" on command, and that he secretly longed for a White woman to make his transformation complete.

> Last Wednesday's Patterson is the same Patterson who said all the nice things about America (whenever you could find him); the same "Negro" who, with his wife, moved into the outhouses of White suburbia and promptly received a cross burnt on his lawn;…[200]

The similar actions and desires of Patterson and Ali are not so much an amusing anecdotes as an example of the shifting nature of authentic Black identity and the difficulty that came with living in an increasingly diverse America. Ali claimed all Blacks, including poor ones, as "his people," despite his choice not to live anywhere near any urban areas in the variety of cities in which he owned homes, while the verbal and

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[199] "Are Bigots Really Making Floyd Patterson Run?" *The Los Angeles Sentinel* Thursday May 19, 1964: 4B. Print.

[200] "Sad night in White America." *The Greater Milwaukee Star* June 27, 1970: Vol. 10, issue 8, pg. 16. Print.

mental abuse suffered by the Patterson family was seen as just desserts for betraying the cause of racial solidarity.[201]

Ali and "Authentic" Blackness

Among the most difficult, but important, narrative reexaminations concerning Ali and "authentic" Blackness are the interactions between Ali and Joe Frazier. Their battles in and out of the ring are not just a highpoint for boxing in the 20th century; they are also evidence of the ways sports and athletes define eras. These athletes are also physical examples of the complicated nature of social movements. In this case, Ali came to represent (however incorrectly and undeservingly) militancy, revolution, while Frazier represented the gradual, integrationist approach championed by disciples of Martin Luther King Jr. and the proponents of mainstream Black civil rights ideology. Though gradual integrationist policies would prove to be the more feasible long-term solution for American race relations, unfortunately for Frazier, voices such as Ali's and Eldridge Cleaver's not only drowned them out, but also made him into an object of suspicion and derision among revolutionary minded Blacks.

Though Patterson and Liston largely tolerated Ali's opinions about Blackness and racial authenticity, two sources that offered consistent criticism of Ali's assertions on race and race relations throughout the early 1970s were journalist A.S. "Doc" Young and, to a lesser extent, Joe Frazier. Reexamining their observations in the primary and secondary sources provides valuable insight into their feelings and observations regarding Ali's views on race, Black-White relations and Black identity in America.

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[201] Jazz great Louis Armstrong, by contrast, maintained a simple home in a largely Black neighborhood in Corona, Queens for his professional career. http://www.louisarmstrongfoundation.org/programs.php. Accessed 7 Apr. 2015.

These opinions not only represent their political beliefs, but also the diverse and complex nature of Black identity and solidarity during the height of the Civil Rights movement.

Of all the outside forces that may have proved most damaging to Frazier's legacy, most significant was his honesty, particularly on such sensitive topics as politics and civil rights. Lacking Ali's flair for the dramatic, Frazier addressed questions of a political nature by flatly stating, "I'm no politician."[202] However, much like Patterson and Liston, his honesty about his strengths and limitations made him an easy target for Ali's taunts. Though their feud began in earnest in the years leading up to their 1971 world title bout, it would be the intangible effects of that feud that would be almost as memorable as the physical action that accompanied it.

While Ali's verbal assaults that both preceded and accompanied the fight are well documented, what have received little to no attention are Frazier's responses to these attacks, specifically the insults aimed at his intelligence, upbringing and racial identity. Much like Floyd Patterson some six years before, Frazier was forced to utilize the media to defend himself and his identity. In Patterson's 1965 *Sports Illustrated* piece, "I want to destroy Clay," he was not only defending his authenticity as a Black male and his religion, but also the ideology of non-violent agitation that he so strongly believed in and where he dedicated much of his time and energy.

Unfortunately for Frazier, the five years that passed between Patterson's fight with Ali and Frazier's emergence as champion were accompanied by drastic changes in

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[202] "Frazier minds own business." *Chicago Defender* January 16, 1971. Pg. 30, col. 1 http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/home/home.do Accessed 25 Mar. 2015.

America's political and social landscapes. Growing discontent with the Vietnam War, heightened racial unrest, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in April and June of 1968, and the murder of four students on the campus of Kent State University by National Guardsmen in 1970 were just a few of the events that helped to make revolution and overthrow of the establishment increasingly attractive.

