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The autobiographical genre in African American literature. The case of sports autobiographies.

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Introduction

The autobiographical genre has always been a powerful means of self-expression throughout history, allowing individuals to document their own experiences, challenges, and accomplishments. In my thesis, I will delve into the autobiographical genre within the context of African American history, focusing specifically on the works of two prominent sports figures, Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. By analyzing their autobiographies, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how the autobiographical genre has played a significant role in African American history, particularly in the ways African Americans have navigated oppression and marginalization in the United States.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I provide an overview of the development of the autobiographical genre, tracing its origins back to ancient Greek literature and examining its evolution in Western society. I draw upon the insights of George Gusdorf, who argued that the autobiographical genre emerged as a response to the increasing significance of the individual in modern societies. Additionally, I explore the defining characteristics of autobiographical texts, such as the presence of a first-person narrator, the focus on the author's life, and the utilization of self-reflection as a means of exploring one's identity and experiences.

Moving forward, the chapter delves into the autobiographical genre within American history, with a particular emphasis on its emergence as a distinctly American form of literature. I refer to the work of Robert F. Sayre, who posited that the earliest forms of autobiographical writing on American soil were the diaries of early settlers and travelers, eventually giving way to Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. Furthermore, I examine the autobiographical genre as it pertains to African Americans, exploring slave narratives and postbellum narratives. This includes an analysis of the social role of African Americans in autobiographies and how it has been influenced by their societal status.

The second chapter focuses on the complex emancipation of African Americans through sports. I explore the hardships endured by black bodies since the era of slavery, how they survived to the infamous middle passage and as well as the anxieties surrounding black male sexuality. The theme of black masculinity is analyzed in relation to white perceptions. The impact of African Americans on American sports is highlighted,

including their initial exclusion from American sports leagues and their subsequent dominance as athletes. However, I also address the continued underrepresentation of African Americans in coaching and ownership positions within American sports.

The subsequent two chapters closely examine the autobiographies of Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. I provide summaries of both texts, exploring the references to race and racism found within each narrative. I also discuss how their conversions to Islam altered their perspectives on self-identity. These chapters further explore how they utilized their autobiographies as a means of challenging prevailing narratives about African Americans in sports and society at large.

In this study, I will highlight the points of convergence between the autobiographies of these two sports champions: the fact that both are written by highly successful athletes, their personal relationship with their Black identity, their religious conversion, and how these themes are approached in distinct ways in their respective texts.

The two athletes approach the autobiographical genre and their relationship with society in their time in an antithetical manner. Muhammad Ali, after an initial phase of his career in which he believed that boxing could liberate him from a secondary position in society, was forced to confront the hostility of a large part of white society at the time. He faced this hostility by becoming both a symbol for African Americans and an "enemy" to white individuals. The highest point of tension came with his refusal to be drafted for the Vietnam War, to which Ali expressed opposition, asking, "Who is this descendant of the slave master to order a descendant of slaves to fight other people in their own country?"[1]

Initially, Ali's rhetoric was seen as a breath of fresh air in the boxing world. However, once the champion started denouncing the violence perpetrated by white individuals against African Americans, he was labeled a "loudmouth" and a braggart. On the other hand, Jabbar tended to retreat into a cold detachment rather than openly expressing his dissent towards the issues African Americans faced in American society.

[1] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, Los Angeles, Graymalkin Media, 2015.

Additionally, I emphasize the significance of these texts in shaping public discourse on issues of race and social justice.

Overall, this thesis presents a comprehensive analysis of the autobiographical genre in African American history, centering on the autobiographies of Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. It explores themes of race, identity, and social justice, shedding light on the struggles and triumphs of African Americans in the realms of sports and society at large. By examining how these two athletes utilized the autobiographical genre to challenge prevailing narratives about African Americans, my thesis aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of autobiographical works in African American history.

Chapter 1 Autobiography in black history

Introduction

This chapter discusses the autobiographical genre, its origins, and its relationship with the African American community.

It will start with an introduction to the history of the genre, then it will offer an investigation of the characteristics of the autobiographical genre which will be followed by an in-depth analysis of the correlation between the texts and their authors and the difference between the actual reality and the one seen from the eyes of the author.

My work will then deal with whether the autobiography can be considered a specifically American genre and will analyze its importance in building an American identity. This correlation between autobiography and American history will be discussed more specifically from the point of view of African American autobiographers.

Autobiographies began to be a way to represent blacks' experiences from 1760. This thesis will analyze the roots of the autobiographical genre in the African–American literary tradition. This chapter will focus on the question of authorial freedom, that is to say whether black authors were free to tell their own stories or they were deeply influenced and limited by white interests in their narrations.

1.1 The roots of the autobiographical genre

As illustrated by James Olney, the term autobiography was created at the end of the 18th Century by combining three Greek words, *autos,* that refers to the self, *bios* to life, and *grafein* to the act of writing, in order to describe an already existing genre but with different names, like memoirs or confessions.[2]

[2] James Olney, *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction*, in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, Princeton,* Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 6.

It has been defined by Philippe Lejeune as "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality"[3].

This definition contains characteristics that are related to some categories:

1) Form of narration
    a) Account
    b) In prose
2) Subject of narration: the life of a person and their personality.
3) Identity of the author and the narrator (whose name corresponds to a real person correspondent to the narrator)
4) Position of the narrator:
    a) Identity between the narrator and the main character
    b) Retrospective narration[4].

For Lejeune, an autobiography is a text that satisfies all of these conditions simultaneously. Certain types of autobiographical works do not satisfy criteria 2, for example when the narrator talks about himself in third person to cite accomplished feats, as in the work of Julius Cesar "Commentaries on the Gallic War"; biographies do not satisfy criteria 4, because there is not shared identity between the author and the life narrated, and personal novels do not satisfy criteria 3 as the protagonist is not a real person.

An autobiographical text must be principally an account, the principally retrospective vision must be accompanied by an account of the present or by self-analysis. The two main characteristics of an autobiographical text are however:

1) Shared identity between the narrator and author.
2) Shared identity between the narrator, author and character.

The identification of these three subjects is possible thanks to the "autobiographical pact", described by Lejeune as the commitment that an author undertakes to directly recount

[3] Philippe Lejeune, *On autobiography*, Paul John Eakin (ed.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 4.
[4] Ibid.

their own life (or part of it) in a spirit of truth. The autobiographer swears that what they are to recount is true, or that which they believe to be true and concerns their own life, they hence identify with the protagonist as well as the narrative voice. The pact of truth is brought about by the title itself: "*The Life Story of…*", "*Memories of…*", and at times via the subtitle "*Autobiography*"[5].

The theme of the autobiographical pact and the relationship between the narrator, the author and the character will be expanded upon in the third paragraph of this chapter.

Despite the rigid approach towards the critical study of the autobiography, in the last chapter of his work Lejeune indicates that it is not necessary to think that one specific genre is isolated, instead it must be imagined as a system of genres that intertwine and are continually transformed.

The origins of the autobiographical genre are ancient, we can date them back to the fourth century BC with the seventh epistle by Plato but, as the name suggests, this was a letter. Then we have the work of Xenophon with the *Anabasis*, a report of an expedition of Greek mercenaries engaged by Cyrus the Younger to pursue the throne of Persia from his brother, in which Xenophon himself participated. This work became exemplary for other important historical figures such as Julius Caesar with *Commentarii de bello Gallico.* These texts can be defined as memoirs, as specified by Julie Rak, that is to say, texts about public figures or historical events narrated in the third person[6]. As texts about historic events, memoirs can be both a series of notes, a collection of reminiscences from a character but also a structured work. These texts focus on the event rather than the person narrating it and their feelings and experiences, hence they cannot be fully considered as autobiographies. Memoirs also provide interesting testimonies that can be useful for historians.

Another forerunner of autobiography was St Augustine with *Confessions*. This text is not regarded as an autobiography since it does not purposefully narrate the life of an individual and there is no autobiographical pact; the author wants solely to describe his journey to faith. The text covers the story of Augustine's conversion. Every person is

[5] Ibid., pp. 14-15.
[6] Julie Rak, *Are memoirs autobiography? A consideration of genre and public identity*, in *Genre*, vol. 37, 2004, p. 483.

accountable for his or her own existence, and the need for self-examination of sins brings Augustine to express his sins in his great literary work.

Although this book from St Augustine is often referred to as an immature form of the autobiographical genre, it displays one of the key features of this type of text, the duality of the narrator: the author is both the omniscient narrator for the story he/she writes about and an active actor in the story itself. Other examples of autobiographical texts are Montaigne's *Essais* and Pascal's *Pensées*.

According to George Gusdorf, the concept of autobiography is directly linked to Western culture at a specific moment: the historical period after the French and American revolutions[7]. Throughout most of the history of human beings, the individual did not single themself out amongst others; being part of a community was part of individual identity and nobody was really the possessor of their own life. Every person had their role within the community, a role that was passed on by their ancestors and that would be passed onto their heirs in an infinite loop. The awareness of the self is almost nonexistent in such a community. Gusdorf declares that "autobiography is possible only under certain metaphysical preconditions"[8]. The interest and curiosity of the individual about themself and their destiny are tied to the Copernican Revolution, the individual finds themself engaged in an autonomous adventure. As the person recognizes themself as an agent of their destiny, there appears the revolution of the autobiography: the artist and the object of art coincide. People started to consider their personal stories worthy of being narrated. Montaigne was descended from a family of merchants and Rosseau was a common citizen of Geneva but they chose to narrate their own stories[9].

According to Olney, the term autobiography came into use after the first self-proclaimed autobiography was written by W.P. Scargill and published in 1834. It was titled *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister*, but it was not strictly an autobiography: Olney stated that the text was "a romance"[10] rather than an autobiography because, even though it is true that the author was a dissenting minister, contrarily it has been confirmed that the narrated events are fictional. After Scargill had published his autobiography, many

[7] Georges Gusdorf, *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography* in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography*, p. 29.
[8] Ibid., p. 30.
[9] Ibid., pp. 30-31.
[10] James Olney, *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment*, p. 4.

previous works from other authors were republished under the new title of "autobiography". In the same month (October 1834) of the release of Scargill's text, Jack Ketch's memoirs were edited, retitled and republished by Charles Whitehead as *Autobiography of a Notorious Legal Functionary.*

However, before these literary works, despite them not being autobiographies, two other literary works of important value must be mentioned: *Confessions* by Jean Jacques Rousseau and *Memoirs* by Benjamin Franklin. In Rousseau's text the author talks about himself for the first time not by way of a mere recording of events, but by means of a recording of his emotions and his inner world. "I felt before I thought" he states at the end of his work.

On the other hand, Franklin transformed the memoir: he narrates his own public life and chronicles his rise to prominence without suppressing his emotional life, desires, and frustrations.

Franklin's autobiography had an important role in the creation of an "American identity"; the relationship between Franklin and the birth of America and of American identity will be discussed in the fourth paragraph of this chapter.

1.2 Features of the autobiography

Lejeune's definition of autobiography, which I specified in the previous paragraph, points out that the fundamental characteristics of autobiography are in general its retrospective point of view, implicitly conveyed by one's memories, and the emphasis on the genesis of a person's story.

In general, trying to define features of the autobiographical genre is not a simple task.

According to Olney:

> "[...] this is so because there are no rules or formal requirements binding the prospective autobiographer - no restraints, no necessary models, no

> obligatory observances gradually shaped out of a long-developing tradition and imposed by tradition [...]".[11]

The *autos* in autobiography, "the "I" that coming awake to its own being"[12] is crucial in differentiating this genre from biography. The *bios* in an autobiography is "what the "I" makes of it"[13]; the narration of a person's life is strictly connected to the voice that narrates it.

The autobiographical genre is by its nature an "incomplete" genre; the narrated story – the *bios* – cannot be recounted in its entirety. At the same time, the narrating "I" - the *autos* - is an entity in a state of constant change; the process of self-analysis has no end and one's sensitivity and feelings towards oneself may very well shift over of the course of time.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Gusdorf stated that the spread of the autobiographical genre is linked to the creation of the modern Western World. The great change in human perception of itself changed with the Copernican Revolution, when humankind no longer felt they were at the centre of the universe. At the same time, human beings started to understand their role as an agent of their own lives.

Writers started to see their lives as exempla for other people and younger generations, and hence they distanced themselves from historians and approached other literary genres. The autobiographer began to see themself and their life as their own work of art and the product of their imaginative activity.

An autobiographical text is a document about one's life, but it is also a work of art and therefore attention is normally paid regarding the stylistic harmony of the text. The autobiographer's perspective is from the inside rather than the outside (as with a historian or a biographer). Memories can be described as foundations for autobiographies. In his study about autobiography, Barret J. Mandel describes memories as pictures from the past triggered by something that happens in the present, i.e., when listening to a specific song in the present moment leads one to

[11] Ibid., p. 3.
[12] Ibid., p. 21.
[13] Ibid., p. 22.

remember something from their past[14]. So, when authors write their autobiographies, they also must consider memories and their own images from the past and attempt to reconstruct them, even though this process do not lead them to produce a fictional work.

The writer must select, reorganize their memories and then produce their literary text. On the other hand, even novelists use features of the autobiographical genre in their works, i.e., that of the first-person narrator, or the protagonist being the narrator himself: as Mandel states, "the intention in most novels is perfectly clear: the novelist's use of autobiographical devices serves an end that is purely fictional"[15].

Autobiography as a genre can be placed somewhere in between third-person narration and monologue. In the former the voice of the narrator is the voice of the hero, the attention is placed on the event and the authors prefer to narrate in the third person to provide more of an objective presentation of the facts - this is in fact the case in the work of Caesar. In the latter, there is the "I" at the center of all narration, hence facts orbit around the expression of the narrator's thoughts and feelings.

In his study of the principles of autobiography, Howarth identifies three main elements that guide an autobiographer's process of writing: action, character, and theme. The element of *character* is dominant in an autobiographer's strategy; it is influenced by different peculiarities: the sense of self, place, and history in writing. These features help us in separating the author from the protagonist. In an autobiography, the protagonist is the same person as the author, but they do not share the same space and time, the author always knows more than the protagonist even if they are the same person. With the term *strategy*, Howarth refers to elements such as style, imagery, and structure. Even these technical aspects are very important in an autobiography since they are part of the protagonist's voice. The last element is *theme*; representing the ideas and beliefs that identify the protagonist's mindset. *Theme* can be related to the author's ideology, religious faith, or political opinions[16].

[14] Barrett J. Mandel, *Full of Life Now*, in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography*, p. 49.
[15] Ibid., p. 53.
[16] William Howarth, *Some principles of autobiography*, in James Olney, *Autobiography*, pp. 86-88.

Howarth defines three classes of Autobiographies:

1) Autobiography as Oratory
2) Autobiography as Drama
3) Autobiography as Poetry.

The first and primary model for autobiography as oratory is St. Augustine. Howarth then added other authors to this genre: John Bunyam, Edward Gibbon, Herny Adams, and Malcolm X. These men all have a strong faith in themselves through the power of words. Their ultimate goal is didactic; they succeed in showing their superiority through their oratory skills. The tone is epic and messianic. These autobiographers share their memories of their days of sin or error. Normally the narrator separates himself from that younger version of himself when his goal is didactic.

Due to these autobiographers placing much attention on the oratory, they aim to use all their arts of inducement. Their style is made of parallelisms, amplifications, and refrains. Normally narrators tend to distance themselves more from the protagonists, and the two figures then merge as the narration continues and the time of writing and time of living start to overlap. In these texts, attention is put on certain themes, such as St. Augustine's conversion; many events are omitted from the narration while others are expanded upon[17].

Howarth stated that authors of autobiographies as drama, view life as a staged performance, therefore they don't place much focus onto any personal development they made during their lives. These narrations are made up of a series of ordered events. Some of the most famous authors are Benjamin Franklin, Montaigne and Mark Twain.

The authors of these dramatic forms of autobiography see life as a stage. These texts focus on characters more than on ideas, and there is a continuous action as in picaresque novels. The importance of the audience is another key aspect of these books, authors know what the readers want. These kinds of authors often use more colloquial language to appear natural. In addition, these texts have theatrical features as they focus on actions more than on explanations. The author's consistency is also important throughout the narration, as

[17] Ibid., pp. 88-85.

well as another key feature in that the situation often changes while characters remain the same throughout the narration[18].

According to Howarth, premier examples of authors of autobiography as poetry are Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Walt Whitman, and William Butler Yeats. These writers operated in a post-Romantic era which was an uncertain one; even autobiographers started to be less sure about the meaning of their own life and consequently about their texts. The voices of these narrators are increasingly contradictory and fragmented as authors are not fully aware of their own identities and self. The author writes only for himself, but the real hero of his work is his reader. These narrators all look for their true selves and in doing so they experiment with their style, often moving into the realm of poetry, which happens with Whitman and Yeats.

Poetic autobiographies use a more lyrical language, and over narration they prefer description. Their ultimate goal is to move away from the traditional aesthetics of autobiographies[19].

1.3 The relationship between the author and the text

In the autobiography the writer puts his life, memories and experiences at the centre of the narrative and communicates them to the reader in a time sequence that follows the author's own life and inner development.

According to Olney, neither the *autos* nor the *bios* are a complete entity, in the beginning, these elements are real only when put on paper; only when they are narrated. The act of writing is seen as the third element of autobiography by Olney; it is through writing that life and the self are represented in different and unique forms. In fact:

> "it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and

[18] Ibid., pp. 95-104.
[19] Ibid., pp. 104-114.

endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors."[20]

Likewise, Starobinski considers the writing process fundamental to the author because his style, associated with the act of writing itself, not only establishes the author's relationship with his past, but also allows his identity to be revealed to future readers[21].
The characteristics of the author represent one of the main differences between biography and autobiography. In an autobiography, the end of the story cannot be told so the *bios* is not complete, while normally biographies narrate people's lives in their entirety.
The possibility of creating an autobiography becomes more likely under certain conditions. People had to realize that time is a natural flow and what has already happened will not happen again, so fixing in writing their own image could be valuable to stop it from disappearing, as everything else in the world does. To narrate their own story, the narrator should take himself as the object of the narration.
Producing this kind of text can be a tool to obtain a higher degree of self-knowledge.
George Gusdorf surmised that the man who narrates his own life is searching for himself through his history[22].
The veracity can never be complete as facts are narrated as remembered by the author. Despite this, the autobiographical pact is maintained, insofar as the author undertakes to write their autobiography in a spirit of truth.
Autobiographical writing involves the splitting of the author's voice as the author of the present is a different person than they were in the narrated past. In order to reduce this fragmentation, the autobiographer can close the door to their consciousness of past times and narrate their life in their own present-day voice. Often the authors appeal to an indefinite posterity; they express their own failures, sins, and conversions so that these experiences can be available to readers and themselves.
It is exactly the relationship between the past and the present that constitutes the author's narrative identity and defines his style. According to Jean Starobinski, style is "a

[20] James Olney, *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment*, p. 22.
[21] Jean Starobinski, *The Style of Autobiography*, in James Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 74.
[22] Georges Gusdorf, *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, p. 30.

metaphoric representation of the present writing self and, at the same time, of the past written self"[23].

Gusdorf, instead, focused on the impossibility of having complete veracity in this kind of text because the author narrates events as he remembers; this way one cannot consider autobiography as a replica of the past, but only the memory of something that will never return:

> "Recapitulation of a life lived claims to be valuable for the one who lived it, and yet it reveals no more than a ghostly image of that life, already far distant, and doubtless incomplete, distorted furthermore by the fact that the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the same being, the child or adolescent, who lived that past"

The author's relationship with the text has been analysed by several scholars; Howarth, for example, proposed an analogy: autobiography as a self-portrait[24]. The painter of a self-portrait must study the reversed image in the mirror, this image is familiar to himself but not to other people. He can also choose to represent himself at a younger age and so he must combine his sight with his memory.

For Olney the moment of writing is a time of discovery and auto analysis for the author; he stated that "the autobiographer half discovers, half creates a deeper design and truth than adherence to historical and factual truth could ever make claim to"[25].

1.4 Autobiography as an American genre

The autobiographical genre is strictly connected to the creation and development of the American identity. As Susan Balée argues in her study *From the Outside In: A History of American Autobiography*, national identity grew out of cultural identity; in this sense, Americans acquired their cultural identity by detaching themselves from the identity of the Old World, changing and adapting their own traditions. In the beginning, thus, the Americans found their identity with the help of external forces such as wars, plagues, and

[23] James Olney, *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment*, p. 18.
[24] [24] William Howarth, op. cit., p. 85.
[25] James Olney, *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment*, p. 19.

famine, along with religious oppression, immigration, and slavery: “for three hundred years, the majority of American autobiographies reflected individual identities constructed in response to external pressures”[26].

According to Robert F. Sayre, the first examples of autobiography in American literature are the travellers’ diaries and tales about the “discovery” of America the new world. The scholar, in his study, traces the origins of these literary works back to the Puritan diaries, travel accounts, and biographies of famous Indian chiefs from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sayre describes how American autobiography is different from texts of the same genre from other countries since Americans are also different from other people; America was the land of immigrants so there was no common cultural background for these people moving to the United States, what they shared was the idea of America, the idea of a new world. This theme emerges from the first autobiographical texts. In his study, Sayre points out that the autobiographical hero represents the ideas that he has lived by, he is a "what"; what he stood up for and what ideals he believed in: “America is not a land or a people”[27] and generally the lives of American biographers are strongly twisted with national ideas[28].

An example of such an autobiographical typology is Benjamin Franklin's work: he narrated his public life without considering his emotional life, and defined by Susan Balée “scarcely spiritual, but, rather, deeply pragmatic”[29]. He believed he was creating his greatest invention: the narration of himself as an element of history. His act of discovering himself occurred at the same time of the birth of America: he began writing his autobiography in 1771, at almost the exact time of the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War. He officially began writing his autobiography when he was 65 but he had already been working on it for fifty years previously. The elder Franklin who describes his youthful life in his autobiography knows more about his life than the young Franklin did, but even if they are two completely different people, the old Franklin - the biographer of the younger one - is quite generous and understanding toward his younger

[26] Susan Balée, *From the Outside In: A History of American Autobiography*, in *The Hudson Review*, vol. 51, n. 1, 1998, p. 41.
[27] Robert F. Sayre, *Autobiography and America*, in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography*, p. 149.
[28] Ibid., pp. 148-149.
[29] Susan Balée, *From the Outside In*, p. 55.

self. Franklin dissociated himself from the Puritan tradition of autobiography by detaching from religious references.

Benjamin Franklin's autobiography provides what can be called the model of the American Dream and according to Susan Balée

> "Franklin is the model of the self-made man. Born in poverty, he achieved both riches and respect. He is the exemplar of what Thomas Jefferson claimed for American society (as opposed to European): a meritocracy based on talent and ability rather than birth and wealth"[30].

In fact, history and events from the author's life occur at the same time. In his story, Franklin depicts himself as a self-made man, he stated that writing an autobiography was a tool that allowed him to live his life all over again. Franklin was free in his form and was not limited by features of memoir; the fact he was not able to narrate his own life to its very end gave him the freedom to end his work whenever he wanted.
Another key text is *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, published in 1854, the text deals with the theme of slavery and how it was dividing the nation. It tells the story of Thoreau's experience in a cabin where the author survived over two years, two months, and two days: it was almost a study on the chance for a modern man to survive closer to nature while quitting all the luxuries of the contemporary world. Thoreau eliminates from his text the Aristotelian unit of time; the narration of a year lengthens, as it was the story of a lifetime. He lives his condition of freedom from all the futilities with joy, and he also criticized the condition of man in his own time; his desire was to live a truly free life, in harmony with nature, just as the American pioneers did. Nowadays, people look for hope for a better future in technology, whereas according to Thoreau it is found in simplicity; which is the original American identity of the early settlers. According to Susan Balée, Thoreau can be considered one of the greatest American autobiographers of his time, because "he opposed the destruction of the American wilderness, and did his best to preserve the small part with which he came in contact"[31].

