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## Confederates in Cool: Oscar Wilde and Jack Johnson

*Abstract:* This article examines Oscar Wilde's contribution to the development of a particularly contemporary sensibility or attitude, in which the dominant aesthetic category is not art but style. This sensibility is crystallised most clearly in the figure of the dandy, and the paper will locate Wilde's dandyism in a continuum from Charles Baudelaire through Salvador Dalí to modern artists and celebrities such as David Bowie and Miles Davis. With a particular focus on Wilde's appearance before American audiences on his 1882 lecture tour, I shall also argue that Wilde's cultivation of dandyism is analogous with black 'Cool', and that it is the basis for his continuing 'afterlife' in contemporary culture.

*Keywords:* Oscar Wilde. Jack Johnson. Dandyism. Cool.

“Particularly obnoxious”: this is the *New York Times*'s description of Oscar Wilde when reviewing an early, 1930s account of his 1882 lecture tour of North America and Canada. “One wonders,” the author continued, “how the country stood him at all, even as a conspicuous freak in the age of Barnum”.<sup>1</sup> Obnoxiousness was, of course, courted on occasion by Wilde and cultivated by his managers and was part of what we now recognise as his assiduous self-construction into a recognisably modern celebrity. The 1882 tour was not simply an evangelical mission in the cause of beauty and the importance of art and design in contemporary culture. Wilde sold himself as a dandy and the poster-boy of modish Aestheticism and helped Richard D'Oyly Carte sell the comic opera *Patience* which satirised it and toured in his wake. Such self-commodification is a form of self-fashioning, and Wilde undertook it with characteristic brashness, with what we now recognise as 'attitude'. I want to examine certain aspects of what made him obnoxious: ways in which Wilde was perceived and his personal style and attitude understood. In so doing, I will focus on the particular valency of what we now call 'Cool' and how it brings together in unlikely but revealing coalescence the 'Professor of Aesthetics' and the first black heavyweight boxing champion of the world: Jack Johnson, who once handed out a beating to a nephew of Wilde's, and whose celebrity and subsequent downfall follow an arc not dissimilar to Wilde's own.

Wilde struggled throughout the tour to define and control the way his public image was created and consumed. Emblematic of that struggle is the series of photographic portraits taken of him in New York at the start of his tour by Napoleon Sarony, the celebrated 'society' photographer, who had, a couple of years before, produced the

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<sup>1</sup> C.G. POORE, “Oscar Wilde's American Tour”, *New York Times Book Review*, 24 May 1936.

publicity shots for Sarah Bernhardt's American tour. Sarony and his sitter co-created 'Wilde': the knee breeches; black stockings; floppy, centre-parted hair; velvet jacket; oversized fur-lined coat; the air of languid self-absorption. As Matthew Sturgis puts it: "Wilde had some experience of being photographed and had been adopting extravagant poses for much of his life. But in Sarony he found an artist ready to encourage him to new heights".<sup>2</sup> The photographer believed he had never done such good work before, and Wilde was also, by all accounts, very pleased with the effect. This was how he wanted to be seen: as the sophisticated and sensitive artist with a profound sense of personal style which in its attention to fashion and costume tested the limits of what was understood to be masculine. In this respect, as Wilde journeyed westward he engineered a clash of cultures. His proselytising for Aestheticism was in deliberate conflict with discourses which – according to Mary Warner Blanchard – were attempting to reconstruct a fractured American masculinity in the wake of the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> However, Wilde could not dictate the way his publicity photos were deployed in the marketplace. They were purloined to advertise, among other commodities, ice cream as well as Straiton and Storm cigars and Ehrlich Brothers fur-trimmed hats. Two years later Sarony successfully established copyright over the photographs in a case that went to the Supreme Court, but that was too late for Wilde, who had to suffer the indignity of staring at himself in shop windows across the country. However, Wilde did not just lose control of these specific images, and the use to which they were put. Contemporary observers read his appearance, style, and attitude in ways that were radically different to his intentions. What Wilde presented as supersophistication was perceived as its exact opposite, and as something deeply unsettling and obnoxious. Nowhere is this more explicit or revealing than in the description of him by the splendidly named E.A. Brayley Hodgetts, who saw him some months after the photos were taken, by which time Wilde had reviewed, revised, and refashioned his coiffure: "His hair was one mass of little ringlets curled tight around his head. He looked, with his thick lips, like a negro painted white".<sup>4</sup> What, we may ask, did he think he was looking at?