For the civil rights movement and its supporters, this meant that the architect of non-violent resistance and a possible heir to the integrationist policies championed by John Fitzgerald Kennedy were gone, leaving the promise of the mainstream civil rights movement in shambles. In this atmosphere, Ali's lectures won him a devastatingly powerful ally in young, college-aged Whites.

Politically and socially, men like Patterson and Frazier were left in limbo. Each man still believed in the promise of gradual, non-violent integration and in the possibility that Blacks and Whites could live and work together peacefully. Muhammad Ali was there to remind them and the public at large, that each man was a sellout, an Uncle Tom, inferior to him personally and professionally, and actually White men in Black skin. Because Patterson had become irrelevant in the heavyweight division by 1971 (he would retire after losing to Muhammad Ali again in 1972), this left Frazier alone to absorb the racially motivated barbs of both Ali and average American Blacks.

This observation is not so much a condemnation of Ali, or the radicals and militants of the civil rights era. Rather, it is an acknowledgment and appreciation of the dedication to ideals that Patterson, Liston, Frazier, and Foreman all possessed. While Ali will always be remembered for his stand against the establishment, these four should at least be acknowledged for their belief in the possibility of an integrated

America. Each man may have expressed it differently but they all demonstrated dedication to race, community and nation. As Patterson intimated, none of them were so naive as to think that America was perfect.

Yet with this realistic view of American race relations, each man sought to affect change in whatever way they thought would do the most good. Patterson, by donating his time, money and effort to the work of the NAACP and gradual, peaceful integration; Liston, by dedicating his time to visit and speak at homes for delinquent and wayward boys; Frazier, by staying true to his Southern and Gullah roots, but still quietly advocating for non-violent integration and equal rights; and Foreman, symbolizing that the programs of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society could, in fact, have a positive impact on Whites and people of color alike.

Each man's peripheral ideology may have differed but they all shared common traits. While their worldviews were often influenced by meeting basic necessities, a mindset they were forced to develop as young men, their personalities allowed for the potential of positive interactions among different racial and ethnic groups. As Frazier intimated in his address to the South Carolina state legislature, Blacks and Whites needed "to get a little closer to each other."[203]

Interrogating the Ali Myth

In spite of the many contradictions that surrounded Ali's personal and professional life, the majority of narratives do not allow much room for the admission of dissenting voices concerning his legacy. With the exception of Joe Frazier and other

[203] "Joe Frazier home, addresses Solons." http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/494305216/7A7D719879BC4F55PQ/1?accountid=14663 Accessed 13 Nov. 2014.

boxers whose own legacies were crafted around the Ali legend, a cursory examination would suggest that Ali was the near unanimous spokesperson for Blacks and college-age liberals throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, the primary sources reveal a small, but vocal number of critics, Black and White, who consistently questioned Ali's actions and statements on a number of issues. Chief among these questions is Ali's relationship to the Black community.

Perhaps the most outspoken of Ali's athletic counterparts was Joe Frazier. While Frazier was initially willing to engage in staged animosity to promote their first fight[204], he became increasingly more critical of Ali's statements on race relations in America throughout the 1970s as Ali's attacks became more personal in nature. His article for *Ebony*, "Cassius Who?" may have been his most recognizable and detailed assessment of Ali as a man, political figure and athlete, but his lesser known interviews printed in the *Chicago Defender* demonstrate that not only was Ali not the spokesperson for Black America, but also that not all Blacks believed in his political messages.

Perhaps the most volatile issue that Frazier was forced to defend was the questioning of his own racial authenticity. Just as he had done with Patterson, Ali consistently labeled Frazier an Uncle Tom and a Black-skinned champion who was really White at heart. Though these attacks would not reach their nadir until the "Thrilla in Manila" in 1975, Frazier had been defending his identity and authenticity since the late 1960s. By the 1970s, he had begun to move past defensiveness and began to question Ali's dedication to the Black community. Speaking to *Playboy* associate

[204] Frazier, 84

editor Carl Snyder in March of 1973, Frazier asked a simple, but relevant question: what had Ali actually done for Black people?

