

‘White Hope’ and Black Power: The Subversion of Black Agency Through the Lens of ‘The Rumble in the Jungle’

By Aidan Keenan

The “Rumble in the Jungle” is often cited as a high watermark in the politicization of global sports. The heavyweight bout, hosted in Zaire in 1974, is often presented as a symbolic clash between integrationist ideas related to Booker T. Washington’s ideology of Black self improvement and Black militancy related to the Nation of Islam (NOI).¹ Unsurprisingly, the two individuals central to “The Rumble” were the heavyweight boxers, Muhammad Ali and George Foreman; although, President of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko and boxing promotor Don King also played pivotal roles in the politicization and perceptions of the fight. As such, this examination will lay a foundation for the discussion on American race relations that “The Rumble” highlighted by briefly surveying the career and political leanings of both Ali and Foreman. Furthermore, the transnational nature of “The Rumble” necessitates a brief survey of Zaire’s recent history. However, before situating “The Rumble” in its historical context, a deeper analysis of the historiography surrounding “The Rumble” will briefly analyze Ali’s identity as an anti-colonial figure, specifically highlighting the discrepancy between his anti-colonial rhetoric, his primitivist statements regarding Zaire and the blatant colourism he used against several opponents. In addition, an examination of Foreman’s agency and identity throughout the “Rumble in the Jungle” will support the argument that Ali and Foreman’s rivalry did not simply represent a two-dimensional fight between Black conservatism and Black extremism, but instead a microcosm of two distinct types of Black athletes, one intent on exercising his agency despite racist backlash—Ali—and one incapable of expressing a similar level

¹ For more on Washington’s ideals on integration and race relations, see: Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1901).

of agency—Foreman. In short, this analysis will refute earlier scholars’ characterization of “The Rumble in the Jungle” as a simple clash between two opposed political ideals, and instead propose that “The Rumble” was a clash between two Black men reacting to the American system of white domination in two distinct ways—one who was *subverted* and the other *subverting*.

Historiography

Since 1974 sportswriters and scholars alike have written about “The Rumble in the Jungle” extensively. Generally, scholarship on “The Rumble” focuses on either Foreman or Ali’s role exclusively, although some more recent scholars, like Lewis Erenberg, have examined the bout holistically.² Due to Ali’s political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, and death in 2016, modern scholarship often falls into the realm of hagiography rather than critical scholarly analysis. While a hugely influential figure and undeniable progressive anti-colonialist, analyses of Ali often only highlight the positive aspects of his life. Scholars tend to downplay Ali’s less savoury associations with the NOI—which include having NOI members intimidate his opponents—and the blatant colourism he employed against Joe Frazier and other opponents.³ Notably, in his article, “‘Rumble in the Jungle’: Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman in the Age of Global Spectacle,” Erenberg completely omits any mention of Ali’s use of primitivist characterizations of Africans leading up to “The Rumble.” However, Andrew Smith notes in his 2020 book *No Way but to Fight: George Foreman and the Business of Boxing*, that Ali made numerous references to cannibalism and made

² For Erenberg’s coverage see: Lewis A. Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle’: Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman in the Age of Global Spectacle,” *Journal of Sport History* 39, no. 1 (2012): 81-97; and Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Rumble in the Jungle: Muhammad Ali and George Foreman on the Global Stage*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021) although *The Rumble in the Jungle* was unavailable through my library and is not included in my bibliography or research.

