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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Icons and ontological (in)security

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Abstract

What role do national icons play in a political community's drive for ontological security? And what implications does this have for global politics? This article situates national icons in service of state ontological security. Icons both unify and divide political communities; therefore they serve, but also disrupt, ontological security-seeking of collectives. Building on research on ontological security and status in International Relations, we examine two case studies of national icons – Vesna Vulović, the celebrated Serbian flight attendant who miraculously survived a major plane crash, and Muhammad Ali, the American boxing legend. Both Vulović and Ali initially generated, and then countered, ontological security for their national communities as they transformed from popular culture celebrities into anti-regime political activists. We conclude the article by discussing opportunities for future avenues of research on icons and the politics of identity going forward.

Keywords: icons; ontological security; protest; race

> I am America. 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.
>
> Muhammad Ali

This article examines the role of national icons in generating ontological (in)security in national communities by connecting this process to status and standing in international politics. Icons – which we understand as persons broadly visible in a national community because they have great influence or significance in a particular sphere of social, cultural, or political life – have received relatively little focus in International Relations. This is surprising considering the opportunities that icons have to reflect, change, and/or reproduce the identities of political communities. An exception to this lacuna comes from the field of visual politics, which has focused on the ways in which iconic images attain that status and to what political effects, as well as on the role iconic visuals have in securitisation practices.[1] Our interest, however, is in the broader definitions of icons that include, but go beyond, icons as images. We focus on humans as icons, recognising that the visuality and visibility of iconic individuals – their 'presence' in a national community – are also a core feature of their function as icons.

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[1] Lene Hansen, 'How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib', *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 263–88; Axel Heck and Gabi Schlag, 'Securitizing images: The female body and the war in Afghanistan', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:4 (2013), pp. 891–913.

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To analyse the role of icons in national communities, we build on insights from Ontological Security Studies (OSS).[2] Ontological security is the 'sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly in [one's] perceptual environment'.[3] Routines are important for establishing this continuity and are 'integral both to the continuity of the personality of the agent … and to the institutions of society, which are such only through their continued reproduction'.[4] Such institutions include a family, home, school, church, *forms of travel and sport*, and political community. Narratives help in making sense of these routines as part of a broader story of the self, but these narratives about collective entities, societies and states, can become contested.[5] Agents practise their routines and develop narratives to establish order for themselves and (some) others, avoiding the anxiety and chaos that can emerge in everyday life.[6] Yet the institutions that provide such order are dependent upon individuals' routines for reproducing the institution in the first place.

Routines prove especially important in the face of 'critical situations', which are 'circumstances of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind which affect substantial numbers of individuals'. These situations 'destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines', disordering biographical narratives about the self. Their 'resolution' involves the establishment of new routines or the re-establishment of old ones, as well as narratives that can 'bridge' from old to new routines.[7]

One purpose of this article is to bring forth a broader understanding of icons and their significance for International Relations. Ontological security, we argue, can help push forward some of the definitional quandaries noted in the literatures on icons, while also clarifying their insecuritising function. A second purpose of the article works in the other direction, to show how icons can contribute to the literature on OSS. The potential that icons hold for OSS is at least threefold. The first, which we return to briefly in the conclusion, regards the levels of analysis or the 'state personhood problem' in Ontological Security Studies,[8] the sometimes-contentious move of 'scaling' an individual phenomenon to collectives such as states. We take a more pragmatic approach here.[9] Following Steele, we do not seek to resolve this dilemma but rather 'to think of other ways to use ontological security … precisely because ontological security proves useful for analysing the struggles over identity at *different levels of analysis simultaneously* that we can and must move on.'[10] Contemporary global politics is rife with such struggles, and ontological security scholars have engaged those as a series of disruptions and politically contentious events understood as competing drives over ontological security. This includes the disruptions and oppressions experienced by individuals and groups through brutalising migration policies and the treatment of ethnic 'others',[11] the insecurity generated by neoliberal governmentality,[12] and the tensions between societal and individual drives for certainty and routines within an ongoing pandemic.[13] Icons are individuals who are definitionally important for societies and thus lie at the intersection of different levels of analysis.

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[2] Ontological Security Studies have increasingly broadened as an approach within International Relations since the mid-2000s with the works of Kinnvall, Mitzen, Steele, Zarakol, and others. Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67; Catarina Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: Habits, capabilities and ontological security', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 270–85; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008); Ayşe Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23; Stuart Croft, 'Constructing ontological insecurity: The insecuritization of Britain's Muslims', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:2 (2012), pp. 219–35; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'From fratricide to security community: Re-theorising difference in the constitution of Nordic peace', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 16:4 (2013), pp. 483–513.

[3] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 243.

[4] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 50–60.

[5] Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27; Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession* (Cham: Palgrave, 2020).

[6] Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies', *International Studies Review*, 24:3 (2022), viac013; Bahar Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into International Relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72.

[7] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.

[8] Alanna Krolikowski, 'State personhood in ontological security theories of international relations and Chinese nationalism: A sceptical view', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2:1 (2008), pp. 109–33; Richard Ned Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[9] Several recent studies have tackled this issue head-on, providing different defences for state personhood via new ways of framing the issue. See Adam B. Lerner, 'What's it like to be a state? An argument for state consciousness', *International Theory*, 13:2 (2021), pp. 260–86; Filip Ejdus and Tijana Rečević, 'Ontological insecurity as an emergent phenomenon: Bottom-up securitization of migration in Serbia', *European Psychologist*, 26:1 (2021), pp. 29–44.

A second important and more recent axis within OSS involves the centrality of performances of and for ontological security. This line of inquiry moves the focus from what ontological security 'is' in individuals and groups to how it is generated, enacted, and performed through 'leaps of faith',[14] popular culture,[15] memory politics and mnemonical practices,[16] vicarious identity and vicarious resilience,[17] to name just a few. Icons become icons through their *performances*, whether those are political or forms of pop-cultural entertainment. But they also serve a performative function for the fulfilment of society's ontological security. We explore this more below.

A third axis in OSS found at the core of our investigation of icons regards the status politics of ontological security. Status has been reinvigorated in International Relations as a key conceptual focus in the past decade,[18] and it has increasingly been of interest to OSS scholars, as ontological (in)security relates to status politics in a variety of global, national, and local communities.[19] Icons are foundationally about status politics and in this way remain vehicles for as well as challenges to a society's ontological security.

The article proceeds through the following three sections. We begin by discussing icons and how they are defined and understood. We make the case for an understanding of individuals as cultural icons, while also advocating for a multi-definitional approach. We then present our two examples of national icons – Vesna Vulović and Muhammad Ali. We end with a brief conclusion and some implications for studying icons within and outside of OSS.

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[10] Brent J. Steele, 'Welcome home! Routines, ontological insecurity and the politics of US military reunion videos', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 322–43 (p. 325).

[11] Alexandria J. Innes, 'When the threatened become the threat: The construction of asylum seekers in British media narratives', *International Relations*, 24:4 (2010), pp. 456–77; Catarina Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 283–302; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Feeling at home in Europe: Migration, ontological security, and the political psychology of EU bordering', *Political Psychology*, 39:6 (2018), pp. 1373–87.

[12] Chengxin Pan and Linus Hagström, 'Ontological (in)security and neoliberal governmentality: Explaining Australia's China emergency', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 67:3–4 (2021), pp. 454–73.

[13] Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Catarina Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered nationalism: Masculinity, climate denial and Covid-19', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21:4 (2020), pp. 432–50.

