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FROM PRISON YARD TO FIELD OF PLAY: DOCUMENTARY HISTORIES OF RACE AND MOVEMENT IN FILM, TELEVISION AND NEW MEDIA

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

FILM AND DIGITAL MEDIA

by

Alexander William McKie Johnston

December 2017

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Tyrus Miller
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2017

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ABSTRACT

**FROM PRISON YARD TO FIELD OF PLAY:
DOCUMENTARY HISTORIES OF RACE AND MOVEMENT IN FILM, TELEVISION AND NEW MEDIA**

Alexander William McKie Johnston

"From Prison Yard to Field of Play: Documentary Histories of Race and Movement in Film, Television and New Media" is a hybrid theory/practice dissertation examining representations of race and history in two distinct but overlapping social spheres in which racial identity is perpetually and prominently being constructed and contested: prisons and professional athletics. It consists of the following components: a pair of written chapters, exploring documentary and commercial media depictions of the boxer Muhammad Ali and the role of the GIF format in the contemporary sports media landscape; a cycle of GIFs depicting Ali; and two short experimental documentaries dealing with two events in American carceral history. Using this diverse array of approaches and objects, I argue that the form and content of narratively determined histories of race and social struggle are often inadequate for addressing questions of racial and political identity and representation in a way that is contingent, non-teleological and non-essentializing. Instead, I advocate for non-narrative scholarly and creative approaches to, and media representations of, histories of race, which emerge from a study of archival moving images, and the historical gestures, movements, and performances they depict. My critique is situated in an analysis of popular historical narratives, as expressed through the form of the

documentary film, as well as a broader assessment of the circulation of essentializing racial narratives in the contemporary online media sphere. Overall, this dissertation contributes to and expands the field of historical documentary media production while critically considering the form, format and content of popular representations of race, gender and class, as articulated through sports media and carceral histories.

DEDICATION

To my great grandmother Sonya Gilman and my great grandfather Abraham Stopper. I never got to meet you, but through the stories of your lives I learned which side to be on, and who to throw stones at.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the help of so many fine and fierce individuals. In no particular order, my deepest gratitude goes out to the following: Fabiola Hanna, Reginald Moore, Esy “Fina” Casey, Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa, Ari and Sara Feldlock, Kelly Gallagher, Travis Wilkerson, Michael Berryhill, Chris Harris, Craig Baldwin, Brett Kashmere, Kenan Sharpe, Kendra Dority, Kelly Sears, Pete Limbrick, Patricia Alvarez Astacio, Jenny Horne, Samuael Topiary, Jasmine Lee Ehrardt, Kristin Miller, Derek Murray, David Collingsworth, Don Rothman, Archie Green, Anita Chang, Matt Edwards, Erica Gammill, Eroy Brown, Sean Burns, Shelley Stamp, Warren Sack, Melanie Godinho, Robert Valiente-Neighbours, Sam Green, Sharon Daniel and Gustavo Vazquez. Also, Chance the Rapper and Lee Fields and the Expressions for providing much needed rhythm on the darkest of writing days. “All We Got” makes everything a little less awful.

On the home (and home away from home) front: the good folks at Lulu Carpenter’s, (especially Jules, who always looks the other way when I bring in outside food) my endlessly patient and always kind in-laws, Lee and Chris Rutter, my lovely and long-suffering parents, (mom, I’m almost done!) my sister for listening to me and listening to me and listening to me, little P who I fight for, Dre for chillaxing (and being 50% responsible for P), and my Bubby Anne and Poppy Joe, whom I miss dearly, and thank everyday for many things, not least of which was making possible the completion of this dissertation.

Endless appreciation also goes to my brilliant dissertation committee: Irene Gustafson for her razor-sharp insights and genuine compassion, David Brundage for his grounding influence and for compelling me to grapple with just what it means to "practice history," Irene Lusztig for making me a messier and better filmmaker, (also, jam) and Larry Andrews for talking me through the B.S., and for challenging me to think more deeply as an artist. And of course, thanks to the taskmaster extraordinaire Jonathan Kahana. It hasn't always been easy, (though good tea and pastries helped) but I would not be the creative scholar or the critical practitioner that I am without your profoundly generous intellect, steadfast belief in my work, Minnesota Vikings metaphors, and insistence that I do my best, regardless of how long it takes.

And of course and always and above all else (feline edition): Roy and Luna, for reminding me that small and simple joys are the best kind. Braeburn apples of my eyes, the both of you.

And of course and always and above all else (human edition): my dear sweet Kit, for being patient and kind and intelligent and so very funny. You've got me back, now try not to get sick of me!

Introduction



Figures 1., 1.1. and 1.2. *Jack Johnson* (Jim Jacobs, 1970). Still capture from YouTube.

Jack Johnson's Cane Flip

I begin this dissertation with a moving image. It depicts the first African American heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, yet it shows Johnson outside the ring. It is from a newsreel or actuality film dating to the first decades of the twentieth century,[1] a medium shot of the boxer looking dapper in a light colored suit, the brim of his panama hat visible at the top edge of the frame. Johnson holds a walking stick in his right hand, and in one smooth action he leans into it, cocks his head seductively to the side while looking into the camera, gives the stick a little toss into his left hand while sliding his right hand down to its base, then, holding it from the bottom, he

[1] Dan Streible, e-mail message to author, November 5, 2017. I have been unable to discover the clip's exact date of production or original usage. In addition to my own research, I have consulted with boxing film scholar Dan Streible, who has written extensively on Johnson. Streible was also unable to identify the original source of the clip, in part because it dates to a period "just before newsreel services became more systematic." However, he speculates that it might have been filmed either during one of Johnson's court appearances on charges of violating the Mann Act, or in advance of his fight with Jess Willard in Havana, Cuba in April 1915.

swings it back to the ground and then upwards to rest on his shoulder, his head now cocked in the other direction. Above are some screengrabs of the shot.[2]

I first saw this clip approximately four years ago while making a short experimental video about Johnson, and then revisited it during an aborted attempt at writing one of my dissertation chapters about the boxer's moving image. It was included in a 1970 documentary made by Jim Jacobs entitled, simply, *Jack Johnson*.[3] However, I found the documentary (and the clip) while trawling YouTube for footage of Johnson. Amongst the many moving images I looked at depicting the boxer there was something about this image I found especially compelling.

But what about it was compelling to me? And was it only compelling to me? What did it convey? Why did this image seem significant? Did it illustrate some particular truth about Johnson, or history, or American culture and society? Was I just fetishizing the image's historical aesthetics, and/or Johnson himself? Or did I simply appreciate the style of his performance, the way he cocked his head and deftly swung his cane, almost as if dancing?

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[2] In order to fully engage with this moving image within the context of the ensuing analysis, it is necessary to view it in motion. This issue persists throughout this dissertation, as it does through a great deal of scholarship which focuses on the moving image. In an attempt to address this issue, I will regularly provide links to GIFs and video clips in the footnotes of the text-based chapters. Here is a link to Jack Johnson's cane flip: http://gph.is/2qXryI9

[3] Jacobs was also the director of the film *A.K.A. Cassius Clay*, and appears in William Greaves' documentary *The Fighters*, both of which figure prominently in my chapter on Muhammad Ali.



Figure 1.3. *A New Way in Knocking Them Out* (Alexander Johnston, 2013). Still capture from digital file.

The video I used the clip in, *A New Way in Knocking Them Out*,[4] laid heavy gaudy effects over archival footage of Johnson, accompanied by a mashup I produced of music from a clip featuring Johnson conducting a jazz band, and the instrumental version of the song "Nosetalgia," by the rapper Pusha T.[5] The idea was to re-present Johnson's archival performances in a way that made them simultaneously legible and novel to contemporary viewers, subverting the attitude of bemused condescension with which contemporary viewers often regard images of the past. This feeling of

[4] You can watch the video here: https://vimeo.com/90788443

[5] The misspelling of the title is an intentional play on words, the song consisting of Pusha T's reflections on his past life as a cocaine dealer.

condescension is rooted in the belief that, to quote Philip Rosen, "We now always know more than they did then."[6] My video sought to complicate this assumption.

The aborted dissertation chapter undertook a related intervention. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's theorization of cultural detritus and of images which "flash" up to form historical constellations, I argued that the moving image of Johnson's cane flip resonated with me because it echoed the style and performance of hip-hop culture from the 1990s. I used this as a jumping-off point for a de-coupling of Jack Johnson from his perceived heir (and in regards to Johnson's racial consciousness, his perceived superior) Muhammad Ali, and argued that a more apt and productive contemporary comparison for Johnson was the basketball player Allen Iverson. I was troubled by an outdated but still prevalent understanding[7] of Johnson as a kind of primitive and unenlightened Ali, and felt that one way to reframe this discourse would be to consider Johnson in other transhistorical contexts.

Both attempts to make sense (and use) of the image stalled out. However, the insights gained by working across theoretical and creative approaches also meant that

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[6] Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 226.

[7] Until the 2000s, the only comprehensive biography of Johnson was Randy Robert's, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson And The Era Of White Hopes* published in 1983. Roberts presented the boxer as an important racial icon, but one who, unlike Ali, lacked a developed racial consciousness or sense of racial solidarity. In more recent years, a number of works have attempted to push back at this categorization. These include Theresa Runstedtler's, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* and Geoffrey Ward's, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* which was adapted into a PBS documentary of the same name by Ken Burns.

neither attempt was a failure. Through this dual process, I developed the theory of engagement with historical moving images and the critique of dominant approaches to representing histories of race which undergird this dissertation. It broadened my understanding of what constitutes the evidentiary qualities of historical moving images, and compelled me to interpret what they depict as a kind of historical or archival performance, an act of preservation and communication. In Johnson's cane flip, I came to see a gestural disruption of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*.[8] There was a casual defiance in Johnson's gesture, or rather, his casualness marked his gesture as defiant. Coupled with his steady gaze into the camera, the gesture also produced a sense of embodied encounter with Johnson, turning a remote historical moment into something less remote, something alive, something that moves.

Through this process of theorizing and appropriating Johnson's cane flip, a new set of questions emerged. What kinds of histories can we tell, and what kinds of conversations about history can we have, through a consideration of movement, gesture and performance, and its inscription, reproduction, re-presentation and repetition as moving image? What would constitute evidence in a work of this kind, and how would it be interpreted and evaluated? How might such an approach enable

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[8] *Habitus* can be understood as a set of dispositions that correspond to, and make legible (through their embodied articulation), an individual's social status. They reflect how "structures of the social order" are inscribed "into bodies [. . .] *via moves and movements of the body, via [. . .] bodily poses and postures*." Bourdieu, "Physical Space, Social Space and Habitus," 14.

new understandings of excluded histories, histories of exclusion and histories of resistance to exclusion? What role, if any, do the differences between moving image forms and mediums (and new media formats) play in shaping and determining the political dimensions of a particular representational project? Finally, what role do popular narratives (and the narrative and rhetorical forms they deploy) play in maintaining and articulating hegemonic ideologies, and how can these ideologies be challenged or subverted? "From Prison Yard to Field of Play: Documentary Histories of Race and Movement in Film, Television, and New Media" constitutes my attempt to respond to these questions.

"Something to Say"

This dissertation examines representations of race and history in two distinct but overlapping social spheres in which racial identity is perpetually and prominently being constructed and contested: prisons and professional athletics. My analysis is constructed through multiple methodological approaches, including textual and formal media analysis of documentaries, television commercials and GIFs, a historical examination of representations and ideologies of race, class and gender in popular sports, and a historiographic reflection on the construction of narrative in the production of carceral histories. I argue that the form and content of narratively determined histories of race and social struggle are often inadequate for addressing

questions of racial and political identity and representation in a way that is contingent, non-teleological and non-essentializing. This critique is situated in an analysis of popular historical narratives, as expressed through the form of the documentary film. Accompanying this analysis is a broader assessment of the circulation of essentializing racial narratives in the contemporary online media sphere. These latter narratives are not about past historical events or actors *per se*, but reflect the accumulated history of hegemonic white capitalist patriarchy in the United States.

In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White explores the role of narrative as a constitutive form and structure in the creation of works of "history proper."[9] Central to this form and structure is the presence of a narrative conclusion, which, by offering the reader narrative closure, also offers a moral and ethical resolution. "The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand," White asserts, "for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama."[10] As such, "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats."[11]

Jill Godmilow identifies a similar deployment of narrative in the realm of the moving image, which she frames in terms of the relationship between the fiction film

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[9] According to White, the "modern historiographical establishment" classifies "history proper" as one of "three basic kinds of historical representation." (The other two types are the annal and the chronicle.) White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, 4.

[10] Ibid., 21.

[11] Ibid., 14.

and the documentary. While pointing to contemporary examples such as Barbara Kopple's *Made in America* and Ken Burns' *The Civil War* Godmilow argues that the appropriation of narrative tropes of the fiction film by documentaries is a longstanding practice, intended to counteract a perceived (and gendered) hierarchy in which the documentary is "a kind of poor step-sister to the fiction cinema of entertainment."[12] Echoing White, she writes of documentary:

> To survive [. . .] it has had to borrow all kinds of structural and strategic devices from fiction in order to achieve [. . .] "satisfying form," that is, to send the audience out of the theater (and/or off to bed) feeling complete, whole, and untroubled. One of those borrowed devices is narrative-which entails sentiment and closure. General audiences seek and expect closure, even from documentary films.[13]

Whereas White and Godmilow allow us to discern a propensity for closure and moral resolution shared by written history and the documentary, Jeffrey Skoller sheds light on the similarities of the practice of history and the practice of filmmaking as regards the partiality of its objects. He writes: "History creates narrative events out of the shattered fragments of what is left of an event after it has occurred. Similarly, films reconstruct time from a series of discrete shots, each an incomplete fragment

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[12] Godmilow and Shapiro, "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?," 84.

[13] Ibid.

severed from ongoing time."[14] Skoller's observation is part of his book's larger argument for a reconsideration of avant-garde film as not merely formalist in its concerns, but as also being engaged with questions of politics and history. Moreover, he argues for the particular capacity of many of avant-garde film's formal approaches (amongst others, the fragmentation of images, the complication of causality and the lack of a linear narrative) to engage with history's partiality and unrepresentability, to "take up the question that is at the center of postmodern historiographic concerns: the recognition that there are historical events that by their nature defy representability but nevertheless play an important part in the ways we understand the present."[15]

Issues of narrative and moral closure and of historical events that "defy representability" figure prominently throughout this dissertation. When considering documentary histories of race, class and gender–which are often histories of struggles for social justice, and against social exclusion and hegemonic violence–historical works which "send the audience out of the theater [. . .] feeling complete, whole, and untroubled," are not just representationally inadequate. Rather, they serve to maintain and perpetuate ongoing hegemonic structures of violence and inequality. Recognizing this dynamic, White argues that the "crucial problem from the perspective of political

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[14] Skoller, *Shadows Specters Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film*, xvi.

[15] Ibid.

struggle is [. . .] who has the power to make his story stick [. . .] enforced upon us by a combination of master narratives and instruments of control backed by weapons."[16]

As a media producer and media scholar interrogating and seeking to undermine these master narratives, I am compelled by a desire to create, understand, articulate and theorize forms of historical practice that eschew narrative closure, that operate within the borderlands of past and present, that recognize and make legible, as Michel de Certeau frames it, that the practice of "history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice [. . .] inhabited by the uncanniness that it seeks."[17] I believe these forms of historical practice provide a means through which to articulate a counter-hegemonic politics, and a space to cultivate, in the words of E.P. Thompson, a "historical consciousness" which can "assist one to understand the possibilities of transformation and the possibilities within people."[18] In order to construct a historical work of this nature, I draw on a range of theoretical and creative practices which consider questions of movement, gesture, performance, historical experience and its trans-temporal conveyance, non-linear representations of the past, and representations of counter-hegemonic, revolutionary and/or subaltern historical figures and movements. My practice originates however, at a point of methodological tension between post-structural philosophies of history and social history practices.

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[16] White, *The Content of the Form*, 167.

[17] deCerteau, *The Writing of History*, 36.

[18] Thompson, *Visions of History*, 16.

Where the former approaches the practice of history with the belief that, in the words of Rosen, "the only way to recover the elements excluded from conventional historiography is to reject its forms and terms," the latter uses traditional narrative forms to represent histories of class, race, and gender, and of oppressed or marginalized peoples.[19]

"From Prison Yard to Field of Play" attempts to integrate aspects of three overlapping forms, methods and/or domains of historical work. The first two consist of established sub-disciplines of history and media studies, and the third reflects my own theoretical contribution (drawing on a range of conceptual frameworks) to the realm of historical practice and representation. They are as follows: 1) Historical projects whose primary objects of study and/or medium of expression are moving images. This constitutes a wide range of work including written texts of film history and theory, historical documentaries and filmed narrative and non-narrative historical performances and representations. 2) Practices of new social history, a movement of historians of the Left, that arose to prominence with the 1963 publication of Thompson's *The Makings of the English Working Class*. New social history (also known as social history) eschews the dominant "great man" approach to history, and instead takes as its subject "those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past," such as women, LGBT and queer communities, people of color and poor and working-

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[19] Rosen, *Change Mummified*, xv.

class communities.[20] Works of new social history traditionally emphasize the individual and collective agency of their subjects, specifically the gestures and actions that can be interpreted as distinct from, and in opposition to, dominant social and cultural paradigms, and the groups who possess and maintain power through them. (3) A historical practice that draws on and expands the first two, possessing a reconfigured taxonomy, linguistic and perceptual framework, and methodology. It takes as its primary evidential objects representations of human bodies in (and of) motion, privileging the movement and gesture of these bodies over hegemonic narratives which seek to incorporate them into a particular ideological project. Enlisting interpretive frameworks from a range of thinkers (such as Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, Jaimie Baron's concept of "intentional disparity" and "temporal disparity" between archival images and documentaries, Hito Steyerl's formulation of "poor images," performance studies scholar Harvey Young's theory of "embodied black experience," and Walter Benjamin's concept of the historical image, which, like a film screen in a darkened theater, "flashes up" to form a trans-temporal constellation), this practice seeks to respond to some of the potential limitations of new social history practices that historian Joan Wallach Scott identifies in her essay "The Evidence of Experience." These include the naturalizing of difference, the foundationalist authority ascribed to evidence, particularly the evidence of

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[20] Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," 776.

"experience," and an over-emphasis on historical inclusion and visibility as the primary goal of a social historical practice. Using the science-fiction writer Samuel Delany's description of his first experience in a bathhouse as a jumping-off point, Scott writes, "Making the movement visible breaks the silence about it, challenges prevailing notions, and opens new possibilities for everyone." However, she goes on to argue that categories of difference in works such as these "appear as nonetheless ahistorical" as "so many fixed entities being played out over time, but not themselves historicized."[21]

Following Scott, I expand upon the crucial step of "making the movement visible" by attempting to identify and historicize the categories, events and discourses that constitute the struggle over defining what Bourdieu terms "the legitimate body and the legitimate use of the body."[22] Jennifer Gonzalez characterizes a culture's *habitus* as possessing a degree of "permanence against changes made by individuals" in defining the "categories, modes of accepted behavior and systems of interaction possible in a given social context."[23] Conversely, Harvey Young articulates a notion of "black habitus," an embodied black experience he describes as "a repetition with a difference," whereby "select individuals have employed expressive forms to relay their stories and life lessons to largely unimagined future audiences."[24] In arguing for

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[21] Ibid., 774, 777-778.

[22] Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class," 826.

[23] Gonzalez, "Electronic Habitus: Agit-prop in an Imaginary World," 125.

[24] Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 5,6.

the fluidity of social categories of difference, I agree with Young's assessment about the possibility, however rare, for individual transformation of a culture's *habitus*. Exploring this possibility for transformation is important to my critical project in that I am interested in examples of historical rupture and change, in addition to the accumulation of history in the "moves and movements of the body."

"From Prison Yard to Field of Play" also contemplates and maps out the capacity of visualized historical gestures and movements to destabilize a default interpretive mode of linear temporality and causality in relation to historical pasts. Describing their use in avant-garde film practices, Skoller argues for the ability of historical moving images to produce "an awareness of other temporalities in which linear chronologies are called into question in favor of other temporal structures such as simultaneity and virtuality."[25] I believe this capacity is due, in part, to a transmissive property of embodied movement and gesture to convey some physical sense of historical experience to a viewer, heightened perhaps by its curation, manipulation and presentation as moving image. In his seminal essay "First Principles of Documentary," John Grierson reflects on this quality of the medium, evoking its capacity to produce a sort of filmic form of a Brechtian *gestus*: "Spontaneous gesture has a special value on the screen. Cinema has a sensational capacity for enhancing the movement which tradition has formed or time worn smooth. Its arbitrary rectangle

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[25] Skoller, *Shadows Specters Shards*, xvi.

specially reveals movement; it gives it maximum pattern in space and time."[26] I can locate my own embodied response to this "enhancement" in the small appreciative dip of my head which mirrors the downward swoop and upward arc of Johnson's cane, or in my constricting throat and clammy hands when watching television reporter John Johnson reckon with the bloody retaking of Attica prison, as he stands, hyperventilating, in front of the facility. To borrow the words of basketball great Bill Russell when describing fellow great Julius "Dr. J" Erving: "The form inspires wonder, and the movement has something to say."[27]

While I use the Russell quote here to describe the transmissive power and political potential of the moving image, its original context and intended subject also reflect this study's focus on the realm of professional sports and sports media. On a theoretical level, this focus can be traced in part, to sports as a site of explicit enactment and contestation of Bourdieu's "legitimate body" and its "legitimate uses." Sports is a place where human bodies are trained and disciplined to move and act in extremely precise formulations, not only intended to maximize performance but also in accordance with certain moral and ideological beliefs. On a concrete and historical level, my focus on the domain of sports is a product of its outsized and highly visible

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[26] Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," 147.

[27] Russell, *Second Wind*, 98. The "wonder" that Russell describes was in reaction to Erving's famed athleticism, fluidity and creativity as a player. The "something to say" refers to Erving's contribution to the stylistic evolution of the game, and the symbolic conflation of these changes with an ideology and aesthetic of black pride and power.

role as a place where racial identity and representation is constituted, contested and spectacularized, from Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali to Colin Kaepernick.[28]

Prisons too, as institutions of state power and social control, play a similarly prominent role in articulating and representing racial identity, here through the criminalization and containment of black and brown bodies. As scholars such as Robert Perkinson and Michelle Alexander have shown, the modern criminal justice system is just the latest articulation of an entrenched system of white supremacy. It is, to quote the title of Alexander's 2010 book, the "New Jim Crow," whose roots Perkinson traces to the form and ideology of the southern slave plantation and the proto-police forces known as slave patrols.

Unlike the realm of sports however, which exalts and spectacularizes images of raced and gendered bodies, prisons operate, in the words of Foucault, as "place[s] of darkness [. . .] which the citizen's eye"[29] cannot see. Unlike in sports, racial identity and difference is here constructed through the containment and exclusion of non-white bodies, whereby the attempt to make these "illegitimate" bodies invisible ultimately becomes the lens through which they are visualized and represented. The

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[28] Colin Kaepernick is a former NFL quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. He was blackballed by the NFL beginning in the 2017-2018 season, due to "taking a knee" during the performance of "The Star Spangled Banner." Kaepernick was drawing attention to unpunished killings by police of black men and women, but his symbolic action spawned a broader protest movement calling for racial justice and harmony, in explicit opposition to the racism and xenophobia articulated by President Donald Trump.

[29] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 115.

tension between the hypervisibility of athletic bodies in motion and the invisible visibility of black and brown carceral bodies contained, and the prominent role both play in historical and contemporary formulations of racial identity and difference in American culture and society, are central to their inclusion and juxtaposition in this dissertation.

Constituent Elements

"From Prison Yard to Field of Play" consists of five chapters. The first two chapters are works of written scholarship. They draw on contemporary discourses in history, literary analysis, cultural and critical race studies, sociology and communications, and film, media, format and documentary studies, to consider hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives and forms within sports media. These are followed by a third interstitial chapter, a cycle of short looping animations that creatively explore the theories, subjects and objects of the two text-based chapters. The final two visual chapters of the dissertation, consist of a pair of single-channel experimental documentaries, examining two events in American carceral history.

The first written chapter, "Tyranny of the Loop: Rhetoric and Representation in the Sports GIF," examines the interplay of ideology, form and rhetoric in the Graphics Interchange Format, known by its acronym, GIF. Through the identification of three types of sports GIFs–the "spectacle GIF," "process GIF," and "*détourn* GIF"–

I explore the racially coded masculinist narratives which dominate contemporary online sports discourses, but also highlight the progressive and anti-capitalist uses of the format. I argue that the spectacle GIF and process GIF reflect competing dominant ideological and rhetorical representational modes in online sports media: the former being traditionalist, politically conservative, narratively determined and essentializing in its representation of racial difference and gender norms; the latter being politically liberal, quantitatively focused and non-essentialist in its representation of racial identity and gender norms. *Détourn* GIFs represent an alternate domain of online sports discourse that is arguably counter-hegemonic, anti-establishment and embraces an ironic rhetorical mode. This textual and structural analysis is complemented by a formal and historical one. I consider the long history of professional sports as a site for the spectacularization and exploitation of black bodies. I also trace the history of the GIF, theorize its status as a looping medium and position the format as an example of what Hito Steyerl terms "poor images," which embody "the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism."[30]

As both a central object in online sports discourses and as a format and medium with its own unique history apart from these discourses, an adequate theorization of the sports GIF requires an interdisciplinary approach. For instance, the bulk of contemporary scholarship on online sports media is situated in the sociology

[30] Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image."

and communications fields, and does little in the way of formal/format analysis. Conversely, theoretical engagement with the formal elements of the GIF has mostly occurred in the fields of media and software studies and in art history, and until recently, was often focused on the medium's use in fine arts contexts. To that end, "Tyranny of the Loop" draws on methods of structural analysis practiced by sociology and communications scholars such as Tony Bennet and Ray Gamache, approaches to formal analysis by art and media scholars such as Steyerl, and work by thinkers in a range of other disciplines, including documentary and film studies, history and critical race studies. For instance, I update Gamache's use of Bennet's concept of assemblage to describe the domain of sports media by considering the increasingly blurred relationship between media producer and media consumer in the online social media landscape. I then expand upon Steyerl's "poor images," by framing them (in the form of sports GIFs) as negotiated objects between capital and the commons within the domain of the sports media assemblage. This interdisciplinary approach results in a fuller theorization of the sports GIF, its cultural significance, formal elements and conditions of production and dissemination.

My focus shifts from a media format to a media figure in the second written chapter, "'What You Want Me to Be': Representing Muhammad Ali, 1970 to the Present." In this chapter, I survey the robust canon of documentaries and commercials featuring the boxer Muhammad Ali, ranging from William Greaves' 1971 film *The Fighters*, to a 1985 television advertisement for a midwestern electronics chain, to

Bill Siegel's 2013 documentary, *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*. Through a close textual analysis of selected works, I make legible, historicize and complicate shifting hegemonic narratives about Ali, focusing especially on the conflation (beginning in the mid-1990s) of Ali's experiences with a grand narrative of American exceptionalism and the perceived triumph of liberal incrementalism in struggles for civil rights and social justice. At the same time, I theorize the radical potential of archival moving images that depict Ali. I argue that the affect and politics of Ali's on-screen performances undermine dominant liberal narratives about the boxer, and thus "resist" full incorporation into most contemporary documentary works. I conclude the chapter by calling for counter-hegemonic representational approaches to documentaries about Ali which eschew an overarching biographical narrative that attempts to reconcile different periods in the boxer's life, and his conflicting politics during these periods. I argue that future documentary works should instead focus on Ali's formally and politically radical performances depicted in archival moving images of Ali from the 1960s and 1970s.

Both "Tyranny of the Loop" and "What You Want Me to Be" are works of text-based scholarship. However, in my exaltation of *détourn* GIFs, and my call for new approaches to representing Ali, these chapters also reflect a critical engagement with these subjects from the point of view of a media producer. In a sense, they serve as a personal call to action to produce media that addresses my scholarly critiques. The interstitial chapter "Strange and Curious" is a direct response to this call to

action. It consists of a series of four GIFs that bracket, collage and amplify fragments of Ali footage, subverting and re-presenting mass media depictions of the boxer. Each GIF constitutes a form of found Brechtian *gestus*, an exaggerated performance which highlights the social meaning and structure of movement, its *habitus*. In this case, the GIFs show Ali's subversion of dominant media forms and his embodied resistance to dominant structures of white supremacy.

