

The Manliest Man: How Jack Johnson Changed the Relationship of White Supremacy and Masculinity in America

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Jack Johnson – an African-American man and the heavyweight prizefighting champion of the world – was a household name and a controversial figure by 1908. Johnson’s prominence is remarkable because of the time of American history. This was the era of Jim Crow segregation and a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. Because of this, it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for African-American men to be perceived as masculine and economically independent. In the early 1900s, masculinity was inherently white; sustaining white supremacy was crucial to maintaining mainstream manhood. Masculinity at this time meant economic success, physical strength, ability to attract women, and participation in all-men leisurely activities.

Johnson was controversial to both white and black Americans. Throughout Jack Johnson’s life, he wanted to be seen as masculine, despite the color barrier. Jack Johnson disrupted the relationship between White Supremacy and masculinity in America between 1907 and 1915. The study will focus on African-American and white American’s views about Johnson. The majority of my primary sources come from the Eastern side of the county. The sources I rely heavily on are African-American and popular white newspapers, film and photographs, biographies, and scholarly articles from the fields of history and law. I will be looking at popular opinions about Johnson during his most famous years. With all of Jack Johnson’s success he created social distress in America because he disrupted the traditional relationship between white supremacy and masculinity by dominating the sport of heavyweight boxing.

The Ideals of Race and Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century

In the nineteenth-century Victorian era, manhood was a major source of anxiety for many middle-class white men.¹ Americans expressed masculinity by focusing on manly restraint, control, character, and economic success. These characteristics all attributed to what historians call the “self-made man.” According to historian Martin Summers, the “self-made man” was a “product of the market revolution and the emergence of liberalism.”² As the twentieth century came around, changes in the American economy

¹ Martin Summers, “Introduction” in *Manliness & its Discontents: The Black Middle Class & the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930*, (London: The University of North Carolina Press), 1.

² Summers, “Introduction,” 1.

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and social structures made it extremely difficult for the average American man to achieve these previous ideals of masculinity.³ Economic changes made it more difficult for a man to have his own business; the self-employment rate dropped from 67 percent to 37 percent.⁴ Because the economy crashed several times, people were going bankrupt. This made it nearly impossible for these people affected by the crashes to hold onto the status of a self-made man.

In addition to economic instability, the twentieth century also witnessed an increase of consumerism. With the self-employment rate dropping so severely, most men did not have specialized, skilled trade jobs anymore. Many middle-class men were working as cogs in factory production lines for large corporations. Since these men could not find an identity rooted in their professional life, they tried to do so in leisure activities and consumption.⁵ Men also started to reject the ideas of manly restraint and started to embrace their primitive side. Many people in the nineteenth century believed that exerting oneself physically could be detrimental, but at the turn of the twentieth century, this idea about physical exertion changed. Americans started to become obsessed with men's physical body. Body builders, football players, and prizefighters were seen as the epitome of superior manhood.⁶ Men were fascinated by the boxing world and in the decades around the twentieth century, the sport was seen as legitimate and became an international sensation across all classes.⁷ These prizefighters had the ability to physically dominate others. This type of manhood is often referred to as "violent masculinity." Men who were unable to physically dominate other men would exercise this sort of violent masculinity with their families. Men had the ability to control their wives and children. This meant that they were allowed to hit their family members.⁸ A man was the master of his household and he was able to use corporal punishment as he saw fit. This was seen as completely acceptable, and even a way that men could access masculinity.

Another huge factor in changing perceptions of masculinities was the women's suffrage movement. Women seeking more equality threatened men's authority and power. A great deal of what made men so powerful

³ Gail Bederman, "Remaking Manhood through Race and 'Civilization'" in *Manliness & Civilization: a Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12-13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷ Kevin B. Wamsley and David Whitson, "Celebrating Violent Masculinities: The Boxing Death of Luther McCarty," *Journal of Sport History* 25, (Fall, 1998): 419.

⁸ Sabrina Balgamwalla, "Bride and Prejudice: How U.S. Immigration Law Discriminates Against Spousal Visa Holders," *Berkeley Journal of Gender Law & Justice* 29, (2014).

was their ability to control the political realm. Men felt the need to strongly oppose excessive femininity in order to regain masculinity.⁹ Countless men aggressively opposed the women's movement and their inroads in coeducational institutions out of fear of losing authority and control. Also, at the start of the twentieth century, many men felt as though men and boys were becoming too effeminate. Because of the change in the labor market due to industrialization, urbanization, and educated women entering the work force, women were filling teaching positions that men no longer wanted.¹⁰ Men started to feel like their boys were spending too much time around women in the classroom and at home with their mothers. Men felt this was turning boys into "sissies." In order to combat this, men were called to take over positions as schoolteachers. This would stop high-school-aged men from becoming too effeminate from their female teachers. Men wanted boys to be curious and powerful, with a "dash of savagery."¹¹ Young boys who did not fit into this ideal were considered effeminate, which attributed to the fear of homosexuality. The fear of effeminacy also contributed to the rise in violent masculinity. Another way men tried to contest this was by joining fraternal groups such as the Freemasons and college fraternities.¹² Boys were encouraged to join the Boy Scouts, which emphasized masculine leadership, and they believed that they needed to keep their organization free of female influence.¹³ Creating strong platonic bonds with other men was seen as essential to prevent men's increasing effeminacy.

One idea about manhood that did not change between Victorian culture and the turn of the century was the idea that manliness was exclusively available to white men.¹⁴ Since restraint and control were the staples of manhood since the nineteenth century, African-American men could not access it. Most black men were subjected to the control of white masters.¹⁵ Slaves could not control who they married, where they lived, or their economic circumstance, making it impossible to be manly.¹⁶

⁹ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 16.

¹⁰ Wayne John Martino, "Male Teachers as Role Models: Addressing Issues of Masculinity, Pedagogy and the Masculinization of Schooling," *Curriculum Inquiry* 38, (2008): 196.