[14] Badredine Arfi, 'Security qua existential surviving (while becoming otherwise) through performative leaps of faith', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 291–305.

[15] Alexandria J. Innes, 'Everyday ontological security: Emotion and migration in British soaps', *International Political Sociology*, 11:4 (2017), pp. 380–97.

[16] Maria Mälksoo, '"Memory must be defended": Beyond the politics of mnemonical security', *Security Dialogue*, 46:3 (2015), pp. 221–37; Jelena Subotic, 'Political memory after state death: The abandoned Yugoslav national pavilion at Auschwitz', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 245–62; Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[17] Christopher S. Browning, Pertti Joenniemi, and Brent J. Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations: Self, Security, and Status on the Global Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Christopher S. Browning and Joseph Haigh, 'Hierarchies of heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the limits of militarized vicarious resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:3 (2022), ksac026.

[18] Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Struggles for recognition: The liberal international order and the merger of its discontents', *International Organization*, 75:2 (2021), pp. 611–34; Pål Røren and Paul Beaumont, 'Grading greatness: Evaluating the status performance of the BRICS', *Third World Quarterly*, 40:3 (2019), pp. 429–50.

[19] Peera Charoenvattananukul, *Ontological Security and Status-Seeking: Thailand's Proactive Behaviours during the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2020); Linus Hagström, 'Great power narcissism and ontological (in)security: The narrative mediation of greatness and weakness in international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:2 (2021), pp. 331–42.

Icons: A multi-definitional approach

There are four main definitions of 'icon' in everyday usage and in scholarship, each focusing on a particular object. The first definition, derived from the Greek *eikon*, is 'a representation (as in a mural, a mosaic, or a painting on wood) of sacred events or especially of a sacred individual (such as Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, or a saint) used as an object of veneration or a tool for instruction.'[20] According to the second definition, an icon is an 'emblem or symbol'. The third definition focuses on an icon as a 'graphic symbol on a computer display screen', or a 'sign whose form suggests its meaning', and, more historically, 'a pictorial representation.'[21] Some of the existing work in visual IR follows these two latter definitional streams of icons. For instance, following the 20th-century art historian Erwin Panofsky, Heck and Schlag note that 'iconology' is a method 'to reconstruct the symbolic content of images in their historical and social context.'[22] Work in visual cultural studies focuses on what makes iconic images iconic, by noting how 'the icon emerges from the welter of images because it evokes the vital center of mainstream public culture. Iconic images capture both the central contradiction and the deepest commonality defining a polity.'[23]

A fourth definition of icon is 'a person or thing admired especially for having a great influence.'[24] This is the primary understanding of icon we use in our two cases. Here, the focus on how one can identify an icon has been primarily the concern of Cultural Studies and within that, work on visual culture. David Scott and Keyan Tomaselli characterise this form of icon as 'cultural', and the individual as someone who is a 'celebrity' that becomes 'encoded' as an exemplar 'of a particular generation, a stylistic epoch, and a feeling about a particular set of social experiences.'[25] Scott and Tomaselli clarify that there are three forms, and thus productions, of cultural icons. One is a 'true' icon of religious significance – overlapping with the first definition above. Secular icons are a second form of cultural icons, who through time 'accrue' an 'exemplary cultural status'. Finally, there are cultural icons as 'constructions', those who have been produced as icons through 'mediatized' environments where 'iconization' occurs – branding as an icon by the media or corporate entities.[26]

Advancing this scholarship further, Parker examined the particular features of an individual's or image's *story* that enabled their reception as icons, specifically a 'tragic-dramatic narrative' connected to that individual and/or image. Following German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, Parker argues that there is a 'natural life force' within humans that draws them to 'gravitate [to] more tragic-dramatic themes than complex, parochial, intellectual constructs.'[27] While we don't adopt Parker's essentialist ontology regarding a 'natural life force', his focus on narratives as well as the emotional impact icons have at an everyday level do instruct our points regarding icons and their enabling of ontological (in)security at a societal level. Here we find an intersection with the role of particular forms of narratives identified in ontological security scholarship – (auto)biographies. To be convincing stories of a community, collective biographies often are personalised

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[20] Available at: {https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icon}.

[21] Available at: {https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icon}.

[22] Heck and Schlag, 'Securitizing images', p. 899.

[23] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 289.

[24] Available at: {https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icon}.

[25] David Scott and Keyan G. Tomaselli, 'Introduction: Cultural icons', in David Scott and Keyan G. Tomaselli (eds), *Cultural Icons* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 7-24 (p. 17).

[26] Scott and Tomaselli, 'Cultural icons', p. 18.

[27] Mike Parker, 'Cultural icons: A case study analysis of their formation and reception', PhD thesis, University of Central Lancashire (2012), p. 73.

(and personified), and icons service these biographies.[28] This approach is consistent with Jeffrey C. Alexander's understanding of celebrity, as 'an iconic form of collective representation central to the meaningful construction of contemporary society'.[29]

While we start with examples of the fourth definition set, all four should be considered in tandem, as a composite or multilayered understanding of icons. For individuals who are icons, their image – both visual and cultural – is an important feature of their reception, and presence or visibility, within a political community. Not only how they look, but also pictures of individuals 'in action' that capture their 'essence', are important for how they are narrated, remembered, and plotted. Further, there are 'sacred' features of individual icons. In the case of Muhammad Ali, as we note below, both his religious conversion to Islam and his role as a sports figure involved iconic themes that went beyond just his status as a 'secular' form of a cultural icon.

Every one of these four definitions or meanings of icon relate to existing streams of research in OSS. The fourth with its focus on individual icons helpfully combines the more transcendent and 'high political' aspects of ontological security drives with everyday popular culture and especially sport. But the first and second conceptualisations are potentially fruitful definitions for understanding the role of daily practices and physical artefacts in the generation of routines, and ultimately ontological security for individuals and groups. The third meaning of a 'pictorial representation' centrally overlaps with the increasing interest in OSS in images and ontological insecurity.[30]

The argument we present for how icons relate to national ontological security drives is threefold: (1) icons serve the role of fulfilling ontological security by relating to and reflecting a political community's biographical narrative. Yet that they have to fulfil that role also reveals an underlying ontological *in*security in political communities of needing icons in the first place.[31] (2) Icons fulfil an international status for a political community because they tap into aspirational and topical issues that resonate across that national community. In both of our cases, Vesna Vulović (who miraculously survived a plane crash and then became an anti-regime activist) and Muhammad Ali (who achieved supremacy in sport, became a global celebrity, and then spoke out on transnational issues of race and racism) became each in their own way not only national but transnationally recognised figures, which in turn had implications for each of their political communities' ontological (in)securities. (3) Iconic status also makes national communities vulnerable to iconic criticisms, crises that generate ontological insecurity,[32] and thus justifies the increasing attention OSS has paid to status as a referent for ontological security drives.[33] This, too, as we note below, happened in each of our cases.

Thus, our focus and argument, and our treatment of icons, depart from the literature so far reviewed. What makes an icon is less our concern than what icons do for and to political communities. How to analyse icons visually is less important for us than what the narratives about them enable and constrain regarding a national community's ontological security. Finally, if there is a tragic element which helps constitute icons, it is a tragedy that speaks as much to the ever-elusive quest for ontological security in international politics as it does to a natural process of 'fleeting glory' for iconic individuals.[34]

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[28] See especially Felix Berenskoetter, 'Parameters of a national biography', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 262–88; Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt of political leaders', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1057–63.

