

***REMEMBERING ALI***

A STUDY OF PRINT MEDIA'S FRAMING OF MUHAMMAD ALI'S DEATH

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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## REMEMBERING ALI

Brooks Holton

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### ABSTRACT

Did the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and *The New York Times* do Muhammad Ali's legacy justice in their obituary and memorial coverage during the week after his June 3, 2016, death, or were the contextual complexities surrounding Ali's narrative simplified to continue a narrative that hinders future attempts to understand what exactly "The Louisville Lip" meant to the world? This study uses framing theory to examine how The Greatest was portrayed by print and digital news publications at both local and national levels after his 1967 refusal to be inducted into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and after he died at age 74 and argues that both newspapers perpetuated a sanitized frame of the boxer as a universally loved iconic athlete-hero role model in 2016 instead of the controversial mouthpiece he was at the height of criticism against him in 1967. The study demonstrates how the re-examination of lives can result in the problematic erasing of historical complexities and the inviting of an oversimplified version of subjects. Analyzing Ali's development as an athlete-hero in print and digital media from the 1960s through his 2016 death allows society to understand how his image was used and changed to serve as a model for understanding wider changes in American attitudes toward issues of race and religion.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

During the June 20, 1967 trial that found heavyweight champion Cassius Clay guilty of violating the U.S. Selective Service laws by refusing to be drafted into the Army, Martin Waldron of *The New York Times* reported that “Clay paid no attention to the legal maneuvering ... He sat at the defense table, drawing and chewing gum.” Out of all of his doodles from the trial, “an elaborate sketch of the words ‘Muhammad Ali,’ which is his Muslim name”<sup>1</sup> stood out as a bold proclamation of self-identity in the face of staunch public criticism and what looked like a lifetime ban from the sport he had come to rule. At 25 years old, Clay knew how he wanted to be remembered — as Ali, a preacher of the Nation of Islam; even if his conversion ultimately cost him his title and three years spent in exile from boxing.

He came back to the sport in 1970 and picked up where he left off, reclaiming the heavyweight title three years later with a knockout victory over George Foreman in a fight that became known as “The Rumble in the Jungle.” At age 38, he retired for good in 1981 with a record of 56-5 (37 KOs-1 KO). Fifteen years later, he was given the honor of lighting the Olympic Caldron at the opening ceremony of the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta. In 1999, Sports Illustrated named Ali the “Sportsman of the Century.”

When it came time to prepare for his death, Ali and his inner circle designed in exact detail how he wanted to say goodbye to the world in a document so thick it became

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Waldron. “Clay guilty in draft case; gets five years in prison.” *The New York Times*, June 20, 1967, <<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0620.html>>

know as “The Book,”<sup>2</sup> a monumental, fitting move by the boxer, who handwrote his global legacy with poetic interviews declaring himself “The Greatest,” offered controversially accurate commentary on race relations in America, delivered and strong left hooks that won three heavyweight championships.

Fast forward to June 10, 2016. Hundreds of thousands of people lined the streets of Louisville, Kentucky. A hearse containing Ali’s 74-year-old body took the deceased champion on one final tour of his hometown before a burial ceremony at Cave Hill Cemetery followed by a three-hour, multi-denominational memorial service at Louisville’s Yum! Center. The onlookers bombarded the hearse with chants of, “Ali! Ali! Ali!” and covered it with so many roses that its driver, Chase Porter, was afraid he might wreck the vehicle.<sup>3</sup>

The heartfelt goodbye, televised internationally, represented the final chapter in the evolution of Ali’s complex legacy. The man once considered by journalists, as well as the general public, to be a loudmouth, a black nationalist and therefore a racist, the greatest boxer ever, the archetypal socially conscious athlete, a hero, an antihero, and “a man so radical that he was far ahead of the country’s ideological curve”<sup>4</sup> was finally at rest. Media outlets began publishing obituaries and memorial coverage tasked with encapsulating everything Ali accomplished and represented into words that would shape

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<sup>2</sup> B. Schreiner & C. Galofaro. “Ali scripted funeral plans in exacting detail in ‘The Book.’” *The Associated Press*, June 6, 2016, <<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/8ff94f3fc3844e56979b634f664a6658/ali-scripted-funeral-plans-exacting-detail-book>>

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Epps Jr. “Muhammad Ali’s Final Ride.” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/25/sports/muhammad-ali-funeral-driver.html>.

<sup>4</sup> G. Fared. *What’s My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).



how we as a society remember the man who shook up the world forever. But did those articles really do “The Greatest” justice, or were the contextual complexities surrounding Ali’s narrative simplified to continue a narrative that hinders future attempts to understand what exactly “The Louisville Lip” meant to the world?

### **Goals of the study**

This study examines how Ali was portrayed in print and digital media coverage of the boxer’s life — during the three-year saga that followed his 1967 decision to refuse entry into the U.S. Army, specifically — and after his death to explore how the way a collective audience remembers a person changes over time and to what extent newspapers had an impact on Ali’s legacy shift in collective memory. With 159 articles combined from *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, Ali’s hometown paper, and *The New York Times*, a national outlet that dedicated significant space to coverage of the boxer’s career and life outside the ring, serving as its primary sources, the study answers the following questions:

**RQ1:** To what extent did print and digital media outlets choose to include or omit details of Ali’s association with the Nation of Islam and the Black Power movement in/from their coverage of the boxer’s life and death?

**RQ2:** To what extent did coverage of the boxer’s life and death view Ali’s loudmouth personality, views on racial separatism and decision to refuse entry into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War as commendable?

**RQ3:** To what extent did local coverage frame Ali differently from national outlets?

**RQ4:** How did the framing of Ali’s life and death in print and digital media coverage reflect or add to the larger narrative/issues of race in America?

Because of the ways print and digital media outlets, as well as longer biographical works and the coverage of the 1996 Summer Olympics, framed Ali during the twilight of

his life, this study found the same sort of iconic, athlete-hero frames perpetuated throughout the obituary coverage of his death. With obituary form allowing journalists the time and space to take a complete look back at someone's life, there is some mention of Ali's radical past and social activism — his association with the Nation of Islam, refusal to join the U.S. Army, comments on race relations in America (advocating for black separatism), etc. — but it appeared in a minor portion of coverage and was used to further perpetuate the heroic narrative surrounding the former boxer as a champion of civil rights rather than complicate his lasting legacy. Although our collective memory of Ali is more positive now than it was conflicted during the 1960s and 1970s, the study argues that the “ideologically sanitized”<sup>5</sup> version of the boxer that is perpetuated now does not do full justice to what Ali stood for at the height of his fame and controversy.

This study used framing theory and its impact on collective memory, the memory of a group of people typically passed from one generation to the next formed when social groups construct their own images of the world by constantly shaping and reshaping versions of the past,<sup>6</sup> to examine the role print/digital media played in the evolution of Ali's legacy from the height of his boxing prowess and political activism to the obituary and memorial coverage that followed his 2016 death. Framing theory illuminates the way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the communication of information from a news report, feature story, interview, etc. The act of framing involves heightening or calling attention to select aspects of a perceived reality to determine what a subject is doing with regards to common cultural values, to identify the forces creating

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<sup>5</sup> G. Farred. *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*

<sup>6</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers, & E. Zandberg (Eds.). *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*. (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press LLC, 2011)

a problem, to evaluate subjects and their effects on society, or offer and justify treatments for problems and predict their likely effects.<sup>7</sup> Effective frames can also produce “dominant images,” or meanings with the highest probability of being noticed and most compatible with audiences.<sup>8</sup> Framing theory and collective memory are complimentary because, in their simplest form, “frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.”<sup>9</sup>

An extension of collective memory is media memory, the exploration of collective memories as narrated by, through, and about the media.<sup>10</sup> The concept demonstrates how the story of America’s past is a story of what the media have chosen to remember and how the media’s memories have in turn become America’s.<sup>11</sup> Both collective and media memories are formed by processes of selection and construction, which allow for the infusion of morals and lessons into narratives of the past to affect the decision-making dynamics determining which memories become most dominant. Media provide a public arena for various agents (political activists, academics, local communities, etc.) who wish to influence the understanding of collective memory, but certain media outlets can also serve as agents that provide their own readings of the

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Entman. Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43 (1993): 51-58.

<sup>8</sup> Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification ... ”

<sup>9</sup> S.D. Reese. Prologue. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social World*. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001)

<sup>10</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers, & E. Zandberg. *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*.

<sup>11</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers, & E. Zandberg. *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*.

collective past.<sup>12</sup> Once collective audiences choose which media frames to receive and interpretations of the past to accept, groups derive what is known as cultural memory, a collective concept obtained through repeated societal practices that help guide behavior and experience within society through establishing rules of conduct.<sup>13</sup> Cultural memory has the capacity to reconstruct the past as well as a clear system of values that structure the cultural supply of knowledge and symbols.

Frames also simultaneously direct attention away from aspects of a subject that are not highlighted in the frame, and those omitted details play an equal role in defining the frame and its common effects in guiding large portions of the receiving audience.<sup>14</sup> Not all individuals will automatically use whatever consideration is made through media frames. Rather, the impact of a frame depends on how the media message interacts with individuals' personal predispositions or knowledge structures, formally defined as "schemas."<sup>15</sup> When activated, schemas can influence what people take into account and what they ignore when choosing viewpoints. Schemas can also affect memory and judgment facilitating retrieval and reconstructed information.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, this study observed the extent to which media outlets included or excluded information about the radical portion of Ali's career — during which the American public was polarized on its opinion of the boxer's name change, conversion to the Nation of Islam, and talk of black

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<sup>12</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers, & E. Zandberg. *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*.

<sup>13</sup> J. Assman, J. Czaplicka. Collective Memory and Cultural Identity. *New German Critique*, 65 (1995): 125-133.

<sup>14</sup> Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification . . ."

<sup>15</sup> F. Shen. Effects of news frames and schemas on individuals' issue interpretations and attitudes. *J&MC Quarterly* 81, 2 (2004): 400-416.

<sup>16</sup> Shen. Effects of news frames and schemas on individuals' issue interpretations and attitudes.

separatism — as well as the twilight of his boxing career through the late 1980s, to perpetuate an ideologically “sanitized”<sup>17</sup> frame of Ali as a moral exemplar and a champion of the civil rights movement.

This research helps to form a better understanding of the mediated re-examination of athlete-heroes’ lives through obituary and memorial coverage. Its findings hopefully raise practical awareness about how the details print journalists choose to include or omit from his or her subject’s life have lasting impacts in creating the frames through which the public will remember the deceased. The study also demonstrates how the re-examination of lives can result in the problematic erasing of historical complexities and the inviting of an oversimplified version of subjects. Examining Ali’s development as an athlete-hero in print and digital media from the 1960s through his 2016 death allows society to understand how his image was used and changed to serve as a model for understanding wider changes in American attitudes toward issues of race and religion. Also, with the recent developments in professional athletes’ protest of the national anthem, this study address issues that arise in media’s coverage of athletes’ expression of political viewpoints and how the public’s perceptions of the athletes protesting can change based on the ways in which the athletes and their acts of protest are presented and covered by the media.

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<sup>17</sup> G. Farred. *What’s My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*

## Chapter 2: Methods

This study used historical textual analysis of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Ali's hometown paper, and *The New York Times* to examine how Ali's legacy as an iconic athlete-hero was perpetuated through a combined 159 articles published between his June 3, 2016, death in Scottsdale Arizona, and June 12, 2016. The study also examined *C-J* and *NYT* stories published after the boxer's 1967 refusal to enter the U.S. Army, during the subsequent legal proceedings that ran through 1970, and between Ali's return to the ring through his lighting of the Olympic caldron at the 1996 Summer Games to form a contextual understanding of how his legacy was shaped during the latter portion of his athletic career up until the twilight of his life. *The Courier-Journal* was chosen because of the unique hometown connection it has above all other publications to Ali. *The New York Times* was chosen because it extensively covered Ali's career, both his fights in the ring and for social justice. *Times* sportswriters Robert Lipsyte and Dave Anderson, a Pulitzer Prize winner, served as some of the most important journalists to document the intimacy of Ali's life in print media, and their stories from Ali's draft evasion trial were syndicated nationally — including in the *Courier-Journal* — via The New York Times News Service. The two papers will also provide the opportunity to compare between local and national outlets' coverage of Ali's death.

### Research design

Historical textual analysis examines both the content and meaning of texts. From there, concepts and historical background gained through corresponding literature and new thoughts brought about by examining primary source data create overarching themes

that will drive critical analysis.<sup>18</sup> In this study, aspects of the text pertaining to print media use of framing theory to perpetuate positive or negative interpretations of Ali's life such as the inclusion/omission of Ali's association with the Nation of Islam, his decision to refuse induction into the U.S. Army, or editorial decisions such as print/digital picture choices and headlines were noted in the Word document along with other notes on the pieces. The articles themselves and the running document of source information and notes, organized by newspaper, article title, and publication date, were examined multiple times with the goal of defining the dominant framing characteristics<sup>19</sup> and offering insights into how those characteristics shape public memory of Ali and reflect themes from the larger narrative of his life. The study also used historical background research into how Ali's narrative is reflective of the larger narrative of the African-American experience and issues of race in America.

When the hero archetype is applied to athletes, they transcend ordinary human qualities and embody the divine, the ideal, the quest, the courageous, the virtuous, and the superior.<sup>20</sup> Athlete-heroes double as moral exemplars whose voices off the field can shape ethical commitments and identities within mediated sports culture. Sports heroes also protect their country's way of life and persevere in spite of obstacles.<sup>21</sup> Fans derive obligation from athlete-heroes by balancing their mythic status with a demand that the

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<sup>18</sup> John Vincent and Jane Crossman, "'Our game our gold': Newspaper Narratives About the Canadian Men's Ice Hockey Team at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games," *Journal of Sport Behavior* 38 (2015): 97-117.

<sup>19</sup> Subin Paul. "When India was Indira: *Indian Express's* coverage of the emergency (1975-77)," *Journalism History* 42 (2017): 201-211.

<sup>20</sup> Drucker, S.J. & Cathcart, R.S. (1994). *American Heroes in a Media Age* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.)

<sup>21</sup> Hoebeke, T., Deprez, A., & Raeymaeckers, K. (2011). "Heroes in the sports pages: The troubled road to victory for Belgian cyclist Tom Boonen." *Journalism Studies*, 12 (5), 658-672.

athlete-hero stand in for the collective body in conquering all obstacles, including economic hardship, personal insecurity, racial inequality, etc.<sup>22</sup> Expectations remain, despite past disappointments, that athlete-heroes should be moral exemplars for the fans, coaches, professional leagues, and sports media that have granted them riches and fame.

According to Hoebeke, Deprez, and Raeymaecker, there are 12 components of athlete-heroes' careers that demonstrate how their legacies can shift over the course of time. Certain sequences of the athlete-hero narrative — such as the “Rise: obstacles and ordeals” phase, in which athlete-heroes conquer both competitive and non-competitive obstacles, the “Temporary fall from grace: trickster” phase, in which athletes become unappreciated by society, and the “resurrection/penance accepted phase,”<sup>23</sup> — were applied to the study of print media's coverage of Ali as an archetypal athlete-hero. The phases contextualize how Ali began his career as a beloved athlete/the ideal representation of America and progressed into a controversial figure with problematic comments about U.S. race relations and his refusal to be drafted into the Army were applied to larger social issues.

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<sup>22</sup> Grano, D. (2007). “Ritual disorder and the contractual morality of sport: A case study in race, class, and agreement.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 10 (3), 445-474.

<sup>23</sup> Hoebeke, T., Deprez, A., & Raeymaeckers, K. “Heroes in the sports pages ... ”



## Chapter 3: Literature Review

### 'I'm free to be who I want', the life of Ali

An excerpt from Blyden Jackson's *The Waiting Years: Essays on American Negro Literature* best describes the racial climate into which Ali — then Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. — was born on Jan. 17, 1942:

Through a veil I could perceive the forbidden city, the Louisville where white folks lived ... On my side of the veil everything was black: the homes, the people, the churches, the schools, the Negro park with Negro park police ... I knew that there were two Louisvilles and, in America, two Americas. I knew, also, which of the two Americas was mine ... I was a Negro. An act of God had circumscribed my life.<sup>24</sup>

Growing up in Louisville in the mid- to late 1950s, Clay had his perception of race shaped by his father, Cassius Clay Sr., a sign painter with a drinking problem and a “frustration manifested in outward rage and loathing for the white man” who would instruct his children: “Don't leave our neighborhood. Don't go into white people's stores. Don't contradict a white man. Don't look at white women. Don't disobey police. And ... don't get arrested.”<sup>25</sup> The stories Clay Sr. would tell his children of black men dying after seemingly harmless encounters with white men<sup>26</sup> were confirmed for Clay Jr. with the 1954 bombing of a black family's house after they refused to move out of an all-white neighborhood just five minutes from his home and with the 1955 murder of Emmett Till.

In December 1960, months after winning a gold medal at the Rome Olympics as an 18-year-old, Clay moved to a segregated Miami to train under Angelo Dundee. There, he fully embraced the Nation of Islam after having his interests piqued when he

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<sup>24</sup> Blyden Jackson. *Jackson's The Waiting Years: Essays on American Negro Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

<sup>25</sup> Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith. *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Roberts and Smith. *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship ...*

encountered members during earlier encounters in Atlanta and Chicago in 1958 and '59, respectively.<sup>27</sup> He was recruited to join Miami's Temple No. 29, and it was there that he learned "that white slave owners stripped the black man of his identity, his heritage, his language, and his true name ... ." and " ... the man who called himself a 'Negro' remains spiritually dead, buried in the grave." Already a devout follower of boxing's physical demands, Clay grew more convicted and regimented in his faith, and both the gym and the mosque became "two sanctuaries that provided shelter from outsiders and antagonistic white men ... ." <sup>28</sup>

Less than three years later, Clay would defeat Sonny Liston to capture the World Heavyweight Championship and celebrate afterward by eating vanilla ice cream with Malcolm X, who sat ringside to watch the victory he considered to be a sign from Allah. The two had forged a friendship that dated back to a 1962 meeting in Detroit for a Black Muslim rally, and that night they discussed even bigger plans for the future. Days later, NOI leader Elijah Muhammad introduced the world to Muhammad Ali.

Ali's success and celebrity in the boxing ring set the stage for his nonviolent political resistance and anti-white, anti-war critiques, which only grew more frequent and more subversive upon changing his name and officially joining the NOI. The boxer "had made a lot of enemies. While white critics denounced his membership in the Nation of Islam, ... Black writers, entertainers, and activists compared his views to those espoused by the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens' Councils, and the Dixiecrats."<sup>29</sup> Although other forms of nonviolent activism have been mostly associated with passive suffering, Ali's

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<sup>27</sup> Roberts and Smith. *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship ...*

<sup>28</sup> Roberts and Smith. *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship ...*

<sup>29</sup> Roberts and Smith. *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship ...*

boxing proficiency created a perception of violence potentially spilling over into wider society, serving as symbolic action that spurred nonviolent social change through its implied threat.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Ali's ties with the NOI, his status as an athlete gave him some independence from the religious group,<sup>31</sup> which was viewed by a majority of Americans as a troublesome, potentially violent sect.<sup>32</sup> His violent sports persona allowed Ali to be unpredictable in speaking his mind, and he had a perverse way of rejecting white stereotypes, yet agreeing to similar sentiment in issues such as interracial marriage and integration on his own terms.<sup>33</sup> He even used the 1960s sociopolitical phenomenon known as the "white man's nigger" against opponents to declare himself an entirely new breed of blackness — that of proud excellence.<sup>34</sup> This new blackness, which drove Ali's then-unconventional black pride and use of white stereotypes to combat racism, led to his embrace by the counterculture, which began looking to those who thought against conventional ways in an attempt to solve society's problems.<sup>35</sup> Ali's belief in black separatism continued through the peak of his boxing career and was exhibited most notably in a 1975 interview with *Playboy*, in which he said "black men with white

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<sup>30</sup> Amir Saeed. "What's in a name? Muhammad Ali and the Politics of Cultural Identity," *Culture, Sport, Society* 5 (2002): 51-72.

<sup>31</sup> E.W. Gorsevski & M.L. Butterworth, M.L. "Muhammad Ali's Fighting Words: The Paradox of Violence in Nonviolence Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97 (2011): 50-73.

<sup>32</sup> Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship ...*

<sup>33</sup> Saeed, "What's in a name?"

<sup>34</sup> G. Farred. *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*.

<sup>35</sup> Meghan Warner Mettler. "If I Could Drive You Out of Your Mind': Anti-Rationalism and the Celebration of Madness in 1960s Counterculture," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 9 (2015): 171-187.

women just don't feel right" and spoke of African-Americans one day separating from the rest of the country:

... black people in America will never be free so long as they're on the white man's land. ... We can't be free until we get our own land and our own country in North America. When we separate from America and take maybe ten states, then we'll be free. Free to make our own laws, set our own taxes, have our own courts, our own judges, our own schoolrooms, our own currency, our own passports. And if not here in America, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad said the white man should supply us with the means to let us go back somewhere in Africa and build up our own country. America, rich as it is, was made rich partly through the black man's labor. It can afford to supply us for 25 years with the means to make our own nation work, and we'll build it up, too. We can't be free if we can't control our own land. ... Black people need to have their own nation.<sup>36</sup>

In February 1966, the United States Army lowered its mental/physical standards with regards to the draft, and a 24-year old Ali, who had received 1Y (below the draft's mental or physical standards) deferment two years earlier, was summoned to take the ceremonial step forward into the armed forces. The boxer made his stance on the reclassification clear from the beginning, saying he would prefer a five-year prison sentence, the standard for draft dodging, to serving in the military and coining the phrase, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong."<sup>37</sup> His decision to fight against Uncle Sam's efforts to draft him into military service was the culmination of his political consciousness and ultimately came down to his view of the draft during the Vietnam War as a racist enterprise.<sup>38</sup> Knowing good and well he could lose his heavyweight title, his respective boxing licenses, and the respect of Americans nationwide if he rejected the draft, Ali was rooted in his beliefs, and it showed in the lead of a April 28, 1967, *Courier-*

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<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Linderman. "This is the legend of Muhammad Ali, the greatest fighter that ever will be." *Playboy Magazine*, June 3, 2016, accessed October 4, 2017, <<https://www.playboy.com/articles/muhammad-ali-playboy-interview-1975>.>

<sup>37</sup> Robert Lipsyte. "I'm Free to Be Who I Want." *The New York Times*, May 28, 1967.

<sup>38</sup> Gorsevski & Butterworth, "Muhammad Ali's Fighting Words ... "

*Journal* article. “I am ready to die for my religion,” Ali said during an April 27 appeal hearing in Houston.<sup>39</sup> On April 28, he officially refused the draft and was stripped of his boxing crown. Ali’s opposition to the draft made the boxer one of the country’s most recognized anti-war activists, a hero who personified the issues of race and class that divided the South and intersected over the Vietnam War.<sup>40</sup> Two months after his refusal, a federal court convicted him of draft dodging and sentenced him to the standard five years behind bars. What followed was a three-year exile from boxing and a Supreme Court hearing that culminated in possibly Ali’s greatest victory ever in the legal battle dubbed by *The Louisville Courier-Journal* as “Cassius Clay vs. Uncle Sam.”<sup>41</sup>

Because Ali had made it clear that he would rather go to prison than compromise his religious beliefs and serve in the Army during the months leading up to his 1967 induction hearing in Houston, print media used game framing to build a compelling narrative around Cassius Clay vs. Uncle Sam for their audiences rather than focusing coverage on speculation as to what Ali would do when faced with the decision or taking the time to investigate the cultural issues at the heart of this legal debate. And, for the first time since the undefeated boxer shook up the boxing world and defeated Liston, Ali was the underdog — framed as the unpatriotic, anti-mainstream, and in a sense unrecognized challenger — in his fight against Uncle Sam, one of the ultimate symbols of the American identity and the American military. Although the American justice system is based on the tenant of innocent until proven guilty, Ali’s predicament offered

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<sup>39</sup> AP/UPI dispatches. “Today’s Main Event: Cassius Clay vs. Uncle Sam.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 28, 1967.

<sup>40</sup> John Ernst and Yvonne Baldwin, “The Not So Silent Minority: Louisville’s Antiwar Movement, 1966-1975,” *The Journal of Southern History* 73 (2007): 105-142.