¹¹ Julia Grant, "A 'Real Boy' and Not a Sissy: Gender, Childhood, and Masculinity, 1890-1940," *Journal of Social History* 37, (2004): 829.

¹² Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 19.

¹³ Julia Grant, "A 'Real Boy'," 834.

¹⁴ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 20.

¹⁵ Michael Hatt, "'Making a Man of Him': Masculinity and the Black Body in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture," *Oxford Art Journal* 15, (1992): 21, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360486>.

¹⁶ Hatt, "Making a Man of Him," 21.

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Toward the end of the nineteenth century, slavery became illegal and African Americans were given the right to vote. Many black Americans also started the Great Migration from the South to the cities in the North. These changes created an anxiety about how to keep masculinity white. Historian Gail Bederman explains that around “the turn of the century, Americans were obsessed with the connection between manhood and racial dominance.”¹⁷ White supremacy was essential to maintaining and upholding masculinity. African-American communities were systematically oppressed, especially in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Jim Crow laws oppressed African Americans economically, politically, and socially.¹⁸ It was not only customs of behavior; it was legalized racism. Economic tyranny made it so African-American men could not be the sole breadwinners and reasonably provide for their families. African Americans were also subjected to seemingly random violence, and they almost never received retribution for this because black men were rarely, if ever, selected to serve on juries.¹⁹ Many black men felt there was nothing they could do to protect their families from racist violence. This hindered black men’s ability to obtain mainstream manhood, because men were supposed to be able to take care of their families. Jim Crow laws also enforced the systematic segregation of blacks and whites. Many African-American men complained about their segregated facilities because of their poor conditions and felt like it was an “insult to their collective manhood.”²⁰ Frederick Douglass frequently wrote about how the African-American man had just as much power as a white man.²¹ He was also very interested in the relationship between race and masculinity. African-American men questioned the validity of masculinity being exclusively available to white men long before Johnson.

Jack Johnson was an interesting paradox. He was born and raised in Galveston, Texas to two emancipated slaves. Because Galveston is so far east, the culture resembled that of the Deep South. Racism and segregation was more intense in this region of the country. Because of the circumstances he was born into, Johnson was supposed to be an oppressed black man. In his autobiography, *Jack Johnson is a Dandy* he said, “How incongruous is it to think that I, a little Galveston colored boy should ever be...sought and

¹⁷ Bederman, “Remaking Manhood,” 4.

¹⁸ Summers, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁹ Tsahai Tafari, “The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow: A National Struggle: Important Supreme Court cases in the battle for civil rights,” *PBS*. (2002).

²⁰ Summers, “Introduction,” 3.

²¹ Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, ed., “Jack Johnson and Paul Robeson,” in *Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press), 156.

acclaimed by thousands in nearly every nation in the world!"²² Johnson was pointing out that it is remarkable he was as successful and famous as he was because of where he grew up and his skin color. Despite racial oppression, he was the best at the 'manliest sport' and lived an extravagantly wealthy lifestyle. He spent a great deal of his time talking about his manhood and he wanted to make sure people knew he was just as manly - if not more - than any white man.²³ Throughout his entire career, Johnson wanted to be seen for his powerful manhood despite the color barrier.²⁴ Johnson's claims to manhood helped shape and redefine the relationship between white supremacy and masculinity.

Jack Johnson and his Embodiment of Masculinity

Johnson's dreams of being the best prizefighter in the world seemed out of reach for many years. Many obstacles stood in his way. For one, prizefighting was illegal in many cities, so Johnson either fought illegally or he had to travel at his expense to cities that would allow prizefighting. Secondly, most white men at this time refused to fight any black man. Jim Jeffries was the white prizefighting heavyweight champion of the world; he said that when there was no longer an opponent suitable enough to fight, he would retire.²⁵ According to Jeffries, African-American men were not appropriate options. Johnson requested to fight him as early as 1903 and Jeffries refused every time.²⁶ With no one he deemed appropriate left to fight, Jeffries retired in 1905, just as prize fighting was gaining momentum and popularity. According to Tommy Burns - the new heavyweight prizefighting champion of the world - Jeffries's retirement caused interest and excitement in the sport to wane.²⁷ In the hope of regaining interest and increasing the amount of money he would earn during matches, Burns agreed to fight Johnson. The Johnson v. Burns fight took place in Australia on December 26, 1908.²⁸ The fight took place in Australia because of how difficult it was to find a place where boxing was legal in the United States.

²² Jack Johnson, "I Take my Pen in my Hand," in *Jack Johnson is a Dandy*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1969), 25.

²³ Jack Johnson, *My Life and Battles*, edited and translated by Christopher Rivers, (London: Praeger, 2007). 5.

²⁴ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ Jack Johnson, "I Am Champion of the World!," in *My Life in Battles*, (London: Praeger, 2007), 69.

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Johnson claimed that there were eighteen-thousand spectators watching the fight and that all of Australia wanted to get a glimpse.²⁹

The most obvious way that Jack Johnson embodied mainstream expressions of masculinity was through violence. He was able to beat everyone who agreed to fight him, and Tommy Burns was no exception. Johnson, being such an excellent fighter and physically muscular, epitomized superior manhood during this era – especially after beating Burns and being named the heavyweight champion of the world.