Dismissing Ali's paid speaking arrangements and visits to poor Black neighborhoods as pointless and silly, Frazier asserted that true Blackness and racial solidarity did not come from rhetoric, but through specific, identifiable actions. When pressed by Snyder to identify what he had done for the Black community, Frazier's answer, though lacking in specifics, was at least an honest assessment of how he felt he contributed positively to the Black community at large.

> 'I've been giving all of me,' Frazier retorted. 'Any way I can…I think just by being a person, the way I am, that's giving the Black man all he needs. By being Black and being a human being, by being intelligent and handling myself well in public, that's the way I represent Black people.'

Much like Liston, Frazier took his role as world champion to mean that he represented all people. When responding to Ali's charges that he was a White man's champion, Frazier said he could not possibly be the White man's champion if he represented all people.[205]

However, one thing Frazier and Ali did have in common was their dearth of tangible contributions to any particular section of the Black community. The difference, however, was in Frazier's acknowledgement that as someone who was famous for his athletic achievements, the amount of actual change he could create was limited. This resulted in the creation of two very different athlete/activist personas. Where Muhammad Ali made it his mission to lecture other Blacks on proper behavior with

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[205] "Smokin' Joe bad-mouths Muhammad." *Chicago Daily Defender* February 12, 1973: pg. 25. http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/hnpchicagodefender/docview/494392895/abstract/6ED2910700094B73PQ/1?accountid=14663. Accessed 16 Mar. 2015.

such articles as "Muhammad Ali's Challenge to Black Men," published in *Ebony* in January of 1975, Frazier attempted to lend his time and notoriety to causes where he felt he could make an appreciable difference to Blacks and Whites alike.

In the early 1970s, Frazier contributed to two causes that benefitted Blacks and Whites. The first was his involvement in a benefit to raise funds for the Yancey Durham National Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation. Durham, Frazier's manager, began the foundation when he learned his son was afflicted with the condition. Frazier felt an obvious affinity for Durham and his son, and used what available resources he had to contribute in the best way possible: by lending his celebrity and financial resources (Frazier donated half his purse from a 1972 title defense against Ron Stander to Durham's foundation) to raise awareness about the illness.[206]

Despite never having served in the military, Frazier became interested in the fate of American prisoners of war in Vietnam. In July of 1971, he became a member of the VIP (Very Important Prisoners) committee along with National Football League quarterback Johnny Unitas of the Baltimore Colts and Major League Baseball manager Ted Williams of the Washington Senators.[207] Frazier would continue with his involvement with American POWs even after his loss to George Foreman in February of 1973. Frazier, along with several other professional athletes (including, again, Johnny

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[206] "Frazier aids Anemia fight." *Daily Defender* [Chicago] 10 05 1972, 30, col. 4. Web. http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview Accessed 19 Apr. 2015.

[207] "Frazier asks POW's release." *Chicago Daily Defender* [Chicago] 17 06 1971, Weekend Pg. 30. Web. http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/493489052?accountid=14663 Accessed 19 Apr. 2015.

Unitas), formed a group called "No Greater Love," whose sole purpose was to raise funds for the children of American servicemen who were missing in action in Indo-China.[208]

Though it is safe to assume that his presence made little, if any, difference in the fate of the men who were imprisoned, Frazier and other athletes tried to think of ways they could aid soldiers and their families, their color notwithstanding. As Frazier had expressed before, he knew what his limits were. Though he was not a politician or diplomat, he and other athletes knew the power of celebrity and attempted to use it in service to others.

Ali Critics Among the Black Press

While several journalists and a few of his contemporaries did question the inconsistencies in Ali's statements and actions, one of his most vocal critics was Black sports reporter A.S. "Doc" Young. Unlike the reporters from *Ebony*, Young remained critical of Ali throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Young was not so much critical of Ali's athletic prowess, but of his relationships to other Black heavyweight boxers and the Black community. What he and a select few took issue with was Ali's demonization and humiliation of other Black fighters who were not as politically active as he.