<sup>41</sup> AP/UPI dispatches, “Today’s Main Event ... ”

an exception: By refusing to take the step forward into the Army, the boxer willingly committed a felony. Now, he had to prove to a court of law that he was a practicing minister of The Nation of Islam, perceived by the white population during the 1960s as a fringe, potentially dangerous organization dedicated to racial isolation.<sup>42</sup>

With the lawyers on both sides throwing the real punches in Cassius Clay vs. Uncle Sam and Ali's fists sidelined in the court of law, the boxer took on the persona of a politician/ideological leader in his struggle for draft exemption. Hayden Covington, in his argument during an April 27, 1967, preliminary hearing, said Ali "is no different than a congressman. A congressman is exempt from the draft. Under the law, so are ministers."<sup>43</sup> Despite Ali's denial of being any sort of leader — "... they're not going to make no Malcolm X out of me. If they make you a leader, they can catch you up."<sup>44</sup> — Robert Lipsyte of *The New York Times* still described the boxer as having a "symbolic role in the Negro's struggles for equality in this country."<sup>45</sup>

Although casting the boxer as a symbolic political figure in print media's game framing coverage created a platform for Ali's message and offered a deeper contextual look into the ideology and experiences that helped shape his decision to refuse the draft, it also offered equal opportunity for Ali's message to be framed as anti-patriotic, self-interested, and disappointing. In the same article Lipsyte includes fellow African-Americans comparing Ali to the president, 22-year-old inductee John McCullough is quoted as saying "It's his prerogative if he's sincere in his religion, but it's his duty as a

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<sup>42</sup> Roberts and Smith, *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship ...*

<sup>43</sup> AP/UPI dispatches. "Today's Main Event ..."

<sup>44</sup> Robert Lipsyte. "'They'll make no Malcolm X out of me.'" *The New York Times*, April 28, 1967.

<sup>45</sup> Lipsyte, "'They'll make no Malcolm X out of me.'"

citizen to go in. I'm a coward, too"<sup>46</sup> before joining the other 46 men with whom he was to go through the induction ceremony.

This contradiction in coverage — framing Ali as a symbolic representation of African-Americans' struggles against systematic racism but also as an insincere, cowardly, and self-interested black man — is reflective of where Cassius Clay vs. Uncle Sam fell into the broader narrative of the Vietnam War: a legal fight that might touch on the larger social issues facing the country but whose outcome would have very little, if any, direct impact on the way issues of race were addressed or stopping the war. In the minds of journalists, Ali could spout his message all he wanted and might gain exemption from the draft, but the outcome of his legal dispute — like a boxing match — would do little to the pro- or anti-war movements other than making one side happy and more inspired toward its cause and the other upset and stripped of power. Therefore, the narrative was simplified to resemble a competition.

Three years after his return to the ring as a 28-year old, Ali's victory over George Foreman in the 1974 Rumble in the Jungle both allowed the 31-year-old boxer to reclaim his heavyweight title for the first time since it was stripped from him in 1967 and served as “a watershed that marked Ali's full-fledged arrival as a mainstream American hero.”<sup>47</sup> Now champion again, and with public discontent toward the Vietnam War continuing to grow as the conflict was still a year away from officially ending, Ali experienced a restoration of his public image after the dispute over his refusal to enter the U.S. Army because, as Ezra argues: “He protested the war well before most others had caught on.

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<sup>46</sup> Lipsyte, Robert. “Clay Refuses Army Oath; Stripped of Boxing Crown” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1967.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

His honesty distinguished him from a presidential administration whose chief executive only months earlier desperately insisted that he was not a crook. He was black but appeared to transcend race without ever losing consciousness of its significance.”<sup>48</sup> When NOI leader Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, Ali left the group to become an orthodox Muslim, a decision that “allowed him to renounce earlier statements about whites, politics, and interracial relations that are repugnant to the vast majority of Americans.”<sup>49</sup>

“I don’t hate whites. That was history, but it’s coming to an end,” Ali told David King of New York Times Magazine in 1975.<sup>50</sup> “We’re in a new phase, a resurrection. Elijah taught us to be independent, to clean ourselves up, to be proud and healthy. He stressed the bad things that the white man did to us so we could get free and strong. Now, his son Wallace is showing us there are good and bad regardless of color; that the devil is in the mind and heart, not the skin. We Muslims hate injustice and evil, but we don’t have time to hate people. White people wouldn’t be here if God didn’t mean them to be.”

Although Ali was making successful advances in reconciling his past grievances with mainstream America, the mid-1970s through mid-1980s proved to be a period of decline for the boxer. Because of financial issues — Ali’s spending habits and divorce from his second wife, Khalilah Ali, and third wife, Veronica Porche — he continued to fight, which only took a greater toll on his health and athletic legacy. He lost his title to Leon Spinks in 1978, reclaimed it by defeating Spinks in a rematch a year later, then retired only to return to the ring 18 months later to be dominated by then-heavyweight champion Larry Holmes. After losing one final fight to Trevor Berbick in December

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<sup>48</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>49</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Hauser. *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).



1981, Ali “slipped into an ignominious retirement”<sup>51</sup> just over a month before he was to turn 39.

In 1984, Ali spent eight days at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York undergoing a series of tests and was diagnosed with Parkinson’s syndrome, but neither he nor the doctors would directly attribute the onset of the disease to the number of punches to the head Ali took during his 21-year career.<sup>52</sup> A Sept. 21, 1984, *Chicago Tribune* wire story noted the development of the ex-boxer’s “slurred, sometimes halted voice,” but Ali continued to perpetuate an image of strength by “looking pretty” and appearing alongside the Rev. Jesse Jackson outside the hospital to talk with reporters.

“I’m in good condition. I’m not hurting, and I’m not in pain,” Ali said then. “I saw so many people waiting and thinking I’m dying. I’m still the greatest of all time.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite Ali’s assertion of his greatness, the retired boxer soon became a figure to pity and, at times, make fun of ... most famously in a 1981 “Saturday Night Live” sketch in which Eddie Murphy “portrayed the former champion as delirious, punch-drunk, and pathetic — repeating himself, not making any sense, slurring his words, and reciting nursery rhymes.”<sup>54</sup> Ali’s name also became associated with “cheap schemes<sup>55</sup>” such as plans to sell powdered milk to underdeveloped countries and create a Muhammad Ali Financial Corporation that would apply for a \$100 billion loan to build mosques and low-income apartment buildings around the U.S., neither of which amounted to anything.

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<sup>51</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>52</sup> *Chicago Tribune* wires, “I’m not hurting; I’m not dying’: Ali.” Sept. 21, 1984.

<sup>53</sup> *Chicago Tribune* wires, “I’m not hurting; I’m not dying’: Ali.”

<sup>54</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>55</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

Ali-endorsed “shoe polish, hamburger joints, popcorn, boxing equipment, and candy”<sup>56</sup> also never caught amongst consumers.

Ali faced criticism from his most liberal supporters for his decision to endorse Republican presidential candidates, such as the re-election of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush in 1984. Those who once viewed Ali as a moral authority had to reconsider after the ex-boxer sided with politicians described by Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader Andrew Young as “candidates whose policies are harmful to the great majority of Americans, black and white.”<sup>57</sup> Ali’s reputation also eroded through his joint business and political associations with shady attorney Richard Hirschfield, who was found guilty of fraud three times by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Their problematic relationship culminated in Hirschfield impersonating Ali in a phone call with six U.S. senators, during which the attorney asked legislators to “enact legislation that would allow Ali to sue the federal government for damages resulting from his exile two decades earlier.”<sup>58</sup> There were not many good things to say about the former champion at the time, and he gradually drifted out of public attention.

Arguably the event that has had the biggest impact on Ali’s ascension to icon status was when, at age 44, he married Yolanda “Lonnie” Ali in November 1986. Lonnie grew up in the home across the street from Ali’s after her family moved to Louisville’s West End in 1962, and the two had a “big brother and younger sister”<sup>59</sup> relationship. That was until 1982, when Ali asked her move to Los Angeles and become his primary

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<sup>56</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>57</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>58</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>59</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

caregiver. When his marriage with Porche ended, Ali proposed to Lonnie, and the couple came months short of reaching their 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary when Ali died.

Lonnie not only tended to the retired boxer's fleeting health, but she also served and continues to serve as "the caretaker of his image and legacy."<sup>60</sup> An MBA student at the University of Louisville who continued her education at UCLA when she moved in with Ali, Lonnie rebuilt the Ali name into a powerful brand without compromising his moral authority. The process began with a July 1988 *New York Times* feature entitled, "Ali: still magic." In the story, Peter Tauber dispels rumors that the former champion was "depressed and physically deteriorating" by presenting Ali as healthier and happier than people believed with testimony from Lonnie and Ali's doctors and anecdotes of Ali performing magic tricks and coming to terms with his boxing legacy with regards to the impact it had and continues to have on America's racial climate:

I never talk about boxing. It's just something I did. It served its purpose. I was only 11, 12 years old — I saw Negroes being put out of white restaurants, I saw Negroes being hung, a boy named Emmett Till, castrated and burned up. I said I'm gonna get famous so I can help my people — that was my intention. ... White people tell me, 'You made me see.' What could I pick better than this to do with my life?<sup>61</sup>

A byproduct of Lonnie's caretaking of Ali's image and legacy, however, was limited access to her husband, who would often spend hours holding court with a revolving door of reporters in hotel rooms or gyms during his boxing career. Instead, the Ali camp recruited Thomas Hauser, a New York City attorney, Pulitzer Prize-nominated author, and Ali fanatic, to produce an authorized biography of the boxer's life and granted him unlimited access to Ali's inner circle and admirers. The product of

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<sup>60</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Tauber. "Ali: still magic." *The New York Times*, July 17, 1988.

“thousands of hours with Ali,” 1991’s “Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times” boasts an appendix of 178 sources and became the foundational work in the reshaping of Ali’s legacy and the definitive source from which the overwhelming majority of interpretations of the boxer have stemmed.

Hauser writes in the preface of the biography: “This book is not an attempt to mythologize Ali. It’s an effort to show him as he was and is: a superb human being with good qualities and flaws.”<sup>62</sup> But the tone of the work, which draws heavily on oral history and personal testimony to tell Ali’s story, strongly reinforces Lonnie’s request to positively “place Muhammad in context, not just as a fighter but also as a social, political, and religious figure.”<sup>63</sup> Critics of the book point out that Hauser had obvious pro-Ali motivations after being granted unprecedented access to one of his idols to write what would be a lucrative biography. Ezra also argues Hauser’s biography produced what has now become the most popular method for the retelling of Ali’s life, “a series of recollections told by Ali’s contemporaries or as testimonies of younger people claiming to recognize Ali’s significance,” which proves problematic because testimony of Ali’s greatness rather than fact has become the primary evidence that the former champion was as great as everybody believes he was.

Regardless of the conflicting opinions surrounding “Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times,” its release prompted an influx of Ali literature that cast the boxer in a heroic light during the early 1990s — “convincing a new generation of consumers to understand the staples of Ali’s moral authority ... takes the kind of argumentation that is well suited to

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<sup>62</sup> Hauser. *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*

<sup>63</sup> Lonnie Ali comment reported in Neil Leifer and Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali Memories* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).

book form.”<sup>64</sup> Hauser used the success generated by his biography to attack the validity of Ali’s 1975 autobiography, “The Greatest: My Own Story,” which “presents Ali as an uncompromising black nationalist who grew up in poverty, was distrustful of white people ...” and perpetuated the myth of Ali throwing his 1960 gold medal into the Ohio River, because it contradicted the version of Ali’s narrative he produced in the 1991 biography. The reshaping of Ali’s public image through literature also coincided with “a larger historiography that once and for all declared the Civil Rights and anti-war movement to have positively impacted American society”<sup>65</sup> and the deterioration of the former champion’s physical state, which the Ali camp believed could not yet be transmitted visually to Americans ... until they found the perfect opportunity.

After investing \$465 million for the television rights to the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, NBC Sports President Dick Ebersol persuaded Billy Payne, the president of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, to have the 54-year old Ali light the Olympic cauldron at the games’ opening ceremony. The decision was aided by an earlier “60 Minutes” special on Ali, which was supposed to perpetuate the theme of the ex-boxer gallantly dealing with Parkinson’s syndrome but instead evoked pity and concern for Ali’s physical well-being. Thus, the moment when Ali, to the surprise of everyone except those who had coordinated the event, took the torch from gold-medal swimmer Janet Evans and lit the cauldron with shaking hands “transformed public understanding of his physical condition from a disability to another thing that made him great.”<sup>66</sup> His determination to light the cauldron with no assistance was broadcast on an

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<sup>64</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon.*

<sup>65</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon.*

<sup>66</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon.*

international scale as a transcendent moment for Ali as a moral authority who was able to unite races with a single, simple act. In another act of rewriting history during the 1996 games, International Olympic Committee Chairman Juan Antonio Samaranch presented Ali with a gold medal to replace the one he had lost at halftime of the men's basketball championship game between the United States and Yugoslavia. Although many still believed the myth that Ali had thrown the medal into the Ohio River as an act of racial protest, this moment corrected that narrative because Bob Costas clarified on the NBC broadcast that the former champion has simply misplaced the old medal.<sup>67</sup> Ezra argues that, after these two moments from the Olympics, Ali had been successfully reintroduced to television audiences, was "ready to be marketed," and spent the next decade as "an endorser, built around the themes of morality, inspiration, achievement, and perseverance."<sup>68</sup> The former boxer, once an outspoken, radical catalyst for change, showed his commitment to the commercialization of his legacy when he punted on questions about politics and terrorism during a 2002 TV interview: "I dodge those questions. I've opened up businesses around the country, selling products, and I don't want to say nothing and, not knowing what I'm doing, not being qualified, say the wrong thing and hurt my business."<sup>69</sup>

By the 2000s, biographers, admirers, cultural ambassadors, and business partners increasingly presented Ali as, "an otherworldly, divine mystic possessed of superpowers."<sup>70</sup> In 2005, The Muhammad Ali Center, a six-story museum dedicated to the boxer's life, was erected in downtown Louisville and serves as the physical

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<sup>67</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>68</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>69</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

<sup>70</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

embodiment of Ali’s larger-than-life story. In early June 2016, Ali was hospitalized with a respiratory illness and died a week later from “septic shock due to natural causes.”<sup>71</sup> In a note posted to Twitter, Hana Ali, one of Ali’s daughters, described the heroic nature with which her father continued to fight against death 30 minutes after total organ failure.

Our hearts are literally hurting. But we are so happy daddy is free now. We all tried to stay strong and whispered in his ear, ‘You can go now. We will be okay. ... You can go back to God now.’ All of us were around him hugging and kissing him and holding his hands, chanting the Islamic prayer. All of his organs failed but his HEART wouldn’t stop beating. For 30 minutes ... his heart kept beating. No one had ever seen anything like it. A true testament to the strength of his Spirit and Will! Thank you all for your love and support!!!<sup>72</sup>

### **Black Power and the intersection of the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam movements**

As a youngster, Ali had his perception of race heavily shaped by seeing the mutilated face of Emmett Till in magazines published throughout the country. As he rose to boxing stardom and began challenging racial norms during the mid-1960s, however, he began shaping African-Americans’ perception of their blackness on a global scale — at a time when “black people had a problem loving themselves”<sup>73</sup> and a 1965 report from Daniel Patrick Moynihan of the U.S. Labor Department “postulated that the Negro family in general was infected by a ‘tangle of pathology,’ indicated chiefly by a high rate of female-headed families and a corresponding low self-esteem in Negro men.”<sup>74</sup> Ali embodied “Black Power,” a catchphrase coined and debuted at a 1966 rally in Mississippi

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<sup>71</sup> Elisha Fieldstadt. “Cause of Muhammad Ali’s death, septic shock, targets sick, elderly.” *NBC News*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/cause-muhammad-ali-s-death-septic-shock-targets-sick-elderly-n585926>.

<sup>72</sup> Elisha Fieldstadt. “Cause of Muhammad Ali’s death, septic shock, targets sick, elderly.”

<sup>73</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. “Muhammad Ali fans pay homage to their local hero.” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor Branch. *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

by Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. When asked to explain the phrase, Carmichael explained, “... that the only way black people in Mississippi will create an attitude where they will not be shot down like pigs, where they will not be shot down like dogs, is when they get the power ... .”<sup>75</sup> Carmichael may have initially intended for “Black Power” to serve as a rallying cry for African-Americans to gain political prominence in areas where they constituted a majority, but the phrase went on to coalesce into a movement characterized by an intense feeling of racial pride, with Ali serving as one of the key symbolic figures. “I am America,” Ali once said. “I am the part you won’t recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky, my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me.”<sup>76</sup>

To the white public, Ali’s aggressive personality and brash political statements came at a time when print media’s documentation of African-Americans’ civil rights struggle were more reactive than proactive, which, as documented in the 1968 Kerner Commission Report, furthered racism. With regards to the Watts Riots of 1965, the report brought attention to important segments of the media’s “failure to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and on the underlying problems of race relations. They have not communicated to the majority of their audience — which is white — a sense of the degradation, misery and hopelessness of life in the ghetto.”<sup>77</sup> Instead, coverage was reported as “an exaggeration of both mood and event.”<sup>78</sup> The result

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<sup>75</sup> Branch. *The King Years* ...

<sup>76</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. “Muhammad Ali: the political poet.” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders. “Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.” (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 1-29.

<sup>78</sup> Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders. “Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.”



was increased tension between the African-American community and white reporters, who earlier that year, helped bring the country's racial monstrosities to light with their coverage of the MLK-led Selma to Montgomery March.

“And we need to stop these honky reporters from coming down and exploiting us,” Carmichael said in an address to the Watts community. “They never show up except when they have a chance to make black people look bad. Where were they all these years when the cops have been intimidating, beating, and murdering our people?”<sup>79</sup> With Carmichael's embrace of black nationalism gaining traction on a national scale, African-Americans throughout the country began using more aggressive protest tactics, which included violence toward white reporters and a belief that “it was therapeutic for oppressed people to fight physically for their freedom.”<sup>80</sup>

Although the Black Power movement sparked a newfound energy in African-Americans' struggle for civil rights, it caused an inner schism between Carmichael and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said on June 17, 1966, “... that while believing firmly that power is necessary, that it would ne difficult for me to use the phrase ‘Black Power’ because of the connotative meaning that it has for many people.”<sup>81</sup> A 1966 *New York Times* composition paid for by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen sums up the conflict of doctrines in a single sentence: “We are faced now with a situation where consciousness power meets powerless conscience, threatening the very foundation of our nation.” King's nonviolent stance and trust in a federal government that had

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<sup>79</sup> Gene Roberts and Hank Kilbanoff. *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

<sup>80</sup> Roberts and Kilbanoff. *The Race Beat* ...

<sup>81</sup> Branch. *The King Years* ...

repeatedly worked to put African-Americans down was considered “too Sunday School, and he no longer commanded attention at the White House.”<sup>82</sup>

A pinnacle moment in the Civil Rights Movement in relation to the study of Ali, King publically denounced the Vietnam War for the first time on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York — just 25 days before Ali refused to take the ceremonial step forward when his name was called for induction into the U.S. Army in Houston. As Ali said upon first learning he was ruled eligible for the draft, King argued before a packed cathedral that he was opposed to black soldiers fighting in “brutal solidarity” with white soldiers for a purpose of guarding liberties in Southeast Asia that remained myths in America — “... a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools.”<sup>83</sup>

“I knew I could never again raise my voice against the violence at the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today — my own government,” said King, who according to a 2016 *New York Times* article by Henry Louis Gates Jr., also directly referenced Ali during the Riverside address: “Like Muhammad Ali puts it, we are all — black and brown and poor — victims of the same system of oppression.”<sup>84</sup>

King went on to offer proposals to stop the conflict. His methods for reaching peace included a permanent bombing halt, a unilateral cease-fire, asylum for any Vietnamese who feared for his or her life under a new regime, and setting a date for removing all foreign troops from the country in accordance with the 1954 Geneva

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<sup>82</sup> Branch. *The King Years* ...

<sup>83</sup> Branch. *The King Years* ...

<sup>84</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. “Muhammad Ali: the political poet.”

Agreement. King also endorsed draft resistance and, as Ali did, prompted each listener to weigh methods of war resistance by “individual conscience and collective promise.”

“But we all must protest,” King said. “ ... The war in Vietnam is a much graver injustice to Negroes than anything I could say against the war.”<sup>85</sup>

Although King received multiple standing ovations from the crowd at Riverside, his address faced “almost universal condemnation” outside the church’s walls.

““What on earth can Dr. King be talking about?”” wrote a Washington columnist on April 5, wondering how any civil rights leader would overlook the benefits of integrated combat. ‘If there hadn’t been a war, it would have served the Negro cause well to start one.’<sup>86</sup>” In a report to President Lyndon B. Johnson, academic liaison John Roche said King, “who is inordinately ambitious and quite stupid (a bad combination) ... is painting himself into a corner with a bunch of losers.” The April 11 edition of *The New York Times* included a headline that read, “N.A.A.C.P. Decries Stand of Dr. King on Vietnam / Calls it a ‘Serious Tactical Mistake to Merge Rights and Peace Drives.’”<sup>87</sup>

In the three years (1967-1970) Ali spent exiled from boxing, America became more comfortable with his militant approach of confronting change head on with regards to issues of race and the country’s involvement in Vietnam — only to watch said militancy fade in the early 1970s as the boxer made his return to the ring in ’70 against Jerry Quarry in Atlanta and reclaimed his heavyweight title in ’74. King was assassinated less than a month after leading a 1968 non-black minority leaders summit, and the radical Black Panthers, who boasted roughly 2,000 members nationwide, were getting involved

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<sup>85</sup> Branch. *The King Years* ...

<sup>86</sup> Branch. *The King Years* ...

<sup>87</sup> Branch. *The King Years* ...

in shootouts with and getting killed off by police.<sup>88</sup> Internal feuds weakened the party, and, in August 1970, the Black Panthers were all but broken when the FBI raided the organization's Philadelphia offices, arrested 14 members, and humiliated them by having some men strip off their clothes in front of members of the media. While this African-American de-militarization occurred and blacks finally began to make legitimate progress in the desegregation of schools, Ali's image underwent a transition from the loud, scary, uncontrollable Black Muslim he was seen as during his induction trial to thoughtful college lecturer who, deprived of his livelihood at his prime, spoke to crowds of anti-war supporters around the country. Ali's exhibition return against Quarry in Atlanta was described as a celebration of black excellence and culture, but he stopped presenting himself as overtly militant because, by that point, the movement had come and gone. Elijah Muhammad died the year after Ali's heavyweight championship in the Rumble in the Jungle. When Muhammad's son took over the NOI and began preaching a less-radical doctrine, it prompted The Greatest to take the next step of his religious evolution into the accepting figure he became know as later in life.

In 1969, anti-war protests began to occur en masse around the country, with 100,000 demonstrators flooding the Pentagon and more than 400,000 gathering in rural New York for Woodstock. Months after the country's deadliest week in Vietnam (543 recorded deaths) and Lyndon B. Johnson halted bombing north of the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel, Richard Nixon was elected president and promised to end the war. That promise did not come to fruition, however, before members of the Ohio National Guard killed four Kent State students during an anti-war rally and Nixon resigned amid the Watergate scandal.

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<sup>88</sup> History.com Staff. "Black Panthers." The History Channel, 2017. Accessed April 17, 2018: <https://www.history.com/topics/black-panthers>

When the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in Ali's favor, the boxer did not immediately provoke the issue further by making a racially charged statement but instead chose to be humble, praise Allah, and vow to be a better person. As he would say later, the only thing he regretted about his decision to refuse induction and his "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong" comment was that he did wait until the rest of the country felt the same way he did before making it.

As a sign of just how drastically Ali's legacy has changed, 49 years later both he and King — once reviled for their racial activism and nonviolent protest of the Vietnam War — are mentioned in the same sentence as the Founding Fathers and Henry David Thoreau as practicing the "proud American tradition of civil disobedience"<sup>89</sup> by Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, a white conservative. In a letter submitted to the C-J Readers' Forum on June 9, 2016, Christie L. Swan adds a few more lofty comparisons to Ali and King — John Brown and "of course Jesus my Lord and Savior" because they "labored, suffered, endured and died for freedom and justice for all people."<sup>90</sup>

### **Print and digital media as the (problematic) sites of athlete-heroes' legacies**

With regard to athletes' legacies, both local and national print publications serve as sites of collective memory: to preserve, reinforce, and contest the past.<sup>91</sup> Journalists contextualize the past within the present — and the present within the past — in order to

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<sup>89</sup> Sheldon S. Shafer. "Sen. Paul puts Ali's name on induction bill." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Christie L. Swan, Kenneth L. Zimmerman, David J. Lott and Monica Marks. "READERS FORUM: 'A hero and inspirational figure.'" *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 9, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> L.A. Roessner. "Remembering 'The Georgia Peach.'" Popular Press, Public Memory, and the Shifting Legacy of an (Anti) Hero. *Journalism History*, 36, 2, (2010): 83-95.

create meaning within collective memory.<sup>92</sup> Journalists also have the power to create “meaningful totalities out of scattered events”<sup>93</sup> through the use of narrative storytelling. Four thematic functions of memory — memory as historical context, memory as a marker of commemoration or anniversary, memory as mythology, and memory as a contest terrain — allow publications to effectively shape and shift audiences’ collective memory over time by changing their interpretations and representations of athletes’ lives in print.<sup>94</sup>

As Lori Amber Roessner explains in her 2010 study on baseball legend Ty Cobb, “Remembering ‘The Georgia Peach,’ Popular Press, Public Memory, and the Shifting Legacy of an (Anti) Hero,” the reinterpretation of athlete-heroes’ lives can prove problematic, as legacies can evolve into a blurred, multifaceted image, which can prove difficult to interpret upon first glance.<sup>95</sup> Media outlets can overreach on the symbolism applied to frames to completely reshape events to narratives to morally appeal to commercial audiences, which can lead to the omission of crucial details that severely distorts the authentic memory.<sup>96</sup> The legends created through journalists’ radicalization of racial frames become socially significant both for their association with history and for

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<sup>92</sup> Roessner. “Remembering ‘The Georgia Peach.’”

