

The Black Radical Sports Writing Tradition: Challenging the Ontological Impossibility of the Black Sports Journalist

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“You ever wonder why I sit down behind third base with my typewriter on my knees? It’s because Negro reporters aren’t allowed in the press box. So, guess what? You, Mr. Robinson, are not the only one with something at stake here.”

– Wendell Smith (2013) (played by Andre Holland), from the film *42*

“I don’t think you notice the absence as much as you notice their presence when you see three or four black reporters in a locker room because it’s unusual. You need diversity. Face it, we’re different in a lot of ways. You tend to feel more comfortable with someone who may understand where you come from.”

– Doc Rivers (2003) NBA player/coach

“Hollywood usually gets it wrong when it comes to how journalism works, and sports writers, when they do show up, are often rendered as a clump of white men occupying the margins of a story, usually as an annoyance at best, a hostile presence at worst. Real issues of sexism or racism as experienced by reporters rarely make it on screen.”

– Nina Metz (2021) “Naomi Osaka, sports journalism and portrayals of sports writers on the big and small screen”

Introduction

In comedian Paul Mecurio’s 2009 HBO sketch “Got No Game: Race in Sports,” a fictitious “Interracial Summit on Athletics” takes place in May 1959, where “top secret negotiations” are held to divide up sports “among the races.” The sketch, which attempts to satirize sporting stereotypes and racial typologies, shows various “racial delegations” arguing over who will get to own which sports. At one point an exasperated moderator interjects, telling the delegates, “Gentlemen, gentlemen, gentlemen, please!...We’ve been at this all night. We have

to come to some agreement, otherwise we're going to end up with black golfers, female race car drivers, and boxers who aren't Italian or even Irish!". Shortly after the Black delegation trade fly fishing for basketball to the Whites, Native Americans are given mascots, and a bespeckled figure wearing a suit emerges from the side of the darkened room and walks slowly towards the negotiating table. He interrupts the conversation. "Excuse me," says the man, "Is there nothing for the chosen people?". The Hispanic delegate replies, "When were you ever *chosen* for a sport?", to mocking laughter from the others. "But there must be something that we could do?". With a poetic intonation, the man continues, "For out on those simple fields, where boys become men and glory is seized by brave gladiators...It was Theodore Dreiser, the son of a Rabbi, who once said...." The moderator interjects: "Alright, alright, please! I'll tell you what, you can have sports writing."

The humor lies precisely in the absurd yet common sense truth that Jews do not play sports – in fact are biologically incapable of doing so (Gilman 1991) – and further that the differentiation in participation rates by various racial and ethnic groups is a simple reality revealing underlying racial truths of immutable biological differences linked to observable sporting aptitudes. Given these self-evident sporting myths, it makes sense that the field of sports journalism will be the Jewish contribution to sports. The reality, of course, is that there has been and continues to be a long and rich tradition of Jewish athletic achievement and representation across nearly all sports, even as this history has been disavowed and denied and as Jewish athletes have challenged antisemitism inside and outside of sports (Eisen 1999, Tatz 2017, Dart and Long 2020). Similarly, there is an equally long standing tradition of writing about sports by black journalists, even if this has been poorly recognized. If "the black athlete" has been an overdetermined trope, celebrated and venerated as well as despised and controlled (Carrington

2010), then we might also say that “the black sports journalist” has been overlooked, ignored, and written out of historical narratives and, until relatively recently, largely invisible within contemporary popular culture.

In seeking to address and understand the image of the black sports journalist in popular culture we are confronted, then, with a paradox, a certain absent presence. The very conjunction of blackness alongside the noun “writer” or “journalist” in the context of sports invokes a tension. As the epigraph from Doc Rivers quoted above suggests, the idea of “the black sports journalist,” if not quite oxymoronic, is, historically speaking, a figure not readily rendered legible in the public imagination as a discernible object. Unlike “the black athlete in popular culture,” which immediately brings to mind an extensive range of examples, types, and scripts, “the black sports journalist” has no immediate signifier and certainly little historical precedent. In this sense, the image of the black sports journalist in popular culture might be considered the symbolic *inverse* of the “Jewish athlete in popular culture,” a cultural figure not only absent through lack of representation but a trope that is, within the logics of racial discourse, ontologically speaking impossible. If racial discourse overdetermines the black body as *inherently and already athletic* (see Carrington 2010) and the Jewish body as *inherently and forever unathletic* (see Gilman 1991), then the body/mind dualism of racial stereotyping marks the cognitive and literary presence in sports *as white*, and therefore, conditionally at least, a space for Jewishness. Conversely, the signifier of the sports journalist is, at the same time, signified as *non-black* (if not quite *anti-black*).

Representations, realities and consequences: Does the black sports journalist exist?

I want to explore three issues in relation to the absent presence of the black sports journalist. First, I discuss the question of the politics of representation, and specifically the image

of the sports journalist within popular culture. Second, I briefly address a more sociological question, namely the actual position of black journalists within the sports media industries. Third, and directly related to the two previous considerations, I examine the consequences of the marginal position of black sports journalists, especially on our understanding of the relationship between sports and politics. If we consider popular culture, and film in particular, then sports journalists are largely absent when it comes to the classic portrayals of the crusading, fearless journalist, holding power to account, as seen in films such as *All the President's Men* (1976), *The Insider* (1999), *Spotlight* (2015) and *The Post* (2017) and others. Thus, within the genre of films depicting journalists as the defenders of civil society in their selfless search for truth and justice, sports journalists rarely, if ever, are featured or given the same status.¹ The stories reported by investigative sports journalists such as Andrew Jennings, for example, who has exposed corruption in sporting organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Jennings 1996, 2016), have yet to be made into compelling dramas. This may be due, in part, to the continuing hierarchy within news journalism itself where, too often, sports journalism has been seen as a “the toy department” (Rowe 2007), when contrasted with the supposedly more serious and socially significant areas of journalism such as economics, health, politics, the environment and so on. Thus, the depiction across popular media such as television, film, radio, plays, novels and comics of the journalist as the heroic and scoundrel figures (see Ehrlich and Saltzman 2015) has yet to become a dominant frame for sports journalists.

