# Jack Johnson versus Jim Crow

## Race, Reputation, and the Politics of Black Villainy: The Fight of the Century

**DEREK H. ALDERMAN**
*University of Tennessee*

**JOSHUA INWOOD**
*Pennsylvania State University*

**JAMES A. TYNER**
*Kent State University*

*Foundational to Jim Crow era segregation and discrimination in the United States was a "racialized reputational politics," that constructed African Americans as not only inferior, but as villainous threats to the normative order, leading to the lynching of thousands of African Americans. While black villainy is a destructive force within society, we explore it is as basis for anti-racist politics, when appropriated by African Americans. There is a long history in African American folklore of celebrating the black outlaw who freely moves about and boldly violates moral and legal norms. Early 20th century American boxer Jack Johnson, who reigned as world heavy champion from 1908 to 1915, illustrates this complex and contested process of vilifying black bodies and reputations during the Jim Crow era. Our paper offers a critical, contextualized biographical analysis of Johnson, situating his struggles within the wider historical geography of violent US race relations and paying close attention to the controversial place he held within the white and black public imaginaries. Importantly, the African American fighter appropriated and manipulated Jim Crow villainy to challenge a white racist society and a conservative black establishment while also claiming the right to live on his own terms.*

*Fundacional a la segregación Jim Crow y a la discriminación en los EE.UU. era una "política reputacional racializada," que no solo construyó a los afroamericanos como inferiores sino también como amenazas villanías al status quo, algo que contribuyó a los linchamientos de miles de afroamericanos. Mientras que la villanía es una fuerza destructiva dentro de la sociedad, en el presente artículo lo exploramos como posible fuente de una política anti-racista, cuando se apropia por los afroamericanos. Hay una larga historia en el folklórico afroamericano de celebrar el proscrito afroamericano quien se mueve libremente y quien rompe las normas morales y legales. El boxeador americano Jack Johnson del sigo XX, quien dominó como campeón mundial del boxeo pesado del 1908 al 1915, ilustra este contestado y complejo proceso de vilificar el cuerpo negro y las reputaciones de la era del Jim Crow. Nuestro artículo ofrece un análisis biográfica crítica contextualizada de Johnson, situando su desempeño dentro de la geografía histórica de las relaciones raciales violentas de los EE.UU. y prestando atención al lugar controversial que tuvo dentro del imaginario público de los blancos y los negros. El luchador afroamericano apropió y manipuló la villanía de la era Jim Crow para desafiar una*

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*sociedad racista blanca y un establecimiento conservador negro mientras reclamaba el derecho de vivir de sus propios términos.*

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PALABRAS CLAVES: Boxeo, teoría crítica de la raza, Jack Johnson, política reputacional, geografía deportiva

## INTRODUCTION

In searing desert heat on 4 July 1910 in Reno, Nevada, Jack Johnson retained his title as world heavyweight boxing champion. The first African American to ever win the heavyweight championship, Johnson pummeled and humiliated Jim Jeffries, touted at the time as "the Great White Hope", who had come out of retirement specifically for the purpose of winning the title back from Johnson (Hietala 2002). Ever since Johnson had won the world heavyweight title from Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia, in 1908 white people the world over had searched for a white fighter who could best Jack Johnson in the ring (Kent 2005). The search for "the Great White Hope" had landed at the feet of Jim Jeffries, a former heavyweight champion and farmer from California, who many at the time considered the greatest fighter in the history of boxing. Initially reluctant to enter the ring, it was only after the famous author Jack London, and other commentators had begged Jeffries out of retirement that he decided to fight Johnson for the title (Kent 2005). The buildup to the fight was immense with hundreds of reporters from around the world in 110° F temperatures covering the weeklong festivities leading up to the fight and scores of stories being written about Jeffries, Johnson and the ways this fight was a proxy for larger questions about race and white supremacy in the United States (Johnson 1927).

The Johnson versus Jeffries bout, billed at the time and still remembered today by many boxing aficionados as "the Fight of the Century," was broadcast by the new "wire services" throughout the United States in what was perhaps the first nationally broadcast sporting event in America. Given the buildup and the racialized politics that surrounded the fight, the air was electric, as Johnson appeared to toy with Jeffries, ultimately knocking him out of the fight in the 14th round (Johnson 1927). Johnson's victory touched off a spate of riots throughout the United States as whites, angered at the outcome, took out their frustrations on African Americans in communities large and small (Hietala 2002). At the same time, segments of the black community were emboldened by the fact that an African American held the world boxing championship and the defiant way in which Johnson visibly transgressed and arrogantly mocked the conventions of white supremacist America. In the words of noted historian John Blassingame (1975, p. 5): "Privately and publicly many blacks applauded Johnson's exploits because he defied all of the degrading customs of America. He was rich when most blacks were poor; free to do as he chose when most blacks were circumscribed; and braggadocious [sic] when many blacks were forced to bear their oppression in silence" for fear of violent reprisals.

To understand the significance of the fight it is important to note that the boxing ring of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was, in many respects, a microcosm of US society. Championship fights

were, for the most part, all-white affairs and the segregated boxing ring mirrored America's preoccupation with keeping African Americans "in their place" and on the outside of the US racial hierarchy. Jack Johnson, for many whites, was the embodiment of the new-found threats that permeated the US in the years after the end of the Civil War. As African Americans struggled to establish themselves after the end of slavery and as whites increasingly undermined the civil rights gains of black people, the nation was entering the Jim Crow era of extended racial crisis. The intensely racist American society within which Jack Johnson fought his opponents—which included "Great White Hopes" such as Jeffries as well as the wider hostile white community outside the ring—was not incidental to a single boxing match but foundational to how the sport of boxing and Johnson's career and reputation came to be understood and represented within America.

Thus the national spectacle of the Johnson versus Jeffries fight was not just a sporting event, but it also served to test white attitudes and superiority on a grand scale. At the turn of the 20th century, racial theories posited white boxers as aggressive whereas blacks were perceived as deferent, passive, and defensive. New scientific studies at the time argued that white male bodies had evolved through centuries of Darwinist survival of the fittest (Bederman 1995, p. 42). For many white Americans, Jeffries was the embodiment of white superiority and commentators could not help, but draw stark differences between the two fighters, differences that were grounded in white supremacist understandings of race and culture in the US (Strible 1996, p. 180).