Although Johnson's ability to physically dominate other men was the most obvious way he obtained masculinity, he made other subtle claims to manliness. Before matches, he would wrap gauze around his penis so that it would appear larger in his tight boxing shorts.³⁰ He also never let his confidence waver. When he was interviewed before fights, he would tell reporters that he was going to win. This public display of confidence was extremely unusual for African Americans during this time who were expected to show deference to whites. Johnson was also known for trying to intimidate or tease his opponents. His fight with Burns was the perfect example of this. When Johnson entered the ring, he remembered feeling confident and attempting to emasculate his opponent when the fight started. He taunted Burns by saying things like "What are you scared of, little boy?" and "get up and fight like a real man."³¹ Johnson recalled how angry this made Burns. In the middle of the fight, Johnson smiled and said, "[Y]ou punch like a woman, Tommy" and "[W]ho taught you to fight, your mother?"³² Burns would throw his body at Johnson with all his might because he was so infuriated.³³ This interaction shows how important manliness was to both of these men. Jack Johnson used his masculinity and fighting superiority to taunt Burns about his supposed femininity. This is one of the ways that Johnson asserted his manhood and dominance over his opponents. He was deliberately playing into the fear that men were becoming too effeminate. Johnson beat Tommy Burns in thirteen rounds, and Johnson attributed his success to verbally emasculating Burns.

Two of the other ways that Johnson displayed his manliness was by attracting white women and being economically stable. Johnson made much more money than the average middle-class white man. Even though he was paid less than his white competitors, Johnson was still winning tens of thousands of dollars every time he fought.³⁴ Johnson said that he had "more

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 8.

³¹ Johnson, "Champion of the World," 71.

³² Geoffrey C. Ward, "The Man with the Golden Smile," in *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 125.

³³ Johnson, "Champion of the World," 71.

³⁴ Ibid.

[money] than I ever dreamed of possessing."³⁵ He was not shy about displaying his wealth. He was frequently photographed in fancy cars and showing off his material items. One picture that was posted in magazines showed Johnson, in a very large fur coat, standing next to his white wife, Etta Duryea, who was also in a large fur coat and hat.³⁶ This image displayed Johnson's success as a man because he was able to provide an extravagant lifestyle for himself and his wife.

These pictures were not only controversial because of his flamboyant display of wealth, but also because he was with a white woman. Johnson made no attempt to hide the fact that he was attracted to white women.³⁷ He was married four times in his life; three of his wives were white. He also had many affairs with white women and enjoyed the company of white prostitutes. In 1926, Johnson recalled that he had "countless women" in his life.³⁸ Johnson made a point to show off his affinity for these women and his ability to attract them in order to bolster his manliness.³⁹ Being able to attract women was a new staple for masculinity at the turn of the twentieth century. As Johnson was able to attract white women despite his dark skin color, coupled with the fact that interracial relationships were highly frowned upon and even illegal in various parts of the U.S., it was clear that he was able to draw on this new form of masculinity. In Johnson's autobiography, he says that it was incredible and inconceivable that he "plunged into romances and love with white women in defiance of a treasured and guarded custom."⁴⁰ African-American men who were involved in relationships with white women were usually lynched.⁴¹ The fact that Johnson would openly flaunt his relationships with white women was extremely bold. Johnson taunted white men but because he was a public figure, lynching Johnson would not go unpunished.

Not only was Johnson married to various white women throughout his life, he also had many mistresses. Everyone knew that he was an adulterer and even when he was unmarried, he loved the company of prostitutes. One of his wives was even a well-known prostitute. He was also known for beating his wives and girlfriends. Being aggressive, even in his personal relationships, was another way Johnson was able to obtain

³⁵ Johnson, "I Take my Pen," 22.

³⁶ *Portrait of Jack & Etta Johnson*, (January 1, 1910). Getty Images. <http://www.gettyimages.com/license/588649330>.

³⁷ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 9.

³⁸ Jack Johnson, "Romances and Regrets," in *Jack Johnson is a Dandy*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1969), 70.

³⁹ Geoffrey C. Ward, "The Brunette in a Blond Town" in *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 226.

⁴⁰ Johnson, "I Take my Pen," 25.

⁴¹ Ogbar, "Jack Johnson and Paul Robeson," 157.

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masculinity. According to Gail Bederman, it was socially acceptable for men to hit their wives; in some cases it was even encouraged in order to control women.⁴² It was already scandalous that an African-American man was in a relationship with a white woman, but he was also beating his white wives. This was conflicting because as a man, he was supposed to be allowed to hit his wife if he wanted to, but as an African American, he was never supposed to touch a white woman. This inverted the racial dimensions of masculinity for the period.

Johnson was extremely prideful in his African-American heritage and though he aspired to claim the symbols of white masculinity, he asserted an African-American style of masculinity.⁴³ This is thought provoking because usually this would cause a person to be inherently less masculine. Johnson was able to use his pride in his African- American heritage to facilitate black masculinity. Johnson's parents were emancipated slaves and he was proud of it. This outraged white Americans because he was claiming his masculinity in connection to his race rather than performing shame and submissiveness due to his blackness.

Johnson was able to access almost every avenue of prescribed mainstream masculinity. He had the perfect muscular body, he was able to physically dominate other men, he attracted white women, and he was able to provide a lavish lifestyle for himself and his wives. He wanted to be seen as a powerful man and told many newspapers that he wanted to be remembered as a man more than he wanted to be remembered as a great boxer. Johnson's boxing and economic success helped to undermine the monopoly whitehood claimed on manhood. It is extremely important to notice how Johnson embodied masculinity. However, public opinions and reactions to Johnson's displays of masculinity also show how he was able to change the relationship between white supremacy and masculinity. Most people reacted negatively to Johnson's embodiment of masculinity. The backlash from white America shows that people saw Johnson as a threat. Americans were starting to see that masculinity was not mutually exclusive to whiteness, and they wanted to do anything in their power to shut it down.

Public Reactions to Jack Johnson

Right after Johnson beat Burns in Australia for the title of heavyweight champion of the world, there was a massive call for a white boxer to take the title back. This search lasted seven years and became

⁴² Bederman "Remaking Manhood," 10.

