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**How and why did attitudes towards black  
heavyweight champion boxers change  
between 1908-1945?**

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**How and why did attitudes towards black heavyweight champion boxers change between 1908-1945?**

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## Introduction

“We’d be all crowded around the radio to hear the announcer describe Joe knocking some mother-fucker out...and when he did, the whole goddamn black community of East St. Louis would go crazy.<sup>1</sup>”

Joe Louis, world heavyweight boxing champion 1937-48, is widely regarded as the first black American to be celebrated as a national hero<sup>2</sup>. The celebration of Louis contrasts greatly to the disparaging treatment of the previous black, heavyweight world champion, Jack Johnson. Johnson experienced racial abuse and harassment throughout his reign of the heavyweight division, which lasted between 1908-15. Sandwiched between these two champions was the reign of Jack Dempsey, heavyweight champion of the world between 1919-27. Dempsey, as a white fighter, benefitted from rampant racism, widespread across American society at this time and he is a useful individual to measure the treatment of the other two fighters: Johnson and Louis. This dissertation will explore how the three men were treated and how their treatment changed over the time period, examining the attitudes of the general public, the press, the federal government, and boxing organisations. It will argue that even after America accepted a black champion, it did so reluctantly, and was dependent on numerous situational factors.

Johnson was the first black heavyweight world champion and received widespread criticism during his reign. He was repeatedly condemned, then aggressively pursued by the FBI before his 1913 arrest for violating the Mann Act<sup>3</sup>. Notable for his relationships with white women<sup>4</sup>, taunting opponents and for his dexterity in the boxing ring, his most famous victory was his 1910 “Fight of the Century” against white, former heavyweight world champion, Jim Jeffries<sup>5</sup>, which sparked nationwide race riots<sup>6</sup>. Johnson, being widely disliked by much of white America, was driven out of the country and censored by the US government in an attempt to suppress black achievement. Jack Dempsey became a national hero and cultural icon of 1920s America; likewise, Dempsey was not without controversy, as he faced accusations of dodging the World War One draft,<sup>7</sup> however unlike Johnson, he managed to evade national hatred and was accepted as a hero of the sport across America. This latter dichotomy between the treatment of Dempsey compared to his forbearer, Johnson, highlights the heightened racialised nature of boxing at this time. Finally, Joe Louis, was widely regarded as the first black American to be celebrated as a national hero after his 1938 victory over German former heavyweight champion, Max Schmeling<sup>8</sup>. A different

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, October 2010), 86

<sup>2</sup> *Hard Times*, 160

<sup>3</sup> David J. Langum, Clarice Jeinman, ‘Crossing Over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol 101 No 5, (December 1996), 1632-1633, 1633

<sup>4</sup> Derek H. Alderman, Joshua Inwood, James A. Tyner, ‘Jack Johnson versus Jim Crow: Race, Reputation and the Politics of Black Villainy: The Fight of the Century’, *Southeastern Geographer* Vol 58, No 3 (Fall 2018) 227-249, 229

<sup>5</sup> Johnson versus Jim Crow 228

<sup>6</sup> ‘To Bar Fight Pictures’, *New York Tribune*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1910, 4

<sup>7</sup> Richard O. Davies, *Sports in American Life: A History*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., August 2016), 184

<sup>8</sup> ‘Louis Knocks Out Schmeling’ *Manchester Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1938, 3

character to both Johnson and Dempsey, noted for his quiet and polite persona<sup>9</sup>, he was a much more palatable champion than Johnson, as unlike his predecessor, he fit into the character profile that was seen as necessary for a black celebrity to abide by. Louis was used for propaganda purposes during the Second World War and received multiple medals<sup>10</sup>, a stark contrast to the treatment Johnson received twenty years prior.

Previous studies of the topic are largely celebratory of the three main individuals in focus, with their skill in the boxing ring being worth the plaudits they receive. However, there seems to be a general lack amongst the literature taking an in-depth observation of the reception of the fighters. Moreover, researchers have not inspected the broader context of the time in much detail when discussing these three fighters.

In 1940, James B. Browning noted that the history of black people's success in sport was neglected<sup>11</sup>. Since the 1970s however, the analysis of the experiences of black heavyweight champion fighters has begun to be examined by mainstream historians. Art Evans discusses the idea of Joe Louis being a key functionary, this being an 'actor performing crucial activities for the total system.'<sup>12</sup> Evans suggests Louis was able to transform boxing's racial landscape, to allow him and other black athletes to succeed. Although the significance of Louis is not to be discredited, his status as a key functionary excludes the broader context of the situation he found himself in. Therefore, I wish to subject Evans' idea to some scrutiny, not attempting to entirely disprove it, but add a deeper contextual analysis to his findings. Previous studies focusing on this topic typically assess *either* Louis, or Johnson, failing to draw meaningful parallels between the two, and to compare their experiences to white boxers, such as Dempsey. This is seen in works such as Derek H. Alderman<sup>13</sup> and Randy Roberts<sup>14</sup>. The observation of individual fighters is not to be discredited however, as it offers an in-depth analysis of the fighters' personal experiences and allows for the opportunity to compare analyses; a valuable tool which I will utilise throughout this dissertation.

A further aspect which has been underutilised is that of important background context. Although mostly addressing some issues of racism throughout the historiography, the longstanding legacy of slavery, the explosion of American consumerism, post-World War One nationalism, rural to urban migration and the great depression all played important roles in influencing this subject and the three main individuals I shall focus on. Some literature, such as Derek H. Alderman<sup>15</sup> includes limited, yet important aspects of the wider

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<sup>9</sup> 'Portrait of a Strong, Very Silent Man', *New York Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1936, 10

<sup>10</sup> Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington D.C., *Joe Louis receiving Legion of Merit Medal*, < <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016651907/> > [accessed 27 December 2020]

<sup>11</sup> James B. Browning, 'Review: The Negro in Sports by Edwin Bancroft Henderson', *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol 25, No 1, (January 1940), 123-125

<sup>12</sup> Art Evans, 'Joe Louis as a Key Functionary: White Reactions Toward a Black Champion', *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol 16, No 1, (September 1985), 95-111

<sup>13</sup> 'Johnson versus Jim Crow', 22-249

<sup>14</sup> *Sport and the Color Line*, 53-71; *Hard Times*, 54-172

<sup>15</sup> 'Johnson versus Jim Crow', 22-249

context, such as the legacy of slavery and boxing's cultural significance in America at the time, however there are few studies that account for all of these key contextual factors.

Recently, boxing legend Floyd Mayweather claimed that racism still existed in boxing, explaining that it is harder for black fighters to receive the same sponsorships that white fighters do, whilst also claiming that black fighters are frequently criticised for their 'easy' choices of opponents and arrogance<sup>16</sup>. Two years prior to this statement, he was criticised in a Guardian article, claiming that Mayweather was arrogant, avoided fights and only fought easy opponents<sup>17</sup>. Examples of contemporary racism in the sport were demonstrated in 2017, in the build up to a fight between white Irish fighter, Conor McGregor and Floyd Mayweather, in which 'racial taunts and stereotyping'<sup>18</sup> were hurled in press conferences; and are also seen in two 2019 editions of The Sun newspaper. One portrayed black British heavyweight champion, Anthony Joshua, as arrogant, pinpointing this as a character flaw leading to his June 2019 defeat<sup>19</sup>. However, the same arrogance was praised as an intelligent strategy utilised by white British heavyweight champion, Tyson Fury<sup>20</sup>, whilst drawing no such positive parallels in the story about Joshua. These cases demonstrate that boxing, reflective of society as a whole, still wrestles with issues of racism. By investigating boxing's long history of racism and analysing the components that contribute to these attitudes persisting, readers may understand the causes of the issues the sport currently faces and potentially lead to ideas around how these problems can be tackled.