[30] Ibid., pp. 57-58.
[31] Ibid., p. 60.

A key figure in the American autobiographical genre was Walt Whitman. As Sayre points out, he was a nobody in 1855 when he published his text; he had a career as a schoolteacher and a newspaperman that could be seen only as modest, yet this was one of the key features of his writings: a study about the misery of the uncelebrated man[32]. Whitman's text shows the relationship between a man's life and his country. As stated by Sayre:

> "Whitman had not experienced the "goodness of God" but the goodness of America. It was what had formed him, so that when he began to celebrate his "self", he celebrated his country. But as well as being his place of birth and nurture, America was an idea and ideal that he strove to embody. America as a land expressed his spiritual and physical muscle. It was new, unknown, wild, and untamed. He was youthful, also unknown, rowdy and "barbaric". And since these traits were mostly identified with the West and the frontier, he identified himself with the West, too, even though he lived on the streets of Brooklyn and Manhattan"[33].

Whitman would represent the American values of life, freedom, and pursuit of happiness as a man. He would become a symbolic figure of his country.

Then there was a huge gap between Thoreau and Whitman to Henry Adams, the latter was the grandson of a former president and so he was unable to picture himself as a standard American. At the same time, Adams saw life as history, and being an Adams he knew that part of his history was part of the history of his country. His text is written in the third person and omits twenty years in the middle of his narration: it was during those years that he experienced his wife's suicide and worked as a teacher at Harvard. Adams, by using the third person narrator, was able to split his consciousness, he becomes solely the narrator and not the character anymore. There are two characters: the old and the present Adams, the past Adams is the source for the present Adams' narration.

[32] Robert F. Sayre, *Autobiography and America*, p.162.
[33] Ibid., p. 160.

The new Adams depicts the old one as a victim of history, he sees life not as a recollection of successes but as a chronicle of failures.

The creation of America had to go through the experience of immigration. The massive migrations were a preoccupation for "old" Americans: immigrants were seen as hordes, and many questioned whether these "hordes" could be assimilated into the American culture. Some autobiographical texts approached this theme; i.e. *The Making of an American* by Jacob Riis. Riis was a Danish journalist who worked with New York immigrants and was himself testimony of possible integration.

In this complex society where identity "derived more from who they were not - not European (any longer), not Indians, not animals -than who they were"[34], a new generation of autobiographers is born. This generation believes that American life should be adventurous, open, and free, hence the fact that many of them from the upper high class went to Europe to absorb French and German culture, in order to better understand the world. This theme of upper-class white people travelling to Europe to fight social rules is another testimony of the ceaseless fight between the idea of freedom and the reality of oppression and conformity to the American behavioral rules. In fact, as Sayre explains, this "testify to that fundamental, continuing contradiction in America between the idea of freedom and human fulfillment and the reality of oppression, conformity, and mean narrowness of spirit"[35].

Sayre summarizes the relationship between the ideas of America and different kinds of American autobiography by putting them in a compass rose with the main authors placed at the four cardinal points. In the East he places Benjamin Franklin, as he looked further East to his English origins and had models in Defoe and Bunyan, but also in the West while looking for a new American writer that could imitate his work. Whitman is placed in the West; a mystic place for a mystic author, as he did not say how to act to be the perfect American instead saying to simply start to act like a real American. In the North, Sayre puts Adams, as he looks back on a more profound simplicity. Sayre places on the Southern side of this imaginative map of the United States Frederick Douglass, one of the

[34] Susan Baléè, *From the Outside In*, p. 62.
[35] Robert F. Sayre, *Autobiography and America*, p.165.

first African American writers who described his life as a slave in his *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* (1845)[36].

1.5 Autobiography as a black genre

Autobiography is a crucial genre in the literary production of black America. The first novel written by an African American was produced in 1853, while by that time black autobiographies had already been circulating for a century.

Since Blacks were normally located at the lowest level of the human chain, and writing was the main differentiator between human beings and animals, these writers broke the chains that relegated blacks to the lowest levels of society. Autobiography is perceived as an act of rebellion against a society that sees authors as objects: according to William L. Andrews "in the act of rebellion the slave realizes himself, gives order to the chaos of his condition, end claims what we might call an existential authenticity nod freedom while still in bondage"[37]

Among the most popular black autobiographies, there was the slave narrative, the recounts of the fugitive slaves and their sufferings. These texts document the life of slaves in the Southern states of the USA, and the struggles of people of colour as slaves but also as fugitives from the South to the North., and they described the exploitation of black women, and how free black men were enslaved, they are hence very useful historical sources when attempting to understand life for slaves during slavery. James Olney in his study "I Was Born", he described this type of narration as a non-memorial description, saying "The writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of "slavery as it is"[38]. This means that the author could not deviate too much from the standard, as his narration could have been judged untruthful.

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[36] Ibid., p.167.
[37] William L. Andrews, *The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism*, in William L. Andrews (ed.), *African American autobiography: a collection of critical essays*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1993, p. 80.
[38] James Olney, *"I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature* in *Callaloo*, vol. 20, 1984, p. 48.

The genre was celebrated during the 19th Century as a means to help African American people realise their American dream to be equal to everybody else.

Abolitionists believed that the publication of these autobiographies of former slaves would enlighten the minds of white people against slavery. The Slave narrative was a very successful genre, and there was the creation of a counternarrative that aimed to demonstrate how loyal and happy the relationship between masters and slaves was. The first example of a slave narrative appeared in 1760 and more than 100 works were published before the spread of the Civil War, all aimed at denouncing the horrors of slavery.

Many slave narrators knew that northern white readers could easily label their autobiographies as untrue, so in some cases black writers had to declare their truthfulness, Harriet Jacobs, in the preface of her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)* had to assure the readers: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are nevertheless, strictly true". The production of slave narratives is wide but it is possible to identify some shared features:

> "an engraved portrait or photograph of the subject of the narrative; authenticating testimonials, prefixed or postfixed; poetic epigraphs, snatches of poetry in the text, poems appended; illustrations before, in the middle of, or after the narrative itself; interruptions of the narrative proper by way of declamatory addresses to the reader and passages that as to style might well come from an adventure story, a romance, or a novel of sentiment; a bewildering variety of documents […] that appear before the text, in the text itself, in footnotes, and in appendices; and sermons and anti-slavery speeches and essays tacked on at the end to demonstrate post-narrative activities of the narrator"[39]

The theme is the brutality of slavery, and the ultimate goal is to abolish it. The narration is episodical, the narrator tells important events in the life of a slave.

[39] Ibid., p. 49.

There is also a presentation of parentage, quite often it included a white father as many slaves were sons and daughters of slaveholders, there is also a description of the cruelties of masters and mistresses. Often slaves are presented as strong and hardworking but there is no interest in their literacy and so, for them, it was quite impossible to read and write. Despite the fact that most slaveholders were often Christians, they are presented as worse than non-Christian people.

Normally slaves were sold in auctions and in these texts, these auctions are well documented; authors narrate the separation of families and the suffering caused by it. There's also the narration of slaves' attempts to escape and their failures.

These texts expose the theme of black Americans as treated like aliens in their own country, exiled from Africa, and forced to live a very difficult life; they of course showed resentment toward their new land.

The white audience of readers read these autobiographical texts not to get acquainted with the individual experience of slaves but to have a first glimpse of the institution of slavery. These narratives normally tend to recount and focus on the reality of the institution of slavery, hence there is almost no space for the development of the narrator's moral growth. Their main goal is to depict features of slavery, the reality of work conditions in the cotton fields, and escape tribulations from these places.

For African Americans, thus, writing an autobiography served to prove that they were equal to whites, as well as an act to manifest their freedom and claim their status as human beings. According to William L. Andrews, therefore, "autobiography became a very public way of declaring oneself free, or redefining freedom and then assigning it to oneself"[40].

It is clear that the main difficulty for blacks in writing their autobiography concerned not only the fact that they were addressing a white audience, but also because, being illiterate, they had to entrust their stories to a white writer, as well as the publisher who would publish it. These issues led black writers to be concerned above all with "making of

[40] William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. xi.

personal memory into collective myth and the initiation of personality through articulation of collective history"[41].

One of the most important examples of the slave narrative is *Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. The text, written by Frederick Douglass, had its value not only in describing and narrating the slavery experience but also "the features of life in the quarters where slaves developed a sense of the sanctity of the family, respect for elders, an enduring culture including folktales, spirituals, and a religion emphasizing black survival, cooperation, fortitude, and hope"[42]. Douglass' narrative relates not only the journey from slavery to freedom but also from slave-hood to manhood as stated by different scholars.

After the Civil War black people had more faith in the American chances to create a new world where blacks could be seen as equal to whites. By the 1880s the hope for better life conditions had disappeared. Blacks had to face hatred from whites, violence towards black people and lynchings were common, and the Jim Crow laws were created. Whites started to be depicted as degenerated in black autobiographies. Black autobiographers started to celebrate blackness, and many of them started to go to Africa as pilgrims and recover their ancestors' roots.

As mentioned by Blassingame in his work *Black autobiographies as history and literature*, Henry Proctor stated that his visit to Africa gave him new pride in his race that he would never forget. "Every black man felt like he was a representative of the race"[43]. So, according to Blassingame, black writers with their works were "embracing and celebrating blackness"[44]. They needed to represent the abilities of black men, and their chances to be great. Within the black community, however, there were mixed feelings as they felt both American and black; yet in many autobiographies, there is evidence of what was defined by DuBois as "twoness", or "double vision" by others. Black people

[41] Gordon D. Taylor, *Voices from the Veil: Black American Autobiography*, in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 35, n. 2, 1981, p. 361.
[42] John W. Blassingame, *Black autobiographies as history and literature*, in *The Black scholar*, vol. 5, n. 4, 1973/74, p. 3.
[43] Ibid., p. 6.
[44] Ibid., p. 6.

appreciated American values but they could not be part of it. They were prohibited from being part of their own country.

After the Civil War the quality of these texts increased, also from a stylistic point of view. There's the use of precise language, archaisms, witty language: the genre became a pillar for the development of black literature in the following years. It was also a way to enter the world of literature for black authors, as it happened with Douglass, who after his autobiographical recount published a novella, articles, and speeches and more autobiographies. Autobiographies were also a way to get out of the stereotypes imposed by whites. Blacks were seen as ignorant, dancing and singing minstrels, but thanks to the development of this literary genre black people started to perceive themselves as a class of men who had survived slavery and were able to fight for their freedom and dignity.

Quoting William Andrews:

> "...in the postbellum narrative, the measure of a slave's dignity is much more pragmatic than existential, more public than private and more tangible and considerably less ideal than it is in the most famous antebellum narratives"[45]

From the Civil War up until to the Great Depression, at least fifty autobiographies were published. These stories looked at slavery from another point of view; there was no need to recount the obstacles of living as a slave but there was instead a focus on how blacks were able to appreciate freedom after being enslaved for so many years. In his text, William Andrews focused on the idea of slavery from Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*. Washington was not interested in the historical idea of slavery related to a lost past, but he was more concerned about its effects on the present. According to Washington, slavery was a concept that had to be reviewed. He wanted to focus more on the consequences of slavery rather than the institution itself. He called slavery a school in which Blacks learned how to survive in the South thanks to hard work, resilience, and perseverance. The idea for black authors was to present a past where they contributed to the foundation of the American South; even as slaves their contribution was undeniable[46].

[45] William L. Andrews, *The Representation of Slavery,* p. 82.
[46] Ibid., p. 77.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the situation changed and the features of the standard autobiography disappeared. Authors like Charles W Chesnutt and James Weldon Johnson created fictional autobiographies. Although the characters were fictional there was the need to represent the real black man.

The text from Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was presented by the author as if it was an authentic text. The fictional autobiography started to have an importance of its own at the expense of antecedent models. According to William L. Andrews his work "blurs die line between fact and fiction, and thus dismantles the opposition between effective acts and mere word"[47]

The interest of scholars in this genre has increased during the years, especially in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to the development of the civil rights and Black Power movements.

1.6 The social role of blacks in autobiographies

The relationship between American autobiographers and the country they lived in is peculiar, as autobiographers were narrators of both personal and national events and they celebrated themselves and their nation at the same time. Authors like Franklin and Whitman identified themselves with their country, they would represent American ideals of life and freedom. It can be true also for the black autobiographers because, as stated by Albert E. Stone "in the struggle for personal, political, and cultural independence, these and other autobiographies are playing a major role in the communications network linking the black writer to his or her audiences"[48].

Since the first slave narratives from the eighteenth century, slave narrators have recounted African Americans' chase for freedom; these texts are a way to show blacks' efforts in claiming their American nationality. The first classic slave narrative texts were sponsored by white abolitionists that had discovered the power of testimonies from eyewitnesses.

The fact that white abolitionists financed slave narratives did not provide a voice to the black former slaves, and they were able to run from slavery but not from social

[47] William L. Andrews, *Introduction*, in William L. Andrews (ed.), *African American autobiography*, p. 5.
[48] Albert E. Stone, *Patterns in recent Black Autobiographies*, in William L. Andrews (ed.), *African American autobiography*, p. 172.

emargination. In 1825 Grimes published his work *The Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*. He was the first black author to describe the South as it would later be depicted in many novels: a place of violence and horrors where slaves were tortured. However, Grimes also focused on his life after slavery and how surprisingly difficult it was to live in the abolitionist North. No publisher was then happy to publish Grimes' work and he had to do it by himself[49].

In 1837, Moses Roper published his *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper* describing "the unremitting labor, persistent hunger, and agonizing floggings which were characteristic features of life for many blacks"[50] in a narrative style in which the author does not seem to identify himself with the protagonist of the brutality, with virtually no emotional response, defined by Davis as "an alienating text"[51]. William L. Andrews argues that Moses Roper's work was "foundational to the development of a truly national literature in the United States"[52].

At first fugitives from slavery were considered fools because of the perils they could encounter narrating their runaway tales. Abolitionist propaganda pushed former slaves to get rid of fear and social stigma about their position as former bondsmen.

Former slave narrators in their role as preachers from "the antislavery pulpit"[53] had to train themselves in their literary skills. Many of them spent years in the abolitionist lecture circuit polishing their writing craft. The idea that lonely fugitives from slavery could produce slave narratives by themselves was not the norm, the influence of white abolitionists was crucial.

Andrews cites another key work from the same period: the *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke;* the importance of this text is the introduction of the hereinafter defined "colloquial style", which Richard Bridgman states is "characterized by the intrusion of regional dialect, either in form of words or rhythms of vernacular speech, into more "serious" discourse"[54].

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[49] William L. Andrews, *To tell a free story*, p. 78.
[50] John W. Blassingame, *Black autobiographies*, p. 3.
[51] Charles T. Davies, quoted by William L. Andrews, *To tell a free story*, p. 92.
[52] Fionnghuala Sweeney, Bruce E. Baker, *'I am not a beggar': Moses Roper, Black Witness and the Lost Opportunity of British Abolitionism*, in *Slavery & Abolition*, 2022, p. 2.
[53] William L. Andrews, *To tell a free story*, p. 100.
[54] Ibid., p. 139.

Slave narratives also opened a window onto women's experience of slavery. In 1861 Harriet Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which she started to write in 1853 after having moved to the North ten years before. Jacobs stated, “Slavery is bad for men, but it is far more terrible for women." In Jacobs's text there is the representation of what Kimberlé Crenshaw would later describe as intersectionality or the intersecting layers of different forms of oppression such as gender, race, sex, class etc. During slavery, women had to deal with violence and sexual abuse from their masters. In her narration, Jacobs insisted on the theme of sexual exploitation that she had to face along with other slave women. Carbis stated that Harriet Jacobs

> “used her autobiography to address the peculiar conditions of black women under slavery in the South and quasifreedom in the North and to articulate a concept of freedom liberated from the dominant ideology of «true woman-hood»”[55].

Very often slave girls gave birth to children of their masters and these children would follow the status of their mothers against the English Common Law, and so they would also be destined to be slaves; this rule was known as the *partus sequitur ventrem*. These women had to worry about running away from their masters while finding a safe place for their children. Marriage remains impossible for many slaves' early love liaisons, and the real marriage for these narrators and women was in the reaching of freedom.
Autobiographies of former slaves dominated the American narrative landscape throughout the 19th and early 1920s. Over time, the genre has changed and modern black autobiography can be defined: “as much a threat to the literary system of autobiography as to the social system of slavery”[56], although two elements remained unvaried:

> “the expressed desire to live as one would choose, as far as possible; and the tacit or explicit criticism of external national conditions that, also as far as possible, work to ensure that one's freedom of choice is delimited or nonexistent”[57].

[55] William L. Andrews, *Introduction*, in William L. Andrews (ed.), *African American autobiography*, p. 5.
[56] Roger Rosenblatt, quoted by William L. Andrews, *To tell a free story*, p. 81.
[57] Roger Rosenblatt, *Black Autobiography*, p. 170.

According to Roger Rosenblatt the black autobiographer, unlike the white autobiographer who progresses in a linear manner along with history and the simple conception of reality, evolves in a conception of history which is cyclical instead, making each point equal to the next:

> "The result is that the black autobiographer in a sense spins off his circle and is carried by the centrifugal force of the life he has led to a state that anticipates grace. Despite the fact that he has been traveling in a circle, the black autobiographer, by the invention of the autobiography itself, has managed to get somewhere. Unlike his white counterpart, he dies but has a future"[58].

The future cited by Rosenblatt is not only that of the autobiographer, but it concerns that of his entire people; the author's own life is less than that of the entire black community, so "black autobiography annihilates the self because by so doing it takes the world with it"[59].

Black autobiography thus becomes, over time, a representation of racial consciousness-raising through what Alfred Kazin calls the "ability to turn every recital of his own life into the most urgent symbol of American crisis"[60] taking forward with pride their ethnic and national identity "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny"[61].

[58] Ibid., p. 179.
[59] Ibid., p. 180.
[60] Gordon O. Taylor, *Voices from the Veil*, p. 351.
[61] Ibid., p. 353.

Chapter 2 The problematic emancipation through sport

Introduction

This chapter discusses how the Black body has been utilized as a racialization tool for centuries. The relationship between Blacks' sufferings and their exploitation by Whites will be analyzed. It will then deal with how slavery was based on the exploitation of Black bodies and how these abominable practices influenced the representation of Black bodies in culture. The focus then will shift to how Black masculinity was stereotyped over the course of history as a way to control Black men and justify a lot of violent actions against them.

In the last two paragraphs, I will provide a historical analysis of the relationship between Black people and sports and how sports had been at the same time a form of liberation and oppression for Blacks.

2.1 Exploitation of Black bodies

In the Declaration of Independence, specifically in the preamble, there is a statement regarding the question of rights that reads as follows: "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"[62].

These statements were clearly against the existence of slavery. The reality was different, though, as slavery was spread across the entire nation and Black slaves were forced into a tough life of work and deprivation of their human nature by Whites.

Since the first settlements of European colonies in Northern America, many landowners had to deal with the lack of farmhands. They had enormous lands to cultivate especially in southern states like Virginia and Maryland. According to Stefano Luconi[63] , at first, these landowners enslaved local native Americans. Luconi cites Alan Gallay (2002) that quantified the number of enslaved native Americans in a range between 24.000 to 51.000 from the year 1670 to 1715. Native Americans were not suited for the role of farmlands as they had been fishermen and hunters for centuries. They had also been vulnerable since

[62] https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/284/text accessed 22/12/2022.
[63] Stefano Luconi, *Gli Afro-americani. Quattro secoli di storia*. Padova, CLEUP, 2015, p. 15.

the Europeans' arrival, because the spread of flu epidemics and other diseases brought from Europe caused a lot of casualties among the original inhabitants of North America. As a result, Europeans began to import slaves from Africa. African slaves had experience with agriculture, so they were a better fit than Native Americans.

European landlords started to choose Black slaves according to their skills; they used to select people from Sierra Leone for their plantations in South Carolina or Georgia as these populations had experience in cultivating cereals in their homeland. Black slaves had to survive the so-called *middle passage*, the transport from Africa to the United States in horrific conditions, in which over 1.5 million people lost their lives[64]. The middle passage represented the second phase of the triangular slave trade. European ships transported finished goods to Africa (the first leg of the triangle), and those goods were sold in exchange for slaves by African slave traders, and governments of African states. Slave ships brought slaves across the Atlantic to America (the second leg of the triangle) in exchange for other goods that were transported back to Europe (the third leg of the triangle). According to Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley Engerman, African traders realized big gains from slave trading, even though slaves were sold for very low prices[65]. Inikori and Engerman explain that the political situation in tropical Africa was difficult and the slave trade only worsened the situation in terms of social cost[66].

The mortality rate during the translation to America was estimated to be between 13 and 33% among slave passengers. In particular, "[t]he best-known element of mortality is that of the middle passage. The summary figure of 15% is a good index of overall slave mortality for that voyage, though research has shown that it varied greatly with time, length of the voyage, and age of the slaves"[67].

Blacks were completely different from White Europeans both physically and culturally. At first, Africans that moved to America had the status of indentured servants, who were contractualized servants unable to pay for their travel to the new land, who decided to work for a certain number of years to repay the trip. This practice was common among

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[64] Patrick Manning, "The Slave Trade: The Formal Demography of a Global System", *Social Science History*, vol. 14, Issue 2, 1990, p. 257.

[65] Joseph E. Inikori, Stanley Engerman, "Introduction: Gainers and Losers in the Atlantic Slave Trade", in J. E. Inikori, S. L. Engerman (Eds.), *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1992, p. 2.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Patrick Manning, "The Slave Trade", p. 258.

European immigrants, and their voluntary bondage could last from two to five years; on the other hand, among Black people, these stays could last a lot longer. In the course of time Black indentured servants became slaves for life; they were treated as property and masters were not under the obligation to recognize their rights.

The institution of slavery was mostly spread in the Southern states, not due to any moral hesitation of the northerners but only because of the lack of plantations in the North of the country, which gradually led to its becoming a sectional issue. Slavery was first institutionalized in Massachusetts in 1630. A huge number of slaves from Africa were brought to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in southern America; only 6% of the 10 million slaves reached the territories of the contemporary USA.

Slavery created the stereotyped idea of Black inferiority that were used to justify their enslavement, and the wrong concept of Black men and women as property to be owned by White men. The hard conditions and hard manual work forced the objectification of their bodies and the spread of the idea that Black bodies were bigger and stronger than Whites. At the same time, there was the belief that Black people lacked intelligence, they were considered an inferior class of human beings.

The fear of Black men's sexuality was a key part of the imagery of Blacks as dangerous uncivilized people who needed to be under the care and control of Whites. Abby L. Ferber approaches this theme in a study regarding the construction of Black Masculinity; she cites in her work the studies of Black sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. Collins affirms that Blacks were reduced to bodies by White elites, and Black penises were the central part of this reduction to physicality for Black men[68]. Black men's sexuality was considered a threat to White women, as they were deemed unable to control their instincts; hence the idea of Black men as "hypersexual, animalistic, and savage"[69].

The stereotype of Blacks as incapable of blocking their instincts, therefore concerns both men and women, and for the latter, it brought to the creation of the "Jezebel stereotype". While White women were normally depicted as models of modesty, self-respect, and purity, Black women were described as lascivious and promiscuous by nature. This image of Black women is implied by the very name Jezebel, which was "an alluring and seductive African American woman who is highly sexualized and valued purely for her

[68] Abby L. Ferber, "The Construction of Black Masculinity: White Supremacy Now and Then," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 31, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 14-15.
[69] Ibid, p. 15.

sexuality"[70]; in that sense, it was a key "to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women"[71]. As a matter of fact, the rape of Black women by their masters was a common practice. These women couldn't even defend themselves in front of a court. Black women, even in case of testimonies of sexual violence against them, could not defend themselves and Black men could not protect them, which resulted in their gender identity being reduced only to physical masculinity.