[29] Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'The celebrity-icon', *Cultural Sociology*, 4:3 (2010), pp. 323–36.

[30] Christopher S. Browning, '"Je suis en terrasse": Political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be', *Political Psychology*, 39:2 (2018), pp. 243–61; Christine Agius, 'Drawing the discourses of ontological security: Immigration and identity in the Danish and Swedish cartoon crises', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 109–25.

[31] This is a prevalent theme in music and popular culture. Think of the line in Simon and Garfunkel's (and then The Lemonheads') 'Mrs. Robinson': 'Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio, a nation turns its lonely eyes to you.'

[32] Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity*; Dmitry Chernobrov, 'Ontological security and public (mis)recognition of international crises: Uncertainty, political imagining, and the self', *Political Psychology*, 37:5 (2016), pp. 581–96; Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, 'The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64, Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security and conflict: The dynamics of crisis and the constitution of community', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 825–35.

[33] Charoenvattananukul, *Ontological Security and Status-Seeking*; Marco A. Vieira, 'Understanding resilience in international relations: The non-aligned movement and ontological security', *International Studies Review*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 290–311.

We now turn to short case studies detailing our two exemplary icons – Vesna Vulović and Muhammad Ali – to illustrate these theoretical points.

Vesna Vulović, 1950–2016

Vesna Vulović was born in 1950 and grew up in Belgrade, Serbia, then part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1971, she became a flight attendant for Yugoslav Airlines (Jugoslovenski Aerotransport or JAT). On 25 January 1972, Vesna was an attendant aboard JAT Flight 367, the regular route from Copenhagen to Zagreb. One hour after take-off, the plane blew up somewhere over Czechoslovakia from what was believed to be a briefcase bomb planted there by Croatian nationalists, who carried out dozens of terrorist attacks against Yugoslav state targets between the 1960s and 1980s.

Vulović, inexplicably, survived the explosion due to what appeared to be a constellation of fortunate factors. First, unlike the other passengers who were thrust into the frigid air following the explosion, Vulović became ensconced in a catering trolley (food cart). Second, her fall to earth was somewhat softened by landing in some trees in the Czech forest, and then on a hillside with a large snowpack. Third, it is believed that Vulović's low blood pressure enabled her to pass out quickly after the explosion, thus preserving her heart and life. Fourth, Vulović landed near the Czech village of Srbska Kamenice. This was also serendipitous, as she was discovered by the local villager Bruno Honke, who, having served as a German medic during World War II, was able to treat her and keep her alive until further medical attention arrived. She suffered skull, pelvic, and vertebrae fractures.[35] Her long recovery started at a Prague hospital and continued in a Belgrade hospital under police protection. She was initially paralysed from the waist down but eventually made an almost-complete recovery.[36]

Vulović's survival granted her immediate celebrity status in Yugoslavia. She was honoured by Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito shortly after her recovery and, in 1985, recognised by the *Guinness Book of World Records* for surviving the highest fall without a parachute. Her fame was instant and the result of several factors.

First, leisure air travel was still something of a luxury for most Yugoslav citizens in the early 1970s. Air travel was glamorous, the domain of the well-to-do, and the profession of a flight attendant was the profession of the jet set. In a nominally and rhetorically equal society as was Yugoslav socialism in the 1970s, the concepts of 'well-to-do' and 'jet set' are all quite relative and do not exactly map onto what we would today consider the domains of the wealthy, but Yugoslavia still had a degree of economic stratification, and those on the top got to fly on planes.[37]

Second, air travel was not just an economic issue for socialist Yugoslavia. As was the case with other communist countries at the time, air travel and aviation more broadly strengthened the state's legitimacy and charted a path to modernity.[38] Air travel was also a hugely important marker of Yugoslavia's state identity, and especially its successful foreign policy.[39] The national airline Vulović flew, JAT, was one of the most internationally visible signs of success for Yugoslavia's 'third way' during the Cold War. Under Tito's leadership, Yugoslavia refused to be part of the Soviet bloc and instead charted an independent path of 'non-alignment'. Positioned in-between the Soviet Union and the West, part of Yugoslavia's foreign-policy strategy was to present itself as a workable, successful, middle-of-the road country which practised 'socialism with a smiling face'. International tourism was a key to this strategy, and JAT was its vehicle.[40] Because of this strategic importance of air travel, and especially international air travel, JAT was one of the most significant and publicly visible Yugoslav companies.[41] Working for JAT, therefore, was not just a job. It was representing the country abroad, it was national work of the highest order, and for a country that was poor, whose citizens rarely got a chance to travel abroad, it was also very cool.

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[34] This is an oblique reference to a famous quote by US general George S. Patton, also expressed in the movie of the same name from 1970: 'For over a thousand years Roman conquerors returning from the wars enjoyed the honor of triumph, a tumultuous parade … A slave stood behind the conqueror holding a golden crown and whispering in his ear a warning: that all glory is fleeting', available at: {https://www.usnewslink.com/fleetingglory.htm}.

[35] Phillip Baum, 'How to survive a bombing at 33,000 feet', *Aviation Security International* (1 April 2002), available at: {https://www.avsec.com/2002/04/01/interview-vesna-vulovic-how-to-survive-a-bombing-at-33000-feet}.

[36] BBC News, 'Vesna Vulovic, stewardess who survived 33,000 ft fall, dies' (24 December 2016), available at: {https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38427411}.

[37] Patrick Hyder Patterson, *Bought & Sold: Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Radina Vučetić, *Coca-Cola Socialism: Americanization of Yugoslav Culture in the Sixties* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017); Adam T. Rosenbaum, 'Leisure travel and real existing socialism: New research on tourism in the Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe', *Journal of Tourism History*, 7:1–2 (2015), pp. 157–76.

Finally, Vesna Vulović's gender was also significant to her construction as a Yugoslav icon. As a female flight attendant or 'air stewardess', as this profession was commonly referred to in highly gendered language, Vulović was certainly perceived in charged, sexualised terms, but this is a largely ubiquitous feature of this gendered and feminised career globally. JAT was hardly unique on this front. 'Air stewardesses' had special cultural appeal, as they were supposed to be both nurturing and caring but also attractive and smart – exactly what a woman should be.[42] The aeroplane workspace was carefully gendered – 'the unmarried female flight attendants made passengers feel at home, while male pilots, depicted as good family men, safely flew passengers in the air'.[43] In the context of Cold War communism, however, traditional gender roles were combined with a declarative commitment to gender equality. The woman's primary obligation was not only to her family; it was to her state and the communist project overall. This commitment to gender equality then led to significant improvements in women's economic standing, more gender parity in the workplace, and more women in positions of power.[44]

All these factors contributed to constructing Vesna Vulović as a national icon who put Yugoslavia on the international map. Her fame also transcended Yugoslavia, as she became well known in other Eastern European countries, who partly claimed her as their own.[45] She was also famous in the West and became a metaphor for weightlessness, freefall, survival – to the point where a New York City dance troupe in 2014 performed a modern dance play about gravity called *Vesna's Fall*.[46] Vesna was a hero and a Guinness World Record Holder, and she got to meet Paul

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[38] Scott W. Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[39] Phil Tiemeyer, 'Launching a nonaligned airline: JAT Yugoslav airways between East, West, and South, 1947–1962', *Diplomatic History*, 41:1 (2017), pp. 78–103; Jelena Subotić, 'JAT – more than flying: Constructing Yugoslav identity in the air', *East European Politics and Societies*, 32:4 (2018), pp. 671–92.