In December 2020, I posted on a popular boxing forum, asking if anyone had any information that would be of use to my research. However, the majority of respondents ridiculed the topic and questioned the point in researching it<sup>21</sup>. The knee-jerk rejection demonstrated on the forum indicates there is a level of hostility amongst some boxing fans, towards uncovering the racial history of boxing. Therefore, it is important to focus on this history, as it appears some fans of the sport are intent on suppressing the re-evaluation of this period and reflecting on the commonly accepted narrative.

## Methodology

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<sup>16</sup> ESPN, *Floyd Mayweather says racism still exists in boxing, MMA*, <[https://www.espn.co.uk/boxing/story/\\_/id/14507107/floyd-mayweather-says-racism-exists-boxing-mma](https://www.espn.co.uk/boxing/story/_/id/14507107/floyd-mayweather-says-racism-exists-boxing-mma)> [accessed 5 January 2021]

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Rhodes, *Floyd Mayweather: an all-time great or an arrogant fraud who ducks fights?* (2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/slip-the-jab/2014/mar/03/floyd-mayweather-boxing-great-ducking-fights>> [accessed 5 January 2021]

<sup>18</sup> *Jack Johnson versus Jim Crow*, 231

<sup>19</sup> Duncan Wright, *Hold my belts, Watch "arrogant" Anthony Joshua hand Ruiz Jr his belts before shocking defeat as he underestimates challenge ahead* (2019), <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/boxing/9203806/arrogant-anthony-joshua-ruiz-jr-belts-before-fight/>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021]

<sup>20</sup> Alan Scott, *Tyson Fury says racist abuse made him feel like an outsider turning him into "arrogant and cocky character"* (2019) <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/10336379/tyson-fury-racist-abuse-outsider/>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021]

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Fairgrieve, *Asking for Sources*, (2020) <<https://boxrec.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=244190>> [accessed 6 December 2020]

In analysing the primary sources, specific attention has been paid to observe trends throughout the period and the continuation of attitudes towards the three fighters. One useful collection of sources I utilise in the analysis of public attitudes towards fighters is fight footage. Being able to view the immediate reaction to fighters' successes and failures gives the viewer material that highlights the partisan racial sides and the fighters' interactions with the crowd. Fight footage is almost entirely omitted from other analyses of the period. The inclusion of fight footage allows for the analysis of a vital source that has been previously neglected, to add more validity to this dissertation.

A further valuable resource that I will use are newspaper reports. Their reporting on the public reaction to key events, such as the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries fight, offer an insight into how the general public reacted to the fighters. Meanwhile, their reporting on the arrest of Johnson and other attempts to censor, or at least limit his success, reflect the negative attitudes of the federal government towards the fighter. However, the language used by reporters in newspapers and the stories they publish about the fighters is also a useful tool, as it allows us to understand the attitudes of the press. One newspaper I use throughout my analysis, particularly in the first two chapters, is the New York Times; this was of particular use, due to its extensive coverage of boxing, therefore giving an element of continuity that is not found in other regional newspapers. This continuity allows for a deeper analysis of media representations of fighters and the changing nature of sports journalism. Given that the press has a profound impact on public discourse<sup>22</sup>, I will analyse how newspaper reports impacted the public perception of the fighters.

I will focus on the period between 1908 and 1945. This timeframe is significant, as the beginning marks Jack Johnson becoming the first black heavyweight world champion. It covers the complete career of Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey and the majority of Joe Louis' career. The end of the time period is important also, as this marks the end of the Second World War, a time when the perception of Louis marked a substantial change from the attitudes displayed towards Johnson. Outside of the three fighters' reign of the heavyweight division, this period is noteworthy, as America experienced economic growth, allowing the public to become more engaged in the sport, whilst also seeing unprecedented economic growth for black Americans and an explosion of post-war white supremacy in the 1920s. These result in this timeframe being very significant in answering the questions I seek to explore. Finally, boxing was the most popular sport in America at this time<sup>23</sup>, therefore it is time to put the sport under the lens when it was so widely followed.

I had to exclude the last three years of Louis' reign, in order to refine the focus of the dissertation. However, by the end of the Second World War, the perception of Louis had completely changed from the perception of Johnson during his reign of the heavyweight division, therefore making the omission of the last three years less impactful. I made the decision to focus exclusively on heavyweights, ignoring the other weight divisions, as this is the marquee division in the sport of boxing. It generates the most interest from the general

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<sup>22</sup> Sheila T. Murphy, 'The Impact of Factual versus Fictional Media Portrayals on Cultural Stereotypes', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 560, No 1, (November 1998), 165-178

<sup>23</sup> 'Johnson versus Jim Crow,' 236



public, therefore holding profound cultural significance at a time when boxing enjoyed enormous popularity. A discussion of women's boxing in the period is beyond the scope of this study, but the time period and topic pertaining to women could be explored in future research. This paper will focus on three main individuals, largely excluding other heavyweights of the period, as these were the three most culturally significant heavyweight champions.

### **Dissertation Structure**

In order to effectively analyse the treatment of these three champion boxers, I shall utilise the four lenses of the public; the press; the government; and boxing organisations. The first chapter explores the attitudes expressed towards the champions from the public. The question I seek to answer in this chapter is 'how and why did the attitudes of the public towards black heavyweight champion fighters change throughout the period?' The public drive interest in the sport and are deeply emotionally and financially invested in the fighters, thus making them a key consideration. The second chapter will investigate the influence of the press on the general public, focusing on the accountability of the press in generating negative feeling towards the fighters. The research question for this chapter is 'how influential were the press in influencing public opinion of the fighters?' The press is partly responsible for exacerbating pre-existing attitudes in society, therefore it is an important aspect to consider. In chapter three, I will discuss attitudes expressed by the US federal government, investigating its role in attempting to smother the success of black athletes and the subsequent change to celebrate Louis as a national hero. The key question I aim to address in the third chapter is 'how did the attitudes of the US federal government towards black heavyweight champions change during this time?' Finally, a fourth chapter will cover the influence of boxing governing bodies, an area few historians have paid attention to. In this chapter, I seek to examine 'how influential were boxing governing bodies in restricting the career development of black heavyweight champions?' For research validity, the situatedness of the researcher must be acknowledged. As a white, British, university-educated male, I cannot fully understand the experiences of the three boxers I shall focus on throughout my dissertation.

## Chapter 1

### Public

‘Across America white bartenders told customers that if Jeffries fought Johnson, he would “probably kill that negro”’<sup>24</sup>

Racialised attitudes expressed by boxing fans in this era were not isolated to the sport but were representative of American society as a whole. To investigate these attitudes, I will largely focus on two events. The first being the 1910 “Fight of the Century”<sup>25</sup> between Johnson and white, former heavyweight world champion Jim Jeffries. The second major event was the 1938 bout between Louis and German ex-heavyweight world champion, Max Schmeling. These two fights represented seminal moments, important to examine when asking the question of the public’s relationship with these fighters.

Johnson’s “Fight of the Century”<sup>26</sup>, although a personal victory, was marred by race riots. The vicious reaction to the fight represented the partisan nature of the sport, whilst also highlighting issues of racism and the legacy of slavery across American society. In contrast to Johnson’s 1910 bout, Louis’ 1938 victory represented the first time a black American was celebrated as a national hero, therefore on the surface, offering the illusion of acceptance of black sporting achievement.

