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To cite this article: Neil Wynn (2003) Deconstructing Tyson: The black boxer as American icon, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 20:3, 99-114, DOI: [10.1080/09523360412331305803](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523360412331305803)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09523360412331305803>



Published online: 08 Sep 2010.



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## Deconstructing Tyson: The Black Boxer as American Icon

NEIL A. WYNN

According to some commentators, 'When the 1990s began, Mike Tyson was simply the most feared fighter the sport of boxing had known.'<sup>1</sup> However, in a tumultuous career the former world heavyweight champion has attracted considerable media attention as a result of his behaviour both inside and out of the ring. In the USA he has been described at various times as 'the most dangerous man in sport', 'an animal', 'a monster', 'a savage', 'an American pit bull' and 'evil incarnate'. His very physique, revealed at weigh-ins, appeared frightening, with 'muscle piled on muscle', and neck and head like a 'death's head'.<sup>2</sup> His visits to Britain in 2000 were met with widespread condemnation in the media and from women's rights groups because of his record of violence both in the ring and outside, and especially against women. This tide of condemnation rose even higher following his pre-match brawl with Lennox Lewis on 22 January 2002 which, coupled with further possible charges of sexual assault, led the Nevada State Athletic commission to deny him a licence to box. Although recognizing him as 'boxing's most fearsome and dangerous attraction', the press was filled with references to his 'uncontrolled savagery', 'animal behaviour', 'mental instability' and 'depraved outbursts'.<sup>3</sup> One respected British sports commentator, Hugh McIlvanney, looked forward in anticipation to Lewis 'Taming The Beast' in Memphis in June 2002 and removing 'sport's most pervasive and toxic pollutant'.<sup>4</sup> Yet as McIlvanney pointed out, many people felt Tyson was 'more sinned against than sinning', and the boxer continued to be a source of 'fascination'. Indeed Tyson met with as much adulation from young black (and indeed some white) followers when he visited Brixton, Manchester and later Glasgow in 2000, as he did among similar groups in America; throughout his career he has had as many defenders as detractors.

These differing responses reflect the fact that, as John M. Sloop has said, Tyson as boxer, African American and male 'is constructed rhetorically', the subject of 'multiple cultural representations'.<sup>5</sup> In this Tyson is little different from many other black boxers before him. However, an examination of the interplay between race and masculinity may offer a wider insight into these readings of the boxer as cultural 'text'. While

presenting neither justification nor defence of Tyson's actions, locating him in the broader cultural and historical context may offer some insight into his behaviour and the differing responses to it.

## I

The prizefighter is considered by most people to be merely a tough, insensitive man, a dumb half-naked entertainer wearing a muzzled mouthpiece. He is supposed to stick to his trade – fighting and keeping his mouth shut and pretending that he hates his opponent. There is so much hate among people who'd like you to think they're moral, that they hire prizefighters to do their hating for them. And we do. We get into the ring and act other people's hates. How else can Negroes like Clay and myself, born in the south, poor and with little education make so much money?<sup>6</sup>

Speaking in 1966 the former black champion, Floyd Patterson, who was himself allotted a particular 'role' both in and outside the ring, clearly recognized boxing as a staged drama, but his final sentence pointed also to a wider social significance. For African American as well as other males, boxing offered a route to success. It could also bring black boxers into direct confrontation with white opponents and in doing so brought about a clash of notions of race *and* masculinity. The boxing ring offers, in the words of one of its best-known historians, Gerald Early, 'a remarkable metaphor for the philosophical and social condition of men (and, sometimes, women) in modern mass society'. It is 'the most aggressively masculine of sports', which in its very elemental nature 'celebrates the individual man in his maleness'.<sup>7</sup> As Early is quoted as saying elsewhere, 'the most metaphorical drama of male neurosis ever imagined'. Put more bluntly by the former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, 'the boxing ring is the ultimate focus of masculinity in America, the two-fisted testing ground of manhood, and the heavyweight champion as a symbol is the real Mr. America'.<sup>8</sup>

