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BLACK FOREIGNERS IN A WHITE WORLD: THE UNACCEPTABILITY OF JACK JOHNSON AND MIKE TYSON

Despite the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century and numerous anti-racist campaigns in the 1960s, the view that blacks and whites do not belong together is still wide-spread in US-American society. A considerable number of people still assume that a “typical” American is someone who is, among other things, of white racial heritage. A look at past history reveals that even though people of darker skin colors had been part of American society for several centuries by the time of the Civil War, they were still perceived as *a threat* to society, order and lawfulness. Political and legal theorist Bonnie Honig traces different “scripts” through which the acceptance and negotiation of foreignness has been acted out in the context of American democracy. In my analysis, I make use of some of her insights to understand the position of blacks following the Civil War, especially in view of the powerful and long-standing resistance against racial mixture on all levels of social life. I focus attention on the legal and social backlash against two black boxers, Jack Johnson and Mike Tyson, who disregarded and often openly challenged racial boundaries, both in the sports arena and in their personal lives.

Keywords: foreignness, democracy, blacks, intermarriage, separateness.

I. Introduction

One day St. Peter saw three men arrive at the gate of heaven: a white man, a mulatto, and a Negro.

‘What do you want most?’ he asked the white man.

‘Money.’

‘And you?’ he asked the mulatto.

‘Fame.’

St. Peter turned to the Negro, who said with a wide smile: ‘I’m just carrying these gentlemen’s bags.’ (Fanon 1967: 49)

In a humorous way this joke aptly illustrates a predominant attitude that has persisted long after the American Civil War ended – that blacks and whites do not belong together. The assumption a “typical” American is someone who is, among other things, of white racial heritage (see Babb 1998: 37) still prevails in certain circles. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson affirms:

Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race. To these objections, which are political, may be added others, which are physical and moral. (1785: 145)

However, in this race- and color-based division, the very idea of whiteness presupposes the presence of blacks: “the people who now call themselves whites originally developed that identity, and continue to maintain it most insistently, in contrast to blacks” (Harris 2017: 568). Angela Harris further explains the dichotomy in which black Americans are caught: between “the historic and continuing centrality of African American ethnicity to American political and social life and ... the centrality of antiblack racism to the patterns of domination we call white supremacy” (2017: 567). It was in contrast with blacks and their unique ways that whites could be what they believed they were supposed to be. In the words of Harris, “American culture...is founded on an image of blackness” (2017: 568). She adds further on:

Our slavery became their freedom. Our degraded labor produced their free labor; our political nonexistence, their political belonging. Our ugliness, our promiscuity, our simple natures reflected their beauty, continence, and refinement. Our simple joys and pleasures, our songs and dances and folktales (mocked and admired in their minstrelsy) enabled their sophistication and formed a basis for their nostalgia. (2017: 568)

By the time of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery people of darker skin colors had already been part of American society for several centuries. Harris affirms that “African Americans play a unique and central role in American social, political, cultural, and economic life and have done so since the nation’s founding” (Harris 2017: 567). She goes so far as to state that “African Americans, for all our talk about Mother Africa, are profoundly and unmistakably Americans. More to the point, Americans are distinctively African” (2017: 567-568).

However, even after emancipation, skin color separated blacks from whites, and the former had to bear “the unique humiliation of knowing that [they were] seen by others as physically frightening, ugly, or loathsome” (Harris 2017: 569). Blacks were predominantly perceived as a threat to society, order and lawfulness, which can be interpreted as a tendency to view them as essentially *alien* or even *foreign*. According to Bonnie Honig, “[i]n classical political thought, foreignness is generally taken to signify a threat of corruption that must be kept out or contained for the sake of the stability and identity of the regime” (2001: 1-2). With the institution of slavery no longer serving as a legal boundary between the races, new boundaries and freedoms needed to be instated, along with new patterns of the distribution of power, both in legal and social terms. “American anti-discrimination law emerged in response to experiences of and with black people” (Harris 2017: 569) and, along

with the long-standing ban on intermarriage, institutionalized the inequality of black-white relations.