This era was made more significant for the sport of boxing, as Americans became increasingly engaged with recreation. By the early 1920s, ‘spending on leisure and recreation consumed a growing proportion of family budgets,’<sup>27</sup> with the percentage of income the average American spent on recreation doubling between 1909 and 1946<sup>28</sup>. Interest in sport overall increased also, with the number of swimming pools in America increasing from 359 in 1920 to 1,449 in 1946 and the number of registered bowlers increasing from 2,000 in 1904, to 1,060,000 in 1946<sup>29</sup>. This heightened interest in sport was coupled with the emergence of the radio, attracting large audiences, as was seen in Jack Dempsey’s 1927 bout against Gene Tunney, with an estimated radio audience of over fifty million<sup>30</sup>. The increased spending on leisure led to an interest in boxing that had never existed on such a scale before.

#### **“Fight of the Century.”**

The small town of Reno, Nevada, with a population of just fifteen thousand in 1910, played host to one of the most significant sporting events of the twentieth century. The presence of twenty thousand fans and the extensive media coverage, further reflecting public

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick B Miller, David K. Wiggins, *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth Century America*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Groups, November, 2003), 56

<sup>25</sup> ‘Johnson versus Jim Crow’, 228

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> David George Surdam, *Century of the Leisured Masses: Entertainment and the Transformation of Twentieth-Century America*, (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, January 2015), 64

<sup>28</sup> ‘Century of the Leisured’, 66

<sup>29</sup> ‘Century of the Leisured’, 68

<sup>30</sup> ‘Sports in American Life’, 186

interest, highlights the significance of the event<sup>31</sup>. Jim Jeffries had been the heavyweight world champion between 1899 and 1904. Despite winning the heavyweight title in 1908, Johnson was not considered the true champion until he defended his title against Jeffries, dubbed the “Great White Hope”<sup>32</sup>, with the hopes and dreams of white America pinned on him as their representative. The fight was scheduled for 4<sup>th</sup> July; the date clearly being of significance to an American audience. Johnson’s fifteenth round stoppage of Jeffries resulted in ‘the sad boxing fan want[ing] to leave the arena as quickly as possible.’<sup>33</sup> Despite Patrick Miller and David Wiggins making note of the reaction to the fight, they do not make use of the fight footage. The footage itself, however, adds credibility to their claims and shows that the glum reaction to Johnson’s success was not isolated to this fight, but is a common pattern seen across other bouts<sup>34</sup>. Whenever Johnson is successful in the ring, the majority white crowd makes little visible reaction, however, when he is hurt, as seen in his 1909 bout with white American heavyweight, Stanley Ketchel, Johnson is met with visible celebration and applause from the majority white crowd. After eventually beating Ketchel, the crowd does not appear impressed with his victory and there are once again, no signs of celebration<sup>35</sup>. There appears to be a gulf between the crowd’s reaction to Johnson and his successor, Jack Dempsey. Unlike Johnson, whose success is met with little positivity, Dempsey’s success, is usually met with wild jubilation amongst the majority white crowd<sup>36</sup>. This celebrative atmosphere is demonstrated in Dempsey’s 1919 victory over Jess Willard, in which fans flooded the ring after the fight, dancing in celebration of Dempsey’s success<sup>37</sup>. Many previous studies such as Miller and Wiggins’<sup>38</sup> are limited in their scope by excluding the usage of video footage in their analysis, thus restricting their ability to effectively analyse the public reaction to black champion fighters. The differing reaction to the two fighters’ successes are signs of the partisan nature of the sport with many seeming to support the respective fighters based on racial preference. This attitude was summarised by many fans in the lead up to the Johnson-Jeffries fight, who stated that they would be supporting Jeffries solely because they “can’t go against [their] race.”<sup>39</sup>

Pre-existing partisan attitudes were exacerbated by statements from Jeffries prior to the fight, in which he said “That portion of the white race that has been looking to me to

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Sport and the Color Line’, 64

<sup>32</sup> ‘Johnson versus Jim Crow’, 228

<sup>33</sup> ‘Sport and the Color Line,’ 71

<sup>34</sup> *Jack Johnson vs Jess Willard*, (2020), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDavUEM6Nfg>> [accessed 28 December 2020]; *Jack Johnson vs Tommy Burns* (2018), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03MFOUgXRW4>> [accessed 28 December 2020]

<sup>35</sup> *Jack Johnson vs Stanley Ketchel Highlights in Color*, (2019), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foP0wXGF3p4>> [accessed 28 December 2020]

<sup>36</sup> *Jack Dempsey vs Jack Sharkey, 1927 In Full Color*, (2020) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPiaV2BUylw>>, [accessed 29 December 2020]; *Jack Dempsey vs George Carpentier*, (2019), <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5AO\\_GODkKY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5AO_GODkKY)> [accessed 29 December 2020]

<sup>37</sup> *Jack Dempsey vs Jess Willard*, (2009), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3BTycNuY44>> [accessed 29 December 2020]

<sup>38</sup> *Sport and the Color Line*

<sup>39</sup> *Sport and the Color Line*, 67

defend its athletic superiority may feel assured that I am fit to do my very best.”<sup>40</sup> Jeffries’ inflammatory language added to tensions going into the fight, indicating that fighters did play an active role in suppressing or exaggerating racial tensions and that the public reaction could be somewhat moulded by fighters themselves. Derek H. Alderman makes the important note that Johnson was of the first generation to be born after slavery, therefore his equal status in the ring and his victories were ‘a visceral symbol of all that had gone wrong for southern whites.’<sup>41</sup> The legacy of slavery had led to a restrictive character being imposed upon black people to enhance their palatability. Ajamu Banjoko emphasises this, noting that ‘Black men had to appear to be submissive, weak, and non-threatening so that they could survive another day without being lynched.’<sup>42</sup> Banjoko’s statement is reflective of the metaphorical straitjacket that black men were forced to endure. Additionally present and connected to the restrictive acceptable character attached to black men in postbellum American racialism was the concept of a power imbalance<sup>43</sup>. Johnson defied the image of an acceptable black man at this time, challenging these ideas by standing over his defeated white opponent. Johnson’s success in the ring, his taunting of his opponent and the crowd and his disregard for the elements of the acceptable character which many black people were forced to submit to led to disdain from white fans. Johnson, despite his success and publicly nonchalant attitude, was clearly aware of a potential backlash, as he slept with a gun out of fear for his safety<sup>44</sup>.

After the conclusion of the fight, riots followed in New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and many other cities nationwide<sup>45</sup>. The majority of violence experienced on the night of the 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1910 was white on black, with several injuries and deaths reported.<sup>46</sup> However, the violence experienced after Johnson’s victory was not unusual; lynch law was ever-present for black Americans, particularly in the south. White mobs in the state of Georgia alone had lynched ‘well over four-hundred black men by 1928,’<sup>47</sup> with almost three thousand black people being lynched between 1885 and 1918.<sup>48</sup> The commonality of violence explains the group behaviour of those who reacted aggressively to Jeffries’ defeat.

A further important aspect that played a significant role in the violence after Johnson’s victory was the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Although this did not take place officially until after the First World War, energised by the 1915 release of D. W.