⁴³ Ogbar, "Jack Johnson and Paul Robenson," 157.

known as the Great White Hope campaign.⁴⁴ For a number of white Americans, it was completely unacceptable that a black man was the best at the manliest sport. The first 'Great White Hope' was Victor McLaglen. He was a British soldier who boxed during his time in the army, but he never took his post-Army boxing career very seriously.⁴⁵ Even though he was not an experienced fighter, he was just as big as Johnson. Many people believed that he would be able to take down Johnson solely because of his size. McLaglen was one of the worst fighters Johnson faced.⁴⁶ He was not a great fighter, but the white community was still convinced that the white man would always overpower the black man. On March 10, 1909 Johnson took down McLaglen with the first few punches he threw, making this first match-up extremely anticlimactic.⁴⁷

Stanly Ketchel was the next person to fight Johnson. Ketchel was a middleweight prizefighter, so he was significantly smaller than Johnson, but the white community still thought he could take down the champion.⁴⁸ One article posted by the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* predicted that Ketchel would win, because "Johnson can't hit as hard as the public thinks he can."⁴⁹ Even though many were hopeful that Ketchel would take down Johnson, many newspapers favored the champion to win ten to four.⁵⁰ The 1909 fight between Ketchel and Johnson was supposedly staged so Johnson would not win too quickly. The opponents wanted the fight to last at least twenty rounds so they would make more money from the films.⁵¹ The first twelve rounds were boring; neither opponent was fighting hard. In the thirteenth round, Johnson accidentally hit Ketchel a little too hard. Ketchel retaliated, caught Johnson off-guard, and punched him in the face. This knocked Johnson to the ground. Johnson got up and instantly knocked out Ketchel and several of his teeth imbedded in Johnson's glove.⁵² One newspaper article by the *Grand Rapid Press* said, "Jack Johnson is running wild" because

⁴⁴ Graeme Kent, "There was no Fight!," in *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson*, (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 7.

⁴⁵ Graeme Kent, "The Future Assistant Provost Marshal of Baghdad," in *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson*, (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸ Graeme Kent, "The Hobo," in *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson*, (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 47-48.

⁴⁹ "Kaufman Picks Ketchel to Win," *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, (October 15, 1909), 14.

⁵⁰ "Papke Backs Ketchel. Illinois Fighter Believes Stanly Will Outpoint Johnson," *Kansas City Star*, (October 13, 1909), 8.

⁵¹ Kent, "The Hobo," 55.

⁵² *IBID.*

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of the win.⁵³ The newspaper was trying to make it sound like Johnson was uncontrollable and needed to be stopped. The article also said that Jeffries was the only conceivable option to take down Johnson. Fears and hostilities were building among Americans.

During the campaign for the Great White Hope, the media begged Jeffries to come out of retirement and fight Johnson. *The Chicago Tribune* even published a picture in 1909 of a little girl pointing at Jeffries, with the caption: "Please, Mr. Jeffries, are you going to fight Mr. Johnson?" (Fig. 1). Many different newspapers all over the country pleaded with Jeffries to vindicate white manhood.⁵⁴ In December 1909, Jeffries agreed to fight Johnson and take back the crown.⁵⁵ He started to train right away. Jim Jeffries was the first real chance the white race had at getting the championship back. From the very beginning, it was portrayed as a fight to see which race is superior. The two men were set to fight in Reno, Nevada on July 4, 1910. This date was purposeful because the white community thought evil – the black man – would finally be conquered on the most important day in America. Tens of thousands of men traveled to Reno to see the "fight of the century." The streets were overcrowded, hotels were full, and people were even sleeping on the ground in order to watch this match. Over five hundred journalists from majority-white newspapers were there to cover the fight, and more than thirty thousand men waited anxiously outside of the *New York Times* office to hear the results.⁵⁶ Camera crews shut off the film in the fifteenth round after Johnson knocked Jeffries to the ground. Johnson did the unthinkable; he beat the most promising Great White Hope and held the title of heavyweight champion of the world. People all over America reacted to this event. Many African-Americans celebrated the victory, while white Americans violently lashed out.

After the Reno fight, Johnson turned into a controversial household name. People who may have not known about Johnson previously, definitely knew who he was now. His name flooded national media. A black man remained the best at the manliest sport, which was totally unacceptable in the eyes of white Americans. Race riots initiated by angry whites broke out in every state in the South and many cities in the North. They did this as retribution against African-Americans and as a warning for challenging white supremacy. There were a few cases of black men attacking white men for disparaging Johnson, but for the most part, white

⁵³ H. M. Walker, "The Aftermath of The Battle Between Ketchel and Johnson," *Grand Rapids Press*, (October 18, 1909), 6.

⁵⁴ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 2.

⁵⁵ Graeme Kent, "A Hot Day in Reno," in *The Great White Hopes: The Quest to Defeat Jack Johnson*, (Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2005) 71.

⁵⁶ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 1.

Americans were attacking African Americans for celebrating the victory.⁵⁷ There were many newspaper articles that condemned these riots, but they tended to blame African-Americans for the riots, not white Americans – who were causing the most damage. One article from the *Beaumont Enterprise* newspaper from Texas said that “disturbances of a very serious nature occurred in many cities” because African-Americans were “too boisterous.”⁵⁸ A political cartoon from *The Los Angeles Times* shows a stick of dynamite pointing at a crowd of people rioting and says, “I couldn’t have cause half so much damage!” (Fig. 2). This political cartoon suggests that Johnson’s winning caused more damage than a literal explosion could have caused. The illustration depicts dark figures wielding weapons and white figures lying on the ground, who appear to be injured. This implies that the African-Americans were the aggressors and the white Americans were the victims. These two articles attempted to blame this violence on Johnson and the African-American community. We know now that white Americans caused most of the damage.

