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Projecting a white savior, the body, and policy: pre-classical and transitional cinema's boxing films in the United States 1893-1915

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PROJECTING A WHITE SAVIOR, THE BODY, AND POLICY: PRE-CLASSICAL AND
TRANSITIONAL CINEMA'S BOXING FILMS IN THE UNITED STATES 1893-1915

By

Siobhan Marie Chaney Carter

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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Master's Thesis

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Siobhan Marie Chaney Carter

August 2019

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

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Of the Requirements for the Degree
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Abstract

This thesis examines preclassical and transitional cinema's boxing films from 1893-1915 alongside the arc of World Heavyweight Champion Jack Johnson's career, a career that was oftentimes captured on film. My aim is to demonstrate ways in which cinema was used by white filmmakers to perpetuate and reproduce a sense of visual knowing on behalf of audiences regarding a racial hierarchy on cinema screens and perpetuate the myth of white masculine superiority over African Americans through the visuals of male bodies in the boxing ring. With this thesis, I hope to expand critical understandings of white mythmaking in cinema that preceded the release of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family for their continued support. My husband, Rick, a boxing fan, for enthusiastically listening to me explain the details of nineteenth and early twentieth century filmed boxing matches and keeping me up to date on what's going on in the world of boxing today.

I would like to thank my committee: Professors Jennifer Seltz, Midori Takagi, and Josh Cerretti, for providing critical feedback and guiding my writing from a confused beginning to a hopefully more cohesive understanding of how boxing and cinema were intertwined at the beginning of the twentieth century. This thesis was challenging, but also rewarding to write. Thank you to Professor Seltz, who helped me formulate this topic two years ago in the thesis planning course.

I would also like to thank the History Department and Fairhaven College at Western Washington University for guiding me through my undergraduate and graduate degrees and supporting my inclination to always write about cinema, even if it didn't always make sense with course requirements.

Professor Takagi was the first professor to demonstrate to me as an undergrad how cinema, even silly action films, horror films, and comedies, have a lot to teach audiences about historically specific ideas of race, gender, citizenship, and class, and how it's important to understand if a film is reinforcing dominant white, patriarchal narratives, or challenging them. I'll always remember the horror film class she taught where we watched *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and discussed how the horror of a zombie attack on screen mirrored the violence that punctuated the Civil Rights movement. The film was released shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. but was filmed and completed before the tragic event. When *Night's* protagonist Ben (Duane Jones), the only Black character, and the only character to survive the zombie attack is senselessly shot and killed by local police, audiences couldn't help but see and feel the fictional story as an allegory specific to the late 1960s in the United States, whether director George Romero intended the message or not.

Films take on a life of their own once they are released to audiences and it's so fascinating to me to use them as texts for understanding not only what *happened* during the time they were released, but what are they a response to? What anxieties do they reveal? What myths do they perpetuate? Thank you, Professor Takagi, for teaching me these connections as an undergrad, I continue to ask myself these questions every time I sit down to watch a film.

I hope to take what I've learned at Western Washington University and apply it to future work in a community college setting. I worked at Whatcom Community College for six years while attending graduate school and both institutions guided my interest in working in a higher education setting and aiding in the success of college students.

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Introduction

“If one wanted to make a case for American exceptionalism, there would be no more compelling instance than the arrival of cinema in the United States.”¹

- Charles Musser, *Historian of Screen Practice*

“Physical and highly visual, boxing always threatened to expose the hypocrisy of the white man’s burden.”²

- Theresa Runstedtler, *Historian of African American Social History*

On July 4th, 1910 under the heat of the desert sun in Reno, Nevada, Black boxing World Heavyweight Champion Jack Johnson, labeled by the press as the “Negroes’ Deliverer” knocked down white former World Heavyweight Champion Jim Jeffries, also known as the “Great White Hope” during the fifteenth round in front of a crowd of twenty thousand spectators and twelve filming movie cameras.³ Jeffries, age thirty-five, was an aging boxer in 1910 and Johnson, age thirty-two, openly mocked his opponent as he defeated him with ease.⁴ Johnson’s fight against Jeffries was his second heavyweight defense, his third win against a white man in three years, and second win against a fellow American. All three of Johnson’s heavyweight wins at this point were captured by film reels.

This event presented an eruption in white men’s early twentieth century perception of their inherent superiority over Black Americans, not because this was Johnson’s

¹ Charles Musser, quoted in Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xiii.

² Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 22.

³ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

⁴ Streible, 217-220. Streible notes throughout *Fight Pictures* a handful of white hope contenders who challenged Johnson during his reign as heavyweight. The nickname was not limited to Jeffries and was applied to other white boxers of the time including W. Warren Barbour, Jim Flynn, Frank Moran, and Jess Willard.

first heavyweight win, but because the fight had been framed in the media a full year prior as an opportunity to reclaim white masculine authority for all white men in the visual form of a white heavyweight win.⁵ Jeffries became known as a white hope not only in the realm of boxing or sports in America, but as an extension of imperial strength and civilization during a time when African Americans were increasingly gaining economic, social, and geographic footholds throughout the United States.⁶ Two years after the Johnson-Jeffries fight a federal law would prohibit the inter-state distribution of fight pictures in the United States, effectively dampening the accessibility of Johnson's success to film audiences around the world.

On July 5, 1910 the *New York Times* ran a quote from Johnson recorded shortly after his win: "I won from Mr. Jeffries because I outclassed him in every department of the fighting game. Before I entered the ring I was certain I would be the victor. I never changed my mind at any time."⁷ Johnson was confident in his fighting ability and never shied away from vocalizing his talent and success to his opponents and to the press. He understood exactly how his visual presence as an African American World Heavyweight Champion, both on cinema screens and in print media directly challenged early twentieth century constructions of white masculinity and the mythology of its inherent superiority over Black Americans.

The racial classification of white at the beginning of the twentieth century was never a monolithic or static agreement between European (and to an extent Russian) immigrants

⁵ Streible, 216-217.

⁶ Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

⁷ OUTCLASSED HIM, JOHNSON DECLARES: Says He Won Because He Was Jeffries's Superior in Every Point of Fighting. RICKARD PICKED JEFFRIES But Johnson Won as He Pleased – First Knockdown Settled Contest Officially, He Says as Referee, *New York Times* (1857-1922), New York, N.Y., 05 July 1910: 3.

and their decedents living in the United States, but more of what Matthew Jacobson terms an “implicit ranking of human difference by degree.” In terms of proximity to the social classification of white difference is situated by predominantly visual signifiers i.e. skin color, with secondary degrees of difference including physical features, knowledge of English language and dialect, and, if immigrants, their country of origin.⁸ By the early 1900s the population of the United States expanded greatly with an influx in Irish, German, Italian, Russian, and Jewish immigrants and though they may have been classified as “free white persons” under the 1790 Naturalization Law, a hierarchy emerged between Anglo-Saxons of Great Britain and other European and Russian immigrants.⁹ In the case of boxing and African American fighters however, any American fighter considered white or Anglo Saxon could be a white hope contender based on a socially fabricated visual understanding of difference.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the perimeters of the boxing ring became a stage where white and Black men could perform and demonstrate their own ideal balance between fit body and mind. Unfortunately, there are not as many filmed examples of African American fighters on screen as there are of white fighters. Filmed fights amplified performative celebrations of white masculinity; film reels had the potential to relay messages of white hope quickly across the United States and serve as instructional texts to film audiences of a racial hierarchy grounded in white hegemony. Before 1908 African American boxers were barred from the chance at the World Heavyweight title.¹⁰ If the heavyweight victor was African

⁸ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 42.

⁹ Jacobson, 4.

¹⁰ Bederman, 11-12. Black boxers could compete for a World Colored Heavyweight Championship prior to Johnson’s World Heavyweight win in 1908. Though Johnson broke the color line in 1908 competitions for the World Colored Heavyweight Championship continued until 1935.

American, the win would disrupt the visual display of power and authority white men practiced systemically over African Americans. Johnson's success in the ring allowed him to perform the role of an economically and socially mobile middle-class man both inside the ring and out. The combination of Johnson's success, the color of his skin, and the ability for film reels to travel quickly made his image a threat to white imperialism around the world. His filmed fight picture against Jeffries was the last straw for white Americans who believed in the inherent superiority of the white hope.

This thesis examines the production, distribution, and exhibition of boxing films in the United States from 1893 to 1915 alongside the arc of Jack Johnson's fighting career from the late 1890s to 1915, a career that was oftentimes captured on film. The 1890s to 1907 are traditionally labeled "pre-classical" cinema and 1908 to the mid-teens is generally known as cinema's "transitional" period toward what would become an increasingly regulated studio system. The purpose of my examination is to widen an understanding of the ways in which silent cinema, particularly preclassical and transitional cinema, has been used by early filmmakers as a tool for reinforcing narratives of white superiority before the release of D.W. Griffith's epic *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. *Birth* is a film often cited as both a place marker for the end of transitional cinema and the beginning of the heavily regulated studio system, and an origin text for the myth of white superiority and racist imagery of African Americans that would remain on cinema screens throughout the twentieth century. Cinema, by design, was a tool utilized by white filmmakers to teach and reinforce to film audiences of all classes and races a social order grounded in white, masculine authority. *Birth* does not live in a vacuum; the film is a

continuation of meticulous and specific ways in which white filmmakers asserted a white authority and reinforced their mythology through stories projected onto a screen.

I argue preclassical and transitional cinema's boxing films reveal attempts on behalf of early filmmakers to enact a sense of control, by means of visual knowing, over both Black and white bodies in motion as a response to the threat of Black boxer's growing economic success and autonomy from white control at the turn of the twentieth century. In this way, I argue, it is important to view cinema reels as instructional texts for audiences. My central question is: what was threatening about Jack Johnson's image on screen? In the case of boxing films this control is both assisted and affirmed by media publications concerning boxers and boxing films, promotional advertisements for fight pictures, and state, private, and federal laws enacted throughout this time period that frame the threat of boxers, particularly African American heavyweights to the state of white, American masculinity. Though commercialized images of African Americans had circulated throughout the United States during the nineteenth century via household goods, literature, and theatrical productions (as only three examples), cinema during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had the ability to capture live events, completely manipulate the cinema frame through lighting and editing, and present it to film audiences as objective documentary.

The *Johnson-Jeffries Fight* prompted policymakers across the United States into action concerning the distribution of fight pictures. Rev. F. W. Johnson, the New Jersey Chairman of the Christian Citizenship Department of the New Jersey Christian Endeavor Union urged the governor of New Jersey John Franklin Fort to condemn the screening of the fight in their state. Fort issued a statement condemning fight pictures and was quoted in the *New York Times* shortly after the match: "Prizefights are brutal, and the displaying of them in moving picture exhibitions

can have only ill effects on the morals of the community.”¹¹ White Protestant advocacy groups across the country pushed for legal reformation that would ban not only the distribution of Johnson’s win, but all further fight pictures.¹²

Both cinema and boxing went through a transformation founded in increased regulation from the late 1800s to early 1900s in order to appease middle-class Protestant policymakers. Regulations placed on the sport of boxing, individual boxers, and cinema during this time include the Queensberry rules; the color line; the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Corporation (MPPC, 1908); the ban on inter-state distribution of boxing films (Sims Act, 1912); *The Mann Act* or, white slavery act against Johnson (1913); and *Mutual v. Ohio* (1915), a Supreme Court ruling that determined moving pictures were not protected under the first amendment. Boxing films were exhibited with other popular and niche film genres during this time including passion plays, documentary news reels and travelogues, and although popularity for fight pictures waned at the beginning of the twentieth century, their production remained consistent until the early 1910s.

Though the anxiety of white men on its own is thoroughly uninteresting, what is illuminating about an incident like Jeffries filmed loss to Johnson is how it clearly signifies an imagined loss of control. Crisis in this case, signifies a perceived loss to what Gail Bederman terms an “access of power” and authority over African Americans.¹³ This supposed crisis would shape and reinforce not only racist stereotypes of Black fighters on screen, but most images of

¹¹ "THEATRE WRECKED IN FIGHT PICTURES ROW." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Jul 12, 1910.

¹² Runstedtler, 80. Runstedtler notes that many Christian groups protested all forms of boxing because the sport became “dominated by immigrant working-class men.”

¹³ Bederman, 11.

African Americans in narrative pictures throughout the 1900s and 1910s. My aim is to demonstrate how these modes of control and erasure were integrated into visual cinema narratives and how visual narratives perpetuate stereotypes that in turn create a sense of knowing on behalf of the viewer.

Debates at the level of the federal government concerning the threat of boxing films in the United States began as soon as the films became popular in the late 1890s. The Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce initially submitted a report in February 1897 to the House of Representatives concerning the “transportation of obscene pictures” from states practicing boxing into “advanced States which have forbidden pugilism” and specifically noted the damage images of prize fights had on America’s youth.¹⁴ Actions to limit the distribution of fight pictures however, were not implemented officially until Johnson’s win in July 1910, signifying a racial element to the decision. Rep. Walter I. Smith, a republican from Iowa, was the first to “enact a boxing film ban...” to prohibit the exhibition of moving pictures of prizefights” in May of 1910. Many representatives wanted to give Jeffries a chance to win the fight before suppressing the moving images and Smith was met with resistance. The Smith bill went nowhere because many believed Jeffries had a chance to beat Johnson.¹⁵

On July 31, 1912 a federal ban was implemented against the inter-state distribution of boxing films in the United States; before 1912 each state had their own laws concerning the filming and distribution of boxing films.¹⁶ The Sims Act, named after Rep. Thetus Sims of

¹⁴ House of Representatives, 54th Congress, 2nd Session, Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *Transmission by mail or interstate commerce of picture or any description of prize fights*, Report No. 3046, February 26, 1897.

¹⁵ Streible, 244.

¹⁶ Streible, 243.

Tennessee formulated the bill *Prohibition of Interstate Transportation of Pictures and Descriptions of Prize Fights* as part of the *Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce*.¹⁷ In a July 19, 1912 Congressional session Seaborn Roddenbery of Georgia referred to the July 4, 1912 fight in New Mexico between Jack Johnson and Jim Flynn, a white man, as “repulsive.” He supported Sims’ bill because it would prevent further “display to morbid-minded adults and susceptible youth...of representations of such a disgusting exhibition.” Roddenbery noted during this meeting that all men descended from “old Saxon race” should reject the sport of boxing altogether, no matter the race of the fighter in the ring.¹⁸ Though many Protestant reformers insisted on the elimination of the sport of boxing altogether, actions taken shortly after Johnson’s win against Jeffries indicate that Johnson’s success was more threatening to white middle class respectability than if Jeffries had won.

Jack Johnson’s continued heavyweight victories in front of movie cameras demonstrates not only an eruption to the myth of white superiority but reveals how tightly controlled cinema’s narratives had been since its commercial introduction to the United States in 1893. Cinema as an economical and geographically accessible text of commercialized information distribution allowed patrons throughout the country to absorb repeated messages of racial and gendered hierarchy as forms of passive entertainment. Silent cinema circulated along with newspapers, published literature, and theatrical productions during this time.

¹⁷ Streible, n9-11, 355.

¹⁸ House of Representatives of the United States, Congressional Record-House, 62nd Cong., 2nd sess., July 19, 1912, 9304.

Cinema is an illuminating tool for contemporary scholars in unearthing not only information about social practices in physical spaces: leisure activities and inexpensive amusements, racially segregated theaters, but also how the images on screen demonstrate a mythmaking on behalf of white filmmakers, grounded in historically specific discourse, that can be read today as an anxious response to perceived shifts in power dynamics of the time.

Cinema's debut in the United States

The introduction of moving pictures to paying audiences in the 1890s provided viewers voyeuristic opportunities to view real-life scenarios by degrees of separation that allowed the viewer to feel both comfort and pleasure from their confidential vantage point through individual viewing of peephole devices (like Edison's Kinetoscope), followed shortly by collective viewing of projected images onto a screen in theaters. First, the film camera acts as what Stewart calls a "neutral observer" to the film's subjects, an inanimate object acting as a set of eyes for the viewer.¹⁹ The second degree of separation is the film reel itself and how the filmmaker has chosen to present their filmed footage through framing and editing. Documentary travelogues like Edison's 1903 films *Negro Baby in Nassau, B.I* and *Native Women Washing Clothes at St. Vincent, BWI* filmed during trips to the Caribbean situate the viewer in real life, often domestic scenarios and provide viewers of the films the vantage of an authoritative gaze over subjects on screen by the seemingly natural placement and movement of the camera.

Edison's 1903 *Native Woman Washing a Negro Baby in Nassau, B.I.* centers on a woman smiling as she bathes a toddler age Black boy in a metal washtub outdoors with a sponge. The woman looks directly into the camera for a moment but does not respond to the gaze of the

¹⁹ Stewart, 68.

camera as she continues to bathe the child. The camera pans left to a group of young Black girls in white (or light color) dresses who scatter out of the frame as the camera looks their way. One young girl appears captivated by the camera and gazes back with what appears to be a mix of caution and curiosity. The position of the camera places the viewer as though they are standing at the edge of this village and looking in, eye level with the adults and taller than the children.²⁰

These films were popular during the late 1890s and invoked a sense of knowing, the film viewer didn't need to travel to these far-away places in order to form ideas about race and civilization and degrees of difference. Authoritative gaze on behalf of the viewer relied on passive or neutral reactions from the filmed subjects. Romanticized cinematic interpretations of non-white populations living under colonial rule allowed white film audiences in the United States and Europe to reinforce their own ideas about civilization as presented by racial difference within the comfort of a movie theater.²¹

“Watermelon picture shows” were popular in the late nineteenth century. Films like American Mutoscope’s 1896 *A Watermelon Feast* and Edison’s 1896 *Watermelon Eating Contest/Watermelon Contest* invoked a sense of comedic voyeurism as the screen captured African American men joyfully and clumsily eating watermelons. Films like these were meant to conjure a romantic ideal of images of African Americans on plantations, as more and more African Americans headed to cities during this time. Furthermore, these films, framed as comedies, allowed the viewer to laugh at an invented racialized difference grounded in degrees

²⁰ Thomas A. Edison, Inc, Kleine, and Paper Print Collection. *Native woman washing a Negro baby in Nassau, B.I.* United States: Thomas A. Edison, Inc, 1903. Video. Accessed February 23, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mp73107100/>.