Johnson's lopsided victory over Jeffries shattered the myths of black deference and inferiority. Johnson tortured his opponents—especially Jeffries and Burns—publically marking and mocking them, and finally vanquishing them. Johnson would rule the heavyweight division for seven years, until 1915, when he lost the title to Jess Willard—another fighter billed as a "the Great White Hope"—by way of knockout in round 25 of a 45 round bout. Bederman (1995, p. 42) contends that by annihilating Jeffries and so many others before Willard, Johnson implicitly challenged the ways hegemonic discourses of civilization built powerful notions of manhood out of race. Johnson's victory symbolized the potential of black Americans to resist racial oppression and, perhaps, to inspire some to fight for racial justice (Mumford 1997, p. 6).

Within the fight's white supremacist environment there was a clear racial division of the boxers in terms of heroism and villainy. Jeffries was portrayed by the white establishment as courageous, disciplined, civilized and solid, while Johnson was "yellow," savage, a braggart and a drinker. Detractors represented Johnson as primitive and gorilla-like, in asserting his supposedly innate inferiority, while also taking issue with his nonchalant and carefree demeanor during training camp. What especially contributed to Johnson's image as a public menace to white America was the open and unapologetic way he had affairs with white women—and even married them—at a time when interracial mixing and sexual relations was not just illegal, but could and did get black men lynched. In contrast, members of the black press, while having complex and sometimes contradictory opinions of Johnson's exploits, expressed great

support for the black champion leading up to and immediately after the fight with Jeffries. They touted his strength, agility, and gentlemanliness—with the *Chicago Defender* declaring him to be a "hero" (Teresa 2015). The fighters themselves realized the broader implications with Jeffries declaring, "I realize full well just what depends on me, and I am not going to disappoint the public. That portion of the white race that has been looking to me to defend its athletic superiority may feel assured that I am fit to do my very best" (quoted in Roberts 1983, pp. 103–4). With each punishing blow, however, Johnson was not only undermining Jeffries claim as the superior fighter, he was eviscerating the white supremacist logics that were the basis of the emerging racially segregated national landscape. This point was not lost on black and white observers at the time, particularly those affiliated with churches and social reform organizations, who feared the Johnson-Jefferies bout would inflame racial animosities and spark violence. For instance, in the immediate wake of Johnson's victory in Reno, several African American newspapers from across the country expressed concern that the victorious rejoicing of blacks would damage race relations because of the white resentment and retaliation it might spur (*The Freeman* 1910).

The promotion of these racialized images of hero and villain were certainly endemic and pivotal to the emerging racial order of early 20th century US society, and they were not new to Johnson or boxing. But these images were actively recreated and reinforced as part of Johnson versus Jefferies, and consciously planned by Tex Rickard, the promoter of the match, as a means of building hype for the interracial bout. For the purposes of this paper, we are interested in analyzing the "black villainy" of Jack Johnson, interpreting it as part of the "racialized reputational politics" that have long undergirded white supremacy and the subjugation of African Americans. Johnson's public image was open to control and contest by white and black publics as well as the athlete himself as he exerted authority over his own life as a black man in Jim Crow America.

Critically, the reputational politics that we identify are central to the everyday ways Jim Crow segregation operated as a racial project (Omi and Winant 1994). For Jim Crow to be successful it wasn't just that African Americans had to know their place in the American racial landscape, but the reality of Jim Crow had to be constantly reinforced through a series of cultural logics and stereotypes that justified white supremacy within the US racial state. Yet, to see the reality of these logics as simply operating as a tool of oppression is to miss the creative and subaltern ways African Americans could and did appropriate those images for their own ends. Consequently, our reading of "the Fight of the Century" is less about the boxing match itself and instead focuses on how the match illustrated the contested, nuanced and fraught US racial landscape at the turn of the century, a time when white America was attempting to reinforce segregation and second-class citizenship for African Americans in the wake of the end of the US Civil War and the growth of segregation. We suggest and demonstrate that black villainy, while certainly a tool of oppression, was transformed in Johnson's hands into a tactic of resistance. We do so by offering an abridged biographical examination of Johnson, recognizing that other scholars

have provided more comprehensive treatments of the prizefighter's struggles and social significance (Sackler 1968; Gilmore 1975; Ward 2004; Burns et al. 2005; Runstedtler 2013). Instead, our purpose is to contextualize Jack Johnson within a broader historical geographic understanding of white supremacy, and to use this moment to explore the complex and seemingly counter-intuitive intersections of resistance and dominance that framed the burgeoning US racial segregated hierarchy at the turn of the 20th century.

## CRITICAL RACIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF SPORT

We draw upon scholarly studies of "the Fight of the Century" and key moments in Johnson's life inside and outside the ring to develop wider theoretical insights into the construction of identity, the operation of social power, and the complex dynamics of racial control and resistance in the America's settler colonial state (Bonds and Inwood 2016). At the same time, our work seeks to join recent conversations about "critical geographies of sport" (Koch 2017). The study of sports by geographers—traditionally focused on mapping and analyzing spatial patterns in athletic talent, teams, and fan support—has begun an important shift to examining the relationship between sports and the expression of identity, place and power (e.g., Bale 2002; Shobe 2008; Gaffney 2010; Koch 2013; Conner 2014; Koch 2015). This more critical engagement also includes a nascent focus on the role of race, racial identity, and racism within sports geography (Mitchelson and Lazaro 2004; Coleman 2006; Cuadros 2011; Alderman and Inwood 2016; Conner 2017). As Koch and Jansson (2017, pp. 237–238) argue: "critical studies in sport can make important contributions to ongoing research and advocacy efforts on issues of social justice."

