



Race, Sport and Politics

Carlingford

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The Sporting Black Diaspora

Ben Carrington



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Race, Sport and Politics

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For my mother, who made everything possible
Clare Anne Carrington (1955–2005)

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Introduction: Sport, the Black Athlete and the Remaking of Race

Sport is ambiguous. On the one hand, it can have an anti-barbaric and anti-sadistic effect by means of fair play, a spirit of chivalry, and consideration for the weak. On the other hand, in many of its varieties and practices it can promote aggression, brutality, and sadism, above all on people who do not expose themselves to the exertion and discipline required by sports but instead merely watch: that is, those who regularly shout from the sidelines. Such an ambiguity should be analyzed systematically. To the extent that education can exert an influence, the results should be applied to the life of sports. (Theodor Adorno)

A professor of political science publicly bewailed that a man of my known political interests should believe that cricket had ethical and social values. I had no wish to answer. I was just sorry for the guy. (C.L.R. James)

The Invention of the Black Athlete and the Remaking of Race

The black athlete was created on 26 December 1908 in a boxing ring in Sydney, Australia. For the following hundred or so years, this new representation would provide one of the most important discursive boundaries through which blackness itself would come to be understood. This powerful fantasmatic figure – ‘the black athlete’ – had been a long while in the making. It was the product and perhaps the logical end point of European colonial racism, its constitutive parts forged from a combination of preexisting, centuries-old racial folklores, religious fables and the scientific tales of nineteenth century racial science. The recently institutionalized, putatively meritocratic arena of egalitarian (male) competitive sports, the emergence of a nascent global communications network and the development of cinema as spectacle, provided the social mechanisms for its conception.

Those present at the birth of the black athlete were unlikely to have been fully cognizant of the lasting and profound effect of this momentous event. That matters racial would never be quite the same again. However, as a 30-year-old boxer from Texas stood victorious over his defeated opponent, the spirited but outclassed white Canadian Tommy Burns, even the largely all-white audience on that warm Sydney morning would likely have realized that a disturbance of sorts had occurred within the heart of the white colonial frame. Burns went down in the fourteenth round of the fight under a barrage of punches. The police intervened, ordering the cameras to stop filming, and

the bout was brought to a close. The big negro from Galveston, as the *New York Times* would describe him, was declared the winner. Jack Johnson, the son of slave-born parents, was the new heavyweight champion of the world.

While the very final moments of this revolutionary sporting moment would not be televised, the wider truth could not be contained nor denied by the averting white technological gaze. A black man held the title that only the bravest and strongest could lay claim to, the supposed pinnacle of heterosexual manhood, the very definition of patriarchal identity based upon violence, domination, courage and mastery: *heavyweight champion of the world*. Race as a productive category capable of explaining social relations and hierarchies, the limits and contours of whiteness, and even the nature of politics and subaltern freedom in the west, would all have to be rethought in the coming years and decades after this fight.

Race, Sport and Politics is an account of the political meanings and global impact of 'the black athlete' over the past century, the role of sport in the making and remaking of western ideas about racial difference, and the position of sport in the forging of gendered, national and racial identities within the broader African diaspora. I suggest that throughout the twentieth century and into the present there has been a continuous struggle over the meaning of 'the black athlete'. It has been contested from within and without. What the black athlete signifies has shifted and oscillated over the years: submissive and threatening, often obedient, occasionally rebellious, revolting and in revolt, political and compromised, a commodity and commodified. At various points in political struggles and during certain historical periods the black athlete has been despised and lionized, blamed for the woes of the black community and held up as its savior, seen as signaling a post-racial future and confirming the indisputable facts of racial alterity in the present.

What is most remarkable about 'the black athlete' is that it has been given many of these contradictory meanings *in the same moment*. Only rarely has the black athlete spoken, or been allowed to speak. It is normally spoken for. It is knowable in advance (before it speaks) and from without (by various others). It is defined by common folklore, sports discourse – most powerfully within the sports media – and by the advertising industries, by pseudo-scientific inquiries and the educational system, and by athletes themselves, fans, sports administrators and officials.