<sup>93</sup> E. Bird & R. Dardenne. “Myth, chronicle and story: Exploring the narrative qualities of news.” In D. Berkowitz (Eds.), *Social meanings of news: A text reader*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

<sup>94</sup> Roessner. “Remembering ‘The Georgia Peach.’”

<sup>95</sup> Roessner. “Remembering ‘The Georgia Peach.’”

<sup>96</sup> P. Hutchinson. “The legend of Texas Western: journalism and the epic sports spectacle that wasn’t.” *Critical studies in Media Communication*, 33, 2, (2016): 154-167.

their allegorical qualities. Each attribute of the legend helps shape collective memory and contemporary attitudes about a specific event.<sup>97</sup>

This study determined print and digital media outlets used Ali's death as an opportunity to provide the collective memory with preexisting frames that simplify Ali's narrative. Where Roessner's study on Cobb reveals audiences from Cobb's home state of Georgia "seem intent on reveling in his success on the baseball diamond and philanthropic deeds within the community" while national outlets continue to indulge in associating the Hall of Fame infielder's status as a vicious anti-hero known for spiking opposing players and starting fights on the field,<sup>98</sup> this study on Ali investigates the discrepancy in the treatment of Ali's legacy by a local and national outlet in their coverage of his life and death. This study found that publications have been influenced to cast Ali as a moral exemplar whose fight against racial injustice can serve as a model for current and future issues surrounding race, religion, and athletes voicing their opinion on sociopolitical issues such as police brutality and the First Amendment right to free speech, gender equality, the election of Donald Trump, LGBTQ rights, etc.

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<sup>97</sup> Hutchinson. "The legend of Texas Western: journalism and the epic sports spectacle that wasn't."

<sup>98</sup> Roessner. "Remembering 'The Georgia Peach.'"

## **Chapter 4: Analysis — How the *Courier-Journal* and *The New York Times* planned their coverage of The Greatest’s death**

Given Ali’s deteriorating physical condition as he regressed further and further under Parkinson’s disease, both the *Courier-Journal* and *The New York Times* planned their coverage of the former boxer’s imminent death well in advance of 2016. Both publications, well aware of the international magnitude Ali’s death would carry, documented their process — the advanced planning and the hectic deadline changes necessary to give Ali’s obituaries the necessary special treatment in print — in pieces published in the wake of Ali’s death and memorial services. In the details about the editing process, the publications reveal some of their motivations in how they would frame Ali over the coming week of memorial coverage.

*Courier-Journal* executive editor Neil Budde wrote the *C-J*’s process piece, “Ali plans were long in the making,” and said he first saw the publication’s Ali special section when he started at the newspaper in 2013. The origins of the *C-J*’s obituary by former sportswriter C. Ray Hall dated back over a decade, and Hall spent multiple more months interviewing 20 to 30 sources for pieces that ran in the June 5, 2016, Ali special section. In helping plan the special section, Budde advised his team to use more never-before-seen archive pictures, “knowing that would be the one thing readers would love.”<sup>99</sup> With normal print deadline approaching, the *C-J*’s digital team quickly publishing news alerts and the obituary online, and the Sunday special section due to press at 7 a.m. on June 4, the staff made a last-minute decision to swap out an action shot of Ali in the ring for an intimate portrait of the boxer — next to his famous quote of how he wanted to be

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<sup>99</sup> Neil Budde. “Ali plans were long in the making.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 19, 2016.



remembered — for the package’s dominant photo. The choice reflects Ali’s transcendence from boxing lore into a global icon who, to millions, stood for so much more outside the ring.

“Several times I’d asked if we really wanted a sweaty faced boxing photo to be Ali’s legacy,” Budde wrote. “And the designers finally agreed after finding a much superior photo they hadn’t considered before. What a pleasant surprise to see the section coming off the press the next morning with that photo instead!”<sup>100</sup>

In New York, the staff of *The New York Times* took similar daily deadline precautions to the *Courier-Journal* once it received news of Ali being in critical condition, although the paper missed the majority of its national deadlines as Ali held on for life. “This wasn’t to be the night, I thought,” wrote Lew Serviss in his piece “*Times*, literally, stops the presses for Ali.” “Muhammad Ali was, in every sense of the word, a fighter, after all.”<sup>101</sup>

Former sportswriter Robert Lipsyte, who first covered Ali when he defeated Sonny Liston to win the heavyweight title in 1964 and followed the boxer throughout his complicated career, had been preparing his obit for 52 years. Sports art director Wayne Kamidoi said discussions about how to visually handle Ali’s obituary in print had been going on for the majority of his 21 years at the publication. The *Times* published what Serviss called “a banquet” of content digitally as soon as the news of Ali’s death became official, but the print team had to reconstruct its front page, and its plate team at the College Point, Queens, printing plant had to stop the presses as the changes were being

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<sup>100</sup> Neil Budde. “Ali plans were long in the making.”

<sup>101</sup> Lew Serviss. “Times, literally, stops presses the presses for Ali.” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2016.

sent to them. For its choice of front-page photo to run with the obituary, the *Times* chose a portrait from legendary African-American photographer Gordon Parks. The photo has been described as “the Mona Lisa of Ali.”<sup>102</sup>

It is clear in both accounts that Ali’s death was a massive event that both staffs knew must be approached with the same strategic and meticulous attention to detail Ali showcased in his training regimen. Serviss describes the experience of that night in the *NYT*’s newsroom as a blockbuster event that would soon be felt around the world. At the center of it all was Ali, a man once described as “the perfect prism through which to view sports, race, religion, politics, celebrity, comedy, tragedy”<sup>103</sup> whose final chapter was about to begin.

### **How did the *C-J* and *NYT* obituaries frame Ali as an icon, athlete-hero?**

A common theme expressed throughout print and digital news coverage of Ali’s death was that his symbolic legacy outside the ring was just as important to his legacy — and more often than not overshadowed — his athletic prominence inside it. This is made immediately obvious in the obituary leads from both C. Ray Hall of the *Courier-Journal* and Robert Lipsyte of *The New York Times*:

***C-J*:** “Muhammad Ali, the Louisville-born boxing champ who inspired love and hate — and finally became a global symbol of peace and reconciliation — died Friday following respiratory complications at a hospital not far from his Arizona home. He was 74.”<sup>104</sup>

***NYT*:** “Muhammad Ali, the three-time world heavyweight boxing champion who helped define his turbulent times as the most charismatic and controversial sports

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<sup>102</sup> David Gonzalez. “Two Champions: Muhammad Ali and Gordon Parks.” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Sandomir. “Muhammad Ali inspires writers in life and death.” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2016.

<sup>104</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 4, 2016.

figure of the 20th century, died on Friday in a Phoenix-area hospital. He was 74.”<sup>105</sup>

In their attempts to organize and present Ali’s ascension to iconic global hero, both Hall and Lipsyte ground their pieces in narrative components of Hoebeke, Deprez, and Raeymaecker’s athlete-hero archetype. Both obituaries note early on Ali’s mythic boxing origin story: 12-year-old Cassius Clay threatening to beat up whoever stole his red Schwinn bike one afternoon near Columbia Gym at 4<sup>th</sup> and York and Louisville Police officer Joe Martin advising him to learn how to fight first. Even in its earliest stages, Ali’s boxing career began with a moral message, which can be and was applied to our current racial climate of police brutality toward African-Americans.

“America must never forget, when a cop and an inner city kid talk to each other, miracles can happen,”<sup>106</sup> Lonnie Ali said during the June 10, 2016, memorial service at the Yum! Center.

From this origin story, the obituaries move into the “rise: obstacles and ordeals” stage. During this phase, Ali is described as conquering both competitive obstacles such as his boxing opponents in the ring en route to a gold medal at the 1960 Summer Olympics and the 1964 heavyweight championship and non-competitive obstacles such as older sportswriters’ denouncing of his outlandish poetry and loudmouth personality and racial discrimination despite returning to his hometown as an Olympic medalist. Those trials as Cassius Clay birthed the next phase of the boxer’s narrative — his “temporary fall from grace” — when he announced his membership in the Nation of Islam and became Ali days after defeating Sonny Liston in 1964 and refused induction

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2016.

<sup>106</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. “Muhammad Ali fans pay homage to their local hero.”

into the U.S. Army three years later. Although the obituaries noted that “Congressmen and columnists condemned him as cowardly and unpatriotic — a man who ruled a violent sport, then discovered his peaceful instincts only when his draft status was upgraded to 1-A”<sup>107</sup> — during this phase of his life, they also allocated space to show how Ali’s actions were perceived as “noble acts of defiance by the liberal opposition.”<sup>108</sup>

“I remember when Ali joined the Nation of Islam,” said Julian Bond, civil rights activist and politician, in Lipsyte’s obit. “The act of joining was not something many of us particularly liked. But the notion he’d do it — that he’d jump out there, join this group that was so despised by mainstream America, and be proud of it — sent a little thrill through you.”<sup>109</sup>

“‘I’m so pretty’ was really him saying ‘black is beautiful’ before it became fashionable, at a time when a lot of black people thought it was better to be white,” added Hauser in a 2005 interview that was included in the *C-J*’s obit. “... that possibly the most handsome and maybe the most physically gifted person in the world was black and should take that position ... by extension he became a beacon of hope for oppressed people all over the world.”<sup>110</sup>

To help further a positive image of Ali during this time period, the *C-J*’s obit also includes a quote from the then-exiled boxer himself during a stop on his college lecture circuit, in which he provides perspective on his decision to resist the draft and how it had a positive impact on his life: “I would like to say to you who think I have lost so much, I have gained everything. I have peace of heart; I have a clear, free conscience. And I’m

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<sup>107</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>108</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>109</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>110</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

proud. I wake up happy. I go to bed happy. And if I go to jail, I'll go to jail happy. Boys go to war and die for what they believe in, so I don't see why the world is so shook up over me suffering for what I believe."<sup>111</sup>

Ali's "resurrection/penance accepted" phase began with his return to boxing after a three-year exile from the sport and the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling to uphold his conscientious objector status. When addressing this period in Ali's athletic career, there is no way around what he lost physically during his forced absence from the ring — the speed that made him float like a butterfly. In a *C-J* article from the publication's June 5, 2016, special section, his trainer, Angelo Dundee said: "We never saw Ali at his peak. He was getting better."<sup>112</sup> As both obituaries note, however, this loss of physical prowess also played a role in swinging public opinion in Ali's favor. He soon became valued for his displays of valor and virtuosity in the ring (see: *The Rumble in the Jungle*).

"In the early days, he fought as if he had a glass jaw and was afraid to get hit. He had the hyper reflexes of a frightened man," said Ferdie Pacheco, Ali's ringside doctor, in the *Courier-Journal's* obit. "He was so fast that you had the feeling, 'This guy is scared to death; he can't be that fast normally.' ... He was fast beyond belief — and smart. Then he went into exile, and when he came back, he couldn't move like lightning anymore. Everyone wondered: 'What happens now when he gets hit?' That's when we learned something else about him. That sissy-looking, soft-looking, beautiful-looking, child-man was one of the toughest guys who ever lived."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> C. Ray Hall. "Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74."

<sup>112</sup> C. Ray Hall. "BOUTS IN & OUT OF THE RING: Clay honed skills then gave birth to Ali." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>113</sup> C. Ray Hall. "Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74."

“It was assumed now that Ali’s time had passed and that he would become a high-grade ‘opponent,’ the fighter to beat for those establishing themselves,” Lipsyte said in his obituary. “But his time had returned. Although he was slower, his artistry was even more refined. ‘He didn’t have fights,’ wrote Jim Murray of The Los Angeles Times, ‘he gave recitals.’”<sup>114</sup>

The physical cost of Ali’s post-exile bouts, however, culminated in his diagnosis with Parkinson’s disease, which resulted in him becoming what Lipsyte describes in his obituary as “a legend in soft focus. ... He was respected for having sacrificed more than three years of his boxing prime and untold millions of dollars for his anti-war principles after being banished from the ring; he was extolled for his un-self-conscious gallantry in the face of incurable illness, and he was beloved for his accommodating sweetness in public.”<sup>115</sup> Ali’s lighting of the Olympic cauldron at the 1996 Atlanta Games, arguably the most important public appearance in solidifying his global icon status post-boxing career, is framed by both obituaries as a triumphant moment of humanization. Here was this legendary, braggadocious athlete stricken in shaking silence by disease surprising the world by taking the Olympic torch and successfully completing its journey by igniting the cauldron despite his physical ailment. The *C-J*’s obituary includes a detail about then-President Bill Clinton being moved to tears<sup>116</sup> at what Lipsyte describes in his obit as “that passive image.”<sup>117</sup> Although both obituaries make a point to discuss how Ali’s decision to continue fighting past his prime added to his physical decay — a criticism

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<sup>114</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>115</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>116</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>117</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

against the champion — they include quotes from family members about his bout with the disease that frame Ali as still mentally present and not letting Parkinson's define him.

“What's hard for me is that he's trapped inside his body,” daughter Laila Ali said in a 2004 interview. “He can't do things he wants to do. He can't say things he wants to say. I feel kind of bad about that. But that's just sometimes. Most of the time I don't, because I know he doesn't feel sorry for himself.”<sup>118</sup>

“Even though he became vulnerable in ways he couldn't control, he never lost his childlike innocence, his sunny, positive nature,” Lonnie Ali added. “Jokes and pranks and magic tricks. He wanted to entertain people, to make them happy.”<sup>119</sup> A June 4, 2016, piece from *Courier-Journal* sports columnist Tim Sullivan — “Ali's greatness extends beyond ring” — includes a quote from the boxer himself to the *Washington Post* that applies a moral lesson to his Parkinson's: “God gave me this physical impairment to remind me that I am not the greatest. He is.”<sup>120</sup>

Although Hall and Lipsyte's obituaries both follow the narrative framework of Hoebeke, Deprez, and Raeymaecker's athlete-hero archetype to establish Ali as a commendable global icon, the two pieces diverge in covering some aspects of the boxer's legacy. Representing Ali's hometown publication Hall dedicates an early portion of his *Courier-Journal* obituary to local reaction to Ali's death: Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer ordering the flags at all city government buildings to be lowered to half-staff until Ali was laid to rest and issuing a statement on the Louisville native that furthers the heroic framing of his legacy.

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<sup>118</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>119</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>120</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Ali's greatness extends beyond ring.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 4, 2016.

“As a boxer, he became The Greatest, though his most lasting victories happened outside the ring,” Fischer said in the statement. “Muhammad leveraged his fame as a platform to promote peace, justice and humanitarian efforts around the world, while always keeping strong ties to his hometown. Today, Muhammad Ali’s fellow Louisvillians join the billions whose lives he touched worldwide in mourning his passing, celebrating his legacy, and committing to continue his fight to spread love and hope.”<sup>121</sup>

Offsetting comments from Fischer and others that applauded Ali as a hometown hero in Hall’s obituary, however, are the perspectives of author Mark Kram and Wilfred Sheed “challenging the prevailing view of Ali as a social force for peace and justice.” Kram, who wrote the 2001 book “Ghosts of Manila,” said Ali was “essentially a blank screen upon which people projected whatever they wished. ... no more a social figure than Frank Sinatra. ... Seldom has such a public figure of more superficial depth been more wrongly perceived.”<sup>122</sup> Sheed, in an excerpt pulled from Hauser’s “Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times,” said he viewed Ali as “more of a symbol than a doer.”

“Without him, I don’t think society would be significantly different today,” he added. “... I’d have to say that if Muhammad Ali never existed, life certainly would have been duller. Whatever you think of the man and his meaning, the world would have been far less interesting without him.”<sup>123</sup> A quote from Hauser, whom the Ali family trusted with unprecedented access to write the boxer’s definitive biography, follows these dissenting voices with a warning against completely misinterpreting the boxer’s legacy through the lens of the athlete-hero archetype: “If you rewrite history and say, ‘Oh, Ali

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<sup>121</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>122</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>123</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”



was a man of principle from the very beginning, and he was wise and he was a proud black man who stood up for his people and he refused induction into the war in Vietnam,’ that’s a half-truth. It doesn’t tell you that yes, he was a proud black man but he also said white people were devils and were created by an evil scientist with a big head. So the Ali legacy of how people can change and learn to embrace each other; we have to learn that.”<sup>124</sup>

Hall also notes the early “white devils” doctrine of the Nation of Islam under leader Elijah Muhammad when discussing Ali’s religious conversion earlier in the obituary. For how emphatically Ali is framed as a universally loved figure across religions who “became a global symbol of peace and reconciliation,”<sup>125</sup> Hall mentioning his early belief in the radical, anti-white message of Elijah Muhammad is perhaps the biggest knock against the boxer made in the *C-J*’s obituary. This detail is excused, however, when Hall describes Ali’s religious progression to “a more temperate, inclusive version of humanity”<sup>126</sup> when Elijah Muhammad’s son Wallace took over the NOI after his father’s death and how the boxing great went on to serve as a religious “bridge-builder” as “arguably the world’s most famous Muslim — and American.” Ali became more widely respected as the country became more racially progressive and public opinion toward the Vietnam War began to unravel into dissent,<sup>127</sup> but, had the champ not

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<sup>124</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>125</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>126</sup> C. Ray Hall. “Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74.”

<sup>127</sup> In the 1970s, African-Americans saw success in the desegregation of schools via court-ordered desegregation. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, but black militancy also died out shortly after with the Black Panthers becoming split internally and persecuted by the FBI. More white Americans protested Vietnam as the death toll increased, so society became accustomed to taking aggressive approaches to tackle social issues head on. Ali also stopped presenting himself as overtly militant after being

assumed a moderate faith or been silenced by Parkinson's, perhaps he would have continued challenging the status quo with more fervor and written a more polarizing legacy.

Hall's piece also touches on the ways Ali "remains highly visible" as an iconic athlete-hero in his hometown: a portrait hanging off a downtown building that reads "Louisville's Ali," a major street named after him, and the \$60 million Muhammad Ali Center, which is described as a physical means to "... carry on his humanitarian efforts."<sup>128</sup> Even in death, Ali will still have the power to inspire change because of his association with the center's philanthropy efforts. In this portion of the obituary, Hall also draws attention to the commercialization of Ali's legacy by including information on Jared Weiss and George Bochetto, both described as admirers of the champ, buying and restoring his childhood home in 2012 for public tours that began days before Ali was hospitalized in June 2016. People not directly in Ali's inner circle prosper financially from his hero status, but it is framed positively because Weiss and Bochetto bought and renovated the house to pay tribute to Ali's life.

A photo accompanying Hall's obituary in print shows a 65-year-old Ali wearing a University of Louisville football jersey while he represents the Cardinals on the field as an honorary team captain at the 2007 Orange Bowl in Miami. More so than Ali lighting the Olympic cauldron, this image presents the champion as Lipsyte's "legend in soft focus." To Ali's left, NBA All-Star Dwayne Wade has his hand wrapped around the boxer's arm to help him stand while he shakes hands and poses with Wake Forest

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reinstated into boxing because that time had come and gone. He was now seen as a member of the old guard.

<sup>128</sup> C. Ray Hall. "Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74."

representative Arnold Palmer. It is clear that Ali is struggling in his bout with Parkinson's, but he is still presented as a triumphant icon. Despite the disease, he is standing next to other renowned athletes while he represents his hometown in a symbolic gesture to the applause of a packed football stadium. The photo calls attention to his hometown bond, his legacy both in and out of the ring, and his resilience to remain visible in public in spite of Parkinson's.

"Louisville was always very important to him," Hauser said in 2014. "He had a lot of affection for his hometown."<sup>129</sup> As the *C-J*'s subsequent Ali memorial coverage would bring to light, however, that relationship wasn't always reciprocal.

More so than the hometown obituary, Lipsyte is quick to list Ali's "hypocrisies, or at least inconsistencies."<sup>130</sup> Those inconsistencies included the champ considering himself "a race man" yet mocking the skin color, hair and physical features of other African-American boxers, belonging to a religious sect that emphasized strong families yet divorcing three times while openly traveling with the next wife-to-be, never learning to read and later admitting he had never read a book, and dodging a question about whether he considered Al Qaeda and the Taliban evil after the Sept. 11, 2011, attack on the World Trade Center because he had "businesses around the country" and an image to consider."<sup>131</sup> He also describes Ali's tendency to "interrupt a fund-raising meeting with an ethnic joke" despite being a spokesman for the Ali Center dedicated to "respect, hope, and understanding: "In one he said: 'If a black man, a Mexican and a Puerto Rican are

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<sup>129</sup> C. Ray Hall. "Louisville native, boxing legend, world humanitarian, dies at 74."

<sup>130</sup> Robert Lipsyte. "Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century."

<sup>131</sup> Robert Lipsyte. "Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century."

sitting in the back of a car, who's driving? Give up? The po-lice.”<sup>132</sup> Still, Lipsyte concedes that these are just small quarrels when considering Ali's larger-than-life legacy. “Ali had generated so much good will by then, he wrote, “that there was little he could say or do that would change the public's perception of him.”<sup>133</sup>

“We forgive Muhammad Ali his excesses because we see in him the child in us,” said Dave Kindred, Ali biographer, in the *NYT*'s obituary. “And if he is foolish or cruel, if he is arrogant, if he is outrageously in love with his reflection, we forgive him because we no more can condemn him than condemn a rainbow for dissolving into the dark. Rainbows are born of thunderstorms, and Muhammad Ali is both.”<sup>134</sup>

Lipsyte, like Hall, mentions the early Nation of Islam doctrine Ali was ushered into while training in Miami during the mid-1960s. But he, too, excuses the boxer to an extent by including a quote from Ali in which he credits the NOI “for offering African-Americans a black-is-beautiful message at a time of low self-esteem and persecution.”

“Color doesn't make a man a devil,” Ali said. “It's the heart and soul and mind that count. What's on the outside is only decoration.”<sup>135</sup>

A major discrepancy between the two obituaries is how both authors handled the false story of Ali throwing his Olympic gold medal into the Ohio River after reportedly being denied service because of his skin color at restaurants in downtown Louisville.

Hall's obituary made no reference to the mythical anecdote while Lipsyte chose to include it alongside a detail about Ali being called “the Olympic nigger”<sup>136</sup> upon

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<sup>132</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>133</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>134</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>135</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

<sup>136</sup> Robert Lipsyte. “Muhammad Ali Dies at 74; Titan of Boxing and the 20th Century.”

returning to his hometown from Rome. The longtime *NYT* sportswriter who followed Ali throughout his career goes on to dispel the myth and credits Hauser's "Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times" for reporting Ali simply lost the medal, but the anecdote serves as a transitional point in his obituary when describing the racial complexities Ali dealt with that guided his religious conversion. The *Courier-Journal* examines how the racial problems that existed in Louisville during Ali's adolescence affected his relationship with his hometown in later memorial coverage, but it could be argued Hall didn't want to include the Ohio River myth — as iconic as it has become — because it would draw attention to Louisville's racist past.

Obituaries are a secularized rite of passage to help the bereaved, but they also serve as a major form of collective memory within modernity. As "... a verdict, derived from professional peers, about the worth of the dead person's contribution," they provide the last judgment about the deceased's personality.<sup>137</sup> Both Hall's and Lipsyte's final tributes to Ali are categorized as "traditional positive obituary ... characterized as it is by an unambiguous celebration of its protagonist and a delineation of a continuous upward ascent."<sup>138</sup> The two journalists call attention to criticism made against Ali throughout stages of his life, but he is exonerated of his faults because, on his continuous upwards ascent to becoming The Greatest, he served as a global role model who advocated for peace and unity. Even during the point of his career when he was the most hated professional athlete in American for his religious conversion and refusal of induction into the U.S. Army, Ali continued to build his athlete-hero legacy for the sacrifices he made

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<sup>137</sup> Bridget Fowler. "Collective Memory and Forgetting: Components for a Study of Obituaries." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22 (2005): 53-72

<sup>138</sup> Bridget Fowler. "Collective Memory and Forgetting ... "

outside the ring and his status as a symbol for African-American and Muslim pride and the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. This framing of Ali as a global athlete-hero icon is carried over into the *Courier-Journal's* and *The New York Times'* subsequent memorial coverage, although the publications' approaches differed because of their status as a local and national newspaper, respectively.