Important to understanding the capacity of sport as an arena for challenging racial inequality is examining the spaces, movements, and struggles of the African American athlete, although very little traditional or new critical geographical work has taken on the topic. The black sports figure has a contested place within US society not only as a victim of racism, but also as a challenger of an unjust social and spatial order, whether that challenge is overt protest and activism or the everyday politics of surviving and even thriving in the face of white supremacy (Alderman and Inwood 2016). It is a theme of considerable historical importance when interpreting the politicized careers of not only Johnson, but also other noted African American athletes such as Henry Armstrong, Arthur Ashe, Alice Coachman, Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, and Muhammad Ali. The racial politics of sports remains highly charged today as the public debates the decisions of professional football players Colin Kaepernick, Eric Reid and others to take a knee at NFL games during the playing of the national anthem in protest of police brutality against people of color. Moreover, black athletes continue to find themselves (un)willing participants in the racialized promotion of sporting events. Recent examples include the racial taunts and stereotyping hurled in the 2017 Floyd Mayweather and Conor McGregor boxing match (Bieler 2017).

African American athletes hold a unique if not sometimes privileged status

within society, but this is not to suggest that their lives and careers are separate from and not in some way reflective of the broader communities to which they belong. The "racialized reputational politics" that constructed Jack Johnson as a villain have long operated in defining African Americans as not only inferior, but as threats to white moral authority and political power. This negative reputational framing is more than a mere cultural label, but has a history and geography of shaping material inequalities suffered by African Americans, including the injury and lynching of thousands of African Americans. The "villainous" tropes applied to Johnson were felt by many black Americans and fueled an era of public hysteria over the idea of a brutish and lust-crazed "bad Negro," a racist stereotype that not only created geographies of white supremacy, but defined black social and spatial mobility as transgressive, dangerous and hence a threat to the existing political-economic order. Johnson is an especially powerful illustration of this racialization of reputation.

In applying a reputational politics framework, we seek to understand the contested terrain that was Johnson's public identity and that of all African Americans. Indeed, what is especially interesting and instructive about Jack Johnson's reputational politics was not just the controversial place he held within white racist imaginaries, but the sometimes-negative reactions he evoked among civil rights leaders and the black press at the time. Importantly, following a resistant black outlaw tradition, Johnson appropriated and manipulated his own Jim Crow villainy and used it to challenge a white racist society and a black establishment while also claiming the right to live on his own terms. It is this dialectic tension which makes Johnson's biography a powerful analytic tool to explore how the reputational struggles of the era were central to an emerging Jim Crow racist politics.

## ON OUR BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

Before delving deeply into the concept of reputational politics, we want to discuss the value of a biographical approach to the study of race and a geographically situated discussion of Johnson as well as the specific contextual aims of our treatment of Johnson's biography. Our biographical approach is consistent with critical race theory (CRT), which asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is central to understanding and challenging racial inequality and thus necessary for fully exploring the lives, perspectives, and struggles of people of color (e.g., Schur 2002; Crenshaw 2011; Alderman and Inwood 2016). Critical race theory emerged during the 1970s from the work of legal scholars Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman who were frustrated over the "slow pace of racial reform" and wanted to understand the way race was reproduced in the US legal system (Delgado and Stefancic 2002, p. xvi). Since that time, CRT has evolved to encompass a variety of academic disciplines and incorporate a wider critique of the processes involved in sustaining systems of racial oppression in the US (Lynn et al. 2002). Moreover, CRT shifted our understandings of racism from "willful acts of aggression" to "discussions of [the ways] race and racism are deeply embedded within the framework of American society" (Parker and

Lynn 2002, p. 8). Currently, CRT posits that "racism is normal, not aberrant in American society" and argues that current efforts at addressing racial injustice only "remedy the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice" noting that more subtle forms of racism are almost impossible to address using current legal and economic solutions (Delgado and Stefancic 2002, p. xvi). Those who adopt a CRT approach frequently: 1) recognize that race is a social construction and argue for the eradication of racism; 2) draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination thus illuminating the way racism links with other forms of injustice; 3) present narratives and other qualitative approaches as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism (Parker and Lynn 2002, p. 10).

Critical race theory integrates concepts about the social construction of race with work on racism through qualitative methodologies. This intends to illuminate questions about social inequality and the spatial reproduction of that inequality through the deployment of CRT (Solorzano and Yosso 2002, p. 24) which emphasizes empirically grounded case studies. Critical race theory 1) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process; 2) challenges traditional research paradigms used to explain the experiences of persons of color; 3) offers transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination; and 4) focuses on the *experiences* of persons of color (Solorzano and Yosso 2002, p. 24). It is the last point, the focus on the experiences of persons of color, which is central to understanding our approach to the life and times of Jack Johnson. We use the biography of Johnson to illuminate larger narratives that challenge commonly held assumptions about the nature of race and the continuing consequences of racism in US society (Price 2010).

Important to our discussion is the distinction that Hodder (2017) makes between "biography as subject" and "biography as method." The former emphasizes the lives of historical figures as texts to be studied in and of themselves while the latter approach emphasizes a contextual analysis of people's lives. Our contextualized biographical approach, which follows other examples in geography (Myers 1998; Alderman 2004; Alderman and Inwood 2016), is "less concerned with knowing a life per se than how those experiences can cast light on the wider social and cultural worlds that a life inhabits" (Hodder 2017, p. 453). By examining the biography of Johnson, opportunities exist to understand the broader structures of racial oppression that have dominated in the US and continue to structure the everyday lives of men and women in the US.

A biographical approach informed by CRT is often occupied with using primary sources to uncover previously unknown or under-appreciated people of color and their experiences. Yet, as in the case of a famous person such as Jack Johnson, a biographical analysis can also concern itself with drawing from published accounts, employing new theoretical frameworks to reread the biography, and relating these new readings to larger understandings of the historical geography of racism and racial resistance. Such biographical work involves creating webs of relevance within disciplinary communities such as geography that are largely unfamiliar with Johnson. Such an approach has long dominated in critical theory and

feminist methodologies and has been used to reevaluate the biographies and, in particular, the key turning point moments in the lives of a range of historical figures (e.g. Denzin 1989; Erne 1998; Gibson 1999; Aurell 2006).

