Modern American History (2025), **8**, 132–136
doi:10.1017/mah.2024.53

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

FORUM: ANIMALS IN MODERN U.S. HISTORY

Canines: Enforcing Race & State

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Two of the world's greatest boxers—Muhammad Ali of Louisville, KY and George Foreman of Houston, TX—met for the legendary "Rumble in the Jungle" in Kinshasa, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) in 1974. With concerts by the African American "Godfather of Soul" James Brown and South African singer-songwriter Miriam Makeba, nicknamed "Mama Africa," the entwining tones of the U.S. civil rights era and anti-Apartheid movement augmented a cultural moment that displayed Pan-African, Black nationalist, and anti-imperial connections. However, the appearance of an insidious symbol from each aforementioned era is what decidedly swayed the local population against Foreman and for Ali.[1]

When George Foreman arrived in Kinshasa, he was accompanied by "Doggo," his very large German shepherd. This and similar breeds of dog were once deployed against the indigenous population by Belgian colonial forces during Zaire's recent imperial era. As news of the event spread, many locals presumed that Foreman must be white. He was then condemned throughout Zaire for traveling with this symbol of the violent Belgian past. Ali, who had already gained support for embracing his African heritage, cemented his own popularity after Foreman's faux pas.[2]

Barely a decade earlier, photographs of German Shepherds attacking civil rights demonstrators in the southern United States had captivated news audiences across the world. In fact, earlier in Ali's career, he had supported civil rights protesters in the South, though he hesitated to march in fear of having dogs attack him.[3] The bout against Foreman was Ali's bid to reclaim the championship after refusing to fight in Vietnam, and in justifying his refusal he was known to use canine imagery, once proclaiming, "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drops bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?" Going even further, Ali stated Black Americans had no reason to join the fight in Vietnam, as it was the white Americans, not the Vietnamese, who set dogs upon Black people.[4] These sentiments followed his protest against racism and segregation in his hometown when he,

[1]Kevin C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York, 2003), 104–106, 124–125, 191–192; Aaron Skabelund, *Empire of Dogs: Canines, Japan, and the Making of the Modern Imperial World* (Ithaca, 2011), 51. Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Rumble in the Jungle: Muhammad Ali and George Foreman on the Global Stage* (Chicago, 2021).

[2]Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 104–106, 124–125, 191–192; Skabelund, *Empire of Dogs*, 51; Lonnie Ali, June 4, 2024, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

[3]Jonathan Eig, *Ali: A Life* (New York, 2017), 118, 384.

[4]Muhammad Ali, "*The Black Scholar* Interviews Muhammad Ali," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 8 (June 1970): 32.

then still known as Cassius Clay, had supposedly thrown his Olympic gold medal into the Ohio River at the Louisville waterfront.[5]

This latter story—though likely apocryphal—is set on the riverbanks where a century or more before, many very real people fled slavery just ahead from packs of hounds specially bred and trained to track and attack them.[6] With resonances across many societies under strains of slavery, dogs were elsewise set against Black populations from the Caribbean to Brazil and across the U.S. South. Across national boundaries in earlier eras, upon plantations and untamed terrains, dogs adapted anew to extract compliance, exploit value, and extinguish those who resisted enslavement. They were made to enforce the commodification of Black populations that built Atlantic economies.[7]

As slavery ended in the United States the promises of citizenship were short-lived. African Americans now confronted forms of state-implemented canine power to enforce Jim Crow legislation, pointing toward inequitable policing strategies that, sometimes, resembled aspects of slavery. Newspaper reports reveal how local police units built upon antebellum training precedents by forcing Black men to run through the woods and encourage the canines to chase them.[8] Contemporary observers noted the definitive similarities between this technique and its antebellum precursors. Concurrent with this development, prison guards drew upon similar tactics once used by slave hunters when training their dogs to trail, capture, and attack Black fugitives. In many ways, these canine breeds were simply extracted from plantations and retrained for prisons.[9]

The racialization of human-canine relations under slavery served as a precursor for two interrelated developments in the early- and mid-twentieth century: the expansion and militarization of police forces in both the United States and imperial-era Africa. Videos, photographs, and correspondences on both sides of the Atlantic show white uniformed officers coaxing their dogs to attack Black demonstrators, and the police canines came to symbolize the state-instituted, racist oppression that protestors hoped to overthrow. Consequently, racial differences toward dog ownership and concepts of interspecies terror among Black populations throughout Africa and North America hold similarities due to their intertwined histories. Canine police units also expanded globally, as aging European empires relied upon the tracking and attacking abilities of dogs to dissipate demands for equality or independence. In each era, human hound hunting received major critiques, whether from abolitionists, civil rights advocates, or anti-colonial activists, regarding its implications for envisioning Black humanity, national morality, and justice.