### **The *Courier-Journal's* localized approach to Ali memorial coverage**

**Ali special section.** The *Courier-Journal* published a 24-page “Remembering The Greatest” special section that accompanied the June 5, 2016, Sunday print edition. As executive editor Neil Budde mentioned in his June 19, 2016, Community Forum piece, this section was done well in advance of Ali’s death and includes work from Hall and other former *C-J* staff members along with guest contributions. More so than Hall’s obituary, this section deliberately organizes Ali’s life and legacy into phases that are encapsulated into one- to two-page commemorative spreads highlighted by an array of photographs of Ali taken over the course of his life. The special section breaks down as follows:

- THE EARLY YEARS: “Seeds of a champion planted in a Louisville gym”
- BOUTS IN & OUT OF THE RING: “Clay honed his skills then gave birth to Ali”
- CONVERSION TO ISLAM: “Ali shifted from radical sect to inclusive group”
- THE FIGHT OVER VIETNAM: “Draft case remains a heated issue for some”
- RETURN OF THE CHAMP: “Boxing ring becomes his stage for greatness”
- KING OF THE RING
- THE FIGHTER (Photo page)
- THE LEGEND (Photo page)
- HOMETOWN STRAINS: “Champ, Louisville have stayed acquaintances if not friends”
- THE FAMILY MAN: “A life filled with love, marriage and nine children”
- STILL FIGHTING: “Ali helped put face on once-hidden disease”
- DEFINING ‘GREATNESS:’ “Ali’s moniker based on more than just boxing
- A CENTER OF INSPIRATION: “Ali wanted — and got — more than a museum”
- GOODBYE, GREATEST (Re-print of Hall’s obituary)

The size, thoroughness and presentation of the section alone speak to the magnitude of Ali's legacy and the *C-J*'s ambitious efforts to present as full a tribute to the Louisville native's life as possible for his hometown audience. By dedicating this much space to Ali, the publication was able to expand on parts of Ali's narrative that were not mentioned or fully fleshed out in Hall's obituary, the first of which was the myth surrounding Ali's lost Olympic gold medal and the Ohio River.

Hall, in "THE EARLY YEARS," discredits the polarizing anecdote of Ali throwing his gold medal into the Ohio River that first appeared in his 1975 autobiography "The Greatest" as "an invention of the Nation of Islam to promote its most famous convert"<sup>139</sup> and notes how the myth has evolved throughout the years. In its earliest form, Ali said he was denied service at a Louisville restaurant and, on a separate occasion, chased down by a white motorcycle gang. "After fighting off the gang, Ali said he threw his gold medal into the Ohio River, realizing it was a sham." In the 1977 movie "The Greatest," the narrative was switched around so that Ali threw the medal off a bridge because of "shabby treatment by one of his wealthy white backers in Louisville."<sup>140</sup> Rather than cite Hauser's report of the medal being lost, however, Hall uses testimony from photographer Howard Bingham, one of Ali's closest friends, to discredit the myth.

"I don't know what happened with the medal," Bingham said. "I know that he did not throw that into the Ohio River."<sup>141</sup>

Although Hall's discrediting of the myth frames Ali in a negative light for allowing an untrue story — essentially anti-white racism propaganda — to circulate as

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<sup>139</sup> C. Ray Hall. "THE EARLY YEARS: Seeds of a champion planted in a Louisville gym." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>140</sup> C. Ray Hall. "THE EARLY YEARS: ..."

<sup>141</sup> C. Ray Hall. "THE EARLY YEARS: ..."

fact, he eases the punishment on the boxer's legacy by calling the story "an invention of the Nation of Islam." Ali's legacy here is still tied to an organization that believed white people were scientifically engineered devils, but Hall exposing the Ohio River story as false softens the boxer's image. Rather than being seen as actively carrying out the NOI's radical doctrine in the face of racist treatment from his hometown, Ali is being framed as a symbolic instrument used to forward the faith's doctrine to other African-Americans. He is humanized, too: While white audiences used to believe he passionately parted with the medal out of protest against their race, he simply misplaced the heavyweight gold like a set of car keys ... only to never be found.

The special section also allows the *C-J* to further explore Ali's spiritual progression from a young Baptist wondering why Jesus and other biblical characters were always depicted as white in church paintings<sup>142</sup> to arguably the most famous American Muslim in the world. After Hall's obituary excuses Ali's initial belief in the Nation of Islam's "white devils" doctrine because he later proclaimed the value of all faiths as a follower of the Sufism branch of Islam, this portion of the *C-J*'s special section further humanizes Ali's faith as a genuine religious journey that led to Ali expanding his icon status to a larger global audience.

"The Nation of Islam taught that white people were devils," Ali said in a 2004 interview included in the special section. "I don't believe that now; in fact, I never really believed that. But when I was young, I had seen and heard so many horrible stories about the white man that this made me stop and listen."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Peter Smith. "CONVERSION TO ISLAM: Ali shifted from radical sect to inclusive group." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Smith. "CONVERSION TO ISLAM: ... "



In this piece for the special section, Peter Smith again describes when Ali faced his most criticism for essentially embracing what newspaper columnist Stanley Crouch described as “a racist cult” — or, as International Boxing Hall of Fame sportswriter Jimmy Cannon put it: using his status as “an instrument of hate.”<sup>144</sup> But even when readers are presented with these views on the Nation of Islam, Hall brings in an opposing voice that frames Ali’s conversion as comforting the African-American community.

“We weren’t about to join the Nation, but we loved Ali for that supreme act of defiance,” writer Jim Nelson said in the 1998 book “King of the World.” “It was the defiance against having to be the good Negro, the good Christian waiting to be rewarded by the righteous white provider. We loved Ali because he was so beautiful and because he talked a lot of lip. But he also epitomized a lot of black people’s emotions at the time, our anger ... the sense of standing up against the furies.”<sup>145</sup>

As Ali progressed to more moderate branches of Islam at the end of his boxing career and beyond, his faith-related humanitarian acts furthered the softening of his image in the public’s consciousness. Instead of being presented as a radical member of a fringe religion spouting off NOI doctrine about necessitating the separation of races in the media, Ali took the role of a quiet peacemaker — stricken silent — advocating for acceptance. “Rivers, ponds, lakes and streams — they all are unique, but they all contain water. Just as religions all contain truth,” he said in a statement read on his behalf at a 2004 meeting with visiting Asian Muslims at the University of Louisville.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Peter Smith. “CONVERSION TO ISLAM: ... ”

<sup>145</sup> “Peter Smith. “CONVERSION TO ISLAM: ... ”

<sup>146</sup> “Peter Smith. “CONVERSION TO ISLAM: ... ”

“Such ecumenical comments — and denunciations of terrorists acting in the name of Islam — preserved Ali’s populist image,” Hall wrote, “even in a post-9/11 era when American Muslims feel they are under intense scrutiny.”<sup>147</sup>

Running complementary to Smith’s narrative-based recounting of Ali’s religious progression is a separate column from Hall entitled “For young, champ made dignity a civil right,” which starts by posing the essential question regarding Ali’s legacy: “Was Muhammad Ali the blank screen upon which people projected whatever image they wished, as writer Mark Kram suggested in his book ‘Ghosts of Manila’? Or was he as others saw him: a towering figure in the civil rights movement — not necessarily for his political stance but his personal behavior?”<sup>148</sup> Readers get an opening argument from a 2006 interview with Juan Williams, author of the civil rights history “Eyes on the Prize,” who notes Ali’s absence from the watershed moments in the Civil Rights Movement such as the Selma to Montgomery march or the 1963 March on Washington. An excerpt from a 1975 piece by author Gary Willis claims “Ali will be a celebrity as long as he lives — like the Duke of Windsor. But he only rules from the ring. He has nothing to say, really, except with his fists.”<sup>149</sup> Still, Williams concedes Ali’s importance.

“There’s a wider lens to life. Sometimes things that are taking place off the field can have tremendous impact on what’s happening on the field,” Williams wrote. “And I think Muhammad Ali, in terms of the civil rights movement was a tremendous force. He was sending people — especially, I think, young black people — onto the field with a greater sense of personal freedom and personal dignity. I think he was making an impact

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<sup>147</sup> Peter Smith. “CONVERSION TO ISLAM: ...”

<sup>148</sup> C. Ray Hall. “For young, champ made dignity a civil right.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>149</sup> C. Ray Hall. “For young, champ made dignity a civil right.”

on young people of all races in terms of an intelligent, funny, charming black man who was a major media star.”<sup>150</sup>

Williams’ positive sentiments are reflected by sources ranging from television host Bryant Gumbel to Kentucky-born historian George Wright and Louisville folk singer Mary Travers, who said Ali “stood for dignity in a culture that afforded precious little dignity to black people. And he was a hero to people who never had a hero before.”<sup>151</sup> In pieces published during the early 2000s, after Ali emerged “larger than life” from his spot at the 1996 Olympics, the boxer was called “maybe the most revered figure not actually mentioned in the Bible” who drew a comparison to Nelson Mandela from British actress Rachel Harris.<sup>152</sup>

“Now that he’s lost the power of speech,” wrote Larry Platt of Salon in 2001, “now that he walks shakily, now that he can be safely trotted out before an adoring public with the surety that he will not offend mainstream sensibilities — now that he is no longer a threat — Muhammad Ali is universally loved.”<sup>153</sup>

In the next portion of the special section, which covers Ali’s draft evasion case, Jim Adams introduces the group that promotes the loudest active dissenting voices against Ali’s athlete-hero legacy: United States veterans.

“He was a coward who was afraid to serve his country,” said Mark L. Cole, a Louisville native, Navy vet, and Virginia state legislator, in response to a fellow state legislator’s proposal to honor Ali in the House of Delegates. “Muhammad Ali was a draft dodger and a man of questionable moral character, and I do not think he deserves to be

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<sup>150</sup> C. Ray Hall. “For young, champ made dignity a civil right.”

<sup>151</sup> C. Ray Hall. “For young, champ made dignity a civil right.”

<sup>152</sup> C. Ray Hall. “For young, champ made dignity a civil right.”

<sup>153</sup> C. Ray Hall. “For young, champ made dignity a civil right.”

honored by this house.”<sup>154</sup> Ali faced similar criticism when Kentucky House Speaker Greg Stumbo proposed placing a statue of the boxer inside the rotunda of the state capitol in Frankfort, Kentucky. Adams chose to include an excerpt of a letter to the editor that was submitted to the newspaper in 2011: “Glorifying a braggadocios draft dodger with public money is an insult to every veteran who honorably served,”<sup>155</sup> wrote Ralph Koslik of Louisville. Adams does not delegitimize the criticism posed by the veterans by including a contrary perspective from someone who approved of Ali’s decision to refuse induction but instead notes how “historians, politicians, boxing fans and ordinary folks continue to wrestle with the intellectual challenges that Ali set in motion that long-ago day in Houston — persistent questions of conscience, politics, race and war.”<sup>156</sup>

The case itself, framed as “the most conscious objector case in history,” is described in this portion of the special section as perhaps Ali’s greatest come-from-behind victory of all time. The controversy falls onto the Supreme Court, whose 5-3 decision against Ali became split 4-4 and eventually a unanimous 8-0 ruling in the exiled boxer’s favor. “He did not know how close he had come to going to jail,”<sup>157</sup> wrote Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong in their 1979 book “The Brethren.”

Ali was not only inevitably framed as the underdog victor but also as thriving while in exile from boxing. Details about his nationwide lecture circuit — 168 college appearances scheduled for 1969 at “up to \$2,000 per speech” — and a quote from the then-27-year-old present readers with a confident image of Ali who, despite being

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<sup>154</sup> Jim Adams. “THE FIGHT OVER VIETNAM: Draft case remains a heated issue for some.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>155</sup> Jim Adams. “THE FIGHT OVER VIETNAM: Draft case remains a heated issue for some.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>156</sup> Jim Adams. “THE FIGHT OVER VIETNAM: ... ”

<sup>157</sup> Jim Adams. “THE FIGHT OVER VIETNAM: ... ”

forbidden to box at the prime of his career, was prospering in the collegiate environment “where opposition to the Vietnam War had blossomed in the years since his case had begun.”<sup>158</sup> He was comfortable with his convictions to his beliefs: “I haven’t fought in three years, and I’m richer than ever before.”<sup>159</sup> In an excerpt from Hall’s “BOUTS IN & OUT OF THE RING,” the boxer showed no remorse for the actions that prompted the most turbulent portion of his life but rather says he only regretted making his “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong” comment “so soon — before so much of the rest of the nation started to agree with him.”<sup>160</sup>

After a stretch of photo pages that commemorate Ali’s legacy both in and out of the ring — with such images as Ali chatting with young children during his workouts in Miami, Ali throwing a fake punch at The Beatles in 1964, and former President George W. Bush awarding Ali the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2005<sup>161</sup> — the special section again shifts back to expanding upon a complicated area of his legacy rarely mentioned in Hall’s obituary: Ali’s “HOMETOWN STRAINS.” Photographs of the Ali banner hanging downtown and of the 33-year-old boxer getting a warm reception as he rides through the streets of western Louisville accompany Andrew Wolfson’s article, but the story frames Ali’s relationship with his hometown as much more complicated. An excerpt from the Book of Matthew, which Wolfson includes in the piece after it comes up in an interview with former Muhammad Ali Center development director Tori Murdan-

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<sup>158</sup> Jim Adams. “THE FIGHT OVER VIETNAM: ... ”

<sup>159</sup> Jim Adams. “THE FIGHT OVER VIETNAM: ... ”

<sup>160</sup> C. Ray Hall. “BOUTS IN & OUT OF THE RING: ... ”

<sup>161</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “THE LEGEND.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

McClure, provides biblical perspective: “Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”<sup>162</sup>

Wolfson begins by mentioning how it took Louisville until 1978 to honor Ali and rename Walnut Street as Muhammad Ali Boulevard, but even those plans met heavy criticism and barely passed 6-5. An unnamed businessman called it “ridiculous and absurd” to name a street “for an individual when he has been a braggart, a conceited jackass and a draft dodger.”<sup>163</sup>

Ali fans note that the boxer has never been embraced as fully and fondly in his hometown as in the rest of the world. Louisville’s anger with its most famous son — then the majority but now the minority — centers on his religious conversion and refusal to be drafted. He was seen as a threat because of his race and religion. “A lot of white folks in Louisville were both angry and embarrassed, former *C-J* columnist Billy Reed said. “The sense of betrayal was as strong as the smell of sour mash coming from the distilleries.”<sup>164</sup> Across race lines, however, Wolfson provides the perspective of Kentucky Sen. Gerald Neal, who said ambivalence toward Ali is only in the white community and “if you want to generalize, the black community embraces him fully and is very proud of him.”<sup>165</sup>

The Greatest was equally critical of the city that raised him — specifically about the racial issues that he encountered: “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,” Ali asked *Sports Illustrated*, “while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like

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<sup>162</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: Champ, Louisville have strayed acquaintances if not friends.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>163</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”

<sup>164</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”

<sup>165</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”

dogs?”<sup>166</sup> When talking about how the people of his hometown knew him too well, he once said: “How can I impress the same people who once put diapers on me?”<sup>167</sup>

Louisville’s affection toward Ali skyrocketed with the rest of the world after the emotional moment at the ’96 Summer Olympics, although Wolfson includes a quote from *C-J* columnist Rochelle Riley that criticized the city because Ali is treated as royalty everywhere else in the world but “can arrive ... at Louisville International Airport much like any Montana tourist.”<sup>168</sup> Toward the end of his piece, Wolfson compares Ali to another prominent athlete from Louisville, “Paul Hornung, the Flaget High School football star who snubbed the University of Kentucky for Notre Dame — and then embroiled himself in a gambling scandal as a Green Bay Packer — but returned to Louisville and built business.”<sup>169</sup> Ali, unlike Hornung, is said to have not made any significant investments in the local community, although Wolfson goes on to mention the development of the Muhammad Ali Center that was met with a “lack of enthusiasm” from his hometown. But it is as if the *C-J* writer includes the negative details about the football player’s decision to leave the state to play at Notre Dame and his involvement in the gambling scandal to make Ali’s accomplishments appear more grand and his principles as an athlete-hero more commendable. A quote from Michael J. Fox, former president and CEO of the Muhammad Ali Center, furthers that theme — while also softening the dissenting voices quoted both earlier on in Wolfson’s piece and in Adams’

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<sup>166</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”

<sup>167</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”

<sup>168</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”

<sup>169</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”

piece about the draft evasion case: “There is a certain sector of the community less than pleased that he left home and went on to do wonderful things elsewhere.”<sup>170</sup>

In its biggest opportunity to delve into Ali’s strained relationship with his hometown, the *Courier-Journal* objectively allows local sources to present both affirming and dissenting opinions of the boxer’s legacy and calls attention to the fact that Louisville has not embraced and celebrated its native son in the ways others have. But the subhead language — “Champ, Louisville have stayed acquaintances if not friends” — alongside the aforementioned photos and quotes from admirers framed Ali as a now-beloved local icon. He does not escape criticism entirely, but the dissenters have gone from being framed as the majority in the mid-1960s to assuming the status of the minority upon his 2016 death.

One of most blatant examples of the *C-J* framing a questionable area of Ali’s legacy in a positive light is the publication’s treatment of his love life in “THE FAMILY MAN” portion of the special section. Rather than call attention to Ali’s three divorces, situations in which previous reporting has found that the boxer would often openly travel with the next wife while still married, the *C-J* says his life was “filled with love” and not filled with failed love. A quote from his daughter Hana, whom he had with second wife Veronica Porche, normalizes behavior that others would condemn as unfaithful by explaining that her father “liked to be married. ... All of his divorces were settled out of court,” she added. “He gave every wife half of anything he had. ... He’s lovable, and he

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<sup>170</sup> Andrew Wolfson. “HOMETOWN STRAINS: ... ”



loves pretty woman. ... My father's wives do share one thing in common. They're very beautiful, they have sweet dispositions, they're very light-hearted."<sup>171</sup>

An intimate black-and-white portrait of Ali listening to a young Hana outside their front door in 1980 dominates the page, which contains another quote from Hana endorsing Ali as a father of nine — “He claims all of his kids. He's always a father to all of his kids.”<sup>172</sup> This piece in the special section disregards criticism that Lipsyte lumped into the “hypocrisies, or at least inconsistencies” portion of his obituary and instead lifts Ali up as a dedicated father. The *C-J* adds to his legacy by having one of his children humble brag about how beautiful and sweet his wives were — no matter how the relationships ended.

The final portions of the special section, which are dedicated to Ali's bout with Parkinson's disease and the creation of the Muhammad Ali Center, solidify the boxer's status as an athlete-hero and a model for humanity — a theme that carries over into the *C-J*'s coverage of the various events held in Louisville over the course of the week leading up to Ali's funeral service and burial. A photo of Ali holding the Olympic torch highlights the spread “STILL FIGHTING: Ali helped put a face on once-hidden disease” and runs alongside a photo of the former boxer joking around with actor Michael J. Fox before the start of a 2002 Senate Labor, Health, Human Services, and Education Subcommittee hearing on Parkinson's disease. In this piece by Laura Lingar, Ali is framed as enduring a more-than-30-year fight with a disease that took away his grace and once-poetic words but also “gave him something too — respect as a different type of

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<sup>171</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “THE FAMILY MAN: A life filled with love, marriage and nine children.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>172</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “THE FAMILY MAN: ... ”

fighter, one who persevered and stayed visible despite his debilitating illness.”<sup>173</sup> Again, readers are presented with quotes from Ali, in which he accepts the disease as a trial from God that carries a moral message. “I never ask, ‘Why me?’ for no condition,” he told *Reader’s Digest* in 2001. “There’s so much good. I’ve been so blessed. God tries you. Some things are good. Some things are bad. All of them are trials.

“Maybe this problem I have is God’s way of reminding me and everyone else about what’s important. I accept it as God’s will,” he said in Hauser’s biography. “And I know that God never gives anyone a burden that’s too heavy for them to carry.”<sup>174</sup>

As a boxer who fought well past his prime, Ali is held accountable for his physical regression, but Lingar also includes expert perspective that questions boxing’s role in causing his Parkinson’s to develop. “Boxing, when it causes brain damage, results in an Alzheimer-like disease,” said Dr. Ira Casson, a New York neurologist writing for The National Parkinson Foundation. “That is not what Ali has. Ali’s mind is sharp.”<sup>175</sup>

Regardless, Lingar writes, Ali’s status as an athlete-hero brought awareness to the disease and money for medical research. Along with Fox, Ali became a “public face” of Parkinson’s who made it OK for others to acknowledge and triumph by living their lives fully in spite of the illness. Photos included on the second page of Lingar’s story support that claim by showing an elderly Ali being greeted by Barack Obama in 2006 and posing first at the ready with actor Will Smith at the 2001 premier of the film “Ali.” The personal testimonies of fellow Parkinson’s victims Lingar includes in the piece, such as that of Louisville lawyer John Baumann, who got Ali’s autograph during a chance

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<sup>173</sup> Laura Lingar. “STILL FIGHTING: Ali helped put face on once-hidden disease.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>174</sup> Laura Lingar. “STILL FIGHTING: ... ”

<sup>175</sup> Laura Lingar. “STILL FIGHTING: ... ”

meeting at the Louisville International Airport before being diagnosed with the disease in 2003, provide intimate examples of how Ali has ascended into athlete-hero icon status by setting a moral example they can follow while combating Parkinson's.

"I said I'm not going to stop my world," Baumann recalled. "Muhammad Ali did that too. When times get difficult, it's focus or fold, as they say in football. ... Muhammad Ali is a focus person. He doesn't complain. He doesn't give up."<sup>176</sup>

Ali's legacy as an athlete-hero icon takes physical form in Sheldon S. Shafer's piece "A CENTER OF INSPIRATION: Ali wanted — and got — more than a museum." The \$80 million, 93,000-square-foot Muhammad Ali Center is described as something the boxer left behind "that would inspire in others the principles by which he lived."<sup>177</sup> Shafer then provides examples of it being at the center of efforts to help the local youth in areas such as conflict resolution and anti-bullying protocol and also mentions that the center's staff aspires to one day have the center welcome diplomats of feuding countries or factions who will find a middle ground there.

"I am an ordinary man who worked hard to develop the talent I was given," Ali said at the center's dedication. "I wanted more than a museum to house my memorabilia. I wanted a place that would inspire people to be the best that they could be at whatever they chose to do, and to encourage them to be respectful of one another."<sup>178</sup>

According to those interviewed for Shafer's story, Ali played an involved role in helping craft his legacy during the center's creation; and by detailing his genuine, personal connection to the museum, Shafer further frames the champ in a positive light

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<sup>176</sup> Laura Lingar. "STILL FIGHTING: ... "

<sup>177</sup> Sheldon S. Shafer. "A CENTER OF INSPIRATION: Ali wanted — and got — more than a museum." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>178</sup> Sheldon S. Shafer. "A CENTER OF INSPIRATION: ... "

because readers see his dedication to making a difference on a local and global scale. Fox, the center's first president, said the staff members followed "what (Ali) laid out to a T" as they structured the six-floor museum around the Louisville native's six core values — dedication, confidence, giving, spirituality, respect, and conviction.<sup>179</sup> Photos of Ali, who reportedly loved sitting in the center, playing with a baby inside the center in 2006 also show he was a frequent visitor to the landmark and, true to his legacy, always made time for his admirers — especially children. "(Ali) felt the rhythm of the place," Fox added. "He knew every nook and cranny."<sup>180</sup>

The *Courier-Journal* ending its "Remembering The Greatest" special section by focusing on the Muhammad Ali Center signals a permanent symbolic shift in Ali's legacy. Through this physical testament to the champ's life organized by his core values, new generations that were not alive until after Ali hung up the gloves and became stricken by disease — or, eventually, until after his death — will be presented with a narrative that is specifically curated by the Ali camp to further his iconic athlete-hero status. The center will carry out what Grano calls the boxer's spectral voice, which "allows him endlessly and didactically to haunt our present political moment."<sup>181</sup> Ali will not be around to offer guidance through actions or words, but through the narrative of his life can society derive parables and core values that can instruct on how to face adversity. The Ali Center's sustained humanitarian efforts on a local and global scale will also

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<sup>179</sup> Sheldon S. Shafer. "A CENTER OF INSPIRATION: ... "

<sup>180</sup> Sheldon S. Shafer. "A CENTER OF INSPIRATION: ... "

<sup>181</sup> Daniel A. Grano. "Muhammad Ali Versus the 'Modern Athlete': On voice in Mediated Sports Culture." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26 (2009): 191-211

continue to build up his heroic status because, even in death, Ali's image is associated with an organization that is striving to build a safer and more understanding world.

As documented in the 24-page package, the details of the champ's complicated narrative are still intact but have been reframed to reflect Ali's personal evolution from a loud, radical member of the Nation of Islam to a quiet, shaking humanitarian who embraced Sufism and the acceptance of all races and religions. The dissenting voices against Ali's status as an athlete-hero that are included in the section negatively frame him as a braggart and a coward whose disingenuous use of his racist religion to dodge the draft should not be considered sacrifice, but these opinions are largely outnumbered by those who hold Ali in iconic athlete-hero status. Traits once condemned and considered dangerous by the white majority, his African-American and Islamic pride are now admired for their cultural importance to their respective communities. His political stance against Vietnam is considered influential at a time when professional athletes have started to address political issues — or have remained silent for commercial gains — and his refusal to let a crippling disease stop him from living a fulfilling life has become a model for other Parkinson's victims to follow. If the *C-J's* special section serves as an extension of Hall's obituary in providing "... a verdict, derived from professional peers, about the worth of the dead person's contribution," then the verdict is that Ali's journey from a young Louisvillian to arguably the most recognizable person on the planet should be respected by his hometown audience. The relationship between Ali and Louisville was not always perfect, but, in death, the champ became portrayed as the iconic athlete-hero the majority of his city and the rest of the world believed him to be.