Within a racial context then the boxing arena is clearly a place where ideas of order are contested. Not surprisingly it is a subject that provides rich material for film-makers, sports journalists, sociologists and historians alike and has been the subject of many literary writers, including Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates. However, the struggle in racial terms is not a neutral contest solely about strength or prowess. Black writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright made use of boxing matches in their work to draw attention to aspects of racial control, exploitation and repression.<sup>9</sup> As Randy Roberts observed, the very act of allowing a black man in the ring with a white opponent implied a sort of equality – and also offered an

opportunity to confirm or challenge notions of racial superiority.<sup>10</sup> But the black boxer in the ring was open to different readings. Through much of American history, to the white audience the black body/black male was symbolic of lust, violence, sexuality, degeneracy; for African Americans it offered a response to the call to be 'a man' which has echoed from Frederick Douglass down to the poet Nikki Giovanni. Thus as one recent reporter commented perceptively, Mike Tyson 'incarnates all the old racist prejudices about black men'. His function, Joan Smith wrote, 'is to confirm racist stereotypes about black masculinity'.<sup>11</sup> But Tyson also clearly acts as a different symbol for African Americans, female and male. Thus the changing responses of both black and white audiences to African American boxers provide something of a barometer of the state of race relations generally.

Although Tyson is still an icon for many African Americans, his behaviour has shocked and appalled people over a number of years. In 1989 his first wife, Robin Givens, divorced him after he had beaten her up on more than one occasion. He was sued on several occasions for sexual assault and harassment and fined a number of times for motoring offences. His sexual violence culminated in the rape of Desirée Washington in 1991 following his visit to the Miss Black America contest in Indianapolis. Against a backdrop of the O.J. Simpson and Clarence Hill cases, Tyson's trial undoubtedly raised the problem of disentangling 'an appalling sexual crime from pre-existing racist and sexist discourses'. While he was portrayed as a victim of racial persecution by various groups and individuals – including the New York activist Rev. Al Sharpton, leader of the Nation of Islam Louis Farrakhan, and writer Maya Angelou – the mainly white press drew upon 'crude racist stereotypes' and 'mythologies about African Americans' to demonstrate his guilt.<sup>12</sup>

As recent writers have pointed out, the Tyson case raised complicated issues of race and gender. On the one hand for some observers Desirée Washington challenged the 'sexually racist mythology – directed against black women as promiscuous', but for others she was the guilty party who knew what she was doing, particularly, given his reputation, in going to Tyson's room late at night. The portrayal of Tyson as a sexual predator, 'reinforcing the mythology of black men as "natural" rapists', produced a wave of antiracist rhetoric in his defence. For his defenders Tyson was the victim.<sup>13</sup> For some black women black male violence could be transformed 'through a lens of racial injustice to be but another indication of the ways institutions frustrate black men'. Thus black women were amongst Tyson's 'staunchest supporters', and a survey in 1993 revealed that 63 per cent of African Americans, male and female, thought the boxer was unfairly convicted.<sup>14</sup> Despite this support and Tyson's protestations of his innocence,

he was found guilty and sentenced to six years in jail in 1992. He was released after three years for good behaviour, although he had been in trouble several times in prison. His conviction and sentencing to a year in jail in 1999 for attacking two elderly men in what the judge described as an act of 'potentially lethal road rage' merely seemed to complete a dismal story of uncontrolled, compulsive violence. A further outburst while in jail, which cost him his chance of early release, only confirmed his apparent capacity to self-destruct.<sup>15</sup>

While his violence outside of boxing was clearly perceived as criminal, it was the very savagery of Tyson's attacks in the boxing ring that won him the world title in 1986 and, aged 20, made him the youngest world heavyweight champion. Although awesome to watch, the intensity of his boxing at least seemed to be controlled and directed. However, on 29 June 1997 he lost even that control when he fought Evander Holyfield, the man to whom he had lost his title the previous November. Facing possible defeat again, Tyson provided 'an iconic moment' when in the third round he bit off part of Holyfield's ear and spat it onto the canvas. The reporter for the London *Times* compared it with scenes from the films *Cape Fear* or *Reservoir Dogs*, while the editor said it was a spectacle which would disgust the most hardened observers and 'put the sport on the ropes'.<sup>16</sup>