African-American newspapers did not have the same view of the race riots, though there were also far fewer African-American newspapers discussing the race riots in general. In an article by the *Cleveland Gazette*, they said “The mob spirit seemed to rise whenever a Negro cheered for Johnson after the fight” and that “Negroes were chased through the streets of the cities of the south and north.”⁵⁹ African-American communities acknowledged that the outcome of the Johnson v. Jeffries fight started the riots, but they blamed the white community for it. The black community saw the riots as white men attacking them for celebrating. One other article from *The Washington Bee* had very strong opinions about the race riots and the fight in general. In regard to the riots, *The Washington Bee* wrote, “Not since the days of suffrage, when colored men attempted to vote the democratic tickets, did this city show such scenes.”⁶⁰ This shows how incredibly impactful this fight was to the American public. The last time there were race riots of this nature, it was when African-Americans were given the right to vote. *The Washington Bee* goes on and said, “The white ruffians showed their teeth and attacked almost every colored person they saw upon the public streets.”⁶¹ This newspaper is making white Americans sound like animals because of the violence they were inflicting on colored

⁵⁷ IBID., 3.

⁵⁸ “Race Riots Came After the Fight,” *Beaumont Enterprise*, (July 5, 1910).

⁵⁹ “Five Killed in Race Riots: Victory of Johnson Over Jeffries Starts Carnival of Crime in Northern and Southern Cities,” *Cleveland Gazette*, (July 9, 1910).

⁶⁰ “The Fight,” *The Washington Bee*, (July 9, 1910), 4.

⁶¹ Ibid.

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Americans. Each race is blaming the other for the violent race riots that ensued days after Johnson's victory over Jeffries.

These riots demonstrate how upset white Americans were about the Johnson victory. Black and white men were flooding the streets to celebrate or attack men with opposing opinions about the fight. Rioting after a sporting event was usually a reaction to its outcome, but the riots after the fight in Reno were more than people upset or excited about a sporting outcome. This was an issue of racial conflict. People were not rioting for the sake of sport; white Americans were killing black Americans because Johnson was helping to break down the relationship between white supremacy and masculinity. Race riots also suggest that white Americans were starting to panic, so they lashed out with violence. An article by the *United Press* estimated that some cities had over seven thousand people rioting in the streets.⁶² They also said that there were 236 people arrested in Washington, D.C. alone.⁶³ Contemporary reports show that eighteen people were killed and hundreds more were injured during riots nationwide.⁶⁴

Thousands of newspaper articles were written leading up to and following the Johnson v. Jeffries fight. Many African-American newspapers talked about the fight. Much to my surprise, opinions about Johnson winning the fight varied. One newspaper article, "Expression of the Negro Press" published by *The Freeman* on July 23, 1910, included excerpts from various African-American newspapers all over the country talking about the Johnson v. Jeffries fight. The abundance of quotes discussing Johnson's masculinity – or lack thereof – shows the importance of manhood to the African-American community.

There were some African-Americans who did not feel like this fight changed anything in regard to white supremacy and manhood. For example, *The Exchange* said: "Jeffries was the most perfect specimen of the white man's superior physical manhood."⁶⁵ Even though Johnson won, some people felt as though this did not change anything and that white men were still superior to black men. This shows many people agreed masculinity was reserved for whites, and even some African-Americans internalized this belief. This is not just one newspaper's opinion. *The Baptist Vanguard* had the same ideas about white masculinity: "The prize fighter is not the standard of the man. Don't lose too much time with Jack Johnson's victory."⁶⁶ Along with internalizing the belief that masculinity was

⁶² "Race Riots in Dozen Cities Follow Johnson Fight Victory," *United Press*, (July 5, 1910).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 3.

⁶⁵ "Johnson Jeffries Fight. Expression of the Negro Press: Culled from the Leading Journals Throughout the Union." *The Freeman*, July 23, 1910.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

synonymous with whiteness, black America did not feel like Johnson was the best representative of their community. Johnson was a rich black man, who associated with rich white men and women. Black America rejected the idea that Johnson was the best representative or model for black masculinity.

In contrast, there were far more African-American newspapers that used this opportunity to claim equality to the white man. *The Zanesville Advocate* – a black newspaper from Ohio – alluded that the win proved black supremacy by declaring: “The victory of Jack Johnson over Jim Jeffries on last Fourth of July at Reno Nev., settles all questions as to the supremacy between the two men.”⁶⁷ This newspaper went as far as to say that Johnson’s victory actually proved that black men were superior to white men. This is an extremely significant quote because this was not a popular opinion before Johnson beat Jeffries. Another important quote came from the *Pensacola Brotherhood* – a newspaper from Florida – who said: “Jack Johnsons is yet champion of this world, and he is all Negro and a man for himself and for his race and for his country.”⁶⁸ This quote draws a direct link between blackness and masculinity, but also to claims of nationalism. This newspaper was saying that he is a man for black people, and more broadly, a man for all America. One other newspaper article from *The Washington Bee* said, “he has demonstrated...that the colored man is the equal to the white man in every particular...Johnson demonstrated superiority.”⁶⁹ This language is intentional because whites were supposed to be superior in all facets of life and African Americans were now coming out and saying a black man is superior to a white man.

There were many African Americans who were publicly stating that the races were equal and that Johnson beating Jeffries was proof of that. This type of language was exactly what white supremacists feared. Although there were still black newspapers that did not think the Johnson v. Jeffries fight changed the relationship between white supremacy and manhood, far more did. Black communities started to openly come out and say that Johnson is the epitome of manhood. This shows the shift in ideas about masculinity and race. African Americans were starting to feel like they could access mainstream ideals of masculinity.

Many of the newspaper articles by white Americans denounced Johnson and his manhood. The most interesting thing I noticed in these newspaper articles is that they often would not call him by his name. They

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “The Fight.”

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would call him “boy,” “the negro,” “darky,” and “little Africa.”⁷⁰ Many articles would call him by his name only once or twice so that the audience knew the subject matter. In this way, the media was denying Johnson his individuality. It makes the articles feel less personal and makes Johnson seem less of a person. White communities make Johnson seem like an object rather than a human. In doing this, they deprive him of his manhood.