¹ As Nina Metz (2021) notes, it is rare to see a sports reporter as a lead character, although there are exceptions. Metz gives some examples, “Humphrey Bogart plays an out-of-work sportswriter who takes a job as a press agent for a boxer in the 1956 noir ‘The Harder They Fall’. The movie is a blunt assessment of the unscrupulous wheelers and dealers working behind the scenes in the sport, and Bogart’s face goes from resigned disgust ... to outright shame as he learns just how dirty these dealings are. Spencer Tracy is a sportswriter to Katharine Hepburn’s political reporter in 1942’s ‘Woman of the Year,’ ... ‘The Odd Couple’s’ resident slob, Oscar Madison, is also a sportswriter, but that’s more biographical detail than plot point. Same goes for Ray Barone on ‘Everybody Loves Raymond.’”

Classic sports film subgenres tend to focus, instead, on a number of predictable narrative structures, such as the tough but wise coach trying to develop the talented but undisciplined athlete who inevitably teaches the coach a deeper life lesson by the end, (*Million Dollar Baby*, 2004); the coach helping his team (nearly always his) to overcome adversity and work together for the greater good, holding on to the noble values of competition and camaraderie against the backdrop of corrupt or cynical owners (*Any Given Sunday*, 1999); heroic feats of individual athletic achievement, against the odds, sometimes for God and country (*Chariots of Fire*, 1981); class and masculinity narratives of struggle and sports as a vehicle for social mobility (*This Sporting Life*, 1963); sports rivalries where good athlete/bad athlete dichotomies drive the narrative (the series of *Rocky* films); and films where sport acts as an idealized space through which nostalgic (Americana) fables of belonging, family and community are told (*Field of Dreams*, 1989). But sports journalists do not figure prominently in any of these films.²

There are also films that explore black life and explicitly locate the traumas of race as a central narrative. These tend to focus on personal struggle, salvation and redemption, such as the biographical drama *The Hurricane* (1999) based on the somewhat tragic life story of Rubin “The Hurricane” Carter, or the familiar narrative of challenging racial discrimination through sport such as in *Remember the Titans* (2000), and the overcoming of racial prejudice in the pursuit of national unity, as portrayed in *Invictus* (2009), a film based on the Springboks attempt to win the 1995 Rugby World Cup shortly after the end of South African apartheid. There is also a genre of white protagonist/black athlete films. Racial dynamics, often implicit rather than explicit, are a

² To be clear, the argument is not that there is a complete absence of sports journalists but rather that they are incidental to plot development and receive limited character development. Two exceptions where sports reporters are at least featured as significant (although still not central) characters would be Jack Rose (played by John C. McGinley) in *Any Given Sunday*, and in the field of comedic television drama, Trent Crimm (played by James Lance) in *Ted Lasso*.

constitutive part of films such as *Jerry Maguire* (1996), *The Blind Side* (2009), and *Creed* (2015). In nearly all of these films, sports journalists (regardless of race) – unlike athletes, fans, family members, partners, owners, coaches, and agents – play minor ancillary roles at best, with little character development and, more often than not, are completely absent from the narrative drive.

Another subcategory of sports films draw upon the success of books. These films are marketed, in part, on the prestige of the writers, such as the British writer Nick Hornby's autobiographical *Fever Pitch* (1997, the US version of the film came out in 2005), published in 1992, *The Blind Side* (2009) published in 2006 and *Moneyball* (2011) published in 2003, both by Michael Lewis, and *Friday Night Lights* (2004) based on H. G. Bissinger's book of the same title that came out in 1990, and which later became a television series (2006-2011, NBC/DirectTV). In nearly all of these cases, whether or not the subject matter is related to race, or black life and struggle is represented, there is rarely any depiction of *black* sports journalists on screen or feature-length films based upon the work of black writers. The fleeting glimpses and secondary story lines given to sports journalists, in the few times they do appear, are overwhelmingly those of white male sports journalists.

This dearth of cinematic representation reflects, to some degree, the marginal position of black journalists within the sports media industries. The anti-black racism and related forms of segregation that historically limited opportunities for black athletes across sports in America (Shropshire 1996, Wiggins 1997), and elsewhere in countries such as Great Britain (see Carrington and McDonald 2001), has been replicated within sports journalism. As Gary Washburn (2021) notes, discussing the situation in America, “racism denigrated the impact of the Black sports journalist in their early years, as these pioneers were only allowed to work at

African-American-based publications” (1). Washburn highlights two important pioneers, Wendell Smith³ and Sam Lacy⁴. Washburn suggests that Smith and Lacy, are “to many current Black sports journalists [and] sports journalists overall...considered the Jackie Robinsons of their field because of the sacrifices they made to emerge as respected and elite storytellers and journalists. Recognition from the mostly white journalism organizations, newspapers and other media outlets came slow and sometimes not at all” (2). There has been a struggle to recognize black people as capable of writing about sports that has been every bit as important as the demands for respect and opportunity on the field. Yet most histories of race and sports have tended to focus on the revolt of the black athlete on the pitch and not on the power of the black writer on the page, even when the two struggles were connected.