Tyson had his license to box revoked for a year, but after 19 months he prepared to make his comeback against Francois Botha in January 1999. Pre-match interviews, which had to be abandoned because of his foul language and his threat to kill Botha in the ring, did not suggest his temper had improved any. During the fight itself Tyson repeated the threat, warning Botha, 'White man I'm going to kill you'. While the devastating blow that felled the 'White Buffalo' confirmed Tyson's nickname as 'Iron Mike', his behaviour before, during and after the contest did little to improve his public image in the predominantly white media. However, for those African Americans described by a reporter as 'the homeboys', 'he was back, as bad as ever – thuggery, viciousness and machismo had won the day. Once more, the ghetto had got one over the establishment.' In pointing to the prejudice evident in the actions of the Las Vegas police in shepherding black men out of some of the casinos prior to the fight, the same report offered an explanation for 'the black gangsta's' admiration of Tyson 'whose power and physique sets off the alarm bells buried deep in the white gene pool'.<sup>17</sup>

While Tyson's erratic behaviour is in large measure undoubtedly due to a psychological disorder which is normally controlled by medication,<sup>18</sup> it is perhaps more difficult to find a rational explanation for the support he attracted. It may be possible to make some sense of that following within the context of both contemporary and past African American experiences. Certainly Jim White's remarks do help locate Tyson in the excessively

masculine culture of 'gangsta rap', the music to which he trains. Just one reference to the work of Tyson's friend, rap artist Tupac Shakur, whose own violent life ended (ironically after a Tyson fight) when he was killed in a drive-by shooting in 1996, makes the connection explicit –

Who you callin' rapist??  
 Ain't that a bitch  
 You devils are so two faced  
 Wanna see me locked in chains  
 Dropped in shame  
 And getten socked by these crooked cops and game  
 Fuckin' with tha' young black male<sup>19</sup>

Tyson, like rap, is a product of the ghetto. The boxer himself pointed to his background when he said, 'I got too much anger in me for past things'.<sup>20</sup> No doubt he was referring in part to his up-bringing in Brooklyn, New York, and a record of juvenile crime which began in 1979 with his arrest and subsequent sentencing to a remand home for purse snatching when he was 12. Boxing has often provided an avenue of success for young men from poor and tough environments. Other boxers, black and white, had similar backgrounds to Tyson, and like him, gained a degree of notoriety, particularly with the white media. One of these was Sonny Liston, with whom he shared striking similarities. Although it was a comparison between Liston and Tyson that apparently triggered the latter's stream of invective in the pre-Botha interview, Tyson said, 'I identify with him the most'.<sup>21</sup>

Liston, who famously (or infamously) lost his heavyweight title to Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) in 1964, had shady associations with the underworld. He served two prison sentences, one for armed robbery, the other for beating up a policeman, before defeating Floyd Patterson for the title in 1962. He tended to be described in disparaging terms by the boxing press and according to his latest biographer, was 'as feared and hated by blacks as by whites', both for his reliance on brute strength and for his apparent moral failings. He was compared unfavourably in both areas with Patterson who was seen as 'a credit to his race', the 'good guy' against Liston's 'bad guy'. Liston himself acknowledged these roles, but pointed out that with him, 'the bad guy wins'.<sup>22</sup> The playwright LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) put this more simply in racial terms:

Sonny Liston was the big black Negro in every whiteman's hallway. Waiting to do him in, deal him under, for all the hurts whitemen have been able to inflict on his world. Sonny Liston was the 'huge Negro', the 'bad nigger', a heavy-faced replica of every whipped-up woogie in the world.<sup>23</sup>

