

Visible men: African American boxers, the new Negro, and the global color line.

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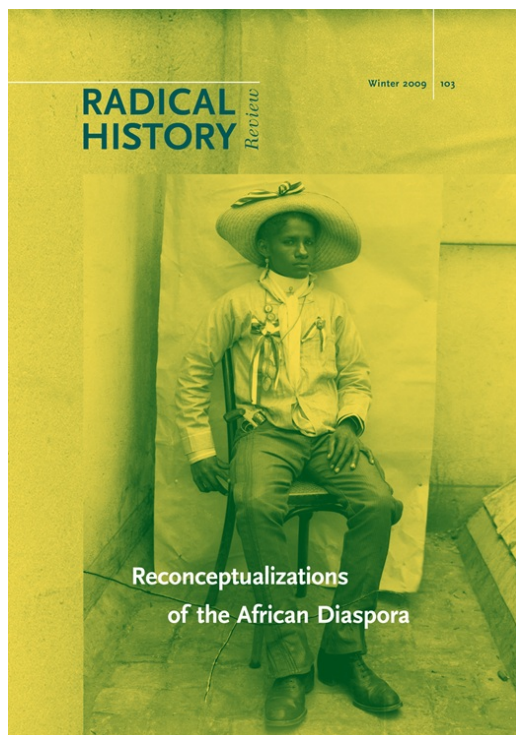
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Volume 2009, Issue 103

Visible Men: African American Boxers, the New Negro, and the Global Color Line

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Radical History Review (2009) 2009 (103): 59-81.



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This article examines the various debates surrounding the exploits of African American boxers in France during the early 1900s as a window into the transnational struggle over the terms of race and modernity. Because of the pervasive racial segregation in U.S. boxing, black American heavyweights like Sam McVea, Joe Jeannette, and world champion Jack Johnson ventured across the ocean in search of better opportunities for fame, fortune, and personal freedom. Their incredible commercial success bolstered the myths of French color blindness that had long circulated in black communities throughout the United States. However, in reality, questions of color were at the very heart of black American boxers' great popularity in Paris. Men like McVea, Jeannette, and Johnson inspired French sports enthusiasts to publicly reflect on their own conceptions of race, manhood, civilization, and the place of Western empire in the modern world. These African American boxers provided French fans with a comfortable abstraction of the colonial question, enabling them to project a public image of enlightened benevolence. Nevertheless, African American pugilists cleverly capitalized on this French fascination with black manhood, not only articulating their own vision of what it meant to be a New Negro but also critiquing the backwardness of U.S. race relations on the world stage. As some of the first and most famous “organic intellectuals” of the African diaspora, they and their audacious brand of masculine blackness held a particular appeal for the dark proletariat. While not explicitly political, black boxers publicly embodied a New Negro masculinity grounded in working-class sensibilities that influenced the radical critiques of white supremacy later forwarded by black intellectuals and artists of the Harlem Renaissance and the Négritude movement.

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