The chapter takes its name from broadcaster Howard Cosell's description of Ali as a "strange and curious" man.[31] It is a description that would likely baffle a contemporary audience accustomed to hagiographic representations of Ali-as-American-saint. As such, these strange and curious looping images constitute a cycle of *détourn* GIFs, undermining hegemonic narratives about the boxer. In "What You Want Me to Be," I quote Gerald Early's observation that a part of Ali's radical brilliance as a performer was that he "offered the public the contradictory pleasure of having to take him seriously while not having to take him seriously."[32] By presenting images of an odd and unserious Ali I am inviting further consideration of this dynamic, which I argue played a central role in the boxer's success in disseminating revolutionary ideas via mainstream media outlets.

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[31] From the broader context of his statement, as well as the cadence and intonation of his speech, Cosell seems to be using the word "curious" synonymously with "strange," as a way of emphasizing Ali's oddness and eccentricity. However, it is possible that he was describing Ali's curiosity in the sense of the boxer's interestedness.

[32] Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, xvi.

Chapters 4 and 5 of "From Prison Yard to Field of Play" constitute a diptych of experimental documentaries interrogating a pair of tragic events in the history of the American prison system. In "A Costly Lesson" I take up the challenge of visually representing a historical event whose scant archive is mostly devoid of images, the death by suffocation of eight African American convicts on a Texas prison plantation in the summer of 1913. Twelve prisoners were placed in a "dark cell"[33] as punishment for their participation in a work slow down to protest labor conditions and were left overnight. When guards went to release them the next morning, eight had been asphyxiated by foul air. The killing of the prisoners received national news coverage, but media attention rapidly subsided with the quick exoneration of the guards responsible, and subsequent historical study of the incident has been minimal.

"A Costly Lesson" constitutes the first sustained research on and representation of the incident at Harlem Farm. Little work has been done on the event, and the only other recent account of what happened is a brief description in Robert Perkinson's 2010 history of the Texas prison system *Texas Tough*.[34] My film foregrounds and interrogates the event's archival absence while also exploring the continuing effects of this absence. This is most explicitly articulated by the film's

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[33] The "dark cell" was a solid 9x7x7 wooden box, with four one inch holes for ventilation. The punishment technique was introduced during a period of reform in the Texas prisons, and was considered a humane alternative to the recently outlawed bullwhip and bat.

[34] It is from Perkinson's book that I first learned of the incident.

repetition of the refrain “They couldn’t breathe,” connecting the events of 1913 to the 2014 death by strangulation of Eric Garner.[35] Additionally, the film is both a work of historiographic self-refection and a memorial for forgotten (though not anonymous) victims of state violence and white supremacy. It operates as a meditation on the difficulties of doing historical work which seeks to visualize neglected and suppressed histories, the struggle to represent despite an absence of evidence, and the moral imperative to expose the structural forces which produced this absence.

Engaging these concerns, the film is in conversation with works of new social history and experimental historical documentary. Of the latter, two films hold particular significance: Travis Wilkerson’s *An Injury to One* (2002) and Marlon Fuentes’ *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995). Both are influential works noted for their unique formal approaches in representing histories of absence and exclusion.[36] Dealing with

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[35] Eric Garner was a 43-year-old black man from Staten Island who was killed by police officers while being arrested for illegally selling cigarettes. A bystander documented the killing on his cellphone, which showed Garner’s repeated insistence while being held facedown on the sidewalk by multiple officers: “I can’t breathe.” The phrase “I can’t breathe” became a slogan for the Black Lives Matter movement.

[36] For further discussion of these film’s formal approaches see Alice O. Lovejoy, “Determined to Set the Historical Record Straight, this Fully Political Filmmaker is: The Anti-Ken Burns,” *Film Comment*, 39(1), 10-11; Walter C. Metz, “Documentary as Adaptation: The Case of Travis Wilkerson's *An Injury to One,*” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35, No. 4 (Fall 2007): 307-312; Jan Christian Bernabe, "Queer Reconfigurations: *Bontoc Eulogy* and Marlon Fuentes’s Archive Imperative,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 24, no. 4 (2016): 727-759; Fatimah Tobing Rony, "The Quick and the Dead: Surrealism and the Found Ethnographic Footage Films of *Bontoc Eulogy* and *Mother Dao: The Turtlelike,” Camera Obscura* 18, no. 1 (2003): 129-155.

a paucity of archival visual evidence, *An Injury to One*–which chronicles the lynching of Wobbly organizer Frank Little in Butte, Montana in 1917–reflects the "esthetic credo" of Wilkerson's filmmaking mentor, the Cuban Third Cinema director Santiago Alvarez: "Give me two photos, music, and a moviola, and I'll give you a movie."[37] The lack of visual and textual evidence or accurate contemporaneous accounts regarding the lynching, (and the campaign to unionize Butte's copper which precipitated it) was largely a product of the political and economic power of the mining companies in the area. Wilkerson deals with this lack by focusing on these reasons for the absence of evidence, and the resulting transformation of company history into official history. My film enacts a related process through the use of parenthetical notes beneath on-screen text of primary source materials as well as a spoken narration, which contradict the official history regarding the incident at Harlem. However, where *An Injury to One* explores the process through which company history becomes official history, *A Costly Lesson* highlights the subsequent disconnect between this official history and the historical practice which the film constitutes. The result in both Wilkerson's film and my own, is a delegitimization of the official history.

Marlon Fuentes models a similar practice in *Bontoc Eulogy*. The film presents an anguished and intimate (despite being imagined) narrative of colonial encounter

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[37] Martin, "He Who Hits First, Hits Twice: The Urgent Cinema of Santiago Álvarez," 71.

and exploitation, as a means of producing a rigorous engagement with a deeply fraught moment in Filipino and American history–the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair– and its deeply fraught archive. Through the construction of a fictional narrative about his grandfather's experiences as a "primitive" Igorot warrior brought to the United States to be put on display at the fair, Fuentes provides the audience with a point of connection and empathy.[38] He also makes legible the ways in which the original sin of the exhibition persists in what is absent from contemporary archives dealing with colonial historical events such as the fair.

In an interview (which he conducted with himself) about the film, Fuentes observes: "The gaps and ellipses [in the archive] are just as important as the materials we have in our hands. If they are missing for certain reasons, whether by accident or force of omission, perhaps these irregularities force us to reflect on the nature and origins of our own situation."[39] *A Costly Lesson*, like *Bontoc Eulogy*, presents and models an act of reflection on these "irregularities," in hopes of compelling a similar act of reflection by the audience. Yet where I insist that the facts, however scant, can adequately convey the particular horror of the crime and its absence in the archive, Fuentes deals with the absence of evidence and narrative by deploying what exists of the former in the construction of a fictional iteration of the latter.

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[38] The coerced importation of a group of Igorots for exhibition at the 1904 fair actually took place, but Fuentes' grandfather was not one of them.

[39] Fuentes, "Extracts from an Imaginary Interview: Questions and Answers about *Bontoc Eulogy*," 120.

A Costly Lesson also draws on the methodology of works of written history and historiography, such as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's sweeping history of radical resistance to the rise of transatlantic capitalism in the 17th and 18th centuries, *The Many Headed Hydra*. In gesturing to Eric Garner's last words, I am echoing Linebaugh and Rediker's own use of contemporary historical references, such as their deployment of Mumia Abu-Jamal's term "onamove" to describe the dynamism of the proletariat during this period.[40] The effect is less a collapsing of past and present, than a nod to the structural continuities which connect them. In a broad sense, the film also responds to social historian Herb Gutman's insistence that, in the words of Ira Berlin, "the alleged absence of sources [is . . .] no excuse for not writing the history of working people."[41]

A Costly Lesson emphasizes these absences of fact throughout, the lack of basic information about the event, and about its victims and perpetrators. However, following Gutman, it ultimately insists on the importance of historical memory, on the importance of knowing, speaking and passing along the names of the dead at Harlem. I see this act of transmission as a "process of mourning," a process which, argues White, "can relieve the 'burden of history' and make a more, if not totally realistic perception of current problems possible."[42] The insistence on naming the dead as a

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[40] Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 333.

[41] Gutman, *Power and Culture*, 35.

[42] White, "The Modernist Event," 32.

gesture of mourning, clarity and resistance has been a central strategy of the "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) movement. When making *A Costly Lesson* I was compelled by BLM's insistence on this practice. Of particular inspiration was Janelle Monae and Wondaland's protest anthem, "Hell You Talmbout," whose refrain, "Say his/her name!" is accompanied by the naming of black victims of state violence, from Emmitt Till and Fred Hampton, to Trayvon Martin and Sandra Bland.[43] To that list, I add the names of those who died at Harlem.

The final chapter of the dissertation, "Evidence of the Evidence," engages the opposite representational challenge of "A Costly Lesson." It is an object lesson in how to produce new knowledge about an over-narrativized historical event with a substantial archival trace. Made almost entirely from surveillance footage shot during the 1971 uprising at the Attica State Correctional Facility in upstate New York, the piece goes beyond simple illustration of the racism that shaped the event, and forces the viewer to inhabit the subject position of a white rank-and-file guard. On a formal level, the use of traditionally "unusable" footage (degraded and blurred images, distorted and maxed-out audio) is foregrounded, articulating the sense of chaos and confusion that characterized the event and its aftermath.

In part, *Evidence of the Evidence* reflects a recent methodological trend in historical documentary known as "archival *vérité*." The term refers to films such as

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[43] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SttWb9mDp3Q

Jason Osder's *Let The Fire Burn* (2013) and Göran Olsson's *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975* (2011), which eschew contemporary talking head interviews, and are constructed almost entirely from archival footage. Although my film fits these criteria, I find the label to be a potentially problematic one in relation to my work. While I see value in the sense of immersion and direct engagement with archival images that comes from the excision of talking heads and other forms of historical contextualization and narrativization in archival *vérité*, I am wary of any implication that this produces a less mediated and more "real" experience of the historical event being represented.

For this reason, *Evidence of the Evidence* was conceived less as a work of archival *vérité*, and is instead in conversation with more explicitly self-reflexive films like Yael Hersonski's *A Film Unfinished* (2010), Craig Baldwin's *RocketKitKongoKit* (1986), and especially, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992). The latter film's presentation of a phenomenological account of a historical event, while at the same time reflecting on the role of the camera in shaping the event's historical narrative, was a central inspiration for the structuring of my film. In *Evidence of the Evidence* this duality takes place through a constant foregrounding of the subjectivity of the cameraman, a New York State trooper named Frank Smith. Emphasizing Smith's ignorance regarding the prisoner's motives and his attempts to construct a narrative that justifies the horrific events at Attica, the film also presents an uncomfortable picture of white justification of racially determined acts of state

violence against people of color. By approaching what happened at Attica through this lens, I am, as a white filmmaker, attempting to avoid aestheticizing and exploiting black suffering. *Evidence of the Evidence* is certainly a film about racial violence. Yet it is an interrogation of the ways in which white supremacist state violence is narrativized, historicized, and thus, perpetuated.

Each chapter of "From Prison Yard to Field of Play" engages with the questions I posed at the beginning of this introduction. They are all concerned with contemporary or historical representations of race in moving image mediums and the role played by traditional narrative forms in reinforcing capitalism and white supremacy. They all advocate for or enact alternative representational modes, which emerge from a close engagement with and reflection upon archival or appropriated moving images, versus an adherence to established master narratives. And they all approach moving images as contingent sites of inscription and re-inscription, and as contested objects central to discourses of, and struggles over, representation and power.

However, certain theoretical concerns and representational approaches do not extend across the entire dissertation. Rather, they are explored through particular sub-groupings of chapters, in particular between the two films on the one hand and the written chapters and GIFs on the other. For instance, the written chapters of "From Prison Yard to Field of Play" engage critical questions at the intersection of politics, media and popular sport. More specifically, they are both concerned with a kind of

recuperative and/or activating process, in which I consider dominant liberal and conservative capitalist enactments of my subjects and objects, (Ali and the documentary form, and sports media and the GIF form, respectively) and identify their radical potentiality or its already existent articulation. However, I reject an essentialized reading of my subjects and objects as inherently radical. In "What You Want Me to Be" I push back against filmmaker Bill Siegel's characterization of Muhammad Ali as an inherently radical figure, despite the boxer's later transformation into a centrist liberal icon. I argue that this characterization not only misrepresents who Ali actually was, but also diminishes a truly radical engagement with his legacy, obscuring the lessons of this legacy for the radical Left. In "Tyranny of the Loop" I don't attribute the radical potential of the GIF form to some abstract or ephemeral quality of the format. Instead, I locate it in the GIF's history as a user-generated counter-hegemonic media object, and in the format's low status in contemporary image hierarchies which exalt lossless high definition formats.

While the written chapters both extensively theorize the role of narrative in articulating and perpetuating hegemonic ideologies, the two films engage questions of narrativity on a formal level. The structure of each film eschews traditional narrative forms while making legible the ways in which historical narratives are constructed. *Evidence of the Evidence* interrogates the construction of narrative as an articulation of white supremacist state power, and as a sense-making form for an act of senseless violence. Through its degraded imagery and selective use of subtitles to amplify

moments where this narrativizing project is explicitly articulated by those at Attica, it shows the contested attempts to narrate the event as it unfolded and in its immediate aftermath. As discussed, the majority of the film does this from the point of view of a rank-and-file white New York State trooper. However, the film's coda brings this narrativizing project into even sharper relief by juxtaposing Officer Smith's account with one by the comedian Richard Pryor, recorded during his KPFA radio program in the aftermath of the retaking of the prison.

A Costly Lesson offers a related but distinct analysis of traditional narrative forms and their functioning as a kind of gatekeeper for historical knowledge. In its choice of a subject which "defies representability" the film articulates a critique of the lack of representation of historical events which refuse easy narrativization, a clear moral lesson, or historical impact. The story of *A Costly Lesson* is its lack of a story. Little differentiates the event, its victims or its perpetrators, from countless other incidents of racial and class violence in the early twentieth-century, and therefore it has been mostly forgotten. The film's primary argument then is that the simple fact of the event, the fact of the crime, (as well as its denial, and reframing as the titular "costly lesson") compels a moral responsibility to represent it.

Assembly in the Archive

I began this introduction with the moving image of Jack Johnson's cane flip. As I asserted, the critical questions which motivated this dissertation emerge from that image, and my response to it as both a media producer and media scholar. However, the fact of its exclusion beyond the introduction is similarly instructive. This exclusion points to an underlying process that sheds light on the multiplicity of this dissertation, the heterogeneity of its constituent elements. This absence points to the dissertation's emergence through the assembling of an archive.

In his book *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom advocates for a process of producing critical arguments which materialize through the assembling of, and engagement with, an archive. The archive he describes here is neither institutional nor official, but is constituted through our own gathering of evidence in the course of research. He writes that critical arguments,

> begin to articulate themselves only after the work of archiving has begun, arguments that can situate themselves, or discover themselves, only in the interstices of the elements assembled [. . .] arguments that can enact themselves as aftereffects of the work of assemblage, arguments, thus, that will find themselves serially disassembled and reassembled as that archive unfolds itself.[44]

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[44] Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 4.

This dissertation reflects that process. The critical arguments I advance emerge from the process of assemblage, from an attempt to reckon with the diverse objects I placed and found in my personal archive. My work with the Johnson footage, the critical arguments I tried to make about Johnson's archival performance, found themselves "serially disassembled." Perhaps in the next iteration, as my archive continues to unfold itself, the moving image of Jack Johnson will cease to be a narrative object and will be reassembled as an archival one.

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Tyranny of the Loop: Rhetoric and Representation in the Sports GIF

Introduction

Two American football players, a wide receiver and a cornerback, race down a sideline. Their movements are presented in slow motion, but it is clear from their momentum that they are running fast. Looking back and skywards in the direction from which they came, both leave their feet at the same moment, the receiver up in a balletic leap, the cornerback down in a controlled fall. As the cornerback tumbles to the ground, the receiver extends his right arm above his head. His hand grazes the top edge of the frame and a football lands perfectly into his outstretched fingers. It lands with such force it bends the receiver's arm backwards, yet he maintains control. As he pulls the ball towards his body, the sequence loops and the footrace begins again. He catches endlessly.[1]

At the top of the three-point line, a point guard in white curls around a pick and dribbles towards the basket. A sea of bodies in blue uniforms collapse toward him as he nears the paint. The point guard fires a pass to his teammate, a small forward, in the opposite corner. As a defender races back to cover the teammate, he pump-fakes the ball and drives towards the basket. This pump-fake is effective, momentarily

[1] http://gph.is/2nD20hJ

freezing the defender out by the three point line. A second pump-fake, executed while jumping for a dunk, is less effective. It causes the small forward to botch the shot, the ball bouncing harmlessly off the iron. The sequence resets, an endless loop of effective and ineffective pump fakes.[2]

A female gymnast appears in mid-air above a horizontal bar. The scene is framed from below, she in the upper right quadrant of the frame, the bar in the lower left. Her whole body is in motion, at the apex of an ascent. Her legs, ramrod straight and tucked tightly together, swing through 180 degrees like a pendulum, from level with and pointing towards the bar, to level with but pointing away from the bar. As she descends, her arms reach out for the bar. She misses. It vibrates like a guitar string, and the gymnast plunges down and out of the frame . . . only to reappear in mid-air, as the sequence resets itself. She falls endlessly.[3]

The looping media objects I describe here are examples of the Graphics Interchange Format, a digital image format better known by its acronym, GIF.[4] More specifically, in depicting the movements, gestures and performances of athletes, they fall under the category of the sports GIF. In this chapter, I take up the object of the sports GIF in order to think about, and think through, the palimpsest of endlessly proliferating media texts which constitute contemporary online discourse about

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[2] http://gph.is/2n8tgIJ

[3] http://gph.is/2nqP6V3

[4] Originally pronounced JIF, like the peanut butter brand, GIF is now more commonly pronounced with a hard "G" instead.

popular sports.

Commentators have referred to GIFs as the "standard for sports highlights" online. While this statement is perhaps hyperbolic, it does point to the significant role that sports GIFs play in our engagement with sports media, as both consumers and producers.[5] The particular qualities of the format (and the murky nature of GIFs' copyright status) encourage circulation via social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook, sports blogs like Deadspin, SB Nation, FTW and Bleacher Report, and fan-based internet platforms like Reddit, Imgur and Tumblr. Despite their apparent omnipresence, the status and legitimacy of sports GIFs is contested. While many are produced and disseminated by commercial/professional sports leagues, the format was popularized by, and is most associated with, amateur and semi-professional producers of public commentary: fans and bloggers. Moreover, in recent years, sports leagues such as Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have begun sending cease-and-desist letters to sports blogs posting GIFs of their events.[6] Sports GIFs thus exist and circulate at a juncture between the official and the unofficial, the sanctioned

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[5] Lyall, "Maker of Animated GIFs."

[6] See Shan Wang, "Fair Use or Copyright Infringement? Deadspin and SB Nation Get Tossed Off Twitter for NFL GIFs," *NiemanLab.org*, 13 October 2015; Caitlin Dewey, "This is Why you Can't Post GIFs of the World Cup," *Washington Post*, 1 July 2014; Matthias Ellis, "GIFs, Twitter Suspensions, and Social Media: An Open Letter to MLB Advanced Media," *SBNation.com*, 6 July 2015; Josh Feldman, "Deadspin, SB Nation GIF Twitter Accounts Suspended, Reportedly Due to the NFL," *Mediaite.com*, 12 October 2015.

and the unsanctioned, the licensed and the pirated. They represent a negotiation between, on one side, sports leagues, the broadcast networks who license their content and establishment journalists, and on the other, unincorporated bloggers and fans. This intermediate status of the sports GIF personifies the transitional nature of sports and sports media discourse in the age of high-speed internet connectivity, giving this format special significance to my attempts to theorize such changes. I do so through two overlapping lines of inquiry.

The first line entails a theorization of the primary rhetorical and representational modes of sports GIFs. I identify and define the two dominant types of sports GIF, which I term the "process GIF" and the "spectacle GIF," and a third counter-hegemonic form, which I call the "*détourn* GIF," with reference to the Letterist and Situationist practice of *détournement* in which cultural objects are manipulated and reframed in opposition to their original intended meaning and usage. I argue that these three GIF forms can be seen to reflect competing ideological positions within contemporary online discourse (beginning with the mainstream embrace of advanced analytical approaches to sports in the early 2000s, up to the present day) and debate about sports, and its mediated representation. My analysis of these GIF forms opens into a broader consideration of the interplay between their representational and rhetorical approaches, and discourses of race, gender identity and athletes' agency within the exploitative realm of commercial/professional sports and sports media.

The second line of inquiry involves a historical contextualization of the sports GIF and the GIF format more generally, as well as an analysis of the GIF's unique formal qualities and those qualities' role in the popularity of the form in the contemporary media landscape. I situate the sports GIF in relation to one of its ostensible representational forbearers, the highlight, arguing that the relationship between the highlight and the sports GIF is less direct than it might seem. This is due to the traditionally oppositional uses of the GIF format, often in an ironic rhetorical mode, in addition to the formal differences between the GIF and the highlight. I also offer a broader analysis of the politics and poetics, and the commodified and non-commodified instrumentalization of the GIF's formal qualities, particularly the low resolution of the form, its lack of synchronous sound and its looping capacity.

My analysis of the format engages with a broad swath of internet sports and media culture. I focus on the GIF in relation to the three most popular American professional sports leagues: Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA). The overwhelming popularity of these leagues results in robust and multivalent online communities, partaking in multiple forms of critical and cultural discourse across "official" and "unofficial" media outlets and social media platforms. This cluster of what Tony Bennett terms cultural "assemblages" provides a diversity of objects for critical analysis. My interest in the MLB, NFL and NBA is also rooted in the contrast between their status as massive multi-billion dollar corporations, and the omnipresent

yet decidedly lo-fi media object of the GIF, a traditionally open-sourced, non-monetized, peer-to-peer format. The inherent tensions between these for-profit sports leagues and the commons-based GIF format which serves as an important vehicle of content delivery, makes legible a host of ideological conflicts encompassing the shifting nature of commodification, fandom, cultural ownership and authorship, and content creation in the contemporary online landscape.

Central to these conflicts is the emerging use of advanced statistics in all three leagues to determine athletic performance, and the ideological, rhetorical and representational changes that have accompanied this profound epistemological shift. However, as the most culturally, politically, analytically and technologically progressive of the three leagues, the NBA distinguishes itself from the analytically sophisticated but tradition-bound MLB, and the culturally, politically and analytically conservative NFL. This progressiveness extends to online discourse around the NBA, leading to a greater degree of critical reflection, not simply around the question of how to evaluate athletic performance using advanced statistics, but of how these new evaluative models undermine and denaturalize older, morally and narratively determined forms of assessment. Moreover, the NBA has adopted a notably *laissez-faire*, non-litigious approach to the production and dissemination of unofficial online media, including GIFs. This calculated embrace of the online commons has paid dividends in a sophisticated, passionate and growing fan base, and beginning in the

2016-2017 season, a massive new television contract.[7] For these reasons, the NBA assemblage figures most prominently in my analysis.

Origin and Rhetoric

In order to critically engage with the form, content and circulation of the sports GIF and its relationship to the major American sports leagues, it is necessary to understand the format's qualities, history and broader uses. The GIF is a compressed lossless[8] color image format. It was introduced in June 1987 by Compuserve, the first major commercial online service provider in the American market.[9] Developed by the company to replace their black and white Run Length Encoding Format, the GIF became the primary color image format for early websites.[10] It held this title into the next decade, when it was supplanted by JPEG compression, introduced in 1992, and the PNG format, introduced in 1996.[11] However, those later formats can only display

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[7] The deal gave ABC/ESPN and Turner domestic television broadcasting rights for $2.67 billion per year, through 2025, nearly tripling the previous contract of $930 million annually. (Prada, 2014)

[8] Lossless compression denotes a type of file format that retains all of its original data when compressed, meaning all data is recoverable when the file is uncompressed. This is in contrast to formats such as JPEGs which use lossy compression, meaning that data is permanently eliminated in the process of shrinking file sizes.

[9] Buck, "The History of GIFs."

[10] Alfonso, "The Animated History of the GIF."

[11] Roelofs, *PNG: The Definitive Guide*, chap. 7.

a single still image. GIFs on the other hand, are able to store multiple images in a single file, and then display them in rapid succession in order to produce simple looped animations. Due to this unique quality the format persisted, and in recent years has flourished. A GIF renaissance is underway, with the format becoming a primary means of depicting moving images online. GIFs have become so ubiquitous that in 2012 the Oxford American Dictionary made GIF its word of the year, citing its evolution "from a medium for pop-cultural memes into a tool with serious applications including research and journalism."[12]

Crucial to the OAD's decision was the shifting usage of the word GIF from a product name to an object name to a verb, from an acronym for a discrete media format to a description of a widespread cultural practice. As with Kleenex or Q-tip, product names that became object names, GIF has transcended its status as a term describing a particular digital format and now refers to any short looping digital animation – or to the action of producing such images. To GIF is to engage in a media practice that is both atomizing and amplifying, in which a notable fragment of a moving image is excerpted from some larger whole and presented for consumption apart from this whole. It constitutes the excision of a moving image from its "native" context and its insertion into a new one. It is therefore an act that is both destructive (and in the conversion between formats, degrading) and creative, building new meanings on the bones of the old.

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[12] Martin, "Oxford Dictionaries USA Word of the Year 2012 is 'to GIF.'"

The fragmentation, brevity and repetition characteristic of the GIF has positioned it as one of the paradigmatic forms of the present age through which we encounter indexical moving image documents. Perfectly suited to the online media landscape, it is a preferred medium of the meme, offering the user–both viewer and maker–short, low-quality but low-sized moving images, without sound, running on a continuous loop, and easily embeddable on a website. Its most common usage is as an ironic visualization of emotion, sentiment or mood, usually in reaction or response to something. These "somethings" are usually low-stakes, ranging from the quotidian and autobiographical, (such as lost car keys, the celebration of a promotion, etc.) to current events or celebrity gossip. In the words of Museum of the Moving Image curator Jason Eppink, the reaction GIF constitutes "a language tool that allows the user to perform a gesture in a context that is mainly text-based."[13] Excerpting a wide range of popular media, it allows us to exasperatedly roll our eyes at someone,[14] register joy at the conclusion of a difficult task,[15] or share and humorize embarrassing failures.[16] As Jane Hu argues, this expressive capacity emerges out of GIFs' emphasis on an "aesthetic (and thus affective) dynamism," a result of "the sheer fact of their mobile quality."[17] While they constitute what might appear to be a universalized

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[13] Owens, "Exhibiting .gifs: An Interview with Curator Jason Eppink."
[14] http://gph.is/2n5Aaz7
[15] http://gph.is/2n5npo6
[16] http://gph.is/2oSwnS0
[17] Hu, "GIF Typologies and the Heritage of the Moving Image."

semiotic form, these GIFs often circulate within and help to reinforce balkanized online subcultures. Writes Colin Beckett, "the animated GIF is one of the tools by which social media users seek tribes and distinguish themselves."[18]

Within the overlapping realms of sports league media, sports journalism and sports consumers/fandom, the GIF is similarly instrumentalized. Yet this process of cultural differentiation reflects a very different rhetorical and representational regime than the standard reaction GIF. Reaction GIFs are used to convey and amplify the emotion or sentiment of the user and/or producer. Their expressive capacity is as important as the media texts from which they are excerpted. While regularly snarky or dismissive in tone, they tend to circulate among like-minded online communities and so are more likely to constitute an act of commiseration rather than argument.

The ironic tone of the reaction GIF and its deployment as a kind of tribal identifier are in fact conjoined. This conjoining is often produced through a shared knowledge of the source material–television programs figuring perhaps most prominently–which are themselves either purveyors of snark, or are appropriated ironically. In the former category are cult and/or high brow programs whose "internet fame" outstrips their popularity based on traditional viewership numbers, such as the animated series *Rick and Morty*, live-action sitcoms *30 Rock* and *Arrested Development* and dramas like *Mad Men*. In the latter, are dating and reality shows such as *Flavor of Love*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and *The Bachelor*. The

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[18] Beckett, "The Rhetoric of the Loop."

sense of camaraderie and community comes from an ability to not simply recognize the source material used in the reaction GIF, but to understand which media text is in on the joke, and which one is the joke. Put another way, the ironic tone of reaction GIFs are either appropriated from the original text or produced through the act of appropriation.[19]

Unlike reaction GIFs, most sports GIFs–like traditional sports "highlights"–are visual representations of athletic acts, and are not usually used to express any particular emotion or sentiment. The majority of sports GIFs are unironic and are not intended to be humorous. Although they tend to circulate within and reify a particular online community in a similar way to reaction GIFs, sports GIF's purpose is often instructional and/or illustrative, rather than affirmational or commiserative.