³ For Ali’s use of colourism and racist caricatures see: Nathan Hadley, “Muhammad Ali does an impression of George Foreman and Joe Frazier,” YouTube Video, 0:23. September 18, 2023 and Paul Beston, *The Boxing Kings: When American Heavyweights Ruled the Ring*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 204; for the NOI’s intimidation of Ernie Terrel see: Andrew R. M. Smith, *No Way but to Fight: George Foreman and the Business of Boxing*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 169.

public assertions that the Zairians would stick pins in voodoo dolls of George Foreman.⁴ Furthermore, Grant Farred notes in his 1995 article “What’s My Name? Muhammad Ali, Postcolonial Pugilist,” that the title “The Rumble in the Jungle” was itself problematic,⁵ as the term “jungle” evokes primitivist ideas about central Africa being crude and pre-modern.⁶ Farred goes on to criticize Ali for not directly opposing these primitivist characterizations, which are especially tone deaf due to Ali’s earlier praise of African modernity after travelling the Muslim world.⁷ Importantly, criticism of Ali’s hagiography does not detract from the very real activism that he promoted—discussed below; however, it is necessary to critically examine both Ali and Foreman while foregrounding discrepancies in established narratives to provide an accurate examination of both boxers. Additionally, the above historiography has almost entirely excluded mentions of George Foreman, as in-depth analysis of his portrayal both in the early 1970s and in present-day scholarship is integral to the following arguments. In short, the existing body of literature on both Ali and Foreman is extensive, but often limited by the cultural legacy that both Ali and Foreman left outside of the boxing ring.

Muhammad Ali—A Transnational Athletic Activist

While Ali’s boxing prowess is undeniable, his political convictions are integral to the cultural impact of “The Rumble in the Jungle.” The most significant of these convictions were his conversion to the Nation of Islam in the early 1960s, his refusal to fight in the Vietnam War, his extensive anti-colonial rhetoric, and his transnational solidarity with people of colour. Each of the above points are integral to the public perception and symbolism that permeated “The Rumble.” As

⁴ Smith, *No Way but to Fight*, 169-70.

⁵ I will utilize “The Rumble in the Jungle,” despite its problematic nature simply because it is one of the most recognizable sporting events of the twentieth century, and any substitution would obscure the larger arguments I am presenting.

⁶ Grant Farred, “What’s My Name? Muhammad Ali, Postcolonial Pugilist,” *Dispositio* 20, no. 47 (1995): 50.

⁷ Farred, “What’s My Name?” 51.

such, the following is a short survey of the activist actions Ali took during the 1960s and 1970s leading up to “The Rumble.”

Perhaps the most public and notable political action taken by Ali is the origin of his own name. Born Cassius Clay, Ali renounced his “slave name” after defeating Sonny Liston and winning the Heavy Weight Boxing Championship of the World in 1964.⁸ In addition to rejecting his “slave name” Ali also publicly announced that he was a member of the NOI.⁹ Ali briefly adopted the common NOI practice of a first name followed by “X” dubbing himself “Cassius X;” however, Ali was given his full Muslim name, “Muhammad Ali,” by Elijah Muhammad shortly after winning the Heavyweight Title.¹⁰ Ali’s affiliation with the NOI immediately raised controversy in America and, according to Ali, prompted the U.S. government to reclassify his draft eligibility from 1-Y to 1-A, making him a prime candidate for enrollment into the U.S. Army.¹¹ While Ali was a controversial figure prior to changing his name, he noted in an interview published in *Umoja Sasa* that, “The outrage against my becoming a Muslim touched off a public upheaval that went far beyond the ranks of athletes and boxing promoters.”¹²

Another major point of political tension surrounding Ali was his refusal to fight in Vietnam and the subsequent legal battle he waged against the U.S. government. After Ali was reclassified and drafted into the U.S. Army he applied for conscientious objector status as a Black Muslim.¹³ However, the Justice Department’s principal attorney dismissed Ali’s request and denied

⁸ Andrew R. M. Smith, “‘Sculpting George Foreman’: A Soul Era Champion in the Golden Age of Black Heavyweights,” *Journal of Sport History* 40, no. 3 (2013): 462; Malachi D. Crawford, “Clear Victories and Missed Opportunities,” in *Black Muslims and the Law: Civil Liberties from Elijah Muhammad to Muhammad Ali*, 128-145, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 130-31.

⁹ Crawford, “Clear Victories and Missed Opportunities,” 131.