Tyson is also often compared, both explicitly and implicitly but always unfavourably, with Muhammad Ali, who now stands as one of America's greatest sporting heroes. Hailed by millions when he lit the Olympic flame at Atlanta in 1996, Ali was voted sportsman of the millennium both in the USA and UK. In his sixtieth year he was the subject of a box-office biopic success, and has even been depicted defeating Superman in a boxing match to save the world from alien invasion. He has, as one of his most recent biographers said, become a mythic figure 'like Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley'.<sup>24</sup> Yet it is easy to forget it was not always so. Much of this adulation for Ali has come as a result of a retrospective construction. Initially, it is true, the young Ali (Cassius Clay) seemed everything a white audience desired: a patriotic winner of a gold medal for the USA at the 1960 Rome Olympics, he was tall, handsome and polite. However, many people soon found his increasingly outspoken, extrovert manner offensive. The 'Louisville Lip' or 'Blabber Mouth', as he was known, was too articulate for some because he 'shattered the mask of humble silence and non-assertion demanded of blacks in America' at the time.<sup>25</sup> His poetic predictions of victory, his habit of taunting opponents both verbally and with fancy footwork – floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee – irritated many a white critic and fight fan. Some even claimed that he could not box and that his dancing around the ring and self-proclaimed 'prettiness' challenged manly notions of the art. According to Eldridge Cleaver, 'Sonny Liston, the mindless Body, is preferred over loud-mouthed Cassius Clay'.<sup>26</sup> Clay's behaviour, though, did fit into African American culture – the psyching out of Liston, 'the Bear', echoes Brer Rabbit, and the verbal dexterity clearly drew on the oral traditions of the 'dozens'. More than that, Clay asked reporters, 'Where do you think I'd be next week if I didn't know how to shout and holler and make the public take notice?' The answer to his rhetorical question was 'down in my home town, washing windows or running an elevator and saying "yes suh" and "no suh" and knowing my place'.<sup>27</sup>

While some commentators could accept Clay's 'clowning', few could accept his conversion to Islam announced after the defeat of Liston in February 1964. (Ironically present-day commentators hoped Tyson's prison conversion to Islam would 'tame' him, reflecting perhaps the extent to which the perception of the Nation of Islam as a threat had declined.) While much of the white press (and some of the black papers, too<sup>28</sup>) reacted with outrage, the World Boxing Association briefly suspended the new champion – until they realized what it would cost them. The *New York Times*, among many others, refused to accept his adopted name of Muhammad Ali until well into the 1960s. The white media was not alone – Floyd Patterson's insistence on calling Ali 'Clay', and promise to 'reclaim the title for America' brought him a savage beating in 1965. As Ali fought he called out

to Patterson 'Come on America! Come on white America!', emphasizing the role both men had assumed.<sup>29</sup> Ernie Terrell suffered a similar fate in 1967 – as Ali hit him he repeatedly asked Terrell, 'What's my name?' and referred to him as 'Uncle Tom'.<sup>30</sup> Ali's religious conversion was in many ways a declaration of independence and a reflection of the changing times. In explaining his action, Ali famously rejected the goals and methods of the civil rights movement – integration and protest. He declared, 'I'm free to be what I want', and confounded many stereotypes when he also announced that he had no interest in white women.<sup>31</sup>

Ali's subsequent 1967 refusal on religious grounds to be drafted into the US armed forces and fight 'a white man's war' led him for a while to become 'the most reviled figure in the history of American sport'.<sup>32</sup> He was stripped of his title and barred from boxing until after 1970 when the Supreme Court reversed the conviction. His stance made him even more of a hero in the eyes of many African Americans. His successful return to the ring against Gerry Quarry in 1970, and subsequent championship fights in 1971 and 1974 against Joe Frazier (portrayed in the press as patriotic, modest and Christian), confirmed his heroic position in the black community. However it was only in the 1970s that he started to become the universally admired and revered figure he is today. After the famous 'Rumble in the Jungle' with George Foreman (1974) and his final victory over Frazier in the 'Thrilla in Manila' (1975) his ability could no longer be denied: as he had often proclaimed, he was 'the Greatest'. By then the country was seeking reconciliation after the end of the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement was in decline, and Black Muslims were no longer viewed as a threat to white society. Now, *his* sexual escapades forgotten or overlooked, and unmanned by the disabling effects of Parkinson's disease, Ali has become a symbol of post civil rights/post-Vietnam America. It may be, as Mark Kram suggests,<sup>33</sup> that the mythic Ali, like Presley and Monroe, has become divorced from the reality of his performance in the ring, but it is also the case that he played a not insignificant part in what has become an equally mythic decade, the 1960s.