[40] Subotić, 'JAT – more than flying'; Hannes Grandits and Karin Taylor, *Yugoslavia's Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism (1950s–1980s)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010).

[41] While a sign of local pride, JAT was mercilessly mocked by international travellers, who used to derisively refer to its frequent delays as 'JAT – Joke About Time'. Marina Simic, 'Exit to Europe: State, popular music and normal life in a Serbian town', PhD thesis, University of Manchester (2009).

[42] Victoria Vantoch, *The Jet Sex: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Joan Sangster and Julia Smith, 'From career girl to sexy stewardess: Popular culture and women's work in the Canadian and American airline industries', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 30:2 (2019), pp. 141–61.

[43] Steven E. Harris, 'Dawn of the Soviet jet age: Aeroflot passengers and aviation culture under Nikita Khrushchev', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 21:3 (2020), pp. 591–626 (p. 608).

[44] For a forceful argument about how socialism improved women's equality, see Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York: Random House, 2018).

[45] Barry Neild, 'Fate or fluke? Air crash sole survivors', *CNN* (13 May 2010), available at: {https://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/05/13/libya.planecrash.survivors/index.html}.

[46] Ellen C. Covito, 'The end of choreography as we know it', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 38:2 (2016), pp. 41–9.

McCartney and Billie Jean King.[47] She also became the subject of numerous conspiracy theories, a sure sign of cultural importance.[48] Vesna became a metaphor – a miracle success from a small, scrappy country, working for a proud national company that transcended the small confines of a socialist Eastern European space and connected it to the big and exciting world beyond.[49] Significantly for our argument, however, her iconic status contributed to securing Yugoslavia's ontological security during the tense and uncertain period of the Cold War. She helped Yugoslavia matter in international popular culture; she embodied spunk, grittiness, global relevance, and fierce independence – qualities that Yugoslavia, the state, wanted to convey in its relationships with international others.

After her crash, Vulović wanted to return to flying – 'People always want to sit next to me on the plane', she said.[50] JAT, however, decided that her presence on flights would be too distracting and instead assigned her a desk job.[51] She worked on JAT freight contracts throughout the 1970s and 1980s, by which time she became increasingly outspoken on matters of Serbian politics. As Serbian nationalism had been on the rise since the late 1980s and especially since Slobodan Milošević took over Serbian political leadership in 1987, Vulović began to frequently and forcefully speak out against the Serbian government and its nationalist expansionism in the early 1990s.[52] She joined the street protests against his rule, and she tried to persuade her co-workers at JAT not to vote for him. In retaliation, JAT first reduced her pay and then forced her into retirement in 1991, the same year socialist Yugoslavia disintegrated into a series of violent wars. Tabloids began to spin conspiracy theories about her crash not being a high-altitude crash at all.[53]

What made Vulović particularly threatening to the Milošević regime and to Serbia's ontological security in the 1990s is that her opposition to the government was on anti-nationalist grounds, which put her squarely at odds with the hegemonic nationalist narratives of the time.[54] Serbia's entire sense of self since the 1990s has been built on a profound sense of nationalist victimisation and grievance, and here was Vulović, a celebrity, an icon, publicly stating that this fundamental state narrative is not only wrong, but dangerous.

The characteristics that made Vulović an agent of ontological security during the previous communist Yugoslav regime – her international fame, her story of success and global status – became a source of ontological *insecurity* for the post-Yugoslav Serbian regime, which built its identity on *anti*-internationalism, *anti*-globalism, and glorification of victimhood and not success.[55] Vulović's commitment to multiculturalism and internationalism – the foundational narratives of communist Yugoslavia – remained the same. It was her country that had changed.

But her own understanding of her activism and her political position was even more nuanced and strategic. She approached her activism from *within* the Serbian narrative, and then fought against its main premise. This is how she explained her involvement in politics:

> I've never been interested in politics. I'm only interested in helping my nation survive. Everybody in the world thinks that Serbs are fighters, and that Serbia is a bad nation. We

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[47] Dan Bilefsky, 'Serbia's most famous survivor fears that recent history will repeat itself', *New York Times* (26 April 2008).

[48] Kate Connolly, 'Woman who fell to earth: Was air crash survivor's record just propaganda?', *The Guardian* (13 January 2009), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/13/flight-attendant-record-fall-hoax}.

[49] Bilefsky, 'Serbia's most famous survivor'.

[50] BBC News, 'Vesna Vulovic'.

[51] Bilefsky, 'Serbia's most famous survivor', Richard Sandomir, 'Vesna Vulović, 66, survivor of midair jetliner explosion dies', *New York Times* (29 December 2016).

[52] Sandomir, 'Vesna Vulović'.

[53] *Večernji list*, 'Optimizmu padobran ne treba' [Optimism does not need a parachute] (4 June 2005), available at: {https://www.vecernji.hr/optimizmu-padobran-ne-treba-806423}; Sandomir, 'Vesna Vulović'.

[54] Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security and foreign policy change'; Jelena Subotić, 'Europe is a state of mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:2 (2011), pp. 309–30.

[55] Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security and foreign policy change'.

> are not like that. I am Serbian and proud of it. So I was always asking people not to go to war, and not to fight against Croats or Bosnians because we are all the same nation.[56]

While Vulović herself may have acted from what she believed was *within* the Serbian political narrative, her position was highly threatening to Serbia's ontological security at the time. Even her simple statement that 'we are all the same nation' cut to the core of the justification for Serbian wartime behavior in the 1990s, as these wars were narratively waged as a defence of the Serbian nation from its enemies – Croats and Bosnians.[57] Vulović's claim that, fundamentally, the wars were being fought over nothing, as the perceived differences between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians are meaningless at best and dangerous at most, profoundly challenged the entire scaffolding of the Serbian nationalist project in the 1990s.

Time and again, Vulović presented her activism as an issue of, fundamentally, the rejection of nationalism – the all-consuming Serbian narrative at the time. When asked by a journalist, 'It's believed that it's Croatian nationalists who bombed that plane. The fact that you were a victim from a nationalist attack like that, does that affect the way you look at nationalism?', she responded without missing a beat: 'Maybe, maybe. I don't like neither Croatian, neither Serbian or any other nationalism.'[58]

Vulović's activism continued through the 1990s and in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars. When Milošević was finally ousted from power in October 2000 in a wave of popular revolt over fraudulent elections, Vulović was among the speakers addressing the massive crowd from the steps of the retaken Serbian parliament.[59] Realising that the forces of Serbian nationalism were not defeated with Milošević's ousting but have, if anything, been reconfigured and strengthened in different party coalitions, she resumed her involvement in politics, rallying for the moderate Serbian Democratic Party and against the hard-nationalist Radical Party in the 2008 elections. She was a sought-after supporter by the reform and pro-European Union movements specifically due to her iconic status. As one of the student-movement leaders remarked in 2008:

> Her survival against all odds still resonates across the former Yugoslavia. Her story is an epic and heroic story, and everybody knows her … If she could survive what she did and still be fighting, then so can we.[60]

Placing Vulović's activism in the context of Serbia's continuing search for its ontological security, she herself explained her politics as bolstering, not threatening it:

> My mission is to prevent Serbia from falling into the same hands that destroyed Serbia in the 1990s … We Serbs are survivors. We have survived Communism, Tito, war, poverty, bombardment, sanctions and Milošević. But we just want a normal life. I want a normal life.[61]

As evidenced in the above quote, she explicitly calls for 'normalcy', for the return to stability, calm, predictability – the bases of ontological security. And yet both her personal life and the political fortune of her country never achieved this level of stability and normalcy. As her health declined, she began to suffer more common bouts of survivor's guilt. She connected her deteriorating health with the deteriorating political situation in her country, especially the seemingly non-stop juggernaut of Serbian nationalism, jingoism, and expansionism.