**‘He passed the torch to us’: Examining Muhammad Ali as an athlete-hero archetype through the *Courier-Journal’s* news and event coverage.** A three-word headline sat just underneath the 1A skybox refer to the *Courier-Journal’s* 24-page “Remembering The Greatest” special section on June 5, 2016: “ALI COMING HOME.” And, just like that, the eyes of the world turned to Louisville, Kentucky.

With celebrities, politicians, foreign dignitaries, and Ali admirers from all over the globe converging on the champ’s hometown to pay their respects during the week leading up to his June 12, 2016, funeral and burial, the *C-J* took an all-hands-on-deck approach to its daily Ali coverage. Stories ranged from general news articles disseminating information about the week’s memorial festivities — such as the traditional Islamic Jenazah ceremony, Ali’s motorcade procession through the streets of Louisville, and the multi-faith funeral service at the KFC Yum! Center — to event recaps, daily features and columns, and opinion pieces in the paper’s Community Forum. Although Ali was the unifying figure around which the *C-J’s* coverage revolves, he assumed a spectral, zeitgeist-like presence in the stories published during the week of festivities — sometimes quoted but otherwise only present in the memories of sources or inside his casket. After dedicating significant coverage and space in print to commemorating Ali’s legacy, the *Courier-Journal* turned its attention from creating mediated collective memory to documenting the perspectives of the people whose lives The Greatest impacted and the magnitude of the week’s memorial events. This localized, source-driven approach allowed the *C-J* to serve as a public arena for various agents (political activists, academics, local communities, etc.) who wish to influence the

understanding of collective memory.<sup>182</sup> The result was a collage of local and global sources, intimate anecdotes, and explanations of why Ali is The Greatest, which further framed the champ as an iconic athlete-hero and a role model across generations.

“For a fairly big city, Louisville is a small town where Ali is concerned,” *C-J* sports columnist Tim Sullivan wrote in a June 8, 2016, piece. “He is not only its most famous son, but its most familiar; an iconic figure who was singularly accessible and seemingly ubiquitous.”<sup>183</sup>

Two photographs on Page 13A of the June 5, 2016, *Courier-Journal* perfectly reflect the ways in which Louisvillians and Ali admirers from around the world reacted to the boxer’s death. In the smaller of the two photos, Les Thomas, an African-American man, kneels and prays before a makeshift memorial of flowers, cards, and balloons outside of the Muhammad Ali Center; he takes his hat off as a sign of respect. It is an intimate moment of mourning but also one of calm personal reflection. In the larger of the two images, 11-year-old Derrick Spratt Jr., a young African-American boy, crouches down in front of the memorial and strikes his best boxing pose as he confidently looks up at the camera.<sup>184</sup> Even in the wake of his greatest defeat yet, Ali inspired.

Throughout the *Courier-Journal*’s daily coverage of the events leading up to Ali’s June 10, 2016, funeral service and burial, the Louisville native’s death is framed not only as a sorrowful event but also one marked by citywide inspiration, unity, pride, and the celebration of Ali’s athlete-hero legacy. In the spirit of the city’s most famous son,

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<sup>182</sup> M. Neiger, O. Meyers, & E. Zandberg. *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age*.

<sup>183</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Ali: World-famous and yet familiar.” *Louisville Courier Journal*, June 8, 2016.

<sup>184</sup> Chris Kenning. “ALI COMING HOME: Public to get chance to say goodbye Friday in Louisville.” *Louisville Courier Journal*, June 5, 2016.

citizens from all walks of life came together and engaged in what Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer described as “mournful but spontaneous, beautiful things”<sup>185</sup> such as braving “heavy bouts of rainfall”<sup>186</sup> to visit and add to the impromptu memorial at the Muhammad Ali Center or quickly organizing an interfaith service at the Louisville Islamic Center. In the *C-J*’s coverage of the June 5 mourning outside the Ali Center, Beth Warren and Phillip Bailey note that over 2,000 people toured the museum that day and include a scene of mourners at the makeshift memorial, led by local hip-hop artist Jecorey “1200” Arthur and Louisville Orchestra conductor Teddy Abrams, breaking out into song and chants of “the Champ is here.”<sup>187</sup> When asked about the musical performance, however, Arthur, in the spirit of Ali’s humanitarian efforts, said he reached out to Mayor Fischer and asked: “How can I use music to help the community?” A West Louisville native, Arthur also reminisced about his grandfather eating fish with Ali in a local park and talked about how the boxer served as a personal role model.

“(Ali) showed men from that area of town you can be great — the greatest,” he said. “I just wanted to give thanks.”<sup>188</sup>

For international perspectives on Ali’s death, the *Courier-Journal* talked to Dustan Baisas, a 55-year-old sales manager for Asset Technology who grew up watching Ali’s fights on TV back home in the Philippines. Baisas said he wept when he heard the news of Ali’s death and spent the whole day at the impromptu memorial “just to honor (Ali) and be near” the man who mesmerized him as a child and moved him as a

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<sup>185</sup> Phillip M. Bailey. “Louisville feeling love for Champ.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 6, 2016.

<sup>186</sup> Beth Warren and Phillip M. Bailey. “Mourners share quiet times, light stories.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>187</sup> Beth Warren and Phillip M. Bailey. “Mourners share quiet times ... ”

<sup>188</sup> Beth Warren and Phillip M. Bailey. “Mourners share quiet times ... ”



humanitarian later in life.<sup>189</sup> Forty-year-old Mumbai resident Mayuresh Joshi called the loss of the legend an “overwhelming moment.”

At the end of Warren and Bailey’s piece on the day-after mourning of Ali’s death, the scene shifts to The Greatest’s childhood home in West Louisville. There, Askia Muhammad, a Louisville native and Muslim, said: “People should remember Ali’s faith as much as his boxing career and political activism” and spent most of his time at the landmark “telling visitors about the tenets of Islam that evoke peace and understanding and how it changed Ali’s life and his own.”

“(Ali) meant a lot for Islam,” Muhammad said. “You have people from overseas in Louisville, they may not know that much about America but they know about Muhammad Ali.”<sup>190</sup>

Two days later in the same West Louisville community where Ali grew up, more than a hundred people gathered at Central High School — his alma mater — and marched a mile to the Ali Center after being inspired by a scene in the “Ali” biopic starring Will Smith as The Louisville Lip.<sup>191</sup> *C-J* reporter Kristen Clark’s decision to include the detail of march organizers using the dramatization of Ali’s life as their inspiration and not the boxer himself draws attention to Ali’s legacy being misconstrued through its mediated form, but it is a quick-hitting detail about a positive event intended to bring the community together that some readers might glaze over and give no thought to.

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<sup>189</sup> Beth Warren and Phillip M. Bailey. “Mourners share quiet times ... ”

<sup>190</sup> Beth Warren and Phillip M. Bailey. “Mourners share quiet times ... ”

<sup>191</sup> Kristen Clark. “Ali honored in march from Central to Center.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 7, 2016.

“They say a person never dies when you say his name,” Rhonda Washington-Mathies told the *Courier-Journal* at the march. “I think (Ali’s) name will continuously be said from generations to generations because of the magnitude of his spirit.”<sup>192</sup>

“He never ever forgot where he came from, and that’s important,” added Louisville resident Dianne Volpe, who reminisced about once receiving a hug and a kiss on the forehead from Ali when the two were younger during the march. “I’m just so proud right now to be a Louisvillian.”<sup>193</sup>

The *Courier-Journal* further framed Ali as an iconic athlete-hero by showing the ways in which the city of Louisville, locals and global visitors used The Greatest as a model to pay tribute to his legacy over the week leading up to his funeral service and burial. During a speech at a June 4, 2016, ceremony outside of Metro Hall, a transcript of which was printed in the next day’s *Courier-Journal*, Mayor Fischer asked those in attendance to “follow (Ali’s) example and live by the same six core principles that he lived by: Confidence, Conviction, Dedication, Giving, Respect and Spirituality.”<sup>194</sup>

Fischer, however, later misconstrues Ali’s narrative when he says: “A devout Muslim and interfaith pioneer, he took the name Muhammad Ali in 1964 and advocated for understanding and peace among people of different faiths.” As previous articles have shown, that was the case during the later portion of Ali’s life, but to say he began advocating for understanding and peace as soon as he converted to the Nation of Islam is completely overlooking the most complicated portion of The Greatest’s life. Because the

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<sup>192</sup> Kristen Clark. “Ali honored in march from Central to Center.”

<sup>193</sup> Kristen Clark. “Ali honored in march from Central to Center.”

<sup>194</sup> Mayor Greg Fischer. “Mayor: ‘He passed the torch to us.’” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

piece is simply a transcript, the *Courier-Journal* could not provide any context to Fischer's comments, and the Louisville mayor goes on to quote a passage from Ali's 2004 memoir "The Soul of a Butterfly" to further the softening of Ali's image: "If you love God, you can't love only some of his children. ... My soul has grown over the years, and some of my views have changed. As long as I'm alive, I will continue to try to understand more because the word of my heart is never done."<sup>195</sup> Fischer challenges his community to carry out Ali's principles by remembering the "incredible" torch lighting at the 1996 Olympic Games and goes on to say "... now, (Ali) has passed his torch to us."<sup>196</sup>

Readers see The Greatest's core values carried out in pieces such as Clark's "Ali is honored in march from Central to Center," when Debra Washington-Hardison said she was attending the event to "be in the presence of all this love that everybody is displaying." Washington-Hardison also frames Ali as a role model for his hometown community when she said she hoped his death "would be a catalyst for change in the community, something to encourage people to come together and make the world a better place."<sup>197</sup> In "Ali's legacy lives on in Louisville gym," *C-J* writer Jeff Greer introduced readers to James Dixon, whose Louisville TKO boxing gym is modeled to look like a place where Ali would train — "fit with the smells and sounds and sights of an old school gym." Dixon has also immortalized Ali in the gym with a spray-painted mural of The Greatest making "one of his iconic I-just-whooped-you poses."<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Mayor Greg Fischer. "Mayor: 'He passed the torch to us.'"

<sup>196</sup> Mayor Greg Fischer. "Mayor: 'He passed the torch to us.'"

<sup>197</sup> Kristen Clark. "Ali honored in march from Central to Center."

<sup>198</sup> Jeff Greer. "Ali's legacy lives on in Louisville gym." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

“We know what city we represent,” he said, “and that means a lot to me . . . .”

But Davis’ tribute to Ali is not just through gym artwork. Because many of his young boxers cannot afford their own gear, he supplies them with shoes and gloves in an attempt to prevent “money or circumstance to stop a kid from boxing” and learning “discipline and sacrifice and hard work. . . . if nothing else, (the sport) teaches them how to become a responsible adult, how to live like Ali.”<sup>199</sup>

“I just know for a fact that (Ali) has been great for the world, great for his people, great for the city of Louisville, and I take a great deal of pride in coaching,” Dixon said. “If a kid has the guts to crawl in between the ropes, then I think it’s our God-given right to get them the best opportunity to win and to be successful. . . . The legacy (Ali) left here, I’m going to, until I’m down, fight as hard and train as hard as he did and try to represent the city and the state as a whole. That’s it.”<sup>200</sup>

Along with Greer’s piece featuring Dixon and Louisville TKO boxing gym, Darla Carter’s recap of the I Am Ali Festival also frames The Greatest as an athlete-hero model for the youth of his hometown through an event designed to “encourage children to achieve their highest potential in life.”<sup>201</sup> A photo accompanying this story of 5-year-old Louisvillian Roddrick Woods wearing a boxing robe and gloves as he looks at the impromptu memorial outside of the Muhammad Ali Center<sup>202</sup> represents the theme of the children’s festival: Although nearly all of the children in attendance only encountered Ali during the twilight of his life, they are being instructed by their elders to use the boxer’s

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<sup>199</sup> Jeff Greer. “Ali’s legacy lives on in Louisville gym.”

<sup>200</sup> Jeff Greer. “Ali’s legacy lives on in Louisville gym.”

<sup>201</sup> Darla Carter. “Children’s festival lets kids be like Ali.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 9, 2016.

<sup>202</sup> Darla Carter. “Children’s festival lets kids be like Ali.”

narrative as inspiration and affirmation that they can overcome personal and environmental boundaries to accomplish their dreams. Carter's piece begins with a description of butterflies being released in Ali's honor as a symbolic representation of his iconic "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" saying. Quotes from Mayor Fischer's opening remarks encourage attendees to use the Louisville native as an example of what can happen if you refuse to compromise on your road to greatness.

"There was one thing the Champ loved above all and that was the kids," Fischer said. "The main thing he asked is what is it that you want to do and how can you be the greatest, just like he was the greatest?"

"Think about yourself as Muhammad Ali — that little boy that was running around Louisville saying he was the greatest," Fischer continued. "All you kids here, you're the greatest. Don't let anybody tell you differently."<sup>203</sup>

Ali's generational shift from controversial figure to iconic athlete-hero is also framed through the perspective of adults who accompanied children to the festival. Toska Adams, a Jefferson County Public Schools teacher who brought her 5-year-old grandson, praised the event's message and "the opportunity to teach kids about obstacles that Ali faced, such as segregation."

"I think it's important that kids know that piece of history because their grandparents aren't going to be around that much longer," she said, noting that her fifth-graders were shocked to learn that Ali could not eat at certain restaurants because of his

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<sup>203</sup> Darla Carter. "Children's festival lets kids be like Ali."

color.”<sup>204</sup> Her grandson, Trey Adams Jr., joined other kids in attendance in writing his aspirations of being a doctor on a giant I Am Ali poster.

Louisville native Yvette Humphrey called Ali’s death the most significant she has witnessed in her lifetime and shared Adams’ desire to immerse her grandchildren, 11-year-old Michael Humphrey Jr. and 9-year-old Kimori Humphrey, in the festivities so “they will remember when they get this age.”

“He’s done so much ... being a humanitarian and for the people,” she added. To end Carter’s story, Michael Humphrey Jr. said he did not know what he wants to be but offered his perspective on what it means to be like Ali: “Try your best.”<sup>205</sup>

A June 11, 2016 front-page piece by Jiahui Hu also documents Ali’s status as a local hero who personally taught the youth of his hometown that they could be great. All three sources interviewed for the story — 15-year-olds Lamar Green and Neveah Hogue, rising junior Loreina Brackett, and 14-year-old D.J. Dorsey — drew lessons from the boxer’s legacy they felt could help better the circumstances of Louisville’s West End and looked up to Ali as an “advocate for the dignity of black youth.”<sup>206</sup>

“He also set an example for many in western Louisville hoping to combat the negative influences of drugs and gangs,” said Brackett, who grew up near the Sheppard Square housing projects. “There is violence here, like bad decisions being made. But if you do as Ali did and overcome it and stay away, the you could do more than what you think you can do.”<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Darla Carter. “Children’s festival lets kids be like Ali.”

<sup>205</sup> Darla Carter. “Children’s festival lets kids be like Ali.”

<sup>206</sup> Jiahui Hu. “Ali lives on in dreams of youths in Louisville.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

<sup>207</sup> Jiahui Hu. “Ali lives on in dreams of youths in Louisville.”

In a sign of how Ali’s legacy has shifted across generations, none of the teenager sources in Hu’s story mention his conversion to Islam or refusal to enter the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War when discussing what he means to them. Even when Hogue, whose grandfather went to school with Ali, offers her perspective on the past, she frames the boxer as an antidote to what was occurring in the area — not as representative or part of the problem, as a lot of white journalists did at the height of Ali criticism.

“While news coverage of western Louisville in Ali’s day seemed often to deal with crime,” Hogue said, the boxer provided a positive counterpunch.” The 14-year-old Dorsey chooses to remember when Ali, in a visit home, once bought slushies for his grandfather and other children at the Parkland Community Center to combat the heat. Years later, The Greatest visited Dorsey’s school when he was in the second grade and spoke personally with the boy. “ ... it touched my heart, Dorsey said. Those were great memories.”<sup>208</sup>

“Yeah, you don’t really see celebrities coming to their hometown and giving stuff to children,” added Brackett, whose comment frames Ali as a virtuous measuring stick by which other celebrities and athletes are judged. Hu also frames Ali’s choice to build his namesake museum in downtown Louisville “despite his international fame” as just another example of The Greatest stoking pride in the city and its youth. Brackett said she “wants to live to the pride he felt in Louisville.”<sup>209</sup> Rather than seeing Ali as a unique case of a Louisville youth who lived out big dreams, Hogue said the boxer is proof that “she can achieve her dream career” of being an orthodontist for celebrities.

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<sup>208</sup> Jiahui Hu. “Ali lives on in dreams of youths in Louisville.”

<sup>209</sup> Jiahui Hu. “Ali lives on in dreams of youths in Louisville.”

“Some people just set themselves to up to have a job in Louisville and be normal,” she said. “I feel like (Ali) taught us to be abnormal and do everything that we want to do.”<sup>210</sup>

While Louisville’s youth are framed as using Ali’s legacy as inspiration to let nothing prevent them from achieving their dreams, others took the boxer’s death as a chance to advocate for change at the community and national level in his honor. A June 5, 2016, story from Chris Kenning spotlights a Change.org petition to replace a controversial Confederate monument near the University of Louisville with an Ali statue, which appeared on the advocacy website hours after Ali died.

“Since UofL has decided to remove the blight that is the Confederate statue, petitioner Molly Smith wrote, “what better to replace it with than a statue in memory of Louisville’s greatest son, Muhammad Ali.” Bridgett Hill, from LaGrange, Kentucky, commented on the petition saying she could not think of any other Kentucky native “who would deserve the tribute more.”<sup>211</sup>

Kenning briefly details the history of the statue and notes that, despite legal opposition from the Sons of Confederate Veterans, Mayor Fischer had already slated it for removal after critics said the memorial and its connections to slavery have “no place amid the diverse university campus that has grown up around it.”<sup>212</sup> The *C-J* reporter does not offer an opinion for or against the Ali statue being erected, but the piece includes a link to the Change.org petition to help direct those readers who want to join the cause and does not bring up previous opposition to an Ali statue at the state capitol or

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<sup>210</sup> Jiahui Hu. “Ali lives on in dreams of youths in Louisville.”

<sup>211</sup> Chris Kenning. “Petition: Replace Confederate statue with Ali statue.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>212</sup> Chris Kenning. “Petition: Replace Confederate statue with Ali statue.”



that the city was barely able to obtain a vote in favor of renaming a street in the boxer's honor. Kenning does, however, draw attention to a caveat that might keep the statue from ever happening: Ali's faith. According to Louisville Islamic leader Muhammad Babar, a strict interpretation of Islam might prevent such a public depiction, but a broader interpretation of the religion "could allow it as a tribute to Ali's role as a humanitarian and a peacemaker."<sup>213</sup> Although Babar is just speaking on behalf of Islamic doctrine, by specifying the statue would have to be a tribute to Ali's humanitarian work he further classifies the boxer as an athlete-hero whose legacy has transcended the sport he dominated. The exception to Islamic doctrine shows that while some may only revere Ali for his athletic prowess — and a statue in his hometown could be justified on his boxing success alone — the contributions he made to the world outside the ring are just as attached to his legacy and in some cases are held in higher regard than his historic knockouts.

In a June 10, 2016, opinion piece published in the *Courier-Journal's* Community Forum, U.S. Sen. Rand Paul demonstrates how Ali's refusal to be inducted into the U.S. Army can be framed to inspire anti-draft legislation. Paul begins his piece in a unique way by offering the first and only positive framing of Cassius Clay — what Ali considered to be his slave name — by paying homage to the original Cassius Clay, who was a Kentucky abolitionist whom the senator holds in high regard: "How did Kentucky end up with two great men both named Cassius Clay?"<sup>214</sup> he asks before addressing criticism of the boxer that frames him as a draft dodger who does not deserve the respect

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<sup>213</sup> Chris Kenning. "Petition: Replace Confederate statue with Ali statue."

<sup>214</sup> Sen. Rand Paul. "Ali a champion in more ways than one." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 10, 2016.

with which his legacy is treated now. Instead of hiding Ali's ties to the Nation of Islam, however, Paul uses it to show the boxer's personal growth over the years and flips the criticism on white politicians who were in power at the time.

"It is true that Ali was part of the Nation of Islam and even said some things about whites and others he would later recant," Paul wrote. But critics who might focus on the controversial aspects of Ali's legacy should remember that many white politicians also said controversial things during that era, many of whom still enjoyed political careers long after the 1960s had ended."<sup>215</sup>

From here, Paul jumps back to present day and uses the discrepancy in marijuana arrests between whites and blacks to point out the existing "imbalance in how African-Americans are treated by our laws and justice system,"<sup>216</sup> and it is at this point when the senator's piece goes from a personal tribute to Ali to forwarding his political agenda. The shift starts with Paul pointing out how, since he entered the U.S. Senate in 2010, he had fought alongside Louisville's civil rights champions to "get rid of these injustices" but noting how "those efforts will never compare to how Ali risked his career and even personal safety to stand up for what was right at the time."<sup>217</sup> Later, he frames the war as "... regrettable for many reasons, but among them was that we forced men or women to fight in a conflict so much of the country was beginning to see as not in our national interest." The senator doubles down on this statement, although retroactive and in line with the general shift of public opinion on Vietnam, by taking it a step further and saying "Ali was not a draft dodger." He backs this claim by pointing out that Ali "did not run

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<sup>215</sup> Sen. Rand Paul. "Ali a champion in more ways than one."

<sup>216</sup> Sen. Rand Paul. "Ali a champion in more ways than one."

<sup>217</sup> Sen. Rand Paul. "Ali a champion in more ways than one."

away” when he was drafted and compares the Louisville native to other well-respected Americans who showed the same admirable convictions.

“He did not go to Canada,” Paul said. “He did not ask for special favors, treatment or even try to get a deferment. He was a conscientious objector and practiced civil disobedience, a proud American tradition that runs from the Founding Fathers to Thoreau and all the way through Martin Luther King Jr. in Ali’s own time.”<sup>218</sup>

Paul, saving his personal agenda for the very end of his piece, praises the strength of America’s volunteer military as “the best in the world” and declares that, in honor of Ali, he will “introduce the repeal of the draft as stand-alone legislation with (Ali’s) name on it.”<sup>219</sup> Although an opinion piece in the *Courier-Journal* can arguably do little to nothing to sway legislators’ minds on the issue, the fact that Paul opted to publish a piece in the *C-J* and used Ali as a timely example to back his legislation shows the power he believes Ali to have in unifying people around a given cause. To end his piece, the senator calls attention to the criticism Ali faced when he decided to reject the draft but goes on to argue why Ali should be universally accepted for his resilience.

“In Ali’s day, he spoke out against the War while many politicians defended it,” Paul wrote. “Half the country cheered Ali’s stances and the other half booed. But all can appreciate his efforts as we look back on the life of a true champion and Kentuckian who exemplified out ‘unbridled spirit.’ ... American and Kentucky never will forget Muhammad Ali, who lived a principled life.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Sen. Rand Paul. “Ali a champion in more ways than one.”

<sup>219</sup> Sen. Rand Paul. “Ali a champion in more ways than one.”

<sup>220</sup> Sen. Rand Paul. “Ali a champion in more ways than one.”

According to a Huffington Post chart, which used opinion polls to create trend lines that tracked Paul’s approval rating between Jan. 1, 2013, and when he suspended his campaign for the Republican nomination for the 2016 presidential election just over four months before Ali died, 44 percent of those polled in February 2016 held an unfavorable opinion of the senator to only 27.7 percent favorable.<sup>221</sup> With this context in mind, Paul’s opinion piece, though a worthy tribute to Ali’s life, could be interpreted as the senator using the champ’s legacy as a unifying iconic athlete-hero to forward a personal political agenda via print media. It is as if Paul believes more people will be in favor of his anti-draft legislation — and therefore hold a more favorable opinion of him — if he frames the bill as his effort to carry on Ali’s humanitarian work in his honor after the boxer’s death. A few pages before the Community Forum in its June 10, 2016, edition, the *Courier-Journal* also ran a separate news story on the proposed legislation, “The Muhammad Ali Voluntary Service Act,” which furthers the frame Paul created by using excerpts of the senator’s op-ed — described in the news story as “remarks prepared for delivery in speaking for the bill”<sup>222</sup> — as quotes.

Paul might have been the only politician who used Ali’s legacy to advocate for proposed legislation via print media, but others joined him in the *C-J’s* Community Forum page offering their takes on how society could improve by following Ali’s principles. In the June 11, 2016, Readers Forum, the Rev. Roosevelt Lightsey Jr. praised Ali’s for showing the Louisville community “how to be our brother’s brother” and, with the city’s 2016 murder rate on pace to be its highest ever, both pledged “to seek peaceful

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<sup>221</sup> HuffPost—Pollster. “Rand Paul Favorable Rating.” Accessed March 2, 2016.