We are indebted to Michèle Mendelssohn's *Making Oscar Wilde* (2018), the most comprehensive and compelling account we have of Wilde's 1882 lecture tour, its foundational role in his career, and how its "transformative events" divided his life "sharply into Before and After".<sup>5</sup> She is particularly informative when detailing the ways in which Wilde was seen as a "negrified Paddy"<sup>6</sup> (the obverse or reverse of the medal, if you will, of a 'negro painted white'). Drawing partly on the work of L.P. Curtis and his venerable study of Victorian cartoons and caricatures of the Irish,<sup>7</sup> she describes the racialised and racist discourse in which the Irish and African Americans were seen

<sup>2</sup> M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> M. WARNER BLANCHARD, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age*, London and New York, Yale U.P., 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in H. WYNDHAM, *Speranza*, London, Boardman, 1951, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> M. MENDELSSOHN, *Making Oscar Wilde*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> L.P. CURTIS, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971.

as sharing common characteristics which stamped them, in effect, as “evolutionary throwbacks to the sub-human”.<sup>8</sup> This sense that the two groups were interchangeable was reinforced by the fact that labouring Irish and “negroes” often worked together: the former were “white niggers” or “negroes turned inside out”; the latter were “smoked Irish”.<sup>9</sup> In this context, Wilde travelling with a black valet constituted a provocative spectacle. The *Washington Post* was riled by Wilde’s airs and graces, accusing him of a performative gentility which meant that he was trying to pass himself off as an Englishman when in fact he was more akin to the black Wild(e) Man of Borneo. The *Post* captured this identification in a savage caricature which gained wide circulation across the country.<sup>10</sup> By the time the tour got to Georgia, Wilde’s valet was being described by another newspaper as “an Irish negro”.<sup>11</sup> Master and servant were melding as class and ‘racial’ differences collapsed into each other. Mendelssohn notes that Wilde’s manager played along by signing them onto a hotel register as “Oscar Wilde and servant of Ireland”.<sup>12</sup> He sensed, no doubt, the significant publicity value of this provocative pair (a comic Beckettian pseudo-couple) which appeared to ape social, class, and power hierarchies, while flagrantly and obnoxiously disregarding the evolutionary fact that they were one and the same.

Wilde deliberately made a spectacle of himself, so it is perhaps no surprise that the hostility and ridicule he excited frequently expressed itself as countervailing spectacle. On at least one occasion Wilde and his management were complicit in such. Mendelssohn argues that the performance by Harvard students who delayed the start of his lecture on the “English Renaissance” by parading in Wildean knee-breeches, floppy-haired wigs, and green scarves was arranged by his management to allow him to demonstrate on stage his hallmark *sangfroid*. However, when Yale students decided to stage their own drama of ridicule the tactic and the effect were rather different. Wilde took control of the way he was seen in Harvard. He sanctioned the mockery of the aesthetic costume he had made his signature and countered it by appearing belatedly on stage in conventional black-tie and tails: a demonstration of dandy-like self-possession. In Yale, however, he was not able to exercise similar control over the way he was seen. Some 200 male students turned up sporting aesthetic attire in what was by now a familiar pantomime, but at their head was the black servant of a prominent local family: “the elderly black aesthete spearheaded the procession of young white aesthetes in knee-breeches and stockings. The audience was astonished”.<sup>13</sup> Again, Wilde – about to lecture once more on the “English Renaissance” – was being lampooned as, indeed *seen* as, black. Students at Rochester took this a step further, to a degree that exposed the angry and violent subtext of the drama. This time a local black ‘character’, one ‘Nigger Pete’ (who was himself used to being the butt of student ridicule) threw himself into the role with both enthusiasm and expertise, provoking