One white newspaper article that was published the day before the Johnson v. Jeffries fight shows how fearful many white Americans were of the potential outcome of the fight. This article was published by the *Brooklyn Eagle* entitled “Better for the Negroes if Johnson is Beaten.” A white newspaper in the South, *The Atlanta Constitution*, republished it. This article was actively trying to convince the African-American community that they should want Jeffries to win. The article argued that the black race could not handle the win; they would “peril” because of “such elation.”⁷¹ It was a common belief that African-Americans were unable to handle their emotions in an appropriate way. The author claimed the white race would be able to handle the win gracefully and it would be better for both blacks and whites for Johnson to lose. This article is overtly racist and is not shy about admitting that Johnson losing would be best for white supremacy. This is a very important sentiment because it shows how worried many white people were about the collapse of white supremacy. The author goes on to argue that if white supremacy was not maintained, then both the white race and the “negroes” would fall, whites figuratively, but African Americans literally through violence.⁷² The author tried to convince African Americans that white supremacy was better for them too; it would be impossible to maintain white supremacy if white Americans admitted they were the only ones to benefit from it. Johnson threatened the exclusive claims white men had on masculinity. White men started to sense the shift in the relationship between race and masculinity and they used the media to try to stop its momentum. This article shows the social distress and fear that a black man could physically dominate a white man, but also threatened African Americans with violence if Johnson won.

There were far fewer articles published by white newspapers after the Johnson v. Jeffries fight. Many white men did not want the details of the fight to be showcased to the public. The papers that were published were either condemning the race riots or advocating for censorship of prizefighting. Censorship was a huge way white Americans tried to remedy

⁷⁰ “World Wide Agitation Against Fight Films,” *The Raton Daily Range* (July 6, 1910) Vol. 11. University of Arizona Microfilm.

⁷¹ The Brooklyn Eagle. “Better for the Negroes if Johnson is Beaten,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, (July 3, 1910), A3.

⁷² Ibid.

Johnson's win and dominance in the sport. Censorship of this event started immediately – the cameras at the event stopped filming right before Johnson knocked out Jeffries. Johnson recalled the crowd yelling, "'Turn off the cameras'" towards the end of the fight.⁷³ Johnson believed that he could have easily knocked Jeffries out cold if he was not stopped so soon. Even though Johnson won, Jeffries was never completely knocked out, and the repercussions might have even been worse if Johnson knocked Jeffries out cold. The film of the fight was supposed to be shown in theaters all over the nation. Even in 2017, when researching this paper, I could not find the film of the Johnson v. Jeffries fight. The documentary, *Unforgivable Blackness* – based on the book by Geoffrey C. Ward – has clips of the match.⁷⁴ In the documentary, you can see how the film cuts out right before the match ends. Jeffries starts wobbling and does not look like he will stand much longer, and the tape ends.

After Johnson won, many white newspapers came out saying the film and images from the event should be illegal. *The Raton Daily Range* posted a newspaper article just two days after the fight talking about "world-wide" anxiety about pugilistic films.⁷⁵ There are collections of articles from all over America, and one article from South Africa. It is a stretch to call this a "world-wide" agitation. Although it is interesting the two nations that provided articles were countries where white supremacy existed. The *Associated Press* published most of these articles, meaning they were published in more than one newspaper. All of them talked about how the exhibitions of prizefighting films are being banned from their states or that they should be banned.

The censorship of the Johnson v. Jeffries fight showed that the white American public was so fearful of the outcome of this fight, they were willing to infringe on American civil liberties such as freedom of the press. After Johnson beat Jeffries, "it was one of the worst waves of movie censorship in American history."⁷⁶ People were so terrified of a black man physically dominating a white man, they ended up censoring the event. The day after Johnson beat Jeffries, "many cities and towns put out official announcements that they would not allow the exhibition of the Johnson-Jeffries Fight Film."⁷⁷ Many mayors felt like they did not have the authority to ban the film and images of the fight, and others thought banning it was in

⁷³ Jack Johnson, "The End of Mr. J. J. Jeffries," in *My Life in Battles*, (London: Praeger, 2007), 110.

⁷⁴ *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. iTunes, Directed by Ken Burns. New York: PBS, 2005.

⁷⁵ "World Wide Agitation Against Fight Films," *The Raton Daily Range*. July 6, 1910.

⁷⁶ Barak Y Orbach, "The Johnson-Jeffries Fight and Censorship of Black Supremacy," *Journal of Law & Liberty* 5, no. 270, (2010): 270.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

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the best interest of the population.⁷⁸ There was one police chief in Baltimore who said that they have a large black population, and showing the film would cause problems between the races.⁷⁹ This man was very clear about the fear of black supremacy and the ideas it would spread. The images of Johnson beating Jeffries was proof that masculinity was losing its exclusivity to white men. The censorship of the fight shows the widespread fears of whites losing supremacy. Laws passed through all layers of our government – local, state, and federal – in order to keep these images out of the public.⁸⁰

The role of photography and movie reel film was extremely influential during this time. People would hear or read about the outcomes of sporting events, but pictures and movies gave people the ability to see it for themselves. Prizefighting was illegal in many cities and states in America, so people would pile into movie theaters a few days after a fight ended to watch the match. After the Johnson v. Jeffries fight, the film and one very threatening image was specifically banned. The picture that caused the most controversy showed Johnson standing over Jeffries after he knocked him to the ground and won in the fifteenth round.⁸¹ This picture is extremely important because since there is no video footage of Johnson taking down Jeffries, this picture is the only way people who were not there could visualize it. This picture was seen as threatening because it was a black man standing over a white man on the ground. This alludes to power dimensions. The picture clearly shows an African-American man physically dominating a white man. This image was seen as a huge threat to white supremacy. The fight in general caused a great deal of social distress because people read about it in newspapers and the majority of the country did not watch it happen. It is clear to see how this image could be seen a threatening to white supremacy and empowering to African Americans. Johnson – an African American – dominated the white supremacists' last Great White Hope. This left black people questioning if masculinity was inherently white. White Americans knew the picture and video of Johnson knocking Jeffries to the ground was too powerful and dangerous, which is why they tried so hard to censor it. Once the African-American community saw the picture of Johnson standing over Jeffries, it could not be unseen. The white community could ban these images, but the damage was already done.