²¹ Shohat and Stam, 101.

of white civilization.²² Though the narrative of watermelon picture shows may have been presented to audiences as less of a travelogue and more as a comedy the gaze of the audience remained authoritative.

In this sense, the authoritative gaze of the viewer is conditioned through film narratives to inherently hold authority over non-white subjects through visual cues grounded in skin color, camera positioning, and racialized stereotypes attributed to non-white subjects on screen. Authoritative gaze relies on the subjects of a film to present as either passive or neutral, unaware of the neutral gaze of the camera. Boxing films had the potential to disrupt the authoritative gaze. The subjects of these films take an active role in the narrative in the fight and on screen. Johnson is in control of the film narrative when he defeats “white hope” Jeffries and his control over the narrative can signify as loss of control to an authoritative white audience. Johnson’s win signifies a loss of control for the audience, a loss of the authorial gaze that previous films taught audiences was inherent.

Boxing films in the United States

The first boxing film released in the United States was the *Leonard-Cushing Fight* in June 1894 by the Edison Manufacturing Company. Filmed in Edison’s studio named the Black Maria, the fight was between two white men, Jack Cushing and Mike Leonard. Each round lasted only a minute to allow the kinetograph to capture the boxers’ movements. Leonard won the fight.

²² Stewart, 55-57. See also William R. Black “How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope,” *The Atlantic*, Dec 8, 2014. Images of African Americans with watermelons was a specific visual trope used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used by white artists and filmmakers to perpetuate a stereotype of “uncleanliness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence.” (Black) Accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/>.

The captured fight “received immediate front-page publicity in the New York papers.”²³ Filmed boxing matches paired well with the new cinema technology, they were filmed inside and light sources were easily manipulated by the filmmaker, their plot was straightforward and full of action, and short rounds fit neatly into the space of the film reels. Though early boxing films looked like live matches, Edison was known to manipulate the standard size of the boxing ring in order to fit it on screen.²⁴

The first African American heavyweight to appear on a movie screen was “Denver” Ed. Martin in Edison’s 1901 fictional picture *Ruhlin Boxing with “Denver Ed. Martin.”* Martin was framed as the “comic foil” to Gus Ruhlin, a white boxer and his appearance on screen concluded with Martin smiling and holding a chicken.²⁵

By the late 1890s boxing remained illegal in “every state of the Union” but continued to grow in popularity and fights were often advertised as “performances” or “exhibitions” rather than sports matches in order to circumvent state and federal legislation.²⁶ Films released during this time include the *Leonard-Cushing Fight*, *Corbett and Courtney Before the Kinetograph*, *Hornbacker-Murphy Fight*, and *Billy Edwards and Warwick*.²⁷ Jim Jeffries secured the world heavyweight title in 1898 and ushered in a high demand for fight pictures during the early years

²³ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 82-83.

²⁴ Streible, 32.

²⁵ Streible, 197.

²⁶ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 193.

²⁷ Streible, 23.

of the twentieth century. The popularity of both boxing and boxing films reshaped formal regulations around the sport.

Historiography

Building a historiography of early cinema studies is a lesson in sticking to one frame of reference for understanding the impact of cinema during the first three decades of its existence. As Sumiko Higashi highlights in her essay “Film History, or a Baedeker Guide to the Historical Turn,” historians of cinema from the 1960s onward live in a duality of defining their parameters and also becoming trapped within their own constructions of gender, class, race, definitions of the middle class, and connections between the text (the film) and its social and/or cultural impact on the audiences of the time.²⁸ Using cinema narratives as a tool for understanding how white filmmakers and by extension white authorial thought of the early twentieth century wanted to view themselves requires both a definition of whiteness and its relationship to authorial power and the consequences applied to the film (text) when that power via access to authorial control is threatened.

I ground my understanding of early twentieth century whiteness in Gail Bederman and to a lesser extent Matthew Jacobson’s analysis of racial classifications grounded in proximity to what was known then as the Anglo-Saxon race. Both Bederman and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart examine white anxious responses to African American migration during the early twentieth century. Bederman highlights an understanding of the performative nature of white masculinity as an anxious response to increased immigration into the United States and Stewart examines

²⁸ Sumiko Higashi, “Film History, or a Baedeker Guide to the Historical Turn,” *Cinema Journal*, 2004, Vol. 44 (1), 95.

cinematic images of African Americans as responses to white anger and fear of African Americans growing economic and social autonomy. Neither Bederman nor Jacobson focus on cinema in their analysis and Stewart's detailed focus on cinema is integral to my understanding of audience reaction to early cinema narratives. My examination of cinema ties into Stewart and Bederman's work concerning the visual spectacle of cinema and boxing by highlighting ways in which repetitive images of white and Black subjects on screen are made to teach and reinforce a mythology of white masculine superiority. Although a niche film genre, I argue that the patterns of representation within early boxing films and responses in major newspapers to these fights and films mirrors ways in which race has been presented in mainstream cinema narratives throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

My primary sources rely predominantly on published material, newspapers, and government documents, rather than personal accounts. The *New York Times* is referenced often due to its accessibility via Western Library's electronic database. Other sources include Congressional records and preclassical and transitional film clips (boxing, narrative, and documentary/travelogue) housed with the Library of Congress. Many heavyweight fight films are available on YouTube and I watched many to gain an understanding of the camera's relationship to the fighters and to the audiences of the fight. I am cautious however, in determining the authenticity of these fights. YouTube clips provide helpful insight into how a moviegoer would view these boxing matches, but it is hard to determine the authenticity of the clips. These sources illuminate how white filmmakers and journalists situated viewers and readers within a framework of understanding racial difference via visual cues and attributing the difference to an inherent hierarchy.

My thesis contributes to academic conversations about early cinema by highlighting a film genre that fully demonstrates and acts as an instructional text to white and African American film audiences concerning gendered and racial hierarchy in the United States. Whereas Dan Streible argues boxing and cinema were successful when they overlapped because each activity was followed by controversy, my aim is to highlight these films as early instructional texts that served to “teach” audiences racial hierarch grounded in white supremacy. My work applies a layer of critical analysis concerning gender and race that is absent from Streible’s text.

Early cinema as an instructional text has been used by previous film scholars to highlight the accessibility of early films to immigrants who did not speak English. Stewart points out that these examinations potentially ignore Black populations in the United States whose families had been living in the United States for centuries and who may have a different and unique relationship to the cinema screen.²⁹ My thesis highlights early cinema narratives as attempts to establish racial and gendered hierarchies grounded in white supremacy. Boxing films provide clear examples of how tightly controlled cinema narratives were in order to perpetuate a myth of white superiority – Jack Johnson’s success directly resulted in increased censorship on behalf of federal policymakers.

No matter the frame of reference, contemporary scholars of early cinema are often limited to the examination of bureaucratic and business practices of early film distribution companies, rather than access to many films released during this time. Most of the film stock produced and distributed during the first two decades of the twentieth century eroded over time. The many patents of Thomas Edison and other film companies, catalogue descriptions of early

²⁹ Stewart, 5.

film reels from various distributors, and newspaper articles and promotional material describing upcoming and recently released films outlives the ephemeral nature of celluloid film stock. Still, scholars can apply critical examinations of representations of bodies in motion on cinema screens, with aid from material that outlives film stock.

Twentieth century cinema scholars often dismiss the significance early cinema in two ways. The first is a dismissal through what Charles Musser calls a lens of “technological determinism”³⁰: The idea that the first two decades or so of cinema present a messy groundwork for a more formalized and structured studio system of the late teens and early twenties of the twentieth century. This narrative was standard until the 1970s. The second dismissal by traditional film scholars asks film scholars to step away from a “negative-stereotypes” and “positive-images” analysis of racist images on screen. Instead of pointing out ways in which Black bodies are misrepresented on cinema screens in contradiction to real life, scholars like Stewart, Shohat and Stam ask readers and film goers to examine the periphery of these images and push beyond an “image study” to reveal the white anxiety and anger as the origin for the creation of the narratives.³¹ This analysis furthers my argument in the eruption of anger followed by censorship of the Johnson-Jeffries fight picture and aids me in answering my question: what was so threatening about Jack Johnson’s image on movie screens?

As cinema technology rapidly became more intricate throughout the 1890s and early 1900s the ability to capture human emotion and expression through close-up shots, point-of-view shots, and continuity editing (sequential shots tied into one narrative) gave audiences a new

³⁰ Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*” Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12.

³¹ Shohat and Stam, 214.

perspective on both fictional narratives, and *actualities* such as documentary style travelogues and ringside boxing matches.³² This form of examination, explicitly or not, assumes that the unrefined nature of early moving pictures evolved into polished studio films. Though technological innovation increased rapidly during the formative years of the film industry, business decisions on behalf of Edison and other production companies oftentimes demonstrates mishandling of products, patent lockouts to discourage competition, and technological glitches that delayed screenings of films.³³ Viewing preclassical cinema through a lens of technological determinism limits an understanding of filmmaker intent and deliberate framing used to perpetuate ideas about ideal white masculinity.

Due to the degradation of early cinema stock most original films are unavailable to contemporary scholars for full analysis. These films are not necessarily dismissed for their lack of style, rather it is harder to engage with film texts, even remastered or restored, when they are not screened in their original format. Though hundreds of cinema reels were produced and distributed between the 1890s and 1915, the ephemeral nature of early cinema's film stock leaves historians' little options beyond newspapers, catalogue descriptions, and patents. Examining business practices, ticket sales, and newspaper promotion of early cinema, specifically upcoming fights might have its limitations, but in many cases, it might be the only way to bring these lost films back to life.

My argument is informed heavily by Dr. Jacqueline Najuma Stewart's critical analysis of African Americans on early cinema screens in her book *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and*

³² Stewart, 38.

³³ Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 12.

Black Urban Modernity (2005). Though Stewart does not examine boxing pictures in detail in her text, her central argument concerns critically rethinking the historiography of early cinema and ways in which African American subjects are presented to imagined white audiences on early cinema screens. Early cinema's images of Black subjects oftentimes relied heavily on "traditional racial "types"" projecting images of incompetent thieves, simple minded women, and dangerous violent men, all within the framework of the white imagination and tied in many ways to postbellum white published literature and consumable household products of the late nineteenth century.³⁴ My analysis of boxing films as instructional texts highlights how these themes were carried into the twentieth century as a response to anger and anxiety towards African Americans and how powerful an image of Johnson defeating a white hope on camera was to white audiences of the early twentieth century. By examining boxing films of preclassical and transitional cinema, along with newspaper responses to real matches and promotional material for fights, scholars can see the intricate mechanical and ideological methods used in projecting the white ideal on screen.

Secondary sources: boxing and cinema

There are relatively few secondary sources focusing exclusively on boxing and early cinema together. Dan Streible's *Fight Pictures* (published in 2008) is the only secondary source currently available dedicated to boxing films released between 1894 and 1915.³⁵ Though Streible's thorough research provides very detailed information about an overlooked subject, his critical analysis of race representation on screen is tepid. In *Fight Pictures* Streible argues that

³⁴ Stewart, 1.

³⁵ Other contemporary texts that focus on boxing and cinema include Leger Grindon's *Knockout: the Boxer and Boxing in American Cinema* (2011). Unfortunately, Grindon's text leaves out early boxing films entirely, and cites the history of boxing films beginning in 1926 with Buster Keaton's *Battling Butler*.

boxing films success in the United States is grounded in the two controversial worlds both boxing and cinema inhabit during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But Streible spends little time unpacking the perpetuation of white hegemonic narratives perpetuated by early boxing films. His assumption in the word “controversy” is that readers will understand how race and difference were highlighted to sell newspapers and movie tickets during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but Streible spends little time examining how deliberate, meticulous, and conscious white filmmakers were in the importance of selling the myth of the white hope, and how cinema can be viewed as an instructional tool concerning gender and race since the debut of the first public film viewing. Streible’s attempt to play both social and cultural historian in *Fight Pictures* stands to prove Higashi’s point as the text contains many generalizations that might be more useful if they were untangled a bit more. Examples include Streible’s detailed examinations of the fight pictures and business practices of film companies but few examples of critical examinations of African American boxers on screen. Streible does devote much of his work to Johnson and a handful of Black fighters who preceded him, but his work can be strengthened with an examination through a lens of critical theory, specifically, a critical examination of gender and race of boxers represented on early cinema screens compared to real-life fighters who were not captured by movie cameras.

Pulling together a collection of sources from boxing, early cinema, as well as *fin de siècle* urbanization, whiteness and manhood, the growth of leisure activities, and labor practices allows me to see a space between how a fighter is portrayed on screen, and how many other fighters like him practiced their skills in real life. Jack Johnson is an example of a fighter who the white controlled media, with the aid of cinema, attempted to shape into someone undeserving of the global heavyweight title. But there are many African American boxers who fought before him

who are not represented on screen (or, not represented to Johnson's degree). Not to mention the many African American fight instructors and gymnasium owners who receive little attention (this will be explored more thoroughly in chapter 1).

Secondary sources: boxing in the United States

Jeffrey T. Sammons *Beyond the Ring* was published in 1988 and follows boxing in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Sammons highlights the mythology that surrounds boxing in the United States: "Unfortunately, in the tendency to focus on the outstanding individual, important trends, events, and mass movements are often ignored, distorted or obscured."³⁶ Sammons pushes back against the tendency for scholars and sports enthusiasts to isolate successful individual athletes from the specific historical framework of their rise to champion. Sammons grounds his analysis in the symbolism boxing represents to American audiences throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This book is important to the historiography because it provides a concise survey of boxing in the United States from the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century regarding the anxieties of the nation at large in different ways from decade to decade.

Whereas Sammons work concerning boxing in the 1800s and early 1900s strives to demonstrate an overview of the popularity of boxing in the United States despite Protestant backlash and moral protest, Louis Moore's book *I Fight for a Living: Boxing and the Battle for Black Manhood 1880-1915* (2017) focuses specifically on African American boxers and the often generational divide between former slaves and Black adolescents who came of age during

³⁶ Jeffrey T. Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 3.

Reconstruction with regard to the construction of carving out an identity and manhood. Two of Moore's sources will be used in this thesis: essay "Fit for Citizenship: Black Sparring Masters, Gymnasium Owners, and the White Body 1825-1889" (2011) examines African American boxing instructors hired by middle-class white men in order to teach them how to be ideal middle-class white men, and *I Fight for a Living*. In each source Moore provides detailed analysis of the constructions of Black and white manhood and masculinity throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each of Moore's texts contributes to my understanding of ways in which African American boxers and boxing instructors participated in visual gendered performances in order to secure acknowledgement as full citizens in the United States.

Theresa Runstedtler's *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (2012) argues for an examination of Jack Johnson's fame, mobility (global, social, economic) and the racism perpetuated against him beyond the borders of the United States. Johnson's career took him all over the world and he experienced the global reach of white imperialism beyond his home country (Johnson was born in Galveston, Texas). Johnson's career and outspoken personality allowed him to reach Black fans all over the globe and his unwillingness to stand down to continued racism served as an inspiration during a time when increased information technology allowed information to travel the globe faster than ever before. Runstedtler's text contributes to this thesis with its global scope, a reminder that the influence of white imperialism is not confined to the borders of the United States. The global arm of white western imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century was easily threatened by images of Black success and cinema played a role in this threat when Johnson secured the heavyweight championship.

Secondary sources: theory

“It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert.”³⁷

- Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s book *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994) provides a detailed framework for comprehending and deconstructing popular culture media images produced in the twentieth century that reinforce white hegemonic authority over non-Western communities and cultures. Shohat and Stam complicate “common sense” or popular consensus understandings of Western popular culture, particularly visual images and note “Eurocentrism... envisions the world from a single privileged point.”³⁸ Their research aids in an understanding of the limited perspective of white filmmakers of the early twentieth century, and complicates simple narrative interpretations of subjects on cinema screens by examining the anxious motivation beyond the cinema subject.

German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” was first published in 1936 and examines the effects of cinema and mass spectatorship in an age of heightened capitalist production and consumption. According to Benjamin, cinema is a unique art form in that it is a direct product of mechanical reproduction of the twentieth century. Cinema has not existed outside of the realm of industry and because of this its continual reproduction is not given a second thought by public consumers (unlike previous works of art like paintings, there is no original source to uncover). Throughout his essay he

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin, February 2005 (first published in 1936), X. accessed March 12, 2019, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

³⁸ Shohat and Stam, 2.

argues for a usefulness of cinema, a medium that replicates itself without an original, or what Benjamin determined, an *aura* - an essence or soul of an art form no longer created directly by human hand, a medium that has the potential to “[wither] in the age of mechanical reproduction.”³⁹ Regarding early cinema’s boxing films Benjamin’s essay speaks to twentieth and twenty-first century scholars who attempt to understand the significance of the new technology to early film audiences.

In this sense contemporary scholars are twice removed from a filmed boxing match of the 1890s. As Benjamin writes “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”⁴⁰ The study of audience reaction to a single film, the *Corbett-Fitzsimons Fight* picture (1897) for example is an examination of a reaction to the viewing of an event that has already passed. And my focus is through the lens of commercial viability and will already alter my conception of the real-life event. Though most of the records that remain that can provide illumination of early cinema are the records concerning business practices, patent disputes, advertisements, and responses in local newspapers.

Organization

This thesis is structured chronologically and split in three parts according to shifts in film development and production, federal regulations of boxing films, the arc of Jack Johnson’s career and will end with the release of *The Birth of a Nation* and the *Mutual v. Ohio* federal court

³⁹ Benjamin, II.