## II

Ali's career points up the ambiguous role of the black boxer in a predominantly white world. For African Americans boxing has offered more than a route to success; it has also enabled them to step outside of the norms of established racial behaviour. Not only could they challenge white men in the ring, they could publicly and literally beat them. Black boxers were (and often still are) the champions of their race. This has been a problem for white audiences. When Jack Johnson defeated Tommy Burns to become the first

black heavyweight champion in 1908, more was at stake than a mere title. The author Jack London, writing in the *New York Herald*, summed this up: he was, he said, 'with Burns all the way. He was a white man and so am I. Naturally I wanted to see the white man win.' Johnson too realized he was fighting for 'the honor of my race', and he did so with particular relish. In the ring Burns warned Johnson he had been born with boxing gloves on, to which the black boxer replied, 'You're about to die the same way.' Metaphorically he did, as Johnson inflicted not just a defeat but a humiliation, as he taunted his opponent before knocking him out in the fifteenth round.<sup>34</sup>

Johnson's victory led to the search for a 'Great White Hope', a search which finally brought the return to the ring of the former undefeated champion Jim Jeffries in Reno on, appropriately, 4 July 1910. The fight, watched by 20,000 while thousands more waited for the outcome outside the offices of various city newspapers across the country, had many of the characteristics of modern confrontations. Both boxers verbally goaded one another, but most of the talking was done by Johnson who urged 'Mr Jeffries' to try harder. He continued to taunt Jeffries and the white audience as he administered a punishing physical beating to his opponent to retain the title. As one report said, his victory and the method of its achievement came 'as a shock to every devoted believer in the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race', and it unleashed a wave of violence against African Americans in numerous towns and cities. Films of the fight were suppressed and increasingly white spokesmen described Johnson in terms such as 'the vilest, most despicable creature that lives'. According to Gerald Early, he was to be the most hated champion among white Americans: that is, until Liston.<sup>35</sup>

While Johnson's style of fighting often led later comparisons to be made with Ali, his flamboyant life-style and ostentatious display of wealth combined with brushes with the law, his open displays of sexuality, and sometimes violent treatment of women, resemble aspects of Tyson's career. His relationships with white women, particularly his three marriages, were considered outrageous in those days, and led to his conviction in 1913 under the Mann Act. He was given a one-year jail sentence, but jumped bail and went into exile. He continued to fight abroad and his defeat of Frank Moran in Paris in June 1914 could still make the front page of the *New York Times*. The critical tone of that report caused the civil rights leader, W.E.B. DuBois to write,

Why then this thrill of national disgust? Because Johnson is black. Of course, some pretend to object to Mr Johnson's character. But we have yet to hear, in the case of white America, that marital troubles have disqualified prizefighters or ball players or even statesmen. It comes down, then, after all to this unforgivable blackness.<sup>36</sup>

In 1915 Johnson fought Jess Willard in Havana and lost; afterwards he claimed to have 'taken a dive' in order to be able to return to America. When he finally did return in 1920 he was sent to Leavenworth prison where he continued to box until his release the following year. Although largely forgotten, Johnson fought on into the 1940s and died in 1946. There was not another black champion until Joe Louis, 'the Brown Bomber', in the 1930s.

Louis was the classic 'credit to his race'. The son of an Alabama sharecropper, his family migrated to Detroit where he was 'rescued' from potentially criminal activity and turned to boxing. Schooled by his managers, publicly he was the antithesis of Jack Johnson in manner and lifestyle. Modest, unassuming and never seen publicly with white women (despite several affairs and a messy divorce), he did little to overtly challenge the racial status quo other than in the ring. There he did not taunt or gloat, and his undoubted boxing prowess did much to overcome prejudice.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, Louis was not just a boxing champion, but champion of the African American race. Maya Angelou was among several black writers who famously recalled her memories of listening to Louis's fights on the radio – 'Champion of the world. A black boy'. However, one had to be careful: 'It wouldn't do for a black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road when Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world.'<sup>38</sup> As the champion of his race Louis was celebrated in the black press, literature, poetry and song. In 1940 Richard Wright, Paul Robeson and Count Basie collaborated to produce 'King Jo (Jo Louis) Blues' which was only one of many popular celebrations; Richard Bak suggests that Louis was 'the greatest blues hero since the mythical John Henry', and such was his power that Martin Luther King recalled that the last words of a young black man executed in the gas chamber were 'Save me, Joe Louis'.<sup>39</sup>