¹⁰ Smith, “‘Sculpting George Foreman,’” 462.

¹¹ Muhammad Ali, “The Black Scholar Interviews: Muhammad Ali,” *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 8 (1970): 32-3; Crawford, “Clear Victories and Missed Opportunities,” 132.

¹² Marion Walker, “Ali: Always the Greatest,” *Umoja Sasa* 5, no. 1 (1978): 14.

¹³ Crawford, “Clear Victories and Missed Opportunities,” 134-5.

him conscientious object status.¹⁴ Ali still refused the draft on religious grounds, and as a result he was found guilty of draft dodging in 1967, sentenced to five years in prison, fined 10,000 dollars and banned from boxing for three and a half years.¹⁵ Ali waged a drawn out legal battle against the U.S. government's decision, all while expressing explicit anti-colonial sentiments and solidarity with oppressed people of colour around the world.¹⁶ Consequently, Ali became an international symbol for the struggle against Western imperialism and an outspoken supporter of the anti-war movement.¹⁷ Essentially, after his return to boxing in 1971, Ali became a lightning rod for American moderates and conservatives to oppose as he represented: a non-western religion, Black militancy, Black supremacy, international coloured solidarity and anti-imperialism. More importantly, Ali was an example of a Black man in America reacting to a racist system by situating himself in a wider Black community and using his position of power—as an internationally loved celebrity—to take back a significant amount of personal agency while highlighting activist causes he supported.¹⁸

George Foreman—A Man with Many Faces

While Ali's legacy is tied directly to his political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, George Foreman's legacy is far less straightforward, due in part to his complete identity shift and second career as a heavyweight boxer in the 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁹ Sportswriters and scholars alike have had difficulty fitting Foreman into an easily described "box," particularly during the lead-up to "The Rumble in the Jungle." The best examination of Foreman's ever-changing identity is Andrew Smith's 2013 article "'Sculpting George Foreman': A Soul Era Champion in the Golden Age of

¹⁴ Crawford, "Clear Victories and Missed Opportunities," 134-5.

¹⁵ Crawford, "Clear Victories and Missed Opportunities," 137.

¹⁶ Ali, "The Black Scholar Interviews: Muhammad Ali," 34, 35.

¹⁷ Farred, "What's My Name?" 40, 44.

¹⁸ For more on Ali's international Black solidarity see: Farred, "What's My Name?" 44.

¹⁹ For exact dates on Foreman's two careers as a heavyweight boxer see: Gerald Early, "No Way but to Fight: George Foreman and the Business of Boxing," Review of *No Way but to Fight: George Foreman and the Business of Boxing*, by Andrew Smith. *Journal of African American History* 106, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 763.

Black Heavyweights,” which directly addresses the difficulties inherent in classifying Foreman’s political and personal philosophies. Generally, Foreman is flattened into the same “conservative Blackman” archetype that Ali and his promoters applied to almost all his championship opponents. As an example, Joe Frazier was also characterized by Ali and his promoters as a conservative foil to Ali’s extremism in 1971.²⁰ Before Frazier, both Ernie Terrel and Floyd Patterson were presented as the conservative Christian inverse of Ali’s Black Muslim militancy, a characterization that Ali encouraged by publicly announcing that he was not just fighting Patterson but was instead fighting the “establishment” that Patterson represented.²¹ As a result, the same “conservative Blackman” archetype was applied to George Foreman in the lead up to “The Rumble.” However, simply labelling Foreman as another in a long line of Black men serving as a “White Hope” flattens the complex identity that Foreman “sculpted” between winning a gold medal at the 1968 Olympics and “The Rumble” in 1974.²² As such, the following section will survey the actions that allowed for Foreman’s characterization as a “White Hope,” the identity that Foreman tried to create following 1968, and how those identities reflect even more malicious manifestations of white supremacy than the “White Hope” narrative.