Spheres of Circulation

Before examining the form, rhetorical modes and intended uses of sports GIFs in their own right, I would like to explain the terms I use to describe the interconnected social spheres through which they circulate: league media, sports

[19] The latter form of appropriation in reaction GIFs regularly depicts African Americans, in particular gay, queer, trans, and female-identifying people of color. This racially determined usage has led to these GIFs becoming central objects of important recent critiques and theories of "digital blackface." For more, see: Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," Teen Vogue, 2 August 2017; Monica Torres, "Instant Replay: The Most Powerful GIFs are More than the Sum of their Repeated Parts," *Real Life*, 22 November 2016.

journalism and sports consumers/fans. League media refers to the official audio-visual representation of live sporting events and secondary media which supplements and contextualizes these events. These media texts are owned and controlled by sports leagues, and are licensed to and co-produced and broadcast by major media networks and local affiliates.[20] Sports journalism consists of the journalistic coverage of these events, and of sports leagues, news, and culture more broadly, which is (technically) produced independently of the leagues themselves.[21] However, given the symbiotic relationship between sports leagues and the journalistic outlets which cover and promote them, (and in the case of the broadcast networks, broadcast them) and the journalist's need for access to events and sources, the degree of independence between the two has long been in question.

The sports fan is perhaps a more immediately legible descriptor, referring

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[20] I use the term "league media" when referring to media controlled by the sports leagues, and the term "sports media" to refer more broadly to media depicting (or related to) sports, regardless of source.

[21] My articulation of these interconnected spheres partially overlaps with, and expands upon, a related explication by Ray Gamache, which is itself an expansion of Pierre Bourdieu's assertion that contemporary sporting events consist of at least "two tiers of production," the production of the event itself, and the production of media representations of the live event. To this model, Gamache proposes a third tier of production, "the televised sportscast that creates narratives gleaned from the live mediated coverage" which are "recontextualized as news and sports mythology." While I agree with Gamache's expansion of Bourdieu's two-tiered model, my analysis focuses on what I would categorize as a newly emergent fourth tier of production, which entails excerpting, appropriating, and re-distributing the media produced in the second and third tiers. This fourth tier is populated by sports bloggers, redditors and fans, and their chosen format is often the GIF or other looping image technologies. (Gamache, 76, 2010)

traditionally to individuals who are sports enthusiasts, and who consume both league and journalistic media texts. However, sports fans are far from a static or monolithic block. They represent a diverse range of fandom and consumption and possess growing agency in their relationship to sports leagues and journalistic outlets. Moreover, the relative empowerment of the sports fan in the contemporary online media landscape–as not only a consumer, but also as a producer of media content and/or sports discourse–has played a substantial role in destabilizing the traditional hierarchy, codified in the televisual age, in which sports journalists served as intermediaries between the leagues at the top and the consumer at the bottom.

The widespread availability, reproducibility and "pirate-ability" of visual media (in part, through the production of GIFs) and the increased emphasis on statistical analysis, has produced a new degree of leveling across, and mixing between, these three domains. Actively engaged and highly educated online fan communities have become "developmental leagues" for new organizations, media companies and sports leagues, as sports media consumers become producers. Fan posts on sports blogs or Reddit message boards lead to paid positions for a select number of writers, and diagnostic algorithms created in dorm rooms are presented at industry-facing conferences like the annual MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference, resulting in positions in team's analytics departments for their creators.

In addition to this professionalization and appropriation of consumers and their labor, many sports bloggers who emerged from the ranks of fandom see their

work constituting a counterdiscourse against hegemonic narratives in sports media and journalism, thereby "filling a void left by traditional sports journalists in the form of commentary and analysis."[22] These dual trends of industry appropriation and resistance have created a degree of bifurcation in the realm of sports journalism, between establishment journalists associated with the leagues and broadcast networks, and sports bloggers and other online journalists who are more closely aligned with fan communities.

An important aspect of this distinction is the question of trust, and the concurrent issue of journalistic access. In a 2012 study of media credentialing by Major League Baseball teams, Avery Holton identified a significant disparity between the degree of access provided to establishment print and television journalists in contrast with bloggers, even when the latter were associated with reputable journalistic outlets. The sentiment among teams was that they did not trust bloggers, a finding Holton deemed "important given that bloggers [. . .] represent some of the most popular sources of sports news and information."[23] What Holton misses in his analysis, however, is that the lack of trust expressed by MLB teams is likely partly responsible for this popularity. Refusing to provide media credentials to bloggers aligns their perspectives and interests with those of the fan, or at least gives this perception. The result is that the lack of trust between bloggers and teams produces an

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[22] Whiteside, Yu and Hardin, "The New 'Toy Department'?", 24.

[23] Holton, "Baseball's Digital Disconnect," 53.

increased level of trust between bloggers and fans. A lack of trust then, and the lack of access that results, paradoxically legitimizes the blogger in the eyes of the fan. The blogger is seen as more objective in their coverage of the MLB. They operate independently from the league because they are not beholden to it for access.

Distinguishing between league media, sports journalists and sports fans is important for understanding the historical formation of the contemporary sports landscape, and by extension, for understanding the degree of upheaval wrought by the ascendance of online and social media. However it is also important to recognize the interconnectedness of these categories as they relate to the contemporary circulation and meaning of sports media, and specifically for our purposes, of sports GIFs. Tony Bennett's model of the "assemblage" offers a useful framework for thinking about what this conflation of domains produces in terms of a shared sports media culture, and its articulation within the social sphere.

In his essay "Making Culture, Changing Society," Bennett defines the assemblage as "bits and pieces of talk, architecture, bodies, texts, machines, etc., all of which interact to construct and perform 'culture' through the governance and regulation of various 'working surfaces' on the social."[24] Central to this idea is Bennett's rejection of the notion that any particular object or practice consists "of a distinctive kind of 'cultural stuff.'"[25] Instead he argues that culture is produced

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[24] Bennett, "Making Culture, Changing Society," 612.

[25] Ibid., 612.

through the assemblage of objects and practices, that what we call culture is actually the network which connects these things together. It is "a provisional assembly of all kinds of 'bits and pieces' that are fashioned into durable networks whose interactions produce culture as specific kinds of public organisation of people and things."[26] Culture then, is not a thing–or not only found in things–but is the contingent and fluid process by which these things are assembled.[27] How cultural assemblages are actually "assembled," what it is we include and what it is we exclude, and the fluidity of the construct, is well illustrated by Ray Gamache's expansion of Bourdieu's two "tiers of production" of sporting events, and my own expansion of Gamache's model. Changes in communication and media technologies and the corresponding changes in cultural practices that result, necessitate a reconfiguration and expansion of the sports media assemblage.

Bennett's emphasis on the interplay of objects and practices, and his characterization of the constitutive parts of the assemblage as "bits and pieces," echoes the formal qualities, perceived value, and blurred line between object and verb, of sports GIFs. They are diminutive textual fragments which are mostly perceived as author-less and disposable. They are often legible only when perceived

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[26] Ibid., 612.

[27] A related theory was central to the work of a number of New Left historians (including C.R.L. James, Herbert Gutman and E.P. Thompson) as it pertained to the concept of class identity as a form of cultural identity. Indeed, the title of Thompson's seminal, *The Making of the English Working Class*, was meant to foreground his insistence that class identity was "an active process," which required "*making*" (9, 1963).

in relation to a larger discourse. And the processes of their creation, dissemination and reception are fluid, multidirectional and relatively undifferentiated from one another.

In making this connection, my goal is not to position the sports GIF as a paradigmatic cultural object of a hegemonic late-capitalist sports media assemblage, a Foucaultian technology whose omnipresence and ubiquity serves to regulate and discipline the unthinking sports consumer. To do so would risk missing the point of Bennett's assertion that we should not essentialize specific objects and practices as inherently cultural, but instead see the production of culture in the ever-changing networks that connect them into an assemblage. Rather, I would like to argue that we consider the GIF format as a contested and negotiated "working surface" on the social, as it pertains to the sports media assemblage. It is contested and negotiated, in part, because although the recent history of the format situates it within a piratic,[28] open-source, and thus anti-capitalist ideological project, in the guise of the sports GIF it is used to represent what Raymond Gamache argues is "the dominant form of cultural expression" in contemporary society, the "sports spectacle."[29]

However, tension exists not simply between the ideological history of the

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[28] The act of piracy has a long history in anti-capitalist struggle. In *The Many Headed Hydra*, their seminal work on early trans-Atlantic anti-capitalist resistance movements, historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker describe 18th century pirates as having "self-consciously built an autonomous, democratic, egalitarian social order of their own [. . .] and a counterculture to the civilization of Atlantic capitalism with its expropriation and exploitation, terror and slavery." (Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra*, 172)

[29] Gamache, "ESPN Assemblage," 80.

format and the ideology of the sports spectacle. It also exists within the sports media assemblage itself, the result of competing ideological positions regarding the role of sports in, and as a reflection of, society writ large. These competing positions can be broadly characterized as ideologically conservative or ideologically liberal, with a third "minor" position that can be described as counter-hegemonic. For the rest of this chapter, I will analyze how these ideological positions manifest in the sports media assemblage, focusing in particular on how they are articulated through the object of the sports GIF.

Spectacle and Process

A study of the most common types of sports GIFs reveals two underlying dominant and philosophically and narratively opposed strains of sports media and fan engagement. On the one hand is the explosion of quantitative analysis, which eschews simple box scores (derisively termed "counting stats") for reams of data fed through complex algorithms and exhaustive film study. Known as "advanced stats" or "analytics" this analytical and rhetorical approach first rose to mainstream prominence with Michael Lewis' 2004 book *Moneyball*, and is mostly conveyed via online long form written journalism, buttressed visually with charts, graphs and GIFs. It is of a piece with the grand narratives, rhetoric, practices, economic models and liberal ideological positions of Silicon Valley. On the other hand is the more

traditional analytical and rhetorical approach to sports media and fan engagement, which relies on mystical narratives about grit and determination, coupled with unquantifiable assessments such as the "eye test."[30] It encourages a kind of regional tribalism through identification with a particular team, and is often aligned with a more conservative or traditionalist ideological position through reinforcement of traditional gender roles and the propagation of racially determined and retrograde narratives about playing the game "the right way." This form of coverage and analysis is more commonly found on television media and regional newspapers, is often informed by classical literary narrative structures, and is visually expressed through the presentation and exaltation of athletic performance in the most dramatic and spectacular way possible.

These opposing discourses point to a fundamental tension regarding how we define what role sports plays in society and culture, what our relationship to it is as viewers/consumers/fans and how it is represented and understood via popular media. In the traditional approach to coverage, sports is understood first and foremost as a form of mass popular entertainment, whose presentation consists of a tried-and-true combination of audiovisual spectacle and dramatic character-driven narrative. Raymond Gamache articulates this approach when discussing sports media giant

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[30] The "eye test" is a slang term referring to the evaluation of an athlete or team based solely on watching them perform. If an athlete "passes" the eye test it means that a positive evaluation of their athletic abilities is visually confirmed by their physical appearance and performance, regardless of statistical evidence which might validate or undermine this assessment.

ESPN's "constant search for the sensational and the spectacular within sporting events," combined with their amplification of "the importance of these events, their seriousness, and their dramatic character."[31] Conversely, stats-driven coverage tends to be directed towards a narrower demographic, the "serious" fans (also known as sports nerds) who pride themselves on understanding "what's really going on" beyond the empty platitudes and cliche narratives that dominate mainstream coverage. In this model, the fan's relationship to sports becomes simultaneously more obsessive and more coldly analytical, with an emphasis on presenting strategy and process rather than easily legible and consumable narratives. In fact, statistical coverage could actually be understood as explicitly anti-narrative, as it tends to consider narrative-driven analysis and presentation to be obfuscatory and misleading. The analytics perspective, grounded in a rationalist empiricist ideology, encourages a more abstract relationship to popular sport, in which players are reduced to numerical production, to data points on a graph.

While sports GIFs technically constitute a form of visual evidence in both modes, their intended usage by, and effect on the viewer, is quite different. In one instantiation they are offered as a visual document intended to illustrate a particular analytical observation. They serve an archetypal function, representing either a "typical" or "aspirational" athletic performance, evidence of a particular athlete or team's tendencies, or glimpses of potential positive or negative developments in

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[31] Gamache, "ESPN Assemblage," 86.

future performance. I am calling this form the "process GIF" because it is primarily concerned with delineating the process rather than the result of a particular athletic performance. In the second instantiation, the GIF is intended to elicit from the viewer what Brad Prager calls a sensation of "aesthetic ecstasy."[32] Here the GIF form is deployed in the presentation of a remarkable or "atypical" display of athletic performance, intended to produce a sense of embodied euphoria in the viewer.[33] I am calling this form the "spectacle GIF."

In the first usage, the GIF is intended to be read as part of a larger, yet discrete, representational and analytical project, a consideration of athletic performance, strategy and execution within a particular sport. It distills and illustrates subtle and/or complex actions in order to educate the viewer. This larger project spans various nodes of the sports media assemblage, from a team's evaluation of a player, to an analytics-minded journalist's Twitter feed, to a Reddit discussion thread. It interweaves traditionally differentiated categories such as amateur and expert, official and unofficial, and instead marks its borders through collective study of a particular

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[32] Prager, *Cinema of Werner Herzog*.

[33] Prager uses the phrase "aesthetic ecstasy" to describe the films of director Werner Herzog. He asserts that Herzog is primarily concerned with the "sensual effects of cinema," and that his "aesthetics" are rooted in the "bodily experience" of making and watching his films. (2007, 2,3) Herzog himself frames his practice and process as physical and athletic, rather than intellectual or pedagogical. He even opines that, "Some of the very best filmmakers were athletes." The reasoning for this assertion is rooted in Herzog's appreciation for the superficiality of what he calls "essential films," in which "It is the moving image *per se* that is the message [. . .] the way that film simply moves on the screen without asking you questions" (2002, 138, Herzog). The same description could apply to the form of GIF I am discussing here.

sport, in explicit contrast to traditional evaluative and representative approaches. Conversely, in the second usage, the GIF's legibility is not dependent on familiarity with or interest in a specialized discourse about a particular sport. While this GIF form emerges from and reinforces a particular set of broader hegemonic narratives, a conscious engagement with these narratives is not necessary for comprehension or appreciation. Moreover, the spectacular nature of these GIFs serves to obscure their role in propagating such narratives.

In *Mythologies*, his seminal analysis of the signifying qualities of "everyday" objects of mass media culture, Roland Barthes identified this obfuscatory quality as the "primary virtue of the spectacle." The spectacle, he writes, serves to "abolish all motives and all consequences [. . .] each moment imposes the total knowledge of a passion which rises erect and alone."[34] He further argues that in "the public['s]" encounter with the spectacular object, "what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees."[35] I would add to Barthes' formulation that what matter to us as viewers of spectacle is not (or not only) what we understand or know, but what we feel. This is because sports as spectacle often presupposes a degree of universal affective understanding, an inherent appreciation of human bodies performing visually impressive physical feats. By nature of its inherence, this appreciation does not primarily produce new knowledge in relation to visually spectacular sports images.

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[34] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 15.

[35] Ibid., 16.

Rather, these images are intended to produce a feeling of awe and/or disbelief at the physical capacities of the athlete or athletes.

Despite the differentiation I am making between these two GIF forms–between process and spectacle–in a Debordian sense, they are both constitutive objects of the late-capitalist media spectacle. I would argue however that the sensual and affective qualities of the spectacle GIF, and the empirical and evidentiary qualities of the process GIF, compel a different form of engagement with this overarching media spectacle, reflecting and begetting different ideological positions, and requiring the cultivation of different forms of, and capacities for, critical analysis of these objects. To this latter point, let us return to two of the GIFs I described at the beginning of this chapter for an example. The first depicts the visually impressive skill and athleticism of New York Giants football player Odell Beckham Jr. Beckham is a wide receiver known for his top end speed and peerless "soft hands,"[36] and both are on full display as he leaps into the air and catches a football one-handed with the tips of his fingers. It is an astounding physical performance, one that is affectively understood and thus inherently appreciated by a viewer with no particular knowledge or interest in American football. Concurrently, the "point" of the GIF, the reason for its existence and circulation, is equally legible to a disinterested viewer. Whether it

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[36] The phrase "soft hands," which refers to an athlete's ability to handle a ball gently amidst the speed and chaos of competition, is an apt visual description, but a somewhat misleading one. The "softness" one perceives, the result of preternatural hand strength and body control, is essentially a velvet-covered vise grip.

interests one or not, nobody would claim that what Beckham does in this clip is mundane or ordinary. The spectacular nature of Beckham's catch then, the entertainment value it offers, renders the GIF's reason for being clear to a broader audience.

The same could not necessarily be said for the GIF depicting an offensive set by the Golden State Warriors basketball team. It is an unremarkable sequence featuring some dribbling, a pick, a cross-court pass, and a botched dunk by Warriors forward Harrison Barnes. The GIF is excerpted from an article by the analytically-minded journalist Zach Lowe, examining the future potential of Barnes–a young player, about to begin his fourth season in the NBA–as an offensive player.[37] Barnes is an elite athlete capable of making spectacular highlight reel plays,[38] yet Lowe's interest lies in the forward's capacity to develop into an equally elite decision-maker, to cultivate his "basketball IQ" such that Barnes is able to serve as a team's 2nd or 3rd offensive option. A viewer encountering this GIF with no interest in or knowledge of basketball (let alone having read Lowe's article) might be hard-pressed to understand or appreciate the sequence it depicts. They might also be hard-pressed to explain why someone went to the trouble to make a GIF of such a seemingly mundane sequence in the first place. In an inverse relation to the broad legibility of the Beckham GIF as depicting a visually impressive athletic performance, the broad illegibility of the

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[37] Lowe, "Why Harrison Barnes Could Be the Most Intriguing Free Agent of 2016."

[38] http://gph.is/2n8A5K2

Barnes GIF emerges out of its status as evidence of a process. It is a piece of data, valued for representing a "typical" offensive performance by Barnes, and for offering a possible clue as to how that "typical" performance might develop as Barnes enters his prime.

An argument can be made that to a sports neophyte, Beckham's catch and Barnes' drive do not appear drastically different from one another. In that case, the distinctions I make here between the spectacle GIF and the process GIF are perhaps less apparent or convincing. However I am not ultimately concerned with proving whether the differences between these two forms would be immediately legible to a neophyte. Rather, I am interested in how the makers and circulators of these GIFs "intend" these images to be received and/or interpreted. This requires delineating and articulating their underlying logic and intent, and making legible the opposed epistemological and ideological frameworks I believe they embrace. In that regard, spectacle GIFs and process GIFs are products–and constituent texts–of a pair of discourses, which I argue, can be categorized as narrativist and anti-narrativist in nature.

Narrative Pieces

Considered in isolation, the spectacle GIF is perhaps not perceived narratively, yet it is inextricably linked to a representational regime that both thinks and expresses

itself through traditional literary narrative modes. For Barthes, the production of a spectacle is actually the primary "function of narrative," its *raison d'être*.[39] I see the object of the spectacle GIF less as an endpoint for a narrative, than as either a form of sensual come-on and flashy insistence for it, or as its distillation. In the first instantiation, the GIF hails us with its pleasurable affective and visual qualities to partake in an experience of sports produced via a set of classic narrative tropes. This is an experience of professional sports (and of driven, highly trained athletes) where descriptors like "grit,[40]" "monster"[41], "courage"[42], "born winner"[43], "beast"[44], "alpha male,[45]" and "freak[46]" predominate. In this mode, the spectacle GIF entices us into, and then reinforces, a fraught and cliche-ridden media discourse in which the field or court or ring serve as a proving ground for masculine dominance, and a staging ground for various iterations of the heroes' journey. It offers exclamation points for these narratives, intended to illustrate an athlete's physical superiority and/or inherent

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[39] Barthes, "Introduction to Structural Analysis of Narrative," 238.

[40] https://qz.com/759503/rio-olympics-2016-mo-farah-abbey-dagostino-nikki-hamblin-and-others-the-rio-athletes-who-fell-and-picked-themselves-up-again/

[41] http://sportsday.dallasnews.com/dallas-cowboys/cowboysheadlines/2013/02/18/sefko-cowboys-shouldn-t-pass-on-this-monster-athlete-from-their-own-backyard-in-the-nfl-draft

[42] http://www.philly.com/philly/sports/phillies/20150117_Rowan_pitcher_honored_as__most_courageous_athlete_.html

[43] http://bleacherreport.com/articles/953574-nfl-when-tim-met-skip-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-hating-and-embrace-tim-tebow

[44] http://jezebel.com/368655/is-vogues-lebron-kong-cover-offensive

[45] http://teamalphamale.com/

[46] http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/blake-bortles-is-excited-to-work-more-with-freak-athlete-julius-thomas/

"will to win," qualities we are reminded *ad nauseum*, which "can't be taught."[47]

In the second instantiation, the spectacle GIF has a synecdochic relationship to the larger narrative. The "story" of a particular athletic contest is framed as being reduceable to a handful of moments in which the outcome of the narrative, the shape that gives it meaning, is determined. This representational mode did not, of course, begin with the spectacle GIF. Rather, it has a long historical legacy in the guise of the highlight, which Raymond Gamache calls "the most important electronic sports journalism form."[48] The highlight's hegemony, Gamache argues, is based in its capacity for "capturing a part of an event and presenting it as a representation of the whole," allowing for "the most efficient means available to communicate the story."[49] While significant differences exist between the two forms, this reductive narrativizing capacity marks a degree of continuity from the highlight to the spectacle GIF.

As an example of this representational mode, let's look at the 7th and final game of the 2016 NBA championship, between the LeBron James-led Cleveland Cavaliers and the aforementioned Golden State Warriors. The game capped an unprecedented comeback by the Cavaliers, who had been down 3-1 in the series (a deficit from which no team has ever come back in the finals) against a Warriors team which had won more regular season games than any other team in NBA history. It

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[47] http://swaysuniverse.com/peyton-manning-says-goodbye-to-the-nfl-after-18-seasons/

[48] Gamache, "Genealogy of the Sportscast Highlight," 102.

[49] Ibid.

was a hard fought affair, with multiple lead changes and multiple exemplary performances. Yet the central narrative regarding the game is structured around three particular plays by the three stars of the Cavaliers: James, Kyrie Irving, and Kevin Love.[50] Two of these have become staple spectacle GIFs; the third has fallen into the interstices between spectacle and process.

First, "The Block."[51] Second, "The Shot."[52] Third, "The Stop."[53]

The first GIF depicts James' chase down block of Warrior Andre Iguodala in the final minutes of the game. For a number of reasons, the play is considered by many journalists, fans and bloggers to be the most iconic moment of both the series and James' career, as testified to by "retrospectives"[54] about the block being published just a year later, and the ultimate sign of internet "arrival," the creation of a Wikipedia page[55] dedicated entirely to this single play. Having returned to his native Ohio after infamously "taking his talents to South Beach" and winning two championships with the Miami Heat, the block has been framed as a kind of double

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[50] See The Ringer Staff, "The Best Moments From Game 7," *TheRinger.com*, 20 June 2016; Pete Blackburn, "A Frame-By-Frame Breakdown Of LeBron's Incredible Chasedown Block On Andre Iguodala," *Uproxx.com*, 20 June 2016; Jason Concepcion, "The Block That Saved Cleveland," *TheRinger.com*, 18 July 2016.

[51] http://gph.is/2n8iaTK

[52] http://gph.is/2mHLyxG

[53] http://gph.is/2lYVi9y

[54] See Andrew Sharp and Ben Golliver, "Reliving LeBron James's Block in Game 7 of the 2016 NBA Finals,'" *SI.com*, 19 September 2017; Hunter Felt, "LeBron James Isn't a Choker, So Let's Ditch that Tired Old NBA Narrative," *TheGuardian.com*, 9 June 2014

[55] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Block_(basketball)

exorcism by James. With it, he shed the "prodigal" status that marked his familial relation to Ohio, while simultaneously ending Cleveland's 52-year championship drought. On a more elemental and fundamental level, the block is a spectacular display of James' "grit" and "will to win," and of his status as the preeminent athletic "freak" of his generation.

Irving's shot, over the more-heralded Steph Curry, is framed as Irving making what NBA fans term "the leap." A player who makes the leap realizes his full potential, reaching or surpassing his perceived ceiling. In most cases, as with Irving, it is used in reference to a player ascending from "star" to "superstar" status.[56] His 3-pointer was the pinnacle of the basketball spectacle, the biggest shot in the biggest moment,[57] and a declaration that Irving was unafraid of the spotlight.

Finally, Love's stifling of Steph Curry on defense constitutes both a classic redemption story, and a David defeats Goliath narrative. Love, a star offensive player on his previous team, had become increasingly marginalized in Cleveland due to his physical limitations as a defender and an awkward fit with his teammates. He had had an especially poor series, and his playing time had been reduced in large part because of his defensive shortcomings. The stop on Curry, a unanimous league MVP due to

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[56] Distinguishing between who is a "superstar" and who is a mere "star" player in the NBA is an imprecise and fairly subjective process. However, the labels are most commonly understood to delineate between a player who can be the number one option on a championship team, as opposed to one who can "only" be the second or third option.

[57] The shot took place with 55 seconds left in the game, giving the Cavaliers a lead they would not relinquish.

Curry's offensive brilliance, spared Love from being traded in the offseason and was the final blow in defeating the juggernaut Warriors.[58]

As with a traditional highlight reel, GIFs of these three plays are perceived to distill, illustrate and then propagate a set of narratives about these athletes and their legacies. They also serve as a synecdoche for the game, the series, and the moralizing narrative of resilience and masculine fortitude which has come to dominate representations of the event. As GIFs, they are not experienced as a linear sequence of events in the way they would be if they were part of an edited collection of highlights, yet they are still linked together in popular discourse surrounding the game and series. This points to a general deemphasis of questions of chronology or causality when the narratives about an event attain a mythological status. Instead, the details of how the Cavaliers won the game become secondary to the ways in which each play is understood to signify a particular universal narrative about each player, (prodigal son returns, hero realizes his destiny, and comeback story/David beats Goliath) and when read collectively, about the true nature of achieving athletic glory in the face of great odds.

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[58] While precisely quantifying the popularity and circulation of a GIF is beyond my abilities as a researcher, GIFs of Love's defensive stop appear to be the least widely disseminated of these three plays. This is perhaps due in part to Love's play falling into an interstices between spectacle and process. His defense is spectacular only to an already-informed fan, and largely, only because it is not expected of him. It would not look particularly impressive to an uninterested fan. Yet because it is not a "typical" play by Love, it also has little value as a process GIF either.

Refusing Narrativity

In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White considers the status of historical evidence that does not easily lend itself to narrativization. Reflecting on Benedetto Croce's "famous dictum" that, "Where there is no narrative, there is no history," White asks: "What about those events and processes attested by the documentary record that did not lend themselves to representation in a story but could be represented as objects of reflection only in some other discursive mode, such as the encyclopedia, the epitome, the tableau, the statistical table or series?"[59]

The ascendance in recent years of a non-narrativist quantitative approach to sports media and analysis, reflects a collective grappling with the issue raised by White's question. With rapid developments in media and body mapping technologies, the exponential growth of data processing capacities, and increasingly sophisticated algorithms able to interpret this data, non-narrative forms of the "documentary record" have taken center stage. While this analytical turn is not evenly distributed across the major professional sports leagues, there is an emerging consensus around the notion that to more fully understand athletic performance (be it as a general manager, coach, player, fan, or sports bettor) one must engage with these not easily narrativizable forms of evidence.

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[59] White, *Content of the Form*, 28.

Where Barthes sheds light on the "function of narrative" in the production of spectacle, White's consideration of what the narrative form cannot contain and articulate helps us to think through the representational issues surrounding advanced analytics. Without the benefit of narrative, how is this type of evidence organized and represented by sports journalists and bloggers? Turning to White's alternative discursive modes, we see regular use of the statistical table and series. Yet as representational objects, data tables and series "tell" of trends, processes, and events, but are unable to "show" the objects from which their data sets are constituted. They lack any visual – let alone indexical – relationship, to the athletic performances they represent. This is a problem, as the fundamental "experience" of sports is a sensorial and embodied one. It is a practice, writes Bourdieu, whose "basis and object is the body."[60] To White's list then, we might add the process GIF.