Covering Ali in early 1962, Young was genuinely amused by Ali's loquacious nature and sense of humor. Because Ali had not yet made race a focal point for building interest in his fights, Young believed he would prove to be a far more exciting and

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[208] "Ex-champ joins in benefit." *Chicago Daily Defender* [Chicago] 17 2 1973, Weekend Pg. 34, col. 2. Web. http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/493516527?accountid=14663 Accessed 19 Apr. 2015.

entertaining champion than either Patterson or Liston.[209] Yet by 1965, Young's displeasure with Ali's behavior was becoming more and more apparent. Still adamantly calling him Clay, he began to question his political affiliations, his treatment of other Black fighters (in this case, Floyd Patterson) and scolded him for injecting his religion, which he saw as bizarre and divisive, into his fights.[210]

As the 1960s wore on and changes in the civil rights movement became more frequent and dramatic, Young tread carefully when it came to issues of race among the heavyweight contenders for Ali's now vacated crown. As the only White heavyweight of note was journeyman "Irish" Jerry Quarry, Young examined the increasingly strained relationships that existed between Ali and other top ranked Black heavyweight. By the time of Ali and Frazier's first encounter in 1971, Young was no longer able to ignore the venom Ali directed at other Black fighters. Even as Young dismissed Ali's growing celebrity, he attempted to make the claim that the fight had no social, historical or cultural importance and that it was "merely a championship fist fight, an evening's entertainment, a sporting event, a diversion." However, he was also quick to note the racial tension that the event created, as well as Ali's willing role in exacerbating that

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[209] Young, A.S. "Doc". "The Biggest Mouth In Boxing: Clay Talks Big, Fights Big." *Daily Defender* [Chicago] 26 11 1962, 21. Web. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/bsc/newspaperViewContent.do Accessed 15 Apr. 2015.

[210] Young, A.S. "Doc". "Will Floyd Regain His Lost Crown From Clay?." *Daily Defender* [Chicago] 14 06 1965, Pg. 26, col. 3. Web. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/bsc/newspaperViewContent.do Accessed 15 Apr. 2015.

tension.[211] Young recognized that Ali attempted "to exploit and belittle another Black man, as he had done on previous occasions." As Young stated, his observations were not done in the spirit of attack as White sportswriters such as Jimmy Cannon and Arthur Daley had done when criticizing Ali's refusal to be drafted. Instead, it was a criticism of his treatment of other Black heavyweights.

> It is no secret that I have been one of Muhammad Ali's severest critics-not because of any personal animosity on my part but on the basis of certain principles: He was wrong to attempt to mash his religion, one of the most controversial of all religions, on sport (a point which Ali reportedly conceded). He was wrong to inject racism, Crow Jim [sic] into sport; it was terribly mean of him to single out Black opponents, as he nearly always did, for punishment, vilification, derision.[212]

Young's main concern, as it related to Black boxers and the heavyweight championship, was the need for support and camaraderie between them, in spite of the massive physical damage they routinely inflicted on each other. What some contributors to *Ebony* and *Sports Illustrated* often failed to recognize was the need for Black athletes to separate physical adversity from ideological adversity in their dealings with the press, both Black and White. As Young pointed out, lionizing Ali's rhetoric while ignoring, downplaying or applauding many of his less than admirable traits and actions only reinforced negative notions and misconceptions about Black representation.

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[211] Young, A.S. "Doc". "Good Morning Sports! Picking The Fight." *Daily Defender* [Chicago] 08 03 1971, Daily Pg. 26, col. 1. Web. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/home/home.do Accessed 15 Apr. 2015.

[212] Young, A.S. "Doc". "Joe Wins Big One." *Daily Defender* [Chicago] 16 03 1971, Pg. 24, col. 1. Web. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/home/home.do Accessed 15 Apr. 2015.

Black spokesmen in athletics ran a distant second to Ali, making him the *de facto* mouthpiece of Black athletes and sports fans, whether they wanted him to be or not. Though other Black directed publications such as *Ebony* would present Ali's voice as representative of the Black fan base, Young pointed out that Black athletes and fans, just as in politics, were not a monolithic group. They had a variety of opinions on not just the contests, but on their own identities and presentations to the public at large.

In Young's column on March 24th, 1971, he recounts a conversation between two fans shortly before the March 8th fight between Ali and Frazier. The column does not just cover the results of the fight, but the politics, culture, and issues of self-identification that many Black fans had attached to the fight. Though Young may have railed against Ali for the multiple "meanings" he attached to the fight, he was quick to notice the diversity of those meanings that existed for Black fans. What Young's article and analysis revealed was that Black people who backed Frazier were not all conservatives and that Ali did not speak for all Blacks.