<sup>8</sup> M. MENDELSSOHN, *Making Oscar Wilde*, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> *Washington Post*, 22 January 1882, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> M. MENDELSSOHN, *Making Oscar Wilde*, p. 192.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115.

overexcited members of the audience to fight each other, and the police. Wilde finished his lecture out of humour and out of pocket.<sup>14</sup>

What I want to suggest, however, is that there is another dimension to the perception of Wilde as an obnoxious “Aesthetic Darkey”.<sup>15</sup> Brayley Hodgetts and others who regarded Wilde as ‘a negro painted white’ did not just see him through the contemporary prism of an evolutionary theory which emphasised the physical similarities of the Irish and African Americans. This identification was reinforced by the attitude Wilde adopted as he first constructed himself for his American audiences, and then attempted to face down their anger and ridicule. He did so with what Baudelaire described as the quintessential response of the dandy to the puzzled hostility of the common herd: the “pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself”.<sup>16</sup> Baudelaire claimed a long history for such an attitude, citing Caesar, Catalina, and Alcibiades as exemplars, but he saw it principally as a kind of modern heroism: a way for the individual whose uniqueness was under threat to counter the power of conformity. What Baudelaire prized we would now call ‘Cool’, and Wilde struggled to maintain it throughout his tour of the United States and Canada, as he tried strenuously to control the ways he was seen, and understood, and read. There is a curious but telling irony here. Wilde’s American public frequently identified him – an Irishman – with African Americans, as we have seen, but he countered this hostility (getting his retaliation in first) with what we have come to understand as a constituent of black style: Cool. In effect, Wilde’s style of self-presentation, deeply imbricated with what were seen as his physical racial characteristics, aligned him in white American eyes with a potentially threatening and subversive black presence, and one which seemed determined to get above its station. That, to answer my earlier question, is what Brayley Hodgetts thought he was looking at: an obnoxious confederacy and complex amalgam of black and white, of physical stereotypes and *attitude*. To see this definitive and shared attitude under stress, as a self-possessed and stylish response to moments of profound personal crisis, I want to examine two related spectacles of power at work: Wilde and Jack Johnson in court and under cross-examination.

Born in Texas in 1878 to parents who had been slaves, the early part of The Galveston Giant’s boxing career was restricted by a ‘colour bar’ which meant that no black boxer was given the chance of fighting for the highest prize: the Heavyweight Championship of the World. However, in boxing money always talks and Johnson finally won the title by beating the white champion, Tommy Burns (guaranteed a hefty \$30,000 dollars for agreeing to the fight), in Sydney in 1908. Police stopped the bout in the fourteenth round as Burns took a ferocious beating, thus preventing cine-cameras from recording the final moments of the champion’s white supremacy. Johnson held the title until 1915 when he was knocked out in the 26<sup>th</sup> round of a contest with the relatively unfancied,

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> C. BAUDELAIRE, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, Engl. trans. P.E. CHARVET, Cambridge, CUP, 1972, p. 420.

and white, Kansas cowboy Jess Willard. (Johnson would subsequently claim that he had thrown the fight.) In 1910 he had fought the brightest of the various ‘Great White Hopes’ who had been lined up to beat him (among them the Irish boxer and later film star, Victor McLaglen). The former champion James J. Jeffries came out of retirement to carry the hopes of the white nation. The humiliating defeat that Johnson inflicted on Jeffries led to race riots and lynchings across the country. This was not just a sporting event, the original ‘Fight of the Century’, but a national spectacle with significant cultural and political import.