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[56] Quoted in Baum, 'How to survive'.

[57] Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security and foreign policy change'.

[58] CBC Radio, 'Remembering Vesna Vulović, flight attendant who survived 10,000-metre fall from plane' (28 December 2016), available at: {https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-wednesday-edition-1.3914159/remembering-vesna-vulovi%C4%87-flight-attendant-who-survived-10-000-metre-fall-from-plane-1.3914164}.

[59] Baum, 'How to survive'.

[60] Quoted in Bilefsky, 'Serbia's most famous survivor'.

[61] Quoted in Bilefsky, 'Serbia's most famous survivor'.

> I am like a cat, I have had nine lives. But if nationalist forces in this country prevail, my heart will burst … I don't think of the accident every day. I am strong. But the politics in this country are making me tired. My heart can't take much more. I have had enough.[62]

She claimed she was still being persecuted for her activism, decades after the fall of the Milošević regime.[63] She got divorced. Her economic situation worsened, and she ended up living on a small pension in a dilapidated apartment. She was found dead in her home in 2016 at the age of 66.[64] Serbian tabloids made much of the fact that she lived alone, with three cats, and was in such infrequent contact with the outside world that it took days for someone to alert the police that she might be dead.[65] The implication of much of the local coverage was that this was not a death of a hero, but of a tragic figure who first abandoned her nation and was then abandoned by her nation in turn. And yet her death resonated beyond Serbia and throughout other Yugoslav successor states, where she was a symbol of a particular form of 'Yugonostalgia', a sadness for a former multicultural federation, a socialist non-aligned, independent state that was taken seriously in international politics.[66]

Throughout her life, Vesna Vulović rejected the idea that her surviving the crash was a sign of 'luck'. It was anything but, she maintained:

> Everyone thinks I am lucky, but they are mistaken. If I were lucky, I would never had this accident, and my mother and father would be alive. The accident ruined their lives, too. Maybe I was born in the wrong place. Maybe it was a bad place.[67]

This arc of desperately seeking, and never fully achieving, ontological security also reflects on the Serbian state itself. Serbia sought to feel secure by trying to dominate the former Yugoslavia in 1991, by committing genocide against Bosnians in Srebrenica in 1995, by ethnically cleansing Albanian civilians in Kosovo in 1998, by fighting a losing fight against a NATO air force in 1999, by first embracing and then turning away from Europe and embracing Russia and China instead,[68] and so on and so on. All these moves were supposed to secure Serbia's sense of self, and yet they increased state ontological insecurity and instability.[69] Vesna Vulović's story of exceptionalism, and her attempt to use that exceptionalism to save Serbia from itself, ultimately failed.

Muhammad Ali, 1942–2016

Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr was born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1942. He finished high school while also boxing as an amateur. His rise to social and celebrity prominence began as an amateur when he won the gold medal in boxing for the light heavyweight division at the 1960 Rome Olympics.

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[62] Quoted in Dan Bilefsky, 'Serbian heroine who fell 10,000 meters steps into politics', *New York Times* (24 April 2008).

[63] *Telegraf*, 'Vesna Vulović: Proganjaju me i danas zbog Miloševića [Vesna Vulovic: I am still persecuted because of Milošević]' (24 January 2012), available at: {https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/37289-vesna-vulovic-proganjaju-me-i-danas-zbog-stavova-protiv-milosevica}.

[64] Sandomir, 'Vesna Vulović'.

[65] A. Vasić and M. Stanojković, 'Brat Vesne Vulović: Još sam u šoku' [Vesna Vulović's brother: I am still in shock], *Novosti* (24 December 2016).

[66] Filip Stojanovski, 'Ex-Yugoslavs mourn Vesna Vulović, flight attendant who survived highest ever fall without a parachute', *Global Voices* (26 December 2016), available at: {https://globalvoices.org/2016/12/26/ex-yugoslavs-mourn-vesna-vulovic-flight-attendant-who-survived-highest-ever-fall-without-a-parachute/}.

[67] Quoted in Ruth Graham, 'Bask in the bracing unsentimentality of Vesna Vulović, the only person to survive a 1972 plane crash', *Slate* (29 December 2016), available at: {https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/12/bask-in-the-bracing-unsentimentality-of-vesna-Vulović-the-only-person-to-survive-a-1972-plane-crash.html}; see also Sandomir, 'Vesna Vulović'.

[68] Marko Kovačević, 'Understanding the marginality constellations of small states: Serbia, Croatia, and the crisis of EU–Russia relations', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 27:4 (2019), pp. 409–23.

[69] Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity*.

He won the heavyweight title twice, once in 1964 over heavily favoured Sonny Liston, and again ten years later, in 1974, over George Foreman in Zaire.

Ali's personality and outspokenness against his opponents, the press, and broader US culture, including on issues of race, religion, and US foreign policy, were as much responsible for his increasing celebrity status as was his boxing. He is a good example of the different avenues and aspects of iconicity we detailed earlier. Specifically, his presence and visibility, beginning especially with the 1960 Olympics, demonstrate how icons can both serve but also disturb a country's ontological security.

Ali biographer Jonathan Eig provided a helpful description of the context of the 1960 Rome Olympics: 'with Cold War tensions running high, it was impossible to watch men and women compete in Rome without considering the global, potentially apocalyptic struggle between communism and capitalism raging across the globe'.[70] It was a time of cultural shifts, with the United States including more women and Black athletes than in any prior Olympics. While there, Clay was asked about US race relations by a foreign reporter. 'Oh I guess there are some troubles. But nothing you can't fix. And the United States is still the greatest country in the world.'[71] Clay would win the gold medal over the favourite, Polish fighter Zbigniew Pietrzykowski, and return to the United States a champion, first to New York, then to his hometown of Louisville. At Standiford Field Airport,[72] Clay was welcomed by the mayor, his former high-school principal, his family, and a crowd of 300 local fans. His principal, Atwood Wilson, included some geopolitical implications for Clay's achievement: 'When we consider all the efforts that are being made to undermine the prestige of America, we can be grateful we had such a fine ambassador as Cassius to send over to Italy.'[73]

Clay turned professional shortly after this return. He won the heavyweight title in 1964 with a stunning victory over then-champion Sonny Liston. A number of issues in the 1960s thrust Clay and his persona into the spotlight and created national controversies. After becoming familiar with Islam in 1959, he officially converted in 1964 and changed his name to Muhammad Ali.[74] While Islam was viewed sceptically by many US Americans at the time, it would be this faith in part that would make him a transnational figure. This was evidenced by the receptions he would receive when travelling outside of the United States, including in 1964 to Egypt where he met President Gamel Abdel-Nasser, in 1971–2 during his pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, and in Zaire (Congo) in 1974 during his 'Rumble in the Jungle' fight against George Foreman.