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Johnson versus Jim Crow,’ 260

<sup>41</sup> ‘Johnson versus Jim Crow,’ 235

<sup>42</sup> Ajamu A. Banjoko, ‘Chapter 9: Adolescent African American Males and Hegemonic Aggressive Masculinity’, *Counterpoints*, Vol 392, No 1, (2011) 136-148 138

<sup>43</sup> John P. Jackson Jr, ‘Cognitive/Evolutionary Psychology and the History of Racism’, *Philosophy of Science*, Vol 84, No. 2, (April 2017), 296-311

<sup>44</sup> ‘Sport and the Color Line,’ 66

<sup>45</sup> ‘Fight News is Followed by Race Riots in Many Parts of Country’, *Los Angeles Herald*, 5th July, 1910, 1

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*; ‘To Bar Fight Pictures’, *New York Tribune*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1910, 4; ‘Clashes reported from many parts of the country’, *Washington Herald*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1910, 3

<sup>47</sup> Springs Toledo, *Murderers’ Row*, (Boston: Tora Book Publishing, 2017), 21

<sup>48</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, July 2016), 4

Griffith's *Birth of A Nation*<sup>49</sup>. The attitudes espoused by the Klan struck a chord with a large number of Americans, with Texas alone recording over one hundred and seventy thousand Klansmen in 1924<sup>50</sup>. Although the violence after the Johnson fight was predominantly orchestrated by white men, organisations such as the KKK received marked support from white women. Women's political engagement was largely restricted at this time, therefore groups such as the Women's Ku Klux Klan offered a rare opportunity to be involved in the political sphere. The strength of these women's groups is not to be understated. The Indiana chapter alone numbered an estimated quarter of a million members at its 1920s peak<sup>51</sup>. Women's groups such as these demonstrate how ideas of racialism were not an exclusively male domain. Although boxing fans were disproportionately male, the racialised trends seen within boxing were reflective of the broader phenomenon of racism across American society. The prevailing attitudes of extreme white supremacy harboured by organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan did not become widespread in a short space of time, but the roots of these views and the aforementioned normalisation of race-based violence were exemplified in the July 1910 riots. Few historians mention this preamble to the KKK being visible in the riots of 1910, signifying a gap in the historiography.

#### **"Joe Knocked Out Hitler Cold"**<sup>52</sup>

By the time of Louis' 1938 rematch victory over Max Schmeling the landscape of American race relations had experienced limited change. Jim Crow segregation was still enforced and would remain until 1954<sup>53</sup>, with more than ninety segregationist organisations present across the south during the 1930s and 1940s, demonstrating clear public support for segregation<sup>54</sup>. However, normalised violence during and shortly after Johnson's reign slightly declined, with the 1930s bringing an end to the second wave of the KKK. In addition to this, black success did become slightly more visible. The great migration north, to access better education and wages of up to a tenfold increase, led to the economic liberation for many Southern black people<sup>55</sup>. Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural episode of the 1920s and 1930s, made black success more visible in arts<sup>56</sup>, however it failed to solve the race problem. There is very little recognition of these factors of more visible black success and declining violence contributing to the changing attitudes expressed towards these boxers outside of Springs Toledo<sup>57</sup>, highlighting the incomplete historiography. In addition to these changes, the Great Depression of the 1930s wreaked havoc across American society. The average attendance of world title fights reduced to around a tenth of

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<sup>49</sup> Richard T. Schaefer, 'The Ku Klux Klan: Continuity and Change', *Phylon*, Vol 32, No 2 (1971), 143-157, 146

<sup>50</sup> 'Murderers' Row', 226

<sup>51</sup> Kathleen M. Blee, 'Women in the 1920s' Ku Klux Klan Movement', *Feminist Studies*, Vol 17, No 1, (Spring 1991), 58-69

<sup>52</sup> *Hard Times Man*, 170

<sup>53</sup> James W. Vander Zanden, 'The Ideology of White Supremacy', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol 20, No 3, (1959), 385-402, 385

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> *Harlem Renaissance*, 3

<sup>56</sup> *Harlem Renaissance*, 1-21

<sup>57</sup> *Murderers' Row*, 1-227

what they had been,<sup>58</sup> boxing needed an economic miracle. In this atmosphere of a somewhat altered, yet still highly racialised atmosphere, a new heavyweight king emerged.

Louis had previously fought Max Schmeling in 1936, losing to the German on this occasion. The rematch however, which took place in 1938 ended with the American victorious. Upon Louis' victory, the crowd was visibly jubilant<sup>59</sup> and the aftermath of the fight was notable for its celebrations, particularly across New York<sup>60</sup> and Louis' home of Detroit<sup>61</sup>, coupled by protests against Hitler's Germany and the Nazi party's human rights violations. Pictures document the anti-Hitler protests that followed the fight, with black and white protesters walking together to voice their opposition to Nazism<sup>62</sup>. Louis, a black man, being selected to represent America against a foreign fighter was a symbolic first for America, with Randy Roberts noting that Louis played 'the unexpected role of national hero for all Americans.'<sup>63</sup> Despite the mixed-race celebrations emerging from Louis' victory, Roberts' statements offer a romanticised view of reality.

Schmeling, despite receiving interest in his camp prior to the fight from American fans, was a controversial figure, tainted by his association with Adolf Hitler's Germany. Upon his arrival to New York, he was 'met by protestors carrying anti-Nazi placards, and flooded with hate letters.'<sup>64</sup> Schmeling himself later explained that Louis became 'the symbol of freedom and equality for all people and race against the Nazi threat.'<sup>65</sup> Contrary to the Johnson-Jeffries fight, this was not for American white supremacy, but against a controversial foreigner. Therefore, because American white supremacy was not at risk, unlike in Johnson's greatest battle, Louis was a more tolerable champion for white America than his predecessor, as he did not immediately challenge domestic racist norms.

In order to improve his public image, Louis did something Johnson did not, he adapted his character. The shadow of slavery was still present; thus, the restrictive character black people were expected to adhere to at the time of Johnson applied during Louis' career. Louis' conscious decision 'not to upset the colour line'<sup>66</sup> made him a more acceptable champion than his predecessor. In a 1936 New York Times article, it makes a note of his quiet persona and praises his frugality.<sup>67</sup> His allegedly docile personality that he advertised to the general population meant he was seen as less of a threat, in contrast to Johnson before him<sup>68</sup>. This restricted Louis' freedoms, forcing him to conform to a particular

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<sup>58</sup> *Hard Times Man*, 58

<sup>59</sup> *Joe Louis vs Max Schmeling – 1<sup>st</sup> Round Knockout*, (2009)

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LNzWHuygpw>> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> January 2021]

<sup>60</sup> *Hard Times*, 170

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>62</sup> Harlemites in anti-Nazi parade after the fight. New York, 1938. Photograph.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2005691930/> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020]

<sup>63</sup> *Hard Times*, 160

<sup>64</sup> Barbara J. Keys, *Globalising Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, October 2006), 118

<sup>65</sup> *Hard Times*, 160

<sup>66</sup> *Globalising Sport*, 116

<sup>67</sup> 'Portrait of a Strong, Very Silent Man', *New York Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1936, 10

<sup>68</sup> 'Joe Louis as a Key Functionary,' 102

character in order to succeed in a segregated America. Louis should not be criticised for adapting to this environment. To survive as a successful and popular black man in America at this time, this was an inevitable sacrifice.