### *Johnson vs. Jeffries as Flashpoint in US Race Relations*

As we argue in this paper, using Johnson's performance in the ring and a rereading of his larger public image—and how it was interpreted by white and black America—we illuminate the larger politics of controlling and injuring black bodies and reputations during the Jim Crow era. Critically, it is not our intent to reduce Jack Johnson's biography and the formation of his reputation to the victory over Jeffries and the public responses that surrounded that bout. Johnson's public persona as a black hero or villain did not begin nor did it end with "the Fight of the Century." Indeed, Johnson fought his last bout as heavyweight champion in Havana, Cuba, losing to Willard, while spending several years as a fugitive in exile from the US. He fled the country after a 1913 conviction under the Mann Act for transporting a white woman (prostitute and former girlfriend Belle Schreiber) across state lines for supposedly immoral purposes. With the defeat of the champion, many in the black public mourned and the white press celebrated, portraying the bout as a triumph of Willard's character over Johnson's skill. The 1910 match with Jeffries was not the totality of Johnson's career, but as we argue it played a major role in his emergence as one of the most famous and controversial African Americans of the early 20th century. The transformation of prizefighters into sports celebrities was a process that had begun in the 19th century (Gorn 1986), but it reached an unprecedented level in Nevada with the filming of the Johnson vs. Jeffries for movie theater distribution. And, no less important in our view, the bout served as an important flashpoint in the historical geography of US race relations. It is that reality which motivates our rereading of the fight and our use of a critical, contextualized biographical approach.

## BIOGRAPHY OF JOHNSON CONTEXTUALIZED

Leon Litwack (1998) describes the period in which Johnson lived and fought as the nadir of the African American experience in North America. In the wake of the US Civil War and with the restoration of the Southern plantation aristocracy, the freedoms that newly freed slaves enjoyed after the end of the war were rolled back as a resurgent white supremacy reasserted itself into the political and economic life of the nation during the Jim Crow era. The term "Jim Crow" refers to a racial caste-like system that began as early as 1877 with the end of Reconstruction and operated nationally but most violently in the southeastern US. While Jim Crow is often identified with rigid laws that marginalized and excluded African Americans, it actually represents a broad array of formal and informal social, economic, and political practices that segregated blacks and whites and justified rampant racism, intimidation, and violence toward African Americans (Woodward 1955; Litwack 1998).

The segregationist and discriminatory Jim Crow laws and practices that were enacted throughout the southeastern US created an American form of apartheid that had implications beyond the separation of the races. In particular, the ways the US continued to rely on subjugated black labor and the way those needs were translated broadly into the predominant system of racial apartheid are central to understanding the period in which Johnson fought. As W.E.B. Du Bois (1935, p. 5) explains, the exploitation of black labor is the "foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce." Following the end of the Civil War the relationships between Northern capitalist and the Southern plantation aristocracy appeared to sunder. However, throughout the history of the US, race, gender, sexuality, and class have been central to understanding the political and economic reproduction of the nation and this relationship rests foundationally upon the relations between black and white labor (Du Bois 1935). As Du Bois explains:

> The plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded, and which persisted to threaten free labor until it was partially overthrown in 1863. The resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over. Thus the majority of the world's laborers, by the insistence of white labor, became the basis of a system of industry which ruined democracy (Du Bois 1935, p. 30).

Key to understanding Du Bois' analysis is the way segregationist polices after the Civil War were advanced by an emergent coalition of labor and industrialists through a shared value system of white supremacist logics. Thus, and importantly, the segregationist policies underlying the Jim Crow era needed to be rearticulated through a variety of popular mediums in order to resonate with and reinforce the emerging racist order. This can be seen in everything from the explosive growth of black face minstrelsy to the use of racist advertising to sell everything from kitchen soap to chewing tobacco (Hale 1998).

Jack Johnson is important to understanding the racialized realities of the Jim Crow era for a number of reasons. First, he came of age during this period. Born in 1878 and raised in Galveston, Texas, by his parents who had once been enslaved, Johnson was a member of the first generation of African Americans born after the end of slavery and freedom. Newly freed slaves and those born outside of slavery were a visceral symbol of all that had gone wrong for southern whites at the end of the Civil War and in this sense Johnson was the embodiment of the end of the old racial order. David Oshinsky (1996, p. 14) explains that the freedoms enjoyed by African Americans in the wake of the Civil War and the southern defeat symbolized what could not be made right as long as black men and women could freely enjoy the spaces that had previously been the sole preserve of whites. Writing in the *New York Tribune* Whitelaw Reid observed, "However these men may have

regarded the Negro slave, they hated the Negro freeman. However kind they may have been to Negro property, they were virulently vindictive against a property that has escaped their control" (quoted in Oshinsky 1996, p. 15). Segregation—and its resultant racist configurations of power and privilege—were part of the solution to these realities. And in working through Johnson's life we can understand both how segregation came to control and constrain black life, but also how it could be resisted.

Perhaps more importantly, Johnson was a boxer, and boxing during that time was one of the most popular, if not *the most* popular, sporting events in the US. It is also important to note that boxing was illegal in many places during the turn of the 20th century America and the somewhat underground nature of professional prize fighting provided the space to carry out Johnson's famous interracial bouts when other sanctioned sports remained entirely segregated. This did not mean that boxing was somehow immune to and stood apart from the white supremacy of the day, which sought to appropriate Johnson's image and very body for its own purposes. Indeed, Johnson's life and the ways white society engaged with and tried to marginalize and control the fighter is indicative of the role of sport as spectacle and the specific historical role that boxing, as a mass consumerist enterprise, played in re-inscribing the emerging white supremacist racial order. This idea has currency in contemporary US society as we understand how sports, and in particular the media portrayals of black athletes, continue to reaffirm the significance of race and racism. The reputational politics of athletes and how they are marketed, exploited, and maligned by the popular press and the media have their roots in the growth of boxing and other sports at the turn of the 20th century. More sinisterly, however, Johnson's rise to fame is juxtaposed against another form of spectacle that predominated during the late 19th and early 20th century—lynching.