Over time, Ali became an icon that implicated US ontological (in)security in three particular and interrelated ways: race, sport, and military service versus religious freedom. First was his focus on race, and especially Black–white relations. One analyst observed:

'To the white majority, Ali's celebration of black culture challenged the existing social order because it helped eliminate the negative self-image prevalent among some blacks and encouraged black consciousness which was a necessary foundation for the promotion of black political and economic power.'[75]

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[70] Jonathan Eig, *Ali: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), p. 63. For an analysis of the Olympic Games as a site of protest and power, see M. Patrick Cottrell and Travis Nelson, 'Not just the Games? Power, protest and politics at the Olympics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:4 (2011), pp. 729–53.

[71] Quoted in Eig, *Ali*, p. 64.

[72] In 2019, this Louisville airport was renamed the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport.

[73] Quoted in Eig, *Ali*, p. 71.

[74] Winston Bowman, 'Feat of Clay: Muhammad Ali's legal fight against the Vietnam draft', *Journal of Supreme Court History*, 44 (2019), pp. 307-24 (pp. 307, 308).

[75] David K. Wiggins, 'The notion of double-consciousness and the involvement of Black athletes in American sport', in G. G. Eison and David K Wiggins (eds), *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), pp. 133-56 (p. 157).

Race has become of an increasing interest to Ontological Security Studies,[76] and the engagement of Ali's commentary with race throughout his career was as much a challenge to US ontological security as it was a statement of his own experiences as a Black athlete. Yet what was important about Ali's narratives on race and the place of Black Americans within the United States is more nuanced than just a challenging of the existing order. As Eig notes, Ali would often 'adapt his remarks depending on the makeup of his audience'. For predominantly or all-Black audiences he would often distinguish his and the Nation of Islam's views from the integrationist perspectives of other civil rights leaders and movements. Yet in front of predominantly white groups, such as the 'liberal white college students' who were his most frequent audience, while Ali would 'challenge them to reconsider their prejudices', he would also playfully and 'in good humor' engage them and conclude with calls and responses ('Whooo's the champ? Whooo's the greatest?').[77] The point here is that while Ali often linked his agency, views, and narratives as an iconic Black athlete to US structural racism, he also tailored that performativity vis-à-vis his audience. As such, as an icon, he shaped but was also shaped by the ontology of his political communities.[78]

Second, his dominance as a boxer gained him notice in a broader US obsession with sport. As Gamal Abdel-Shehid notes:

> [one thing that] can be said about the United States is, more than any other, it is a sporting-mad nation. Although it is true that other countries throughout the world can at times be sporting-mad (e.g., Brazil for soccer, Pakistan and India for cricket), it is not true that these countries feature a constant diet of different professional and amateur sports that occupy the calendar for 52 weeks of the year with almost no respite. As such, within this constant interchanging, and sometimes converging, economy of war and sport, the athlete in the United States takes on a very important cultural and political role.[79]

Eldridge Cleaver, a commentator, intellectual, writer, and once-leader of the Black Panthers, characterised the intersection of these two themes, race and sport, in his *Soul on Ice* memoir in 1965: 'What white America demands in her black champions, is a brilliant, powerful body, and a dull bestial mind – a tiger in the ring and a pussycat outside the ring.'[80] Ali challenged this dynamic.

The connections between sport and ontological security, including the role of sport as a source of vicarious identity, have only recently been of interest to OSS scholars.[81] But there has been a long-standing interest in sport as a form of popular culture intersecting with world politics.[82] What makes sports figures like Ali so important as sites for OSS is that sports involve both celebrities (i.e. 'elites') as well as the everyday level of analysis. Sporting events involve routines which deeply imbricate individuals and groups with one another and invest the viewing of sports with emotions and excitement. Here, race intersects with sport in the context of the Cold War and the middle of the 20th century. Abdel-Shehid again notes how 'Black athletes and soldiers (largely male) play a key and iconical role in reproducing United States hegemony both nationally and internationally, and to a great extent, reproducing dominant ideological values'.[83] Here, the site of sport, the valuing of supremacy, and sport's relationship to US ontological (in)security as a global hegemon will prove to be an important theme for further investigation.[84]

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[76] Katharine A. M. Wright, Toni Haastrup, and Roberta Guerrina, 'Equalities in freefall? Ontological insecurity and the long-term impact of COVID-19 in the academy', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28 (2021), pp. 163–7; Michael Newell, 'Comparing American perceptions of post-Civil War Ku Klux Klan and transnational violence', *Security Dialogue*, 51:4 (2020), pp. 287–304, Justin De Leon, 'Lakota experiences of (in)security: Cosmology and ontological security', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22:1 (2020), pp. 33–62.

[77] Eig, *Ali*, p. 261. The role of humour in ontological security is a recent interest in that research community: see James Brassett, Christopher Browning, and Muireann O'Dwyer, 'EU've got to be kidding: Anxiety, humour and ontological security', *Global Society*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 8–26.

[78] The dynamism here is in some sense even more remarkable, as US society during Ali's time as a boxer changed radically. As Eig notes, 'when he had won the heavyweight championship as Cassius Clay, he had been merely a promising boxer with manic energy and a loud mouth'. But after increasing protests against racism, the Vietnam War, and other civil and political issues in the 1960s and 1970s, Ali's status became more persuasive: 'It wasn't that Ali moved toward the mainstream but that the mainstream moved toward Ali', Eig, *Ali*, pp. 276–7.

[79] Gamal Abdel-Shehid, 'Muhammad Ali: America's B-side', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 26:3 (2002), pp. 317–25.

[80] Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 117.

[81] Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity*, chapter 1.

[82] Victor Cha, 'Role of sport in international relations: National rebirth and renewal', *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 11:1 (2016), pp. 139–55, Hannu Kyröläinen and Tapio Varis, 'Approaches to the study of sports in international relations', *Current Research on Peace and Violence*, 4:1 (1981), pp. 55–88.

Further, the narrative features of sports can implicate ontological security, especially as they relate to the central significance of the 'biographical' or 'autobiographical narrative' of agents.[85] Sports figures can and often are a regular presence in the everyday lives of fans. Ali's presence was pronounced in 1960s America. As Eig observes about 1964, 'among black Americans only Martin Luther King Jr., who won the Nobel Peace Prize that year, would receive more attention from the nation's leading newspapers'.[86] Activist and comedian Dick Gregory, though, took the comparison further:

> When you saw King, you saw sound bites. Most folks never heard 'I have a dream'. They heard little tidbits of it.' But with Muhammad Ali, he was 'in your … face for as many rounds as the fight last … You watch him beat a white boy down to the ground and there ain't a goddamn thing you can do about it. Then he'd go and talk, *praising Allah!* This had never happened before.[87]

An additional related point regards the specific sport of boxing which allows a boxer 'to be a rebel'. As Eig observes, 'Ali merely extended it beyond the ring. He wanted to make everything he said and everything he did a protest.'[88]

The third issue relates to Ali's challenges to US foreign policy. Even before his resistance to military conscription during the Vietnam War, Ali had challenged US foreign-policy positions. In his 1964 visit to Africa, he first visited Ghana and met its president, Kwame Nkrumah, who gifted him copies of his *Africa Must Unite* and *Consciencism*. Ali biographer Eig characterised this exchange as 'meant to show that Nkrumah and Ali shared the desire to fight the white powers that had subjugated black people for so long, that the civil rights movement in America shared common goals with the postcolonial liberation movement in Africa'.[89] On that same trip, his visit to Egypt included the viewing of a film on the 1956 Suez Crisis. Ali told the Egyptians afterwards that this changed his views on that war, which he said had been made out by the US press to 'appear as an Arab aggression against Israel. I now understand the truth about the battle. It was an aggression against you.' Ali then vowed that he 'should be pleased to fight on your side and under your flag'.[90]

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[83] Abdel-Shehid, 'Muhammad Ali', p. 318.