⁴⁰ Benjamin, II.

case in 1915. Part one is longer than the subsequent parts in order to build a timeline of both boxing and cinema in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Part one focuses on boxing's emergence in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, shifts in film development between the 1894 and 1907, and how boxing became a popular subject for early moving pictures. The 1890s highlight a rapid development of cinematic technologies and bodies in motion were used to showcase those technologies. Additionally, part one will focus on Edison's transition to cinema, the famous 1897 *Corbitt-Fitzsimmons* fight picture, patent wars, and the birth of the industry as capitalist innovation. Part one will conclude in 1907, the eve of Jack Johnson's heavyweight championship, a dip in interest in boxing films, the birth of the nickelodeon, and a brief economic recession that affected film distribution in the United States.

Part two explores federal regulations of boxing films and will focus on 1907-1912. State laws and congressional debates surrounding the boxing film that either allowed or prohibited boxing matches to be held and filmed state by state. The formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in 1908 was an attempt on behalf of U.S. production companies and a small number of European affiliates to hold the monopoly of film reel production in the United States and edge out foreign competitors. This part will highlight the Johnson-Jeffries fight and aftermath and conclude with the 1912 federal ban on the distribution of boxing films in the United States and the sharp decline in the popularity of fight pictures.

Part three focuses on the arc of Johnson's career and how it coincided with end of transitional cinema between 1912 and 1915. The fall of Johnson's career began shortly after his 1910 win and he traveled abroad in 1911 to escape persecution of the Mann Act. This part will

also focus on the release of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, the disbandment of the MPPC the same year, movies loss of first amendment rights in 1915 (*Mutual v. Ohio*) and the transition to studio films. The emergence of a studio system in the United States presents a solidification of racist tropes concerning the invented threat of Black men on the cinema screen.

Chapter 1: The Emergence of Boxing and Cinema in the United States: 1800s through 1907

“One of the most potent causes of the ill-concealed alienation between the clergy and the people, in our community, is the supposed deficiency, on the part of the former, of a vigorous, manly life.”⁴¹

- Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Saints, and Their Bodies” (1858)

“But we are a softer and more comfortable race. Civilization has its way with us: and the primal qualities of a man are not, we think, so needful as they used to be. Hence they come to be despised and neglected, and neglect brings atrophy.”⁴²

- Bohun Lynch, *The Complete Boxer* (1914)

In 1914 English author Bohun Lynch published *The Complete Boxer*, a book aimed at clarifying the sport of boxing, or, the “sweet science of bruising!” to the amateur gentleman who might be curious about the connection between a fighting man’s primal instincts and the social guidelines that allow such brutality in decent society.⁴³ Though published as a how-to book for the modern amateur, Lynch criticized the state of the modern man’s “pluck” in the face of continued regulation. Romanticizing the days before boxing was regulated and incepted into the realm of civility by the Queensberry Rules Lynch noted “It is whispered that bare-knuckle fights still take place in the early hours of summer on Welsh mountains.”⁴⁴ Though policy may have hindered man’s ability to fight freely, the increased regulation of boxing during the latter half of the nineteenth century made boxing a respectable sport to the middle-class and would propel its popularity into a global phenomenon.

⁴¹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Saints, and their Bodies,” in *Out-door papers* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 7. Accessed March 2, 2019, <https://cutt.ly/wJ8wLt>.

⁴² Bohun Lynch, *The Complete Boxer* (New York: F.A. Stokes Company, 1914), 41.

⁴³ Lynch, 1.

⁴⁴ Lynch, 41.

One of the regulations included the 1867 introduction of the Marquess of Queensberry Rules in England. The set of twelve rules aimed to civilize the sport for both amateur and professional fighters; the rules eliminated bareknuckle fighting and required boxers to wear padded gloves.⁴⁵ These rules were adopted in the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century and enforced timed three-minute rounds, interval between each round of a minute, required new gloves “of the best quality,” and if a fighter knocked down, they must get up within ten seconds.⁴⁶ The Queensberry rules established a policy in both England and the United States legitimizing the sport of boxing and align it with another accepted sport of the time, sparring.⁴⁷ Though these rules were adhered to in the United States to secure fight venues and heightened promotion, the term “Queensberry rules” also became a term used to describe increased regulation in general.⁴⁸

In the United States James Corbett became the first “gloved heavyweight champion” when he defeated heavyweight titleholder John L. Sullivan in September 1892 in New Orleans.⁴⁹ Sullivan, a working class Irish immigrant, spent his career fighting predominantly without gloves (bareknuckle) and became a media celebrity for his skill in the ring.⁵⁰ A *New York Times* article

⁴⁵ Before this time boxers in the United States adhered to the London Prize Ring regulations that allowed for bareknuckle fighting. John L. Sullivan became the first heavyweight champion under the London Prize Ring rules when he knocked out Paddy Ryan in a bareknuckle match in February 1882. Sullivan would hold his title until 1892 when he lost to “Gentleman Jim” Corbett while wearing padded boxing gloves.

⁴⁶ Kasia Boddy, “Under Queensberry Rules, So to Speak: Some Versions of Metaphor,” in *Sport in History* 2011 31:4, 398-422, web published 15 Feb, 2012, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wvu.edu/10.1080/17460263.2011.646835>

⁴⁷ Boddy, 400.

⁴⁸ Boddy, 398.

⁴⁹ Boddy, 401.

⁵⁰ Streible, 12.

from September 8, 1892: “He [Corbett] Americanized the manly art, deprived it of much of its brutality, and made it possible to decide championships before athletic clubs under the best auspices [sic] before classes of people who formerly took little interest in the sport.”⁵¹

By this time Thomas Edison had taken an interest in capturing the sport on film and in May 1891 he addressed the “sporting fraternity” in the *New York Sun* with a promise to popularize the sport of boxing in his new invention, the Kinetograph.⁵² The 1890s present a time where the intersection of policy, boxing, and cinema not only legitimized the sport of boxing, but catered it to growing “mass commercial spectacle.”⁵³ The regulation of how a body moved within the sport now had the potential for replication and distribution.

The male body in motion, whether in the boxing ring, in front of the movie camera, or both, attempts to reinforce white male superiority over non-white men and all women. Gail Bederman’s examination of early twentieth century white manhood and masculinity argues “gender as a *historical ideological process* [emphasis Bederman].”⁵⁴ In a simplified translation the social and oftentimes very visual construction of gender situated individuals of the early twentieth century to identify as either a man or a woman predominantly through collective reinforcement of surrounding society as a whole. In western countries biological males are granted a social authority based purely on anatomy and the mythology surrounding an inherent male authority is reinforced repeatedly through visual metaphors. Boxing is an ideal way to examine this anxiety and Bederman’s connection between “male genital anatomy to...authority

⁵¹ "CORBETT NOW IS CHAMPION." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Sep 08, 1892.

⁵² Streible, 22. “The Kinetograph,” *New York Sun*, May 28, 1891.

⁵³ Boddy, 401.

⁵⁴ Bederman, 7.

and power” and can be applied to understandings of early boxing film narratives in their visual performance of ideal masculinity.⁵⁵ Boxing as a visual signifier for imperial strength played an important role in the construction of early twentieth century white masculinity. Bederman’s analysis of white masculinity translates to filmed boxing matches in that early silent cinema screen relied on visual signifiers grounded in race and gender to reinforce racial hierarchy.

Boxing is tied to this notion in its emphasis on a perfect balance between civilization – rational thought, and primal instincts – the urge to physically defend oneself through violence. Only the white body could be deemed civilized, this justified the implementation of policies and color lines that prohibited non-white boxer’s chances for universal championships. This also meant if a non-white fighter demonstrated the skills of a heavyweight champion, they can still be relegated to the perimeters of uncivilized because they are inherently primal.⁵⁶ These beliefs are played out in the media’s response to Jack Johnson throughout his boxing career and later shaped policy concerning the distribution of boxing films in the United States. Though a sense of anxiety and anger may have swept white middle and working-class American men, they continued to hold on to a narrative of power in information dissemination through newspapers and trade journals, and control of early cinema in front of and behind the camera.

Used predominantly by capitalist innovators in America to showcase technological feats in theatrical and cinematic production, boxing existed within early twentieth century cinema to demonstrate technological innovation. This ties images of the human body into the mechanics of

⁵⁶ Bederman, 1-31.

technological innovation and reproduction. Examining assumptions made about cinematic images demonstrates the perpetuation of mythmaking while demonstrating erasure, in this case, the erasure of most African American fighters from cinema narratives. To nod to Walter Benjamin's examination of the *aura* of cinema, in this sense the filmed human body becomes separated from the individual on screen and along with the mechanics of the cinema industry, is made to represent an ideal, rather than a real form. The on-screen boxer becomes a myth with no definitive or original source. Constructions of ideal whiteness and citizenship can change over time and the ideal image on screen will adjust to fit the time, but the images of bodies on screens cannot be tied back to specific individuals, they speak for the time the image is produced and/or reproduced.

A Brief History of Boxing in the United States: 1790-1890

David A. Gerstner notes in *Manly Arts: Masculinity and Nation in Early American Cinema* the tendency for late nineteenth century artists to highlight a specific and separate roughness to American art, separate from English refinement. Boxing was envisioned in writings, cinema, and paintings.⁵⁷ Romantically, the space of the club or ring gives the illusion of challenging and at times defying social hierarchy. The early twentieth century produced art demonstrating the allure of the masculine space of a gentleman's club or a saloon. Notably, George Bellows' 1909 painting (oil on canvas) "Both Members of This Club" depicts a Black and white boxer fighting in a ring of light surrounded by blurry figures of the white crowd in dark suits. The tone of this painting indicates a hunger on behalf of the spectators, a consuming

⁵⁷ David A. Gerstner, *Manly Arts: Masculinity and Nation in Early American Cinema* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006), 1-50.

of the fight. Though Black fighters could make their way into these clubs, they were not always welcome outside the confines of the ring.

During the mid-1800s historian Louis Moore notes “white middle-class men, worried openly about their bodies.”⁵⁸ Health reformers and Protestant leaders of the mid-nineteenth century connected both illness and a sedentary living to signs of moral decay. Furthermore, physical strength was tied to imperial strength, particularly when compared to England and Higginson notes in his essay “Saints, and Their Bodies:” “Physical health is a necessary condition of all permanent success. To the American people it has a stupendous importance, because it is the only attribute of power in which they are losing ground.”⁵⁹ A July 1858 publication of *Farmer’s Cabinet* touts the virtues of fun, physical activity and moral health: “The intellect that plays a part of every day, works more powerfully, and to better results...the heart that is gay for an hour is more serious for the other hours of the day; the will that rests, is more vigorous than the will that is always strained.”⁶⁰ Physical culture would become popular during this time in the United States and boxing would soon be incorporated into an accepted form of exercise.

The sport of boxing, according to texts like Lynch’s (quoted above) demonstrates a balance between the physical strength of the body and the civilized strength of the mind. Lynch deems boxing a “noble art of self-defense.”⁶¹ An *NYT* article published on January 27, 1859

⁵⁸ Louis Moore, “Fit for Citizenship: Black Sparring Masters, Gymnasium Owners, and the White Body, 1825-1886,” in *The Journal of African American History* 01 October 2011, Vol. 96 (4), 448.

⁵⁹ Higginson, 9-10.

⁶⁰ “Recreation.” *Farmer's Cabinet* (Amherst, New Hampshire) 56, no. 52, July 28, 1858: [1]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://cutt.ly/IJ59KM>.

⁶¹ Lynch, 1.

demonstrates attempts at a moral overhaul in the construction of The Seventh Regiment at Woods's Gymnasium in New York City. The perimeter surrounding the gym had been outfitted with drinking fountains and a medical doctor is quoted saying the features are a "necessity for the public health" as they would deter women and children from entering saloons for a sip of water and feeling pressure to "take a little something" extra for the trouble of water.⁶² Morality surrounded physical health and the sport of boxing on all sides.

Muscular Christianity was developed in England during the mid-nineteenth century and is described by Clifford Putney in *Muscular Christianity* as "a Christian commitment to health and manliness."⁶³ Putney argues in his book that "muscular Christianity was in part a male reaction against women's religious leadership."⁶⁴ In fact, many exclusive groups for white men popped up during the mid-1800s including the YMCA, the Freemasons, Odd Fellows, and Red Men. African American YMCA organizations appeared around the same time as the white establishment (1850s), but until 1946 the YMCA remained a "separate but equal" establishment.⁶⁵

Though boxing was adopted from England, the United States attempted to separate itself from England "...as America continued to grow and become aware of itself as a nation, "distinct, different, and superior" to the "corrupt monarchies" of Europe, Americans strove to

⁶² CITY INTELLIGENCE, *New York Times*, 27 Jan 1859: 4.

⁶³ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11.

⁶⁴ Putney, 3.

⁶⁵ Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA 1852-1946* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), chapter one; and Putney, 4.

improve, if not perfect, the young republic's institutions and individuals.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the United States during the nineteenth century attempted to construct its own definition of 'civilization' separate from England. Gerstner notes in *Many Arts* that America, without a concrete definition of its own markers for civilization, began to define itself by what it was *not* based on the grounds of nationality, gender, and race.⁶⁷ In the United States Henry Ward Beecher, social reformer and clergyman, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, American Unitarian minister and Edward Everett, pastor "developed and promoted a positive sporting ideology that justified the playing of certain sports as healthful, an alternative to vices, and a proper training tool for young children."⁶⁸

The social construction of ideal white American manliness in the mid-1800s was an aspirational myth for middle-class white men to aim for. As the sport of boxing edged its way into a virtuous, manly activity, a market opened for boxing professionals to share their skills. In 1859 Aaron Molineaux Hewlett, an African American man, was hired by Harvard University as "the first physical education instructor in U.S. higher education." His role as one of many Black "professors of the manly arts"⁶⁹ concerned teaching boxing to white clients during a time when the middle class became concerned with the physical body and fears of becoming sedentary. Though it was not common for an African American man to hold the title of "physical education specialists," a skilled trade, when the majority of free African Americans worked unskilled labor, a handful of African American men, mostly in the northeast and to some extent San Francisco,

⁶⁶ Sammons, 5.

⁶⁷ Gerstner, 4.

⁶⁸ Sammons, 4.

⁶⁹ Moore, "Fit for Citizenship," 449.

were successful in this trade. Molineaux was employed at Harvard until his death in 1871. Catering to the middle and upper classes, Professors like Hewlett boxing instructors would contribute to the growing popularity of boxing in the United States throughout the nineteenth century.⁷⁰

Many African American leaders emphasized and equated Black economic success as proof of legitimacy for equal citizenship in the United States.⁷¹ Though a handful of African American men found success as gymnasium owners and instructors they oftentimes had to adhere to a mode of respectability that might alienate them from their own community in order to fit in with the white middle class. As Moore explains: “The Professor had to abide to social image of respectability...Respectable professors trained other men, but they themselves avoided engaging in prizefights.”⁷² Additionally, many professors rented buildings and filled them with expensive equipment. The money they accrued from training would be used to pay their debts for the building and equipment. Though Professors might have been able to perform a role of economic upward mobility, their debts at times presented challenges for attaining footholds into higher income brackets.

Some Black boxers who were not instructors published information about the sport in local newspapers. In the 1880s the *St. Paul Globe* published training tips from “a young Hercules” Billy Wilson.⁷³ Canadian fighter George Dixon, who held the 1891 featherweight title

⁷⁰ Moore, “Fit for Citizenship,” 451.

⁷¹ Moore, “Fit for Citizenship,” 449.

⁷² Moore, “Fit for Citizenship,” 451.

⁷³ Louis Moore, *I Fight for a Living: Boxing and the Battle for Black Manhood 1880-1915* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 16.

wrote a book *A Lesson in Boxing* where he described continued requests from white men on how to fight. Moore notes in *I Fight for a Living* “Dixon toured the nation teaching white men to be men.”⁷⁴ “However, unlike their white counterparts, black physical specialists did not write books or articles, or give public lectures about their expertise, and thus have been overlooked in the historical record.”⁷⁵ Nor were these professors featured in boxing films during the late and early nineteenth centuries, demonstrating an erasure of Black men’s participation in the sport of boxing. This erasure within the realm of cinematic narratives further removes African American boxer’s attempts at performing citizenship.

The professional life of Canadian Heavyweight boxer George Godfrey (1853-1901), World Colored Heavyweight Champion (not to be confused with African American World Colored Heavyweight Champion George Godfrey, 1897-1947) preceded Johnson’s. After defeating many African American heavyweight boxers throughout his career Godfrey challenged white champions like John L. Sullivan to matches with no success. Godfrey framed his right to fight white men by attempting to humiliate their sense of white masculine authority. In a newspaper quote in 1888 Godfrey noted that Sullivan was a man he didn’t “dread at all, and if I ever met him in the ring I would be confident of whipping him.”⁷⁶ In 1888 Godfrey “attended Jack Havlin’s benefit in March 1888 in order to challenge any man in America for a \$1,500 side.”⁷⁷ White boxers refused his challenge and Godfrey was unable to prove himself as a World Heavyweight Champion. A *NYT* article dated October 21, 1901 titled “Funeral of a Pugilist” highlights the death of Godfrey. “He had died a Christian man...His hand had never struck an

⁷⁴ Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, 17.

⁷⁵ Moore, “Fit for Citizenship,” 470.

⁷⁷ Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, 9.

unfair blow in battle, and he might have said, as many do, that he always had been square and honest with his fellow-men.” Compared to how Johnson would later be framed in newspapers, earlier boxers seen as “respectable in their demeanor” could be used as a foil to Johnson’s refusal to abide by the rules of the color line.⁷⁸

Though Jack Johnson is remembered as a successful African American boxer of the early twentieth century Black heavyweight Peter Jackson (b. 1861) preceded Johnson in fame. Though he secured the Australian Heavyweight title in 1886 but was unable to cross the color line as American heavyweight John L. Sullivan denied him the opportunity to fight him.⁷⁹ Many successful Black fighters were denied their chance at the world heavyweight, and many were persistent in their pursuit to secure the coveted title.