The exact number of lynchings will never be known. Brundage (1997, p. 4) reports that between 1880 and 1930 an estimated 3,220 blacks were lynched and lynchings were predominantly in the South. Critical to understanding lynching in the context of an emerging consumerist society, is a recognition of the great extent that lynching was a public event. In many cases, newspapers announced in advance the time and place of lynchings and in some cases railroads ran special excursion trains to ensure that city dwellers could make it to the lynching of African Americans outside of an urban context. It was not uncommon for schools and businesses to shut down in anticipation of the impending deathscape. As Litwack (2009) concludes, to kill the victim was not enough; the execution became public theater, a participatory ritual of torture and death, a voyeuristic spectacle prolonged as long as possible for the benefit of the crowd.

African Americans were lynched for many reasons, but sex was ostensibly at the heart of many of these spectacle killings. "Nearly a quarter of all lynchings were based on charges of sexual assault, but often an accusation of rape, or the simple act of knocking on a white woman's door, would suffice" (Westcott 2015, para. 6). While the protection of white women from the presumed sexual threat that black men posed was frequently invoked

as a reason, lynching also filled much broader desires on the part of white communities to maintain social and spatial order over African Americans and eliminate black assertion of rights and competition within economic, political, and social spheres (Payne 2007). This fact provides context to understand how dangerous Johnson's victories and sexual relationships were challenging to broader white supremacist control.

The unexpected victory of Johnson over Jeffries in Nevada (it was at least unexpected from the perspective of many whites) was a significant jolt to this public culture of watching and participating in the intimation, humiliation, and murdering of black Americans. The famous African American educator Benjamin Mays was fourteen at the time of the Johnson-Jeffries bout. He recalled years later the anxiety felt in South Carolina: "White men in my county could not take it [when Johnson defeated Jeffries]…. Negroes dared not discuss the outcome of this match in the presence of whites. In fact, Johnson's victory was hard on the white man's world…Jack Johnson committed two grave blunders as far as whites were concerned: He beat up a white man and he was socializing with a white woman—both deadly sins" (quoted in Gilmore 1976, p. 65).

Mays also reported that African Americans in his hometown of Greenwood, South Carolina, were beaten up in the aftermath of the Johnson victory, a scene that repeated in many places inside and outside the South (Reimann 2017). In fact, Johnson's successful battle against white supremacy within the ring, allowed him to defy and delegitimize efforts to cast him as a mentally and physically inferior scoundrel, led to a broader geography of racial violence between celebrating and defiant blacks and whites angered by what they saw as a strike against the Jim Crow status quo. While African Americans attacked whites in some instances, most of the violence repeated the nation's established pattern of whites mobbing and injuring blacks and much of this racial terrorism was indiscriminate and targeted any and all black citizens who got in the way as whites sought to assert their racial dominance even if Jeffries could not (Gilmore 1975).

Johnson is a pivotal figure in the emerging racial order of early 20th century American society, not just because he vanquished a white fighter so handily but also because he is emblematic of a larger historical geography of racial conflict. His victory, when contextualized within images of Jim Crow black villainy and inferiority, demonstrated something larger than a single boxing match. Johnson exposed in raw form the potential power of black resistance and simultaneously the limits of this defiance in the face of growing Jim Crow racism and white control. Johnson could dispatch Jeffries with ease, but it was much more difficult for the millions of African Americans living under the everyday threat of racial terrorism and lynching to conquer their white detractors. Johnson's transgressions inside and outside the ring continued to inspire subjugated blacks and emboldened white intransigency. Many cities, especially in the South, prohibited the showing of the filmed Johnson-Jeffries fight in motion picture theaters (e.g., if not to prevent further racial riots then to "spare the white race the humiliation of seeing its high-esteemed champion knocked out in vivid

repetition") (Gilmore 1975, p. 75). Suppression of the Johnson fight film was also part of an effort to control the fighter's following and popularity, not providing an alternative to the decidedly non-heroic image that was projected in the pages of white-control newspapers. As we discuss in the next section, Johnson's struggle against white supremacy, like all African Americans, was clearly a bodily one, but one must also recognize the racialized reputational politics that he and many other black Americans confronted and sought to reclaim and redefine.

## REPUTATIONAL POLITICS

The idea of "reputational politics" is central to understanding the racially charged and contradictory way that Jack Johnson came to be seen as a hero by many blacks and as a villain to much of white America. Reputational politics is a term and analytical framework developed in sociology by Fine (2001, 2012) and applied within geography by Leib (2004), Post (2009), and Alderman (2002). Reputation, in the words of Fine (2001, pp. 2-3) is "a socially recognized persona…not the opinion that one individual forms of another; rather, it is a shared established image." The concept of reputational politics suggests that a public reputation is not simply intrinsic to a person and his or her achievements. Rather, reputations are shaped by a larger community of social actors, groups, and organizations who operate as "reputational entrepreneurs." These entrepreneurs trade in what is the social and symbolic capital of reputations by claiming, controlling, defending, or denouncing the cultural legitimacy or following of a public figure, thus influencing the lines of action and thought encouraged or discouraged by such reputational framings. These images can have a legacy or what Jansen (2007, p. 984) calls "reputational trajectories." Over time and space, a heroic or villainous reputation can take on the power of social fact and memory aid in placing events within a particular moral context. Fine (2001, p. 6) points to the public pedagogical power of historical reputations: "Images of public figures are used in an attempt to teach citizens how they should think about the issues that confront them." This was the case with Johnson as his black advocates and white detractors each used his public following to project larger positive and negative meanings on the reputation of all African Americans.

Two key ideas underlie a reputational politics framework and are crucial to analyzing the construction and contestation of Johnson's social persona. First, the construction of heroes and villains is driven by entrepreneurs working within broader systems of the political economy that help frame and legitimize the persona of public reputations. "Reputations are embedded in social relations," according to Fine (2001, p. 3), and are important tools in the everyday negotiation of identity, power, and rights within communities. Second, we suggest reputations are embedded within the socio-spatial dialectic and thus reflect and project historical and geographic systems of racial, ethnic, gender, and class prejudice and discrimination. The public image of a person influences and is influenced by the image and place of the social group—dominant or marginalized—to which he or she is associated.