[84] Benjamin T. Harrison, 'The Muhammad Ali draft case and public debate on the Vietnam War', *Peace Research*, 33:2 (2001), pp. 69–86 (p. 77). Mike Marqusee posits the importance of 'role models' coming from sports, similar to how we are treating Ali as an icon due to his status as a champion boxer. He notes that the role model's 'origins … lie in the Victorian ideology of amateur sport. The Victorians paid tribute to the level playing field … at the same time that they justified the domination of sport by a social and economic elite', Mike Marqusee, 'Sport and stereotype: From role model to Muhammad Ali', *Race & Class*, 36:4 (1995), pp. 1–29 (p. 9).

[85] See Berenskoetter, 'Parameters of a national biography'; Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt', as well as Jakub Eberle and Vladimír Handl, 'Ontological security, civilian power, and German foreign policy toward Russia', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16:1 (2020), pp. 41–58; Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908.

[86] Eig, *Ali*, p. 164.

[87] Quoted as an interview with author, in Eig, *Ali*, pp. 164–5. Eig also notes that Ali's 'faith in a nonwestern religion confused many Americans, and his belief that a global union of nonwhites would eventually defeat the Caucasian minority infuriated many of those same people. What made Ali so controversial was that he was an athlete, not a radical political activist. He was more difficult for white Americans to ignore.' Eig, *Ali*, p. 203.

[88] Eig, *Ali*, p. 229.

[89] Eig, *Ali*, pp. 168–9.

[90] 'Clay says he would answer an Egyptian call to arms', *New York Times* (11 June 1964), p. 40.

Ali had registered for the selective service in 1960 but received such low scores on his military aptitude test (later discovered to be a result of his dyslexia), that he was designated an I-Y, making him unlikely to get drafted. Yet US involvement in the Vietnam War gradually increased so that by the mid-1960s, the US military began lowering its testing standards, resulting in a reclassification of Ali to I-A in February of 1966. Consequently, Ali was drafted.[91] He soon thereafter issued a conscientious objection to the draft, based on religious grounds resulting from his Islamic faith. It was in an interview in February 1966 that Ali justified his resistance with a line that would provide an almost-rhythmic mantra for protestors thereafter: 'I don't have no personal quarrel with those Viet Congs'.[92] His requests were rejected by a number of bureaucratic and political audiences, including his local draft board in Louisville, the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee and its chairman and vice-chair, and several appeals courts.[93] In April of 1967, he was stripped of his title and banned from boxing, and his case would go to the US Supreme Court in 1971.

Ali's objection to the draft fostered US ontological insecurity by revealing not only the systemic manifestations of US structural racism but also the increasing unease and instability of the prolonged Vietnam War. Most draft-board officials who heard cases of conscientious objectors were white, and Black Americans disproportionately served and were casualties in the Vietnam War.[94] Ali, like many Black Americans, also faced systemic challenges in the US court system and within broader US institutions (initially including the US press). While religious concerns from individuals who invoked their faith's pacifism were often accepted as a basis for conscientious objection, the Second Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Islam, while possessing 'some characteristics of a religious sect', was primarily, nevertheless, a political ideology and thus different from other religions.[95]

There are a number of data points that illustrate how Ali as an icon generated US state ontological insecurity. The extent to which Ali's conscientious objection to the draft implicated various parts of US society cannot be understated. US president Lyndon Johnson proposed a deal to Ali to fulfil his draft obligations by engaging in exhibitions at army bases, as former heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis had done in World War II (Ali declined the offer). Years later, the next president Richard Nixon would cheer Ali's March 1971 defeat against Joe Frazier, celebrating Ali's loss by referring to him as the 'draft dodger asshole'.[96] Many US newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, refused throughout the 1960s to print his new name in stories on his resistance to the draft and instead continued to refer to him as Cassius Clay.[97]

It was a topic for those deployed in Vietnam, with one army specialist in a letter to US president Johnson observing 'there are few people who speak of anything else over here'.[98] Draft boards indicated his case was a slippery slope and would make it more difficult for them to execute conscription. The chairman of one draft board, Allen Rhorer, wrote to US attorney general Ramsey Clark that the case made members 'seriously consider submitting their resignations' unless something 'prompt' was done about it.[99] The US State Department, shortly after Ali's conscientious objection to the draft, convinced then-British prime minister Harold Wilson not to meet with the champion during Ali’s visit to Great Britain in 1966.[100] The US Department of Justice took Ali’s objections so seriously that he was put under surveillance, including during some of his conversations with the Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad.

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[91] Bowman, 'Feat of Clay', pp. 380–1.

[92] Quoted in Eig, *Ali*, p. 213. Eig notes that 'when he recognized its resonance, Ali began repeating the line "I have no quarrel with the Viet Cong" … Alone, with almost no support from the nation's intellectuals or religious leaders, he had taken a position that was, ironically very much American … like Henry David Thoreau … making a stand for civil disobedience, for freedom.' Eig, *Ali*, p. 214.

[93] Bowman, 'Feat of Clay', p. 310. This systemic discrimination in terms of conscription would become an increasingly prevalent observation by US Americans through Ali's appeals. Bowman asserts that by 1971, 'As a consequence, views on the fairness of both the war and the draft that had once seemed radical had become increasingly commonplace', with Richard Nixon even observing 'the unfairness of the present system' in a 1970 address to the US Congress: Bowman, 'Feat of Clay', p. 307.

[94] Harrison, 'Muhammad Ali draft case', p. 73.

[95] Bowman, 'Feat of Clay', p. 311.

[96] Larry Platt, 'Muhammad Ali's Philadelphia Story', *The Philadelphia Citizen* (6 June 2016), available at: {https://thephiladelphiacitizen.org/muhammad-ali-philadelphia-story}.

[97] Victor Mather, 'In the ring he was Ali, but in the newspapers he was still Clay', *New York Times* (9 June 2016).

[98] Quoted in Eig, *Ali*, p. 264.

[99] Quoted in Eig, *Ali*, p. 232.

His conscientious objection also, eventually, mobilised Black America, where he had been up until that time a controversial figure because of his rhetoric against Christian (and Black) opponents such as Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson as ‘Uncle Toms’, and his criticisms of integrationist protest movements such as Dr Martin Luther King, Jr’s. In one key inflection point during the case, when LBJ’s deal to tour army bases doing exhibitions had been presented to Ali in June 1967, Ali’s manager asked the professional football star Jim Brown to gather together fellow Black athletes to convince Ali to take the deal. Many at that meeting, which would come to be known as the ‘Cleveland Summit’, were veterans themselves, and all urged Ali to take the deal. But after several hours of meeting, where Ali calmly, and somewhat jovially, responded to each of their criticisms, ‘everybody had a chance to ask him all the questions they wanted to. Eventually, everybody was satisfied that his stand was genuine based on his religion and that we would back him.’[101] Along with a highly publicised meeting two months prior with Dr King that led to a press conference where each issued their support for one another and against the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement were now coalescing, both in opposition to the US government, in part because of Ali’s stances.