> Hell, I don't have to buy that Muhammad Ali jive if I don't want to. Who decreed that Ali is God anyway? Where did that stuff start about him being 'the people's champion?' Aren't we all people? You mean to say I'm not people because I like Joe Frazier?[213]

Whether Young took journalistic license or not, perhaps the most important part of the exchange is the question of the Black athlete and the meaning of tangible impact on the world at large. When it came to the subject of Ali being anti-establishment, Young

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[213] Young, A.S. "Doc". "Add 1: Fight Talk." *Daily Defender* [Chicago] 24 03 1971, Pg. 32, col. 1. Web. http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/494286380?accountid=14663. Accessed 16 Apr. 2015.

correctly points out that there was more Ali could have done to protest the establishment, but refused to do.

> And what's all this nonsense about Ali being the anti-establishment guy? He's fighting FOR the establishment. He isn't fighting for any hippie association. He'll take the money, won't he? He's going to pay taxes, isn't he? I mean: if he's so much anti-establishment, why doesn't he do something really way out, like refusing to pay income taxes?[214]

The point, whether Young concocted the exchange or if the conversation actually occurred, was a legitimate one. As Richard Hoffer illustrated in the events that surrounded several of Ali's speaking engagements, he sought only attention and a validation of his fluctuating celebrity status.

Whether wanting only to discuss his new briefcase-sized portable phone during a speaking engagement at Randolph-Macon College or calling a group of Black students who dared to heckle him and question his politics "niggers" during an appearance at Mulhenberg College in 1970, the content and quality of his lectures was difficult to characterize. The Muhlenberg incident would somehow grow even stranger; after accusing the Black students of giving him "more trouble than the Whites," he also angered a large enough portion of the White students in attendance to the point that several challenged him to a fistfight.[215]

It was occurrences such as these that lent credibility to the question that Brad Pye, contributor to the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Doc Young, and Joe Frazier had been asking: what had Muhammad Ali actually done for Blacks other than himself? With events like

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[214] Young, A.S. "Doc". "Add 1: Fight Talk."

[215] Hoffer, 13

the Muhlenberg debacle, hearing Ali rail against an adversary that was increasingly difficult to identify was starting to lose its appeal.

In Pye's defense of Floyd Patterson entitled "We Need More Uncle Toms," he lists the financial and physical contributions that Patterson had made in the name of civil rights and the general cause of integration. Fundraising for the NAACP, participation in marches, and donations of time, money and personal appearances to a variety of youth groups were just a few of the charitable acts that Patterson undertook on his own, and received little in the way of thanks or fanfare.[216]

Despite the available evidence, most accounts ignore or offer passing mention of Patterson's contributions and those of his fellow champions. Liston, who not only dedicated his time to at-risk youth, but also was a quiet supporter of the push for equal rights; Frazier, who despite his limited knowledge of politics and lack of public speaking skills, routinely espoused the importance of integration and that he could best represent himself and his race by conducting himself in a dignified manner as a public figure among both Blacks and Whites; and Foreman, to earn a college degree and become a youth counselor for the Job Corps (though his plans did not come to fruition). If we reexamine the defining legacies of the champions of the Civil Rights era, perhaps we should not, as Pye suggests, demand to know what "has Cassius Clay done for anyone beside himself" but instead ask what did his contemporaries do for others?[217]

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[216] "Floyd Patterson Cited By New York Boys Club." *Chicago Defender* [Chicago] June 24, 1961: Pg. 20, col. 6. Print.

[217] Pye, Brad, Jr. "We Need More Uncle Toms." *Los Angeles Sentinel* [Los Angeles] 28 01 1965, B1. Web. http://bsc.chadwyck.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/home/home.do Accessed 16 Apr. 2015.

