

clears away, and when the din of mingled cheers and groans has died away in the atmosphere, there will be deep mourning throughout the domains of Uncle Sam over Jeffries' inability to return the pugilistic sceptre to the Caucasian race."

As Farr indicates, the odds were so strongly against a Negro's becoming world champion during the first two decades of the twentieth century that Johnson had been ignored as a title contender until he was almost too old—30. And afterward, opposition was so strong that he was given little opportunity to defend the championship and profit from it. Yet Nat Fleischer, today's top boxing authority, has named Johnson best of all the heavyweight champions.

Once on top, Johnson immediately began his descent. He undoubtedly could have extended his years as champion if he had shown more humility. But Johnson not only crossed the color line; he flaunted his position after doing so. He lived expensively and noisily ("Johnson was a generous patron of commercialized vice"); he ignored taboos (three wives and all white). He was unpredictable and antagonistic and anti-social. How could the majority tolerate a hero who had polished his ring style while in jail, who would humiliate an opponent by calling punches before landing them, who ran a notorious night club—a Negro who took a mile when given a few inches?

Farr tells us that the man who lost the title to Johnson—Tommy Burns—once summed up the issue in this way: "Race prejudice was rampant in my mind. The idea of a black man challenging me was beyond enduring. Hatred made me tense. It wasn't Johnson who beat Tommy Burns but Tommy Burns who beat himself."

Johnson was sent into headlong flight by the social reformers who assaulted brothels, saloons, gambling parlors and boxing rings alike. In a sense, he was a victim of the same impulse that led to prohibition. He was arrested and fined several times for speeding. His wife committed suicide. He was convicted for a violation of the Mann Act, the unfortunate result of an affair with a 19-year-old white girl (eventually to become his wife). The champion finally fled the United States, becoming the world's most notorious fugitive. Johnson couldn't be hurt in the boxing ring, but he was mortally wounded by public reaction. And this reaction included his own people. Booker T. Washing-

ton, Negro spokesman at that time, wrote the epitaph for Johnson's career: "Jack Johnson has harmed rather than helped the race. I wish to say emphatically that his actions do not meet with my approval, and I'm sure they do not meet with the approval of the colored race."

Europe in the 1910s offered no sanctuary. Johnson was ordered out of Russia in 1914. He was compelled to leave Germany after a street fight. He escaped from France ahead of the invasion. He was expelled from England for what was termed improper conduct. By the age of 37, he was broke, no longer champion—it was Jess Willard who dethroned him in 1915—and a man without a country. He wrestled. In Spain and Mexico he became a matador. He returned to vaudeville with a routine of song and dance, some chatter and a demonstration of basic boxing moves.

Finally, in 1920, Johnson surrendered to U. S. authorities and served a year in Leavenworth. He then lived out twenty-five more years as an ex-champion who lectured on morality and health, who put on boxing exhibitions until he was 68, who appeared often as a side-show attraction in circuses. He finally died in an

automobile accident, a victim, as Farr describes it, of an "inborn genius for fast movement."

Johnson lived long enough, however, to see Negroes dominate the heavyweight championship. Twenty-two years after he had lost the title, it went to Joe Louis, and after Louis came seven champions, five of them Negroes. The quiet, acceptable ones were Ezzard Charles, Jersey Joe Walcott and Floyd Patterson. More recently, Sonny Liston and Cassius Clay have chosen to follow the Johnson style.

Farr's book is as much social history as biography. It chronicles quite fully the rise of Johnson and the championship years, but is weakest when tracing his fall; Farr dismisses Johnson's life after 1920 quickly and disinterestedly. Perhaps Farr found the pattern of disintegration too familiar, too typical of athletic heroes, and therefore not worthy of intensive treatment. He leaves us, nevertheless, with a burning image of a tragic character trapped between his own temperament and an inimical society.

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## In The Ring (2)

### LeRoi Jones

Sonny Liston was the big black Negro in every white man's hallway, waiting to do him in, deal him under, for all the hurts white men have been able to inflict on his world. Sonny Liston was "the huge Negro," the "bad nigger," a heavy-faced replica of every whipped-up woogie in the world. He was the underdeveloped have-not (politically naive) backward country, the subject people, finally here to collect his pound of flesh.

The mock contest between Liston and Patterson was a "brushfire" limited war, Neo-Colonial policy to confuse the issue. Patterson was to represent the fruit of the missionary ethic; he had found God, reversed his underprivileged (uncontrolled) violence, and turned it to work for the democratic liberal imperialist state. The tardy black Horatio Alger offering the glad hand of integration to welcome 20 million into the lunatic asylum of white America.

In this context, Liston the unreformed, Liston the vulgar, Liston the

violent, comes on as the straightup Heavy (who still had to make some gesture at the Christian ethic, like the quick trip to the Denver priest before the match, to see if somehow the chief white could turn him into a regular fella). "They" painted Liston Black. They painted Patterson White. And that was the simple conflict. Which way would the black man go? This question traveled on all levels through the society, if anyone remembers. Pollsters wanted the colored man in the street's opinion. "Sir, who do you *hope* comes out on top in this fight?" A lot of Negroes said Liston. A lot of Negroes said Patterson. That old hope come back on you, that somehow this is my country, and ought'n I be allowed to live in it, I mean, to make it. From the bottom to the top? Only the poorest black men have never fallen at least temporarily for the success story. And the poor whites still fall hard.

A white cab driver was turning to see me in his rear-view mirror; he said,



"You know that Liston has got the biggest hands of any boxer to come in the ring. You know his arms are 6 feet long. I mean 6 feet long each. He's like an animal. Jesus! He shouldn't even be allowed to fight normal guys." That was the word from that vector of polite society.