The reputational politics approach prompts scholars to consider the work

that heroic and villainous reputations do in producing *and* challenging social boundaries, divisions, and hierarchies *and* the way these reputations can be capitalized on in a consumerist economy. A critical analysis of Jack Johnson is not possible without recognizing the reputational struggles that have long constrained, and continue to constrain, the African American struggle for civil rights, survivability, and mobility (social and spatial). People of color have historically had their wider social image or reputation demeaned, demonized, and controlled by a white supremacist power structure that has sought to restrict the aspirations of African Americans and others. However, the capacity of African Americans to make interventions in and contest how their social personae are framed publicly helps us to understand the complex and contested terrain of reputational politics.

*Jim Crow Era*

Foundational to a system of white supremacy, especially during the Jim Crow era was an oppressive rewriting of the public reputations of African Americans coupled with the tight control of their bodies, hopes, and movements within racist America. Accompanying Jim Crow was the creation and daily reproduction of racist stereotypes of African Americans. Hutchison (2012) encourages us to consider the powerful way that dominant white interests defined Johnson as the "other" by relying upon and advancing this readily available stock of stereotypical images. Indeed, in these efforts to fashion a public image of Jack Johnson, the white press characterized him using a variety of stereotypical framings that sought to portray Johnson as "dangerous" and "inferior" to Jeffries. These framings ranged from representing the essential mental and physical inferiority of Johnson as an African American to representing him pictorially and textually in terms of traditional sambo and coon caricatures. Finally, Johnson was also painted with the villainy of the "bad Negro" or what Hutchison calls the "bad buck" stereotype. The "bad Negro" or "bad buck" stereotype relied upon framing African American men as physically strong, violent, and over-sexed threats to society. In drawing attention to this racist trope the white press was channeling racist images that predominated in the US and were often used to justify the lynching of black men in the US South. The bad buck reputation was pervasive in the Jim Crow South and elicited visceral reactions from whites, fueling many of the public fears and demands to protect white womanhood and to seek revenge against people of color at the time. As public controversy and legal action intensified in 1912 over Johnson's interracial sexual relations, one saw growth in public calls, especially from the South, for the fighter to be lynched (Gilmore 1973).

Hutchison (2012) argues that Johnson's public image was heavily shaped and slanted by the era's white press, reflecting not only a desire to characterize and interpret him in selective ways, but the press coverage also served the wider social project of constructing whiteness as heroic and the moral norm. In this sense, Johnson's public persona and his arrogant manner could both play into white stereotypes, but could also stand in stark opposition to those same stereotypes. In using a reputational politics framework, we need to consider how the framing of Johnson's persona and that of all African Americans

as a group were manipulated and made to work to serve a white supremacist social system, thus illustrating how the production of heroes and villains as racial labels and categories was not simply a matter of language and perception but also integral to negotiating the socio-spatial, life and death material existence of people of color in America.

The vilifying of African American reputations during the Jim Crow era and throughout US history has surely been controlled by white dominant interests, but that control—as part of the process of racialization—has never been absolute or complete. This leads us to the second major theme underlying a reputational politics approach, namely that the reputations of individuals and their associated groups are always open to competing constructions and interpretations. According to Fine (1996, p. 1166), "Reputations are not inevitable; they may be changed or contested," and the active process of building reputations is "caught up in battles between attackers and defenders." Indeed, claiming control of the reputation-building process can serve as the basis of resisting and redefining imposed personal and group identities and the inequalities that accompany them. Accompanying the history of white control and marginalization of the public image and legitimacy of African Americans is also the story of the black struggle to define their social reputation in more favorable and emancipatory ways.

*Media Interpretation*

The reputational politics surrounding Jack Johnson proved to be an important arena for asserting the right of African Americans to belong not just in the professional boxing ring with a white man, but also within the wider society as a full-fledged human being not defined by racist stereotypes. Teresa (2015) analyzes for example the important role that America's black press played in offering a counterpoint to the tearing down of Johnson's reputation by the white press. She finds that the primary goal of black newspapers, acting as "reputational entrepreneurs," was to "frame Johnson's victory [over Jeffries] in terms of racial pride while undermining the negative publicity the outspoken boxer received in the mainstream [white] press" (Teresa 2015, p. 28). In contrast to the grotesque caricatures of Johnson in the white press as a big lipped and ignorant stereotype, photographs in black newspapers showed the champion as either a flexing and fearsome fighter or a well-dressed and socially mobile gentleman (Teresa 2015). Perhaps nowhere were these tropes more evident than in the aftermath of the defeat of Jeffries. The *San Francisco Call*, the city's prevailing white newspaper at the time, noted that Johnson was a "clever Negro" who baffled Jeffries. The paper went on to note that Johnson, who is described as the "black object," "sprang catlike and glided snake like" in pummeling Johnson (Edgren 1910, p. 15). This description ties into a long history of dehumanizing African Americans and attributing African American athletes with superhuman attributes.

We would be mistaken to reduce the reputational struggle over Jack Johnson to a dualism between a hero-creating black community and a vilifying white society. Reputational politics, in general, are characterized by a complex convergence of different ideological positions and discursive

rivalries that must be accounted for. In reality, Johnson had a controversial relationship with the black press and major black leaders at the time. According to Teresa (2015, p. 38), "the black press sought to offer support to [black] individuals who could represent the best of the race and debunk negative stereotypes." Johnson had this reputational support when he embodied the "ideal early twentieth century black citizen who was economically powerful and socially mobile enough to challenge the prevailing racial assumptions of white America" (Teresa 2015, p. 39). However, some black newspaper journalists and editors began distancing themselves from Johnson as "his personal vices and unabashed arrogance clashed with other ideals of the black community during this period—an insistence on dignity, morality, and temperance" (Teresa 2015, p. 39).