Even though most people could not stand the idea of Johnson being the heavyweight champion of the world, his flamboyant extravagance and

⁷⁸ Ibid., 306.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 311.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 276.

⁸¹ Dana Photo Studio, "The Knockout" (July 4, 1910). Special Collections Department, University of Nevada, Reno.

relationships with white women infuriated not only white Americans, but blacks as well. Many African-Americans felt like he was betraying their race because he was not interested in colored women and white Americans believed white women were too pure for a black man. There were also many African-Americans who praised Johnson for being able to reach this version of masculinity and having an interracial relationship, despite the dangers. While Johnson was still married to Etta Duryea, he started seeing a new white woman. She was an eighteen-year-old prostitute named Lucille Cameron.⁸² After Duryea committed suicide in 1912, Johnson and Cameron started to date publicly. White Americans saw Cameron as a poor seduced virgin because white women were seen as pure, so they were usually given the benefit of the doubt. Cameron publicly claimed to be in love with Johnson and married him soon after Duryea died, but this did not change the public's views about their relationship. It was no secret that Johnson was extremely successful with white women, which made white men fear this was proof he was a superior man.

After Johnson started to publicly date Lucille Cameron, white men started to become more hostile towards him. Cameron's mother – Mrs. F. Cameron-Falconet – also saw her daughter as a poor seduced white woman who was tricked by Johnson. She claimed that Johnson kidnapped her daughter and had 'hypnotic powers' that were keeping her hostage. Mrs. F. Cameron-Falconet's claims caught public attention and really encouraged hostilities towards Johnson.⁸³ The white community lashed out. They hung effigies of Johnson from poles around the city. People would scream, "Lynch him! Lynch the nigger" when Johnson would show his face in public.⁸⁴ He received death threats by mail and telephone calls almost daily.⁸⁵ In Johnson's autobiography, he said during this time, "my car and my house were watched day and night. Every step I took I was dogged. I was hunted every minute of my life."⁸⁶ The hostility toward Johnson had reached an all-time high. The way that Johnson was acting was completely unacceptable because it entailed issues of interracial sex and the white community felt like it was their duty to take him down.

White men started to realize they were not going to be able to take down Johnson with censorship, slander, or a 'Great White Hope', so they developed a new idea. The public and Lucille's mother called upon the Bureau of Investigation to find something they could legally pin on Johnson.

⁸² Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 3.

⁸³ Geoffrey C. Ward, "The Accused," in *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 301.

⁸⁴ Bederman, "Remaking Manhood," 3.

⁸⁵ Ward, "The Accused," 306.

⁸⁶ Johnson, "Romances and Regrets," 84.

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Johnson was charged with violating the Mann Act in 1912. The Mann Act was a law that made it illegal for a man to transport a woman across state lines for the purpose of prostitution – also known as white slavery. The Bureau of Investigation had to dig far into his past to find a way to pin this crime on him. They found that Johnson once crossed state lines with a white mistress – Belle Schreiber – and bought her gifts.⁸⁷ They were able to get Schreiber to testify against him. In *Jack Johnson is a Dandy*, Johnson said, “I had committed no heinous crime and that because of my color, perhaps, and because of prejudices and jealousies I was being persecuted and prosecuted.”⁸⁸ Johnson denies any wrongdoing and historians today agree that he did not violate the Mann Act.⁸⁹ The government usually only used the Mann Act for what it was made for – prosecuting pimps for commercialized prostitution – but they made a special exception in order to take down Johnson.

When Johnson was standing trial for the Mann Act in 1913, the United Press Association wrote a letter to Booker T. Washington – a prominent leader in the African-American community – asking him his thoughts on Johnson. Washington said that he would neither condemn nor defend the allegations and that it was for the court to decide whether he was guilty or not. Washington tried to make sure to never publicly condemn Johnson too harshly. But he did write back saying: “[N]o one can do so much injury to the Negro race as the negro himself.”⁹⁰ Washington believed Johnson was hurting the African-American community throughout his career. He goes on to say that “what makes this situation a little worse in this case, is the fact that it was the white man, not the black man who has given Jack Johnson the kind of prominence he has enjoyed up to now.” Johnson was not successful because members of the African-American community lifted him up; he was successful because of white Americans. Washington believes that because of this, “he has been able to bring humiliation upon the whole race of which he is a member.”⁹¹ Washington was pointing out the irony that the white man-made Johnson famous and they were the same ones to tear him down. Throughout Johnson’s career, Washington warned him that he should not be so boastful.⁹²

Washington believed being passive and not aggressively opposing Jim Crow was the best way for African Americans to eventually gain

⁸⁷ Ward, “The Accused,” 313.

⁸⁸ Johnson, “I Take my Pen,” 23.

⁸⁹ Ward, “The Accused,” 313.

⁹⁰ Booker T. Washington quoted in David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, “Striving for Success,” in *The Uneven Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 79.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Wiggins and Miller “Striving for Success,” 78.

equality. He thought that cooperation with white Republicans was the only way African-Americans would ever gain equality. He did not appreciate Johnson's flamboyance and he thought that his inappropriate behavior "further stigmatized African-Americans everywhere."⁹³ Above all, his relationships with white women upset Washington. He believed it was completely inappropriate that Johnson cavorted, flaunted, and taunted white men with his interracial relationships.⁹⁴ Washington thought that Johnson's behavior was hurting the movement towards equality because he was embarrassing the whole race. The reason the white race retaliated so harshly was because they saw Johnson as a threat. If a white man acted the same as Johnson, he would have been praised for his superior manliness. Johnson being accused of violating the Mann Act may have been embarrassing at the time, but it helped many people see that the white community truly saw him as a threat.