Honig traces different “scripts” (2001: 4) through which the acceptance and negotiation of foreignness is acted out in the context of American democracy. In her interpretation of democratic theory, she takes her cue from readings of Gothic fiction:

Gothic novels depend on the reader’s uncertainty as to whether the heroine’s would-be lover is really a hero or a villain. Similarly, a gothic approach to democratic theory presses us to attend to the people’s perpetual uncertainty about the law and their relation to it: Is it really part of us or an alien thing, an expression of our intimate will or a violent imposition? (2001: 9)

Arguably, the position of blacks after the Civil War could be approached from a similar perspective, especially in view of the powerful and long-standing resistance to racial mixture on all levels of social life. Nikki Giovanni argues that black Americans are irreparably alienated from other Americans: “living in a foreign nation we are, as the wandering Jew, both myth and reality” (Tate 1983: 70). In his analysis of different types of interrelations, Russel Robinson concludes that “[w]e frame black and white men through radically disparate lenses even when they engage in the same underlying conduct” (2017: 438). Ralph Ellison claims that for whites in America, blacks are ultimately “human ‘natural’ resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization” (1964: 29). In the present article, I will focus attention on the legal and social backlash against two black boxers, Mike Tyson and Jack Johnson, who disregarded and often openly challenged socially (and sometimes legally) imposed racial boundaries, in the sports arena and in their personal lives.

II. Research methodology

Honig’s comprehensive analyses suggest that “democratic citizens... are often threatened and supported by dreams of a foreigner who might one day come to save us and enable us to finally abdicate or perhaps reassume the abundant responsibilities of democracy” (2001: 14). In a similar fashion, the two champion boxers were both celebrated for their physical and mental prowess and violently resisted for working their way into what was deemed an exclusively white domain – invading and conquering the (white) world of professional sport and in the case of Johnson (possibly even worse so) – of white women.

In the second chapter of her book, Honig asks: “By what magic are dependent, not yet fully formed followers supposed to become the responsible, active citizens that democracy requires?” (2001: 17). She explains that “[t]he problem is crystallized at the moment of founding, but it recurs daily in a regime as new members enter fully into citizenship ... and as established citizens are renormalized into accepted expectations of belonging” (2001: 17). Along this train of thought, the claiming of the world championship title in boxing by a black person (who also dared to engage in relations with white women), could be seen as unacceptable be-

havior, a sort of denial of belonging, and a subversion of the established status quo of a relative division between the white and the black races.

Whereas the Declaration of Independence argues for the “right” of American citizens to independence, [Thomas Jefferson’s] *Notes* argues whether they have the “capacity” to exercise it, and whether they could become a “representative citizen” capable of reconciling the paradox of “standing apart from his constituents by virtue of any direct legislation yet capable of embodying in his imagination a harmonized population.” (Jarret 2011: 31)

Various scholars, such as Gerald Wright, have looked upon the development of the position of blacks with regard to the dominant white society through the prism of what Baker, Jr. terms “Integrationist poetics” (1984: 68). He considers such instances as the Court ruling in the case of *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) where the Court held that “the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ was inherently unequal” (1984: 68) and infer that soon “Afro-America would stand at one with the dominant white culture of America” (1984: 68). However, he is quick to add afterwards that this does not at all apply to all levels of black society, and “[a]t the folk, mass, or vernacular level, the relationship between Afro-America and a dominant Anglo-American culture has always been one of... separateness” (1984: 68). Johnson further supports this view: “indeed, relationships between Blacks and whites – especially Black men and white women – continue to be an issue of controversy in the African American community, as well as among whites, today” (2005: 13). G. Early openly states that in the early twentieth century “blacks were subjected to a harsh, abject system of racial segregation and second-class citizenship” and any interrelations between the races were unwelcome and unwanted (Early).

III. Jack Johnson and Mike Tyson: boxing careers, personal lives and legal trials

In Afro-American folklore there is a cycle of trickster tales, which recount the story of a weak animal (usually a rabbit), who time after time outwits a predator to his salvation. The rabbit doesn’t confront his enemies head on, but he tricks them. L. W. Levine warns against reductive interpretations of the cycle’s message:

While each tale may bring the satisfaction of the weak triumphing over the strong, the cycle itself has a more complicated message: Rabbits may win battles, but they don’t win wars. Rabbits don’t replace foxes and wolves; they’re *rabbits*! They have to use their wits all the time. They’re always in danger. They never become secure. They’re never on top. That was the lesson being taught to the young; not some fantasy of victory, but what you needed to do to survive in this world. (2007: xviii)

Even though it is only a small part of Afro-American folklore, this narrative seems to be acted out in the lives of the two black boxers: they started out in a highly uncompromising and unsupportive environment, but even with most - if not all odds - against them, they managed to raise themselves to world-champion status. Then, they got stripped of their titles, professional success and future prospects;

for the legal system, for the dominant culture, they were *rabbis*, and needed to be brought back to where they had come from and where they were believed to belong.