Before becoming a boxer Foreman grew up in Houston’s “Bloody” Fifth Ward, where he lived in immense poverty and quickly became a violent criminal.²³ However, Foreman joined the U.S. Job Corps, which was a part of President Lindon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, intended to provide jobs and training to impoverished Americans like Foreman.²⁴ Shortly after joining the Job Corps, Foreman became an amateur boxer and joined the U.S. Olympic boxing team, winning a gold medal at the 1968 Olympics.²⁵ After utilizing the Job Corps, a federal program, to rise from abject

²⁰ Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 204.

²¹ Farred, “What’s My Name?” 39.

²² Smith, ““Sculpting George Foreman,”” 457.

²³ Smith, ““Sculpting George Foreman,”” 456; Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 213.

²⁴ Smith, *No Way but to Fight*, 32-3.

²⁵ Smith, ““Sculpting George Foreman,”” 456-7.

poverty to world-wide recognition as an Olympic athlete, Foreman had essentially lived the “American dream.” As such, it is unsurprising that, after defeating a Soviet boxer for the gold medal, Foreman waved a small American flag in the ring to declare his allegiance to a country that had, for all intents and purposes, plucked him from the depths of poverty.²⁶ However, the naivety of Foreman’s patriotic stunt was highlighted by Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ controversial Black Power salute on the Olympic podium for the 200 meter sprint.²⁷ Importantly, Foreman’s patriotic stunt and unabashed support of the U.S. federal government made him an easy target for white propagandists to appropriate, hoping to encourage moderate Black integrationist ideals while downplaying the defiance that Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s epitomized.

However, Foreman did not remain the “all American” poster child of a Booker T. Washington-esque integrationism indefinitely.²⁸ Certainly, Foreman maintained the integrationist desire to be an “American athlete” not a “Black athlete,” but he also realized that the growing television age required both athletic ability and an entertaining persona.²⁹ As a result, Foreman looked outward for inspiration. Ironically, Foreman initially copied Ali’s rhyming and poetic language, but he later adopted a more brooding, violent demeanour evocative of the “Black badman” trope popular in Blaxploitation cinema.³⁰ Foreman’s sullen yet stylish persona was inspired by his desire to present a “Black anti-hero” façade that would garner him the reverence required for a shot at the Heavy Weight Championship—then held by Joe Frazier after Ali’s aforementioned ban.³¹

²⁶ Smith, ““Sculpting George Foreman,”” 457; Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle,’” 88.

²⁷ Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 214.

²⁸ Although Booker T. Washington was not explicitly cited in any of the sources I read, the ideals he espouses in his *Up From Slavery* and his “Atlanta Exposition Address,” are closely reflected in Foreman’s early career (i.e. hard work and belief in the American system can result in individual success for a Black man), see: Washington, *Up From Slavery*, Chapter 14.

²⁹ For Foreman’s integrationism see: Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 214; for the TV culture of the later 1960s and early 1970s see: Smith, ““Sculpting George Foreman,”” 459, and Gregory Kaliss “Ali–Frazier 1: Black Gladiators, White Promoters, and the Economics of Big-Time Boxing,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34, no. 11 (July 2017): 1005.

³⁰ Smith, ““Sculpting George Foreman,”” 457, 461; Joshua Wright, “Black Outlaws and the Struggle for Empowerment in Blaxploitation Cinema,” *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 2, no. 2 (2014): 65.

³¹ Smith, ““Sculpting George Foreman,”” 460-2, 466.