The animal instincts of African Americans had to be appeased by Whites, they were seen as beasts to be controlled. These stereotypes were created to justify violence and sexual assaults on Black women on the part of White masters and the lynchings of Black men. Collins concludes, in fact, by stating:

> "This combination of violence and sexuality made Black men inherently unsuitable for work until they were trained by White men and placed under their discipline and control. To explain these relations, White elites created the controlling image of the buck. Unlike images of African natives who roam their wild homelands like beasts untamed by civilization (colonialism), the representation of the buck described a human animal that had achieved partial domestication through slavery."[72]

This is one of the main ideas of White American identity. As Carol Henderson states in writing about the corporeal body as a symbol of national identities, the African American body was the "anomaly", often described as Other in contrast with the White body depicted as the norm[73]. In particular, Henderson states that American culture considers Black people "more body than mind. Such thinking lies at the core of all the stereotypes of blackness […] which suggests we are 'naturally, inherently' more in touch with our

[70] Joel R. Anderson, Elise Holland, Courtney Heldreth, Scott P. Johnson, "Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype: The Impact of Target Race on Sexual Objectification", Psychology of Women Quarterly, vol. 42, Issue 4, 2018, p.

[71] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York/London, Routledge, 2000, p. 81.

[72] Abby L. Ferber, "The Construction of Black Masculinity", p. 15.

[73] Carol E. Henderson, *Introduction* to *Scarring the Black body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 4.

bodies, less alienated than other groups in this society"[74]. So, this is just another stereotype regarding Black people which depicted them as more in touch with their bodies, perpetuating the idea of a different class of humans closer to animals than to human beings. Lashes scars have also a practical reason for the master that produced them: if a slave would run away the master needed to find any sign to identify him in order to bring him back.

Every little physical imperfection had a role in finding a fugitive slave. Every imperfection that was "invisible" for Whites made a Black person even more visible. It was the case of Harriet Jacobs that was identified with a "decayed spot on a front tooth"[75]. In her work Carol Henderson analyzed the advertisements in the newspapers to capture a fugitive slave and studied in detail the language utilized in them; she pointed out the difference between the different terms to define scars: "branded", "whip-scarred", and "smallpox-pitted". She also noticed the difference between how distinct scars are described according to their "production". There is the reference to a "branded mark" that a slaveowner placed on his slaves as a symbol of his possession and a "whip-scarred" mark that was a wound as a punishment, often as a response to the attempt of running away[76].

The obsession with Black bodies was a key constituent of the development of racism to keep Black people in a subjacent position to Whites. This control had to be maintained especially with Black males.

2.2 Black masculinity

At the time of slavery in the United States, the imagery of Black people as more akin to animals than humans was spread among White people. At first, the stereotype of Blacks as docile and childish beings in need of support justified their enslavement since they were not able to take care of themselves, they were happy to be servants under the paternalistic figure of the white master because they recognized their own inferiority. During slavery, Whites created the idea of the subordinate nature of Blacks and the fact that they could only be suitable for a job if they were trained by Whites: the belief was that slaves would be comfortable in their subservient position within society.

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Penguin Classics, New York, 2000, p. 109.
[76] Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body,* pp. 25-26.

Stereotypes of Blacks as inferior human beings were spread also in the North by 19th-century minstrel shows. This form of show consisted of White performers darkening their faces and pretending to be Black; the success of these minstrel companies allowed their parodies of Blacks to spread across the nation[77].

The fear of Black men's sexuality emerged in the South after Emancipation. The myth of the Black man being unable to control his sexual desires was related to the fear of miscegenation in the South. Riché Richardson studied Black masculinity in her work *Black Masculinity and the US South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta,* where she stated that many of the stereotypes of Black men as rapists and violent were created in the US South, where White men were associated with ideas such as chivalry, honor, and gentility. These White men believed they had to defend White women from angry and violent Black men. Lynchings were used as a form of social terror against Blacks to discipline and annihilate the Black body. Violent associations like the Ku Klux Klan found a reason for their violence against Blacks in the trope of the Black rapist[78].

The stereotype of rapist Black men and honourable White men is also addressed by Susan Fraiman, who reasoned that there is a "paradigm of American racism, available during slavery but crystallized in the period following Reconstruction and still influential today, in which White men's control of Black men is mediated by the always-about-to-be-violated bodies of White women"[79].

After the Civil War Black men had hope in a new world without slavery and the opportunity to be part of the active American population; on the other hand, increasing fear of Black people spread among White people, and this fear especially grew in places where Blacks outnumbered Whites, in the South of the country. This brought to a new wave of lynchings in the South. The belief of Blacks as violent and sex-driven animals was justified using erroneous interpretations of Darwinist theories. Even craniologists and phrenologists utilized alleged scientific theory to define the subordinate nature of Black people.

The upsurge in anti-Black sentiment also spread caricatured images of Black people in popular culture. The media caricatured the image of Black men to demonstrate their

[77] Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the US South: From Uncle Tom to gangsta*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2010, p. 99.
[78] Ibid, p. 5.
[79] Abby L. Ferber, "The Construction of Black Masculinity", p. 15.

inferior status within the nation. Even in journals, there was the spread of caricatured portraits designed, as stated by Riché Richardson "to discredit and malign Blacks in and beyond politics"[80], while erasing all the heroic actions performed by them during the Civil War. To answer back to the White stereotype of black men as violent sexual animals, Blacks created the trope of the "bad nigger", described in Charles Chesnutt's 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*. According to the folklorist John W. Roberts, the "bad nigger" or "bad Negro" as a "badman" in African American cultural history, is "an outlaw folk hero from the trickster tales that emerged within Black slave communities and the economically, legally, and politically repressive social climate that Blacks faced after Emancipation"[81]. The trickster was present in the folk tradition of African American people; this figure was influenced by the African folk tradition[82]. By definition, tricksters are animals or characters who, while disadvantaged, succeed in getting the best of their more powerful adversaries. So, tricksters were able to outsmart their opponents. This trope was prevailing in identifying Black masculine insurgency around the turn of the century[83].

In a study by Lawson V. Bush and Edward C. Bush, the two scholars try to describe the origins and the development of ideas about Black manhood. Bush and Bush state that African American men have been emasculated due to different factors. First of all, slavery, which caused a situation where African American men were unable to protect themselves and their families; secondly, a "matriarchal system" within African American communities caused by absent fathers emerged in the context of a patriarchal US society that expects men as the heads of households. And lastly, economic reasons pushed Black men at the margins of society. It was only after the late 1960s that African American males were recognized as men. It was Malcom X and the Black Power Movement that created a more self-confident Black man[84]. According to Ossie Davis, Malcolm X was "the embodiment Black manhood"[85], predominantly influencing the idea of Black masculinity.

[80] Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity*, p. 24.
[81] Ibid., p. 26.
[82] Ibid., p. 27.
[83] Ibid., p. 33.
[84] Lawson V. Bush, Edward C. Bush, "God Bless the Child who Got his Own: Toward a Comprehensive Theory for African-American Boys and Men" *Western Journal of Black Studies* vol 37, Issue, 2013, p. 2.
[85] Ibid.

In the mid-1980s a new trend spread in the body of literature that would impact the study of African American males. Scholars started to compile statistics of homicide, incarceration, life expectancy and infant mortality comparing them to those of Whites. African American males outdistanced themselves to their counterparts by huge measurements.

All of this research led to a new study by Lawson V. Bush and Edward C. Bush, published in 2013, in which they illustrate the theory they developed, the African American Male Theory (AAMT), whereby the experiences accumulated during the period of slavery, power and cultural hegemony, together with racism perpetrated over centuries, frame the analysis of the African American population. Specifically, the principles of AAMT concern the idea that both the individual and collective experiences and behaviour of African American boys and men can be analysed on the basis of Bronfenbrenner's systemic ecological approach, whereby "African American boys and men exist in a symbiotic and bidirectional relationship with other beings, matter, concepts, and phenomena"[86]. The second principle affirms the uniqueness of being male and Afro-descendant and the influence of African culture and consciousness on African American boys and men. The fourth principle concerns the resilience and stamina of African American boys and men, whereby "African American boys and men are born with an innate desire for self-determination and with an unlimited capacity for morality and intelligence"[87]. Another point considered by the two scholars is the deep impact that racism, classism and sexism has had on African American boys and men. Ultimately, the AAMT aims to study the phenomenon so as to discourage practices that promote the oppression of African American boys and men.

One of the most productive scholars in researching the theme of Black masculinity has been Tommy J. Curry. In his 2021 study, Curry critiques the definition of intersectionality proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which identifies the multiple aspects of a person's social and political identities that combine to discriminate and oppress that person[88]. Crenshaw used the term intersectionality to study the various forms of oppression that Black women

[86] Lawson V. Bush, Edward C. Bush, "Introducing African American Male Theory (AAMT)", in *Journal of American Males in Education*, vol. 4, Issue 1, 2013, p. 8.
[87] Ibid, p. 10.
[88] Tommy J. Curry, "Decolonizing the Intersection: Black Male Studies as a Critique of Intersectionality's Indebtedness to Subculture of Violence Theory", in Robert K. Beshara (ed), *Critical Psychology Praxis*, New York/London, Routledge, p. 132.

had to face along the course of history. Curry analyses intersectionality as a tool to discriminate Black men, explaining that more contemporary theorists of intersectionality have continued to confirm the racist theory stating Black male identity is caused by the imitation of White masculine rules and supremacy. According to them, emulation of White masculinity makes it more likely for heterosexual Black men to subjugate women and gay men in order to prove their self-worth, because "heterosexual Black men will feel compelled to prove their manhood through acts that distance them from marginalized others"[89]. Curry also mentions bell hooks and her theory that puts in relationship the hypersexuality of Black men and the history of racism and Jim Crow segregation:

> "Much of the subculture of blackness in the early years of the twentieth century was created in reaction and resistance to the culture whites sought to impose on black folks. Since whiteness had repressed black sexuality, in the subculture space of blackness, sexual desire was expressed with degrees of abandon unheard of in white society."[90]

Since Black sexuality was repressed during years of slavery, it became a compensatory trait of Black men. Black males tended to amplify the worst and deleterious characteristics of White masculinity. Black manhood reflects through a process of mimesis the patriarchal violence of Whites. hooks coupled the high rates of violence committed by Black men and their "gangsta behavior"[91] to the patriarchal violence of Whites.
What Curry argues in his article is that "[c]ontrary to its promises for more liberated Black identities, intersectionality merely replicates the pseudo-science of racist criminology and presents decades-old theories as cutting-edge analyses"[92]. In conclusion, according to Curry, the theory of intersectionality has led to a conceptualisation that has enabled the reconstruction of Black women's identity, both in terms of their differences and their similarities. This has not happened with Black males, who are viewed primarily through similarities, particularly that of belonging to the patriarchal category. The male experience

[89] Ibid., p. 137.
[90] hooks, quoted in Ibid.
[91] Ibid., p. 139.
[92] Ibid. p. 151.

is therefore categorised in terms of violence. Black masculinity is considered, in this sense, "merely the exemplification of White masculinity's pathological excess"[93].

The representation of Black men through negation or their lack of manhood from slavery times only produces a pathological way to depict Black men. These abstract descriptions only try to explain the deviant and criminal behavior of a small number of Black men.

2.3 Black people in American sports

Nowadays the group of African American athletes is one of the defining cultural aspects of the United States. Black Athletes such as LeBron James, Tiger Woods, and Mike Tyson have earned as much in just one season as hundreds of people in their lifetimes. Black athletes now are the faces of brands, their bodies are used to sell everything from clothes to soft drinks. They are bodies of capitalism. But from 1934 to 1946, in professional leagues like the NFL, there were no Black players. There was no official ban on the participation of African Americans, but there were agreements between the teams that Black athletes would not be part of the competition[94].

William C. Rhoden discusses the role that Black athletes should play in fighting social discrimination, in his book *Forty Million dollar slaves*. He believes that athletes should talk about social problems as they have more access to young minds than any politician or clergy, and that athletes have an enormous influence on style and tastes and could do a lot more for their community[95]. In the last couple of years, the behavior wished for by Rhoden has become a reality. The Black Lives Matter movement had important voices in Black athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, who took a knee during the national anthem to protest the death of George Floyd, a 47-year-old African-American man who was stopped by police and died shortly thereafter from suffocation under the weight of the knee of the officer, Derek Chauvin. After Colin Kaepernick's gesture, taking a knee became a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement. The quarterback said:

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Bowen F., *Kenny Washington paved way for black players in pro football*, in *The Washington Post Online*, 12/02/2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/kenny-washington-paved-way-for-black-players-in-nfl/2014/02/19/063ad55e-98c2-11e3-80ac-63a8ba7f7942_story.html?utm_term=.91ee4bd22a05 accessed 28/01/2023

[95] William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. New York, Crown Publishers, 2010, pp. 7-8.

> "I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change. When there's significant change and I feel that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the way that it's supposed to, I'll stand. This stand wasn't for me. This is because I'm seeing things happen to people that don't have a voice, people that don't have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change. So, I'm in the position where I can do that and I'm going to do that for people that can't…"[96]

In 2018 LeBron James publicly supported Hilary Clinton in her presidential campaign, but he was told to just "Shut up and dribble"[97] by the Fox news journalist Laura Ingraham; James then embraced his social role declaring "I'm more than an athlete," knowing that he was not just answering back to a Fox journalist but that he was talking to a multitude of young Black people in the United States.

The process to arrive at the point where an athlete expresses his thought about the social marginalization of Blacks has been long and difficult. Rhoden explains that when Johnson defeated Jeffries, while Black communities celebrated, White mobs beat up Blacks due to the fear that that Johnson's victory over a White man would embolden the Black community[98].

On December 10, 1810, there was a historic boxing match, in Capthorne Commons, Sussex, England; the two fighters were Tom Cribb, the English champion, and Tom Molineaux, a former slave that once he arrived in the UK, declared himself as the boxing champion of the United States. Molineaux was born in Virginia and worked as a slave in the American plantation system, he began to fight slaves from other plantations and won his master many bets. Molineaux's master set him free so when he moved to England, he was neither a slave nor a servant, he was a free man ready to become a professional boxer and gain money doing so. The fight lasted 35 rounds and in the end Cribb won in an

[96] Faust A., Johnson D., Guignard Z. et al., "Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives", in Charles Tilly, Ernesto Castañeda, Lesley J. Wood (Eds), *Social* Movements*, 1768–2018*, New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 247.
[97] Y. Galily, "'Shut up and dribble!' Athletes Activism in the Age of Twittersphere: The Case of LeBron James" *Technology in society*, vol. 58, 2009, p. 2.
[98] William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million dollar slaves*, p. 14.

obscure way. The crowd was impressed by Molineaux's finesse, as according to stereotypes Blacks should have been lacking the intellectual ability to be strategic. This fight in a way was the symbol of Blacks' ascension to the sport world[99].

While on England soil the story of Tom Molineaux spread across the entire country, nobody talked about it in the United States. The impact of slavery was still huge and nobody wanted to spread the idea that Black people had alternatives to bondage.

Sports were a tool for psychological freedom for Black people and were introduced by masters as a form of distraction from revolutionary ideals. Since slaves could not express their feelings, sports as well as dance, music, and gestures became a form of communication and expression. Athletes earned special status from the plantation owners and other slaves, and they were regarded as role models for slave children.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the presence of Black athletes was flourishing, at the same time, White hysteria over the "black rise in sports"[100] increased. Whites feared that Blacks would overtake them, bringing them to change the rules to eliminate the Black presence in sports.

The period between 1890 and 1915 marked the end of interracial sports in the US as it was also the most brutal period for Black people after the Civil War. In the South of the country, there had developed a tradition of Black jockeys, who were dominant in their sport, and also enjoyed a reputation for honesty, something unusual for Black men as they were believed to be unreliable and prone to stealing. This dominance of Blacks in horse riding became soon a problem, especially after emancipation. When slaves became citizens, they were seen as a threat, and White jockeys formed "anti-colored" unions according to Rhoden[101]: "By the turn of the twentieth century, Black jockeys were being driven out of the industry faster than the mounts they rode"[102].

Something similar happened in baseball, where informal agreements among organized amateur teams excluded Black baseball players in the 1850s. Baseball became so popular to be transformed into a very lucrative enterprise by the end of the 19th Century. The first professional Black team was formed in 1871, the best Black players had a salary of 500$ per season while White laborers had salaries of less than $600 a year. This sparked the

[99] Ibid., pp. 35-42.
[100] Ibid., p. 60.
[101] Ibid., p. 75.
[102] Ibid., p. 76.

indignation of White people and brought to the purge of African Americans from baseball professional leagues[103].

The rise of Jack Johnson was the realization of White people's nightmare: the appearance of an independent African American, loaded with the ability of fighting and winning against any White boxer. Johnson was the first Black heavyweight championship and was able to defend his title causing white riots throughout the United States where eight Blacks were killed[104].

Johnson had no adversaries in the ring, but he had adversaries in the government; an eighteen-year-old White girl moved accusations of abduction against him. Even if the case fell though the government continued to pursue proof against Johnson. Even Johnson's marriage to his White lover created White riots and brought a Southern congressman to call for a constitutional amendment that would prevent White women from being corrupted.

Rhoden talks about "the Jockey Syndrome"[105] or the ways White people have continually changed their rules to exclude Black people to preserve their power. In particular, this syndrome takes its cue from a common phenomenon outside sport, where previously granted rights were withdrawn and access to blacks was restricted through coercion and force. Segregation and the "Jockey Syndrome" forced African Americans to create "Blacks only" leagues. In 1920, The baseball Negro National League (NNL) was created[106]; it became popular within the African American fan base but it spread soon also within the white audience. In 1923 the first professional African American basketball team "The Harlem Rens" was founded. The Rens competed against white teams. They even won the first basketball championship in 1939. The presence of Black leagues did not diminish White control, as White booking agents had control on main sports arenas and their role was fundamental in organizing black sports events. Then, in a couple of decades, it started a process of integration of Black players in White leagues with no compensation to Black teams. Baseball was integrated in 1945 when Jackie Robinson signed a contract with Montreal. In 1951 the Negro league slowly started to die, and Black owners were not able to obtain control over White league teams.

[103] Ibid., p. 81.
[104] Ibid., p. 60.
[105] Ibid., p. 61.
[106] Ibid., p. 100.

Rhoden stated that a Black institution was dead, whereas a white institution would grow richer and even stronger. According to Rhoden the integration of the major leagues pulled back athletes into the mainstream but under control and away from real power[107].

Rhoden talks about the integration in sports as a winning opportunity for Whites who controlled the sports industry. Integration stopped a momentum of independence and self-definition for Blacks, and consequently for Black athletes. In colleges, integration occurred for Black players but not for Black coaches or educators; those who were coaches became assistants, and Black principals for Black high schools became principals for middle schools. This disparity is still present in today's sports: nowadays 70% of NFL players are Black[108], this percentage increases to 81% for NBA players[109], on the other hand, team ownership for Black people is still under 10%.

The next paragraph will analyze the relationship between racism and sports, and how racism has had an enormous influence in keeping Black people away from decisional power in sports alongside other public positions, along with the so-called myth of the superiority of the Black athletes.

2.4 The myth of the Black Athlete's superiority

Today the idea of the superiority of Black athletes is commonly accepted, but, according to Harry Edwards

> The myth of the Black male's racially determined, inherent physical and athletic superiority over the White male, rivals the myth of Black sexual superiority in antiquity. While both are well fixed in the Negrolore and folk-beliefs of American society, in recent years the former has been subject to increasing emphasis due to the overwhelmingly disproportionate representation of Black athletes on all-star rosters, on Olympic teams, in the various "most valuable player" categories, and due to the Black athletes

[107] Ibid., p. 121.
[108] Andrew Lawrence, *The NFL is 70% black, so why is its TV coverage so white?*, The Guardian Online, 31/01/2019, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/jan/31/nfl-tv-coverage-racial-demographics-super-bowl, accessed 27/12/2022.
[109] Marc J. Spears, *Where are all the white American NBA players?*, Andscape Online, 25/10/2016, https://andscape.com/features/white-american-nba-players/ accessed 27/12/2022.

> overall domination of the highly publicized or so-called "major sports" - basketball, football, baseball, track and field.[110]

The world of professional and college sports is deracialized, publicity at least; according to Hoberman the sports media, in fact, tend to downplay or not delve at all into the conflicts between Blacks and Whites: young African-American athletes are described as short-tempered and immature, while (White) coaches are treated as curmudgeons[111]. The world of organized sports in high and middle schools, instead, perpetuates openly some stereotypes such as Blacks being 'naturally' better athletes than Whites. At the same time, this stereotype normally tends to boost Blacks' self-confidence while it also increases self-doubts on the part of White athletes.

Hoberman believes that while the integration of colleges and professional teams had a tremendous impact on the civil rights movement, it also fomented the stereotype of the "violent black male"[112]. It is clear that sport has made a huge contribution to racial integration, but at the same time the images of the athlete, the gangster rapper and the criminal have merged into a unique menacing figure. This has been made into the dominant image of Black masculinity in the United States and around the world by the sports, music and advertising industries. These commercial interests amplify and embellish the physical and psychological traits of athletes whose public personas have come to embody the full spectrum of male pathology, in the belief that Black athleticism alone cannot sustain market appeal; for example, according to Hoberman, Dennis Rodman, defined as "the self-mutilating eccentric" is not only an athlete, but with his off-field antics, his full-body tattoos and bleached hair, he becomes a spectacle of the black jester served up to White America[113].

Another common practice within the world of marketing regarding sports is to "domesticate" and "soften" the image of the aggressive Black male in sports. In advertisements for fashionable men's clothes "[e]thnic blackness is dissolved in a sporting world that is exclusively and impeccably white"[114], Black males are dressed in

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[110] Harry Edwards, "The Sources of the Black Athlete's Superiority" *The Black Scholar*, vol. 3, Issue 3, 1971, p. 34.
[111] John M. Hoberman, *Introduction*, position 226.
[112] Ibid., position 268.
[113] Ibid., position 282.
[114] Ibid., position 341.

the fashion of white sports such as golf, tennis, rowing, sailing, etc. Hoberman also cites another domesticating strategy used in white marketing to represent Blacks: the use of naked Black bodies to accentuate their vulnerability. There is a higher chance of a Black male naked torso than a White one on an American magazine. According to Hoberman this is due to the racist mentality that plays on the tempting themes of miscegenation and the enslavement of human beings.

Harry Edwards in his study titled "The Sources of the Black Athlete's Superiority" in 1971, cited an issue of *Sports Illustrated* published the same year in January 18th. The article was produced by Martin Kane, one of the magazine's senior editors at the time. The issue of *Sports Illustrated* was an attempt to explain how the Black athletic superiority in sports was related to racial characteristics that are not matched in the White population. Kane reported statistics about the high presence of African American athletes in main professional sports, and their impact as leaders of their teams. Kane explained these numbers detecting some physical and psychological features of Black men such as longer leg lengths, wider calf bones among Black athletes than among Whites; a relatively denser bone structure; his greater capacity for relaxation under pressure relative to the capacity of the White athlete and the selectivity of American slavery times[115].

Edwards disputed these statements due to their relationship to debatable scientific assumptions, such as the physical description of Blacks as if they were a different biological form of human beings, and lack of a valid scientific methodology. The data were taken from already-proven excellent athletes; there is no evidence of a physical difference between people of different skin color. There are more differences within the same so-called race than between different races. Black athletes do not conform to a "fabricated average", and furthermore, even inside the group of Black athletes there are a lot of different physical builds, and differences in other physical features like in other groups such as the "white race".

Another theme contrasted by Edward is the race-related psychological factors that should boost Black athletes' performances in some sports. In his article on *Sport Illustrated*, Kane quoted a former track and field coach, Lloyd C. Winter, who stated that Black athletes had an advance over Whites because they were able to relax under stress. Edward refuted this data citing data collected by two psychologists in an article that ironically was

[115] Harry Edwards, "The Sources of the Black Athlete's Superiority", pp. 34-35.

published in the same issue of *Sports Illustrated,* where the results of a test with a high degree of reliability shows that Black athletes were more serious and concerned than their White counterparts. This could be easily associated with the disadvantage in competing against Whites in a racist society.