Being shut out from almost any other viable option for a (sports) career, Jack Johnson applied himself to boxing, a difficult but also well-paid profession, which some saw “as a less lethal form of dueling” (Early), transforming both his life and the boxing arena as it had been previously known (see Early).

While boxing was the means through which he earned his income and found his sense of self-worth, his fights were not about boxing; they were about race. Jack Johnson was an African American. His winning of the heavy-weight boxing crown on Boxing Day 1908 exposed the lie of white superiority. ... Jack Johnson’s skills in the ring fundamentally challenged notions of white hegemony. (Dabscheck 2009: 92)

“In 1908 Jack Johnson knocked out the Canadian fighter Tommy Burns to become the first-ever black world heavyweight champion” (Runstedtler 2012: xix). He was a popular figure at a time when blacks appeared in the white press only when they “were the perpetrators of crime or had been lynched” (Early). More outrageously so, he openly shared his affiliations with white women, at a time when about 700 African American men were estimated to have lost their lives to punishment for (supposedly) illicit interracial relations only within the first decade of the twentieth century (see Ward 2005: 139). He challenged the status quo and pressed against a painful and disputed issue in his society: racial mixture. Racial mixture has been recognized as part of the national heritage of the United States. However, “U.S. society historically went to great lengths to keep it underground. For that reason, when social norms failed to maintain the public separation of the races, law intervened with a vengeance, as it did in Jack Johnson’s life” (Johnson 2005: 11-12). It has been remarked that [w]hat is surprising is not that Jack Johnson, considering his times, should have had his ultimate downfall but that he was ever able to rise to the point where he was able to challenge for the heavyweight title in the first place” (Early).

Half a century later, another black contender appeared on the boxing scene, Mike Tyson. He grew up in Brownsville, one of the poorest neighborhoods of New York. Later Tyson would describe it as a “horrific, tough, and gruesome kind of place” (2014: 16). He had practically no support from his environment and for this reason few hopes about the future: his mother lost hope of his advancement after a racist social worker told her that Tyson was mentally retarded (see Tyson 2014: 37). However, he began his boxing training at the age of thirteen in a detention center for juvenile offenders (see Tyson 2014: 39-41), where he met the professional boxer and political activist Muhammad Ali and was inspired by his personality (see Tyson 2014: 37). He spent seven years of rigorous training and discipline, with his trainer Cus guiding him, and perceiving him as a totally different person from what others did:

I found what I thought I’d find: a person of basically good character, capable of doing the things that are necessary to be done in order to be a great fighter or champion of the world. When I recognized this, then my next job

was to make him aware of these qualities... The ability to apply the discipline, the ability to do what needs to be done no matter how he feels inside, in my opinion, is the definition of a true professional. (2014: 90)

Cus predicted that Tyson would “go down in history as one of the greatest we ever had” (Tyson 2014: 90), and in 1986 he did become the youngest heavyweight world champion, taking the belt from Trevor Berbick (see Tyson 2014: 123).

Understandably, the ways in which the black boxers under discussion conducted their lives, and more crucially, public perceptions thereof, were marked by the professional field which they occupied. In popular belief, boxing has been connected with “fixed fights, dishonesty and corruption, almost since its beginnings” (Early). “As fighters mostly existed in the sporting world of women, pimps, hustlers, pop entertainers, drugs, crime, and alcohol, it was difficult for any fighter to maintain his training regimen and his concentration” (Early). Thus, even though champion titles were supposedly reserved predominantly for whites, boxing had a bad name and the people practicing it were not considered respectable and law-abiding. What is more, as some Critical Race Theorists have noted, there has long been a general tendency for the over-criminalization of African-Americans as many of their activities have been represented as criminal – such as being part of street gangs (see Delgado 2017: 80). It is no wonder that in that climate many boxers succumbed to alcoholism and venereal disease (see Early). Johnson and Tyson, among others, were not immune to certain excesses.

To exacerbate matters in the minds of many whites, as heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson flaunted the social mores of his times by living a sporting life in which he refused to accept the restrictions on interracial relationships that applied to most African American men, and were strictly enforced through rigid social norms, anti-miscegenation laws, and brutal extra-legal means. (Johnson 2005: 3)

Still, Johnson remained focused, determined and did not give in to dissipation, as many of his fellow fighters did; he did his best to stand his ground with white managers, practiced, and most importantly, wanted to be a champion (see Early). With a background of juvenile delinquency, detention centers, drug abuse, robbery, and armed fights (see Tyson 2014: 11-66), Tyson was far from an exemplary figure at the height of his career. In addition, he indulged in alcohol and drugs, took part in wild parties, had relationships with many women and spent enormous amounts of money (see Tyson 2014: 126-184). Tyson opens his autobiography stating that he spent the time between his conviction for rape and his sentence “traveling around the country romancing all of [his] various girlfriends” (2014: 1). After serving 3 years in prison and being released on parole, the first thing he did was to get a car and drive to New York to see one of his girlfriends, instead of seeing his wife (see Tyson 2014: 353).