Johnson was acutely and provocatively aware that what his biographer calls his “Unforgivable Blackness”<sup>17</sup> could be commodified. He was the archetype of the trash-talking black boxer who knew that an almost exclusively white audience’s enmity meant they were eager to spend their money on the prospect of seeing him beaten. This was a lesson Muhammed Ali was later to put into memorable practice, against both black and white opponents. Johnson knew that to make the most of opportunities in the ring, he had to sell himself outside it, and he did so with a determination to scandalise both by his appearance and behaviour that was positively Wildean. Johnson was a flamboyant dandy and lover of conspicuous consumption (what we might now recognise as ‘bling’) from fast cars to eye-catching jewellery and clothes. As his notoriety and boxing success grew his “highly developed sense of style inside and outside the ring” started to attract newspaper attention and the “kind of celebrity coverage that had always been reserved for white sports stars”.<sup>18</sup> He was mocked for his “dandy togs”; his “loud duds and fancy hosiery”.<sup>19</sup> Rising to the challenge, Johnson housed what one newspaper called twenty-one “tasty suits” in his hotel closet, changed his clothes twice a day, and had a maid whose sole responsibility was to keep those suits “ready for occupancy”. The same newspaper could not resist a pointed comparison: “Beau Brummell might have been a preliminary but Jack Johnson is a main event”.<sup>20</sup> Johnson was annexing dandyism for his own ends in an act of *bravura* cultural appropriation. This is perhaps best captured in a powerful image of him dressed in a black suit with a black bowler hat and waistcoat, with a watch-chain stretched across his chest. This was the costume of a well-to-do white city gent. Johnson’s huge frame seems on the point of bursting out of his clothes as if he is pushing his role-play to its very limits. It is a deliberately challenging image, co-created by Johnson and the photographer: Otto Sarony, son of the Napoleon Sarony who had photographed Wilde in New York a couple of decades previously.

Johnson’s sartorial cool was matched by a controlled, counter-punching boxing style as he perfected the art of defence and of turning his opponents’ aggression to his advantage. The trainer of one boxer he defeated remarked: “Talk about coolness! Johnson was arctic in the ring”.<sup>21</sup> Arctic in the ring and supercool outside it: Johnson composed himself into an obnoxious and threatening spectacle – and never appeared more so than when publicly flaunting his relationships with a series of white women.

<sup>17</sup> G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, London, Pimlico, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 281.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.

Of the many such liaisons, the most provocative was that with Etta Duryea, a divorced Long Island socialite. Johnson first paraded her in furs and jewellery, then married her, in 1911. The pair were the prey of *paparazzi* and drew fascinated, infuriated, and sometimes horrified crowds whenever they appeared in public together. Johnson and Etta; black man with a white woman on his arm. This is his politically charged version of the dandy gesture which had seen Gerard de Nerval walk a lobster on a lead along the boulevards of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, and Salvador Dali do the same with an anteater on the Paris Metro in the 1960s. All three were declaring ownership; inviting ridicule and astonishment; confronting the hostile and uncomprehending gaze; turning themselves impudently into performance art. In Johnson's case, this display was fraught with danger.

The marriage to Etta Duryea was a troubled one and Johnson was vilified by both blacks and whites when in December 1912 he married another white woman, the nineteen-year-old Lucille Cameron, a few weeks after Etta committed suicide. At the time Johnson was already under Federal Indictment for violating the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, which prohibited the transportation of women across state lines for 'immoral purposes'. This 'Mann Act' was the product of an intense national moral panic about the supposed coercion of white women into prostitution by organised crime. White America chose it as the legal means to pummel Johnson, punishing him for his success in general and his marriage to a sophisticated white woman in particular. Johnson was found guilty by the inevitable all-white jury in the spring of 1913 and sentenced to a year in prison, but he skipped bail and escaped to Europe, returning to the United States finally in 1920 to serve his time. Celebrity; fortune; notoriety; downfall occasioned by sexual adventurism; trial; imprisonment and exile; bankruptcy and penury: there is a Wildean trajectory to Johnson's life and career.

It was during his exile from the United States while a fugitive from 'justice' that Johnson collided with a relative of Wilde's. Arthur Cravan was the son of Wilde's brother-in-law, Otho Holland Lloyd, and was 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'. A self-styled Dadaist poet and performance artist given to taking off his clothes and firing a pistol over the heads of his audience, Cravan claimed that his uncle Oscar was still alive and had visited him in Paris in 1913. He was also 6 feet 7 inches tall and fancied himself as a boxer. Indeed, he claimed to be the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of Europe, at a time when the continent had better things to do than quarrel with his presumption. In Barcelona in April 1916, he stepped into the ring to face the former and now disgraced champion, Jack Johnson, and was soon separated from any illusions he may have harboured when he entered it. Both men were broke. Cravan needed money from the fight to get to the US; Johnson needed cash to stay out of it. Johnson, overweight and unfit, tired of the mismatch (despite the need to prolong proceedings enough to make a saleable film) and brought matters to a concussive end in the sixth round. Cravan gathered himself from the canvas, found his way to America, married Mina Loy, and disappeared at sea off Mexico in 1918.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For a fictionalised account of these events, which hardly need fictionalising, see Antonia Logue's novel, *Shadow-Box*, London, Bloomsbury, 1999.