Historian Louis Moore writes in *I Fight for a Living* about the significance of boxing for African American men in the late 1800s.

...prizefighting offered black men the best opportunity at full-time athletic employment because of the individualistic nature of the sport, the growing desire among men to see other men fight, and the easy access to fight...During an era in which black men faced increasing racial violence, a black fighter’s public performance of manliness challenged whites’ tolerance for what they would accept from a black man.⁸⁰

In his writing about the rise of popularity in boxing in the United States during the 1890s Moore quotes scholar Anthony Rotundo: “The male body moved to the center of men’s gender concerns; manly passions were revalued in a favorable light; men began to look at the ‘primitive’

⁷⁸ " FUNERAL OF A PUGILIST.: OFFICIATING MINISTER TELLS HOW GEORGE GODFREY PREPARED FOR DEATH." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Oct 21, 1901.

⁷⁹ Runstedtler, 9.

⁸⁰ Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, 2.

sources of manhood with new regard.”⁸¹ During the 1890s and early 1900s African American men who sought careers in boxing not only asserted a new twentieth century masculinity, but also had to contend with criticism from white journalist and Black leaders. Jack Johnson would be a force to reckon with considering both sides.

Newspapers like the *New York Times* (NYT), established in 1851 and journals like *The Atlantic Monthly* founded in 1857 helped boxing gain popularity in the United States. Newspapers also aided in highlighting controversy that continued to surround prize fights. An NYT article dated March 24, 1860 discusses an upcoming fight in England the journalist notes “No spectacle can be more low or degrading, none is more certain to collect together the vilest elements of every community.... The scene of a prize-fight is always the gathering-place of all the rowdies and black-legs [gambler or swindler] of a country, and all the brutal passions of the lowest part of the community here hold their carnival.”⁸² Protestant advocacy groups resisted boxing in addition to many people who saw the practice of the sport as a direct support to England in a country that was still solidifying its independence.

Boxing was legal in private athletic clubs in New York City starting in the 1880s. To demonstrate the civilized nature of the sport articles in the *NYT* framed the matches as “scientific boxing bouts.” In a July 1894 article advertising the opening of the Seaside Athletic Club in Coney Island the upcoming matches are described: “Brutality will give way to science. No effort will be sacrificed in bringing together the most scientific men in their several classes, and, if anything, preference will be given to men who class at 158 pounds and under” (middle-weight or

⁸¹ Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, 15.

⁸² "The Coming Fight." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Mar 24, 1860.

below).⁸³ The specific framing of a preferred weight class demonstrates how boxing clubs and newspapers intended to frame the sport of boxing as civilized.

Edison's early on-camera boxing bouts further popularized the sport. Many of Thomas Edison's early films were filmed in a studio laboratory created on his New Jersey property called the Black Maria "a slang expression for the patrol wagon it was said to resemble."⁸⁴ Completed and ready in May 1893 The space was an enclosed, dark housing structure. The space allowed for complete control over lighting on behalf of the filmmaker. Many subjects filmed in the Black Maria focused on the human body in motion including short films of German bodybuilder Eugene Sandow.⁸⁵ Edison held total control over his subjects in the Black Maria, from lighting to camera framing, to movement. Edison would use the Black Maria to stage his first fight pictures.

The first boxing fight film was produced by Latham and filmed in the Black Maria on June 14, 1894. *The Leonard-Cushing Fight* was viewed by the public through the lens of the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company. Kinetoscope machines were set up in rows of "five or six" alongside urban boardwalk activities and each round of the fight was a separate reel. If paying customers wanted to see the entire match, they would move from machine to machine paying at each to view "6 Slashing Rounds" that ended in a knockout on behalf of Leonard.⁸⁶

Boxing films were a part of the technological feats of the Black Maria and drew the world of boxing from niche insider knowledge into a wider audience. Accessibility to fight

⁸³ "SCIENTIFIC BOXING BOUTS.: A GOOD CARD ARRANGED BY THE NEW SEASIDE ATHLETIC CLUB," *New York Times*, July 26, 1894.

⁸⁴ Musser, Charles, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 72.

⁸⁵ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 75.

⁸⁶ Streible, 29-31.

pictures garnered fighters a wider fan base. Streible notes in *Fight Pictures* “Amateur and professional fighters of varying degrees of fame came to the New Jersey laboratory and sparred while technicians recorded their actions in installments lasting little more than a minute.”⁸⁷ Boxing films captured in the Black Maria between 1894 and 1895 include but are not limited to the *Leonard-Cushing Fight*, *Corbett and Courtney Before the Kinetograph*, *Hornbacker-Murphy Fight*, *Billy Edwards and Warwick*.⁸⁸ The timing of boxing matches, unlike other American sports like baseball and football, aligned closely with the capability of film reels at the time. Short bursts of action could be captured on a film reel in the space of a minute and provide more viewers with action packed entertainment.

The popularity of interracial fight pictures rose during the early 1900s. Runstedtler writes in *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner* “Ironically, the overwhelming desire of white men to prove their own physical supremacy in the ring turned interracial title matches into massive commercial spectacles that reverberated around the world.”⁸⁹ Some of the first interracial fight pictures were staged for the movie camera as comical. “Gag” fight films were recorded and became popular included *A Scrap in Black and White* (Edison, 1903), *Chuck Connors vs. Chin Ong* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1899), *Barrel Fighters* (Selig, 1903). These films present fictional fights between members of different races and oftentimes relied on racist stereotypical imagery to heighten intended comedic effects on behalf of the non-white fighter.

⁸⁷ Streible, 23.

⁸⁸ Streible, 23.

⁸⁹ Runstedtler, 22.

Jack Johnson's on-screen fame is preceded by sub-heavyweight fighters George Dixon and Joe Gans, who fought in front of the cameras against white boxers with much less fanfare than the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries fight. Dixon, a bantam and featherweight champion in the late 1800s, lost in front of the movie camera to white fighter Terry McGovern in January 1900. Gans was filmed several times between 1906 and 1908 and his filmed match against Battling Nelson in 1906, which Gans won, contributed to a growing public interest in the continued production of interracial fight pictures.⁹⁰ An *NYT* article from September 6, 1906 mentions Gans' accusation that he was offered \$25,000 to throw a fight against Nelson. Gans refused and the article notes: "The colored pugilist declined to give any particulars and would not say who made the offer."⁹¹ The demand for these fights weakened the stronghold many white boxers had on the color line, but the heavyweight category wouldn't budge for another two years.

The color line regarding boxing was a term used to describe white heavyweight fighter's refusal to fight African American boxers. Frederick Douglass' essay "The Color Line" was first published in 1881 and highlights de facto segregation between Black and white fighters: "Everything against the person with the hated color is promptly taken for granted; while everything in his favor is received with suspicion and doubt."⁹² These words rang true for Johnson as he climbed the ranks towards World Heavyweight Champion and defeated many white contenders. Though not exclusively used to describe segregation in the boxing ring, it demonstrates a clear boundary that many African American fighters had to challenge before Johnson received the chance at the heavyweight title in 1908 (the color line has also been used to

⁹⁰ Streible, 198-199.

⁹¹ "\$25,000 TO THROW FIGHT." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Sep 05, 1906.

⁹² Frederick Douglass, "The Color Line," *The North American Review* vol. 132 no. 295 (Jun., 1881), 569.

describe Johnson's relationship with white women). W.E.B Du Bois in "The Color Line Belts the World," first published in *Collier's Weekly* in 1906 writes "This is the problem of the Color Line. Force and Fear have hitherto marked the white attitude toward darker races; shall this continue or be replaced by Freedom and Friendship?"⁹³ Many Black fighters challenged white heavyweights to no success before Johnson defeated Burns in 1908.

Due to the color line in the United States many Black fighters sought success fighting overseas in countries like England.⁹⁴ Anti-Black racism was a global problem and many African American and Black Canadian fighters who were able to travel to Europe with the hope of better treatment were disappointed with their reception overseas.

White Canadian boxer Tommy Burns took a chance against his white "manly authority" and broke the color line in 1908. He lost the fight to Johnson.⁹⁵ Many prominent white boxers refused to fight black boxers, even if they had run out of competitors for this very reason. Though reluctant at first, Burns agreed to fight Johnson on camera in Sydney, Australia. Moore notes that "Burns...lifted the color bar, and promptly lost, causing great problems for a shaky white psyche propped up by physicality."⁹⁶ The anger of white boxing fans after Burns defeat echoed globally and the media fed off the anticipation of the next white man to bring down Johnson.

The sport of boxing would not have been as accessible to fans without the ability for information to travel quickly. Newspapers aided in getting the word about Johnson's

⁹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Color Line Belts the World," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: John Macrae/Owl Book Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 43.

⁹⁵ Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, 3.

⁹⁶ Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, 19.

heavyweight win against Burns and cinema reels allowed audiences to relive the moment in their own hometowns. Boxing gained popularity in the 1890s due to in large part the acceleration of information technology including “telegraph, telephone, and newspaper communication” that quickly connected information about fights across the country to reporters and eager moviegoers.⁹⁷ Promotion of boxing matches took on a corporate concept. Though still illegal in many states Athletic associations began to promote fights and garnered them a sense of respectability.⁹⁸ The Olympic Club in New Orleans is the site of a shift to the acceptance of boxing in the United States. Sammons notes in *Beyond the Ring* that the law “legalized pugilism under the polite name of ‘boxing bouts.’”⁹⁹ Regulation during this time included the Horton Law of 1896 which legalized boxing in the state of New York from 1896-1900. The law was enacted to keep boxing from moving west, into states and territories with no laws against pugilism.¹⁰⁰

The rapid rise of boxing’s popularity in the United States coincided neatly with the rise of cinema. Together, these two modes of entertainment demonstrated a twentieth century anxiety of the white man’s ‘place’ in the changing Progressive Era.

⁹⁷ Streible, 13.

⁹⁸ Sammons, 13.

⁹⁹ Sammons, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Sammons, 24.

Cinema's emergence in the United States

“Motion picture film stock manufactured in the period of silent cinema consists almost entirely of highly unstable organic materials.”¹⁰¹

- Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema*

Many scholars of early cinema focus on late nineteenth century business practices, or the “industrial practices” of early investors.¹⁰² Though there may be limitations within the examination of bureaucratic patterns, the reality is that a large percentage of the films produced during this time no longer exist due to fires, disintegration, and other modes of destruction. Today, film historians of early cinema seek to explain these films in their “intended state” (the words of Italian Film Critic Paolo Cherchi Usai) while speaking about something that for the most part no longer exists.¹⁰³ My examination of this material is taken largely from newspaper publications, promotional information concerning boxing film screenings, and congressional documents that discuss the continued distribution of fight pictures.

Cinema is a highly controlled mode of expression, both artistic and technological. Unlike stage theater or other forms of screen practice: shadow plays of the seventeenth century or sliding glass projections of the eighteenth century, has existed solely and successfully within and beside the growth of corporate capitalism in the United States.¹⁰⁴ Used predominantly by

¹⁰¹ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 1.

¹⁰² Allen, Robert C., “Vitascope/Cinématographe: Initial Patterns of American Film Practice,” in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. John L. Fell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 144.

¹⁰³ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), 21.

¹⁰⁴ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 22.

capitalist innovators in the United States to showcase technological feats in theatrical and cinematic production, boxing existed within early twentieth century cinema predominantly as a means to demonstrate technological innovation. Thomas Edison's Vitascope captured prizefights in motion during the 1880s and 1890s and his many legal patents and propensity to sue his competitors provided him nearly sole authority on reel distribution in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Edison's work is integral to the understanding of the beginning of cinema in the United States, not because he is a lone genius, but it is helpful to examine the mythology that surrounded his contribution to industry in the United States. Hailed as both a scientific innovator and the "Wizard of Menlo Park" holding dual space with science and folklore. Edison was not an artist, but a strategic businessman. Charles Musser writes in *The Emergence of Cinema* "In the 1870s Thomas Edison had established himself as the businessman's inventor" by developing efficient methods for cutting costs to corporations such as Western Union and Jay Gould. Edison's innovative specialties originated and resided in the fields of communication and transportation.¹⁰⁵ His work in the field of cinema developed throughout the 1880s as he designed and constructed the Black Maria studio. Edison's hand in the world of early motion pictures in the United States highlights an emphasis on commercial innovation over artistic experimentation.

On May 9, 1893 Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope held its public debut in Brooklyn, New York. The Kinetoscope was a viewing machine, a large box with a small peephole on the top. Viewers stood in line to wait for their turn to peer into the box. A film reel inside the box projected a short film, the first film titled "The Blacksmith Scene" depicts white American

¹⁰⁵ Musser, *History of the American Cinema vol. 1*, 55.

laborers “hammering on an anvil and passing a bottle of beer around as they worked.”¹⁰⁶ Though a staged scene filmed in Edison’s West Orange, New Jersey Black Maria studio, early cinema began by projecting white, working-class life back to early cinema audiences.

American and French Cinema in the United States

Before 1905 there was no standard in film reel perforation. The various projectors that flooded the global market were not compatible with other projector’s film reels. The visual illusion of moving images on a screen required perforated film reels to line up precisely with the projecting apparatus. Before 1905 Edison’s Kinetoscope projector ran on 35mm film “with four vaguely rectangular perforations on either side of each frame.” The French Lumière brothers, Edison’s foreign competitors on the other hand “the film is drawn along by means of one single, circular perforation on either side of the frame.”¹⁰⁷ Edison competed largely with the Lumière brothers of France during the first decade as French films flooded and originally dominated the American film market.¹⁰⁸

Though the birth of American commercial cinema is traditionally attributed to Edison and the invention of the Kinetoscope, French films widely circulated the U.S. market in the late 1890s. The success of French brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière’s Cinématographe initially had more to do with their traditional methods for projecting images on a screen. Without a reliance on electricity, Lumière films were hand cranked on their own projectors by a

¹⁰⁶Charles Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 72.

¹⁰⁷ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 2.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Able, *The Red Rooster Scare*, 6-19.

projectionist.¹⁰⁹ Though the physical labor might be more taxing than Edison's reliance on electricity to project an image, the success rate of Lumière's screenings was higher than Edison's. Edison's emphasis on technology would at times hinder his ability to screen films as sometimes the electricity would not communicate between theater and projector. Additionally, some theaters ran on alternating current (AC) while Edison's projector ran on direct current (DC).

The first films were often screened in vaudeville theaters. Vaudeville theater traditionally featured "visual novelties" such as pantomime, shadowgraphy, puppetry, lanterning, and *tableaux vivants* - silent and motionless group of people used to depict paintings or events. Vaudeville theaters were ideal for cinema and theaters began incorporating film shorts into live vaudeville shows. The debut of the Vitascope in 1896 was a hurried event prompted by vaudeville theaters' interest in the Lumière Cinématographe, a projector that held a higher successful screening rate than Edison's machine. Edison's Vitascope was a rushed effort to hold the monopoly on reel production in the United States.¹¹⁰ French films in the United States would compete with Edison until the formation of the MPPC in 1908.

Edison debuted the Vitascope, an electric projector, at vaudeville theater Koster & Bail's Music hall in New York City in April 23, 1896. For \$800 a week, Albert Bail (co-owner of the theater) secured Edison's lead in film reel exhibition and the debut screening was reported a success.¹¹¹ A *New York Times* article dated April 24, 1896 provided some highlights from the

¹⁰⁹ Allen, 149.

¹¹⁰ Allen, "Vitascope/Cinématographe, 147.

¹¹¹ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 116.

screening: “Upon a white screen in a darkened hall...the turret is neatly covered with the blue velvet brocade which is the favorite decorative material in this house...The white screen used on the stage is framed like a picture. The moving figures are about half-life size.” Screened subjects included two young blond girls performing an “umbrella dance,” a “burlesque boxing match” between a thin tall man and a fat short man as an allegory called “The Monroe Doctrine.” The article takes effort to mention that audience members who may not be interested in the Vitascope might enjoy the theater’s continued vaudeville attractions.¹¹² As Musser notes in *The Emergence of Cinema*: “The spectators [of the Vitascope debut] were...assumed to make a conscious comparison between the projected image and the everyday world as they knew and experienced it directly.”¹¹³ The novelty of cinema during this time was the combination of realistic movements of subjects on screen with exaggerated theatrical gestures and uncanny depictions of a world of absurdity. Cinema’s success during the late 1890s was directly connected with the vaudeville stage, though cinema would soon eclipse stage theater and become an act of its own.

In 1897 cinema narratives transitioned from the novelty period (1896-97) into slightly longer narratives and “evening-length, single-subject screen entertainments.”¹¹⁴ Popular topics included boxing pictures, Passion Plays (the retelling of the death of Jesus Christ), and travel documentaries, or travelogues. Audiences of the late 1890s were expected to come to the theater with some familiarity to the stories on screen. World news stories such as the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor in January 1898 and America’s entry into the Spanish-American war the

¹¹² “EDISON'S VITASCOPE CHEERED.: " PROJECTING KINETESCOPE" EXHIBITED FOR FIRST TIME AT KOSTER & BIAL'S," *New York Times*, April 24, 1896.

¹¹³ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 118.

¹¹⁴ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 193.

same year demonstrated that films could serve as moving newspapers. Audiences, especially ones who could not read English-language print media now had access to major U.S. news stories. Here is an example of cinema literally taking the place of a newspaper information source and presenting real life events along with visuals to audiences.