Observing the popularity Louis achieved in his victory against Schmeling, celebrated as the American champion, in stark contrast to the treatment Johnson received from the general public, on the surface suggests there was significant progress in American race relations. However, the controversy surrounding Schmeling, in comparison to the celebrated Jim Jeffries, and the restrictive character profile that Louis was forced to conform to suggests there was not significant progress in the notion of the black celebrity. This implies that the celebration of Louis as a national hero by the public owed a large amount to his personality and his opponent being a controversial foreigner, rather than a progression in the idea of black excellence. Therefore, Art Evans' idea of Louis as a key functionary, able to perform 'crucial activities for the total system' is simplified, as Louis was dependent on the situation that he found himself in; had he found himself pitched against a popular white American fighter, similar to Jeffries, it is unlikely Louis would have enjoyed as much public support. However, Evans' conclusions are not without validity, as Louis' actions outside the ring, in contrast to Johnson, helped to normalise black success somewhat, and although this in no way solved the issue of racism, the success surrounding Louis did help make the idea of a black celebrity more acceptable to white America.

## Chapter 2

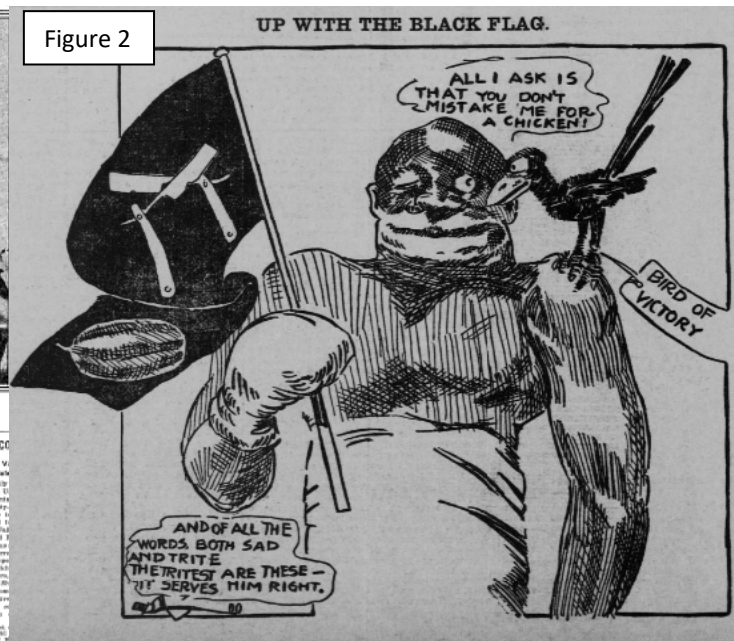
### Press

Although the public played an important role in the reception of the fighters in this period, they did not form their opinions in a vacuum; the public were heavily influenced by sentiments expressed in the press and therefore, it is important to briefly consider the impact of the press on the attitudes of the general public. The importance of the press is recognised by Randy Roberts<sup>69</sup> and Patrick B Miller<sup>70</sup>, whilst the significance of press impacting public opinion outside of this subject has been covered extensively by James M. Snyder Jr, David Stromberg<sup>71</sup> and Sheila T. Murphy<sup>72</sup>. As is true today, most people during this time received their news 'via the media',<sup>73</sup> making the press an important influencing

Figure 1



Figure 2



factor on the public perception of fighters. The press both represented and exacerbated the public's attitudes at the time.

In a comparison between depictions of Jack Dempsey and Jack Johnson in popular press, figure 1<sup>74</sup> is from a July 1919 edition of the New York Times, whilst figure 2<sup>75</sup> is from a July 1910 edition of the Topeka State Journal. The incredibly racialised depiction of Johnson is immediately apparent and contrasts to the heroic image of Dempsey, stood victorious over his defeated opponent. Whilst Dempsey is pictured with multiple American flags in the

<sup>69</sup> *Hard Times*, 122-171

<sup>70</sup> *Sport and the Color Line*, 53-62

<sup>71</sup> James M. Snyder Jr., David Stromberg, 'Press Coverage and Political Accountability,' *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol 118, No 2, (April 2010) 355-408, 355-367

<sup>72</sup> 'The Impact of Factual versus Fictional Media Portrayals', 165-178

<sup>73</sup> 'Press Coverage and Political Accountability,' 355

<sup>74</sup> 'Jack Dempsey, New Heavyweight Champion Announces He Will Draw the Color Line', *New York Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1919, 20

<sup>75</sup> 'Jack Johnson Still "Champion of the World"', *Topeka State Journal*, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1910, 1



background, indicating his status as an American hero, with a supportive crowd, indicating the public's adoration for the white fighter; Johnson is shown as an exaggerated caricature, with his bird of victory a crow, depicted as more intelligent than Johnson, asking him not to 'mistake [it] for a chicken.' This racialisation however, is not limited to images, but is seen throughout writing on the two men.

Within articles discussing Johnson, other black fighters of his era and to a lesser degree Louis, there is a focus on his race being very significant; this is present across a number of articles<sup>76</sup>, emphasising the animalistic nature of black fighters<sup>77</sup>, and when praising them, it is usually for physicality<sup>78</sup> and rarely for their intelligence. In describing white fighters, such as Jeffries and Dempsey, the press emphasises their whiteness<sup>79</sup>, especially in contrast to Johnson, signifying the alleged civilised and barbaric binary<sup>80</sup> and are frequently described as being intelligent fighters<sup>81</sup>, and displaying overwhelmingly positive imagery of the white fighters<sup>82</sup>. The language used to describe the fighters indicates a clear sense of favouritism towards white fighters and dislike of Johnson. However, by the time of Louis' prime, although some Southern writers celebrate Schmeling had re-established racial order, in Louis' 1936 defeat, these racialised depictions, particularly after the 1938 rematch, become less frequent, with Louis favoured over white fighters in some cases<sup>83</sup> and praised for his influence on the sport<sup>84</sup>.

In addition to racialised favouritism, Dempsey also benefitted from a changing style of journalism, known as the 'Gee-whiz' style. Popularised by Grantland Rice, a key sports journalist of the 1920s, this style emphasised 'heroic effort and stunning victories rather than underachievement and defeats.'<sup>85</sup> Given that 'Gee-whiz' sports journalism succeeded Johnson's reign, he never experienced this positive journalism; Dempsey, on the other hand, profited from this, with stories and images, such as figure one, exhibiting the new, positive approach to sports journalism. Despite there being a legacy of 'Gee-whiz' during Louis' reign in the late 1930s, it did not resonate the same way as it had in the 1920s, therefore, Louis was unable to benefit from this changed format to the same degree as Dempsey had done before him. The public, reading these stories and seeing sensationalised, positive images of Dempsey would have looked upon Dempsey more favourably than they had Johnson a decade prior.