Wilde's world and Johnson's collided that April afternoon in Barcelona but, in a sense, they had coalesced some three years previously when Johnson was on trial for transporting one Belle Schreiber across state lines for immoral purposes. In order to understand the exact nature of that coalescence we first need to listen to Wilde in the courtroom, under cross-examination by Edward Carson who was acting for the Marquess of Queensberry in the libel action Wilde had brought against him. The circumstances of that trial – and the trials of Wilde himself which followed – are well known and I shall not dwell on them here. What I will focus on is a particular moment in his cross-examination in court which embodies Cool, and which also characterises Johnson's provocative attitude and style in the dock nearly 20 years later, when his marriage to Etta contributed to his downfall in much the same way as Wilde's recklessly public conduct of his relationship with Bosie, Lord Alfred Douglas precipitated his. That Johnson was capable of a laconic Wildean wit, a necessary constituent of Cool, is perhaps best captured by his exchange with a police officer who was obliged to fine him \$50 for speeding in one of his five automobiles. Johnson handed a hundred-dollar bill to the Sheriff, who protested that he had no change. "Keep the change," said Johnson, 'Cause I'm coming back just as fast as I went through'.<sup>23</sup>

Wilde put in quite a performance under Carson's cross-examination on the morning of Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> April 1895. He maintained, for the most part, an attitude of lofty, patrician disdain for the detailed questioning Carson submitted him to in attempting to prove that Wilde was indeed the practising 'somedomite' Queensberry had called him. One characteristic exchange concerned two bottles of iced champagne that Wilde was alleged to have shared at the Savoy with a young man, Charles Parker. "Was it a favourite drink, iced champagne?" asked Carson:

*Wilde:* Is it a favourite drink of mine?

*Carson:* Yes.

*Wilde:* Yes, strongly against my doctor's orders.

*Carson:* Never mind the doctor's orders.

*Wilde:* I don't.<sup>24</sup>

Much of the sparring between him and Carson has this dynamic. Carson's persistent and detailed interrogation, his sarcasm and barely controlled aggression, is met with a languid insouciance as Wilde affects, coolly, either not to remember the mere details of his social encounters with young men such as Parker (some of whom Carson knew were prepared to testify against him) or not to understand the direction and implication of Carson's line of questioning: "Did you give them an 'intellectual treat'?", "They seemed deeply impressed".<sup>25</sup> Wilde is playing to the gallery, and Carson – shrewdly – gives him every opportunity to do so, confident that at some point Wilde will overreach himself, allowing Carson to deliver if not a knock-out blow then one which will floor him. Carson presses Wilde insistently about the various young men that had

<sup>23</sup> G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, p. 182.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in M. HOLLAND, *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, London, Fourth Estate, 2003, p. 170.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 168.

been introduced to him by Alfred Taylor who ran a male brothel near, as Wilde takes considerable pleasure in pointing out, the Houses of Parliament. Carson mixes sexual distaste with snobbery as he lists the occupations of those who had been arrested there with Taylor, some in women's clothing: a waiter, a valet, a clerk, a costumier, a tobacconist, a fishmonger, a fruiterer. Apart from their sexual proclivities and social standing, Carson focuses relentlessly on the youth of Taylor's rent-boys, particularly that of Charles Parker. "Was he a gentleman's servant out of employment?", asks Carson:

*Wilde:* I have no knowledge of that at all.

*Carson:* Did you never hear it?