<<http://elections.huffingtonpost.com/pollster/rand-paul-favorable-rating>>

<sup>222</sup> Sheldon S. Shafer. “Sen. Paul puts Ali’s name on induction bill.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 10, 2016.

resolution of conflicts” and challenged “all individuals, agencies and organizations, that genuinely love and respect Brother Ali ... to cease and desist all acts of violence perpetrated against our brothers, neighbors and all of our heavenly father’s children.”<sup>223</sup> All this, he said, was done in Ali’s name — “in tribute to this man of the millennium.” Fellow Louisvillian Joseph H. Stoltz joined Lightsy in advocating for change in the Community Forum but instead chose to focus on “the profound irony of the contrast between (Ali’s) life and deeply held universal values and the current rise of what seems like a newly resurrected Know Nothing Party, with its values of ugly nativism, xenophobia, and hate mongering.”

“We must do more than just fondly remember Ali in our minds and hearts,” Stolz continued. “We must join the struggle against any form of injustice, hate-mongering, scapegoating or anti-immigrant fervor. Ali may have been the ‘Greatest,’ but our fair city can be even greater by living out the values he espoused and believed in.”<sup>224</sup>

The *Courier-Journal’s* coverage of Ali’s memorial week briefly veers into the commercialization of the boxer’s legacy during a story about fans scalping tickets to both the June 9, 2016, Jenazah ceremony and the June 10 Yum! Center memorial service. With tickets to both events — per Ali’s request — being given away free of charge, the *C-J* framed the distribution process, described as tranquil with brisk-moving lines, around the dedication of Ali admirers and the moments of tribute that happened as some fans waited through the night and early morning to secure their spot to what many called Louisville’s most historic funeral. In a June 8, 2016, column, Tim Sullivan draws

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<sup>223</sup> Rev. Roosevelt Lightsy Jr. “READERS FORUM: In Ali’s name, desist from violence.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

<sup>224</sup> Joseph H. Stoltz. “READERS FORUM: In Ali’s name, desist from violence.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

attention to Abdul Mu'min, a Vietnam vet, waiting “nearly two hours for a ticket that would entitle him to pay his respects to that war’s most conspicuous conscientious objector.”<sup>225</sup> Others such as Sharell Carter recalled her time waiting for a ticket as well spent and marked by the inspiration Ali has been known to give to his fans.

“People were speaking on the Muslim faith,” Carter said. “People were dancing. People were doing art. People were sharing their stories of Muhammad Ali. We had people up here who went to school with him, people with pass-down stories like me, people who knew all the facts, people who knew all the speeches.”<sup>226</sup>

There were also people waiting in line who wanted to make a profit off Ali’s legacy. In a June 9 story, the *C-J’s* Matthew Glowicki reported “tickets — and many, many pleas for tickets — have flooded sites such as Craigslist, with sellers seeking hundreds of dollars for the Friday service at the KFC Yum! Center.”<sup>227</sup> Because the tickets were given away for free, selling them for any amount was considered illegal scalping, and Glowicki included a comment from one Craigslist poster to further shame the selling of the tickets as “beyond wrong” and “a mockery of (Ali’s) death.” Most of the postings were flagged and removed from the site that day.

Despite reporting and providing criticism against the scalpers, Glowicki softened the blow by clarifying that “most of the online postings were people looking for tickets who were unable to wait in line or did not come early enough. Demand far outpaced need, a scan of the site shows.”<sup>228</sup> In some cases, he mentioned posters seeking tickets by

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<sup>225</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Ali: World-famous and yet familiar.

<sup>226</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Ali: World-famous and yet familiar.

<sup>227</sup> Matthew Glowicki. “Scalpers already selling Ali tickets.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 9, 2016.

<sup>228</sup> Matthew Glowicki. “Scalpers already selling Ali tickets.”

name and recapped their stories to show that they were normal people who wanted to pay their respects to Ali like everyone else — not money-hungry scalpers. In one instance, a Craigslist poster from Louisville had an MRI scheduled and could not make it to ticket line. Regardless, the fact that Ali funeral tickets would go on sale illegally shows the magnitude of his death and legacy as a global icon and the intense desire people had to attend the event to pay tribute to their hero.

**Coverage of the June 9, 2016, Jenazah funeral ritual.** In Chris Kenning’s recap of what was “thought to be the most widely covered Muslim funeral ever held in the U.S.,” the *Courier-Journal* reporter presented readers with a laundry list of notable guests ranging from the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Pakistani Ambassador Jalil Jilani, to boxing legends Sugar Ray Leonard and fight promoter Don King.<sup>229</sup> Rather than get wrapped up in the celebrities who attended the ceremony, however, he continued to frame the event through Ali’s athlete-hero icon legacy and the impact he had on the everyday people whom he inspired. Kenning only included quotes from Jilani in his recap, which could have just been a logistical decision, but it furthered a theme presented by Louisville Mayor Fisher during a June 7, 2016, news conference: There is no prioritizing any high-profile guest’s presence over The Greatest during his week of memorial festivities.

“This is about the champ,” Fischer said. “This is one thing we’re telling these dignitaries: ‘This is for Ali. And if you want to come and be secondary to that, come to

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<sup>229</sup> Chris Kenning. “‘We’re here to pay our respects’: General public, dignitaries side by side as thousands attend traditional Islamic funeral ritual for Ali.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 10, 2016.

our city. But if you want to come and be treated like you're somebody special, the only person that's special this week is Muhammad Ali.”<sup>230</sup>

To reflect Ali's evolution to an advocate for universal acceptance of all faiths, his Jenazah ceremony was open to people from all walks of life — from “an Iraqi refugee giving away flowers, a Muslim Imam from Brooklyn, New York, and a pair of boxing fans from Los Angeles in Ali T-shirts and hats. . . . Some came from across the globe, including a man from Afghanistan and another from Bangladesh, who came without a ticket or hotel but who organizers worked to find a place to stay.”<sup>231</sup> Kenning also used description to show how attendees chose to deal with Ali's death as both a sorrowful loss of an icon and a celebration of the Louisville native's life and message: “Some said they were left with a feeling that they'd lost an important ally,” Kenning wrote. “Others reveled in the celebration of a figure who stood for ideals that many emulated.”<sup>232</sup>

Given Ali's status as a symbolic “father figure”<sup>233</sup> for American Muslims and followers of the religion around the world, the recap of the Islamic funeral ritual focuses heavily on how The Greatest's faith both challenged the status quo during the 1960s and comforted and empowered Muslims through the perspectives of those in attendance, some of whom said they converted to Islam because of the example Ali set.

“Ali showed many that it's possible to be both Muslim and American,” said Zainab Chaudry, a member of the Council on American-Islamic Relations who “hoped

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<sup>230</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Ali: World-famous and yet familiar.”

<sup>231</sup> Chris Kenning. “‘We're here to pay our respects’: General public, dignitaries side by side as thousands attend traditional Islamic funeral ritual for Ali.”

<sup>232</sup> Chris Kenning. “‘We're here to pay our respects’: General public, dignitaries side by side as thousands attend traditional Islamic funeral ritual for Ali.”

<sup>233</sup> Chris Kenning. “Devout boxing legend Ali a ‘father figure for Muslims.’”  
*Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2016.



the service would stand as a much-needed antidote to Islamophobic rhetoric in the U.S. presidential campaign.”<sup>234</sup>

Chaudry was not alone in using Ali’s Jenazah as inspiration to address anti-Muslim political rhetoric perpetuated by Donald Trump during the buildup to the 2016 election. In another *C-J* article from the Islamic funeral ritual, Deborah Yetter and Joseph Gerth’s “Prayer service for Muhammad Ali draws mourners from around the globe,” several Muslims said “they were pleased to see their faith showcased in such a positive light after a barrage of bad publicity about religious extremists and controversial comments by political figures” such as Trump, “who had suggested a temporary ban on Muslims entering the country.”<sup>235</sup>

“Let’s face it — at a time when it is difficult to be a Muslim in America, it’s a very good thing, said 19-year-old University of Louisville student Dina Fahmila, a representative of the Muslim Youth of North America. “As a Muslim youth, it’s hard to find someone who represents you.”<sup>236</sup>

Yetter and Gerth’s piece, along with a column from Sullivan, provides the perspective of non-Muslims who attended the Jenazah. Although instructed to watch the ritual from a different area of the Kentucky Exposition Center, those who spoke with the *Courier-Journal* demonstrated the inclusivity Ali represented during the latter portion of his life.

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<sup>234</sup> Chris Kenning. “‘We’re here to pay our respects’: General public, dignitaries side by side as thousands attend traditional Islamic funeral ritual for Ali.”

<sup>235</sup> Deborah Yetter and Joseph Gerth. “Prayer service for Muhammad Ali draws mourners from around the globe.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>236</sup> Deborah Yetter and Joseph Gerth. “Prayer service for Muhammad Ali draws mourners from around the globe.”

“I really respect the life that he lived,” said Kaury Edwards, a Methodist from Louisville. “He wasn’t just a boxer. It’s the things he did outside the ring that made him the greatest.” Jacqueline Edwards, a Louisville Baptist, said she attended the event to show her respect to Ali and the many Muslims who came to the prayer service.”<sup>237</sup> In Sullivan’s piece, the columnist addressed the feeling of foreignness that non-Muslims might have experienced watching the ritual but advocates for a selfless showing of respect for Ali and those who consider him a hero of the Islamic faith.

“If non-Muslims found the service hard to follow, and equally hard to see in a flat-floored hall ill-suited to spectator events,” Sullivan wrote, “paying respects is primarily about showing up, sublimating self-interest and recognizing that the day is about the deceased.”<sup>238</sup>

Sullivan also spoke with two non-Muslim sources to get their perspectives for his column: former Air Force image analyst Jerry Martin and Ali’s former business manager Gene Kilroy, who was named one of Ali’s honorary pallbearers. Martin, who made the trip from Martinsville, Virginia, for the Jenazah, dressed up his 10-year-old walking horse, Rekoa, as “a mobile monument to Ali:” A white bathrobe draped over the horse’s hindquarters with red duct tape spelled out “ALI,” while a pair of black Everlast boxing gloves hung from from his saddle, and black athletic shoes had been stuck backwards into the stirrups to “symbolize a fallen hero.”<sup>239</sup> Although Martin has a military background, he told Sullivan that Ali played a major role in helping reshape his

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<sup>237</sup> Deborah Yetter and Joseph Gerth. “Prayer service for Muhammad Ali draws mourners from around the globe.”

<sup>238</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Even in death, people are drawn to Ali.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>239</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Even in death, people are drawn to Ali.”

perspective on faith. “(Ali) made a world statement,” he said. “I couldn’t imagine myself at 19 years old being bold enough to tell America it (isn’t) right the way you treat me and my people. ... He made me rethink my positions spiritually.”<sup>240</sup>

Kilroy told Sullivan that he maintains a Christian-centric spirituality but, when talking about Ali is concerned, the boxer’s former business advisor “is as inclusive as they come.” He does, however, frame his former client through a Christian perspective when talking about what will happen to Ali in the afterlife.

“I’m sure when he meets St. Peter, St. Peter will have a cell phone and take a selfie,” Kilroy said. “He’ll get him to sign a boxing glove and then go through the golden gates.”<sup>241</sup>

In a Community Forum op-ed published the day after Ali’s Jenazah, The Rev. Joe Phelps, a pastor at Louisville’s Highland Baptist Church, further explores Ali’s religious evolution and legacy through a Christian perspective, specifically a quote from St. Stephen Church pastor Kevin Cosby that claimed “Ali was more Christian than most Christians.”<sup>242</sup> In morally unpacking Ali’s conversion to Islam, Phelps uses his religious education as a child — where faith was something students were taught and were told not to explore; rather “just believe.” Within this context, Phelps described two different types of conversion: one “more about being conformed than transformed” and the other, which Ali classifies under, as “transformation into the persons of self-giving love we were created to be. Less about words, more about spirit. Less ‘I’ve found it!’ and more ‘Lord,

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<sup>240</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Even in death, people are drawn to Ali.”

<sup>241</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Even in death, people are drawn to Ali.”

<sup>242</sup> The Rev. Joe Phelps. “Ali used life to be ‘ambassador for peace.’” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 10, 2016.

be merciful to me, a sinner.’ Less form, more function. Less about heaven, more about here and now.

The basis of judgment? Not what you believed, but whether you joined the sacred work of love, intentionally or unintentionally,”<sup>243</sup> Phelps added.

The pastor called attention to Ali being “human and flawed like all of us” but did not specifically mention the Nation of Islam or the sect’s radical beliefs that The Greatest once held to be true — white people being created by an evil scientist — during the height of public criticism against him. Yes, Ali’s refusal to be drafted into the U.S. Army because of conscience was “scandalous to many Americans,” but Phelps said the choice “reflected Jesus’ way, even if as a devout Muslim, he did not invoke Jesus’ name.”<sup>244</sup> To help support his claim, Phelps framed Ali’s actions as a follower of Islam through a passage of The Bible: “‘I have sheep you don’t know about,’ Jesus gently reminded his followers. ‘They hear my voice and follow me.’ Sacred love transcends our divisions, unites us in common cause,” Phelps added, “and welcomes our faithfulness.”<sup>245</sup> The pastor concluded his op-ed by revisiting Cosby’s quote and said that his colleague was not making “an attempt to snatch Ali from his Muslim faith” but rather “a recognition that, as a Muslim, Ali was also walking the way of Jesus, regardless of whether he was conscious of doing so.”<sup>246</sup> As has and will continue to be the case throughout the *C-J*’s coverage of Ali’s memorial week, the boxer’s hometown roots serve as the great unifier across Louisvillians’ different beliefs.

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<sup>243</sup> The Rev. Joe Phelps. “Ali used life to be ‘ambassador for peace.’”

<sup>244</sup> The Rev. Joe Phelps. “Ali used life to be ‘ambassador for peace.’”

<sup>245</sup> The Rev. Joe Phelps. “Ali used life to be ‘ambassador for peace.’”

<sup>246</sup> The Rev. Joe Phelps. “Ali used life to be ‘ambassador for peace.’”

“Christians might feel chagrined that we were out-Christian-ed by a Muslim, Phelps said. “Or we can simply give thanks for this Louisvillian who embodied the sacred way for all the world to see.”<sup>247</sup>

### **Coverage of the June 10, 2016, funeral procession through Louisville.**

Admirers from around the world attended Ali’s 19-mile funeral procession through the streets of his hometown, and millions more watched the global event unfold remotely. On its June 11, 2016, front page, the *Courier-Journal* reflected the magnitude of its most famous native son being laid to rest with the headline “WORLD RETURNS THE LOVE TO ALI” above a photo of fans crowding around the line of rose-covered limousines as the procession makes its way past Ali’s childhood home.<sup>248</sup> Reporters Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey, however, took a localized approach in framing their recap of the procession as the culmination of the unity that resonated throughout the city over the past week being broadcast for everyone to see. There was mention of the celebrities who were riding in the funeral procession — Will Smith and former heavyweight champs Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis — but, much like the *C-J’s* Jenazah coverage, the focus was on the dedication of “those who’d waited in the heat for hours” to pay their respects and offer condolences, although the procession was described more like a celebration than mourning.

“ ... Even before Ali’s remains had been interred, many of his friends and fans appeared ready to move on from their mourning,” wrote Tim Sullivan in a column from

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<sup>247</sup> The Rev. Joe Phelps. “Ali used life to be ‘ambassador for peace.’”

<sup>248</sup> Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey. “World returns the love to Ali: Thousands take to the streets to say goodbye to The Greatest.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

the procession. “They watched his funeral cortege with a mixture of solemnity and spirit, as if the joy Ali customarily evoked had been too long suppressed.”<sup>249</sup>

“It’s not sadness. It’s greatness,”<sup>250</sup> attendee Angie Whitfield added.

Although not directly referenced in the recap of the procession, Ali’s once-complicated relationship with Louisville is framed as amended in the opening graphs of the piece: “Muhammad Ali, the championship boxer and global icon who oft reminded the world of the love of his hometown, was showered in adoration in return — from highway guardrails and the narrow Parkland street where he grew up, to the center of downtown on Broadway and the open gates of his final resting place at Cave Hill Cemetery.”<sup>251</sup> In another display of intimacy, Goetz and Bailey choose to call the hundreds of people waiting for “the man who called himself the people’s champion” and his funeral procession at Muhammad Ali Boulevard “neighbors.” Sources’ vignettes of their encounters with Ali reinforced the sense of intimacy felt by his hometown community and just how much the week of memorial events had been to an area of Louisville that is not given a lot of good publicity.

“It means everything because it brought this community together,” said Louisville resident Kevin Glenn, who grew up in the neighborhood that produced Ali. “What a great thing for Muhammad to do that one last time. The world saw Parkland today.”<sup>252</sup>

Goetz and Bailey showed the importance of Ali’s procession to the West Louisville community as a chance to be seen by the entire world in small details such as

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<sup>249</sup> Tim Sullivan. “Even in death, Ali’s image larger than life.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

<sup>250</sup> Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey. “World returns the love to Ali: ... ”

<sup>251</sup> Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey. “World returns the love to Ali: ... ”

<sup>252</sup> Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey. “World returns the love to Ali: ... ”

lawns being “noticeably mowed, even the vacant lots century-old brick homes” and neighbors wielding “brooms and dustpans.”<sup>253</sup> For residents of the area such as Raymond Ferrell, “Ali was proof a person could rise above his circumstances and do the right thing.” Others choose to again frame the boxer’s funeral as an event that could hopefully encourage Louisvillians to put an end to the violence that plagued the city during 2016.

“Hopefully, a lot of the young people this week will stop killing each other,” Louisville resident Eric Tillman said. “Maybe Ali’s funeral will inspire them to put their guns down.”<sup>254</sup>

Ali was further framed as an iconic symbol when Goetz and Bailey noted that motorcade attendants “tucked yellow placards with the image of a butterfly beneath each shining Cadillac windshield for his final pass” and how members of the crowd wore T-shirts “emblazoned with his picture.”<sup>255</sup> In these minute details, readers see how the boxer is immortalized through different — and commercial — interpretations of his image and legacy. When imagining what Ali’s final resting place in Cave Hill would be like, Ferrell’s hope that the monument would be graceful, “quiet and thoughtful, like (Ali)”<sup>256</sup> showed how the collective memory of Ali had shifted from what people once thought of the loud, braggadocios young boxer rattling off poetic knockout predictions. Again, Ali’s status as a humanitarian — stricken silent by Parkinson’s but powerful in a different way — had overtaken The Greatest’s athletic prowess in the minds of some admirers.

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<sup>253</sup> Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey. “World returns the love to Ali: ... ”

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The Louisville native also assumes godlike, prophetic status in a paragraph about a tweet from Hana Ali posted during the procession, in which she remembers a recurring dream her father told her about. In the dream, Ali would be “running down Broadway in downtown Louisville where people gathered on the street, clapping and cheering his name.” Hana said her father told her: “I waved back. Then all of a sudden I just took off flying.”<sup>257</sup> In the context of Ali’s grand narrative — and considering Louisville’s reluctance to fully embrace the boxer like other parts of the world did — the recurring dream symbolizes the final step in The Greatest’s ascension into the afterlife and global icon status: coming home and being celebrated by the people who once discriminated against his race and criticized his religious conversion. Instead of turning him away from their restaurants, Louisvillians chanted his Muslim name as his hearse passed and rushed to gather the rose petals that fell off the limousines as “a memento”<sup>258</sup> from the final chapter of his iconic legacy.

**Coverage of the Yum! Center interfaith memorial service.** With a lineup of eulogists that featured clergy representing four religions, former President Bill Clinton, a representative sent on behalf of then-President Barack Obama, renowned actor Billy Crystal, Lonnie Ali, and more, the *Courier-Journal’s* main story from Ali’s funeral service at the KFC Yum! Center chose to frame Ali as an iconic figure through the words of the high-profile guests who spoke on his behalf. The boxer’s hometown newspaper ran a story that compiled reactions to his death from prominent figures in its June 5, 2016, edition but, with the local angle on the week’s worth of events leading up to Ali’s funeral, decided to wait until the eulogists took center stage to make their voices most prominent.

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<sup>257</sup> Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey. “World returns the love to Ali: ...”

<sup>258</sup> Kristina Goetz and Phillip M. Bailey. “World returns the love to Ali: ...”



*C-J* reporters Andrew Wolfson and Chris Kenning frame the inclusive, three-hour funeral service as a representation of the different aspects of Ali’s iconic legacy — “part prayer meeting, part political rally and part comedy club.”<sup>259</sup> Ali drew comparisons to such once-in-a-generation titans as William Shakespeare, Mozart and Pablo Picasso from Crystal, whose anecdote of the boxer boycotting a country club after learning they did not admit Jews further portrayed The Greatest as a fighter against oppression rather than the dangerous figure many saw him to be when he joined the Nation of Islam. Crystal framed Ali’s stance against the Vietnam war as commendable; he said The Greatest “gave young people someone to look up to ... after other leaders — Malcolm X, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sen. Bobby Kennedy were killed” during the turbulent 1960s. The Rev. Kevin Cosby echoed Crystal’s sentiment by saying Ali “led African-Americans to a new identity.”

“He dared to love America’s most unloved race,” Cosby added. “And he loved us all, and we loved him because we knew he loved us, whether ... you lived in the penthouse or the projects ... or came from Morehouse or no house.”<sup>260</sup>

In a statement read by senior aid Valerie Jarrett, Obama, who could not attend the funeral because of conflicts with his daughter Malia’s high school graduation, gave personal testimony of how Ali was an empowering role model in his life. The Greatest’s success showed him “how a descendent of slaves could become ‘king of the world’ and help inspire a skinny kid with a funny last name to have the audacity to think he could be anything — even the president of the United States.

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<sup>259</sup> Andrew Wolfson and Chris Kenning. “Clinton: Ali ‘soldier for humanity.’” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

<sup>260</sup> Andrew Wolfson and Chris Kenning. “Clinton: Ali ‘soldier for humanity.’”

“He was not just a Muslim or a black man or a resident of Louisville,” the president wrote. “He was Muhammad Ali. He was bigger and brighter and more influential than just about anyone of his era. And yes, he was pretty too. You couldn’t have made him up.”<sup>261</sup>

Clinton, who saluted Ali as “a universal soldier for humanity,” chose to talk about Ali’s resilience in battling Parkinson’s. Despite the champ’s deteriorating physical condition, Clinton praised Ali for never being imprisoned by the disease or for wasting a day “feeling sorry for himself.”

“With his free spirit, he made his life bigger, not smaller,” Clinton added. “He was a free man of faith, and he shared the gifts we all have.”<sup>262</sup>

For all the grandiose praise Ali received from his renowned eulogists, the *Courier-Journal’s* piece from the funeral service did not include any quote from Lonnie Ali’s address to the KFC Yum! Center. With so many high-profile guests in attendance and Lonnie Ali expected to give a loving testimony to her husband — as most would expect from a family member — perhaps Wolfson and Kenning found it best to focus on those not related to Ali who spoke. Regardless, other than a photo on the June 11 front page of her giving her eulogy, Lonnie Ali had had a notable absence from the *C-J’s* coverage thus far, which is especially surprising considering that she, too, is from Louisville and played such a large role in keeping Ali relevant into old age and despite Parkinson’s. Maybe the *Courier-Journal* did not want to focus on Lonnie during its memorial coverage because the week was dedicated to celebrating Ali’s legacy and she had to deal with the grieving process and funeral planning. As noted in a New York

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<sup>261</sup> Andrew Wolfson and Chris Kenning. “Clinton: Ali ‘soldier for humanity.’”

<sup>262</sup> Andrew Wolfson and Chris Kenning. “Clinton: Ali ‘soldier for humanity.’”

Times piece, the boxer's fourth wife is also known for being a behind-the-scenes presence and does not chase the spotlight.

**Auxiliary coverage of Ali's funeral service.** Crystal closed out Wolfson and Kenning's piece from inside the Yum! Center by saying, "(Ali) is gone but will never die. He was my big brother."<sup>263</sup> In the *C-J's* auxiliary coverage of the Ali funeral, framed through the perspectives of "ordinary people,"<sup>264</sup> Crystal's statement is affirmed by those who chose to watch the memorial service on screens in an area of downtown Louisville and shared stories about how Ali impacted their lives.

The general consensus amongst sources was the same it has been throughout the *Courier-Journal's* Ali coverage: "Many people who came to the service didn't speak first of Muhammad Ali's boxing career but instead focused on his life outside the ring."<sup>265</sup> But a few specific event attendees stood out in carrying out — and complicating — Ali's legacy.

- In praising Ali for using his athletic platform "to advance the cause of black people," **Eric Menal (New York)** wrongly told the *C-J* that Ali "went to jail, came out and reclaimed his title and just continued to be an ambassador."<sup>266</sup> The Greatest was never imprisoned during his draft induction fight, however, and reporters did not follow up Menal's quote with any clarification or correction. Maybe Menal confused Ali's exile from boxing as a form of prison, but his

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<sup>263</sup> Andrew Wolfson and Chris Kenning. "Clinton: Ali 'soldier for humanity.'"

<sup>264</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. "Thousands share their stories." *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

<sup>265</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. "Thousands share their stories."

<sup>266</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. "Thousands share their stories."

perspective shows how falsities have crept into the collective memory of Ali's legacy.