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<sup>76</sup> 'Sam Langford and Jeannette to Box', *New York Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1913, 7; 'Flynn Gets a Beating', *New York Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1912, 12; 'Lang, nearly out, fouls Sam Langford', *New York Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb, 1911, 10; 'Whites and Blacks in Many Riotous Battles', *New York Tribune*, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1910, 1; *Washington Herald*, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1910, 3; 'Joe Jeannette Beaten', *New York Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> Jan, 1911, 11; *New York Tribune*, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1910, 4

<sup>77</sup> Joe Louis, 'The Life Story of Joe Louis: His Early Years', *New York Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1948, 27

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> *Daily Press*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1910, Vol 15, No 155, Richmond, Virginia, 1

<sup>80</sup> Edward W. Said 'Orientalism', *The Georgia Review*, Vol 31, No 1, (Spring 1977), 162-206

<sup>81</sup> Jack Dempsey Will Draw the Color Line, 20

<sup>82</sup> *Time Magazine*, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1923, New York, Vol 2, No. 2, 1

<sup>83</sup> 'Louis Knocks Out Galento in 4<sup>th</sup> After Challenger Drops Him in 3<sup>rd</sup>', *New York Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> June, 1939, 1

<sup>84</sup> 'Portrait of a Strong, Very Silent Man', 10-21; James P. Dawson, 'Joe Louis Again Placed at Top In World Ranking of Pugilists', *New York Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1939, 26

<sup>85</sup> *Sports in American Life*, 175

The importance of the press to public perception cannot be understated. The more controversial a celebrity, the more stories appear covering them<sup>86</sup>, meaning stories about Johnson would have been more commonplace than stories around less controversial white fighters of his era. What is significant about the press coverage of Johnson and Louis in particular is highlighted by psychological studies conducted in the 1990s, which found that white readers who saw stereotypical portrayals of a singular black man in the press, were likely to expand this viewpoint to all black men. The study concluded that it does not necessarily matter if the depictions are factual, or fictional and furthermore, that men are more susceptible to negative stereotypical portrayals than women<sup>87</sup>. The majority male audience of the sport would therefore be more prone to expanding the racialised depictions of black fighters to other black people across society, possibly offering one explanation for the violence that ensued after the Johnson fight, as many involved could possibly have viewed all black people as representative of Johnson.

These points regarding the press further highlight inadequacies of Art Evans' statement that Louis was a key functionary<sup>88</sup>. However, Louis' contributions to his image are not to be discredited, a significant reason for his success was dependent on a changing style of journalism and the depictions of him in the press. Additionally, although this explanation of the press' impact on public opinion does not excuse the attitudes of the general public towards Johnson and Louis, it does bring into question the press' accountability and responsibility. It possibly explains some of the prejudicial labels pressed onto Johnson and Louis and the positive perception of Dempsey amongst the general public. The consideration of the press' importance also aids the recognition that the general public were and continue to be heavily influenced by external forces.

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<sup>86</sup> 'Press Coverage and Political Accountability,' 367

<sup>87</sup> 'The Impact of Factual versus Fictional Media Portrayals 165-178

<sup>88</sup> 'Joe Louis as a Key Functionary,' 95-111

## Chapter Three

### Government

“There should be just as much pride in their progress and prowess under our system as in the triumph of any other Americans. For all their misfortunes and shortcomings, they are our people-Negroes, yes, but our Negroes’<sup>89</sup>

This chapter will explore the attitudes expressed by the US government towards Johnson and Louis and how this changed over time. I will mainly focus on Johnson’s 1910 arrest, the reasons surrounding this and attempts by the government to censor his victories. How the government changed into using Louis as a propaganda tool during the Second World War shows how the situation around the black celebrity was adapted. The transition from victimising a black celebrity to using a celebrity as propaganda in a thirty-year time frame is an evolution I shall investigate. The above statement from General Hugh S. Johnson, a prominent Democratic politician summarises the government’s reluctant acceptance of Louis, since even in praise, there seemed a need to mention perceived racial inadequacies.

### Bad Mann

The Mann Act of 1910 was passed with the official intent to criminalise trafficking women across state boundaries for immoral purposes<sup>90</sup>. The law was passed during ‘a time of anxiety over perceived moral decay.’<sup>91</sup> Originally, Illinois police tried to charge Johnson with abduction of his girlfriend, but he was eventually charged in 1913 retrospectively, for a 1909 violation of the Mann Act. The wrongful charging of Johnson received public attention recently, with former US President, Donald Trump, pardoning Johnson in 2018.<sup>92</sup>

The enslavement of black men in the west has, ‘continued to perpetuate the belief that the performance of masculinity by African American males is overly aggressive, inappropriate, deviant, defiant, and hypersexual.’<sup>93</sup> Hypersexuality added to the idea of black men as a threat to white society and especially to white women. Johnson’s public relationships with white women unsettled the racial imbalance of Jim Crow America and Johnson was made to pay for the insecurity he caused. This was a further aspect of his character, which was deemed as not conforming to the acceptable character prescribed to black people and led to him being labelled a “bad nigger.”<sup>94</sup> The insecurity created by Johnson’s relationships with white women, was summarised by Georgia Representative Seaborn A. Roddenbery, in 1912, after Johnson’s marriage to his second wife. Roddenbery stated that nothing was as “degrading, villainous, or atrocious [as the laws] which allow the marriage of the negro, Jack Johnson, to a woman of Caucasian strain...[to allow a] black-

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<sup>89</sup> *Hard Times Man*, 172

<sup>90</sup> *Crossing Over the Line*, 1633

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>92</sup> *Jack Johnson: Trump pardons black heavyweight champion*, (2018), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44244687>>, [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2021]

<sup>93</sup> ‘Adolescent African American Males and Hegemonic Aggressive Masculinity’, 137

<sup>94</sup> Barak Y. Orbach, *The Johnson-Jeffries Fight and Censorship of Black Supremacy*, (Arizona: University of Arizona, July 2010), 272

skinned, thick-lipped, bull-necked, brutal-hearted African...[and other black Americans to marry white women].'<sup>95</sup>

The disciplining of Johnson acted as a metaphorical lynching; an example to black America not to disregard the 'sexual infrastructure of racism.'<sup>96</sup> This extension of the lynch law that ran riot in the south was an underhand endorsement of punishing black men for their sexual contact with white women. To contextualise Johnson's arrest, it is important to consider the controversy surrounding Jack Dempsey seven years after. Richard O. Davies is one of the few writers who makes this important comparison<sup>97</sup>. Indicted for evading military service during the First World War<sup>98</sup>, there was little attempt to pursue Dempsey in the same vein as had been done with Johnson. Dempsey won his acquittal and the memories of his label as a draft dodger quickly waned,<sup>99</sup> as he was allowed to continue without pressure from the authorities. This contrasting treatment of two fighters, one white and one black for their violations of the law indicate that Johnson's arrest was a case of scapegoating<sup>100</sup>, rather than a genuine attempt to enforce the rule of law; highlighting the government's attempts to suppress the personification of black success.

Prior to Johnson's arrest, his 1909 Pittsburgh celebration parade was cancelled by the police. The official reason was that it was cancelled due to 'slip ups' by the police department.<sup>101</sup> The suppression of his success in 1909 was repeated in 1910, with police departments in St Louis clubbing black celebrants 'into submission' and again in Pittsburgh, 'the police beat the crowds back with their clubs.'<sup>102</sup> These cases demonstrate how not only Johnson's individual celebrations were quelled, but those of his fans and of black people across America were quickly suppressed by local authorities in an attempt to stifle any signs of black achievement. The public acknowledgment of black excellence and particularly a black victory over a white hero undermined official racial policy, therefore authorities were quick to disrupt any public recognition of these events.

A significant challenge to white supremacy for the authorities came in the form of fight footage. The filming of sports was relatively new, offering a fresh test to white supremacy, as the images of a black man standing victorious over his defeated white opponent could be viewed nationwide. This footage of black triumph did not fit into the Jim Crow mould and created a great irony in American movie theatres, with black audience members forced into segregated seating, in some cases caged in with chicken wire<sup>103</sup>. To combat the inevitable prospect of people seeing his victories in theatres across America, the decision was taken to censor the images.