Interestingly, the singular exception to this general absence of black sports journalists in film can be found in the Jackie Robinson biopic *42* (2013). The portrayal of Wendell Smith (played by André Holland) contains one of the few examples of a black sports journalist represented in film whose role is more than fleeting, and where the character is a meaningful protagonist in the film’s narrative. In actuality, Smith did not merely report on baseball, but was an active participant in advocating for the desegregation of baseball, effectively working for the

³ Smith was born in 1914 in Detroit. He was an accomplished pitcher but was unable to pursue a professional career in baseball due to the Jim Crow-enforced segregation norms of the 1930s. Instead, Smith became a sportswriter, first as a journalist at the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the largest national black newspaper at the time and from 1948 at the *Chicago Herald-American*, becoming the first black sportswriter at a white newspaper. That same year, Smith became the first black member of the Baseball Writers’ Association of America. In October 1972, Smith wrote an obituary of Jackie Robinson, which would turn out to be his last published article. Smith himself died of cancer a month later, aged just fifty-eight.

⁴ Lacy was born in 1903 in Mystic, Connecticut. As with Smith, he was a talented baseball player, and played semi-professionally for many years. Lacy was a sports reporter for the local black newspaper the *Washington Tribune*, a radio sports commentator in the early 1930s and worked for the *Chicago Defender*. From 1944 he joined the *Afro-American* in Baltimore as sports editor and columnist, where he would spend the rest of his professional career. In 1948 Lacy became a member of the Baseball Writers’ Association and only its second black member, following Wendell Smith. Remarkably, Lacy wrote his last column for the *Afro-American* in 2003 at age 99, just days before his death.

Brooklyn Dodgers, including crafting positive stories about Robinson's first years in the majors and co-authoring Robinson's autobiography. However, critics of *42* have pointed out the disproportionate credit given to Branch Rickey, owner of the Dodgers, and other senior administrators within baseball in ending segregation. This creates a "top down" account of how baseball was desegregated, thereby underplaying the role of black organizations, athletes, community leaders and sports journalists of the era who pushed for change. For example, Lisa Alexander (2015-16) suggests that "this narrative completely erases the massive efforts by Lester Rodney, Sam Lacy, and Wendell Smith to force MLB teams to desegregate in the early 1940s" (95). The marginalization of the efforts and actions of black journalists is reproduced in *42* when Smith first meets Jackie Robinson. As Howard Bryant (2013) notes, "Robinson acts as though he's never heard of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. In black America at that time, the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Baltimore Afro-American* were the leading black newspapers, shipped across the country. An athlete of Robinson's stature, especially one raised amid the segregated and parallel structures of American life, would have known of the *Courier* the way most people today have heard of *Time* magazine".

Washburn (2021) suggests that the emergence of black sports journalists "into what was once a white-only field has been slow and meticulous. But one only needs to watch ESPN, the preeminent sports network, for a few hours to see the plethora of Black faces" (3). The available evidence appears to support this story of historical marginalization alongside more recent changes. It has been well established that sports journalism is a male-dominated space. For example, research in the early 1990s found that only 3% of America's 10,000 print and broadcast journalists were women (Creedon, 1994). Whilst this number has significantly increased over time, recent studies have estimated that still only 11.4% of America's print and broadcast sports

journalists are women (Women’s Media Center, 2018).⁵ If sports journalism remains a male domain, it is also, of course, overwhelmingly white as well. William Rhoden, himself one of the few high profile black sportswriters at a major US newspaper, pointed to the “race gap between professional athletes and the journalists who cover them” in a 1993 article for *The New York Times*. Rhoden highlighted the fact that in the early 1990s there were no African American editors in charge of sports sections at any of New York’s four major daily newspapers and only two across the entire country’s 1,600 daily papers. Rhoden notes that research at the time by the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) found that of the 306 full-time reporters assigned to professional football, only 12 were African Americans (cited in Washburn 2021).

More recent figures compiled by Richard Lapchick, Director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport as part of “The 2021 Sports Media Racial and Gender Report Card,” provide the most reliable information we have on the demographics of the sports media industry. In America and Canada, editors of color constitute 21% of the workforce, columnists of color make up about 23% and copy editors and designers, similarly, are around 23%. A key driver of these numbers, which have been steadily rising over the past decade or so, has been ESPN itself, one of the largest employers of sports journalists in America (Lapchick, 2021). Interestingly, Lapchick notes that if ESPN were removed from the count, the numbers for minority representation across all areas of the sports media would actually *decrease*. Of course, these numbers aggregate a range of racial and ethnic groups, meaning that the numbers for *black* sports journalists specifically is significantly lower. Compared to black athletes in high profile,

⁵ An interesting study by Painter and Ferrucci suggests that the representation of female sports journalists further marginalizes and undermines their standing. They examined female journalists on the fictional sports news television series *Sports Night* (created by Aaron Sorkin) and found that women were depicted as unprofessional, often displaying motherly qualities, chose personal lives over work, were deferential to men, and lacked sports knowledge compared to the male characters.

revenue-generating sports such as the NFL and NBA, the numbers of black sports journalists remain low. Washburn (2021) concludes by pointing out that the sports media industries remain white and male: “Despite the increase in numbers... 77.1 percent of sports columnists in the United States and Canada are white and 82.2 percent are male... [as are] 77.1 percent of copy editors and designers. Although the numbers are steadily increasing, sports journalism remains an overwhelmingly white industry” (37). In a recent article on local sports media, entitled “Fighting for a Voice: Why Black Reporters Covering Black Athletes Makes for Better Journalism,” Shalise Manza Young (2022) summarizes the situation in Boston, one of America’s leading sports cities: “There are two sports radio stations in Boston; in May 2017, there were a combined 17 primary hosts on those stations. All were men; sixteen were White. The picture was similar in the sports departments of the area’s two biggest newspapers, *The Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald*, which between them had one Black columnist.”