The entwinement of hounds and power made salient moments and meanings. Resilient demands for humanity in the face of canine teeth that mediated racial inequalities are also central to the reevaluation of human-animal interactions. This intergenerational saga, from the start of colonization in the Americas to more recent concerns over how states apply force, instantiated some insidious aspects of modern history.

Bridging slavery to civil rights in the United States, hounds also appeared in policing and penitentiaries during the Jim Crow era, and it is worth noting their dimensions were always transnational. In 1895 a writer from London excitedly described the scenting abilities of hounds used by Texas penitentiaries, packs that were crossbreeds of the notorious "Cuban bloodhounds" and foxhounds. The writer warned readers against abolitionists' tales of terror

[5]Michael Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: Making an Icon* (Philadelphia, 2009), 125, 176.

[6]Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York, 1849), 121–130.

[7]Tyler D. Parry and Charlton W. Yingling, "Slave Hounds and Abolition in the Americas," *Past & Present* 246 (Feb. 2020), 69–108.

[8]"Bloodhounds in the South," *The Rideau Record* (Aug. 23, 1894); "Training Bloodhounds," *The Sydney Mail* (Sept. 30, 1899), 26.

[9]"Bloodhounds in the South," *The Galveston Daily News* (Oct. 28, 1894), 12; "Slavery in Alabama," *The Age* (July 2, 1903), 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.53 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and wondered if English bloodhounds might serve British police.[10] The breeding and training of attack dogs was not a haphazard practice, but one that was professionalized and organized nationally and even internationally.

As U.S. prison systems adapted the packs that tracked runaways to do the same with prisoners, police forces in the U.S. gradually deployed dogs of different types, such as German Shepherds, that had a distinct backstory. By the time newspapers and magazines worldwide showed police dogs in Alabama assaulting civil rights protestors, similar tactics were used by Europeans staking imperial claims throughout Africa. With time, however, the practice of interspecies human hunting transitioned from the provenance of private trackers to that of governmental sanction. As chattel slavery was gradually abolished throughout the Americas during the nineteenth century, policing and penitentiary systems formally supported state power across the Americas and in late imperial Africa. Just as enslaved people in the antebellum South often recalled that southern bloodhounds were a distinctly ferocious type of dog, new canine types emerged as the symbol of governmental terror in the twentieth century.[11]

The most popular non-human state enforcer was embodied by the Shepherd breed, as "German" Shepherds and the Belgian Malinois populated canine units throughout the United States, Nazi Germany, imperial militaries throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, and beyond (Fig. 1). Their association with law enforcement was so ubiquitous that they were nicknamed "police dogs," as that was their most recognizable function. And the Shepherd breeds' reputations preceded them, as they were deployed in battlefield scenarios during the world wars and celebrated for their prowess. Taking these imperial connections even further, some inspiration for their acquisition also derived from early applications of canine power in Apartheid South Africa. Just as hounds once dominated the discourse of private slave hunting in past centuries, the more recent policing breeds similarly carried racial implications.[12]

Stories of racist dog training circulated throughout the twentieth century, as Black communities were intimately familiar with the multi-generational legacies of interspecies violence that crossed imperial boundaries. Despite the German Shepherd's associations with Aryan ideals of purity amplified by Nazi Germany, it still became a mainstay of policing worldwide in an era that advanced and preserved segregationist and apartheid policies. In one especially poignant example, activist organizations in the United States uncovered that a man who trained police dogs near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was a former Nazi Schutzstaaffel (SS) officer, and his animals were being disproportionately acquired by Mississippi police departments in 1961.[13]

Thus, by the mid-twentieth century Shepherd dogs distinctly symbolized the state's methods of social control and willingness to initiate anti-Black violence. In many respects, these animals linked American police departments with colonial law enforcement regimes throughout the African continent, including Kenya, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa. In Kenya, colonial forces used dogs to track and violently attack Kenyan freedom fighters. Videos from the colonial state of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) bear haunting similarities to the pictures from Birmingham, Alabama, as white colonial police sicced their dogs on peaceful protestors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the clearest comparisons persist in South Africa, where indigenous populations hold similar ideas surrounding the colonial dog's links to racist violence.

[10]A. Croxton Smith, "Bloodhound as Detective," *Windsor Magazine* 1 (London, 1895), 433–439.

[11]Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Auburn, 1853), 136–137.