It would be a mistake, as Charles Musser emphasizes in his essay “The American Vitagraph, 1897-1901” to apply a line of technological determination to the trajectory of early film history in order to arrive at a conclusion that fits linear innovative progress. Although we can view the rapid growth in cinematic technology within the mechanics of the industrial revolution it is not correct to think of the production of cinema in the same way one would think about the production of other materials such as steel. Musser: “Films are not like steel. With steel, the mode of production can change, but the product remains constant. In cinema, when the mode of production changes, the product (as evidenced in its mode of appreciation) changes and *vice versa* [emphasis Musser]”¹¹⁵ Cinema as a commercial product had a different relationship with its consumers during the industrial boom of the early twentieth century. Though advancements in technology allowed filmmakers to capture clearer pictures and complicate their editing style, early cinema’s films can reveal a fair amount of depth and emotional intrigue. Just because the technology got better does not mean films became more refined. As audiences demanded newer film material during the early years of the twentieth century, film production companies rushed to produce more material than ever before. Cinema went through many transition periods between the 1890s and 1915. The mode of production: advancements in

¹¹⁵ Musser, John L. Fell ed., “The American Vitagraph, 1897-1901: Survival and Success in a Competitive Industry,” in *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

cinema camera technology, lighting, advancements in editing, and presentation greatly changed audience's relationship to cinema between 1894 and 1915.

African American representation on screen

Attempts to construct and perpetuate the myth of white superiority through repetitive consumer imagery were not new to the twentieth century or to cinema. Nineteenth century post-Civil War images of African Americans provide examples of racial mythmaking through published literature, theatrical productions, minstrel shows, household goods, promotional advertisements, scientific publications, and many of these ideas were folded into visual cinema narratives of the early 1900s. Jacqueline Stewart highlights “traditional racial “types”” of African American representation in early twentieth century cinema: “Mammy in apron and bandanna [often seen in commercial advertising]...a Zip Coon figure in top hat and tails [a character intended to mock free Black men who attempted to gain social and economic capital] and...a harmless, shabbily dressed, white-haired Uncle Remus [a fictional folktale narrator invented by white author Joel Chandler Harris and published in the 1880s. The character of Uncle Remus spoke in a simplified southern dialect constructed by the white author].”¹¹⁶ These visual signifiers were often produced for white homes and depicted Black people frozen in time as a direct response to African American's migration into metropolitan cities.¹¹⁷ Stewart highlights the pattern of visual signifiers to render images of African Americans “palatable, humorous, and therefore more commercially viable.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Stewart, 1.

¹¹⁷ Stewart, 55.

¹¹⁸ Stewart, 34.

The content of early cinema's narrative films oftentimes reflected and reinforced a mythology of white control over Black subjects. This pattern reflects wider instances of subjugated African Americans in white-produced literature and emphasizes a theme of Black American's as uncivilized and underserving of full citizenship.¹¹⁹ In *Before the Nickelodeon* Charles Musser notes "The production of Edison films within a white, "homosocial," male world affected the choice of subjects as well as the ways in which they were depicted.... Such biases shaped the portrayal of women and blacks in particular."¹²⁰ Films of the late 1890s often used African Americans as actors and/or passive subjects. "during the 1890s Edison's kinetoscope films featured popular Black dancers performing their stage acts...."¹²¹ Though Black figures were sometimes the center of focus on early cinema screens (blackface was not introduced until the early 1900s) they were framed as subjects of curiosity, often in comedic roles at the expense of the Black character or characters for white audience consumption.

One letter to the editor of the *New York Times* dated October 8, 1905, written by American author John R. Spears and titled "A SUGGESTION.; Why Not Have a Texas Lynching Reproduced by Kinetoscope?" asks plainly and in a satirical tone why the Kinetoscope company had not yet developed reels of films depicting real life lynchings. Spear's letter highlights cinema's tendency to rely on spectacle in narratives concerning racial difference. Specifically referencing a recent lynching in Texas the letter reads: "With those facts [that upwards of 2000 people viewed the lynching in person] in mind permit me to say that it would

¹¹⁹ Stewart, 33.

¹²⁰ Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 9.

¹²¹ Stewart, 54.

be a good business enterprise to organize a stock company, and send a kinetoscope to the next lynching of the kind in order to secure a complete series of photographs for the event.” Suggesting someone go to a scene of a lynching with movie camera supplies in hand, Spears’ letter emphasizes the power of a camera (and by extension, white) gaze at a scene of racial violence in order to reinforce “public instruction,” “...a kinetoscope man is to attend in the interest of public entertainment and, I may add, public instruction.”¹²² It was not lost on activists of the early twentieth century that repetitive images of racist stereotypes and sometimes violent cinema narratives against African Americans contributed to dangerous retaliation at the hands of angry white audiences.

According to Swedish film scholar Jan Olsson Spears letter to the editor was to be read in the style of Jonathan Swifts’ “Modest Proposal.”¹²³ The Nickelodeon-era (roughly 1905-1915) trend of chase film production tied into the spectacle of lynching. Films include Selig’s 1904 *Tracked by Bloodhounds*, and *A Lynching at Cripple Creek*. Regarding boxing films of the time, racial difference had become a theme in cinema and was heightened in chase films as well as the growing popularity of interracial fight pictures.

Shifts in film development 1890s-1910s

Policy surrounding the film industry and protecting each film company’s work and distribution rights changed rapidly at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sigmund Lubin’s

¹²² John R. Spears, "A SUGGESTION.: WHY NOT HAVE A TEXAS LYNCHING REPRODUCED BY KINETOSCOPE?" *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Oct 08, 1905.

¹²³ Jan Olsson, "Modernity Stops at Nothing: The American Chase Film and the Specter of Lynching" 2012, in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, edited by Nicolas Dulac, et al., John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2012, 274.

practice of recreating other company's fight pictures (a practice called "duping") and selling the reels either at a discount, or before his competitors, was successful because there were no laws in place to stop him at the turn of the twentieth century. Before 1903 the copyright of film images fell into the same category as the protection of photographs. Edison and other film production companies would submit their entire film reels for copyright protection of their entire film, rather than frame by frame. When Edison sued Lubin for copyright infringement in 1902 Lubin argued in court that filmmakers should submit every frame of their work (at 50 cents a frame) for copyright protection to preserve the film in its entirety. Surprisingly the judge agreed with Lubin and filmmakers were charged by each frame to protect their copyright. The new policy prompted film producers to shy away from investing large amounts of money into un-released film negatives.¹²⁴ Due to this court case, almost zero fight films were produced and distributed between 1903 and 1904.¹²⁵

In 1903 American Mutoscope & Biograph followed Lubin's lead and released reproduced fight pictures: *Reproduction of McGovern-Corbett Fight* and *Reproduction of Jeffries-Corbett Fight*. Though the popularity of boxing films had diminished to mainstream urban audiences, the boxing films produced by Biograph, Edison, and Pathé, during this time were screened for niche audiences in burlesque clubs and were included in their catalogue alongside other "stag" films. The screening of boxing films alongside burlesque films and burlesque shows continued throughout the decade.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Musser, *History of American Cinema vol. 1*, 331.

¹²⁵ Streible, 144.

¹²⁶ Streible, 159-160.

Longer narrative pictures became popular with moviegoers by 1904 as documentary-style *actualities* slowed in demand. No prizefight films, staged or ringside, were filmed or released in the United States that year.¹²⁷ Cinema's foray into longer narratives initially borrowed many visual elements of nineteenth century minstrel shows.¹²⁸ Depictions of African Americans on screen were oftentimes used to highlight racial differences in a comedic manner. Popular themes included infant "mix-ups" where a white mother and a Black mother would accidentally switch their infant children (*Mixed Babies*, 1908), or, a white man mistakenly flirts with a Black woman (*What Happened in the Tunnel*, 1903). Films like these would aid in the popularity of interracial fight films during the later years of preclassical cinema.¹²⁹

The Miles Brothers demonstrated "new patterns of exhibition" during the birth of the nickelodeon era, 1904-05 aided in a resurgence of fight pictures in the United States and Europe. Their film, the *Nelson-Britt Prize Fight* for the Lightweight championship between two white fighters: Battling Nelson and Jimmy Britt, was released in 1905 and was responsible for keeping boxing films popular in the United States. The resurgence of boxing pictures and the rise of nickelodeon cinemas in the United States coincided with increased reform and regulation, both inside the film industry and "other social institutions."¹³⁰ Accessibility to cinema grew during this time and Protestant reformers rushed to quell the subjects of visual narratives. In response to threat of censorship, film companies began to form their own groups of self-censoring.

¹²⁷ Streible, 161.

¹²⁸ Stewart, 55. "By 1903-4, an increasing number of Black roles were performed by white actors in blackface."

¹²⁹ Stewart, 57-60, 81-83.

¹³⁰ Streible, 165.

Boxing films have existed in the United States from cinema's debut in the 1890s and reinforced ideas about ideal citizenship to Black and white audiences. Both boxing and cinema were heavily regulated between 1894 and 1907 and this regulation demonstrates forms of control over the human body in motion. Similarly, cinema demonstrates processes of control over the gaze and of bodies in motion; it appears effortless but, both sociological realms are tightly controlled. During a time when the perimeters of white manliness/masculinity were shifting and the United States, along with England, France, and Germany were extending the reach of a white, imperial arm across the globe. Boxing and the wide distribution of boxing films came to symbolize the state of white, masculine, imperialism and the films released during this time would lead to the popularization of interracial fight pictures. Regulations on the human body continued into cinema's transitional period, 1908-1915.

Chapter 2: Cinema's transitional period 1907-1912 and Jack Johnson's filmed fight against Jim Jeffries, 1910

“Optical illusions do not simply obscure the truth about the world, but rather offer new information about the process of perceiving and the perceiver's body.”¹³¹

- Tom Gunning, Film Scholar “The Play between Still and Moving Images”

The Nickelodeon Era of American cinema spans between 1905 and 1915 and the name comes from the price of admission, five cents a head. Nickelodeon theaters were known for their inexpensive price of admission and their autonomy from vaudeville theaters. Their space was dedicated exclusively to film screenings and their popularity skyrocketed after 1905. It is estimated the number of Nickelodeons doubled in the United States between 1907 and 1908; *Moving Picture World* reported approximately 2,500 nickelodeon theaters across the country in January 1907, by July 1908 the number had increased to 8000.¹³² Boxing pictures remained popular throughout this time period and screened in nickelodeon venues, as well as saloons and burlesque houses. The birth of the nickelodeon in the United States is tied to the growth of urban leisure activity in the early years of the twentieth century; midwestern cities like Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Chicago, Illinois were the first cities to screen nickelodeons, rather than New York City.¹³³

During this time film production grew at a rapid pace and fight pictures became more popular than they had during the first five years of the twentieth century. The demand for new images on screen reshaped the film industry as new organizations and policies were implemented

¹³¹ Tom Gunning, “The Play Between Still and Moving Images: Nineteenth-Century “Philosophical Toys” and Their Discourse,” in *Between Stillness and Motion Film, Photography, Algorithms*, ed. Eivind Rossaak (Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 27.

¹³² Eileen Bowser, *The History of the American Cinema vol. 2: the transformation of cinema 1907-1915*, Charles Harpole, ed. (Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), 4-6.

¹³³ Musser, *History of the American Cinema vol. 1*, 418.

to protect the interests of distributors, exhibitors, and middlemen. As Musser puts it, the evolution of the film industry during this time was “based on hierarchy and specialization.”¹³⁴ Hierarchy was shaped by the formation of exclusive United States corporations in the interest of reducing outside competition and specialization came in the form of increased ability of film cameras to capture new forms of representation.

With an increased presence at the movie theater, exhibitors felt pressure to bring in new film reels at a faster rate than before. Between December 1906 and August 1907 *Moving Picture World* reported an increase from 10,800 ft to 30,000 ft in “new subjects available to the nickelodeons.”¹³⁵ Audiences, particularly in large cities, became accustomed to seeing new material when they visited the movie theater and distributors sometimes struggled to meet the growing demands for new content. Moviegoers during this time were able to view literature and theater adaptations or Shakespeare adaptations. This increase in production included an influx of foreign films in the U.S. market, a trend that would eventually be driven out by the formation of the MPPC in 1908.

The production of live boxing films had declined in 1904 but with the release of the *Nelson-Britt Prize Fight* in 1905 the Miles Bros. company established themselves as leaders of the new economy of rented reels. The company would release boxing films from ringside in California, Nevada, and New Mexico between 1905 and 1907 and revive public interest in fight pictures.¹³⁶ The Miles Bros. business model was successful in its practice of renting, rather than

¹³⁴ Musser, *History of the American Cinema vol. 1*, 491.

¹³⁵ Musser, *History of the American Cinema vol. 1*, 450.

¹³⁶ Streible, 166.

selling fight film reels to film exhibitors. Exhibitors were more apt to rent film reels as the demand for new images increased with cinema's popularity during the early years of the twentieth century.

The recession that hit the United States in 1907 didn't affect the Nickelodeon's growing popularity as working class immigrants continued to frequent nickelodeon theaters. Eileen Bowser notes in *The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915* the nickelodeon during this time was a "gold-rush business in the midst of the economic recession of 1907." Nickelodeon shows ran about thirty minutes at a time and nickelodeon theaters would run moving pictures from morning until night. Though films were silent during this period audiences could view pictures like *Rip Van Winkle* (a Selig production) with voice accompaniment by the "Humanoscope," which consisted of actors reading lines behind a screen.¹³⁷ This year demonstrated a revived interest in the "showman-narrator or lecturer" a person who would accompany a film and narrate to the audience.¹³⁸ Nickelodeon managers began to rent, rather than purchase reels of film from distribution exchanges. These changes to film production, distribution, and presentation allowed new film reels to play in major city movie theaters at a rapid rate, creating a higher demand for new material than ever before.

The Motion Picture Patent Company (MPPC) was formed in December 1908 with the interest of monopolizing the film industry into fewer hands and squeeze out non-American competition. Edison spearheaded efforts to bring together American and select French film production companies including Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Selig Polyscope, Lubin

¹³⁷ Bowser, 2.

¹³⁸ Bowser, 19.

Manufacturing, Kalem Company, Star Film Paris, and American Pathé and according to Bowser, designed the company as a “holding company for the patents belonging to all producers [in the U.S.]”¹³⁹ The MPPC even struck a deal with Eastman Kodak to hold a monopoly on raw film stock.¹⁴⁰ In the United States the Motion Picture Patents Company agreed to “share technologies” with fellow members of the General Film Co. and shared their information via trade journals.¹⁴¹ This exclusive group of film distributors advertised in trade journals and transitioned to renting reels of film to exhibitors, rather than requiring reel purchase. Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, and Lubin continued to film and distribute fight pictures during this period, but their monopoly on fight pictures was hard to control because ringside fights were often hired and filmed by third-party production companies such as “Miles Bros., Veriscope Company, American Sportagraph, and Pantomimic Corporation.”¹⁴²

The formation of the MPPC could have led to a diminish in fight film production, but the popularity of boxing films was still very high, even during a time when narrative films dominated the nickelodeon market. Johnson defeated Burns on camera the same month the MPPC was formed (December 1908) and demand for the film reel (shot by Gaumont Film Company) ran high. Specialty subjects like fight films and travelogues remained popular with outside film corporations, sometimes beyond the reach of the MPPC.

Though boxing pictures were less popular than narrative films during the nickelodeon era, they held a strong niche market in saloons and gentleman’s clubs and print media continued

¹³⁹ Bowser, 29.

¹⁴⁰ Bowser, 30.

¹⁴¹ Streible, 165.

¹⁴² Streible, 5.

to focus on the popularity of both live boxing matches, and boxing films. Newspaper articles that described fights provided notable information about various matches and peaked public interest in attending boxing pictures. An *NYT* article from July 18, 1907 details a match between Jack Johnson and “Bob” Fitzsimmons on July 16, 1907 at the Washington Sporting Club. The fight lasted only two rounds and Johnson’s win is described as “clean.”¹⁴³ Johnson’s rise to heavyweight champion would prompt newspapers to publish details about his personal life, his relationships with white women, and his interest in expensive cars and clothes. The framing of Johnson in newspaper compared to previous African American boxers who were considered “respectable” demonstrates attempts on behalf of media to frame Johnson as a Black man who has stepped out of his place.

Johnson was not the first heavyweight captured on film cameras. Streible writes in *Fight Pictures*: “The first African American heavyweight to be filmed played a comic foil to the white contender Gus Ruhlin in Edison’s *Ruhlin Boxing with “Denver” Ed. Martin* (1901)”¹⁴⁴ A skilled fighter, Martin held the title of World Colored Heavyweight Champion from February 24, 1902 to February 5, 1903, when he lost his title to Jack Johnson. Before Johnson’s 1908 defeat of Tommy Burns, official boxing matches between Black and white boxers were scarce in the name of the color line. Black fighters were traditionally unable to attain the status of World Heavyweight and were “barred at the top levels of the profession.”¹⁴⁵ The World Colored

¹⁴³ "FITZSIMMONS PUT OUT BY JOHNSON: CORNISHMAN, WITH AN INJURED ARM, EASY FOR THE NEGRO HEAVY CHAMPION. CROWD SEES TAME SPORT FORMER CHAMPION ANNOUNCES BEFORE BOUT THAT HE TORE A LIGAMENT, IN TRAINING, BUT WOULD DO HIS BEST." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Jul 18, 1907.

¹⁴⁴ Streible, 197.

¹⁴⁵ Streible, 196.

Heavyweight Championship dates to 1876 and was a title African American boxers could receive prior to 1908.

Johnson's rise to fame also demonstrates a weakening of the color line, as many African American audiences in theaters both exclusively African American and segregated cheered Johnson as he defeated Tommy Burns on camera in 1908.¹⁴⁶ News of Johnson's win against Burns quickly traveled the globe in 1908 and solidified Johnson's status as a threat to global white imperialism.

1908 heavyweight fight

In 1908 British cinematographers were hired as an extension of the Gaumont Film Company to record the Johnson's heavyweight title fight against Canadian Tommy Burns at Rushcutters Bay, Australia on December 26, 1908.¹⁴⁷ The fight lasted fourteen rounds and Burns lost. An *NYT* article dated December 21, 1908 described the upcoming Johnson-Burns match with emphasis placed on Burns for the win. The article mentions Burns initial refusal to fight Johnson but after Burns "went on his way picking up easy money purses against second and third rate fighters" he agreed to fight Johnson in Sydney, Australia for a "purse of \$35,000."¹⁴⁸ Johnson

¹⁴⁶ Streible, 195. Streible: "...although the continuing segregation of theatrical space was a constant reminder of coercion, the cinematic images of Johnson projected large on the screen challenged the basis of that segregation."

