

Antiracism

Segregation

Segregation was introduced officially in 1877 and lasted until the mid 1960s. It was a policy of separation between white and black Americans. Black Americans were seen as inferior to white Americans, they became second class citizens with segregation.

Segregation, it was argued, did not break the American constitution because black Americans would receive the same opportunities but separately from white Americans.

Examples of segregation were found throughout society. White patients in hospital could only be nursed by white nurses, white-owned businesses only employed white people and white children went to white schools while black children went to black schools.

Although in theory white and black Americans would live 'separate but equal' lives, in reality black Americans had much worse housing, schools and healthcare, they were excluded from many employment opportunities and were much more likely to be arrested, convicted and imprisoned than white Americans.

Ali's Childhood

Muhammad Ali grew up in this environment of segregation. If he ventured into the neighbouring district of Portland, a white-dominated area, there would be racist abuse in the street. There were whites only hotels, whites only parks and whites only stores.

In an interview Ali described how the racism of his youth affected him. The journalist later said:

When Clay's father told him all about the case of young Emmett Till, who had been beaten, mutilated, shot in the head, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River in the summer of 1955 by a pair of white men, Clay saw himself as Till, who was just a year older than he was. The killing helped reinforce in him the sense that he, a black boy from Louisville, was going out into a world that would inevitably deny him, rebuff him, even hate him and so he sought a means of escape in the ring. "I started boxing because I thought this was the fastest way for a black person to make it in this country," he would say years later.