[12]Charles F. Sloane, "Dogs in War, Police Work, and on Patrol," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 46, no. 3 (1955): 387–388; Aaron Skabelund, "Breeding Racism: The Imperial Battlefields of the 'German' Shepherd Dog," *Society & Animals* 16 (Jan. 2008): 354–371.

[13]Alfredo Graham, "Mean, 'Hate-Negro' Dogs Being Trained in Pittsburgh Area," *New Pittsburgh Courier* (Apr. 15, 1961), 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.53 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. This ties to the transnational circulation and experimentation with the utility of this dog breed. "Male owner with German police dog," July 1934, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, 42307.

Just as abolitionists used imagery of interspecies violence to mount a transnational campaign against chattel slavery, civil rights protestors in the United States and anti-colonial activists throughout Africa similarly revealed how interspecies violence defined each groups' relationship to state power and to animals.[14]

The uneven, persistent racial consequences of certain policing practices resound with rhymes of a colonial past. Human to human tensions have long been mediated through cajoled non-human animals, and such trends carry comparable colonial residues in the United States and far beyond. The legacy of anti-Black training techniques and their disproportionate use against Black communities throughout the post-civil rights era led many African Americans to assert that U.S. police dogs are trained for racist violence. Indeed, many studies show that people of color still comprise a disproportionate number of the K-9 unit's bite victims in the United States.[15] Similarly, South African police used dogs to terrorize Black populations, even to the

[14]Josh Doble, "Can Dogs be Racist? The Colonial Legacies of Racialized Dogs in Kenya and Zambia," *History Workshop Journal* 89 (2020): 68–89; Gabeba Baderoon, "Animal Likenesses: Dogs and the Boundary of the Human in South Africa," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2017): 345–361; Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York, 2018).

[15]Trone Dowd, "The Violent, Racist History of K-9 Units," *Vice News* (Sept. 7, 2022); The Marshall Project, "Mauled: When Police Dogs are Weapons," *The Marshall Project* (Oct. 15, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.53 Published online by Cambridge University Press

point that one pack of dogs was given a psychological evaluation to determine if they were "racist," as victims claimed.[16]

The canine's multifaceted legacies of enforcing race and state invite a number of questions for further thought. Who has the right to decide the legacies that dogs leave? How should our society today reckon with this heavy past, and also better respect canines' needs and capabilities? As our oldest companions, dogs aid humans in a variety of positive functions. They can be trained to help the visually impaired, preemptively alert humans to seizure activity, and even detect cancer in humans.[17] Therapy dogs enliven children in hospital beds and accompany those in hospice care as they cross the threshold to death. They can be used for search-and-rescue purposes, physically reuniting family members with one another. Dogs regularly become emotionally entwined family members whose deaths humans often grieve profoundly.[18]

The echoes of a longstanding, intersecting history between anti-Black racism and speciesism remains palpable in the twenty-first century as attack dogs remain a fixed symbol of unjust power and enforcement in many countries. This fraught human-animal history continues to bind continents separated by thousands of miles, but one wonders if there is a better path going forward. Using the benefit of hindsight, how might we, humans and canines, now write a conclusion to this centuries-long story together? Ultimately, we the authors argue it is humans who must consider how much longer we can collectively justify the manipulation of the canine senses toward force, especially when such actions are sanctioned by state authorities.

[16]Tim Butcher, "'Racist' Dogs May be Destroyed," *Telegraph* (Nov. 10, 2000), www.telegraph.co.uk (accessed Apr. 9, 2019).

[17]Miriam Ascarelli, *Independent Vision: Dorothy Harrison Eustis and the Story of the Seeing Eye* (West Lafayette, IN, 2010); Emily Singer, "Dogs Can Predict Epileptic Seizures," *New Scientist* (June 21, 2004) https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn6047-dogs-can-predict-epileptic-seizures/ (accessed Jan. 27, 2025); Leon Frederick Campbell, Luke Farmery, Susannah Mary Creighton George, and Paul B. J. Farrant, "Canine Olfactory Detection of Malignant Melanoma," *BMJ Case Reports* (2013): bcr2013008566; Laura Geggel, "If Dogs Can Smell Cancer, Why Don't They Screen People?," *Live Science* (Dec. 22, 2017) https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/if-dogs-can-smell-cancer-why-dont-they-screen-people/ (accessed Jan. 27, 2025).

[18]Lori Kogan and Phyllis Erdman, eds., *Pet Loss, Grief, and Therapeutic Interventions: Practitioners Navigating the Human-Animal Bond* (New York and London, 2019); Andrei Markovits and Katie Crosby, *From Property to Family: American Dog Rescue and the Discourse of Compassion* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2024.53 Published online by Cambridge University Press