¹⁴⁷ Johnson's fight against Burns was not his first fight in front of a camera. Streible notes in the footnotes of his essay "Race and the Reception of Jack Johnson Fight Films" that Johnson was filmed fighting English boxer Ben Taylor in Plymouth, England before his match against Burns. The *Jack Johnson-Ben Taylor* fight picture was filmed on July 31, 1908. The film was not widely circulated and is unavailable today. Streible, Dan, "Race and the Reception of Jack Johnson Fight Films," in Bernardi, Daniel, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 195.

¹⁴⁸ "BURNS AND JOHNSON READY FOR BATTLE: FRENCH-CANADIAN FAVORITE AT ODDS OF 5 TO 4 FOR HEAVYWEIGHT FIGHT. MAKE MONEY TRAINING TWENTY THOUSAND PEOPLE EXPECTED TO WITNESS CONTEST IN AUSTRALIA -- BOTH MEN IN CONDITION." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Dec 21, 1908.

became the first African American to secure World Heavyweight Champion status. The film *The Burns-Johnson Fight* or the *Burns-Johnson Contest* was released shortly after Johnson's win and had wide circulation in Australia, Great Britain, the United States and France.¹⁴⁹

Johnson returned to North America three weeks after his heavyweight win on the "Canadian-Australian liner *Makura*" and docked in Vancouver, British Columbia in March 1909.¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey C. Ward notes in *Unforgivable Blackness*: "As [Johnson] made his way down the gangplank, wearing a full-length fur coat, smiling and waving at the hundreds of Canadians who had come down to...see him...reporters [were] waiting for him on the dock. Some were sportswriters, but most had simply been assigned to cover the arrival of a Negro celebrity, a phenomenon they had never encountered before."¹⁵¹ After his win Johnson quickly became a household name across the globe.

Questions concerning a possible upcoming fight with Jim Jeffries were hurled at Johnson by reporters upon Johnson's return to North America. Johnson jokingly acknowledged that Jeffries time in the sun had passed and said he would fight Jeffries for the right price. White populations across the globe immediately began their search for a white hope. Speaking about the Johnson-Burns fight in 1908 Australian fight promoter Hugh McIntosh indicated in the September 1910 publication *Boxing* "that the prizefight pictures had "influenced the various coloured [sic] races in each country where they were shown."¹⁵² On April 19, 1909 Jeffries

¹⁴⁹ Runstedtler, 71.

¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 137.

¹⁵¹ Ward, 137.

¹⁵² Runstedtler, 68, 280n Hugh D. McIntosh, "The Pride of the Blacks," *Boxing*, 24 September 1910.

officially announced to an audience at the American Theater in New York he would fight Johnson “he was now convinced that within eight to ten months he would be ready to wrest the title back from Jack Johnson.”¹⁵³ Though he was older than Johnson and out of shape, Jeffries relied on his belief in the inherent superiority of the white hope.

After Johnson’s heavyweight title win in 1908 many states reversed their laws against boxing in order to secure a white hope to take back the title. The *Burns-Johnson Championship Contest* was screened to American audiences by March 1909 on a states’ rights basis.¹⁵⁴ Tennessee, for example, was a state that outlawed boxing but reversed the law and allowed interracial matches in hosting clubs, interracial fights had been banned in the state since the 1890s.¹⁵⁵ Clubs could profit off the success of Johnson even if he wasn’t in the room, as white audiences flocked to interracial boxing bouts in order to witness the next white hope.

Johnson defended his title on October 16, 1909 on camera against Stanley Ketchel, a white man and middleweight champion who many white viewers hoped would take back the championship. Media coverage of Johnson played on the mythology of the threat of Black men as inherently uncivilized and dangerous. The *NYT* described Johnson’s movements in the ring as “like a wild beast” and that he “did not seem to know what had happened” during the moment of

¹⁵³ Ward, 149.

¹⁵⁴ Streible, 201.

¹⁵⁵ Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, 154.

his win.¹⁵⁶ Johnson again won the fight and the film, the *Johnson-Ketchel* pictures garnered hundreds of thousands of dollars as it distributed and screened across the country.¹⁵⁷

1910 The Fight

The infamous filmed fight between Johnson and Jeffries in 1910 was not the first interracial fight film with a Black victor. Just four years earlier, in 1906, fight promoter George Lewis “Tex” Rickard commissioned a fight film with the Miles Bros. company between Joe Gans (born Joseph Gant), an African American World Lightweight Champion (1902-04, 1906-08) and Oscar Matthew “Battling” Nelson, a white Danish-American World Lightweight Champion (1905-06, 1908-10). It was dubbed in the media as a “contest between best of whites and black titleholders.”¹⁵⁸ The film titled *Gans-Nelson Contest, Goldfield, Nevada, Sept. 3, 1906* was screened predominantly in burlesque venues. Though fight pictures were screened in both nickelodeon theaters and niche venues like saloons and burlesque houses, they sometimes found more success in the niche market than in a venue that played a variety of genre films.¹⁵⁹ Little to no controversy surrounded the release of the film in the media but in a Biograph catalogue advertising filmmaker Sigmund Lubin’s reenactment of the fight it is described as a must see: “This is the greatest fight of the age between a white man and a colored man....This is the fight

¹⁵⁶ "JOHNSON DAZED AS KETCHEL GOES OUT: BLACK CHAMPION FINISHES WHITE FIGHTER IN TWELFTH ROUND. LAST SECONDS SENSATIONAL NEGRO RISES FROM A FALL AND PILES INTO KETCHEL WITH CRASHING BLOWS -- \$40,000 TAKEN IN." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Oct 17, 1909.

¹⁵⁷ Streible, 211.

¹⁵⁸ Streible, 199.

¹⁵⁹ Streible, 175.

the country is talking about.”¹⁶⁰ The country would have even more to talk about as interracial fights grew in popularity and media publications profited off white male anger as Johnson’s success eclipsed previous white heavyweight champions.

The arena hosting the match in 1910 was constructed specifically for the fight and the production company J. & J. Co. was assembled by wealthy fight promoters Sid Hester and Tex Rickard, along with William T. Rock, the president of Vitagraph “to handle this special film property outside the regular MPPC distribution system.”¹⁶¹ Under threat of censorship by the MPPC precautions were put in place on behalf of J. & J. Co. to ensure production and distribution rights, not to mention a recoup of the investment. In 1909 *Harper’s Weekly* projected boxing films produced at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century would be “worth at least \$1,000,000.”¹⁶² The *New York Times* reported on July 5, 1910 that the total cost of the Johnson-Jeffries match was \$360,000.¹⁶³

Though it was their first match against one another it was not the first time Johnson had challenged Jeffries to a fight in the ring. Perhaps the results would have been different if Jeffries had taken Johnson’s offer to fight in 1903, five years before Johnson became the world heavyweight champion after beating Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia in December 1908 and two years before Jeffries’ retirement as an undefeated heavyweight champion in 1905. Instead, when asked by reporters in 1903 if he would take Johnson up on his fight offer Jeffries replied

¹⁶⁰ Streible, 200.

¹⁶¹ Streible, 219.

¹⁶² Streible, 218.

¹⁶³ By JOHN L SULLIVAN Special to The New York Times. "I'LL WIN -- JEFFRIES; CAN'T LOSE -- JOHNSON: SULLIVAN TALKS WITH BOTH AND FINDS THEM CONFIDENT AS TO TO-DAY'S FIGHT. 20,000 VISITORS AT RENO PROBLEM OF FEEDING AND HOUSING THEM A GREAT ONE -- GUN MEN SWORN IN TO CONTROL THRONG." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Jul 04, 1910.

“When there are not white men left to fight, I will quit the business...I am determined not to take a chance of losing the championship to a negro.”¹⁶⁴

In the arena financed by Rickard, Johnson’s final blow to Jeffries in July 1910 left a notably somber note in the air. Streible notes in *Fight Pictures* “the nearly all-white crowd conveyed disappointment, exiting in funeral silence but without incident.” Outside the arena was another matter. News of Johnson’s victory prompted immediate violence on behalf of angry white mobs across the country and at least eighteen people were killed as a direct result of Jeffries’ defeat.¹⁶⁵ This was the third time Johnson had defeated a white man on camera and this time the win sent shockwaves across the reach of global white imperialism. Federal regulations were soon be put in place to limit the reach of boxing films in order to subdue the power of another Black victory bolstered by cinema.

The *New York Times* ran many articles on July 5, 1910 concerning the fight. Former heavyweight champion John L. Sullivan provided a round-by-round recap with the headline “Negro Champion Led All the Way -- Jeffries Slow and Clumsy.”¹⁶⁶ Other articles highlighted the violence that followed the fight. Headlines such as “Eight Killed in Fight Riots: Clashes Between Races in Many Cities Follow Contest - Negroes the Victims.” In Houston it was reported that a “negro’s throat was slashed by a white man on a trolley car on which both were riding, and the negro bled almost to death before he could be taken to a hospital, where he died

¹⁶⁴ Bederman, 1.

¹⁶⁵ Streible, 220-222 and Bederman, 3. Streible and Bederman both note eighteen people were killed as a direct result to Johnson’s win, but only Streible notes that all eighteen killed were African American.

¹⁶⁶ JOHN L SULLIVAN, Special to The New, York Times. "THE FIGHT BY ROUNDS.: NEGRO CHAMPION LED ALL THE WAY -- JEFFRIES SLOW AND CLUMSY." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Jul 05, 1910.

later. He had jeeringly proclaimed Johnson's victory."¹⁶⁷ "Pittsburg Negroes Riot" in which fifty Black residents of the "Black Belt" quarter of Pittsburgh were arrested after up to 1000 African Americans attempted to start a parade through the Russian quarter.¹⁶⁸ In "Three Killed in Uvaldia" it is noted "The negroes at the camp have been insolent in their remarks about Jeffries for some time, and to-day were boasting that Johnson would kill the white man." Three Black men were killed by gunshot wounds from a mob of angry white residents. The article continues "Conservative citizens have asked Gov. Brown to send troops to stop the rioting."¹⁶⁹ At least eighteen people nationwide lost their lives as a direct result of the fight, with "hundreds more injured."¹⁷⁰ The threat of a Black fighter's success within the ring ignited anger nationwide and highlighted the symbolic nature of an interracial heavyweight boxing match to white fears about African American's growing autonomy from white control.

News of Johnson's win against Jeffries quickly circulated the globe. A news report out of New Brunswick, Canada highlighted a brick-throwing fight between two men with the surname Martin (no-relation), placing one Martin in the hospital two days after the boxing match. One man attempted to demonstrate Johnson's winning blow to Jeffries on his friend and was met with a brick to the face.¹⁷¹ The *Johnson-Jeffries Fight Film* had limited release in the United States

¹⁶⁷ "EIGHT KILLED IN FIGHT RIOTS: CLASHES BETWEEN RACES IN MANY CITIES FOLLOW CONTEST -- NEGROES THE VICTIMS. A BATTLE IN GEORGIA ARMED FORCE EVICTS BLACKS FROM A UVALDIA CONSTRUCTION CAMP, SLAYING THREE. MANY FIGHTS OCCUR HERE SAN JUAN HILL AND HELL'S KITCHEN DISTRICTS PROLIFIC OF TROUBLE -- GANG ORGANIZED TO BEAT UP COLORED FOLK. EIGHT KILLED IN FIGHT RIOTS." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Jul 05, 1910.

¹⁶⁸ "PITTSBURG NEGROES RIOT.: EJECT WHITES FROM STREET CARS AND INVADE RUSSIAN QUARTER -- 50 ARRESTED." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Jul 05, 1910.

¹⁶⁹ "THREE KILLED IN UVALDIA.: ARMED PARTY OF WHITES ATTACK NEGRO CAMP AND DRIVE OUT OCCUPANTS." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Jul 05, 1910.

¹⁷⁰ Bederman, 3.

¹⁷¹ "ILLUSTRATION TOO VIVID." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Jul 06, 1910.

and included images of the Johnson and Jeffries training separately before the match. Boxing films, like all films of the time, were silent and oftentimes relied on local narrators to introduce and guide audiences through the screenings. This meant that audiences would receive different interpretations of the same filmed event.¹⁷² Though this practice certainly provided vastly different film going experiences depending on the audience, Runstedtler notes the practice provided curiosity and debate over interracial fight pictures to a variety of movie goers.¹⁷³ Though controversy surrounded the release of the film, Johnson provided voice-over narration to the film shortly after the match. Theaters with phonographs could play the narration alongside footage of the match and the recording was marketed towards African American audiences.¹⁷⁴ Jeffries “shook hands with the former white world champions John L. Sullivan and James J. Corbett in a show of racial solidarity.”¹⁷⁵ Clips like these would tie into a “broader universe of white supremacist productions” as interracial fight pictures “circulated right alongside newsreels of events such as President Theodore Roosevelt’s African safari and various fictional dramas of U.S. western expansion including *Custer’s Last Stand*” (1909).¹⁷⁶ Fight pictures during this time, particularly interracial pictures released in the United States reached audiences on a global scale and any controversy surrounding these films highlighted a concern for white imperial control over Black bodies, both locally and across the globe.

¹⁷² Runstedtler, 70.

¹⁷³ Runstedtler, 70.

¹⁷⁴ Runstedtler, 77.

¹⁷⁵ Runstedtler, 76.

¹⁷⁶ Runstedtler, 77.

U.S. Congressional sessions from 1912 concerning prizefighting films include arguments about the nature of transporting the films across state lines. Notes from a meeting held on July 19, 1912 demonstrates the discussion of bill S. 7027 – “an act to prohibit the interstate transportation of pictures of prizefights, and for other purposes.”¹⁷⁷ This decision resulted in a national ban on the inter-state transportation and distribution of boxing films in the United States. The results would lead directly to a decrease in the popularity of boxing pictures just as Johnson’s career began to decline in the mid-1910s.

Johnson’s decline

Johnson’s career began to decline after his heavyweight win in 1910, though he wouldn’t lose the title until 1915, the press began to paint him in a more negative light shortly after his victory against Jeffries. The *New York Times* appears to note every move Johnson made after his victory including his frequent arrests for speeding. Johnson was fined in August 1910 for speeding and he was held in jail over two weeks in San Francisco for the crime.¹⁷⁸ The article notes “[Johnson] objects to the monotony of port and beans, which form the staple of the jail menu. He has suggested an occasional chicken, but this didn’t meet the approval of the District Attorney.”¹⁷⁹ Finding fault with Johnson’s car he was fined again in New York in 1913 for “running automobile with muffler open.”¹⁸⁰ The mundane details of Johnson’s legal troubles

¹⁷⁷ House of Representatives of the United States, Congressional Record-House, 62nd Cong., 2nd sess., February 19, 1912, 9304.

¹⁷⁸ "Jack Johnson Fined again." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Aug 19, 1910.

¹⁷⁹ "Will Keep Jack Johnson in Jail." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Apr 03, 1911.

¹⁸⁰ "Jack Johnson Fined \$5." *New York Times* (1857-1922), May 30, 1913.

were published in newspapers to further signify white disapproval of Johnson's economic and social upward mobility and how he chose to spend his money.

Many countries held bidding for rights to the Johnson-Jeffries fight picture before the fight. After Johnson's win however, the United States was not the only country to rush against distribution and screening of the film. Canada, Australia, England, and South Africa were a few of the countries who feared their Black citizens would feel emboldened by Johnson's victory and respond to racial injustice in their own countries. Runstedtler notes that officials in South Africa, a country with a white minority, feared retribution from their Black populace: "In the Union of South Africa a confluence of local, national, and transnational factors had intensified racial feelings in recent years, which made the Jeffries-Johnson fight seem like a matter of life and death for many white settlers."¹⁸¹ Protest against the film spanned the globe and demonstrated the threat Johnson held against Jim Crow laws locally and global arm of white imperialism.

News of Johnson's win prompted countries across the globe to put up their own white hope to fight Johnson. In June 1911 Johnson traveled to London, England to fight British title holder and former soldier in the British Indian Army Bombardier Billy Wells, England's attempt at their own white hope. In his first few months in England Johnson gave a series of interviews where he expressed his admiration for England compared to the racism he received from the United States. When asked if he would go to war for the United States he stated "What has America done for me? Has it ever given me a square deal...I've given up thinking about America." He is quoted saying he would "never shoulder a musket for America," but would take up arms for Britain.¹⁸² A short film *How the Champion of the World Trains: Jack Johnson in*

¹⁸¹ Runstedtler, 91.

¹⁸² Runstedtler, 107.

Defence [sic] and Attack (1911) was shot in London shortly after Johnson's arrival and shows him flexing for the camera and demonstrating his strength against his white managers in a comedic way.¹⁸³ Johnson would soon find his attempt to escape America's racism was met with some of the same racial barriers overseas. Johnson could not escape the global reach of white supremacy.

Protest quickly rose over the looming match in England and Johnson and his wife traveled to Paris in August 1911 to get away from the controversy and train for the upcoming match. Rev. F. B. Meyer, a minister in England circulated a petition for a ban on the match: "no good can be done to honest sport [sic] by an encounter between Johnson and Wells under the proposed conditions."¹⁸⁴ Johnson believed he would receive a warmer welcome in Paris while he trained for his upcoming match.

Johnson's visit to Paris presented a continuation in Black fighters who felt more welcome in the French city than other major cities. A handful of other Black Canadian and American boxers before him: Sam Langford, Joe Jeannette, Jim Johnson, and Sam McVey found a warmer welcome in Paris in the early 1900s after white fighters in the states refused to cross the color line.¹⁸⁵ Though Runstedtler writes of Johnson's time in France in 1911: "[The white American dailies] mocked the unusual French adoration of black boxers, suggesting the overcivilized and effeminate Frenchmen were failing to uphold their end of the white man's burden."¹⁸⁶ Rumors

¹⁸³ Streible, 240.