Louis's acceptance among white audiences was not immediate, and initially he was often defined in racial terms – 'the dusky challenger', 'the colored pugilist', 'the Dark Destroyer'. In a report of his defeat of Primo Carnera in 1935, Davis Wald wrote 'something sly and sinister and perhaps not quite human came out of the African jungle last night', while Paul Gallico described Louis as a 'man on whom civilisation rested no more securely than a shawl thrown over one's shoulders'.<sup>40</sup> Even his deliberately quiet demeanour was sometimes seen as surly or backward.<sup>41</sup>

With his fights against Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938, Louis began to take on a wider mantle as the representative of democracy against Nazism – at least in popular imagination, if not in reality. During World War II, Louis became an all-American hero. His body became national property

when President Roosevelt said 'we need muscles like yours to beat the Germans'.<sup>42</sup> Louis demonstrated his patriotism firstly by donating purses to support the military effort and then, in 1942, by volunteering for military service. As Lauren Sklaroff has argued, while African American leaders hoped that Louis's role would help bolster campaigns for racial equality, the War Department intended instead to defuse race tension without concrete action by using the boxer in a public relations capacity.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, whatever the aims of the War Department, the use of the 1938 Louis-Schmeling fight in the propaganda film *The Negro Soldier* did underline the racial issues raised in fighting Nazism and undoubtedly contributed to the changing climate of opinion in the United States. Furthermore, Louis was himself able to challenge some aspects of segregation, and was therefore able to combine patriotism and protest. But it was his unquestionable boxing achievement combined with his display of loyalty that made him, like Ali, 'an icon of American popular culture'.<sup>44</sup>

### III

Between 1937 and 1964 six out of the eight heavyweight champions were African Americans. None however achieved the prominence of Louis or Ali, partly because none held the title for long. Some, like Ezzard Charles, had an unattractive boxing style and were also quiet to the point of anonymity. Others, like the loquacious and entertaining Archie Moore, were better known as light-heavy weight or middleweight champions. Equally significant was the changing social and political environment.

The careers of Louis and Ali demonstrate how times had changed. Louis became a national hero by combining his success in the ring with conformity to dominant racial stereotypes and accepting conscription into national service. In the first part of his career Ali became a black hero in refusing to accept stereotypical roles either inside or out of the ring. It was left to other black boxers who matched the images desired by the white media to become 'the white hopes'. In the second part of his career with growing integration and greater black participation in sport, and as African American sportsmen began to assume symbolic roles for white as well as black audiences, Ali won over a wider audience with his consummate boxing skill. Looking back after the Vietnam War was over, Ali's earlier stance also made him seem heroic to many whites in a changing racial and political climate.

Both Ali and Louis were able to transcend the racial divide in their different ways, but boxers like Johnson, Liston and Tyson clearly did not. While their physical attributes could not be denied, they were never accepted other than among sections of the African American community or

boxing fraternity. Men such as these can perhaps best be understood within another aspect of the African American cultural tradition – that of the outsider.

In his famous essay ‘How “Bigger” was Born’, explaining the origins of the character of his novel *Native Son* who is driven to murder both a white woman and his own black girlfriend, Richard Wright wrote of the black men who were compelled to break the established rules. He spoke of the individual who was a ‘product of a dislocated society; ... a dispossessed and disinherited man’, and of the ‘blind rebellion’ which was an expression of black frustration and rage produced by ‘the fear, the hate, the impatience, the sense of exclusion, the ache for violent action, the emotional and cultural hunger’. Wright listed five different models including one who directed his anger towards whites, another referred to by whites as ‘a bad nigger’ who ‘carried his life in his hands’, another ‘whose only law was death’, and another who openly confronted the Jim Crow laws. For the first model on whom Bigger was based, feared equally by African Americans and whites,

life was a continuous challenge to others. At all times he took his way, right or wrong, and those who contradicted him had to fight. And never was he happier than when he had someone cornered and at his mercy; it seemed that the deepest meaning of his squalid life was in him at such times.<sup>45</sup>