- In the spirit of Ali's politically charged statements and symbolic protests during the early parts of his career, **79-year-old Vergil Watson (Jackson, Tennessee)** used the boxer's funeral service to "send a message to Kentucky's senior senator, Mitch McConnell, the Republican majority leader of the U.S. Senate who famously said his goal during President Barack Obama's first term was to make him a one-term president."<sup>267</sup> Watson, holding a sign that read, "Sen. McConnell are you here today," told the *C-J* he drove 300 miles to congratulate him on his defeat.<sup>268</sup> Referencing one of McConnell's campaign ads, Watson said: "I got my 20 bloodhounds out looking for him but they ain't found him yet." The senator was not expected to be in attendance.
- **Deborah Muhammad (Cincinnati)** drove to Louisville for the funeral despite knowing there was probably no way she would get a ticket. Her daughter, Clara Jackson, and she "sat outside the arena with a photo of a young Ali shaking hands with late Nation of Islam Leader Elijah Muhammad,"<sup>269</sup> which is the first time in the *C-J's* memorial coverage that Ali's ties to the radical sect were openly referenced and embraced in tribute by a source.
- At first, **Louisville resident William Brown** "did not like the champ's talk and boasting," but Ali eventually won him over. "He'd say, 'I'm the Greatest.' But he changed my mind," Brown said. "He really was a great guy." Brown also

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<sup>267</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. "Thousands share their stories."

<sup>268</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. "Thousands share their stories."

<sup>269</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. "Thousands share their stories."

reflected on the racism Ali faced in his hometown but praised him for never giving up on Louisville. “People struggle to get along,” Brown added. “Why does it take something like this to bring us together? Why can’t we live like everybody is important?”<sup>270</sup>

- As he and his husband walked past a handful of Westboro Baptist Church members protesting Ali’s funeral with signs reading “Ali rejected Christ” and “God hates Islam” and another saying “Ali was in hell,” **Louisville resident James Bannis** shouted: “That is not the way of this city.”<sup>271</sup> The headline for James Bruggers’ story in the *C-J* the next day read, “Ali’s message drowns out Westboro protest.”

“Louisville — and America — are built on striving to find ways to get along, and that is what Ali stood for,”<sup>272</sup> Bannis said. His German husband, Eric von Stein, said he has found Louisville to be liberal and welcoming and speculated that the city’s kindness might have something to do with Ali comforting people “on issues of justice.”

***Aftermath: a time for reflection — and progress.*** With “the pomp and panache” of Friday’s funeral ceremony over, Kristina Goetzl continued the *C-J*’s “everyman”<sup>273</sup> approach with her piece on the steady stream of visitors who enjoyed intimate moments of quiet reflection — some shedding tears such as senior citizen Anson Lane, who

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<sup>270</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. “Thousands share their stories.”

<sup>271</sup> James Bruggers. “Ali’s message drowns out Westboro protest.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 2016.

<sup>272</sup> James Bruggers. “Ali’s message drowns out Westboro protest.”

<sup>273</sup> Kristina Goetzl. “A day of quiet reflection.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 12, 2016.

traveled from Portsmouth, England, to Louisville to offer thanks<sup>274</sup> — at Ali’s grave the day after he was laid to rest at Cave Hill Cemetery. Again, even though Ali had reached his final resting place, his legacy remained very much alive in the visitors’ consciences as a symbol of unity and a role model.

“... today it doesn’t matter what faith you are, said Eradzh Sattorov, a Muslim from Tajikistan who looked to The Greatest for inner strength when he was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2009. “We are all Ali.”<sup>275</sup>

Brad Williams of Wales never met Ali but did not have a father growing up and kept a photo of the boxer on his wall. “The boxer wasn’t a thug, but he could fight, Williams said. He was educated and had a way with words. He was a ladies man *and* a man’s man.” Imitating Ali, Goetzl wrote, “was how Williams became one.”<sup>276</sup>

The reflection that followed Ali’s memorial week was not just reserved for giving thanks to The Greatest for all that he did and stood for. In a June 12 column entitled “Citywide memorial shows progress,” Joseph Gerth looked back to Louisville’s racist past to applaud the city’s efforts in honoring Ali. The deck of the column reads: “Old antagonism over Ali ends in harmonious day.”<sup>277</sup>

“It was, simply put, Louisville’s finest day,” Gerth wrote. “The city welcomed the world on Friday to celebrate the life of Louisville’s greatest champion and it shined. ... The events of the day created a scene that we’re unlikely to see again in Louisville — the city and the world coming together on a national stage to mourn one of our own without

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<sup>274</sup> Kristina Goetzl. “A day of quiet reflection.”

<sup>275</sup> Kristina Goetzl. “A day of quiet reflection.”

<sup>276</sup> Kristina Goetzl. “A day of quiet reflection.”

<sup>277</sup> Joseph Gerth. “Citywide memorial shows progress.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 12, 2016.

concern for race, religion or politics.”<sup>278</sup> The *C-J* columnist used a quote from Lonnie Ali’s eulogy at Friday’s funeral service to explain how Ali’s personality and values allowed him to become universally loved: “Muhammad was not one to give up on the power of understanding, the boundless possibilities of love that the strength of our diversity. He counted among his friends people of all political persuasions, saw truth in all faiths and the mobility of all races as witnessed here today.”<sup>279</sup>

From here, Gerth framed Ali’s funeral procession against his motorcade through Louisville after winning the 1974 heavyweight championship to show how the events of his triumphant return home in 2016 progressed drastically from what was, in 1974, “largely a celebration for the black community.”<sup>280</sup>

“At the time, there were still misgivings about Ali in the white community,” said Harvey Sloane, whom Ali dubbed the “hippie mayor” of Louisville during the mid-1970s. “There was sort of a quiet opposition in the white community but then you got down in southwest Jefferson County and Fairdale and some of those places it was pretty strongly felt.”<sup>281</sup>

As is the case in other *C-J* stories detailing criticism against Ali by members of his hometown, Sloane cited the boxer’s refusal to be drafted into the Army and his conversion to Islam as what prompted the backlash. At the heart of both of those reasons, Sloane said, is that “some just weren’t comfortable with a loud and proud black man who spoke his mind.”<sup>282</sup> Veterans posed similar opposition to the former mayor’s 1974

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<sup>278</sup> Joseph Gerth. “Citywide memorial shows progress.”

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<sup>282</sup> Joseph Gerth. “Citywide memorial shows progress.”

attempt to rename Armory Place in Louisville to Muhammad Ali Place as they did to the proposed Ali statue at the state capitol, and Phelps noted there was so much “antagonism toward (Ali) in the white areas” that you could not name a street that went the length and breadth of the city after its most famous son. When then-Alderman Jerry Bronger casted the deciding vote to rename Walnut Street after Ali in 1978, he told Gerth that all the hell he caught was from veterans.

But, some 30 years later, public opinion has with a few exceptions completely flipped in the boxer’s favor. Similar to Goetz and Bailey’s recap of Ali’s funeral procession, Gerth ends his column by framing Ali’s memorial events as having amended the boxer’s once-complicated relationship with his hometown for the better from both perspectives. Not only do Louisvillians get to celebrate the life of their most famous native son, but also themselves for promoting a culture of greater acceptance, which Ali helped perpetuate as an iconic athlete-hero.

“Sloane said Saturday that, in those days, he couldn’t have imagined the scene that unfolded on the city’s streets and at the KFC Yum! Center ... with people of all races and religions coming together to honor Ali because of that opposition all those years ago,” Gerth wrote. “Two generations later, there remain pockets of opposition to Ali, but Friday’s events showed that most in the community have moved beyond that. So many believe that Ali was the greatest and, after Friday’s outpouring of love for him, it’s hard to believe Ali wouldn’t say the same of his hometown.”<sup>283</sup>

To wrap up its week of Ali memorial coverage, the *Courier-Journal* decided to amend its complicated relationship with The Greatest, too. In a Community Forum

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<sup>283</sup> Joseph Gerth. “Citywide memorial shows progress.”



editorial and with no credited byline, the *C-J*'s staff penned a piece that acknowledged and apologized “ever so belatedly” for “the role it played by not accepting the name Muhammad Ali for several years after the 22-year-old Cassius Clay took on the moniker when he adopted the Muslim religion in 1964.”<sup>284</sup> Even when Ali’s hometown paper finally broke the barrier and used his preferred name in the headline of an October 1970 column, the body read, “Muhammad Ali, which is the name he prefers to Cassius Clay.”

“We won’t even try to speculate what the motives of the editors in that era were,” the piece continued. “The *C-J* was certainly an early champion of civil rights and desegregation. Yet we took what in today’s light is an oddly hostile approach on the specific issue of Ali’s name, which did little to help race relations in a turbulent time.”<sup>285</sup> Not only did the *Courier-Journal* ignore Ali’s declaration of his new Muslim identity, but it also poked fun at him. The 2016 editorial begrudgingly described for readers a Hugh Haynie *C-J* cartoon that depicted Ali surrounded by children with the caption: “Oh, Mister — Did You Change Your Name So You Could Pass The Army Spellin’ Test?”<sup>286</sup>

For all the blame the *Courier-Journal* accepts in this blemish on the paper’s legacy, it makes sure to note that its behavior during this turbulent period of American history was in line with other upstanding publications such as *The New York Times*, which used Cassius Clay when referring to Ali until 1971.<sup>287</sup> This editorial decision seeped into collective memory; the *C-J* editorial recalled an October 1966 front-page story in which “young patients at Children’s Hospital were confused that everyone was

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<sup>284</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay and the C-J.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 12, 2016.

<sup>285</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay and the C-J.”

<sup>286</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay and the C-J.”

<sup>287</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay and the C-J.”

telling them about Cassius Clay visiting but the big visitor was signing Muhammad Ali autographs.

“Were we adding to that confusion?”<sup>288</sup> the unknown editorial author asked, although he or she already knew the answer.

In ending the apologetic editorial statement, the *C-J* staff chose to frame its decision to address a misstep in the paper’s history as Kentucky’s largest print news organization around one of Ali’s six core principles: respect.<sup>289</sup> After dedicating so much time and space to documenting Ali’s legacy and the events that unfolded during the week of his memorial ceremonies in Louisville, the *Courier-Journal* owning up to its past mistakes shows not only that the publication views the boxer as an athlete-hero icon like the majority of his hometown but also that the newspaper understands and takes seriously the impact print media can have in shaping the collective memory. The *C-J* was once on the wrong side of history, but, now that history has evolved with Ali’s legacy, the newspaper wanted to “pay him the respect he deserves.”<sup>290</sup>

### ***The New York Times’ approach to framing Ali’s legacy on a national scale***

As a major national outlet more than 700 miles away from the events that unfolded in Louisville during the buildup to Ali’s funeral, *The New York Times* chose to structure the majority of its post-obituary Ali memorial coverage around think pieces and personal essays that meditated on different facets of The Greatest’s legacy. The publication dispatched reporters to Kentucky for stories from Ali’s Jenazah ritual, his motorcade procession, and the KFC Yum! Center funeral ceremony. But, otherwise, the

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<sup>288</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay and the C-J.”

<sup>289</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay and the C-J.”

<sup>290</sup> Courier-Journal Staff. “Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay and the C-J.”

newspaper let a talented lineup of writers have free rein in penning personal tributes to the global icon centered around abstract concepts such as how he “evolved from a blockbuster fighter to a country’s conscience,”<sup>291</sup> “never sold out,”<sup>292</sup> was “never the white man’s Negro,”<sup>293</sup> and exemplified “a truer kind of bravery.”<sup>294</sup> Although different in format and style from the *Courier-Journal’s* localized, event-heavy coverage, the *Times’* think pieces also relied heavily on allowing individuals’ specific memories of Ali to shape collective memory. The result was an athlete-hero frame that applauded the boxer’s athletic prowess but raised him to icon status for everything he did and stood for outside the ring.

“We celebrate athletic courage,” Michael Powell wrote in a June 4, 2016, piece. “Watch a hoopster hit a spinning, fall-away jumper in the last seconds, see a center fielder race toward a fence heedless of the possible injury, applaud a fullback who catapults into the end zone, and we talk of courage. Such feats are athletic and wonderful and memorable. Courage is being 24 years old and risking all, the anger of newspaper and television reporters and millions of white Americans who see you as a public enemy, to say no to a war.”<sup>295</sup>

As Powell’s quote indicates, the think piece and personal essay forms allowed the *Times’* writers to openly embrace Ali’s controversial draft refusal in ways that the

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<sup>291</sup> Wesley Morris. “Muhammad Ali evolved from a blockbuster fighter to a country’s conscience.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2016

<sup>292</sup> William C. Rhoden. “Muhammad Ali: The champion who never sold out.” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2016.

<sup>293</sup> Joyce Carol Oates. “Muhammad Ali: Never the white man’s Negro.” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2016.

<sup>294</sup> Michael Powell. “In Muhammad Ali, an example of a truer kind of bravery.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2016.

<sup>295</sup> Michael Powell. “In Muhammad Ali, an example of a truer kind of bravery.”

Courier-Journal's writers could not in pieces for the paper's special section or event recaps. Even the *C-J*'s columnists would acknowledge changing public opinion on Vietnam or let sources offer their opinions on Ali's refusal before they would advocate that he did the right thing to their audience, which includes Southern veterans who still view his "draft-dodging" actions as cowardly and selfish. That is not to say veterans did not criticize *The New York Times* in Letters to the Editor sections during the week of Ali memorial coverage, but the publication could still claim objectivity because the think pieces and personal essays could be classified as opinion.

*The New York Times*' treatment of Ali's ties to the Nation of Islam and its radical separatist doctrine ran almost parallel to what was seen in the *Courier-Journal*. In national think pieces and personal essays, writers largely skip over "jarring details"<sup>296</sup> such as Ali denouncing whites and speaking about the creation of an African-American state. The only examination of his anti-white comments appeared in a republished Oct. 25, 1964, piece from Lipsyte.<sup>297</sup> Instead, some pieces simply acknowledged the boxer's physical and verbal cruelty — "wielding racist imagery to rile opponents."<sup>298</sup> His behavior was excused by his religious evolution and importance as a role model representing black pride at a time when other black celebrities were complicit in the circus of the white press. In a personal essay entitled "Muhammad Ali shaped my life," Walter Mosley compares the boxer at the height of public criticism against him to mythic folk hero John Henry.

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<sup>296</sup> Joyce Carol Oates. "Muhammad Ali: Never the white man's Negro."

<sup>297</sup> Robert Lipsyte. "Muhammad Ali grew into many roles." *The New York Times*, October 25, 1964 — republished on June 10, 2016.

<sup>298</sup> Wesley Morris. "Muhammad Ali evolved from a blockbuster fighter to a country's conscience."

“We always felt that he was one of us and with us because he was a working man,” Mosley said. “He was our John Henry. He was sweat and bone, blood and pain. That’s the language of the worker. And like most people, who build the world with their sweat and strain, he had his best years taken from him.

“Ali was loved because he walked with us and took the barbs and arrows, body blows and head shots, the prejudices and dismissals.”<sup>299</sup>

*The Times*, like the *C-J*, also ran an article about its role in perpetuating the use of Cassius Clay instead of the boxer’s Muslim name in print through his return to boxing in the early 1970s — around the time public opinion began to shift in his favor. According to the publication’s research, “Cassius Clay” appeared in more than 1,000 articles between 1964 and 1968, while “Muhammad Ali” was present in about 150.<sup>300</sup> Sometimes pieces would note that he was “also known as Muhammad Ali,” but the bulk of the articles defaulted to what the boxer called — and continued to call in old age — his slave name. Lipsyte, who was interviewed for the story, said editors at the time were adamant that “until Ali changed his name in a court of law, we would call him Cassius Clay,”<sup>301</sup> which led to the instances of naming neglect that writer Victor Mather decided to include in his piece.

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<sup>299</sup> Walter Mosley. “Muhammad Ali shaped my life.” *The New York Times*, June 5, 2016.

<sup>300</sup> Victor Mather. “In the ring he was Ali, but in the papers he was still Clay.” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2016.

<sup>301</sup> Victor Mather. “In the ring he was Ali, but in the papers he was still Clay.”

- “A *Times* article in 1966 noted that Ali balked at accepting an award because it was inscribed to Cassius Clay, not Muhammad Ali. The article’s headline was ‘Clay Gets Award as Boxer of Year.’”<sup>302</sup>
- “A news story about his speech at a Houston mosque called him Muhammad Ali in the headline, but Clay in the text. (In general, stories about Ali away from the ring were more likely to use his preferred name.)”

“I found it very embarrassing,” Lipsyte said. “We did not ask what John Wayne and Rock Hudson’s real names were.” When he once apologized to Ali about his misnaming, the boxer replied: “Don’t worry, you’re just a little brother of the white power structure.”<sup>303</sup>

Like the *C-J* editorial, *The Times* made sure to point out that it was not alone in this naming practice and mentioned other publications that shared similar policies — *The Washington Post* and a 1967 *Sports Illustrated* cover that read, “Cassius Clay, the Man, the Muslim, the Mystery” but referred to the boxer as Ali inside the magazine.<sup>304</sup>

Although Mather chose to include the aforementioned regretful editorial decisions, he does not issue a deliberate apology on behalf of *The New York Times* like the *C-J* did in its editorial. Instead, he described how treatment of Ali’s name evolved through a generational shift in the editorial staff — “times do change at *The Times*”<sup>305</sup> — and provided readers with insider information on the Times’ naming policy now.

“It’s much more the norm now not to impose a name on someone,” said Phillip B. Corbett, the associate editor for standards. “Our basic approach now in general is to use

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<sup>302</sup> Victor Mather. “In the ring he was Ali, but in the papers he was still Clay.”

<sup>303</sup> Victor Mather. “In the ring he was Ali, but in the papers he was still Clay.”

<sup>304</sup> Victor Mather. “In the ring he was Ali, but in the papers he was still Clay.”

<sup>305</sup> Victor Mather. “In the ring he was Ali, but in the papers he was still Clay.”

the name people use for themselves. ... You want to be respectful to the people you are writing about by using their names. On the other hand, you don't want to baffle your readers."<sup>306</sup> The editor reflected a culture of acceptance and notes that the publication was quick to begin referring to Caitlyn Jenner and Chelsea Manning by their new names and genders. It would be interesting to see, however, if the publication would have treated the transgender women differently during the 1960s and 1970s — or if Jenner and Manning were not once white males.

Although the Times heroically framed Ali as “an ungentrified black man”<sup>307</sup> who evolved into a global symbol of universal acceptance and humanitarianism, outlier articles such as Ishmael Reed’s June 4, 2016, think piece “Muhammad Ali: Worshiped. Misunderstood. Exploited.” challenged the majority’s generalization of The Greatest’s legacy by arguing, “the more people watched Ali, the less they understood him.” Reed denounced the views of “Ali scribes” — writers who worshiped the boxer and “cast him as a member of the 1960s counterculture for his 1967 refusal to serve in Vietnam.”

“In fact, Reed continued, he was simply following the nonviolence policy of the Nation of Islam, which he had joined a few years earlier.”<sup>308</sup> By not including any of Ali’s poignant and well-known quotes on how America’s race relations informed or confirmed his decision to refuse induction, Reed further framed his argument that the controversial decision was simpler than most people often give the boxer credit for. The truly complex aspect of the boxer’s legacy that the Ali scribes should instead choose to examine, he argued, is his relationship with the NOI.

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<sup>306</sup> Victor Mather. “In the ring he was Ali, but in the papers he was still Clay.”

<sup>307</sup> William C. Rhoden. “Muhammad Ali: The champion who never sold out.”

<sup>308</sup> Ishmael Reed. “Muhammad Ali: Worshiped. Misunderstood. Exploited.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2016.

(Ali scribes) saw him as a victim, saying that the Nation stole money from him. Unlike them, who dismiss Ali’s mentor and the head of the Nation, Elijah Muhammad, as a ‘cult racketeer’ or worse, I actually interviewed some of the Nation members. They said it was the other way around: According to Khalilah Ali, whose father was a captain in the Nation ... the organization — and her father personally —gave him much more money than he gave in return. Some members of the Nation are still bitter.<sup>309</sup>

Reed also called attention to Ali’s tendency to fall in “with the wrong crowd,” which included his friend Major Coxson, a politician and gangster who was killed in a 1973 mob hit and former manager Richard M. Hirschfeld, who was a criminal and hanged himself in jail. Worst of all was Harold Smith, the one-time chairman of Muhammad Ali Professional Sports Inc. who “used the champion’s name to steal \$21.3 million from Wells Fargo, one of the largest embezzlement cases in history.”<sup>310</sup> These connections — not mentioned in the *C-J* or other *NYT* memorial articles — do not necessarily incriminate Ali as doing anything wrong, but they present an image of the boxer that diverges from the athlete-hero role model frame widely circulated in the majority of the memorial pieces examined. Because of the way print media can influence collective memory through the circulation of dominant images, it is likely that the same people who encouraged their children to use The Greatest’s principles as a guide to overcome obstacles and promote acceptance were not aware of Ali’s questionable connections to less-than-reputable people. With the softening of Ali’s image, those complicating details will ultimately be overshadowed and eventually lost amongst all the good the boxer did and stood for — and his admirers think he did and stood for — unless journalists like Reed choose to expose them.

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<sup>309</sup> Ishmael Reed. “Muhammad Ali: Worshiped. Misunderstood. Exploited.”

<sup>310</sup> Ishmael Reed. “Muhammad Ali: Worshiped. Misunderstood. Exploited.”



Despite all of this criticism for Ali's prevailing collective memory he rouses, Reed still praised the boxer's generosity and showed sympathy as he recounted the numerous people who took advantage of him financially without regard for his physical health, which is also something the *C-J* largely ignored in its coverage. Howard J. Moore, a lawyer and frequent Ali houseguest said the boxer's phone rang all day with requests for loans or for Ali to pay rent — “... more often than not he did, no questions asked.”<sup>311</sup> In another anecdote, Reed described how boxing promoter Don King “cheated (Ali) out of all but \$50,000 of an \$8 million purse after Ali was “nearly killed in the ring by Larry Holmes in 1980.” On the subject of The Greatest's deteriorating health toward the end of his boxing career and beyond, Reed pointed out that “doctors warned him and his camp followers (early on) that he was getting hit too much while training for his fights. (Ali) wouldn't listen, and no one around him tried to persuade him otherwise”<sup>312</sup> because they too stood to prosper monetarily from his career.

“Ali's career will make you cry,” Reed said, reflecting on how so much physical agony could have been avoided had the boxer decided to make the right decision and call it quits when his health initially became an issue. For how much he deconstructs the idealistic image of Ali perpetuated globally during the twilight of his life and questions Ali's greatness, Reed could not deny the near-godly symbolic power the icon had in inspiring those around him — even during encounters as brief as the anecdote with which he ended his article.

“... I think of a story that one of Ali's friends and former managers, Gene Kilroy, once told me,” Reed wrote. “A child was dying of cancer. Ali visited the hospital and told

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<sup>311</sup> Ishmael Reed. “Muhammad Ali: Worshiped. Misunderstood. Exploited.”

<sup>312</sup> Ishmael Reed. “Muhammad Ali: Worshiped. Misunderstood. Exploited.”

the boy that he was going to defeat Sonny Liston and that he, the kid, was going to defeat cancer. ‘No,’ the boy said. ‘I’m going to God, and I’m going to tell God that I know you.’”<sup>313</sup>

One of the most surprising articles to come in the wake of Ali’s death was Steve Eder’s “Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.” Although sources in the *Courier-Journal’s* recap of Ali’s Jenazah funeral ritual used the boxer’s legacy as a platform to speak out against the then-candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, Eder’s piece framed The Greatest and Trump as having a friendly and supportive relationship that dated back to the 1980s. Specific details also called attention to the Ali camp’s calculated efforts to preserve that relationship when Ali allegedly denounced Trump for the Muslim ban he proposed in the wake of the December 2015 shootings in San Bernardino, California.

Trump, who invited Ali to his 2005 wedding to Melania Knauss and appeared at some of the boxer’s charity events, called Ali a “terrific guy,” “so generous,” and an “amazing poet” as he reflected on The Greatest’s death.<sup>314</sup> He said Ali “had taught him about diversity and called him an ‘amazing example of strength and kindness and ability and athleticism.’” Eder also noted that Ali “presented Mr. Trump with a least two awards honoring his charitable work” over the years and auctioned off a dinner with the billionaire at a 2007 auction to benefit the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center at Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix. After Ali’s remarks in a statement entitled

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<sup>313</sup> Ishmael Reed. “Muhammad Ali: Worshiped. Misunderstood. Exploited.”

<sup>314</sup> Steve Eder. “Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2016.