The most criticized theme of Kane's article by Edward is the idea that Black athletic superiority was related to physical selection during slavery times. Edwards stated that if it is possible that some slaves were able to survive the middle passage and atrocities of slavery due to a greater physical strength many undoubtedly survived due to their thinking abilities[116].

Often it is believed that for Black athletes the demonstration of physical ability alone is the reason for their success while no mention is made of psychological, racial, and political pressure that these athletes have to fight against even at the amateur level.

No accomplishment is natural for Black athletes; they have to take the hard path to pursue their goals through a lifetime of dedication as much as every other athlete.

The idea of Blacks as superior athletes only reinforces the concept of Whites as smarter and more suitable for intellectual jobs. So, according to Edwards, "The argument that Blacks are physically superior to Whites as athletes or as a people is merely a racist ideology camouflaged to appeal to the ignorant, the unthinking, and the unaware in a period heightened by Black identity."[117]

Edwards stated that the factors underlying athletic superiority are related to a complex of social conditions that pushed young African Americans to emerge in sports. This emergence of Blacks in sports has in a way complicated the identity problems for Black people, since their performances have been taken as symbols of African-American achievements, shadowing the presence of a Black middle class. The scholar ends writing that "[o]ur best sociological evidence indicates that capacity for physical achievement (like other common human traits such as intelligence, artistic ability, etc.) are evenly distributed throughout any population"[118], so any form of physical superiority of one race over another is definitely unfounded.

In his study Hoberman reflects that this public attention to sport had a huge impact on Black youngsters that nowadays have their preferred models in rappers and athletes rather

[116] Ibid., pp. 35-39.
[117] Ibid., pp. 39.
[118] Ibid., pp. 39.

than in the pursuit of academic achievements. This idea of Black athletic superiority is brought to different fields: in the army, for example, white instructors let Black soldiers believe that they can endure physical stress better than Whites as they the fortified lineage of slaves who survived under the toughest conditions[119].

Black children are led to believe they are born with athletic ability and in some cases, coaches tell them they have no future without the development of their athletic talent. Hoberman argues that "sports fixation"[120] by Black men has led athleticism to become an achievement for Black people. The accomplishment of Black America is represented by athleticism. Successes in sports had their importance in the integration of Black men, but at the same time, they prevent other Black excellences in other fields to be known.

The integration of American sports had commercial explanations, college and professional sports could not survive without Black athletes but this integration in the end has just reserved a secondary role to Blacks as bodies and not minds in a multi-millionaire industry, making sport, in some cases, a perpetrated form of slavery.

In basketball, for example, despite the fact that almost 80% of the league's players are Black, most of them do not hold managerial or presidential roles within the league; in fact, in 2019, in the entire NBA, apart from Michael Jordan, all the owners were White. The very word 'owner' has been questioned within the league: "The word 'owner' [...] dates back to slavery"[121]. This is even more striking in the case of the NCAA, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, which runs the sports activities in several American colleges: the young players, most of them Black, can only be paid a small salary, but earn the association billions of dollars that are managed by others. It is noteworthy that more than 82 per cent of college basketball coaches are White, as are more than 92 per cent of FBS head coaches and more than 86 per cent of conference commissioners. There has never been an African-American to serve as a commissioner in any of the Power Five conferences[122].

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[119] John M. Hoberman, *Darwin's athletes*, position 500.
[120] Ibid., position 471.
[121] Kurt Streeter, "Is Slavery's Legacy in the Power Dynamics of Sports?", in *New York Times Online*, 16/08/2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/16/sports/basketball/slavery-anniversary-basketball-owners.html accessed 28/01/2023.
[122] Brandi Collins-Dexter, *NCAA's amateurism rule exploits black athletes as slave labor*, in Andscape, 23/03/2918, https://andscape.com/features/ncaas-amateurism-rule-exploits-black-athletes-as-slave-labor/ accessed 28/01/2023.

Chapter 3 *THE GREATEST* BY MUHAMMAD ALI

Introduction

The Greatest: My Own Story is the 1975 autobiography of the former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, written in collaboration with Richard Durham. Ali was a three-time World Champion and is considered the greatest heavyweight of all time.
In the first paragraph I will give a brief summary of the autobiography, highlighting the main episodes that changed Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali's sporting and personal life.
The second paragraph discusses episodes of racism in Ali's autobiography and how he dealt with it in his life. The third paragraph looks at how Muhammad Ali, who has become a symbol of social struggle, fought against stereotypes and changed the way in which black athletes are viewed by the white public. The fourth paragraph is about Muhammad Ali's religious conversion and how he became a symbol of freedom and peace by refusing to enlist in a war that did not represent him. The fifth and final section looks at Muhammad Ali's relationship with his biographer Richard Durham and the difficulties Durham had in writing a book that both told the truth and met the needs of Ali and his religious congregation.

3.1 Summary

Muhammad Ali's autobiographical text[123] begins in 1973, after Muhammad Ali's monumental loss to Ken Norton, who broke Ali's jaw in the second round. First-person narrator Ali tells the reader that he wanted to return home after this defeat, even though everyone in his hometown had watched it live on national television and he was ashamed because he had lost.

He expected the journalists to turn against him because he had been defeated by a "nobody" so that his "big mouth" would shut forever. There is a description of the moment of Norton's victory after the fight and the reaction of the white men who called Ali a bastard and the white women who asked him "Who's the prettiest now?". Although the coaches try to convince Ali that the crowd's reaction is related to the fact that the fight

[123] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, Los Angeles, Graymalkin Media, 2015.

took place in Norton's home town, Ali is convinced that the violent reaction is that of white America, always eager to see him lose even to another black man like Norton.
Ali is then self-critical about his defeat, telling his wife that he has been punished by Allah for not training properly and forgetting the sacrifices that have to be made to win.
Back in Louisville, Ali talks about his encounters with the locals and how the elders called him by his "slave name", Cassius Clay, that he has changed to Muhammad Ali, because it was a way to distance himself from the power of the white man.

On his return to Louisville, Ali is forced to face his past. Ali sees the old church where his Christian baptism took place, walks inside and sees the bench where, as a child, he sat with his initials "C.C." carved into the wood.
Suddenly a crowd of people come to greet Ali, and many call him Cassius. He reflects that his home town is the only place where most people still call him Cassius and where they love him.
The narrator describes his early life in Louisville as one of poverty or semi-poverty.
Ali then describes his life of discrimination in Louisville when he was growing up. According to Ali's mother, he was aware of discrimination as a child. He would cry when he heard about some injustices against black people.
Ali goes on to tell the story of his father, a talented painter who could have done something more than just paint houses and shop signs if he had not been living in Louisville, a place where there was no future for talented black artists. The narrator also delves into the origins of his surname, explaining that during slavery, slaves were automatically named after their owners.
Clay/Ali's encounter with boxing is told as an epiphany; young Clay went with a friend to a black exhibition at Columbia Auditorium, attracted by free food and candy, riding his new bicycle. The bike was stolen. Clay was forced to report the theft to a policeman who was watching a boxing match in the Columbia Gym, just down the hall from the auditorium. The sound and smell of the boxing gym thrilled Clay so much that he almost forgot about his lost bike.
Sport was seen by Clay's father as a way for him to get away from the gangs of the streets. The desire to be a future heavyweight champion pushed Clay to train even harder, developing his techniques of constantly moving around the ring, leaning away from opponents and catching them off guard. Clay went on to win 161 of his next 167 fights as

an amateur. He then flew to Rome, where he won the gold medal at the 1960 Olympic Games. That summer, after thousands of rounds, hundreds of fights and countless days of training, he tossed the medal into his hometown river. At first, Clay thought that bringing back the gold medal would have a huge impact on his community. And in the beginning it did. But later in his career, as Clay began to defy the ideas of white managers, they began to call him an anti-white racist.

After that he received many offers to become a professional fighter. One manager offered to be Clay's manager for $65 a week, and to this offer Cassius' father shouted that the time of slavery had ended. His ambition was to become a professional fighter and eventually the heavyweight champion of the world.

Clay then describes the night of the first heavyweight world title fight. There was Malcolm X in the audience, and Clay confesses that he was not the only "X" in the building. He also considered himself to be Cassius X and a follower of Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm X, who was Elijah Muhammad's minister at the time, was one of the most influential African-American rights activists and Clay himself had invited him to attend the match. The influence of Muhammad, who believed that black people should free themselves from the names their former slave masters had placed on them, was also behind the X in Malcolm X.

The narrator also discusses one of the traits that made him famous: his tendency to talk down to his opponents and to declare himself "the greatest". Clay began to understand that no one liked an immodest braggart, that it got on the nerves of his opponents but it was a conscious tactic he used to make them unfocused.

This made him famous even before he became a professional fighter. Clay brought this attitude to his first heavyweight championship fight against Sonny Linston in 1964. At that time Linston was the heavyweight champion of the world, and as he was intimidating, many were reluctant to fight him.

His contract was majority owned by Frankie Carbo, a member of the Lucchese crime family who ran boxing interests for the Mafia. Clay went to Linston's in the middle of the night to shout at his opponent that he was "The Greatest". Clay was considered by the newspapers as the underdog, while Liston was thought to be unbeatable.

Before the fight, Clay had his sparring partner, Harvey Jones, read a poem he had written himself. The rhyming was a boast by Clay against Liston:

"Clay comes out to meet Liston and Liston starts to retreat,
If Liston goes back an inch farther he'll end up in a ringside seat.
Clay swings with a left, Clay swings with a right,
Just look at young Cassius carry the fight.
Liston keeps backing but there's not enough room,
It's a matter of time until Clay lowers the boom.
Then Clay lands with a right, what a beautiful swing,
And the punch raised the bear clear out of the ring.
Liston still rising and the ref wears a frown,
But he can't start counting until Sonny comes down.
Now Liston disappears from view, the crowd is getting frantic
But our radar stations have picked him up somewhere over the Atlantic.
Who on Earth thought, when they came to the fight,
That they would witness the launching of a human satellite.
Hence the crowd did not dream, when they laid down their money,
That they would see a total eclipse of Sonny".[124]

Clay's strategy was to dance around Linston during the fight and it worked. He was able to lean back on Linston's punches and hit him back with his jabs. In the end, Clay won the fight and became the heavyweight champion.

In 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated and for a few months Clay was considered a target for black Muslims. The hatred for Clay/Ali exploded when he declared that he refused to be drafted into the US Army to fight in Vietnam.

Muhammad Ali was convicted and had his passport revoked in 1967.

He was celebrated by many people who were in favour of his refusal to enlist in the Vietnam war, which was seen as a totally unjust war, "more barbaric than others"[125].

The judge sentenced Ali to 5 years imprisonment and a $10,000 fine. Four years later, in 1970, the Supreme Court overturned the decision and Ali declared it to be the most

[124] Cassius Clay, read on *I've Got a Secret*, CBS, 24/02/1964, https://thetvdb.com/series/ive-got-a-secret/episodes/5370368, accessed on 22/02/2023.
[125] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The Greatest*, p. 229.

important victory of his life. On the other hand, the World Boxing Association stripped Ali of his title almost immediately.

Ali soon became a symbol for African-Americans opposing the Vietnam War. At the same time, he was the perfect target for white supremacists. The greatest interest in the decision of Muhammad Ali came from the university campuses all over the country, because it was young people who were being drafted into a war they did not believe in.

Another issue that Ali faced was the lack of friendship between heavyweight fighters and he reports a transcript of a conversation between himself and Joe Frazier, his biggest rival. Their conversation was a friendly sharing of common knowledge about training techniques, but also a mutual exchange of challenge declarations and trash-talk, which is "a deliberate form of verbal communication used by individuals for both affirmative personal reasons (i.e. motivation, fun) and disruptive motives towards opponents (i.e. distraction, intimidation)"[126], used particularly in sports such as boxing or football.

Some time later, Ali asked Frazier to fight him. It was an unofficial event, as Ali was banned from boxing before the end of his trial. The two fighters agreed that they would call several journalists and disc jockeys to spread the news of a fight between them. Ali met Frazier in his gym to the cheers of hundreds, the fight never took place as Frazier was advised not to fight Ali in a private match, but the interest in Ali's return as a professional fighter was huge. In 1970, thanks to the support of black and white politicians and governors, Ali was allowed to return to professional boxing.

The day of Ali's return to the ring is described as a "Resurrection"[127] by his trainer Bundini. He tried to convince Ali to keep fighting even though he was out of shape because this moment would be remembered as his resurrection and he was supposed to be in jail by then.

Muhammad Ali then took part in a virtual fight against the retired white legend Rocky Marciano. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter, Arnold Davis, told Ali that this virtual fight was invented to finally have a white fighter destroy Ali and his trash talk. Ali and Marciano spent several days together to create the animated sequences for the virtual fight and were able to bond a bit, with Ali acknowledging Marciano's status as a former champion, even though he questioned whether he fought the best competition of his time.

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[126] Ben Conmy, Gershon Tenenbaum, Robert Eklund et al., "Trash talk in a competitive setting: Impact on self-efficacy and affect", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 43, 2013, p. 1002.

[127] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The Greatest*, p. 539.

In the virtual simulation of the Ali-Marciano fight, the former was destroyed by the Italian-American champion.

Ali went to Atlanta for his first official fight after the suspension, to face Jerry Quarry, another WASP (White - Anglo - Saxon - Protestant) hope who was expected to destroy him.

For Ali, this fight would represent the disease of American democracy, since, to use Bundini's words, "This ain't a fight. It's a war between two schools of thoughts. Whether he wants to or not, Quarry represents the establishment. Nothing shows the sickness in American society more than a prizefight between a White Hope and a black man"[128].

In the days leading up to the fight, Ali received threats from white supporters in Atlanta, where the fight took place. Although he recognised that he was in very bad shape, he was able to win the fight quickly. After the fight, Ali sought help to regain his license to fight in New York. One of his great rivals, Jackie Robinson, tried to persuade Governor Rockefeller to help Ali, but the governor was afraid to go against President Nixon. As soon as Ali got his license back, Governor Rockefeller even asked Ali to sign a public letter to thank him, but Ali refused to do so, as the Governor did not support Ali at all.

After the victory over Quarry, many journalists expected Ali to have a rematch with Frazier. Instead, he decided to fight Oscar Bonavena, an Argentine heavyweight who had given Frazier a hard time in their fight.

Although the fight against Bonavena was harder than Ali expected, he was able to defeat the Argentine fighter. After that, it was time for an Ali vs. Frazier fight, the two fighters would sign a $5 million contract for their fight. The fight would take place at Madison Square Garden in New York and was advertised in every newspaper, increasing public interest. The press expected a Frazier victory, and it was mostly a close fight between Frazier's furious jabs and Ali's precise hooks. In the end, Frazier won a very memorable, hard fight, although Ali was pretty sure he had the edge on points over Frazier. Muhammad Ali asked his manager to let the press into his room for an interview, he wanted to be a source of inspiration for everyone because even though he had lost to Frazier, he was going to get back up and fight again, as everyone should do after a defeat.

[128] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The Greatest*, p. 610.

He was sure he would fight Frazier again, and he did. Although he does not go into detail about the rematch in his autobiography, he was able to fight Frazier again at the Garden and he was able to win.

Ali then talks about the fight against George Foreman in Africa; he describes how his training changed after his first fight with Frazier. Ali used to stay in a big city before a fight. He used to eat breakfast with strangers, chat with them and spend time signing autographs. After losing to Frazier, he began to set up his own training centre in the woods, where he would concentrate on caring for the body and working out in the gym.

The fight between Ali and Foreman is described by the former in his preparation; the key figure who set everything in motion was Don King, the first black promoter in the history of boxing. He was able to obtain a 10 million dollar contract for the fight and he received requests from all over the world to host the event. In the end, the venue chosen for the Ali-Foreman fight was Kinshasa in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Foreman, due to his younger age and desire to beat the former heavyweight champion, was expected to be in better shape than Ali. Both fighters sent scouts to their respective training sessions to 'spy' on their opponent and find any weaknesses. Ali told Archie Moore, the former world champion and Foreman's spy, that he would destroy Foreman with his unique style of dancing boxing. The Zairean crowd roared for Ali as he entered the stadium, chanting "ALI! ALI! BOMAYE!" (Ali, Ali, kill him!). Foreman waited to come out of the dressing room and into the ring, hoping to frustrate Ali. On the other hand, Ali was getting used to the atmosphere, the ring and the crowd, and when Foreman came into the ring, he talked trash to Foreman, saying that he was nobody's champion and that he would get destroyed in front of thousands of Africans. The trash-talking continued during the fight as Ali tried to get inside Foreman's head. Ali decided to change his fighting strategy against Foreman; the idea of dancing around him would not have positive results as the opponent was well prepared by his trainers, so Ali decided to move to the ropes and take the risk of being hit by Foreman's powerful punches to make the opponent tire. After seven long rounds, Foreman was starting to tire and Ali was ready to fight back.

Eventually Ali won the fight and at the end inspectors came into Ali's dressing room to check if he had taken drugs before the fight.

The last chapter of Ali's autobiography recounts the so-called "Thrilla in Manila", the last fight against Joe Frazier, in Manila. The two fighters were exhausted and only the referee stopped the fight and declared Ali the winner, but the champion himself defined the fight as the toughest of his career, he even called it "the next thing to death". At the end of the book, Ali proclaims himself to be "the Greatest".

Muhammad Ali, in his autobiography, faithfully reflects his image as a symbol of black defiance against white exploitation. In Ali's narrative, there is a description of a youth marked by resignation to a subordinate position compared to white individuals. Later, the author hopes that his fame as an Olympic medal-winning athlete will emancipate him from his subordinate status as a black person in the eyes of white people. However, this never happens, leading Ali to become "a man against." He makes a series of difficult choices, such as refusing military conscription and involvement in the Vietnam War, which result in his boxing disqualification and garner hatred from both white and black communities.

Ali's loquaciousness and constant taunting of opponents were not a problem for the public until he began expressing views contrary to the Vietnam War and criticizing the inequalities faced by black people in American society. Once he definitively assumed the role of a critic of white society, all the white praises for Ali ceased. He quickly became the embodiment of the "malign black" stereotype—a black individual who goes against the rules and control of white power, rebelling against their subordinate position in American society. Ali's role as the "villain" leads white society to support various "white hopes" in turn, many of whom are actually represented by other black athletes who do not possess the same strength as Ali.

Throughout the text, Ali constantly dwells on the insults that were hurled at him. From the very introduction, phrases like "We beat you bastard!" and "You finished, loud mouth" are reiterated, aiming to echo the treatment he received for his rebellion.

Similarly, Ali recounts all the rhymes dedicated to opponents whom he would later defeat, emphasizing how he embraced being cast in a negative light by the press, adopting a denigrating attitude toward his opponents and celebrating himself as "The Greatest"

3.2 Reference to Race and racism in Ali's autobiography

Throughout the autobiography, racism is a recurring theme; even when he returned to Louisville as an Olympic champion, he had to confront segregation at a local restaurant, where he was not allowed to eat because he was black.

When he returned from Rome as a local hero, he expected a warm welcome, but instead discovered that no black man, no matter how successful, was welcome.

In the first chapter, Ali recounts his fight against Ken Norton in 1973. Norton was a black fighter, but the crowd cheered his victory instead of Ali's, who was considered a loudmouth, dangerous to the status quo and white power in American society. They were referring to Ali with the "N-word" while Norton was called by his name and that night he was the Great White Hope.

People from the crowd shouted at Ali that he was a bastard and that Norton was a representative of white people even though he was black. They also called Ali "Loudmouth".

Norton injured Ali very badly and forced him to return home to Louisville. In his hometown, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, Ali was called by his former name "Cassius Clay", which Ali refers to as his "slave name", passed down to his family by the slave master who owned their ancestors.

Ali then reflects on his past in Louisville. He describes how his city was segregated when he was young, and how blacks were not allowed to stay in hotels. There was only one movie theatre for colored people. Almost no restaurants would serve food to non-white people. Black waitresses were even afraid to serve water to black children because they might lose their jobs. Ali refers to Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy who was tortured and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of insulting a white woman. His mother had refused his burial until his mutilated body had been seen by hundreds of thousands in Chicago. Cassius Clay was the same age as Till at the time and felt he needed to show his anger at white people; the narrator tells how he and other boys threw stones at a poster of Uncle Sam, almost as a sign of what he would come to fight against the US Army some decades later.

Ali remembers that his family never had good relations with white people, his grandfather even prevented white people from entering his house, because he remembered how white people had treated him and his black ancestors.

Even journalists were unaware of how black people lived in Louisville. They used to describe Ali's upbringing as middle class and his mother as a graceful, fair-skinned lady, in which case being fair-skinned was a positive attribute. The reality was very different. Ali grew up in a very poor part of the city of Louisville. He and his brother didn't even have the money to take the bus to school every day, and the rain kept leaking into their roof because it was damaged and they didn't have the money to fix it. Ali himself reflects on how discrimination affected his family. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, his father was a talented artist, he could dance and sing, but he had no chance to pursue his artistic dreams in the segregated South and had to work as a painter, even though he was also a skilled painter and many churches approached him to paint their walls.

Ali talks about his experience when he was young and was harassed by actor William Reynolds' gardener, who then gave Ali a job and the chance to train before the Olympic Games, which Ali eventually won. In Reynolds' house, Ali felt that he was treated as an investment. Almost like an animal to be fed in order to make the money invested in him. The discrimination against Ali in Reynold's house became clear when one day Reynold's aunt started screaming at Ali, thinking he was trying to steal Reynold's car. When Ali won the Olympic gold medal, he turned down Reynold's contract offer because he felt uncomfortable being represented by such a man.

The real change in Ali's approach to the fight for black equality began soon after the Olympics, when he returned to Louisville. The local newspaper wrote that his gold medal was "the greatest prize a black boy has ever brought back to Louisville", even though no white boy had ever won an Olympic medal. In 1966, he ended his contract with the Louisville group that had represented him in the early stages of his career. He did so because he had heard someone in the group refer to him as "our horse".

The narrator explains that he felt ashamed of having been brainwashed about the history and the life of the black people from whom he descended. When he grew up, he was educated about Africa's contribution to the ancient and modern world. In the world of sport, such as boxing, it is clear from Ali's words that it continued to prevail the idea of "the next white hope". This could be a black fighter, as long as he acted and spoke like a white man.

On one occasion, when Ali returned home with his gold medal from the 1960 Summer Olympics, he was confronted by a group of racists who were wearing Nazi insignia and

Confederate flags. Despite believing in the power of his gold medal to get him and his friend served in a diner, Ali was kicked out. At the time, many restaurants in the South were still segregated and Ali was forced to leave. The racist gang wanted Ali's gold medal. In the end, he got rid of it by throwing it into a river so as not to be robbed[129]. Ali should have been a national hero. Instead, he was just another black man who had to submit to white power. This is how he described how he felt about the Olympic medal:

> "The Olympic medal had been the most precious thing that had ever come to me. I worshiped it. It was proof of performance, status, a symbol of belonging, of being a part of a team, a country, a world. It was my way of redeeming myself with my teachers and schoolmates at Central High, of letting them know that although I had not won scholastic victories, there was something inside me capable of victory. [...] I wanted something that meant more than that. Something that was as proud of me as I would be of it. Something that would let me be what I knew I had to be, my own kind of champion"[130].