As I have indicated however, the process GIF is not just a solution to the problem of representing non-narrative data, but reflects a rhetorical, analytical, and ideological project, which is explicitly hostile to traditional narrative forms. It is a project in which an empiricist approach to representation is prized above all else. It seeks to excise narrativized preconceptions about a player, team or game situation, and instead observe and quantify what is "actually happening." Its proponents and practitioners approach their chosen subject with a dim view of the old master narratives, seeing them as actively damaging to a true understanding of what actually

[60] Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class," 834.

produces success on the court or field. Analytics-based writer Bill Barnwell outlines this argument in an article on the "momentum" narrative in American football:

> I can't prove that momentum does or does not exist in sports, because it's an arbitrary, abstract idea that you can mold into just about anything you want to tell, the story you're looking to tell. Of course, you can also say the same thing about statistics, but there are stricter concrete rules that come into play when using statistics; even an untrained eye can recognize a small sample size or an arbitrary endpoint chosen to create a misrepresentative idea. There are really no rules for momentum.[61]

While the attempt to resist narrativized preconceptions is compelled by a desire for a more quantitatively-based means of assessing athletic performance, it produces other shifts in the rhetorical and ideological makeup of discourse about professional sports. Perhaps most significant is the way in which an anti-narrativist discourse inevitably disrupts a moralizing one. The moralizing operation of narrative, "the content of the form" so to speak, is a central tenet of White's (and other poststructural theorists') critical projects. As he argues, "Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too."[62] While an absence of narrative does not guarantee an absence of

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[61] Barnwell, "Nomentum, Part 1." For other examples, see Brandon Anderson, "A Sports Narrative Palate Cleanser: Can We Please All Just Shut Up and Let the Games Speak for Themselves for Once?" *Medium.com*, 18 June 2016; Brett Smiley, "10 Mind-Numbingly Stupid Sports Narratives," *SI.com*, 25 April 2014.

[62] White, *Content of the Form*, 24.

moralizing within a sports analytics discourse, an argument about performance which is aligned with popular moralizing narratives must be supported by the data or its legitimacy will be called into question. If a sports blogger writes a post in which she labels Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson a "clutch"[63] player, her argument will not be taken seriously if she does not back that claim up with statistics showing that Wilson excels at the end of close games. Conversely, the seemingly secure "clutch" legacy of retired shooting guard Kobe Bryant has come into question in recent years, due to the relative statistical inefficiency of Bryant's late-game heroics.[64]

The elevation of data over narrative, of fact-based evidence over moral judgement, leads to an interesting set of questions. If a morally determined narrative is, when applied to a discrete case, quantitatively provable, is it still necessarily morally determined? Or does its status as quantitatively proven, supersede and overtake its moralizing framework? Similarly, when a morally determined narrative is contradicted by the data, what effect does this have on the perceived legitimacy of the narrative?

Further examining the changing nature of the "clutch" narrative in the NBA provides a useful case study for thinking through some of these questions. In

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[63] "Clutch" is an adjective describing an athlete's ability to excel under pressure. It is a quality that is usually framed as masculine, and associated with violent martial analogies. Clutch athletes are regularly described as "killers" who posses "testicular fortitude."

[64] See Henry Abbott, "The Truth About Kobe Bryant in Crunch Time." *ESPN.com*, 29 January 2011.

basketball, “clutchness” has traditionally been articulated through a style of offensive play dubbed “iso ball,” which involves four supporting players pulling their defenders away from a fifth superstar player, who then goes one-on-one against his defender. As a result, superstars like Bryant are understood to act as lone gunslingers, imposing their will upon their defender and upon the outcome of the game itself. While superstar talent is still considered a near-necessity to championship contention, iso ball has become increasingly anathema to contemporary philosophies and strategies of the sport. Advanced statistics have called into question the positive impact of this type of play, showing that more often than not the best shot at the end of a game is the one by an open player, not the one by a well-covered superstar. In turn, as writer Danny Chau explains, “The profile of the ball-dominant superstar has shifted dramatically: Truly singular individual success can no longer be measured in isolation plays [. . .] but in how bounteous—altruistic, even—one player can be for the good of his team.”[65]

This perceptual shift has compelled a related reevaluation of the moralizing narrative which codes clutchness as masculine and its opposite (choking) as feminine. For instance, the current consensus best player in the NBA, LeBron James, is celebrated as much for his abilities as a playmaker and passer, than as a scorer. Yet before James broke through and began winning NBA championships, he was relentlessly critiqued for his propensity to pass the ball at the end of games. Many

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[65] Chau, “The Season that Broke Statistics.”

sports commentators framed this as evidence that James shrunk from the spotlight, that despite his prodigious talents he was not on the same level as Bryant, let alone Michael Jordan. The rhetoric of this argument was couched in a (barely) subtextual emasculation of James.[66]

Where this type of position and rhetoric was once ascendant in basketball discourse however, the on-court success of James, (and the playing style of the previously discussed Golden State Warriors) and the rapid adoption of an analytics-driven perspective in coaching, team-building and media coverage, has led to it becoming increasingly marginalized. Now, when an old-school commentator or retired player criticizes LeBron's clutchness, the opinion is met with widespread derision, particularly when it traffics in a rhetoric of emasculation.[67] While this shift is in part a reflection of broader changes in popular discourse about the fluidity of gender identity, and the mainstreaming of concepts like "toxic masculinity," it is supported by the statistical debunking of the style of play most closely associated with traditional gender-based moralizing narratives.

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[66] For an example, see Dan Shanoff, "Choke Defines LeBron's Career," *SBNation.com*, 14 May 2010; for further analysis of choking and emasculation, see: Kevin Arnovitz, "Care, But Don't Cry," *ESPN.com*, 7 March 2011.

[67] See Ethan Sherwood Strauss, "Why LeBron James Always Chokes,'" *ESPN.com*, 26 April 2010; Hunter Felt, "LeBron James Isn't a Choker, So Let's Ditch that Tired Old NBA Narrative," *TheGuardian.com*, 9 June 2014; Zach Phillips, "'Steph Couldn't Win in '96'' Meets 'LeBron is a Choker' in NBA Narrative Finals," *TheKicker.com*, 31 May, 2016; Tony Manfred, "This Nonsensical ESPN Graphic Tells You Everything You Need To Know About The LeBron James 'Choker' Debate," *BusinessInsider.com*, 13 June, 2012.

Statistical analysis does not supersede and marginalize morally determined narratives altogether, but it can make space and offer evidentiary standing for competing narratives whose moral possibilities have yet to be defined. As Hayden White writes, "Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult."[68] The analytics movement is anti-narrative inasmuch as it advances a form of analysis and representation which often denaturalizes the naturalizing effect of already established narratives. Narratives can serve representational roles, but they should not be interpreted as having any evidentiary value as far as proving a particular argument pertaining to "real events." It is at this point that the role of narrative in understanding athletic performance becomes a problem.

Narrative Essentialism, Anti-Narrative Non-Essentialism

The narrativist vs. anti-narrativist divide mirrors a related schism over an essentialist vs. non-essentialist analysis of athletic performance. In relation to modern American sports culture, these intertwined narrativist and essentialist modes have historically played a central role in reifying ideologies of gender conformity, racial difference and white supremacy. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gary Peller argue in an

[68] White, *Content of the Form*, 4.

essay on the so-called Rodney King video, "the realm of interpretation, ideology, and narrative is a critical site in the production of American racial domination."[69]

Popular narratives of the athletic domain as masculine proving ground, combined with essentialist views of the inherent moral superiority of white athletes–who, despite some perceived physical inferiorities were considered harder working, more courageous and more intelligent than their non-white adversaries–rose to prominence during the social tumult of the Progressive era. As scholars such as Gail Bederman and Theresa Runstedtler have detailed, this racist masculinist discourse emerged in large part as a response to white males' anxieties over diminished virility, and the loss of physical dominance over non-white peoples in the United States and around the world. These anxieties were famously crystalized around Jack Johnson's 7-year reign as the first African American World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, and the long quest to find a "Great White Hope" to defeat him. The popular cultural mythology of racialized athletic prowess has–as I will further explore in the next chapter–never been merely "about" the personae of the sporting events or sports genres, out of which particular individual mythologies are crafted. Rather, the history of athletic competition is never far from a sociological narrative about the omnipresence of racialized violence in American culture.

Bederman writes, "The heavyweight's male body was so equated with male identity and power" that Johnson's capturing of the championship belt exploded a

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[69] Crenshaw and Peller, "Reel Time/Real Justice," 57.

"metonymic process of turn-of-the-century manhood," which "constructed bodily strength and social authority as identical," and thus had difficulty reconciling Johnson's perceived social, cultural and biological inferiority due to his race, with his physical mastery of his white opponents.[70] To address this narrative discrepancy, whites turned to biological justifications for Johnson's superiority in the ring. Although it was believed that "he had a weak stomach as well as a [. . .] lack of courage" due to being "bred from a 'lower' species," Johnson's success was attributed in part to a "popular belief, [that] black men possessed thicker skulls and a higher pain threshold than their white counterparts."[71]

Kobena Mercer sheds further light on the essentializing racial politics embedded within the field of play, identifying "sport" as "a key site of white male ambivalence, fear and fantasy."[72] Elaborating on this structuring feeling of ambivalence, (which I would argue is even more central to our present day experience of sports than it was in Johnson's era) Mercer asserts that, "the spectacle of black bodies triumphant in rituals of masculine competition reinforces the fixed idea that black men are 'all brawn and no brains,' and yet, because the white man is beaten at his own game [. . .] the Other is idolized to the point of envy."[73] This ambivalence, and the racist essentializing narratives that produce it, can be clearly discerned in

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[70] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8.
[71] Runstedler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner*, 55.
[72] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 178.
[73] Ibid.

contemporary discussion and evaluation of professional athletic prospects. While none of the major American sports is immune, we see the most explicit and pervasive examples of these racializing masculinist narratives in the ideologically conservative realm of college football and the NFL.[74] A recent informal analysis by Vice Sports about the language used to describe future NFL players during the 2015 draft offers a simple but effective visualization.[75] Compiling every subjective descriptor used by ESPN analysts during three days of continuous coverage of the draft, (15 hours total) author Aaron Gordon and data scientist Eduardo Ariño de la Rubia produced a series of word clouds, which represent the most frequently used words to describe only white players and only black players:

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[74] A number of peer-reviewed studies have examined this issue. See James Rada, "Color Blind-sided: Racial Bias in Network Television's Coverage of Professional Football Games," *Howard Journal of Communications* 7, no. 3 (1996): 231-239; George Cunningham and Trevor Bopp, "Race Ideology Perpetuated: Media Representations of Newly Hired Football Coaches," *Journal of Sports Media* 5, no. 1 (2010): 1-19; Andrew Billings, "Depicting the Quarterback in Black and White: A Content Analysis of College and Professional Football Broadcast Commentary," *Howard Journal of Communications* 15, no. 4 (2010): 201-210.

[75] Gordon, "Here's How Often ESPN Draft Analysts Use the Same Words."

Words only used to describe white players:



Figure 2. *Words Only Used to Describe White Players*, by Eduardo Ariño de la Rubia, from "Here's How Often ESPN Draft Analysts Use the Same Words."

Words only used to describe black players:



Figure 2.1. *Words Only Used to Describe Black Players*, by Eduardo Ariño de la Rubia, from "Here's How Often ESPN Draft Analysts Use the Same Words."

As these word clouds show, racialized essentializing terms like "natural," "gifted," "freak," and "aggressive," were used only to describe black athletes, while only white players were described as "intelligent," "cerebral," "overachiever[s]," and

"workmanlike." Although none of the analysts is claiming that African American players have thicker skulls or lack courage, their descriptors differ in degree rather than in kind from those used to describe Jack Johnson versus various "Great White Hopes" at the turn of the twentieth century. This same linguistic transformation of essentializing racist rhetoric regarding perceived biological difference also extends into the realm of perceived social difference. As Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman forcefully responded to critics who referred to him as a "thug":[76] "The only reason it bothers me is because it seems like it's the accepted way of calling somebody the N-word nowadays. [. . .] Because they know."[77] The second part of Sherman's statement is more subtle but arguably more damning, in that it accuses those who use the term "thug" (broadcasters, media personalities, journalists, bloggers and fans) as aware of the connotations of the term. "They know" that when they say "thug" it is both a linguistic workaround for saying the N-word, and a dog whistle to like-minded individuals.

While the racially essentializing nature of sports discourse is perhaps more immediately legible in the domain of language, it can also be discerned in moving images. The deployment of spectacle GIFs is both a symptom of and reinforcement for such a discourse. These GIFs present feats of raw athleticism and physical

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[76] Sherman, a Super Bowl winning cornerback, is a graduate of Stanford University, where he majored in Communications.

[77] Petchesky, "Richard Sherman Explains What People Mean When They Call Him A 'Thug,'" *Deadspin.com*, 22 January 2014.

mastery, which, while not always solely depicting people of color,[78] fetishize and objectify the athletic body through a racially tinted lens. "Cerebral" and "workmanlike" athletic performances do not generally lend themselves to spectacle, "freakish" and "aggressive" ones do. Moreover, the spectacle obscures the critical ground necessary to recognize and refuse essentializing narratives. Spectacle GIFs beckon us to see and marvel at athletic feats divorced of context, their looping repetition further lulling us into a sense of unquestioning awe.

In contrast, process GIFs are inherently non-essentializing, requiring a degree of critical viewing by the viewer and a willingness to engage with a broader analysis of athletic performance that is irreducible to a particular discrete act. To put it another way, a single process GIF is incapable of boiling down and representing a complex process-based analysis "to its essence." Further, one of the primary uses of the process GIF is in the evaluation and representation of change (or potential for change) in athletic performance over time. They also tend to focus on skills-based details such as body position, footwork and coaching strategy, which are the result of practice and preparation rather than innate physical characteristics. And where process GIFs do emphasize physical characteristics or natural ability, it is often in the service of an analysis of how these qualities are either being maximized by a player, or used to

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[78] This mirrors an argument made by Angela Davis regarding the negative effects on white people of the racially determined expansion of the criminal justice system, beginning in the 1980s with Reagan's "War on Drugs." As Davis frames it, white people caught up by draconian drug laws were victims of a racist system, if not of racism itself. (Angela Davis, in discussion with the author, Winter 2012.)

compensate for a lack of experience.

The "Ethic of Signs" Beyond the Field of Play

To this point I have examined how traditional and quantitative approaches to sports overlap and reflect competing conservative and liberal ideological positions regarding representations of race and gender within the realm of athletic performance. I would now like to shift focus and consider the ways that the sports media assemblage engages with and represents contemporary social, cultural and political issues which may be sports-related, but which exceed the field of play. In particular, I want to highlight the opposed tendencies of the liberal (quantitatively-oriented) and conservative (narratively-oriented) factions of the sports media assemblage to differentiate between, or conflate, "more than sports" issues and the "diegesis" of the athletic contest. At issue is a debate over whether sports media should present its subject in relation to broader social, cultural, political and economic concerns, or if it should focus solely on the game itself and the analogic capacity of sports to represent and advance a range of ideological projects. While my analysis in this section looks beyond the realm of the sports GIF, it is intended to provide a fuller picture of the competing ideological and representational projects from which the process and spectacle GIFs emerge.

In a recent article for *The Ringer* website, writer Bryan Curtis declares that

"the era of 'stick to sports'[79] is over."[80] Written in the immediate aftermath of President Donald J. Trump's first (failed) attempt at a Muslim ban, Curtis notes the broad range of sports journalists weighing in critically on social media as evidence of this change. However, he argues that even more than the radicalizing effect of Trump's presidency on sports journalists, this shift reflects the democratizing effect of sports journalism's migration to the online sphere and away from the rigid hierarchy of the newspaper masthead: "The internet has made everybody into a de facto columnist [. . .] at casually edited content farms, hot-taking[81] is the first thing you get to do."[82] Curtis further argues that the internet has made sportswriting, "once and for all, part of a single, large American subject."[83]

This latter notion implies a newfound acceptance of the integration of sports journalism into broader journalistic subjects, a recognition that to talk about sports means also to talk about politics and economics and social policy. (For instance, as a number of sports journalists noted, Trump's Muslim ban had a direct impact on foreign-born athletes in the United States and on athletes from the United States who

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[79] "Stick to sports" is shorthand for the sentiment conveyed by (mostly) politically conservative sports figures, media personalities, and fans, when their more liberal counterparts speak out on issues of social justice.

[80] Curtis, "The End of 'Stick to Sports.'"

[81] A "hot take" is a comment by a media personality intended to provoke attention and a strong reaction, and is usually offered in rapid response to an event. It is generally understood to be disingenuous and/or unintelligent in nature, and in the world of online media, is derisively labeled as "clickbait."

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

were playing abroad.)[84] The reactionary demand to stick to sports then, is really a demand to focus solely on the field of play. It is an insistence that sports media should engage only with the end product, and that athletes should be represented only through their performance as athletes. It is an insistence that sports media should ignore those intersections where, to borrow the catchphrase of left wing sports journalist Dave Zirin, "sports and politics collide."

Beyond expressing a retrograde and narrow minded conservatism, there is a clear logical and ideological blind spot to this call to "stick to sports." Those who articulate it are either denying, or are unable to see due to its naturalization, the conflation of the "field of play" with hegemonic ideologies of race, gender, class and nationalism. Sports and sports media have rarely stuck to sports, as anyone standing for the national anthem before a game or watching the Blue Angels fly overhead during halftime, can attest. Moreover, as Raymond Gamache argues, because most sports media and sports leagues are the purview of massive multinational corporations, "consumerism, class inequality, and individualism are presented as natural and even benevolent, while political engagement, community values, and antimaterial attitudes are marginalized."[85] What is being objected to in a "stick to

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[84] See Lester Munson, "How Trump's Immigration Ban Might Affect Sports and Athletes' Play," *ESPN.com*, 31 January 2017; Teddy Cutler, "Athletes Exempt from Donald Trump's Travel Ban, Says U.S. Olympic Committee," *Newsweek.com*, January 2017; SB Nation Staff, "Athletes From Multiple Sports React to Donald Trump's Travel Ban," *SBNation.com*, 29 January 2017.

[85] Gamache, "ESPN Assemblage," 73.

sports" argument then, is not the inclusion of the world beyond the game but the explicit reckoning with social realities which puncture the myth of the playing field as a signifier of neoliberal democracy and American meritocratic exceptionalism.

My critique of this myth is not solely directed towards the politics it advances, but to the solemn and self-serious tone and form through which it is conveyed. By presenting sports as a metaphor for military conflict, (and a symbol of the hegemony of democracy and capitalism) representations of the field of play are imbued with the same seriousness of tone accorded to those of the battlefield. The result is a blurring of the signifier (field of play) and the signified (battlefield).

To be sure, this same tone is deployed in liberal-leaning "more than sports" narratives. Stories about Brittany Griner[86] and Michael Sam's[87] refusal to conform to normative classifications of sexuality and gender, and Chris Borland's[88] refusal to conform to the militaristic ideologies of unquestioning loyalty and self-sacrifice that define the culture of the NFL, were somber and serious in tone.[89] However in these

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[86] See Kate Fagan, "Owning the Middle," *ESPN the Magazine*, 29 May 2013.

[87] See Mike Freeman, "NFL Prospect Michael Sam Comes Out as Gay: Big Test Looms for Him, League," *BleacherReport.com*, 9 February 2014.

[88] Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada, "Why Former 49er Chris Borland is the Most Dangerous Man in Football."

[89] Sam was the first openly gay player to be drafted by an NFL team. Griner is not the first openly gay WNBA player, but her superstar status and public articulation of her queer identity thrust her into the public spotlight. Chris Borland, a linebacker for the San Francisco 49ers, retired after a promising rookie year, due to concerns over concussions, CTE, and what he calls the "dehumanizing" effects of playing football. (Ibid.)

narratives, the seriousness of tone is consistent with the subject. For Griner, Sam and Borland, the stakes are high (and in Borland's case, potentially even life-and-death[90]) and they extend beyond the discrete domain of the athletic contest. Moreover, the insistence on visibility for a particular out group or for a counter-hegemonic ideological position, actively transforms the field of play from a site of metaphor to one of actual struggle. Griner's presence on the basketball court and Chris Borland's absence from the football field are not metaphoric or symbolic gestures, they are embodied acts of resistance to entrenched hegemonic ideologies.

The problematic nature of the conflation of signifier and signified in the traditional and conservative representational mode can be understood via Barthes' articulation of an "ethic of signs." Of primary concern to Barthes is what he terms the "intermediate sign [. . .] a degraded spectacle, which is equally afraid of simple reality and of total artifice." What is dangerous here is not spectacle in and of itself, which has value to a society if it "is created to make the world more explicit." Rather, in its "degraded" form, which Barthes calls "reprehensible" and "deceitful," the spectacle "confuse[s] the sign with what is signified."[91]

In the traditional representational mode of sports media we regularly find

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[90] Borland eloquently articulates the grotesque conflation of football's metaphoric capacities and its real world consequences, its blurring of the boundaries between sport and violence: "It's like a spectacle of violence, for entertainment, and you're the actors in it[. . .] . And it's a trivial thing at its core. It's make-believe, really. That's the truth about it." (Ibid.)

[91] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 28.

these types of "intermediate signs," of "degraded spectacles" which equivocate between sober reality and shiny artifice, corrupting both in the process. We see them in the omnipresent conflation of the gridiron with the battlefield and the football player with the soldier.[92] We also see them in the disingenuous moralizing narratives about amateurism (the "student-athlete" competing for the "love of the game") which undergird morally questionable arguments against compensating college athletes for their play.[93]

This latter example makes legible the fact that the "deceit" perpetrated by the production of intermediate signs is often two-fold. Articulating a false equivalency between signifier and signified, these narratives of somber morality also regularly obscure the base economic realities of organized athletics at both the professional and amateur levels. In turn, the diminished stature of the intermediate sign as a result of the analytical turn in sports media, has led, for better and for worse, to an explicit reckoning with these base economic realities. We have entered an age in which everyone, fan and media personality alike, is an "armchair general manager." We have entered an age when all but the most dominant athletes are regularly referred to as "assets" and their value as such is determined by a combination of performance

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[92] See Mark Edmundson, "Football is America's War Game," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 August 2014; Shaun Scott, "How the NFL Sells (and Profits from) the Inextricable Link Between Football and War," *SI.com*, 9 September 2016; Jeb Lund, "Football and the Military: The NFL's Mercenary Marriage of Patriotism and Violence," *Alternet.com*, 13 September 2015.

[93] http://www.ncaa.org/amateurism

and pay-scale.[94]

The effect of the analytical turn in sports media discourse on our perception of and relation to sports and athletes, compels a complex discussion about the representative power of language, and of quantitative analysis to conceal and reveal certain truths about both the field of play and what lies beyond it. Does the abstracting focus on a player's statistical output, on their "measurables," represent a new paradigm of discourse which further dehumanizes and commodifies the athlete? Or does the analytical turn simply lay bare the already existing economic considerations of the sports industrial complex? I have presented a negative picture of the metaphoric uses of the field of play, but it is of course also a site for less fraught aspirational and inspirational metaphors, compelling us to strive for excellence, to persist in the face of long odds and to subsume our egos and collectivize in the achievement of a larger goal. If we primarily engage with athletes and athletic competition as data sets to be interpreted, we potentially diminish the analogic power of sports altogether. However, if we only engage with sports on the realm of metaphor and myth, we risk obscuring issues like economic justice through the deployment of intermediate signs, foreclosing attempts to resist the exploitation of athletes and their labor. Returning to the question of compensation for college athletes, it has only been through the puncturing of the myth of amateurism propagated by the National

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[94] For instance, a slightly better than average player on a below-average contract, is often more highly valued than an all-star caliber player being paid like one.

Collegiate Athletic Association (known by its acronym, NCAA) and the highlighting of the exploitative economic realities of this system, that the struggle for just compensation has moved from the margins to the mainstream.[95]

Clearly, the use of data does not in and of itself guarantee a more just, humane or equitable engagement with the sports domain. Yet, I would argue, the conflation of a liberal and cosmopolitan ideology with the analytical turn in sports media is not a coincidence. It reflects a deeper truth about who constitutes the traditionalist and quantitative factions within the sports media assemblage. Baseball writer Rany Jazayerli succinctly articulates it this way: "The battle was never between the quants and the gut-instinct types, it was between the curious and the incurious."[96] In the curiosity of the curious, we can discern what Ian Baucom calls a "cosmopolitan interestedness," a form of empirical empathy encompassing both the field of play and what lays beyond it.[97]

The *Détourn* GIF

In the previous section I moved beyond the realm of the moving image in order to further analyze the two primary representational and ideological modes

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[95] See Taylor Branch, "The Shame of College Sports," *The Atlantic*, October 2011.

[96] Jazayerli, "The Curious Have Won."

[97] Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 213.

within the sports media assemblage. In this section I will return to the GIF, but will consider a third form of the media which is representative of a satirical counter-discourse within the sports media assemblage. I call this the *détourn* GIF.

The *détourn* GIF takes its name from the practice of *détournement*, a method of "culture jamming" popularized by the Situationists in France in the late 1950s. In a collectively authored 1959 essay, they describe it as "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble" as a means of "negation of the value of the previous organization of expression."[98] The practice of *détournement* serves as a creative and more explicitly political corollary to the critical work Barthes does in *Mythologies*. Artists who employ *détournement* appropriate and reconfigure objects (often media objects) of mass culture, so as to make legible and critique the ideologies they advance. *Détournement* constitutes an act of anti-capitalist jiu-jitsu, turning capitalism's objects and messaging against itself. In the domain of the sports media assemblage, the targets of *détournement* are manifold. And in the GIF, a format which personifies the piratic ethos and ironic tone of a particular sector of the internet, practitioners of *détournement* have a ready-made medium of expression.

If the spectacle GIF and the process GIF reflect competing ideological and rhetorical approaches to understanding athletic performance within the diegesis of the athletic event, the *détourn* GIF regularly extends to the surrounding textual detritus. They are produced through an explicit manipulation of an image's ideological

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[98] Situationist International, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude."

messaging, or through the identification and re-presentation of subtle moments of ideological slippage which inevitably occur amidst endlessly proliferating sports media coverage. In the latter form they often constitute "outtakes," which due to editorial oversight and/or the unpredictability of live broadcasts and sporting events, make it "in." Common versions of this kind of *détourn* GIF may feature moments from the field of play, but also revealing sideline interactions, odd or telling facial expressions by a player, announcer, coach or fan, or a typo or other mistake in the explanatory graphics used by broadcasters. This form of *détourn* GIF regularly documents and displays examples of anti-spectacle, quotidian "tiny slices" in the words of Deadspin editor Ben Mathis-Lilley, "indicative of something larger."[99] By turns humorous, silly, odd, surreal or uncanny, their rhetorical mode is almost uniformly ironic. They puncture and deflate sports' grand narratives by magnifying the permeability of their presentation, its inherent shallowness and superficiality, or by making legible a fundamental contradiction between the narrative and reality. In so doing, *détourn* GIFs can make us aware of the underlying ideologies which produce and are propagated by these narratives.

Due to their subversive intentions, *détourn* GIFs are most commonly found on sports blogs (as well as Reddit and Twitter feeds, and Tumblr pages) which present themselves in opposition to, or at least apart from, the sports industrial complex. The most popular, visible and explicitly oppositional of these blogs is Gawker Media's

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[99] Lyall. "Maker of Animated GIFs Waits for Offbeat Moments."

Deadspin, whose motto is "Sports News without Access, Favor, or Discretion."[100] Launched in 2005 by sports blogger Will Leitch, the site has become, in the words of journalist Charlie Warzel, "a formidable counterweight to the sports media industrial complex of *Sports Illustrated*, ESPN and other players."[101] Deadspin combines aggressive reporting with a healthy dose of sarcasm and disdain, directed towards sports' sacred cows. They rarely "stick to sports" in their reporting, showing a penchant for stories which explicitly highlight the hypocrisy and bad behavior of various individuals and institutions within the sports media assemblage.