The race rebel in this form has been identified in African American culture, in folk legend and in song, as the ‘bad black man’, the ‘*bad nigger*’, a hero fearless and enormously strong, prepared to break all the rules and overcome enemies, black or white.<sup>46</sup> While such a man is feared and admired in the black community, he is feared and hated among whites. The classic heroes of this type are John Henry, the legendary railroad worker, or John Hardy, a black steel-driver, who killed a man in a gambling dispute and was hanged in 1894. Perhaps less well-known is ‘Railroad Bill’, a character based upon Morris Slater, a robber and gunman who killed several people before his own death in 1896, or Aaron Harris who killed not only policemen but also his own sister and brother-in-law before being shot dead in 1915:

Aaron Harris was a bad, bad man.  
Baddest man ever was in this land.<sup>47</sup>

As Leon Litwack and others have pointed out, Jack Johnson, while no Bigger Thomas, also entered this pantheon of heroes both because of his victories over white opponents – victories that were won within an arena legally sanctioned by white society – and also because of his flamboyant life

style and open rejection of socially approved racial norms. As Johnson said, he would not be a slave.<sup>48</sup>

While some of these 'heroic' figures entered folk culture because they triumphed over whites and/or challenged other racial conventions, others become just plain 'baaad'. Not long before Johnson won his title, Robert Charles became 'legendary' in an extra-legal act of rebellion. Already incensed by the lynching of a fellow African American, Charles reacted violently in an altercation with a New Orleans policeman in 1900. In the shootout that followed, Charles shot 27 white men, killing seven before he himself was finally killed.<sup>49</sup> Charles was perhaps an example of 'the totally hard man', such as the imaginary Stackolee (sometimes known as Stagolee, Stackalee, etcetera) or possibly even the real Sonny Liston (who David Remnick describes as a 'Bigger Thomas'<sup>50</sup>). As the lines of a ballad said of another figure:

I've got a tombstone disposition, graveyard mind.  
I know I'm a bad motherfucker, that's why I don't mind dying.<sup>51</sup>

This then was the 'bad nigger' who 'embodied the notion of resistance at the highest level as his presence defied all acceptable norms of behaviour, decorum or existence'.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps in this context Mike Tyson's seemingly irrational behaviour and popular appeal does make sense. Tyson apparently once described himself as 'the baddest man on the planet', and the sports reporter James Lawson referred to him as 'one of the most compelling anti-heroes in the history of sport'.<sup>53</sup> The writer Joyce Carol Oates recognized something of this in Tyson when he became the youngest heavyweight champion in 1986. Observing that Tyson showed a 'savagery only symbolically contained in the ring', she described him as 'the outsider, the psychic outlaw, the hungry young black contender for all that white America can give' – and, one might add, all it can deny. As Oates has pointed out, the violence in Tyson's personal and professional life seems to have increased as his career has gone into decline and 'we are left with mere ferocity, inchoate rage'.<sup>54</sup> But in enacting extreme expressions of masculinity inside and outside of the ring, his appeal appears akin to that of the rap singers, and its acceptance among young black male ghetto dwellers points to their continued alienation from the mainstream of black, as well as white, society.

It may well be too that the misogyny evident in Tyson's behaviour and the rapstas' lyrics reflect the ongoing 'crisis of identity' of the black male in America recognized by such writers as bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates and Phillip Brian Harper and addressed in the Million Man March of 1996. With racial integration, hooks suggests, black men became concerned to subordinate black women: 'Manhood was not providing and protecting; it

was proved by one's capacity to coerce, control, dominate.<sup>55</sup> These are, of course, precisely the characteristics Tyson reveals both inside and outside the ring. Alternatively such behaviour could be a product of the denial of black masculinity evident in the treatment of men like Jack Johnson and Joe Louis and their emasculated, lynched forebears. Whatever reading is made of Tyson's life, it is worth bearing in mind Gerald Early's perceptive observation:

Myth tries to invest lived experience with greater meanings, but despite the stories that have proliferated around him, Tyson's life can never point to anything larger than itself: his own self-serving actions, his own madness, his own befuddlement and consternation before the revelation of his limitations.<sup>56</sup>

Following his defeat against Lennox Lewis in 2002 it seems unlikely that Tyson could ever regain the championship or the status he once had. It is hard, however, to imagine what else he can do other than continue boxing – as he said himself after the Holyfield fight, 'I have made it this far because I had no other way.'<sup>57</sup> In the words of his biographer Richard Hoffer, while he still has the physical strength to fight he will remain 'boxing's most mesmerizing presence', and as such will continue to attract audiences for the spectacle. The different reactions to Tyson continue to illustrate the different ways in which the black boxer has been 'read' by diverse audiences at various times. The experiences of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali demonstrate that their iconic status among black and white audiences varied as much according to the particular context of the moment as to their respective skills in the ring. It is likely that this will continue to be the case, and with or without Tyson, the boxing match will continue not just to be a ritualized struggle between men's bodies, but will offer 'a reading of American experience'.<sup>58</sup>

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#### NOTES

A version of this paper was given at the Swedish Association for American Studies Conference, 7 October 2000. I am very grateful to my former colleagues at the University of Glamorgan Henrice Altink, Andy Croll, Chris Evans, and Gareth Williams and Professor Ben Lawson (Albany State University), Yvonne Johnson (Central Missouri State University), Andrew Kaye (University of Newcastle), and John White (University of Hull) for their advice and encouragement. Anonymous readers also provided useful direction and references.

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  4. Hugh McIlvanney, 'Taming The Beast', *The Sunday Times*, 2, 2 June 2002, 13.
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  8. Early quoted in Jeffrey T. Simmons, "'Race" and Sport: A Critical, Historical Examination', *Journal of Sports History*, 21, 3 (Fall 1994), 212; Eldridge Cleaver quoted in Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, New York, and London: Kennikat Press, 1975), p.25. Also see Joyce Carol Oates, 'Rape and the Boxing Ring', *Newsweek* (24 Feb. 1992), 45.
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  11. Joan Smith, 'Tyson – just a punch-bag for our racial prejudices', *The Independent*, 27 Jan. 2002.
  12. See Peter Heller, *Bad Intentions: the Mike Tyson Story* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), pp.409, 414; Lule, 'The Rape of Mike Tyson,' 177, 178. A full account of the trial can be found in Randy Roberts and J. Gregory Garrison, *Heavy Justice: the Trial of Mike Tyson* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000). Garrison was the special prosecutor in the case against Tyson. On Tyson's career also see Richard Hoffer, *A Savage Business: The Comeback and Comedown of Mike Tyson* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).
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17. Quoted in *The Guardian*, 23 Jan. 1999. See Jim White, 'One for the Ghetto,' *Guardian Unlimited*, 23 Jan. 1999, at <http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive>.
  18. See Heller, *Bad Intentions*, pp.301–302, 307.
  19. From 'Fuck the World', in *Me Against the World* (Interscope Records INT 0518432, 1995), and lyrics available at <http://www.tupac.com/lyrics/against/world.shtml>. According to T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, one rappa, Chuck D of Public Enemy, sang of the Tyson case as lynching in 'Hazy Shades of Criminality'. See Sharpley-Whiting, 'When a Black Woman Cries Rape', p.54.
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  21. David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of the American Hero* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), pp.295–6.
  22. Nick Tosches, *Night Train: The Sonny Liston Story* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), pp.5, 159–60.
  23. LeRoi Jones, 'In the Ring (2)', in *The Nation* 1964, in Early (ed.), *I'm a Little Special*, p.48. Tosches quotes an article from *Look*, 25 Feb. 1964, titled 'Sonny Liston: King of the Beasts', in *Night Train*, p.201.
  24. Mark Kram, *Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud Between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier* (London: Collins/Willow, 2001), p.2; Early (ed.), *I'm a Little Special*, pp.vii, xii. Ali is played in the film *Ali* by Will Smith, who once sang 'I think I can beat Mike Tyson' with DJ Jazzy Jeff (Information provided by Taneya@aol.com).
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