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### Changes and Challenges to White Manhood

In his study of *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, John Mack Faragher argues that “the differences of sex are the starting place for gender roles: each person is given a polar label, either man or woman.”<sup>1</sup> While this may be true in many instances, particularly on the frontier where issues of race and class are less prominent, masculinity has not always been assigned based on a person’s sex. In the early nineteenth century the middle class began to develop, thus allowing for a social construction of masculinity in terms of class. During this century, gentility, respectability, control, and independence helped to create the self-made man. Following the Civil War economic depressions and labor competition with immigrants lessened the effects of class on white notions of masculinity. In addition, the black middle class began to develop and experienced its own conceptualization of masculinity through a “better man” mentality. As such, white notions of masculinity began to change based on ideas of racial domination. Racial constructions of masculinity were also influenced by political, social, imperial, and physical characteristics that led to an entirely “new white man” ideal. Despite these efforts in linking racial dominance to male dominance, some black men were able to challenge white manhood, as evidenced in the story of Jack Johnson, 1910’s world heavyweight boxing champion. An analysis of how race influenced constructions of masculinity, along with Johnson’s experience, shows that no social construction, including one regarding gender, is indestructible.

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<sup>1</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 48.

Transformations in masculinity were first documented in detail by E. Anthony Rotundo in *American Manhood*. According to Rotundo, one of the causes in the masculine revolution of the latter part of the nineteenth century was man's desire to regain his "animal instincts." This shift from "manliness" to "primitive masculinity" led men to turn toward nature in order to express their "natural" passions in outdoor "savage" activities, including hunting, fishing and camping. During this time, clubs and lodges became an escape for men to free themselves from the repressions of civilization and to regain "their independence, their courage, [and] their drive for mastery." This even led to a paradox on the racial level, as "performances turned affluent white men into black-face minstrels, tribesmen of 'Darkest Africa,' and 'cannibal choruses.'"<sup>2</sup> In addition, ideas about the perfect male body also changed from an admiration of "lean and wiry" figures such as John Sullivan's to the "physical bulk and well-defined muscles" of Eugene Sandow.<sup>3</sup> This embracement of the "muscular" and "savage" man did not lead white men, however, to relinquish their claims to racial superiority. In her study on *Gender and Jim Crow*, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore argues that because "Black Best Men" were threatening white supremacy, "young white Democrats searched for ways to exclude African Americans from politics and power once and for all." This new generation sought and found their connection between manhood and white supremacy in the language and rhetoric of empire.<sup>4</sup>

Rudyard Kipling's ideas in "The White Man's Burden" as well as other poems confirmed that white men maintained the ability for self-government, even while embracing "savage" characteristics. As Gilmore explains, "as North Carolina's New White Men read Kipling, they fancied that they saw themselves between the lines. If they liked Kipling's description of darker

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<sup>2</sup> E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 227, 232 & 228.

<sup>3</sup> Chiou-Ling Yeh, "Race & Gender" (lecture, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, March 9, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 63.

men,” she continues, “they loved his model of manhood illustrating ideals of self-restraint for a new generation of southern white men.”<sup>5</sup> Imperial rhetoric explained how white men could embrace their “natural” qualities because of their added ability of self-control. Linking racialized manhood to civilization and imperialism led to justifications by Theodore Roosevelt and William McKinley in America’s involvement overseas, including in the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War. In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt lauded white men’s “great virile virtues – the virtues of courage, energy, and daring; the virtues which beseem a masterful race – a race fit to fell the forests, to build roads, to found commonwealths, to conquer continents, to overthrow armed enemies.”<sup>6</sup> In Roosevelt’s mind, only the white man’s race was capable of these virtues and achievements. As Anglo-Saxon’s argued for the inability of the “other” to self-govern in these far reaches across the ocean, the same argument would influence domestic politics.