Conclusions

In 2004, author Peter Wolfe submitted a guest editorial for *The Journal of Popular Culture* entitled "The Greatest? A Revisionist View." In the space of three pages, he makes the argument that while Muhammad Ali is truly one of the finest boxers to ever step into the ring, his self-imposed label of being "The Greatest" needs to be reexamined. As Wolfe argues, Ali's status was inflated by battling a number of mediocre opponents he failed to knock out, the benefit of friendly referees who allowed him to commit any number of illegal moves and fouls, and his habit of what can only graciously be labeled bad sportsmanship. Wolfe specifically mentions his decision "to taunt and punish" opponents unnecessarily. Perhaps the most glaring example of this was Ali's contempt of light heavyweight champion Bob Foster, who Ali outweighed by forty-eight pounds.[218]

Wolfe's observations are worth considering in reexamining the ring career of Ali. When this revisionist approach is applied to the social and cultural contexts that surrounded the men who were forced to endure the Ali legend, what new narratives and understandings do we have outside of "The Greatest"? Of additional importance, how do we separate these men from the legacy of the Uncle Tom label that each man, with the exception of Liston, was in some way saddled with?

Though not writing explicitly about Ali, author Wiley Hall offered an analysis and suggestion regarding the nature of this label and its impact on historical legacies. In 2002, scholars were preparing to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of

[218] Wolfe, Peter. "The Greatest? A Revisionist View." *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 38, No. 2 (2004) pgs. 239-241 (241) Academic Search Elite. Web. Accessed 10 Sep. 2014.

Uncle Tom's Cabin and its complicated legacies. Yet instead of beginning his analysis with the characters and their impact, Hall is instead reminded of Ali's use of the term "Uncle Tom" to demean and alienate Joe Frazier in the 1970s, and Ali's apology for it nearly thirty years later. Instead of accepting Ali's apology ("It was all meant to promote the fight."), Hall places the insult in its 19th century context illustrating how it took on a different, yet equally devastating meaning in the 1960s and 1970s. While it is questionable if Ali or any of the fighters he saddled with the label knew its origins, what Hall does recognize is that Ali's use of the term, and long delayed apology, marked a watershed moment in the way Blacks related to and treated one another in a politically turbulent era.

> …Ali's apology in March 2001 marked the end, symbolically at least, of the civil war within the Black community, an end to the brutal infighting and vicious backbiting of the 1960s and 1970s when, in the name of Black Power and Black Unity, Blacks ripped each other to shreds.[219]

It is not a matter of downgrading Ali's legend, but allowing for the possibility of rethinking labels and legacies and expanding the narratives of these four men. Suggesting that Patterson, Liston, Frazier and Foreman overcame, maybe even defeated, Ali and his legend in and outside the ring takes nothing away from "The Greatest" nor does it leave them as sycophantic White hopes or Uncle Toms. It only suggests that greatness is created, expressed and interpreted in any number of ways. Much like legacies, the understanding of it should never be above critical examination, revision, or expansion. To paraphrase Hall, one legacy does not need to rip others to shreds to

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[219] Hall, Wiley A., III. "Urban Rhythms: Contemplating the 'good name' of Uncle Tom'." *Afro-American Red Star*. 110.45 (2002): 1. Web. http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu Accessed 16 Apr. 2015.

maintain its legitimacy or to make room for the growth of others. For certain, no Vietcong ever called Ali nigger. What, then, gave him the right to call other Blacks the same?

As the Great Migration pertains to this work, it is not to suggest that this mass migration was directly, physically responsible for producing these men and their turns as champions. However, each man and their migration stories are not just stories of physical relocation but of the formation of self and psyche that allowed them to deal with America's changing political scene, fight their own battles against long entrenched racism, and make sense of the uncertain and shifting nature of White and Black race relations. What their migration experiences demonstrated, in their experiences in the South as children and as young men in the north and west, was that the physical change in environment facilitated emotional, psychic and personal redefinition, and boxing would help to facilitate those changes and personal developments.

An inscription from James Baldwin to Floyd Patterson on the eve of his fight with Sonny Liston captures the spiritual and personal journey of each man. Though not an athlete by any means, Baldwin understood the power that came with a fresh physical and mental start. Whether it was out of a cotton patch in Arkansas, the slums of Bedford Stuyvesant, the discrimination of rural South Carolina, or the violence and despair of Houston's Fifth Ward, physical movement was the catalyst for spiritual renewal and growth, and Baldwin knew this as well as Liston, Patterson, Frazier and Foreman.

> He gave Patterson copies of two of his books---*Another Country* and *Nobody Knows My Name*. On them, Baldwin inscribed: "For Floyd

Patterson: Because we both know whence we come, and have some idea of where we're going."[220]

[220] Levy, 148

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