¹⁸⁴ THE NEW YORK TIMES. "JOHNSON FIGHT STIRS CLERGY IN ENGLAND." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Sep 24, 1911.

¹⁸⁵ Streible, 240.

¹⁸⁶ Runstedtler, 117.

began to circulate in the media that Johnson's visit to Paris was only meant for the fighter to take advantage of the "fetes, feasting, fashion, and freedom [from boxing]." ¹⁸⁷ Again Johnson was painted in a negative light.

Johnson's initial affection for England further soured when Home Secretary Winston Churchill deemed Johnson's fight against Bull illegal "declaring it a breach of the peace and counter to the best interests of the nation and empire." ¹⁸⁸ In 1912 Johnson returned, disillusioned, to the United States to prepare for his next fight. ¹⁸⁹

Johnson's next fight was against Jim Flynn, an Irish American fighter whom Johnson had previously defeated in 1907. Though Flynn's success in the ring was dwindling, he had been defeated by Sam Langford in March 1910, he was framed in the press as the next white hope. The *Johnson-Flynn Fight* was filmed July 4, 1912 in New Mexico, as the state had no laws against prizefighting and Johnson beat Flynn in the ninth round. By this time Congress had put into law that the interstate movement of fight pictures was illegal; the newly implemented ban on interstate travel of boxing pictures "...with distribution legal only in the state where a bout was recorded, no significant profits could be realized. Fight film production ceased in the United States." ¹⁹⁰ The *Jack Johnson vs. Jim Flynn Contest for Heavyweight Championship of the World* was not as popular as Johnson's earlier fights and failed to secure Flynn as a white hope, he lost to Johnson easily in the ninth round. ¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Runstedtler, 117.

¹⁸⁸ Runstedtler, 124.

¹⁸⁹ Streible, 241.

¹⁹⁰ Streible, 246.

¹⁹¹ Streible, 242.

The year 1908 was transformative for both cinema and boxing. The formation of the MPPC pushed non-American film companies out the United States and solidified a monopoly of film production between a handful of American film production companies. Johnson secured the world heavyweight championship and became the first African American Heavyweight to break the color line. The ensuing global search for a new white hope demonstrates the threat Johnson presented to white masculine imperial identity. The production of interracial fight films increased between 1908 and 1912. Negative press surrounding Johnson during this time contributed to global discrimination and racism against Johnson and Black populations globally. Johnson's hold on his heavyweight championship was met with policy and regulation regarding both cinema and boxing to quell growing Black autonomy. Johnson was unable to escape the scope of global imperialism. While in London Johnson initially vocalized to the press his disappointment in the United States for failing to shed its Jim Crow racism, soon Johnson would find that racism would follow him wherever he went.

The years following 1912 demonstrate a buckling down on rules, regulation and policy as the United States buckled down in their framing of Johnson as an enemy. Additionally, cinema became more controlled on both a private and federal scale. Johnson's personal life was reported nearly daily in the newspapers and a pending arrest in 1912 would force Johnson to flee the United States. Film production increased in specialization and legal control over film patents as studio systems began to form during this time. Increased specialization of the film industry and regulation of Johnson's body, not to mention regulation of film narrative subjects demonstrates the control the film industry attempted to have on the power of the visual and accessible medium of cinema during this time.

Chapter 3: The arc of Jack Johnson's career and the end of pre-classical cinema, 1912-1915

"We have a way in America of wanting to be "rid" of problems. It is not so much a desire to reach the best and largest solution as it is to clean the board and start a new game."¹⁹²

- W.E.B. Du Bois *The Color Line Belts the World*, 1906

"The time will come, and in less than ten years, when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obligated to read history again."

- Filmmaker D.W. Griffith, quoted in *New York Times Magazine*, March 28, 1915

Jack Johnson was arrested by U.S. authorities in November 1912 for violating a new and ambiguous law known as the Mann Act, or, the White Slave Traffic Act. Named after Republican congressman James Robert Mann (IL), the act "barred the interstate and international transport of women for "prostitution or debauchery" and "other immoral purposes." In this case Johnson was accused of transporting Belle Schreiber, a white sex worker and former girlfriend "across state lines for purposes of prostitution."¹⁹³ Though Johnson had transported Schreiber across state lines he had done so *before* the Mann Act went into effect on June 1, 1910. After Johnson's first wife Etta Duryea died by suicide in September 1912 Johnson began a relationship with an eighteen-year-old white sex worker in Chicago, Lucille Cameron. Cameron was with Johnson during the Schreiber accusation and married Johnson to thwart charges against him. In an early December 1912 interview to Chicago reporters Johnson said he intended to marry Cameron "by the end of the week."¹⁹⁴ Johnson and Cameron were married on December 4, 1912.

¹⁹² David Levering Lewis, ed. *W.E.B Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: John Macrae/Owl Book Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 42.

¹⁹³ Runstedtler, 134.

¹⁹⁴ "WILL MARRY MISS CAMERON.: JACK JOHNSON DECLARES WEDDING WILL TAKE PLACE BEFORE END OF WEEK." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Dec 03, 1912.

Shortly after their wedding Johnson fled the United States with Cameron to avoid any charges. He would not return until 1920. The color line surrounding Johnson became a sexual one.¹⁹⁵

Public Support for Johnson in the United States faded after his victory in 1910 and his career began to decline. While some members of African American communities criticized Johnson's seemingly reckless behavior, white media outlets began to frame him as a threat to the sanctity of white, law-abiding citizens, specifically white women. Here are some examples of how Johnson was framed in metropolitan newspapers: JACK JOHNSON FASINATES [sic] BEAUTIFUL WHITE GIRL. A *Los Angeles Times* article of Johnson published October 1912 opens with a profile picture of the fighter in a bow tie and tuxedo gazing outside the frame, to his left. "This is Jack Johnson's Face" – "For whose kisses another beautiful white woman has deserted friends, social position and family."¹⁹⁶ The article concerns Chicago police attempting to pin Johnson with a crime for attempting to marry eighteen-year old white woman "Miss Lucille Cameron." The story depicts Johnson tearing Cameron away from the arms of her loving mother and mentions Johnson's previous wife's suicide. "Her [Lucille's] unusual blond beauty attracted the negro." In a section titled "The Black's Caress" "leering caress of Jack Johnson. The girl was forced to choose between love for her mother and "her fascination for the negro." The framing of Johnson in the press as a threat to white woman played on nineteenth century white constructions of the threat of Black men and would play a key role in filmmaker D.W. Griffith's 1915 release of *The Birth of a Nation*.

¹⁹⁵ Runstedtler, 134.

¹⁹⁶ "JACK JOHNSON FASINATES BEAUTIFUL WHITE GIRL.: LUCILLE CAMERON OF MINNEAPOLIS GOES SLUMMING IN CHICAGO; MEETS JOHNSON; FALLS IN LOVE; LEAVES HER HOME FOR HIS EMBRACES--JACK BOASTS TO HEARTBROKEN MOTHER. JACK JOHNSON FASCINATES." *Los Angeles Times (1886-1922)*, Oct 18, 1912.

During this time longer genre films were emerging onto the American screen. Though genre films had existed in cinema from the previous decade, exhibitors began to increase their demand for “dramas, comedies, and Westerns represented in equal numbers.”¹⁹⁷ Genre film categories can be divided into the following: Westerns and “Indian Films” – extensions of westerns that often featured Native Americans from east and south United States, Civil War films, slapstick comedies, newsreels, detective films, serials, and feminist serials, prohibition and labor films.¹⁹⁸ Boxing films continued to play alongside these films, though the prohibition of inter-state distribution of fight pictures in 1912 greatly impacted the accessibility of audiences to boxing films and contribute to Jack Johnson’s career decline.

After Johnson’s defeat of Jeffries in 1910 the public and fight promoters began to seek a new white hope as Johnson was increasingly harassed by local police.¹⁹⁹ Though many African Americans criticized what they viewed as an overblown reaction and suppression to the *Jeffries-Johnson World’s Championship Boxing Contest* fight picture criticism of Johnson’s behavior and public persona appeared in African American newspaper publications. Streible notes in *Fight Pictures* a 1910 article from the *Afro-American Ledger*: “the race which in a large measure is proud of him [Johnson] is not altogether pleased at the pace he is going.”²⁰⁰ Johnson was arrested and fined many times for speeding in his expensive cars. He flaunted his wealth by easily paying the fines.

¹⁹⁷ Bowser, 167.

¹⁹⁸ Bowser, 167-189.

¹⁹⁹ Streible, 241.

²⁰⁰ Streible, 239, 354n1, “Now Jack!” *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger*, March 12, 1910.

Johnson defends his title

In July 1912 Johnson was filmed by the Miles Bros. fighting Jim Flynn in Las Vegas, New Mexico. New Mexico achieved statehood January 1912 and as a new state it held no laws against boxing. Johnson won the match against Flynn and distribution of the *Jack Johnson vs. Jim Flynn Contest for Heavyweight Championship of the World* was largely unsuccessful due to the ban on interstate distribution of fight pictures. Advertising for the fight was limited.²⁰¹ Congressional meeting notes from July 1912 address the fight between Johnson and Flynn and Roddenberry is asked if it matters the race of the fighter regarding the censorship of fight pictures. Roddenberry replied that the preservation of the old Saxon race is in order.²⁰² Though unpopular at the time, the film demonstrates to contemporary audiences Johnson's continued success in the ring, even as his fans began to fade.

In June 27, 1914 Johnson, now age thirty-four was filmed fighting Frank Moran, age twenty-seven, a new white hope in Paris, France. Moran represented an ideal in white, American civilization: he was young, a former navy member, and college educated, he held a certificate in dentistry.²⁰³ The match lasted twenty rounds and Moran lost.²⁰⁴ Though arena audiences loudly

²⁰¹ Streible, 242.

²⁰² House of Representatives of the United States, Congressional Record-House, 62nd Cong., 2nd sess., February 19, 1912, 9304.

²⁰³ Runstedtler, 188.

²⁰⁴ Streible, 247.

cheered for Moran's victory, Johnson beat their odds and continued his reign as heavyweight champion.

Johnson's defeat

Johnson's first defeat on camera as heavyweight champion would come at the hands of Jess Willard, a white man. Held on April 5, 1915 *The Willard-Johnson Boxing Match* was overseen by Fred Mace, an actor and film director.²⁰⁵ Johnson had not yet returned to the United States since evading authorities on the Mann Act charge and the fight was held in Havana, Cuba with promoter Jack Curley. Johnson was thirty-eight years old in 1915 and his competitor was "ten years younger, half a foot taller, and solid."²⁰⁶ The film of this match demonstrated advancements in cinema technology with "medium and close-up shots" "The close-ups of Willard in action are consistent with the promoters' view that they were there to frame a film of his victory."²⁰⁷ Bootleg copies of the filmed match were released in the United States before the official footage and the white press framed Willard's win as a restoration of "pugilistic supremacy to the white race" and that "Willard [win] announced a return of the color line."²⁰⁸ Boxing became segregated by a color line again.

Even though Willard was white, the film was not successful. The only source I came across during my research concerning the distribution of a boxing film with a white victor is the Congressional document discussed above where it is emphasized that boxing was threatening to

²⁰⁵ Streible, 250.

²⁰⁶ Streible, 249.

²⁰⁷ Streible, 251.

²⁰⁸ Streible, 251-254.

the Saxon race. White audience's in search of another white hope were satisfied with the footage of Johnson knocked-out by Willard. The *NYT* reported: "Jack Johnson, exile from his own country, today lost the heavyweight championship of the world to Jess Willard, the Kansas cowboy, the biggest man who ever entered the prize ring and a "White Hope" who has at last made good."²⁰⁹ The Sims Act was still in effect at the time and although a white victor might secure nationwide distribution, heavy censorship was applied to the film.

Those who owned the rights to the *Willard-Johnson Boxing Match* fought for nationwide distribution all the way to the supreme court without success. This demonstrated a nationwide conversation in the media concerning the censorship of fight films. An *NYT* article from April 27, 1915 notes the Port of Newark prohibiting entry of the film into the state of New Jersey. Former United States Senator is quoted: "We do not believe the Government has the right to prohibit the importation of these pictures."²¹⁰ The film did not meet success due to the censorship.

The film industry was rapidly organizing into what would become studio systems between 1912 and 1913. Feature films became popular during the mid-1910s. A feature film originally served to boost advertising crossover, elements of feature films were used in commercial advertising.²¹¹ These films, due to their length, were sold as multi-reel exhibitions and came at a higher price to exhibitors.

²⁰⁹ "WILLARD KNOCKS JACK JOHNSON OUT IN TWENTY-SIXTH ROUND FOR WORLD'S TITLE." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Apr 06, 1915.

²¹⁰ "NEW ATTACK ON MOVIE LAW.: FIGHT FILM OWNERS GO TO NEWARK TO BREAK DOWN FEDERAL STATUTE." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Apr 27, 1915.

²¹¹ Bowser, 191.

The release of *The Birth of a Nation*

Film director D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was first screened to movie audiences in February 1915 (originally titled *The Clansmen*). The film not only invoked protest and controversy during its time of release but secured a place in film history as *important* – both as a large-scale production laden with anti-Black racism, and a technological feat that would embed itself in American culture and inspire future generations of filmmakers (John Ford and Orson Wells, for example).²¹² The storyline in the film depicts two wealthy families during the Civil War and how their shared Aryan heritage binds them together against the threat of freed African Americans.

There are many parallels between the way Johnson is framed in the press and the way African Americans are portrayed as a threat in *The Birth of a Nation*. Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansman* (1905) is compared to John L. Sullivan in an editorial printed in the *Afro-American Ledger*: “Next to Mr. John L. Sullivan, probably the Rev. Thomas Dixon, Jr., author of *The Clansman*, is the greatest living exponent of the color line. Mr. Sullivan would never fight a Negro, and Rev. Dixon won't fight anyone else.”²¹³ *Birth of a Nation* was also subject to censorship along with the censorship of boxing pictures. Though “Only the Johnson films were confiscated and destroyed by federal authorities.”²¹⁴ Many African Americans viewed Johnson

²¹² Nick Pinkerton, “Bombast: D.W. Griffith's America,” Film Comment Magazine blog, published April 3, 2015.

²¹³ Streible, 255.

²¹⁴ Streible, 259.

fight films as direct responses and in turn, protests against racist film narratives that cropped up during his reign as champion.²¹⁵

The *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* was a Supreme Court case in 1915 that determined that cinema did not fall under free speech protection and were subject to censorship. The Mutual Film Corp. attempted to demonstrate to the court of the state of Ohio that “the state censorship boards were unconstitutional” in censoring cinema.²¹⁶ The Mutual Film Corp. was unsuccessful in their efforts and on February 23, 1915 *Mutual v. Ohio* was passed and movies were not protected by the first amendment. This time in cinema history demonstrates an amplification of censorship of cinema on a states-rights basis. Movies held a “capacity for Evil” and were subject to legal censorship.²¹⁷ In a sense, the business practices of preclassical cinema could be grounded more heavily in business than art, at least in the United States. This legislation demonstrated the perceived threat of cinema’s ability to communicate with mass audiences, specifically, the inability for filmmakers to control. Opponents of the law noted “the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and press.”²¹⁸ Protestant reformers were concerned with an increase in non-Protestant immigration into the United States and feared what kinds of messages they would take in as film audiences if the movie industry was not more

²¹⁵ Streible, 255.

²¹⁶ Streible, 262.

²¹⁷ Streible, "A History of the Boxing Film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era," *Film History* 3, no. 3 (1989): 240.

²¹⁸ Garth S. Jowett (1989) ‘A capacity for evil’: The 1915 supreme court Mutual Decision, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 9:1, 59-78, DOI: 10.1080/01439688900260041, 59.

tightly regulated.²¹⁹ The dissemination of information received from film narratives needed to be controlled at the federal level.²²⁰

The MPPC disbanded in 1915 on order of the federal courts.²²¹ The purpose of the trust was to eliminate foreign film competition in the United States and standardize film distribution both in the United States and abroad.²²² The MPPC charged two dollars a week from “each licensed exhibitor” and eventually held the monopoly on film production and distribution in the United States.²²³ Though the MPPC was successful in virtually eliminating foreign competition in the United States, it was met with many legal battles. Filmmakers working independently outside the MPPC moved their studios to Hollywood, California in order to distance themselves from Edison and his laboratory in New Jersey.²²⁴ The MPPC overestimated their reach within the United States to hold the monopoly in the United States, this led to their demise in 1915.

The release of filmmaker D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* to audiences in February 1915 was met with protest by many members of African American communities across the United States. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 and strongly protested the film’s release. Ida B. Wells, a prominent African

²¹⁹ Jowett, 59.

²²⁰ Jowett, 68.

²²¹ Bowser, 30.

²²² Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 439.

²²³ Bowser, 4.

²²⁴ Peter Edidin, “La-La Land: The Origins,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2005, p. 4.2, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://cutt.ly/2X5awV>.

American investigative journalist, and early leader in the Civil Rights movement responded to the film by challenging its use of African American stereotypes.

To nod to the W.E.B. Du Bois quote above, the United States was able to get “rid” of a problem like Jack Johnson through continued print and cinematic narratives that emphasized the threat of the Black man to the safety and security of white women, as an extension of the property of white men. Though Johnson’s career faded in part to his age, the height of his fame coincided with a unique time in cinema’s history as it transitioned to narrative film and regulated studio systems. Congress heightened the perceived threat of African American boxers by crippling the boxing film industry. Newspapers framed Jackson as a flashy, superficial man with a subtext that suggested he wasn’t staying in his place. Federal authorities were able to get rid of the problem of Jack Johnson through Johnson’s Mann Act violation in 1913 and prompted him to flee the country. The film industry was able to get rid of Johnson and other African American fighters through destructive imagery and racist tropes. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* was not the first film to present damaging images for African American communities and the more scholars examine the films produced before 1915 the more critical conversations can be had concerning not only what is projected on the screen, but the historically specific ideology perpetuated on behalf of early filmmakers and supported by the framing of African American fighters in the press. After Johnson lost his heavyweight title to Jess Willard in 1915 there would not be another Black heavyweight champion until Joe Louis won heavyweight championship in 1937.