Importantly, Foreman's new "Black anti-hero" persona presents a fascinating microcosm of Black identity and white supremacy in the 1970s. Essentially, Foreman's identity as a Black man was controlled by white structures from his time in the Job Corps until "The Rumble in the Jungle" in 1974. During Foreman's "patriot era" his identity was defined by two things: his ability to enact violence—i.e. boxing—and his loyalty to the U.S. federal government. By examining each part of that identity in turn, the white supremacist control over Foreman's identity is clear. First, during the 1960s, boxing was almost entirely controlled by white Americans at an administrative and promotional level.³² Similarly, the U.S. federal government was entirely controlled by white men. Therefore, both key aspects of Foreman's identity were controlled, created, and defined by white America. However, when Foreman attempted to create his own identity, he was still implicitly controlled by white society. As Joshua Wright highlights in "Black Outlaws and the Struggle for Empowerment in Blaxploitation Cinema," the "Black outlaw" and later "Black badman" archetypes were created by white literature to present Black men who, while sympathetic, were incapable of being true "heroes" because of their race and position in society.³³ During the 1970s, white filmmakers then used the aesthetics of Soul culture to create Blaxploitation cinema that sensationalized ghettos, Black music, violence, promiscuity and Black vengeance against white characters to profit off of low income Black communities.³⁴ Therefore, Foreman's open embrace of the "Black anti-hero" aesthetic was another symbolic, and in some ways very tangible, example of his inability to create an identity separate from the white power structure of America.

³² Kaliss "Ali-Frazier 1," 1006.

³³ Wright, "Black Outlaws," 64-5.

³⁴ Wright, "Black Outlaws," 66.

The Rumble—Black Boxers, in a Black Country, Organized by Black People

After returning to boxing in 1970, Ali had a single trajectory: regaining the Heavyweight Championship that was taken from him.³⁵ Similarly, after Foreman defeated Frazier in two rounds and won the Heavyweight Title, he lived in the shadow of Ali who had never technically “lost” the title in a boxing match.³⁶ Consequently, a confrontation between Ali and Foreman was unavoidable as the 1970s wore on. However, two individuals seized the potential of an Ali-Foreman title match and transformed the fight into a transnational symbol of Black Power and independence: Don King and Mobutu Sese Seko. As such, the following will briefly outline Mobutu’s rise to power in Zaire. Following the survey of Zairian independence, the promotional and logistic circumstances of “The Rumble in the Jungle” will provide the context needed to finally contrast Ali’s Black militant autonomy against Foreman’s limited agency within a white American system.

Recognizing the potential for large profits and a political statement, Don King began planning a Heavyweight Title match between Ali and Foreman in the newly independent Zaire.³⁷ After centuries of exploitation as a Belgian colony, the Congo achieved independence in 1960 and elected Patrice Lumumba, a relatively progressive socialist leaning Prime Minister.³⁸ However, fearing Communist infiltration into central Africa, the U.S. and Belgian governments sponsored a military coup that killed Lumumba and left Joseph Désiré Mobutu the de facto leader of the country.³⁹ After consolidating power in the early 1970s Mobutu renamed the Congo “Zaire” after similarly discarding his own “Christian name” for the new monicker: Mobutu Sese Seko Kuru Ngbendu Wa Za Banga, or “the all powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and will to win,

³⁵ Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle,’” 91.

³⁶ Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle,’” 91; Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 214.

³⁷ Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle,’” 89-90; Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 217.

³⁸ Mel McNulty, “The Collapse of Zaïre: Implosion, Revolution or External Sabotage?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (1999): 57-8.

³⁹ McNulty, “The Collapse of Zaïre,” 58; Smith, *No Way but to Fight*, 174.

goes from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, Mobutu centralized all industry in the resource rich Zaire, allowing him to siphon off an estimated five billion dollars into his own personal fortune.⁴¹ Despite the blatant corruption and Western influence, “The Rumble in the Jungle’s” location in Africa, featuring two Black fighters, and organized by a Black promoter—Don King—held immense symbolic value. First, holding the largest sporting event in history, up until that point, brought Zaire into the global spotlight and promoted an otherwise forgotten corner of an already marginalized Africa.⁴² Second, it signalled a growing awareness of a deeper Black history in America connected to African history, which flew in the face of white supremacist attempts to destroy Black American heritage.⁴³