Timothy Burke, Deadspin's Video Director, is perhaps the most prolific and visible producer of sports GIFs on the internet. A self-described "media critic" with a graduate-school education, Burke sees his work as a form of "hands-on" critical intervention in the sports media assemblage.[102] He is a prominent creator of *détourn* GIFs, and argues that the format constitutes an "art object."[103] He believes that the specific critical and creative impact of the GIF, as opposed to more traditional moving image forms, is located in the form's default loop: "Video requires a reader's intervention to play, whereas a GIF adds itself forcefully."[104]

A sampling of Burke's *détourn* GIFs illustrate this, particularly those

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[100] Warzel, "Deadspin: An Oral History."
[101] Ibid.
[102] Lyall. "Maker of Animated GIFs Waits for Offbeat Moments."
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.

depicting small and easy-to-miss gestures. Take for instance a *détourn* GIF of an assistant removing the cap of New York Jets wide receiver Percy Harvin's Gatorade bottle, while Harvin, oblivious to the gesture, talks to a coach.[105] The gesture is so subtle that it would hardly have registered when viewed within the flow of the game's telecast. Through the GIF's loop however, the moment is pushed "forcefully" on the viewer and is "forcefully" transformed by it, accumulating layers of meaning with each successive repetition. Burke critiques the unequal valuation of labor, Harvin's inability to see the assistant's work despite being its beneficiary. Moreover, the loop's insistence provides a meta-critique of our own inability to see this inequality, due to its banality and naturalization.

A more dramatic example features a white boxer, his face bloodied and his eyes popping out of his head. He raises and spreads his arms, emitting a full-throated (albeit, silent) battle cry, at which point he is punched so hard in the face by his black opponent that his mouth guard pops out.[106] It is an absurd moment, grotesque and compelling. Yet through Burke's presentation via *détourn* GIF, the image obtains the quality of a spectacle "created to make the world more explicit."[107] It pushes us to reflect on notions of racialized toxic masculinity and acts as a sharp repudiation of boxing's racist grand narrative of great white hopes.

In other works Burke's critique is even more explicit, often making use of text

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[105] http://gph.is/2oRJMdS

[106] http://gph.is/2oKRji0

[107] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 28.

located outside the GIF's frame. We see this in a 2014 Deadspin blog post entitled "The NHL Believes Strongly In Player Safety."[108] The post features no text, just a single GIF depicting hockey player Brandon Prust, a forward for the Montreal Canadiens, ripping the helmet off of Washington Capitals forward Liam O'Brien and punching O'Brien twice on the side and back of his head. As he does so, a referee skates in from the bottom left of the frame and looks on without intervening. The brutally sarcastic title and brutally violent image combine to lay bare the hypocrisy of the NHL's stated commitment to player safety, even as it sanctions and naturalizes bare knuckled fighting.

Timothy Burke is something of an anomaly in that he represents the rare case of a known and acknowledged sports GIF author. One who not only creates GIFs for the readership of his posts on a widely-respected sports journalism site, but who has also taken the time to formulate a critical media "project" that drives the creation and dissemination of many of his GIFs. By contrast the vast majority of the *détourn* GIFs on the web are produced and disseminated both anonymously and collectively, emerging from a confluence of online political discourse, opportunity, gamesmanship and a low tolerance for institutional hypocrisy and/or capitalist appropriation of internet culture.

Perhaps the most notable recent example of this type of collective production

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[108] http://screengrabber.deadspin.com/the-nhl-believes-strongly-in-player-safety-1644603372

is a cycle of explicitly anti-capitalist *détourn* GIFs, which emerged out of a viral marketing campaign to promote the 30th iteration of the football video game *Madden NFL*, *Madden NFL '15*.[109] In the week following the August 2014 release of the game, *Madden NFL* maker Electronic Arts launched the "Madden Giferator" website.[110] The Madden Giferator allows users to produce GIFs featuring a video game avatar of an NFL player (with multiple players from each team) against a selection of customizable backgrounds, including among others, an NFL stadium, a lightning storm, a close up of sizzling bacon and an American flag. Once a user has chosen an avatar and a background, they are able to add text to their GIF. In an advertisement headlined in all caps "GIF YOUR RIVAL IN THE FACE," Electronic Arts describes the Giferator this way:

> The Madden GIFERATOR is a highly sophisticated NFL GIF engine. Our aggressive, bleeding edge technology fuses live NFL data with Madden NFL 15 footage to kick out real-time GIF highlights for every game, all season long. The result is an ever-growing arsenal of customizable GIFs football fans can hurl in the face of their rivals.[111]

As the ad copy states, the idea behind the Giferator is for fans of teams to make GIFs as a digital form of "talking smack" directed at fans of rival teams.

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[109] Know Your Meme, "Madden Giferator."

[110] The "Giferator" site is still live, and can be accessed here: http://giferator.easports.com/create/team

[111] http://i2.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/825/405/750.png

Recognizing the potential for users to produce GIFs featuring sexist, racist or otherwise obscene text, or to make mention of the NFL's ongoing concussion scandal, a number of words are disallowed by Electronic Arts.[112] As the following screengrab shows, attempts to use these words results in a red highlight across the text and a caption stating "illegal use of words," (perhaps a reference to the NFL penalty, "Illegal use of hands") and the Giferator will not generate the GIF.

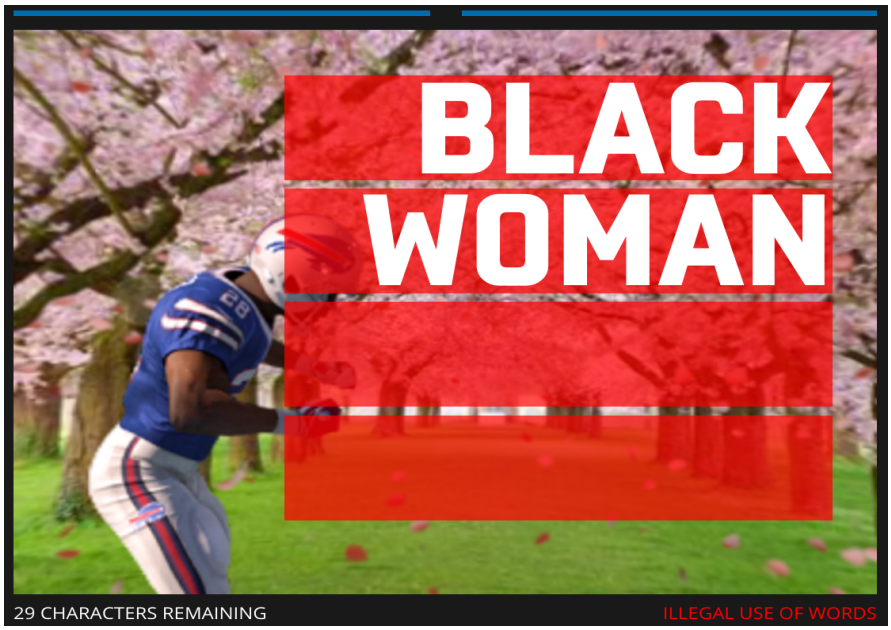


Figure 2.2. "Black Woman," Screenshot from Madden Giferator. Screenshot by author.

[112] These include not only obscenities and terms for male and female genitalia, but also any reference to non-male caucasian identity. The words "man" and "white" are allowed, but "woman," "female," "girl," "her," "Mexican," "black," "African," "latino," "arab," "muslim," "jew," and "Israel" are all considered "illegal use of words." While the desire to prohibit usage of these terms as insults is admirable, referring to them as "illegal" reflects an unfortunate blind spot regarding Electronic Arts' own use of words.

Despite the prohibitions on language, users of the Giferator came up with an array of subversive captions for their GIFs, including references to other memes, absurdist humor and more explicitly political slogans. Against a backdrop of football player avatars running, catching, flexing and celebrating, slogans like "HYPERMASCULINITY IS A LIMITING NARRATIVE,"[113] "BRING DOWN THE PATRIARCHY,"[114] "TRAUMATIC HEMATOMAS DEMENTIA PUGILISTICA,"[115] and "OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM IS HORRIBLY FLAWED,"[116] circulated on message boards and blogs around the internet. In addition to these various captions, a substantial number of users began producing GIFs which explicitly critiqued capitalism,[117] and adapted famous communist slogans such as "SEIZE THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION,"[118] and "LABOR IS ENTITLED TO ALL IT PRODUCES."[119] The circulation of these anti-capitalist *détourn* GIFs reached enough of a critical mass, that Electronic Arts added "capitalism"[120] and "socialism" (though interestingly, not "communism"[121]) to its list of illegal words.

Where Burke's more subtle "negating" intervention is usually dependent on

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[113] http://gph.is/2oLHosg
[114] http://gph.is/2oaLiIk
[115] http://gph.is/2o7Mhcg
[116] http://gph.is/2pbVijN
[117] http://gph.is/2nWeVw1
[118] http://gph.is/2oShMH0
[119] http://gph.is/2oM3TgN
[120] http://gph.is/2o7L7x7
[121] http://gph.is/2oM5kMd

the GIF's loop to reveal and amplify counter-hegemonic meaning within existing media,[122] the Madden GIFs rely on a juxtaposition of images embodying hetero-normative capitalist patriarchy, with slogans that directly contradict and undermine those ideologies. The GIF's looping animation is secondary to the act of montage as a means of *détournement*. Regardless of methodology however, both sets of GIFs are immanently concerned with critiquing the hegemonic ideologies of the sports media assemblage. Unlike the spectacle and process GIFs, the representation of athletic performance is ancillary. In this regard, *détourn* GIFs have more in common with non-sports usages of the format such as the reaction GIF. They are not so much media "about" sports, but media "about" sports media.

The Loop

I'd now like to further consider the quality of the loop in regards to the spectacle and process GIFs. How does repetition operate in these two representational and rhetorical forms? What is the loop's relationship to the ideological projects these GIFs represent? Secondarily, how does the loop differ from other forms of image

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[122] Burke's atomizing and amplifying process recalls the work of Austrian experimental filmmaker Martin Arnold, whose seminal works, *Pièce Touchée* (1989) and *Passage à l'acte* (1993) loop clips from Golden Age Hollywood films in order to tease out their underlying ideological projects. Film scholar Scott MacDonald could be describing Burke's GIFs, when he asserts that Arnold's work, "lays bare the politics of a conventional media moment." ("Sp... Sp... Spaces of Inscription," 3.)

manipulation, such as slow motion or the use of freeze frames?

In the process GIF, the loop serves as a simple solution to a basic conundrum for analysts and scholars of moving images. How do we study (and illustrate for readers) the moving image in its "native" articulation, which is to say, in motion? Andrea Hammer elegantly sums up the fundamental difficulty of this task in an article about the nature of sound, which I would contend similarly applies to the moving image. The problem, in the words of Hammer, is that the moving image object can only be "apprehended as it decays."[123] We can perch atop a photograph, our eyes interrogating its contours and shapes until the image elicits (or we project upon it) some meaning. We can endlessly scan a dense line of text, laying obediently in place on the page or screen, as we sort out its knotty syntax or complex ideas. We cannot however, take as much time as we please when studying the subtle kick of silent film comedienne Mabel Normand's leg as she pulls along a lion on a leash, believing it to be a dog.[124] And while we can perhaps grasp the mechanics, we cannot experience the astounding quickness of Steph Curry's silky 3-pointer–from dribble to release in .4 seconds[125]–by studying it in slow-motion.[126] Our experience of these physical acts, is our experience of their absence, apprehended as they decay. If we truly want to study them and to experience them, we must do so at their time signature, at their pace.

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[123] Hammer, "Audible Evidence: On Listening to Places."

[124] http://gph.is/2ox1S7g

[125] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOiH1eVCggw

[126] http://gph.is/2o4tWM4

Moving images can be slowed down and moving images can be frozen, but this manipulation of time signature fundamentally transforms them, makes them into different objects of study.

I am not arguing here for a "natural speed" of the moving image, and the slowing down or freezing of moving images can be useful ways of studying them. However these types of manipulations can also alter our understanding of the actions being depicted. A notable example of the effect of such manipulations on viewers is the frame-by-frame deconstruction by defense attorneys, of the Rodney King video. The distorting representational tactic, which Avital Ronell has argued "refigure(d) the violence to which King was submitted," destabilized the perceived meaning of the visual evidence and the jury's perception of the intentions of the four officers beating the prone and subdued King.[127] The exoneration of the officers in the first trial was due in no small part to this manipulation of the video, transformed from an uninterrupted moving image to a set of discrete and disconnected still images.

Conversely, a 2016 study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences* showed that the use of slow motion in representations of visual evidence in death penalty cases actually increased jurors perceptions of "perceived intent."[128] While recognizing that the use of slow motion was "intuitively appealing" because it gives "people 'a better look' at real-time events that happened quickly or in a chaotic

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[127] Ronell, "Trauma TV," 64.

[128] Caruso, Burns and Converse, "Slow Motion Increases Perceived Intent."

environment," researchers "demonstrate(d) that slow motion replay, compared with regular speed replay, produces systematic differences in judgments of intent."[129] In a capital case, this can mean the difference between a verdict of first or second degree murder, and thus, in many American jurisdictions, life or death for the individual on trial. Returning to the lower stakes of the field of play, the study found a similar correlation regarding perceived intent in the case of helmet to helmet hits in football, which can directly impact player suspensions, fines, and the outcome of games and seasons.[130]

Ultimately, what we seek to understand about a particular moving image plays a central role in how best to study it. It matters immensely how we define what constitutes an "accurate" depiction or indexical representation of physical movement and gesture by the moving image. For the sake of this discussion, I propose that we consider the most "accurate" depiction to be the one in which the movement in question unfolds as close to the same speed and temporality as we would experience it if we had watched it live. Put another way, if it takes Steph Curry .4 seconds to get his three point shot off, then the most "accurate" footage representing the indexical trace of this shot would also last .4 seconds.

Returning now to the problem of apprehending the moving image as it decays, the process GIF seeks to address this issue through a basic tactic: repetition. The

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[129] Ibid., 9250.

[130] Ibid., 9251.

formal quality of the GIF offers us a simple, and perhaps more importantly, an uninterrupted method for working our way through a quick, complex or subtle gesture or movement. Unable to grasp the particular mechanics of how Minnesota Vikings quarterback Teddy Bridgewater, in the process of being tackled to the ground, was able to flip the ball to running back Adrian Peterson?[131] You can watch for it next time around. Now wondering how Peterson was able to break away from two nearby defenders to get in to the open field? You can see for yourself in 3 . . . 2 . . . 1.

While this might seem like a minor development–it requires little effort to hit the replay button–it has a substantial effect on the viewing experience. The seamless repetition of the GIF makes possible an uninterrupted engagement with the movement it depicts, allowing for a more full immersion into the diegesis of the moving image. The eye requires no retraining or refocusing, and via the loop the viewer is gradually taught how to look at, and what to look for, in the image. The viewing experience becomes one of continuity rather than one of interruption and disruption. A single movement or gesture is made endless, without destroying its tempo.

This has particular value given the average length of the athletic performances depicted in the process GIF. A movement which in "real time" might last four seconds, can now be experienced as lasting 40 seconds or 40 minutes. The brevity of the GIF and its looping ability complement each other in such a way as to produce this sense of continuity. So too does the absence of sound, which can be much harder

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[131] http://gph.is/2o4qxwR

to orchestrate. Repeated sounds are as likely to produce a sense of distraction and abstraction as one of continuity. Where a seamless image loop draws the viewer in, a corresponding sound loop instead draws our attention to the stutter. It disrupts the diegesis of the loop, the signifier becomes decoupled from the signified, and like a word repeated over and over, the sound begins to lose all meaning.

In the process GIF, the continuity and rhythm of the loop encourages a close and focused reading of the depicted movement. The relative mundanity of what is being depicted compels an active form of viewership, in that the intended purpose of the GIF can only be discerned through an engagement with a larger argument or analysis. We look “at” the process GIF, and then we look “through” it to the larger analytical project. The unremarkable movement's articulation as GIF doesn't “make sense” without being placed in a larger context, but when encountered within this context, the GIF's loop offers substantial use value to a close reading of what is being depicted.

In the spectacle GIF, the looping quality produces the same type of immersion in the diegesis as in the process GIF. However in this representational mode– operating in the narrativist and essentialist realm of the mythological–the GIF's loop encloses and anaesthetizes the viewer, discouraging rather than demanding further critical analysis. Here we look “at” the spectacle GIF and all we see is what it shows us then and there. There is nothing to be learned or gained from looking “through” it. Its sole purpose is to overwhelm us and pleasure us through its depiction of

spectacular athleticism. Its *raison d'étre* is immediately legible–"Look at that person do that physically difficult thing!"–and thus encourages a passive and uncritical viewing experience. We watch because it feels good to watch. And we watch again, because A) it feels good to watch again B) we seek a deeper understanding and comprehension of, and familiarity with, the movement's particular and unique brand of spectacle, and C) the onus is on the viewer to disrupt the loop, it does not stop unless we take action against it. The tyranny of the loop requires our complicity.

The Highlight, the Gif, and the Digital Commons

In an article on the sports highlight, Raymond Gamache offers a genealogy of the form, "from film actualities to newsreels to network television."[132] He argues that each of these periods represent a distinct stage in the evolution of the highlight: "the film period is marked by formative concerns of production and distribution; the newsreel period by the refinement of visual, sound and editing techniques; and the early network television period by imaginative story-telling and myth-making."[133] The article only superficially mentions the status of the highlight in the contemporary online media landscape, but Gamache devotes a chapter to the subject in his 2010 book, *A History of Sports Highlights: Replayed Plays from Edison to ESPN*. Turning

[132] Gamache, "Genealogy of the Sportscast Highlight," 78.
[133] Gamache, "Genealogy of the Sportscast Highlight," 83.

from the evolution of the form to its impact on our evolution as media consumers, he argues that viewers seamless adaptation to a fragmented and non-contiguous online sports media landscape reflects "a generation nurtured on highlights, instant replays, and more cable versions of ESPN than there were broadcast networks for the generation that preceded it."[134] Perhaps because it was written in the years prior to the GIF's cultural re-ascendance, Gamache does not mention the format (or any other type of looping, user-produced and user-circulated media) in relation to the highlight.[135] How then might we theorize the nature of this relationship?

A cursory reflection on the sports GIF's relationship to the sports highlight, might lead us to think about it in genetic or evolutionary terms, in which the latter begets the former amidst a radically changing media landscape. As I discussed earlier, the spectacle GIF serves a similar synecdochic function to the highlight, distilling a game's central narrative. Yet I think a more accurate metaphor would be to think of the highlight as a kind of organ donor for the sports GIF. It gives the sports GIF life, (makes it legible, offers a basic representational framework) yet like a borrowed liver or kidney, is at constant risk of rejection due to its alien nature. The transplant requires a DNA match, but the donor and recipient are fundamentally different entities. The user-determined, fair-use, piratical circulation of the GIF stands in sharp

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[134] Gamache, "A History of Sports Highlights," 178.

[135] Gamache's exclusion of the sports GIF is not unique. A survey of the literature reveals no published scholarship on the sports GIF, let alone its relationship to the highlight.

contrast to the copyrighted, uni-directional distribution model (from commercial entity to consumer) of the highlight. This is coupled with formal differences that limit the GIF's capacity to fully operate in the mode of a traditional highlight, or conversely, give the GIF (and its users) a degree of autonomy from total incorporation into the sports media industrial complex.

Author Charles Hirshberg describes a "good highlight" as "at once a poetic distillation of athleticism and a carnival barker's holler for your attention, a shameless effort to keep you from pressing that damned remote."[136] Hirshberg's articulation of the two primary aspects of the highlight, as evocative athletic essence and as hailing apparatus for the interpellation of consumers, serves as a nice encapsulation of the form. Highlights are by definition excerpts, yet within the context of local news broadcasts, cable sports networks such as ESPN and Fox Sports, and game recaps on blogs and websites, they are presented as the primary media text. More often than not, highlights are presented in compilation form, as part of a "highlight package" or "highlight reel." Highlight packages can include highlights from the same game, and/ or combine highlights from all of the day's games in one sport, or even multiple sports. In other iterations such as sports documentaries or retrospectives, highlight reels can depict a broader temporal scope, such as the greatest moments in an athlete's career, or a chronicle of a team's march to a championship.

As I argued during my discussion of representations of the seventh game of

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[136] Hirshberg, *ESPN 25*, 12.

the 2016 NBA finals, the formal qualities of the GIF render diegetic linear incorporation into a highlight package difficult. When they are presented collectively, such as in a game recap, GIFs of each play generally occupy different windows within a webpage, embedded down the vertical length of the page, and are often bisected by text. While GIFs will occasionally contain more then one play, their looping repetition tends to compliment brevity and the illustration of a single action, even if this single action is made up of multiple shots. The most effective GIFs loop in such a way that the reset feels almost seamless, like the closing line of a chorus in a pop song, which also serve as its opening line. Before you realize it, you are singing along again . . . and again. In this way, although the GIF format is well-suited as a container for a single highlight and compels repeated viewing via the loop, it does not lend itself to the highlight reel.

A related formal distinction between the highlight and the sports GIF is the absence of sound in the latter. This renders impossible the presentation of extra-imagistic context via synched audio of the game, live announcing or voiceover recorded in post-production. As Gamache points out, the audio of the highlight package is where the "meaning context" is produced, where the "reconstituted narrative guides the viewer to the correct interpretation and feeling state."[137] This central role of audio means that the production of meaning context takes place almost entirely outside of the frame. Yet the dividing line between the diegetic and the extra-

[137] Gamache, "Genealogy of the Sportscast Highlight," 83.

diegetic is enforced and maintained by the GIF's form. Therefore, the form of the sports GIF forecloses attempts to seamlessly suture the image to its preferred hegemonic contextualization.

The confluence of these differences in format and the opposing ideological discourses surrounding their creation and dissemination, position the GIF as a direct threat to the highlight in ways above and beyond the evolutionary dynamic of a new media form supplanting the old. As opposed to the highlight, which reinforces hegemonic ideologies, the GIF's lack of an author/owner, its unruly origins and its refusal of incorporation, directly challenge the near-total corporate control of the sports media assemblage. In the object of the GIF the assertion of proprietary control by sports leagues and affiliated media companies comes in direct conflict with an online community built on an ethos of fair-use and remix culture.

Like any other media form, the sports GIF is neither inherently liberal or conservative, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. As I have shown, sports GIFs can be used to reinforce and perpetuate entrenched ideological narratives of race, gender and class; they can broaden or mitigate those narratives as part of a project of quantitative analysis; and they can be used to directly confront the capitalist ideologies which undergird both of these positions within the sports media assemblage. Yet I am in agreement with Jane Hu, when she argues that "The true GIF celebrates imperfection, where flickers and flawed loops maintain the possibility of something different —

something alive — entering the picture."[138]

Regardless of the ideology of its maker, the GIF stands as a paradigmatic form of what Hito Steyerl famously terms the "poor image," defying "patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright."[139] They are pixelated, grainy, soundless, partial, "the contemporary Wretched of the Screen," representing "the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism."[140] Identifying the "contemporary hierarchy of images" as being rooted in the quality of "resolution," Steyerl equates the poor image to a more ambivalent[141] form of Cuban director Julio García Espinosa's concept of "imperfect cinema."[142] Where Espinosa argues that "perfect cinema–technically and artistically masterful–is almost always reactionary cinema," imperfect cinema, in the words of Steyerl, "insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist [. . .] blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author."[143] Translated to the realm of the sports media assemblage, the perfect cinema represents the "perfect broadcast" and "perfect

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[138] Hu, "GIF Typologies and the Heritage of the Moving Image."

[139] Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image."

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ambivalent, in that poor images are not always counter-hegemonic in nature, (as the constant and proliferating stream of pop-ups, banner ads, and junk email in our inbox, can attest) and circulate over broadband signals and social media and file sharing networks fully imbricated with capital.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

highlight." They are high-definition, visually and aurally loud, tightly edited, and spectacularize entrenched hegemony. Imperfect cinema is represented by the sports GIF, which even in spectacle form is low-resolution, diminutive, fragmented and leveling.

As poor images then, despite a lack of an inherent politics, GIF's are nevertheless difficult to recuperate by capitalist interests. The anachronistic sports GIF's popularity represents a contradiction for traditional sports media producers, operating within a resolution-based media hierarchy. The format's limitations complicate hegemonic ideological appropriation of the GIF using existing tactics, (high-definition image, use of sound, incorporation into a polished package) thus serving as a bulwark against total corporate control of the production and circulation of sports media. The sports GIF serves as both metaphor and object lesson for the struggle between the preservation of the commons and its commodification, with the loop reminding us that this struggle is an essential conflict of capitalism, past, present and future. The tyranny of the loop demands our resistance.

2

"What You Want Me to Be":

Representing Muhammad Ali, 1970 to the Present

"Us and Him"

In the final scene of Bill Siegel's documentary *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* (2014), journalist and Ali chronicler Robert Lipsyte makes the following observation about perceptions of the boxer: "There's so many ways of looking at him that have only to do with us, and have nothing to do with him."[1] Lipsyte is correct in identifying this act of projection as a central characteristic of representations of Ali, but who exactly is the "us" to whom he refers? The film audience? White liberals? That slippery category known as the "American public?" Conversely, which "Ali" is he speaking of? The irrepressible young man who won the gold medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics? The outspoken black nationalist and anti-war activist reviled by the white establishment?[2] Or the quiet shuffling figure who lit the torch at the 1996

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[1] Siegel, *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*.

[2] While the term "white establishment" is imprecise and reductive, (Ali was certainly reviled by many economically and socially marginalized whites, as well as many middle-class, "assimilated" blacks) it likely reflects how Ali himself perceived the hegemonic forces arrayed against him.

Atlanta Olympics, becoming, in the words of Gerald Early, the "Great American Martyr"?[3]

Making legible the multiple, fluid and historically determined nature of these categories "us" and "him," this chapter will trace the evolution of popular narratives about Muhammad Ali and his social, cultural and political legacy. It will do so through analysis of a selection of documentary films about the boxer, as well as a series of television commercials featuring Ali.[4] Spanning five decades–from the early 1970s, until just a few years before Ali's death in 2016–each work offers a snapshot of the particular historical moment in which it was made, the mode and tenor of its dominant political discourses and representational practices.

My reading of these films and commercials consists of two overlapping lines of inquiry: an analysis of dominant narratives about Ali and their relationship to media about the boxer; and a consideration of the interplay between these works and the archival moving images of Ali which they either incorporate or exclude. In the first, I argue that in addition to offering us a historical snapshot of their moments of production, these works played an important role in reflecting, propagating and/or producing an evolving and contested set of popular narratives about Ali. Of particular emphasis is the role played by documentaries and television commercials in a dramatic narrative and ideological shift in popular discourses about Ali from his

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[3] Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, vii.

[4] This includes commercials featuring Ali in person, and ads deploying archival footage of the boxer.

(relative) cultural marginalization during the 1980s, to his triumphant return to the spotlight in the 1990s.

In the second line of inquiry I offer an analysis of the relationship between archival moving images related to Ali and documentaries and commercials featuring the boxer. This entails both how archival materials are incorporated into (or excluded from) these works, and how they sometimes "resist" or undermine this incorporation. By focusing on the relationship between the archival document and the documentary and commercial, I show the ways in which these appropriating works negotiate Ali's complex historical legacy in the service of a given ideological project. I analyze why some films successfully appropriate footage of the boxer, while in others, Ali's archival "performance" opposes or exceeds these ideological projects.[5]

Approaching my topic through a theorization of documentary and commercial narratives in relation to Ali's archival performances, I complicate the reductive nature of contemporary discourse about what constitutes a "correct" understanding of the fighter's political legacy. While my critique focuses on the dominant liberal narrative of Ali's legacy, my broader concern is that debate over whether Ali should be framed as a liberal icon or a radical one obscures other ways of thinking about him. I am

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[5] Throughout this chapter, I will use the term performance to describe Ali's depiction in archival moving images. In so doing I am insisting that we think about these materials in terms of Ali's agency as an on-screen performer. The wealth of archival moving images depicting Ali is not some lucky stroke of history, but to a great extent reflected Ali's desire for public visibility and his capacity to realize that desire through a compelling performance.

arguing for an encounter with Ali which, heeding Lipsyte's observation, has "something to do with him" instead of using debate over the boxer's legacy to simply hash out competing ideologies. This is not meant to de-politicize Ali's legacy, but to understand those politics as fluid, inconsistent, changeable and not limited to explicit actions or statements.