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<sup>95</sup> Dan Streible, Charles Musser, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema*, (Berkley: University of California Press, April 2008), 246

<sup>96</sup> Jessica R. Pliley, *Policing Sexuality*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 103

<sup>97</sup> *Sports in American Life*, 184

<sup>98</sup> 'The Indictment of Jack Dempsey', *The Observer*, 29<sup>th</sup> February, 1920, 22

<sup>99</sup> *Sports in American Life*, 184

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<sup>101</sup> 'No Parade for Jack Johnson', *New York Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1909, 7

<sup>102</sup> 'Fight News is Followed by Race Riots in Many Parts of Country', *Los Angeles Herald*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1910, 1

<sup>103</sup> *Fight Pictures*, 207

The mayor of Detroit explained his decision to have the fight footage censored as being to prevent further race riots<sup>104</sup>. It is unclear whether this was the genuine reason the fight footage was censored, or whether it was an attempt to suppress black achievement. Another commonly cited reason was that the films would ‘subvert the morals of children.’<sup>105</sup> Ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, a notable fan of the sport, condemned the fight and the subsequent violence<sup>106</sup>. Unlike the mayor of Detroit however, there is reasonable evidence that Roosevelt’s statements may have been racially motivated. In January 1909, he invited white lightweight world champion, Battling Nelson to the White House to discuss which white fighter could defeat Johnson.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Roosevelt expressed his concerns over Southern European, black and South/Central American immigration to the United States, throughout his life<sup>108</sup>, indicating that Roosevelt may have had a pre-existing racial bias against Johnson and adding strength to the possibility that his call to censor the fight footage was racially motivated, rather than to prevent violence.

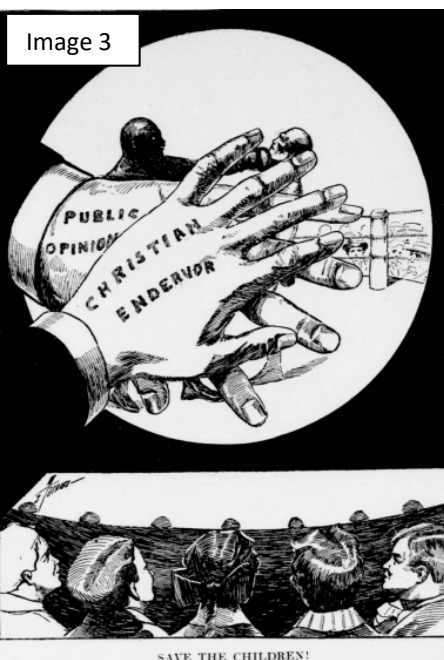


Image 3<sup>109</sup> appeared in the New York Tribune on 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1910, showing how soon after the fight, calls to have the footage censored were in the public discourse. The Washington Post justified the decision to have the fight censored, stating that ‘it is very clear that quarrelsome whites were glad to find an excuse for attacking the blacks,’<sup>110</sup> possibly indicating that the hands shown in the image are preventing the white audience from using the footage as a reason to engage in violent behaviour. This would align with the mayor of Detroit’s excuse, adding some credibility to his claim that censoring the fight was an attempt to prevent white on black violence and demonstrating that this idea was in the public discourse. The ‘Public Opinion’ hand is significant, as this indicates that the decision to censor Johnson’s victory was widely supported. However, the irony of the censorship was not lost on all.

A significant number of those in favour of banning all fight footage on moral grounds ‘recognised that anti-negro sentiment fuelled the campaign.’<sup>111</sup> An image appeared in the Richmond Planet, in August 1910, mocking the position of those who called for the outlaw of the Johnson-Jeffries fight footage on moral grounds, but ignored racial inequality across America. Furthermore, the claim that the footage needed to be censored in order to ‘Save the Children’, as was cited by the mayor of San Francisco, and appears below Image 3, was widely debunked at the time. Fight footage

<sup>104</sup> *Censorship of Black Supremacy*, 307

<sup>105</sup> *Censorship of Black Supremacy*, 312

<sup>106</sup> *Censorship of Black Supremacy*, 335

<sup>107</sup> *Fight Pictures*: 204

<sup>108</sup> Leroy G. Dorsey, Rachel M. Harlow ‘We Want American Pure and Simple: Theodore Roosevelt and the Myth of Americanism’, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol 6, No 1, (Spring 2003), 55-78

<sup>109</sup> *New York Tribune*, 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1910, 14

<sup>110</sup> *Censorship of Black Supremacy*, 310

<sup>111</sup> *Fight Pictures*, 225

was not shown in nickelodeons<sup>112</sup>, discrediting this argument for censorship as inaccurate and misinformed. The hypocrisy of the decision to outlaw the Johnson-Jeffries fight footage was further exposed after the 1915 release of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation*, which depicts a Southern town in peril after the Civil War, before eventually being saved by the KKK. Despite leading to an increased interest in white nationalism, the KKK and their domestic terrorist activities, there was no significant attempt to have this film censored in a similar effort to what was seen with the fight footage<sup>113</sup>. The attitudes of local, state and the federal government with regards to the censorship of Johnson's victory indicate that it was overall, a blatant attempt to suffocate images of black success, as this would have served to undermine the segregationist legal system.

## War Hero

Although contrasts have been made between Louis and Johnson, there has been little effort to compare the US government's treatment of the two men. Within the crowd of seventy-thousand fans attending Louis' 1938 fight were seated President Roosevelt's son, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and several members of Congress, all cheering for the American fighter<sup>114</sup>. This was not long after Louis was invited to the White House to meet with President Roosevelt<sup>115</sup>. Open support of a black fighter by US government officials would have been unheard of twenty years prior. Therefore, it appears there had been some change in attitudes from government officials towards black champions, however I seek to demonstrate that to assume governmental sentiment had switched to full support of Louis is oversimplified.

By the time of the Second World War, the US government's attitude towards the heavyweight pugilist king changed dramatically. Instead of demonising Louis and aggressively pursuing him on criminal charges, they instead used him as a propaganda tool. During wartime, Louis frequently appeared in military uniform, received numerous medals<sup>116</sup> and attended public recruitment events aimed at attracting black servicemen<sup>117</sup>. There seemed to be a determined effort from the US government and the press to present Louis not as a threat, like had been done with Johnson, but as an ally<sup>118</sup>. The US government experienced a problem trying to recruit black troops in World War Two after the poor treatment of black servicemen upon their return home after the First World War<sup>119</sup>. Therefore, officials were keen to portray healthy cooperation between white and black

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<sup>112</sup> *Fight Pictures*, 230

<sup>113</sup> *Fight Pictures*, 196

<sup>114</sup> *Globalising Sport*, 117

<sup>115</sup> 'Roosevelt Greets Joe Louis' *New York Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 1935, 23; 'Joe Louis to Receive Award', *New York Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1945, 22

<sup>116</sup> 'Joe Louis to Receive Award', *New York Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1945, 22

<sup>117</sup> Luis Alberto Sanchez Y. Sanchez 'The North American Negro', *The Antioch Review*, Vol 2, No. 3, (Autumn 1942), 357-370, 364

<sup>118</sup> *Hard Times*, 171

<sup>119</sup> Paul Alkebulan, *The African American Press in World War II: Toward Victory at Home and Abroad*, (Maryland: Lexington Books, April 2014), 8; *Murderers' Row*, 226

Americans, working together to aid the war effort<sup>120</sup>. Despite this image, segregated units<sup>121</sup> and the segregation of blood donation<sup>122</sup>, demonstrate this was not the reality. In 1940, a survey of black Tennessee college students found that Louis was one of the most well-known and admired Americans, ranking above Booker T. Washington and Thomas Jefferson<sup>123</sup>. A cultural figure as significant to black America as Louis, complying to the acceptable image of a black man and supporting the war effort, was a powerful propaganda tool. The need for a positive figure that the government could display to white America happened to coincide with Louis' prime. This is not to discredit Louis as an individual, however, the government celebrated Louis because they needed to, they needed a role model to display as wartime propaganda. The government did not suddenly choose Louis as an American hero because their attitudes towards black Americans had fundamentally shifted, but they did out of necessity.