Today, broadcast media showcase greater diversity and there is more on-screen black representation than there was twenty years ago, yet African Americans are still underrepresented as play-by-play announcers and on-field reporters. Black journalists do have a presence on TV, for example, but in far fewer numbers compared to their white counterparts. In fact, research shows that especially when covering sports such as football, for black broadcasters a previous career playing the game is often required for entry into the sports media. White figures on the TV are often ex-athletes, but they can also secure positions as journalists or well-regarded presenters, on-field reporters, and commentators, *regardless of their previous sporting achievements*. As Washburn (2021) puts it, “There is a growing perception that trained Black journalists are being pitted against ex-athletes in terms of reporting and analyst positions”. Or, as Howard Bryant noted on Twitter, “So, Mr. Bryant, as a black male aspiring journalist, what skills do I most need

to get a shot in this business?” “A good 40 time” (Bryant, 2021). Bryant’s tweet suggests that disparate on-screen representation, and the access to such positions, is an issue that many black sports media personalities are acutely aware of. As one black journalist told Washburn (2021), “How many Black talk radio hosts are there? How many Black columnists? When it comes to giving our opinion, if we did not dribble, if we didn’t tackle, if we didn’t hit the ball, people don’t find Black people credible from a straight up intellectual standpoint” (42). This situation of reduced opportunities for the limited “black spots” across the broadcast sports media results in black journalists feeling they are being forced to compete with former athletes for host and commentary positions, positions that traditionally would have been held by trained journalists (Washburn 2021).

Beyond the U.S. and Canada, the position of black journalists within the sports media industries remains marginal. Research in the U.K. shows underrepresentation of black and other ethnic and racial minorities across the media in general and especially within the sports media industries, with print media being less diverse than broadcast media (see Farrington et al. 2012, Nakrani 2019). The British media remains overwhelmingly white and male and dominated by those who are privately educated and upper-middle class. One study found that an astonishing 45% of leading journalists had graduated from either Oxford or Cambridge (Sutton Trust 2006). Sports journalism replicates these exclusions. As Farrington et al. (2012) have argued, “The situation is poor across the profession of sports journalism, yet is particularly noticeable in some sporting contexts due to the contrast between participants and their counterparts in the media. For example, athletics is a sport with many black and Asian competitors, yet the press boxes are populated almost exclusively by white journalists ” (36)

As with the U.S., Farrington et al. (2012) go on to argue that in trying to “increase diversity” within the broadcast media, media corporations such as the BBC have relied on ex-athletes as commentators (although rarely employed as lead presenters) rather than hiring and promoting black sports journalists. In discussing the use of ex-athletes in producing broadcast media reports, Farrington et al. (2012) note that “there is a question mark over whether such presenters can be classed as journalists... Certainly, some are skeptical whether the appointment of these ex-players really does much to address the lack of diversity in sports journalism” (38). Farrington et al. conclude that “the high-profile broadcast careers of some former athletes can be seen as window dressing” (38).

As I highlight in more detail later, this situation has consequences for how the sports media understand the relationship between sports, politics and race. Scholars such as Rowe and Boyle (2023) suggest that “many sports journalists... have often accepted the fallacy of the separation of sport and politics, and consequently have been reluctant to ask uncomfortable questions about the sport-society nexus” (1035). They go on to note that the work of sports journalists has been criticized “for social stereotyping and marginalization of various kinds, including that based on class, gender, ‘race,’ ethnicity, sexuality, ability and age” (1035). In this context, sports journalists, when they claim to be neutral, disinterested reporters of sporting facts “can be seen to contribute to hegemonic structures that naturalize social inequalities by mobilizing sport’s mythologies and ideologies in ways that constitute functionalist justifications of an inequitable status quo” (1035). Rowe and Boyle give the example of the early reaction to NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s protest and the take-the-knee gestures that quickly became “a notable visual-corporeal symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement” (1035) and suggest that

sports journalists were initially “unsupportive or negative” in their coverage” (1035).⁶ Rowe and Boyle conclude that, as a result, “it can be suggested that mainstream sports journalism reluctantly followed rather than enthusiastically led this change in social disposition toward racialized violence, just as it has struggled to come to terms with the issues that promoted protests and demonstration within sport in general” (1035).

As a general critique of “mainstream sports journalism” this account is broadly accurate, but it elides an important point, namely that “mainstream” is a euphemism here for “white.” Taking the example of baseball, although the argument would hold for other sports too, Chris Lamb (2016) states that “the color line could not have existed as long as it did in baseball without the aid and comfort of the nation’s white mainstream press, specifically white mainstream sportswriters, who participate in what black sportswriter Joe Bostic of the *People’s Voice* called a ‘conspiracy of silence’” (8-9). It is important then to better understand the specific role of *white* sports journalists in not just maintaining but helping to create the so-called “color line” on the pitches and in the press box, and their ability to shape dominant narratives around black athleticism more generally.

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Sports Imagination

An important consequence of the historic marginalization of black sports journalists has been the reproduction of racist stereotypes about black athletes by white writers and commentators, who have played a pivotal role in mediating the meanings of black athleticism to wider audiences. Emma Lindsey (2001), in a self-reflexive essay on her experience as one of the few, and earliest, black female sports journalists in Britain, notes how “the media machine works to perpetuate, and indeed helps to create certain stereotypes” (188). Historic examples abound.

⁶ See Boykoff and Carrington (2020) for a fuller analysis of the media’s reaction to Kaepernick which shifted over time, and at least within the U.S. print media, did show some variation in the level of negative coverage.