Highlighting the contingent and historically determined nature of prominent narratives about Ali, my analysis of selected "Ali docs" and "Ali ads" is presented (mostly) chronologically, organized in such a way that it reflects the various stages of Ali's life and career. Yet in order to more fully contextualize and historicize these chronological textual readings, some further critical work is required. I begin by offering a brief overview of the evolution of popular narratives about Ali and their relationship to contemporaneous documentaries and commercials featuring the boxer, focusing on the period between his retirement from the ring up to the present day. This overview includes an analysis of Ali's current status as a signifier for the triumph of liberal racial politics in America, and the ways in which this status is complicated by his archival performances. Next, I argue for an approach to archival materials featuring Ali, which treats them not simply as historical evidence, but as constituting a "body of work," a collection of the boxer's on-camera performances both in and out of the ring. This approach is situated in the overlapping histories of boxing and theatrical performance, which Ali channeled and ultimately transcended. Having laid this groundwork, I then offer a close reading of a selection of "Ali docs" and

commercials and their relationship to footage of the boxer. Through these readings, I identify a problematic shift in how documentaries (and commercials) have historically represented the boxer and deployed archival footage depicting him. I conclude the chapter by calling for a reconsideration of earlier Ali documentaries which are less burdened by entrenched grand narratives, and are thus able to offer models for a more speculative engagement with the boxer.

Iterations of Ali

Muhammad Ali is perhaps most closely associated with the decade of the 1960s, yet the first feature length documentary about him was not released in the United States until 1970.[6] By this point, dominant opposing narratives of the boxer were well established across racial and political lines. Ali was, in the words of author Dave Kindred, "the world's most famous man," both in spite of and because of his 1967 ban from boxing for refusing military induction.[7] Idolized by both the civil rights and antiwar Left,[8] he was reviled by much of mainstream white America.

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[6] Photographer and filmmaker William Klein made two short documentaries about Ali in the 1960s, a French production from 1964 *Cassius le grand* and a 1969 film *Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee*. His later feature *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest* (1974) is an amalgamation of these earlier films, combined with footage from Ali's 1974 title-winning bout with George Foreman in "The Rumble in the Jungle." (O'Rawe, "Eclectic Dialectics," 56.)

[7] Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 128,130.

[8] See Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 128; and Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*, 122-123.

Articulating these latter sentiments, a Florida Congressman named Claude Pepper railed against Ali on the floor of the house, asserting that: "If any one individual contributed to the contagious disrespect for law and love of country, then it would have to be our deposed fighting king."[9] The three documentaries made about the boxer during the 1970s reflect the complexities of Ali's fame and notoriety. Produced by sympathetic left-leaning filmmakers, they nevertheless portray Ali as a racially and politically divisive figure, a controversial symbol of the immense social changes taking place in the United States and abroad.

That symbolic importance was diminished in the 1980s, a result of, among other things, Ali's retirement from boxing, his turn away from radical left politics, broader shifts in the cultural and political landscape, financial difficulties and the onset of Parkinson's. These factors resulted in an absence of documentary projects produced about Ali during the decade and an almost complete lack of attention paid to this period by later documentarians. Still famous, his cultural and political relevance had nevertheless waned, and in need of cash, Ali fell back on one of his non-pugilistic gifts, his charisma. He became a television pitchman, selling a range of products from stereo equipment, to hash browns, to motor oil, usually with the tagline, "It's the greatest!"

Ali's fortunes were revived in the 1990s. In the midst of the golden age of hip-hop and liberal multiculturalist rhetoric, he was reclaimed as a hero of the civil rights

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[9] Bingham and Wallace, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight*, 194

movement. This turn of fortune was due in no small part to the release of Leon Gast's Academy Award winning documentary, *When We Were Kings*. However the boxer's earlier outspoken anger at the white establishment was now subsumed by his shaking and diminished form,[10] an image made indelible by his lighting of the 1996 Olympic torch. Ali's reemergence, stricken with Parkinson's disease, marked the beginning of a sharp shift in the relationship between the man and his legacy, and the mainstream cultural and political establishment. As scholar Michael Ezra contends, this changing relationship reflected "a full-blown movement to canonize" Ali, casting him "as a standard bearer of American values and the embodiment of the best things this country has to offer."[11]

Rather than hindering him, Ali's illness made possible this drastic change. His physical vulnerability disassociated him from the radicalism of his youth and made him sympathetic to mainstream Americans. Jodi Melamed identifies "the rise of liberal multiculturalism" in the 1980s and 1990s as a de-radicalizing intervention in racial politics in the Unites States.[12] It constituted a "second phase of postwar race-liberal hegemony," whereby "racial justice" came to be framed in terms of "cultural integration" rather than a restructuring of power relations or a redistribution of

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[10] http://gph.is/2sL5Bhz

[11] Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*, 137.

[12] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, xix.

wealth.[13] The diminished and de-radicalized Ali became a symbol for this new phase of "race-liberal hegemony."

Whether an act of integration, reconciliation, appropriation or exploitation, this accelerated in the 21st century when Ali's condemnation of the 9/11 terrorists, coupled with his call for peace and understanding towards Muslims, further cast him as a kind of liberal pacifist patriot. In 2005, in the throes of the Iraq war, this 180-degree turn was cemented when president George W. Bush awarded Muhammad Ali (and Ali accepted) the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The media component of this shift included an explosion of documentaries about the boxer. Most of these films presented this new perception of Ali as a form of narrative resolution and of moral closure. Ali's story, resolved via his liberal redemption, was now framed teleologically as the inevitable triumph of American democracy.

The ongoing "canonization" of Ali positions him as both a survivor of America's "past" racism and a symbol of collective national transcendence of that past. In this regard, Ali's legacy echoes that of his predecessor Jackie Robinson, whose "body-image," Alessandra Raengo has argued, became shorthand for America's nascent "integration story."[14] However where Robinson's body-image symbolized the tip of integration's spear in a postwar America still seven years from Brown v. Board of Education, the metonymic significance of Ali as embodiment of

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[13] Ibid., xix, 116.

[14] Raengo, "A Necessary Signifier," 2.

liberal progress and American exceptionalism emerged long after his career had ended. This emergence followed years of relative symbolic insignificance, preceded by a period when Ali was understood by much of the white establishment to embody the anti-white and segregationist tenets of the Nation of Islam.

The racial symbolism of Ali's body-image stands on less firm historical ground than Robinson's, but is also capable of escaping historical periodization in a way that Robinson's legacy has not. In turn, Ali's body-image has been transformed into a changeable signifier of ahistoricized and decontextualized notions of racial justice and social equality. The result has been a de-radicalizing liberalization of the boxer's legacy, a turn many attribute to Ali's fourth wife, Lonnie, and to Ali's literal inability to speak for himself.[15]

The current perception of Muhammad Ali embodying liberal triumph over racial injustice is inextricable from the dominant post-Olympics narrative of his life. Offering a redemption story that is affirmational and legible to a wide audience, it is omnipresent in most Ali documentaries made after 1996. Ali's archival presence however, does not always support this narrative. Agreeing with scholar Joshua Malitsky that "visual documents often resist full incorporation into the documentary argument or narrative," I contend that in the space of the archive we can begin to

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[15] See Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon,* 164-166; Zirin, *The Muhammad Ali Handbook*, 367-368; Reed, *The Complete Muhammad Ali*, 17, 71-72, 78.

locate the limits of this narrative, and thus begin to conceive of its transcendence.[16] An intervention of this kind usually requires identifying what Jaimie Baron calls "intentional disparity" in a documentary, the difference between the "original" intent of a piece of archival media (or as I argue, the intent of the individual–here Muhammad Ali–appearing in front of the camera) and the often conflicting intent of the film in which it appears.[17] When considering some films, our identification of "intentional disparity" constitutes an act of resistance against a documentary's intended narrative or ideology. Yet as Malitsky points out, within the genre of the sports documentary films often make "use of this tension [. . .] to provide a space for individual expression," thus highlighting the singularity of their subject.[18]

While assessing the motive of a particular documentarian in using a specific piece of Ali footage is important to my analysis, doing so is secondary to a consideration of the ways in which Ali's archival performances make legible the limits of a set of overarching narratives about the boxer which underly the majority of Ali docs. Through an analysis of Ali's archival performances across (and excluded from) a range of documentaries, I begin to construct a radical counter-discourse situated in the boxer's corporeal form, which is dynamic, laden with paradox and irreducible to the prevailing liberal multiculturalist narrative of America's slow but

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[16] Malitsky, "Knowing Sports: The Logic of the Contemporary Sports Documentary," 209.

[17] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 111.

[18] Malitsky, "Knowing Sports: The Logic of the Contemporary Sports Documentary," 209.

steady march to a more just and equitable society. This counter-discourse identifies the persistent structural and economic inequalities that the young Ali railed against, and which are not sufficiently articulated by a narrative of liberal progress. More broadly, I am also engaging a set of questions about historicization, narrative, ideology, affect and performance, posed at the intersection of the document and the documentary.

Ali's Body-image of Work

Muhammad Ali's exceptionalism begat a social, cultural and political omnipresence that is global in scale, and has endured for more than half a century. In the public spotlight since he was a teenager, Ali was widely documented throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century, particularly in the years between his 1964 triumph over Sonny Liston and (in what is considered his last great fight) his 1975 defeat of Joe Frazier. This omnipresence has resulted in a robust collection of moving and still images, many of which have found their way into the various documentary projects about the boxer. The ubiquitousness of archival images of Ali, and the ubiquitousness of documentaries which make use of these images, offers an expansive and temporally diverse set of objects through which to consider the tensions between the two, alongside the changing mediations of Ali.

Surveying this robust collection of media, particularly Ali's on-screen performances from the 1960s through the mid-1980s,[19] one is repeatedly struck by the boxer's destabilizing and idiosyncratic charisma. Be it the dynamic articulation of dynamic thoughts, (variously pointed, incisive, fanciful, playful and surreal) the jitterbug cadence and tone of his speech, his facial expressions, (by turns, utterly sincere then utterly performative) or the way he moves both in and out of the ring, (loose and bouncy but also deliberate, and before the Parkinson's, always perfectly balanced and precise) there is something uncanny and thus compelling about Muhammad Ali. He seems to buzz and hum at a higher frequency than those around him, conveying both otherworldliness and a sense of bemusement (or when talking about injustice, frustration) at the inability of others to keep up. These archival performances constitute a kaleidoscope of invention and criticism—cultural, political, social, linguistic—conveyed through a singular and mercurial personage. "Like the Marxist or the deconstructionist" writes Early, Ali "made ideology self-evident where it had once been invisible, but he seemed more amused by his discovery than belligerent, more deeply struck by its wondrous expression of a benighted humanity than outraged by its expressions of unjustified power and dominance."[20] Where Early casts the boxer as an incisive yet genial social critic, Norman Mailer sees something

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[19] By the end of the 1980s, Ali's Parkinsonian symptoms (stilted motion, frozen facial expression, slurred speech) had become severe enough to limit his performative capacities.

[20] Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, xii.

God-like, ethereal, yet embodied in Ali's charisma: "If Ali never opened his mouth to quiver the jellies of public opinion, he would still inspire love and hate. For he is the Prince of Heaven – so says the silence around his body when he is luminous."[21]

Whether considering the impact of Ali's on-screen performances as immanent and mystical or grounded in the boxer's capacity to articulate social realities, they represented a new form of self-presentation and self-promotion, a blurring of the lines between person and persona, a melding of counter-hegemonic ideologies with popular entertainment and a brilliant harnessing of the television medium's capacity for "liveness." Ali was a boxer and a cultural icon. He was also a televisual performance artist. Thinking about him in this way, we can begin to identify the ways Ali probed and expanded the boundaries of the televisual (and cinematic and pugilistic) medium in his performance of self.

My interest here is not in sentimentalizing or aestheticizing boxing, and so my focus throughout this chapter is on Ali's performances outside of the ring. In addition to his unique status as an artist however, my approach reflects the longstanding convention that boxers also be showmen. It is a tradition rooted in a conflation of social spheres that has occurred since the sport's ascendance as a part of American mass media culture at the dawn of the twentieth-century: between boxing and performance, first theatrical, then cinematic, then televisual.

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[21] Mailer, *The Fight*, 3.

Dan Streible's landmark work, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* provides the most comprehensive analysis of the early stages of this relationship, crediting the ascendance of motion pictures as a dominant form of popular entertainment, in part to the genre of the fight film. In addition to being a natural fit between subject and medium, Streible chronicles the overlapping milieu of boxing and theater at the turn of the twentieth century, a cultural sphere of urban masculinity known as the "sporting life." He argues that boxing film producers during this time identified as a combined "theatrical and sporting syndicate" and that popular fighter's pugilistic exploits were only one contributing factor in their fame.[22] For instance, regarding the heavyweight champion "Gentleman" Jim Corbett, Streible observes he "was not merely a professional boxer, but also a stage idol, picture personality [. . .] and raconteur."[23]

Tracing this lineage forward, Ali was always a showman even when his acts were politically, religiously or morally motivated. He understood and exploited the connection between theatrics and pugilism perhaps better than any boxer since Jack Johnson.[24] Coupled with his social conscience, brilliant charisma and high self-regard, Ali attained a level of prominence in the sport and in society, that has yet to be eclipsed by any other athlete. As Early describes it:

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[22] Streible, *Fight Pictures*, 49.

[23] Ibid., 49-50.

[24] Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion, was also, argues Streible, "the first black movie star." (Ibid., 195)

> What Ali had was an irresistible combination of talent, showmanship, and a genius conceit of himself that bordered on both the heroically self-possessed and the insufferably megalomaniac. [. . .] He was intuitive, glib, richly gregarious, and intensely creative, like an artist.[25]

While Ali fits squarely within the tradition of the fighter[26] as showman, his "intense creativity" transformed his on-screen performances into works of performance art, in that they were unique, lyrical, aesthetically refined and capable of shedding light on naturalized social realities. Therefore, archival moving images depicting Ali should be understood as works of art, in addition to their status as historical and biographical evidence. Ali's performances are not reducible to the facts of their creation and their place in a grand historical narrative, which is how they have often been deployed by later documentarians. Moreover, as works of art they possess a form and content that draws attention, that renders seamless incorporation into documentary works an exceedingly difficult task. They represent Ali's intentional acts of performance–and often, resistance–in and out of the ring. Upon announcement of his conversion to the Nation of Islam in 1964, Ali famously told reporters "I don't have to be what you want me to be." As I will show, documentaries which take seriously (and make use of) Ali's capacities as a performer, which "let Ali be what he

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[25] Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, xii, xvi.

[26] In addition to this tradition in boxing, Ali also cited the professional wrestler Gorgeous George as a primary influence on his performance style. (Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 39.)

wants to be," offer a fuller and more complex representation of the boxer than those which simply exploit these capacities in the service of particular ideological project.

Ali in *Medias Res*

Three feature length documentaries about Muhammad Ali were released in the 1970s: Jim Jacobs' *A.K.A. Cassius Clay* (1970), William Greaves' *The Fighters* (1971)[27] and William Klein's *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest* (1974). To varying degrees all three films serve as archival building blocks for future Ali docs, in that footage from them is often appropriated by later films about the boxer. They are

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[27] There are some discrepancies regarding the release date and title of Greaves' film, further complicated by the fact that two different versions appear to have been released. The original film, originally titled *The Fighters*, was shot in 1971 and was either released later that year or in 1974. This version is 114 min. long and depicts the 1971 Ali-Frazier fight in its entirety. True to its (original) name, it also follows both fighters in the lead up to their famous bout.

In a documentary about Greaves' produced for the Criterion release of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, the Ali film is now identified as *Ali, The Fighter* and given a 1971 release date. (McClutchy, "Discovering William Greaves") However, according to a 1975 New York Times review of the film (which asserts the documentary was originally released in 1974 as *The Fighters*) the change in title appears to reflect the release of a shortened version in conjunction with the release of another short documentary *Ali, The Man*, which was produced by Greaves but directed by Rick Baxter. Where *Ali, The Fighter* still focused on the first Joe Frazier bout, *Ali, The Man*, according to the review, offered a broader biographic portrait of Ali. (Weiler, "Screen: *Ali, The Man*.")

I have been unable to locate a copy of this latter work or the shortened version of Greaves' film. As a result, my ensuing discussion will be centered on the earlier feature length version, and I will use its original title *The Fighters*.

documentaries which, due to the passage of time, have themselves become historical documents.

Unfortunately, the appropriation of footage from these films does not extend to an appropriation of their non-traditional structures and aesthetics, unburdened by the solemnity of Ali's subsequent elevation to American icon. With their narrative openness and formal experimentation, and speculative and essayistic approach to Ali's political and cultural significance, these films stand in contrast to the rigid liberal teleology that marks most later documentaries about the boxer. They convey a sense that Ali's story is still unfolding, that to offer some type of narrative and/or moral closure would be preemptive and disingenuous. They are films in dialogue rather than monologue, grappling with their audience, with themselves as media objects, with the domain of sport and spectacle, with the politics of their moment and most of all, with Ali himself.

Ali's Psych-Game

Of the three, Klein's *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest* has received the most contemporary critical attention and praise.[28] This visibility is likely due to Klein's

[28] A DVD of the documentary was produced by independent film distributor Facets Multimedia in 2004 and a 2012 screening of the film was held at the Tate Modern in London.

status as one of the most influential photographers of the twentieth century,[29] as well as to the film's stylish yet incisive aesthetic and structural approach. Des O'Rawe could be describing *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest* when he writes that Klein's photographs "exude an edgy [. . .] aesthetic that combines formal iconoclasm with social criticism."[30] Enlisting newly ascendant documentary tropes such as handheld camera work and a mix of *vérité* and direct address by subjects, the film chronicles the periods surrounding Ali's two mid-1960s defeats of Sonny Liston, and his 1974 triumph over George Foreman in the "Rumble in the Jungle." This broad temporal range is structured through a set of chapter break intertitles, which critic Scott Tobias equates to the use of chapter breaks in Jean-Luc Godard's *Masculin/Feminin*, reflecting the influence of Klein's French New Wave "cohorts" on the film.[31]

The explicit temporal segmentation of the chapters deemphasizes the narrative drive of the film, with the most dramatic event in Ali's life, his refusal of induction and exile from boxing, taking place between chapters. As O'Rawe observes, "Klein's documentary film practice has always tended towards a cursory, essayistic method, probing the subject matter rather than seizing a dramatic revelation."[32] True to form, while the film is organized around this absent climax, Klein seems more interested in

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[29] A 2012 ranking of the 100 most influential photographers of all time by *Professional Photographer* magazine, had Klein ranked 25th. (Tam, Kenn. "Professional Photographer Magazine's 100 Most Influential Photographers of All Time," FStoppers.)

[30] O'Rawe, "Eclectic Dialectics," 50.

[31] Tobias, "Muhammad Ali, The Greatest."

[32] O'Rawe, "Eclectic Dialectics," 50.

observing and representing the before and after: the factors and forces which led to the fighter's exile and the significant effects it had on Ali (his body, his performances outside the ring, his politics) upon his return to boxing. More broadly, the temporal juxtaposition compels us to reflect on the drastic changes in American culture and politics that occurred between 1964 and 1974.[33]

Klein's background as both a fashion and street photographer is also legible throughout the film. The former can be discerned in his meticulously crafted and highly stylized framings and the latter in his depiction of "everyday" people, discussing, debating and even "performing" Ali. In a sequence from 1965, shot between the two Liston fights, Klein depicts an acting class at the Harlem Drama School. The scene begins with a white instructor explaining to a group of young African American students that they will be improvising a scene, representing the life of Ali. Recognizing the boxer's sophisticated approach to fame and the immense challenges he faces as a black man, one student observes, "I think he's played . . . a wonderful kind of psych-game on the American public, in order for him to gain what he needs. It's a shame that black people have to go through such a phenomenal chore, even to be recognized."[34]

The idea of Ali playing a "psych-game," understanding his public performance as something calculated and cunning, was at odds with the view of much of the white

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[33] As well as on the technological advancements of the film medium, with the 1960s footage shot in high contrast black and white, and the 1970s footage in color.

[34] Klein, *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest*.

establishment who simply saw him as brash and arrogant. However this underestimation of Ali essentially confirms the student's point, in that the boxer consciously conformed to such stereotypes only to turn them back against the white establishment through his racializing rhetoric. Ali "performed" the role of the brash and arrogant buck, but situated his greatness–validated by his performances in the ring–in his racial identity, thus conferring it (and the requisite confidence and self-regard necessary to proclaim it) to the black community writ large. The result of this powerful rhetorical maneuver is evident in the ensuing improvisation, when another student depicting Ali, shrugs his jacket off to reveal his naked torso and declares to his improv partner, "Touch me! I'm beautiful!"[35] It is a performance of a performance–a fact not lost on the student actor–concentric ripples of articulation of black pride and power emanating from Ali's initial disruptive splash.

"**Two Fighters"**

Where Klein is forthright with his politics and explicitly celebrates Ali's radicalizing influence, William Greaves takes a more understated approach in *The Fighters.* Chronicling the first of Ali's famed trilogy of fights with Joe Frazier, a 1971 bout at Madison Square Garden, the film was commissioned by the fight's promoter Jerry Perenchio. It is a unique amalgamation of genres: the first half consists of an

[35] Ibid.

observational documentary examining the production and promotion of the fight; the second half is given over to the fight itself shown in its entirety, sans titles or non-diegetic sound, including play by play announcing or color commentary. This oddly bifurcated structure is what is most likely to jump out to contemporary viewers, yet as Scott MacDonald asserts, the film's original novelty lay in Greaves' attempt to turn "a documentary about Muhammad Ali [. . .] into a kind of story," an approach that has since become commonplace, "but at the time [. . .] was still a relatively new idea." Greaves himself concurred, writing that his film constituted a "new form" which he dubbed a "docudrama," because "it catches people in actual dialogue in real life, in highly dramatic situations."

While Greaves' assessment reflects some degree of self-aggrandizement, the first half of *The Fighters* certainly offers a dramatic depiction of the lead up to the fight. The filmmaker pinballs around a dizzying array of players and entities instrumental to the event, (the Ali and Frazier camps, the broadcasters and journalists, the promoters and money men, etc.) his *vérité* approach propelled by a judiciously used hard funk score. As with his depiction of the fight, Greaves eschews all use of subtitles or voiceover to provide context for the proceedings or identify the figures on screen. The decision seems compelled by his interest in supplanting the didacticism of traditional documentary tropes with a more dramatic and immersive diegesis. However it has the effect (whether intended or not) of leaving the viewer constantly

playing catch up, which further heightens the drama and feeling of frantic action surrounding the execution of such a massive event.[36]

This dramatic approach does not overshadow Greaves' keen observations and subtle representations of the power dynamics which underly not only this particular fight, but the larger hegemonic sports media assemblage. As I argued in the previous chapter, these power dynamics are often structured around the spectacularization of black athletic bodies. Greaves illustrates this in recognizable but powerful ways, such as the cutaway shots of older white men assessing the boxer's bodies during training sessions and the depiction of the fight's larger-than-life money man, Jack Kent Cooke, who at one point refers to the bout as a "a primitive contest."[37] Even more incisive is the director's use of editing and sequencing to make legible the hierarchies of power which determine the event, and the racially-coded narratives which are used to promote it. The effectiveness of these formal strategies is on display in two sets of sequences which present depictions of each boxer in relation to these structural forces. The first juxtapose scenes of Ali and Perenchio and the second complicate dominant narratives about Frazier.

The film's opening credits play over a sequence of Ali holding court on a city street, drumming up business for the fight. A lively and compelling performance,

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[36] This dynamic is likely even more pronounced for a contemporary viewer, as details of the event and the figures depicted are increasingly obscured by the passage of time.

[37] Implying, by extension, that Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier are "primitives."

Richard Brody describes it as an example of Ali's "aesthetic outside the ring, a jovially boisterous and boastful encounter with a New York City bus and its passengers that displays his thrilling real-life performance art."[38] Opening the film with these images, Greaves–who called Ali "a whole drama in himself"–displays an understanding of the power of the boxer's charismatic performances, their aesthetic appeal.[39]

However the director is also executing a kind of bait and switch. Following brief shots of a press conference between Ali and Frazier and of a group of black men debating the fight on a street corner, Greaves cuts to the interior of an expensive town car. Sitting in the backseat is Jerry Perenchio, a well-coiffed middle-aged white man wearing a heavy winter coat. The film's score comes in for the first time, a hypnotic and funky flute vamp backed by a roll of conga drums, as Perenchio gazes out the window of the town car, regally surveying the streets of Manhattan. We now cut to a handheld shot from outside of the car, which is stopped in front of a skyscraper. The camera tracks the driver, wearing a chauffeur's uniform, exit and walk briskly around the car, opening the door for Perenchio and another man, who proceed to walk into the building. After they do so, the camera pans up to reveal the imposing scale of the building, its roof barely visible against a dull gray sky.

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[38] Brody, "The Muhammad Ali Documentary That Gets to the Existential Heart of Boxing."

[39] Greaves, "Two Fighters on Film," 137.



Figures 3. and 3.1. *The Fighters* (William Greaves, 1971). Still capture from DVD.

With this opening scene, Greaves' delineates the power dynamics between Ali the performer and the fight's sponsors and overlords. Ali may own the streets, he may be the "people's champ" Greaves seems to be telling us, but this white man conducting his business up in the sky, owns the city. It is a perspective which echoes the filmmaker's own experiences as a black man[40] confronting what he called a "wall of racism in the motion picture industry."[41] Greaves himself makes this connection explicit in a 1978 article for the *Black American Literature Forum*, "Two Fighters on Film." Ostensibly about the making of *The Fighters*, the "two fighters" of the title has a double meaning, referencing Ali and Frazier as well as Ali and Greaves himself. While offering some insight on the production process of the film, most of the article chronicles Greaves' struggles to establish himself as an African American director

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[40] It is important to note that Greaves is the only African American filmmaker to produce a major work on Ali. A troubling reflection of the very marginalization of filmmakers of color that Greaves' rails against, this fact may also inform *The Fighters'* comparatively sophisticated treatment of racial politics.

[41] Ibid., 137.

whose "goal was not only to direct and produce films, but to change the direction of films."[42] In Ali he identifies a kindred spirit in audacity, someone willing to challenge the status quo despite the overwhelming structural forces allayed against him.

As Greaves details, he got his start as an actor but was "revolted" by the types of roles he was offered, which were "not only unacceptable but insulting." The racist archetypes which dominated available roles for actors of color compelled his move behind the camera, where, he writes, "I could control what appeared on the screen."[43] In *The Fighters* we see Greaves' sensitivity to this issue and his directorial control, in the subtle way he problematizes the racial stereotypes which structure the bout's dominant narrative, the contrasting styles and personas of Ali and Frazier. As with the film's opening he achieves this through a juxtaposition of sequences: a description of the fighters by boxing expert (and the director of *A.K.A. Cassius Clay*) Jim Jacobs and a scene chronicling Frazier's visit to a black church.

The first sequence begins with Jacobs, encircled by a phalanx of observers, discussing Ali's famed speed as a puncher. He details an experiment he conducted using a film synchronizer, comparing Ali's jab with that of the legendary (and legendarily fast) middleweight boxer, Sugar Ray Robinson,[44] concluding "Clay is the fastest human I have ever seen." Jacobs gets to his feet now and begins

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[42] Ibid., 137.

[43] Ibid., 136.

[44] Robinson, Jacobs explains, threw his jab in eight and a half frames, Ali in six and a half.

shadowboxing, illustrating the "tools of Muhammad Ali's trade." Ali "throws punches, bing, bing," he explains, but when he does so "he doesn't have bad intentions." In contrast, "When Frazier throws punches, they're not the tools of his trade. When he throws a punch at you, he wants to kill you."[45]

The lighter skinned Ali, despite his controversial standing, is characterized by Jacobs as playful and good-natured, and the taciturn and darker-skinned Frazier as brutish, unskilled and violent. It is a neat, legible, racially determined narrative, which Greaves' promptly dismantles, enlisting the same bait and switch strategy as in the previous example. He cuts from Jacobs to a closeup of Frazier's stony face, looking sufficiently brutish and violent. This image is followed by a wide shot showing the boxer sitting on a church pew, listening to the choir sing. We see the choir, then other parishioners, then cut back to the wide shot of Frazier, and finally, back to the same closeup on his face. This time however, Frazier bobs his head to the beat as the music starts working on him. He begins to sing, and as he does so, breaks out into a massive joyful grin. Now the camera zooms out to catch the fighter, unable to contain himself, rising to his feet as he sings and claps his hands.

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[45] Greaves, *The Fighters*.



Figures 3.2., 3.3. and 3.4. *The Fighters* (William Greaves, 1971). Still capture from DVD.