During Reconstruction, African Americans who had served in the thousands during the war now sought their “manhood rights.” The “Black Best Man” sought to vote, hold electoral office, serve on juries, and contribute to society any which way he could. This model of black masculinity, according to Gilmore, grew in response to white manipulations against black power through a “criteria to exclude most African Americans.”<sup>7</sup> In order to achieve his “manhood rights,” a black man often needed to mirror his own manliness and masculinity in many ways that mirrored white manhood. According to Martin Anthony Summers, “as he struggles with his identity and his future in American society, he consistently measures himself against middle-class white men.” Summers also explains how blacks did not always emulate white manhood,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, quoted in Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, xii.

<sup>7</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow*, 62-63.

however, at times “articulating fundamentally different notions of masculinity.”<sup>8</sup> Regardless of how blacks shaped their own manliness and masculinity, whites continued to see their presence as politically threatening and justified their exclusion through social reinterpretations of black men.

In order to justify Jim Crow laws, blacks were depicted as beastlike and violent creatures, dangerous because they lacked the self-control inherited by “new white men.” Whereas once blacks were depicted as satisfied slaves, they were now seen as rapists and brutes. Social notions of black inferiority led to judicial justifications of segregation, such as the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The acceptance that blacks were “separate but equal” included not only racial interpretations but gender constructs as well. Not only were black men excluded from white masculinity, they were placed below black women who were socially seen by whites as unnatural matriarchs over their men and families. “Ironically,” as Gilmore explains, “as black men were forced from the political, the political underwent a redefinition, opening new space for black women.” According to Gilmore, interracial efforts to gain woman’s suffrage inevitably challenged racial constructions to the point that brought black men gradually back into the political process.<sup>9</sup>

The story of Jack Johnson, however, illustrates how black men continued to challenge white masculinity and racial superiority. By the turn of the twentieth century, white masculinity became embodied in the public discourse of competitive sports.<sup>10</sup> Commonly absent from these public spectacles, however, were interracial competitions, until Jim Jeffries agreed to a boxing match with Jack Johnson. “The event was publicized internationally, and Whites all over the

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Anthony Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class & the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 209 & 9.

<sup>9</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender & Jim Crow*, xxi.

<sup>10</sup> E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 239.

world anticipated the victory of Jim Jeffries, dubbed ‘the Hope of the White Race,’ which they believed would confirm White men’s supremacy not only in civilization, but also as a symbol of masculinity.”<sup>11</sup> Johnson’s victory disappointed many whites to the point of rioting, and sports were once again re-segregated to prevent future embarrassment. Even Congress moved to prevent films of prizefights from inciting further violence and rage, but Johnson did not limit his challenge of white manhood to the ring. He was regularly seen in public with white women and enjoyed pursuing white prostitutes. His sexuality contributed to challenging white manhood, but also fostered a continued depiction of blacks as sexual predators who threatened white women’s virginity. It was in Johnson’s sexuality that white opponents found a way to fight back. In 1912, Johnson was charged and convicted of the Mann Act for crossing state lines with his mistress and paying her money. White response of the outcome is illustrated by “a writer to the *New York Call* [who] cogently observed, ‘Johnson is black and has more money than is good for a black man... Anglo-Saxon America is relieved of a most dangerous menace to the preservation of its color.’”<sup>12</sup> By considering deportation rather than a prison sentence, whites sought to regain not only their racial superiority but their masculinity as well.

Despite efforts in maintaining dominance on a racial and gender level, public discourse became increasingly available to blacks, both men and women. Public portrayals of those who challenged representations of white masculine dominance help to show the fluidity of social structures in twentieth century America. Each time the dominant culture was challenged, whether the white race or its masculinity, efforts were made either to protect the power structure or to change it in ways that would make it less penetrable. Jack Johnson was neither the first nor

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<sup>11</sup> Annegret Daniela Staiger, *Learning Difference: Race & Schooling in the Multiracial Metropolis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 114.

<sup>12</sup> Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 184.

the last to challenge white superiority or its masculine dominance. What his efforts reveal, however, is how connected race and masculinity were in white hierarchical discourse. When both were challenged at once, the entire fabric of white civilization found itself vulnerable. Following defeat, all that could be done beyond rioting or suppression of the event was a removal of the threat and the memory that accompanied it. In the second decade of the twentieth century, that meant Jack Johnson's deportation, but the event had already been recorded and white masculinity's weakness revealed.

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