As Ali’s case worked its way through the courts, he was a frequent speaker at college campuses and peace rallies protesting the Vietnam War. His leadership and presence at these protests would have consequences for him, including limiting his ability to continue his fighting career, especially when it came to travelling.[102] Yet public opinion on the Vietnam War changed during this time, with Americans increasingly opposing the war as casualties mounted and strategic losses (such as the Tet Offensive) were revealed.[103] The Supreme Court was also divided. Justice Harry Blackmun privately noted his own body’s quandary: ‘the Court will be excoriated whether it upholds or reverses’ the conviction.[104] Eventually, in 1971 the court overturned Ali’s conviction in an 8–0 decision in *Clay v. United States*, albeit the reasons for each Justice’s opinion varied.[105]

There are four further aspects of Ali’s iconic status that should be noted. First, it was not only his continuous presence in American life and media, but also the interdependent series of momentous images of Ali that reinforced his iconic status. Two pictures in particular – his yelling triumphantly at Sonny Liston in their May 1965 rematch,[106] and an *Esquire* cover depicting Ali as a martyr like Saint Sebastian[107] – served to reinforce Ali’s iconic status, and the themes of his supremacy in the ring and his sacrifice and unwavering stance vis-à-vis the draft.

Second, what also made Ali’s juxtaposition with US ontological insecurity so striking was his supreme calm, and even confidence, with who he was and what he believed. In a sense, Ali projected ontological security at a time when that of the United States was being upended, both at home and in the world. Most drives for ontological security insecuritise the other way – states or societies seeking their drives in ways that insecuritise individuals both ontologically and physically, such as, for example, with policies on migration noted earlier. National Basketball Association star Bill Russell, who was present at the Cleveland Summit, wrote in a letter to *Sports Illustrated*:

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[100] Harrison, ‘Muhammad Ali draft case’, p. 77.

[101] Jim Brown, quoted in Eig, *Ali*, p. 248.

[102] Ali’s passport was revoked by the US government during this time. Bowman, ‘Feat of Clay’, p. 313.

[103] John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

[104] The Blackmun Papers, available at: {https://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/blackmun/}.

[105] Bowman, ‘Feat of Clay’, pp. 318–19.

[106] The photo and an accompanying story behind it can be seen and read at Chris Rattue, ‘When Muhammad Ali knocked out Sonny Liston: The story behind the most famous image in sport’ (27 May 2020), available at: {https://www.foxsports.com.au/boxing/when-muhammad-ali-knocked-out-sonny-liston-the-story-behind-the-most-famous-image-in-sport/news-story/f11e95c8a5c172b5c48852e8fe80bef9}.

[107] The photo recreated Francesco Botticini’s 15th-century painting of the saint. See Carl Fischer, ‘The photograph that made a martyr out of Muhammad Ali’ (7 November 2018), available at: {https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photograph-made-martyr-muhammad-ali}.

> I envy Muhammad Ali. He faces a possible five years in jail and he has been stripped of his heavyweight championship, but I still envy him. He has something I have never been able to attain and something very few people I know possess. He has an absolute and sincere faith … I am not worried about Muhammad Ali. He is better equipped than anyone I know to withstand the trials in store for him.[108]

It was this conviction that some of Ali's friends connected to Islam.[109] The third observation thus follows from the second, in that his religious convictions, and the global expanse of his religious community, provided a break with the Christian faiths that were practised across Black and white America. Christianity had been both a vehicle for white supremacy but also a potential bridge between Black and white America that other civil rights leaders such as Dr Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy emphasised in speeches and sermons. Christianity was imposed on slaves on the plantation as another form of white supremacy. This was discussed in the Nation of Islam literature and speeches that proved influential on Cassius Clay, leading to his conversion.[110] Here, it was that part of both white and Black America that sought racial harmony that would be unsettled by Ali's religion.

Our fourth observation is that icons in these settings can also be mobilised by other actors for varying purposes. Ali on several occasions was commanded by Elijah Muhammad to go to Africa and generate donations and loans for the flailing Nation of Islam, something he did most notably in March 1974, where he was able to get Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi to donate $3 million to the cause.[111] His 1974 'Rumble in the Jungle' bout was financed in part by Zaire's dictator Joseph Mobutu, and the fight boosted that leader's reputation.

Ali's image would improve following the overturning of his conviction, his regaining of the heavyweight title in 1974 against Foreman, and then perhaps most poignantly and tragically the toll Parkinson's disease took in silencing him. In line with Parker's 'tragic-dramatic' narrative definition of icon presented earlier, Abdel-Shehid asserts in 2002: 'Many in America may be able to love Ali today he who can barely speak and who trembles almost constantly. As such, Ali, or rather the image of Ali, can be slotted within the logic of racial paternalism that has been so emblematic of the United States since slavery.'[112]

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that icons are both an effect of, but also a challenge to, a political community's ontological security drives. There remain several avenues to explore regarding icons for future research. We focus on three here.

The first regards the potential for once again mining the 'levels-of-analysis' or 'aggregation problem' in ontological security studies for its analytical leverage. Icons are individuals, but their iconic status presupposes and then impacts the communities they are within, all of which have drives for ontological security. Tracing the ways in which political communities co-create icons that then make them vulnerable to ontological insecuritising calls attention to how important it is to continue to move beyond concerns regarding 'resolving' the aggregation issue and instead utilise it for exploring how the politics of ontological security inevitably involves a multitude of 'levels', actors, spaces, and times that conflict with one another in the elusive search for ontological security.

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[108] Bill Russell and Tex Maule, 'I am not worried about Ali', *Sports Illustrated* (19 June 1967).

[109] As Sam Saxon, a friend of Ali since they met in Miami in 1961, noted, 'Most people who don't come over [to Islam] have fear in their hearts. He was fearless. I was fearless' (quoted in Eig, *Ali*, p. 91). It is not incidental that routines – a key device in establishing ontological security – are also central to religious practice.

[110] Specifically, the depiction of forced Christianity in a cartoon in an issue of Nation of Islam periodical *Muhammad Speaks* struck a chord with Ali, according to a letter from 1961: see Sean Gregory, 'Exclusive: The real reason Muhammad Ali converted to Islam', *Time* (2 June 2017), available at: {https://time.com/4798179/muhammad-ali-islam-conversion/}. Also, Eig, *Ali*, p. 87.

[111] Eig, *Ali*, p. 364.

[112] Abdel-Shehid, 'Muhammad Ali', p. 321.

The second is a core ethical issue regarding the process of 'icon-ing', or society looking to individuals for ontological security needs. This is a theme in more recent ontological security scholarship, which draws out the politically concerning and ethically dubious treatments of the actors who are asked, even forced, to perform in the routines that restore (but also undermine) a community's ontological security. In structurationist terms, treating Ali and Vulović as icons in national and international settings calls into question who had agency, and how to judge their political communities, who engaged them not as subjects but iconic objects. It calls further into question how those communities should be judged as to how they treated those icons when they exercised that agency in ways which proved ontologically and politically inconvenient. Such a line of inquiry becomes even more urgent when considering younger international icons such as Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani woman who advocated for women's education, and Greta Thunberg, the Swedish woman who began her environmental activism as a teenager.

The third and final thread of future research is a flip side of the second. It is not about icons but iconoclasm, or the tearing down, resisting, or rejecting of icons by society. This too can be investigated utilising the politics explored through ontological security studies and would marshal insights from works in religious studies[113] and history[114] to examine the ways in which an icon is delegitimated or even destroyed because of the challenges it presents to a community's ontological security. This is a particularly important future research agenda considering the role of icons in both producing, but also challenging, a society's ontological security.

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[113] James Noyes, *The Politics of Iconoclasm: Religion, Violence and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[114] Marina Prusac and Kristine Kolrud (eds), *Iconoclasm from Antiquity to Modernity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

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