It is a masterful juxtaposition of narrative and reality. Greaves identifies the racial stereotype inherent in Jacobs' characterization of Frazier and quietly but pointedly discredits it. However, Frazier's beaming face is not simply a repudiation of Jacobs, who was a respected boxing mind with progressive racial politics. It is also part of Greaves' broader deconstruction of the modern athletic spectacle and its grand (essentializing) narratives, which hail audiences at the same time that they obscure the unequal distribution of power, often along racial lines. He is not only trying then to "change the direction of films." Rather, Greaves is using these changes to make us cognizant of the hegemonic representational regimes which maintain and perpetuate entrenched power structures.

"The Vibration of Limits"

The Fighters and *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest* reflect the self-assured and highly developed creative visions of their makers, both of whom were outsiders to the

world of boxing. While inventive and idiosyncratic within the canon of sports, boxing or Ali documentaries, these works fit squarely within the filmographies of Greaves and Klein, respectively. As observational documentaries, they constitute portraits of Ali at specific moments in the boxer's life. For these and other reasons, they stand in contrast to the third Ali doc produced during this period, Jim Jacobs' *A.K.A. Cassius Clay*.

Where Greaves' and Klein's films offer unique combinations of *vérité* tropes with those of the fight film and avant-garde film practices, *A.K.A. Cassius Clay* plays like a cross between a television newsmagazine, a special interest documentary on boxing history and a stylized performance piece featuring direct address by Ali and legendary fight trainer Cus D'Amato. It was the most widely distributed of the three films during its initial release and is the only one to make extensive use of archival materials to offer a biographic overview of the boxer's life. Made in collaboration with Ali during his exile from the ring, the film's mishmash of styles is well-suited to representing the fighter's controversial historical and cultural significance, but also his playfulness, irreverence and oddness. Jacobs, a prominent collector of historical fight films, structures the film around a series of sequences in which Ali and D'Amato watch selections from his collection, discuss the fighting styles of earlier boxing greats and bicker playfully about how Ali would fare if matched against them.

Complementing these sequences are a mix of archival materials and on-screen narration (performed by actor Richard Kiley) recounting Ali's biography and

reflecting on his present circumstances and cloudy future. While the film presents many of the same biographical highlights as later documentaries about the boxer, it refuses to ascribe a teleological significance to them, making possible an open-ended and speculative encounter with Ali and his as-yet-unwritten legacy. This sense of contingency is notably articulated (particularly to modern viewers) in a sequence where Kiley wonders if Ali might become the leader of a forthcoming "black revolution."[46]

Despite being produced in *medias res* of Ali's career, *A.K.A. Cassius Clay* does articulate some degree of objective and temporal distance from the events it chronicles. We see this most clearly in a revealingly inconsistent use of sepia filters[47] over archival materials, intended to differentiate images the film considers "past" from those it regards as "present." This stylistic technique provides an effective visual cue when we see Ali and D'Amato in full color, watching a sepia tinted Joe Louis fight. The boxer and trainer watch the historical images, debating, speculating about, and trying to imagine what the sepia signifies as impossible; namely, an encounter between the past fighter and the present one, in the ring and in the flesh.

This neat visual taxonomy is troubled however, when the sepia is or is not applied to archival images from Ali's own life and career. The dividing temporal or chronological line between which images warrant sepia and which do not suddenly

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[46] Jacobs, *A.K.A. Cassius Clay*.

[47] A sepia filter gives images a reddish-brown tint, indicating to viewers that the image depicts an earlier historical moment.

becomes less clear. In the film's representational confusion, we see an example of what Michel de Certeau calls "the vibration of limits" produced at (and by) the juncture point of a discrete present and a historical past.[48] Who is the past Ali and who is the present Ali? In what ways does the latter differentiate itself from the former? When does Ali as he is currently constituted emerge in the historical record? When do we remove the sepia tone? Regarding *A.K.A. Cassius Clay*, these are mostly questions of style and form and their relation to the production of a historical narrative. The film illustrates the difficulties of representing historical and temporal difference, of drawing a stable demarcation line between past and present. The stakes rise significantly however and attain a political dimension, when these questions are addressed to ensuing documentaries about Ali. Later works are tasked with retroactively representing and ascribing meaning to multiple contradictory stages in Ali's social and political life. Due to this, parsing the relationship between the historical Ali and the present Ali becomes a much more fraught endeavor.

The Pitchman Ali

Muhammad Ali's last professional fight was a losing effort, a sad affair against journeyman Trevor Berbick in the Bahamas in 1981. By this point however, his career, his public stature and his health had already been in decline for some years.

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[48] de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 38.

Although Ali reclaimed the heavyweight title a record third time in 1978, winning a 15-round split decision against Leon Spinks, standard narratives date the beginning of his end to what is considered the boxer's last great triumph, a famously brutal 1975 bout with Joe Frazier known as the "Thrilla in Manila." From the late 1970s then, through the first half of the 1990s, Ali found himself increasingly out of the public spotlight, a place and a state of being which journalist Robert Lipsyte poetically calls "the warm."[49]

A range of personal factors likely contributed to this diminished cultural prominence, both in terms of Ali's visibility and in the esteem with which he was held. These included Ali's retirement from boxing and the melancholic (and uncharacteristic for him) lack of grace which characterized it, personal tumult compelling his 1986 divorce from third wife Veronica Porche, his money problems, his unwitting implication in a number of political and financial scandals, his turn away from radical left politics, and underlying it all the growing severity of his Parkinsonian symptoms. Perhaps due to some of these circumstances, alongside broader shifts in the cultural and political climate, this period is marked by an absence of documentary film projects about Muhammad Ali. Instead, these years offer a very different set of media objects through which to consider non-fiction representations of the boxer. This is the era of Muhammad Ali, professional pitchman.

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[49] Zirin, *The Muhammad Ali Handbook*, 297.

“Come See Us”

A starry sky is punctured by two blocks of text sliding and spinning into frame, providing the name and location of two midwest electronics stores. In voiceover, an announcer tells us the reason for the dramatic scene: “Midwest and Independence Audio present Muhammad Ali.”

And here he comes, exploding onto screen as if from the farthest reaches of the galaxy. He stands in front of a flat beige background, wearing a cream suit, a bright white shirt and a red tie. His body looks a little stiff, his left arm hanging at a vaguely awkward angle a bit apart from his torso. When he enthusiastically points at us with his right hand, the rest of his body turns slightly, inorganically, as if he is reaching out to us while sandwiched between two chain link fences.

“You want good video,” he seems to both ask and tell us. Then, pointing back at himself, he finishes his command/question: “then come see us.”

The boxer is swiped off screen by a VCR sitting on a reflective surface, an aura of cool blue light emanating from behind it. As a price emerges from the blue light ($199), mirroring Ali’s own celestial appearance, the announcer exhorts us to “Look at the ‘knockout’ price on the VCA24!” The cycle then repeats as Ali again expands into the frame, the camera now zoomed in slightly, and repeats a variation of his first line and accompanying physical gesture: “If you want good stereo, then come see us.” Again we see an A/V component, now a laser disc player, with the same blue light.

The final time Ali appears, he has his arm around a smaller white man standing to his right. The man is nebbishy, with large glasses and mustache, and he wears a black suit that is a little large for him. He looks directly into the camera, but when Ali begins speaking, swings his face towards the boxer: "And if you want a good deal, come see my friend Jeff today, cuz' he's the greatest," and then, turning to Jeff for confirmation, "right?"[50]




Figures 3.5. and 3.6. Television Commercial for Midwest and Independence Audio. Still capture from YouTube.

Muhammad Ali appeared in this spot for Midwest and Independence Audio in 1985. He had been retired from boxing for five years and announced his Parkinson's diagnosis and divorced his wife the year prior. In the words of Steve Scearcy, the producer of the commercial, Ali "was at a low point in terms of visibility, and financially, and in terms of him starting to be a little bit sick."[51] That said, getting him to appear in an ad for a regional electronics chain was still something of a coup.

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[50] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBXsDYNe-V4

[51] Steve Scearcy, interview with author, February 4, 2016.

A production slate before the commercial provides us with a title: "Mohammed Goes to the Mountain." According to Sceary however, Ali's stature was still such that "The mountain [ie. the production crew] had to go to Muhammad." Which is to say, no matter how diminished Ali (and his reputation) may have been at the time, if they wanted to hire him Sceary and his crew would have to make the five hour drive from Kansas City to Oklahoma City, where Ali had some business meetings scheduled.[52]

Upon arrival in Oklahoma City, Sceary was greeted by one of Ali's handlers who laid out the ground rules for the shoot: "You don't talk or mention that he's sick. He doesn't know it yet. Keep it happy and everything's fine, but you don't mention that he's sick, or ask any questions about that."[53] While Ali had in fact announced his diagnosis the year prior, Sceary's recollection implies that the boxer had perhaps not yet accepted that his symptoms were sufficiently advanced to be recognizable to those around him.

Yet what Sceary remembers most about the shoot was not Ali's illness, but his warmth, kindness and charisma. The commercial capitalizes on these qualities and on Ali's comfort and ease performing in front of a camera. Despite the relatively humble nature of the endeavor, as well as his stiffness and slurring, Ali still manages to give an appealing performance. He is lighthearted and playful, and he delivers his

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

repetitive lines with subtle shifts in intonation that give the commercial a sense of momentum it might otherwise lack. There is no explicit mention of the boxer's illustrious accomplishments in or out of the ring, no sentimental salute to his past glories. Rather, the commercial capitalizes on his gifts as a likable personality.

The glimpse of Ali that we get here and in other commercials from this period, represent a rarely employed type of the boxer's archival performances. While readily available to view online, examples of these commercials almost never find their way into documentaries about the boxer. That may be because they don't sit easily within dominant narratives of Ali's life, representing a period when he was not strongly associated or identified with any contemporaneous social, cultural or political movements. The line drawn from a young Ali, steeped in the radical social upheaval of the 1960's and 1970's, to an older Ali, identified since the mid-1990's with narratives of liberal social progress, becomes obscured in the period when these commercials were produced. If there had been a notable public implosion during this period, an obvious detour on his path to secular beatification, perhaps a place could be made for it in documentary narratives about the boxer. Instead, this period is marked by slow and unremarkable decline, by failing health and a failing marriage, by minor scandals more sad than damning in that Ali was a naive victim rather than a corrupt perpetrator. What we have is a historical period when Ali just didn't matter very much to popular culture, or to the social and political movements of his time.

Nicole Fleetwood describes racial icons as figures who "make us want to *do* something," who "impact us with such emotional force that we are compelled: to do, to feel, to see."[54] This definition offers a useful evaluative measure for understanding the qualitative difference between Ali-as-icon and Ali-as-celebrity. Where the Ali of the 1960s and 1970s inspired progressive social-political action, and reactionary racist hegemonic counteraction, the Ali of the 1980s inspired (or attempted to inspire) the purchasing of home fries, stereo equipment and motor oil.

The Ali on display in these commercials is an Ali without history, or more precisely, an Ali outside of dominant historical narratives. This Ali does not stand for nothing, rather, he stands only for himself. He is not particularly invested in burnishing his historical legacy because the narrative which will be constructed to convey this legacy has yet to be fully articulated, disseminated and accepted as truth in popular discourse. The commercials from this period offer us an encounter with Ali located outside the narrativized myth-making discourses which predominate most moving image representations of the boxer. They are historical outtakes, a set of images which constitute an "awkward appendage" in accepted histories of Ali, requiring amputation by popular documentary representations of the boxer.

This unique fact of the images, their "un-historical" nature, suggests some interesting questions. Given that these images have been mostly excluded from documentary representations of the boxer, that they feature Ali at a point in time when

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[54] Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 4.

he was not being thought of in historical terms, and that the context of their production was not consciously historical, what can we learn from them? How does this instantiation of Ali allow us to think beyond hagiography? What new interpretive frameworks are made possible without the burden of grand historical narratives framing our encounter with Ali? What new understandings of Ali do they make possible? And what new understandings of narratives of racial progress do they make possible?

On a fundamental level, this Ali outside of historical narrative makes legible that narrative's existence, inasmuch as these historical outtakes compel us to ask what made them unfit for inclusion. In so doing, they reveal the shape of that narrative, its ideological form and what it excludes. The period represented by these commercials was one of relative hardship for Ali. Yet unlike the hardship experienced by Ali during his earlier exile from boxing, this humbling period does not fit a narrative of incremental liberal progress. It represents regression without obvious symbolism. There is no political significance attached to it, nor was it the result of a noble act of integrity and sacrifice. Ali's struggles were mundane, structural and humanizing rather than mythologizing.

Similar to Greaves' juxtaposition of Joe Frazier's smile and Jim Jacobs' characterization of the boxer, Ali's commercials in the 1980s expose the disconnect between the dominant triumphal narrative and material reality. These outtakes are objects which in the words of Melamed, are "screened off" by liberal narratives of

racial progress, because they hint at racial inequality's inherence to capitalism.[55] Neither freedom fighter nor liberal icon, capitalism's harsh realities have reduced Ali to a mere laborer, driven by economic need. To represent Muhammad Ali during this period then, requires a painful reckoning with that base economic reality and its racial dimensions. If the pitchman Ali is a diminished or debased Ali–financially, culturally, physically–then what does that say about the country whose values and ideals he was supposed to embody?

Ali as History, Ali as Vessel

Two media events occurred in 1996 which radically shifted public perceptions of Ali and restored him to the status of racial and national icon: the release of Leon Gast's Academy-Award winning documentary *When We Were Kings,* and Ali's lighting of the torch at the Olympic games in Atlanta. Both the film and Olympic appearance historicized the fighter, claiming a place for him in a grand narrative of liberal progress and American exceptionalism. *When We Were Kings* re-familiarized audiences with Ali's earlier social, political and cultural prominence, and his appearance at the Atlanta Olympics positioned Ali's return to the spotlight as a new chapter in his story which was unifying rather than divisive, liberal rather than radical. Ali became "the perfect vessel," in the words of Sohail Daulatzai, "through

[55] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 47.

which to reimagine America's past and its future during the post-Cold War 1990s, because his redemption as a national hero [. . .] suggested that, because of his 'courage,' the racism and imperialism he fought against no longer exist."[56]

Ironically, the now "imperfect vessel" that was Ali's diminished corporeal form only magnified this dynamic. His "opposer" was no longer perceived as external, no longer framed in terms of racism, structural inequality and state violence, but was now understood to reside in his body and mind. The result was a melancholy and de-politicized narrative of Ali's courage and dignity, which emphasized personal over political struggle. Commensurate with this narrative shift was a visual and archival one, whereby the historical images introduced by *When We Were Kings* and those produced during Ali's Olympic appearance became mainstays of later Ali documentaries and marketing campaigns featuring the boxer.

"I'm not there, I'm here"

The torch lighting has become the image most closely associated with this newly shifted perception of the fighter. However it was the concurrent release of Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings*, the most critically acclaimed and commercially popular of all Ali documentaries, which in the words of Early "re-awakened [Ali] in the

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[56] Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon*, 139.

public's mind."[57] The film depicts Ali's 1974 reclamation of the heavyweight title from George Foreman, in the bout famously known as the "Rumble in the Jungle." Staged in the newly independent African nation of Zaire, Gast frames the fight as both a symbol and celebration of contemporaneous triumphs in the struggle for black liberation. He makes this connection explicit in the film's opening montage, intercutting archival footage from various black liberation movements throughout Africa and the United States with footage chronicling Ali's pugilistic rise, and a live performance by South African singer Miriam Makeba from a music festival which accompanied the fight.

The timing of the release of the film in the same year as the Atlanta Olympics, and at the tail end of the golden age of hip-hop, is partly responsible for the film's popularity. The former drastically increased Ali's mainstream visibility, and the latter reflected an ascendant cultural movement for whom Ali fulfilled the role of historical fore bearer, alongside fellow civil rights icons Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.[58] However, the timing of the film's release was not the result of canny marketing, but an unwelcome yet ultimately fortunate byproduct of its tortuous and torturous production history.

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[57] Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, ix.

[58] A poignant early example can be found in the opening lyrics of Public Enemy's 1989 song "Black Steel In the Hour of Chaos," which referenced Ali's refusal of induction: "I got a letter from the government the other day, I opened it and read it, it said they were suckers. They wanted me for their army or whatever, picture me givin' a damn, I said never. Here is a land that never gave a damn, about a brother like me…"

The film was originally slated for release in 1976, but the 280,000 feet of undeveloped film stock shot by Gast and his crew became the subject of multiple legal struggles, first with the government of Liberia which had funded the project and then with the film's producer, promoter Don King. Finally obtaining legal ownership of the footage in the late seventies, it took Gast another 15-odd years to afford to have it all developed, and to edit the film into a two-hour cut.[59] Given this protracted production history, *When We Were Kings* offers a unique case study regarding the incorporation of "archival" materials featuring Ali into the documentary form. If the film's production had followed the planned (and more normative) timeline, the footage of and around the 1974 fight would not have been considered archival at all, and thus would not be imbued with the particular qualities that such a label implies. Yet because the film was in production for twenty-two years, its now historical footage was received by audiences as archival, even though it was not necessarily thought to be by Gast. The film cannot really be said to incorporate its archival materials then, because it *is* its archival materials. In fact, it might be more accurate to refer to this footage as "un-archival" in nature.

Jaimie Baron's work on archival moving images and their incorporation into later films is helpful in understanding what I mean here. Expanding on earlier classificatory models of the appropriation film, Baron identifies two central qualities for evaluating this relationship, "temporal disparity" and the previously discussed

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[59] Ahrens, "Director Gast Goes the Distance."

intentional disparity. Where the latter refers to the degree to which the intent of archival materials is consistent with the intent of the later incorporating work, the former engages the aesthetic and material differences which distinguish historical vs. "contemporary" media, and the effect these differences have on a viewer, "who perceives a 'then' and a 'now' generated within a single text."[60] By referring to *When We Were Kings*' historical footage as un-archival, I am arguing that while it produces this effect of temporal disparity in viewers, the film's peculiar production history results in an inversion of the traditional hierarchy of intentional disparity. Put another way, the intent of *When We Were Kings* emerges out of and is secondary to, the intent of its un-archival materials.

Gast's original intent for the footage was ostensibly to produce an observational documentary. This quality is evident in the film's searching, mostly handheld camera work (shot by Albert Maysles, among others) and often expansive editing style, approaches more commonly associated with direct cinema practices than with the historical documentary. Yet late in the editing process, producer Taylor Hackford suggested the addition of talking head interviews to make the film more accessible to a contemporary audience.[61] Unlike most historical documentaries however, these interviews (with Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, Spike Lee and others) serve to illustrate and contextualize an *already existing* narrative that has been produced

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[60] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 106.

[61] Ahrens, "Director Gast Goes the Distance."

through the un-archival materials. At a number of points, *When We Were Kings* does look back on the events of 1974 with a periodizing nostalgia, but in the process of doing so it does not exclude a more curious and speculative approach to its subject. Incorporating both nostalgic and speculative modes, it represents the juncture point between the 1970s films of Klein, Greaves and Jacobs, and those which were to follow.

The combination of stylistic elements and Gast's unique relationship to the footage results in an Ali documentary in which the boxer's archival performance is not only treated as a means of illustrating or advancing the film's narrative and it's underlying ideological position, but as a source of pleasure, awe and curiosity. While the talking heads wax poetic about the Ali legend and about his historical significance, Gast revels in the corporeal charisma and sophisticated performance of Ali himself. The fighter is given ample space within the film for "personal expression," emerging in this case not out of tension between the document and the documentary, (as Malitsky argues) but out of Gast's willingness to linger on and with his subject.

We can see this lingering approach in an early sequence, when Ali tells the story of the controversial punch which knocked out Sonny Liston during their 1965 rematch. Lounging in the sun, framed on either side by a companion, Ali recounts the night in question. With good humor and dramatic flair, he addresses the allegation that the winning blow was in fact a "phantom punch," and that Liston actually threw

the fight. The scene is convivial and intimate, offering a languorous and understated illustration of Ali's on-screen charisma.

Perhaps more compelling even then Ali's story, is the sequence's opening image, a closeup on the fighter's face cradled in his massive right hand. For a brief second he gazes thoughtfully into space, recalling that night in Lewiston, Maine almost ten years prior. Instead of opening on a fully engaged Ali launching into his story, Gast gives us this quiet portrait. He lets us see Ali seeing his historical self. The fleeting moment of contemplation before performance hints at the limits of only understanding Ali through a political and/or teleological framework. Emphasizing action over contemplation, and motion over stillness, such frameworks often deter reflection on the content of their form, and the form of their content. In showing us the moment before the action commences, Gast is both providing a non-narrativized encounter with Ali's body-image, and drawing our attention to the intentionality and craft of his performance.



Figure 3.7. *When We Were Kings* (Leon Gast, 1996) Still capture from DVD.

“The Man in the Corner”

If *When We Were Kings* serves as a juncture point between the earlier and later cycles of Ali docs, a 1997 television commercial for the restaurant chain Pizza Hut reflects a similar transition in how the boxer was represented in advertising campaigns. His increased social-cultural standing and decreased abilities as a performer meant the end of the period of Ali-as-pitchman and the beginning of a new marketing strategy by advertisers, to appropriate, depoliticize and commodify Ali’s historical legacy instead of his corporeal form. The Pizza Hut commercial marks this shift, in that it combines both the earlier and later representational modes.

We open on a boxing gym, dusty golden late afternoon light streaming through large windows, casting a dramatic chiaroscuro effect. A swooping crane shot takes us past a silhouetted man working a heavy bag, pushing in on two fighters (both white) sparring in a ring. We cut to a low angle shot of one of the boxers, who looks frustrated, then a two shot of him and his opponent trading blows. Throughout, we hear the boxer’s trainer berating him, and the camera now cuts to the voice’s source, an animated older man with large owl glasses and a towel flung over his shoulder. If we didn't recognize his voice, perhaps we recognize his face, for this is Angelo Dundee, Muhammad Ali’s personal trainer and arguably the most famous boxing trainer of all time.

The sequence continues with a rapid montage of the young boxer sparring, working the heavy bag, and becoming increasingly frustrated with Dundee's goading. Finally he erupts, ripping his head gear off and yelling at the trainer: "Yer full of it old man! What do you know about boxing!?" Dundee looks at him sympathetically, and as shmaltzy instrumental music fades in, tells him: "Cool down kid. Let's go get a pizza."

We now see the two men walking down the street in slo-motion. After the freneticism of the gym, the new tempo indicates a narrative turn. It also denotes a turn to the nostalgic, an aesthetic shift signifying a perspectival shift. The commercial is still set in the present, but it seems to be turning its attention backwards towards a slower simpler past. The next shot is of Dundee and the boxer sitting in a restaurant, the latter looking off despondently. Suddenly, an unordered pizza arrives at the table, the waitress telling them: "It's from the man in the corner. He says you taught him everything he knows." Dundee looks over, and there's Muhammad Ali sitting with a young girl and boy and smiling at his former trainer. Dundee shakes his head knowingly and appreciatively, and then the young boxer turns and sees Ali, who points at Dundee and punches his fist, non-verbally indicating that "Yes, he taught me everything I know." The young boxer turns back to Dundee, only now realizing who his trainer is. As the music swells, the two look meaningfully at each other, then dig

in to their food, as an announcer tells us: “Sometimes, nothing brings people together, like a nice hot pizza . . . from Pizza Hut.”[62]




Figures 3.8. and 3.9 Television Commercial for Pizza Hut. Still capture from YouTube.

With its nostalgic reference to Ali’s past glories, the Pizza Hut spot distinguishes itself from earlier commercials which highlight Ali-as-pitchman. Those earlier advertisements traffic in Ali’s celebrity status, while minimizing any reference to the impressive accomplishments through which he attained this status. This is not to say his fight career is not referred to in them. For instance, many commercials from the period feature Ali bestowing his own “greatest” honorific on whatever product he is shilling. Yet these advertisements are fundamentally unserious in tone, exploiting Ali’s outrageousness, charisma and performativity, instead of his impressive biography and social cultural significance.

[62] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6byv3f4wyU

Conversely, commercials produced beginning in the mid-1990s, generally do not traffic in Ali's personality and performativity, but instead shift their focus to his legacy as a revolutionary trailblazer. The shift was likely a byproduct of Ali's worsening physical condition. The boxer's natural charisma was now hidden behind a frozen face and strangled whisper, necessitating a turn by advertisers to his past glories. However it also reflected Ali's renewed cultural cachet, his re-elevation to the status of American icon, made possible through the de-radicalization of his legacy as a racial icon. This mainstream embrace of Ali's trailblazing legacy caught the attention of a class of prestige brands which marketed themselves as innovative and cutting edge, and thus, sought to associate their products with the boxer. IBM, Apple, Adidas, Porsche, Louis Vuitton and others,[63] produced advertising campaigns which gestured towards Ali's revolutionary legacy, sans any reference to the nature (and adversary) of his revolutionary struggle.[64]

Ali's commercial for Pizza Hut, a successful but decidedly middle brow restaurant chain, sits on the line between these two representational and rhetorical modes. As with earlier commercials, Ali–rather than his archival image–appears on screen. Yet like later advertisements, the spot is centered around presenting Ali's

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[63] For examples of print advertisements see: https://thisisnotadvertising.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/muhamedali.jpg, https://si.wsj.net/public/resources/images/PJ-BH707_FASHIO_G_20120606205341.jpg, https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/4d/77/28/4d7728128e2ac49897fcb76eea76ca84.jpg, http://esq.h-cdn.co/assets/15/48/1600x800/landscape-1448301718-muhammad-ali-shinola.jpg

[64] I analyze a commercial Ali made for IBM later in this chapter.

legacy instead of deploying him as a pitchman, and it's tone is serious and reverential. Due to the nature of its business however, Pizza Hut appears uninterested in aligning itself with Ali's revolutionary legacy. Instead, the company offers a sentimental take on Ali's relationship with Angelo Dundee, which is rooted in the boxer's less controversial legacy as an all-time great athlete. This Ali didn't "shake up the world." Rather, he represents a vague and generalized nostalgia for past glories and old friends. "The man in the corner" here embodies a wizened grandfather (buttressed on either side by two young children), rather than the radical icon who had been backed into a much different corner for standing up to state power.

The Triumph of a Triumphant Ali

The dominant post-1996 narrative of Muhammad Ali which continues into the present day, positions him as a symbol of reconciliation between the Left counterculture of the 1960's and the political establishment. As Michael Ezra points out, this "rehabilitation of Ali's image" did not occur in isolation but was "part of a larger historiography that once and for all declared the civil rights and anti-war movements to have positively impacted American society."[65] Ezra's observation is accurate, yet conflating Ali's re-emergence in the 1990s with an ascendant liberal

[65] Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*, 170-171.

historiographic consensus regarding the progressive social movements of the 1960s,[66] risks overlooking the particular circumstance which marked it; namely, Ali's status as a living yet poignantly diminished symbol of that earlier period.

Unlike fellow African American civil rights icons Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., Ali survived the 1960s. In turn, he served as a living embodiment of that earlier, now idealized moment of progressive social change. And yet Ali's diminished physical state rendered him a mute signifier of that past, a beatific and benevolent recipient for liberal white guilt. It also introduced a new layer of narrative, casting him as a symbol of resilience in the face of entropy for the baby boomer generation. The condition of Ali's illness rendered identification with him possible for a broader demographic, a radical racial icon transformed into an emblem of perseverance, both personal and social.

He represents the triumph of liberal progress over racial intolerance and injustice, a teleological narrative reflecting a broader teleology of American exceptionalism. This narrative recalls Raengo's articulation of Early's take on the film *The Jackie Robinson Story*, as a "tale of success of the disadvantaged that never challenges the systemic inequalities creating such disadvantage – and as conveying the triumph of a self-redeeming Western liberalism: America takes notes of the

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[66] See, John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1992*, 2nd edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

injustices of race and corrects its past mistakes."[67] The result is a kind of sanding down of Ali's biography, where what does not comfortably fit ideologically and/or narratively is diminished or elided. The scale and intensity of the vitriol directed towards Ali in his earlier days is minimized, but so to is his earlier support for racial segregation and his fall from grace during the 1980s.

In a book-length meditation on the "style" of Muhammad Ali, German scholar Jan Phillip Reemtsma articulates the potential pitfall of framing a boxer's career in terms of triumphs: "When you write about victories, your writing style takes on a teleological tinge. And even when you want to avoid it, you fall easily into artificial drama."[68] Heeding Reemtsma, I would argue that popular narratives about Ali have calcified around a series of challenges bested, thus offering "artificial drama" and a sense of inevitability in equal measure. As a brash young David he defeats the Goliath that is Sonny Liston. Suffering professional martyrdom as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, Ali's position, for which he is at first vilified, eventually becomes a vanguard one. Returning to the ring, a too slow, too weak, too old Ali, vanquishes the indomitable George Foreman through strategic brilliance. And finally, after years of beatings then years of whispers about his health, he emerges, physically broken, but somehow, someway, triumphant, a symbol of the resilience of the human spirit.