The black athlete is thus a political entity and a *global sporting racial project*. The invention of the black athlete was (and remains) an attempt to reduce blackness itself and black people in general into a semi-humanized category of radical otherness. The exceptionality of black athleticism thus moves through a double bind. It is on the one hand and at once *typical*; an *ideal type* that attempts to define the boundaries of blackness itself and therefore, by extension, the identities of all black people or rather, to be very specific, those racialized *into* the category of blackness. And yet this very *typicality* serves to render black people, as bodies, outside the category of the truly human as *exceptional*. *Typically exceptional* we might say. Black athletes – and therefore black people in general as the particular comes to

stand in for the whole – become nearly human, almost human, and sometimes even super-human. Human-lite or human-plus. But very rarely, simply, *ordinarily* human. Thus the very boundaries and meanings that mark and therefore define ‘the black athlete’ come to be fought over and can be seen, I want to suggest, as a site of political struggle.

Finally, ‘the black athlete’ turns out not to be about blackness at all – although it has come to be seen that way. Historically, the black athlete developed out of and from a white masculinist colonial fear of loss and impotence, revealing the commingling of sex, class, race and power. The black athlete was created at a moment of impending imperial crisis; the concern that the assumed superiority of colonial whiteness over all Others could not, after all, be sustained. The colonial project was porous. It leaked. It could not contain the very aspects of difference that it helped to produce and claimed to both know and master. The loss of political power, and the concomitant fears of sexual impotency, finds its corollary in the rise of the black athlete. The invention of the black athlete, at the height of European colonial global governance, signaled not Europe’s crowning moment of success but its impending decline. This colonial anxiety would require a rethinking of the very category of race and of what it meant (and means) to be ‘white’.

More generally, *Race, Sport and Politics* addresses sport’s historical and contemporary role in the shaping of racial discourse. It considers sport’s place within black diasporic struggles for freedom and equality as well as the contested location of sport in relation to the politics of recognition within contemporary European multicultural societies. I argue that even within a putatively post-racial era, the institutional forms of commodified and hyper-commercialized sports¹ remain profoundly and deeply racialized. In part, this is a story of the continuing effects of ideas about race and racial difference within sport itself. But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, an argument that suggests that *sport reproduces race*. That is, sport has become an important if somewhat overlooked arena for the *making and remaking of race beyond its own boundaries*.

I use the term *the racial signification of sport* to indicate how sport, as a highly regulated and embodied cultural practice, has, from its manifestation as a modern social institution during the high-period of European imperialist expansionism, played a central role in popularizing notions of absolute biological difference while also providing an important arena for forms of cultural resistance against white racism. These ‘acts of resistance’ have ranged from the redemptive (sport as personal savior) to the transformative (sport as social change). In short, ideologies of race saturate the fabric of modern sports, sports help to reproduce race and, further, the discursive construct of ‘the black athlete’ becomes an important site for these various and varied struggles.

Two separate but interrelated general arguments also structure the book. The first, that precisely because sport is commonly viewed as apolitical it has had an important influence on not only black politics, formally understood,

but more widely on how African diasporic peoples have viewed themselves *and* how these communities have come to be viewed. It is sport's assumed innocence as a space (in the imagination) and a place (as it physically manifests itself) that is removed from everyday concerns of power, inequality, struggle and ideology, that has, paradoxically, allowed it to be filled with a range of contradictory assumptions that have inevitably spilled back over and into wider society. It has offered a space for transcendence and utopian dreaming, often before other supposedly more important arenas of civic life were able to be changed. I suggest that taking this contradiction seriously – that is, *the political nature of the apolitical* – helps us towards a deeper and richer understanding of politics: what it means to act as well as the limits to human agency, what is at stake in the very claims for recognition and freedom, and how power itself is both manifest and challenged.