One other prominent African American – W.E.B. Du Bois – had an outspoken opinion about Johnson. During much of Du Bois's career, he campaigned for interracial marriage laws in order to obtain equality, but he generally expected people to marry within their race. He thought that if African-American men were marrying white women, African-American women would be subjected to the "lust of white men."⁹⁵ Du Bois did not like that Johnson was having relationships with white women, but despite that, Du Bois praised Johnson. Unlike Washington, Du Bois commended Johnson for his refusal to conform to what the white man wanted him to be.⁹⁶ When talking about the Johnson v. Jeffries fight, Du Bois said he beat Jeffries "with little brutality, the utmost fairness and great good nature."⁹⁷ Du Bois even insinuates Johnson was not trying that hard to win, he was just so much better than Jeffries was. This shows Du Bois was trying to prove that Johnson has good character; he was fighting like a respectable man would. In the same excerpt, Du Bois said the only reason for the national uproar was because Johnson was a black man. Johnson was breaking down white supremacy, and Du Bois pointed out that the white community was only outraged at his character as a front. People would not be outraged if a white man was the heavyweight prizefighting champion, walked around showing off his wealth, and had various affairs with white women. There were some African Americans who did not see Johnson as an embarrassment like Washington did. Instead, they celebrated the fact that he refused to conform to what the white man wanted him to be.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ogbar, "Jack Johnson and Paul Robeson," 161.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 160.

⁹⁶ W.E.D. Du Bois quoted in Wiggin and Miller, "Striving for Success," 80.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 81.

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Johnson was eventually found guilty on June 4, 1913 and sentenced to a year and one day in prison with a \$1000 fine. Johnson pointed out the flawed logic of his conviction in *Jack Johnson is a Dandy* because the Mann Act was not in effect when he and Belle Schreiber were together, so it should not have been legally operative against him. Johnson goes on to say, “[T]he whole accusation was unfounded and I do not hesitate to say that fraudulent practices were adopted.”⁹⁸ Even though the Mann Act conviction had nothing to do with Lucille Cameron, she was put in jail for being a prostitute, but was released shortly after. After Johnson was sentenced, and in the hope of finally getting rid of him, government officials encouraged Johnson to flee the country, which he did.⁹⁹ This was a huge victory for white Americans. This was intended to serve as a warning for any African-American man who wanted to be like Johnson. A white man – Jess Willard – finally beat Johnson in a fight in Cuba in 1915. In Johnson’s autobiography, he claimed that his desire to get rid of the prejudices could be proved by “my willingness to permit Willard to acquire the heavy-weight championship of the world.”¹⁰⁰ Johnson tells all his readers he lost on purpose, but the match lasted twenty-six rounds with him knocked out cold. It is not likely that Johnson is telling the truth, but it is an interesting lie because he clearly still wants to be seen as the best. Regardless of whether Johnson wanted to lose or not, it did not make a difference; white Americans celebrated his demise. The picture of Johnson knocked out on the ground hung in bars all around the country for decades.¹⁰¹ This was a reminder that the white man would always be superior to an African-American man. Even though this hurt the morale of many people who praised Johnson for his masculinity, he already proved what a strong and resilient African-American man can accomplish in America.

Conclusion

Some scholars, like Geoffrey C. Ward, say the public would not have come after Johnson if he had not been so flamboyant and showed off his relationships with white women. I agree they may not have made as much of an effort to take him down, but I still think white men would have come after Johnson because he was such a threat to white masculinity. The reason the Great White Hope campaign started was because Johnson won the title of heavyweight champion of the world. So, despite his personal life, white men wanted to take him down because his physical ability to dominate the

⁹⁸ Johnson, “Romance and Regrets,” 83.

⁹⁹ Bederman, “Remaking Manhood,” 4.

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, “I Take my Pen,” 24.

¹⁰¹ Bederman, “Remaking Manhood,” 4.

white man was threatening. Ward points out that there were African-American boxers who came before and after Johnson, and people did not try nearly as hard to take them down. Jack Johnson was not the first African-American boxer, but he was the first black heavyweight champion of the world. He accessed an extremely important aspect of masculinity. What should white men do when blacks are supposed to be inherently non-masculine, while a black man is the best at the manliest sport? Johnson's overt display of manhood helped break down the traditional relationship between masculinity and white supremacy.

Johnson made white and black Americans realize that African-American men are able to access masculinity. Johnson was deliberate in his attempt to show the American public that he was manly. He was able to access almost every avenue of mainstream masculinity. The systematic oppression of African Americans under Jim Crow should have prevented this from ever being the case. Yet Johnson was physically large and strong, he was the heavyweight prizefighting champion of the world, he was economically stable and able to provide an extravagant lifestyle for himself and his wives, he was successful in courting white women, and he did all of this while boasting about his African-American heritage. Johnson represented what the black intelligentsia called the "New Negro," an image of the African-American elevated from slavery to a position of potential power.¹⁰² He was the "new picture of black masculinity."¹⁰³ White Americans reacted to Johnson's personal life and his successes in the way they did because he was so threatening. They started to see that Johnson was the epitome of masculinity while being African-American. Manhood was supposed to be exclusive to white men, and Johnson proved this was not the case. The reactions by African-Americans and white Americans show that Johnson was shaping and redefining masculinity and the role race played in it. Even though white Americans were able to get rid of Johnson by forcing him to leave the country, he disrupted the connection between race and masculinity forever.

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¹⁰² Ogbar, "Jack Johnson and Paul Robeson," 162.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

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Figures

Figure 1: "Please, Mr. Jeffries, Are You Going to Fight Mr. Johnson?" *The Chicago Sunday Tribune*. April 4, 1909, 4.



Figure 2: "Not So Bad", Los Angeles Times. July 7, 1910.



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