Paul Gallico, the *New York Daily News* sports editor and founder of the Golden Gloves amateur boxing competition, once described Joe Louis as a “magnificent animal”. Gallico went on to write, “He eats. He sleeps. He fights...Is he all instinct, all animal? Or have a hundred million years left a fold upon his brain? I see in this colored man something so cold, so hard, so cruel that I wonder as to his bravery. Courage in the animal is desperation. Courage in the human is something incalculable and divine” (cited in Carrington 2010, 98). Westbrook Pegler, the first columnist to win a Pulitzer Prize for reporting, referred to black sprinters as “African savages” and described boxer Joe Louis as “a cotton-field Negro” (cited in Lamb 2016, 9). Bill Corum, one of America’s most recognizable sports columnists and radio personalities from the 1930s through to the 1950s described Louis in the following way: “He’s a big, superbly built Negro youth who was born to listen to jazz music, eat a lot of fried chicken, play ball with the gang on the corner, and never do a lick of heavy work he could escape” (Lamb 2016, 9). Grantland Rice, arguably the one of the most important writers in the formation of American sports journalism, was “blatantly racist in his use of language” (Laucella 2016, 74) throughout his writing career and described Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics as “a wild Zulu running amuck” (cited in Lamb 2016, 11). Later, during the 1960s and as black athletes came to voice and started to directly and overtly challenge racism in both wider society and within sports, it was white sports journalists and broadcasters who pushed back against the athletes’ protests. Brett Musburger, for example, infamously described Tommie Smith and John Carlos as “a pair of dark-skinned storm troopers” after their iconic black gloved protest at the 1968 Mexico summer Olympic games (cited in Lamb 2016, 13).

While the type of overt racist stereotyping of black athletes that was commonplace for much of the first half of the twentieth century had certainly dissipated by the turn of the twenty

first century, the underlying logics of natural (black) physicality versus (white) mental dexterity linked to hard work and dedication continue to structure contemporary sports journalism. This is due, in part, as discussed earlier, to the relative lack of black sports journalists and other writers of color. As Boyle (2006) notes: “There is no doubt that the perpetuation of particular stereotypes around race that can find articulation in the discourses produced by sports journalism is, in part, enhanced by a relative lack of diversity among the collective body of sports journalists” (156). In this context it is important to understand the shifting and contradictory nature of contemporary racism and the complex *inter*-relationships between ideologies of race, sport and the media (Carrington, 2011, 84).

The sports/media complex is a powerful site for the manufacturing and creation of the spectacle of sports, and relatedly, to the articulation of deeply held if mistaken beliefs concerning human difference in the packaging and selling of racialized athletic bodies to sports media audiences. The sports/media complex daily produces a “spectacle of the Other” (Hall 1997) that serves to (seemingly) confirm liberal ideas related to racial equality and the (supposedly) meritocratic nature of western societies, whilst, at the same time, othering the black body as exceptional, exotic and “super-human” (Carrington 2001/2002; Carrington, 2011, 85). The sports/media complex becomes, in other words, a key modality through which folk ideas about race are created, magnified, and disseminated. Sports help to make race seem real and mainstream sports journalism, as a central aspect of the sports/media complex, plays an active role in this process (Carrington 2010).

What we might more specifically term the *white* sports/media complex (see Carrington 2011) draws our attention to the underappreciated role of the sports media in centering and naturalizing whiteness as the default and unexamined norm against which all other identities are

understood. This simultaneously positions black and other athletes of color as different if not deviant and their acceptance into sports as conditional on their deferential behavior. This centering of whiteness also downplays and sometimes simply ignores how white racism saturates the sports field. Thus, the white sports/media complex does not just relay or re-present a version of sporting reality to audiences. It is not even that it heightens and amplifies an existing racial world already out there, neatly intact, although, as John Hoberman (1997) rightly notes, sports is an “image factory” that intensifies our racial preoccupations. More than all of this, and in very fundamental ways, the white sports/media complex works to constitute our racial reality, what we understand to be true about the world, and the meanings given to the invented categories we call “races” (Carrington, 2011, 90). As has been suggested, few entities have done more to produce that reality for us than the racialized, patriarchal and heteronormative space that is mainstream sports journalism, which is to say, *white* sports journalism.

For most of its history, and in contrast to the black press, mainstream American sports journalism has been an active force in the production and maintenance of the idea of white supremacy and, directly related, the policing of black sporting achievement. White sports journalists, in other words, have long held on to the fiction of sport’s apolitical status as a way to avoid acknowledging their participation in the reproduction of anti-black stereotypes and mythologies of racial difference. Phillip Hutchinson (2016) makes this point in his essay “Framing White Hopes: The press, social drama, and the era of Jack Johnson, 1908-1915,” where he outlines the active role of the press in popularizing the idea of “the great white hope” such that “the African American press was marginalized and forced to react to the overarching narratives that the white press established” (40). In reviewing the literature on this topic, Lamb and Bleske (2016) conclude that “studies of press coverage of the integration of baseball have

shown that black sportswriters were more active in reporting the story than white sportswriters” (149). They go on to add that most white sportswriters “like the public they wrote for, either criticized integration, ignored the issue completely or...said that no good would come from raising the race issue” (151). As Toni Morrison has argued in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), structural forms of racism are founded on unacknowledged beliefs about white entitlement and innocence that structure much American literature. The same argument, as I’ve suggested here, can be applied to the field of American sports journalism.