Obviously, both Johnson and Tyson were easy targets of adverse criticism, and more to the point, tempting ones. They disrupted the social status quo, disregarded conventional behavior norms and flew in the face of white supremacy.

Kevin Johnson employs the term “pretextual prosecution” (2005: 15) when he describes the legal attack on Jack Johnson: he was a notorious and disruptive figure, and any way that could be found to punish him for that was justifiable (to the public and to a great extent – to the legal bodies as well), even if it was for a lesser offense (see Johnson 2005: 15). Actually, he triggered two major law amendment considerations with regard to interracial relations, which shows just how much he troubled white society’s psyche (see Johnson 2005: 14).

However, the most significant deployment of the law to challenge Jack Johnson’s conduct was his criminal prosecution, which helped dethrone him from the heavyweight championship when no white challengers could. The U.S. Attorney in Chicago prosecuted Jack Johnson under the Mann Act, also known as the White Slave Traffic Act, for transporting across state lines a white woman, Belle Schreiber, a spurned lover of Johnson’s who later testified against him. Importantly, the prosecutor indicted Johnson even though Schreiber was an adult and, as she testified, her travels with Johnson were wholly consensual (Johnson 2005: 15).

In order to avoid going to prison, Jack Johnson found himself forced to travel to Europe, and eventually lived abroad for nine years. The conviction under the Mann Act both took away his title and put an end to his career as he knew it, with only minor appearances and tight funds to follow afterwards (see Johnson 2005: 17). It was not until the late 1960s that he came back to the boxing scene, prompting Muhammad Ali to comment on their similar taste for open defiance in the face of white discrimination: “I grew to love the Jack Johnson image, I wanted to be rough, tough, arrogant, the nigger white folks didn’t like” (*USA Today* 2005).

Similarly, Tyson’s trial finished with a conviction. He was tried for rape, and with little to no evidence against him, initially the prosecution did not even believe they could make a case against him (see Tyson 2014: 236). Starting with a far-fetched accusation, the trial ended with Tyson’s being sentenced to ten years in prison, only one judge having the courage to speak in his favor: “My review of the entire record leads me to the inescapable conclusion that he [Tyson] did not receive the adequate fairness which is essential to our system of criminal justice” (Judge Patrick Sullivan, quoted in Tyson 2014: 259). After leaving prison, he never managed to reach the earlier heights of his professional career and mostly fought to procure money. Eventually Tyson gradually withdrew from boxing, losing his passion and motivation for fighting (see Tyson 2014: Chapters 323-385).

IV. Conclusion

The rise of Jack Johnson and Mike Tyson at a time of racial segregation and inequality (see Early) shook the foundation of white sports and culture. “When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one, . . . when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened. . . . Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an ‘other’ among others” (Ricoeur, quoted in Levine 172-73). The emergence of black champions eroded white monopoly, questioned white superiority, flew in the face of the established order, and was met with a due response. Undeniably, both fighters were far from exemplary citizens, and were faced with disapproval from blacks and whites alike (see Early; Tyson 353-385). However, a closer analysis points to the conclusion that if they had not been black and defiant in the face of the predominant mentality, they would not have faced so much opposition and legal prosecution, or they would have been better protected against it. In his *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin vividly describes the unsolvable tension of black-white relations in America:

In every aspect of his being, [the American Negro] betrays the memory of the auction block and the impact of the happy ending. In White Americans he finds reflected—repeated, as it were, in a higher key— his tensions, his terrors, his tenderness. . . . Now he is bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh; they have loved and hated and obsessed and feared each other and his blood is in their soil. Therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced (1990: 122–123).

Even though they could be seen as part of the same society and even as members of the same “family,” the black fighters have been denied a happy home-coming. “What [they have gotten] instead is a sense of the terror of belonging, the hope and betrayal that come with the inextricable intertwining of people in one another’s lives across lines of difference and power” (Honig 2001: 121). Their careers have been sabotaged by the laws of their native country, and the outcome of that has been rejection. In many ways, the two fighters’ lives have mirrored precisely the dichotomy between “native” and “foreigner.” In Nikki Giovanni’s words, black Americans will always remain “strangers.” However, she also claims that “our alienation is our greatest strength” (Tate 1983: 70).

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