The second general argument rests on the claim that the deeply priapean nature of modern sports – and especially of competitive, hyper-commercialized sports – produces a homosocial space for the projection of white masculinist fantasies of domination, control and desire for the racialized Other. I suggest that this well-observed feminist and psychoanalytical reading helps us to understand sports as, in part, a stage for the white male imaginary to engage the latent (occasionally explicit) homosocial desires for and fears about the black male (sporting) body. Or what we might more succinctly and simply term *the fear of the black athlete*. Some of these popular sporting tropes of desire, yearning and ultimately of impotence are familiar, such as 'The Great White Hope' and 'White Men Can't Jump'. But we tend to skip past these commonplace utterances rather too quickly. I want to suggest that if we care to take them seriously we might find that they reveal something more fundamental about how the 'white colonial frame' continues to reproduce forms of white colonial desire and therefore of anti-black racism in the present.

The white colonial frame is my adaptation of what the sociologist Joe Feagin (2010) terms the *white racial frame*. Feagin defines the white racial frame as a centuries-old worldview that is based on whites' racially constructed reality of how the world works. This 'frame' then becomes the dominant way in which people come to 'see' race and provides a further function in enabling racism itself to be rationalized away while denying the historical forms of white supremacy that continue to structure contemporary social institutions, cultural processes (including language) and interpersonal relations. The white racial frame, Feagin suggests, is 'an emotion-laden construction process that shapes everyday relationships and institutions in fundamental and racialized ways' (Feagin 2010: ix).

The white *colonial* frame draws attention to how these racialized ways of seeing and framing the world derive not from some abstract and universal notion of whiteness (which, paradoxically, runs the risk of essentializing white racism) but from a specific set of European historical institutions (political, cultural and economic) that slowly begin to emerge in the sixteenth century and that structure much of the world in a very specific way, or what is commonly labeled European colonialism. In other words, the white

colonial frame is a concept that seeks to highlight how both the lived experience of white supremacy (as a social and cultural phenomenon) and the systemic features of colonialism (as a political and economic institution) come together to produce forms of anti-black racism, both historically and contemporaneously, even after the formal dismantling of European colonial regimes. I explore this 'colonial model of the world' which underpins the white colonial frame in more detail in the following chapter.

I also read the dominant mode of competitive, hyper-commercialized professional sport within the west as a site for the ritualistic display and enactment of violence, both symbolic and literal. Sport remains one of the few spaces within modern liberal democracies for the sanction of acts of physical violence within and by non-state actors. Thus, sports have historically provided an opportunity for blacks throughout the African diaspora to gain recognition through *physical struggle* not just for their sporting achievements in the narrow and obvious sense but more significantly and fundamentally for their humanity in a context where the structures of the colonial state continue to shape the 'post/colonial' present. I argue that the (latent) sexualized and physical nature of the sporting encounter between black and white athletes becomes sublimated into a set of highly racialized discourses and representations about the black Other and that finds ultimate expression in forms of sporting ritual.

Throughout the text I use the *post/colonial* to mark the current period of racial formation. My use of the virgule is deliberate and meant to signal that the moment 'after' the colonial is itself caught in ambivalent tension between, on the one hand, the surpassing of formal colonial governance, and on the other, the continuance of neocolonial relations. The virgule can mean 'or' as in a divide between two different words. It can also be used to mean 'and' implying a strong association. It suggests a contextual choice of sorts as well, that even the meanings of the *neocolonial* (same/continue) and the *postcolonial* (different/after) may themselves shift from one geographical and historical location to another, just as the post/colonial's formal linguistic usage implies that either side of the division can be chosen to complete the meaning of the sentence. To put it simply, different locations experience the post/colonial in different ways. I do not claim any deeper analytical insight beyond this attempt to unsettle the reader and to bring to the fore the political question of the colonial in the present by questioning the 'post' in the post/colonial. This does not, of course, resolve the problem that the post/colonial, as Ann McClintock notes, remains 'haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle' (1995: 10).

In order to make sense of the shifts between human freedom and unfreedom, the politics of resistance and accommodation, longing and loathing, that mark the relationship between sport, race and politics, I attempt to produce a diachronic analysis. The time frame moves from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, with a particular focus on the past one hundred years. Key moments in the history of the racial signification of