The white sports media complex: Black bodies, White words

An underexamined consequence of the white sports/media complex has been the extent to which black athletes’ voices have been profoundly shaped over the years by white writers. It is well known that most sports autobiographies (as with most “auto”-biographies for celebrities and famous people who are not themselves writers) are in fact written by “ghostwriters.” Such writers are usually formally credited, discreetly, in the acknowledgements page (“thanks for helping me to write this...”). Sometimes, depending on the publisher and the contract negotiated, the writer’s name will appear on the book cover itself, usually in much smaller font, under the star athlete’s name, claiming the book was written “with...,” said writer. Given the historical exclusion of black journalists from sports, the visibility of black sports journalists, who might otherwise have gained wider public recognition, has been restricted. The complex, often hidden, process, by which white writers have been selected to “help” black athletes tell their story, and the decisions made most likely by athletes’ management and agents as much as by the athlete’s themselves, is beyond the scope of this essay but is worth exploring in its own right. These decisions about the appropriate writer to tell an athlete’s story have likely shaped how black athletes have told “their” stories and what parts of their life histories have been deemed worthy

of sharing (or not). Thus F1 driver Lewis Hamilton's (2007) first memoir *Lewis Hamilton: My Story* is actually the product of the words of a Timothy Collins (*our* story perhaps being a more accurate subtitle), boxer Frank Bruno's (2006) widely praised and award winning autobiography *Frank: Fighting Back* was written "with Kevin Mitchell", the well-known *Guardian* and *Observer* British sports journalist, footballer John Barnes's autobiography credits Henry Winter, the *Telegraph* and *Times* chief football writer, and even the "undisputed truth" of Mike Tyson's (2013) autobiography (*Mike Tyson Undisputed Truth: My Autobiography*), comes to us via the words of New York-based writer Larry Sloman⁷.

The reliance on white writers to narrate the lives of black athletes is not universally the case, of course. For example, and perhaps most famously, Arnold Rampersad, the academic and literary critic, co-wrote Arthur Ashe's best-selling memoir *Days of Grace*. Given Ashe's own political commitments and deep understanding of African American history, it is perhaps not surprising that a Caribbean-born writer of color, immersed in the history of African American culture and politics and well known for his award-winning biographies of key African American intellectuals and musicians, such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1976), Ralph Ellison (2007) and Langston Hughes (1986, 1988), and, relevant, in this context, Jackie Robinson too (1997), would be chosen to work with Ashe. Similarly black writers have worked with historic figures of the sporting black Atlantic world to tell their stories, such as Richard Williams and Muhammad Ali

⁷ In Leon Gast's award winning documentary *When We Were Kings* (1996), based on the 1974 World Heavyweight Championship fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, the only writers chosen by directed Leon Gast to comment on the significance of the "Rumble in the Jungle" are George Plimpton and Norman Mailer (black singers and filmmakers, like Spike Lee, appear as "talking head" commentators). The film ends with an anecdote where Mailer recalls meeting Ali a few years after the fight. As Mailer leaves to go to the toilet, Ali allegedly makes a pass at Mailer's wife: "For me that's Ali, you can't even turn your back on him!" Mailer tells the audience. This undoubtedly said more about Mailer's own view of Ali than it did any meaningful take on Ali's significance, character and legacy, but the moment also encapsulates, perhaps unintentionally, the misrepresentations of black athletes by white mediators.

(*The Greatest: My Own Story*, 1975) and Alfred Duckett and Jackie Robinson (*I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography of Jackie Robinson*, 1972).⁸

To be clear, this should not be read as a reductive point that white writers or white sports journalists are incapable of translating the lived experience of being black to wider audiences or that in doing so they would always “water down” the complex realities of racism to appease the presumed white reading audiences. Or, conversely, that, a black writer would necessarily highlight issues of race or be less compromising to assumed white audiences in the portrayal of racism. The black sportswriter and provocateur Jason Whitlock, for example, would likely not share the same world view and commitments with today’s politically engaged black athletes due to Whitlock’s hard right conservative views and his repeated attacks on athletes who speak out on social issues. The point instead is to highlight the fact that when left unexamined white racial frames (Feagin 2020) are likely to profoundly shape the stories we get to know about black athletes’ lives. There is in fact an important if overlooked radical tradition of sports journalism by white writers who explicitly challenged the failures of mainstream sports journalism to adequately account for and understand sport’s inherently political meanings. This counter-mainstream white sports journalism tradition actively interrogated racism in sports rather than ignoring and downplaying it. Examples would include Jack Scott’s *The Athletic Revolution* (1971) and Paul Hoch’s *Rip off the Big Game: The Exploitation of Sports by the Power Elite* (1972). Arguably the foundation figure within this tradition would be Lester Rodney, who as

⁸ Interestingly, Arnold Rampersad notes the difficulties Jackie Robinson had in getting his autobiography published. In 1969 Robinson contacted Random House to discuss his autobiography. After an initial successful meeting with his young editor, none other than the celebrated novelist Toni Morrison, a meeting was arranged with Morrison’s superiors, all white men, to pitch his book. The meeting went well at first, as they talked about sports, but, Morrison adds, Robinson “wanted his book to be about more than baseball. He wanted it to be about the larger picture, about society and the times he had lived through. I knew what he meant, but I could feel the interest ebbing from the room. The white men became cool, indifferent. They wanted something more exotic, something more voluptuous than he was prepared to offer. When he left, they complained the book was going to be too political, too much social studies, it wouldn’t sell. They turned us down” (Rampersad, 1997, 435).

sports editor of the *Daily Worker* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the United States) from 1936-1958, did more to highlight sport's role as site of power, domination, but also resistance than any other white sports writer.