*Reactions to Flaunting Social Norms*

In particular, Johnson's transgression of the sexual color line drew intense public attention and criticism. Johnson's biographers note that white women were a mainstay in his personal entourages and that he had numerous casual sexual affairs and long-term relationships with white women, including a marriage to Brooklyn socialite Etta Terry Duryea (Farr 1964; Gilmore 1973). Within a month of Duryea's suicide and funeral in 1912, Johnson was seen arm in arm with another white female companion, Lucille Cameron (Burns et al. 2005). The heavyweight champion's symbolic value to the black community became especially damaged after being found guilty of violating the Mann Act, which was created ostensibly to make sex trafficking a federal crime but was applied in practice rather ambiguously and prejudicially. It was a dubious conviction motivated by the white establishments' outrage over Johnson's inter-racial relationships. His reputation among some African Americans underwent revision out of fear of all blacks being targeted by whites inflamed by Johnson's lifestyle if not on sheer moral grounds. *The Washington Bee*, which had previously praised Johnson as a "gentleman and a man," later proclaimed "The colored people of this country are not responsible for the acts of Jack Johnson….Jack Johnson is not regarded as a hero, but a pariah among respectable colored men and women" (quoted in Teresa 2015, p. 30). Of course, one did not see this condemnation across the board. The *Topeka Plains Dealer*, a Kansas African American newspaper, noted that Johnson was the target of whites "framing up" charges against him while also taking issue with the inconsistent way that inter-racial relationships were treated in America. Specifically, the paper argued that if government officials and the white press prosecute Johnson, then they should address the wrongful acts committed against black women by white men.

Johnson was the target of the ire of the famous Booker T. Washington, whose teachings about racial uplift through accommodation, frugality, and industriousness appeared to collide with the fighter's indulgent lifestyle and the forthright way he questioned and challenged white social conventions. Gilmore (1975) also suggests that Washington may have been jealous of the great attention that Johnson was receiving at the time. He criticized African Americans for betting so heavily

on Johnson in the bout with Jeffries (Gilmore 1975). One of Washington's biographers (Norrell 2009, p. 413) notes that Johnson represented a "public relations nightmare" for the famed Tuskegee leader, "a black man who threatened white domination in both his physical and sexual prowess." Washington publicly denounced Johnson during his Mann Act trial, pointing to the great injury that the fighter was doing to the black race. In a 1912 speech before the Detroit YMCA Washington used the controversy to reaffirm his belief that "men should be educated along mental and spiritual lines in connection with their physical education" (quoted in Gilmore 1973, p.25). Washington also lands a rather stinging hit to Johnson's reputation as hero when he says: "A man with muscle minus brains is a useless creature," which also tragically echoes some of the white supremacist stereotypes that depicted black men as brutish and mentally inferior (quoted in Gilmore 1975, p.102). Washington, like others within the African American community, understood and projected Johnson's public image through a certain ideological, political prism of blacks winning and earning respectability in the eyes of white America. While this ideology was clearly more progressive and socially just than what Jim Crow offered black Americans, certain segments of the black establishment sought nevertheless to control Johnson's reputation and popular following for their own personal ends as well as part of (re)defining the social and spatial place of African Americans within US society.

*Individual Agency*

While it is true that reputation can have a social life of its own beyond the public figure in question, especially once that figures dies, it is important to recognize the agency that the individual hero or villain can exert within their own reputational politics since they are cognizant of and react to the larger social and spatial system within which their achievements are interpreted publicly. If one stopped investigating Johnson's reputational politics with simply discussing how the wider white and black communities depicted him, then one would run the risk of viewing Johnson as simply a pawn rather than as a conscious social and geographic agent. In reality, Johnson manipulated his own public image in controversial ways for the purposes of racial resistance and fulfilling his own personal desires and needs. He did this undeterred by dominant white interests who sought to depict him, culturally and legally, as a villain and later in defiance when segments of his own black community treated him with ambivalence if not rejection.

While black villainy is a destructive force within society, it is also necessary to recognize its potential to be productive, and a basis for anti-racist politics, when appropriated by African Americans. There is a long history in African American folklore of celebrating the black outlaw who freely moves about and boldly violates moral and legal norms. It is a social persona and reputational framing dating back to the days of slave resistance to describe an African American who "adamantly refuses to accept the place given to blacks in American society, and who frequently challenges the outer perimeters of expected behavior" (Gilmore 1975, p. 12).

Importantly, rather than denying or seeking to mitigate his Jim Crow villainy, Johnson went to great pains to play the

part. He directly and fearlessly challenged the legitimacy of a racist social order and flaunted social conventions at the time by dating and marrying white women (Gilmore 1975). Point in fact he was quoted as saying: "I have the right to choose who my mate shall be without the dictations of any man" (Gilmore 1975, p. 14). Johnson's own reputation-building was not limited to simply taking a controversial stand against Jim Crow laws, but included the frequent pleasure he took in "aggravating and annoying whites" (Gilmore 1975, p. 14). In the integrated Chicago nightclub he owned, named Café de Champion, Johnson hung a large portrait of him embracing his white wife. He was also known to play the bass violin on the club's bandstand and sing "I Love My Wife." Especially interesting was how Jack Johnson took possession of and culturally weaponized the very stereotypical depictions that had for so long been used to constrain black expression and identity. "Prior to the Jeffries fight, for example, he mugged for newsreel cameras by conspicuously bulging his eyes and grinning unnaturally in the manner of minstrel performer" (Hutchison 2012, p. 225). According to Gilmore (1975, p. 14), "most daring and potentially explosive act came during his sparring sessions when he played on the innermost fears of white men and the fantasies of white women by wrapping his penis in gauze bandages, enhancing its size for all onlookers, and strolled around the ring affecting the awe and admiration of all." Ostentatious displays of wealth and extravagant parties were other important ways of not only embellishing his hedonistic reputation, but also irritating a white supremacist society that kept many African Americans poor and conservative. It would be easy to dismiss or de-value Johnson's antics as serving to reinforce white America's stereotypes (see Hutchison 2012), but to do so is to lose sight of the spaces of resistance that are created when a black man takes control of the politics of constructing his own public image out of the hands of his white oppressors and manipulates and benefits from the process for his own material reproduction.