*Wilde:* I never heard it, nor should I have minded. I don't care twopence about people's social positions. *Carson:* Even if he was a gentleman's servant out of employment you would become friendly with him?

*Wilde:* I would become friendly with any human being that I liked and chose to become friendly with.

*Carson:* How old was Parker?

*Wilde:* I don't keep a census.<sup>26</sup>

"I don't keep a census". This is Wilde at his most supercool but it is a style of response that is precariously maintained in the heat of Carson's forensic attack. Once again, he presses Wilde about Parker's age and is told that he was "about twenty". That, says Wilde, was "one of the attractions, the attraction of youth". Carson spots his opening and lands a heavy punch: "He was seventeen". Wilde is momentarily caught off balance and reacts with un-dandylike petulance: "I don't know his age, he may be sixteen or he may be forty-five, don't ask me about it. I think he was about twenty. If you cross-examine me on the question of whether he was seventeen, I have never asked him his age. It is rather vulgar to ask people their ages". Carson follows up by asking if Parker was an educated man and Wilde recovers himself sufficiently to parry the sarcasm with a cool response: "Culture was not his strong point".<sup>27</sup> A few moments later Carson pierces Wilde's defence by asking him if he ever kissed a boy called Walter Grainger. "Oh, no," avers Wilde in his moment of overreaching, "never in my life; he was a peculiarly plain boy". "He was what?" asks Carson, sensing blood. This time Wilde is staggered and as Carson presses home the advantage his Cool melts away: "You sting me, insult me, and try to unnerve me in every way. At times one speaks flippantly when one should speak more seriously, I admit that, I admit it – I cannot help it. That is what you are doing to me".<sup>28</sup> The dynamic between him and Carson shifts irrevocably. Wilde's imperious *sangfroid* is no longer possible to maintain nor sufficient to his cause, indeed it is proving inimical to it. There is something both ironic and uncool in the way Wilde buckles at this point and confesses to the vital importance of being earnest.

The circumstances surrounding Johnson's arrest and trial are complex. Suffice it to say that the civic authorities in Chicago persuaded themselves that the public

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 164.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 208-209.

would not be happy until he was behind bars and one of his many girlfriends, Belle Schreiber, a prostitute (Johnson enjoyed ‘feasting with panthers’ as much as Wilde did), was persuaded or induced to claim that he had transported her from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Chicago, Illinois (therefore across state lines and in direct contravention of the newly constituted Mann Act) for debauched and immoral purposes, or as the prosecuting Assistant District Attorney Harry Parkin put it, to “commit the crime against nature upon his body”.<sup>29</sup> On his first night in prison awaiting trial, Johnson requested, with a degree of aplomb that Oscar would have admired, candles, cigars, and a case of champagne. He was given a bar of soap.<sup>30</sup> In the run-up to the trial, he remained confident to the point of complacency, coolly acknowledging that, although he used prostitutes (and many of them), he was no pimp. He took that confidence with him into the courtroom and his cross-examination by Parkin on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> May 1913. Parkin opened by accusing Johnson of beating his dead wife Etta (Johnson denied this, somewhat implausibly) and of habitually travelling with prostitutes – up to three at a time – though his defence argued that the instances cited were irrelevant because they had taken place before 1910 when the Mann Act had come into force. He then focused on Belle Schreiber:

*Parkin:* Now, why did you have Belle come to Atlantic City?

*Johnson:* I never had her come to Atlantic City.

*Parkin:* You entertained her there?

*Johnson* [brushing this aside with Wildean Cool]: I wasn’t there long enough to entertain myself.

*Parkin:* What did you do with her there?

*Johnson:* Nothing.

*Parkin:* Did you buy her meals or pay her hotel bills or give her any money?

*Johnson:* I never gave her nothing that trip at all.

Parkin continued his attack, determined to prove that Belle Schreiber was with Johnson under some form of physical or financial duress and that as a result had committed “the crime against nature upon his body”. He asked Johnson if he had sexual relations with Belle in Atlantic City and Johnson responded with an evasiveness worthy of Wilde when asked about his activities with Alfred Taylor’s rent-boys: “Belle and I were very friendly...”