During the Olympics a Russian fighter had asked Ali about the situation for black people in the USA and he had replied that he would not live anywhere else. Clay's understanding of the world he lived in and the treatment of black people changed after the Olympics. He regretted the statement he had made at the Olympics about the USA being the best country in the world, because then many whites used this statement to defend the status quo. He had been so brainwashed that he had also said: "I'd rather live here in Louisville than in Africa 'cause at least I ain't fighting off no snakes and alligators and livin' in mud huts."[131] After winning the gold medal at the Olympic Games, Ali became closer to Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, a relationship that was unpopular with Ali's management; this change in Ali's approach to American racism is well analysed in the book *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X*[132] by Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith. The two authors were interested in the relationship between

[129] In fact, as I will explain later in the criticism of the book in the last part of the Chapter, Ali has never confirmed that he threw the medal into the river on that occasion.
[130] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest*, p. 107.
[131] Ibid., p. 85.
[132] Randy Roberts, Johnny Smith, *Blood brothers: the fatal friendship between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X.*, New York, Basic Books, 2016, (ebook).

Ali and Malcolm X, but also in Ali's changed approach to the issue of American racism towards black people; at first, Cassius Clay was a defender of the progress made in the USA regarding racial relations; Robertson and Smith define this Cassius Clay as "the quiet Southern Negro"[133]. After 1960, Cassius Clay evolved into Cassius X, a name briefly adopted in imitation of Malcolm X, rejecting the Clay surname of his ancestors' white owners. After 1964, Clay became one of the most controversial sports figures in American history, changing his name to Ali and embracing the Black Muslim religion and philosophy.

Before the Linston fight, Ali was approached by Chris McDonald, part of his management, who tried to persuade him to distance himself from Malcolm X and the Black Muslims, arguing that after the gold medal at the Rome Olympics he could represent the "real all-American boy"[134], as described by Morton Sharnick in an issue of *Sports Illustrated*, and that his closeness to the Black Muslims could ruin his career. The fear for black self-reliant men was obvious, Ali could be the real American boy only if he adopted the stereotype of the obedient black man, but he would be seen as dangerous if he adopted the ideals of the Black Muslims.

Ali compares the separation from his wife to the one he had with the white Christian community in America. There was an increase in prejudice and hatred towards black Muslims; he also mentions the words of columnists who wrote that boxing would be better run by the Mafia than by the Black Muslims. Although mainly peaceful, Black Muslims were seen as enemies of whites worldwide.

The narrator says that many mosques were raided by the police at the time, especially in the South. For example, in Monroe, Louisiana, Muslims were beaten and thrown in jail.

Ali saw the Nation of Islam, an organization known as "The Black Muslim Movement"[135], as an opportunity for blacks to liberate themselves from oppression and slavery. Before the Linston fight, Ali had received many phone calls from threatening voices calling him with the N-word and threatening to hurt him if Linston failed to do so. The threats came from White people because Ali was seen with Malcolm X in New York[136].

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[133] Ibid., position 145.
[134] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest*, p. 144.
[135] Tinaz Nuni, "The Nation of Islam: Historical Evolution and Transformation of the Movement", *Journal Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 16, Issue 2, 1996, p. 193.
[136] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest*, p. 166.

After Malcolm X was assassinated, the feeling of being threatened became stronger and it seemed that Ali might become the next target. The hatred for Ali only grew when he refused to take part in the Vietnam War. A "Draft that Nigger Clay" campaign was started by a white lawyer and former heavyweight champion Gene Tunney sent Ali a telegram saying "YOU HAVE DISGRACED YOUR TITLE AND THE AMERICAN FLAG AND THE PRINCIPLES FOR WHICH IT STANDS".[137] In his autobiography, Ali's response to the telegram was that Tunney had refused to fight any black opponent in his time and that he and other white fighters never spoke out against the lynchings of blacks in the South. The theme that emerges from the text is that black sportsmen and women were tolerated as long as they represented the white ideal of black people as docile and non-violent towards white people. Muhammad Ali, on the other hand, wanted to express all of his anger against the power of the whites and their behaviour towards black people. That was why he opposed the draft; the same country that wanted blacks to die for it did not give them equal opportunities.
He commented his decision in his autobiography with the following words:

> "Who is this white man, no older than me, appointed by another white man, all the way down from the white man in the White House? Who is he to tell me to go to Asia, Africa or anywhere else in the world to fight people who never threw a rock at me or America?
> Who is this descendant of the slave master to order a descendant of slaves to fight other people in their own country?"[138]

Refusing to join the Army would not only lead to threats but also to violent actions against Ali, he and his managers were shot while training in an isolated house in Atlanta, they were lucky enough not to be hurt but this attack made Ali understand how badly his decision not to join the Army was perceived.
In the text, an episode is narrated that, more than any other, is able to depict the conditions of the blacks in the United States: the story of Judge Aaron, the man who was advised by Martin Luther King to meet Ali because he had a story to tell. Underneath his jacket,

[137] Ibid., p. 204.
[138] Ibid., p. 249.

Aaron had a scar on his chest, that formed the letters KKK[139]. Then he took his trousers off, and where his testicles should have been, there was just a piece of flesh. On his way to a shop, he was approached by a group of seven white men in a car who shouted 'nigger' at him. Aaron did not stop and continued walking, but the group insisted he should stop. Then one group member hit him, blindfolded him and put him in a car. The ride lasted for half an hour; then the seven let Aaron out of the car and started kicking him. Aaron was blocked and asked if he was a follower of Martin Luther King; when Aaron said he was not and he had not even voted, they spread his legs, wrote the KKK symbol on his chest with a knife and then cut off his testicles with a razor and left him in the dust. This act of violence was designed to stop Aaron from fathering more black babies. They left Aaron's testicles next to him as proof of what white supremacists would do to black men. It was a warning to the entire black community.

It was a story that shocked Ali and made him understand the fight he was really fighting for.[140]

3.3 Fighting against stereotypes

According to Mike Marqusee, the idea of athletes as role models was created in the Victorian era[141]. At that time, sport was a white elite activity; they created the idea of fair play, which introduced a moral assessment of sporting performance. This idea allowed black people to participate in sport. At the same time, they were judged on their adherence to the white idea of fair play. According to Marqusee, black athletes were expected to be role models for other blacks on and off the field; the 'gentleman's code', a set of rules that players were expected to follow as role models, has been used as a qualification or denigration of black success. It restricted West Indian and Pakistani cricketers for playing the game differently from the original English style, even though some talented Indian players had the same aggressive style as other whites, whose style was instead enhanced[142].

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[139] Ibid., p. 488.
[140] Ibid., p. 496.
[141] Mike Marqusee, "Sport and stereotype: from role model to Muhammad Ali" *Race & Class*, vol. 36, Issue 4, 2016, p. 2.
[142] Ibid, p. 9.

Muhammad Ali changed the whole notion of how black athletes were supposed to behave in and out of the ring, on the court or on the field. First, as Cassius Clay, he was the epitome of the "great white hope". In the ring, Clay was already different from the other heavyweights, moving faster than anyone else, able to bounce off his opponent's punches and then dodge to jab without getting hit.

The first time Clay went against the "rules" was when he refused to sign a contract with William Reynolds because he felt he was being treated like an animal rather than an athlete in Reynolds' house.

The young Clay used to predict the round in which his opponents were going to fall during their fights, and he used to put these predictions into rhyme. This behaviour frustrated his critics and opponents; this did not stop Clay, and then Ali, from rhyming the defeats of his rivals. It was a way of attracting more attention from the crowd and the promoters. The more Ali predicted the rounds in which his opponents would fall, the more boos came from the crowd.

It is the poem he calls "Feats of Clay" that defines Ali's vision of himself and his opponents more than any other:

> "It all started twenty years past.
> The greatest of them all was born at last.
> The very first words from his Louisville lips,
> "I'm pretty as a picture, and there's no one I can't whip."
> Then he said in a voice that sounded rough,
> "I'm strong as an ox and twice as tough."
> The name of this Champion, I might as well say,
> No other one than the greatest, Cassius Clay.
> He predicts the round in which he's gonna win,
> And that's the way his career has been.
> He knocks them all out in the round he'll call,
> And that's why he's called the Greatest of them all.[143]

[143] Ibid., p. 141.

Ali defines himself as pretty, which can be seen as at odds with the super-masculine image of African-American men. Pretty, in its conventional usage, conveys a specific, girlish sort of beauteousness. By using this term, Ali challenged the prevailing notions of toughness and brute force often associated with the sport. Ali's assertion that he was not only a fierce fighter but also aesthetically pleasing showcased his confidence and self-assuredness. This linguistic choice was also a form of self-affirmation and empowerment, particularly for the African-American community during a time of racial tension and social unrest. Ali embraced his blackness and used the term "pretty" as a means of redefining beauty standards. By claiming his own attractiveness, he challenged the prevailing norms that often excluded or marginalized black individuals. Furthermore, Ali's use of the term "pretty" had a transformative impact on public perception. It drew attention to his physical appearance, emphasizing his agility, grace, and skill in the ring.
Ali's self-definition as "the Greatest" is another peculiarity of his character, it went against the idea of fair play created during the Victorian era and especially white expectations of how blacks should behave and also increased the hatred of other fighters towards him. Ali's nickname soon became 'The Big Mouth' and many wanted to shut it.
The most obvious form of the contrasting black labels that Ali had created for himself was his conversion to Islam. This self-definition was initially at odds with his Christian family, but it was an inspiration to them. He got rid of his former "slave name" Clay. As he told the Italian journalist Gianni Minà:

> "When I got back to Louisville (from the Olympics), I understood that nothing had changed; I understood that nothing would ever change. This was my opinion till I met Elijah Muhammad. From that moment on I know that salvation for my people would stand in trust of our religion."[144]. [my translation]

For his managers, who believed that conversion would ruin Ali's career, his relationship with Black Muslims was a problem because they were seen as too controversial. White managers believed that Ali's decision would prevent them from making millions of dollars off the greatest fighter of all time. Ali never complied with the requests of his

[144] Gianni Minà, *Il mio Ali*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2015, p. 54.

managers to publicly reject his faith in order to continue his boxing career, as in his opinion the Nation of Islam was a way of freeing black people from subjugation and slavery[145].

Of all the statements Ali made, the most effective was in 1966 when the Louisville draft board had found him eligible for induction into the army; Ali told a television programme that he had written a poem:

> "Keep asking me, no matter how long
> On the war in Viet Nam, I sing this song
> I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong…"[146]

The rhyme spread around the world via newspapers and television, and Ali's phones wouldn't stop ringing with haters telling him to get himself drafted.

According to his managers, the US government wanted Ali to be drafted into the military so that they could silence him. They even lowered the number of access points needed to be drafted so that Ali could get in. The first time Ali, then Clay, was called to take an examination at an induction centre in Florida, he passed the test and then signed the name "Cassius X" for the first time in his life; when the supervisor asked him what the X meant, he replied that he was a member of the Nation of Islam and that they rejected the names given to them by their former slave masters. He was deemed to belong to a subversive organisation, although the Nation of Islam was not listed as such.

The government wanted to make an agreement with Ali: he would never actually fight in the war, but like so many other famous athletes before him, he would only have to box for the troops. Despite this offer, he refused to take part in the war and fought for what he believed was right.

Ali, on the other hand, had seen pictures of dead Viet Cong and had no desire to be part of that massacre. In his text, Ali states that he had the feeling that he was only accepted as world heavyweight champion on white American terms, as a black, dumb, brute athlete with no thoughts against the white establishment.[147] Ali's decision was challenged among the elite and those who supported the power of whiteness, but it also received support by

[145] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest*, p. 14.
[146] Ibid., p. 110.
[147] Ibid., p. 207.

many, particularly students who opposed the war abroad. On the day of Ali's appeal, huge crowds packed the sidewalk outside the US Customs House in Houston, many of them holding signs and banners reading "STAY HOME, MUHAMMAD ALI!"[148].
According to Ali's autobiography, his decision not to join the army created a crusade for whites, he quotes a columnist who wrote:

> "The heavyweight champion is the symbol of masculinity and youth of America, if so, it has now descended into the darkest dungeons of hell, into the worse worms of race hate and degradation, worse than it was controlled by gangsters [who] were sweet angels compared to the people who control Muhammad Ali"[149]

After four years, Ali had to face the Supreme Court decision, and even then, messages of hatred came his way from white people, because from the moment he declared himself a Muslim and refused to enlist, many described Ali as unworthy to wear the crown of heavyweight champion of the world.

3.4 Race, religion, and representation.

When eighteen-year-old Cassius Clay returned from the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, the mayor of Louisville introduced Clay at a ceremony for his gold medal. He asked Clay to repeat a statement he had made in Rome about the conditions of "Negroes" in America. Clay replied, "Look here, Commie. America is the best country in the world..."[150] He was a patriotic athlete and proud of his nationality. Clay was also praised by mainstream publications such as *Life and Tim*[151] although his arrogance was unusual for a black athlete. According to Saeed, Cassius Clay was not seen as a social threat[152]; he was seen as the embodiment of a racist stereotype of blacks as dumb. Clay was also proud of his Christian name, saying: "Don't you think it's a beautiful name? Makes you think of the

[148] Ibid., p. 233.
[149] Ibid., p. 293.
[150] Ibid., p. 25.
[151] Amid Saeed, "What's in a Name? Muhammad Ali and the Politics of Cultural Identity", *Sport in Society*, vol. 5, Issue 3, 2002, p. 54.
[152] Ibid., p. 55.

Coliseum and those Roman gladiators". The name change was linked to how he became involved in the civil rights movement in the USA. At a very young age, Clay did not know much about his famous white ancestor Cassius M. Clay. His teacher at Central High School directed him to *The Writings of Cassius M. Clay,* by Horace Greeley[153], and there he discovered that his ancestor was a proponent of the superiority of the white "race". The young, naive Clay continued to use it because he liked how it sounded, and he kept it before he got converted.

Despite his naivety, Clay was aware of the difficulties of being black in the United States; a year before the Linston fight, he declared:

> "Where do you think I'd be next week, if I didn't know how to shout and holler and make the public take notice? I'd be poor and I'd probably be down in my home town, washing windows or running an elevator and saying "yes suh and "no suh"... Think about that. a southern colored boy has made one million dollars."[154]

He approached the Nation of Islam (NOI), founded during the Great Depression, which quickly became the main African-American nationalist organisation. The NOI recruited its members from prisons and the inner cities[155]. The conversion of Malcolm X and his joining of the NOI was a catalyst for the growth of the movement. The meeting between Clay and Malcolm X in a certain way increased the interest of the former in the NOI and its activities. After the Linston fight in 1964, the interest was not in the fight that had just taken place. It was in Clay's affiliation with the NOI. The newly crowned heavyweight champion had this to say when asked:

> "I believe in Allah and in peace. I don't try to move into white neighborhoods. I don't want to marry a white woman. I was baptized I was twelve, but I didn't know what I was doing. I'm not a Christian any more. I know where I'm

[153] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest*, p. 52.
[154] Mike Marqusee, *Sport and stereotype*, p. 10.
[155] Amid Saeed, *What's in a Name?*, p. 7.

going, and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want."[156]

Clay added that because of the violence that blacks were subjected to, the lynchings that still occurred and the fact that there were still segregated neighbourhoods where a black man could not go, he could no longer be a Christian. Clay himself implied that his conversion was much more than just religious, as he continued to refer to racism and black oppression by whites. George Foreman stated that he did not believe Clay's conversion was a religious experience, but rather a social awakening[157].

On 6 March 1964, Elijah Muhammad announced to the world that Cassius Clay had changed his name to Muhammad Ali. This change of name can also be seen as a way for the former Cassius Clay to distance himself from the power of the white man. He created a new identity for himself which was not defined by white categories and was in opposition to the idea of what an African American was supposed to be - submissive, silent, and subservient to the white culture. According to Marqusee, Clay would carry a sign by becoming a sign[158], by changing his name and his identity, and by rejecting the idea of himself that had been imposed on him by white people.

The reaction of white audiences to Ali's declaration of his change of faith was brutal. Many writers felt more comfortable with the gangsters around fighters like Sonny Linston than with the Muslims around Clay[159].

Clay's conversion to Islam was a boost to the Black Power movement; he was clearly not the only person to have an influence on social protest, but his conversion to Islam was inspirational to many black activists in America; furthermore, the spread of the black civil rights movement was important for other human rights movements. Saeed explains that Ali's defiance had an influence and empowerment effect on groups who could relate to similar experiences of prejudice for racial, social or religious reasons[160].

In a way, Ali embodied a new black consciousness; he led the younger generations of immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s to be more assertive in demanding their own rights

[156] Mike Marqusee, *Redemption song: Muhammad Ali and the spirit of the sixties*. Verso Books, New York, 2016.
[157] Ibid., p. 14.
[158] Mike Marqusee, *Sport and stereotype*, p. 15.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Amid Saeed, *What's in a Name?*, p. 63.

and to be more vocal and visible in the process. It could be said that Black Power created an "imagined community"[161]. Ali's conversion to Islam was closely linked to the racial struggle of black people for self-determination. His tenacity in following his new faith went against the threats of his managers to keep him out of the ring if his acquaintance with the Black Muslims did not end. Ali was adamant in proclaiming his faith, even if it meant losing the chance of becoming a world champion or even just a boxer. In his autobiography, Ali said he saw the Nation of Islam as liberation from slavery and a way to reach freedom, equality and justice.[162]

Ali maintained this straightforward approach throughout his legal battle with the US Army following his decision not to fight in the Vietnam War. There were also political repercussions to this rejection, which erected him as a representative racial and religious symbol: Ali's title defence was banned by the state of Illinois and then by the cities of Miami and Pittsburgh; Congressman Frank Clark of Pennsylvania called for a boycott of Ali's fight.[163] On the other hand, Ali strongly denied involvement in the Vietnam War; in 1967 he published this response to a question about the war:

> "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam," Mr. while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?... I have nothing to lose by standing up and following my beliefs. So I'll go to jail. We've been in jail for four hundred years."[164]

Ali was one of the few black voices against the war at a time when being against the war was anything but commonplace. He received threatening phone calls from both white and black people, urging him to join the army like many others. This led to protection from the F.B.I.[165]. Even among his fellow black athletes, he was considered a stranger. In his autobiography, he wrote that fighters were rarely heard on issues of public importance. Ali's belief was that he had changed the image of the heavyweight champion of the world, both in and out of the ring.

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[161] Benedict Anderson, quoted in Mike Marqusee, *Sport and stereotype*, p. 16.
[162] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest* p. 52.
[163] Mike Marqusee, *Sport and stereotype*, p. 17.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest*, p. 171.

Ali began to inspire people by refusing to be drafted into the army. He knew that children saw him as a role model, and he tried to explain to those he could meet that the Viet Cong were not so different from them, and that was why he did not want to join the army.[166]. His actions were the catalyst for a wave of protests by black athletes. In 1968, the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) was formed by a group of black athletes, and their first demand was the restoration of Muhammad Ali's titles. At the Mexico City Olympics, OPHR supporters Tommie Smith and John Carlos won gold and bronze medals, raising clenched black-gloved fists on the podium during the US anthem. Tommie Smith declared:

> "I wore a black right-hand glove and Carlos wore the left-hand glove of the same pair. My raised hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos' raised left-hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of the black dignity".

White America had always wanted Ali to pay for his cockiness and his boasting, for declaring himself "the greatest" without conforming to white ideas of black athletes. He decided to go against the white Christian faith and join a faith of his own. After twenty-nine months out of the ring, Ali was able to return to the ring to fight Joe Frazier and before the fight with Frazier, he stated that black people identified with him and that his opponent was just an "Uncle Tom", a white man's champion. Frazier's problem was that the people who wanted him to win were the racists who wanted Ali to lose.

Ali was the first athlete to understand the power of words in creating one's own identity, an identity that went against what white people had been promoting for black athletes for years, and he did it despite the possibility of having to give up the sport he had practised all his life.

[166] Ibid., p. 195.

3.5 The relationship between Ali and Richard Durham.

In January 1970, Richard Durham received a call from Charles F. Harris, an editor at Random House who wanted to publish Muhammad Ali's autobiography[167]. Richard "Rick" Durham, born on 6 September 1917, was a writer and black rights activist. He fought against discrimination as director of the United Packinghouse Workers of America[168]. Raised in Chicago, Durham had joined the Communist Party in the late 1930s. He supported the party's anti-displacement policies and its efforts to integrate trade unions,[169] although the black press seemed to mimic the white idea of contrasting the Communist Party.

Later in his life, Durham criticised the way the Communist Party responded to some black issues. They ignored black problems in order to blame the dangers of the "Axis" fascists in Europe. During the Second World War, Durham reported on the inferior training given to black soldiers and the cost in black lives resulting from this. He used to write for the *Defender* magazine. He was sacked for writing an article "against" the editor.

He had a major role in writing famous radio programmes such as *Democracy USA*; he used to write about the difficulties and achievements of black leaders, and the programme was even praised by President Truman.

The most famous radio programme Durham wrote and produced was *Destination Freedom*, which aired on NBC Radio and was to be a series of half-hour dramas about black personalities. The list of potential black characters for Durham's radio show included abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, innovators like Daniel Hale Williams and George Washington Carver, and boxing champions like Joe Louis and Ray "Sugar" Robinson. Durham's approach to notorious black figures was to avoid stereotyping. He chose to tell men's and women's lives. He studied piles and piles of documents about the black leaders that he chose to talk about in his show.

The underlying philosophy of Durham's stories was universalism about African Americans: "I think the Afro-American represents that particular microcosm of the entire world"[170], he said. Then he underlined that poverty, lack of education suffered by African

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[167] Sonja D. Williams, *Word warrior: Richard Durham, radio, and freedom*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2015 (ebook).
[168] Ibid., position 144.
[169] Ibid., position 994.
[170] Ibid., position 1974.

Americans also affected or had affected the majority of the world's population, even the white population of Europeans who moved to America and had to face poverty and a new life in an unknown land. In *Destination Freedom*, Durham argues that women face more discrimination than men. The programme won many awards [171], and ended in 1950. In the 1960s, the Nation of Islam approached Durham about editing their newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks,* This publication served as the official newspaper of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a religious and social movement prominent in mid-20th century America. Durham infused it with a journalistic approach, enhancing its quality and broadening its appeal.

Under Durham's stewardship, "Muhammad Speaks" underwent a substantial transformation. Adopting a rigorous reporting framework and prioritizing investigative journalism. It also focused on the freedom struggles of Africans in Kenya and South Africa.

Muhammad Speaks began to publish articles about a young boxer called Cassius Clay, who was named Muhammad Ali by the same Elijah Muhammad. His name meant "one worthy of praise". Durham, who was also a boxing enthusiast, developed a good relationship with Ali.

After Ali was banned from boxing, Durham was offered the job of writing Ali's autobiography. He wanted to write about every shade of Ali's personality. He believed that Ali had a multi-layered character, as Durham told a *Chicago Defender* journalist:

> "Some people have two personalities, Muhammad has five. When he is alone he is brilliant, when he is with a companion he is meditative, in the boxing ring he concentrates, and for the press he is a clown."[172]

Durham was also of the opinion that Ali was a capable spokesman for Islam, but also a womaniser, something that the NOI leaders would not be happy to have in the book. Durham tried to portray Ali as fully as possible. He followed him around with a tape

[171] Ibid., position 2259.
[172] Ibid., position 3609.

recorder, trying to get the most natural reaction from one of the world's most famous personalities.

Durham initially worked with editor Charles F. Harris on *The Greatest*, but Harris left the company, giving Durham a new editor in writer Toni Morrison. Morrison would become the first African-American to win a Pulitzer, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Nobel Prize for Literature. By then her first novel *The Bluest Eye* had been published. Morrison liked Ali, she believed that Durham was a very capable writer and was able to portray Ali's qualities[173].

Durham was concerned that his work could be corrected and changed by the NOI. After all, they had the final say on the book's content. Nevertheless, Durham followed Ali for five years, gathering events and facts to include in the book. According to Tony Morrison, he had a "theatrical eye" that enabled him to decide "what to throw out and what to include… What was interesting and what was not and how to make a scene"[174].