The match meant most to the Liberal Missionaries. It was a chance to test their handiwork against this frightening brute. So a thin-willed lower-middle-class American was led to beatings just short of actual slaughter. Twice. And each time Patterson fell, a vision came to me of the whole colonial West crumbling in some sinister silence, like the across-the-tracks House of Usher.

But, dig it, there is no white man in the world who wanted to fight Sonny Liston himself. So the Orwell Synapse takes over. What we cannot gain by experience, we will gain by *inperience*, the positing of a fantasy "event" for what is actually the case. History is changed to correspond with what we all know reality *should* be, a maneuver common to every totalitarian order. The December, 1963 issue of *Esquire* fantasizes with an essay entitled "The Greatest Fights of the Century." Liston beats Marciano, "the most brutal first round ever seen," and he also beats Louis . . . "Louis flew back five feet, fell, and rolled on his face." Having set this up, Dempsey comes marching in like drunk Ward Bond whistling a cavalry tune, to straighten everything out. It is a little hectic (like in *The Spoilers* or when John Wayne is facing a really brave Indian) but the end is never in doubt. As the barbarian climbs through that chink in the wall, IBM! ". . . Liston turned and fell heavily to the floor, his right glove under his face." In the posture of sleep, like a gypsy in the desert, a *fellaheen*. "At six, he rolled over and, back now in his corner, Dempsey smiled." The muscular Neyland-Smith.

See the white man dream? Which is where the whole race has gone: to the slowest. But the mass media make the dream a communal fulfillment, so that now each man who had and has the dream in solitary can share and grow bigger at its concrete illustration. It's like the European painters when they began to paint Arab/Moorish/Semitic experience in medieval middle-European contexts. Christ is then a blond all dressed up in desert clothes but still looking like Jeffrey Hunter. Another smart Germanic type made

good. (Practically speaking, for instance, if God were not white, how could He get permission from the white man to make him? If, say, God were black, there would have to be some white man somewhere to tell him what to do, right?)

So now, forget that all this is dream and wish fulfillment, and think of it as a blatant social gesture. This is how the synapse works. We erase the mad-bad big black bad guy by going back in time to get him in a dream; the drop to the canvas takes nearly the whole of the dream, it is so slow and gravityless; you can replay it over and over again — ". . . heavily to the floor, his right glove under his face." "Liston vs. Dempsey. . . . Dempsey, K.O., 1:44 of the ninth."

The champ is the big strong likable immigrant who has always done America's chores. He's glad to oblige. We always get to the bad niggers . . . either kill 'em or drive 'em out of the country. Jack Johnson, Henry Highland Garnet, Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Robert Williams, Richard Wright, Sidney Bechet, Josephine Baker, Beauford Deloney, Chester Himes, so many others. The black neurotic beauties trailing dumbly through the "equal" streets of hopeless European cities. All the unclaimed fugitive corpses.

That leaves us with Cassius X. Back in the days when he was still Clay it was easy to see him as a toy manufactured by the Special Products Division of Madison Avenue. Now I think of him as merely a terribly stretched out young man with problems one hoped would have waited at least for him to reach full manhood. Clay is not a fake, and even his blustering and playground poetry are valid; they demonstrate that a new and more complicated generation has moved on to the scene. And in this last sense Clay is definitely my man. However, his choice of Elijah Muhammad over Malcolm X (if indeed such is the case) means that he is still a "homeboy," embracing the folksy vector straight out of the hard spiritualism of poor Negro aspiration. Cassius is right now just angry rather than intellectually (socio-politically) motivated.

The Liston-Clay fight seemed to be on the up and up to me. Liston was way out of shape, expecting young X to be just another weakfaced American. But Cassius can box, and even Liston in shape might have trouble spearing the very quick X. Sonny's risking jail now, where most of the white world would have him (shades

of Jack Johnson!) and the possibility of a return match between Clay and Liston grows each day more remote.

But whoever has the heavyweight championship now, or in the future, it is an even remoter possibility that it will be Jack Dempsey, or for that matter any of his Irish progeny. The Dempseys in America, having graduated from the immigrant-newcomer class, don't have to knock heads for a living except as honest patrolmen; their new roles as just Anybody make them as weak and unfit for the task of defeating any of the black heavyweights as any other white Americans, even the honorary kind like Floyd Patterson.

So what kind of men are these who practice such deception on themselves? Oh, they are simply Americans, and some years from now, perhaps there will be this short addition: "you remember them, don't you?"

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## The 1,000

*THE BLACK JEWS OF HARLEM.* By Howard Brotz. The Free Press. 144 pp. \$4.50.

Alan Kohlman

Sympathy for professors prodded to "publish or perish" must yield to upholding the comparatively high level of sociological analysis of the Negro search for identity and equality; this book is a disjointed, disappointing, and in some ways a deplorably dated work.

Less than half of it is devoted to its alleged subject. Brotz follows Frazer in tracing the use of the Israelite experience in bondage by Negro slaves; and he links this with even older European speculations concerning the ten lost tribes of Israel. He does not establish any direct connection between these philo-Biblical sources and the actual appearance of "Black Jews" around 1915. Briefly noting the rise and fall of eight such cults, he concentrates on the "Commandment Keepers Congregation of the Living God," also known as the "Royal Order of Ethiopian Hebrews." In contrast to the mass base of the Black Muslims, this group of Black Jews numbers only 1,000. "The Black Jews are working people. Of the women, who constitute between 60 and