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[67] Raengo, "A Necessary Signifier," 21.

[68] Reemtsma, *More than a Champion: The Style of Muhammad Ali*, 118.

The appeal of this narrative, a product of its redemptive tone and the simplicity and coherence of its structure and symbolism, was likely at least partly responsible for the ensuing explosion of popular media about the boxer. It both universalized Ali and represented his biography as one in which struggles against systemic racial injustice were supplanted by struggles for individual well-being. Since 1996, there have been countless feature length documentaries, television specials, shorter documentary works, two narrative features and myriad advertising campaigns, all featuring Ali and/or his archival presence. The vast majority of these works hew closely to the post-Olympics narrative.

Two documentaries which complicate this narrative in different ways are Carlos Larkin's *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest* (2001) and Bill Siegel's aforementioned *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*. These films advocate and/or reflect very different ideological positions, cultural and creative aspirations, and levels of production quality. They also differ greatly in how they make use of archival materials featuring Ali and in their relative success at incorporating these materials. Yet both films are notable for marking the limit points of what is considered "acceptable" political discourse about Ali, a spectrum ranging from the most progressive strains of the mainstream left, to just right of the political center. They do not stand in diametric opposition to the liberal orthodoxy that underlies most Ali documentaries, but they do attempt to problematize this orthodoxy. In so doing, these films make legible to us the

ways in which the prevailing narrative regarding Ali is shaped by, and thus advances, a liberal ideological position.

Archival Performance, Archival Rebuke

While ascribing to the dominant narrative of Ali's reconciliation with mainstream America, *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest* breaks from other post-1996 documentaries by explicitly condemning the politics of Ali's youth. In other films, Ali's reconciliation is framed as a celebration of America's progress in regards to race relations. He is celebrated for standing up to injustice back in the "bad old days," and we are meant to congratulate ourselves on how much society has changed since then, and honor Ali for his sacrifice. In Larkin's film however, there is an implied condemnation of Ali's refusal of military induction and his turn to black radicalism, an inference that these acts were inherently un-American.

This position is articulated most clearly in the film's final scene, which depicts the symbolic replacement of Ali's 1960 Olympic gold medal during the 1996 Atlanta games.[69] In Larkin's reading, Ali's actions during the 1996 ceremony not only

[69] Ali famously but apocryphally threw the original medal in the Ohio River, after returning from Rome to the same bigotry and racism he had experienced before his Olympic triumphs. Despite its staying power, the story is generally considered to be untrue.

represent an act of reconciliation, but a repudiation of his earlier politics of the 1960s and 70s. As the filmmaker (who serves as the film's narrator) tells us in voiceover:

> With a trembling hand, the fighter who had scorned so much of the establishment, the champion who had been hated and loved by millions, the man who had started his journey so long ago and had eschewed many of the values he now embraced, lifted his new gold medal to his lips and kissed it. That said more than he ever had in his entire life.[70]

The sentimentality of Larkin's statement obscures a conservative reframing of the post-Olympics narrative. Despite his dim view of the actions most responsible for Ali's exalted status, Larkin still presents the boxer as a national hero. Yet instead of ascribing Ali's heroism to his radical politics and refusal to fight during the Vietnam war, the filmmaker credits it to Ali's eventual "embrace" of, and by, the political and cultural establishment. The fighter's legendary gift of gab through which he articulated his radical political beliefs, is dismissed as so much hot air in comparison to his symbolic (and silent) act of reconciliation in kissing the gold medal. In Larkin's perverse reading, Ali's heroism is not just burnished by his bravery in publicly confronting his illness, but is a direct result of Ali's illness robbing his ability to speak.

The filmmaker's conservative take on the boxer also plays a role in his deployment of Ali's archival performances. This dynamic is evident in a sequence

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[70] Larkin, *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest*.

examining Ali's 1967-1970 exile from the ring. Consisting of archival footage of two speeches from the speaking tours Ali went on to support himself financially during this time, the sequence highlights his pro-segregation rhetoric, a topic usually glossed over or deemphasized in most other Ali documentaries.

The sequence is edited to give a sense of escalating antagonism, to chronicle Ali's radicalization by the Nation of Islam. In the first speech he is jovial, and lines such as "Strong coffee is black coffee. You make it weak, you integrate it," are delivered with a wink, and received by his archival audience with a laugh. In the second speech the boxer is wearing dark sunglasses and a grim expression, and he points angrily at his audience: "We are not seeking to lose our identity in blood mixing! [. . .] We don't hate you! We don't hate those of you that are white! We just want to stay black! I love my color! I just love myself!"[71]




Figures 3.10. and 3.11. *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest* (Carlos Larkin, 2001) Still capture from DVD.

[71] Ibid.

At first blush, the Ali on display in this second speech, with his reference to "blood mixing" and repetitive use of the word hate, (hurled in such a way that it seems to belie his denial) is an intimidating and frightening presence, which Larkin exploits in arguing that Ali's real act of heroism was his turn away from radical left and black nationalist politics. And yet Ali's archival performance does not let itself be incorporated so easily. He may initially come across as angry and inflammatory, but his delivery of the clip's concluding lines tempers that stridency with a vulnerability, an open-hearted plea for empathy and understanding. The affective qualities of Ali's articulation of self-love and racial pride directly undermine Larkin's agenda, the sincerity and nuance of his archival performance calling attention to the lack of these qualities in the film itself.

Gloves Off

While the conservative bent of *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest* make it unique within the canon of Ali documentaries, it is shoddily made, aesthetically unambitious and superficial in its presentation of the boxer's life and career. Larkin's documentary is in marked contrast to Bill Siegel's *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, a meticulously researched, carefully conceived film, that conveys a sense of urgency in its presentation of Ali's radical legacy. Like Siegel's previous film, *The Weather Underground* (2002), *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* pushes past gauzy liberal

narratives of the 1960s, exposing contemporary audiences to the deep and rancorous social, cultural and political divisions of the period. It is, in Siegel's words, a "fight film" not a "boxing film," focusing on Muhammad Ali's battles "beyond the ring," during the period from his conversion to the Nation of Islam in 1964 up until the Supreme Court decision to overturn his conviction for draft evasion in 1971.[72]

Siegel's film shows the depth of Ali's historical opposition to the establishment, but also the depth of the white establishment's antagonism towards him. The presentation of the latter, an insistence that we remember the profound ugliness of the institutional vitriol towards Ali, differentiates it from most other post-2001 Ali documentaries. To accomplish this, Siegel introduces unseen or rarely-seen archival footage which gives a face and a voice to Ali's "opposers." The capacity of this additive act to open up and reframe Ali's story beyond the dominant narrative is a potent reminder that archival materials do not simply illustrate such narratives, but actively contribute to their creation or transcendence. This capacity is apparent in the opening sequence of *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, which juxtaposes two sets of archival materials.

The first is from Ali's appearance on the British talk show *The Eamonn Andrews Show*. The episode in question features the liberal American talk show host David Susskind berating Muhammad Ali for his political stand and religious

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[72] Sachs and Sachs, "Recovering History Through Filmmaking: An Interview with Bill Siegel."

affiliation. Ali's passport was revoked at the time of filming, and so while Susskind is in studio the boxer appears via closed-circuit television. The historical containment of Ali's corporeal body persists through the present containment of his archival one.[73] Put another way, our encounter with Ali's archival performance is visually mediated by the historical restriction of his movement. His image is smaller and grainier than Susskind's or Andrew's, appearing diminished by comparison. He appears a captive audience to the two white men, his face a mute mask of sadness and defiance as Susskind tears into him:

> I find nothing amusing, or interesting, or tolerable about this man. He's a disgrace, to his country, to his race, and what he laughingly describes as his profession. [. . .] He will inevitably go to prison, as well he should. He's a simplistic fool, and a pawn.[74]

The contempt Susskind expresses towards Ali is likely a revelation to contemporary audiences accustomed to the post-Olympics narrative. Where other Ali documentaries discuss Ali's divisive standing during this period in the abstract, Siegel's use of the archive gives it a powerful tangibility and specificity, a face and a voice. Notably, that face and voice do not belong to a Bull Connor-type southern bigot, but to a liberal New York-based public intellectual. In opening with Susskind's

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[73] I engage the question of historical and archival containment in both greater depth, and in practice, in my visual chapters, *Evidence of the Evidence* and *A Costly Lesson*.

[74] quoted in *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* (2014).

rant, Siegel is pushing back against what Robin Marie Averbeck identifies as a "strictly enforced blindspot" of liberal narratives of social and political struggle, the representation of "victims without victimizers."[75] The Susskind clip does not perhaps add much to our factual knowledge of Ali's struggles, but in visualizing one of his "victimizers" it forces a visceral encounter with those struggles, thereby denying us the comfortable abstraction of the triumphal liberal narrative.

The affective heft of these "new" archival materials heavily influences our perception of the opening sequence's second set of archival images. These depict a silent and shuffling Ali being awarded the 2005 Presidential Medal of Freedom by George W. Bush. Susskind's tirade about Ali collides with Bush's honoring of him, producing a cognitive dissonance that begets a narrative one, as we attempt to reconcile these diametrically opposed and wholly incompatible perceptions of the boxer. It is a juxtaposition as stark as *A.K.A. Cassius Clay*'s use of sepia tone. Yet unlike that earlier work, the dissonance between images is not merely temporal, but also ideological. The brutal reality of Susskind's excoriation renders the pomp and artifice of the medal ceremony suspect. Ali documentaries often enlist footage of the latter as a means of moral and narrative closure, yet Siegel presents the event as both an empty charade and the starting point for an interrogation of the gap between past hatred and present veneration. How and why did Muhammad Ali go from heavily racialized traitorous "pawn" to peaceful patriot? When did we remove the sepia tone?

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[75] Averbeck, "Why I'm Not a Liberal."



Figures 3.12. and 3.13. *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* (Bill Siegel, 2014) Still capture from DVD.

In an interview about the film, Siegel identifies the Atlanta games as the moment of "resurrection of Ali as a 'safe' figure. And from then on, we've been able to put him in our 'beloved' category." He then goes on to imply that in staging this reconciliation with the establishment, Ali's appearance at the Olympics also enacted an erasure of historical memory. Reflecting on the boxer's receipt of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Siegel wonders: "Do you think George W. Bush really understood the person he was putting that medal around?"[76]

It is a worthwhile question, and one that perhaps should be asked of Bill Siegel himself. *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, despite its crucial intervention in the preservation and articulation of Ali's radical past, never satisfactorily addresses the question it poses through its opening juxtaposition of archival materials. The film powerfully evokes a young and radicalized Ali, but seems at a loss when trying to

[76] Sachs and Sachs, "Recovering History Through Filmmaking: An Interview with Bill Siegel."

"understand" or explain how that Ali could someday find himself being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, especially in the midst of a preemptive war against a predominantly Muslim country. This starkly presented juxtaposition undermines the liberal teleological narrative used by most post-Olympics documentaries as a means of reconciling the disjunction between past and present Ali. In his desire to push back against the whitewashing of the boxer's legacy however, Siegel replaces it with the equally debatable narrative that the earlier Ali is the authentic one. In both cases, what is revealed is the impossibility of reconciling an individual life to a political agenda or overarching ideology.

Framed another way, it can be argued that while the filmmaker better understood who Ali was, the former president had a firmer grasp on who Ali had become. In 2006, Ali, in concert with current wife Lonnie, struck a $50 million dollar deal with the advertising firm CKX Inc., for an 80% stake in Ali's "name, image, and likeness, as well as the rights to all of his licensing agreements."[77] Ali's literal act of selling out can certainly be interpreted as long overdue "reparations" for the lost earnings of his exile years, but that does not diminish the dissonance with his radical past. As scholar Michael Ezra pointedly argues, Ali's current standing is "not a reflection of the triumph of the 1960s, black power, civil rights, the anti-war

[77] Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*, 191.

movement, or whatever other contemporary label you wish to attach to his salad days, but in some ways a reflection of their defeat."[78]

Staking positions to the left and right of the dominant Ali narrative, *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* and *Muhammad Ali: The Greatest* trouble the liberal consensus regarding the boxer's legacy. In so doing, they reveal that those documentaries which offer a superficial or uncritical engagement with the political dimensions of Ali's biography are perhaps the most political films of all. Where there is injustice, there are competing ideologies. When there is a victim, there are also always victimizers. Minimizing or negating these realities, a "blindspot" of liberal narratives of social struggle, is itself a profoundly political act.

"I shook up the Wor—"

The immense sum paid by CKX Inc. for a majority stake in "Ali" is perhaps the clearest indication of the hegemony of the de-radicalized post-Olympics narrative. A similar deal would have been unthinkable during Ali's first iteration as a (then-radical) racial icon, or his subsequent years spent schilling magazine subscriptions and stereo equipment. Yet the ensuing de-coupling of Ali's courageous stand from what it was he was standing against, has enabled various companies to appropriate his

[78] Ezra, "Muhammad Ali's Deification Shows an America Reluctant to Confront its Past."

reputation as a free-thinking iconoclast, without addressing the radical left politics central to this reputation. The earlier commercials featuring Ali-as-pitchman were mostly ingenuous in minimizing the boxer's radical past, focusing instead on Ali's natural charisma and celebrity status. They exploited the latter and had no use for the former. The new generation of advertisements however, while "respectfully" engaging with Ali's legacy in hushed and reverential tones, do far more damage to that legacy by appropriating it in the service of burnishing a corporate identity. This rhetorical and ideological appropriation is on full display in a 2006 IBM commercial for the operating system Linux.

A young boy sits and watches an old black and white television. The image is presented in widescreen. Yet rather than the customary black letterbox, it is sandwiched above and below by a cool clinical blue, the traditional colorway of the iconic IBM logo. The boy is blond, blue-eyed, and looks as if he was made in a laboratory. His surroundings are seemingly non-existent. More than just a blank canvas, he inhabits a place of pure bright energy, an otherworldly space, or perhaps, an inner worldly space, the interior of a computer server. He is Linux incarnate. Both boy and setting are blindingly white. On the television is archival footage of Muhammad Ali from after his first defeat of Sonny Liston, the original audio accompanied by solemn tones reverberating in the background. As the image cuts between a head-on close up of the boy's face and an over the shoulder shot of him watching the television, Ali declaims: "Never make me no underdog, and never talk

about who's gonna stop me! Ain't nobody gonna stop me! I must be the greatest! I shook up the world! I shook up the world!" The archival image, a close up of Ali's face, now fills the screen. "I shook up the wor—!"

The archival image abruptly cuts out, and the boy, whose head appears bowed in concentration, looks up to find the contemporary Ali now sitting across from him. In a strangled whisper, this Ali echoes his archival self: "Shake things up," he tells the boy, "shake up the world." The boy smiles in response, and we cut to a single word "Linux," followed by a line of text, "The Future is open," and finally, the IBM logo.[79]



Figures 3.14. and 3.15 Television Commercial for IBM. Still capture from YouTube.

It is a striking piece of marketing, both slickly produced and remarkably sophisticated in the ways it inhabits and conveys multiple temporalities. The formal qualities of the archival materials situates them in the past, but the archival Ali is presented as a harbinger of things to come, seeing, compelling and demanding a

[79] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BesI6NEPWlM

future that is radically different from the present of the 1960s. Mirroring this dynamic, the boy also represents a dual temporality. The present is where he meets both the archival and the elder Ali, and where he learns from them/him to also see, compel and demand an as-yet-unrealized future. Yet being a child, his advocacy for a different future will itself also take place in the future, albeit a less distant one.

In this way, the commercial delineates a specific set of possibilities for each temporal period, whereby the present serves as a meeting place for the past and future. It is not a place of action, but simply one of transmission. It is a historical weigh station, a place of knowledge acquisition, commemoration and advocacy, produced through an encounter between past and future. We can learn about making change in the present, we can envision it, articulate it, and sometimes we can even demand it, but we don't enact it here. "Action," the commercial seems to be telling us "comes later."

But of course . . . later never comes. The moment of its arrival is the moment of its transformation into the present. Crucially then, while the "future is open," the present is a constrained place, a place for the discussion of movement and change but not for their enactment. Ascribing the capacity for social change to the past and future but never to the present, is a profoundly de-politicizing and de-historicizing gesture, and one in keeping with the commercial's underlying ideological position, most clearly articulated through the whiteness of the child encountering Ali. For if the child

had been black, a parallel interpretation of the commercial would have been made possible, one situated squarely in the overlapping domains of history and politics.

If the child had been black, Ali's declaration turned exhortation to "shake up the world," would no longer be emptied of its original meaning. It would also be, if not at odds, then at the least, incompatible, with the way IBM would like us to associate their product with Ali. If the child had been black, it might also have undermined Ali's own significance, in that it would imply that his radical intervention ended up unfulfilled. It would imply there is still more to do regarding race in America, instead of suggesting that we have entered a post-racial egalitarian society. And so we get a white child. And instead of seeing, compelling and demanding a more just and humane world, the commercial directs our attention to the project of seeing, compelling and demanding a more technologically developed one.

"What You Want Me to Be"

How do we combat this de-historicizing commodification of Ali's legacy? *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* offers one strategy. It presents new archival materials which make legible and visceral the antagonism towards Ali, thus casting the boxer's later reclamation as an American icon (and marketable brand) in a critical light. In so doing, the documentary problematizes the dominant triumphal narrative of Ali's life. Yet in its political commitments, the film is constrained by its inability to reconcile

Ali's earlier radicalism with his later rightward shift. Much of the film constitutes a fleshing out of the dominant counter-hegemonic narrative, rather than an honest reckoning with the contradictory and mercurial unfolding of Ali's life and politics. Siegel complicates the commodification of Ali's legacy and offers important historical context, but in the process, *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* becomes less about the man himself and more about his contested status as a symbol of racial progress (or its lack) in the twentieth century.

Likely recognizing this, the director concludes his film with the statement by Robert Lipsyte which opens this chapter: “There’s so many ways of looking at him that have only to do with us, and have nothing to do with him.” Lipsyte's parting shot is an acknowledgment by Siegel that debating Ali's legacy in the manner that the film does, constitutes an articulation of one's own cultural, political, and ideological beliefs. It reads as a confession that the documentary we just watched isn't really about Muhammad Ali at all, it is about “us.”

The interview's placement at the end of the film could also be understood as a call to future documentarians to produce works which engage more fully with Ali himself, rather than his outsized legacy. But what would it mean to make a film “about” Ali, rather than one about his legacy? What would such a work entail? Would it be necessarily “apolitical”? (And if not, how would it represent Ali's contradictory politics?) What would be its form and structure? How would it eschew the dominant liberal narrative without simply replacing it, or being defined by its opposition to it?

We can begin to address these questions through a reconsideration of the pre-1996 Ali docs, those works produced before the post-Olympics narrative became entrenched. Without having to engage the dominant triumphal narrative or reconcile Ali's turn from radicalism to liberalism, the makers of these documentaries were better positioned to produce films "about" Ali, films which represented his legacy and symbolic importance as contingent. William Klein's *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest* rejects grand narratives for episodic and essayistic observation. William Greaves' *The Fighters* lays bare the racially determined narratives which codify hierarchies of power in the boxing world, and contextualizes Ali within (and against) these hierarchies. Jim Jacobs' *A.K.A. Cassius Clay* grapples seriously with the question of who Ali was, and who he might yet become. Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings* offers a portrait of the boxer that emerges from, and is led by, Ali's archival presence and performance. The 1970s films are heterogenous and multivalent, with a speculative quality that is not just a result of their production in *medias res* of Ali's career, but of genuine engagement with their subject's expansive and dynamic sense of self. *When We Were Kings* is grounded in Ali's on-screen performance and our affective response to it, rather than treating the archive solely as illustration or evidence for a predetermined narrative.

These documentaries provide a model for thinking about and representing Ali which is generative, malleable and discursive, but also structured around his embodied charisma and performance. They depict an Ali who was choreographer,

carnival barker and main event, all rolled into one. Questions surrounding Ali's legacy and impact are prevalent in all four films, but never supersede a concerted effort by the filmmakers and by Ali himself, to represent the phenomenological experience of an encounter with the boxer. In a sense, that means these works are still about "us." Yet it is an "us" in intimate collaboration and engagement with Ali, rather than an "us" insistent on making Ali a symbol for a particular grand narrative about race in America.

Of these documentaries, *The Fighters* best illustrates how Ali's performative media interventions played a crucial role in his outsized social significance. However I would argue this is due in large part to Greaves' de-centering of Ali within the film. He splits screen time with "co-star" Joe Frazier, and both boxers are contextualized within the spectacular milieu of professional boxing, and its mirroring of broader realities of racial inequality in America. Ali is presented in relation to others and to a larger social domain, not as the "Great American martyr" but as a forceful and charismatic performer, "a whole drama in himself." What Greaves highlights is not Ali's costly stand against Vietnam,[80] but his disruption of the norms and forms of mass media production.

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[80] Despite being produced shortly after the boxer's return from exile, the film does not emphasize Ali's refusal of induction, or ensuing legal troubles. The most explicit articulation of his situation comes during a man on the street interview almost 30 min. into the film, when a white British man asserts: "If he [Ali] was a white man who had refused to go into Vietnam, he would not be in the predicament he is in."

As previously discussed, Greaves' identified Ali as a kindred spirit, a black man who rejected the unbearable compromises of assimilation into his chosen field. Yet in addition to Ali's audacity, I would argue that Greaves' was also drawn to the boxer's sophisticated deconstruction of popular media forms through his on-screen performance. We can infer this from Greaves' own forays into media deconstruction in the film he made just prior to *The Fighters*, 1968's *Psychosymbiotaxiplasm: Take One*. A meta-documentary about the production process, *Psychosymbiotaxiplasm: Take One* constitutes an elaborate though messily choreographed exploration of the conflation of reality and performance. Greaves plays "himself" in the film as an incompetent director holding auditions in Central Park for a scene depicting an argument between a couple. However, the rest of the cast and crew are kept in the dark to the fact of Greaves' performance, believing they are actually partaking in the audition process and its documentation.[81] Their response to his seeming incompetence and boorishness, which ultimately results in a mutiny on the set, is captured by multiple film crews tasked with filming the production of the

[81] Both the exaggerated nature of Greaves' performance and the fact that his crew is ignorant that he is performing at all, echoes Ali's own performances for the media, most famously during the weigh-in before the first Ali-Liston bout. His behavior during that event was so outré and his performance so believable, that the physician for the Miami Boxing Commission described Ali as "emotionally unbalanced, scared to death, and liable to crack up before he enters the ring." (Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, 71.)

production.[82] Through this film within a film within a film structure, Greaves reveals the underlying power dynamics inherent in the production process, and shows how the act of performance extends into the ostensible reality behind the camera.

In Muhammad Ali, the director identified both a compatriot and a muse. *The Fighters* eschews the destabilizing formal experimentation and explicit self-reflexiveness of *Psychosymbiotaxiplasm: Take One,* with Greaves instead relying on Ali's performance to provide the media deconstruction. Ali obliges in a sequence shot at his training camp, during a sparring session open to journalists and the public. The boxer, clothed in a white bathrobe, paces around the ring and pontificates. The journalists are seated on one side of the ring, the spectators on the other. Ali chides the former, and tells them he will circumvent them when giving his prediction for the fight, instead offering it directly to the people. In so doing, he burnishes his populist credentials while at the same time asserting his independence from, and power over, an often critical press corps, a number of whom still refuse to call him Ali. He is also both calling attention to, while at the same time exploiting, the fabricated and performative nature of the prediction ritual. While there is no doubt that Ali will predict victory, he teasingly waves around an envelope in which he has recorded his

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[82] In all, Greaves employed three different film crews. The first was told to film the actor's auditions. The second crew was tasked with documenting the first. And the third was told to roam around, filming as they saw fit. Finally, Greaves himself also periodically shoots footage.

prognostication. Written on the outside of the envelope: “THE SECRET OF MUHAMMAD ALI.”

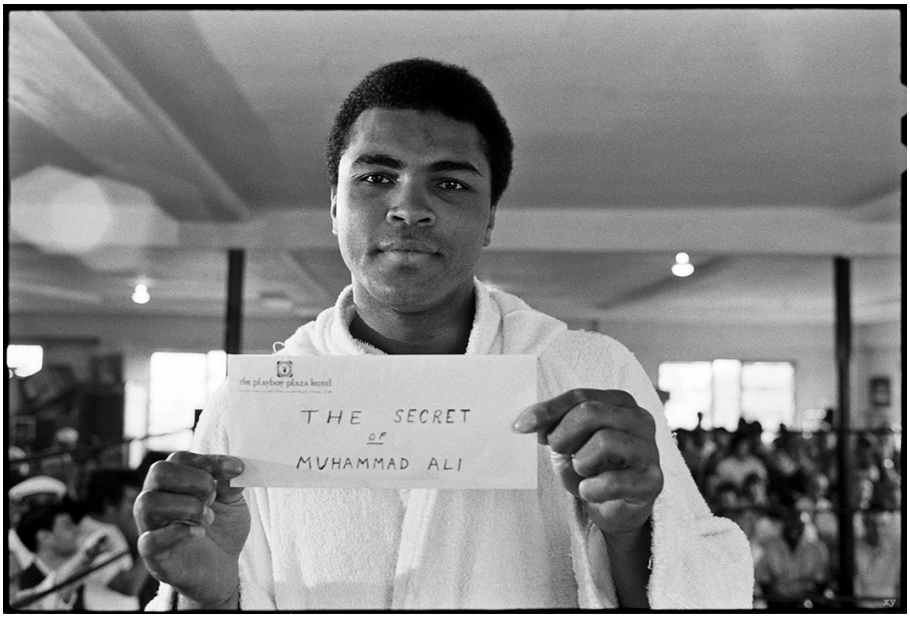


Figure 3.16. “The Secret of Muhammad Ali” by Al Satterwhite. Courtesy of Al Satterwhite.

“The Secret of Muhammad Ali”

What Greaves, Klein, Jacobs and Gast all seemed to grasp, and what subsequent Ali documentarians often seem to forget, is that “the secret of Muhammad Ali,” the secret behind his immense significance and symbolic potency, has as much to do with the intelligence, style and self-awareness of his media performances, as it does with the magnitude of his sacrifice and articulation of a particular ideology. The gravity

(and/or the political stakes) of representing the latter often obscures the importance of the former, and as a result this aspect of the "real" Ali is subsumed by the desire to respect and preserve a particular interpretation of his legacy. Gerald Early sheds further light on this representational absence when articulating a central incongruity regarding Ali's relationship to the public. He writes: "Ali offered the public the contradictory pleasure of having to take him seriously while not having to take him seriously. He was deeply aware of this himself and played a game of public relations deceit as cleverly as anyone.[83]"

What is seemingly foreclosed by the ascendance of the post-Olympics narrative in many documentaries about Ali, is a willingness or ability to not take him seriously. Perhaps the accumulated (and continuing) horrors of racism and white supremacy in America would seem to disallow a depiction of a Civil Rights icon that is anything less than serious. Yet as Early points out, this very dynamic is what allowed Ali to manipulate the media in such a way that he was given the platform to articulate and perform an emancipatory political project. Eliding or minimizing the boxer's unseriousness then, means not only foreclosing a truer and fuller engagement with who Ali actually was; it also represents a missed opportunity for a case study in the manipulation of mass media in the service of revolutionary struggle. Only after we stop taking Muhammad Ali seriously, can we begin to take him seriously.

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[83] Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, xvi.

In that sense, a truly radical response to the dominant liberal narrative about Ali can not come in the form of a similar counter-narrative, it can possess neither the same structure, scope, or temporal arc. Rather, it must be located in a close study of those periods in the boxer's life when he articulated and agitated for the total dismantling of the entrenched hegemony of white supremacy. It demands a return to the archive, to Ali's on-camera enactment of an emancipatory political project, a "psych-game" directed towards a public which both did and did not take him seriously. Ali's later political and cultural conservatism is only a problem that needs to be debated and grappled with when we distill his whole life down to the form of a narrative, of a legacy. It is only a problem when we make Ali a stand-in for America's tortured racial history. It is not a problem for understanding Muhammad Ali himself, or what we may yet learn from him.

3

Strange and Curious



https://drive.google.com/open?id=1gh1k5OQmyr3uyK-t71jvjyN9_liz0h2a

4

A Costly Lesson



https://vimeo.com/151091897

5

Evidence of the Evidence



https://vimeo.com/220683717
(Password: **Attica**)

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