In the text, Durham's voice is often suggestive. For example, when he recounts the long conversation between Ali and Joe Frazier during a two-hour car ride from Philadelphia to New York City. Durham describes an image that Ali had of himself and Frazier as two "big black slaves fighting, almost on the verge of annihilating each other while the masters are smoking big cigars, screaming and urging us on, looking for the blood."[175]

Durham and editor Toni Morrison had to confront the NOI's restrictions on the text. Herbert Muhammad, Ali's manager, was very controlling of the text and would not include the locker room language of the fighting world which Durham wanted to include. There were three main players in the production of the book: Ali, Durham and the NOI, and each of them had their own point of view. Durham's aim was to select the key episodes in Ali's life in order to write a compelling story for their readers. He was also determined to really understand Ali:

> "when he's in that ring… his trainers and handlers and managers can't do a thing for him. He's alone. And it's the same for a writer… a boxer is all alone in the ring and a writer is all alone at the typewriter"[176].

[173] Ibid., position 3658.
[174] Ibid., position 3688.
[175] Muhammad Ali, Richard Durham, *The greatest*, p. 354.
[176] Ibid.

The relationship between Ali and Durham grew stronger and Durham became much more than Ali's writer. He supported him as a kind of manager, but was late in delivering the book, which was not finished in 1974. Durham was also the one who was able to arrange for Don King to meet with NOI leader Elijah Muhammad to set up the historic Ali-George Foreman fight in Zaire.

The fight gave Durham the opportunity to see more of the country and he recorded some of his observations on tape. He was able to observe that while the president of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, was one of the richest people in the world, the people of Zaire were living in very poor conditions. Durham's "labor limae" on the text is revealed in an interview published in 2002 by his son Mark, who also worked on Ali's autobiography, and who stated that his father suggested he add more drama and emotion to the texts he had already written about Ali's time in Zaire. He wanted to tell a compelling story and he was ready with all his stylistic tools from his years as a radio writer.

Durham ended the book with a summary of the 1975 Ali vs. Joe Frazier fight, which he described as a pre-death experience for Ali.

Published in 1975, the book was praised by many newspapers. In *The New York Times* Ishmael Reed, an appreciated black writer, stated that *The Greatest* was

> "a splendid action-packed hurricane of a book, which, like George Foreman, takes off and runs uphill, goat-like. […] It is a good old two-fisted country thumping in words; a bone-crushing, quality thriller that belongs in the same class as autobiographies written by Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass and James Weldon Johnson."[177]

Phillip E. Borries of the *Chicago Tribune* said he was pleased that Durham had not used the classic chronological style that so many people had used in their autobiographies. The reviews were not all positive, with the *L.A. Times* criticising the subjugation of the text to the philosophy of the NOI. "The man-child that is Muhammad Ali is too often obscured

[177] Ishmael Reed, "The Greatest", *The New York Times,* November 30, 1975.

by the swirling sands of etiolated rhetoric and self-serving revisionism"[178]: this was the conclusion of the *Los Angeles Times* article.

The text was also criticised for its lack of veracity, and Durham's quest for the literary quality of his narrative even led him, as I mentioned before, to include a false story about Ali throwing away his gold medal in the Ohio River because he was being chased by a white gang. Journalist David Remnick confirmed that this story was made up and that Ali had in fact lost his gold medal[179].

Remnick stated that *The Greatest* mixed fact and folklore, Ali's true story, Durham style, and Elijah Muhammad's agenda. Remnick believed that "Durham made Ali out to be a champion fueled almost solely by anger and racial injustice."[180]

[178] David Shaw, "Ali: Now a Socio-Political Symbol: Two Views of Muhammad Ali"*, Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1975.
[179] Sonja D. Williams, *Word warrior*, position 3868.
[180] Ibid., position 3867.

Chapter 4. *Giant Steps* by Kareem Abdul Jabbar

Introduction

This chapter explores the autobiography of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, titled *Giant Steps*. The focus of this chapter is to examine how Abdul-Jabbar, one of the most accomplished basketball players of all time, navigated through the complexities of race and racism during his career. Throughout his autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar reflects on his experiences growing up in New York City, his conversion to Islam, and his decision to boycott the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

The chapter begins by providing a summary of Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography, followed by a detailed analysis of key themes, including race, religion, and representation. Additionally, the chapter explores the relationship between Abdul-Jabbar and his co-author, Peter Knobler.

Overall, the purpose of this chapter is to offer a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of black athletes, particularly within the context of systemic racism and discrimination. By examining Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography, the chapter aims to shed light on the ways in which black athletes have had to navigate societal expectations, institutional racism, and the politics of sports in order to succeed in their respective fields.

4.1 Summary

In the opening of his autobiography, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar reminisces about his youth in New York City, where he spent much of his time playing basketball on the streets and facing off against bullies. When Lew Alcindor, as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was then known, was born in 1947, his family was living in Harlem, where they resided in a 'rooming' complex with shared common areas, including the kitchen and bathrooms[181]. The family occupied two rooms in the complex. In his autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar reflects on his childhood in Harlem, and describes it as a relatively safe place to live, though not without its challenges. During Abdul-Jabbar's childhood, the different neighborhoods in New

[181] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Peter Knobler. *Giant Steps*. New York: Bantam, 2017 ebook. Position 78 of 4673

York City did not have distinct cultural identities. The government-funded housing projects were multicultural, and only 15% of the residents were black. Such diversity allowed Abdul-Jabbar to interact with people from different parts of the world.

Abdul-Jabbar's parents were determined to provide their only child with a solid education and protect him from the dangers of the streets. They were strict with him, highlighting the importance of academic achievement and personal safety. Although Abdul-Jabbar's father was a trained musician, circumstances prevented him from working in the music industry, leading him to become a police officer instead. He was also an avid reader, which greatly influenced his son. His father's demeanor was menacing and uncommunicative, but Abdul-Jabbar admired him and saw him as a role model. On the other hand, his mother was talkative and expressive, and she was determined to see her son succeed in his studies. To help support the family, she worked part-time in a department store and instilled a strong sense of ambition in Abdul-Jabbar.

Abdul-Jabbar gained a deeper understanding of what it meant to be black only when his parents decided to send him to an all-black boarding school in Pennsylvania. While he was aware of race relations in Harlem, where he grew up playing with children from various backgrounds and different races, it was at the boarding school that he truly experienced the importance of race and racial identity. In Pennsylvania, Abdul-Jabbar was smarter and better prepared compared to the rest of the schoolmates, but while being the tallest, he was not the strongest, so he faced bullying from older students.

For Abdul-Jabbar, the basketball court was the only safe haven. He had learned some basketball moves from his father in New York, but initially he was unable to move fluidly on the court. He tried to avoid the attention of the bullies, and inadvertently became invisible on the court as well. In his autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar describes the sensation of his movements on the court as if he were wearing someone else's clothes.

In 1958 with the start of the Civil Rights Movement, the relationship Abdul-Jabbar had with his former white friends began to loosen and he felt he was “no longer simply one of the crowd; he was black”[182]. When his former friends distanced from him because he was black, Abdul-Jabbar felt like a stranger to both the black and white friends. He found

[182] Ibid. position 330 of 4673

relief only on the basketball court, even if he still moved awkwardly. Anyway, he started to have an impact on the game, and started to be scouted by other schools, that offered him scholarships to play with them. He decided to enroll at Power Memorial Academy, a Catholic all-boys school run by "the brothers", where he had to face prejudices and racism. On the other hand, the time spent on the court was easy for Abdul-Jabbar, who quickly became the best player of the team and maybe of the state.

At Power Memorial Academy he lacked confidence in his chances, but was able to join the varsity team as the coaching staff had faith in his abilities. During the time at this school, Abdul-Jabbar encountered his first coach, Jack Donohue, who was very tough on his players to motivate them to improve. With Abdul-Jabbar, in particular, he would sometimes ask him if he was a farmer[183]. Occasionally, Mr. Donohue would take the team to watch NBA games at Madison Square Garden, the most famous arena in the world, and he encouraged Abdul-Jabbar to observe and learn from Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain, two players who were redefining the role of the center position in the game. The freshman year was difficult for the young Abdul-Jabbar, but he continued to grow and refine his game so much that college recruiters started proposing he visit their campuses.

During his sophomore year, the Power Memorial Academy became the team to beat. They began to have a large following, attracting crowds of fans. The young Kareem Abdul-Jabbar soon started to change his perspective on basketball, as he already was not just a basketball player but he was carrying "thousand people's self-esteem to shoulder"[184]. To Abdul-Jabbar the game became more than being just fun.

Mr. Donohue prevented Abdul-Jabbar from giving interviews to New York magazines. He thought that his young center should be protected from fame and pressure. He wanted to keep Abdul-Jabbar from individuals who might try to recruit young athletes by offering promises of money.

The year 1962 marked a great change both for him and African Americans in the United States. Black people started to identify themselves as a group and Abdul-Jabbar started to see himself as a mature individual who could take his life in his own hands. During the

[183] Ibid. position 531 of 4673
[184] Ibid. position 618 of 4673

Easter holidays he travelled alone to North Carolina to visit some friends. The difficulties of the black population increased and several incidents occurred in which black individuals became victims of violence. Abdul-Jabbar became increasingly aware of these injustices.

In 1964, at the age of seventeen, Abdul-Jabbar enrolled in HARYOU (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited), an association created to keep young adults in Harlem away from the streets. The association offered various summer workshops, including dance, drama, music, community action, and journalism. Abdul-Jabbar's interest in journalism led him to know more about the neighborhood he was living in. He also came in contact with the ideas of significant figures like Marcus Garvey and W.E.B DuBois. Within the HARYOU newspaper there was a sense that something had to change for the black community. There was the idea that they had to write for the black people, not just to them. Within his task as a journalist, Abdul-Jabbar was sent to cover Martin Luther King Jr's press conference in New York[185]. On July 18, 1964 Abdul-Jabbar found himself in the black protests against the New York police department. A policeman had killed a black boy stating he was armed, but no weapon was found. The protests were violent. Abdul-Jabbar believed that the cause of the protest was the fact that the police failed to apologize, covering agents committing crimes against black individuals and providing false evidence over the causes of those deaths .

During the summer of 1964, the protests became less dangerous, thus allowing Abdul-Jabbar to continue playing basketball on the streets of New York. He participated in the Rucker Tournament, which is now recognized as one of the most famous street basketball tournaments in the world. It was during this time that he first met Wilt Chamberlain, the famous player from Philadelphia who remains the only player in NBA history to have scored 100 points in a single game. Their friendship grew stronger as Chamberlain would spend some time in New York to train. According to Abdul-Jabbar, Chamberlain followed his career partly because he was a New Yorker, but also because sooner or later he could be his opponent on the basketball court. Chamberlain invited Abdul-Jabbar to his luxurious apartment near Central Park where they would play cards. Wilt Chamberlain was the only person Abdul-Jabbar knew to be extremely rich, as all of his friends were

[185] Ibid. position 1027 of 4673

"working-or lower-middle-class guys"[186]. Wilt enjoyed showing off his wealth, driving a Bentley, owning horses, dining at the finest restaurants and spending time in the clubhouses[187].

The young basketball star looked at Wilt as his mentor, not just on the basketball court but also in life. The young Abdul-Jabbar felt uncomfortable with the girls, with people he did not know, especially white individuals. In his free time, he would go on dates, learn to play the saxophone and try to choose the college to attend. When Abdul-Jabbar had to choose a college to attend and to play for, he decided to exclude universities in the South, and chose to attend UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), as this college had made an extremely positive impression on him[188]. The campus was large, and the basketball team had recently won the national championship for the second consecutive year. At UCLA, Abdul-Jabbar had the opportunity to meet John Wooden, a highly respected and skilled coach who was clear about his expectations from his players: to focus on training and academic dedication. Abdul-Jabbar was very good in both, so there would be no problem to him.

Abdul-Jabbar spent his senior year at high school trying to emancipate from his parents, and starting to feel an adult. For example, he decided to experiment with smoking marijuana. In his autobiography he refers to this experience as a way of tasting a new air of freedom.

Upon arriving in California, he had to adapt to being 'famous' within his campus. He also had to adapt to living with another guy of the same age in the same room. In the campus, Abdul-Jabbar decided not to go to the Mass and never went again in his life[189]. Everybody wanted to meet Abdul-Jabbar, but he was not interested in meeting many people in the campus – he found a small circle of friends and stuck to it. He became friends with Edgar Lacy, who shared the same ideas about white people, and also with Jimmy Johnson who introduced him to the black Los Angeles, in particular the South Central part of the city. Abdul-Jabbar considered Harlem the typical American ghetto and saw that the living conditions of people in South Central L.A were similar. However, Abdul-Jabbar felt that

[186] Ibid. position 1228 of 4673
[187] Ibid. position 1235 of 4673
[188] Ibid. position 1534 of 4673
[189] Ibid. position 1753 of 4673

in South Central there was a more developed sense of black pride. At this time, he began reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a text that would mark his coming into consciousness as a black individual.

At UCLA, teachers did not expect Abdul-Jabbar to excel in any field other than basketball, but he stood out in many subjects. On the basketball court, coach Wooden encouraged him to try a new technique for the hook shot, which would later prove to be his signature move throughout his pro career – the sky hook. The first season was not complicated, and his team won all the games. When it ended, he felt a sense of independence like he had never experienced before[190].

During his sophomore season, Abdul-Jabbar had to deal with the real competition of the NCAA, the college basketball level. Expectations were very high, especially because the new Pauley Pavilion arena had been inaugurated just before the beginning of the season. The first game of the season was against USC, the L.A rivals, and the UCLA 'Bruins' won. Abdul-Jabbar scored fifty-six points, which set a school record[191]. Abdul-Jabbar describes his former coach as a genius[192]. The team's confidence continued to grow, and they continued to win.

Abdul-Jabbar had other problems to think about beyond the basketball court, particularly related to money. His scholarship did not cover all his expenses – he owned a car and rented an apartment. During his years at UCLA, Abdul-Jabbar received financial help from Sam Gilbert, a builder who helped young athletes at the collegiate level to have some sort of income. He ignored many of the NCAA's financial restrictions for college players, but he didn't do anything illegal, according to Abdul-Jabbar[193].

Another issue Abdul-Jabbar had to face during his senior year at UCLA was how to handle the media and interviews. In his high school years, Abdul-Jabbar was forbidden from having conversations with journalists, and the same thing happened during his freshman year. The national attention on the talented young center from New York exploded during his sophomore season, so much so that even the NCAA was not prepared to it. The majority of journalists were white and asked questions he was not interested in answering.

[190] Ibid. Position 1960 of 4673
[191] Ibid. Position 2155 of 4673
[192] Ibid. Position 2186 of 4673
[193] Ibid. Position 2230 of 4673

His main interest was to discuss about black people and the mistreatment they had to face in white America[194].

At the end of their sophomore season, the UCLA 'Bruins' emerged as the national champions, and they entered the following year as the favorites to win the title again. During the off-season, the NCAA prohibited dunking during games, which, according to Abdul-Jabbar[195], was aimed at preventing him from dominating in the game. He believed that if he were a white player, there would be no limitation on dunking. This restriction only improved Abdul-Jabbar's soft touch and did not significantly affect his performance. They returned to the NCAA Final Four again and won their second consecutive national championship.

During his second and third years at UCLA, Abdul-Jabbar made some very important decisions. In fact, he began to mature a new faith by studying various religions; in the summer of 1968 he converted to Islam. He also decided not to participate in the Summer Olympics under the United States flag.

In his senior year, Abdul-Jabbar started to view basketball as a way to connect with people who had an impact on the world. In a way, the game became less fun than once was. The rejection of the Olympic call had only widened the distance between Abdul-Jabbar and others. However, on the basketball court, the team continued to win as expected. The next step for Abdul-Jabbar would be entering the pros, therefore he decided to hire a business adviser before the draft. The Milwaukee Bucks held the first pick in the NBA draft that year, although Abdul-Jabbar would have preferred to play for the Knicks, closer to the Muslim community.

After graduating from UCLA in June 1969, Abdul-Jabbar told his parents about his new faith. His mother did not approve this change, since she had raised his son as a Catholic. Abdul-Jabbar describes that summer as a very difficult period. He wasn't even ready to move from New York to the Midwest. In October, he arrived in Wisconsin, where he had to face a new reality. Milwaukee was very different from New York or Los Angeles, and he describes the people there as 'Farmers', many having German and Polish origins. He was still concealing his Muslim identity in public, and everybody knew him as Lew

[194] Ibid. Position 2255 of 4373
[195] Ibid. Position 2286 of 4373

Alcindor. Abdul-Jabbar had no social life because his religious beliefs prohibited him from drinking alcohol, and the only gathering places in Milwaukee were taverns.

In the autobiography Abdul-Jabbar says that the only positive element of his rookie year was the experience in the NBA. He wanted to compete against other pros and realized very soon the difference between college basketball and the pros game. In the NBA, players have to play a significant number of games, causing a lack of emotional involvement in the preparation for each game. The preparation was more intellectual and physical than emotional[196].

Pro players were also required to be interviewed after each game, but the relationship between Abdul-Jabbar and the press was difficult from the beginning. His religious faith and his ideas against white America were not popular among the general audience of readers[197]. In his autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar comments that journalists were very critical only of black athletes, not white ones. The journalists expected always the maximum and tried to provoke him by describing him negatively. His strategy was to minimize contact with journalists and give concise answers, which made them dislike him[198]. He mentions a very specific interview he had where a journalist asked him what he meant by calling another player "a motherfucker". The answer was at the same time sarcastic and explanatory:

> "The black community is very much of a matriarchy. Has been ever since the days when families of slaves were broken up, the men sold all over the place with no regard for their wives or children, humiliated, made to feel like they were less than men. Lots of times the women had to take over everything, bring up the children by themselves, maybe bring up other people's children as well. That's lasted to this day; the men are still being humiliated, still being moved around, sometimes can't support a family, shamed. Black women are still raising most of the kids and running a lot of the culture. The mothers are very important to black people. So, anyone who would fuck his mother is

[196] Ibid. Position 2857 of 4673
[197] Ibid. Position 2863 of 4673
[198] Ibid. Position 2894 of 4673

thought of as the lowest type of person, and what I was saying was that this person is a very low type person."[199]

During the first year in the NBA, he felt that basketball was just work. The expectations on him were huge, so was the pressure, as he was the tallest and strongest athlete: even the referees never gave him the benefit of the doubt, leading him to feel not protected by the rules. Despite these challenges, his rookie season with the Milwaukee Bucks was successful. The team developed a collective confidence and a team spirit which were essential to win. Abdul-Jabbar's playing style improved, both in attack and defense, and he won the Rookie of the Year Award. However, Milwaukee lost in the playoffs to the New York Knicks.

His life in Wisconsin was tough but, after his rookie year, his life on the court improved significantly with the arrival of Oscar Robertson to the Milwaukee Bucks. Robertson, considered one of the best players in NBA history, excelled in points, rebounds and assists. He was six feet five inches tall for 210 pounds, but he was also smooth and graceful, quick and smart, always ready to make the right move at the right time. He also had an inspiring effect on the rest of his team and was very charismatic. Abdul-Jabbar recognizes that Robertson had a huge impact on his career. Furthermore, Abdul-Jabbar finally had the opportunity to play against Wilt Chamberlain, who had been out during the previous season due to a knee injury. Chamberlain was a star and a symbol for every NBA player, and he had a significant influence on Abdul-Jabbar's career. However, Abdul-Jabbar was disappointed when Chamberlain publicly supported Nixon for the presidency in 1968[200].

In 1971 the Bucks reached the finals after beating the Lakers in the Western Conference and won the NBA championship. Abdul-Jabbar was already a world champion as the NBA's MVP at his second year in the league.

After winning the NBA championship, Abdul-Jabbar married a girl who had converted to Islam. Abdul-Jabbar's parents were prohibited from attending the ceremony because they were Catholics. Abdul-Jabbar did not protest because he believed that it was the Islamic procedure for marriages. His mother was very upset, and he was not convincing in

[199] Ibid. Position 2920 of 4673
[200] Ibid. Position 3119 of 4673

defending Muslim laws regarding the ceremony because he himself was not fully convinced. After the marriage he made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Back home, he officially adopted the name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Abdul-Jabbar devotes part of his autobiography to explaining the different behaviors of former teammates and opponents. He mentions the kind of *trash-talking* players used during games and what his life as a pro athlete was like. He describes the physical effort required from players during the NBA regular season, and everyday life outside the basketball court that limited or even eliminated the possibility of having a social life. Abdul-Jabbar also discusses the racial ratio between black and white players in the NBA. When he started playing in the NBA, the majority of players were white, but over time the league became predominantly black, and white players had to adapt. He notes that in some cases, white players had no experience of the black lifestyle and were 'excluded' from the team's social life [201]. To emphasize the gap between black and white players, he states that referees were not fair with black players.

In 1973 and the following year the Bucks did not win the finals. Abdul-Jabbar's contract with the Bucks expired and he needed a change: he accepted to join the Los Angeles Lakers. During his first season with the Lakers, he won his fourth MVP award, but the team did not reach the playoffs. The following season, the Lakers had improved results, but they were ultimately defeated by the Portland Trail Players.

In 1977 Kareem Abdul-Jabbar realized he was alone: Hamaas Abdul-Khaalism, who had inspired him to convert to Islam, was in jail, his wife was in Washington living a life of her own and his parents' visits were uncomfortable. In the following two seasons the Lakers did not experience significant success. Abdul-Jabbar was named captain of the team and started receiving letters of appreciation from Lakers supporters. Abdul-Jabbar's attitude toward fans and supporters of the team changed. Additionally, his new relationship with a woman whose name was Cheryl Pistono influenced him to be more socially open to fans and re-establish contact with his parents: he started a ritual of greeting his parents during TV interviews. Furthermore, his relationship with journalists also became more open, likely due to the influence of Pistono.

[201] Ibid. Position 3591 of 4673

This ‘transformation’ was further enhanced when the Lakers drafted a young star, Earvin ‘Magic’ Johnson. Johnson, who was twenty years old, had already experienced two previous highly successful seasons in college and proved his great basketball skills. He was very emotional and enthusiastic, and this was transmitted to his teammates. Johnson was so energetic that after just the first win of the season he celebrated as if he had just won the NBA finals. At the end of the 1980 season, the Lakers played against Philadelphia ‘76ers. For the first time in nine years they reached the finals once again. In Game Five, Abdul-Jabbar suffered a severe ankle sprain, but he continued to play scoring 40 points and assuring his team the victory. He was not able to play in the following game, but ‘Magic’ Johnson scored 42 points, leading the Lakers to win the championship. The following seasons were characterized by ups and downs. In 1981, the Lakers did not reach the finals. However, in 1982 they won the title once again, and in 1983 they managed to win the title two years in a row.

On January 30, 1983, his house in Bel Air was completely destroyed by a fire. Nobody got injured, but all the objects he had collected over the years were reduced to ashes, in particular his collection of vinyl records and oriental rugs. At first, he was shocked and disoriented, but then he turned to Qur’an to seek strength and realized how lucky he was to be safe with all his family. Many fans began sending him vinyl albums and other objects to show him their admiration.

The autobiography of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar concludes with the realization that his playing career was near to its end. He had no interest in coaching, but he wanted to keep mentoring young stars of the NBA.

In a sort of Nietzschean eternal return, in the last paragraphs of his autobiography Abdul-Jabbar recollects his return to New York for a playground basketball game with his former friends. During this reunion, they recalled their past. Abdul-Jabbar describes these moments as some of the happiest moments of his whole life.

In an autobiography, the protagonist is the same person as the author, but they do not share the same perspective of time and space. The author always possesses more knowledge than the protagonist, even though they are one and the same. Howarth uses the term "strategy" to refer to elements such as style, imagery, and structure, as these technical aspects are crucial in conveying the protagonist's voice.