Furthermore, in the five months leading up to “The Rumble in the Jungle” Ali and Don King staged a masterful promotional campaign that utilized Ali’s established trope of positioning himself as an anti-establishment “people’s hero” opposed by a symbol of the *white* “establishment.” For his part, Don King positioned “The Rumble” as a symbol of Black Power, a narrative expanded by Mobutu who proclaimed that “black power is sought everywhere in the world, but it is realized here in Zaire.”⁴⁴ The backdrop of Black Power perfectly framed Ali and Foreman’s rivalry. Like all of the Black boxers who challenged Ali’s title before, Foreman was described as a “White Hope” who would defeat Ali for the sake of white American moderates.⁴⁵ In fact, Ali’s characterization of Foreman as a symbol of white oppression was so effective that the native Zairians assumed Foreman was white until he stepped off the plane in Zaire.⁴⁶ Compounding Foreman’s characterization as a “White Hope” was Foreman’s complete detachment from the local Zairian

⁴⁰ Smith, *No Way but to Fight*, 175.

⁴¹ Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 216; McNulty, “The Collapse of Zaire,” 60.

⁴² For more on the West’s ignorance of Zaire see: Smith, *No Way but to Fight*, 172

⁴³ Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle,’” 94-5.

⁴⁴ Smith, *No Way but to Fight*, 173.

⁴⁵ Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle,’” 92.

⁴⁶ Erenberg, “‘Rumble in the Jungle,’” 92.

people, which gave a prophetic weight to Ali's earlier assertions that: "There ain't no 'Foremans' in Africa ... You're coming to my country now," implying that Foreman was disconnected from his identity as a Black man.⁴⁷ Finally, while it is undeniable that Ali believed in the narrative he presented, he also made an insightful comment about his various rivalries on talk-show appearances with Joe Frazier; when asked "what's the point of insulting each other?" Ali responded: "What's the point ...? [Madison Square Garden] is sold out, that's why!"⁴⁸

While Foreman did not necessarily play into Ali's trope, he certainly did not explicitly deny his role as a "White Hope." Again, Foreman completely removed himself from the local Zairian people and country, spending essentially his entire stay in a training camp protected by armed guards and barbed wire.⁴⁹ Perhaps an even more damning symbol of Foreman's complete apathy for the Zairian people was the fact that his guide in the country was a Belgian—a blatant symbol of colonial oppression.⁵⁰ However, it is worth noting that Foreman's silence was likely an extreme manifestation of his "Black anti-hero" persona, and not necessarily a wholehearted acceptance of a "White Hope" identity. Ultimately, whether Foreman agreed with his characterization as a "White Hope" or not, his silence and brooding persona fed directly into Ali and King's politicization of "The Rumble in the Jungle," and created not only a sports spectacle but a clash of opposed ideals within the Black community: Black militancy and Islam against Black conservatism and Christianity.

⁴⁷ Smith, *No Way but to Fight*, 169-70.

⁴⁸ MuhammadAli_GOAT, "Rare - Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier appear on same talk show - Part 1," YouTube Video, 20:33, March 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgbFj-z8eG8>

⁴⁹ Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 217.

⁵⁰ Erenberg, "'Rumble in the Jungle,'" 92.

The Rumble—Results!

In the end, Ali defeated Foreman on the 30th of October, 1974, knocking him unconscious in the eighth round.⁵¹ While the fight itself is notable for Ali's pioneering of the "rope-a-dope" technique, which entails leaning against the ropes to absorb the force of your opponent's punches to wait for an opportunity to counter punch, this analysis is centered on the outcome and racist structures the match highlighted.⁵² This analysis has presented the accepted political narrative attached to "The Rumble in the Jungle"—i.e. Black conservatism versus Black militancy—but the following will propose an underrepresented narrative that contrasts the level of agency expressed by Ali and Foreman leading up to "The Rumble."