“Presidential Candidates Proposing to Ban Muslim Immigration to the United States,” however, Eder said “there appeared to be a chill in their mutual admirations.”<sup>315</sup>

“We as Muslims have to stand up to those who use Islam to advance their own personal agenda,” Ali said in the statement. “They have alienated many from learning about Islam.”<sup>316</sup>

Many believed Ali’s statement was condemning Trump’s proposed ban — except for Trump, who said, “if it were about him, Ali would have mentioned the name.”<sup>317</sup> Ali spokesman Bob Gunnell confirmed Trump’s speculation was true and clarified that the boxer told him the statement was intended for “extremists and jihadists” and that he and Lonnie are “for the people.”<sup>318</sup> For most, if not all, of Ali’s Muslim admirers, however, their hero had just shown them that he was not exactly for his people. This clarification further framed Ali as passing on chances to make a radical statement against injustice in the same way he ducked questions about the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center because he did not want to “say the wrong thing and hurt my business.”<sup>319</sup> Rather than provide comments from Ali supporters, which might not exist judging by how they used him as an inspiring model for making anti-Trump comments at his funeral festivities, or further clarification from the boxer’s representatives on his statement, Eder presented another instance that further complicated the boxer’s relationship with Trump.

When President Barack Obama made a speech in the wake of the San Bernardino shootings, he urged Americans to reject Muslim discrimination by saying, “Muslim-

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<sup>315</sup> Steve Eder. “Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

<sup>316</sup> Steve Eder. “Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

<sup>317</sup> Steve Eder. “Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

<sup>318</sup> Steve Eder. “Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

<sup>319</sup> Ezra. *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*.

Americans are our friends, neighbors and sports heroes.”<sup>320</sup> Trump responded in a tweet the next day: “Obama said in his speech that Muslims are our sports heroes. What sport is he talking about, and who? Is Obama profiling?”<sup>321</sup> These comments were taken as a slight against Ali and other prominent Muslim athletes — and as a sign of his ignorance of Ali’s religion. In response to the controversial tweet, Trump attempted to clarify: “I’m saying, “‘What sport is he talking about, and who?’ I know there are many great Muslim athletes in soccer and other sports. All I’m saying is, ‘I’d like him to name them because I agree there are some. That’s not a knock by any stretch of the imagination.

“I know who they are. I mean, look, Muhammad Ali is somebody that I’ve liked for a long time — and I know he’s Muslim.”<sup>322</sup>

Again, Gunnell responded on behalf of the Ali camp and said the boxer had not been concerned with Trump’s comments: “Muhammad was the greatest. So, Donald Trump mistakenly spoke because he knows who the greatest is and who the greatest was. When he tweeted that, it never came up. Muhammad never in a million years would have thought that was directed at him.”<sup>323</sup>

Whether or not Ali and Trump’s friendship remained as it was during the 1980s after these interactions, the boxer’s avoidance of confrontation and taking a public stand against Trump’s proposed Muslim ban showed that he evolved from the once-radical mouthpiece against racial and religious injustice his admirers reminisced so fondly over in pieces published after his death. Although his statement might have really been aimed at extremist Muslims, and he personally might not have been offended by Trump’s

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<sup>320</sup> Steve Eder. Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

<sup>321</sup> Steve Eder. Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

<sup>322</sup> Steve Eder. Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

<sup>323</sup> Steve Eder. Donald Trump reflects on his relationship with Muhammad Ali.”

response to Obama’s speech, there is a right side and wrong side to this debate over Muslim discrimination, and The Greatest chose to not use his status as a global athlete-hero icon to challenge the white authority like he probably would have when he was younger. If publicized more by media outlets during their Ali memorial coverage, his relationship with Trump and behavior in these situations could have been a major point of contention against his legacy. Instead, it became a footnote, a minor anecdote of Ali diverging from his already solidified status as a legendary figure that could be overlooked or eventually forgotten as other more positive stories of his greatness in and out of the ring are perpetuated and engrained in collective memory.

Much like the way Ali handled his interactions with Trump, Lonnie Ali’s role in helping her husband create and perpetuate his athlete-hero image was for the most part ignored by the *Courier-Journal* and only mentioned in passing detail in *The New York Times*’ Karen Crouse’s “Muhammad Ali was her first, and greatest, love.” In the article, Ali’s fourth and final wife was framed as a savvy “hard-nosed M.B.A. who managed Ali’s affairs with steely determination”<sup>324</sup> and protected Ali’s health and wealth as he continue to regress under Parkinson’s. After dedicating most of the piece to describing the storybook narrative of how Ali and Lonnie evolved from childhood friends to lovers destined to be together, Crouse examined how Lonnie established her husband as a global brand through “Greatest of All Time, Inc.,” which allowed Ali’s intellectual properties to be consolidated and licensed for commercial purposes and was sold to entertainment and licensing firm CKX for \$50 million.<sup>325</sup> When Ali was hesitant to become the face of

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<sup>324</sup> Karen Crouse. “Muhammad Ali was her first, and greatest, love.” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2016.

<sup>325</sup> Karen Crouse. “Muhammad Ali was her first, and greatest, love.”

Parkinson's disease, his personal doctor, Abraham Lieberman, said Lonnie was responsible for getting him to reconsider and eventually accept, which then launched his global status as an iconic athlete-hero into a different stratosphere.

“Muhammad was afraid he was getting old because he saw Parkinson's as an old-person's disease,” Lieberman said. “If (Lonnie) wasn't there he probably would have said no, and that would have been the end of it.”<sup>326</sup>

Instead of publications giving Lonnie her due credit in prodding her husband to make the decision that arguably led to the most iconic moment of the twilight of his life in the lighting of the Olympic caldron at the 1996 Summer Games, she was framed by both the *C-J* and the *NYT* as happily embracing her behind-the-scenes role in managing Ali's legacy. “Lonnie balanced Ali because he loved the spotlight and she never looked for it, said John Ramsey, one of Ali's pallbearers. “She used to say, ‘He belongs to the world.’ She embraced that.”<sup>327</sup> In scenes from their Arizona home in the wake of Ali's death through Ramsey's perspective, Lonnie joined admirers around the world in using her husband as a model of resiliency in coping with the grief of his passing.

“(She said) John, when I get sad and think I'm going to cry, I hear Muhammad's voice saying: ‘Stand up. Hold your head up high. Don't cry. And it helps me,” Ramsey recalled. “It's the end of a great love story. Who does recover from that? But she does have that Muhammad DNA. She gets off the mat. She's strong to the core.”<sup>328</sup>

Although overlooking Lonnie's importance in shaping Ali's legacy does not necessarily hinder his status as an iconic athlete-hero, it showed how print media's

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<sup>326</sup> Karen Crouse. “Muhammad Ali was her first, and greatest, love.”

<sup>327</sup> Karen Crouse. “Muhammad Ali was her first, and greatest, love.”

<sup>328</sup> Karen Crouse. “Muhammad Ali was her first, and greatest, love.”

omission of key details shaped a dominant narrative in the boxer's favor. Ali's lighting of the Olympic Cauldron was cited in numerous articles as the watershed moment in the boxer's ascension to universally loved public figure. But, with the context of Lonnie having to talk him into becoming the face of Parkinson's and embracing public appearances despite his deteriorating health, his humanitarian efforts could be framed as disingenuous or controlled by those around him who hold a personal and financial stake in his commercial legacy. To combat this, Lonnie was framed as preferring to let her husband have the global spotlight he deserves while she served as the caretaker to his physical health and public image.

***The New York Times'* event coverage of Ali's funeral procession, and KFC Yum! Center memorial service.** *The Times* returned to its framing of Ali as an iconic athlete-hero in its dispatch coverage from his funeral procession and memorial service. His final 19-mile journey through the streets of his hometown was described as a joyous moment of unity with "a gently chaotic decorum"<sup>329</sup> both in descriptions of the scene and through the perspectives of those in attendance. Much like in the *C-J's* coverage, *The Times'* reporters drew attention to the moral messages behind Ali's interfaith funeral service through eulogists' quotes such as this one from Lonnie Ali: "Muhammad indicated that when the end came for him, he wanted to use his life and his death as a teaching moment. ... Muhammad wants young people to know that adversity can make you stronger. It cannot rob you of the power to reach your dreams. It is far more difficult to sacrifice oneself in the name of peace than to take up arms in the name of violence."<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Jim Dwyer. "A stirring farewell to Muhammad Ali, just how he scripted it." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>330</sup> Jim Dwyer. "A stirring farewell to Muhammad Ali, just how he scripted it."

Where the national publication differed from the *Courier-Journal* was in its framing of Louisville and its inhabitants, specifically those from Ali's neighborhood. Reporters Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer combined to produce two almost-identical pieces from the June 10 procession and funeral service — "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage to their local hero" and "Through the streets of Muhammad Ali's childhood home, a final sendoff." Both framed the monumental events of the day as celebratory and having a positive impact on the community that raised the global icon, but it was almost as if the former was edited into the latter to remove and reshape details that stereotype African-Americans. For example, in "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage ... ," the reporters noted the fans they chose to spotlight convened in the parking lot of Liquor Zone but, in "Through the streets ... ," the exact location is changed to "a parking lot on the corner of Broadway and Louis Coleman Jr. Drive."<sup>331</sup> A detail noting that procession attendees "opened ... water and other, stronger beverages"<sup>332</sup> was redacted entirely from the second story.

Louisville resident Robert "Fruit Loop" Mitchem, who sold Ali T-shirts during the procession, is present in both stories, but the reporters framed him in the first as wanting "to be ready for the once-in-a-lifetime chance to commemorate the city's most famous son, and make a few bucks at it"<sup>333</sup> like he's taking advantage of Ali to make financial gains. The phrasing of this sentence was reworked in "Through the streets ... " to: "(he) wanted to be ready for the once-in-a-lifetime chance to commemorate the city's

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<sup>331</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Through the streets of Muhammad Ali's childhood home, a final send-off." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>332</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage to their local hero." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>333</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage to their local hero."



most famous son and to make a few bucks selling T-shirts with Ali's picture and his most famous catchphrases, like 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.'"<sup>334</sup> In the first story, the reporters called attention to Fruit Loop's selling price of \$15 as "a relative bargain," which could be in comparison to others who overcharged for shirts or could be a commentary on the financial situations of those who live in Ali's former neighborhood. Regardless, the detail is omitted in the second story and replaced with, "The shirts were hot sellers with the hundreds of people from the neighborhood who gathered to await the champion."<sup>335</sup> At the end of "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage ... ," the reporters go back to Fruit Loop's perspective as he "still had work to do. Having sold more than 10 dozen shirts, he was going to rush home and print some more."<sup>336</sup> A quote from Mitchem describing what the procession meant to him — "That was awesome. It sent chills through me because it was like pure love."<sup>337</sup> — was removed from the second story, and he became framed more as a money-hungry entrepreneur looking to continue his hot streak of selling T-shirts.

Finally, the ending of the first story focused on the scene of the neighborhood as Ali's hearse passed: "Eventually, the police closed traffic on Broadway and helicopters circled above the big intersection. The crowds on every corner swelled further."<sup>338</sup> But this description was removed from Belson and Dwyer's second story. Obviously, the helicopters were probably circling the procession throughout the entirety of the journey through Louisville, but this description of a predominantly African-American part of the

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<sup>334</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Through the streets ... "

<sup>335</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Through the streets ... "

<sup>336</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage ... "

<sup>337</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage ... "

<sup>338</sup> Ken Belson and Jim Dwyer. "Muhammad Ali fans pay homage ... "

city gave off the idea that authorities anticipated something bad happening and took precautionary measures. It is doubtful that Belson and Dwyer intended to frame Ali's neighborhood in any sort of stereotypical light as they spotlighted locals' perspectives and praised their dedication to waiting through the summer heat to pay respect to a man who greatly inspired the community, but the noticeable discrepancies and redactions between two near-identical stories otherwise drew attention to the fact that they were edited and/or omitted for a reason.

Dwyer also drew attention to Louisville's racist past in another story from the memorial events, "A stirring farewell to Muhammad Ali, just how he scripted it." From the perspective of Broadway and South Fourth Street, "... a street where the young Ali, then known as Cassius Clay, would not have been allowed into the cafeterias or department stores,"<sup>339</sup> Dwyer had Carolyn Miller-Cooper, the executive director of the city's Human Relations Commission described the discrimination Ali faced as "polite racism. You couldn't try on clothes. Children had to trace their foot on a sheet of paper for parents to bring to the store and try to buy the right-sized shoes."<sup>340</sup> Dwyer used the racist past to frame the present-day scenes of Louisville "pulsing with pride for a native son" as the city denouncing its ugly history in a grand showing of acceptance. But Miller-Cooper's casual description of polite racism could also be taken as Louisvillians trying to compensate for the discrimination that used to plague the city by framing it through a word whose synonyms include "civil," "well-mannered," and "respectful." A jarring detail, it showed the differences between the *C-J's* localized coverage framing the city in as positive a light as possible to accentuate one of the most historic events in its

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<sup>339</sup> Jim Dwyer. "A stirring farewell to Muhammad Ali, just how he scripted it."

<sup>340</sup> Jim Dwyer. "A stirring farewell to Muhammad Ali, just how he scripted it."

history versus reporters dispatched to the city by a national outlet with the goal of transmitting the scenes and culture on a global scale. It is not that the *C-J* was dishonest about or did not draw attention to the difficulties Ali encountered in Louisville growing up, but the publication was much more calculated as to when to bring up the difficult subject in its coverage as opposed to the national media holding up a mirror to the city for the world to see.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In a June 9, 2016 piece for the *Courier-Journal's* Readers Forum, Louisville resident David J. Lott had this to say about the presentation of Ali's legacy over the course of publications' memorial coverage:

Almost before the healing has begun from the loss of the Greatest, the colorblind narratives are swirling around us as much as white America lays claim to Muhammad Ali as if he was one of their own. He is praised for being on the grand stage as a humanitarian without acknowledging how Grand Avenue helped shape his consciousness and the human rights giant he became. He is lauded for being a man of principle when he said 'no' to U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, but the content of that refusal to bow down and its implications for today's struggles is being whitewashed and sanitized. The Ali version of 'I have a dream' is played out in the media and by mourners without holding up his resistance to the American nightmare of Jim Crow segregation and violence, and his less-often noted solidarity with his international struggles for justice in Palestine and elsewhere.<sup>341</sup>

After examining a week's worth of Ali memorial coverage from the *Courier-Journal* and *The New York Times* compared to coverage of his 1967 refusal to be drafted into the U.S. Army, it is safe to say Lott's claim of Ali's legacy being whitewashed and sanitized by print media is true. **(RQ1)** Both outlets chose to include surface-level-at-best details from his association with the Nation of Islam and for the most part omitted the controversial comments he made against white people during that portion of his life. Instead, they included quotes from Ali in the mid 1970s, in which the boxer denied hating white people and advocated for universal acceptance under a new NOI doctrine preached by Wallace Muhammad — "the devil is in the mind and heart, not the skin. ... White people wouldn't be here if God didn't mean them to be." His decision to join the NOI is not applauded as heroic, but writers from both the C-J and the NYT frame the decision to

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<sup>341</sup> David J. Lott. "READERS FORUM: 'A hero and inspirational figure.'" *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 9, 2016.

join what was viewed as a racist cult during the mid- to late 1960s as inspiring and empowering to African-Americans whose voices and identities were suppressed by mainstream white media. Along with his religious conversion, Ali's refusal of induction into the U.S. Army is presented as the biggest point of contention remaining against his legacy but is not fully contextualized. More detail is put into game framing the draft evasion trial than attention is placed on what Ali stood for when he took his stance against induction, and the symbolic refusal is largely excused outside of a slim minority of veterans because public criticism of the Vietnam War largely outnumbered those supporting the conflict by the early 1970s.

**(RQ2)** Rarely, if at all, were Ali's views on racial separatism while he was a member of the NOI mentioned in obituary coverage. He was heralded as challenging the system as a young boxer, but the newspapers did not present readers with polarizing quotes from the past such as "A black man should be killed if he's messing with a white woman."<sup>342</sup> Ali's once-criticized loudmouth personality became framed a beloved trait through which he embodied the principles of the Black Power movement. With the boxer nearly silenced by his bout with Parkinson's, writers from both the *C-J* and the *NYT* fondly reminisced on his youthful braggadocio and omitted instances in which Ali used reversed racism toward his opponents, whom he'd call Uncle Toms and the "white man's nigger."

**(RQ3)** Although both the *Courier-Journal* and *The New York Times* presented Ali as an athlete-hero whose principles were commendable and should be followed, the

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<sup>342</sup> Lawrence Linderman, (Interviewer) & Muhammad Ali. (Interviewee). "This is the legend of Muhammad Ali, the greatest fighter that ever will be."

publications used different methods to arrive at this conclusion. The *C-J* used its hometown ties and event coverage to frame Ali as a localized hero. His once-problematic relationship with the city that raised him was framed as being amended and resolved over the latter portion of his life, culminating with Louisvillians' outpouring of love toward Ali during the week that led up to his heartfelt funeral procession through the streets of his hometown. There are a few instances in which the publication's coverage included criticisms against Ali's legacy and status as a global icon, such as the argument that he was not involved in any of the major events of the Civil Rights Movement and therefore should not be considered as influential as he is. But those claims are overwhelmed by sources praising the boxer's symbolic power of inspiring pride and self-determination in the African-American community at a time when there was little. In death, he assumed an encouraging omnipresence in Louisville through the Muhammad Ali Center and his narrative being presented to the city's youth as inspiration that they are capable of accomplishing their hopes and dreams if they set their minds to it.

Writers for *The New York Times* used personal essays and think pieces to address Ali's legacy on a personal and global scale. As a national outlet, the *NYT* was a bit more open in offering criticism against Ali's legacy and pointed out aspects of his narrative left untouched by the *C-J* such as the boxer's friendship with Donald Trump and the importance of Lonnie Ali in shaping her husband's legacy as the spokesman for Parkinson's and managing his public image as his health deteriorated. But, again, these points against Ali's status as a hero are in the minority and are overshadowed by pieces in which writers applaud his ability to shift the African-American consciousness during a period of intense racial division and the heroic sacrifice he made by using his status as

one of the world's most well-known athletes to take a moral stand against the Vietnam War. Rather than focus on the man and the radical figure Ali once was, the publications depicted him as the universally loved humanitarian he evolved into by the end of his life. As more distance is put between the present day and the 1960s, this will likely continue to be the case, because the physical manifestations of his legacy such as the Muhammad Ali Center perpetuate a calculated framework of the boxer's narrative that casts him as an athlete-hero icon whose core principles society should follow.

**(RQ4)** Print and digital media's embrace of Ali as an athlete-hero reflected a progressive attitude toward race and the Vietnam War that began developing in the early to mid-1970s. Although Ali remained a polarizing figure to some, those who held a dissenting view against his legacy such as conservative white military veterans were framed as a small minority in both the *Courier-Journal* and *The New York Times*. Ali, as an omnipresent zeitgeist in the *C-J's* coverage of the events leading up to the boxer's funeral, served as a unifying force in the hometown that was once split on his religious conversion and political outspokenness. His six core principles — Confidence, Conviction, Dedication, Giving, Respect and Spirituality — and humanitarian work are framed as guidance for Louisville citizens promoting the end of black-on-black violence during the city's most violent year to date and police brutality toward African-Americans. Citizens also used his message to speak out against hate groups like Westboro Baptist Church and hateful political legislation like Trump's proposed Muslim ban. In *The New York Times'* coverage, Ali is applauded for challenging the consciousness of the white establishment and not following other African-American celebrities who did not use his or her public platform to promote change.

The irony in this framing, however, was that it was made possible by the *C-J* and *NYT* neglecting and forgiving Ali for what he said and stood for as a member of the Nation of Islam, what was once widely considered to be a hate group during the 1960s. Also, a quote from former Louisville Mayor Harvey Sloane — “some just weren’t comfortable with a loud and proud black man who spoke his mind” — still holds true when considering the polarization that swept the country during weeks of National Anthem protests in the National Football League a little more than a year after Ali’s death. Much like Ali’s draft evasion case, coverage of the protests focused more on debating the morality of NFL players’ choices to take a knee during “The Star-Spangled Banner” while simplifying what the protest stood for and hoped to accomplish. Although Colin Kaepernick, who was not legally forced out of sports like Ali was after taking his stance against draft induction but remains in the midst of an exile from the NFL, and those who joined him in the kneeling protest along with other superstars such as LeBron James, Stephen Curry, and Kevin Durant have been applauded by some for taking political stances on issues of police brutality toward African-Americans and the presidential election of Trump, they faced similar “stick to sports” criticism from white conservatives that Ali was subjected to when he converted to Islam and refused induction into the U.S. Army. Only time will tell whether these athletes will ascend to Ali’s status as a universally loved role model for remaining convicted to his beliefs in the face of public criticism but their struggles in using their platforms to express political views complicates the admiration show toward Ali by print and digital publications after his death. It appears as if the public is still not prepared for loud and proud black men to speak their minds and promote societal change for the better; the priority for



entertainment — sticking to sports — above all else remains an unfortunate norm.

### **What can journalists learn from the study of Ali's obituary coverage?**

When approaching high-profile obituaries and subsequent memorial coverage of the deceased, publications must be conscious of the frames through which their subjects are presented. Newspapers are supposed to be objective observers and chroniclers of history, but dominant images and frames will always be produced through what is included, emphasized and/or omitted in coverage. Obviously, both the *Courier-Journal* and *The New York Times* planned their Ali coverage well in advance of 2016, but it would be interesting to know what sort of conversations took place between their editorial staffs and obituary writers in deciding what portions of the boxer's life to focus on and how to approach the controversial aspects of his legacy. Especially with someone whose life was as well-documented and as polarizing as Ali's, publications should embrace open dialogue that allows for staff members who are not directly involved in the obituary process to offer their memories and interpretations of a subject's life and what he or she meant both personally and to society before the pieces are published, because those interpretations soon become a part of the collective memory.

If there are aspects of a subject's life that are difficult to fully contextualize given the constraints of print budgeting or the daily news cycle, publications should embrace different forms of storytelling — video, podcasting, etc. — to supplement print articles. This solution would not only cover all the bases for publications in terms of fully contextualizing a subject's legacy but also creates engaging content that can entertain audiences in ways traditional stories cannot. Another suggestion that would stimulate audience engagement would be if the *C-J* or the *NYT* organized a community forum with

a panel of writers, editors, and historians to discuss Ali's complicated legacy and have citizens offer their personal interpretations of what The Greatest means to them. Any of these proposed alternate forms of coverage would allow publications adequate time and space to give Ali's polarizing past the attention it deserves and would promote honest discussion that could help to solve issues of race, religion, and athlete activism that remain prominent points of discussion two years after Ali's death.

Journalists can also use the coverage of Ali's memorial services to learn when they must contextualize sources' quotes. For example, the *Courier-Journal* needed to point out that Ali was never imprisoned after Eric Menal of New York wrongly told a reporter that the boxer "went to jail, came out and reclaimed his title and just continued to be an ambassador."<sup>343</sup> Also, considering how *The New York Times* ran an entire story outlining Ali's friendship with Trump, the *C-J* should have mentioned that the boxer insisted that he did not condemn the presidential candidate's proposed Muslim ban when sources were using Ali's legacy as inspiration to speak out against Trump during the Jenazah ceremony. Ali's longtime friendship with Trump and lack of criticism against the presidential candidate's attack against people who share his faith is a huge knock against The Greatest's legacy, and the *C-J*'s failure to mention could be considered just as much an inaccuracy as not clarifying that Ali was never imprisoned. Finally, the *C-J* needed to follow *The New York Times* in including information on Lonnie Ali's impact in shaping her husband's legacy as his health worsened over the years, especially in articles detailing Ali's bout with Parkinson's and status as the poster boy for the disease. Many of the sources included in those articles who cited Ali as a major influence and motivator in

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<sup>343</sup> Joseph Gerth and Deborah Yetter. "Thousands share their stories."

their fights against the disease, but without Lonnie talking Ali into going through with being a spokesman for the illness that probably wouldn't have been the case. These clarifications would not necessarily ruin Ali's status as an iconic athlete-hero and would help provide a more-contextualized look at the boxer's legacy, which would help the credibility of the *Courier-Journal* and would allow its audience to make better-informed decisions about how the boxer should be remembered over time.

With that being said, it is difficult to criticize both publications' grand efforts to pin down a man who represented so many different things for people around the world. The *C-J* and *NYT* do not shy away entirely from addressing the hometown racism that shaped Ali or his efforts to combat that racism on a global scale and also openly addressed their wrongful negligence in waiting until years after Ali changed his name to acknowledge him as such. There were plenty of anecdotes and poignant quotes from the boxer, in which he raises questions and criticism against American race relations and inequality that resonate to this day, and the fact that Ali has become almost universally accepted as an inspiring symbol of how Americans should go about solving issues of race is a sign of society's progression that, although not fully contextualized, should be celebrated.

And that is not to say Ali's full image has been completed — or that newspaper articles should be considered the definitive statements on his larger-than-life legacy. With biographic works such as Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith's "Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X," Jonathan Eig's "Ali: A Life," and Howard L. Bingham's "Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. the United States of America" — all published within the past five years — readers have the option

to dig into the intimate complexities that shaped the boxer's grand narrative if they choose. Whether the sanitized iconic athlete-hero frame through which Ali is presented now will drown out or be complicated by the details of those works or future research remains to be seen. But, in the celebration of his life, it is much better for The Greatest and society as a whole if we choose to remember him fondly as a heroic inspiration to better ourselves and the world in its fight for equality than to emphasize the racist frames through which he was condemned during the 1960s and 1970s.

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