The final element is theme, representing the ideas and beliefs that shape the protagonist's mindset. Themes can be related to the author's ideology, religious faith, or political opinions. The temporal distance between the events narrated and the moment in which they are being narrated is an important element in Jabbar's text.

In his autobiography, Abdul Jabbar speaks of himself with clear detachment. His autobiographical text closely aligns with Howarth's definition of "Autobiography as Poetry," where the author does not seek to glorify oneself but rather recounts their life, highlighting the difficulties.

Unlike Muhammad Ali's text, in which the author embodies a new way of being an athlete, particularly as a Black athlete, Jabbar questions himself as a person, as an athlete, and as a Black athlete. As an athlete, Jabbar began to bear the weight of the pressure to win and fulfill the desires of his fans from the early years of high school.

He expresses the following thoughts on the matter:

> "Victory was no longer confined to any one given high school basketball contest but was invested with a lot of other people's currency that I couldn't afford to lose. Coach Donohue made a big point of basketball being a team sport, but I knew whose fault it would be if Power lost; I knew who people would come to first."[202]

Jabbar given his introverted nature, being an only child, and his height that became a symbol of physical distance from the rest of the world, he feels like a fish out of water, distant from both whites and blacks.

Throughout the text, Abdul-Jabbar maintains a tone that avoids self-aggrandizement. Instead, he openly acknowledges his weaknesses, his struggles with socializing, and the significant influence certain individuals held over his life. His mother, Coach Donohue,

[202] Ibid. Position 623 of 4673

and Hamaas all played pivotal roles in shaping his beliefs and choices. To Hamaas, Abdul-Jabbar entrusted the responsibility of guiding him as a devout Muslim, seeking advice on matters such as marriage and even allowing him to block his parents' entry into the mosque during the wedding ceremony, ultimately adopting a new Muslim name.

4.2 Lew Alcindor and New York City.

The role of New York City in Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography and, consequently, in his life was enormous.

The Alcindors moved to Harlem in 1947, before their son was born. Abdul-Jabbar's father, Ferdinand Lewis 'Al' Alcindor, left the Army to join Abdul-Jabbar's mother, Cora, in a 'rooming', a rented apartment where the Alcindors had only one room while sharing the kitchen and bathrooms with other tenants.

The autobiography opens describing how Abdul-Jabbar, known as Alcindor at the time, was accustomed to fighting with other children on the streets of New York. The city and Abdul-Jabbar's neighborhood were filled with aggressive streetwise children who were inclined to bully younger children. Growing up in the city, young Alcindor was compelled to stand up against bullies who wanted to torment him. Harlem is described as far from a paradise, but also far from the war zone that it would become in the 80s. The neighborhood is described as a place where people would leave their front doors open and where theft was not tolerated[203]. Although New York is presented as a city divided into neighborhoods, each with its own identity, the different neighborhoods did not have distinct cultural identities. The government-funded housing projects were multicultural, and only 15% of the residents were black. The housing projects where the Alcindors moved in are depicted as a "multinational enclave"[204] where young Abdul-Jabbar could play with children from various backgrounds and from different parts of the world, including English, Scandinavian and Cuban children.

Although the city was not as segregated as the southern regions of the country in terms of racial marginalization of black individuals, Abdul-Jabbar recalls a tense event when he

[203] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Peter Knobler. *Giant Steps*. New York: Bantam, 2017 ebook. Position 78 of 4673
[204] Ibid. Position 83 of 4673

and his mother would visit the local grocery store on Dyckman Street, in their neighborhood. The store manager intercepted Abdul-Jabbar's mother and compelled her to show him the contents of her package, suspecting she had been stealing from the store [205]. This incident had never occurred with local Irish and Italian customers and other marginalized groups. Abdul-Jabbar's mother started to shout and ran away. This event remained stuck in the memory of young Alcindor, although at the time he was not aware of racism or feeling different from the other children. He became aware of his blackness in third grade, when one of his classmates brought a Polaroid camera to school to take a class picture. When Abdul-Jabbar saw the photo, he realized that he was not only the tallest child, but also the only black pupil in his class. What really changed Abdul-Jabbar's perception of himself as a black child was the period he spent at an all-black school in Pennsylvania, the Power Memorial Academy. At the school, where there was only one black teacher, some of the 'brothers' who ran the school believed that black people wanted "too much too soon": if African Americans wanted equality, they had to work for it. Abdul-Jabbar realized he was different from the other black children, as he was not able to properly communicate in their language, as he had good manners but no ability in dealing with threats. In Philadelphia, Abdul-Jabbar understood he was no longer living in his familiar multicultural city where he used to play with children from different ethnic backgrounds. The only place where he felt sure and safe was the basketball court, where he spent hours improving his basketball skills. When he returned home to New York for his summer holidays, he reunited with his friends, and discovered he had become tougher on the basketball court compared to his opponents in New York.

At the age of fifteen Abdul-Jabbar and his team became famous throughout all of New York. Basketball started to feel like a profession for him, with victories piled up like bricks. Abdul-Jabbar and his teammates were not only playing for themselves, but also for the self-esteem of thousands of people[206]. It was very challenging for a fifteen-year-old, but the rewards were important. Abdul-Jabbar captured the attention of the entire city, and his name appeared in the newspapers. However, his coach prohibited him from giving interviews to the press, stressing the importance of focusing only on the game.

[205] Ibid. Position 138 of 4673
[206] Ibid. Position 619 of 4673

The interest in Abdul-Jabbar also grew among individuals referred to as 'sharks' by coach Donohue. They wanted to exploit the image of the young basketball star for their own financial interest. Following his coach's advice, Abdul-Jabbar did not pay much attention to these people. Coach Donohue, who had grown up in Kentucky, appeared to be an open-minded person to the young Abdul-Jabbar. He opposed the mistreatment of black people in Kentucky.

The Power Memorial High School quickly established itself as the Undisputed City Champion. The title gave Abdul-Jabbar a sense of relief, as he had met the expectations of his supporters.

Every summer, after the official basketball season was over, Abdul-Jabbar had the chance to hit the streets of New York with confidence, going everywhere in search of basketball games, from the Bronx to the Greenwich Village. In the playgrounds of Harlem the majority of the players was black. There were also some Italian sharpshooters who were not up to the level of the competition[207]. Not all of Abdul-Jabbar's friends in New York had basketball as their main activity. Each of them had their own specialty: he was the basketball phenomenon, Julio aspired to become a gangster (he eventually served a ten-year sentence), Harold burgled gas stations. Abdul-Jabbar managed to maintain friendship with them without getting involved in their criminal activities. Abdul-Jabbar describes his friends as modern-day Robin Hoods compared to the other criminals that crowded the streets of New York. He personally witnessed a gunfight and read about a child murdered on Christmas day for twenty-five cents. Harlem is described as a neighborhood full of roach-infested slums, with most of the buildings and stores owned by white people.

The majority of Abdul-Jabbar's friends were black, but he also liked some white boys he met on the numerous playgrounds of the Big Apple. Most players were also black, but occasionally there were some Italian players with good sharpshooting skills, although they rarely received the ball. The status of Italians as not being considered completely white emerged frequently in the texts, as they were often opposed to other white individuals.

[207] Ibid. position 832 of 4673

During the summer of 1964, Abdul-Jabbar had the opportunity to fully explore Harlem for the first time in his life. He applied to the Harlem Youth Action Project, an association that aimed to keep talented children away from the street. He applied for a place in a journalism workshop. Thanks to this workshop, he was able to delve into the history of Harlem, exploring the architectural importance of some notable buildings such as the elegant brick row houses of Striver's Row, which stood in the middle of Harlem. As a reporter, Abdul-Jabbar was able to delve into the activities of known figures like Marcus Garvey, W.E.B DuBois, and the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural revival centered in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. He even had the opportunity to cover Martin Luther King Jr's press conference upon his arrival in New York. While discovering the roots and history of Harlem, Abdul-Jabbar was also reluctantly exposed to the violence that had spread in the neighborhood following the killing of a black boy by a white man during the summer of 1964.

Abdul-Jabbar interviewed outraged people regarding the protests throughout Harlem. Many of them had themselves experienced police violence, yet their accounts never appeared in the newspapers or on TV, which only focused on property damage and injuries suffered by police officers. After a couple of weeks, the protests slowed down. Abdul-Jabbar returned to attending local playgrounds and participating in tournaments, with the most famous being the Rucker Tournament. These tournament games provided an opportunity for black athletes to show their skills against the best competition from their neighborhoods. The Rucker Tournament was so well-known that even famous NBA players like Wilt Chamberlain and Connie Hawkins would participate in it.

The friendship between Abdul-Jabbar and Chamberlain introduced the young New Yorker to a new world. Chamberlain had an apartment in the exclusive Park West Village, and Abdul-Jabbar would spend nights there engaging in conversations and playing cards with Wilt and his circle of friends. Chamberlain also took Abdul-Jabbar to the Latin Quarter, a nightclub reminiscent of Las Vegas, where Wilt was familiar with everyone. They also attended horse races together. Furthermore, Chamberlain introduced the young Abdul-Jabbar to a series of famous jazz clubs and his extensive collection of jazz albums, which only fueled the young center's passion for this music.

Abdul-Jabbar's passion for music continued to be significant throughout his high school years in New York. He would often spend time in jazz clubs, and living in the Big Apple allowed him the opportunity to witness great performances by jazz legends like Roland Kirk and Thelonius Monk[208]. Abdul-Jabbar describes the circle of famous musicians as a private community, and he considers himself lucky to have personally known many of them. During his senior year, Abdul-Jabbar gained a sense of independence, influenced by his personal relationship with Wilt Chamberlain. Through Chamberlain he had various experiences, including the use of marijuana. However, Abdul-Jabbar verified that it was not classified as a drug according to LaGuardia Report, a government-sponsored study on drugs. As Abdul-Jabbar had to take the decision of which college to play for after graduating from high school, he decided to move away from New York, trying to further expand his personal freedom.

New York is portrayed as a continuously changing city in Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography, a place where every section of the population has its own distinct neighborhood, but the projects are presented as a multicultural place where individuals from different backgrounds shared the same spaces. The city is characterized by ongoing violence inflicted by white individuals on black communities, leading to protests and social unrest. Harlem, however, is represented as a place where a black child could explore their African American cultural roots, attend jazz concerts and meet famous African American musicians. Moreover, New York was the place where many young adults idolized gangsters or aspired to be part of that world. The many layers in one's identity played a significant role on Abdul-Jabbar's subsequent career, life experiences, and even his conversion to a new faith.

4.3 Reference to race and racism in Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography.

The references to race and racism recur throughout Abdul-Jabbar's autobiographical text with particular connotations. Race is a concept that has always been used to discriminate against black people, subjecting them to various forms of suffering and limiting their access to the same opportunities available to white people. Race, however, is not only a

[208] Ibid. Position 1398 of 4673

tool of oppression but also an identifying feature that brings a group of people together to share a way of living, musical genres, and a distinct form of talking. Both aspects of race are present in Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography.

Abdul-Jabbar's father, "Big Al" Alcindor, faced the difficulties of being black and not having the same opportunities compared to others. He studied and played trombone at a music school, graduating with a degree in musicology. However, due to race discrimination, he was unable to find work as a musician and had to settle for working as a bill collector. Abdul-Jabbar's mother, who came from North Carolina, had firsthand knowledge of the hard living conditions for blacks in the South.

Being black for Abdul-Jabbar was not something that he had thought about frequently growing up in the multicultural environment of the New York projects. These government-owned housings were filled with people from various backgrounds, and as a result Abdul-Jabbar spent a lot of time interacting with people of different descent. It becomes evident from the following fragment of his autobiography:

> "Up until that point, color had not been a major issue. It wasn't ignored, we weren't living in any dream world, but race had not been the sole determining factor in what my life had been like. I'd been more apt to play with someone who was friendly than with someone who was black[209]."

At the age of nine, Abdul-Jabbar's parents decided to enroll him in an all–black boarding school located in Philadelphia. Abdul-Jabbar had to interact with other black children, who often lacked the same attention by their parents as he did. He excelled at school, but he was marginalized by his schoolmates. He was not even able to communicate with them because they frequently used slang he was not familiar with. He started to be increasingly isolated from his schoolmates. He was taller, better-educated, and quieter, and despite being black as everybody else, he felt different from other children for the first time in his life.

Abdul-Jabbar had his own chance to witness the treatment of black people in the South. During the Easter break of 1962, he travelled to North Carolina to visit a family friend.

[209] Ibid. Position 251 of 4673

There he saw store signs such as "Johnson's White Grocery Store" and "Corley's White Luncheonette"[210]. The stark contrast to New York or Philadelphia was very evident, and made Abdul-Jabbar ask people whether black individuals were allowed to walk on the same side of the street as whites.

The spread of the Civil Rights Movement affected not only black people, but also Abdul-Jabbar himself. In fact, his former white friends in New York distanced from him. He started to spend more time with other black individuals, who often had several problems. One person, named Vino, struggled with alcohol addiction, while others had aspirations to become criminals, as they believed the ghetto did not offer them better alternatives.

Even in high school, at Power Memorial Academy, he encountered difficulties with racial issues. Abdul-Jabbar continued to improve on the basketball court, and initially his relationship with coach Mr Donohue was good. The coach was able to communicate with the players and motivate them to give their best on the court. The relationship suddenly deteriorated during Abdul-Jabbar's junior season when the coach shouted at him that he was playing "like a nigger"[211], meaning that he was not playing at 100% of his abilities. The phrase remained in Abdul-Jabbar's mind for the rest of the season, even though the coach had previously demonstrated awareness of the conditions faced by the black population in the United States.

From the text, it is evident that there were no black authoritative figures around Abdul-Jabbar: no black coaches, only a black music teacher who, however, knew nothing about black music. All the people in positions of power were white. The very few black people with any form of power were even critical of those who protested mistreatment by whites. Abdul-Jabbar mentions the example of a religion teacher who claimed that "Black people want too much, too soon"[212].

The young center was in favor of 'black power', but he was never a typical fighter for black freedom. Instead, he was a victim of bullying himself, he disliked confrontation, and concealed his emotions behind a mask of shyness. Violence was not just the result of poverty and related crimes committed by black people. It also came from white hatred

[210] Ibid. Position 682 of 4673
[211] Ibid. Position 957 of 4673
[212] Ibid. Position 717 of 4673

and racism. The bombing of a black Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963, resulting in the deaths of four young black girls, shocked Alcindor, who recalls how his faith was shattered like the church rubble. There was no safe place for black people, and he felt that black people had no allies to rely on. He even states: "God wasn't stepping in; they'd just bombed His house![213]" From that moment throughout his adolescence, Alcindor attended Church only to please his mother. The event also made him realize that he was part of the population that was neglected by both the media and the Government. Alcindor understood that the problem was not individual white people, but those in power who held control over the lives of black people.

Abdul-Jabbar used to be very detached from others out of a kind of shyness and he was a private person. Like many other black young adults of his generation, he shared a sense of resentment towards whites. However, this displeasure amplified his desire to learn more about the roots of African American culture. He enrolled in a journalism workshop organized by the social-justice association called HARYOU. Through this workshop, he had the opportunity to learn about the history of Harlem and the presence of black communities in the neighborhood for decades. Moreover, Abdul-Jabbar had to opportunity to delve into the life of Malcolm X and to discover the black literature of the Harlem Renaissance, which had never been taught to him.

The HARYOU association aimed to be a voice for the black community, and the participants of the journalism workshop wanted to emphasize the lack of jobs for black people and the disparity between black and white workers. Abdul-Jabbar was able to cover Martin Luther King's press conference when he went to New York, and directly assisted to the 1964 protests against the NYPD that were caused by the shooting of a young black student. He describes the killing of a black boy by a white officer as something common, and even more common was the lack of any admission of guilt from the police. The staff of the HARYOU newspaper interviewed people from Harlem to gather their thoughts about the protests. In contrast, the white media showed little interest in reporting the acts of violence that black people were accustomed to. The experience as a journalist in the HARYOU newspaper further increased Abdul-Jabbar's awareness of

[213] Ibid. Position 879 of 4673

black subordination and he withdraw into silence rejecting anyone who wanted something from him.

Meeting a star like Wilt Chamberlain gave Abdul-Jabbar a new perspective on what a black man could achieve. Chamberlain was one of the biggest stars in the '60s National Basketball Association and he was well aware of his status. He had enough money to buy an enormous flat near Central Park, and he was a celebrity. Wilt was famous among both blacks and whites, and during Abdul-Jabbar's youth years, he was a mentor figure to him. Over the years, the relationship between Abdul-Jabbar and Wilt worsened. Chamberlain became envious of the young center who had the potential to replace him as the biggest star in the NBA. On the other hand, Abdul-Jabbar ceased to see Wilt as a role model when he supported Richard Nixon in 1968 presidential campaign[214]. While Abdul-Jabbar was aware of the struggles of black people for basic human rights, Wilt was supporting a man whom Abdul-Jabbar knew had no regards for those rights.

The event that drove the two basketball players apart was when Chamberlain stated that black women were inferior sexual partners. Abdul-Jabbar commented on his statement as follows:

> I would never have criticized Wilt unless I felt extremely strong in my beliefs; he was not a guy to cross lightly, but I couldn't let that one ride.
>
> This was sexuality and capitulation and racial abandonment all in one piece. Wilt was a powerful black man, a symbol to a generation (I had looked up to him myself) and to an entire race; there was no way he should have denigrated his people, particularly in front a white public guaranteed to seize upon this racist assertion as another means to divide and control us. Wilt the lover had gone too far. I stopped seeing him as a political crossover and began thinking of him as a traitor.[215]

The relationship between the two big men improved once again only ten years after. Abdul-Jabbar never truly disliked Chamberlain as a basketball player, but in the end he rather disagreed with his political affiliation with Nixon.

Abdul-Jabbar's attitude towards his own race stemmed from his upbringing. He was raised in a multicultural environment and wasn't aware of being different from other

[214] Ibid. Position 3118 of 4673
[215] Ibid. Position 3131 of 4673

children until he attended an all-black school. There, he stood out from everybody else because many of the other black children hadn't been as fortunate to have a strong family. Abdul-Jabbar was also an only child who followed the advice of his mother, his father, and his coaches. His height always created a sense of distance between him and everybody else, making him appear much older. During his college years, Abdul-Jabbar felt annoyed by people of his age and began to socialize more with older black boys. At UCLA, he started to envision himself as a black man, while finding it difficult to understand and trust white people[216]. Once in Los Angeles, Abdul-Jabbar had the opportunity to visit the black neighborhood and he was fascinated by how it resembled Harlem. He stated that Harlem was the prototype of the American black ghetto, although in Los Angeles, black people had a greater sense of pride in their blackness[217]. At UCLA, Abdul-Jabbar also read Malcolm X's autobiography, which had an enormous influence on his way of thinking about the relationship between blacks and whites. Malcolm X was against the concept of integration, which Abdul-Jabbar had always supported, as he believed that true equality was not possible because black people were systematically denied access to the same economic and political power as whites.

Abdul-Jabbar did not share the same appeal among the white audience as Wilt Chamberlain. Since high school days, his coaches had not allowed him to make public comments about the games he played and Abdul-Jabbar himself did not want to talk to journalists. As he expressed in his autobiography, he did not want to play the role of the 'good boy' for white readers. This reserved attitude from Abdul-Jabbar offended journalists and further worsened his relationship with the press, even during his pro years. As Anthony Wilson wrote in 2009:

> "Abdul-Jabbar was elegant and unstoppable on the court, and thoughtful, intelligent, and articulate off it. But he was also shy and moody...His mood tending to lean very heavily in the antisocial direction for most of his career, which led to his adversarial relationship with the media."[218]

[216] Ibid. Position 1823 of 4673
[217] Ibid. Position 1844 of 4673
[218] Wilson Anthony, 'Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: The (Relatively) Neglected Legend', in *Bleacher Report Basketball*, March 16, 2009

The difficult relationship between Abdul-Jabbar and the white sports fans and media grew even more contentious when he publicly announced his conversion to Islam.

4.4 Race, religion, and representation.

The correlation between race and religion in shaping Abdul-Jabbar's identity is crucial. Lew Alcindor grew up in a very religious family. His mother wanted him to attend church regularly wearing his finest clothes[219]. She had converted from Baptist to Catholic in order to marry Al Alcindor, Lew's father. Therefore, as a consequence to her religious convictions, she enrolled her son in a Catholic school because she thought it could offer stricter discipline and a better academic program.

Alcindor was already taller than all the other children at a very early age, and he quickly started to play basketball. The games he played were officiated by Christian brothers. They often chose to not call fouls on the young Alcindor in order to maintain the competitiveness of the game and "to make it interesting." [220]

The young center from New York maintained his Catholic education when he enrolled at Power Memorial Academy high school. The narrator analyzes his Catholic upbringing during his youth from his adult perspective, suggesting that Catholics encouraged individuals to confront various forms of repression. As a young adult, Alcindor also experienced sexual repression within his Catholic setting. Abdul-Jabbar recalls attending confession, a practice expected of him by his mother. At that age, he felt obliged to comply with his mother's desires. At Power Memorial High School, the brothers maintained an environment where their authority was absolute, and questioning was not accepted among the young students. Discipline at Power Memorial was imposed with fear, leading Abdul-Jabbar to describe the atmosphere as tense and filled with terror. The person responsible for discipline, Brother McLaughlin, would subject students to extended hours at school for even minor mistakes, delays or missed assignments. The Brothers at Power Memorial did not consider the cause of black people. Young Alcindor was told that black individuals

[219] Ibid. Position 42 of 4673
[220] Ibid. Position 373 of 4673

had to work for their equality, as it was not something they inherently deserved as human beings.

A turning point in Abdul-Jabbar's perspective on his identity as a young black man was when he read at UCLA *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* in his own words:

> "I couldn't put the book down but didn't want it to end. All I did the week I bought it was go to class and come home and read. It was exhilarating; all the things I had always assumed, he was saying out loud. His life was like a primer for me; his growth from nigger to man developed as if he could be the race in microcosm."[221]

He was fascinated by the text of Malcolm X and how he analyzed the role of African Americans within the American society. He was deeply engaged with the description of Harlem provided by Alex Haley in the foreword of the text and was captivated by the narration of the struggles faced by the young poor black man named Malcolm Little, who was forced to go from thief to drug dealer. Malcolm X was then able to find his path to a new identity as a new man, *a black man*. Malcolm X's greatest teaching for Alcindor was his self-discovery through Islam. Before reading Malcolm X's autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar supported the idea of complete integration between white and African American communities. After reading the autobiography, he began to question whether complete integration was the way to claiming black identity. Malcolm X did not consider all white people in America as inherently evil, and he understood it through his conversion to Islam.

At first, Malcolm X followed the Black Muslims, a group related to the Nation of Islam. Their message inspired Malcolm to a deeper study of Islam. Malcolm X strongly opposed all the acts of violence perpetrated by white groups against black people. After his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X abandoned any hatred towards whites. According to Abdul-Jabbar, Malcolm X put at the center of his life the principle that people from all over the world should live in peace, sharing their faith in Allah. Malcolm X's example was crucial for the basketball star of UCLA. While at university, Alcindor began taking history classes and looking for a new faith, having abandoned Catholicism.

During Abdul-Jabbar's second and third year, he looked for something to believe in, and studied various philosophies and religions, including existentialism, Buddhism, Taoism,

[221] Ibid. Position 1999 of 4673

Zen, and Hinduism. Although he was fascinated by various aspects of each, he still felt influenced by monotheism. Abdul-Jabbar found in Islam a religion whose followers were mainly black and that touched the issue of racism. In his autobiography, he mentions the Qur'an: "We created you from one parent, and we created differences so that you know one another". Abdul-Jabbar states that these differences were ethnic and cultural, but the parent and source was one: Allah. In the enroll summer of 1968 Abdul-Jabbar started his path of conversion to Islam by attending a local mosque in New York. After one month of intensive study, he pronounced his *shahada* and declared his new faith. Lew Alcindor had to choose his new Muslim name, and his teacher suggested Abdul (meaning 'servant of Allah') and Kareem (meaning 'generous')[222].