*Parkin:* Just answer the question. Did you have sexual relations with her in Atlantic City?

*Johnson:* I did not.

*Parkin:* In August, 1910?

*Johnson:* I did not.

*Parkin:* [But] you did in every town where you and she were together?

*Johnson:* I don’t remember. I never kept tab.<sup>31</sup>

So, there we have it. “I don’t keep a census” / “I never kept tab”. In an extraordinary confluence of Cool, the Oxford-educated scion of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, p. 333.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 316.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 340-41.

son of former slaves, more used to dealing in double negatives than exquisitely turned epigrams, respond in exactly the same way, strike exactly the same attitude, confront authority and crisis with self-possession and style. At a crucial moment both are 'arctic'.

In some respects, the restraint and poise – the Cool – of Wilde and Johnson under cross-examination and attack was as obnoxious as the excessive behaviour which had brought them to court in the first place, and provoked its precise opposite: a heated rhetoric of furious and unrestrained denunciation. In sentencing Wilde to two years' hard labour (the maximum penalty he could impose), Justice Wills described it as the worst case he had ever tried, saying of him and Taylor that "people who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame"<sup>32</sup> (his shock that 'gross indecency' might be practised by a gentleman suggests that his experience of the English public school system had been untypical). Harry Parkin was very clear about the real crime that Johnson had committed: the conviction had been a nakedly racist and political one. He told reporters from the courthouse steps that:

This verdict will go around the world. It is the forerunner of laws to be passed in these United States which we may live to see – laws forbidding miscegenation. This Negro, in the eyes of many, has been persecuted. Perhaps as an individual he was. But it was his misfortune to be the foremost example of the evil in permitting the intermarriage of whites and blacks. [...] Money and fame, such as it was, brought white women. One is a suicide, the others are pariahs. He has violated the law. Now it is his function to teach others the law must be respected.<sup>33</sup>

Johnson had been all too clear about this from the outset. As he became aware of the case being built against him, he told an audience of black businessmen in Chicago (striking an almost Shakespearean note) that "I do want to say that I am not a slave and that I have the right to choose who my mate shall be without the dictation of any man. I have eyes and I have a heart and when they fail to tell me who I shall have as mine I want to be put away in a lunatic asylum".<sup>34</sup> There was also a political dimension to Wilde's conviction, though one less explicit and clearly delineated. Letters from Queensberry were read out in open court which named in defamatory terms Lord Rosebery, the Prime Minister (who was rumoured to have a sexual interest in young men, including one of Queensberry's other sons, Viscount Drumlanrig), and Gladstone, the former Prime Minister. Carson believed that this was a mistake by Wilde's defence team because it became inevitable that he would now be prosecuted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, so that the highest levels of the government could not be seen to favour him, or his type (what Queensberry called 'the Rosebery sort'), in any way.<sup>35</sup> Wilde was exonerated to a degree in 2017 when the British government's 'Turing Act' pardoned gay men who had been convicted of sexual offences which no longer exist. It also took over a hundred years for the United States to recognise officially that Johnson had been the victim of a racially motivated injustice and had been convicted on trumped up charges. So – given the fact that

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, p. 584.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, pp. 344-45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 310.

<sup>35</sup> See R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987, p. 423.

Johnson had paid off numerous prostitutes who might have been prepared to testify against him – it seems both ironic and appropriate that it was Donald Trump who granted Johnson a posthumous presidential pardon in 2018.

Sex Pistols Svengali Malcom McLaren managed to convince the *Irish Times* that he was planning a movie with Stephen Spielberg about how Wilde discovered Rock ‘n’ Roll as he toured the West.<sup>36</sup> I am not trying to suggest that Wilde also invented Cool at the same time. In fact, he was channelling, unknowingly, a particular form of dandyism, with a particular political and historical valency: that of black servants and slaves who appropriated the sartorial flamboyance their employers and owners expected of them as signifiers of their wealth and status. These were the “Slaves to Fashion” that Monica L. Miller describes in her pioneering study of black dandies from the eighteenth century to the present.<sup>37</sup> Dandyism and its expression as Cool was for both Wilde and the African Americans he was identified with a form of self-definition and resistance. Johnson’s moment of impertinent *sangfroid* – “I never kept tab” – validates that complex perception of Wilde as black that had so troubled his American audiences. In a sense they were right. The style Wilde developed and the attitude he struck, that combination of dandyish display and apparently nerveless self-possession, defined the black boxer as much as it did the Irish artist. What bound them together was not evolution or race but the aesthetics of Cool, and the politics of impudence.