White writers have also written extraordinary biographies of black athletes that have centered, in nuanced ways, on the structuring effects of racism in sports and the struggles of black athletes on and off the field, such as Geoffrey Ward's *Unforgiveable Blackness: The rise and fall of Jack Johnson* (2004), Mike Marqusee's *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the spirit of the sixties* (2005, 2nd ed.), and Raymond Arsenault's *Arthur Ashe: A Life* (2018). Indeed, with books such as NFL player Michael Bennett's *Things That Make White People Uncomfortable* (2018), written with the journalist Dave Zirin, it is clear that the current moment is one in which black athletes have come into voice and that white writers, if there is a shared politics, can help to articulate those sensibilities, regardless of the race of the writers or the athlete. It is noteworthy that many of the more radical white sportswriters and who themselves have departed from or were never a part of mainstream sports journalism are Jewish intellectuals and often socialist in their politics (see for example Rodney, Marqusee and Zirin), demonstrating moments of solidarity and identification of struggles within the Jewish and black diasporas (Gilroy 1993).

The complex and more interesting reality is that there is a rich tradition of black writing on sport, just that it has not always been found within the narrow professional borders of mainstream journalism, which has been heavily policed, as it was for most of the twentieth century, by white journalistic gatekeepers and the wider sports media industries. It has not just been a story of white writers inscribing the history of sport on and through the bodies of black athletes. If we broaden our definition from black sports *journalists* to black *writers* who have

engaged sports then a much different picture emerges. The trials and tribulations of individual black athletes, the place of the black athlete in the white imagination, and the potential of sport to be a vehicle not just for transformation and determination of self for the individual but, crucially, the role of sport as a modality for struggle can be found in the writings of black intellectuals throughout the black diaspora (see Carrington 2010). From W.E.B. Du Bois' occasional writings on the impact and importance of Jack Johnson in the early twentieth century to the more developed discussions on sport and the black athlete found in the work of Frantz Fanon in the 1950s and 1960s in books such as *Black Skin, White Masks* and the *Wretched of the Earth*, we can delineate a black radical sports writing tradition that continues to inform contemporary discussions of race and sport.

Within that tradition of black writers who engaged sports (for whom the moniker “sportswriter” is at once both accurate but too restrictive), would be the iconic figure of C.L.R. James, perhaps the most recognized and cited “black sportswriter” of the twentieth century. James was a polymath; he was a radical Marxist intellectual, a revolutionary activist, an essayist of classical literature, a historian of black revolution, a fiction writer and, as important as those other areas were, he was a cricket journalist too! James's writings on sport in general but cricket in particular stretched from his earlier analyses of player styles and match reports in the 1930s, through to his commentaries on the state of English and West Indian cricket and the batting style of Ian Botham in the mid-1980s (see James 1986). As the cricket correspondent for both the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Glasgow Herald*, and through his classic text on cricket and sports, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), James established the importance of sport to black cultural politics and decisively showed that sport not only had political significance, but that politics was often played out through sports themselves. James shows us that sport is a complex site of

collective joy, human creativity and art making, as well as a space where power struggles, political overdeterminations and cultural resistance occurs, often at the same time.

Not surprisingly C.L.R. James figures prominently in the work and minds of black writers who I want to claim as “sportswriters.” For example, I have argued previously in “Playing Home: The Boy in the Mirror as Sportswriter” (see Carrington 2017) that sport has been centrally important to novelist Caryl Phillips’ development as a writer. Despite the fact that Phillips’ sports-related writings have tended to be ignored by his literary critics, his sports writings are in fact central to his understandings of belonging, identification and rejection and of the entanglements of race, class and gender, themes that saturate much of his fictional and non-fictional work. Thus, as I argue in the essay, “we should also think of Phillips as a ‘sportswriter’ – not in the traditional sense of that word, which tends to invoke a narrow journalistic concern with reportage and match summation, but more broadly as someone who understands the intimate connections between sports and questions of power, the joy and pain of passionate identification through fandom, and the cultural politics made possible through creative play” (Carrington, 2017, 132).

Phillips himself once observed that C.L.R. James’ *Beyond a Boundary* was significant because the text rose above genre in order to explore the complexities of cricket in the colonial Caribbean (132). According to Phillips, James “had an extraordinary ability to write about sport in a way that linked it to other avenues of life concretely and provocatively. In this way he promoted not only our understanding of the game but also our understanding of the culture” (132). Phillips’s summation of James’s approach to sport is an apt general description for the radical black tradition of sports writing I have alluded to. This is a tradition that reconfigures the boundaries of sports writing as a genre, deconstructing and expanding the very idea of what a

“sportswriter” should and can be. Such an expansive concept accepts all forms of “writing,” including inscribing, marking, painting, drawing and creating narratives and stories about sports that would actively embrace the work of all artists and poets, painters and novelists. The image of the black sports journalist in popular culture would then be able to include those black intellectuals who have grappled with the condition of the black athlete in various cultural forms using various media, from Claudia Rankine’s poetic and powerful mediations on tennis, sport and Serena Williams in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, to Howard Bingham and Gordon Parks’ beautiful and timeless portraits of Muhammad Ali, to Jean Michel Basquiat’s striking and occasionally sardonic renditions of America’s fascination with black athletes to contemporary artists like the diasporic self-portraits of Omar Victor Diop who, similar to Basquiat, explores the tensions, dualities and paradoxes of the glory and recognition of black (African) footballers in Europe, through to Michael Ray Charles and Hank Willis Thomas who have both unflinchingly rendered the white capitalist exploitation of the black athletic body visible for all to see.