In a 1960 essay for *American Quarterly* Everett Carter writes retrospectively about *Birth*: “not only does significant motion picture history begin [with the release of *Birth*], but most of

the problems of the art's place in our culture begin too."²²⁵ These problems, according to Carter include a "belief in a golden age of the antebellum South."²²⁶ Carter clarifies this belief as a "plantation illusion" that presented white audiences with a romance uniting the North and South through a "shared Aryan race" dangerously seduced white audiences into interpreting the Victorian melodrama as ideological truth.²²⁷

In the nearly sixty years since Carter's publication numerous of books, critical essays, and think pieces, have been published concerning the social and cultural impact *Birth* has on American audiences, most reviews admonish the racism while highlighting the technological achievement. Jack Johnson is a key figure for resistance against white supremacy and anti-Black racism during the early years of the twentieth century. In part due to his status as a heavyweight champion, his dark skin and large physique, his tendency to eschew limitations placed on him due to his race, his success and tendency to marry white women, and his presence in the media, both in newspapers and on cinema screens. Both Johnson and *Birth* signify examples of racial tensions of the time. But there are earlier films, earlier fighters, earlier patterns that shaped these cultural icons. Johnson as a fighter did not live in a vacuum and it is important for scholars to widen their lens when examining his success.

²²⁵ Everett Carter, "Cultural History Written with Lightening: The Significance of *The Birth of a Nation*," *American Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 3, Autumn, 1960, 348.

²²⁷ Carter, 350.

Conclusion: The legacy of Johnson and other African American boxers and filmmakers of the twentieth century

“The production of Edison films within a white, "homosocial," male world affected the choice of subjects as well as the ways in which these were depicted. Again and again, when early filmmakers expressed a nostalgia for a lost childhood, it was boyhood they recalled and boyhood that they visualized.”²²⁸

- Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 1991

But of course, Ali himself said it best. “For the black man to come out superior,” Ali once told Roger Ebert, “would be against America’s teachings. I have been so great in boxing they had to create an image like Rocky, a white image on the screen, to counteract my image in the ring. America has to have its white images, no matter where it gets them. Jesus, Wonder Woman, Tarzan, and Rocky.”²²⁹

- Adam Serwer, from “How *Creed* Forever Changed the *Rocky* Series, 2018

To accompany the release of *Creed II* (director Steven Caple Jr.) on November 21, 2018, *The Atlantic* staff writer Adam Serwer examined the impact of three fictional boxing characters from previous *Rocky* films, a major film franchise spanning over forty years in his essay “How *Creed* Forever Changed the Rocky Series,” Rocky Balboa, Apollo Creed, and Apollo’s son Adonis Creed. First released in November 1976 *Rocky* follows Rocky Balboa (played by Sylvester Stallone), Philadelphia’s southpaw “Italian Stallion” as he rises to the challenge to fight current heavyweight Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) in a pageant-laden celebration of the U.S. bicentennial. Serwer frames the character of Apollo Creed as a “barely concealed stand-in for Muhammad Ali,” a figure with a public persona similar to Jack Johnson in his unwavering confidence in his fighting abilities (though each fighter used their platform to different ends, Johnson demonstrated he could flaunt his money as he pleased and live in a manner he chose and Ali took many political stances during the Civil Rights movement with his platform). Although Rocky ultimately loses to Creed at the end of the first film he threatens Creed’s ego and future

²²⁸ Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 9.

²²⁹ Adam Serwer, “How *Creed* Forever Changed the *Rocky* Series,” *The Atlantic*, November 28, 2018, accessed December 1, 2018, <https://cutt.ly/BX5a1r>.

status as heavyweight champion. Rocky and Creed ultimately become close friends through subsequent film sequels until Creed's untimely death at the hands of Russian Ivan "Drago" Dragimov (Dolph Lundgren) in *Rocky IV* (1985). The *Rocky* films proceeding *Creed* can be read as soothing to white audiences, their fictional Great White Hope in the working-class underdog Rocky.

Apollo's son Adonis Creed (Michael B. Jordan) first appeared in film director Ryan Coogler's 2015 film *Creed* in a narrative that refocused the entire franchise from Rocky onto Apollo's legacy. Serwer notes in his essay that Apollo Creed's dominance in the ring after the first *Rocky* film could be interpreted as a "wound in the ego of certain white sports films." *Creed II* rounds back to the loss of Apollo in *Rocky IV* and reclaims Apollo's legacy as Adonis defeats "Pretty" Ricky Conlan (Tony Bellen). Serwer's essay highlights America's love affair with white middle-class underdogs in sport film narratives. Though Apollo Creed was heavyweight champion at the beginning of the franchise, Serwer notes that like Ali his character has "hubris too comic for pathos." In his over the top Uncle Sam costume and flamboyant personality, Apollo's confidence in his fighting ability is played for laughs in the first film. Rocky is always framed as a serious, determined foil.

Additionally, Serwer notes the importance of a white victor in the imaginations of white audiences. The famous bronze Rocky statue that sits at the bottom steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art was erected in 1982 to coincide with the release of *Rocky III*. Real life African American boxer Joe Frazier was from Philadelphia. Frazier was the undisputed heavyweight champion from 1970 to 1973 and his statue was not erected in Philadelphia until 2015. Sewer notes "the *Rocky* films are a product of a sense of white pride and humiliation, and the desire to

overcome it by restoring the proper order of things.”²³⁰ This pattern can be traced back to early cinema’s boxing films and the African American fighters filmed for the screen. The white hegemonic urge to present a ‘knowing’ of Black people on screen has survived the existence of cinema, at this time nearly one hundred thirty years.

The legacy of Jack Johnson

Jack Johnson’s imprint on sports and cinema history on the one hand presents a story of an individual who dared to eschew the social and geographical, and at times economic limitations placed on him during the time he was alive. On the other hand, the legacy of Johnson should not be relegated to one African American man who defied the limitations placed on his story. Johnson’s story: his filmed matches between white opponents and media publications concerning his demeanor are important, but as any historian might note, scholars should place caution on isolating one historical figure and look beyond a single-story narrative. Many African American, and Black fighters worldwide were successful before Johnson. Examining Johnson’s life and legacy could be an entryway into the world of boxing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and an examination of the various regulations placed on Black fighters and Black fighters on cinema screens demonstrates that Johnson is not an anomaly in fighting ability.

Johnson’s popularity has resurfaced throughout the twentieth century. The *Jeffries-Johnson World’s Championship Boxing Contest* entered the National Film Registry in 2005. A Broadway play about his life debuted in 1967; two films in 1970: *The Great White Hope*, directed by Martin Ritt and starring James Earl Jones as Jack Johnson, and documentary *Jack*

²³⁰ Serwer, “How *Creed* Forever Changed the *Rocky* Series.”

Johnson, directed by Jim Jacobs. Ken Burn's released a photo documentary focusing on Johnson in 2005 titled *Unforgivable Blackness*, based on Geoffrey C. Ward's book of the same title. Comic book author Trevor Von Eeden released a visual story of Johnson's life in his graphic novel *The Original Johnson* in 2009. Though met with heavy criticism, President Trump's pardon of Johnson in 2018 for his violation of the Mann Act in 1913 is secured as a symbolic pardon in the twenty first century. Though Johnson died in 1946, members of Johnson's family were satisfied with what was viewed as a long overdue pardon.²³¹

But there are other Black fighters who do not receive this focus and it is important to remember that cinema and media play a role in framing individuals as though they are anomalies, rather than an extension of an African American boxing community, and this not only creates an erasure, but fails to recognize the many roles African American fighters, instructors, managers, promoters, and theater owners play in challenging racist images of African American in the ring and on movie screens. Some African American men during last half of the nineteenth century honed their skills in the boxing ring to demonstrate the same economic and social upward mobility afforded to white men. Not all of these men were heavyweights like Johnson, and it's important to widen an understanding of a historical figure from an individual, to the community and historical discourse surrounding the media attention placed on an individual fighter, while other fighters are ignored, or not examined in depth.

Cinema and preservation

Cinema plays a specific role in historical memory not only in the footage captured, but ways in which film reels are preserved over time. At the turn of the twentieth century noted

²³¹ John Eligon and Michael D. Shear, "Trump Pardons Jack Johnson, Heavyweight Boxing Champion," *New York Times*, May 24, 2018, accessed October 2, 2018, <https://cutt.ly/qX5swT>.

Italian film preservationist Paolo Cherchi Usai estimated the preservation of early films sat around 30,000 but if film historians are to be believed, more than eighty percent of original film footage had been lost.²³² Scholars of early cinema have to rely predominantly on the business practices, preserved stills, patent information, promotion, and ticket sales in order to piece together how early filmmakers intended to frame their subjects in front of their cameras and also, how audiences perceived and reacted to what they saw on screen.

Many African American filmmakers strove to correct negative cinematic image of Black Americans in the 1910s. William Foster founded the first African American owned film company and Hunter C. Haynes founded the Haynes Photoplay Company in New York in the early decades of the twentieth century. Their aim was to create “motion pictures made by, with, and for African Americans.” In Chicago, producers William Foster and Peter P. Jones strove to produce Black led films. “In September 1915, Jones offered his own response to *The Birth of a Nation*. He recorded five reels documenting events at the recent Illinois National Half Century Exposition and Lincoln Jubilee, a commemoration of Emancipation. It was sold nationally on a territorial-rights basis.”²³³ These films unfortunately do not exist today.

In 1918 white film director John W. Noble released *The Birth of a Race*, a film intended as a response to *The Birth of a Nation*. Though it was ultimately considered a commercial flop, it is preserved in the Library of Congress.²³⁴

²³² Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 10.

²³³ Streible, 258.

²³⁴ See Thomas Cripps, “The making of *The Birth of a Race*”: The Emerging Politics of Identity in Silent Movies,” in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 38-55.

The study of boxing films is a combination of sports history and film history. I am not a sports historian, so my focus is pulled from early fight pictures to representations of boxers in fictionalized narratives in the decades that follow the decline of the fight film. A sports focused scholar could just as easily examine early fight films and chart their path towards contemporary sports reporting and filmed matches, ESPN, etc. Either way, patterns emerge concerning representations of Black men on camera, and ways in which fighters are framed in the press is grounded in the color of their skin. As a film scholar I am curious about ways in which the search for a “great white hope” evolved into fictional characters and how the romance of narrative Hollywood studio boxing films presents various anxieties about boxer’s bodies throughout the twenty and twenty-first centuries.

Paolo Cherchi Usai notes in *The Death of Cinema* that the destruction of cinema is commercial and political: “...witness to the extinction of moving images that nobody cares to preserve, either because they are deemed unworthy or unsuitable for the purposes of further commercial exploitation. This is considered as normal as the corruption of an oral tradition, or the vanishing of other ephemeral forms of human expression.”²³⁵ Academic conversations surrounding the importance of *The Birth of a Nation* may have more to do with the availability of the film reels left behind, though this conversation illuminates a hegemonic mode of remembering early cinema. Surviving documents that demonstrate protest to both fight films and Griffith’s work generate a conversation concerning the continual need for a great white hope, and a denial of the fact of the capturing of what really happened on camera.

²³⁵ Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 17.

Jacqueline Stewart highlights early African American filmmakers in *Migrating to the Movies*. The 1910s demonstrated an emerging market for African Americans who wanted to reclaim images of themselves onscreen and diminish negative stereotypes and racist images on screen. Though by the mid-1910s African Americans across the United States were not a monolithic group, Black filmmakers of the time had to attempt to market their films to a diverse audience without relying on the same methods used by white filmmakers. Many filmmakers strove to highlight the “Americanness” of African Americans of the early twentieth century.²³⁶ African American filmmakers produced a variety of genres including: “city comedies, migration melodramas, and military newsreels that encouraged and reflected renewed assertions of American identity on the part of Black audiences.”²³⁷ Early cinema’s African American filmmakers put together Black owned production companies during the 1910s.²³⁸

Today, Oscar Micheaux is considered the first major African American film director, his films are available to us today while earlier African American directors work has been lost. He released *The Homesteader* in 1919 and his second feature *Within our Gates*, released in 1920 was a response to *Birth of a Nation*. Micheaux released over forty films between 1918 and 1948.²³⁹ His themes ranged in ways that demonstrate multiple versions of life for African Americans in the United States.²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Stewart, 191.

²³⁷ Stewart, 191.

²³⁸ Stewart, 189.

²³⁹ Stewart, 219.

²⁴⁰ Stewart, 220.

Jack Johnson continued to fight after his loss to Jess Willard in 1915. Streible notes that Johnson even appeared in some narrative films in the 1920s including the “nonthreatening role of a clown” and a 1929 Fox Movietone newsreel where he did not speak but “mugged and mimed while conducting a jazz orchestra.”²⁴¹ Johnson died tragically at the age of sixty-eight in 1946 after his car crashed as he was driving away from a diner restaurant in North Carolina that refused to serve him. Although Johnson was able to publicly rebuff criticism and anger thrown at him during his youth and reign as World Heavyweight Champion, racism followed him across the globe his entire life.

Boxing films of early cinema have the potential to reveal anxiety on behalf of white populations in the United States. My research demonstrates that social unrest was never secret or hidden, often it was exploited for media promotion: American v. Brit., Black man v. white man. Historian Jeffrey T. Sammons frames boxing in the United States during this time as a signifier for the state of the nation. That is, if the white U.S. heavyweight was winning, boxing in the U.S. was worthy of praise and a symbol of America’s growing independence from England and growing imperial strength.

It is important to remember, as Robert C. Allen terms in his essay “Vitascope/Cinématographie: Initial Patterns of American Film Industrial Practice,” the “casual factors” that lead to an event, an invention, the debut of a film. Koster and Bial’s exhibition of the Vitascope on April 23, 1896 didn’t begin the history of cinema. It is a date chosen and reaffirmed by historians, but the deliberateness in which that date is remembered is not

²⁴¹ Streible, 265.

objective.²⁴² Similarly, Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* didn't invent racism and misrepresentation in cinema, it is an accumulation of previous works, previous films. It is curious that we use this film as the beginning, ignoring over twenty years of previous film innovation and public exhibition of cinema. Or, as Paolo Cherchi Usai writes in *The Death of Cinema* "Film history proceeds by an effort to explain the loss of cultural ambience that has evaporated from the moving image in the context of a given time and place...If all moving images could be experienced as a Model Image...no such thing as film history would be needed or possible."²⁴³ Reconstructing ways in which early cinema audiences experienced early moving pictures extends beyond the narrative of the cinema reels relies on the ticket sales and business practices of early film distributors and exhibitors.

All images produced during pre and transitional cinema are deliberate on behalf of white filmmakers and producers. Accessibility to cinematic images contributed to a sense of knowing the subjects on screen. It is only when we carefully and critically analyze the images, in this case the images of early cinema, and question the agency behind racist cinematic imagery that film audiences and scholars can begin to see the power of the moving image and the importance in a widening of representation on all levels of cinema creation.

Boxing films released in the United States between 1894 and 1915 demonstrate a tear in the discourse of early twentieth century masculine white supremacy. Boxing's popularity in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century can be attributed to continued controversy surrounding the practice and its popularity as a subject of cinema since cinema's birth in the

²⁴² Robert C. Allen "Vitascope/ Cinématographie," in *Film Before Griffith*, John L. Fell, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 144.

²⁴³ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), 21.

United States. Both boxing and cinema were met with regulations during this time and the regulations: Queensberry rules, the color line, film production policy, ban on inter-state distribution of boxing films, *The Mann Act* against Johnson (1913), and *Mutual v. Ohio* (1915) demonstrate attempts on behalf of private film production companies, as well as federal lawmakers to control images of Black and white bodies on screen in order to perpetuate the mythology of white superiority. This mythology in turn aided in both justification and reinforcement of a global arm of white imperialism. Jack Johnson's victory in the ring signified an enormous threat to the mythology of white supremacy and demonstrates to contemporary scholars the intricate measures taken by the film industry, the federal government, state policies, and unwritten rules concerning the color line to reframe a boxing champion as a great white hope.

It's not only Johnson's legacy of the time that must be critically examined through a contemporary lens but ways in which preservation of the films produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been carried into the twenty first century. It is important to not isolate Jack Johnson as a lone figure, but to ground his success within the context and parameters of many other Black fighters, instructors (professors), and gymnasium owners of his time.

Dr. Jacqueline Stewart attributes this anger to the growing "mobility and visibility" of Black Americans during the first two decades of the twentieth century.²⁴⁴ This time period

²⁴⁴ Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Stewart repeats this phrase throughout her book to approach from a variety of angles, ways in which anti-Black images on movie screens at the beginning of the twentieth century present a specific form of white anxiety directly connect with a need to control the narrative of Black Americans as second-class citizens.

demonstrates increased movement and migration of Black Americans from the south and into large metropolitan cities and white anger can be viewed in media publications of this time period. Johnson's win on the hot July afternoon demonstrates the power visual mediums, specifically, the power cinema screens had on American audiences regarding the importance of representation and how white Americans interpreted cinema as a threat when it captured anything but white hegemonic fantasy.

Pre-classical and transitional cinema's boxing films demonstrate attempts at racial hierarch from the very beginning. *Birth* is not an outlier, it is the norm, and through understanding of early twentieth century mechanical erasure via cinema we can understand how the narratives of successful Black boxers, not to mention Black boxing instructors, fight promoters, and gymnasium and ring owners, have been dampened or erased in the name of perpetuating a myth of white superiority on behalf of white filmmakers during a time of increased industrial production and mechanical reproduction.

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