Johnson died in 1946, in a car crash, driving furiously, having – allegedly – been refused a table in a racially segregated restaurant. His widowed third wife said that she loved him for his courage and that “he faced the world unafraid”.<sup>38</sup> In recent decades, that fearlessness has made Johnson something of a hero to black Americans and a martyr to the cause of Civil Rights. Both his heroism and his martyrdom are deeply compromised, however. There is little doubt that he used his fists on some of the women in his life as well as his opponents in the boxing ring; he lied in court and to many of those closest to him; he was not someone it was wise to go into business with. The excesses of his behaviour outside the ring deeply embarrassed those black Chicago businessmen he spoke to on the eve of his trial because they were aiming for respectability in the eyes of white society. Yet, that “I am not a slave” has profound resonance. It shows that Johnson struck attitudes and developed behaviours he felt were necessary for him to free himself from a still powerful set of historical circumstances which continued to oppress black people in general and not just him as an individual in particular.

In a sense, the clarity with which Johnson understood the political predicament he was in – however overconfident he was about his ability to extricate himself from it – contrasts sharply with Wilde’s naively blinkered view of what would happen when he found himself in the Central Criminal Court. He seems to have felt that discussions would revolve around matters artistic and cultural, and the classical antecedents of the ‘love that dare not speak its name’, and not the age of his rent-boys and soiled hotel

<sup>36</sup> *The Irish Times*, 19 July 1997.

<sup>37</sup> M.L. MILLER, *Slaves to Fashion: Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, Durham and London, Duke U.P., 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in G.C. WARD, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, p. 448.

bedsheets. Carson soon began to disabuse him of such lofty notions. Wilde's Cool was a display not just of resistance and self-definition, it was also a form of self-delusion. He began the trials with no understanding of the weight of evidence that was massed against him, or that his palpably reckless behaviour was not going to be excused on the grounds that he was an exceptional individual. Wilde's subsequent status as a gay martyr is perhaps even more deeply compromised than Johnson's as a black martyr. First, Wilde saw himself as a martyr to Art not to homosexuality. He continued to deny all the clearly warranted accusations against him and lied to his own legal counsel about what he had done and with whom. Further, some of the 'renters' and others that Wilde had sex with were not young men but boys. Alphonse Conway, for instance, who was picked up by Wilde and Bosie when they holidayed with Wilde's family in Worthing was sixteen. No doubt there were others who were also juvenile. Even though the 'Turing Act' pardoned Wilde for the vaguely defined 'gross indecency' that he had been convicted of and which is no longer an offence, his relations with boys like Conway would land him in legal trouble today. He would also find himself swiftly cancelled because of the power dynamic between him and the various valets, grooms, waiters and sundry unemployed youths that he entertained, charmed, used, and paid.

Wilde and Johnson took their pleasures dangerously and in so doing exposed the hypocrisy and prejudice of the society they fascinated and angered. They did so with a shared – if in Johnson's case unarticulated – understanding of the power of the pose and of style and attitude. Johnson had a sharp understanding of the politics of the impudence he cultivated; Wilde saw that impudence as the necessary response of the artist to a philistinism that valued utility above beauty. Dandyism was for each a way of freeing themselves, of defining themselves, of possessing themselves. "Attitude," said Wilde, "is everything"<sup>39</sup> and Johnson recognised this too. Inveterate individualists who could be as careless of themselves as they were of others, they were not saints or martyrs, and heroes only in the Baudelairean sense with which Wilde, if not Johnson, would have been familiar. They were, however, confederates in Cool.

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<sup>39</sup> O. WILDE, "The Decay of Lying", 1889, in ID., *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, Collins, New Edition, 1966, p. 913.

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