Conclusion: The black radical sports writing tradition

In 1999 David Halberstam edited a massive 776-page tome immodestly titled, *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*. Halberstam, himself an esteemed Pulitzer-prize winning journalist with many books on sports on his impressive literary resume, assembled 52 essays on sport, written by 48 authors. The supposed definitive book on a century of American sports writing did not contain a single entry by a black writer. And there were only two women included, both white. It is hard to imagine “the black sportswriter in popular culture” when, if Halberstam’s selection criteria is to be believed, the black sportswriter does not even belong in a book about sports writing. At the end of his introduction, and partially self-aware of his own selective bias, Halberstam (1999) states, “Obviously no one can write about sports in America in

this century without writing about race as well, given the terrible prejudice inflicted on blacks earlier in the century and their immense contributions in the second half of the century. So, we have presented here among other things, a portrait, however incomplete, of the rise of the black athlete in America” (xxxiii). There is much here we could unpack, given more time, such as the suggestion that “terrible prejudice” existed in the first half of the twentieth century (but presumably not in the second half?) and that black athletes made immense contributions to sport in the second half of the century (but not the first?). Those points notwithstanding, the thought that black writers might have been able to offer words of insight worthy of inclusion among the 52 chapters selected on matters related to the black athlete or indeed on any other related to sports and American society across an entire century, seemed to have escaped the attention of Mr. Halberstam and presumably of the series editor Glenn Stout too. The white sports/media complex, here in its more literary form, seemed as committed at the end of the twentieth century to eradicating even the idea of a black literary contribution to sport as it had been at the start of the century. As with the hackneyed joke that the history of the Jewish athlete is a single, empty page, so it seems that the contribution of the black sportswriter is similarly blank. But both of these claims are untrue. Perhaps the history of the black sportswriter is more of a palimpsest, where the traces of previous writings exist and can still be seen, if we care to look closely enough. Given this, we need to recover forgotten and overlooked writers of the past. To expand our restrictive category of “the black sports journalist” to that of “the black sportswriter” and to expand again what it means to write, to include, to inscribe, to record, to compose, to enter into the historic ledger. Our category of the black sportswriter would then incorporate the athletes and fans, poets and novelists, and even singers and artists, who have over decades and across geographical borders and national boundaries, communicated, imagined and *inscribed* in black

vernacular culture the black experience in sports in wonderfully creative ways, ways that have celebrated and critiqued in polyvocal, call and response fashion a different vision of sport than found in the sterile pages of mainstream sports journalism.

Part of this challenge, as Toni Morrison and others have pointed out, is how to make the whiteness of “the mainstream” visible without further re-centering it. That is, how to name and reveal the whiteness of what passes under the deadening moniker of “mainstream sports journalism.” This is a particular field of white literary work that has created and celebrated “great white hopes,” all the while disavowing the structuring effects of racism on the field of play, and actively producing racial stereotypes that do not stay on the field but seep into all areas of society, eventually becoming the basis for exaggerated white fears about excessive, violent, hyper-sexual blackness. The end result, as Rankine notes, is black people dying on the streets because police officers can’t control their imaginations, imaginations that project tropes of superhuman sporting power onto the everyday bodies of black women and men. It is the “fields of dreams” of sports, as Fanon first noted over sixty years ago (see Fanon 2004, 2008), where white (colonial) fantasies are played out and end in the deification of “superhuman” black sporting bodies, eroticized, packaged and sold to audiences. These bodies are revered and feared in equal measure, but serve to ultimately reduce blackness to either savage animalism or superhuman athleticism, but never, ordinarily, simply, human. The commodification of the black athletic body is in many ways the cultural logic of post/colonial racism (Carrington 2000/2001, 109).

In this essay I have attempted to show that there is in fact a rich if underappreciated history of black writing on sports that challenges and debunks the idea that black people just run and fight and don’t think and write. In fact, it was the black press that helped to keep alive and facilitated the black radical tradition of sports writing, a tradition at times joined and supported

by politically conscious white writers, often Jewish and socialist. The refusal to name and discuss racism other forms of discrimination in sport and, is to take sides in that struggle, on the side of exploitation and white supremacy under the guise of journalistic neutrality. In this context the fight for recognition and respect that black athletes have demanded, encapsulated in the refrain, “I don’t have to be what you want me to be,” and stretching at least as far back as Jack Johnson at the start of the twentieth century, to Althea Gibson and Muhammad Ali in the mid twentieth century, to contemporary athletes like Serena Williams and LeBron James, has been directed at what I have called the white sports/media complex. The desire of athletes such as Marshawn Lynch, Naomi Osaka, Lewis Hamilton, and others to control their message and to deal with the media on their own terms is a form of resistance to the allowable and preapproved public scripts given to them by mainstream sports media.

As Farrington et al. (2012) succinctly put it, “If black athletes can achieve on the pitch, then black writers should be able to achieve off it” (32). And they have been. From the earlier writings of Lacy and Smith, through the words and ideas of C.L.R. James, and latterly the works of figures like Ralph Wiley (2005), the black radical tradition of sports writing is one we are only just beginning to understand, trace and appreciate. It is a live tradition, open to the creative contributions of artists and musicians, poets and playwrights as much as those formally trained within schools of journalism. This living tradition can be seen today in various forms in the voices of numerous contemporary writers from established broadcast journalists like Jemele Hill and Bomani Jones, to the poetic and mercurial imaginations of Musa Okwonga and Zito Madu, to the historically informed scholarly analyses of Amira Rose Davis and groundbreaking baseball journalism of Claire Smith, to the incisive cultural commentaries of LZ Granderson, Howard Bryant and Joel Anderson, among many, many others. Far from being an ontological

impossibility, the black sportswriter is today at the forefront of not just rewriting the dominant sports scripts of the 20th century that helped to shore up the imaginative boundaries of whiteness and the destructive borders of race, but is reimagining what the broader landscape of sports culture will look like in the twenty-first century.

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