In characterizing the anti-racist politics that Johnson carried out by framing his own reputational following in ways that many whites and some blacks would find contemptuous, it is important to note that the black champion never represented himself as a role model or as a civil rights crusader. However, as Alderman and Inwood (2016) discuss in the context of Wendell Scott, another African American sports figure who competed during the Jim Crow era, political practice need not be restricted to formal protest, commentary, or campaigns. The very act of surviving and, in the case of Johnson thriving, in the face of rampant racism was a form of everyday anti-racism work. Important to Johnson's constructed public persona, as well as Scott's, was the important way that each refused to show fear to an incredibly hostile white world.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have introduced and begun interpreting the highly racially charged career and life story of African American heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson, using a historically and geographically situated and contextualized reading of his biography and public persona to understand what his 1910 victory over Jim Jeffries symbolized

to Jim Crow America. As we suggest, the complex racialized ways in which Johnson was constructed as both heroic and villainous point to a broader black reputational politics that, on one hand, undergirded white supremacy's segregation, disenfranchisement and even murder of people of color and, on the other hand, carried the seeds of anti-racism resistance. Johnson's public image—what Fine (2001) would term a "difficult reputation" because of the controversy and discursive rivalries that surrounded it—exposes the constraints that whites and blacks imposed upon what constituted the proper behavior and place of African Americans in early 20th century US society. While Johnson's public image was claimed and rewritten by many for progressive and reactionary reasons, in the end the fighter crafted his own resistant social persona. He formed this persona by physically beating white opponents in the ring, mocking white supremacist sexual conventions, refusing to defer to conservative black political and social expectations, and by appropriating and playing upon the very stereotypical reputational framings used against black Americans for many years.

Analyzing Johnson's athletic practice in the ring and the reputational politics within which he engaged and contributed to prompt us to problematize some of our dominant conceptions of black resistance within geography. It would take over twenty years before America would allow another black man to fight for the world heavyweight title and that person, Joe Louis, offered a decidedly less controversial public image. Other black fighters have followed in Johnson's footsteps and used their celebrity to challenge the white-dominated status quo—perhaps most notably Muhammad Ali, who frequently invoked the memory of Johnson when facing his own struggles to define who he was and what he stood for politically and racially (Ali and Durham 1975). The issue of athletes as political actors begs us to realize that the practices of celebrity athletes and the impact of these practices and their reputations cannot necessarily be made analogous to the praxis and social persona of traditional political leaders and activists.

Thus, a critical reading of Johnson and the social-spatial environment within which he fought and lived allows us to expand scholarly understandings and workings of race in the US and provides an important intervention into uncovering the making of contemporary white supremacy. We emphasize the contemporary relevance of Johnson. Although it has been over 100 years since his vanquishing of Jeffries, African American men (as well as women) remain mired in struggles to recover and redefine their public identities and reputations. Indeed, undergirding much of the recent, highly publicized instances of police violence against people of color is a history and culture of reputational politics and stereotypical assumptions that is part of rather than apart from the racist practices of injuring black bodies and controlling their movements. Our own current US President, Donald Trump, has engaged in his own "racialized reputational politics" of depicting black communities as being in "the worst shape ever" (Jacobson 2016) and referring to Haiti and African nations as "shitholes" (Alderman 2018). These are not mere labels and homilies, but part of the larger historical and continuing geography of white supremacy.

In the contemporary, Johnson's reputation continues to be a dynamic and

contested terrain. The famous heavyweight provides white America a way of talking about and even condemning racism in the past while not fully coming to terms with the inequalities that plague the present. Indeed, over the past several years, Johnson's legacy has undergone a positive and sympathetic re-appraisal by historians, politicians, and the broader public, culminating in the PBS documentary *Unforgivable Blackness* (Burns et al. 2005) and the depiction of the fighter as a global as well as national rebel icon (Runstedtler 2013). In 2009, US Senator John McCain and US Representative Peter King unsuccessfully urged then-President Barack Obama to issue a posthumous presidential pardon to Johnson for his 1913 conviction under the Mann Act. Earlier requests for a pardon of Johnson had failed in 2004 and 2008 (Associated Press 2009).

Ironically, it would be US President Donald Trump who would sign Johnson's pardon, responding to a request from Hollywood actor and boxing enthusiast Sylvester Stallone. The pardon was portrayed as an act of racial justice, but it more likely represented President Trump's fixation with one-upping the Obama administration. Indeed, during his remarks at the pardon ceremony on May 24, 2018, Trump highlighted President Obama's refusal to grant clemency to Johnson and how much that decision was "disappointing for a lot of people" (British Broadcasting Corporation 2018). While legal and symbolic justice may have been done to Johnson's legacy through Trump's pardon, his reputation was nonetheless appropriated and controlled in service of a white social order that otherwise would not champion the rights of African Americans. Importantly, missing from much of the recent news coverage of the pardon and Johnson's unjust conviction were discussions of the resistant agency that Johnson exercised in trying to define his reputation and life on his own terms and in the face of rampant Jim Crow racism. Lost is a moment to understand the full scale of African American humanity, dignity, and defiance that is so critical to recovering what McKittrick (2011) calls a "black sense of place."

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DR. DEREK H. ALDERMAN (dalderma@utk.edu, @mlkstreet) is a Professor of Geography at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee, 37996 and Past President (2017–18) of the American Association of Geographers. His work focuses on race, social justice, popular culture, and the historical and contemporary experiences of African Americans.

DR. JOSHUA INWOOD (jfi6@psu.edu, @joshgeog) is an Associate Professor of Geography and a Senior Research Associate at the Rock Ethics Institute at the Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pennsylvania, 16802. His work is focused on critical race theory, civil rights and the US South.

DR. JAMES A. TYNER (jtyner@kent.edu, @Tynergeography) is a Professor of Geography at Kent State University and a Fellow of the American Association of Geographers. The author of seventeen books and numerous articles, his research interests include population, political geography and political economy.