This brings into question his lack of agency during this time. Louis was not driven out of his country, similar to Johnson, but every aspect of his character was restricted, from his ability to choose where he went in military uniform, to his bathing and table manners<sup>124</sup>. The restrictions he faced were immense, in order to avoid similar hatred to what Johnson received before him and project the image of the modest, Christian, family man, who appeased white America. Therefore, this suggests that although some progress had been made, as Louis was still a popular figure and a figure chosen by the government to aspire to, one of the first black Americans to experience such a feat; similar to how the public perception of Louis was largely dependent on the situation and his personality, the treatment of Louis by the US government seems to mirror this same pattern of being situational, rather than displaying significant progress in race relations.

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<sup>120</sup> David Brown, Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, July 2007), 233-259

<sup>121</sup> *Race in the South*, 252

<sup>122</sup> Thomas A. Guglielmo, "Red Cross, Double Cross": Race and America's World War II-Era Blood Donor Service,' *The Journal of American History*, Vol 97, No 1, (June 2010), 63-90

<sup>123</sup> Lily Brunschwig, 'An analysis of the listings of famous Americans by a group of negro college students', *Journal of Psychology*, Vol 10, (January 1940), 207-219

<sup>124</sup> 'Joe Louis as a Key Functionary', 103

## Chapter 4

### Boxing Organisations

The importance of boxing officials and organisations has been largely overlooked by the historiography. Springs Toledo mentions the obstacles black boxers faced breaking into the professional ranks due to the reluctance for boxing organisations to accept them<sup>125</sup>. Meanwhile Derek H. Alderman<sup>126</sup>, Richard O. Davies<sup>127</sup>, Dan Streible and Charles Musser<sup>128</sup> make note of Tex Rickard, an early twentieth century boxing promoter, however they all omit the influence Rickard made on black heavyweight champions and race relations in America. Unfortunately, there are limited resources on this topic, therefore, due to the narrow literature, chapter four is relatively brief.

Rickard is a consistent factor in many of the most racialised fights in America between 1906, until his death in 1929. Rickard was the promoter who arranged Jack Johnson's bout with Jim Jeffries in 1910, responsible for much of the pre-fight racialised build up, intentionally inflaming racial tensions to promote the fight<sup>129</sup>. These attempts to publicise the fight were clearly successful, as the event received national attention, however this racialised discourse, similar to that from Jeffries and the press, all contributed to the violent aftermath of the fight. Following this, Rickard later became Jack Dempsey's representative and president of Madison Square Gardens after the legalisation of boxing in New York in 1920<sup>130</sup>, therefore increasing his influence on who could compete in title fights. Rickard was responsible for the promotion of Dempsey, with the 'Manassa Mauler' frequently depicted as an American hero. During this time, Dempsey claimed that he would not fight black fighters<sup>131</sup>, therefore notable black fighters such as Harry Wills were unable to gain a title shot, despite Wills and his team's efforts to display Wills as a 'moral character in contrast to former champion Jack Johnson's questionable reputation,'<sup>132</sup> all while Dempsey was represented by Rickard. In Dempsey's 1923 bout with Argentine, Luis Firpo, an opponent who had most recently worked as a dishwasher, 'Rickard again played the nationalism card, noting that this was an epic battle between North America and Latin America.'<sup>133</sup>

Rickard's ability to present white fighters as defenders of American values and demonise black or non-American fighters to manipulate public interest was profound. His influence played a significant part in the hatred of Johnson in the build up to his fight with Jeffries, whilst his role as Dempsey's promoter coincided with immense popularity for the champion. His restriction of black fighters' abilities to challenge for titles is clear from his

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<sup>125</sup> *Murderers' Row*, 90

<sup>126</sup> *Johnson versus Jim Crow*, 230

<sup>127</sup> *Sports in American Life*, 184

<sup>128</sup> *Fight Pictures*, 216

<sup>129</sup> *Johnson versus Jim Crow*, 230

<sup>130</sup> *Sports in American Life*, 183-184

<sup>131</sup> 'Jack Dempsey, Will Draw the Color Line', *New York Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1919, 20

<sup>132</sup> Briand D. Bunk, 'Harry Wills and the Image of the Black Boxer from Jack Johnson to Joe Louis', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol 39, No 1, (Spring 2012), 64

<sup>133</sup> *Sports in American Life*, 184



management of Dempsey and his position of authority in the boxing world. The overwhelmingly positive media portrayal of Wills suggests that Rickard was unwilling to give any black fighter a title shot, irrespective of their character or their boxing skill. Rickard's 1929 death means it is impossible to know whether he would have allowed for Louis to challenge for the title during his prime, however his treatment of Wills and the racialised language he promoted suggest this would have been unlikely. As a result, this adds further credibility to the argument that Louis' success was largely a matter of timing, rather than signalling a shift in attitudes towards race.

## Conclusion

This dissertation explored the changing attitudes of the American public, the press, the US government, and boxing organisations towards black heavyweight champion boxers between 1908-1945. There was a slight change towards a somewhat more tolerant atmosphere around the support of Louis in all four aspects on the surface, celebrating Louis as a national hero during the Second World War and receiving widespread praise and upheld as America's chosen representative of freedom against Nazi tyranny in 1938 in his victory over Schmeling. This treatment contrasts greatly to the aggressive pursuit of Johnson until he was eventually driven out of the country. Furthermore, the public celebrations and endorsements of Louis after his most significant victory over Schmeling juxtaposes the violent reactions, largely from white fans to Johnson's victory over his white opponent in 1910. The censorship of black success during Johnson's era was not repeated during Louis' time at the top, with the government's usage of him as propaganda being opposed to the treatment of Johnson. The press' changed reporting from largely negative coverage of Johnson to a more positive approach to Louis and finally boxing organisations transitioning from not accepting a black champion in the 1920s, to seeming to be content with Louis in the 1930s all suggest change.

However, despite these events offering an image of America moving to become much more accepting environment, this is a simplified view; Louis still faced significant racism and prejudice. The improved treatment of Louis was largely dependent on him restricting his character in order to fit in the prescribed role of black men. Johnson made no attempt to conform to this, perhaps explaining why he was so hated by large portions of white America. The extensive focus on the race of black champion fighters does decline somewhat, but is still present, whilst the focus on physical and animalistic traits of Louis indicate that people were not ready to accept the idea of a black champion. The consideration of Dempsey is important, as it highlights how people were not disparaging of all boxers and offers an insight into how important race was to the treatment of these fighters. Whilst Dempsey was widely celebrated and praised, the celebration of Louis, even in his crowning moment, seems somewhat reluctant. The fact that this differing treatment of black and white champion fighters and tired stereotypes still exist today, and the reluctance for people to accept historic injustices emphasises the importance of this topic. The treatment of Floyd Mayweather and Anthony Joshua signify there is still progress to be made and that racism in the sport of boxing is not a problem confined to the past. This dissertation aimed to give these men a voice, to explore the ways they were mistreated and their image appropriated. There are many others who are yet to have their story told.

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