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Jesse, Joe and Jackie: The Hegemonic Roots of the Black Sports Star

This paper explores the theoretical relationship between culture and power during that transformative historical moment of the 1930s and 1940s which witnessed the zenith of black sporting prowess. I highlight the popular significance of sporting heroes like Olympic world record holder Jesse Owens, heavyweight world champion boxer Joe Louis, and baseball integrationist star Jackie Robinson, but also critique the cultural resonance of their achievements, its limited political challenge, and problematic legacy which has meant that black working class men are structurally locked into professional sports.

The paper is divided into three sections. It begins with the migration of blacks (including the Owens, Louis, and Robinson families) from the South to the North and West during the opening decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to the whiggish paradigm which sees this migration simply in terms of improved economic opportunity, I argue that the proletarianization, ghettoization and educational tracking all three experienced anticipated the structural limitations which later earmarked their sporting participation. The second part of the paper explores the three athletes' accomplishments and popular success. It documents the making of these community folk heroes during a time when the sporting arena took on a particular symbolic value in the struggle for dignity against fascist Europe as well as racist America. It analyses the black newspapers which both heralded the achievements of black sportsmen and debated the federal state's

usage of Joe Louis as an American hero in the fight against Nazism, and challenges the political efficacy of sport as an area for combating American racism.

The paper concludes with a brief look at the troublesome legacy of the black sport hero, tracing the decline of Owens, Louis, and Robinson, all of whom ended up either broke, in poor jobs or simply out of touch with the political changes of the 1960s. The very different relationship between Louis and the federal state is highlighted by comparing the actions of Louis to those of Muhammed Ali. The conclusion also critiques the burgeoning historical literature on sports and the black community especially that on the Negro Baseball Leagues. In some of this work, these sporting communities seem to exist almost in a pastoral space which offered a non-commodified alternative to the industrial capitalism surrounding them, an interpretation which tends to reify older flawed notions of the political efficacy of sports for social change. Finally, the paper challenges a racist sport system which idolizes black sportsmen, deceives youngsters with flights of fancy, and maintains that racism in sport amounts to nothing more than an occasional racist comment which can be simply dealt with by hiring and firing more black faces.