Ali's almost complete control of "The Rumble in the Jungle's" narrative is the most obvious example of his heightened level of agency in an otherwise white supremacist system. Despite being a Black man in America during a period when Black athletes generally focused on their careers rather than activism, Ali controlled his identity and the discussions surrounding his identity to an unprecedented degree.⁵³ While clearly Ali could not act on his political ideology with impunity, best exemplified by his conviction for draft dodging and subsequent ban from boxing, he still stood for his ideals and accepted the consequences of those stands, unflinching.⁵⁴ Obviously, Ali's activism was assisted and guided by the NOI which complicates a narrative of complete autonomy, but when compared to Foreman and contemporary Black athletes, Ali exercised an unprecedented amount of Black agency within a white dominated system. While asserting that Ali was an influential Black activist who balked at authority is not a novel statement, "The Rumble in the Jungle" highlights his agency unlike any other fight, due in part to its geographic and political

⁵¹ Classic Sports Channel, "The Rumble In The Jungle: Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman (Full Fight, 30th October 1974)," YouTube Video, 33:00, July 10, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAXTvi2W6JA>.

⁵² Beston, *The Boxing Kings*, 220.

⁵³ Joshua Wright, "Be Like Mike?: The Black Athlete's Dilemma," *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 4, no. 2 (2016): 5.

⁵⁴ Erenberg, "'Rumble in the Jungle,'" 93.

position, but more so because Ali's agency was directly contrasted against Foreman's attempt at similar agency.

While Ali's direct opposition to white supremacist power structures undeniably highlights those structures, Foreman's inability to achieve—or disinterest in—a similar level of autonomy implicitly highlights the insidious and subversive nature of white supremacy in America. The poverty that Foreman was raised in clearly socially conditioned him to perceive a federal program that provided the bare minimum to impoverished people—the Job Corps—as an act of service worth his loyalty. Ali alludes to this system in a 1970 interview with *The Black Scholar*, stating,

See, black people were mentally imprisoned. If a baby is born in prison, never knew his mother, never knew his father, never knew freedom. [*sic*] Never knew justice, never knew equality. [*sic*] And the jailer or the warden gives him a bone or two, a piece of bread. He'll start saying, 'Oh, he's so good to me.'⁵⁵

Clearly, Foreman was a victim of conditioning similar to that which Ali describes. In fact, Foreman was so manipulated by these systems that even after he distanced himself from his patriotic persona he adopted *another* manipulated Black identity: the “Black anti-hero.” As discussed above, the “Black anti-hero” was derivative of the “Black badman,” which was an exploitative caricature created by white authors to portray a sympathetic Black character that still conformed to the limits of a white dominated society.⁵⁶ Essentially, Foreman was such a victim of white supremacist manipulation that even the “Black” identity he chose was one co-opted and utilized by white America to exploit Black people. Furthermore, despite Foreman adopting a persona steeped in the aesthetics of Soul culture, the manipulation of that identity by white America and his earlier patriotic persona allowed Ali to exercise his own agency to shoe-horn Foreman into a nearly clichéd trope—the Black conservative. While it is obviously problematic to imply that a poor Black person

⁵⁵ Ali, “The Black Scholar Interviews: Muhammad Ali,” 34-5.

⁵⁶ Wright, “Black Outlaws,” 65.

has no agency in America, Foreman is a prime example of the ways that the white supremacist system subverts attempts at Black agency to maintain white dominance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, “The Rumble in the Jungle” serves as a microcosm for the subversive ways that a white supremacist system attempts to control expressions of Black agency. “The Rumble” also foregrounded discussions of race in the early 1970s and the conflicts within the post-Civil Rights Movement Black community. In particular, Ali and Don King’s expert politicization positioned “The Rumble” as a clash between Black moderate integrationism and more radical Black Power related ideologies. On a far larger scale, “The Rumble” also promoted Zaire to the Western world, which was largely ignorant of its existence—particularly after Mobutu changed its name from “Congo”—and provided a globally recognizable piece of media that rivals the other world famous piece of media depicting the area, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Finally, “The Rumble” was a stupendous boxing match that pitted two of the greatest American heavyweights of all time against each other in an emotional and politically contentious battle.

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