Lew Alcindor started to read and study the Qur'an and was captivated by its teachings. In his autobiography, he states that Islam was a religion that touched all his concerns, especially racism[223]. He decided to join the Sunni current of Islam since Malcolm X was a Sunni Muslim when he died. One day he made the decision to visit a mosque located on 125th Street in New York. He arrived at the mosque dressed in traditional African style, only to discover that all the Muslim present there were dressed entirely in white.

He had no idea of the dedication required to be a Muslim. He started to memorize chapters of the Qur'an. After a month of study, he pronounced the *shahada*, declaring his faith in Allah. The former Lew Alcindor had to choose his Muslim name, and he was guided by his Muslim teacher, who suggested the name Abdul, meaning "servant of Allah", and Kareem, meaning "generous"[224].

Another important person in Abdul-Jabbar's conversion was Ernest McGee, a former friend of his father and a drummer. After the conversion to Islam, McGee changed his name to Hamaas Abdul-Khaalis. Hamaas contacted Al Alcindor asking to have a conversation with his son. Although Big Al didn't know about his son's conversion to Islam, he was aware that Hamaas was a Muslim and understood that something was happening with his son's faith. Abdul-Jabbar went to visit Hamaas in his apartment in Harlem, and that is how they got to know each other. Hamaas Abdul Khaalis was born in

[222] Ibid. position 2450 of 4673
[223] Ibid. Position 2425 of 4673
[224] Ibid. Position 2448 of 4673

Gary, Indiana. He served in the US Army during WWII but was discharged due to mental instability. He later joined the Nation of Islam, but eventually left the group following altercations with other members. Hamaas aligned himself with the Hanafi school of thought, which is considered closer to fundamentalism within the Muslim world. According to the studies conducted by Aram Goudsouzian, Hamaas had a unique approach to Islam. He chose to celebrate black pride while proclaiming Islam as a universal religion[225]. Hamaas was firm about his perspective on the world and his interpretation of Islam, and he could be very tough to those who did not share his ideas. Abdul-Jabbar would visit Hamaas' house to learn different chapters of the Qur'an. Hamaas had a strict approach to the Islamic traditions, he was a purist, and this changed Abdul-Jabbar's perspective on Islam. On the other hand, Abdul-Jabbar was submissive towards individuals in position of power and adhered to Hamaas' teachings. He woke up at 4:30 am every morning throughout an entire summer to receive instructions from Haamas. Abdul-Jabbar describes his mentor as "the ultimate purist", who expected nothing less than a rigorous zeal in following Muslim traditions.

Hamaas Abdul Khalis wanted Abdul-Jabbar to abandon his wrong beliefs regarding racism and anti-Semitism. Hamaas believed that individuals should be evaluated for their personal character rather than just for their racial or religious background. Moreover, Hamaas condemned American society for its consumerism and for sponsoring and selling many items that were prohibited for Muslims, such as alcohol. He also opposed the Black Muslims, as he believed they had stolen some cultural aspects of Islam while promoting a racist demagoguery against white people. Abdul-Jabbar pronounced his *shahada* once again, in the presence of Hamaas. He shaved his head and then Hamaas renamed him, feeling that something was lacking in his spirit. He already had the name "Abdul" and "Kareem", and Hamaas decided to add "Jabbar" (meaning 'powerful')[226].

The former Lew Alcindor accepted his new identity without hesitation. Abdul-Jabbar, however, was discouraged by Hamaas regarding his relationship with his family, which left him feeling alone once again. His senior year at UCLA was not simple, as he had to

[225] Gousdsouzian Aram, *From Lew Alcindor to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: Race, Religion and Representation in Basketball* 1968-1975 Cambridge University Press 2016
[226] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Peter Knobler. *Giant Steps*. New York: Bantam, 2017 ebook. Position 2615 of 4673

publicly declare his conversion to Islam. Consequently, he isolated himself from the campus environment and remained within his own circle of Muslim friends. Throughout his college career, he maintained this isolation from his teammates and the media.

Following that, Abdul-Jabbar encountered even greater challenges during his rookie season in the NBA. He was selected by the Milwaukee Bucks, but Milwaukee offered limited forms of entertainment to NBA players, mainly local bars where people gathered to drink beer, which was far from ideal for a young Muslim man like Abdul-Jabbar, who aimed to distance himself from any form of alcohol. Even more frustrating for Abdul-Jabbar was his relationship with journalists. In the NBA, he was obliged to release interviews, but his reluctant answers had the unintended effect of some journalists portraying him as rude and only interested in financial gain. Abdul-Jabbar felt this attitude as being reserved primarily for black players, while noticing that journalists tended to be more understanding towards white players, often described as soft-spoken.

Abdul-Jabbar had immense respect for Hamaas and went to him even for very personal problems. When faced with the choice between a Muslim woman he shared only the faith with and another woman whom Abdul-Jabbar loved sincerely, he asked Hamaas for advice on whom to marry. Hamaas recommended that Abdul-Jabbar marry the Muslim woman, and Abdul-Jabbar accepted this recommendation without questioning it. Abdul-Jabbar himself narrates his inner struggle to challenge Hamaas on matters of doctrine and other issues. Hamaas was very strict on rules, such as the presence of non-believers at ceremonies, including Abdul-Jabbar's own parents at his wedding.

In 1971, Abdul-Jabbar legally changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Inspired by Muhammad Ali, who had set a precedent with his conversion and change of name, Abdul-Jabbar decided to officially declare his new faith to the world.

After his rookie season in Milwaukee, Abdul-Jabbar decided to study Arabic at Harvard University. He wanted to deepen his understanding of his faith and its history. As he started to learn Arabic and to read the Qur'an and the Hadith, Abdul-Jabbar realized that many of the teachings he had received from Hamaas were not written anywhere in the Islamic texts. He discovered that he had been exposed to "the outer ridge of the extreme

orthodoxy[227]". Abdul-Jabbar's faith in Allah remained strong, but his relationship with Hamaas underwent significant changes. He continued to provide financial support for some of Hamaas' past activities aimed at spreading the Islamic faith in New York, but Abdul-Jabbar no longer adhered to his particular vision of Islam.

On January 18, 1973, in Washington, DC there was a massacre in a mosque located in a building bought by Kareem for his Muslim brothers and managed by Hamaas. Before the tragic event, Hamaas had claimed that he had created a "religion" that had nothing to do with Islam and that everything that they knew was wrong. Following Hamaas's provocation, Black Muslims sent a dozen men to kill Hamaas, who was not at the mosque. The murderers killed the three sons, daughter and second wife of Hamaas. Abdul-Jabbar began to live under protection as he could be an easy target for Black Muslims.

During the summer of 1977, Hamaas and eleven gunmen attacked three buildings in Washington taking several people hostage to protest against a movie - *Mohammad, messenger of God* - about the prophet's life. Hamaas found it blasphemous and menaced to cause deaths and riots if the movie would be released. Hamaas surrendered peacefully but during the attack there were casualties, and he was then sentenced to forty-one years in prison.[228].

4.5 The Olympics Boycott

During the summer of 1968 Abdul-Jabbar made the decision not to participate in the Summer Olympics under the United States flag. Alongside many other African American sports figures, Abdul-Jabbar wanted to denounce the systematic discrimination of black people in the USA. Black athletes did not intend to participate in the Olympics, as they did not want to represent a white America that treated the black population so poorly. In his autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar also mentions the incident where Cassius Clay was refused service at a restaurant after the 1960 Olympics, and how the situation had not changed at all since then[229].

[227] Ibid Position 3699 of 4673
[228] Ibid. Position 4001 of 4673
[229] Ibid. Position 2462 of 4673

The 1968 Summer Olympics, held in Mexico City, were marked by political turmoil and controversy. Taking place in a year of global unrest, the Games coincided with civil rights movements and anti-war protests worldwide. The 1968 Olympics were no exception, as they were overshadowed by the political tensions and civil rights protests occurring in the United States.

The situation in the United States in 1968 was characterized by racial tension and social unrest. African Americans were advocating for equal rights, engaging in protests against discrimination and police brutality. Although significant laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had been enacted, many African Americans still experienced discrimination and violence. The assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 further heightened the existing tensions.

In this situation, many African American athletes began to wonder whether they should take part in the Olympics. They felt that participating in the Games might convey the message that all was fine in the United States, while they believed that the country was still plagued by racism and discrimination.

Tommy Smith and John Carlos, both African American track and field athletes who won the 200-meter gold and bronze medal, decided to use the Olympic platform as a means to draw attention to the plight of African Americans. They planned to stage a protest during the medal ceremony. Smith and Carlos wore black gloves and black socks and no shoes to symbolize black poverty, and while the American national anthem played, they raised their fists in the Black Power salute. The protest was a powerful statement, but it also met controversy. They were soon expelled from the Olympic Village and were treated as renegades when they returned to the United States, facing significant vilification by the media and the public. They did not receive any support even from fellow Black athletes when they returned to their home country.

The protest by Smith and Carlos was not the only controversy at the 1968 Olympics. The Games were also marked by additional protests from various countries. Several African nations expressed their intention to boycott the Olympics due to the participation of South Africa, a country that enforced apartheid policies. Eventually, South Africa was banned from participating in the Games. However, the threat of a boycott persisted during the event.

The 1968 Olympics proved to be a pivotal moment in the history of the Games, and they demonstrated the power of sport as a force for social change. The protest by Smith and Carlos highlighted the racial tensions and inequalities in the United States, while drawing attention to the struggles of African Americans.

Indeed, the idea of an African American boycott of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City was initially conceived in 1967 by the Olympic Project for Human Rights, an organization of amateur Black athletes. As described by Dave Zirin in his article for the ISR (International Socialist Review), the association initially aimed to raise awareness about the challenges faced by black student athletes in finding housing near universities[230]. In the founding statement of OPHR, they wrote:

> "We must no longer allow this country to use … a few "Negroes" to point out to the world how much progress she has made in solving her racial problems when the oppression of Afro-Americans is greater than it ever was. We must no longer allow the Sports World to pat itself on the back as a citadel of racial justice when the racial injustices of the sports industry are infamously legendary.... [A]ny black person who allows himself to be used in the above matter…. is a traitor to his country because he allows racist whites the luxury of resting assured that those black people in the ghettos are there because that is where they want to be…. So we ask why should we run in Mexico only to crawl home?[231]"

One of the first athletes to join the OPHR was Lew Alcindor, who at the time was the most famous college athlete of the country. During the summer of 1968 Abdul-Jabbar made the decision not to participate in the Summer Olympics under the United States flag. Alongside many other African American sports figures, Abdul-Jabbar wanted to denounce the systematic discrimination of black people in the USA. Black athletes did not intend to participate in the Olympics, as they did not want to represent a white America that treated the black population so poorly. In his autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar also mentions the incident where Cassius Clay was refused service at a restaurant after the 1960 Olympics, and how the situation had not changed at all since then[232].

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[230] Dave Zirin, "The explosive 1968 Olympics" in International Socialist Review Issue #61 Winter 2016-17

[231] Harry Edwards. *The Revolt of the Black Athlete in Ibid.*

[232] Ibid. Position 2462 of 4673

His decision to boycott the 1968 Olympics was based on several factors. During that period, the United States experienced civil unrest, with Black Americans fighting for their rights and protesting against systemic racism and police brutality. Lew Alcindor, who had been raised in a predominantly white neighborhood in New York City, developed an awareness of these issues during his college years at UCLA, where he became actively engaged in the Black Student Union and other civil rights organizations. In his autobiography, Abdul-Jabbar reflects on the reasons that influenced his decision to join the boycott. He states that "If white America was going to treat blacks poorly, then white America could win the Olympics on its own[233]."

Abdul-Jabbar had previously shared his ideas during the founding conference of the OPHR. At the event, the reserved center from UCLA had delivered a passionate speech against white American society:

> "I'm the big basketball star, the weekend hero, everybody's All-American. Well, last summer I was almost killed by a racist cop shooting at a black cat in Harlem. He was shooting on the street—where masses of people were standing around or just taking a walk. But he didn't care. After all we were just niggers. I found out last summer that we don't catch hell because we aren't basketball stars or because we don't have money. We catch hell because we are black. Somewhere each of us have got to make a stand against this kind of thing. This is how I take my stand—using what I have. And I take my stand here.[234]"

Abdul-Jabbar deeply admired Carlos and Smith and their Black power salute on the Olympic podium. In his autobiography, he recalls receiving numerous hateful letters that labelled him a traitor, but he recognizes that the consequences faced by Carlos and Smith were much more severe. Abdul-Jabbar considers their protest as an act of patriotism.

4.6 The relationship between Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Peter Knobler

Peter Knobler is an American music journalist, author, and editor who has made significant contributions to the music industry. Born in 1950 in New York City, he was

[233] Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Peter Knobler. *Giant Steps*. New York: Bantam, 2017 ebook. Position 2464 of 4673
[234] Dave Zirin, ibid.

raised in a family that loved music. This early exposure to music sparked his passion to write about the subject, which he pursued as a career.

During the 1970s, Knobler began working as a writer and editor for *Rolling Stone*, a renowned music magazine. He quickly established himself as a talented interviewer, known for his insightful and in-depth conversations with iconic musicians like Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and B.B. King. In addition to his journalism work, Knobler has also achieved considerable success as an author, in particular as writer and co-writer of several biographies of famous musicians. His most notable work, published in 1983, is the biography of Ray Charles, titled *Brother Ray: Ray Charles' Own Story*". The book earned him the prestigious Ralph J. Gleason Award for Best Music Book of the Year.

Alongside his work as a music journalist and author, Knobler has also worked as an editor, helping to shape and enhance the work of other writers. He has collaborated with various authors, spanning from musicians and celebrities to academics and journalists.

One of Knobler's most significant collaborations was with basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on his autobiography, *Giant Steps*. In the Foreword of the book, Knobler shares the story of his first meeting with the young Lew Alcindor. They were both very young and met at a party in New York, the city they both lived in. They used to know each other when they were teenagers, but they lost contact for a decade before working together on Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography.

In the introduction, Knobler states that his long relationship with Abdul-Jabbar helped him narrate his personal life, without the pressures of fame, wealth, religion, and race that pushed him inward. Knobler assisted Abdul-Jabbar in presenting himself without being self-indulgent. Abdul-Jabbar openly discusses the challenges he has faced to please others throughout his life, beginning with his mother, then his coach, and continuing through his conversion to Islam, guided by his mentor Hamaas Abdul-Khaliis.

During the writing process, Abdul-Jabbar and Knobler developed a strong bond based on mutual respect and a shared commitment to presenting Abdul-Jabbar's story with authenticity and integrity. They worked together to craft a narrative that captured Abdul-Jabbar's experiences as a Black man in America, a basketball legend, and a cultural symbol. The result is a captivating memoir that provides readers with a distinctive perspective into the life of one of the most influential athletes of our era.

Abdul-Jabbar was not only a talented athlete, but also an important figure in creating the identity of Black athlete, as Kurt Streeter well describes:

> "Guided by the footsteps of Jackie Robinson and Bill Russell, Abdul-Jabbar pushed forward, stretching the limits of Black athlete identity. He was, among other qualities, brash and bookish, confident and shy, awkward, aggressive, graceful — and sometimes an immense pain to deal with. He could come off as simultaneously square and the smoothest, coolest cat in the room.
> In other words, he was a complete human being, not just the go-along-to-get-along, one-dimensional Black athlete much of America would have preferred him to be.".[235]

[235] Kurt Streeter, "Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is greater than any basketball record", *The New York Times*, February 7, 2023

Conclusions

This paper explored the issue of autobiography as an American and particularly African American literary genre that has helped people to construct their cultural identity. I also explored the issue of African American autobiography in relation to the exploitation of the black body, particularly in sport, and how this has influenced representations of the black body and masculinity over time.

From the earliest narratives during slavery, African American autobiographies have included accounts of black people's birthrights and the abuses, triumphs and failures that occurred during that time. Slaves used these media as a means of expressing their conditions, as well as their personal feelings and achievements, in a visceral and powerful way. In this thesis, therefore, I have considered two autobiographies written by two world-famous, powerful, controversial African American figures who achieved sporting fame in two very different fields: a street-based, individual, tough sport such as boxing, and a team-based, spectacular, fast-paced sport such as basketball.

Cassius Clay, later known as Muhammad Ali, was a great man in and out of the ring. As a boxer, he proved that he was truly the greatest by taking on all of his opponents and never backing down. Ali was a man who made boxing an art, studying the style of each opponent before meeting them, trying to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and rehearsing the situations he might face in the ring with different sparring partners who most resembled his opponents. This served to make his training more effective, and he trained consistently and meticulously in order to arrive at the fight in perfect physical and, above all, mental condition.

In the ring, Muhammad Ali was an intelligent boxer; he knew when to attack and when to hold back, and he knew how to capture the attention of both his fans and those who did not think much of him.

In contrast, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, born Lew Alcindor, had a completely different character and attitude. Although he shared Muhammad Ali's triumphs and the pride of being among the greatest in his sport, he had a surly, aloof and in some ways even opinionated manner. This certainly stemmed from his less expansive and more introverted

character, which made him less inclined to give interviews or even entertain his fans and supporters much.

As I could see from their attitudes in and out of the ring and on the , the two characters I have explored in my work are very different. Both have written four-handed autobiographies, and this might lead an unsuspecting reader to believe that, as they are both sports champions, they might have produced two similar books.

However, from my work it is clear that Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar have completely different approaches not only to the text but also to racism and conversion to Islam, which makes both texts extremely interesting.

Muhammad Ali uses his autobiography to become a symbol not only of the struggle of African Americans against white exploitation, but also from a religious point of view. This is probably due to the fact that he lives in a time when blacks still do not have the same opportunities as whites in many areas, on the contrary, they are hindered and opposed; let us recall, for example, the episode in which he recounts that they could not enter some restaurants simply because they were black. That is why he is the spokesman for a people who do not have a voice, also because of the enormous popularity he has enjoyed, for better or worse, as a sportsman, but also because of his strong and controversial life choices. It is worth mentioning his refusal to enlist in the Vietnam War because it was a conflict that did not represent him, which cost him a disqualification and major problems with the American government, as well as a hefty fine. Muhammad Ali therefore used his book to give a voice to the African-American people, to justify his blackness and to become a leading figure of his time in terms of the suffering and abuse suffered by black people.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, on the other hand, perhaps because of his more shy nature, used autobiographical narrative in a less universal and more personal way, to tell his story and his experience, rather than to set himself up as a representative symbol of black people. His writing is more intimate and measured, and his discomfort at not feeling part of the world, at being a fish out of water, and at using his height, which he said he only realised when he saw a photo of himself in the school yearbook, to put a boundary between himself and others, as a kind of shield, is clearly expressed.

Another feature that makes the autobiographies of the two sportsmen so different is certainly their approach to the racism they both perceived and suffered. This is certainly due to the parts of America in which they lived: Muhammad Ali was born and grew up in Lousiville, in the south of the United States, where he fully experienced the humiliation of segregation, the stark difference between whites and blacks, and this led young Cassius, according to his mother's account, to become aware of the discrimination suffered by his family and his community in general from a very early age, to be saddened and moved to tears when he heard a story of injustice on the part of the African-American population.

Kareem Abdul Jabbar, on the other hand, grew up in Harlem, a multicultural neighbourhood in New York where blacks and whites, Asians, Italians and Irish lived side by side; this made him less aware of his cultural affiliation, although there were episodes in his childhood that he remembers with sadness, when his family was accused of shoplifting simply because of the colour of their skin. As he grew up, however, Kareem became increasingly aware of his own diversity, especially after he moved to Philadelphia, where he felt out of place because his peers, all African-American, behaved and spoke differently from him, used slang he did not understand, and bullied him, making him feel increasingly excluded and alone.

It is likely, therefore, that the places where these two sportsmen belonged gave them a different perception of racism, at least in their childhood and adolescence, but led them both to realise that there was no full equality between whites and blacks and that the latter had to fight tooth and nail for their rights, which were often trampled underfoot.

Both had an epiphany about racism. Although Muhammad Ali had experienced the cruelty of whites against blacks in his city from an early age, the episode he recounts with horror is certainly that of the young Emmett Till, who was tortured and thrown into the Mississippi for having molested a white woman. This episode filled young Cassius with rage and he spoke of it as an abuse of white supremacy over black people.

For Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, on the other hand, the bombing of the Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 was probably the epiphany, because he realised that there was a part of the American population that was not protected by the state and was almost forgotten, leaving him powerless and grieving.

In both autobiographies we find the relationship of both to Malcolm X; both see the activist as a spiritual guide in their conversion and fight against racism.

Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X are both charismatic and ambitious people, and the latter's teachings on the boxer inspired and supported him in his conversion and fight against racism. However, when Malcolm X came into sharp conflict with Elijah Muhammad, to the point of leaving the Nation of Islam to form his own organisation, the Nation of Islam leader asked him to disassociate himself from him and Ali agreed, turning his back on his friend, a mistake he later regretted.

In his autobiography, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar also describes his relationship with Malcolm X, whom he regards as a role model, to the point of changing his mind about the situation between whites and blacks in the United States: if before he wanted total integration, after reading Malcolm X's texts he realised that instead African Americans had to assert their own identity and that they had to distrust any progress procured or granted by whites, to reject any form of paternalism and to assert the use of force, racial pride and self-determination. Unlike Ali, Abdul-Jabbar never knew Malcolm X personally, coming to know and appreciate him only through his writings and after his assassination.

Both sportsmen converted to Islam from Christianity, but they approached conversion differently.

For Muhammad Ali, conversion was almost a consequence of a social awakening to defend black identity against white oppression. He saw the Nation of Islam as an opportunity for the African American community to free itself from white oppression and reclaim its historical and cultural identity. For Ali, the claim to identity arising from his conversion to Islam was so strong that he refused even the demands of his managers to remain a private believer, disavowing himself in public in order to continue boxing.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who came from a Catholic family, realised that Islam was a predominantly black religion and began his conversion precisely because he believed that people all over the world should live in peace by sharing their faith in Allah, and because he felt that Islam touched on most human concerns and issues, including racism.

So, while for Muhammad Ali Islamism became almost another way of becoming a spokesman for the African-American people, and thus standing for the fight against black

discrimination and white oppression, for Kareem Abdul-Jabbar religion had more of a spiritual and personal meaning, of communion with the rest of the world, saying that differences were created so that people could know each other better.

What the two sportsmen have in common, and what is clear from the two autobiographies, is the pressure and strong influence of Muslim leaders on both characters: in the case of Muhammad Ali, it is the co-author of the text who explains that he was concerned by the Nation of Islam because he could have changed or deleted parts of the book that were not in line with the religious group; in essence, he had the final say on the final draft of the autobiography.

In a similar vein, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar listened almost obsessively to the advice of his spiritual leader, Hamaas Abdul-Khaalis, whom he often consulted on even the most personal matters, even to the extent of letting him decide which girl to marry, between one with whom the basketball player was in love and another with whom he shared only his faith. The latter was chosen and Abdul-Jabbar accepted without asking any questions. These episodes illustrate the importance of religion for both sportsmen and the importance of the judgement of their spiritual leaders.

Both champions, both winners of prestigious trophies, nevertheless approached their relationship with sport in different ways: while Muhammad Ali believed that excelling in a sport could save him from his subordinate status in society, which did not happen, for example when he returned from the Rome Olympics and was not celebrated as he had expected, for Kareem Abdul-Jabbar the basketball court was the only place where he felt comfortable, where he could feel superior to others and strong in his size and technique, where he could rise above everyone.

In conclusion, we can say that the two autobiographies deal with similar themes, such as the fight against racism, the segregation of the black community or the conversion to Islam, but that the two sportsmen deal with these themes and situations in different ways, certainly because of their different family situations, the different environments in which they grew up, but also because they had extremely peculiar and different characters and personalities.

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